



Duality and Ontological Quest in *A Heart Under the Ash* by Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt*

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IN the five collections of short stories published until 2020 by Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt, the figure of the double is omnipresent. Extremely diverse, it sometimes appears in traditional shapes, while at other times, it takes innovative forms, which echo the contemporary culture.

The plot of the short story *Un cœur sous la cendre*, included in the collection *Les deux messieurs de Bruxelles* (2012), is centered on the parallel (or potentially intertwined) dramas lived by two related families, on the background represented by the awakening of the Eyjafjöll volcano in Iceland. A secondary plot with accents of crime fiction brings the story close to the acute debates of contemporaneity, which raise questions relating to bioethics, to the body and its limits, to the unity of the individual.

The aim of this article is a thematic analysis of the modalities of the double found in the short story, through qualitative and interdisciplinary research. The main working methods are textual analysis and critical reading, sometimes supplemented by comparative and diachronic research. The key concepts on which the discussion is based are provided by the critics Thierry Ozwald and Florence Goyet with regard to the classic forms of the literary double, by the semiologist Fanny Georges in relation to the digital avatar and by the sociologist David Le Breton on the

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subject of the ontological quest that takes place around the human body, the three theoretical strands representing the main directions of the empirical research.

Thierry Ozwald has focused extensively on the theme of the double in his work *La nouvelle*, where he states that dualism affects all the components of the text, to the point of becoming “a law of the genre” (Ozwald, 1996, p. 87). The most systematic manifestation is found in actantial forms and combinations, in various forms -rivalry, similarities, twinning, and relationships between entire groups. Besides this, the problem of duplication arises at all levels: the exterior and interior are modeled on one another. Dualism also manifests itself at the level of narrative structures - split narrator, split narrative discourse, reproduction of events.

Our research highlights the dialogue that the short story *Un cœur sous la cendre* maintains with the tradition of the genre, more concretely the way in which the motif of the double evolves to become part of the poetics of the short story in the 21st century, marked by philosophical, ethical and sociological discussions of the time.

The modalities of the double found in the short story are grouped according to two axes: duality and affective life, which includes elements belonging to the long and fertile tradition of this literary motif and duality and ontological quest, which includes contemporary concerns essentially linked to identity issues.

The first main direction of research highlights traditional forms of the double, a sub-category of which is represented by the figures of the couple. Alba and Katrin -the Ólafsdóttir sisters- heirs to family history are linked by a bond, which enables them to communicate without words, guess the thoughts of the other and share codified languages. The point towards which the common impulses of the two sisters converge is Katrin's son, Jonas. From the beginning of the story, the reader is led to understand that the Ólafsdóttir sisters both fulfill, differently, the role of mother in Jonas' life. The couple Jonas-Thor constitutes a second binary structure of the short story. The cousins are painted in antithesis: while Jonas cumulates various qualities -considerate, kind, enthusiastic, and generous-, Thor goes through an adolescence crisis that renders him sullen, defiant and distant. The opposition continues in the short story: while everyone is worried about Jonas' survival, it is Thor who suddenly dies in a moped accident. Thor's descent into death is simultaneous with Jonas' ascent to life due to a heart transplant received miraculously.

The second sub-category of traditional forms is represented by the psychological double, an example of which is the ambivalence of Alba's feelings about the fates of Thor and Jonas. Pain and unhappiness coexist, destabilizing her. Suspecting that her nephew had received her son's heart, Alba experiences a psychological split, discovering in her a previously unknown *alter ego*: a demonic self.

In this circumstance, Alba finds a double - "Vilma, her new sister" (Schmitt, 2012, p. 210) and begins "a life parallel to her official life" (*Ibid.*, p. 209). Alba plans to assassinate Jonas; Vilma plans to kidnap him to find her daughter's heart. At this point, their trajectories diverge: while Vilma takes action and kidnaps Jonas, Alba, shaken by this act, goes through a moment of lucidity, which brings her back to herself and pushes her to use all her resources to save her nephew.

Finally, in the well-known tradition of the short story, the outdoor elements reflect various episodes of the narration and increase their intensity, from the serenity of the beginning, to the energies discharged during the dramatic moments of the story, ending with a regained calm in the natural world, as in the human one.

The second main direction of research highlights the modalities of the double linked to contemporary concerns and mainly related to ontology, more precisely to the perception of the human being, its meaning and its future.

A first modern representation of the double, which can be found in the short story, falls under the debate concerning the virtual universe and the digital avatar. In the 21st century, the term *avatar* enters the vocabulary of computer science to designate a contemporary evolution of duplication, because, in order to build such an avatar, the player metaphorically finds himself in front of a blank page, which he must fill with elements of real identity and fictional elements. This is what Thor does in front of his computer. Thor's addiction to video games makes him almost absent from his family. Alba's attempts to enter into dialogue with him result in a monologue with violent and threatening overtones. Alba also recognizes one of the essential problems linked to digital avatars, that of the virtual universe as a space of immortality. Paradoxically, the digital representation of the body's survival will be contradicted by the reality of life, where Thor dies shortly after having argued with his mother.

The second contemporary representation of the double leads to a discussion concerning the body and its component parts, their limits and meaning.

The point of reference for the analysis of this subject is the book *Anthropologie du corps et modernité* by David Le Breton. According to the author, the body, being at the center of individual action and social symbolism, represents a modality of analysis that facilitates a better understanding of the present. David Le Breton equates the body with the *alter ego* of man, his modern double. In this imaginary, man is an emanation of his body, in the form of genes, which gives rise to the hypothesis that personality is conditioned by physiological functions. David Le Breton also tackles the problem of organ transplantation; for science, the body is no longer the sign of human identity, but a collection of organs, interchangeable parts, and one material among others.

All of these subjects of reflection are echoed in the short story *Un cœur sous la cendre* and are even mentioned by the author in his *Journal d'écriture*. The short story puts the body under the sign of a paradoxical conception: it is, on the one hand, the support of the person; on the other hand, the body is seen as an entity detached from the individual, able to continue its existence almost autonomously. If disturbing, Schmitt's story of transplantation is not scary. It also includes an important psychological dimension, which examines post-traumatic stress in the families of *post-mortem* donors.

The very old motif of the double proves its dynamism and its capacity to renew itself if we take into consideration the plurality of its manifestations in a single short story. The text juxtaposes the double, which arises from the split of the individual, and the double, which comes from the sphere of non-self, of otherness. A third category of the double arises from the fusion of the two forms mentioned above, when a part of the individual merges into otherness through transplantation.

In literary history, the motif of the double has often been linked to the individual's desire for immortality. We must highlight the innovations that Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt operates in relation to this tradition, by granting medical and digital technological advances the power to create figures of the double capable of achieving a form of immortality.

People who are going through a crisis and trying to find the meaning and the order of things populate the world of the short story. In this quest, the confrontation with the double brings the individual to a deeper knowledge of oneself, the other and the world.

Keywords— Double, *Alter ego*, Avatar, Body, Transplantation.

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