

Beata Piątek

Jagiellonian University, Kraków

## “The Waxworks of Memory” or the Search for the Meaning of Life in John Banville’s *The Sea*

“Since we are haunted now by the idea of being haunted by the past, it is tempting for contemporary novelists to try and come up with new metaphors and analogies for memory,” writes Adam Philips (2005: 35) in his comprehensive review of John Banville’s *The Sea* (2005). The phenomenon that Philips is referring to is succinctly described in an introduction to a recently published volume on theories of memory as a “memory boom” (Rossington and Whitehead 2007: 5), that is, a recent explosion of memory writing in the humanities and most significantly, in fiction. John Banville is one of many contemporary writers who present their readers with narrators struggling to come to terms with their past experience of trauma. The more or less conscious act of remembering and forgetting plays a crucial role in a large number of contemporary novels.<sup>1</sup>

*The Sea*, Banville’s fourteenth novel, won the author the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2005, in an atmosphere verging on scandal; in the final round, despite the protests of a group of judges, John Sutherland, the chairman, cast the decisive vote against the other runner up, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (Ezard 2005), which is, significantly, another novel about remembering and forgetting. In *The Sea*, Banville continues a number of themes which have come to constitute trademarks of his fiction: a solitary narrator dabbling in art history caught in between hope and despair, self-consciously commenting on the shortcomings of the language with which he is trying to express his anxiety (Hand 2002: 4).

As Eve Patten (2002) writes: “[r]egarded as the most stylistically elaborate Irish writer of his generation, John Banville is a philosophical novelist concerned with the nature of perception, the conflict between imagination and reality, and the existentialist isolation of the individual.” That last phrase, “existentialist isolation of the individual” could be used to describe the writing of another Irish author Samuel Beckett, whose legacy is also discernible in

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<sup>1</sup> Other significant contributions to memory writing have been recently made by Graham Swift, Sebastian Faulks, Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro and W. G. Sebald.

Banville's preoccupation with human failure as well as his narrators' obsessive attention to language (Hand 2006: x). As Philips notes,

in his recent novels – *The Untouchable*, *Eclipse*, *Shroud* and *The Sea*, books that seem retrospectively to form a quartet – the narrators have been, in their different ways, successful men who have a sneaking and a not-so-sneaking suspicion that there really is nothing to them. (2005: 35)

All the four novels are dominated by internal monologues which attract attention to the narrators as “voices.” As the author states in an interview, he considers himself to belong to the oral tradition of Irish writers (Hand and Banville 2006: 1).

In the same interview he comments on the structure of *The Sea*:

there are really two books there – one set in the past, that is quite direct and has a pulse that's like the sea: wave sentences, pulsating, while in the present-day narrative, when Max Morden is talking about himself in the present, the style goes back to that of *Shroud*. I think it makes for an interesting tension between the two voices. (Hand and Banville 2006: 5)

The pulse of the sea is achieved by means of alternating long and short sentences, the poetic effect is enhanced by alliteration:

They departed, the gods, on the day of the strange tide. All morning under the milky sky the waters in the bay had swelled and swelled, rising to unheard-of heights, the small waves creeping over parched sand that for years had known no wetting save for rain and lapping the very bases of the dunes. The rusted hulk of the freighter that had run aground at the far end of the bay longer ago than any of us could remember must have thought it was being granted a relaunch. I would not swim again, after that day. (Banville 2005: 3)

The opening paragraph quoted above contains both syntactic and thematic foreshadowing of the text that follows, the story that dwells on loss, grief and “the gratuitous dramas of memory” (Philips 2005: 35). The pedantically crafted structure of the novel will become apparent to the reader only at the very end, when, in the final paragraph, the gods' “departure” will reveal its tragic meaning. The role of the reader is to persist in an attempt at making sense of the narrator's monologue, which is only possible if the reader stores every detail mentioned in his memory and is prepared to fit the relevant elements into the jigsaw puzzle. That is all the more difficult as not all the details are relevant and the narrator's recollections seem as chaotic, random and unpredictable as

we may expect in a man recently afflicted by severe psychological trauma. Gradually the reader learns to navigate between the two narratives that Max Morden inhabits; he moves between the present account – his stay in a boarding house, where he is trying to recover from the loss of his wife, and the past – his childhood memories of a summer he had spent in the same place.

The memories of the summer fifty years before open the text and “swell” like the sea in the first paragraph, so that they quickly dominate the narrative. They are composed of a series of “tableaux,” as the narrator calls them, each recalled with amazing immediacy and obsessive attention to detail, which may be only explained by the fact that, as Max says, the day he met the Grace family his life “was changed forever” (Banville 2005: 33). By making friends with the Grace twins, Chloe and Myles, the narrator is allowed entry into a new world where he can observe and occasionally even experience directly the middle-class life style; it is an existence so superior to that of his family that the Graces assume divine status in his eyes. He uses the term “gods” with reference to the entire family, he sees the father as Poseidon (123) or Old Father Time (90); Connie, the mother is transformed into a daemon by his sexual desire, and even Myles’s webbed feet are “marks of a godling, sure as heaven” (Banville 2005: 61). The Graces seem divine to young Max because of the way they live; their superior lifestyle is marked by what they can afford: trips to France, renting a house for the whole summer, drinking gin and entertaining guests over the weekend. These become attributes of a world that the narrator aspires to enter; his dream will come true years later when he marries Anna, the daughter of a wealthy crook.

The narrative of childhood memories is occasionally invaded by the narrative of the present; however, the connection between these stories remains rather obscure until the end of the novel. The only point of correspondence is the place, and like in many previous novels by Banville, the house. The Cedars, which the Graces used to rent and endowed with magic qualities, is now a boarding house, run by an eccentric Miss Vavasour, who seems strangely attentive to the needs of her mourning guest. In an attempt at self-fashioning so characteristic of Banville’s unpleasant narrators, Max Morden introduces himself as an art critic writing a book on Bonnard, but that book seems never to get written (yet another failure); instead the narrator is “working the trauma through” for the purposes of self-understanding (Kaplan 2005: 20). In a manner characteristic for trauma victims, Max Morden represses the actual external event that caused the shock, and focuses on the summer he spent in love with the Graces.

The two narratives are written in different styles; the childhood memories are extremely vivid, the narrator's professional interest in art is visible in the images which he reconstructs with loving nostalgia. His recollections are visual and sensual: "I see the game as a series of vivid tableaux, glimpsed instants of movement all rush and colour" (Banville 2005: 125). On another occasion, the narrator comments on the peculiar way in which he remembers: "Memory dislikes motion, preferring to hold things still, and as with so many of these remembered scenes I see this one as a tableau" (Banville 2005: 221), and a little bit further on he uses another metaphor of painting, where his memory is a "wall" on which he paints an image:

[...] I mean Chloe and her mother, are all my own work while Rose is by another, unknown, hand. I keep going up close to them, the two Graces, now mother, now daughter, applying a dab of colour here, scumbling a detail there, and the result of all this close work is that my focus on them is blurred rather than sharpened, even when I stand back to survey my handiwork. (224)

*The Sea* is a novel preoccupied with the working of memory and it abounds in metaphors of memory as well as reflections on its randomness and unreliability. Given the dramatic moment in life in which Max is writing, it is understandable that he dwells on the parallels between the past and the present, life and death, memory and imagination. A recollection of a voyeuristic moment at a picnic provokes reflections on the nature of reality and mortality which carry allusions to Joyce's "The Dead":

Which is the more real, the woman reclining on the grassy bank of my recollections, or the strew of dust and dried marrow that is all the earth any longer retains of her? No doubt for others elsewhere she persists, a moving figure in the waxworks of memory, but their version will be different from mine, and from each other's. Thus in the minds of the many does the one ramify and disperse. It does not last, it cannot, it is not immortality. We carry the dead with us only until we die too, and then it is we who are borne along for a little while, and then our bearers in their turn drop, and so on in the unimaginable generations. (Banville 2005: 118–19)

The "waxworks of memory" are an image borrowed from the earliest theories of memory; Plato in *Theaetetus* compared memory to a block of wax on which the experience is imprinted (Rossington and Whitehead 2007: 25). More recently, Freud conceptualized memory as the Mystic Writing Pad (Rossington and Whitehead 2007: 114) following a very similar concept. In both metaphors the reliability of memory remains unquestioned; we may have prob-

lems accessing our memories, but once we reach them, the imprint in the wax is a consistent mark of the past experience. However, Max's own experience seems to contradict his own confidence; although his childhood memories are strikingly vivid and alive with detail, on a number of occasions they prove inaccurate, or entirely made up. When Adam Philips claims that:

Banville wants us to see that memory can be as random, as futile and baffling in its prompting, as anything else that happens to occur to us; and that what we see without looking – including our memories and our dreams – can be fascinating without being in any way intelligible or revealing, (2005: 35)

he seems to go too far. Max's memories may not always seem relevant and revealing, but in the end the story becomes intelligible and coherent, and the past narrative throws some important light on the present.

The fascinating randomness of rambling memories and the dreamy world of childhood immediately bring to mind the work of yet another great writer Marcel Proust, an affinity recognized by a number of critics and reviewers (Tague 2005, Conradi 2005). *The Sea* is particularly reminiscent of *La recherche du temps perdu*; the holiday in a seaside resort, the narrator awestruck in the presence of the divine creatures from a superior social class, reflections on mortality and finally the blurred distinction between the narrator and the implied author, all bring to mind the work of Proust. But apart from borrowing the motifs and themes from Proust, Banville seems to enter a debate with the French author. For example, the visit at the dairy farm may be read as a commentary on Proust, or even a parody. Max Morden takes his daughter to visit Ballyless just after his wife's funeral; the little streets and shops bring back the memories of the summers he spent there as a boy, but the sight of the dairy farm seems to transport him in time. Banville's description is modelled on Proust's description of the summer in Combray. In his analysis of the narrative structure of *La recherche du temps perdu*, Gérard Genette describes one of the complex anachronies as the iterative, that is, a single event which Proust describes as repeated in the past (1980: 116). Banville's memory of the farm is an iterative event in this sense; we know that the details presented must belong to a single memory; the cool air in the yard, the dog lying under the cart, the horse putting its head over the half-door must have been noticed and remembered by the narrator on one occasion, but the grammatical tenses and the adverbs used transform this visit into a repeated event: "here as a boy I would walk down every morning [. . .]. there was always a dog lying tethered [. . .]" (Banville 2005: 51). Like Proust's summer in Combray, the walk to the farm seems expanded into eternity; the

narrator is transported into the past, he remembers the shade of the horse's forelock and "the cool thick secret smell of milk" (Banville 2005: 53). The elation is dispelled by a witch-like woman of an uncertain age who, when asked about the farmer's family, surprises Max with a list of names that, to him, are completely alien. Suddenly he realises that he knows nothing about the farm:

I found it suddenly dispiriting to hear of them [...] all crowding in on my private ceremony of remembering like uninvited poor relations at a fancy funeral. [...] All the levitant euphoria of a moment past was gone now and I felt over-fleshed and incommensurate with the moment, standing there smiling and weakly nodding, the last of the air leaking out of me. (Banville 2005: 56–7)

In *La recherché*, Proust's narrator was transported into the past moment by a trick of involuntary memory; in this way he gained access to the past experience as it really was. Banville, or rather his narrator, experiences the same euphoria only to discover a few moments later that it was only an illusion. Walter Benjamin's comment about Proust's narrator could be applied to Banville's narrator as well, namely, what matters to him is not what he experienced but "the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of recollection [...] or of forgetting" (1929: 238). Just like forgetting is an inextricable element of remembering, death is an inextricable element of life, Max talks about life being "no more than a long preparation for the leaving of it" (Banville 2005: 98) and on another occasion, he describes life as a rehearsal for the "real drama" (Banville 2005: 184) and goes on to say:

what I am looking forward to is a moment of earthly expression [...] I shall be expressed, totally. I shall be delivered, like a noble closing speech. I shall be, in a word, said.

The postmodern condition in Banville's work manifests itself in an attempt at "saying the world while simultaneously admitting the futility of any such act of saying actually connecting with the world" (Hand 2002: 4).

Gradually, as the narratives of the past and the present move on, the elements of the jigsaw puzzle come into place, more and more parallels between the narrator's childhood memories and his life with Anna become apparent. The marriage with Anna has enabled Morden to fulfil his childhood dream inspired by the Graces and move up socially. His laid-back wife fostered his sense of identity, which, as he says, he owes entirely to Chloe. But the crucial link between these two stories is departure and loss. The summer idyll ends suddenly when having quarrelled with their governess, the Grace twins wade into the sea

and commit suicide. Thus the phrase: "the gods departed on the day of the strange tide" of page 3 takes on its full meaning on page 246, just like the final sentence of the novel in which Max remembers the nurse telling him that his wife had just died: "I turned and followed her inside, and it was as if I were walking into the sea" (Banville 2005: 264). Twice in the novel, Max makes a self-conscious comment on his own narrative saying that he is compiling a Book of the Dead. Indeed of all the people that appear in his childhood memory, only the governess survives as the housekeeper of the Cedars, as Mr and Mrs Grace die a few years after the suicide of the twins. Max's narrative and especially the story of the Grace family remembered with great love of detail suddenly assumes a therapeutic function in the eyes of the reader; the death of his first love is remembered in lieu of the more recent one. While the recollections of the summer he spent with the Grace family fill the pages of the text he is writing, they keep the memory of the agony of his wife's death at bay. In the Tibetan tradition the Book of the Dead is written to bring spiritual comfort to someone looking after someone dying, and Max's memories, which seemed random and irrelevant, serve this very purpose. The narrator focuses on his first encounter with death, his first experience of loss and mourning, in fact, the whole novel, like the *Eclipse* before may be summed up as a "crisis of mourning" (Wilkinson 2003: 27). Max is unable to mourn his wife; he seems unable to come to terms with this loss, and at some point the repressed emotions explode in a barrage of verbal violence: "You cunt, you fucking cunt, how could you go and leave me like this [. . .]" (Banville 2005: 195). The repression is also visible in the sharp contrast between the discourse time of the two stories. Max takes up 29 pages to describe his visit at a farm where his mother used to send him to fetch milk and only 6 pages to describe his relationship with Anna from their first encounter to their wedding day. The relevance of the twins' suicide is deferred until much later in the narrator's life, it is his wife's death that makes it painfully relevant. Banville tries to illustrate the tragedy of the human condition which resides in the duality of life and death: one becomes relevant only when the other loses relevance.

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