

LANGUAGE IN THE PROTAGONIST'S PHILOSOPHY OF LOVE AND IDENTITY IN DAVID LEVITHAN'S *EVERY DAY*

LE LANGAGE DE LA PHILOSOPHIE DE L'AMOUR ET DE L'IDENTITÉ DANS LE CAS DU PROTAGONISTE DU ROMAN À COMME AUJOURD'HUI DE DAVID LEVITHAN

LIMBAJUL FILOZOFIEI IUBIRII ȘI IDENTITĂȚII ÎN CAZUL PROTAGONISTULUI DIN ROMANUL ZI DUPĂ ZI DE DAVID LEVITHAN

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Abstract

This paper relies on David Levithan's novel „Every Day”, looking at the protagonist's language in the expression of his innermost considerations on love and identity. We inspect some linguistic aspects in A's reflections, trying to decode the philosophical meanings conveyed, on the one hand, and to observe the actual wording resorted to for them, on the other, through an analysis of context and co-text, denotations and connotations, as well as semantic fields. We will attempt to ascertain whether there is a coherent, round and logical philosophy forming as a result of A's meditations, and if there is any relation between A's language and a certain open-mindedness promoted by people with alternative sexual orientations, or who are not biased about others in this respect. Last but not least, a number of concrete and textual linguistic characteristics of the protagonist's discourse will be highlighted.

Résumé

Cet article se base sur le roman « À comme aujourd'hui » de David Levithan, en analysant le langage du protagoniste dans l'expression des plus profondes considérations sur l'amour et l'identité. Nous inspectons certains aspects linguistiques dans les réflexions d'A, en essayant de décoder les sens philosophiques proposés, d'un côté, et, de l'autre, d'observer le langage par lequel ils sont rendus, par une analyse du contexte et du cotexte, des dénnotations et des connotations, aussi que celle de champs sémantiques. Nous essayerons d'établir s'il y a une philosophie cohérente, formée et logique qui dérive des méditations d'A, aussi qu'une connexion entre le langage d'A et une certaine tolérance promue par les personnes d'orientations sexuelles différentes ou celles qui n'ont pas de préjugés envers les autres à cet égard. Finalement, mais non des moindres, nous mettrons en évidence une série de caractéristiques du discours du protagoniste, du point de vue linguistique.

Rezumat

Această lucrare se bazează pe romanul „Zi după zi” de David Levithan, analizând limbajul protagonistului în exprimarea celor mai lăuntrice considerații asupra iubirii și identității.

Inspectăm anumite aspecte lingvistice în reflecțiile lui A, încercând să decodificăm sensurile filozofice propuse, pe de o parte, și să observăm limbaajul cu care sunt ele redade, pe de altă parte, printr-o analiză a contextului și co-textului, a denotațiilor și conotațiilor, precum și a câmpurilor semantice. Vom încerca să stabilim dacă există o filozofie coerentă, logică și formată, care să decurgă din meditațiile lui A, precum și vreo legătură între limbaajul lui A și o anumită toleranță promovată de persoanele cu alte orientări sexuale, sau persoanele lipsite de prejudecăți față de alții în această privință. În cele din urmă, dar nu în ultimul rând, vom evidenția o serie de caracteristici ale discursului protagonistului, din punct de vedere lingvistic.

Key words: *linguistics, philosophy of love, identity, existentialist phenomenology*

Mots-clés: *linguistique, philosophie de l'amour, identité, phénoménologie existentialiste*

Cuvinte-cheie: *lingvistică, filozofia iubirii, identitate, fenomenologia existențialistă*

1. Introduction

The main idea of the novel is as full of disturbing implications as it is apparently simple and easy to understand: a teenager shifts bodies and identities overnight, waking up a randomly different person every day. The only constant is the age of these individuals that the character literally embodies and impersonates: sixteen. Anything else – their sex, lives, beliefs, preoccupations – are as uneven as they may get. One day, A falls in love with a girl named Rihannon, and preserves this feeling no matter who he subsequently gets to be.

There are some obvious issues raised by this body-shifting phenomenon. Firstly, changing bodies and personalities daily can be extremely confusing, given the diversity that the individual in the story is exposed to, in terms of other identities assumed as his own. Then, there is the moral aspect of living those other people's lives without impacting them in a negative way, while at the same time remaining true to oneself (avoiding to lie or to go against one's own convictions), and the dilemmas and choices that ensue. Then, there is a constant fight with depression caused by rootlessness, and everything that it presupposes: the inability to create meaningful long-term connections, having to cope with lack of belonging and continuity, as well as the incapacity to build something that lasts, in all senses and areas of one's life.

Unavoidably, by its very nature, due to the ethical issues and confusion that it triggers in terms of identity, this situation invites to introspection, existentialist questions and considerations, as well as a lyrical narrative style. This is one of the reasons why we have decided to take a closer look at the philosophy of love and identity and the language that is used to express it, as the very subject of the novel is in some way conducive to this topic.

Another reason is condensed in the comment made by the protagonist, A, in the first lines of the book, which is actually the mirror reflection of the endeavor in our paper, summarizing and pinpointing it in synthetic and metaphorical terms: "The body is the easiest thing to adjust to [...] It's the life, the context of the body, that can be hard to grasp." (LEVITHAN, 2013, 1) In a similar manner, if we were to draw a parallel between the bodies and the lexical reality of a language (i.e. the actual words taken out of context and their denotations), and where "context" or "life" are the semantic connotative aspects, we may say that what the protagonist has to do every day, indeed, in adjusting to new lives/interpretations of identity, is the same as the effort that we make in decoding hidden meanings that are not immediately available, and which become apparent as a result of taking into account the (wider) "text", or connotations of words and phrases.

The connotation is a reunion of secondary meanings and associations based on "objective relativity" and "subjective interpretation" or imagination; connotations may be more individual or more general/social, they are emotive or affective meanings that get added to the denotation relying on aspects that are present in the linguistic or extra linguistic contexts (BIDU-VRĂNCEANU,

CĂLĂRAȘU, IONESCU-RUXĂNDIOIU, MANCAȘ, PANĂ DINDELEGAN, 1997, p. 129). These are our primary concern in this paper. Our attempt will be to detect them in conjunction with the character's philosophy of identity and love, which will ultimately provide a comprehensive analysis of both language and overall main message of the novel regarding the aspects announced above.

2. Starting point

"I stopped trying to figure it out a long time ago. I'm never going to figure it out, any more than a normal person will figure out his or her own existence. After a while, you have to be at peace with the fact that you simply *are*. There is no way to know why. You can have theories, but there will never be proof." (LEVITHAN, 2013, p. 2)

This fragment is quintessential for the basic meaning of the novel, functioning as a self-reflexive comment on novel writing as well, thus bearing a secondary and third levels of interpretation. Apparently, the character describes his unusual state, of existing in the world in this strange manner, and refers firstly to the understanding of this special condition of being in the world. However, the signified then slides towards the understanding of the human condition in general, to the why of anyone's presence in the universe. The repetition of the phrase "to figure out" points to this struggle to make sense of not only his peculiar situation but also life in general. Hence, the direct object "it" changes its signified, being, in turns: the explicit case of the character (reiterating the signified of the demonstrative pronoun "this", present two sentences before); then, a generic "it" that is used in the second "figure it out" phrase.

If we take these observations into account, the character's dilemma becomes our dilemma. He implies that his particular situation is in fact no different, essentially, from ours, and, hence, his story is not only a fantastic one merely potentially read for entertainment as science fiction, but a relevant one for mankind, inviting to meditation and serious pondering over human condition. With this, we slowly slip into a more general and secondary hermeneutic, which also constitutes a self-reflexive comment on what the novel is and how it can be read. Self-reflexivity is present as well in the other hint that this quote introduces, namely that this narrative may have an open ending, which indeed is the case: in the end there is no solution offered to the existentialist concerns, and no specified closure for the character either.

Given the existentialist strain, the nouns and verbs in these three lines have to do with being and knowing/cognition, clearly pointing to the above-mentioned current of thought: "existence" and "*are*", respectively "know", "theories", "proof". They mirror the existentialist preoccupation with consciousness and experience of the world through "occupying (or adopting in imagination) the point of view of someone who is conscious of things", which in our story is less metaphorical, and happens literally through the change of bodies and lives (SIEWERT, 2006, p. 78).

3. Existentialist phenomenology

Knowing and being are the two major directing lines in the phenomenological-existentialist approaches and strains of thought. Phenomenology relied on a descriptive rather than theoretical or hypothetical approach to understanding existence, which was the core of Hegel's intimations in the nineteenth century (WRATHALL, DREYFUS, 2006, p. 2). Husserl then became preoccupied with consciousness, and with finding its structures or characteristic features, which, in his perspective, were "intentionality" (or "object-directedness") and "temporality"; Heidegger was concerned with "being-in-the-world" and "worldly relations", whereas Merleau-Ponty had his attention specifically directed at the "bodily experience of the world in perception" within this interest; Sartre combined the two outlooks – the one focusing on the mental and the other focusing on one's way of being in reality – thus becoming interested in relations, but with an attention to consciousness (*Ibidem*, p. 3). Existentialism starts from Blaise Pascal's contradiction body-mind, passes through noticing the absurd condition of the human being in the world due to his/her imminent death, and concludes about the need to cling to reality and develop attachments in order to find a way to counter this absurdity – through Christian existence, for instance (in Kierkegaard) (*Ibidem*, p. 4)

Both phenomenology and existentialism share some concerns and ideas: an empirical, descriptive approach to experiencing the world, relying on the body and on affect, rather than on theory, science or the rational; an interest in the uniqueness of an individual instead of considering her/him a type; the absurdity of existence; there is no set list of features to be ticked in order to define what a human being is or is supposed to be; there is no absolute or pre-established goal of human existence, the only objective is living freely and authentically; our perception may be limited by our intellect, learned categories etc.; awareness of non-conscious practices, habits, passions; the desire and need to assert life and daily existence despite the anxiety of nothingness and absurdity (*ibidem*, 4-5).

All these are present in the character's comments, as we shall see. Also, through his/her characters, an existentialist author can "explore a way of being in the world from the inside, as it were" (*ibidem*, 4). David Levithan has managed to take this idea to another level of literalness, by making his protagonist actually inhabit and embody different individuals. In this case, Merleau-Ponty's focus on bodily experience of the world is at its peak, satisfying the preoccupation with both unmediated experience and the workings of consciousness. All these are valid reasons to direct the reading of this character and the reading of the novel along the line of a phenomenological-existentialist lens. The "making" of perception is superposed on the making of the novel, on writing and the creative process; ultimately, we are dealing with various forms of decoding of reality.

4. The body

In the first pages of the novel, A is trying to explain what happens to him: "I can access facts, not feelings" (LEVITHAN, 2013, p. 2); "We all contain mysteries, especially when seen from the inside"; "I am already forgetting their details. I have to, or else I will never remember who I really am." (*Ibidem*, p. 3)

When attempting to understand the differences between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre's ways of seeing embodied experience of the world, Hoffman admits to the inevitability of considering the body as a "permanent point of view", "in perspective and within orientation", i.e. situated, which is common to both thinkers (HOFFMAN, 2006, p. 255). However, with the character of *Every Day*, this condition disappears, leaving room for an even fuzzier logic and situation. From what we understand from the protagonist's observations, there is no complete identification with the person whom he inhabits, as he preserves the consciousness and awareness of his own self (whoever that is), accessing, nevertheless, facts, i.e. the mind of the other, but not his/her feelings. This means that there is no complete fusion between the two personalities, but rather a schizoid existence, a double personality pushed into oneness, but keeping some more or less clear boundaries. This is proven at the linguistic level by the way in which A refers to the host body in the third person, singular. Moreover, a lot of times, especially when he feels that the respective body is prey to certain drives that are difficult to control, there is personification involved – many sentences begin with "the body" as subject, followed by an action verb. Hence, the body becomes an agent endowed with volition and intention. The nature of the situation makes it somewhat similar to: possession (as in Nathan's case); mental dissonance (as with Kelsea – the depressed, disturbed girl); withdrawal from drugs (in the case of the addict). And it does not get any clearer along the way. On the contrary. We realize as we read that A has, nevertheless, *some* access to the inhabited person's feelings and emotions – A experiences the sickness of the tripping addict, as well as Kelsea's sadness, plastically describing the emotion as either a black cloud or a black dog. This would mean that more identification takes place than what he initially states. On the other hand, he sometimes cannot even access facts from the person's memory. Despite him and the host appearing to remain separate, he can leave behind traces of feelings and even memory of occurrences, especially when he intends to. In support of this idea comes Rihannon's testimony that she felt different, as if something got added, the morning subsequent to A having inhabited her body. All this means, overall, that, firstly, he is not in control of how much he identifies with the "host" individual, and, secondly, that this identification may take place both to a higher and a lesser degree than announced at the beginning.

It also means that inhabiting different bodies gives him access to a wider variety of experiences, with the respective bodies as vehicles for knowledge acquisition. He proves to be aware of this when he tries to explain to Rihannon that somehow his special situation has made him wiser than a regular teenager, and has brought a plus to his understanding of life, which is deeper, not shallower, as a consequence of his ability.

The effort to make sense of this context and to establish what is going on more clearly and precisely, as well as to understand it more thoroughly, is visible, at the linguistic level, in: the obsession with the verb “be” used in the first person singular, and modals like “can” and “have to”, denoting a preoccupation with the professionalism and hygiene of existing in someone else’s body, the concern with the ethic and appropriateness of how one should do it; the plethora of verbs of physical and especially mental perception (“access”, “seen”, “forgetting”, “remember”), along with nouns denoting the experiencing of the world and an interest in reality and perception (“facts”, “feelings”, “mysteries”, “details”). In this whole set, there is an obsession with knowing, and with the right way or approach to something.

Since the body is the central issue (more exactly, its versatility), there is, as probably natural and to be expected, a focus on body-related vocabulary. This conglomerate of body terms is accompanied by enhanced attention to body language. In describing Rihannon, A resorts to highly suggestive adjectives that manage to compress a lot of information on character and pinpoint some personality features in a very synthetic manner: she is “unsteady” in Justin’s presence, as well as “tentative, expectant, nervous and adoring” (LEVITHAN, 2013, p. 4). Most adjectives share the sememe [+hesitant/insecure], as well as [non-central]. Hence, they suggest lack of self-worth, or a poor form of it present in the girl in her boyfriend’s company. Body language is minutely documented by A: Rihannon “makes herself small” (*Ibidem*, p. 5), “hiding behind her hair”, “looking at the floor” (*Ibidem*, p. 4), is “so lost in her sadness that she does not realize how visible she is” (*Ibidem*, p. 5), and when “Justin” agrees to lunch she manifests “a guarded form of relief” (*Ibidem*, p. 6). These phrases suggest the same insecurity contained in the adjectives, and have in common the idea of cringing and retreat, as well as that of holding back self-expression. All of them are the opposite of openness and of a communicative disposition. They point out that communication is barred and show a context that is unfavorable to it. Rihannon’s gestures are sometimes rendered with the help of metaphors, such as making oneself “small”, which means trying to figuratively appear as harmless and undisturbing as to send out the impression of non-belligerence and thus gain cooperation and even affection.

At some point, A tries to remain awake after midnight, hoping that in this way he will no longer shift bodies. He does not, however, manage to stop the process, and what he experiences instead is a dismemberment which he describes as feeling much like a literal one: “I was ripped from the body I was in [...] every single nerve experiencing the pain of the break, and then the pain of being fused into someone new” (*Ibidem*, p. 25). Violent terms – “ripped” (repeated), “pain” (also repeated), “break”, “fused” – are used to recreate in the fantastic story a science-fiction physical experience that conveys, on a material plane, the metaphysical experience of separation, abandonment, subsequent loneliness and absurdity characterizing existentialist thought. The violent terms and the analogy with literal dismemberment draw attention to the respective experience with more urgency than if it were merely described as a mental-emotional one, rendering it dramatism and intensity.

The body can also provide grounded-ness for A. The phrase “going through the motions”, i.e. solving daily chores, approaching them in the usual ways and for the sake of them being done, perfunctorily, resides – in its first interpretation, to begin with – in the actual performance of physical activities, which involves the body. The body is a tool helping one create habits and routines that ultimately define him or his ways. Hence, the body in this context plays an integrative role for the individual. Also, when he runs, for instance, A identifies with the body he is in, and thus does not feel so separate from the host and the world anymore, and so lonely. The self-effacement that he gives in to paradoxically anchors him: “when you run, you could be anyone. You hone

yourself into a body, nothing more or less than a body. You respond as the body, to the body [...] you have no thoughts but the body's thoughts, no goals but the body's goals. You obliterate yourself in the name of speed. You negate yourself in order to make it past the finish line" (*ibidem*, 182). Also, swimming offers the sensation that one plunges (literally, but also metaphorically) into another reality – given the different environment and its parameters, which impact the body, making one feel differently – a sensation that soothes A, psychologically and emotionally, due to the familiarity that it contains for him, resembling the body-changing experience that he is forced to relive every day.

5. Life philosophy and the role of memory

A outlines his life philosophy early in the novel, in a nutshell fragment that is inclusive of most of the ideas consistent with existentialist phenomenology (mentioned here in the previous section): "I am a drifter, and as lonely as that can be, it is also remarkably freeing. I will never define myself in terms of anyone else. I will never feel the pressure of peers or the burden of parental expectation. I can view everyone as pieces of a whole, and focus on the whole, not the pieces. I have learned how to observe, far better than most people observe. I am not blinded by the past or motivated by the future. I focus on the present, because that is where I am destined to live. I learn. [...] Sometimes I am taught something completely new. I have to access the body, access the mind and see what information it's retained. And when I do, I learn. Knowledge is the only thing that I take with me when I go." (*Ibidem*, p. 7) In connection with the announced philosophy, mirroring it, what he says is: loneliness is part of human condition, but comes accompanied by freedom, which is a chief value; the refusal to take anyone as a landmark or model in defining one's identity is much in tune with existentialism emphasis on uniqueness, as well as lack of guiding lines in terms of what is right or wrong for a human being; seeing people as pieces of a whole accounts for human perception being limited, partial and conditioned; the interest in observing things constitutes the core of phenomenology (as shown above), just as the obsession with knowledge, consciousness and vantage points; last but not least, he stresses the concept of embodied knowledge, and of the body as vehicle for creating relations and experiencing reality (the center of Merleau-Ponty's theory). When he accesses the body, he actually relies on the learned, unconscious practices and routines ingrained in it as well.

Loneliness should not be mistaken for alienation. In A's case, loneliness is owned, as it were, taken as natural, as it is deemed by him inherent in his/human condition. In understanding this, he remarks that his mistake used to be the way he "took other people's lives personally" (*ibidem*), craving bonds and closeness, then having to adjust to the separateness of individuals and the distance, which he eventually grew accustomed to. Alienation, on the other hand, is "lacking a clear sense of oneself as a 'being of possibility'" (MICHELMAN, 2008, p. 31); when this realization and awareness are missing, the individual cannot attain authenticity. Rihannon seems incapable of conceiving herself as such a being for whom opportunity is in place, thus being alienated. She gets a glimpse of it when she gives up Justin, and considers a relationship with A. A, on the other hand, is willing to try to have a life with her despite the obvious inconveniences, against all odds, and embodies this "being of possibility" precisely, primarily, through the way in which he envisages the others as such beings: "Every person is a possibility." (LEVITHAN, 2013, p. 309). The use of this word is not accidental, as in the paragraph in which it appears, the idea is put forth again – "the only way to keep going is to see every person as a possibility" – and the noun "possibility" is used five times in seven lines and a half, the seventh time in the plural, reiterating more or less the same idea, and explaining what being in this way, filled with possibility, means and entails, in relation to humans: "Kindness. Creativity. Engagement in the world." (*Ibidem*). Seeing the potential in the others is seconded and completed, in A's case, by believing in having that potential himself, and by persevering in trying to achieve things.

If we analyze the language of the long fragment above we come up with interesting conclusions. Let us look at the words, classified on parts of speech. The nouns are: "drifter",

“peers”, “burden”, “expectations”, “pieces”, “whole”, “knowledge”, “people”, “present”, “past”, “future”, “body”, “mind”; the verbs are: “am”, “can be”, “is”, “define”, “feel”, “view”, “focus”, “learn”, “taught”, “observe”, “access”, “see”, “retained”, “take”, “go”; adjectives: “lonely”, “freeing”; pronouns “myself”, “anyone”, “everyone” (*Ibidem*, p. 7). Most words refer to physical or mental processes and cognition, as well as feelings. The majority of the others are in some way connected with the body and the actions that it performs. Here, we may detect a sense of discontent or existentialist anxiety, implicit in the terms “burden” and “expectations”. Some terms, like “define”, “pieces” or “whole” designate attempts to make sense of, or order the world and reality through logical categories and relations – part-whole, for instance, or inclusion-exclusion and identity-difference. The indefinite pronouns point to generality and non-identifiability, which again contain an effort towards the understanding of existence, and to open-mindedness that makes room for all diversity; in this last sense, the use of indefinite pronouns is connected with the notion and attitude of tolerance, enhanced by the use of the nouns “peers” and “people” which show empathy and awareness of the others’ existence. The obsession with being-in-the world (and how this happens and what it means), knowing, consciousness, and noticing is kept on, through the use of some relevant verbs, such as “be” (mostly in the present), “learn”, “taught”, “access” or “observe”.

Another relevant detail, which will amount to a tendency in its own right in the whole narrative, is the introduction of spatial metaphors in the discourse. They are implied in the noun “drifter”, in A’s discussion of “pieces” and the “whole”. Later on in the novel, he explains that “By seeing the world from so many angles, I get more of a sense of its dimensionality” (*ibidem*, 107). The use of the noun “angles” refers to different manners of perception, whereas “dimensionality” covers the notion of the vast range of such ways of seeing, in its totality. Daily routines are described as “I just sit in my frame, float in my tank”, physical containment being used to express a type of self-censure of both mind and emotion, of A’s own self, so as to avoid altering the life he is living at one particular moment (*Ibidem*, p. 184). The preference for spatial metaphors helps the narrator convey the notions of: our smallness and limitedness of perception (transposed in limited spatial viewing angle); the existence of difference; the innumerable possible interpretations of something; and the immensity of the world itself. The last point is also made through the obsession with the ocean and the term “enormity” used to describe the hugeness of the order/something that lies beyond our understanding (as we shall discuss presently).

5.1. Memory

Verbs like “retained”, “learn”, and “taught”, along with nouns such as “knowledge”, or “past”, “present” and “future” have in common the meaning feature [+memory]. Their intervention in discourse parallels the frequent use of the verbs “forget” and “remember” in the text of the novel, and retrieve the theme of remembrance. In the existentialist framework, it is linked with learning and knowledge, as well as taking in practices and habits or movements of the body. In our context, remembering is also important in a different way as well, given the particularity of the situation, in which the character needs to permanently negotiate memory content. There is, first, what he knows and remembers about himself, which needs to be left in the background, or even discarded if the principles contained in it contradict what the ethics of the temporary situation require him to do; in other words, he sometimes needs to refrain himself from doing what he would normally choose to do, if it comes in disagreement with what he senses that his host would do, or if the radicalism or decidedness of his gesture would cause a dramatic change that would irremediably affect the host’s life, under the circumstances in which A does not (usually) know what the host would actually want. In order to refer to the symbolical boundaries that A should not breach, from an ethical point of view, he uses the terms “parameters” and “safe zone”, which have in common in their sense the notion of limit (*Ibidem*, p. 68). When he wakes up in Rihannon’s body, he resorts, for more emphasis, to the metaphor of the world having “turned to glass” to stress the need for delicacy, and the kind of attention, sensitivity and responsibility of symbolical moves which are required in inhabiting one’s body and life (*Ibidem*, p. 188). Another metaphor for the danger of affecting

someone's life irremediably is the "butterfly effect" (*Ibidem*, p. 195). Coming back to the kinds of memory involved in this strange context and their features, secondly, there is the memory of the host, the probing of which should also be done mindfully, respectfully, sometimes on a need-to-know basis, with the preservation of the person's dignity, individuality and privacy. Thirdly, there is the aspect of what memory A decides to leave his host with after he has left her/his body. A careful and responsible doctoring of the remaining traces in this sense is necessary. Memory, therefore, exists on the battlefield of a constant negotiation between selves. It is a matter of back-and-forthness, of coexistence of bits and pieces that at the same time need to remain separate. This is why, at some point in the story, A becomes worried upon realizing that he no longer delimits events and moments very well, as he fears he will negatively impact the lives of the inhabited if he does not pay attention to details and to remembering them exactly. Memory is thus a matter of ethics, and of living ethically, and ethic is an aspect that existentialists have always shown interest in.

Memory also means continuity, which the character is desperately trying to acquire, since his situation makes it difficult to have it. Continuity means a story line, which ultimately means identity, coherence, which is something else that he is implicitly denied. Hence, the obsession with memory, as memory comes accompanied by other things at stake, things that A loses when he loses track of events: "Normal people don't have to decide what's worth remembering. You are given a hierarchy, recurring characters, the help of repetition, of anticipation, the firm hold of a long history. But I have to decide the importance of each and every memory. I only remember a handful of people, and in order to do that, I have to hold tight, because the only repetition available – the only way I am going to see them again – is if I conjure them in my mind." (*Ibidem*, p. 52). Remembering means literally re-memorizing one's life out of patches, establishing hierarchies by prioritizing as the timeline is no longer given, making up a life and meaning from patches of various personalities and contexts. Repetition does not happen naturally in his life, as there is no life, no co-occurrence of persons or routines; repetition is not available as a first-hand experience, but only as a second-hand one, at the expense of effort and stress; repeat access to the same reality is inexistent. The protagonist-narrator's obsession with word repetitions at the level of the narrative, just as the occasional circularity in his statements appear as material forms of an attempt to prevent or compensate for loss, an effort for retrieval – of information and of identity. Moreover, the pondering on the decision what to keep in mind is actually the decision for the composition of the story that we are reading. Hence, the quote above is, moreover, a self-reflexive comment on novel writing.

5.2. Presentism

Understanding that Justin does not treat her properly and affectionately, A means to give Rihannon at least "one good day" (*Ibidem*, p. 11). Entwined with this purpose, there is another, more general one, which asserts and reflects his life philosophy: "I have wondered for so long without any sense of purpose, and now this ephemeral purpose has been given to me"; A wants the day to be, above all, a "shared one", and to be able to "take the music of the moment and see how long it can last" (*Ibidem*); when they sing along in the car, he feels that "We sense each other. The world, right now, is only us." (*Ibidem*, p. 12) One gloomy idea that can be taken out of these remarks is the absurdity of life, its apparent purposelessness, which is an existentialist anxiety. However, the attention that A gives Rihannon has in it the ethic of the existentialist intention of authenticity and quest for freedom, the interest in the uniqueness of an individual, as well as in experiencing the world. There is also a need for communication and sharing, to bond with another human being. Moreover, A would like to find a way to hold on to a purpose beyond the fleetingness of the moment, he tends to look for something durable and lasting, which is, ultimately, a quest for meaning at a larger scale, but knows that what he experiences now is all that he has. This idea is put forth through the intermediary of a music metaphor. The two teenagers are indeed listening to songs, literally, in their car, and it is inside their musical duet that the above-mentioned communication, harmony and bonding take place. When A says that he wants the music to go on,

her refers to the harmony, order and symphonic whole – i.e. meaning – for which music constitutes a metaphor. It is this meaning that A would like to have and hold on to in the future, and which in reality he knows he can't appropriate, except in the enjoyment of a particular instance that he can then preserve in his heart.

A resorts to metaphor on various occasions in order to send out his life philosophy. He says "We weren't supposed to come near the ocean today." to apparently refer to their atypical, holiday-like trip to the water made on a week day, but in reality describing the creation of uniqueness and meaning in one's own, specific, un-prescribed, out-of-ordinary ways, and the figurative deviation from the common, beaten-track, conservative approach to things (*Ibidem*, p. 16). The sentences preceding the one above are: "She should be in English class. I should be in bio." (*Ibidem*). We notice, again, the use of repetition as a focus of attention and as a means to condense affect in what he says; with this trope, the phrasing points to more emotional investment, and is more soulful. Also, in this particular case, the use of the modal "should" (repeated), next to the negative verb "weren't supposed to" adds the dramatism of doing prohibited things, ultimately converging to the main idea of stepping over an invisible but existent line of convention.

Striving to hold on to meaning, despite knowing that it is impossible, and that meaning only resides in context, goes hand in hand with the philosophy of presentism and mindfulness. If all we have is what we have now, then we should try to enjoy the present moment at its fullest, and make the most of it: "I am not thinking about the past. I am not thinking about the future. I am full of such gratitude for the sun, the water, the way my feet sink into the sand, the way my hand feels holding her." (*Ibidem*) The way A feels seems a perfect match for Eckhart Tolle's state of being in the Now: nothing exists outside the present, and the mind is not the suitable instrument to grasp this, but when the person does grasp it, "there is a shift in consciousness from mind to Being, from time to presence. Suddenly, everything feels alive, radiates energy, emanates Being" (TOLLE, 2005, p. 50). A seems to be trying to apply Tolle's philosophy, and succeeds, still having, however, at the back of his mind, a nostalgia for finding a durable truth and resolving the dilemma of holding on to it in both past and future.

5.3. The absurd hero

We shall now look into whether and how much A resembles Albert Camus' absurd hero, a prominent figure in existentialism. Camus' character refuses the comfort and "self-mutilation" of both believing in God (i.e. of indulging in myths and deceptions), and literal suicide, and dignifiedly goes on living in "revolt" and awakened, in ongoing awareness of absurdity (YOUNG, 2006, p. 519). Dogged "perseverance" and discipline in performing life's routines is the attitude that one should embody, i.e. be a Sisyphus who is in a state of consciousness regarding the "nauseating character of his condition", which is death, nothingness and the "abyss" (*Ibidem*). Camus pointed out that there is a type of happiness to be found in this dignified, heroic approach to life, and that "We need the nothing to become alive to the wonder and value of the 'something'" (*Ibidem*, p. 520). Also, existentialist authenticity is a result of (or definable as) the "urgency, intensity, and heightened awareness" coming from the danger and excess characterizing life, and, to illustrate the absurd hero and this approach, Camus gives the examples of Don Juan and the actor as relevant types: the former encompasses excess in his existence because of his conquests, and the latter because he impersonates many others (*Ibidem*).

If we look at A, he is both a Don Juan and an actor. Also, his profile fits, broadly, the absurd hero's. However, he does not have the revolt and the anguished dramatism of Camus' prototype. This is actually the reason why we chose Julian Young's essay to talk about Camus' absurd hero, instead of referring directly to Camus, as the corrections that Young brings to Camus' logic are the ones that A, as a character, seems to have applied in his logic and life philosophy as well. Basically, what Young states is that Camus' hero cannot, logically (or should not), have both revolt, on the one hand, and happiness and rapture, on the other (*Ibidem*, p. 523). Also, perseverance and "unconditional resistance" in the face of imminent obliteration is foolish, if one were to really be

that terrorized (*Ibidem*, p. 524). Which means that the horror with which one regards death is not actually that, it is replaced by “equanimity”, and an explanation why this is possible is offered (*Ibidem*, p. 525). Young says that Camus’ absurd hero feels alone because he is disconnected; he would be soothed if he believed that the universe were able to suffer and love as well, just like him; the reason why he fails to conceptualize this situation is because he cannot see himself past/outside his ego, as more than strictly human, i.e. metaphorically swell into the universe (*Ibidem*, p. 526). So, instead of shrinking into one’s ego, one should make the opposite move, of expanding into the universe. Terror arises from the fact that death is the end of the ego, and, for one who reduces himself to the ego, death consequently means extinction; but, if one conceives oneself as more than the ego, death does not mean annihilation, or something negative (*Ibidem*, p. 527). Of course, Young continues by asking if this may not be seen as just another form of metaphorical suicide or maiming, and answers that it is rather an assertion of the existentialist idea that we are limited in our perception, and that there are undisclosed things and a plenitude that remains hidden out there (in Heidegger’s terms) (*Ibidem*, p. 528).

A’s situation is both better and worse than the absurd hero’s. Since he apparently cannot die (he is perpetually stuck at sixteen), he has no fear of death. Nevertheless, he has no actual life either, because of his rootlessness. So, in a way, he is perpetually dying every day. On the other hand, by experiencing other lives, and seeing how the others have similar problems, he feels less lonely. Given his special condition, A can, in his impersonation of others, go outside his ego, and expand into the universe. This gives him a different perspective on death, which is no longer as final and definite, or well-defined, as for a regular human being. He understands that there is, and has first-hand evidence of, something beyond the physical existence. Nevertheless, it can be argued that this something may come as a variation of the same routine and absurdity of normal existence. Nevertheless, living it seems to take the edge of the fear or revolt present in Camus’ absurd hero. A is an absurd hero with a twist. This twist, in the way he feels and speaks, seems much like Young’s “elegiac sense of ephemerality” in the face of departure (which replaces Camus’ horror and revolt in the face of death as a final ending) (*Ibidem*, p. 529). This elegiac sense is visible in A’s vocabulary, tone and wording, which make room for the lyricism mentioned at the beginning of our study.

A also turns out to be a paradoxical absurd hero because he has moments of what we may call mysticism – not necessarily in the religious sense, but as an “altered state of consciousness” (HONDERICH, 1995, p. 599) in which the subject feels he has acquired special knowledge (*ibidem*, 600) – a state in which he not only believes in the existence of a higher power and order in the universe, but also seems to experience them: “I feel the universe is telling me something. And it doesn’t even matter if it’s true or not. What matters is that I feel it, and believe it. The enormity rises within me. The universe nods along to the songs.” (LEVITHAN, 2013, p. 52) These words denote the presence of faith, in the large sense of the word, and thus go against the profile of the typical absurd hero. However, the sense of futility is still there, but there is an effort from A’s part to encompass, reconcile and harmoniously internalize both tendencies. We notice the use of the term “universe”, for which some comments are in place. The first is that its meaning here is not the denotative one appearing first in any dictionary, i.e. the universe as the object of scientific study for astronomers. It refers to the universe as a mysterious order of things, definable with the help of the sememes [+consciousness/+conscious] and [+intentionality]. Secondly, we catch on the all-encompassing, democratic stance of not limiting belief in a master order to God, i.e. religious dogma. A does not avoid the word/concept, though, as he quotes the lyrics of a song containing it repeatedly in the novel: “*And if I only could, I’d make a deal with God*” (*Ibidem*, p. 10, 52). Hence, the reason why he resorts to the term “universe”, and not “God”, is not absence of religious belief/faith, but a desire for tolerance and inclusiveness. The noun “enormity” is synonymous with “universe” in the second sense described above. It is interesting how the narrator comes up with a new term to designate the unspeakable, the master order, and does so based on an extrapolation of meaning for a noun for which one of the basic sememes is [+big]. This artifice entails, and means to

transmit, more open-mindedness in his approach to speaking about the metaphysical, also hinting at the fact that, even though our appraisal of it is limited, this does not need to bar either belief or the quest for the unknown.

From what he comments further in the novel, we understand that his message, and, indeed, the point, is beyond establishing whether one believes in the traditional God of any given religion, just as, also, the point is not examining difference in terms of race, sexual orientation, gender or ideas. All these are merely outer manifestations of people's common desire and need "to touch the enormity": to believe in the existence of something beyond them/"a higher power", "to belong", and to keep "company"/not to be alone (*Ibidem*, p. 77). We have to take into account the ambivalence hidden in his statement: if people have these needs, and religious belief fulfils them, this may also interpret belief as a mere alleviation of basic anxieties, as a dispeller of fears, and, hence, as holding nothing real beyond the satisfaction of a psychological drive, as being a simple construct. This is why the ambiguity of A as an absurd hero (be that with a twist) gets maintained. Nevertheless, his pacifism and urge for tolerance is definite: it is visible in the repetitive use of "everybody"; he even puts it mathematically, by saying that all conflict arises from people's stubbornness "to focus on the 2 percent" (*Ibidem*) rather than the 98 percent that we have in common, genetically speaking. Maths and biology are universal languages that he brings into his argument precisely for the sake of the persuasive cogency intrinsic in the universality and factuality of their findings.

His tolerance is manifested towards alternative sexual orientations as well. Since it is an issue that he tends to come back to upon various occasions in the novel, we could say that it is a central concern. Again, the reality of body shifting may also be a material aspect particularly chosen to illustrate the perspective of tolerance in the announced respect. The narrator uses the empathy created through this context to suggest and inspire empathy for people with a different sexual orientation: "I have never fallen in love with a gender. I have fallen for individuals." (*Ibidem*, p. 142) Protesting against homosexuals is "like protesting the fact that some people are red-haired" (*ibidem*). In terms of style, he uses simple, easy-to-understand words, and examples to put this awareness forth, to the purpose of making his ideas more impactful. Also, when he means to make a point, he is outspoken, direct and concise. Moreover, comparison appears in the picture as a trope.

In saying that "people use the devil as an alias for the things they fear" (*Ibidem*), the character-narrator A implies that the devil is a construct, one that covers the absence of assuming responsibility for one's incapacities or disavowed anxieties. His stance is also a denunciation of a dualistic vision of the metaphysical world, denying religious doctrine. It does so by acknowledging, in what resembles a dictionary definition, the devil – the character or principle made to represent evil in doctrine – into an invented, metaphorical, scapegoat entity standing, in fact, for human shortcomings. Potentially, this statement hides a criticism of the church, on account of it having promoted dualism in dogma – a reading encouraged by the ironical way in which the narrator comments on the church people's irrational, hysterical (on occasion) reactions and behavior to Nathan's story (of waking up on the side of the road at night, unable to explain how he got there), which they unequivocally see as a consequence of possession by the devil. Dualism is something that the narrator would find annoying because it means to oppress people into "choosing" good based on fear, instead of willfully, out of awareness, empathy and as a result of freely formed conviction, i.e. also in line with the narrator's professed tolerance.

6. The philosophy of love

In a discussion of how love is viewed, we should first say that, for A, it is the one thing that can provide the answer to a quest for the meaning of life. The two things that love offers are continuity and belonging, the latter concept having to do with continuity just as much as it has to do with emotional comfort and purposefulness: belonging is "the most euphoric of feelings" (*Ibidem*, p. 22); love renders one the impression that "everything has been *leading* to this, all the secret *arrows* were *pointing here*, the universe and time itself *crafted* this long ago, and [...] you are just now *arriving* at the *place* you were always meant to be" (*Ibidem*, p. 23) (my Italics). If we look at

the terms used in this comment, they point to spatiality and, more precisely, to a figurative journey, which, in its turn, entails a master plan, the existence of order (a “craft”) in the universe. Love’s merit, then, among others, is to reveal this secret of an existing *telos*: “when you love someone, they become your reason” (*Ibidem*, p. 68). It comes in one’s life along with meaning, reassurance, emotional wellbeing. It is, to a certain extent, going against (if not the dispeller of) nothingness.

However, love provides continuity only in the sense of meaning/*telos*, not *per se*. Like the assumed everlasting existence of one’s body, its perpetuity is falsely taken for granted, while all one has, in connection with love, is “presence” in one given moment (*Ibidem*, p. 58). Body shifting then becomes a metaphor for life’s transitory character, for the idea of enjoying the moment while it lasts, for presentism and for the temporariness of love, as well as for its inevitable loss, and the immanent ending of one’s material existence. Body change is illustrative of the fact that death is inherent in life, just as loss and separation are inherent in love.

The choice of the right words may evoke a powerful image that manages to throw light on one’s personality in a very revelatory manner starting from just one detail of their body language. We have seen above that the protagonist succeeds in this clinical descriptive accuracy when it comes to presenting Rihannon. In a few poignant images of photographic precision, we understand her personality better than if A had written essays on it. His way with words is seen in the manner in which he conveys his philosophy of love as well. Talking about Rihannon’s need to make things work with Justin, and the way in which she clings to the relationship with her boyfriend, A states: “The unwarranted devotion. Putting up with the fear of being with the wrong person because you can’t deal with the fear of being alone. The hope tinged with doubt, and the doubt tinged with hope.” (*Ibidem*, p. 9) The main point is knowing when emotional investment should not be made anymore, drawing the line in making compromises, recognizing a lost cause, having the wisdom to admit incompatibility, having enough self-esteem and courage to walk away from a toxic relationship, even if it means confronting one’s fear of being alone. The narrator’s masterful choice of adjectives is something that we have noticed and mentioned above, and which is again in place in this context: “unwarranted” reunites the exact meanings that he is trying to put forth – [underserved], plus [uncalled-for]. Another aspect that we notice again is the repetition of a few key words: “fear”, “hope”, “doubt”. These repeated terms draw attention to the feelings involved in this mechanism, as well as to the fact that they are contrastive and thus create antagonism and anxiety, meaning that they signal the presence of disharmony and that something is wrong and needs to be corrected; they stress that the emotional side a human being is important, showing that what one feels should be heeded and analyzed; last but not least, the way in which they circularly re-occur manages to clearly suggest, at the linguistic level, the vicious circle that the character is in.

Love modifies one’s perception of the beloved: “the attachment you have can define your perception as much as any other influence” (*Ibidem*, p. 34). Besides representing a point of view on what love and its effects are like, the statement is also an illustration of the existentialist idea that there are limits and constraints that shape our outlooks.

Adjusting to the other person in the couple is like fitting puzzle pieces, except that these need to be smoothened first: “It’s not like a puzzle piece where there’s an instant fit. With relationships, you have to shape the pieces on each end before they go perfectly together.” (*Ibidem*, p. 260) We notice the spatial metaphor of the puzzle behind the description of a successful relationship, as well as the part-whole logic, achieved through nouns sharing or entailing a [+spatial] feature, like: “puzzle”, “piece”, “fit”, “end”, along with the verb “shape”. This comment also sends us to the way in which love and being in a pair/couple/relationship is perceived, as completing a whole, in the sense of filling both an emotional and an epistemological void. Still based on a spatial metaphor, a relationship is, on a number of occasions, likened to tight-roping, in which case, besides the [up/being situated higher in the air] spatial feature, we also have the implied sememes [+ (effort to) keep one’s balance], [+adjustment/adaptability], [+minding the environment], [+move carefully] coming into the picture. For each of these references that the image sends to/pieces of advice that it implicitly provides for interacting with the material world, there is a

similar metaphorical reality to be read in it: being in some sort of danger, or in a situation that is out of one's full control; to figuratively steer in one's actions so as to maintain the connection with the other person; to mind the other person's needs and desires; to adjust, to some extent, one's behavior and expectations so as to make them compatible with the other, to make compromises; to be empathetic; to be consistent with oneself; to read the signs of potential changes in the relationship etc. Last but not least, the "golden tether" between people is yet another metaphorical way to refer to a love connection. The spatiality involved in this figurative definition is emphasized in the detailed description of the mechanics of this tether: partners "hold on to" an "end" each, can "feel the pull" from the other "on the other end" (*Ibidem*, Six earlier days, added chapters). The tether is a subtle reference to string theory in physics as well, which symbolically supports the idea that everything is not only interconnected, but also linked by way of consequence or cause and effect as well, and thus pointing to the fact that everything that we do matters more than we are aware of.

7. Conclusions

At the linguistic level, among the first things that we notice, there is the use of picturesque, evocative adjectives. The narrator is observant in what regards body language, and has a special ability to condense complex meanings regarding personality in simple, but telltale gestures. The use of repetition is particularly poignant, either for drawing attention or to increase dramatism, or even to suggest more complex ideas and associations, such as, for instance, a vicious circle. Notions from the exact sciences seem to be a vehicle for the intention to persuade, like those taken from mathematics, physics and biology-genetics.

Metaphors are an effective way of conveying ideas. In our context, they are mostly about physical, mental and emotional processes, such as the ones associating depression with a black cloud and a black dog, or the chemistry of a wired-up body with the noise and enhanced perception of stimuli involved when it comes to a radio at top volume flipping channels uncontrollably, which the person in such a state can be likened to. When he describes Kelsea's self-inflicted cuts on her skin as "the web you create to catch your own death" (*Ibidem*, p. 120), A combines metaphor with a double meaning. The verb "to catch" may be understood as either describing symbolically someone's intention to get in control, and get rid of the destructive emotions that are dominating him/her (i.e. illustrated by a figurative "death"), or synonymous with "becoming infected with"/"bringing upon oneself", in which case it would refer to the actual dying. It depends on the meaning role we assign to the person in relation with which the statement is used, i.e. Agent or Patient. Besides the metaphors related to physical, mental and emotional turmoil, spatial language and metaphors constitute a special interest. There is a lot of vocabulary connected with the body as container, with part-whole interpretations of reality, and with dimensions and size.

The profile of the main character is that of an existentialist, with a twist. We have seen that, although he realizes the futility inherent in his peculiar life, he does not give up living, and he approaches it in a positive way. Also, the narrator manages to suggest that the life led by A is in essence no different from ours – all lives involve loss, separation, absurdity, beauty. The protagonist does not share the gloom, revolt or anger of a basic absurd hero, but, rather, the relentlessness of performing his role(s), and the elegiac sense of the revisited absurd hero of Young's perspective, plus a belief in the importance of connecting and in human affection, not losing sight of the "being of possibility": "If you stare at the center of the universe, there is a coldness there. A blankness. Ultimately, the universe doesn't care about us. Time doesn't care about us. That's why we have to care about each other." (*Ibidem*, p. 320)

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