“A Little Pain. Reading Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life*”

It is not often that one comes across a literary text in which the embodied reader gets to have the upper hand in an encounter (Kukkonen: 369) that generally favors the implied reader (see Wolfgang Iser’s Implied Reader), the one concerned with filling gaps, with constructing meaning, a reader who responds to the literary text as both a cognitive vehicle and an instrument, inasmuch as the term ‘cognitive’ refers to higher order processes. *A Little Life*, Hanya Yanagihara’s novel about trauma, friendship, and the thin line separating living from surviving, manages to foreground the kind of embodied engagement that has gained more attention from cognitivists in the field of literary study. Literature is a product of cognition and is, at the same time, an instrument of cognition, as noted by Terence Cave (*Thinking with Literature*, 2016), and that is true for the author as well as for the reader. Cognition, in turn, has long ago ceased to signify only higher order processing, and is viewed now as including perception, emotion and deeply rooted physiological resonances (Cave:14). The reader physically resonates to certain passages from *A Little Life*, experiencing a sensation that echoes the pain felt by the character(s), and by continuing to read despite the physical discomfort, seems to embody the character’s spiraling back to self harm. Thus literature emerges as a vessel of deeply physical knowledge. This paper suggests that there are key textual factors which favor the embodied engagement, we may call them triggers, or affordances. By slowing down the process of ‘thinking with’ those passages it looks for those elements that help the reader to keep going, in spite of the physical strain presented by the engagement with this text. At the same time it looks for the ways in which strands such as extended cognition might play a part in understanding Hanya Yanagihara’s novel.

**Key words:** cognitivism, embodied reading, extended cognition, affordance, reader-response.