

Shared stories:

Co-authorship and relational perspectives in two breast cancer memoirs

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The essay examines two breast cancer memoirs from a literary perspective: Cancer in Two Voices by Sandra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum (1991), and The Use of Photography by Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie (2005). The comparative analysis of the two texts aims to explore the dual perspective that characterises both works, shedding light on how the notion of kinship acts and is interpreted within them. Furthermore, the inquiry investigates the ethical implications of these collaborative literary projects, ascertaining the presence of different narrative authorities and determining what values and functions are associated with storytelling when a couple experiencing illness decides to write about it. What emerges from the comparison is an extended notion of kinship that gives rise to narratives pervaded by tensions between introspection and acceptance of otherness, the private story and the public dimension, the role of the caregiver and that of the sick person.

Introduction

Among the authors of illness memoirs, or pathographies,¹ we find caregivers belonging to the family circle and partners acting as compassionate witnesses, thus foregrounding the concept of kinship and rejecting the sick person's subjectivity as the only dominant principle of the narrative. The change of perspective is further accentuated in those memoirs written by two closely related authors. This is the case of the texts at the centre of this essay, written by pairs of lovers and from different geographical areas; *Cancer in Two Voices* by Sandra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum (USA, 1991) and *L'usage de la photo* (*The Use of Photography*) by Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie (France, 2005).²

By considering the impact of the diagnosis in a couple and community dimension, this article aims to establish how the notion of kinship is interpreted within these two co-authored works and influences the very structure of the text. Indeed, in both stories the sick person elects her partner as her closest companion and participant in the illness, questioning both the meaning of kinship and that of caregiver. At the same time, she encourages the other to give voice to his or her own experience of living with someone diagnosed with cancer. This subdivision of the narrative, however, does not only entail a thematisation of the bonds privileged by the authors, their importance and their limits, but also a shaping of the text that bears the traces of the tensions and negotiations associated with the notion of kinship.

To explore these representations of kinship and how they influence both form and content in the two memoirs, I will rely on close reading. This literary approach allows me to identify and highlight the narrative strategies through which the authors present, navigate, and challenge notions of kinship in and through their collaborative writing projects. Emphasis is placed on the selected memoirs, *Cancer in Two Voices* and *The Use of Photography*, covering the two decades leading up to and following the millennial shift. The works have in common that they are exceptional cases in which it is precisely the plurality of subjectivities at stake, starting from the dual authorship, that determines atypical textual configurations. While Butler and Rosenblum's memoir stands out for being «[t]he only published breast cancer narrative written collaboratively by a lesbian couple» (DeShazer, 2005, p. 232), *The Use of Photography*, despite its heterosexual belonging, is also an isolated case, since co-authored writing projects are a rarity in the general

1. The term is used by Anne Hunsaker Hawkins to define «a book-length narrative about the author's illness» (Hawkins 1999, p.xiv).

2. The first English translation of *L'usage de la photo* came out in October 2024. However, as this article was written earlier, all translations from the original French text are mine.

autobiographical landscape.³ Moreover, in the two works dialogicity is intensified using various genres of discourse, as Butler and Rosenblum do by combining the writing of a collaborative diary with letters and essays, and by including in the text a series of photographic images, as is the case in *The Use of Photography*. As I will observe, however, even if both works are hybrid and co-authored texts, and the same disease is the motive of the narrative act, their literary responses are quite distinct and lend themselves to wide-ranging reflections prompted by the notion of kinship in the context of illness and writing. For example, it cannot be excluded that the equal relationship between the two authorial subjectivities may be strengthened or denied by the difficulties and tensions that illness introduces into the couple's life.

Comparing breast cancer memoirs

Before delving into the selected works, a few words need to be said about the inclination of breast cancer memoirs towards a communitarian vision that is reflected in the textual composition. This aspect derives from the historical-cultural conditions that, since the 1970s,⁴ produced such publications. Furthermore, the strong gender connotation of the disease explains, in part, the desire of female authors to be the spokesperson for a community in danger to which they belong, as is the case with *Cancer in Two Voices* and *The Use of Photography*.

Since even a diagnosis of breast cancer can entail painful encounters with cultural preconceptions and dynamics of oppression in the biomedical context, choosing to write publicly about this pathology from a personal perspective is in line, patently or implicitly, with principles in defense of women's health and independence. Similar motivations persist over time and although in France there has not been the pathographic flowering that took place in the United States, Annie Ernaux (born in 1940) and Barbara Rosenblum (1943) and Sandra Butler (1938)

3. Two further exceptions, where the disease in question is not breast cancer, are the Italian memoir *La cura (The Therapy)* by Salvatore Iaconesi and Oriana Persico (2017), and *A Matter of Death and Life* by Irvin D. Yalom and Marilyn Yalom (2021).

4. In the same period, the women's health movement took hold (which has its analogue in France in the *Mouvement de Libération des femmes*), determined to make women regain control over their bodies, by freeing them from the prevarications of institutions such as the law and medicine, which through reification and paternalism have led to a negative connotation of gynaecological phenomena and practices in particular. The organization of consciousness-raising groups and self-help clinics encouraged women to share their experiences and to play an active role in the therapeutic processes, so that they would not succumb under the potentially oppressive weight of medical knowledge and more generally of male domination (see Diedrich 2007, pp. 37-38).

witnessed and lived through the same years of social change. The French writer has also repeatedly described those years in her autobiographical works, dwelling on female sexuality and recounting the clandestine abortion she suffered when she was a student (see her memoir *Happening*, 2001).

In spite of their individual peculiarities, breast cancer memoirs are defined by certain general traits and implications of the disease that are emphasised in the narratives: since breast cancer is an extremely common pathology among women, all are at risk and therefore involved in the story of those who have been diagnosed with cancer; as it is prone to recurrence, it impacts an entire life; as it affects a specific female organ, with cultural and social meanings, it influences a person's identity. Although inevitably absorbed by the severity of their illness, especially when narrated while it is ongoing, the authors turn to the other to increase her chances of survival and support her through her own experience, thus expressing the political mission of these texts (cf. Couser 1997, pp. 37-38). While this claim can be made about pathographies in general, where «the need to *tell* others so often becomes the wish to *help* others» (Hawkins 1999, p. 25), in breast cancer memoirs this desire to affect and possibly change the external reality is particularly pronounced and urgent due to the prevalence and high mortality of the disease, which currently remains the most common cancer among adults. It is not surprising, therefore, that the personal dimension of her partner's illness is promptly transcended by Sandra Butler in the introduction to *Cancer in Two Voices*, in which, although relying on 1990 statistics, she defines breast cancer as «a shared epidemic – a collective experience» (Butler and Rosenblum, 1996, p. iv). Consequently, far from diminishing, breast cancer memoirs continue to exist in the West and represent one of the most significant contributions – not only in numerical terms – to pathographic writing.⁵

It is undeniable, then, that there is a political matrix, which unites the breast cancer memoirs, limiting an exclusively self-referential function of the narrative act in favor of a collective cause. Such a vocation is recognisable in both *Cancer in Two Voices* and *The Use of Photography*. If Butler and Rosenblum explicitly conceive their book as a text serving and defending the female population threatened by breast cancer, Ernaux participates in the same project, even though the statements of intent are kept to a minimum and are not reiterated. The work's political value is inherent in the existence of the text itself, whose dialogical component lies not only in the collaborative writing of two authors. If anything, Ernaux, for whom

5. By way of example, I recall, for their political strength, the seminal *The Cancer Journals* by Audre Lorde (1980) and the recent *The Undying* by Anne Boyer (2019), which has contributed greatly to renewing the tradition of breast cancer memoirs.

feminism is not an option, but her natural way of being (see Ernaux and Marie 2005, pp. 157-158), addresses a reader to whom she wants to make visible the women affected by breast cancer, starting with the unveiling of her own experience:

In France, 11% of women have had or have breast cancer. More than three million women. Three million breasts sewn, scanned, marked with red and blue drawings, irradiated, reconstructed, hidden under blouses and T-shirts, invisible. We will have to dare to show them one day, indeed. [Writing on mine is part of this unveiling.] (Ernaux and Marie 2005, pp. 112-113)

Meticulously describing her completely hairless body and the device implanted under the skin for the infusion of drugs, Ernaux exposes aspects of cancer that the public does not know, and that she, too, ignored before she fell ill (see Ernaux and Marie 2005, pp. 23-24). This sharing of knowledge acquired through experience is a task that the French author and Barbara Rosenblum share, even if they are distant in time and space: both are the first, in their circle, to have breast cancer, but they know that they will not be the last. As Rosenblum writes: «There will be others. [...] Such a weighty responsibility, to be the first, yet it gave me a purpose. I am trying to live self-consciously (and perhaps die self-consciously) in an exemplary manner. Many of my friends will see their future in the way I handle mine» (Butler and Rosenblum 1996, p. 13). And Ernaux, similarly: «The feeling that breast cancer was going to happen to me like all things that only happen to women. Even though neither my mother, nor my grandmother, nor my aunts, nor my cousins, ever had one, that I am the first, as I was when I chose higher education, that I inaugurate» (Ernaux and Marie 2005, p. 33).

Of course, there are also many differences between the two memoirs. To understand the discordant plot developments that I will discuss later and that illness also brings to light as disparities on the level of narrative authority, it is necessary to keep in mind the works' specific starting relationships. Regarding *Cancer in Two Voices*, Butler and Rosenblum are a longstanding couple, composed of two defined and independent personalities sharing important affinities (both Jewish, in their forties, lesbians, feminists, intellectuals). Moreover they are equal from a professional point of view that contributes to legitimising their narrative: both together and individually they have already authored other publications (essays) and readers might not feel any imbalance between the relevance of the activity of Butler (who is a consultant for women victims of violence) and Rosenblum (who is a sociologist and an academic), an ideal situation for collaborative writing. Things are different in *The Use of Photography*, since cancer is diagnosed at the same time as the beginning of the relationship between a man and a woman who, driven by

erotic passion, decide to write about it. While Annie Ernaux is an internationally renowned writer, Marc Marie is a journalist, 22 years her junior and not in the public eye; furthermore, as readers, we perceive that his admiration for Ernaux surpasses, in the text, the one she may feel for him.

These preliminary observations immediately suggest a first notable element of the collaborative writing undertaken with the next of kin of choice. Importantly in this context, a negotiation of narrative authority is necessarily taking place in pathographies when a kinship member shifts from the role of character to that of narrator, from object to subject of the telling, from the periphery to the centre of illness. It is not an innocent transition, firstly because with regard to the person who has been diagnosed with the disease, the other, being healthy, is certainly privileged and her experience is intrinsically different from that of the patient. The latter, however, holds an irreducible narrative authority provided by the direct experience of illness and, in extreme cases, of the proximity to death.

In addition to *Cancer in Two Voices* and *The Use of Photography*, this shift of roles is acknowledged, more or less explicitly, in other illness memoirs that stick to the conventional single narrator. Public sharing may imply that is not the sick person who has chosen to reveal his or her story by taking responsibility for it directly: this is what happens in David Rieff's *Swimming in a Sea of Death*, in which the author recalls the fatal leukemia of his mother Susan Sontag, who notoriously never wanted to write a pathography. Instead, in *In Love* by Amy Bloom, who accounts for supporting her husband after his decision to apply for assisted suicide, inaugurates the memoir with this sentence used as an epigraph: «“Please write about this”, my husband said». Nevertheless, these ‘narrative mandates’, whether tacit, explicit or stolen from the ill or deceased person without his or her consent («the dead instantly lose their entitlement to privacy»; Miller 2000, p. 13), force us to question the boundaries between one's own experience and that of others, as well as the authorisation to tell that being a kinship member would seem to entail automatically.

Therefore, the doubts that these narratives raise are close to those that Nancy K. Miller investigates in her essay *Bequest and Betrayal*, valid even if they refer to the death of a parent: «whose story is it? [...] If not explicitly, the memoirs devoted to a dead parent are almost always meditations on a writer's authority, her right to tell this story, the path she followed to telling it» (Miller 2000, p. 13); «Is the biography of another ever a story separate from ourselves? Is autobiography ever a story separate from the significant others – parents, lovers – with whom we continually make and remake our selves?» (p. 123). These same issues lead David B. Morris, who in *Eros and Illness* combines theoretical inquiry with the story of his care for

his wife Ruth, an Alzheimer's patient, to attempt to set boundaries, however fluid, between his role as a caregiver and as a scholar who has to unveil private family facts:

First, on ethics: Ruth's story belongs to Ruth, and I need to respect her privacy as far as our joint experience allows. Second, on method: as caregiver, I am a paramedical figure, with rights and responsibilities at the bedside, but my role is more complex than duties and privileges suggest. Family caregivers cannot put aside the interlaced social and emotional filaments that bind them to the patient, which infiltrate my account in ways that prevent me from dividing subjective experience and critical inquiry into separate compartments (Morris 2017, p. 26).

Rights, responsibilities, duties, privileges, social and emotional filaments: all these aspects also belong to Sandra Butler's part of *Cancer in Two Voices*, since she takes a triple role, as caregiver, co-author and co-protagonist. On the other hand, regarding Marc Marie, despite his central role in *The Use of Photography*, I will argue that he does not fulfil a traditional caregiver function. As far as the plot is concerned, the two memoirs show divergences related to the same specific disease that inspired them, but whose prognosis and progress are dramatically different, leading to two opposing narrative arcs. While for Annie Ernaux, the therapies are successful and the memoir ends with a restored health, Barbara Rosenblum faces a diagnosis that is immediately declared to have little chance of recovery.

Significantly, regardless of the different prognosis of Rosenblum and Ernaux, the thanatographic component, manifested in *Cancer in Two Voices*, is also present in *The Use of Photography*. Despite the prospects of recovery, the diagnosis is welcomed by Ernaux as a *memento mori* that forces her to come to terms with her own finitude and to question the idea of the future. Instead, as the metastasis spreads, Rosenblum longs to live the remaining time to the full, and finally to embark on a path of preparation for death. According to the classification proposed by Arthur Frank in *The Wounded Storyteller*, it is therefore recognisable in *The Use of Photography* a restitution narrative, which highlights the favourable outcome of treatment, and in *Cancer in Two Voices* a quest narrative, which considers illness as an opportunity for personal growth.

In the following close readings, the analysis of the dialogical structure of the text and the role that the notion of kinship, rethought in a personal manner, plays within it, will help to bring out the originality of these two memoirs and open up to different interpretations of relationality arising from dual authorship.

Cancer in Two Voices: «A window to see out of and to allow others to see into»

In *Cancer in Two Voices* the breast cancer story traces the plot set up by the disease, generally characterised by the discovery of a lump, followed by diagnosis, treatment with heavy side effects and an epilogue, given by recovery (permanent or temporary) or, as is the case in *Cancer in Two Voices*, the death of the patient. However, the text by Butler and Rosenblum does not merely account for this storyline and indeed falls within the category of multicultural narratives identified by Mary K. DeShazer, in which the political and communitarian aspects of the patient's experience stand out (see DeShazer 2005, pp. 219-220, 233). More precisely, *Cancer in Two Voices* foregrounds lesbian feminism, class inequalities, the Jewish identity shared by the two authors and criticism of the American health system (Rosenblum is the victim of an initial misdiagnosis that prevents her from immediately treating the cancer, which remained undetected for a year). All these facets contribute to composing the circumstances in which the illness takes place and reflect the values and principles at the heart of Butler and Rosenblum's response to the diagnosis. While these premises exist before cancer, its onset then offers an opportunity to test them, question them and finally confirm who one is. *Cancer in Two Voices* certainly coincides with a path of personal development through illness, of self-discovery and inclusion of the unexpected in one's life, but mostly, for Butler and Rosenblum, it is a matter of consolidating and reaffirming who they have been up to that point. Hence, the political dimension coexists with the individual approach and inner growth expected in personal narratives of breast cancer (see DeShazer 2005, pp. 223, 234), which the memoir also adheres to.

Cancer in Two Voices is mainly composed of the shared diary that Butler and Rosenblum decide to write when Rosenblum's soon-to-be terminal breast cancer breaks into their relationship. Thus, the authors' voices alternate, offering two distinct perspectives on the day-to-day course of the disease and relying on writing as a regular exercise in introspection to account for the effects of illness on their lives. Moreover, the work contains personal essays in which the two authorial voices merge; letters signed by Rosenblum, including those addressed to the collective recipient represented by her circle of female friends, and one, also written by Rosenblum, addressed as a bequest to her nephew. Finally, the memoir is opened and closed by the sections written by Butler to complete the narrative and contextualise it after the death of her partner, whom she does not hesitate to address directly.⁶ The interweaving of genres of discourse and differentiated

6. My analysis is based on the second expanded edition of 1996.

recipients contributes to the structurally relational character of *Cancer in Two Voices*, in which an extended notion of kinship appears embedded in the textual fabric that includes the partner, family, friends, and the vast readership, composed primarily of women and patients, to whom the work as a whole is addressed. Each part of the memoir, then, highlights the relevance of these connections: if the diary coincides with self-analysis, it is also open to reciprocal reading within the couple, while the letters enhance the relationship with the other women and with the family. Since Butler and Rosenblum's bond has always valued the autonomy and subjectivity of the individual, and, at the same time, the constant exchange with the other, this approach is naturally reflected in the way the couple deals with the illness and conceives its narrative. Hence, for Butler the pronoun «us» underlying *Cancer in Two Voices* has a precise meaning:

The loneliness that had been our oldest companion lifted and the partnership – the “us” – replaced it. [...] We retained our separate friends, our own priorities, our own political emphases. That is what made the “us” work so well. Even after Barbara became ill [...] the pattern we had established remained constant. [...] There was much air and space and movement in our “us”. [...] This book is filled with the words of the “us” that began with Barbara’s diagnosis and ended with her death (Butler and Rosenblum 1996, pp. iii-iv).

From Rosenblum's point of view, isolation and participation coexist in the disease:

Each day is filled with a wide-ranging richness, from really deep laughter to inexpressible, inconsolable isolation. From connectedness with others to the beauty of perceiving the inner design and structure of all things. [...] I am filled with a sense of being here, being moved, being touched and both connected and alone in my life, my journey, my odyssey (pp. 42-43).

Given these premises, it is clear that each author has in mind a double direction of her writing around the journey undertaken after Rosenblum's diagnosis: towards herself and towards all the people she cares about. In this regard, it is significant that after going to see an exhibit of an AIDS quilt, Butler asks Rosenblum what panel she would have wanted for herself and she answers: «A window to show I wasn't a monad. A window to see out of and to allow others to see into. I would want all my friends to sign it so it would reflect the connectedness of my life. Then I would want it to have a message from you. Something about us» (Butler and Rosenblum 1996, p. 182). On the one hand, the metaphor of the window encapsulates the unceasing exchange between interiority and the external world

that both Rosenblum and Butler have constantly practised. On the other hand, the window may be associated with glass, a transparent surface that, while allowing the reciprocity of the gaze, establishes both a separation between the subjects, who remain distinct, and the possibility of self-reflection on the part of the beholder, thus emphasising and encouraging self-consciousness.

Cancer in Two Voices also adheres to this framework through a rhetorical strategy that pervades the text and is based on the authors' longing for clarity, understanding and knowledge with respect to what is happening and how one feels about it, which must be made intelligible to one's own eyes and those of others. Hence the analytical inclination of the text, which insists on explanations and justifications even, and indeed especially, when their proximity to the truth makes them unpleasant and painful. This dynamic is matched by the rapid sharing of the diagnosis with Rosenblum's expanded kinship:

Exactly one week and three hours after I learned I had cancer, I had a meeting in our house of twenty women who would be involved in my healing and caretaking. It was a conscious and deliberate choice to mobilize a battalion of friends to help and assist me in every phase of fighting my disease (Butler and Rosenblum 1996, p. 12).

Rosenblum's female friends, who are also involved in collective alternative medicine practices in her favour, become part of a therapeutic alliance, suggested by the use of the war lexicon that proves empowering for both authors. The functional role of the group, however, does not obscure the individual subjectivities that compose it, which are also affected by their friend's illness. Rosenblum is willing to welcome them together with the inspiring words, once spoken by herself, that this virtuous circle gives back to her:

They spoke of their feelings and their love for me, of their commitment to the shared struggle of winning the battle against the cancer growing in my body, and of their dedication to whatever was needed to win that battle. That night changed the way I spoke. Since then, many friends have reminded me of my own words (p. 13).

The empathy shown in this circumstance is instead expressed through a partial communication, marked by omissions, towards Rosenblum's elderly parents, who belong to the core of the more traditional and, in this case, vulnerable kinship of biological family. Far from being conflictual, the relationship with their daughter becomes the object of problematisation, in terms of unveiling the diagnosis and sharing the care with Butler, since their frailty requires that they must first of all be protected from the gravity of the situation.

Undoubtedly, the fact that Rosenblum, exhausted by the disease, still manages to make such a sense of consideration for her family prevail, supported by Butler, underlines her extraordinary moral strength: «In my living, and even now in my dying, still protecting and taking care of» (Butler and Rosenblum 1996, p. 34). If in this observation emerges the pride of those who manage to remain faithful to themselves even when death is approaching, Rosenblum's words may also hint at a certain weariness due to the additional effort, in the midst of illness, that this altruism requires, where perhaps it would be less demanding, for the sick person, to indulge her own needs to the detriment of those of others. Rosenblum is aware of this inner conflict, which she formulates without reticence elsewhere in reference to Butler:

I have fewer boundaries now. Our needs seem out of sync and out of proportion. Sandy has never seemed more independent, more separate, and I have never been so needy. My sense of time is urgent. Hers seems scattered all over the place. We can't align our priorities, it seems. [...] I'm jealous of her enormous energy (Butler and Rosenblum 1996, p. 39).

As I outlined in the previous section, co-authorship necessitates a negotiation of narrative authority. For her part, Butler, as the primary caregiver and co-author of the memoir, does not overlook the tensions and issues that arise from making kinship a meaningful part of an experience, and story, of illness. Hence, her contribution to the story is not ancillary, because she is at the centre of a personal journey that is indivisible and at the same time different from the one marked by her partner's illness, but equally significant and worthy of being told. Butler's account is complementary and symmetrical because it reveals the other side of the story of illness, that of someone who witnesses the suffering of her loved one, is terrified by the prospect of life without her and must be able to manage her care without losing her own identity.

If Rosenblum is prey to the unpredictability of a body deeply affected by illness and therapy, struggling to maintain a positive spirit, Butler is no less unstable on an emotional level, admitting feelings that are as unpleasant as they are human and disclosing a complex psychological landscape:

My moods are wide-ranging and unpredictable. I marvel at her. I marvel at me. And sometimes I want her to tell me she's sorry for getting cancer and ruining our lives together. And sometimes I'm angry at her for getting it. I want to tell her that I am sorry for letting her get cancer and not making her go to a better doctor. And most of the time, I lie in her arms grateful for the life we have together (Butler and Rosenblum 1996, p. 15).

Sometimes, Butler expresses an ambivalent position towards the very idea of kinship, for example when she is irritated because she is not the only beneficiary of the gifts derived from the conspicuous compensation received by Rosenblum for her misdiagnosis; or when she struggles to accept other caregivers, even if she quickly recognises that it is precisely the network of contacts on which the couple can rely that allows her to maintain her own independent life and story:

Her parents will arrive next week. I feel displaced and jealous of her intimacy with them. All the old rough and unresolved places of our relationship resurface. All the tangled threads of her specific history that exclude me. But at the same time, I am released. Reprieved. Able to be in my own life for a week or so. To remember myself (Butler and Rosenblum 1996, p. 33).

Indeed, it is by opening the experience of illness to a circle of sympathetic and supportive presences that Butler can carry on her own single narrative, the possible thinning of which worries her from the moment of Rosenblum's diagnosis: «How will her cancer force me to engage with the choices of being both in my life and in hers as well – and still keep my balance?» (Butler and Rosenblum 1996, p. 19).

Finally, Butler must also recognise that, as the stage of her partner's disease becomes advanced, Rosenblum moves further and further away from her. Mutual understanding fails and even looking at oneself in the mirror offered by the other is now unbearable:

Seeing her vulnerability forces me to face my own. But mostly I turn away from it to tend to her and grow burdensome. She goes so far away when she is in pain: [...] she cannot speak. I am alone, outside, and am, for the moment, temporarily bereft. Her fear parallels my own, and we cannot do more than hold each other and cry. I whisper to her [...]. She reaches towards me, touches my face, but her eyes seem inward now, the reflex an automatic one (Butler and Rosenblum 1996, p. 152).

An ultimate change in the balance of narrative authorities in the text is given by Rosenblum's death, which incurs the transition of the voice to Butler alone. She is responsible for the completion of her partner's story, the end of which can only be told by the other. Butler is also in charge of assembling, refining and clarifying the work in line with the intentions shared with Rosenblum, with whom the project was conceived and carried out until death interrupted it. The overall impression remains, however, that *Cancer in Two Voices* presents us with two subjectivities enlightened by illness and by the presence of the other, with respect to which both authors continue to position themselves. This includes highlighting moments of differentiation that Rosenblum identifies from the initial stage of the disease: «I

went alone today to see Dr. Grant for my post-chemotherapy visit. This painful disentangling is necessary for both of us. The truth is that it is not our cancer but mine. I have to find my way alone now» (Butler and Rosenblum 1996, p. 17). Keeping the window open proves rewarding, but neither Butler nor Rosenblum downplay the limits and difficulties of such an ambitious collaborative writing project.

The Use of Photography: « He makes me live above cancer»

Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie are co-authors of *The Use of Photography*, a text enhanced by 14 photos, taken by the couple, which depict the clothes confusedly abandoned on the ground before having sex. Ernaux and Marie decided to write a piece inspired by each snapshot, autonomously, freely and without agreeing or sharing the content with the other, to be offered to read only once completed. In this circumstance, photography and writing are primarily conceived as a *divertissement* and a component of the erotic game, outlining a project that at first glance is very different, because it appears to belong exclusively to the intimate sphere, from the didactic unveiling of Sandra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum. Although in *Cancer in Two Voices* the erotic dimension linked to collaborative writing is not overlooked, it operates as a substitute element, albeit of enormous value, for a sexual activity made impracticable by the ferocious effects of illness and therapy: «Together we have developed a new form that can accommodate our individual and unique voices into a dialogue. We write about things that are important to us. We make love at the typewriter, not in the bedroom» (Butler and Rosenblum 1996, p. 159). As for Ernaux, whose therapies are successful and who, unlike Rosenblum, does not undergo a mastectomy or develop metastases (to this day the French writer is still healthy), sex is not precluded at all, since she can rely on a body altered by medical treatments, but not debilitated or deprived of desire.

The Use of Photography is driven by a literary motive that Ernaux declares at the beginning of the work, relating it to the poetics that distinguishes her entire production, already considerable in those years: the author aims to grasp the flow and elusiveness of life, here represented by eros, fixing them in visual and written traces. Therefore, compared to *Cancer in Two Voices*, *The Use of Photography* is characterised by a less ominous diagnosis and a greater literary ambition, but also by an interpretation of kinship that coincides only with Ernaux's partner, Marie,

and does not extend to a wider network of meaningful relationships. Above all, the couple flaunts an attempt to belittle cancer and suggests, in a latent way, a disparity between the narrative voices that is not consistently observable in *Cancer in Two Voices*. Both elements can be identified from the first pages of the French text.

It is Ernaux alone who takes charge of the introduction of the work, where cancer is mentioned almost at the end, as a random fact of secondary importance:

When we started taking pictures, I was being treated for breast cancer. As I was writing, I immediately felt the need to evoke "the other scene", the one that was taking place in my body, absent from the negatives, the uncertain, astonishing fight — "is it to me, really to me, that this is happening?" — between life and death. I shared it with M. Not even he could hide this fact, which was essential in our relationship for months. It is the only time we have spoken of the content of our "compositions", a spontaneous, provisional name of our project, corresponding to what they were, in both senses of the term, for us (Ernaux and Marie 2005, pp. 16-17).

While cancer is thus first evoked as something other, «the other scene», Ernaux immediately discusses her illness in the following section (again without sharing this part of the text with Marie). This further contextualises the collection of pictures and written pieces by providing its backstory. Here, Ernaux recalls the first evening spent with Marie, when the writer casually informs the man that she cannot meet him the next day because she has a medical appointment as she is being treated for breast cancer. The scene repeats the mode of the introduction, where the illness was mentioned last, and the tone of her dialogue with Marie appears equally and intentionally nonchalant. The informative, descriptive purpose, in line with the flat, rigorous and denotative style of Ernaux's writing, aims, by the author's own admission, to upset the other without giving him the time to prepare for the shocking news:

Now I have the impression that I have said to M. "I have breast cancer" in the same brutal way in which, in the sixties, I had said to a Catholic boy "I am pregnant and I want to have an abortion", in order to force him, without having time to take precautions and assume an expression, to look at an unbearable reality (Ernaux and Marie 2005, p. 22).

Ernaux's bold imperturbability, however, cracks in acknowledging, precisely, that this reality is unsustainable. Subsequently, in this first text that is associated with a photo, the apprehension brought by illness has free rein in the words of Ernaux.

Ernaux and Marie carry out a strategy of resistance to clichés and to narrative conventions that distinguish respectively the expectations of healthy people and the stories of other patients. From the point of view of the illness plot, the omissions stand out: the diagnostic moment, hospitalisations and caregivers are absent; apart from Marie, no one else from Ernaux's circle enters the narrative (according to the extratextual biographical information about Ernaux, she has two adult children from her ex-husband, but there is no mention of them), also because the author preferred to confide her condition only to a few people to preserve the integrity of her identity: «I didn't want any compassion that, every time it was shown, failed to mask this fact: for people, I had become someone else» (Ernaux and Marie 2005, pp. 75-76). This reaction is the opposite of the one that produced *Cancer in Two Voices*: while Rosenblum and Butler choose to share the diagnosis with a large number of people, Ernaux announces it only to a few (without naming them in the text). Similarly, although collaborative, the writing of *The Use of Photography* coincides with a strict delimitation of interferences in the experience of illness, which is made public only with the release of the work and when cancer has become an event of the past. While *Cancer in Two Voices* is based on a trusting openness to a wide community, which has a positive effect on the couple's life with illness, since Ernaux has encountered only disheartening looks, she leans towards a protective closure. Given her general diffidence, the relationship and collaboration with Marie take on even more importance. The writer implies that her partner has the strength and empathy to bear the weight of her diagnosis, respecting an identity that Ernaux does not want to be changed by illness. Her partner's male gaze – «I think she looks fine. [...] Her hair is brand new because of the chemo, I love to caress it» (Ernaux and Marie 2005, p. 55) – seems to confirm and flatter this identity.

The personal growth usually associated with Arthur Frank's quest narrative is also missing in *The Use of Photography*, which sticks to the restitution pattern. For Ernaux, the most remarkable inner alteration following the diagnosis is the different perception of time, which has shrunk and is subject to a sudden acceleration. However, even this discovery is greeted with calm astonishment:

In the underground, at the bank, I looked at old women, their deep wrinkles, their drooping eyelids, and I said to myself «I'll never be old». It wasn't a sad thought, just a surprising one. I'd never had it before.

The most striking thing was the simplicity of it all (Ernaux and Marie, 2005, p. 36).⁷

7. It is worth noting, to highlight the subjectivity and relativity of Ernaux's perspective, that the author was already 62 years old at the time of diagnosis.

Atypical is also the invariably positive connotation of the words related to the Institut Curie, defined by Ernaux as an «ideal place» (Ernaux and Marie 2005, p. 36) where human beings are cared for with attention and delicacy: «My stay at the Institut Curie for the operation [...] was very sweet. [...] In my diary I wrote that I felt immensely happy» (pp. 24-25).⁸ After some time, Marie, who used to visit Ernaux every day while she was hospitalised, remembers that period as the «happy days of the Institut Curie» (p. 152).

Certainly, the approach of *The Use of Photography* suggests a shift in perspective and an enrichment of the illness plot (which here is not the main storyline, as the erotic narrative arc is equally foregrounded). This might be expected from the evolution of the genre, since «it is symptomatic of the maturing of the breast cancer narrative that new ones evince the need for a new angle; once the genre has been established, the experience of cancer is not necessarily sufficient to justify a narrative» (Couser 1997, p. 70). After all, Ernaux and Marie wrote *The Use of Photography* at the beginning of the 2000s, when breast cancer narratives included previously unexplored motifs in their plots. Ernaux and Marie, apparently unconsciously, participate in this transformation, even though the originality of their contribution is such that it does not fit into any of the prevailing tendencies in English-speaking areas.⁹ This can be explained by the fact that *The Use of Photography* is a French work and may be susceptible to other influences and discourses, or that its authors have not viewed their work as a breast cancer memoir. Ernaux does give an impression of unfamiliarity with this genre when she feels the need to consult a biography of the French writer Violette Leduc, who died in 1972, to find out how long she had survived her breast cancer diagnosis.

The aspects of the work that make it a counter-narrative of breast cancer may also be seen as the result of the isolation of the couple through eros, in which illness, rather than being integrated, is consciously dominated and downgraded. In *The Use of Photography* there are recurring signs that refer to a *mise-en-scène* carefully opposed to the troubling presence of cancer. As Marie observes:

8. In *The Use of Photography* both authors mention their diaries as a source they occasionally rely on to retrieve information or clarify details about the period in which the photo they are writing about was taken. The diary, anyway, remains a textual form external to the collaborative work and not a constitutive element as it appears to be for *Cancer in Two Voices*.

9. In the new millennium, breast cancer narratives written in English have been enriched with new elements compared to their twentieth-century counterparts: more cultural diversity is included; mainstream cancer culture (consumer-oriented, based on pink iconography, promoting philanthropy instead of activism) is considerably criticised; the environmental causes of the disease are discussed; the memory of those who did not survive is extensively honoured; medical practice aiming more at detection than prevention is contested; genetic testing and prophylactic mastectomy become part of the plots (see DeShazer 2013, pp. 1-2; 8-11).

[the table] where we have dinner when we've chosen not to go out. Part of the ritual, once again, in so far as we have divided time from the first night. As if our days were numbered. As if to create a series of perfect moments [...], little bubbles in which the tragedy of the events of our respective lives would be both trivialised and forbidden to stay. From bubble to bubble, death finally let go (Ernaux and Marie 2005, pp. 102-103).

The couple takes refuge in their relationship to escape the dramatic circumstances of their respective lives in which they happened to meet: illness for Ernaux, while for Marie the death of his mother, a breakup and a dismissal from work. It is not surprising, then, that the relationship between Ernaux and Marie is marked by lightness and that the occasional tensions that emerge between them are simply part of the dynamics of seduction (jealousy, lack of attention for the other). So, after an argument with Marie, although Ernaux is in the meantime waiting to know if she will have to undergo a mastectomy, the upset caused by their quarrels seems more relevant to her: «I told myself that the pain caused by M. was worse at that moment than not yet knowing if I was doomed or not» (Ernaux and Marie 2005, p. 88). Nevertheless, the fact that erotic semantics punctually prevail over the discourse of illness alludes to the need to exorcise the latter and, in particular, that persistent association between cancer and death to which not even Ernaux is immune. In fact, she confesses that for years, prior to her diagnosis, when she had to go to a library near the Institut Curie, she used to change sidewalks before arriving at the height of the building, as if she were avoiding danger (see Ernaux and Marie 2005, p. 33).

The use of photography, here primarily encouraged as erotic ritual, has a further implication in this context, which refers to death. The link is inevitable if it is true that, as Susan Sontag states, all photographs remind us of human finitude as they «state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of all people» (Sontag 1977, p. 3). However, the pictures taken by Ernaux and Marie only represent objects, which is also in contrast to the tendency towards (self)portrait in connection with breast cancer, focusing on the detail of bodies modified by treatment (see Bolaki 2016, pp. 26-50). Since the late 1990s, breast cancer narratives have relied on this expressive medium, occasionally resorting to memorial photographs of what remains, i.e. objects belonging to those who did not survive or places emptied of their presence (see DeShazer 2013, pp. 11-12). Ernaux and Marie's compositions partly correspond to this second type of images, but the French writer is alive at the time of the shots and thus there is no memorial intent in the couple's project. On the one hand, the two authors cannot

help but acknowledge the deadly fascination inherent in each photo and identified by Sontag; on the other hand, the uncertainty of Ernaux's prognosis accentuates the shadow of the end and forces the couple to anticipate the confrontation with it: «When I look at our photos, it's the disappearance of my body that I see. [...] M.'s statement last year "You've always wanted to write as if you're going to die afterwards, well, you've got there, my cocotte!"» (Ernaux and Marie 2005, p. 146).

Marie is not assigned any role as a caregiver in *The Use of Photography* and his figure is not as defined and central as that of Ernaux within the text. A closer look reveals an asymmetry concerning the voices of Ernaux and Marie, indicating that they do not carry the same weight. In fact, the French writer's narrative authority predominates: she is responsible for the introductory sections of the work, as well as the epilogue in which she declares that her cancer has gone away with treatment; her perspective and needs are also placed in the foreground in Marie's parts; Ernaux's house is where most of the photos were taken and all the reflections on writing belong to her. The fact that the relationship is recent and that the couple does not have a shared past life contributes to the sense of a distance to be bridged, which Marie compensates with what he has learned about the writer through her books, as it happens when he and Ernaux visit the house where she grew up: « There I found details that she had mentioned in her books. Somewhere, we could feel like we were on an equal footing by now» (Ernaux and Marie 2005, p. 128). Nevertheless, between the lines Marie shows an inferiority complex towards Ernaux, expressing insecurities ranging from the woman's greater height (she is also older, therefore arguably more experienced) to her talent and fame as a writer.

Particularly revealing of these feelings of inferiority is a passage in which the couple, while having sex, throws on the ground the objects on the desk where Ernaux usually composes her works: Marie confesses that he has taken pleasure in desecrating her «sanctuary» and being put before «what she is socially recognised for» (Ernaux and Marie, 2005, p. 91). Marie also recalls the day when, in the absence of his partner, he sat at Ernaux's desk, as if to rehearse her role as a writer. As for Ernaux, with regard to sex in her studio, the momentary oblivion is twofold, since she sets aside both her literary activity and illness, thanks to Marie's ability to make her «live above cancer» (Ernaux and Marie 2005, p. 87). It is always Ernaux, however, who fears that there is an unconscious textual strategy at work on her part aimed at not really making room for Marie's writing: «Sometimes that scares me. To open up your writing space is more violent than to open up your sex. What an unconscious strategy, perhaps already at work, to make no room for him» (Ernaux and Marie 2005, p. 62). It is possible that illness, for a writer like Ernaux, entails the fear of no longer being able to master her own story. Unlike the presence of two actual co-protagonists in *Cancer in Two Voices*, then, Annie Ernaux emerges

as the true heroine of the story in *The Use of Photography*, and not only because of her illness, but also because of her posture as a writer highlighted in the text. In addition, this is allowed by the fact that death acts as a vague threat in the text, without having the more defined contours of the imminent and announced end which Barbara Rosenblum must face, eventually being forced to surrender her story into the safe and loving hands of her partner.

The story goes on

While this article is focused on the act of collaborative writing, it is worth adding a few final observations on how the reading, at all levels, of their work is conceived by the authors, and how it expands the relationality of both memoirs to include a broader public. As we shall see shortly, in Ernaux's case this implies overcoming Marie's role both as the primary recipient of her text and as the exclusive representative of her kinship during her illness. Similarly, I will show how Rosenblum openly questions her readership and how, as she approaches death, this reflection has to do with the idea of legacy.

In the epilogue to *The Use of Photography* Ernaux confesses that she did not write thinking Marie would read her texts and that she was afraid, in exchanging their pieces, of discovering his otherness, wondering whether writing separates or reunites. We do not know the outcome of the couple's reading of each other's texts, but having had access to the complete work, we may see a certain distance persisting between the authors despite and throughout their co-authorship. Ernaux's introduction serves to shorten the gap between the text and its readers, who are responsible for bringing it to life and enriching it with their own experience: «The highest degree of reality, however, will only be attained if these written photos are changed into other scenes in the memory or imagination of the readers» (Ernaux and Marie 2005, p. 17). Noting how Ernaux also writes to make public her own breast cancer story, positioning herself in an unbroken chain of sick women, an important part of the audience the author refers to is therefore likely to be female. This bond with other women, who perhaps represent the actual kinship for Ernaux in her work, establishes a continuity both in the past, given by those who have experienced illness before, and with those who will read her work and come after her.

Even if *Cancer in Two Voices* and *The Use of Photography* have clear narrative closures (death for Rosenblum, recounted by her partner; recovery for Ernaux), the authors of both works call on their readers to continue their stories in the form

of testimony. In the imminence or fear of death, the preoccupation with one's role within a continuity through writing and reading appears more accentuated in the absence of children to whom the story of a life can be passed on. As Nancy K. Miller points out: «What happens to our legacy if there is no next of kin? [...] Who will witness your death? Visit your grave? Tell your story?» (Miller 2000, p. 11); «To be a childless adult (and to be straight) represents a peculiar form of marginality in a culture dependent on identities of generation» (p. 65). For Rosenblum, this problem does not arise, as she is able to count on a kinship whose value is not diminished by the absence of children. *Cancer in Two Voices* includes a letter to this effect, addressed to her nephew Asher who is still a child. His aunt has made sure to leave 13 letters to give him for as many birthdays when she will no longer be there. The letters contain moral teachings based on Rosenblum's life (the one included in the work, for example, focuses on the theme of fullness) and are recognised as an «ethical will» by the rabbi with whom she is preparing to die according to Jewish tradition, tracing her act back to a practice with a long history (see Butler and Rosenblum 1996, p. 192). Consequently, Rosenblum's trajectory, made even more meaningful by the narrative of and through illness, is rooted in a long-term continuity that honors her identity as a woman and a Jew and projects herself into the future. Readership therefore allows one's own story not to end completely and to establish bonds that go far beyond the private circle. This aspect, albeit with some differences, can also be found in Ernaux's text and reinforces the relational nature of both works examined.

My comparative analysis of *Cancer in Two Voices* and *The Use of Photography* shows that although starting from similar premises, namely a collaborative writing project based on a diagnosis of breast cancer, the narrative outcomes can be significantly different in terms of content and form. Affinities and divergences have emerged by adopting the specific relationship between the two authors of each memoir as a key. Firstly, I noted that, even if kinship is primarily made to coincide with one's partner, who has absolute prominence in the relational dimension of both sick authors, it does not overlap with the role of caregiver. While Sandra Butler does take on this role, Marc Marie does not. Secondly, I observed that the notion of kinship is more extended in *Cancer in Two Voices*, where friends and other family members appear significantly, while in *The Use of Photography* the couple is the only relevant bond to be involved in the experience of illness. In any case, the texts analysed, both devoted to introspection, problematise these same bonds, which are strengthened but also complicated by the appearance of breast cancer, since the diagnosis brings to light the strengths, limits, nuances,

and contradictions within the couple's life. Ethical dilemmas and ambivalent connotations thus arise, given that a partner and/or a caregiver can be both a reassuring and intrusive presence.

Despite the premise of a writing project equally divided between each memoir's authors, narrative authority will, more or less intentionally, become unbalanced or unevenly distributed in a co-authorship between a patient and their next of kin. The article has explored this dynamic by taking into account the authors' biographies, the specificity of their relationship, and the inextinguishable opposition between the healthy and the sick. Nonetheless, in both works breast cancer is considered an experience capable of establishing a sort of blood bond with all women, whether known or never met, connected and united through writing. What emerges is a shared and further reinterpretation of the notion of kinship that extends towards a wider readership.

Finally, the multilayered and collaborative narratives I have examined are supported by the idea that choosing to show ourselves to others means making ourselves visible and intelligible to ourselves. This is a central task for autobiographical writing that the concomitance of illness further complicates because it forces us to deal with our vulnerable and mortal nature. The plurality of voices and perspectives which enriches *Cancer in Two Voices* and *The Use of Photography* allows these intimate texts to transcend the private and individual dimension, honoring the closest ties, but also building extraordinary bridges with people and realities distant in time and space. In conclusion, this is one of the powers of literature that the co-authored stories discussed here express in an exemplary way: «We need a language and stories for an exchange between generations that bypasses the body and the family: bonds of paper, not only bonds of blood. We are also connected by books and the friendships that grow out of them» (Miller 2000, p. xii).

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