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# Mapping Memory in B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*

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This paper addresses the issue of memory in B.S. Johnson's novel *The Unfortunates* (1969). It focuses on the workings of memory as thematized in the novel and shows how the impulse to reflect a random chaos in the text is offset by the constraint of the mind to create order. Secondly, it deals with Johnson's notion of ontological authenticity and its anchoring in perceptual reality, arguing that Johnson's narrative represents itself as a paradigm of reality and also the denial of that paradigm by evoking its textual presence on the surface of the page.

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## 1 Introduction

B.S. Johnson has long been doomed to a marginal position in the academic world, his work being considered secondary to the post-structuralist and postmodern project. The reasons for this are manifold. First of all, his literary politics created an opposition with most of his contemporaries. The primary task of the novel, as he saw it, was to interrogate itself, to draw attention to its own artifice. Moreover, Johnson aspired to true literary naturalism, that is, he formulated and professed an almost esoteric theory of the truthfulness of literature. However, beyond formal innovation and the obsessive life-likeness there was also a third aspect that made Johnson neglected, namely that his writings were unusually raw and confrontational for academic tastes. As Jonathan Coe explains,

If Johnson's peers never quite gave his novels the recognition they deserved, it was because they presented an emotional challenge, rather than a formal one. Militantly working class, with no access to the Oxbridge network, Johnson was, in many ways, an embarrassment to the literary establishment. The feeling in his books was too raw, too upfront. They lacked the veneer of politeness and diffidence which England has always admired in its writers. (Coe 1999)

The aim of this paper is to address the issue of memory in B.S. Johnson's novel *The Unfortunates* (1969). First I will deal with the workings of memory as thematized in the novel, and show how the impulse to reflect a random chaos in the text is offset by the constraint of the mind to create order. Secondly, I will argue that the narrative represents itself as a paradigm of reality and also the denial of that paradigm by evoking its textual presence on the surface of the page.

## 2 The Workings of Memory

Even though he hated the word, Johnson was a boldly experimental writer: *The Unfortunates* is his most formally outrageous work. It was published in a box and comprises 27 sections, bound only by a removable wrapper. The first and last sections are marked as such, but the remaining 25 are intended to be encountered in an order of the reader's own choosing.

“Disintegration and frailty: these are the themes of *The Unfortunates*”, claims J. Coe, “and its tone is one of restless, enquiring melancholy. Johnson's prose owes a great deal to Beckett, the long, looping sentences punctuated only by commas, clause piled upon clause, qualification after qualification, but always carrying the reader through by means of an emotional momentum which derives, in Johnson's case, from the intensity of his remembered grief.” (Coe 1999)

The narrator, a writer, is sent to a Midlands town to cover a Saturday afternoon football match. He scarcely considers his destination until he is there but when he arrives, fragments of his past return to him gradually, and he recalls that it was in this particular city that his friend Tony lived – an academic who died of cancer. It is no accident that the book cover, more precisely, the box, shows a blown-up photograph of cancer cells. As the narrator runs through the formalities of reporting the match, he finds himself in a world of forgotten detail: memories of his encounters with Tony and their often troubled relationship surface in a haphazard fashion.

“The novel therefore combines a sustained lament in the tradition of Lycidas”, as Coe points out, “with a vibrant celebration of the sort of provincial intellectual life which tends to go unrecorded in British fiction” (Coe, 1991: 29).

The random order of the material evokes the unpredictable workings of the mind. “In this way”, said Johnson, “the whole novel reflected the randomness of the material: it was itself a physical tangible metaphor for randomness and the nature of cancer [...] This randomness was directly in conflict with the technological fact of the bound book: for the bound book imposes an order [...] on the material” (Johnson, 1973: 25).

Hugh Hebert argues that opening *The Unfortunates* is rather like opening a box of old letters: there is a “sense of anticipation, of discovery, almost of prying”. He draws attention to the vulnerability of the novel:

A single sheet here, a little batch of 10 pages like a pamphlet there. The sort of thing you might absent-mindedly screw up and put in your pocket. In spite of its stout cardboard box, this is as near the disposable book, the ‘Kleenex’ novel, as we have yet come. (Hebert, 1969: 9)

It is therefore a strange sort of ephemera, a paradigm of “the unfortunates”, mortal people. “It is the record of Johnson’s very personal and painful yesterday, is the reader’s here and now, and tomorrow may be waste pulp” (Hebert, 1969: 9).

Christopher Sorrentino examines the novel in the context of contemporary metafiction and considers it innovative on the grounds that Johnson appears in it both as the “disembodied, authoritative, obtrusive narrator familiar to readers of metafiction, and as ‘the actual character of the artist, living and working at his art’” (Sorrentino 2000).

The workings of memory are not only imitated or enacted but also extensively commented upon in *The Unfortunates*: the metafictional asides reflect on the dynamics of remembering and forgetting, the metamorphosis of past events in the mind as well as the urge to reconstruct and understand the past.

Even though the sense of remembering and the reliability of memory is constantly challenged – “it’s meaningless [...] it all is, this wallowing in recollection” (‘Away from the ground’ 3)<sup>1</sup> – the narrator desperately tries to build up a chronology, relate past incidents and remnants of speech to each other and endow events with meaning.

In a short review written for *The Times* Richard Holmes points to the relativity of experience emphasized in the novel: “One is made aware of the terrifying relativity of experience: that which comes before depends so much on what comes after” (Holmes 1969). Indeed, past events undergo a transformation in the process of remembering: changes occur in their relevance and meaning. However, this is more than the usual transfiguration of past events by the conceiving, creative, narrativizing mind. It is the death of the narrator’s friend, Tony that acts as a catalyst in this process:

I sentimentalize again, the past is always to be sentimentalized, inevitably, everything about him I see now in the light of what happened later, his slow disintegration, his death. The waves of the past batter at the sea defences of my sandy sanity, need to be safely pictured, still, romanticized, prettified. (‘I had a lovely flat then’ 2)

Philip Tew interprets such “prettified” memories as an aspect of the narrator’s “inability to confront death or understand its nature and significance” (Tew, 2002: 37). I think that it is precisely the confrontation of death that triggers a change in the way the narrator relates to past memories. It asks for a reinterpretation of previously held beliefs: “[...] how I try to invest anything connected with him now with as much rightness, sanctity, almost, as I can, how the fact of his death influences every memory of everything connected with him” (‘At least once he visited us’ 1).

Richard Holmes considers that the awareness of the relativity of experience is responsible for viewing language as an obstacle rather than a means of grasping ‘reality’: “Characteristically, it leads Mr Johnson to shy from the relativity of language, stalling all similes and metaphors like a thoroughbred before doubtful hedges” (Holmes 1969). Tew also deals with the failure of language. He claims that the emphasis on the physical presence of the book reemphasizes the physical presence and effects of language and its failings (Tew, 2002: 39). Indeed, the inability of language to account for our experiences is a central concern underlying Johnson’s novel, for “[...] how, using the poor, inadequate, blunt instrument of language”, can we recapture anything of the “simultaneity and multiplicity of modern life?” (Coe 2003).

The whole narrative is in fact a Sisyphean task, a struggle against forgetting. Recording Tony’s voice on a newly acquired tape recorder is emblematic in this sense. On the pretext of requiring assistance with an article the narrator records his friend’s words which stand for frailty and decline, signifying a change in Tony’s body:

His fingers tampering with the mike, and he kept switching it off, perhaps it was too much for him, the thought I won't be here, perhaps he had this thought inside him, insistently, by now, all hope gone, saying, I won't be here to see this, or that, or whatever, even to see this article we were talking about, perhaps I was too ghoulish, in wanting to have his voice, the reason I had brought the recorder, though I did genuinely want his help with the article, too. Ghoulish, but not now, no, I have the man's voice still, the shake in it that was not there before, the sippings, the pauses, long sighs, I remember so clearly, have played it enough times, his voice, or the last vestiges of it, it's not that clear, a new slur, too, but his voice, his voice I still have, yes, and what he said, what he was. ('Then they had moved' 7)

Ironically, the only direct speech in the novel is the football report while the characters' words are entirely missing. We do not have Tony's utterances or the actual words of any of their joint conversations. The loss of words is a sign of approaching death and the decline of the power of language is all the more baffling as Tony was a man of letters, critic and editor.

The novel which is so acute about the apparent clutter and scramble of memory, is "pointedly serious about the possibility of forgetting", as Henry Hitching explains, "for the true misfortune of the title's 'unfortunates' is their extinction, the brittle immateriality of their achievements and their aspirations. Yet this is never overplayed. There is a quiet, unshowy precision in Johnson's prose; his grand effects are conceptual, not stylistic" (Hitchings 1999).

Interior monologue, more precisely, the stream of consciousness method is used to show the workings of the narrator's mind. Questions, self-denials and reinforcements interrupt the flow of memories, while spaces, the lacunae of whiteness between words mark pauses in the process of thinking. Extremely vivid memories alternate with distant episodes that are hard to recall, but in both cases the past overwhelms and determines the present. The vividness of the past is most obvious when time markers such as "now" and "then" overlap, the narration bordering on anachronism. This involves a clash between the system of reference of the past and of the present, and thus we witness the presentification of the past:

And again they had not been able to come up for the publication party, of the second one, he had been in hospital, in fact, when June wrote to me to say she had taken the advance copy to him there, and it had cheered him up, they had just changed the whole of his blood and he was looking and feeling much better now, then. So it was in his blood now, then. ('Then they had moved' 1)

In terms of intensity such memories resemble snapshots: they provide a sense of how things were, nevertheless they are episodic and do not provide us with a sense of coherence among the past events remembered. The narrator himself draws on photographic terminology when recording a brief episode during Tony's funeral: "[...] his mother I see still, tears, one foot on the upper step, the other one step down, caught, I see her as if in a still, held there, fixed" ('We were late for the funeral' 1).

The problem of memory and its accuracy appears to be mainly a question of restoring the vividness and intensity of original experience. It is generally assumed that the memories that are vivid and detailed, the recollections that have a rich texture are the ones worth cultivating. However, it is rather the "work of memory", the struggle for recalling even the tiniest detail and lost connection that redeems the past in *The Unfortunates*. It is the ceaseless effort to tie loose ends and recreate forgotten chronologies in spite of the torturing thought that "it is all meaningless", that makes the novel memorable.

Furthermore, if there is an imperative to remember, there is also a need to forget in the novel. The narrator's mind needs occasional rest, a relief from the overpowering thought of

his friend's death. This is how he reflects on his entering the "black and gold and french-polished mahogany shop", the ancient grocery in the Midlands city where he was sent to report the football match:

Why do I waste my time here? Because I'm interested in food, to keep my mind wasting on anything but Tony's wasting, the idea being to have no ideas, but food [...] it would take my mind off why I was ever here before, my mind runs on it [...] ('This poky lane' 3)

As we have seen, the random order of the chapters in *The Unfortunates* intended to evoke the unpredictable workings of the mind is counterpointed by the narrator's repeated attempt to create order.

### 3 A Paradigm of Reality

Let us now turn to Johnson's idea of ontological authenticity, that is, truth and its anchoring in perceptual reality or experience.

"Telling stories is telling lies, and I want to tell the truth [...] I want to tell the truth about me [...] about my truth", says Johnson in the *Preface* to his 1973 short story collection, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* According to Jonathan Coe, the writer believed that a true literary naturalism was both possible and desirable:

Instead of moving further away from his own experience, he is starting to move closer towards it in the belief that he can only tell the truth about something if he has experienced it. Yet he also knows that this is impossible, because even in one small life there is so much incident, so much detail, that even the most compendious novel could not contain it. (Coe 2003)

We may agree with Johnson's distinction between life and literature, his claim that writing stories means a process of selection and therefore a degree of falsification:

Life does not tell stories. Life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily. Writers can extract a story from life only by strict, close selection, and this must mean falsification. Telling stories is really telling lies. (Johnson, 1973: 14)

However, Johnson's peculiar desire to reduce the novel to the status of real life, his claim that the novelist should not be a writer of fiction but concentrate on the simple facts of his own life proves to be problematic. In his review of Coe's recently published biography of Johnson, Frank Kermode shows how the writer's manic insistence that his novels should contain no lies had been subverted by his very writings: he could not stop telling stories. Kermode considers Johnson's conception of truth faulty and explains how telling the truth for him means formal innovation, typographical variation, chapters in random order, "as if the book, to contain truth, needs to be a model of the author's mind, or of the universe" (Kermode 2005).

Unlike most experimental writers who sacrifice intensity of feeling for formal ingenuity, and despite his quixotic attempt to tell no stories but the truth, Johnson cannot completely break with story-telling: "His books are immensely readable, and usually follow a strong narrative line, almost in defiance of his own doctrinaire attitudes" (Wiles, 1995: 59).

As Henry Hitchings (1999) points out, Johnson's two fundamental commitments – formal innovation and rigorous truth-telling – coalesced into a strange, powerful and

spellbinding work of literature, a faithful fulfilment of the narrator's promise to his dying friend to memorialize him. Let us conclude with Johnson's own words:

What matters most to me about *The Unfortunates* is that I have on recall as accurately as possible what happened, that I do not have to carry it around in my mind any more, that I have done Tony as much justice as I could at the time; that the need to communicate with myself then, and with such older selves as I might be allowed, on something about which I cared and care deeply may also mean that the novel will communicate that experience to readers, too. (Johnson, 1973: 26)

#### 4 Conclusion

Most of the reviews and studies on Johnson's infamous book in a box content themselves with presenting Johnson's theory of the novelistic structure closely following the random workings of the mind. Going beyond the scope of these studies I tried to highlight the coexistence of the opposing drives of figuring randomness on the one hand and desperately trying to create order, on the other hand, within the narrative. My claim is therefore that we should focus on the aporetic nature of Johnson's novelistic discourse.

As to the truth condition professed by Johnson, the violent rejection of the slightest trace of fictionality, I propose an approach which accounts for the dialogic nature of the paradigm of reality: the strong narrative line in *The Unfortunates* counterpoints the cardinal Johnsonian truth-claim. The urge to build up a chronology and endow events with meaning pervades the novel. This is essential in writing stories and constitutes a denial of Johnson's professed paradigm of reality.

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Since each section in *The Unfortunates* is paginated separately, the first few words of each section are included for identification of any quotation

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