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'For recuperation': elegy, form, and the aleatory in
B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*

B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969) is British fiction's predominant attempt to embrace aleatorism and to subvert linear causality: the chapters are unbound, and the text invites the reader to shuffle them before reading. Narrative can be understood as a means of containing the ever-present risk of death, of disease, of loss, and has as its impetus a curative trajectory: recuperation is, perhaps, implicit in narrative. *The Unfortunates*, however, defiantly refuses such comfort. Johnson, this essay asserts, uses his form to cancel the consolations of narrative construction, taking the infectious chains of narrative and repudiating any doctrial/authorial urge to trace the spread of disease/narrative. The anti-linear narrative is inextricable from the type of mourning it enacts, and from the aetiology of the disease that it displays, but declines to track: a type of mourning that refuses movement through time, and the story of a disease that refuses to certify its own development. These refusals, I suggest, are embedded in the grammar and syntax of Johnson's prose. In *The Unfortunates* the full stops are nodal points of anxiety and loss, an expression of the novel's mortal anxiety. Johnson's final, missing full stop, the novel's aterminal terminus, offers a defiant refusal of recuperation of any kind.

Keywords

B.S. Johnson; aleatory; *The Unfortunates*; elegy; chance

Someone gave us a lift back to the house, I forget who, but it was packed, three or four of us in the back, the car, and as we went away up the hill, over the shoulder of the hill, I looked down and back at the crematorium, sunny but there was still a blue haze, perhaps from the sea, and there was a straight column rising from the chimney of the crematorium, it went straight upwards, as far as smoke can ever be said to move in a straight line, into the haze, the sky, it was too neat, but it was, it was.¹

In its rhythmic, syntactic, and rhetorical movement, this is a characteristic sentence in B.S. Johnson's 1969 novel *The Unfortunates*. The commas introduce qualifications of previous clauses, either to clarify a colloquialism or broad description, to increase specificity, or to shift into a more opaque literary register. With an excess of prosaic scrupulousness, 'car' situates the local 'back'; the painterly 'haze' becomes anxiously clarified into the blankly accurate 'sky'; and 'up the hill', becomes 'over the shoulder of the hill', accumulating topographical specificity as this particular, no-longer generic, landscape is brought into sharper focus. In this way *The Unfortunates*, a novel about the processes of memory and grief, continually shows its workings out. Each sentence contains its own first – and sometimes second and third – draft.² The cumulative effect is to suggest that memories come upon us partially, and only give themselves up in perfect mimesis after a certain amount of work: we need to chase them down, imposing 'straight line[s]', demanding 'neat[ness]'. The sentence which reads so meanderingly is anything but; it is a replication of its own process, working with a logic of accretion to eliminate imprecision (not straight, but perhaps 'straight . . . as far as [Johnson] can ever be said to move in a straight line'). The full stop eventually, and only, occurs after a reiteration: 'it was, it was'. The sentence arrives, exhausted, at its end.

The long-deferred closure is accompanied by a sense of disbelief at the implausible linearity of the smoke's progression, but also with a celebratory exhalation that the memory has finally been 'got': captured, stilled, in what we imagine to be almost photographic accuracy. The full stop here is symptomatic of Johnson's will-to-perfection – it was like that, 'it was, it was' – where the exact repetition suggests the final veracity of the depiction; there are no more adjustments or qualifications to be made. And yet, that same repetition betrays a profound instability. The period cedes depictive defeat; where we expect further description (it was . . . hot; it was . . . raining) what we get is something simultaneously elliptical, profound, nebulous. 'It was, it was' inevitably protests too much. The sudden reiteration admits an

impotence, a melancholy admission of the implausibility of the representation we have just arrived at, where we are reduced to bald assertion in the face of some sort of universal scepticism. The 'truth' we have reached signals its own impossibility – the curtailment of the thought, of memory itself. Fixing it to the page has killed it. The full stop has performed a cancellation of the memory, which seems more alive in the restlessly moving, shifting adjustments marked by those constant commas.

The grammatical construction of each sentence replicates, on a local level, the formal structure of the novel. In *The Unfortunates*, Johnson reconstructs his friendship with Tony Tillinghurst through the self-contained, unbound chapters that represent discrete memories of their relationship: from before Tony was ill, to his diagnosis with cancer, through his illness, his death, and his funeral. The reader can shuffle the chapters before reading them in any order, an act which Johnson believes will recreate the randomness of experience and of memory. But the effect of this discontinuity – embedded not just in the literally torn apart chapters, but also in the unusually final full stops – is also to defer loss.³ *The Unfortunates* has been described, notably by Nicholas Tredell, as an elegy, placing Johnson's prose text, which is rooted in a specific 1960s experimental trope of aleatory art, at an eccentric angle to a tradition that has associations of the poetical and classical. It is, he writes, 'a verbal act of mourning and remembering', and one where, crucially, the form is indistinguishable from its affective value; 'in pointing up the means by which it produces Tony's death, [*The Unfortunates*] does not diminish that death' rather, he argues, 'it makes it more poignant, more final. Death is produced, but not cancelled, in writing; it is an absence that writing cannot fill, an absence that writing stresses.'⁴ The novel attempts to conjure with absence: elegy is an act of attempted, and necessarily failed, resurrection. Yet mourning narratives, whether prose or poetry, might also be productive, seeking not just to articulate or perform an act of mourning, but also to recover the griever to the wider world: to assimilate him back into a normal relationship with his own life; to bring an end to the stasis of absolute loss and recuperate the survivor back into a sense of life lived teleologically, in a basically forward direction. Mourning is thus a work, as was first pointed out by Freud in 'On Mourning and Melancholia': a finite, achievable task. In Derrida's *The Gift of Death*, this is transmuted into the stark recognition that the work of mourning is something that, '[i]n order to succeed [...] would well have to *fail*', and 'fail in order to succeed': we only successfully mourn someone's passing when we cease to mourn, or when we, in short, get over it.⁵ The temporal structure implicit in this is key to all elegy: 'getting over someone' has either been achieved or it has not. And yet recent scholarship on elegy has argued for the twentieth-century novel as a site of what Nicholas Royle has

described in his writing on ghosts as ‘mourning, refused or impossible’.⁶ A refusal to mourn is the key to the theory of mourning that Derrida develops against Freud, later articulated so persuasively by Royle among others: in any act of mourning, there is always an aspect of the lost other that refuses to be assimilated or incorporated.⁷ Jahan Ramazani imagines a language that would allow ‘the violence and irresolution, all the guilt and ambivalence of modern mourning’ (p. ix): one that is equal to our experience, that would not be a failure of mourning, but a defiant subversion of its implicit agenda of recuperation.

I wish to claim something similar for Johnson’s text. The relationship between the subject of the book – which is elegiac – and the form – an aleatory structure that seeks to abolish linear causality – is, I suggest, fundamentally antagonistic, and illustrates the doubling movement by which death’s status in the text is formulated. The logic of mourning is temporal, and it requires protensity: it looks back to memories of the lost one, and forward to a life lived without them – to go up the hill and look back over one’s shoulder simultaneously. *The Unfortunates*’ attempt to subvert the idea that our memory of a loved one is constructed chronologically therefore perhaps challenges the very linearity needed for literary acts of mourning. In doing so it calls into question its own elegiac status, and refuses the traditional products of elegy: consolation, compensation, and the temporal wisdom that is an implicit benefit in ‘getting over’ something. What a resistance to this structure of grief might mean for how we approach death in a narrative sense is a central question – what does it mean to have shuffleable death?

If *The Unfortunates* is a kind of elegy, it is also, because of its unique jumbling of tenses, Tony’s living sickness narrative, where periods of recuperation give real hope for the future even if his death lies in the past of the reader’s experience. In *Illness as Narrative* (2012), Ann Jurecic argues that ‘illness narratives reclaim patients’ voices from the biomedical narratives imposed upon them by modern medicine’.⁸ Narrative, for Jurecic, is a means of containing the ever-present risk of death, of disease, of loss: ‘The pervasive awareness of risk in the contemporary world has [...] altered the cultural work of life narratives. We use them to make sense of or contain the sense of being at risk from disease, accident, or death’ (p. 20). *The Unfortunates*, however, defiantly refuses such narrative comfort, and in doing so resists the readerly compassion that is both its correlate and perhaps a precondition of narrative, as Martha Nussbaum has suggested, compassion is a narrative emotion.⁹ Similarly, Priscilla Wald compares infectious sickness to narrative, in that narrative seeks to locate causal chains back to an origin, in the same way that doctors search for the source of disease (the Patient Zero or the Typhoid Mary), tracing the chain of infectious connections.¹⁰

Traditional causal structure, by adopting a similarly explanatory mode, could be said to contain a curative impetus. In foregoing linear, causal narrative, Johnson attempts to use his form to cancel any consolations that inhere in narrative construction, taking the infectious chains of narrative and repudiating any doctored/authorial urge to trace the spread of disease/narrative. Instead, he allows Tony's disease its full terror. Johnson's belief that 'telling stories is telling lies' has as its correlate the principle that to disorder a sickness narrative is to reject such a naïve curative impulse.¹¹ The construction of the anti-linear narrative is inextricable from the type of mourning it enacts, and from the aetiology of the disease that it displays, but declines to track: a type of mourning that refuses movement through time, and the story of a disease that refuses to certify its own development.

These refusals, I suggest, are embedded in the grammar and syntax of Johnson's prose. *The Unfortunates* goes to great lengths to defer its full stops because they demarcate the moment at which memory gives way to blankness, when the confrontation with death that the text has notionally been trying to conjure suddenly intrudes: the full stops are nodal points of anxiety and of loss. This is given weight by the non-uniform spacing that occurs after so many of these sentences; after a full stop, there might be one space or as many as eight: all the better, we assume, to embody the discontinuity between the individual memories. This discontinuity is total: not the hypothetical rupture induced by a full stop that is conventionally ignored, but the absolute end of a discrete singular memory, an ending which invokes the original loss all over again. The novel's resistance to the period is matched by its obsessive attachment to the periodic: memories, experiences, are discrete and separate, the chapters insist. Johnson's sentences are the shortest sentences he can sentence himself to write, and yet the loose chapters proclaim potentially infinite continuity in their cyclical, shuffleable perpetuity – this has happened and this will happen again. The curious sense both of absolute discontinuity and a kind of protensive ongoingness are brought about by the novel's aleatory method and its semantic and syntactic form; sentences and chapters are caught between terminal nostalgia and propulsion. There is a continual refusal to stop, matched only by the terrible literalness of the stops when they come – the exaggerated gaps between sentences, the chapters that are unbound. This resistance to endings is echoed by a recalcitrance felt towards beginnings. Johnson did not want to have to label the first chapter 'First' or the last chapter 'Last': it was a resented compromise made with his publishers. The first word of 'First' is 'but' as we are brought into the narrative *in medias res*. This reading of *The Unfortunates* seeks to establish a sense of the temporal as something deeply problematic and simultaneously crucial to Johnson's elegiac project.

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I have argued that Johnson's essaying of grief denies consolation even at phrasal level, with each sentence offering a terrifying leap into negation; this singular approach to the refusal of mourning, this essay suggests, positions *The Unfortunates* as a significant development in this tradition. This is characterized by two differing approaches to terminal punctuation.¹² Full stops are sometimes followed by differing lengths of textual silence; we are unexpectedly deposited into a white space of purgatorial nothingness, left floundering for an unpredictable length of time before being whisked up safely, or reincarnated, into the next sentence. At the other times – as we saw with 'it was, it was' – a repetition, a qualification, or a quick modification precedes the punctuation, offering clarification and the disambiguation of a reiterated conclusion:

The difficulty is to understand without generalization, to see each piece of received truth, or generalization, as true only if it is true for me, solipsism again, I come back to it again, and for no other reason. In general, generalization is to lie, to tell lies. ('Last', p. 6)

Yet while to generalize is to lie, perhaps to *tell* lies – to narrate and thereby explicate one's untruths – the distinction may counter this threat of 'generalization' and, with a neurotic qualification, refuse collusion with non-particularity. To avoid generalization, Johnson qualifies. Consequently, the last sentence of the novel unpacks with anxious particularity: 'not how he died, not what he died of, even less why he died, are of concern, to me, only the fact that he did die, he is dead, is important: the loss to me, to us'. That 'us', of course, can be read as Bryan and Tony, but is also the 'us' of the living, widening out its referential scope in an act of literary generosity from the solipsistic 'me' that seeks to own the loss. From 'true only if it is true for me', we arrive at 'us'.

One chapter consists of the following paragraph:

June rang on the Saturday, was it, or the Thursday before, no, quite late, we had already arranged to go, though what arrangements could we have needed to make, saying there was no need for us to come down now, on Sunday, for he had died that evening, had not recovered consciousness that morning from his sleep, but previously there had been the opposite of a relapse, three days where his mind had been virtually normal, for which she had been grateful, June, it had seemed like a miracle, though he still could not move, his mind had come back and they talked very seriously about everything, for the first time had talked about death.

The prose seems neurotically expansive here, modifying itself compulsively and shifting through tenses in an effort to keep the momentum of the sentence going. While the memory is being sought, then the possibility of presence exists: the specificity of the memory maintains the life of the sentence, a point illustrated neatly by the full stop coming only at the utterance of the unutterable – ‘death’. The shuffleability of the chapters gives expression to this same resistance to the full stop, here at the level of the chapter rather than the sentence. There is no loss because inherent in the act of shuffling chapters is the consolation that they will come round again. In this way Tony’s death itself, the specific thing that cannot quite be pinned down, is infinitely deferred.

Memory moves in *The Unfortunates*, and the hesitating, qualifying clauses that hope to pin down the truth, and yet continually foreclose on the possibility of doing so, are characterized by a ‘restless, enquiring melancholy’.¹³ The melancholy generated by this movement is melancholic in the full sense: repetitious, circular, compulsive. The writing expresses its own inadequacy by these qualifications: the first, second, third go at representation of recollection has failed, but never absolutely, and implicit in this type of failure is the necessity and inescapability of repetition. Present also is a sub-textual questioning of the very existence of the truth which it seeks, a questioning that never, as in so much of Johnson’s oeuvre, becomes explicit. In all of Johnson’s statements about his attempts to get to the truth of experience as he sees it, in all its randomness and chaos, he resists questioning the dissemblings, deceptions, and misrepresentations that, once-acknowledged, might make representational fidelity itself a radically speculative enterprise. Johnson’s oft-quoted literary philosophy about stories being lies comes to mind again here: ‘telling stories really is telling lies’ is an assertion that, of course, implies an original ‘truthful’ version of reality from which representations must deviate. In fact the ‘truth’ he so doggedly pursues remains elusive, a half-remembered image that seems to resist any attempts to formulate it in language – ‘but it was, it was’. The infinite loops of qualified, partial memory seem less about conveying randomness and more about some profound sensitivity to the constant attenuation and loss that existing in time provokes: memory is slipping away, as is the immediacy of experience, and to full stop and parcel it out into discrete sentences would be to assent to this atomization of one’s own experience.

This understanding that loss is profoundly temporal is echoed repeatedly:

[w]e must have come up this hill, there, past here, and on, he leading, Tony, we two lovers, like Merlin in a tale, we were that besotted, or

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ill-fated, at least I was, June later said I seemed besotted with her, or daft about her, or something like that. ('Up there', p. 1)

Here, the shifting qualifiers end bathetically in the disconsolate 'something like that' before ending at the period, an admission of the absolute irretrievability of the past and the inexact futility of memory. Elegy, conjuring as it does with the paradox of making absence present in language, or as Peter Sacks calls it 'the intertwining of loss and figuration' (p. xii), simultaneously acknowledges that literary presence is emphatically not presence: there is a vast ontological gulf between the representation or memory of the lost person that is conjured by the elegist, and the real, living subject.¹⁴ The literary displacement of the lost one, Sacks argues, is inextricable from the idea of writing one's loss – that the living exist in and through language is proof of the difference between the living and the dead that the mourner traditionally denies or seeks to abolish. So while language is that which elevates the dead into the stuff of literary immortality, it is also that which irrevocably finalizes the difference between the living and the dead.

For Johnson, this is marked:

It was obvious to me that even if he was still there the following week, he would be less able to talk, at the rate he was deteriorating, disintegrating, so the last thing I said to him, all I had to give him, alone with him, with my coat on, about to go, the car waiting outside to run us to the station, staring down at him, facing those eyes, he staring back all the time now, it must have been a great effort for him, yes, and I said, it was all I had, what else could I do, I said, I'll get it all down, mate. It'll be very little, he said, after a while, slowly, still those eyes. That's all anyone has done, very little, I said. ('Last', p. 5)

This passage speaks eloquently to the simultaneous importance and impossibility of 'getting it all down'; representation might be shoddy, as shoddy as memory is, but attempting to capture experience as it was lived is nonetheless vital. Made explicit here too is the move in emphasis from the elegized to the elegist, where the 'deteriorating, disintegrating' Tony is slowly textually attenuated in favour of an emphasis on Johnson's own literary process. Tredell limns this movement as both particularly Johnsonian and a facet of all elegy. Tony's fading vivency, both literal and textual, is a marker of this notion of surplus, of capaciousness impenetrable to the text. If the novel's task is to 'keep Tony's memory alive', then it fails; it is a different sort of memorialization that is achieved here: partial, fragmented, perhaps distorted. Our private, internalized version of another is always an invention: it will always involve subjective

appropriation, fabrication, misreading. For Johnson, the twin task of recognizing this, while also retaining a fealty to the 'real' version of Tony that he remembers, demonstrates the straining quality of all elegy, and the difficulty of representing a particular person, a particular loss. Tredell points this out as characteristic of elegy in general, and what he calls 'the elevation of the elegist over the elegised [...] implicit in all elegy' (p. 33) is key in *The Unfortunates*: 'Visits run together, the trivial with the important, our life with his dying' ('So he came', p. 4). Johnson's recognition that his memories are not Tony in any meaningful sense is at the emotional centre of the work: 'I sentimentalize again, the past is always to be sentimentalized, inevitably, everything about him I see now in the light of what happened later' ('I had', p. 2). The traditional elegy always, in this way, involves a transformation of loss into aesthetic substance, as the past is 'pictured, still, romanticized, prettified' (p. 2); the elegist's loss is the elegist's gain.

Johnson's frustration at the effort required to acknowledge these conflicting impulses is continually emphasized in *The Unfortunates*: '... how I try to invest anything connected with him now with as much rightness, sanctity, almost, as I can, how the fact of his death influences every memory of everything connected with him' ('At least', p. 1). The eventual failure of memory to do the job of resurrection he wants it to do is solved, in part, by the randomness with which he has the memories present themselves to the reader. Johnson wants the reader to be made privy to his memories in an impossibly unmediated way – not to recount them, but to invoke in his reader an experience as close as possible to the sensation of memory. Jacques Derrida has suggested that it is only in us that the dead may speak, and that in elegiac discourse we, the living, are talking amongst ourselves. 'To keep alive, within oneself,' asks Derrida, 'is this the best sign of fidelity?'¹⁵ In this sense, Johnson's prescription that what must be reckoned with is not the death of the individual as an event, but the 'he'ness, the ineluctable nature of that individual, is an insistence that will necessarily prove to be futile.

Throughout *The Unfortunates*, Johnson is visibly trying to work out how to care primarily about himself again, and the novel ends angrily with an example of what Sacks calls 'the confrontational structure required for the very recognition of loss' (p. 35):

Yet, but for his illness, death, it seems probable to me that we might have grown further and further apart, he becoming more academic, I less and less believing academic criticism had any value at all, perhaps saying to him in anger Let the dead live with the dead! In any case it does not matter, now, his death makes so much irrelevant. ('Last', p. 4)

It is this sense of absolute absence, rather than the recourse to any elegiac or anticipatory consolation, which *The Unfortunates* articulates so eloquently. A primary impetus for, and corollary of, the aleatory structure of the book is Johnson's refusal of not just elegiac consolation but also of the consolation of causal explanation and the linear temporal narrative structure which houses it. The seriousness and importance of Johnson's loss is defined as identical with its inexplicability, and death's status as beyond comprehension or explanation is referred to throughout. What Freud called the reckoning of death – its cataloguing, the assessment of its impact, our tallies and our taxonomies of loss, our reasoning and understanding of its consequences and aetiologies – are all futile. The text's absolute refusal of reckonings, of causal explanations, is palpable, as if they would amount to an almost obscene acquiescence to death's mode of operation. This demonstrates Johnson's central concern with causation, 'about how the thing had arisen . . . how it had all started . . .' ('The then', p. 2): for him, death comes from nowhere; it is a random event, without cause. It just is – an inexplicable, unknowable, epistemological absence at the centre of life: 'That this thing could just come from nowhere, from inside himself, of his very self, to attack him, to put his self in danger, I still do not understand. Perhaps there is nothing to be understood, perhaps understanding is simply not to be found, is not applicable to such a thing' ('For recuperation', p. 2). The illness, 'this thing', here assumes its own causality, a sort of relentless determinism that belies its unpredictable origins. His loss is not to be reckoned with, refusing all attempts at comprehension, while resisting fiercely any attempt to assimilate it into an understanding of the world. Just as, for Johnson, the mind has fuses, and connections are made without recourse to cause and effect – 'I fail to remember, the mind has fuses' ('Just as', p. 5) – so too the narrative, and the cancer, jumps rather than progresses: ' . . . the explosive, runaway, zealous, monstrous cells of the tumour: if one single cell escaped to another part of the body, by insinuating itself into the bloodstream, then it would grow and multiply there too' ('Just as', p. 8).

Causality operates temporally. But as we read *The Unfortunates*, Tony is, variously: dead, then ill, then young and healthy, at his funeral, then at the football. The causality that Johnson has, throughout the novel, resisted so fiercely, is continually neutralized by the randomness that is a property of the novel's very form. It is as though Johnson repeatedly asks: what does one event, or one memory, really have to do with another? The incomprehensibility of this randomness lies in its refusal to be subsumed into the ordered world of cause and effect, a cause and effect rendered explicable to us by sequential narrative's compliant ability to move uncomplicatedly in a forward direction. The alliance between narrative and causality is a potent one: as soon as something is written as happening after something

else, we impute a connection between the two in an example of what Roland Barthes calls our habit of eliding ‘consecution’ and ‘consequence’: ‘what *comes after* being read in narrative as what is *caused by*’.¹⁶ Resisting this marginalization of randomness by narrative is Johnson’s single greatest artistic motivation for escaping, subverting, or ironizing sequentiality in *The Unfortunates*, and as such he was typical of his generation of avant-garde writers. The relationship between aleatory composition and linear time was under scrutiny elsewhere, as Bernard Bergonzi criticized ‘the unconditional adoption of chronological development, linear plots, a regular graph of the emotions, the way each episode tended towards an end’, and Alain Robbe-Grillet commented: ‘why should we try to reconstitute the time that belongs to clocks in a tale that is only concerned with human time? Isn’t it wiser to think of our own memory, which is *never* chronological?’¹⁷

By the nature of aleatory art’s inimicability to the linear temporal task that elegy demands, the form thus disrupts, subverts, and sabotages the elegiac content of the novel. But this is not an accidental disagreement between the two, and the form is not only about representing the randomness of the mind, life, and cancer, as Johnson suggests. It also acknowledges death as the ultimate determinism, an attempt to enact a literary avoidance of the shock to the self it delivers and which must be negotiated by mourning (and of course, our commitment to the continuation of grief may resist the recuperations offered by mourning). As I have argued, implicit in the idea of the aleatory text is that we will do this again – one of the most central aspects of shuffleable narrative is its odd sense of ongoingness. The very unrepeatability of moments is radically challenged. To pick up *The Unfortunates* and shuffle the chapters is to say that this time it is like so; next time it will not be. We acknowledge the possibility of re-reading even while reading, because it will be different each time we do; we invoke a state of possibility which, if it is not quite infinite, is still vast and unimaginable. The effect of this expansiveness is that, for us, Tony is continually resurrected, and he continually dies, and he will again in the future of our reading. As Tredell suggests, death is ever-present in the novel, never successfully avoided: the novel is saturated with the death. And yet, by dint of the defeat of time and the elevation of repetition, the ‘finality’ of Tony’s death that Tredell posits is stymied. If, as Derrida says, death is always about singularity, and if mourning is temporal, then the atemporal repetitions of *The Unfortunates* deny that very singularity, and subvert the fetishism of finality. Tony’s death is happening, has happened, and will happen, palimpsestically.

I would like to link this reading of *The Unfortunates*, and my identification of its singular formal power, to the figure of the photograph. The text’s approach to the temporal, I suggest, is analogous to what Barthes

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identifies in Camera Lucida as photography's uniquely unsettling eschatology:

In the Photograph, Time's immobilization assumes only an excessive monstrous mode: Time is engorged . . . Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory (whose grammatical expression would be the perfect tense, whereas the tense of the Photograph is the aorist), but it actually blocks memory, becomes a counter-memory . . . the Photograph . . . is *without future* (this is its pathos, its melancholy); in it, no protensity, whereas the cinema is protensive, hence in no way melancholic.¹⁸

Photographs bear a specific relation to death, then – one that is not temporal, because they do not perform the work of memory. They exist not in a specific temporal place that we can access, but an indeterminate one: ' . . . in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past' (p. 76). The resulting uncertainty has radical implications: 'I read at the same time: *this will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior horror of which death is the stake . . . *a catastrophe which has already occurred*. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.' With the shuffleable chapters of *The Unfortunates*, the catastrophe that we anticipate has already occurred, both in an extraneous 'reality' and diegetically. We are therefore denied a further consolation: that of death's location as a fixed point which we either move towards, in the case of our own death, or away from, when the catastrophe occurs to someone else. Furthermore, this collapse ushers in the possibility of death's repeatability. In terms of intensity Johnson's discrete memories resemble snapshots: they provide a sense of how things were, but do not provide us with a sense of coherence among the past events remembered. The narrator himself draws on photographic terminology when recording a brief episode during Tony's funeral: 'his mother I see still, tears, one foot on the upper step, the other one step down, caught, I see her as if in a still, held there, fixed' ('We were', p. 1). As Barthes continues: 'what the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially'. Tony's death, as it exists in the text, is a fantasy of the event (that is, death) being repeatable infinitely, in a way that a linear narrative occludes. Barthes identifies a 'defeat of Time in them: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die' (p. 77). While we read, Tony's existence is ambiguous. We know that he is dead, in 'reality', but if we keep reading, we will keep resurrecting him. In an analogue for Barthes' photographs, then, the text takes the unrepeatable – that which did and can only ever happen once – and reproduces it,

mechanically, to infinity. In Freudian terms, the desire for repetition inherent in Johnson's aleatory project both controls grief – as there is no crescendo, no catharsis – while extending it in subterfuge. *The Unfortunates* stands as a blank refusal to 'get over' anything.

There is, then, a clear link between narrative and the inevitable movement towards death. Unlike the chaos and randomness of life that Johnson was so intent on replicating narratively, death gives us a firm narrative *telos*, the thing towards which the inexorable movement of any human life is ceaselessly propelled. This *telos* is one that we can both anticipate, and one that retrospectively casts back a meaning over a life. The consoling predictability of death is perhaps the problem for Johnson, rather than, as he stated, its randomness. A fealty to the randomness of life perhaps in some way always flirts with the fantasy of escaping death. Johnson's constant theme is the unfairness of luck: how we, the preterite, the unfortunates, have life doled out to us in unspeakable and unanswerable ways. Why me? Why him? It is a contradictory, self-defeating mode of questioning for someone who defines experience by randomness so insistently: those who choose to accept the randomness of life as its organizing principle should, presumably, accept its vagaries. But Johnson's theory of the aleatory refutes such a paradox: the unfairness of randomness is not that it is not really random, but more that it does not succeed in making all life random – it is not random enough. There are still determinisms that chance cannot conjure with; there is still a *telos* of one kind or another that we will continue to make our way towards. Death still exists, whether one shuffles it or not. The idea that everything is up for grabs is frustrated by the ultimate determinism of death, no matter how much the aleatory can force us to alter our literary consumption of it. Johnson's understanding of contingency places the novel firmly in a specific (anti) elegiac tradition: one that refuses to mourn, to enact any temporal work; *The Unfortunates* repudiates, indeed upends, the elegiac movement. Though it seems to have imported certain poetic elegiac tropes to prose, the novel resists temporal movements towards redemption, closure, and consolation: even the compensatory mechanism of the artwork itself amounts to 'very little, mate' (p. 35). The tensions between memory and forgetting in the novel are heightened by the formal refusal to accept time as linear, to accept the unrepeatability of memory, and of death. The work of elegy cannot be completed if the work of memory, and mourning, is so starkly resisted. The angry refusal to move along temporal lines of acceptance is formally performed by the novel, and instead characterizes death by its repeatability: the death is made not more final, as Tredell argues, but not final at all; it is held in a fine suspension that is both continually imminent and continually inaccessible at once.

Textual Practice

Understandably, a large amount of the critical concentration on *The Unfortunates* has been on whether or not the narrative shuffle, its aleatory energy, survives the 'narrative engines of recuperation', in Leland Monk's words; the fact that we recreate the fabula no matter the aleatorism of the sujet; the fact that by placing them in a narrative, haphazard or episodic fragments are necessarily subsumed into order.¹⁹ Moreover, we are given to understand, by means of memory we consciously or unconsciously do the same thing to our lives: we continually sift, order, and recuperate for sense and meaning. Jonathan Culler, writing about 'the basic activity of "recuperation" that one's critical discourse performs', describes our 'desire to leave no chaff, to make everything wheat, to let nothing escape but to integrate it into a larger scheme by giving it a meaning'. As we 'organize and name', we find that 'even the most aleatory series of words or phrases [or, we could add, chapters] will be made to signify':

We cannot arrest or escape the process of recuperation; it always overtakes us in the end and puts a name, albeit abstract, to what we have done. All we can do is observe the process for what it is, attend to whatever blocks one sort of recuperation and sends the whole operation, with great grinding of gears, one stage higher into a more abstract mode, and try to see that the final recuperation to which we are subject is not a premature foreclosure but allows us room for play and includes an awareness of its own process under an abstract and formal heading like 'the difficulty of making sense'.²⁰

The need to resist this inevitable process formed the basis of Johnson's primary literary philosophy, and *The Unfortunates* arrests this process of recuperation, offering a resistance that is put to double use in the novel. As Jurecic writes that for Susan Sontag 'educating readers about simplistic or false sympathy is the work of criticism' (p. 69), this extra-textual function, to resist or identify recuperation, in *The Unfortunates* is itself absorbed into the narrative's internal structure. The novel will not certify false sympathy or false consolation. It recognizes that to recuperate oneself after bereavement, to undertake the work of mourning, is identical with the narrative will to recuperation described by Culler, and which *The Unfortunates* aims to subvert. The novel's serious task is to essay this 'difficulty of making sense', both of loss, memory, and the practice of reading.

For recuperation, after the first treatment, they went to Brighton, his parents had moved to Brighton, Peacehaven, was it, the name, ah, near there, forget the name of the place, not a village, exactly, new bungalows spreading cancerously over the cliffs . . .

The periods of recuperation that, for Tony, recuperated nothing – remission, viewed retrospectively, is just a stage in the cancer’s narrative – are here transmuted into a different type of recuperation. Not the consolations offered by elegy, that Johnson would so clearly ally with the false comforts of other sorts of consolatory fictions, but the lessening of the solipsistic fealty to ‘my truth’ that eventually is ‘for us’: ‘the loss to me [is now] to us’ he concludes without, however, any terminal punctuation. This missing full stop is perhaps made more urgent by the forced positioning of this section as ‘last’, and returns us to the underlying neurosis: the full stops are the novel’s best expressions of its mortal anxiety, little deaths that must be avoided, averted, occasionally confronted (and thus followed by the blank-space of narrative afterlife). If, for Jurecic, ‘expressions of pain (are) social, contingent’, as they convey interior pain for public sympathy, then by assaulting contingency, Johnson denies that condescension in the reading process. Instead, Johnson allows the shuffle that represents the stochastic nature of reality to order our reading experience while simultaneously disordering the experience that it seeks to represent. This subversion, by means of aleatory disruption, of the recuperative effects of the ‘sickness narrative’, the elegy, and, I suggest, all narrative, accounts for *The Unfortunates*’ unique achievement. Johnson’s final, missing full stop, the novel’s aterminal terminus, offers a defiant refusal of closure, and in doing so, insists upon the need for a new way of enacting mourning – one which refuses recuperation of any kind.

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Notes

- 1 B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1969), ‘We were’, 1. Subsequent references to this novel will appear in parentheses in the text, where, rather than number the unbound chapters, I have adopted the device of naming each chapter after its first two words.
- 2 We can perhaps assume that Johnson’s own compositional practice echoes this, as he describes in *The Unfortunates* ‘[w]orking more specifically, this time, on and around my first novel, discussing, improving, refining, deleting’ (‘Again the’, p. 1). What could be mistaken for a semi-improvised discursive stream should instead be understood as a laborious construction of the textual surface of the novel.
- 3 Philip Tew makes a similar point, discussing the ‘prettified’ memories in the novel as indicative of its ‘inability to confront death or understand its nature and significance’ (‘B.S. Johnson’, *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 22.1 (2002), pp. 7–57 (37)).
- 4 Nicholas Tredell, ‘Telling Life, Telling Death: *The Unfortunates*’, *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 5.2 (1985), pp. 33–42 (33–34).

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- 5 Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 144.
- 6 Nicholas Royle, 'Clipping', *Forum*, University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts, 7 (2008). www.forumjournal.org/site/issue/07/professor-nicholas-royle, accessed 8 October 2012.
- 7 From Virginia Woolf onwards, who in a 1925 diary entry regarding *To the Lighthouse*, wrote 'I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant "novel". A new – by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?' Nicholas Royle, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok and others have identified the particularity and significance of death and mourning in the twentieth-century novel, an interest that has become more acute since Jacques Derrida's adumbration of an 'impossible mourning' (*Memoires for Paul de Man* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1986], p. 6). See Nicholas Royle, *Telepathy and Literature: Essays on the Reading Mind* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), Nicholas Royle and Andrew Bennett, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel: Still Lives* (London: Macmillan, 1995), and Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, trans. Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). Tammy Clewell and Jahan Ramazani have established that elegy need not be a 'work'; need not produce positive effects of compensation or substitution on either elegist or audience; can be angry, incomplete, circuitous, funny, recalcitrant. And most importantly, that elegy need not trace the movement and dissipation of grief through time, need not 'move' at all. See Tammy Clewell, 'Mourning Beyond Melancholia: Freud's Psychoanalysis of Loss', *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 52.1 (2004), pp. 43–67, and Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
- 8 Ann Jurecic, *Illness as Narrative* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), p. 3.
- 9 Martha Nussbaum, 'Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 13.1 (1996), pp. 27–58.
- 10 Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
- 11 B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* (London: Constable, 1964), p. 167.
- 12 Of course, in my reading of Johnson's narrative as constantly impelled towards its particularly terminal punctuation I am in a general sense indebted to Frank Kermode's *A Sense of an Ending* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 13 Jonathan Coe, 'Introduction', in B.S. Johnson (ed.), *The Unfortunates* (London: Picador, 1999), p. xii.
- 14 Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. xii.
- 15 Jacques Derrida, 'The Deaths of Roland Barthes', in Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (eds), *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 31–68 (36).
- 16 Roland Barthes, *The Semiotic Challenge*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 94.

- 17 Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 26; Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Snapshots and Towards a New Novel*, trans. Barbara Wright (London: Calder & Boyars, 1965), p. 63.
- 18 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), pp. 89–90.
- 19 Leland Monk, *Standard Deviation: Chance and the Modern British Novel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 89.
- 20 Jonathan D. Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. xxi.