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The "Novel of Recollections" – Narration as a Means of Coming to Terms with the Past

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Abstract

Among the large body of contemporary British novels dealing with the past, one specific genre can be identified, and called, the "novel of recollections" as it revolves around its first person narrator's coming to terms with the often traumatic memories of his or her past life. This article focuses on this genre and its characteristic features, both formal and concerning the content, in John Banville's *The Sea* (2005), Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007) and Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* (2011). Using the example of Graham Swift's *Tomorrow* (2007), this article also shows that these features alone may not necessarily guarantee the text's positive reception, suggests the main reasons why Swift's novel failed with most readers and critics, and contemplates the novel of recollections' future course and development.

Keywords: Novel of recollections; memory; unreliable narrator; traumatic experience; added value

1. Introduction

A specific and very popular form of contemporary British literature is a fictional narrative that could be given a working label of the "novel of recollections". It is mostly a short novel narrated in the first person by an adult narrator who in his/her memories returns to his/her past – childhood, adolescence, student years – which he/she attempts to present to the reader, at least in the beginning, as a comprehensive and indisputable sequence of objectively perceived and absolutely clearly recollected events. In the course of time (and narration), however, these recollections lose this neat logical shape of unambiguous causes and natural effects, the same as the narrator's memory proves to be unreliable, frequently embellishing unpleasant history through conscious as well as unconscious defensive mechanisms such as selectiveness, idealisation and surmising connections between disparate phenomena and events. Such an image of the past is to some extent a fiction, an imaginative story motivated by the narrator's sincere desire to find out what really happened and his/her need to give the past a coherent and satisfactory appearance and thus make it intelligible, transparent and easily interpretable.

Thus this seemingly self-contained image is exposed to stronger and stronger pressures in the form of newly discovered facts, written and pictorial materials, unexpected and surprising recollections of the narrator or other people's testimonies, under the weight of which its compactness gradually breaks down. As a result, the narration discloses various bygone offences, unpleasant incidents and experiences which, deep inside, torment the narrator and which have substantially affected his/her life, including his/her dismal present situation, and so, in his/her thoughts he/she tries to search for their roots or to overcome a long-term urge to displace them from memory. A serene recapitulation of long forgone events therefore transforms into a dramatic and often painful coming to terms not only with the past but also with the present and, along with that, with the immediate future, with other people's fates but, above all, with him/herself and his/her own conscience. This kind of a novel is in no way thematically original in the context of contemporary British fiction as the theme and motif of recollecting and journeying through the memory back to the past in order to achieve its better understanding, re-living or even its complete re-evaluating appears in the works of a few prominent prose writers of the last two decades of the twentieth century. We can mention, for instance, Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983) and *Last Orders* (1996), Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989), Angela Carter's *Wise Children* (1991), Julian Barnes's *Talking It Over* (1991) and Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs* (1992), all of which, though to varying extent, emphasise "postmodern uncertainties in experimental styles", tell "stories about the past that point to multiple truths or the overturning of an old received Truth", mix genres, and adopt "a parodic or irreverently playful attitude to history over an ostensibly normative mimesis" (Keen, 2006, p. 171). However, even older influences can be traced, such as B.S. Johnson's experimental novel *The Unfortunates* (1969), and Ford Madox Ford's pioneering impressionist novel employing the device of the unreliable narrator *The Good Soldier* (1915). Despite this apparent thematic affinity, the novel of recollections differs from its predecessors in several fundamental aspects, both formal and where content is concerned as well.

The novel of recollections also bears several related features with "trauma fiction", which tries to cope with the indescribability, and thus the impossibility of an authentic representation, of a traumatic experience by shifting its "attention away from the question of what is remembered of the past to how and why it is remembered" (Whitehead, 2004, p. 3). By doing so, such novelists have sought literary techniques which would allow them to narrate the unnarratable" and they have found that "the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection" (Whitehead, 2004, pp. 3-4), by which it best reflects the fact that although an individual is well aware of the experienced event he/she can never fully know and understand it. This kind of literary theory derives from the ideas of Sigmund Freud who "turns to literature to describe traumatic experience" because, like psychoanalysis, it is "interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet" (Caruth, 1996, p. 3). The novel of recollections employs similar narrative and stylistic devices, yet their main purpose is mostly not to reflect the impacts of trauma on the personality of the narrator, but to depict the process of admitting one's guilt, becoming reconciled with one's failure and coping with their consequences. In some cases it does not deal with a traumatic experience in the true sense of the word, and even if it does, it affects the narrator rather indirectly as most frequently he/she tends to be a witness of something bad that happened to another person. However, the principle is almost identical: an unexpected, overwhelming and painful event that is not fully grasped in its immediacy when it occurs returns later through processes beyond the control of one's consciousness, such as "repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (Caruth, 1996, p. 91), or through some reminder coming from outside. Although the theme of memory and recollections cannot be completely separated from that of trauma, the novel of recollections, though it also works with the motif of traumatic experience, does follow somewhat different goals than trauma fiction.

The novel of recollections is generally popular not only with readers but also with critics which can be demonstrated, among other things, by the fact that three such novels have won the prestigious Booker Prize in the past ten years: *The Sea* (2005) by John Banville, *The Gathering* (2007) by Anne Enright, and *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) by Julian Barnes, even though in all these cases the victory came rather as a surprise. Using these three books and Graham Swift's novel *Tomorrow* (2005) as examples, this article focuses on the specifics of this kind of fiction, on its characteristic features and those aspects that make it attractive for the reading public. At the same time, however, it mentions its potential difficulties and pitfalls which can cause the text's predictability, schematisation or unconvincingness, and thus shows that the formal side itself and the mere presence of a certain number of these features does not automatically ensure positive readers' and critical reception.

2. The Novel of Recollections

As they are written by renowned and established writers, a rather substantial body of critical work has been produced on the four above books, mostly in the form of journal articles and chapters in monographs. Overall, they focus on the narratives' central themes, such as memory, grief, nostalgia, trauma, survival, personal ethics, individual choice and responsibility, evasiveness when facing one's guilt and troubled conscience, the relationship between the present and the past, as well as between the personal, or private, and the collective, or public, history and experience. Several of them also explore the diverse narrative and stylistic forms, techniques and strategies employed in these novels, especially in the construction of confessional, testimonial and trauma narratives and their effects.[1] However, none of these scholarly writings seem to have attempted to compare the books in terms of a number of characteristic and defining features they have in common, and which may therefore allow us to classify them as a distinct subgenre of the novel.

The novel of recollections is a very compact and strongly subjectively tuned kind of fiction, in terms of its size and composition often bordering on the novella, which combines postmodernist and modernist narrative devices. It is written in the first person and the narrator, who is also the main protagonist of the story, is a mature person with a certain amount of life experience (it is no coincidence that its authors are also of this age interval, in the discussed works it is the range of 45 and 65 years). The novel's story is very simple and rather static, taking a relatively short period of time, within a few days or weeks. Most of the story takes place in the narrator's mind, in his/her memories, feelings, contemplations and commentaries, in which almost obsessively he/she deals with him/herself, his/her past, his/her role in past events and the image of him/herself as he/she perceived him/herself, or as he/she thinks others may have perceived him/her. More important than the story then is the gradual disclosure of earlier events and through the narrator's memory, recollections and various associations the present takes turns with several other time levels in his/her narration, from a distant past up to a quite recent one. The main plotline is thus pushed to the background as it is incessantly interrupted by time inversions from the present to retrospection and back, as a result of which the narration is constructed in order to faithfully reflect the workings of human memory: it is fragmented, discontinuous at places, composed of scrappy facts, hints, and disparate and isolated images. Therefore, at first it resembles an indeterminate and disorderly jigsaw puzzle whose bits the reader strives, with the help of the narrator's not always trustworthy and consistent pieces of information, to assemble into an intelligible whole.

The personality of the narrator plays a crucial role in this type of the novel. Although he/she is troubled by a sense of blame, or failure, and is tormented by a guilty conscience, he/she is by no means a social outsider or down-and-out, but an intelligent, educated person with a corresponding and relatively fruitful professional career, which can be seen in the linguistic and stylistic form of his/her speech. In spite of this, his/her narration reveals a certain dissatisfaction with

his/her personal life, irritation at his/her mediocrity, ordinariness, conformity, lack of courage to make a radical change, no matter how intensively he/she is trying to convince the reader otherwise. A feeling of frustration from wasted chances, from life that has slipped through his/her fingers thus prevails in his/her narration. In the present moment of the story he/she struggles to overcome the feeling, but this coping with the past is not particularly successful and so he/she resorts to various escapist solutions, most often to alcohol. Such circumstances inevitably have an impact on the content and form of his/her narration, in which he/she convinces him/herself of what suits him/her, is prone to self-delusion, self-pity, false illusions, wishful thinking, tends to justify his/her acts or pretends not to have done anything wrong. This character is an unreliable narrator who keeps modifying his/her story, manipulates the facts and, along with that, the reader. His/her monologue often transforms into a dialogue with him/herself, with the reader, or with some third, absent person, to whom he/she desperately attempts to defend him/herself. Here it is important to note that the guilt the narrator is concealing does not concern anything fatal or momentous with far-reaching social consequences, it is rather a failure on the personal, private if not intimate, level.

The narrator's motivation for presenting his/her life's story is essentially auto-therapeutic as he/she tells his/her story primarily for him/herself, for his/her own need of coming to terms with an unpleasant past and its effects, becoming reconciled to something that can no longer be redeemed, rectified or changed. Therefore, only very slowly and painfully does he/she come to confess and accept his/her share of blame and responsibility for old wrongs and injustices caused, at least in part, by his/her improper behaviour. In order to make this process effective, a thorough deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of the fictitious image of the past as it has been created and consolidated by the narrator's memory over the years proves crucial: long-forgotten events displaced to the unconsciousness must be brought to the surface, the narrator must de-idealise his/her image by admitting that, rather than noble and altruistic, the true motives of his/her acts were often mean, egotist, inconsiderate, driven by low instincts such as malice, hypocrisy, vengefulness, envy and vanity. Moreover, the narrator must accept that some "natural" and "self-evident" connections between past events as his/her memory presents them are merely speculative, imaginative constructs, products of his/her need to make the hard-to-understand phenomena meaningful and to allow him/her their comfortable and convenient interpretation. Such confession is a difficult task for the narrator, but verbalisation of recollections through the narration makes it to some extent easier, as if the uttered or written words "eased" his/her memory, took off from it the weight of conserved history, and enabled the memories to get moving, little by little clear away the layers of lies, delusions and fictions, and help reveal the true character of the events in question.

3. *The Sea*, *The Gathering* and *The Sense of an Ending*

All these aspects, in differently modified forms, can be traced in *The Sea* by John Banville, *The Gathering* by Anne Enright and *The Sense of an Ending* by Julian Barnes. The protagonist of Banville's novel, a retired art historian Max Morden, arrives in a small seaside village where as a small child he spent summer holidays with his parents. On the one hand, by doing so he is trying to escape from the recent loss of his wife who died after a year's futile fight with a serious disease, yet, simultaneously, he is trying to cope with a long ago experienced trauma which he had almost forgotten about, or, more precisely, which he has almost managed to displace from his memory. During those holidays he met an unusual, free-thinking and well-off family, the Graces, consisting of Mr and Mrs Grace, people more straightforward, spontaneous and open-minded than all the adults Max had known before, and their twins – the mute and hyperactive Myles and the energetic, confident and forthright Chloe, who later became his first childlike love. This family is also accompanied by a young woman named Rose, the governess of the twins, who is very insecure which is why she becomes an easy target of their provocations, spiteful acts and pranks.

In order to flee from thoughts of his wife's death, Max sets off on a journey to his past, both spatially and mentally, to the time more than fifty years before, and puts up in a summer house called the Cedars, in the same room which was once occupied by the Graces. However, this journey is also a probing into his soul, which is seized by the too recent and oppressive experience of helplessly witnessing his wife's suffering, but which, at the same time, progressively discloses a traumatic recollection of the summer holiday's abrupt end when the twins drown while swimming in the sea, helplessly watched from the shore by a confused Max and desperate Rose who, as Max finds out in the end, is the lady who runs the Cedars. A significant element of this reminiscence is his admitting of a certain share of complicity, though indirect and objectively unprovable, in how a seemingly banal conflict between Chloe and Rose grows into an event with fatal consequences. The stylistically and linguistically rich text is written in the form of a contemplative diary, whose author's self-reflection "brings with it a sense of doubtful self-identity, suspect authenticity, and an agonized yearning for a sublimely idealized, preconscious, and therefore innocent, self" (Kenny, 2009, p. 170). Descriptions of the narrator's cheerless present existence, filled with routine activities and drinking, take turns with details of his wife's dying and, most of all, with memories of the fatal summer at the sea full of new stimuli, a first love experience, and also first grievous losses. These are continually accompanied by contemplations about the unreliability and imaginativeness of memory, whose steady image of the past provides Max, as he notes, with a place where he can shake off "the cold present and the colder future" (Banville, 2005, p. 61), about the intricacies of relationships with other people, but also about the peculiarity and complexity of human nature and the formation of an individual's identity.

The narrator of the novel *The Gathering*, Veronica Hegarty, a soon-to-be-forty mother of two children and a journalist currently on maternity leave, must cope with the uncomfortable task of transporting from England to Dublin the body of her recently deceased brother Liam, a heavy drinker who committed suicide by drowning in the sea. Only very slowly is Veronica coming to terms with the loss of her most beloved sibling, but an even more difficult trial for her are the memories that her brother's death triggers in her. And thus her two-week's journey to England and back becomes a

tormenting return to her childhood and adolescence in an impecunious family with twelve children in a bigotedly Catholic Ireland. However, it is not only the expectable conflicts between the siblings and the modest living conditions of the large family, far more serious consequences are brought about, rather than by the children's squabbles and the material scarcity of the large family, by the emotional deprivation caused by the parent's indifference, in Veronica's case especially from the mother's side, to their children's real needs, feelings and desires. Since besides having given birth to twelve children, Veronica's mother also underwent seven miscarriages, she never had enough energy and vigour to look after her offspring properly, as a result of which Veronica and her siblings spent much time at their grandmother Ada's. This lack of parental love harmed all the young Hegartys, who are now not able to show their emotions, and in a vain search for sense in their lives, drink, get divorced, are incredulous, cynical and begrudging. One of the narrative's purposes is thus making an accusation against their mother for her maternal failure, which even after so many years Veronica cannot forgive.

Besides the present, there are also two more time levels in the novel set in the past. The first involves Veronica's recollections of her own life and covers the period from her childhood to the beginning of her marriage and the birth of her children. Most of these recollections, particularly the earlier ones, are unpleasant if not traumatic, which is why she turns to them only slowly and reluctantly, all the more because they are permeated by the visions of her late brother's ghost. The second, taking place in 1925, on the other hand, is her favourite as it is in fact an imaginative reconstruction of the beginning of the relationship between her grandparents, her grandmother Ada and her husband Charlie. Unlike her own recollections, whose truthfulness and credibility she must incessantly convince herself of, in Ada's story based on second-hand information Veronica can unleash her imagination and with no worries think the missing connections and circumstances through to the end. This idealised world, however, is gradually losing its intensity and Veronica's search for the causes of her brother's bleak fate is coming to the foreground. In the course of time, her recollections crystallise, become more lucid, and eventually reach the climax of the story when the nine-year-old Veronica is a witness to one-year-older Liam's sexual abuse at the hands of her grandparents' landlord. Therefore, what also comes to the surface is her guilt: although she has known about the offence she has never told anybody about it, in part because she did not have adequate linguistic devices for its recountal. Veronica is now trying to break this silence and shout out the terrible truth, which is inevitably reflected in the formal aspects of her narration. Enright's style is deliberately disarranged, disrupted by the narrator's emotional effusions, at places bordering on a loss of sanity, often induced by alcohol, and following the stern logic of a circle when the narrator resists "[t]he drive towards psychosis and death" which "is countered by the desire to live again, but living requires an accommodation with the truth that madness reveals" (Bracken & Cahill, 2011, p. 148). The novel is thus written in colloquial, sometimes crude or even vulgar language lacking any poeticity and figurativeness. The reader gradually comes to understand why Veronica has been so much obsessed with carnality and literal descriptions of its undesirable manifestations, as it was precisely adult individuals' inability to control their sexual desire that gave rise to the tragic events in her life. Apart from the fatal disclosure, the novel offers a testimony about one large dysfunctional family, as well as contemplations about the nature of memory and the significance of language for the verbalisation of recollections and experiences, and, along with this, for the grasping of truth.

At the beginning of Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* its narrator and protagonist, a retired historian named Tony Webster, briefly presents his hitherto existence as a tranquil succession of ordinary and common events of personal, familial and professional life of a decent, discreet and mediocre citizen, whose only blemish appears to be his divorce, and even this is not portrayed very dramatically because it took place some twenty years earlier and he and his former wife have remained on friendly terms. Tony's narration thus more and more often returns to his youth and early adulthood, to his secondary school and university years, he recollects various stories from his favourite history lessons, depicts his friends, above all

the most gifted, distinctive but also withdrawn of them, Adrian Finn. Following this he talks about his first serious relationship with a girl named Veronica, including his visit to her parents' house and the short conversation with her congenial mother who urges him not to tolerate her opinionated daughter's wilfulness. His narration then goes on to describe their break-up and mentions that shortly after that Adrian asks Tony in a letter to give him formal consent to his going out with Veronica. Tony gives him his consent, though he does not deny himself writing to Adrian what he thinks about the situation from the moral point of view, warns him against Veronica's whims, only to finally wish him good luck in his life. Part One of the novel then ends with the surprising information that six months later Adrian committed suicide for unclarified reasons.

Tony is disturbed from this serene image of his life by an unexpected impulse when he inherits from the late Mrs Ford, Veronica's mother, apart from some money and her letter, Adrian's diary which, however, Veronica refuses to hand over to him. And so Tony, by the means of letters, emails as well as personal meetings, begins his futile struggle with his former girlfriend for the possession of Adrian's diary which, as he hopes, he could learn the truth about his friend's voluntary death. Instead, thanks to Veronica, he discovers inconvenient truths about himself, including the real wording of the letter that he sent to Adrian in reaction to his friendly request. These facts then "refresh" Tony's memory, as a result of which his idyllic self-image breaks down as he gradually admits that many of his acts were in fact driven by malice, jealousy, thirst for retribution or offended pride. And although nothing from what he did in the past caused directly the subsequent course of events – that Adrian broke up with Veronica, fell in love with her mother (whom he even impregnated), which was probably the principal motive for his suicide – one remains clear: Tony comes out of his story as a hypocrite, coward and liar, which is yet another piece of evidence that Barnes is arguably the best-known British "practitioner of [the] curious compromise between the customary and the aberrant" (Bradford, 2007, p. 48).

Together with contemplations about the unreliability of memory and the sense and making of history, in which Barnes makes use of his typical "exploitation of doubt as a productive force" (Groes & Childs, 2011, p. 8), the novel deals with the theme of the relationship between reality and fiction. This is viewed, among others, through an interesting, and owing to the main protagonist's character or the surname of his tragically deceased friend also considerably ironic, polemic with Frank Kermode's literary critical study *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), whose title Barnes borrowed for his book, and which explores the age-long ability of creative literature to offer the reader, who always finds him/herself in a "spot of time in the middle" (Kermode, 2000, p. 8) of his/her existence, from the perspective of which one in vain attempts to perceive a higher order and sense of the world and one's being in it, a solace in the form of an illusion of an intelligible end. Such end allows the reader's imagination to create coherent interpretative patterns which can then satisfy his/her need "to experience that concordance of beginning, middle, and end which is the essence of our explanatory fictions, and especially when they belong to cultural traditions which treat historical time as primarily rectilinear rather than cyclic" (Kermode, 2000, pp. 35-36). Barnes's novel thus evinces all major cornerstones of his writing – resorting to and subverting realistic strategies, self-reflectiveness, and celebrating the literary past while at the same time considering it with irony (Guignery, 2006, p. 1) – which, however, to varying extent, also constitute the narratives of *The Sea* and *The Gathering*.

4. A Less Successful Case – *Tomorrow*

Graham Swift's *Tomorrow* can be also classified as a novel of recollections. Its protagonist, the forty-nine-year-old art dealer Paula Hook, is lying awake in her bed beside her sleeping husband Mike on the night from the 16th to the 17th of June 1995 and is becoming aware that from tomorrow nothing will be as before. The reason for this is that she and her husband are going to tell their sixteen-year-old twins a big secret which can crucially affect the family's peaceful life in their elegant house in a London suburb: that they were conceived through artificial fertilisation. Within the few hours between midnight and early morning the narrator is trying to recapitulate the story of her life before and after her marriage as if in a rough draft of what she would say which, however, is not actually accurate as from the very beginning she makes the reader know that Mike will be the person who will do most of the talking to the children. Rather than being a dress rehearsal before an ominous performance, Paula's narration is thus provoked by her need to collect her thoughts, arrange her memories and come to terms with her past, particularly with the bad relationship with her egotistic and pretentious mother, whom she has almost displaced from her memory and from her life. Taking these aspects into account, the story appears to possess all the significant attributes this kind of novel requires, yet, unlike the three aforementioned books (and most of Swift's previous novels), *Tomorrow* did not succeed much either with the reading public or the critics and reviewers.

One of the reasons behind this failure may be a certain predictability of the fateful secret the Hook twins are to get to know. From the narrator's various repeated hints the reader soon infers that it concerns the twin's birth or, more precisely, the manner in which they became part of the family, and the possibilities are not that numerous – was it an adoption, artificial fertilisation, or perhaps Paula's having an extramarital affair? And although all these possibilities remain in play for some time the narration loses the element of surprise, sudden and unforeseen disclosure. It is in a way paradoxical that one of the few critical voices appreciating this relatively early exposure of the central secret was Anne Enright, who in her review "Mothers and fathers" (2007b) suggests that once the secret is revealed the reader is "free to stop guessing and start enjoying the novel's more delicate truths". Paula's stories then, she continues, are "the more engaging for being modest […] Nothing rings false, all the emotions are just large enough". The second reason is the absence of something mysterious in the narrator's past that negatively affects her present situation – a guilt, a wrong she did someone or some agonising experience, as a result of which she would be haunted by pangs of conscience and nightmares. Yet, nothing of this kind does Paula reveal to the reader, with the exception of her one-time infidelity, whose practical and pragmatic justification, moreover, does not sound very convincing. Rather than a miserable, depressed individual tormented by remorse Paula is a content and happy person whose life from the emotional and material points of view does not lack anything substantial, and who therefore, to use Stendhal's words, does not have any vices and other causes of illusion that by studying readers could gain a clearer image of their own mental and emotional states.

The third aspect is the certainty with which the narrator presents her recollections. She does admit that different people can have different versions and interpretations of the past and points to the fact that her children will mostly hear her husband's version, while now she is composing her "bedtime story" (Swift, 2007, p. 9). After this, however, she does not question her recollections, her memory and its functioning, she never doubts what she is telling, she does not ask herself whether what she claims had happened did happen in that way in reality, she never mentions the possibility that some part of her narration could be of a fictitious nature. It is interesting that none of these three aspects can be found in Swift's preceding, more acclaimed novels *Waterland* (1983), *Last Orders* (1996) and *The Light of Day* (2003), which self-reflexively "problematize the way 'the truth' about 'what really happened' gets told" and explore "such iterative themes as the interpretation of the past and present, the blurring of distinctions between 'history' and 'story', fact and fiction, 'the real thing' and its substitutes, the possibilities (or not) of redemption in a contemporary social and emotional wasteland" (Widdowson, 2006, pp. 4-5), thus showing a great degree of self-conscious emphasis on textuality and asking "searching questions about narrative authority, historical and fictional" (Head, 2002, p. 230). The fourth reason is the fact that Paula's story does not disclose its secret gradually, in small steps – in hints and seemingly insignificant details and remarks – but only keeps the revelation postponed, while, in the meantime, by her further explaining of the past she makes it even more predictable. The desired domino effect, when one suddenly revealed trifle grows stronger and progressively but more and more quickly breaks down the compactness of a long and strenuously

built image or idea, is then not started up. Therefore, the narration only lengthily and at places almost mechanically revolves around an unsaid secret and the reader, instead of feeling tense expectation of a surprising twist of events, rather yearns for the moment when the truth will be finally uttered.

Yet, there is one more important factor which does not speak in favour of *Tomorrow*, and it is the lack of something extra, beyond the given defining framework of this generic type, some kind of an added value which would lend the story a new dimension, aesthetic or one of meaning. In Banville's *The Sea* it is particularly the refined language and style, when with the absence of direct speech the text is composed of an unceasing sequence of the narrator's thoughts and memories, which are presented not only with varying coherence, from continuous descriptive passages up to almost impressionist flows of imaginative scenes and motifs reminding of daydreaming, but also by a remarkably figurative language full of similes and metaphors, whose function oscillates between lyrical poeticity and ironic hyperbole. In Enright's *The Gathering* it is the socio-historical extension since the character of that time's tabooed crime, which lies in the centre of Veronica's confession, is crucially conditioned by the social and religious climate of 1960s and 70s Ireland. Her narration is also framed by her contemplations about the extent to which our language allows us to get to know and understand our past and present experience. "I do not know the truth, or I do not know how to tell the truth. All I have are stories, night thoughts, the sudden convictions that uncertainty spawns. All I have are ravings" (Enright, 2007a, p. 2), says Veronica at the beginning of the novel and thus not only anticipates that without the missing linguistic devices the truth is impossible to be named, but also that their mere existence may not guarantee their full understanding. Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* is, like many of his earlier novels, permeated by musings about the nature of history, about what history and historiography are, about how, what and who makes them, and about the relationship between history and fiction, if history can be defined as "that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation" (Barnes, 2011, p. 17), as the character of Adrian Finn notes. The intertextual dimension of the novel is also not negligible, when apart from numerous allusions to works of famous British writers and poets – Orwell, Huxley, Koestler, Eliot, Auden, Gunn, Hughes – it is realised primarily through the above mentioned polemics with Kermode's influential study.

Tomorrow, on the other hand, does not offer such added value, though it would be unfair to claim that the novel does not try to do so, as the very setting of the story, the night from the 16th to the 17th of July, refers to the night in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, specifically to the famous forty-page long and punctuation-missing interior monologue of Molly Bloom falling asleep beside her husband in their bed. Yet although the temporal and also thematic parallel between Molly's and Paula's narration is apparent – both women talk about their former suitors, their marital infidelity, their childhood and beginnings of their marriage – this parallel is not developed any deeper and Paula's straightforward and prevailingly rational narration thus contrasts strikingly with Molly's diverging stream of consciousness. On the contrary, some Joycean elements, such as the symbolism of birth and death, motifs of loneliness and anxiety, and moments of epiphanies, can be to a greater extent traced in Joyce's compatriots Banville and, most of all, Enright, whose Dublin haunted by ghosts of the dead is moreover topographically related to that of *Ulysses* and *Dubliners*. And so, what remains is the theme of artificial fertilisation which, however, although it still can be viewed as debatable from some perspectives, it is already far from controversial or taboo in the twenty-first century Western world.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is possible to say that the novel of recollections can be viewed as a relatively narrowly delineated genre defined by certain distinctive features in terms of both the narrative's formal aspects and content. However, the mere presence of these features is only a necessary, not sufficient condition for achieving the intended effect on the reader. What is also important is the manner in which they are arranged, combined and tied together into a functional whole. It is precisely this genre's narrow delineation that raises questions concerning its further tendency and development, including the eventuality that it would exhaust its potential completely. One of the possible answers to these questions is the above discussed added value reaching beyond the text's basic framework of form and content, be it through linguistic and stylistic vividness, variety and distinctiveness, through innovative narrative techniques, or through philosophical, literary-critical, historical, sociological or other humanities' extension of the main plotline, which makes use of the novel's story as a basis on which it gradually builds its aesthetic effect, or as a point of departure for its polemic or argumentation. Although the themes of coming to terms with past wrongdoings, traumas and their unforeseen disclosures will always attract readers, they might not automatically guarantee the positive reception of the novel of recollections in its current form. It is therefore, to some extent paradoxically, the "superstructure" level of the text seen by some readers as secondary and subordinated to ingenious plot construction which may prove fundamental for the further viability of the genre.

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Notes

1. This article does not aspire to present an exhaustive list of these texts but to provide a representative enough sample. Various perspectives of the themes of memory, mourning, nostalgia, the ethics of coming to terms with traumatic experience and/or guilty conscience, and the relationship between individual and collective past and present can be found, among others, in Joanne Watkiss's "Ghosts in the Head: Mourning, Memory and Derridean 'Trace' in John Banville's *The Sea*" (*The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 2, 2007), Hedda Friberg's "Waters and Memories Always Divide: Sites of Memory in John Banville's *The Sea*" (*Recovering Memory: Irish Representations of Past and Present*, 2007), Isabelle Roblin's "Graham Swift's *Tomorrow*, or the Devious Art of Procrastination" (*Voices and Silence in the Contemporary Novel in English*, 2009), Carol Dell'Amico's "Anne Enright's *The Gathering*: Trauma, Testimony, Memory" (*New Hibernia Review*, 14.3, 2010), Liam Harte's "Mourning Remains Unresolved: Trauma and Survival in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*" (*Literature Interpretation Theory*, 21, 2010), Ilaria Oddenino's "Personal Wounds, National Scars. Reflections on Individual and Cultural Trauma in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*" (*Studi Irlasndesi. A Journal of Irish Studies*, 1.1, 2011), Avril Maddrell's "Mapping Grief and Memory in John Banville's *The Sea*" (*Geography and Memory: Explorations in Identity, Place, Becoming*, 2012), Christian Gutleben's "Individual Choice and Responsibility for the Other: Two Ethical Paths in the Representation of Trauma in Jeanette Winterson's and Graham Swift's Postmodernist Romances" (*Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature*, 2013), Maricel Oró Piqueras's "Memory Revisited in Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*" (*Coolabah*, 13, 2014), Abdul Haseeb's "Mourning, Memory and Nostalgia in John Banville's *The Sea*" (*International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, 2.4, 2014), and Ulrike Tancke's "Trauma, Narrative, and the Body in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*" (*Identity and Form in Contemporary Literature*, 2014). The novels' narrative, linguistic and stylistic aspects are explored, for example, in Sarah C. Gardam's "'Default[ing] to the Oldest Scar': A Psychoanalytic Investigation of Subjectivity in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*" (*Études Irlandaises*, 34.1, 2009), Monica Facchinello's "'The Old Illusion of Belonging': Distinctive Style, Bad Faith and John Banville's *The Sea*" (*Estudios Irlandeses*, 5, 2010), Stephen Benson's "Contemporary Fiction and Narratorial Acoustics: Graham Swift's *Tomorrow*" (*Textual Practice*, 25.3, 2011), Bożena Kucała's "Unspoken Dialogues and Non-listening Listeners in Graham Swift's Fiction" (*Brno Studies in English*, 41.1, 2015), and Frederick M. Holmes's "Divided Narratives, Unreliable Narrators, and the Sense of an Ending: Julian Barnes, Frank Kermode and Ford Madox Ford" (*Questia*, 51.1, 2015).