

# Telling Otherwise: Collective and Personal Remembering and Forgetting in Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life*<sup>1</sup>

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This essay aims at exploring collective and personal remembering, as well as the notion of forgetting as a kind of “rebeginning” (Augé 57) in Kate Atkinson Costa prize-winning *Life After Life* (2013). In Atkinson’s novel Ursula Todd is born on February 11 1910, dies and is born again and again to undo the traumatic events that caused her previous death(s). The narrator’s retelling of Ursula’s life takes the reader through the two wars, and to different incarnations of Ursula’s life, which finally set things right for her and for her beloved ones. The sense of *déjà vu* and constant repetitions underline the novel’s main premise: what if? Indeed, it is a historical novel about the consequences of the past upon the present and the future, as well as about the decisions we as individuals make all the time, and how they can affect others. Therefore, it is also a novel about temporality. The prevalence of historicity and memory in contemporary criticism in recent years has led to a turn to the past; meanwhile, the future has attracted less attention, being understood only as potentiality of the present, as I will explore later. However, Atkinson’s *Life After Life* stresses the drive towards the future and the inherent connections between past and future as another way of memorialising the past. In addition, this essay will also look into the ways in which Atkinson’s novel engages with the concept of collective memory that underscores networks of individual and communal relations. Lastly, Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, alongside philosophical enquiries about time and death, expounded in Ricoeur’s

*Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1953) and Marc Augé's *Oblivion* (2004), provide the main theoretical underpinnings of this essay.

### *Temporality in Life After Life*

Ursula Todd, the protagonist of the novel, is born on 11 February 1910, but her umbilical cord is wrapped around her neck, which leads to her premature death. Dr Fellowes does not arrive in time due to a snowy storm, and then, Ursula's mother, Sylvie, does not get the medical aid needed in such a situation: "The little heart. A helpless little heart beating wildly. Stopped suddenly like a bird dropped from the sky. A single shot. Darkness fell" (24). This is the first of countless deaths Ursula suffers in the novel; however, she is given the chance to re-live her life many times, due to little shifts of the events and situations. This way, she dies and re-lives her life with her family at Fox Corner, through the main historical events of the twentieth century: the Great War, the Spanish flu epidemic, the Second World War and the London Blitz, and she reaches the 1960s. Clearly, the novel interweaves the personal affairs of the Todd family, particularly, those related to Ursula, with historical occurrences, thus neatly interlocking the private and the public. In other words, the novel follows the pattern of Atkinson's early works in "the interconnection of public and private stories" (Parker 25). Interestingly, the novel opens with a scene at a café in Munich in 1930: she is about to shoot a man she calls "Führer"; the reader wonders if the protagonist manages to kill Adolf Hitler, thus leading him/her to reflect upon the alternative trajectories worldwide politics may have had, should Adolf Hitler have been killed at that German café.

Reviews of this widely acclaimed novel have interpreted it as Atkinson's "making various points about human life – that they hang by a thread and that our identities are not necessarily fixed (and could easily have been other); that our destiny is uncertain; that writers control their characters and can produce many versions of them" (Cartwright 2). Given the complex structure of the novel, I would like to take Atkinson's endnote as a starting point:

Miss Woolf, the moral centre of the Blitz chapters, tells Ursula that “we must bear witness” for “when we are safely in the future”. I am in that future now and I suppose this book is my bearing witness to the past. And somewhere in that past, in the ethereal world of fiction, it is always a snowy night in February 1910 [...] To research the background of this book I read as much as possible before beginning and then tried to forget as much as possible and simply write. (Atkinson, “Author Note” 618)

The above-mentioned passage touches upon some of my main critical concerns regarding *Life After Life*. On the one hand, I am particularly interested in the stress on the future and death in connection with historicity and the critical work by Paul Ricoeur and Martin Heidegger. On the other, I will focus on the link between forgetting and “rebeginning”, following Ricoeur and Marc Augé, as I will develop later. Indeed, past, present and future fuse in this passage, and in the novel as a whole, which seems to suggest an altogether different vision of the contemporary historical novel, shifting the emphasis on to the future. According to Paul Ricoeur, “it is especially history that is involved methodologically in this eclipsing of the future [...] the inclusion of futureness in the apprehension of the historical past will move strongly against the prevailing flow of the clearly retrospective orientation of historical knowledge” (346). Then, the issue of temporality is key to the understanding of the role of the historian. Arguably, Atkinson succeeds in including “futureness” in *Life After Life*, and in so doing, she proposes a future-oriented approach to historicity. In fact, she looks back to the past by proposing alternative futures, in which repressed events are unlocked, thus connecting past, present and future, and activating change.

Since the late 1980s we have witnessed the proliferation of critical works on the interaction of history and fiction, ignited by the current interest in memorialising and commemorating the past, as happened in 2014 with the centenary of the First World War.<sup>2</sup> Recently, studies such as Alan Robinson’s *Narrating the Past: Historiography, Memory and the Contemporary Novel* (2011), Kate Mitchell and Nicola Parsons’s edited collection *Reading Historical Fiction: The Revenant and Remembered Past* (2013), and Elodie Rousselot’s edited volume *Exoticizing the Past in Contemporary Neo-Historical Fiction* (2014), to name just a few, explore new conceptualisations to address history, memory and the past in contemporary fiction. To a greater or lesser extent, these works engage

with the ambivalent relationship between history and fiction from the late 1990s onwards, and point out the need to find new terms and definitions for narratives that depart from the ‘historiographic metafiction’ mode, *pace* Linda Hutcheon (105-23). For example, Elodie Rousselot embraces the term “neo-historical” to refer to this new category: “the neo-historical carries out its potential for radical possibilities in more implicit ways. Its use of verisimilitude is crucial in this respect: in seeking to reproduce the past so faithfully – at least on the surface – the neo-historical critical engagement with that past may appear to be absent, while it is in fact seamlessly embedded into the fabric of the text” (5). Significantly, other critics like Victoria Stewart, Peter Middleton and Tim Woods address that shift in contemporary historical fiction, and indicate “that much current fiction dealing with the past has a different emphasis” (Stewart 13). Already in Atkinson’s first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1995), there seems to be a tension between postmodern beliefs and a reshaping of postmodernism, perhaps anticipating the advent of the so-called “post-postmodernism”, which has as yet received scant critical attention in contemporary criticism. In fact, Fiona Tolan perceived in Atkinson’s first novel an existing friction between “postmodernist impulses toward multiplicity and limitless expansion and traditional historiographic beliefs in containment and the discoverable real” (288). Arguably, Kate Atkinson’s *Life After Life* represents a move-on from postmodernism and provides a more nuanced way of dealing with time, memory, and past and present negotiations.

By means of forgetting and rebeginnings, Ursula has several iterations and the chance to escape from her deaths or near-deaths many times. Those accidents are traumatic events and processes, which Ursula endlessly re-enacts by re-living and re-writing them, albeit slightly changed. This way, Ursula’s narrative offers “a means of transforming traumatic memories into narrative memories” (Andermahr and Pellicer-Ortín 2). It remains unclear how much she remembers her past lives, although as the novel progresses, she is more aware of her ability to undo certain personal and historical moments through the traces of her many pasts. In this line, Dominick LaCapra states that a narrative can explore alternative paths in the past in the light of deferred effects or knowledge in the present (18). This is precisely what Atkinson’s novel achieves.

Definitions of trauma provided by well-known Trauma critics, such as Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub, Lawrence Langer, and Shoshana Felman, among

others, dwell upon the notion of backwardness, since “[v]iolence saturates time, reorders it from progressive movement into recursive movement via flashbacks and other time disorders associated with post-traumatic stress syndrome” (Gilmore 92). If, for survivors of trauma, “temporality is structured through permanent simultaneity” (Gilmore 93), *Life After Life* shatters the notion that in trauma that past and future coexist in the present: by re-writing the past event, the novel provides a new and alternative path that bears important bearings upon the future. One instance is Ursula’s death, as a toddler, at sea, when she was jumping the waves with Pamela, her elder sister, while being on holiday in Cornwall: “No one came. And there was only water. Water and more water. Her helpless little heart was beating wildly, a bird trapped in her chest. A thousand bees buzzed in the curled pearl of her ear. No breath. A drowning child, a bird dropped from the sky. Darkness fell” (Atkinson, *Life After Life* 47). In another re-enactment of her life, Ursula and Pamela are rescued by a stranger, a clerk, who happened to be there when the girls went into the sea (56). This way, Ursula is given another life, full of potentialities.

At times she is able to set things right also for her beloved ones. For example, in one variant of Ursula’s life, Bridget, the maid, dies of the Spanish flu on the day after the celebration of Armistice in London. Teddy, Ursula’s beloved brother, also catches the infection and dies within the next few days. In the following re-birth, Ursula attempts to avoid his tragic demise by forging a letter and thus preventing Bridget, who is already ill, from arriving home:

*Dear Bridget, I have locked and bolted the doors. There is a gang of thieves – [...]* Next morning there was no Bridget in the house. Not, more puzzlingly, was there any sign of Pamela [Ursula’s eldest sister]. Ursula felt overwhelmed by a relief as inexplicable as the panic that had led her to write the note the previous night [...]. “I sent Pamela to Mrs Dodds to fetch Bridget home,” Sylvie [Ursula’s mother] said. “You sent *Pamela*?” Ursula echoed in horror. “Yes, Pamela”. “Pamela is with *Bridget*?” “Yes,” Sylvie said. “Bridget. What is the matter with you?” Ursula ran out of the house [...]. “What is the matter?” [...] “Whatever is it? *Tell* me,” Pamela said, caught up now in the dread. “I don’t know,” Ursula sobbed. “I just felt so worried about you.” (135-36)

This time Ursula is not fully aware of what is happening, but it is clear that she feels the need to stop the course of her family's actions. Towards the end of the novel, when she is holding a conversation with Nigel, Pamela's son and Ursula's favourite nephew, she seems to be remembering when she met Hitler in a past life: "I think it was the eyes, he had the *most* compelling eyes. If you looked in them you felt you were putting yourself in danger of believing—'You met him?' Nigel asked, astonished. 'Well', Ursula said. 'Not exactly. Would you like dessert, dear?'" (555). There are moments in which Ursula suffers from *déjà vu*, as suggested by Sylvie, Ursula's mother, who unsympathetically tries to find a rational explanation for Ursula's feeling that "[w]ords and phrases echoed themselves, strangers seemed like old acquaintances" (Atkinson, *Life After Life* 151).<sup>3</sup>

The Italian philosopher Paul Virno affirms that "when we fall mercy to *déjà vu*, we seem to be repeating something, but we cannot say *what it is* that we are repeating: the specific content of the repetition is established only by the actual experience [... thus] the doctrine of the eternal return serves as an antidote to nihilism" (44-45). On one occasion, Ursula repeats her visit to the psychiatrist that she had visited earlier on in the novel, and Dr Kellet explains the symbolism of the drawing Ursula makes: "'it's a snake with its tail in its mouth' [... ] '[i]t's a symbol representing the circularity of the universe. Time is a construct, in reality everything flows, no past or present, only the now'" (Atkinson 579). Similarly, one reviewer has noted that "Ursula's existence is cyclical, swinging in different directions to encompass new (and sometimes unwelcome) possibilities" (Kellogg 1). Ursula's time loops, which allow for change, underline the potentiality of the future, or "actuality to come", which is 'always' and permanent, from Virno's point of view (67, 70). Significantly, this interpretation of Atkinson's novel owes much to "the philosophies of the future", best represented by Martin Heidegger in his *Being and Time* (1953), where the main argument is the "*nexus between historicity and death*...[t]he future is the predominant temporal dimension only because it is home to death" (Virno 56). Atkinson takes on the role of the historian in *Life After Life*, and thus, her novel approaches twentieth-century history, and particularly, the Second World War, placing the emphasis on possibilities and the future, and exploring "the 'what ifs?' of a life" (Lakeland 24). Ursula's life projects itself to the future which, following Virno's theories, is full of potential. In philosophical terms, Heidegger's "Being-towards-death" is closely linked to the temporality of the future: "we must characterize being-toward-death

as a *being toward a possibility* [...] toward something possible [...] to be out for something possible” (Heidegger 250). In the novel, Nigel embraces that notion of historicity towards the future, towards a possibility: “History is all about ‘what ifs’” (553). To explore those “what ifs?”, Atkinson states in her author’s note that she read as much as she could, and “then tried to *forget* as much as possible and simply write” (“Author Note” 618; emphasis added). I would like to turn now to the concept of forgetting as a kind of “‘rebeginning’ or finding the future by forgetting the past” (Galloway 3).

Paul Ricoeur’s *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004) and Marc Augé’s *Oblivion* (2004) treat forgetting as a positive figure. For example, Ricoeur utilises the notion of “the reserve of forgetting”, which is characterised by the “survival of images”, and opposed to a more negative figure of forgetting, conducted through the erasure of traces (Ricoeur 436). This forgetting that preserves can be perceived when towards the end of the novel, Sylvie saves her new-born daughter, Ursula, from her death by finding a pair of surgical scissors: “‘One must be prepared,’ she muttered. ‘Hold the baby close to the lamp so I can see. Quickly Bridget. There’s not time to waste’. Snip, snip. Practice makes perfect” (Atkinson 602). After the many deaths of Ursula that occur throughout the novel, Sylvie seems to ‘remember’ or at least finds in her memory a faint recollection of what was needed to save her daughter’s life: a pair of surgical scissors. This seems to support the argument that “[r]emembering and forgetting are two sides – or different processes – of the same coin, that is memory. Forgetting is the very condition for remembering” (Erl 9).

In addition, “practice makes perfect” is a kind of motto Sylvie keeps saying in the novel, which highlights the capacity of the return, repetition and rebeginning to set things right for the individual and the community, too: “‘What if we had a chance to do it again and again,’ Teddy said, ‘until we finally did get it right? Wouldn’t that be wonderful?’” (Atkinson, *Life After Life* 522-23). In this sense, Marc Augé contends that the notion of *rebeginning* “indicates the complete opposite of a repetition: a radical inauguration, the prefix *re-* implying that from then on, a same life may have several beginnings” (57). Clearly, Ursula fits into the description of a same life having several beginnings, since, following Augé, “death itself, at the end of a reversal attested to in every culture, may also be conceived of as a rebeginning” (83). Although hardly ever mentioned in the novel, rebeginning is connected with the theme of resurrection and reincarnation. Ursula resurrects and rebegins every time she reaches death

or her near-death, just like the historian, who mobilises historicity by showing his/her debt with respect to the past (Ricoeur 380-81). As far as reincarnation is concerned, Dr Kellet, Ursula's psychiatrist, mentions it in passing (Atkinson 191, 578). The topic is again tackled at the end of *A God in Ruins* (2015), *Life After Life*'s companion piece, devoted to Teddy, Ursula's most beloved brother.<sup>4</sup> This companion piece can be considered as "one of Ursula's lives, an unwritten one", as the author sustains in her Author's Note (385). Interestingly, Teddy is erased from history at the end, when he dies in one of his air raids. Thus the novel sweeps away his life entirely. Later, Nancy, his childhood companion and girlfriend, wonders about reincarnation, and the possibilities of Teddy returning as something else. The author, as the historian, allows for the characters to have more than one life and thus, "[t]he creative power of repetition is contained entirely in this power of opening up the past again to the future" (Ricoeur 380).

Time and space are superimposed in the novel, and this multi-layered structure proves to be one of Atkinson's probing attempts at considering time as dynamic, and not constraining. Atkinson wished to craft a complex novel from the structural point of view: "I knew that I wanted something more complex than that, something downright *trickier*, something multi-layered and slightly fractal" (Atkinson, "Author Note" 617). The multi-layered structure resembles that of the palimpsest, "created by a process of layering – of erasure and superimposition –" (Dillon 12). It is my contention that the palimpsest serves as an apt metaphor for the novel as a whole where time and space are superimposed, and where Ursula's life is built upon a process of layering. Therefore, each variant of Ursula's life is an added layer or text upon the fabric of the novel, which collapses temporality: "[t]he present of the palimpsest is only constituted in and by the 'presence' of texts from the 'past', as well as remaining open to further inscription by texts of the 'future'" (Dillon 37).

At this point it might be of use to draw attention to the similarities between *Life After Life* and *Atonement* (2001), a heavily intertextual and "palimpsestuous novel", following Sarah Dillon.<sup>5</sup> Briony Tallis, the protagonist, produces a novel, which is "marked by the other possible narratives which it could have been" (Dillon 97). Likewise, *Life After Life* offers a textual layering of all the possibilities and choices Ursula has at hand when she re-begins. There are more common elements between McEwan's novel and Atkinson's: *Life After Life* begins with a view of the



prelapsarian Edwardian period, in which the Todd children grow up and live at Fox Corner, like the family in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. One critic has considered *Life After Life* against the backdrop "of a classic English country-house novel" (Lakeland 24), and a similar comment has been also made with relation to *Atonement*. Ultimately, if McEwan's narrative is about the interplay of the personal and the collective, the private and the public, the same can be argued in relation to *Life After Life*.

### *Communal/Cultural Memory in Life After Life*

I will now turn to discuss the interlocked processes of remembering and forgetting, not only applied to individuals, as happens with Ursula, but also to the community. Communal memory is particularly mobilised in the act of telling otherwise: "[t]hrough narrating one's identity otherwise, a community can work through its past, have an acceptable understanding of itself, and to justice to others" (Leichter 124). Therefore, this essay also looks into the ways in which Atkinson's novel engages with Ricoeur's concept of collective memory that is based upon networks of individual and communal relationships.

Atkinson's fiction has manifested her concern with history and collective memory ever since she published *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1995), a novel which opens in York, where the "streets seethe with history" (10). In *Life After Life* history is as important as in Atkinson's early fiction, as looking back allows for the long-forgotten or less privileged historical events to acquire more predominance, opening up potentialities and futureness. If we envisage possible futures, we bear witness to the past, resurrect events of that past, thus connecting past and present and activating change. One critic has posited that the most important historical event depicted in the novel is the London Blitz, where, for her, "the logic of the novel [leads]: the war should not have been allowed to happen" (Hore 2). Considered as "the best fictional depiction of life in the Blitz" (Lakeland 25), the central section of the novel is devoted to the sustained bombing of London for eight months between 1940 and 1941. In it, Ursula experiences the London Blitz as an ARP (Air Raid Precaution) warden, and suffers from the trauma of re-living in different incarnations the bombing of a cellar in Argyll Road, where a dozen people have sheltered in November 1940. She works alongside Miss Woolf,<sup>6</sup> a retired hospital matron, who

becomes a senior warden:

Skirting the treacherous crater from last night, she discovered Miss Woolf sitting behind a dining table salvaged from the wreckage, as if she were in an office, telling people what they should do next – where to go for food and shelter, how to get clothes and ration cards and so on. Miss Woolf was still cheerful, yet heaven knows when she had last slept. The woman had iron in her soul, there was no doubt about that. Ursula had grown enormously fond of Miss Woolf, she respected her almost more than anyone else she knew [...] (465).

This scene is an example of Miss Woolf's understanding of her sense of herself "as sharing a common life with others" (Leichter 114). Paul Ricoeur's conceptualisation of intersubjectivity can be utilised to analyse the interdependence among individuals and the communities. If one reviewer of the novel has affirmed that "Ursula is one woman, rendered in multiple iterations, which makes this a story about the creation of self" (Kellogg 1), it could be argued that *Life After Life* recounts the process of the creation of the community. In so doing the novel re-enacts networks and relationships, fostering the idea that "reading oneself is the key to self-understanding" (Simms 101). This is to be applied not only to the individual, but also to the community. Seen in this light, the fictional production of "cultural memory is an ongoing process, characterized by a dynamic interplay between text and context, the individual and the collective, the social and the medial" (Erl 171).

Atkinson's novel promotes the encounter with the other as another self, which facilitates and expands the "sense of meaning and opens up the possibility for genuine community" (Leichter 118). Miss Woolf indeed creates such a community in her heroic actions during the London Blitz, by forging links with the members of the squad. She is raising everyone's spirits despite the horrible scenes of bombed houses, filthiness, and death everywhere. However, at one point the women's voluntary service (WVS) canteen is bombed and the messenger boy, Anthony, who is scooting past on his bicycle, is hit. This time, it is Ursula who is cheering Miss Woolf up, as she finds his death unbearable:

"Oh Anthony", Miss Woolf said, unable to say anything else [...] She stifled a sob with her hand. Tony made no sign of having heard them and they watched as he slowly turned a deathly pale, the colour of thin milk. He had gone.

"Oh, God", Miss Woolf cried. "I can't bear it".

“But bear it we must”, Ursula said, wiping away the snot and the tears and filth from her cheeks with the back of her hand and thinking how once this exchange would have been the other way round (512).

This section on the London Blitz illustrates the theme of the novel since death or life depends on the “capriciousness of the bombs and just where you were standing when they hit” (Lakeland 25). Anthony dies by chance, and his death, inexplicable as it is for Miss Woolf, breaks something inside the senior warden whose strength and courage have been instrumental in saving lives on many occasions. Ursula provides comfort when Miss Woolf most needs it, and thus, they represent an example of intersubjective relationship by means of encountering the other as another self.

Miss Woolf, as an individual, is a wounded subject, and so are the other wardens. Then, the novel seems to suggest that it is necessary to exorcise the past wounds by memory and mourning through *telling otherwise*, following Ricoeur: “through narrating one’s identity otherwise, a community can work through its past, have an acceptable understanding of itself, and to justice to others” (Leichter 124). The sense of the community that the novel promotes is connected with what Kate Atkinson has said about the purpose of the novel: *Life After Life* is about being English, “[n]ot just the reality of being English but also what we are in our imagination” (“Author’s Note” 616). This way, Atkinson’s novel bears striking similarities with *Atonement*, as mentioned earlier, which also examined established definitions of Englishness, as well as with Atkinson’s earlier work that also challenged and exposed “the cracks and contradictions in the ideology of Englishness” (Parker 64). In order to do so, Atkinson shows a duty to do justice in interlocked ways, which gives predominance to secondary voices or to alternative stories other than the dominant ideology. According to Ricoeur (86-92), to do justice involves to turn towards others, as Ursula does in her encounter with the German other.

In one of Ursula’s incarnations, she is determined to improve her knowledge of modern languages, and in the summer of 1933 she goes to Munich as “part of her adventurous year in Europe” (*Life After Life* 391). In this iteration of her life, she marries Jürgen Fuchs (who will work for the Ministry of Justice in Munich), gives birth to a daughter, Frieda, and has the possibility of enjoying the hospitality of Eva Braun at Hitler’s summer house on the mountains. The reader is to know the magnetic attraction that Hitler had for women: “Women in particular seemed to love the Führer.

They wrote him letters in the thousands, baked him cakes, embroidered swastikas on to cushions and pillows for him [...]” (428). In 1945, Ursula lives in Munich but the city is being bombed by the Allies day and night: Frieda, an unhealthy girl, with a poor chest, is suffering the cold. When the Russian tanks are already in the city, Ursula decides to kill her little daughter, and to commit suicide in one of the most harrowing scenes of the novel:

She held tightly on to Frieda and soon they were both wrapped in the velvet wings of the black bat and this life was already unreal and gone. She had never chosen death over life before and as she was leaving she knew something had cracked and broken and the order of things had changed. Then the dark obliterated all thoughts (445).

It is difficult to ascertain how much she remembers of this life, but witnessing the war from the enemy’s viewpoint grants Ursula with a more sympathetic perspective about German casualties. While suffering the ravages of hunger and cold in Berlin, Ursula is comparing the consequences of the bombing in both Berlin and London: “After the British raid on the zoo they had gone to see if there were any animals they could eat but plenty of people had got there before them. (Could *that* happen at home? Londoners scavenging in Regent’s Park zoo? Why not?)” (440). This underlines the levelling effect of war casualties, which is further reinforced in *A God in Ruins*, when Ursula wonders if Teddy feels uneasy about attacks on civilian population, considered a legitimate target (277), a contentious issue in the last few years as far as war history is concerned. Following Ricoeur, among the others we are indebted to are the victims (89).

In fact, Ricoeur argues that the duty of memory, or the notion of debt to the past, situates us in a privileged position as mediators between the past, present and future. “*We must remember these people when we are safely in the future*”, Miss Woolf states (*Life After Life* 164); and this future-oriented perspective, already developed in the earlier section of this essay, keeps our duty to the past alive, making us responsible for those who came before us, and who provided us with a heritage:

The duty of memory is not restricted to preserving the material trace, whether scriptural or other, of past events, but maintains the feeling of being obligated with respect to these others, of whom [...], not that they are no more, but that they were.

Pay the debt [...] but also inventory the heritage (Ricoeur 89).

There is one moving scene in the novel when Ursula, as an ARP, relives the bombing of a shelter in Argyll Road and fails to avoid the death of a baby. The cellar where the residents of the house have found shelter looks like “a crypt [...] full of the ancient dead” (*Life After Life* 509). The dead are compared to Roman ruins and the relics preserved from the eruption of the Mount Vesuvius in the first century A.D., where villas and streets had been buried under ashes:

The dead here – men, women, children, even a dog – looked as though they had been entombed where they had been sitting. They were completely cloaked in a shell of dust and looked more like sculptures, or fossils. She was reminded of Pompeii or Herculaneum. Ursula had visited both, during her ambitiously titled ‘grand tour’ of Europe (507).

By means of a simile, where the dead people are compared to the remains of those underground cities, the novel recognises a debt to the past, treating it like a heritage that has to be preserved and acknowledged. More importantly, the novel shows that we should feel the obligation to do justice for the sake of future generations (Leichter 124). In a similar key, Atkinson states that the writer has to *care* about what s/he is writing, particularly when there is “a moral imperative” (“Author’s Note” 388). Furthermore, she affirms that “[i]f this is a refutation of modernism or post-modernism or whatever has superseded post-modernism, then so be it” (“Author’s Note” 388), a statement that agrees with my discussion of the neo-historical novel as representing a move-on from postmodernism.

### *Conclusion: “History Is All About ‘What Ifs’”*

As the notion of “circularity” (Atkinson, *Life After Life* 192) represents the backbone of the novel, it seems fitting that this essay should conclude by means of a re-beginning of what was first stated in the introduction. In this piece I have dealt with Atkinson’s *Life After Life* as a novel with a special concern with temporalities in relation to history and memory. I have focused particularly on the future and death in connection with

historicity, drawing on Paul Ricoeur and Martin Heidegger's theories, as well as on the link between forgetting and "rebeginning", following Ricoeur and Marc Augé. Also, I have proved that the drive towards the future or "futureness" signals another way of memorialising the past and of showing a duty to the dead. In this sense, a concept of communal memory, in which Ricoeur's intersubjective model provides an apt critical notion, is at stake here, since it facilitates the production of networks of individual and communal relations.

Ultimately, the novel suggests alternative trajectories as a metaphor of the infinite possibilities an author faces when writing fiction. One critic has aptly noted that "Atkinson sharpens our awareness of the apparently limitless choices and decisions that a novelist must make on every page, and of what is gained and lost when the consequences of these choices are, like life, singular and final" (Prose 4). Therefore, fiction writing bears resemblance to the inherent potentialities that memory condenses: "[...] memory is fluid, ever-changing, even while it appears to remain the same. Due to its capacity to relate past, present, and future – envisioning alternative trajectories through a recourse to the past, activating forgotten knowledge in the present, making sense of the new by comparing it to the old – memory is the very apparatus that enables change" (Erl 174). Both memory and fiction are treated as similar forces: protean, ever-changing, putting together past, present and future orientations and possibilities. If we envisage possible futures, we manifest our debt to the past, recuperate forgotten events of that past, thus creating new possibilities for the future. Atkinson has posited that she cannot conceive a novel as "a two-dimensional space where the text ceases to be an interface between the self and the wider world" ("Author's Note" 388). This calls for an ethical position of the author who, like the historical fiction writer, reclaims the past for the future generations by *telling otherwise*.



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- 2 The *Cultures of Commemoration* Conference, held at the University of Portsmouth (11-12 July 2014), considered commemorative practices in contemporary literature and culture in the year that marked the centenary of the First World War. Other events contributed to the commemoration of relevant historical moments, such as the project “Transforming the D-Day Museum”, sponsored by the Portsmouth D-Day Museum Trust. *Lest We Forget* was Portsmouth Museum’s First World War Centenary Exhibition (19 July 2014–25 January 2015), inviting “visitors of all ages to uncover personal stories that reveal the fates of those involved on their journeys of chance, choice and destiny in the First World War” (n. p.).
- 3 The strained mother-daughter relationship in *Life After Life* is not uncharted territory for Atkinson. One has only to remember her early work, especially her trilogy *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1995), *Human Croquet* (1997) and *Emotionally Weird* (2000), where the mother-daughter bond features prominently. According to Emma Parker, “[throughout the trilogy] Atkinson persistently depicts the pain of feeling unmothered or inadequately mothered, as well as the enduring power of the mother-daughter bond” (18).
- 4 Atkinson has labelled *A God in Ruins* a companion piece, rather than a sequel. It is about Teddy’s life and his role as a Halifax pilot in the strategic bombing upon Germany. In a way the novel fictionalises the controversy about the bombing campaign in WWII, which ended up hitting civilians, and not only military targets (Atkinson, “Author’s Note” 388-89). Also, it capitalises on the relevance of the secret, since during WWII Nancy, Teddy’s wife, was doing something “abstrusely mathematical”, according to Ursula. Teddy knew that it was “German codes” (Atkinson, *A God* 115), and later the plot discloses that she was working at Bletchley Park, deciphering intercepted German coded messages alongside Alan Turing, mathematician who cracked the Enigma code machine. In 2014 the award-winning film *The Imitation Game* (dir. Morten Tyldum) featured Alan Turing’s achievement, which

helped saving thousands of lives during WWII. For a further exploration of the importance of secrecy “as both a theme and a structural device in contemporary fiction” (Stewart 2), and as a crucial element in WWII, please consult Victoria Stewart’s *Second World War in Contemporary British Fiction: Secret Histories* (2011).

- 5 Victoria Stewart has been the first critic, to the best of my knowledge, to indicate the similarities between Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001) and Atkinson’s *Life After Life*. Fiona Tolan notes that in *Behind the Streets at the Museum* Ruby sees history as a palimpsest (287).
- 6 It remains clear that Miss Woolf’s name pays homage to Virginia Woolf, the modernist writer, whose London house was destroyed in the London blitz.





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