

Simultaneous Past and Present in The Sea

Passado e Presente Simultâneos em O Mar

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Abstract: *Time is complex in Banville's novels in that they constantly feature tense switching, chronological confusion, and characters who are always casting a look back to the past for an escape from the present. In The Sea, Banville's experimentation with tenses reflects his conception of time, particularly, the complex relationship between past and present. Part one of this article, focusing on Max's childhood memory, examines how the blurring of the past and present selves, resulting from frequent tense switching and the notable use of the historical present, destabilizes the temporal gap between the narrator and the narrated within retrospective narration. Part two, concerning Max's present, proposes to compare the portrayal of the present-day Cedars in the two parts of the novel, and proves the present to be elusive since Max's experience is not contemporaneous with the time of narration. Drawing on Max's various experiences of an alternative space, part three proceeds to argue that Max's entire act of narration constructs a similar alternative space where past and present are engendered simultaneously. The dubious existence of the self in this alternative space suggests a defiance against the deictic center as I-here-now.*

Keywords: *simultaneous past and present, tense switching, alternative space, act of narration.*

Resumo: *O tempo é complexo nos romances de Banville, pois constantemente apresentam mudança de tempos verbais, confusão cronológica e personagens que estão sempre lançando um olhar para o passado para uma fugir do presente. Em O Mar, a experimentação de Banville com tempos verbais reflete sua concepção de tempo, particularmente a complexa relação entre passado e presente. A primeira parte deste artigo, ao focar a memória infantil de Max, examina como o embaçamento entre os "eus" do passado e do presente, como resultado da troca frequente de tempos verbais e do uso notável do presente histórico, desestabiliza a lacuna temporal entre o narrador e o narrado na narração retrospectiva. A segunda parte, referente ao presente de Max, propõe comparar o retrato da família atual, os Cedars, nas duas partes do romance e provar que o presente é ilusório, pois a experiência de Max não é contemporânea ao tempo da narração. Com base nas várias experiências de Max de um espaço alternativo, a terceira parte argumenta que todo o ato de narração de Max constrói um espaço alternativo semelhante, onde passado e presente são gerados simultaneamente. A existência duvidosa do eu neste espaço alternativo sugere um desafio contra o centro dêitico como eu-aquí-agora.*

Palavras-chave: *Passado e presente simultâneos; troca de tempos verbais; espaço alternativo; ato de narração.*

Banville is fascinated with time, particularly the relationship between past and present. As he questions repeatedly in *Time Pieces*, his Dublin memoir: "When does the past become the past" and "What transmutation must the present go through in order to become the past" (4).

The author's questions are echoed by his protagonist Max Morden in his continuous exploration of memory in *The Sea*. By examining the use of tense in this novel, I argue that Max's narration constructs an alternative space, where past and present becomes simultaneous. For one thing, tense switching challenges the temporal gap between past and present underlying the retrospective narration, and questions the perpetuated present with synchronized experience and narration. For another, generated through the act of narration, both past and present have no preexistence and acquire a non-sequential simultaneity.

Many critics approach the problem of time in *The Sea* from a thematic study of memory, whereas the conception of past and present in relation to the act of narration, or "the temporal logic of storytelling" (Currie 2), calls for more attention. Time needs to be reconsidered beyond the past and present division presumed in the mode of remembering. As Laura P. Z. Izarra compares the entire narration in *The Sea* to a dream, her suggestion of "a confluence of time" with "a self at a simultaneous past, present and future" opens up more possibilities to interpret narrative time (146-7). Joakim Wrethed explores temporality encapsulated in the issue of ekphrasis in light of "the phenomenology of life" and argues that the novel "is a literary enactment of living-through, which follows the temporal laws not of exteriorized reality but of life itself" (204).¹

Additionally, although many have noted a common feature of tense switching in Banville's works, few have systematically examined how it affects the conception of time within *The Sea*.² The unnaturalness of tense in literature has been examined alongside an increasing attention to the narrating process and a rising use of present tense.³ That tenses should match the division of time into past, present, and future proves to be a rule of factual use and is too restricted for literary practice. Indeed, any creative use of tense seems to contribute to a re-configuration of narrative time and a new conception of time. *The Sea* is a typical case in that it abounds with the historical present tense, intermittent present-tense narration, and frequent tense switching. Its tense deployment exemplifies what Irmtraud Huber considers "an emancipation from the mimetic paradigm" (15). Therefore, a study of tense will help explicate the convoluted relationship between self, time, and narration in the novel.

Blurred Past and Present

Within a retrospective narration, there is a present narrator, intrusive or invisible, telling a past story. In the case of the intrusive one, as Huber points out when explicating the deictic use of the present tense, the tense difference between past and present makes discernible both the temporal gap and the narrative levels (24). *The Sea* with intense narrative self-consciousness, however, adopts frequent tense switching and there is also a notable use of the historical present. Therefore, the gap between past and present, and that between narrator and the narrated are blurred. I argue that tense switching and the historical present destabilize the retrospective mode by blurring particularly the narrator "I" and the narrated "I."

In *The Sea*, most cases of tense switching occur in relation to the use of the pronoun "I" which results in confusion between the narrated version of Max (young Max) and Max as the narrator (old present-day Max). The first scene featuring the historical present is about the Graces on the beach. Even before the large chunk of present-tense employment, tense switching occurs frequently. The beginning of one paragraph reads: "I do not know for how long Chloe had been standing on the dune before she jumped." (29). The use of present tense is understandable yet peculiar because in previous paragraphs in the same section, except for a

couple of self-reflexive comments, related experience is invariably expressed in past tense as “I noticed” and “I was sure” (27-9), indicating a retrospective narration. In this case, however, in place of the past “I” is the present remembering self. The present intrusion highlights a significant process of narration and remembering. Reliability of memory is not taken for granted as memory fails the first-person narrator. Much of the confusion caused by tense variation indicates a blur between the past and present selves instead of division, as if there is no point in distinguishing between the two.

A transitional shift with aspectual verbs slips in before the historical present takes over. The transition marks a turn from the rigid tense-time correspondence to a flexible deployment of tense. The key paragraph opens as follows: “They played a game, Chloe and Myles and Mrs. Grace, the children lobbing a ball to each other over their mother’s head and she running and leaping to try to catch it, mostly in vain” (31-2). After this sentence all is related in the present tense. The main clause of the sentence is conveyed in the past tense, but the sentence includes notable imperfective aspectual verbs like “lobbing” and “running.” Aspect and tense are usefully distinguished by Suzanne Fleischman: “Unlike tense, however, aspect is not a relational category, nor is it deictic; it is not concerned with relating the time of a situation to any other time point, but rather with how the speaker chooses to profile the situation” (13; emphasis original). Non-relational and non-deictic are features that Max seeks in aspectual verbs and his overall tense manipulation. The aspectual feature of verbs helps ease the divisive tense-based temporality. More importantly, it offers an alternative to retrospective narration. The transition enunciates Max’s manipulation of ways to re-present the past.

The historical present brings about more confusion upon narrative levels. Switching is not even necessary to enact the blurring of temporal boundaries because the historical present is defined as a rhetorical device that “uses the present tense to narrate past events” (Huber 9). The form itself is a breach of retrospective narration. As the narration in the novel leans toward consistent use of the present tense, authorial intrusion becomes less visible. Within the present-tense playing scene, Max’s involvement is again featured: “I imagine hitting him [Mr. Grace], punching him in the exact centre of his hairy chest as Chloe had punched her brother. Already I know these people, am one of them. And I have fallen in love with Mrs Grace” (32). While the violent impulse and other contextual information point to the viewpoint of young Max, the tense concerning Chloe and Myles’s frolic play in the past perfect suggests old Max’s viewpoint, which is incompatible with the historical present scenario. How does one tell whether it is the desire of young Max or the imagination of present-day Max? The consistent use of present tense deliberately blurs the two by erasing the temporal difference in retrospective narration. It would not be a problem to use the historical present in a third-person narration or in a first-person narration without much self-reflection. *The Sea* engages with temporal complexity because of its intense self-consciousness.

The blurring of past and present is reinforced when the historical present encounters the foregrounded artistic self-consciousness. The historical present is justified when Max as a rememberer adopts a painterly eye. He tends to compare memorable scenes and persons as paintings in that the process of remembering is likened to that of appreciating a picture. The comparison highlights the viewpoint of a spectator. In this way, the hierarchical narrative division between the narrator and narrated obtains physical existence as the frame of a painting. The painter stands outside the frame whereas the painted is always framed within.

Nevertheless, Banville’s artistic self-consciousness does not allow such a simple installation of a frame. The present tense breaks the frame, as observation comes not

necessarily from the present-day Max as a painter but possibly from young Max as a secret voyeur. A striking example is Max's memory of Mrs. Grace washing Rose's hair. The opening line, "I see this one as a tableau" (221), and the entire remembered incident imply a spectator outside of the frame with his attentive gaze. Yet, the present tense allows for an alternative stance for young Max whose view is equally compatible with these statements: "I see her toes in the long grass" and "I have a clear glimpse of her pendent breasts" (222). As shown above, tense switching and the resulted tense complexity not only affect the perception of past and present, but also force us to reconsider the nature of observer as the present narrator or the participant in the past. One may question the involvement of young Max within this discussion since he does not appear in this context. But the loss of young Max's viewpoint has always been a concern for the narrator Max. Without the previous experience of young Max as a witness, how does the memory of old Max come into being? The validity of memory should have both young and old Max as prerequisites. Otherwise, memory becomes a pure imagination that old Max has conjured. Indeed, the duality in subjectivity has been repeatedly sought after in the course of Max's narration. The questions of "Where am I, lurking in what place of vantage" (Sea 10) and "what phantom version of me is it that watches us" (137) mark Max's self-conscious exploration of how memory is formed.

Neil Murphy points out Banville's temporal innovation in merging the verbal and the visual as follows: "The fusion and mirroring of different ontological levels in the novel represents an attempt to move beyond representational and temporally sequential narrative forms" (77). The conception of time is reconfigured in Banville's multi-layered narrative matrix with memory, dream, artistic critique, and daily observation of the Cedars. The historical present constitutes an alternative existence beyond the past and present opposition. Its conjunction with Banville's intense self-consciousness weakens the retrospective mode of narration. As a result, the historical present in *The Sea* cannot be reduced to a rhetorical device which vivifies the representation of memory. Instead, it is a significant indication of Banville's use of non-mimetic or even de-temporalized tense.

One question to be addressed is the selective and uneven tense alternation in the novel. If there is a tendency to de-temporalize tense, especially in the use of the present tense, why are some memories rendered in present tense while the rest remains in the past? Notably, tense switching and the historical present are not employed in Max's memories of Anna. Instead of viewing the use of the past tense as conforming to a retrospective convention, I argue that Max chooses the past tense because the memory of Anna is too traumatic to fictionalize and frame as tableaux. Despite the seemingly plain description in the past tense within certain sessions, Max is highly conscious of time and tense concerning Anna. For instance, when both of them try to come to terms with Anna's disease and her impending death, Max remarks: "we sought escape from an intolerable present in the only tense possible, the past, that is, the faraway past" (99). The past and the present tenses are likened to two spaces offering optional residence. Max also notices Anna's use of tense after the diagnosis: "By then the past tense was the only one she cared to employ" (155). Anna's choice of the past tense indicates her resolution to make an end of the life she has had before the disease. In both cases, tense is not taken for granted. Instead, they reflect Max's flexible view of tense and time. Max's revisiting of the Cedars is also illustrative for an inconsistent use of tense. The revisiting registers both an escape from the present without Anna—like their escape into the past tense in the above-mentioned quotation—and also a yearning to leave Anna in the past. Yet Max's hope to seek refuge at the Cedars is not gratified, which will be shown in next section.

Present as Fictional

When the bond between tense and time is cut, the past and present tenses become equally fictional in narration. If past and present in retrospective narration cannot be distinguished because of tense switching and the use of the historical present, the seemingly immediate and actual present at the Cedars is also questioned. Although Max strives to establish the present as solid through his pervasive use of the present tense regarding his return, the present remains slippery. The simultaneity of experience and the act of narration sustained by the present tense cannot be verified.

Based on notable variations in the use of tense, I propose to compare the two parts of the novel to further unravel the tense and time relationship. In an interview, Banville comments on *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*” (Friberg 203-4; emphasis added). Although Banville’s “two books” roughly points to Max’s past and present life, the tension between past and present is stressed. Past and present are inseparable. Yet, the two-part division ingenuously registers the tension and Max’s different attitudes toward both his past and present. That the two parts are allocated exactly the same number of pages in the Picador edition, as Rüdiger Imhof points out (172), also invites a parallel and comparative reading. Additionally, many correspondences across the two parts are suggestive of repetition or a gesture of correction, such as the depiction of the robin and the cat, and the thought-provoking repetition of “Everything seems to be something else” (65, 138).

In the first part of the novel, Max’s stay at the Cedars stands out for its pervasive use of the present tense as opposed to his memories of childhood and Anna. After a brief opening section about the day when the gods departed, the narration shifts to the present Cedars. A brief introduction of the Cedars with its detailed layout, doors and windows is all rendered in the present tense. So are Max’s concomitant sentiments.

I am amazed at how little has changed in the more than fifty years that have gone by since I was last here. Amazed, and disappointed, I would go so far as to say appalled, for reasons that are obscure to me, since why should I desire change, I who have come back to live amidst the rubble of the past? (4)

The renewed impression seems to suggest that Max has just arrived at the Cedars. The present tense strikes the reader with a sense of immediacy, and Max’s act of narration, his experience and thoughts are all synchronized.⁴ As more of Max’s experience at the Cedars is registered in the present tense, simultaneous narration seems to be an inevitable recourse.⁵

However, the portrayal of the Cedars with its daily routine, or as Banville has it “the present-day narrative,” takes only a small part in the first part of the book and it serves to punctuate Max’s endless memories as fillers. In most cases, the present occurrences are absorbed by timeless narration in form of the habitual present, before giving way to another account of the past. For instance, Max’s memory of his first encounter with the Graces is followed by a paragraph describing the present. Max notices his subconscious whistling while Colonel Blunden’s wireless next door leads to his reflection upon the Colonel’s weekly activities. After this present-day interruption, Max’s memory of the Graces continues. Nothing much happens in the present. Some moments amount to simultaneous narration, but the main

function of the present is to balance out Max's obsession with the past.

In the second part of the novel, Max's experience at the present-day Cedars seems to lapse into the past, in contrast with the perpetual present in the first part. A sharp contrast is shown in Max's recounting of his arrival at the Cedars which marks the beginning of the first part.

It was an evening just like that, the Sunday evening when I came here to stay, after Anna had gone at last. Although it was autumn and not summer the dark-gold sunlight and the inky shadows, long and slender in the shape of felled cypresses, were the same, and there was the same sense of everything drenched and jewelled and the same ultramarine glitter on the sea. I felt inexplicably lightened; it was as if the evening, in all the drench and drip of its fallacious pathos, had temporarily taken over from me the burden of grieving. (146)

Unlike the previous quotation from the first part with an immediacy verging on impossibility, this excerpt conforms to the retrospective convention by converting the arrival to a past event. Wrethed points out that the repetition of "the same" banishes the temporal distance of fifty years (207). Yet the temporal distance between the arrival and the narration is obvious. All description and sentiments are naturalized in a retrospective glow. The emphatic repetition of the arrival accounts for a change in Max's mind.

Equally conspicuous are Max's nearly opposite impressions of the present Cedars within his "two" arrivals. In the first part, the present Cedars seems to be overtaken by his memory. Hence, the similarity is stressed and he observes that "little has changed." It is not the present Cedars that he sees but a past he *recognizes*. In the second part, on the contrary, Max is shocked by the realness of the present as different from what he remembers. When Max is introduced to his room by Miss V., he observes: "I experienced a sense almost of panic as the real, the crassly complacent real, took hold of the things I thought I remembered and shook them into its own shape" (156-7). While the past seems to erase the present in the first part, the present starts to gain its independence in the second. In her phenomenological investigation of the alliance between places and the body in Max's mourning and homecoming, Linara Bartkuvienė notes: "Max seems to be re-entering not only the places per se but also the past of a world that is gone forever" and that Max's homecoming offers him only "a considerable ambiguity, rather than reciprocal affinity" that he expects (92-3). The fact that the striking sense of displacement is selectively narrated after the "second" arrival reaffirms Max's renewed attempt at homecoming in the second part.

By recounting the arrival in the past tense and acknowledging the present Cedars, Max seeks to readjust his experience at the Cedars and confront his current problems. Indeed, the past tense is applied in more instances such as Bun's visit, the day that the colonel's daughter fails to turn up, and the night when Max blacks out. The last instance of the present-tense use at the Cedars occurs after Max comes to consciousness from the black-out night. Yet it soon shifts back to the past tense in a paragraph that jarringly includes both "she [Miss V.] says" and "she said" (262-3). The shift seems to be a succumbing gesture to the lapse of time and a resignation to the fictionality of presentness put up by the present tense.

Moreover, simultaneous narration is disavowed openly in the second part of the novel. Max describes a conversation between Miss V. and him as such: "We are in the lounge, sitting in the bay of the bow window, as so often. The day outside is bright and cold, the first real day

of winter we have had. All this in the historic present” (248).⁶ This is the only self-reflexive reference in the narration concerning and debunking the “present” of the Cedars. On the one hand, it severs the tense and time correspondence. The conversation turns out to be prior to instead of contemporaneous with the act of narration. The act of narration recedes and becomes indiscernible within the text. On the other hand, this self-conscious gesture uncovers Max’s previous attempt to presentify and perpetuate his stay at the Cedars.

Max’s varied views upon past and present are drawn from a comparison between two parts of the novel. Narration in the first part perpetuates the present at the Cedars by consistently applying the present tense in order to establish a refuge from the pains of bereavement. The peaceful life at the present-day Cedars is idealized and matches the merry memories of the Graces. Max sustains this delicate correspondence between past and present to facilitate his journey of return. In the second part, problems are uncovered beneath the peaceful disguise at the Cedars in the present, aligning to the traumatic outcome of the Graces in the past. Neither his memory nor the present-day Cedars offers Max the solace he desires. A general resignation to the past tense in the second part suggests the transience of happiness and the ultimate failure of his retreat to the past.

An Alternative Space of Narration

The first section of this article has shown a process of narration in continuous struggle between a narrated past and a present of narration. The second section has identified a temporal gap between Max’s stay at the present-day Cedars and the time of narration. With simultaneous narration debunked, two options emerge to interpret the narrative present. Max’s self-conscious gesture to the historical present offers a partial solution to the tense complexity. In the second interpretation, the present simply refers to the present of narration. This last part focuses on the second interpretation in order to elaborate on Max’s complex conception of past and present. By exploring his various experiences of an alternative space, I argue that Max’s entire narration creates a similar alternative space where the validity of both the past and present is questioned. There is only a constructed relativity of *past* and *present* engendered through the act of narration. For Max, the past is dependent on the process of narration and remembering, while the present comes to be merely a reliving of the past. In turn, they acquire a simultaneous or even non-temporal interdependence.

In the novel, Max has several inarticulate experiences of an imagined space through “inexplicable transport” (97). In the first case, Max compares the torturous days he suffered, when accompanying Anna in the hospital, to “a twilit netherworld” and the dying moment of “pre-departure” (96-7). “Twilit” and “pre-departure” both indicate a sense of liminality in terms of the day-and-night, and life-and-death oppositions. Max also remarks “it has all begun to run together, past and possible future and impossible present” (96). It seems that the special circumstances help shape a particular space where the normal conception of time is inapplicable.

Moreover, in delineating this special space, Max enumerates other instances which elicit similar encounters.

Strange as it was, however, this imagined place of *pre-departure* was not entirely unfamiliar to me. On occasion in the past, in moments of inexplicable transport, in my study, perhaps, at my desk, immersed in words, paltry as they may be, for even the second-rater is sometimes inspired, I had felt myself break through the membrane of

mere consciousness into another state, one which had no name, where ordinary laws did not operate, where time moved differently if it moved at all, where *I was neither alive nor the other thing* and yet more vividly present than ever I could be in what we call, because we must, the real world. And even years before that again, standing for instance with Mrs. Grace in that sunlit living room, or sitting with Chloe in the dark of the picture-house, *I was there and not there, myself and revenant, immured in the moment and yet hovering somehow on the point of departure*. Perhaps all of life is no more than a long preparation for the leaving of it. (97-8; emphasis added)

Two kinds of experiences are conjured up as analogous to Max's imagined pre-departure. The first kind, as the first half of the excerpt shows, concerns Max's particular preoccupation with words. A mysterious state of being in words and out of consciousness suggests a space of words as singular. "Another state" affirms the alterity of this space as beyond the usual conception of time and the life and death dichotomy. Assertively, what Max means by "more vividly present" is a negation of the real-world present. Moreover, this space of words points to a narrative self-consciousness typical in Banville's novels. As Derek Hand observes, "All his [Banville's] writing is concerned with the act of writing itself: it is a self-conscious, self-aware, and ultimately self-reflexive art" (220). The second kind concerns the process of remembering. Apparently, it describes Max's experience that occurred "years before." Yet the retrospective mode invariably implies and posits a remembering process that entails the problematic existence of the self. In other words, it is the narrator Max who possesses the experience rather than young Max. For young Max is already a remembered version and cannot possibly experience the remembering transport. Hence, the process of remembering enables a dubious existence of the self or, as Murphy puts it, "[a] slippage between different temporal versions of himself [Max]" (110). The blurred past and present are a result of the dubious existence of the self within the act of remembering.

The two kinds of experiences above share a common attribute of alterity involving a dubious existence of the self, transcending the divisions of past and present, life and death, and consciousness and unconsciousness. Thus, I argue that Max's act of narration, incorporating both his imagination and memory, helps install an alternative space beyond the usual concepts of time and self. Although Max seldom distinguishes the act of narration from the act of remembering, the unique space of words reflects his underlying concern with narration. This deep-rooted concern with narration is pronounced in Max's dream about typing his will on a typewriter with the letter "I" missing. The loss of "I" stresses that the self cannot be articulated, reinforcing the dubious existence of "I" in the autonomy of words. Ultimately, the alternative space of narration registers Max's navigation through the possibility and impossibility of saying "I."

Banville's view of writing also authorizes Max's alternative space of narration. In several interviews Banville has likened his fiction writing to a dream world. The repetitive comparison indicates that the process of writing is inaccessible. As Banville maintains, "the person who wrote the book that you love is not me. He ceased to exist when I stood up from my desk. And he has no affects, he has no affects at all. There's nobody there" (Haughton and Radley 868). Rejecting to identify with the person that writes, Banville postulates almost an identical view with Max who claims to have penetrated the "membrane of mere consciousness." Both of them have recognized the alterity of the space of words.

Within Max's alternative space of narration, past and present become simultaneous and shed light on more cases of tense anomalies. On one occasion, Max remembers walking down Station Road when he was a child. A seemingly corrective sentence is inserted: "I am walking down Station Road" (12). But the rest of the walk is all rendered in the past tense. One may argue that the present-tense insertion is another case of Max's self-conscious use of the historic present. Yet this assumption is untenable since right before the insertion, Max claims to have heard the Colonel next door. It is more cogent to interpret Max's present walk as fictional and metaphorical, since the walk is not contextualized by any present-day circumstances. In other words, the process of narration and remembering a walk down Station Road becomes an imagined experience of walking down the same road during the process of narration. The present acquires its metaphorical existence as a reliving of the past through the act of narration. As the present "walk" requires only the act of narration and no contextualization, the isolated sentence in the present tense serves to parallel the walk in memory.

Furthermore, the simultaneous past and present engendered in the alternative space of narration are testified by Max's notion of concentration. Similar substitution of the past tense with the present recurs in Max's memories about Mrs. Grace and Chloe: "So there I *am*, in that Edenic moment at what was suddenly the centre of the world" and "I *am* in the Strand Café, with Chloe, after the pictures and that memorable kiss" (89, 160; emphasis added). In both cases, the present tense highlights the present-ness of narration and remembering. Max justifies the possibility of transcending the past and present with an effort of concentration in his memory of Chloe: "Remarkable the clarity with which, when I concentrate, I can see us there. Really, one might almost live one's life over, if only one could make a sufficient effort of recollection" (160). Likewise, in the case of Mrs. Grace, an effort of concentration is also implied: "Let me linger here with her a little while [...]; she will be displaced soon enough from the throbbing centre of my attentions" (86-7). Max's effort to concentrate seeks not a time travel but a transcendence over the past and present dichotomy. Past and present are not temporally defined anymore. Rather, they come into being at the same time within the act of narration. While the present is a renewed experience of the past, the past is a present construction.

Max's concentration corresponds to Banville's conception of "artistic concentration" and foregrounds a narrative manipulation over the authenticity of remembering. In an essay entitled "Making Little Monsters Walk" Banville remarks:

[...] action in a novel is not a matter of stage management but of *artistic concentration*. Under the artist's humid *scrutiny* the object grows warm, it stirs and shies, giving off the blush of verisimilitude; the flash of his relentless *gaze* strikes them and the little monsters rise and walk, their bandages unfurling. (111-2; emphasis added)

Banville highlights the authorial agency that comes with artistic concentration. Max's notion of concentration reveals the authorial self-consciousness. Underlying the desire to concentrate is the control Max holds over those memories, which resembles Banville's authority over the characters he creates.

Related to the temporal ambivalence in Max's alternative space of narration, spatial representations become slippery too. At the end of the first part of the novel, watching his image in the mirror, Max is transported to a dream-like scenario on the beach. Echoing the

boat of death in his previous rumination of pre-departure, Max discerns “a black ship in the distance” and he chants: “I am there. [...] I am there, almost there” (132). Instead of being *here*, Max locates himself on the other side as *there*. On defying the geographical dichotomy, the chants reaffirm the possible split of the subjectivity, similar to the situation where “I was there and not there” (98). Taken together, in the alternative space of narration, the deictic center of I-here-now is destabilized, when subjectivity, along with geographical and temporal locations, becomes questionable. The act of narration transports Max away from the real world and from the comfortable domain of language itself.

To cope with his bereavement, Max seeks solace in the past. However, revisiting the Cedars does not guarantee a possible return. At most, Max’s journey back to the Cedars is a navigation between the past and present both of which remain elusive and require redefinition. Along the way, his endeavor turns out, more and more, to be conceptive, as he engages in experimentation with narration. While the second part of the novel overshadows the first by exposing its deceitful idyll, the second part, by no means, offers a promise of comfort and ease. Max’s experience of the dreamy space, embedded right in the middle of the novel, captures the in-betweenness within which Max is trapped and anticipates future futile struggles with narration and remembering. He is and will be always almost there.

Notes

- 1 According to Wrethed’s study of Michel Henry’s phenomenology of life, the “auto-affectivity of life” constitutes and yet cannot be accommodated in the exteriorized reality (188). The former corresponds to the felt present of life and the phenomenology of life, whereas the latter corresponds to a world of representation (208). In particular, examining Bonnard’s paintings and Max’s narration side by side, Wrethed stresses the similarity between the two (192). He considers the failure of representation in both as exemplary of the inarticulate life which is the “enigmatic core” that “moves Max Morden through the narrative” (188-205).
- 2 Karen McCarthy in her recent article has addressed a case of tense shifting in Max’s imagination of the old sailor “Oh, to be him. To have been him” (5). She argues that the past perfect registers Max’s aversion to the present (172).
- 3 As Suzanne Fleischmann notes, the use of present tense in narration is “consciously or unconsciously antinarrative” (7) since “retrospective intelligibility” is a prerequisite to narrative convention (21). In other words, the use of the present tense against narrative tradition pioneers an interrogation of the naturalness of tense.
- 4 Regarding the mode of narration in this case, interpretation can be contestable between interior monologue and simultaneous narration. The core of this contention lies in the conceptualization of narration. Dorrit Cohn elaborates “self-narration” in the present tense as featuring both the automaticity of interior monologue and the signal of quotation suggestive of narration (*Transparent Minds* 165). The difference between narration and interior monologue is addressed fully in her other work to underline the breakthrough of simultaneous narration (*Distinction* 96-108).
- 5 Many scholars, such as Suzanne Fleischmann, Dorrit Cohn, and Monika Fludernik, have commented on the impossibility of simultaneous narration or narrative present as to synchronize the act of narration and the experience of events. It has been recognized as an experiment upon narrative time yet also a peculiar formula established for long.
- 6 This quotation does not sufficiently justify the historical present as a consistent solution to the

present-day narrative in the novel. The self-reflexivity suggests more of a tense sensitivity and flexibility than a determined choice of temporal expression. Likewise, the semblance of simultaneous narration in many parts of the novel does not justify this mode of narration throughout the novel. Neither mode on its own can do justice to the complex relationship between tense and time in *The Sea* as a whole.

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