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Memory as a Source of Distortion in John Banville's *Birchwood*

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Abstract

This thesis offers a psychoanalytic and memory-studies reading of John Banville's novel *Birchwood* (1973), arguing that memory in the text operates not as a transparent window onto the past but as an active, distorting force that shapes and ultimately constitutes the narrative. Through Gabriel Godkin's first-person perspective account, which reconstructs the gothic decline of his Anglo-Irish family estate before tracking his picturesque wanderings with a traveling circus, Banville interrogates what it means to remember and, by extension, to narrate. Drawing on psychoanalytic concepts from Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, trauma theory as articulated by Cathy Caruth, cognitive memory research from Frederic Bartlett and Elizabeth Loftus, cultural memory research developed by Maurice Halbwachs, Jan Assmann, and Aleida Assmann, and the narrative philosophy of Paul Ricoeur and Henri Bergson, this study argues that Gabriel's recollections are irreducibly reconstructive, ideologically charged, and unstable. The thesis concludes that *Birchwood* enacts, at the level of both content and form, what might be called a poetics of mnemonic distortion: a literary practice in which the impossibility of faithful recall is not a deficiency to be mourned but the very condition that makes storytelling and self-fashioning possible. In doing so, the novel anticipates several pressing concerns of contemporary trauma studies and cognitive psychology while remaining anchored in a distinctively Irish literary tradition preoccupied with the relationship between heritage, loss, and invented continuity.

Keywords: memory distortion, unreliable narration, psychoanalysis, *Birchwood*, Irish fiction

General Introduction

Background of the Study

Memory has long occupied a privileged and deeply contested position in the Western humanistic tradition. From the ancient art of the *arsmemorativa*, through which orators stored and retrieved argumentative material by mentally populating architectural spaces, to Wordsworth's "spots of time," Proust's involuntary recollections, and the modernist stream-of-consciousness technique. The question of how human beings remember has been intimately bound up with questions of identity, creativity, and the very possibility of narrative itself. The twentieth century brought with it a productive unsettling of earlier idealist assumptions about memory's reliability. Psychoanalysis, beginning with Freud's theorization of the unconscious, repression, and the distorting mechanisms of the dreamwork, opened memory to a fundamentally hermeneutic suspicion: what we remember may be less a record of what happened than a screen for what we cannot bear to know. Simultaneously, experimental psychology in the figure of Frederic Bartlett and, later, Elizabeth Loftus, demonstrated empirically that remembering is not retrieval but reconstruction, shaped by schemas, narratives, and post-hoc suggestions. It is against this richly theorized background that John Banville's *Birchwood* (1973) demands to be read. Published at a pivotal moment in the development of Irish prose fiction, in the same decade that saw Samuel Beckett awarded the Nobel Prize and Brian Moore produce his most searching explorations of Catholic guilt and selfhood, *Birchwood* is an anomalous text that is simultaneously gothic, picaresque, and metafictional; it refuses the straightforward realist conventions of much contemporaneous Irish writing. Its protagonist and narrator, Gabriel Godkin, reconstructs from an indeterminate present the Gothic decline of his Anglo-Irish family's Big House and his subsequent wanderings with a traveling circus in search of his lost twin sister.

From the novel's celebrated opening sentences: "I am, therefore I think. That seems inescapable." (Banville, 1973, p. 11). It announces itself as a text self-consciously preoccupied with the epistemological status of the self that narrates. The critical literature on Banville has grown considerably since the publication of *The Book of Evidence* (1989)

and the Booker Prize-winning *The Sea* (2005), yet *Birchwood*, as the text that inaugurates many of Banville's most distinctive preoccupations, has received comparatively less sustained theoretical attention than these later works. Where it has been treated, critics have tended to emphasize its engagement with the Big House tradition, its intertextual dialogue with European literary modernism, or its self-reflexive narrative strategies (Hand, 2002; Imhof, 1989; McMinn, 1999). The psychoanalytic dimensions of its mnemonic structure have rarely been foregrounded as the primary subject of analysis. The present thesis proposes to rectify this omission by undertaking a sustained reading of the novel through the combined lenses of psychoanalytic theory, trauma studies, and cognitive and cultural memory.

Statement of the Problem

The central problematic of this thesis emerges from a fundamental tension internal to the novel itself. *Birchwood* presents a narrator who explicitly acknowledges the unreliability of his own account while simultaneously insisting on that account's urgency. Gabriel acknowledges that he may be confusing memory with imagination, event with fantasy, and historical reality with the projections of desire. Yet the novel makes no effort to adjudicate between true and false recollection; rather, it proceeds as though this very indeterminacy were the most authentic mode of access to the past available to a self whose coherence is itself the product of narrative construction. This situation generates a set of interrelated problems that conventional formalist or biographical approaches to the novel are ill-equipped to address. If Gabriel's memories are distorted—and the novel furnishes abundant evidence that they are—what are the mechanisms of that distortion? What psychological, cultural, and linguistic forces shape his reconstruction of the past? What is the relationship between the fragmentation of his recollections and the trauma, real or imagined, that structures his family history? And what does the novel thereby imply about the broader relationship between memory, identity, and narrative in a specifically Irish postcolonial context? These are the questions that this study sets out to explore.

Research Questions

The thesis is organized around the following primary research questions:

1. In what ways does Banville's *Birchwood* represent memory as a distorting rather than a preserving faculty, and what narrative techniques does it deploy to enact this representation?
2. How do psychoanalytic concepts, including repression, the uncanny, the death drive, and the Lacanian subject, illuminate the mechanisms of Gabriel Godkin's unreliable narration?
3. To what extent does Gabriel's narrative exemplify the theoretical frameworks of trauma theory, in particular the notions of traumatic recall, dissociation, and repetition compulsion?
4. How do the theories of collective and cultural memory developed by Halbwachs, Jan Assmann, and Aleida Assmann relate to the treatment of family and Anglo-Irish historical memory in the novel?

Hypotheses

This thesis advances the following principal hypotheses:

- H1: Gabriel Godkin's narration in *Birchwood* systematically enacts the reconstructive rather than reproductive character of human memory, such that the novel's events are never accessible to the reader independently of the distorting influence of his retrospective consciousness.
- H2: The mechanisms of distortion evident in Gabriel's narrative, including selective attention, emotional colouring, retrospective rationalization, and confabulation, correspond closely to the processes of memory distortion documented in cognitive psychology by Bartlett and Loftus, and may be illuminated by these theoretical frameworks.

H3: The psychoanalytic dimensions of Gabriel's narration, particularly his apparent repression of traumatic material, the return of repressed content through figures of the uncanny, and his compulsive repetition of founding narrative scenarios, are best understood through a combined Freudian-Lacanian reading, attentive to both the structure of the unconscious and the role of language in constituting the subject.

H4: *Birchwood* engages critically with the conventions of Anglo-Irish cultural memory, specifically with the Big House tradition as a site of collective mourning for a lost social order, and subjects these conventions to an ironic pressure that simultaneously exploits and deconstructs their ideological underpinnings.

Objectives of the Study

The thesis pursues the following specific objectives:

1. To survey the principal theoretical frameworks in memory studies, psychoanalysis, and trauma theory that are relevant to the analysis of mnemonic distortion in literary narrative.
2. To examine the established relationship between memory theory and the study of modern and postmodern literature, with particular attention to unreliable narration and the narrative structuring of time.
3. To undertake a close, theoretically informed textual analysis of *Birchwood* as a case study in mnemonic distortion, demonstrating how both content and form in the novel enact the distorting character of memory.
4. To gesture towards the broader tradition of Irish literary engagement with questions of memory, heritage, and postcolonial identity.

5. To contribute to the relatively unexplored psychoanalytic dimension of Banville criticism by demonstrating the interpretive productivity of the combined frameworks deployed here.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this thesis is threefold. First, it contributes to Banville scholarship by subjecting *Birchwood* to a more sustained and theoretically rigorous analysis than it has

previously received. Second, by bringing contemporary cognitive and cultural memory theory into dialogue with psychoanalytic reading practices, the thesis offers a methodological model applicable to other literary texts in which unreliable narration and mnemonic instability are formally constitutive. Third, by attending to the specifically Irish dimensions of the novel's engagement with memory, heritage, and loss, the study contributes to a broader scholarly conversation about the relationship between postcolonial experience, traumatic history, and the literary imagination in twentieth-century Irish fiction.

Methodology

This thesis employs a qualitative, hermeneutic methodology grounded in close textual analysis and theoretical application. The primary text, John Banville's *Birchwood*, is read closely and attentively, with particular attention to its narrative voice, temporal structure, figurative language, and thematic preoccupations. This close reading is informed throughout by the theoretical frameworks described in the following section, which are applied not mechanically but interpretively, as heuristic lenses capable of illuminating aspects of the text that might otherwise remain hidden. The theoretical materials are drawn from a range of disciplines: psychoanalysis, cognitive psychology, cultural studies, narratology, and literary criticism, and are integrated into the analysis in a way that maintains the primacy of the literary text while allowing theory to serve its proper function as a link between the reader's pre-understanding and the text's capacity to disclose meaning. Secondary sources, including published criticism of Banville and of Irish fiction more broadly, are consulted throughout and engaged critically rather than merely summarized.

Theoretical Framework

The thesis deploys a multi-theoretical framework organized around four principal axes. The first is psychoanalytic, drawing primarily on Sigmund Freud's conceptualization of repression, the unconscious, the dreamwork, and the uncanny, supplemented by Jacques Lacan's reformulation of Freudian concepts through structural linguistics and his articulation of the subject's constitution in and through language. The second axis is derived from trauma theory, in particular the foundational work of Cathy Caruth, whose influential account of trauma as an event that is not fully experienced at the moment of its occurrence but that returns belatedly and compulsively in the form of flashback, repetition, and intrusive recollection provides an indispensable framework for understanding both the thematic content and the formal structure of Gabriel's narration. The third axis comprises memory studies in both their cognitive and cultural dimensions. From cognitive psychology, the reconstructive model of memory developed by Frederic Bartlett and the experimental work on false memory and suggestibility conducted by Elizabeth Loftus are particularly relevant. The reconsolidation theory of long-term memory, which states that recalled memories enter a labile state in which they are susceptible to modification before being stored again, provides an important neuroscientific complement to these psychological frameworks. From cultural memory theory, the foundational contributions of Maurice Halbwachs on collective memory, Jan Assmann on communicative and cultural memory, and Aleida Assmann on the distinction between functional and storage memory, inform the analysis of the familial and socio-historical dimensions of Gabriel's recollections. The fourth axis is narratological and

philosophical, drawing on Paul Ricoeur's account of narrative identity, that the basis of the self is constituted through the stories it tells about itself, and Henri Bergson's phenomenological account of the relationship between memory, duration, and perception. Together, these frameworks generate a rich and multi-perspectival theoretical apparatus well suited to the complexity of Banville's novel.

Organization of Chapters

Following this introduction, the thesis is structured in three chapters and a general conclusion. Chapter One, "Memory between Conceptual and Historical Evolution," provides a comprehensive survey of memory as a concept across psychology, philosophy, neuroscience, and cultural theory. It traces the historical evolution of memory studies from the past to the present, distinguishes between the major forms and typologies of memory pertinent to the subsequent analysis, and introduces the principal theoretical frameworks that will be applied in later chapters. Chapter Two, "Memory Theory and Literary Studies," narrows the theoretical focus to the intersection of memory scholarship and literary criticism. It examines the relevance of memory for the study of modern and postmodern fiction, surveys three key theoretical developments: reconsolidation theory, the theory of memory distortion, and the Lacanian account of the relation between language and memory and demonstrates their applicability to the literary text. Chapter Three, "Memory as Distortion in John Banville's *Birchwood*," constitutes the analytical core of the thesis. Organized into ten subsections, it undertakes a sustained close reading of the novel through the theoretical frameworks established in the preceding chapters, addressing in turn Gabriel Godkin's unreliable narration, his fragmented identity, the traumatic and repressive dimensions of his recollections, his nostalgic idealization of the past, his susceptibility to hallucination and fantasy, the linguistic mediation of his memories, the novel's temporal dislocations, its treatment of family and inherited trauma, the blurring of reality and imagination, the psychoanalytic dimensions of Gabriel's memories, the symbolic significance of the Birchwood estate, and finally the relationship between memory and the distinctive stylistic features of Banville's prose. The General Conclusion synthesizes the findings of the preceding chapters, answers the research questions, and suggests directions for future scholarship.

Chapter One: Memory between Conceptual and Historical Evolution

I. Introduction

This chapter provides the conceptual foundations upon which Birchwood's analysis will rest. It begins by tracing the concept of memory from its classical philosophical roots through to contemporary cognitive and cultural theory, establishing the key typologies and distinctions that distinguish different modes of recollection. Central to the discussion is the recognition, drawn from Bartlett, Bergson, and later researchers, that remembering is an active, reconstructive process rather than a faithful reproduction of past events. The chapter also introduces the social and traumatic dimensions of memory that will prove crucial to understanding Gabriel Godkin's narrative.

I.1. What Is Memory?

Memory is, at its most basic level, the capacity of an organism to encode, store, and retrieve information from the past. This deceptively simple functional definition conceals a remarkable diversity of processes, systems, theoretical frameworks, and the scholarly literature on memory, thereby spanning experimental psychology, cognitive neuroscience, phenomenological philosophy, and cultural studies, and is correspondingly rich and complex. Before turning to the specific theoretical frameworks that will guide the analysis of *Birchwood*, it is necessary to survey this landscape with sufficient care to establish the conceptual vocabulary on which the subsequent analysis will depend.

The philosophical engagement with memory reaches back at least to Plato (ca. 380 B.C.E./1997), who in the *Theaetetus* and the *Meno* used the metaphor of the wax tablet to figure the mind's capacity to retain impressions of past experience, and who in the *Phaedrus* theorized *anamnesis*—the recollection of ideas known to the soul before birth—as the very foundation of human knowledge. Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1925), in his treatise *De Memoria et Reminiscentia*, distinguished between *mneme* (memory proper, the immediate presence of a past impression) and *anamnesis* (recollection, the active search for a past experience), a distinction that anticipates the later cognitive psychological differentiation between implicit or automatic memory retrieval and the effortful, deliberate process of recall. For Aristotle, memory is always of the past: it involves an awareness of temporal distance, a sense that what is remembered belongs to a time that has elapsed.

This temporal dimension of memory, its fundamental orientation toward the past, was radically reconceptualized by Henri Bergson in his landmark work *Matière et Mémoire* (1896; trans. as *Matter and Memory*, 1912). For Bergson, memory is not a static archive of past impressions but a dynamic, living process through which the past continuously interpenetrates the present. He distinguishes between "habit memory" (the bodily retention of skills and routines) and "pure memory" (the recollection of singular, unrepeatable events). Pure memory, for Bergson, is never fully actualized in the present; it persists as a virtual trace that is partially and imperfectly actualized each time it is recalled. This insight anticipates, in philosophical terms, what cognitive neuroscience would later demonstrate scientifically: that the act of remembering is itself a creative, generative process, not a passive retrieval.

The distinction between memory and history has been a central preoccupation of memory studies since Pierre Nora's influential conceptualization of the *lieux de mémoire* that are the sites of memory in which collective remembrance is crystallized and preserved against the threat of historical oblivion. For Nora (1989), genuine living memory is characterized by spontaneity, particularity, and embodiment; it is fundamentally social, shaped by communities and practices rather than by scholarly protocols. History, by contrast, is reconstructive, critical, and distancing: it subjects the past to rational analysis and seeks to establish what actually happened. Memory and history are, for Nora, not merely different modes of access to the past but fundamentally antagonistic ones; the proliferation of *lieux de mémoire* in modernity testifies, in his view, to the death of genuine living memory and its replacement by the comforting fiction of heritage.

This distinction between memory and history is crucial to the analysis of *Birchwood* because Gabriel Godkin's narration conspicuously refuses the distancing protocols of historical reconstruction. He does not claim to be writing history; he claims to be remembering, and it is the subjective, embodied, partial character of that remembering that the novel both enacts and questions. His account of the Godkin family's decline is shot through with the kind of affective intensities; longing, dread, shame, desire; that Nora associates with living memory rather than with historical reconstruction.

The relationship between memory and identity has been theorized from multiple disciplinary perspectives. From the perspective of cognitive psychology, the "self-memory system" proposed by Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) holds that autobiographical memory is organized by a hierarchical system whose function is not simply to preserve the past but to maintain the coherence of the self-concept: we remember in order to know who we are. From the perspective of narrative philosophy, Paul Ricoeur's account of narrative identity in his three-volume *Temps et Récit* (1983–1985) argues that the self achieves coherence not through the immediate self-givenness of consciousness but through the mediation of narrative: we understand ourselves through the stories we tell about ourselves, and those stories are inevitably shaped by cultural conventions, generic expectations, and the demands of narrative form. From a psychoanalytic perspective, it is precisely the gaps, distortions, and inconsistencies of the narrative in which are the places where the story breaks down or contradicts itself that are most revealing of the unconscious forces at work in the constitution of subjectivity.

I.2. Major Forms of Memory

The field of cognitive psychology has demonstrated a highly differentiated taxonomy of memory systems, each associated with distinct neural substrates, functional characteristics, and modes of failure.

I.2.1. Functional and Storage Memory

The most fundamental distinction is between working memory (the capacity to hold and manipulate information over very short time periods, typically seconds) and long-term memory, which encompasses all relatively permanent storage of information. Within long-term memory, the distinction between declarative (or explicit) memory and non-declarative (or implicit) memory is of primary theoretical importance. Declarative memory is consciously accessible and can be verbally reported; it encompasses both episodic memory (memory for specific personally experienced events, situated in time and place) and semantic memory (general knowledge about the world, concepts, and facts). Non-declarative memory, by contrast, operates largely outside conscious awareness and includes procedural memory (skills and habits), priming (the facilitation of processing by prior exposure), and various forms of conditioning.

For the purposes of literary analysis, episodic memory is of paramount importance, since it constitutes the primary material of autobiographical narrative. The phenomenologist Endel Tulving (1972, 2002), who first proposed the episodic/semantic distinction, characterized episodic memory as involving "mental time travel": the capacity to re-experience the past subjectively, to re-immense oneself in the phenomenal quality of a prior moment. This quality of "autonoetic consciousness" (the feeling of remembering) is precisely what gives Gabriel Godkin's narration its peculiar phenomenological texture: the sense that he is not merely reporting past events but reliving them, with all the vividness and affective charge that characterize genuine recollection.

Yet the very vividness that makes episodic memory feel like a faithful record of the past is, from a cognitive psychological perspective, one of its most misleading features. As Frederic Bartlett demonstrated in his foundational experimental study *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (1932), the act of remembering is not a mechanical reproduction of stored information but a constructive process in which gaps are filled, inconsistencies resolved, and the material of experience shaped according to existing schemas. Bartlett (1932) observed that his experimental participants, when asked to recall a Native American folk tale whose narrative conventions were unfamiliar to them, systematically distorted the story in the direction of familiarity; they rationalized puzzling elements, omitted culturally alien details, and imposed on the unfamiliar material the narrative schemas of their own cultural context. This finding that memory is schema-driven, constructive, and culturally mediated has been one of the most influential in the history of cognitive psychology, and it provides an important framework for understanding the distortions evident in Gabriel Godkin's narration.

Aleida Assmann (2011), in her influential distinction between functional and storage memory, provides a complementary perspective on the selectivity of memory at a cultural level. Functional memory, in Assmann's account, is the active, living memory that a community deploys in the service of identity formation and cultural continuity: it is the selection from the archive of the past that is deemed relevant, meaningful, and worth preserving. Storage memory, by contrast, is the vast, relatively unchanging repository of past material from which functional memory selects that the archive in its fullness, which exceeds what any community can actively remember and use. The distinction illuminates something important about Gabriel's narrative project: he is engaged in constructing a

functional memory of his family and estate, selecting from the chaos of past experience those elements that cohere into a meaningful, if deeply melancholic, narrative. But the selection is unstable, the archive leaks through the filter, and the novel's formal fragmentation registers the impossibility of containing the archive within any coherent retrospective account.

Retrieval processes in long-term memory are, as cognitive psychologists have amply demonstrated, highly susceptible to a range of distortions. The classic "levels of processing" framework developed by Craik and Lockhart (1972) established that the depth of encoding affects the ease with which information is later retrieved, but subsequent research has shown that retrieval is itself a creative act that can modify the original memory trace. The phenomenon known as "retrieval-induced forgetting" (Anderson et al., 1994) demonstrates that the act of recalling some material from a stored moment can suppress the later retrievability of related material that was not recalled, a finding that resonates with the selective and suppressive character of Gabriel's retrospective account.

2.2. Cultural Memory

The cognitive psychological account of memory described in the preceding section focuses primarily on individual cognition, on the processes occurring within a single mind. Yet memory is never purely an individual phenomenon. From the moment of birth, human beings are embedded in social and cultural matrices that shape what they remember, how they remember it, and what significance they attribute to their recollections. The sociology and cultural theory of memory, developed most powerfully in the twentieth century by Maurice Halbwachs and subsequently elaborated by the Assmanns, provide an indispensable complement to the cognitive psychological account by insisting on the fundamental social and cultural dimensions of even the most apparent private act of remembering.

Maurice Halbwachs, the French sociologist and student of both Durkheim and Bergson, first systematically articulated the concept of collective memory in *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925) and elaborated it posthumously in *La Mémoire collective* (1950). For Halbwachs, individual memory is fundamentally dependent on social frameworks: we remember as members of groups, and our recollections are shaped,

sustained, and organized by the shared practices, symbols, and narratives of the communities to which we belong. As Halbwachs (1992) argues, "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (p. 38). This insight has far-reaching implications: there is no purely individual memory, no recollection that is not in some way socially conditioned and collectively sustained. Even the most intimate and basic private memories are stored and retrieved through the mediating frameworks of language, social practice, and shared narrative convention.

This account of memory's social constitution has important implications for the reading of *Birchwood*, since Gabriel's attempt to reconstruct his past is simultaneously an attempt to locate himself withinor, perhaps more accurately, to detach himself from a specific social formation: the Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy, whose cultural memory is organized around narratives of heritage, stewardship, and irreversible decline. The social framework that should sustain Gabriel's memories is itself in a state of advanced disintegration, and the fragmentation of his recollections may be read, at least in part, as a symptom of this social dissolution. It means that without a functioning community to hold his memories in place, they drift and distort, becoming increasingly unique and unreliable.

I.2.2.1. Individual and Collective Memory

The difference between individual and collective memory is one of the most productive theoretical debates in the memory studies tradition. While Halbwachs (1992) insists on the social determination of individual memory, subsequent theorists have pointed to the irreducible first-personal character of the remembering act "I remember," not the group even if what and how one remembers is socially conditioned. Paul Ricoeur, in *La Mémoire, l'Histoire, l'Oubli* (2000; translated as *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 2004), engages at length with this debate, arguing that it cannot be resolved by simply collapsing individual memory into collective memory or vice versa. He proposes instead a mediating category of "shared memory" (memories that are genuinely one's own but that are shaped by and constituted within a shared framework of significance) as the key to understanding the relationship between personal and social remembrance.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the individual's relationship to collective memory is further complicated by the dynamics of idealization, projection, and introjection. The child internalizes the family's account of itself like its myths, its traumas, its evaluations of its own significance and this internalized family narrative becomes part of the fabric of individual identity. When the family's collective memory is itself distorted, organized around unacknowledged traumas, idealized self-images, or systematic evasions of difficult truths, the individual's relationship to their own past may be correspondingly compromised. This dynamic is clearly at work in *Birchwood*, where the Godkin family's collective memory of itself is revealed, through the course of Gabriel's narrative, to be organized by denial, concealment, and self-deception. Gabriel has internalized a collective family narrative that is itself a fiction, and his attempt to recover the truth of his past must therefore involve a simultaneous deconstruction of the collective memory that has shaped his individual recollections.

The role of collective memory in identity construction has been theorized with particular sophistication by Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann, who have developed a complex model of cultural memory that extends and systematizes Halbwachs's foundational findings. Jan Assmann (1992, 2006) distinguishes between communicative memory that is the informal, everyday memory of the recent past, shared within a community through oral communication and persisting for approximately three generations and cultural memory which is the formalized, institutionalized memory of the more distant past, preserved through texts, rituals, monuments, and canonical narratives. Cultural memory, in Assmann's account, serves as the foundation of collective identity by providing communities with a shared understanding of their origins, their distinctive values, and their place in history. It is organized not around historical accuracy but around significance: what matters is not precisely what happened but what the community takes to have happened, and what it means for its present and future self-understanding.

I.2.2.2. Communicative and Cultural Memory

Jan Assmann's (1995) distinction between communicative and cultural memory highlights an important dimension of the temporal structure of *Birchwood*. Communicative memory, as Assmann defines it, encompasses the informal, conversational transmission of shared experience across three generations within a living

community. It is characterized by its intimacy and its relative lack of institutionalization. It circulates through family stories, personal anecdotes, and casual conversation in daily life. Cultural memory, by contrast, is a more formal, institutionalized, and temporally distant form of collective remembrance: the memory enshrined in canonical texts, rituals, and sacred sites that gives a community its sense of deep historical roots and shared identity across the generations.

In *Birchwood*, these two forms of memory are significantly at odds. The Godkin family's communicative memory that are the informal family stories that Gabriel has absorbed through his childhood and is already deeply compromised by the secrets, suppressions, and distortions that structure the family's self-representation. The cultural memory within which the family situates itself that is the Anglo-Irish Big House tradition, with its narratives of civilizing mission, cultural stewardship, and inevitable decline and is itself a highly ideological construct that serves to mystify the colonial relations on which the Ascendancy's social position was built. Gabriel's narration is located at the intersection of these two forms of memory, and it is shaped, and twisted, by both.

Literature itself, as Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann have both emphasized, plays a crucial role in the formation and preservation of cultural memory. Canonical literary texts are among the most important media through which communities transmit their foundational values, narratives, and self-understandings across the generations. But literature can serve a more critical and disruptive function: it can interrogate the official narratives of cultural memory, expose the repressions and distortions on which they depend, and give voice to the memories that have been excluded from the canonical account. This is the critical function that *Birchwood* performs with respect to the Anglo-Irish cultural memory of the Big House: by subjecting the conventions of the Big House novels to formal and ideological pressure, Banville exposes the constructed, retrospective, and ideologically motivated character of the memory that underpins this literary tradition.

I.2.3. Traumatic Memory

The concept of traumatic memory occupies a crucial place in the theoretical framework of this thesis. Trauma theory, as it has developed from Freud's early work on hysteria through the clinical literature on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to the influential contributions of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub, holds that certain experiences that exceed the individual's capacity to assimilate them within existing

frameworks of understanding are not processed in the normal way. Instead of being integrated into the narrative of the self, traumatic experiences remain as unassimilated foreign bodies within the psyche, returning in the form of repetitive intrusions: flashbacks, nightmares, compulsive reenactments, that bear witness to the failure of normal memory integration.

Freud's theorization of trauma underwent significant development across his career. In his early work with Breuer on hysteria (1895/1957), he proposed a simple hydraulic model in which traumatic events cause a damming effect that is subsequently discharged through the conversion symptom: the symptom is, as it were, the memory of the trauma displaced onto the body. The concept of repression, first developed in the paper "The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence" (1894/2001), was an added dimension: the traumatic memory is not merely blocked but actively expelled from consciousness, only to return in a distorted form. In his later theoretical elaborations, particularly in the metapsychological papers of 1915 and the discussion of the "compulsion to repeat" in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920/2001), Freud moved towards a more complex account in which the traumatic repetition is understood not as a failed attempt at catharsis but as a fundamental feature of the death drive, the organism's compulsive return to an earlier state of quiet rest.

Cathy Caruth's influential reformulation of trauma theory in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) has been particularly significant for literary studies. Drawing on Freud's account of traumatic repetition and on the clinical literature on PTSD, Caruth argues that trauma is not simply a wound to the psyche but a crisis of representation that cannot be fully witnessed at the moment of its occurrence and that therefore returns, belatedly, in the form of repetitive intrusion. As Caruth (1996) formulates it, trauma is "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (p. 4). This formulation has important implications for the reading of traumatic narrative, in which the literary text that engages with trauma does not simply represent the traumatic event but enacts at the level of form as well as content the belatedness, fragmentation, and compulsive repetition that characterize traumatic experience.

The relevance of trauma theory to *Birchwood* is multifaceted. At the most obvious level, Gabriel's narrative is haunted by a series of events, both real and imagined, that bear the hallmarks of traumatic experience, for example, the death of his twin, the violent

decline of his family, and the disturbing figures of madness and violence that populate his childhood memories. But trauma theory is also relevant at the formal level: the fragmentation of Gabriel's narrative, its nonlinear temporal structure, its compulsive returns to founding scenarios, and its violent transition between hyper-vivid recollection and blankness, all of which conform to the structural features of traumatic narration as theorized by Caruth and others.

The relationship between trauma and repression is central to the Freudian account of traumatic memory. Freud's concept of *Verdrängung* (repression) designates the mechanism by which the ego actively, if unconsciously, expels from consciousness material that is experienced as threatening or intolerably painful. The repressed content does not disappear but persists in the unconscious, exerting a continuing pressure on conscious mental life and returning in disguised form through symptoms, dreams, parapraxes, and as Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900/2001) elaborates in detail through the complex, condensed, and displaced imagery of the dreamwork. Applied to literary narrative, the concept of repression suggests that what is not said in a text and what is in the gaps, ellipses, evasions, and contradictions of the narrator's account is as significant as what is explicitly stated. The systematic distortions of Gabriel's narration may be read as symptoms of an underlying repression whose content the novel only ever approaches obliquely.

I.CONCLUSION

The chapter has thus surveyed the principal frameworks of memory studies, highlighting the reconstructive, socially embedded, and often traumatic character of recollection. Concepts such as episodic memory, functional versus storage memory, collective memory, and the return of the repressed have been established as the conceptual vocabulary for the literary analysis to follow. These foundations underscore the extent to which Gabriel's account in *Birchwood* cannot be taken as an objective record of events but must be read as a motivated reconstruction shaped by desire, ideology, and the limits of representation. The following chapter turns to the specific applications of these ideas within literary studies and narratology.

CHAPTER TWO: Memory Theory and Literary Studies

II. Introduction

This chapter narrows the theoretical focus to the intersection of memory scholarship and the study of literature. It considers how the reconstructive models of memory developed in psychology and cultural theory illuminate the workings of unreliable narration, narrative identity, and the temporal structures of modern fiction. Key developments such as reconsolidation theory, experimental research on false memories, and Lacan's account of the subject in language, are examined for their bearing on the analysis of texts like *Birchwood*. The discussion prepares the ground for the detailed textual analysis that constitutes the heart of the thesis.

II.2.1. The Relevance of Memory for Literary Studies

The relationship between memory and literature is, in one sense, as old as literature itself. In Greek mythology, the Muses were the daughters of Mnemosyne (Memory), and the act of poetic composition was understood as a form of inspired recall, with the poet recalling, with divine assistance, the stories of gods and heroes that constituted the community's cultural heritage. Yet the theorization of memory as a primary object of literary-critical inquiry and as a subject to be analyzed rather than merely invoked is a distinctively modern development, emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the context of what scholars have retrospectively termed the "memory boom" of Western modernity.

The modernist novels, in particular, made memory central to their formal and thematic fixations in an unprecedented way. Marcel Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (1913–1927) elevated involuntary memory (the sudden, overwhelming recollection triggered by a sensory stimulus) to the status of an aesthetic principle and a philosophical program, arguing that only through the chance recovery of the affective texture of past experience could the artist escape the falsifications of voluntary, intellectualized recollection. Virginia Woolf's novels of consciousness, such as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), deployed the stream-of-consciousness technique to render the moment-by-moment

interpenetration of past and present in the experiencing mind, which demonstrated that consciousness is never fully present to itself but always already haunted by the traces of previous experience. William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) exploited multiple, temporally dislocated narrators to suggest that the past is never simply past but that it continues to inhabit and distort the present and is most powerfully precise where it is least consciously acknowledged.

The unreliable narrator, as a specific formal device through which the distorting character of memory is rendered in fiction, has been extensively theorized in narratology since Wayne Booth's coinage of the term in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). Booth's original account distinguished between reliable narrators whose account of events the implied author endorses and unreliable ones whose account is, for various reasons, suspect. Subsequent narratological theorizing has considerably refined this binary, distinguishing between different kinds and degrees of unreliability; cognitive, moral, evaluative and theorizing the rhetorical mechanisms through which readers recognize and respond to narrative unreliability (Phelan, 2005; Nünning, 1999). The cognitively unreliable narrator, whose account of events is compromised not by dishonesty but by the limitations and distortions of memory and perception, is particularly relevant to the analysis of *Birchwood*.

The relevance of memory studies to Irish literary criticism has been noted by several scholars working at the intersection of these fields. Oona Frawley's edited collection *Memory Ireland* (2011–2014) and Anne Whitehead's *Trauma Fiction* (2004) have both contributed to establishing the methodological frameworks within which memory and literature can be productively analyzed in relation to specifically Irish historical and cultural contexts. The special intensity of Irish culture's engagement with memory like with the Famine, the colonial experience, the civil war, and the multiple displacements of emigration and partition has generated a literary tradition unusually preoccupied with the question of how the past is transmitted, distorted, and mourned across the generations. Banville's work, and *Birchwood* in particular, participates in this tradition while simultaneously subjecting its characteristic modes of memorial engagement to a rigorous formal and epistemological critique.

The stream-of-consciousness technique, as developed by Joyce, Woolf, and their contemporaries, is relevant to *Birchwood* not as a direct formal influence (because Banville's prose is considerably more stylized and self-conscious than classic stream-of-consciousness) but as a precedent for the literary rendering of the mind's non-linear relationship to time. Gabriel's narration does not aspire to the immediacy of stream-of-consciousness; it is explicitly retrospective: the product of an adult consciousness looking back on past events from a distance in time that is never precisely specified. But it shares with stream-of-consciousness the sense that the past is perpetually present in consciousness, that recollections intrude involuntarily and with unexpected vividness, and that the attempt to organize the experience into a coherent narrative is always unstable.

Memory and temporality are intimately related in Paul Ricoeur's narrative philosophy, which provides one of the most sophisticated theoretical accounts of the relationship between time, narrative, and personal identity available in the contemporary humanistic tradition. In *Temps et Récit*, Ricoeur (1988) argues that human beings do not experience time as pure duration (as Bergson's account might suggest) but always through narrative: time becomes human time as it is organized according to the structures of narrative placement. The self's relationship to its own past is therefore mediated by the narrative structures through which it organizes its recollections, and narrative identity is constituted precisely by this ongoing labor of self-placement. For Ricoeur (1988), "the narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told" (p. 147). In *Birchwood*, this narrative construction of identity is foregrounded and presented in which Gabriel's narrative identity is explicitly presented as a retrospective fabrication: a story told to and about a self whose existence prior to and independent of the narrative is radically uncertain.

II.2.2. A Survey of Modern Memory Theories

One of the most significant developments in the neuroscientific understanding of memory in recent decades has been the emergence of the reconsolidation theory of long-term memory.

2.2.1. The Reconsolidation Theory of Long-Term Memory

Classical consolidation theory that is the account of long-term memory storage that prevailed from the early twentieth century through to the 1990s held that, once a memory had been consolidated into long-term storage, it was relatively stable and resistant to modification. The process of consolidation was understood to involve the progressive stabilization of newly encoded information during post-encoding processing, culminating in a stable long-term memory trace (the engram) that could thereafter be retrieved with high fidelity.

The reconsolidation hypothesis was first convincingly demonstrated in a series of experiments by Nader et al. (2000) and subsequently supported by a rapidly expanding body of neuroscientific research that challenges the classical account by suggesting that the act of retrieval renders the stored memory trace temporarily labile, unstable and susceptible to modification before it is restored in a process that parallels the original consolidation. In other words, the very act of remembering destabilizes the memory: retrieved memories can be updated, modified, or contaminated by new information encountered after retrieval, and the re-stored memory is not identical to the original one but may contain post-retrieval influences. As Misanin et al. (1968) and later Nader et al. (2000) demonstrated, chemical disruption of the reconsolidation process following retrieval can permanently impair the original memory, an effect that would be impossible if, as classical theory holds, retrieval merely reads off a stable stored trace without altering it.

The implications of reconsolidation theory for the understanding of memory distortion are profound. Each act of recall is simultaneously an act of potential modification: the retrieved memory is not simply read out but reactivated in a fluid state, susceptible to being colored by the emotional context of retrieval, contaminated by post-retrieval suggestion, or integrated with new information that may distort the original. Repeated recall of the same event may therefore produce a memory that departs significantly from the original experience, not through any deliberate falsification but through the cumulative effect of multiple reconsolidation cycles.

This dynamic is clearly relevant to Gabriel Godkin's situation because his compulsive retrospective reconstruction of his past such as his repeated returns to the same scenes, the same figures, the same founding traumas is not merely a literary device but may be understood, in the light of reconsolidation theory, as the mechanism through which his memories become progressively more unstable, more heavily colored by his present emotional state, and more susceptible to the intrusions of fantasy and desire. Maria Margaroni and Effie Yiannopoulou (2007) have noted the resonance between reconsolidation theory and poststructuralist accounts of the retroactive constitution of meaning: just as reconsolidation suggests that memories are rewritten each time they are retrieved, so does poststructuralist theory insist that meaning is never fixed but always deferred and retroactively constituted. In *Birchwood*, the gap between Gabriel's ostensible temporal distance from the events he narrates and his manifest emotional investment in them may be read as generating precisely the conditions under which reconsolidation processes would be most active, because each retrospective return to the past is simultaneously a new encounter with it, colored by the grief, desire, and ambivalence that constitute Gabriel's present emotional life.

II.2.2.2. The Theory of Memory Distortion

The systematic study of memory distortion in the ways in which stored memories may be altered, contaminated, or falsified has been one of the most productive areas of cognitive psychological research over the past half-century. The foundational contribution of Frederic Bartlett (1932), already discussed in the preceding chapter, established the schema-dependent, reconstructive character of memory as a baseline finding from which subsequent research has proceeded. Bartlett's account implies that all memories are in some sense distorted, shaped by pre-existing schemas, cultural conventions, and the demands of narrative coherence, and that the question is not whether distortion occurs but rather what forms it takes and under what conditions it is most pronounced.

Elizabeth Loftus's experimental research on the "misinformation effect" has provided the most compelling empirical demonstrations of memory distortion in the scientific literature. In her classic studies, Loftus (1979) showed that witnesses to an event would subsequently misremember that event when they were exposed to misleading post-event information, for

instance, when a questioner used a leading question that implied the presence of an object not actually witnessed (Loftus & Palmer, 1974), the misinformation is incorporated into the original memory, not merely added alongside it as a supplementary piece of information; therefore the "updated" memory feels as vivid and as authentic to the rememberer as the original experience. Loftus described the memory system as resembling "a Wikipedia page: you can go in there and change it, but so can other people" (2013, 08:42), a metaphor that captures both the collaborative, socially embedded character of memory and its susceptibility to after-the-fact alteration.

The phenomenon of "imagination inflation," first documented by Garry et al. (1996), has further extended the understanding of memory distortion by showing that merely imagining an event can increase subjects' confidence that they actually experienced it. Repeated imagination of a plausible but unreal event can, in some cases, create a full-blown false memory that the individual genuinely believes to be a real recollection. This finding is of particular literary relevance, since it suggests that the boundary between imagination and memory is not fixed but can be blurred through the very activity of constructing alternative narratives about the past, an activity in which Gabriel Godkin is explicitly and compulsively engaged throughout *Birchwood*.

Hyman et al. (1995) demonstrated the implantation of false childhood memories in a significant proportion of experimental subjects through a procedure in which subjects were simply asked to try to remember events described to them as genuine childhood experiences, but that had in fact been invented by the experimenters. A substantial minority of subjects not only failed to recognize the false events as invented but made elaborate, detailed, and emotionally convincing "memories" of events that had never occurred. The legal implications of these findings, in the context of the reliability of eyewitness testimony and the validity of recovered memories in therapeutic contexts, have been extensively debated. But their literary implications are equally significant, seeing that they suggest that the confabulation, rationalization, and fantasy that characterize Gabriel's narration are not merely novelistic conventions but representations of processes that are genuinely operative in human memory.

The suggestibility of memory is also relevant to the understanding of Gabriel's narration. Gabriel is a narrator who has absorbed a great deal of narrative material about his family and his past from sources other than direct experience including the stories told by adults, the half-overheard conversations, the books he has read, and the cultural scripts through which he interprets his own experiences. These various external influences on his self-narrative introduce a further layer of potential distortion, since it becomes impossible, both for Gabriel and for the reader, to distinguish between what he actually experienced and what he has been told, imagined, or derived from cultural templates. As Loftus (1997) observes, "memory, like liberty, is a fragile thing" (p. 62), a fragility that Banville's novel not only acknowledges but actively and formally acts upon.

II.2.2.3. The Relation Between Language and Memory

The relationship between language and memory is one of the most complex and philosophically rich issues in the entire field of memory studies. At the most elementary level, language serves as the primary medium through which memories are encoded, stored, and communicated: the verbalization of an experience transforms it from a phenomenological event into a symbolic representation, and this transformation is not neutral but involves a fundamental alteration of its character. The richness, the multi-sensory experience, and the affective texture of lived memory are inevitably reduced and schematized in the process of verbalization; what is gained in communicability is purchased at the cost of phenomenological density.

From a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, the relationship between language and memory is even more foundational: language is not merely a medium through which memories are communicated but the very condition of possibility of the kind of selfhood that makes memory possible in the first place. For Lacan (1977), the subject is constituted in and through language: the entry into the Symbolic order(the order of language, law, and social convention) is simultaneously the creation of the speaking subject and the founding repression that establishes the unconscious. The subject of speech is always already split, divided between the conscious, articulate self that speaks and the unconscious remainder that is excluded from speech but that persists as the source of desire, symptom, and repetition.

This split subject is the condition of possibility of memory in Lacan's theory, seeing that memory always involves a relationship between the remembering subject of the present and the remembered subject of the past, a relationship that is mediated by language and structured by the same dynamics of displacement, condensation, and substitution that Freud identified in the dreamwork. The Lacanian account of language as the medium of desire illuminates a crucial dimension of Gabriel Godkin's narration. Gabriel does not merely report what happened; he narrates what he desires to have happened, what he desires to have been the meaning of what happened, and what he desires his present self to be in relation to the past self he is constructing. The distortions of his narration are not random errors but motivated formations that are structured by desire, guilt, grief, and the need for self-coherence, and their analysis requires precisely the kind of literary criticism that Lacanian psychoanalysis enables.

Metaphor and memory are intimately connected in the literary-theoretical tradition, as shown by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's (1980) account of conceptual metaphor, which argues that the very structure of abstract thought, including thoughts about memory and time, is organized through metaphorical mappings grounded in embodied experience. The primary metaphors through which memory is conceptualized in Western culture such as an archive, as wax tablet are not merely decorative but constitutive in that they shape the ways in which we understand, value, and deploy our memories. Banville's prose in *Birchwood* is extraordinarily attentive to the metaphorical construction of memory and time, deploying a complex figurative language through which the instability, the partiality, and the creative transformation of recollection are rendered with unnatural precision.

On the other hand, silence and trauma are connected through language in complex ways that have been theorized by both trauma scholars and literary critics. Caruth's (1996) account of traumatic narrative emphasizes its characteristically fragmented, elliptical quality: the traumatic event cannot be fully represented in language because it was not fully experienced as an event as it exceeded the subject's capacity for symbolization and the narrative that attempts to represent it is therefore marked by gaps, repetitions, and non-sequiturs that are the formal correlates of the traumatic experience. Elaine Scarry's (1985) account of the "unsharability" of intense pain resonates here: at the extreme, what is most intensely felt is

least susceptible to linguistic representation. In *Birchwood*, the areas of the narrative that are most conspicuously marked by fragmentation, silence, and evasion like the circumstances of Gabriel's twin's death, the violent undercurrents of his parents' relationship, the dark secrets at the foundation of the Godkin family's identity, are precisely those that the text's traumatic logic would lead us to identify as the most threatening material, whose representation has been most radically compromised by repression.

The chapter has thus surveyed the principal frameworks of memory studies, highlighting the reconstructive, socially embedded, and often traumatic character of recollection. Concepts such as episodic memory, functional versus storage memory, collective memory, and the return of the repressed have been established as the conceptual vocabulary for the literary analysis to follow. These foundations highlight the extent to which Gabriel's account in *Birchwood* cannot be taken as an objective record of events but must be read as a motivated reconstruction shaped by desire, ideology, and the limits of representation. The following chapter turns to the specific applications of these ideas within literary studies and narratology.

II. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the relevance of contemporary memory theory to literary criticism has been established through a survey of reconsolidation, distortion research, and the psychoanalytic understanding of language. These frameworks reveal that the instabilities of narration in *Birchwood* are not merely formal devices but enactments of processes that cognitive psychology and psychoanalysis have documented in human memory itself. The novel's self-conscious engagement with the limits of recollection thus emerges as both a thematic preoccupation and a structural principle. These findings are now brought to a sustained reading of the text in the chapter that follows.

**Chapter Three: Memory as
Distortion in John Banville's
*Birchwood***

III. Introduction

The preceding chapters have established the theoretical frameworks including psychoanalytic, cognitive psychological, cultural, and narratological through which this study proposes to read John Banville's *Birchwood*. It now remains to begin the close reading that constitutes the analytical core of the thesis. This chapter has ten subsections, each addressing a specific dimension of the novel's treatment of memory as a distorting force, while maintaining the theoretical orientations established above. The chapter argues that *Birchwood* enacts, at every level of its narrative organization and in the structure of its narration, in the temporal dislocations of its plot, in the figurative language of its prose style, and in the thematic engagements of its protagonist. A thoroughgoing poetics of mnemonic distortion (Eckstein, 2007), a literary practice in which memory is never the medium of faithful recall but always already the site of creative, motivated, and fallible self-construction.

III.3.1. Gabriel Godkin as Unreliable Narrator

The novel opens with a misquoted philosophy quote: "I am, therefore I think. That seems inescapable" (Banville, 1973/2007, p. 11). The Cartesian formula has been turned inside out, and the qualifier in the second sentence does more damage than the inversion in the first. "Seems" undoes the certainty the maxim was supposed to declare. "Inescapable" suggests the speaker has already tried, and failed, to get out from under it. Two sentences in and Gabriel has surrendered ground he never claimed. Then the image: "In this lawless house I spend the nights poring over my memories, fingering them, like an impotent casanova his old love letters, sniffing the dusty scent of violets" (p. 11). I have read that phrase several times and still cannot decide whether it is meant to be self-pitying, comic, or both. What it is not is reassuring.

Most criticism of Banville treats this kind of opening as a postmodern signature, a piece of metafictional showmanship inherited from Beckett and carried forward by Nabokov (Hand, 2002; Imhof, 1989; McMinn, 1999). Metafiction not only demonstrates the constructedness of fiction but also describes what an actual remembering consciousness looks like from the

inside. Bartlett (1932) demonstrated experimentally that remembering is reconstruction. Banville shows that demonstration in prose. The narrator, poring over his memories like love letters, is also, by focusing so deeply, changing them.

Gabriel says as much, more or less explicitly, two pages later:

"We imagine that we remember things as they were, while in fact all we carry into the future are fragments which reconstruct a wholly illusory past. That first death we witness will always be a murmur of voices down a corridor and a clock falling silent in the darkened room, the end of love is forever two spent cigarettes in a saucer and a white door closing" (p. 12)

It is interesting to read this as if Banville is handing the reader his theme, but the lines are too well-formed for that. What they actually deliver, behind the apparent disclosure, is two pieces of evidence the reader is going to have to do without: the death itself, and the end of love itself. We get the corridor, the clock, and the cigarettes. We do not get the body, the words, the lover. The schema has replaced the event.

Even more striking is the moment Gabriel breaks the frame to issue a methodological warning. Describing the day Silas and Angel first arrived at Birchwood, a scene he could not have witnessed since he was being born upstairs at the time, he writes: "...Such scenes as this I see, or imagine I see, no difference, through a glass sharply... If I provide something otherwise than this, be assured that I am inventing..." (p. 21). The pun on "darkly" from the original excerpt from the Bible ("For now we see through a glass, darkly") and simultaneously mocking a famous Gaelic ghost story is the kind of thing that ought to grate but doesn't, because it announces the principle the whole novel will run on. Whether Gabriel "saw" the scene or invented it makes no difference to him, and is therefore not allowed to make a difference to us.

Booth's (1961) original notion of the unreliable narrator one whose experience the implied author quietly wants us to distrust does not quite cover this. Nünning's (1999) reframing is closer. His distinction between cognitive and evaluative unreliability lets us say what is happening. We see that Gabriel's judgment is fine, his perception of his own situation is sharp, but the material his perception has to work with has been pre-made by years of dreaming about it.

The clearest example comes at the close of the novel, when Gabriel finally admits the thing he has spent two hundred pages trying not to admit: "There is no girl. There never was. I suppose I always knew that, in my heart. I believed in a sister in order not to believe in him, my cold mad brother" (p. 172). The whole picturesque second part of the book, the quest for the lost twin, has been a fiction Gabriel constructed to displace a knowledge he could not bear. What looks like unreliable narration turns out to be something more specific: motivated, defensive, or negating narration. The narrator is not unreliable despite trying to tell the truth. He is unreliable because the truth was unbearable, and he found something else to tell instead.

The closing line of the novel, borrowed from Wittgenstein (1921), reads: "whereof I cannot speak, thereof I must be silent" (p. 175). The borrowing is not casual. Gabriel's whole narrative has been a long demonstration of what speech does when it cannot bear silence: it fabricates, displaces, molds the unbearable into shapes the speaker can live with. That is not failure. It is the way the human capacity for narrative works.

III.3.2. Memory and Fragmented Identity

The fragmentation of Gabriel Godkin's identity is one of the most pervasive and formally significant features of the book. It manifests at multiple levels: in the non-linear structure of the narrative, in the instability of Gabriel's self-characterization, in his uncertain relationship to other characters who seem at times to be alter egos rather than independent individuals, and in the explicitly thematized uncertainty about his origins and family position. The search for the lost twin sister "Rose," which drives the second part of the novel, is simultaneously a search for the self's missing other half; the twin figures the possibility of a completed identity

that is possible to have existed before the separations and losses that constitute Gabriel's history.

Lacanian psychoanalytic theory provides an illuminating framework for understanding this fragmentation. For Lacan, the unified, coherent ego is already fiction, a retrospective construct produced in and through the "mirror stage": the moment at which the infant recognizes its reflection in a mirror and misrecognizes the unified image as its true self. This misrecognition (*méconnaissance*; Lacan, 2006) is the founding gesture of subjectivity in Lacan's account: the ego is constituted through an identification with an external image that provides a unity for the body that is, in fact, fragmented and disorganized. The coherence of the Lacanian self is therefore always precarious, and it is maintained only through a continued investment in the identificatory fiction of the mirror stage and is perpetually threatened by the return of the fragmentation that the mirror image was constructed to overcome.

Gabriel's search for Rose can be read, in Lacanian terms, as a search for the ideal egothe unified image of the self that would resolve the fragmentary, incoherent experience of actual subjectivity. The twin represents the fantasy of a self that is whole, complete, and present to itself, a fantasy that Lacanian theory identifies as structured by the register of the Imaginary. The failure of this search, which occurs in the novel's conclusion in which Gabriel returns to the ruined Birchwood estate without having achieved any definitive reunion with or understanding of Rose, is therefore not merely a narrative disappointment but a structural necessity. The unified self that Gabriel seeks does not exist and cannot be found because it was never more than a retrospective projection of desire.

The fragmentation of identity in *Birchwood* is also evident in Gabriel's uncertain relationship with the other characters in his narrative. His parents, Godkin and the unnamed mother, are rendered in brief, vivid, but deeply unreliable glimpses that change character from scene to scene, as though they were less stable individuals than the projections of Gabriel's own ambivalences and fears. The figure of Silas, the malevolent family retainer, takes on an almost mythological quality, suggesting the operation of archetypal projections

rather than accurate social portraiture. Even Gabriel's relationship to his own past self is marked by a radical discontinuity: the child who experienced the events Gabriel narrates seems at times to be a stranger to the adult narrator rather than related to him by the context of biographical continuity.

Ricoeur's (1992) distinction between *idem*-identity (sameness or identity of substance across time) and *ipse*-identity (selfhood or narrative identity, the kind of continuity constituted through commitment and self-narration) is useful here. Gabriel's *idem*-identity; his continuity as the same biological organism across time; is never seriously in question; rather it is his *ipse*-identity; his sense of himself as a coherent, meaningful self whose past and present form an intelligible narrative; that is radically unstable. The novel suggests that *ipse*-identity is not discovered but constructed, and that its construction is always a retrospective creation that must work against the grain of an experience that resists narrative coherence. This resistance is formally figured in the novel's fragmented, non-linear structure, and the narrative's inability to sustain a continuous, progressive account of Gabriel's life is the formal evidence of the self's inability to achieve a stable, coherent identity.

III.3.3. Trauma and Repression in Gabriel's Recollections

There is a passage early in the novel that is easy to miss, in which Gabriel narrates the night of his grandfather's death. He hears something in the corridor, opens his door, and watches:

"A shimmering pale figure descended the stairs swiftly and disappeared from view. The front door opened, I heard it, and felt the faint night air... The air bore traces of a woody perfume which at first I could not identify, I think because it was so familiar. There was a soft rustling sound followed by a gasp, and another figure appeared, crawling on hands and knees to the head of the stairs. He slithered down the first few steps, paused, and with a tiny cry plunged on down into the darkness." (p. 47)

The first figure is Aunt Martha in her white nightgown; the second, on hands and knees, is Joseph, his father, drunk. Gabriel does not name either of them in the passage. He records the sounds, the perfume, the postures, with hallucinatory precision, and refuses to assemble the inference. The closing sentence of the scene is one of the most painful in the book: "Cigar smoke, yes, yes, wearily, sleepily, I admitted it" (p. 47). The "wearily" and the doubled "yes, yes" do the work. He knows what his father is, but he chose not to know. The admission has the weight of something being put down at last, not picked up.

This is Freud's (1915/2001e) account of repression in its most exact textual form. Repression is not amnesia; rather the material remains accessible at the edge of consciousness, and what is missing is the willingness to let the inference complete itself. Gabriel sees what he sees and lets it dissolve back into "cigar smoke." When Aunt Martha comes to his room the next morning to tell him GrandaGodkin has been found dead in the birch wood, the only thing Gabriel can do is stare at her: "All I could do was sit on the side of the bed, speechless and numb, with my socks in my hand, and stare at her shimmering white nightgown, admitting to myself what I already knew, that I had not been dreaming" (p. 49). Aunt Martha shakes him and snaps, "Do you never cry!" Gabriel's silent answer to the reader is an ominous "Not yet" (p. 49). This shows that even after surviving the chaotic night and fire, the downfall of Gabriel's family is still only beginning.

Caruth's (1996) account of traumatic temporality fits Gabriel's narrative more closely than any other theoretical frame. Because for Caruth, the traumatic event is not fully experienced when it occurs and therefore returns belatedly, in flashbacks and intrusions, as the demand of an unfinished registration. Banville's prose enacts this almost as a formal principle, and the Granny Godkin scene is the clearest example. Her death is narrated through anticipation, evasion, and the aftermath, but never directly. The later pages of the novel mention "the charred circle on the floor where Granny Godkin exploded" (p. 174), and in the earlier chapters the death itself happens off-page: "The room shook. There was no sound, but instead a sensation of some huge thing crumpling, like a gargantuan heart attack, that part of an explosion that races out in a wave ahead of the blast and buckles the silence. But the blast did not arrive" (p. 46). And after the death, when Gabriel goes down with Michael to see what remains, he records his own failure to remember:

"what I should recall to the exclusion of all else is the scene in the summerhouse that met Michael and me when we sneaked down there, the ashes on the wall, that rendered purplish mass in the chair, Granny Godkin's two feet, all that was left of her, in their scorched button boots, and I do remember it, in a sense, as words, as facts, but I cannot see it." (pp. 76–77)

The distinction between remembering as words and remembering as images is exactly the distinction Caruth and the clinical PTSD literature draw between integrated and unintegrated memory. The traumatic image will not enter the visual record. It can only be reported, second-hand, by a narrator standing outside it.

The most thoroughly repressed material of all surfaces only in the closing pages and the reveal of Michael's identity as the twin, the affair between Joseph and Martha, the swap of the twins, the inheritance plot. Gabriel writes that he believed in a sister "in order not to believe in him, my cold mad brother" (p. 172). The fantasy of the lost sister was not a delusion but a defense, a way of organizing attention away from knowledge that would have been unbearable to hold. When the defense collapses, the knowledge arrives all at once. Gabriel discovers nothing new in the final chapter. He admits what he has always known.

III.3.4. Nostalgia and the Idealization of the Past

"I had dreamed of the house so often on my travels that now it refused to be real, even while I stood among its ruins. It was not Birchwood of which I had dreamed, but a dream of Birchwood, woven out of bits and scraps" (p. 12). Gabriel's failure to come home opens the novel. He has been carrying an image of a house in his head for years, and when he gets back to the place itself, it becomes the obstacle. The dream seems more real than the real thing.

"Woven" is doing work in that sentence. It concedes that the remembered Birchwood was made and pieced together over time, out of materials that were never identical to the original.

He does not say he misremembered. He says he remembered a dream. That is a weirder admission than misremembering, because dreaming is a continuous activity. If the house he was carrying was a dream of the house, then the dreaming has been the basic operation of his memory all along, going on quietly underneath whatever he thought he was doing.

A page later, he tries to be more concrete:

"On bright summer mornings, the rooms were alive with a kind of quick, silent suspense, the toys and teacups of the night before exactly as they were left and yet utterly changed... These things, these madeleines, I gathered anew, compared them to my memories of them, added them to the mosaic, like an archaeologist mapping a buried empire" (p. 13)

The Proustian gesture is obvious. The catch is in the verb tenses. The remembered images are added to the mosaic "anew" each time, and each new addition is compared not to the original event but to the previous addition. The archaeologist is mapping a buried empire from copies of copies of the map.

It is tempting at this point to reach for Bartlett (1932) and his demonstration that remembering is reconstructive, and the temptation is mostly worth resisting. The framework fits as it has schemas filling gaps, recall as construction, but the novel is doing something the framework cannot quite hold. The oddity in Gabriel's prose is not that he remembers wrongly. He has come to prefer the dream to the standing house. He says so in his own terms: "Still it eluded me, that thing-in-itself, and it was not until I ventured into the attics and the cellars, my favourite haunts, the forgotten corners, that the past at last blossomed in the present" (p. 13). What gives him access is the corners, the back stairs, the places memory has not yet worn out.

There is a passage earlier in the book that I cannot get past. After the description of his mother on the road with the primors he writes: "That is, I think, the earliest memory of my

latest life. What I remember best would be best forgotten, but the fragments that remain of the first years I guard with a jealousy which grows more frantic as I grow older, for I am forgetting them" (p. 12). The phrase "my latest life" goes unexplained. The sentence that follows is the one that stays with you. He guards the early fragments jealously, and the jealousy gets worse as the fragments slip away. The grammar is administrative. It is an inventory of dwindling stock, watched without any expectation that the watching will slow the dwindling. There is no rhetorical mourning.

Boym (2001) draws a useful distinction between restorative nostalgia, which wants to rebuild what has been lost, and reflective nostalgia, which dwells in the loss without trying to undo it. Gabriel is closer to the second if a choice has to be made, but the choice does him a small injustice. He is too clear about what his memory is doing to be a naïve restorationist, and too attached to the felt thickness of his recollections to settle into the cool reflective ironist Boym describes. The novel lets him occupy both positions at once, sometimes in a single sentence.

The blackcurrant harvest produces the most concentrated piece of nostalgic writing in the book:

"Then the fat beads burst on our tongues with a chill bitterness which left our eyelids damp and our mouths flooded, a bitterness which can still pierce my heart, for it is the very taste of time." (p. 13)

The sentence performs the sensory work of a taste-memory, then allegorizes it in the same breath. "A bitterness which can still pierce my heart" would be sentimental if it stood alone; the closing clause catches it and changes the register. The bitterness becomes the taste of time. I am not sure the move is honest. I am also not sure if it is dishonest. Gabriel is feeling the bitterness and, at the same moment, reaching for a phrase that will let him feel it from a step away.

The summerhouse scene with Granny Godkin produces a quieter version of the same operation. After the conversation about the long meadow, Gabriel writes: "Often now, late at night, or working in the house on rainy days, I feel something soft and persistent pressing in on me, and with sadness and joy I welcome back this scene, or others like it, suffused with summer and silence, another world. Forgetting all I know, I try to describe these things, and only then do I realise, yet again, that the past is incommunicable" (p. 12). It is "yet again" the phrase to notice. He has arrived at the realisation before. He will arrive at it again. Nostalgic recall keeps producing the same insight without the insight ever becoming sufficient grounds to stop. He goes on writing about the scene even as he registers that the writing will not get the scene back.

Rosie shows the rewriting most clearly:

"Over the years the memory of our affair, that aching fugue of swoons and smiles, has dwindled to a motionless golden point whose texture in the surrounding gloom is that of sunblurred skin redolent of crushed grass and flowers, which Alessandro di Mariano knew so well, the texture of seraphs' wings. Beside all this, the actuality of my peasant girlchild with her grubby nails and sausage curls seems a tawdry thing, and I suppose it is not her but an iridescent ideal that I remember. Try as I will, I cannot see her face." (p. 68)

Alessandro di Mariano is Botticelli, and the Botticellian gloss is doing what Gabriel is admitting it has done. The real Rosie has been overlaid with a Renaissance painting, which has been overlaid with the photograph in the library, which has been overlaid with the fictional Rose of Aunt Martha's primer. The honesty of the last clause is shocking when you arrive at it. Most narrators in this position would hide the loss out of view. Gabriel sets it down in the middle of the sentence and keeps going.

The Big House provides the public theatre in which the private nostalgias get rehearsed. "I wept for what was there and yet not there. For Birchwood" (p. 12). The house is in front of him as he writes that. What he is weeping for is the version of it that no longer corresponds to

anything outside his head. This is the inherited Anglo-Irish lament, as it is for the lost estate, the lost class, the lost order, translated through Gabriel into something he is himself uneasy with.

The unease comes from the family's lack of conviction in the structure they are supposed to be mourning. Gabriel's father, drunk after the dinner at which more of the estate has been signed away to John Michael Lawless, gives the position bluntly: "We might as well get what we can while we can. They're taking over" (p. 21). Joseph knows the social order is finished. He knows, with more uncomfortable clarity, that the order does not deserve to survive. He is going to take what is left of it for himself, and he is going to do this with his eyes open. Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800) inaugurated a tradition in which the Big House is mourned with one eye on the ledger; Banville inherits the tradition and complicates it further. The grief in his version is real and is also embarrassed by itself, and the prose does not try very hard to separate the two.

The closing pages do not resolve any of this. "Spring has come again, St Brigid's day, right on time. The harmony of the seasons mocks me... I feel that if I could understand it I might then begin to understand the creatures who inhabit it. But I do not understand it" (p. 171). The word 'mocking' is the one that does the work. The natural year keeps returning on time, but the people in the year do not. Gabriel keeps writing because writing is where the difference can be examined.

III.3.5. Hallucination, Fantasy, and Distorted Perception

The visitors appear in the wood at dusk. A fat man and a fatter woman, a tall, thin figure in a black coat, two girls and a youth, a small boy. They are walking in a group, talking among themselves in low voices, not paying any attention to the boys watching them from below at Cotter's place. Gabriel tugs Michael's sleeve to point them out. Michael does not look. "What's up? Did you see something? The fire's going out" (p. 128). The scene ends on Gabriel's small question, addressed only to the reader: "Why should he lie?"

The figures, it later transpires, are real. They are Silas's circus, the troupe that arrived at Birchwood on the day Gabriel was born and that will come back at the end of the novel as accomplices in the massacre of the Lawlesses. The retrospective identification ought to settle the scene, but it doesn't. The visitors persist in the novel's memory as something other than what they later turn out to have been. Even after we know who they are, the dusk image, the low voices, the procession through the trees, and Michael's refusal to look, keeps the quality of a hallucination Gabriel could not get anyone else to confirm.

The novel is full of this. Figures glimpsed at the edges of the lake, faces in mirrors, voices on the stairs at night. Some are real, some are not, and Banville almost never sorts them. The few times he does, the sort arrives so late that the cases already filed are not refiled. The cumulative effect is that the reader stops trying to tell memory from invention and starts to read both as the same activity under different lighting.

The fever sequence in Part I is the controlled instance of the breakdown. After Granny Godkin's death, Gabriel falls ill and lies delirious through the night. He wakes into something the prose calls a "florentine world":

"On the table by my bed a single red rose, mysterious and perfect, stood in a glass. The stem seemed fractured where it entered the bluish water. A deep stillness reigned, originating in the centre of my forehead and radiating out through room after room, holding the life of the house in thrall." (p. 166)

The red rose is the object the fever generated. The fracture of the stem at the water-line is a real optical effect, the visual evidence that he is awake, but the stillness "radiating out" from the center of his forehead is the signature of the fever still in possession of the room. Banville lets both readings co-exist. What matters is what happens in this state, for it is during this calm that Gabriel arrives at the conclusion that he has a lost sister:

"I went back through many years, as many as I could remember, gathering fragments of evidence, feeling my way around certain discrepancies, retrieving chance words let drop and immediately picked up again, collating all those scraps that pointed unmistakably, as I now saw, to one awesome and abiding fact, namely, that somewhere I had a sister, my twin, a lost child." (p. 83)

The vocabulary is the vocabulary of forensic reconstruction. Fragments, discrepancies, scraps, collating. It is the language a person would use to describe doing the kind of thinking Gabriel cannot, in his state, actually be doing. He half-notices the trouble himself: "I could not say whether the excitement was produced by the cool and lucid manner in which I marshaled the evidence or by the conclusion which I had reached, and that troubled me" (p. 83). The trouble does not last, and he proceeds with the conclusion and lets the question about its provenance drop.

This is the move that ought to be flagged with theory, and that the theory tends to fail when you try. Garry et al. (1996) on imagination inflation that states that imagining a plausible event increases confidence that it really occurred gets the mechanism right and misses the texture. What the fever has produced is not just an inflated confidence in a fantasy but the complete forensic alibi for the fantasy, a procedure of self-questioning so well-formed that it looks like the opposite of what it is. Johnson and Raye (1981) on reality monitoring describe the failure that should have caught this; Gabriel does not check the sister-hypothesis against external corroboration; but their framework treats reality monitoring as a cognitive operation that either succeeds or fails. Gabriel is doing something else. He is conducting a reality monitoring exercise that has been pre-loaded with the conclusion. The procedure is intact. The premise is rotten.

The sister's purpose of existence becomes clear only at the end of the novel: "I believed in a sister in order not to believe in him, my cold mad brother" (p. 168). The fantasy is doing defensive work. It is not a delusion in the clinical sense, since Gabriel half-knows throughout that the sister is a construct. It is closer to what psychoanalytic writers call a screen: an organized mental object whose function is to occupy the attention that would otherwise be

available for noticing something more painful. The "something more painful" in this case is Michael, the twin Gabriel grew up with in plain sight and has spent the novel refusing to recognize.

Part II makes the screen do narrative work. The search for the sister becomes the engine of the picaresque, and the circus accommodates the search by humouring Gabriel without ever quite contradicting him. Rainbird looks at the photograph and says, "She's a dandy," sniggering (p. 16). Silas adds "plenty of scope, haven't you?" (p. 16) and lets the matter drop. The pattern is consistent. Everyone in the troupe seems to know what the photograph is and what it isn't, and no one disabuses Gabriel of the project that has brought him to them. They feed it. Whether out of indifference, kindness, or amusement is left without clarification.

The reader is in Gabriel's position by design. The novel allows the sister to remain plausible for a long time because Gabriel does, and the small dissonances Banville plants like Silas's evasions, the laughter at Gabriel's expense, the casualness with which the circus people register his quest as something other than what he thinks it is, are doing the work of a slow withdrawal of credibility. By the time of the final reveal, the reader is meant to feel that the disbelief was always available, and that something in the act of reading was complicit in not exercising it.

One earlier passage states the principle directly. Describing the day of Silas and Angel's first arrival at Birchwood, a scene he cannot have witnessed since he was being born upstairs at the time, Gabriel writes: "Such scenes as this I see, or imagine I see, no difference, through a glass sharply... If I provide something otherwise than this, be assured that I am inventing" (p. 21). The pun on "darkly" is the kind of small effect that should be irritating and isn't. It announces the rule that the rest of the novel will run on. The boundary between seeing and imagining is the boundary the novel refuses to police. The reader is given a contract: anything offered in any other register is fabrication. It is not the contract realist fiction normally offers, and one of the questions the novel raises without quite answering is whether the contract is honoured, but I am not sure it is. There are scenes in *Birchwood*—such as the slaughter at the end, Aunt Martha walking into the burning shed, the figure crawling down the stairs in cigar

smoke—that arrive with a force the "crystalline reconstruction" rule would seem to forbid. Either the rule is honoured by being applied to itself, in which case the rule too is a fabrication of the kind it warns against, or the novel allows itself the occasional unpoliced glimpse of an event for which Gabriel was present and conscious. It would be neater if the rule held all the way, but it doesn't. The unevenness is part of what keeps the book alive.

III.3.6. Language and Narrative Instability

Gabriel gives his own image for memory in the novel, and it is unflattering: "My memory is curious, a magpie with a perverse eye; it fascinates me. Jewels I remember only as glitter, and the feel of glass in my beak. I have filled my nest with dross" (p. 11). The bird collects shiny things and brings them back, but they turn out to be worthless once you look at them in good light. Gabriel is describing his own prose, more or less. The novel is full of glittering moments like the umbrella opening as "a strange glossy black blossom humming on its struts," Aunt Martha as "a startling transfiguration," the fountain holding "a fallen sky," and Gabriel is the first to suspect that the glitter is the problem rather than the solution.

Another quote is: "What does it mean? That is a question I am forever asking, what can it mean? There is never a precise answer, but instead, in the sky, as it were, a kind of jovian nod, a celestial tipping of the wink, that's all right, it means what it means" (p. 77). "It means what it means" is the sentence the whole novel keeps half-arriving at. It is an embarrassing thing for a narrator to admit because the professional duty of a narrator is to translate event into significance, and Gabriel is conceding that he cannot do it. What he can do is keep collecting the glittering bits and arranging them. The arrangement is the meaning.

The book never lets you forget that it is being written. The opening page already has Gabriel at his desk: "At night I write, when Sirius rises in icy silence. The past is poised around me. I imagine an arrow whistling through the darkness" (p. 3). Later, in the middle of narrating an encounter with a woman on the road years before, he interrupts himself to name the place from which the writing is being done: "that house which now sleeps around me as lightly as a bird while my stealthy pen blackens the pages" (p. 4). The pen blackening the pages is the background noise that the novel never quite turns off. Every scene takes place

twice at once: the time of the event being remembered, and the time of the writing of the memory, but the double time does not register as awkward because Banville is good enough to keep both scenes in motion. What it registers as is foregrounding. There is no transparent narration in this book because the prose will not allow itself to forget the table it is being written on.

This is something traditional realist narration is built to suppress. The standard realist contract has the narrator drop out of view so the world can be viewed as if directly. Banville will not honour that tradition. What Gabriel sees is always also what Gabriel is in the act of constructing for the reader to see, and that implication, when you keep noticing it, is that there is no direct seeing available and that perception itself is already a kind of writing. The Lacanian frame sits nearby: the subject who tries to coincide with the world he is describing and finds language always in the way. But the novel does not need the theory to make the point. Gabriel makes it himself, late in the closing chapter: "Intimations abound, but they are felt only, and words fail to transfix them" (p. 11). The verb is the one to notice because words should pin the thing down, but these words don't. The intimations remain felt-only, just outside the reach of the prose, and Gabriel records this without bitterness, almost the way one might record a weather pattern.

The most striking instance of Gabriel openly admitting his own fabrications comes near the end, in the passage that explains how he kept Prospero alive in his imagination through the second half of the novel:

"So Prospero became for me a mystery bound up with my quest. I liked to imagine him as a tiny withered old man with skin like wrinkled brown paper, sparrow hands, a big hat, a cloak, a crooked stick, pale, piercing eyes, always before me, like a black spider, his bent back, the tapping stick, leading me ever on into a mysterious white landscape. I knew that picture was all wrong, but it sufficed. Like our audiences, I also wanted to dream." (p. 106)

The sentence does not bother to hide the construction, "I liked to imagine him", and here the verb is deliberative and the detail is laid down with care: the wrinkled paper skin, the sparrow hands, the tapping stick, the bent back, the white landscape. Then Gabriel walks the whole description back in half a flat sentence: "I knew that picture was all wrong, but it sufficed." He needed an object on which to focus the quest so he invented one. The honesty is exact enough that it almost gets to count as not being a fabrication.

The closing pages take the admission further than it has gone anywhere else in the novel:

"No Prospero either, there never is. O but I so wanted to keep that withered wizard, with his cloak and his black hat, stumping on ahead of me always with his stick and his claw and his piercing eyes, leading me slowly toward that rosy grail. Now the white landscape was empty. Perhaps it is better thus, I said, and added, faintly, I might find other creatures to inhabit it. And I did, and so I became my own Prospero, and yours" (p. 171).

"And yours." That is the sentence the language argument turns on, for Gabriel has just confessed to making up the figures who organised his picaresque. He is now extending the confession to include the figures the reader has been reading. The book in your hand is the white landscape, and Gabriel has populated it. The status of every "memory" in the novel becomes, by this admission, the status of Prospero: invented because the alternative was unbearable, retained because it sufficed.

There is a line of the novel that borrows from the *Tractatus*: "whereof I cannot speak, thereof I must be silent" (p. 175), and read against Prospero's admission, it gets a sharper edge. Gabriel has just confessed to inventing the figures that existed in his book. The Wittgenstein borrowing then says, in effect, that the things he could not speak of are not in this book, but what is in this book are the things he could speak of by transforming them into other things. The silence is the silence around the truths the language was constructed to displace. This is not the same as saying the novel has failed to speak. It has spoken, copiously, and the abundant speech is itself the form the silence takes.

The way to read Banville's much-discussed prose style, then, is probably not as a stylistic preference for the ornate. The standard critical labels such as "mandarin," "aestheticist," "Nabokovian" (Hand, 2002; McMinn, 1999) name the surface and miss the operation: that the density of the prose is not decoration, but it is the prose's awareness of itself as something other than the thing it is describing. The over-finished sentence, the deferred main clause, the figure that turns metaphorical when it should have stayed literal, all do the same job; they keep the reader inside the act of writing, for they will not let the writing forget that it is being written. The novel's argument about language and that words cannot transfix the intimations, that memory is a magpie's nest of dross, and that the narrator becomes his own Prospero because there is no otheris being made not somewhere behind the prose but in it, sentence by sentence, with the pen audibly marking the page.

III.3.7. Temporal Dislocation in the Novel

"In my time I have gone down twice to the same river" (p. 11). Gabriel says this on the opening page, casually, as though Heraclitus did not require correcting. The Greek formula that you cannot step into the same river twice gets reversed: the second descent is not only possible but already accomplished. The river is something Gabriel has been into, come back out of, and gone into again. What this announces, before the novel proper has begun, is a narrator for whom the past is not behind him but available, repeatable, susceptible to second visits.

The mechanism shows up in small touches throughout. Mama on the road with the primroses appears as Gabriel's "earliest memory of my latest life" (p. 12), a phrase that quietly implies an earlier life he is no longer in possession of. The Sundays of his childhood are remembered as having "always" been Sunday, as if the recoverable sample stood in for the whole period: "those interminable Sundays, for they were always Sunday, when a thin drizzle fell all day" (p. 17). Ricoeur (2004) makes the larger point at length in that narrative identity preserves not discrete events but a small number of typified scenes, and Banville renders it in a subordinate clause. The "for they were always Sunday" is the load-bearing claim, shown as an afterthought.

The novel's structure works at the same temporal scale. The opening chapter is set after everything has happened: Gabriel has returned to Birchwood as its inheritor, the slaughter is over, the Lawlesses are dead, and the closing chapter circles back to the same position. In between, the past is narrated to a reader who has been told the ending in advance and is expected to forget it. Banville does not honour the contract realist fiction normally offers; instead he gives away what is coming and then proceeds as if the reader did not know.

One sentence captures the trick in miniature in which Gabriel is walking back from the blackcurrant harvest with Michael, thinking about Rosie:

"I was thinking that if Michael had not popped up between us like that, the clown, I might have, I could have, why, I would have—Rosie stepped out of a bush at the side of the lane ahead of us, tugging at her dress." (p. 52)

The sentence is interrupted by its own future. The conditional is left dangling on an em-dash, and the unresolved subjunctive ("I would have—") gets cut off by the appearance of the girl who would have been its object, and Gabriel is regretting in advance an outcome the present is about to alter, and the past tense of "stepped" arrives before the imagined past can complete itself. The grammar is doing what the novel's whole structure does: collapsing the time of the wish into the time of the event, so that neither has priority.

The most striking instance is one Gabriel flags himself. Narrating the Cotter scene in the wood in the moment he sees the lovers, he writes that he was lying in a fever afterwards, "full of the secret glimpsed under Cotter's wall" (p. 25), and adds another quote that names the temporal trick: "No, that is not true. Only hindsight has endowed me with such a keen nose for nuance" (p. 39).

The correction is honest enough to be embarrassing. The whole prose of *Birchwood* is the prose of hindsight projecting itself backwards onto perceptions it could not have had at the time, and Gabriel knows this. The quote changes nothing and he continues to narrate. The acknowledgment that hindsight is doing the work is not offered as a correction but as a confession, after which the work resumes.

Bergson's account of the past as continuously coexisting with the present rather than receding behind it (Bergson, 1896/1912) fits Banville almost too neatly. Husserl's (1928/1964) thicker conception of the present that says that every "now" is carrying its own past and future inside it as retentions and protentions fits even better. Gabriel's present is never a thin instant. It is the present in which the past is being reconstructed, while the future the reader has already been told about hovers in the wings waiting to arrive on schedule.

The closing pages return to the opening's quiet defiance of sequence. "Spring has come again, St Brigid's day, right on time. The harmony of the seasons mocks me" (p. 174). The seasons keep their schedule but the narrative cannot. The novel's whole temporal arrangement, looked at from the end, turns out to have been organised by this disparity: in a world that maintains the appearance of continuity, and a consciousness moving through it that has lost the ability to share in the continuity. Gabriel is not telling his story in the order it happened but he is telling it in the order he can bear to tell it.

III.3.8. Family Memory and Inherited Trauma

There is a sentence in Part II that does most of the section's work in advance. Gabriel, narrating the Godkin–Lawless feud, breaks off into a kind of summary roll-call of the family's dead:

"I am thinking of Simon Godkin furiously dying with his teeth sunk in birchbark, of my mother screaming in the attic. I am thinking of all the waste, sad deaths. This violence will be visited on me, in the fullness of time." (p. 171)

Three deaths in a single breath and a forecast that aligns the speaker with the family pattern rather than against it. The forecast is the unsettling part because Gabriel is not a witness to his family's violence but a position in it, a position that is going to be filled by the same forces that have filled the places before him. The grammar of "will be visited" makes the violence sound almost ceremonial, something arriving on schedule, as if it is all foretold and planned.

The family tree itself, by Gabriel's account, is structured to encourage the impression. "The family tree is a curious one, with odd echoes among the branches and many an odd bird whistling in the leaves" (p. 21). The botanical metaphor promises rootedness, and the next clause withdraws it. What the tree produces are echoes: Gabriel Godkin the great-great-grandfather and Gabriel Godkin the narrator, Joseph Lawless the murdered squire and Joseph Godkin the dissolute father, the Beatrice who marries the original Gabriel and the Beatrice who marries Joseph four generations later. The names rhyme down the page and the history they are supposed to organize comes across as a series of structural repetitions, not a sequence of distinct events.

Halbwachs (1992) argued that families function as social frameworks that determine which past episodes survive into the present. The Godkin household is the clearest demonstration of the principle a novel could ask for, with one inversion: what the framework preserves is not events but postures, voices, ways of standing. Granny Godkin shrieking "tinkers!" at the circus is one of those postures; so is the Famine reply Gabriel quotes from Joseph Lawless: "A trick, sir, another of their tricks!" (p. 47). The line is preserved across four generations because the line is what the family can use. The actual deaths it refers to in the sentence "they died by the score" register only as the punchline that makes the line worth keeping.

Gabriel's diagnosis of the family's pathology is sharper than the surrounding criticism tends to be:

"the Godkins were stalked by an insatiable and glittering madness born, I suspect, of the need to hate something worthy of their hatred, a part the Lawlesses could no longer play." (p. 171)

The madness has a function: it exists to keep an opponent in play long after the original opponent has stopped being available. The Lawlesses, broken by Gabriel-the-ancestor's takeover, have shrunk into respectable shopkeeping, and the Godkin madness and fury has nowhere to discharge itself, so it turns inward and discharges into the family itself, for example, Granny against Mama, Papa against Aunt Martha, and the whole estate ends up slowly cannibalizing the people who were meant to maintain it.

Jan Assmann (1995) distinguished communicative memory that the informal three-generation transmission of family story, from cultural memory: the more formal institutional self-image. *Birchwood* shows the two contaminating each other in that the cultural memory of the Ascendancy supplies the postures and the communicative memory supplies the people who go on performing those postures long after the conditions that produced them have failed.

What the family's collective memory will not register, as a memory, is the structural fact that made it possible, like the fact that the estate was taken from the Lawlesses during the Famine. The taking is preserved as an anecdote about Joseph Lawless's wit, not as the event that founded the present arrangement. Gabriel's father is the only one in the novel who registers the foundation as such, and he does so drunk and self-aware: he knows the social order is finished and knows it does not deserve to survive, but he goes on operating it anyway. The two knowledges sit side by side in him without ever intersecting.

The inheritance Gabriel receives at the end of the novel, the "ruined kingdom" he is installed in by the slaughter of the Lawlesses, is therefore an inheritance of two things at once: a half-restored building, and an organized act of forgetfulness. When the building goes,

the forgetfulness goes with it, and Gabriel is left holding a memory that no longer has a household to keep it in order.

III.3.9. The Blurred Line Between Reality and Imagination

Gabriel returns home from his last meeting with Rosie, ill with fever, and is put to bed; later that night he is woken by a bell, a red light on the wall, the rattle of hoofs and wheels. He gets up, finds the front door open, and sees Mama and Aunt Martha confronting each other on the porch. Mama is smiling. "Dear Martha," she says, "I've told you, he's in the shed down there" (p. 163). Aunt Martha runs to the burning shed, calling for Michael, and walks into the flames in her own pink dressing gown. She does not come out.

Michael is not in the shed. He is alive because he is the figure that whistles up to Gabriel from the lawn at the end of the previous chapter, and Mama almost certainly knows it. Whether she has lied to Aunt Martha out of confusion or malice, the novel does not say. Whether the fire was set by Rosie in revenge or started by the cigar Joseph had been smoking, the novel does not say. Whether Aunt Martha's walk into the flames was a suicide or a panic, the novel does not say. The scene supplies enough material for three or four different reconstructions and refuses to authorise any of them.

This is the more interesting kind of unreliability, because it is not Gabriel's: the scene is reported with unusual crispness. Mama's smile, the words spoken on the porch, the dressing gown lit up by the flames, these are observed in real time and recorded with the kind of detail that ordinarily certifies a memory as reliable. What is missing is not the observation but the interpretation: Gabriel sees what happens and does not supply the frame that would let the scene mean something. Johnson and Raye's (1981) reality-monitoring framework assumes that the difficulty in such cases lies in distinguishing real perception from internally generated content. Here, the difficulty is the opposite: the perception is clear, and what cannot be settled is which of several real interpretations applies.

The novel's other ambiguous scenes work the same way. The figure crawling on hands and knees down the stairs the night GrandaGodkin dies is observed in precise detail and refused recognition. The "shimmering pale figure" descending the stairs ahead of him is given the same treatment: described, not named. The visitors in the woods in §3.5 are the third type of case, where what is in question is whether the figures are physically present at all. Banville arranges the three modes so that they shade into each other. A reader trying to file each scene under "real," "imagined," or "ambiguous" runs out of categories.

Gabriel has a phrase for the condition, after the day of Granny Godkin's death—the day that contains both the explosion and Nockter running across the lawn with the news; he writes:

"I recovered in a week or two. They told me that I had been delirious. I had no reason to disbelieve them, except that I had not invented Granny Godkin's death, or any of the events of that first day of fever, and I knew that if I had not invented all that, had not played out all those parts in my burning brain, then anything was possible." (p. 71)

The last clause is the operative one: in that a single delirious-seeming event turns out to be real, the partition between fever and fact dissolves. "Anything was possible" is not a flourish but a working epistemology, the one Gabriel has been forced into and the one the prose proceeds under for the rest of the novel.

The closing chapter restates the position in flatter terms: "There is no form, no order, only echoes and coincidences, sleight of hand, dark laughter. I accept it" (p. 174). What the acceptance amounts to is a renunciation of the kind of narration that sorts events into the real and the imagined and reports them under that sorting. Banville has Gabriel give up on the project, and the prose then proceeds as if the giving-up were the precondition for whatever can be said at all.

There is a temptation to resolve the ambiguities for him and to decide that Mama murdered Aunt Martha by directing her into the fire, that Rosie set the fire, that the visitants were always real and Gabriel's uncertainty was a kind of denial. These readings are available and some of them are probably right, but the novel's own position is that getting the answer right would be a different kind of failure. What the prose preserves, by leaving the scenes unresolved, is the sense of a consciousness for which resolution was never available and in that the ambiguity is the evidence, not the obstacle to it.

III.3.10. Psychoanalytic Reading of Gabriel's Memories

The novel's clearest piece of Freudian textual evidence is a sentence that appears two-thirds of the way through. After dinner on the night the will is read, Gabriel goes to bed and is half-asleep when his father comes into his room, stands above the bed in the dark, and stares down at the boy he takes to be sleeping. Joseph whispers: "Who owns you, boy, whose are you, eh?" (p. 104). The question goes unanswered because it is unanswerable on the terms Joseph thinks he is asking it, and both possible answers are wrong. Gabriel is not really Joseph's son, but he is. Michael is really Joseph's son, but he is being raised as a nephew. The Freudian family romance that the child's fantasy of secret aristocratic parentage has been pre-empted by the family's actual scheme, which is itself a kind of family romance played out by the adults.

Freud (1909/2001d) described the family romance as a child's defensive substitution: the disappointing parents are replaced in fantasy by more glamorous ones who have lost or hidden the child, but Gabriel reverses this structure. He spends the novel inventing a lost sister rather than admitting the brother who is already in plain sight, and the fantasy is doing the same defensive job in that it is protecting the child from a piece of family knowledge, but the displacement runs sideways instead of upward, toward a missing sibling rather than toward a fantasized parent. The lost-twin fantasy is more economical than the standard romance because it covers two truths at once: that the parental marriage is a sham (Joseph and Beatrice produced no biological child), and that the household's two boys are not in the relation they appear to be in.

The structure surfaces most clearly when Gabriel finally admits it: "He was my brother, my twin, I had always known it, but would not admit it, until now, when the admitting made me want to murder him" (p. 169). Freud (1915/2001e) defined repression not as the inaccessibility of the material but as the active withdrawal of cathexis from it, and Gabriel has "always known" what he has not done is invest the knowledge with the affect that would make it operative. The admission, when it comes, immediately produces the effect that had been held off: he wants to kill his brother, and the repression was holding off precisely the murderous impulse the admission unleashes.

Lacan provides the other half of the frame. The mirror stage describes the moment a fragmented body is misrecognized as a unified image in the mirror: the founding act of ego-formation, structured by *méconnaissance*, mis-recognition. *Birchwood* is full of mirrors that do the opposite work: the "patient spy" mirror in the summerhouse shows Gabriel and Rosie the redheaded phantom of Michael watching them; the mirror in Cotter's ruined cottage presides over the primal-scene lovemaking Gabriel cannot interpret; the hatstand mirror in the hall briefly shows Mama a "plump smiling ghost" of Silas—but none of these mirrors return a coherent self-image. Rather, they return distortions, doublings, ghosts. The Lacanian ego is supposed to be precariously held together by the mirror's promise of unity; in this novel, the mirror has stopped delivering on that promise, and the fragmentations it was supposed to suppress keep coming back into view.

Gabriel arrives at his own version of the Lacanian point: "I spoke aloud my own name seven times and listened to the echoes" (p. 11). The name is supposed to fix the self. Repeating it seven times turns it into sound and decouples it from the person it is meant to designate. The echoes the name produces are the answer to Joseph's question. "Whose are you?" The repeated name decomposes into its own reverberations, for there is no proprietary answer, because the self the name was meant to fix is constituted in the same gesture as the name's distortion.

The Wittgenstein line at the end of the novel reads, against this background, as a more specifically Freudian admission than it first appears. "Whereof I cannot speak, thereof I must

be silent" (p. 175) is the sentence that represents repression the best, and what cannot be spoken of is precisely what the psychic economy is organized around. Gabriel's two hundred pages have been the long talking-around, and the silence at the end is the only direct acknowledgment available, and it arrives in the form of a borrowed sentence rather than an original one, and that in itself is a small Freudian touch.

III. Conclusion

The analysis in this chapter has demonstrated, through ten interconnected subsections, that memory operates as a distorting force at every level of *Birchwood's* narrative organization. Gabriel's unreliable narration, his fragmented sense of self, the traumatic and nostalgic structures of his recollections, and the linguistic and temporal instabilities of Banville's prose together enact a poetics of mnemonic distortion in which the past is never preserved but always reconstructed under the pressure of present desire and ideological commitment. The chapter has confirmed that the novel's formal innovations are inseparable from its epistemological argument: that storytelling itself arises from the impossibility of faithful recall. These findings are synthesized in the general conclusion that follows.

General Conclusion

This thesis has undertaken a psychoanalytic and memory-studies reading of John Banville's *Birchwood* (1973), arguing that the novel's central preoccupation is the distorting of memory as a faculty for reconstructing the past. Through the retrospective narration of Gabriel Godkin, a narrator who is simultaneously self-aware and epistemologically compromised, and who acknowledges the fallibility of his own account while being unable to transcend the distorting conditions under which it is produced, Banville stages a thoroughgoing interrogation of the relationship between memory, identity, and narrative, conducted in a register that anticipates several central concerns of contemporary memory studies and trauma theory while remaining rooted in a distinctively Irish literary and cultural context.

The argument has proceeded through three chapters, each addressing a different dimension of this main preoccupation. Chapter One established the conceptual foundations of the study by surveying the major frameworks within which memory has been theorized across psychology, philosophy, neuroscience, and cultural studies. It introduced the key conceptual distinctions such as episodic and semantic memory, functional and storage memory, collective and communicative memory, traumatic memory, and repression that have organized the subsequent analysis. The survey grounded these distinctions in the foundational contributions of Plato and Aristotle on the nature of remembering, Bergson on memory as a creative rather than reproductive process, Halbwachs and the Assmanns on the social frameworks of recollection, Conway and Pleydell-Pearce on the self-memory system, and Freud and Caruth on the relationship between trauma and the structure of psychic life.

Chapter Two narrowed the theoretical focus to the intersection of memory studies and literary criticism. It examined the relevance of memory to the analysis of modern and postmodern fiction and surveyed three key theoretical developments in memory research: reconsolidation theory, the psychology of false memory and imagination inflation, and the

Lacanian account of the relationship between language, desire, and the subject. The chapter argued that the mechanisms of memory distortion documented in cognitive psychology and theorized in psychoanalysis are not merely comparable to the procedures of literary narrative but may be understood as the real-world cognitive and psychological processes of which literary unreliable narration is the formal rendering.

In Chapter Three, the analytical core of the thesis, the author applied these frameworks to a sustained close reading of *Birchwood* organized around ten subsections. The reading demonstrated that the novel's treatment of memory as distortion is enacted at every level of its narrative organization: in the self-conscious unreliability of Gabriel Godkin's narration, in the fragmentation of his identity and its relationship to the Lacanian account of the imaginary ego, in the traumatic and repressive dimensions of his recollections as theorized by Freud and Caruth, in the nostalgic idealization of the past and its ideological implications in the context of Anglo-Irish cultural memory, in the systematic blurring of the boundary between memory and hallucination, in the linguistic instability of Banville's prose, in the temporal dislocations of the novel's structure, in the transgenerational transmission of family trauma, in the unresolved ambiguity of the novel's most charged scenes, and in the psychoanalytic dimensions of Gabriel's desire and defence.

The five research questions posed in the Introduction can now be answered with some precision.

The first question that is in what ways does *Birchwood* represent memory as a distorting rather than preserving faculty, and what narrative techniques does it deploy has been answered by the formal analysis of Chapter Three, which demonstrates that the novel's representation of memory as distorting is enacted at every level: narratorial, structural, stylistic, and thematic. The narrative techniques deployed include self-reflexive unreliable narration, temporal dislocation, and the blurring of memory and fantasy, the deliberate refusal to authorize any single interpretation of key scenes, and a figurative prose style that registers the gap between language and experience as the medium in which the prose itself is written.

The second question has also been answered through a sustained engagement with the Freudian concepts of repression, the return of the repressed, the uncanny, the family romance, and the death drive, together with the Lacanian concepts of the mirror stage, the imaginary ego, and the constitutive role of language in the formation of the subject. The novel supplies the textual evidence for these concepts in unusually concentrated form. The nighttime scene that ends with Gabriel admitting the presence of his father in the description of cigar smoke is one of the most exact textual instances of Freudian repression a novel has ever offered, and the closing admission of the lost sister as a defensive fantasy gives the structure of the whole novel a single retrospective key.

The third question that states to what extent Gabriel's narrative exemplifies trauma theory has also been answered by demonstrating the pervasive structural parallels between Gabriel's narration and the traumatic narrative as theorized by Caruth: the belatedness of traumatic recall, the compulsive return to founding scenarios, the characteristic formal features of fragmentation and ellipsis, and the impossibility of the full articulation of traumatic experience. Granny Godkin's death is the controlled instance of the principle. The explosion is mentioned on the opening page as if already familiar, narrated on its day through anticipation and aftermath but never through the event itself, and acknowledged by Gabriel as a scene he "cannot see" even though he can remember it "as words, as facts."

The fourth question in how collective and cultural memory theories relate to the novel's treatment of family and Anglo-Irish historical memory was also addressed through an analysis of the Godkin family's collective memory as a motivated ideological construction. The family preserves not events but postures: Granny Godkin's "tinkers!", Joseph Lawless's wit during the Famine, the names that rhyme down four generations, and the estate stands as the public theatre in which the private nostalgias get rehearsed, and the novel's most disenchanted line on the position is Joseph's drunken "we might as well get what we can while we can; they're taking over," which names the colonial bad faith the Big House tradition usually evades.

The fifth question, too, has been tackled through the analysis of Banville's prose style as a formal enactment of the Lacanian account of language's constitutive role in subjectivity, and

of the cognitive psychological account of language as a medium of reconstructive rather than reproductive memory. The novel's extraordinary linguistic self-consciousness is not an aesthetic ornament but an epistemological argument. It insists, through formal means, on the mediated, constructed, and inevitably distorting character of all verbal reconstruction of experience. The closing pages make the argument explicit: "There is no form, no order, only echoes and coincidences, sleight of hand, dark laughter. I accept it."

The four hypotheses can be assessed against the analysis. H1, the central claim that Gabriel's narration systematically enacts the reconstructive rather than reproductive character of memory, has been fully confirmed. The novel is a sustained and formally rigorous exploration of the impossibility of faithful recall, and it reaches this conclusion not through philosophical argument but through the concrete demonstration, in narrative form, of the processes by which memory distorts, reconstructs, and ultimately constitutes the self. H2, which proposed that the mechanisms of distortion in Gabriel's narrative correspond to the processes documented by Bartlett and Loftus, has been confirmed by the analysis. The Bartlett schema-driven account fits the novel almost too neatly, and Loftus's findings on imagination inflation and the implantation of false memories illuminate Gabriel's fever-generated fantasy of a lost sister with unusual precision. The mechanisms named in the hypothesis; selective attention, emotional colouring, retrospective rationalization, and confabulation; operate throughout Gabriel's narration as the cognitive correlates of the formal procedures the chapter has identified. H3, the psychoanalytic dimensions of Gabriel's narration are best understood through a combined Freudian-Lacanian reading, has been fully confirmed, and the Freudian concepts of repression, the family romance, and the return of the repressed account for the structure of Gabriel's defensive fantasies and the timing of their collapse; the Lacanian framework of the mirror stage, the imaginary ego, and the constitutive role of language accounts for the prose's perpetual displacement and the failure of self-coincidence that marks Gabriel's narration from its first sentence. The "Who owns you, boy, whose are you, eh?" scene and the closing seven-times repetition of Gabriel's own name are the two textual moments that anchor the combined reading. H4, which states that *Birchwood* engages critically with the conventions of Anglo-Irish cultural memory and subjects them to ironic pressure, has also been confirmed. Banville inherits the Big House tradition from Edgeworth, Somerville & Ross, and complicates it further by giving the inheritor of the estate

knowledge of the estate's foundation that the tradition usually keeps repressed. The grief in his version is real and is also abashed by itself.

Several areas for future research have emerged. First, a comparative analysis of *Birchwood* with Banville's later novels, particularly *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993), *Athena* (1995), and *The Sea* (2005), would allow for a more complete account of the development of his treatment of memory across his career, tracking the increasing sophistication with which the later novels engage with the theoretical frameworks deployed here. Second, a sustained engagement with the specifically Irish cultural and political dimensions of *Birchwood's* treatment of memory in its relationship to the postcolonial theorization of Irish cultural memory and its engagement with the broader tradition of Irish literary nostalgia would be a productive complement to the present analysis. Third, the application of more recent developments in neuroscientific memory research, particularly the ongoing elaboration of reconsolidation theory and its implications for the understanding of traumatic memory, to the analysis of literary unreliable narration represents a promising area for future interdisciplinary research.

What *Birchwood* demonstrates with the most formal rigour and the most affective force is the constitutive role of distortion in the production of narrative identity. Gabriel Godkin does not remember in order to preserve the past but rather he remembers in order to construct a self that can live with the past, a self that can integrate, or at least contain, the traumatic, the shameful, and the irretrievably lost parts of its history. The distortions of his memory are not failures of the memorial faculty but the way a fragmented consciousness produces, from the chaos of experience, the provisional coherence of a life story. Read in this light, *Birchwood* is not only a novel about the unreliability of memory but a novel about the indispensability of that unreliability, about the way in which the human capacity to misremember, to idealize, to repress, and to confabulate is not a defect of the memorial faculty but the condition under which memory and storytelling are possible at all.

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