

Degree Project

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Memory, Ageing and Narrative Identity in John Banville's *The Sea*

A Narratological Approach

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Introduction

The novel *The Sea*, written by the Irish writer John Banville in 2005, borrows from the genre of the Bildungsroman. This literary genre, also referred to as the coming-of-age novel, is characterised by a narrative which follows a main protagonist through their childhood, adolescence, and sometimes young adult years. In contrast, the main character of *The Sea*, Max Morden, is entering young-old life¹, as he is in his sixties at the time of the narration. However, despite this important difference with the traditional Bildungsroman, the novel borrows many of the traits which characterise the genre, including the focus on the character's development, the importance of questions of identity formation both in childhood and adulthood, and the presence of mentors. Indeed, it focusses on Max's development through his memories of both his recent and distant past. The recent loss of his wife Anna triggers his return to a seaside village named Ballyless, where he spent a fateful summer as a child. There, he remembers the childhood trauma of witnessing the deaths of Chloe and Miles Grace, the twins with whom he had developed a budding friendship. As a result, the novel can be qualified as an ageing Bildungsroman, focussing on the life of one character but from the perspective of his ageing self.

Max's reminiscences structure the entire novel, with a narrative which is told in the first person. At the time of the narration, Max is in his sixties and, together with his bereavement, he displays signs of an identity crisis following the loss of his wife. He speaks little about the present and rather focusses on events which marked his life as he struggles to make sense of his past to understand his identity. As a result, most of the novel features Max's reminiscences. In this respect, the novel can be studied in relation to concepts used in the field of literary geronto-

1 "Young-old life" is defined in the article on adulthood in the Dictionary of Psychology to be one of the sub divisions of "later adulthood" which starts at the age of sixty-five, and it corresponds to the ages of sixty-five to seventy-four years old.

logy, as reminiscence is a central concept in theories of ageing. In *Reminiscence and the Self in Old Age*, Edmund Sherman explains that reminiscence “enabl[es] the older person to reintegrate past issues and experiences in the present purpose of achieving a sense of meaning and ego-integrity in Eriksonian terms” (29), referring to the work of the psychologist Erik Erikson. For Max, reminiscence plays this exact role. His past is fragmented by trauma and loss and reminiscence enables him to make sense of it, to reintegrate these parts of his past in his present and to understand his identity. As a result, his narrative shares common points with both trauma narratives and illness narratives. Like texts of these genres, the narrative of *The Sea* bears the evidence of Max’s attempts to bridge the disruptions created by trauma and illness. Trauma narrative and illness narrative are both important subgenres in the novel as the nature of the past experiences Max has trouble to reintegrate in his present identity plays a critical role in his process of reminiscing.

The form of the novel imitates confessional writing, as it is told in the first person with internal focalisation and follows the narrator’s train of thought. Memory is also of particular importance to the construction of the character’s identity from a narratological point of view. Indeed, in narrative fiction, characterisation occurs through different textual indicators such as “direct definition” and “indirect presentation” (Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction* 59). This implies that a character’s identity is traditionally constructed in the reader’s mind through the combination of several sources, as for instance the character’s own discourse but also description and narration from several other characters and/or narrators. The narrative form of *The Sea* restricts the elements which contribute to characterisation; in fact, the construction of Max’s identity is entirely dependent on his own reminiscing, with the exception of a few lines of direct discourse from other characters. For this reason, the analysis of the development of his identity both as a character

and as a narrator is closely interrelated with the way the text reproduces the workings of memory. Thus, time and memory are closely related in two ways. On the one hand, memory reflects Max's ageing experience as it is his way of dealing with the passing of time, and on the other hand, it is through his reminiscing that he reconstructs his life and sense of identity in the narrative. As a consequence, time is crucial as a narrative feature in the novel.

While time, as a category of human experience, can be analysed as a theme, it can also be studied in the narration itself. The handling of time at the level of the narrative is interlinked to what the text may say about time and is therefore particularly important to study in the context of a text which deals with ageing and memory, both of which are strongly connected to time. Therefore, in order to focus on this relationship between time as a theme and time as a narrative tool, this thesis will analyse how the text deals with time through the lens of narratology. Among narrative theorists, Gérard Genette was the first to develop a terminology to analyse time in narrative. In his groundbreaking essay "Narrative Discourse," he dedicates three of the five sections to the study of time. Through the detailed study of the handling of time in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Genette created a typology of disruptions of chronology, changes in pace and in frequency. In relation to these questions, Banville's novel breaks from the norms associated with the Bildungsroman. Traditionally, as Marianne Hirsch points out, one of the features which characterises the genre of the Bildungsroman is the linearity of the timelines (297). However, because the narrative of *The Sea* imitates the workings of memory, the timeline is very fragmented and does not follow the chronological order. Certain events, such as the deaths of the Grace twins and that of Anna, create violent disruptions in Max's life. These disruptions are reflected in the plot structure of the narrative, namely in the order in which the story is told.

The fragmentation of the narrator's identity, which, as this thesis will show, is visible through the handling of time, is also mirrored in the narrative technique, particularly relating to focalisation. The roles of focaliser and narrator are here carried by the same character, as is often the case, particularly in first-person narratives. As will be discussed, these roles are heavily influenced by the fragmentation of Max's identity. To analyse this, the concept of narratorship, coined by Barbara Dancygier in *The Language of Stories*, and developed by Natalia Igl and Sonja Zeman in *Perspectives on Narrativity and Narrative Perspectivization* will be particularly relevant.

The combination of narrative theory with trauma and ageing perspectives has not been used to study the novel. Previous research on *The Sea* has largely focussed on memory. In the article "'In the Murky Sea of Memory': Memory's Miscues in John Banville's *The Sea*", Hedda Friberg studies various ways in which memory fails the character, using concepts developed by Daniel Schacter such as "'mis-attribution,' 'suggestibility,' and 'bias'" (Friberg 112). She analyses in particular how these processes interfere with Max's depiction of the four main female characters, Mrs. Grace, Rose, Chloe, and Anna. In *Recovering Memory*, Friberg devoted another article to the study of memory in this novel, "Waters and Memories Always Divide: Sites of Memory in John Banville's *The Sea*". Her focus in this chapter is the physical, spatial and topological forms which memory takes, such as the beach or the book itself. Another article which analyses the theme of memory in Banville's novel is "'My Memory Gropes in Search of Details': Memory, Narrative, and 'Founding Traumas' in John Banville's *The Sea*", written by Kathleen Costello-Sullivan. It focusses on the role of the sea in relation to trauma. She also analyses how the narration is a way for the character to reconnect with his past, a point which will be mentioned in the third section of this thesis but with the addi-

tion of narratological and ageing perspectives. Zheng Jie's article "Towards an Ethical Subject: Mourning and Memory in John Banville's *The Sea*" approaches memory in Banville's novel by questioning the morality behind mourning in the relationship between the subject and the other. In "'The Past Beats Inside Me Like a Second Heart': The Narrative (Re)Construction of Emotions in John Banville's *The Sea*", Stephanie Frink analyses the novel with the help of the field of affective narratology introduced by Patrick Colm Hogan. Her study focusses on the character's emotions and how these are reflected in his narrative. It is interesting to note that Frink chose to work on the same two narrative devices than in the present thesis, namely time and focalisation. However, the perspective of this thesis is largely different insofar as Frink's focus is solely on emotions, while this thesis studies identity through the question of ageing and memory.

The Sea has also been studied from the perspective of literary gerontology. One of the first scholarly articles on the subject is Carmen Zamorano Llana's "'The Figures of the Far Past Come Back at the End': Unmasking the Desired Self through Reminiscence in Late Adulthood in John Banville's *The Sea*". It focusses with particular attention on the concepts of reminiscence and life-review, which will be defined and used in the present thesis, and offers a psychological analysis of Max Morden's ageing. In "'Strangers to Themselves': Ageing, the Individual, and the Community in the Fiction of Iris Murdoch, John Banville, and John McGahern", Heather Ingman sets to bringing a perspective of literary gerontology to the work of three well-known Irish writers. Only a short passage is dedicated to *The Sea*, but the comparison between the different cases allows her to conclude that the Banville shows a rather pessimistic vision of ageing through his protagonists. Marta Cerezo Moreno's "Traces of Stigma in John Banville's *The Sea*" offers a reading of *The Sea* through the question of Max's self-stigmatisation as a response

to his wife's illness. It analyses the novel's depiction of themes such as "disease, stigma, pain, suffering, age, death, and artistic creation" (126) to discuss the effect that Anna's illness and subsequent death has on Max.

More generally, a certain number of critics have also engaged with narratives featuring disruption or imbalance. These studies, analysing, notably, trauma and illness as generic categories, are interesting to mention in relation to *The Sea*, as Max's narrative shares features with these genres such as the quest for identity through disruption, features which are highly relevant for the present analysis. For instance, in *Écrits en souffrance*², Marc Amfreville studies literary texts in which suffering affects narration. Similarly, many texts, such as *Berätta för att förstå?*³ (Bergvall, Tyrberg and Wennö) and *Between the Urge to Know and the Need to Deny* (Herrero and Baelo-Allué) have discussed the paradox of narrating the un-narratable, especially in relation to trauma narratives. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's article "The Story of 'I': Illness and Narrative Identity" will also be of a certain importance to this thesis. In this paper, she examines some of these narratives and observes various types of disruption as well as the reaction to this disruption, which she calls "narrative restructuring" (14). While her primary sources are not fictional and thus differ from *The Sea* in an essential way, the narrative features she observes in those texts will be relevant to the present analysis. These studies are interesting to refer to, as Max Morden's memories – and thus his narrative – are affected not only by his ageing, but also by the traumatic events of his childhood and by his wife's illness and death. The parallels made between *The Sea* and observations made by researchers about illness narratives and trauma narratives

2 This critical text has not been translated, and the title is rather difficult to translate as it uses a play on words to relay a double meaning. On the one hand, it could be translated as *Delayed Writings*, on the other hand, it refers to writings *in* suffering as a field of study, as the author explains on page 9.

3 This collection of essays is bilingual and has therefore not been translated. The title could be translated as *Narrating to Understand?*

thus allow to study the development of Max's identity in all its depth and complexity.

Previous research on *The Sea* has thus studied the novel's depiction of memory, but not through the close analysis of narrative devices. Therefore, the text calls for an analysis combining narratology with ageing perspectives, as well as a focus on the role of narrative in the character's attempt to make sense of his identity. This thesis will analyse the narrative structure of the novel, in particular the handling of time and features of focalisation in relation to the theme of memory, and argue that the narrative is both evidence of disruption and a tool for healing and self-understanding in late life for the character.

Reminiscence and the Handling of Time

Max Morden's return to the seaside is triggered by the loss of his wife Anna. Anna's death marks a shift in his life, a gap which can only be bridged by memory. Indeed, as Sherman writes, "Reminiscence has a major function in coping with the loss of significant others and in grief resolution. Gerontological practitioners have been aware of the need for recently widowed persons to reminisce about their spouses" (Sherman 36). The use of memory also leads Max to reflect upon another traumatic event of his past, the death of the Grace twins and the summer in their company. The two events are not connected in Max's past, but his process of reminiscing connects them, as his thinking about the death of Chloe and Miles is a consequence of his thinking about the death of his wife. This pattern of a recent trauma echoing with a trauma further back in the character's past is a known pattern in trauma literature. Another literary example of this phenomenon would be Patrick McGrath's novel *Trauma* (2008). In this novel, the narrator and protagonist, Charlie Weir, remembers the trauma he experienced as an adult, and

its narration prompts him to think about his childhood, and the traumatic event which took place when he was a child. *The Sea* also resorts to this pattern, a recurrent one in trauma narratives. Max's going back to the events in his childhood is not incidental, but triggered by the recent trauma, which suggests that they are both crucial events in his life.

These two events have affected his life course through disruptions which are reflected in his narration, notably through the handling of time. This first chapter will analyse how ageing and disruptions are reflected in the temporal structure of the text. The study of time in narrative fiction requires a good understanding of two concepts first developed by Russian formalists, then modified and explored by other theorists. The Russian formalists proposed the distinction between *plot* and *story*. *Plot* refers to the events as they happened in the fictional world, whereas *story* refers to the events as they are told (Rivkin and Ryan 4). Later on, Gérard Genette coined a more technical terminology to avoid the confusion which comes with the use of words which are already used in other contexts. He uses the word *diegesis* to refer to, as Gerald Prince writes "the (fictional) world in which the situations and events narrated occur" (Prince 20), and *narrative* to refer to "the representation . . . of one or more real or fictive events" (Prince 58). This thesis will use Genette's terminology for purposes of clarity. The understanding of these terms is crucial because the analysis of the handling of time in a novel is based on the comparison between time of the diegesis and time of the narrative (Genette 77). Genette divided the study of time as a narrative feature into three categories: order, pace and frequency (Genette 78), all three of which will be analysed in this thesis.

As mentioned in the introduction, the genre of the Bildungsroman is usually characterised by a linear timeline; the narrative tells the events in the same order as they took place in the diegesis, because the text follows one character's develop-

ment. However, *The Sea* challenges this tradition, choosing to tell a life narrative through the character's reminiscence. In the present of the narration, Max is in the Cedars, looking back on his life. In terms of narrative techniques, this is translated into analepses – Genette's term to refer to a flashback (82). From this point, the entire narrative, with the exception of some short passages focussing on the present, is analeptic, with the narrator going back to his distant and near past.

While the timelines are numerous and not entirely separate, it is possible to sketch out a list of the main ones. The latest point in the narrative is the present, it is the anchor of the narration but also an object of narration. Five other main periods of his life can be distinguished: the time with his daughter a few days prior to his temporary move to Ballyless, the time with Anna from her diagnosis to her death, the period of his adulthood up to Anna's diagnosis, the period of his childhood with his mother and without his father, and the timeline at the Cedars with the Graces. This list is subjective and one possibility among several – the novel could be divided in more parts if looked at in more detail – if, for example, only a passage was studied. However, this particular division seems to be the most sensible one on the chosen scale, that is to say, the whole novel, as each timeline is clearly defined on the level of the narration by anachronies (Genette's term for disruptions in chronology (79)) and on the level of the diegesis by ellipses. These different timelines are separated by the events which fragment Max's life; in fact, each can be said to have a beginning and an ending, if looked at as individual narratives. For instance, the timeline narrating Anna's illness starts with her diagnosis and ends with her death – a fact which will be elaborated upon later on.

In the novel, the different timelines interrupt one another. This is often the case when Max makes a remark on the present despite having been thinking of the past, as for instance in the following quote: "The dog was barking wildly, wanting to be

let in again to retrieve the ball. By the way, that dog. I never saw it again. Whose can it have been? Odd sense of lightness today, of, what shall I call it, of volatility” (92). Two interruptions are featured here. The first sentence is the end of the narration of an important event in his childhood, and it is interrupted by the second and third sentences, which are a passing thought regarding the dog. Finally, the last sentence is an entirely separate subject, as well as a different timeline. It seems that, even as Max tells about his past, the focus is more the process of narration – in the present – than the events he is telling. As a result, while, he sometimes switches from the narration of one past event to another, he also sometimes switches from the narration of the past to that of a present feeling or passing thought. These switches are abrupt, imitating the workings of memory. It is thus part of the strategy to imitate memory but also spontaneity. Indeed, the text has a high level of orality, strikingly reflected for instance in the passage “the poet Valéry, I believe it was pronounced” (41). This is quite surprising, for pronunciation should not be a worry in a written narrative, giving this sentence a slightly absurd appearance, but ultimately creating the impression that Max is speaking out loud, to the reader or to himself.

The anachronies observed previously are also part of the process of recreating a character’s attempt to reminisce upon different and apparently irreconcilable periods of his past. Furthermore, he seems to go through the process of life review – a concept which will be defined and discussed later on – for the first time; it is even possible that he is thinking back on some of the events for the first time. This adds another layer to the spontaneity of his narrative, as the events are truly laid out in the order in which the character remembers them. The abundant use of anachronies, along with the other divergences from the norm in regards to the handling of

time which will be explored throughout this chapter, is a way to reproduce the effects of reminiscing about traumatic events for the first time.

Another disruption in the handling of time can be observed, namely that between occurrences, iteration and description. Occurrence and iteration relate to the category of frequency; an occurrence is an event which happens once, whereas iteration refers to events which happened several times. Description relates to duration, as it is a kind of pause “where some segment of the text corresponds to zero story duration” (Rimmon-Kenan 53). The following passage, which takes place with Max’s father at the beach during his childhood, in the summer he spent with the Graces, includes all three of these modes:

At last, he let her go and turned on me, upending me and grasping me by the ankles and pushing me forward wheelbarrow-fashion off the edge of the sandbank and laughing. How strong his hands were, like manacles of cold, pliant iron. I feel even yet their violent grip. He was a violent man, a man of violent gestures, violent jokes, but timid, too, no wonder he left us, had to leave us. I swallowed water and twisted out of his grasp in a panic and jumped to my feet and stood in the surf, retching (36-7).

It is interesting to quote this passage at length to analyse how the three modes alternate. It starts as an occurrence, that is, the father and son’s wrestling at the beach. Then, it evolves into the descriptive mode but with some implied iterative elements, such as his “violent gestures” and “violent jokes”. Then, the text follows his thought to another occurrence, his departure from his family, but only as a reference as Max turns back to the occurrence he was originally narrating at the beginning of the passage. This extract is, therefore, a telling example of how the text

mirrors the workings of memory. In this way, it also illustrates the process of ageing, as memory is the only way for Max to reconnect with his youth. Furthermore, as Brian Worsfold remarks in his analysis of André Brink's *The Rights of Desire*, "the passing of time in middle-age is perceptually different from the passing of time in youth" (149). In this regard, the play with different rhythms which was illustrated above also illustrates the chaos resulting from the putting together of different timelines, each of which has its own rhythm and pace.

This juxtaposition of several modes can also be linked with the disruptive elements such as the childhood trauma and the death of Anna, as the narrative is broken by these descriptive and iterative passages. The novel contains a large proportion of description, as Max tends to interrupt his story to observe his surroundings:

"That's a pity," she said in a plain, flat tone. "I'm sorry to hear that." She did not seem to mean it, somehow.

The autumn fell slantwise into the yard, making the cobbles bluely shine, and in the porch, a pot of geraniums flourished aloft their last burning blossoms of the season. Honestly, this world (58).

This passage starts with dialogue, which is considered the most life-like pace. As Rimmon-Kenan writes "In *scene* . . . story-duration and text-duration are conventionally considered identical. The purest scenic form is dialogue" (*Narrative Fiction* 54). Dialogue is followed by description, a mode in which no action is told despite there being some text, and the story is therefore at a halt. Thus, the rhythm of the narrative is abruptly stopped, as Max's life was after his wife's death. Yet, the description itself refers to the passing of time, since it describes the season. As

a consequence, the dialogue is interrupted by a passage which simultaneously slows down and quickens the pace. Similarly, Max sometimes ends paragraphs dramatically with short sentences which have a fateful echo: “And I have fallen in love with Mrs Grace” (32), “And my life is changed forever” (33). In addition to being somewhat dramatic, they produce a sudden acceleration of the rhythm, as the parts preceding them are descriptive or characterised by slow narration. Furthermore, they are the mark of a narrator who has distance and is able to determine that his life was changed by these events. Thus, it is also a way of connecting with the present, as it connects to the long-term process of narration, and the fact that he has a different perspective because of his temporal advantage. This will be further discussed in chapter two.

The novel also goes back and forth between the character’s pasts – in the plural – and his present. The various periods alternate in relation to the spontaneity previously discussed in this thesis, as the text delivers the result of his reminiscence without ordering it in a conventional linear narrative. This relates to what Hedda Friberg describes as “the inescapable dependence of the present on the past and of the past on the present” (“In the Murky Sea of Memory” 111). As Friberg further analyses, “In its exploration of this interconnectedness, Banville’s novel becomes an investigation of the distorting processes of memory” (111). This juxtaposition of the different timelines allows Max to compare his memories of the past to the present, which he does regularly: “the iron gate that is still painted green, though rust has reduced its struts to a tremulous filigree” (4). Here, the narrator, who only just returned to the place of his childhood holiday, is comparing his memories of the past with his observations of the present, particularly through the use of the adverb “still”.

Non-chronological accounts of events are also characteristic of trauma narratives, a sub-genre to which *The Sea* arguably belongs and with which it shares many traits. Thematically, two major traumatic events are narrated, the illness and subsequent death of Anna and the shocking drowning of Chloe and Miles. Their narration bears the trace of the traumatic impact on the narrator. As Troy writes, “Narrative techniques that are used to express traumatic memories and experiences are, for instance, repetition, fragmentation, gaps or ellipses, lack of chronology, and shift of verb tenses” (125-6). This is important to point out in the context of the study of Banville’s novel, because erasing the dimension of trauma would be erasing a dimension which is essential to the construction of the narrative as well as the character’s memory and his identity. Thus, precisely because, as Troy observes, trauma “resists narrative integration” (126), the novel has to depart from traditional narrative techniques to portray the character’s life despite the interruption of trauma.

While a comparison with trauma narratives is interesting to study one aspect of the character’s identity, his reminiscing and its functions shares traits with another genre, namely illness narratives. Rimmon-Kenan’s article “The Story of ‘I’: Illness and Narrative Identity” defines the effect of illness on identity as the “disruption of continuity” (10). She also observes that the illness narratives she studies are divided into “a ‘before’ and ‘after,’ with an unbridgeable gap between them” (Rimmon-Kenan 10). This applies to *The Sea* in two respects. Firstly, the timeline with Anna is constructed like an illness narrative. The first element in that timeline, both in the time of the diegesis and the time of the narrative, is the diagnosis (13-7), followed by the couple’s return home from the doctor’s. Furthermore, the last element, again both in the order of the diegesis and in that of the narrative, is Anna’s death. Illness is defined temporally by these very elements; starting with

diagnosis, and ending either with death or cure, making the timeline with Anna completely devoted to her illness. In another way, Max's entire story is an illness narrative insofar as "illness narratives can also include the narratives of relatives about the effects the illnesses have had on their relationships with the sick people and on their own lives" (Hydén 2007). Taking this into account and considering the fact that Anna's illness affects the couple as a whole, *The Sea* can be considered an illness narrative. However, it cannot be restricted to an illness narrative as a genre, since, as discussed previously, it also belongs to other genres, such as the ageing Bildungsroman, and the trauma narrative. The fact that only one timeline is an illness narrative contributes to the fragmentation of the text. Indeed, different timelines belong to different literary sub-genres – illness narrative, trauma narrative, memoir, Bildungsroman – making the novel generically heterogeneous.

Finally, as Darya Tsymbalyuk writes, "In the words of Lisa Capps and Elinor Ochs: 'Nonlinear narration opens narration to multiple truths and perspectives and the realization that certain life experiences resist tidy, ready-at-hand interpretive frameworks'" (Tsymbalyuk 6). As a result, this type of narration also allows the portrayal of identities which are fragmented. This chapter has shown that the temporal structure of the text imitates the functioning of memory and reminiscence in the context of a life fragmented by trauma and loss. However, time is only one aspect of this fragmentation, as the character's identity is also influenced by his ageing in general and more specifically the traumatic events previously discussed. These shifts in his identity have an incidence on his role as a focaliser and therefore on how the story is related. This is the focus of the second chapter, which will analyse features of narratorship – a concept which will be explained – to study how his identity is constructed in the novel.

Fragmented Identity and Narratorship

The narration of different points in time leads to the portrayal of the same character at different stages of his life. Time is a very important part of one's identity; it is the basis for growing up and ageing, for change and evolution. The passing of time shapes Max's identity, as do the various events in his life. The child named Max is very different from who he becomes with time, different from, for instance, the adult Max who is grieving the loss of his wife. Thus, while Max is the narrator and focaliser in the entire novel – concepts which will be clarified below –, the effects of ageing and trauma on his identity also affect how he perceives the events he narrates. As a result, the question of whether the roles of narrator and focaliser are carried by the same identity can be raised.

Narratologists distinguish between narrator and focaliser, the narrator being the one who tells and the focaliser the one who perceives the events which are told. (Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction* 71-2). "Narrator" and "focaliser" are not characters, they are functions which "may, but need not, be attributed to the same agent" (Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction* 72). Furthermore, "focaliser" is an element of the narrative, whereas "narrator" is an element of the narration, as implied by the structure of Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction, Contemporary Poetics*. Indeed, her study is divided in three major sections; in the category of "story" (the word she uses where Genette uses "diegesis"), she studies "events" and "characters". In the category of "text" (the word she uses where Genette uses "narrative"), she analyses "time", "characterisation" and "focalization". Finally, under the category of "narration", she places "levels and voices" and "speech representation". In relation to *The Sea*, it can be argued that Max is present on all three levels. On the level of the diegesis, he is a character, on the level of the narrative, he is a focaliser, and on the level of the narration, he is a narrator.

The concept of “narratorship” facilitates an analysis all three of these levels as interdependent. The concept was first introduced by Barbara Dancygier in *The Language of Stories* and is defined as “a cluster of epistemic and linguistic choices which organize the text-wide viewpoint structure of the story” (2). As the title of her book indicates, this perspective is born from the use of concepts from cognitive linguistics within narrative study. It focusses on the analysis of the reader’s conceptualisation of the narrative and is based on cognitive theories such as mental spaces theory and blending (5). Fauconnier and Turner explain the concept of mental spaces in the following way: “Mental spaces are small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk, for purposes of local understanding and action” (40). “Blends” is another concept developed by cognitive scientists. Blending takes place in context, when two of these mental spaces form a structure, called “blend” (17-9). With these theories as a starting point, Dancygier distinguishes two levels in a narrative: main narrative spaces (MN-spaces) and story-viewpoint spaces (SV-spaces) (63), the latter being where features of narratorship are located. Natalia Igl and Sonja Zeman develop Dancygier’s use of the term and claim that: “the level of the narrator does not have to be seen as a narrating persona . . . but an abstract level where possible narrative instances can be materialized. Such a configuration is in alignment with the concept of ‘narratorship’ proposed by Dancygier (2012)” (30). This theory can be particularly useful to study not only aspects of a narrative relating to voice, but to focalisation as well, as “‘narratorship’ is a subordinated, subjective force that constitutes the ‘story viewpoint’ and ‘the source of the narration’, emerging from the distance between the different narrative spaces involved (Dancygier 2012:4)” (Igl and Zeman 30)

This system of analysis leads to a new way of studying narrative discourse, especially when it comes to narratives told by a fragmented voice such as *The Sea*. It allows to study the narrative technique, including its fragmentation, as a network:

The potential of perspectivization can be materialized in rather complex forms, while the underlying structure remains the same. In this respect, the model reconciles the seemingly irreconcilable perspectives with respect to the narrator's different conceptualizations, as it differentiates between an abstract 'narratorship' and the actual materialization of narrator personae. As a result, the model offers a flexible approach in order to account for phenomena of polyphony or (multi)focalization, which can both be seen as surface effects of the general principle of perspectivization (Igl and Zeman 38).

This model thus seems to be particularly useful for the analysis of fragmented narrative situations or cases of complex focalisation, such as that in Banville's novel. The phrase "the narrator's different conceptualization" is particularly relevant in regards to the novel, as this model of analysis allows to consider all of Max's various identities at various stages of his life as constituents of the novel's narratorship. Furthermore, while *The Sea* is not polyphonic in the literal sense of the term, it can, as will be demonstrated, be said to be an example of what Igl and Zeman refer to as multi-focalisation.

In *The Sea*, all narration is done in the present, therefore, Max, as a narrator, has the same identity all along. In contrast, his identity as a character, and therefore as focalising agent, changes from one timeline to the next. When the present is narrated, his sixty-something year-old self is the focaliser, with all his experiences. When he narrates about the timeline from Anna's diagnosis to her death, the

focaliser is a Max who has lived through the deaths of the Grace twins, but who has not lost his wife, etc. This also means that the passages focussing on the present have the same narrator and focaliser, whereas the others have a different focaliser. Consequently, Max as a narrator experiences more distance with past events; as he is the focaliser of the present but not of the past. This reflects the split in his identity caused by trauma and illness: “John Kenny observes that Banville’s narrators all suffer from an ‘excessive self-awareness’ that ‘brings with it a sense of doubtful self-identity, suspect authenticity, and an agonized yearning for a sublimely idealized, preconscious, and therefore innocent, self’ (170)” (Zheng 361). This disruption in the character’s identity has as a consequence the appearance of several sides of the same character: his pre-trauma self, post-trauma self, pre-doctor visit self. Each identity belongs to another timeline, and it also influences his perception and voice. This can be linked to how illness narratives portray identity. As mentioned in the introduction, Rimmon-Kenan’s studies of the genre explores the disruption of the voice caused by the author’s illness, which fragments their identity as a narrator, since the texts she works on are not fictional. She observes a clear separation between a *before* and an *after*, with, of course, the diagnosis as the turning point. The fragmentation of the narrative identity is a phenomenon she observes in some illness narratives.

The disruption of the chronology also allows to contrast who Max is with who he was. This is, for instance, emphasised by the way in which he talks: “We holidayed here every summer, my father and mother and I. We would not have put it that way. *We came here for our holidays*, that is what we would have said. How difficult now to speak as I spoke then” (Banville 34). This passage is in line with the spontaneity and orality analysed in the first chapter, but it also marks the difference between who he is and who he was. The use of the deictic time markers

“now” and “then” underlines this difference due on the one hand to the different times, and on the other hand to changes in his identity.

Another point worth noting is that identity is strongly linked to one’s relationships with others; they influence one another. This is thematised in the text through Max’s relation with Rose Vavasour. In the memories of his childhood, he calls her Rose, whereas in the present, he calls her Miss Vavasour. As a result, the reader is not aware that they are, in fact, the same character. In the present, he also calls her “quite the elegant old lady” (39). However, it is not her whose identity is double, but Max’s perception of her, as it is only his perspective which is offered to the reader. In his mind, he distinguishes the young woman he knew in his childhood, Rose, from his landlady. It is only in the last few pages of the novel that they merge in one person, when, as she unexpectedly calls him by his first name, he reflects: “I do not think it means I can call her Rose” (160-1). Rose Vavasour’s presentation as two separate characters shows that, in Max’s mind, she has two identities, namely who she was as a young woman, and who she is as an older adult. This can be explained by his fragmented perception of his own identity, leading him to perceive the world around him very differently as a child and as an adult. The fragmented narratorship of the novel, with one narrator, and several focalisers, who are simply the same character at different points in his life, thus thematises the character’s identity crisis in a complex manner.

This disunited way in which Max’s narrative presents him as a character can be explained through the concept of decompression, another concept borrowed from the field of cognitive linguistics. Dancygier discusses the notion of decompression of one character into two personas, in relation to the concept of a blend defined above. She writes: “One’s sense of uniqueness is a result of a highly compressed blend, but it is natural to decompress that whole when need arises, if only to be

able to recognize the changes that inevitably occur” (100). Thus, the blend which is required to create a character is here decompressed. On the level of the diegesis, Max decompresses his identity as a result of the need to, in Dancygier’s words, “recognize the changes that inevitably occur”. At the level of the narrative, this is reflected by the decompression of the focalising agent, highlighting how fragmented his identity as a character is.

The Role of Narrative in Identity Construction in Late Life

The study of narrative has also bloomed outside of the field of narratology. As Mieke Bal writes in *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, “‘Narrative’ is . . . a transdisciplinary concept, while ‘narratology,’ the systematic study of the phenomenon that concept names, has been developed within the disciplinary niche of literary studies. As a result of the move towards greater interdisciplinarity, others have alleged narrative as important” (11). Bal mentions the field of historiography as one such field, but other examples could very well include oral history, trauma studies, or even psychology and psychoanalysis, as well as medical sciences and gerontology, all of which are based on the analysis of narratives in various forms and with various aims. While the present thesis is very much anchored in narratology and analyses a work of fiction, it can be argued that it also belongs to the field of narrative, as the features of disruptions analysed are not specific to fiction.

As a result, it is possible to analyse the effect which the process of narrating has on the character, for instance in its relation with trauma narratives and illness narratives previously explored, but also more importantly with the process of ageing and its narration. Some of the studies in these fields mentioned in the first two chapters also focus on the goal of story-telling for the narrators, and of the effect it has on them. For instance, in her study of nonfictional first-person illness narrat-

ives, Rimmon-Kenan, observes what she calls “narrative restructuring”, that is to say a “pull toward coherence, continuity, transformation – motivated by a transitory or permanent need on the part of ill subjects to counter the rupture” (14).

Similarly, the study of trauma narratives often looks at the relation between the subject’s sense of self, their identity, and the narration of the traumatic event. While, of course, trauma and narrative are very closely linked, the expression *trauma narrative* in itself is, in a way, paradoxical. As Troy writes, “trauma and narrative are sometimes seen as close to mutually exclusive notions” (126). They are antithetic because an event is traumatic, by definition, because the mind cannot grasp it or assimilate it (Herrero and Baelo-Allué 11). Yet, narrative is used by psychoanalysis to help the subject come to terms and assimilate the event, because remembering is necessary in order to forget: “We should . . . accept the paradox that, in order really to forget an event, we must first summon the strength to remember it properly” (Zizek 22). It is in this same way that the narrative in *The Sea* serves as a healing process for Max. Narration is a way for him to restructure this fragmentation by making sense of the different periods of his life and of what fragments it. In fact, Max is nearly in the same position as the reader, who needs the narrative to understand the events. As Costello-Sullivan writes, “the narrative [of *The Sea*] recreates the process of self-discovery and reconstruction that is critical to recovery from trauma” (354). It is not only his return to the seaside, which, as Cerezo Moreno writes, is a “consoling retreat” for the character, but the process of reminiscing and narrating which allows him to reconcile the various periods of his life with his identity in the present. In Philippe Malrieu’s words, “Autobiography is an activity of the subject, of dialogue between two “I”, in the moment where it develops, the present “I” questions the several past “I”, to bring to consciousness

the old dialogues which took place between the latter” (195)⁴. This is exactly what occurs in the novel. For Max, reviewing his life in the same way than an author does when writing his autobiography allows this dialogue between his present self his past selves and indeed between the selves of each timeline to occur, seemingly for the first time.

In ageing studies, reminiscence and life review are types of narratives in which an ageing subject looks back on their past. While reminiscence is more focused on punctual memories, life review is concerned with the entire life span to the time of the reviewing process. Ingersoll-Dayton and Bommarito explain Robert N. Butler’s “conceptualization of the life review” as “a form of reminiscence spanning the life of the individual that could actually facilitate the successful and adaptive integration of experiences, create meaning, and offer older adults the possibility of change” (781-2). This dynamic can be observed in Max’s narrative, as some elements in the general structure of the text reflect a certain cohesion in the way he understands his life. For instance, the narration of the two major events fragmenting his life, the deaths of Chloe and Miles, and the death of Anna, takes place in parallel. The two sub-narratives alternate and evolve simultaneously until they reach the same conclusion, both in the last few pages of the novel. In addition to the dramatic effect created by the revelation of the most striking facts at once, this climactic ending is also a sign that Max is making sense of his life, ordering it into a coherent narrative of his sense of self. Thus, despite the apparently chaotic nature of the timeline, Max’s narrative is indeed a case where the subject is “structuring reminiscence interventions to facilitate the integration, evaluation, reframing, and potential resolution of recalled experiences” (Ingersoll-Dayton and Bommarito 782).

4 My translation. Original: “L’autobiographie est une activité de sujet, de dialogue entre deux moi, dans l’instant où elle s’élabore, le moi présent interrogeant les moi passés, pour faire advenir à la conscience les dialogues anciens qui ont eu lieu entre ces derniers” (195).

Max's narration takes place in one location only, at the seaside in the house called the Cedars in Ballyless. He has a very strong connection to this place, as it is the place where many changes occurred in him. During the summer he spent there as a child, he discovered love in the attraction he felt towards Connie Grace, intimacy with Chloe, and was confronted with death. As a result, he harbours strong feelings towards Ballyless, feelings which cannot be classified as homesickness – as the Cedars was not, in any sense of the term, home for Max – but certainly of nostalgia. Nostalgia “is frequently associated with the experience of ageing” (Hepworth 89), and can also be linked to ageing in the case of Max. Indeed, his return to the place is closely interrelated with the process of life-review. His physical return to the place is accompanied by a metaphorical return in time, as he uses narrative to go back to the past.

Finally, the narration itself is also a way to find meaning and order in his life, which he needs in order to come to terms with his identity. The first chapter of this thesis demonstrated that the story is not told in the chronological order. However, the focus of Max's narration is not only the events, but his thought process as he goes through his memories. This is particularly visible when he is unsure of the facts he narrates and comments on the unreliability of his memories: “that kiss in the dark of the picture-house – I am coming to think it must have been our first kiss, after all” (161). More generally, many of his sentences are structured around a main clause which introduces the memory process, such as “I am recalling with especial quality” (120) or “I remember that” (161). As the action of thinking is also action, the narrative is completely linear insofar as it is told in the same order as Max remembers it, it is narrated in the order in which Max thinks. Consequently, it can be said that the role of memory and narration is to recreate a new order, in the literal sense. In this way, he gives his life a new order, a way to make

sense of discontinuity. The order of the text is the order in which he thinks in the diegesis, making the narrative chronological in this sense.

Conclusion

Banville's novel follows the character's struggle to make sense of his memories as he is confronted with the double destruction of a balance, namely the trauma of childhood and the loss of his wife. His identity is also strongly affected by the process of ageing, as Max is entering young-old life. Through the close focus on the handling of time, the first chapter showed how time is used as a strategy to imitate the workings of memory. The use of a non-linear timeline is one of the tools used to articulate the difficulty of reminiscing in the context of trauma and illness. The analysis has also shown that, "in order to meet the challenge of giving a narrative voice to trauma, literature itself must depart from traditional sequential patterns and develop new forms, just as it must revise received notions of time, memory and history" (Onega and Ganteau 64). The novel thus uses features from various genres to develop a character's identity in all its complexity. The events which fragmented his life, the deaths of his childhood friends and that of Anna, structure the narrative as they did his life.

The study of the handling of time and of focalisation in the novel showed that these events work as the articulation between the distinct periods of his life, as the different timelines also correspond to different identities. Furthermore, the study of narration, focalisation, and the relationship between the two, cast light on how each timeline corresponds to a different identity. The narration is a testimony of the fragmentation of Max's identity, which influences not only his character, but also his perception of himself, of his environment, and of others. The analysis of his identity as a character, as a narrator and as a focaliser allowed to understand

the complexity of the narrative structure and the way in which his ageing is portrayed.

Yet, the narrative is not only an evidence of the fragmentation in his identity; it is also a way for Max to reach a certain self-understanding. Concepts such as reminiscence and life review have been particularly useful to study the role of narrative in the context of ageing, showing that Max finally comes to terms with his ageing through his narrative. The process of life-review itself, helps him to connect with his own identity again by thoroughly reviewing his memories. Thus, while the narrative does not heal the fragmentation, it makes sense of it by giving his life a new order.

The crossing of narratology with ageing studies allowed a better understanding of how identity is constructed on several levels. The past is still very much present in Max's present self, and the study of his ageing is consequently deepened by the focus on the different identities he had in the past through narrative techniques such as focalisation. At the same time, comparisons with other genres, notably trauma and illness narratives, allowed to analyse the character's development throughout his life without excluding elements which are crucial to the construction of his present identity. In all the genres mentioned, the process of narrating is crucial. Narrative, including trauma and illness narratives, but also life-review and reminiscence as various types of narratives, is a way to create unity by constructing a new articulation between previously-isolated events in one's memory. *The Sea* is an evidence of this process, as Max's process of life-review enables him to think back on recent and distant painful memories, coming to terms with his past, and thus with himself, for the first time.

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