9.2 Abstract

In this Master's thesis we have attempted to interpret Émile Ajar's novel *La Vie devant soi* using knowledge based on the psychoanalytic theory of trans-generational transmission. This theory assumes that a person who has been the victim of a traumatic experience cannot consciously refer to it, either through embarrassment or due to the fact that the trauma cannot be referred to verbally. However, he or she can refer to such traumas subconsciously in hints or symbols, precisely because expressing traumas, or their symbolisation in words, is the most effective therapy. If the trauma is not erased, it is transferred further trans-generationally.

We consider Émile Ajar's *La Vie devant soi* to be a suitable work for applying the above-mentioned theory, not only due to the extraordinary life story of the author, but also as concerns the novel itself. Émile Ajar is a pseudonym of the well-known author Romain Gary (born Roman Kacew) who created the character of Émile Ajar in order to write freely regardless of what was expected of Gary as an established author and moreover, a well-known supporter of de Gaulle. As Gary's play on identities was brought to light only after his death, he was the only author to have ever been awarded the Goncourt Prize twice – the second time as Émile Ajar in *La Vie devant soi*.

He gave an insight into his life experiences in his “autobiographies” (e.g. *La Promesse de l'aube*) published under Gary's name. However, it has been proven that the author embellished this work with a certain amount of fiction. Therefore, we presumed that he used the same strategy (fact interwoven with fiction) in his novels published as fiction. For the purposes of our interpretation we therefore borrowed from Serge Doubrovsky's concept of autofiction and decided to look for analogies between the author's work and his life which was marked by his Jewish fate. He was on the run continuously, and went through WWII as a fighter pilot with de Gaulle's forces. Furthermore, he had to live alongside his exceptionally strict and domineering mother whose excessive demands he attempted to fulfil throughout his entire life, even after her death. He became a fighter pilot, a war hero, a diplomat and an acclaimed writer precisely as his mother had wished.

The story of the little Arab boy Momo growing up in the poor Paris quarters of Belleville in the 1970s presents the reader with numerous motifs related to the author's personality. We have only concentrated on several of these motifs – wartime events, false identities, mother and father – all of which are closely connected. When the novel came out in the 1970s, there was a surge in French society in a tendency to discard the heritage of the past as an unnecessary burden. Understanding the past as an element of a cultural part of our origin is an essential component in the formation of our identity, with the most significant element being parents. Dual origin (from both mother and father) is a basic condition for a free identity, something which was withheld from both Gary and Momo. Therefore, we dare to claim that *La Vie devant soi* is not a novel concerning a mother or
love for her but a novel about a father Gary never had.