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The Unbounded: On the Fragmentation Strategies in B. S. Johnson's Novel

Abstract: This paper examines the fragmentation strategies in B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* from the perspective of the theory of the novel, realism and literary sociology. This framework facilitates an investigation into the novel's construction: ranging from the global level of text organisation, typographical construction and formal composition, down to the local level of semantic structure and syntax. Analytic conclusions suggest that fragmentation is ubiquitous, which leads to the violation of most of the novel's components, its traditional and conventional elements, with an overriding impact on the narrative. As a result, *The Unfortunates* maintains its narrative coherence on the basis of different textual cues and generates its semantic potentialities in an alternative way. This to say, the novel's "methodology" rests on the narrative agent, the act of narrating and meta-narration. These features contribute to what commonly passes as experimentalism of *The Unfortunates*.

Keywords: B. S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*, fragmentation, experimental fiction, novel, narrative, narratology

In my current project, "A Theory and Typology of Experimental Narrative Fiction", I am seeking to theorise the experimental novel.¹ The following essay is an exemplification of selected elements of the methodology, argumentation and practical analysis of my "work in progress". To commence, it is most important to map out the conceptual territory I am going to cover in the following article. Subsequently, I examine a novel by B. S. Johnson, a household name as a leading

¹ For the purposes of this paper, I have decided not to differentiate between the highly contested terms of "(narrative) prose" and "(narrative) fiction". This issue, important and intriguing in its own way, is not the subject of my investigations; indeed, it might take a monograph-length piece to discuss it.

literary experimenter in twentieth-century literature,² from the perspective of manifold fragmentation strategies, ranging from chapter sequence to sentence structure. Finally, in the concluding sections, I make an argument for the novel's coherence being founded on alternative semantic mechanisms.

The analytical toolkit of "A Theory and Typology of Experimental Narrative Fiction" derives from the theory of the novel, the theory of realism and the Polish sociology of literature. Each of these domains is a debatable one—and as such requires further explication, which can by no means be exhaustive due to the limits of space in this article. My theory of the novel is grounded in the work on prose and narrative done by a number of eminent twentieth-century Polish scholars: Henryk Markiewicz, Janusz Sławiński, Jerzy Ziomek, Włodzimierz Bolecki and others. Therefore, in this paper, the novel is defined in terms of three criteria: semantic structure, formal composition and thematic material; collectively, they serve to differentiate the novel from other literary modes (i.e. poetry and drama). In the following article I am going to primarily employ the first two criteria and only in the concluding sections will I briefly make reference to the third one.

The semantic structure of the novel is characterized by the so-called large semantic figures [*wielkie figury semantyczne*] (Sławiński 151)³ and functional duality (the sphere of the narrated being separate from the sphere of the narrating), with anteriority (or subsequence) [*uprzedniość*] as the dominant temporal dimension (Bolecki 5–6). Furthermore, in terms of the formal composition, the novel is composed using modes of discourse [*formy podawcze*], verbal representations of events or states: narration, description, reflection and characters' utterances (Markiewicz 101–103; Sławiński 124–125⁴). Finally, when it comes to subject matter, it is peopled with believable characters in concrete spatiotemporal conditions, whose lot develops along an Aristotelian plot line (Ziomek 10; Owczarek 16–17; Głowiński 96).

It is generally acknowledged that the theory of the novel is to a large extent a theory of the realist novel.⁵ Realism, therefore, also needs to be elucidated. How-

² Despite Johnson's contempt for this term due to its association, in his mind, with unsuccessfulness, "experimental" is generally considered as a more relevant and less historically compromised term than "avant-garde" or "innovative" (see Bray, Gibbons, and McHale; Booth; Moore; cf. Burrow).

³ Large semantic figures operate above the sentence level. They require extensive textual material (paragraphs, chapters or whole works) to come into being. Examples of these include plot, time, space or characterization.

⁴ It is crucial to note the inherent correlation between modes of discourse, functional duality and anteriority in the novel (Sławiński 124–125).

⁵ Although this argument has been repeatedly contended and criticized, at least since Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*, it is universally agreed that modern theories of the novel and of the narrative heavily rely on a specific group of works, usually described as "realist" and dating back to the 1850s. Importantly, the self-professed "experimental novelists" in the UK (J. G. Ballard, B. Brophy, B. S. Johnson, A. Quin, and others) and the USA (J. Barth, D. Barthelme, R. Coover and others) went against a specific type of fiction whose common denominator for them was indeed realism and its particular manifestations, such as "Victorian realism" or the post-WWII "English realist novel" (see Moore 1–4; Booth). A good case in point is what Johnson himself called a "neo-Dickensian

ever, to avoid the bumpy area of the theories of mimesis and representation, the term here exclusively denotes a specific function of language. As Bolecki posits, following the conceptualisations from Ziomek, the function of the language of realism is characterized by a maximal transparency of its medium in order not to interfere with the semantic content of a message (Bolecki 6). Ziomek christened this function as vehicular: “Vehicularity [*wehikularność*] can be understood as a specific way of organizing an utterance in such a way as to make it maximally transparent for the transmitted meaning; it is, therefore, an antithesis of poetic function, which attracts attention to the internal organisation of an utterance” (Ziomek 29–30).⁶ Arguably, it is the vehicular quality of the language in the realist novel that has made it possible to describe it metaphorically as an “undistorted mirror of, or transparent window on, the ‘real’” (Palmer 491–492) and to trust in it with infallible certainty and unflappable faithfulness (Głowiński 96). *Ipsso facto*, in this paper, the novel is one in which the vehicular function of language dominates.

Structural and compositional properties, along with the function of its language, form a particular angle from which we can view the novel as a distinctive literary text type; this angle might be considered internal and intrinsic. There is, however, one more angle from which we need to shed critical light on the novel, as it invariably exerts implicit impact. This angle is external and extrinsic: it refers to the theory of the sociology of literature.⁷ One of its most insightful facets pertains to “literary awareness”: the most common, history-specific ways of reading fiction with their inherent conventionality of a comparable degree to that of the literary works themselves (Bolecki 248–249). It encompasses the concept of how “standard” features, such as theme, language, narration, or characters (Sławiński 43–44) translate into formal manifestations quintessential for any novel: a heterodiegetic narrator, subsequent narration, internal focalisation, etc. However, in the following article on an experimental work, the notion that seems most conducive is that each novel, however untypical, is necessarily coherent, and the reader’s task is to formulate its overriding “method” (Głowiński 93–94) in terms of the various “coherence mechanisms” [*mechanizmy spójności*] it necessarily contains (Indyk 5–6).

My above elucidation of the theory of the novel, the theory of realism and the sociology of literature is admittedly rather general. Nevertheless, it must suffice as a convenient and cohesive basis for conducting studies on an experimental novel

novel”; “‘neo-Dickensian’ writers were using a 19th-century form to gratify the ‘primitive, vulgar and idle curiosity’ of the reader to know ‘what happens next’. A truly modern novel would seek, in Beckett’s phrase, a form to accommodate the mess, stripping readers of their escapist illusions while remaining ruthlessly true to the writer’s experience” (Martin).

⁶ “Wehikularność można zrozumieć jako ten sposób organizowania wypowiedzi, który czyni ją maksymalnie przezroczystą dla przenoszonego znaczenia, a więc jako przeciwieństwo funkcji poetyckiej, która zwraca uwagę na wewnętrzną organizację wypowiedzi” (translation mine).

⁷ The sociology of literature originates in phenomenological tenets of the ontology of a literary work. Some Johnson scholars adapt a similar approach to look into, for example, the elements of the concretization process (see James).

in this paper. It is worth pointing out that these three theories, dating back to the zenith of structuralism in Poland, interrelate to form a complex matrix of what we call “the novel” in the twenty-first century as well: from its language function to constructional components to common means of decoding. In such a model, an experimental work of fiction is one in which concrete rules of the novel are violated⁸: the rules of semantic structure, elements of composition and subject matter; any use of form and language that purposefully undermines the vehicularity of the medium and self-referentially attracts attention to its fictionality and constructedness. Last but not least, an experimental novel requires the reader to assume and adopt alternative ways of ensuring its coherence, that is, means for making sense of it.

The three-faceted model is used here to investigate Johnson’s *The Unfortunates*. In this paper, I discuss this novel in detail and scrutinize the four main levels, or aspects, of its organization: typography, composition, structure, and syntax. I look into how these components undergo fragmentation, that is, a complex, multi-layered process of individuating and recontextualizing, of separation and quasi-autonomy, and what the potential consequences of this process are. Finally, I reconsider the iconoclastic and idiosyncratic properties as a new basis for the covert coherence of the novel and offer a methodology grounded in the narrator and his self-conscious act of narrating.

It is generally acknowledged that Johnson belongs to the exclusive Mount Olympus club of contemporary English novelists. His 1969 masterpiece, *The Unfortunates*, is likely to take the biscuit as one of the most unique and intriguing pieces of literature to date. This might explain why, as *New York Times*’ Charles Taylor points out, the novel was “critically praised and commercially ignored”, as well as, according to *LRB*’s Frank Kermode, “expensive to produce and hard to sell”. It consists of 27 unbound chapters, with only the first and the last marked as “First” and “Last”, respectively, to give the story, to use Jonathan Coe’s phrasing, “a proper sense of form and closure” (x) or, alternatively, in Philip Tew’s view, “thematic and contextual terminal points” to B. S. Johnson’s “journey” (“Early Influences” 31).⁹ The remaining chapters, “a muddle in the middle”, to adapt another of Kermode’s apt coinages, are of varying length, from one to a-dozen-or-so sections; the shortest is eleven lines long and the longest twelve pages long. They usually comprise separate sections and the sections themselves are riddled with blank spaces of varying length. The unbound chapters can be read in *any* order preferred and possible.¹⁰ This is why *The Unfortunates* has repeatedly been dubbed an “aleatoric” (Jenner 77;

⁸ Historically, the idea of experimentation is as old as the novel. In England, it was not until the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the genre consolidated into a specific set of recognisable features, that new novelists considered themselves as experimenters: see for example the Prefaces to Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* or Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley*.

⁹ It is mandatory to remember that the indication of the first and last chapters was forced on Johnson by his publisher (see Kermode).

¹⁰ Some researches thought fit to append a list of symbols and first lines from each chapter to organize the object of their analysis (Coles 110–111).

Jordan, “For Recuperation” 754) or “ergodic” novel (Mitchell 59), a forerunner of hyperfiction. The peculiar status of this “anti-Dickensian” novel is usually taken for granted as fragmentary, although few scholars have tackled the formal and semantic variety of its fragmentation strategies. It should be noted that the strategies permeate the entire novel: from the global level of the text (chapters, events and their sequencing) down to the local level (sentences and sentence units), and will be analyzed accordingly.

The typographic construction of *The Unfortunates* excludes any possibility of constituting a single and repeatable sequence of chapters. With the exception of the first and last ones, the author fails to provide a fixed chapter progression and cedes his authority in constituting this progression to the readers.¹¹ This is unprecedented, as authors typically arrange a sequence of events in a very specific and singular order, even in novels as unusual as *Tristram Shandy* or *Hopscotch*. Such a sequence invariably influences how the events elapse and evolve; moreover, an event sequence of, say, ABC impacts the semantics of the constituent events: event A’s meaning depends on its being followed by event B, while event B’s meaning depends on its being followed by event C and preceded by event A, and so on until the end of a novel. In short, the sequence is unmistakably meaningful; it *is* a meaning in itself. However, in *The Unfortunates* a meaning derived from the pre-imposed order is non-existent. This authorial gesture “frees” the chapters from the shackles of paradigmatic eventfulness, cause-and-event logic and incrementally linear time, and for these rudimentary coordinates readers cannot rely on the author anymore. With no authorial and authoritative arrangement, the random chapters are all equally significant and their reader-made order is arbitrary.

This typographic freedom is, in fact, a double-edged sword, as the reading process lacks solid ground or a consistent point of reference. Able to create any chapter progression they like, readers might read in any order and fashion they wish. Hence, there are no two identical readings. Moreover, they are also deprived of any semantic stability, as there is no textual “god” guiding them through the narrative. Hence, there are no two interpretations founded on the same textual data. Finally, there is no chronology or unidirectionality of plot or characterization: both are syntagmatic, relative and incidental. These conclusions can seem somewhat scary for some recipients as, commonly, they are rather used to their job being extraonematic: to move their eyes along the lines and turn the pages; now they need to select each chapter by means of which they become nothing short of co-creators.

¹¹ A potential hypothesis is that the narrator’s cession is incomplete, or even illusory. The First and the Last chapters are always first and last, respectively, functioning as a fixed frame and suggestive of a prologue and an epilogue. In other words, the beginning and ending of the novel are invariably the same despite the reader’s machinations. In Sebastian Jenner’s understanding, this authorial gesture serves as a “compromise between order and disorder, and a movement towards a more representative portrayal of the contemporary interpretation of chance—with an emphasis on the ambiguities, contradictions and complexities that encircle it” (72).

Returning to the typography of *The Unfortunates*, the arbitrary and random arrangement of the chapters leads to the collapse of a fundamental large semantic figure: narrative. Without the necessity to fulfil a role in an authorially prescribed position, determined by the laws of teleology, temporality or causality,¹² the chapters can be constantly, if not infinitely, recontextualized. Therefore, there is no narrative defined as *a* representation of events in a sequence: the representation is not one, but multiple. Also, there is no way to determine which chapter is more significant for the discourse than the other (as an exposition or climax). All of them are functionally equal, whatever their length and theme. This is how the typography produces the first variety of fragmentation in *The Unfortunates*, one that has been suggested above and referred to frequently in other works on the novel. It pertains to the fact that the chapters constitute a finite 27-piece entirety, yet their aleatory order results in an indeterminate narrative. This phenomenon, in turn, results in an exponential increase in the individual functional status of the chapters.

The violation of narrative destructively influences another staple of the theory of the novel: the division of narrative material into story and discourse. In *The Unfortunates* there is no solid or stable narrative, so the discourse undergoes modification every time the readers take the “book” in their hands, shuffle the sections and start to read; in fact the discourse is indeterminate and never to be recuperated, whilst the story is a hard-to-retrieve and contradictory sequence of events with insufficient and incomplete temporal markers. Kaye Mitchell is right to claim that “we can’t talk of *the* ‘order of sequence’ being disrupted in *The Unfortunates*, because there is no originating order of sequence from which the ‘new’ readings can differ, only a (finite but multiple) number of possible orders of sequence” (53). According to Brian Richardson, in a work such as Johnson’s there is no single, unambiguous and self-consistent story to be extrapolated or inferred from the discourse, but rather a series of more or less diverse and infrequently contradictory versions of that story which seriously vitiate the very notions thereof (48–49).

Not only is the story-discourse distinction compromised, but the duality of the narrated (comprising the events) and the narrating (consisting in the act of telling), fundamental for prose fiction, exhibits an unusual set of properties. Specifically, many sections are narrated exclusively in simultaneous narration (present tense) as when Johnson arrives at the railway station, goes to a restaurant, writes a football match report or visits a marketplace; others are subsequent narrations (past tense) whose anterior status is, however, undermined on account of the present-tense intrusions “I remember”, “I think”, “I forget” or such like; for instance, in section Last: “June *wrote* to ask me for an epitaph for some memorial, his, I was not interested in memorials, really,

¹² Any story hypothesis arguing for a teleological chronology in *The Unfortunates*, with Tony Tillingham’s death as its finale, falls prey to a realistic bias which stipulates that death is the climax of a life, making this event more significant than it really is, and certainly more significant than other events in the novel. These hypotheses are interpretive gestures based on extra-textual (autobiographical) material that desire to impose order and contain the novel’s random intra-textual reality.

but I *remembered* the poem Brecht wrote ... This I *thought* appropriate for Tony, from my point of view, but there would have been copyright problems, *ha*, I *suppose*, and probably that was not how June saw him” (italics mine). In this passage, a uniformly past-tense account is unexpectedly disrupted by a present-tense “I suppose”; “ha”, as a sign indicative of orality, also suggests the ongoing process of narrating. Further textual evidence supports a claim of a constant negotiation between the past and the present, with the temporal gravity tending to lean in the direction of the latter. Hence the remembered seems to become subjected to the remembering: “Southwell, the Chapter House, the delicate, convoluted carving on the capitals, foliage *is it, yes*, leaves, the book *The Leaves of Southwell*, now I *think* of it, though I *did* not know of it at the time, but June *did*, she *knew* the cathedral *was* important for at least this, that *was* perhaps the main reason why we *visited* it, when *was* it, fairly late in our friendship ...”, “[Tony] *said* he *was* cooking fish fingers, he *said* they *tasted* okay if they were fried, *a curious thing to remember*, all memories so curious, for that matter, the mind as a *think of an image*”, “Tony’s dissertation I *read*, *do not remember* the subject-matter, but *was* surprised by some of the spelling errors” (italics mine).

The structural conundrums elevate the status of the chapters not only to being functionally equal due to their arbitrarily constituted arrangement, but also quasi-autonomous insofar as they individually establish their own structural properties, with the caveat that these properties can repeat and reappear in other sections. As a result, there are two types of fragmentation in *The Unfortunates*: the *typographic* fragmentation which gives rise to the *structural* fragmentation, one manifested in the indeterminate discourse and the ambiguous story. Not only does this lead to the collapse of a globally constructed narrative, but also to the constitution of individual chapters with an identical functional status and qualitative quasi-autonomy. Finally, the duality of the narrated and the narrating is unstable and untenable, and the temporal orientation centre lies in the present, which is against the anteriority principle of the novel.

Clearly, fragmentation violates all the major tenets of the semantic structure of *The Unfortunates* generated above the sentence level. Consequently, in pursuance of a semantic stability, the readers might resort to the sentence level and below. Let us consider the following excerpt:

Sign to Castle Boulevard, yes, that’s right, I remember now, they call streets boulevards in this city, some streets, that is, the university is on another of them, University Boulevard, logically. And yes, there is a castle here, of course, of a kind, there, up on its stump of rock, sandstone, as I remember, pale yellow, friable, the pub at its foot with some rooms carved out of the solid rock, it is that soft, and other caves, dwellings which were used comparatively recently, until the early 1800’s, did Tony tell me, he had a great mind for such historical trivia, is that the word, no, nor is detail, trivia to me perhaps, to him important, which I doubt ...

Long, looping sentences punctuated only by commas; clause piled upon clause; qualification after qualification; and signs of orality e.g. repetitions, colloquial expressions—this is not wholesome nourishment for a novel. The properties

combine and impact the sentence structure, which leads to important and far-reaching consequences. Firstly, the sentences quoted above are devoid of their two crucial properties: syntactic construction and informativeness. They are as if exploded from within: their subjects are not followed by verbs, which are not followed by objects. Instead, extraneous material is cumulatively added which leads to a substantial overloading of sentences. Also, the number of “additional” elements lends an impression to the sentences of being incomplete, unfinished, or even extemporised; Greg Buchanan and Julia Jordan employ the term “draft” to account for the temporary, provisional and transitory nature of the resulting prose (Buchanan 55; Jordan, “For Recuparation” 745). The overloading has an opposite effect from expected, as the sentences in fact pass on little information. A captious and finicky critic might scold the narrator’s verbosity and demand more concrete content instead. In addition, the narrator intrudes upon his narration, butts in with a sudden revelation, interrupts his thoughts, and, in effect, goes to great pains to pass himself off as speaking right now, not only spontaneously but also simultaneously. The simultaneous narration, that is, narrating the story concurrently with the narrated events, seems to functionally reflect the phenomenon of the text’s *being* in the making at a higher level of text organization: the story comes to life with the readers’ selecting particular chapters.

Secondly, the unconventional construction of the sentences attracts attention to them and their particular elements, even their tiniest particles; it is as if we were invited to read the excerpt through a microscope. Passages such as “there is a castle here, of course, of a kind, there, up on its stump of rock, sandstone, as I remember” cannot be fully appreciated without taking into account their musical qualities; there is a readily perceived rhythm in the form of classical metric feet: anapaests (“of a kind”, “on its stump”) and iambs (“a castle here, of course”).

Thirdly, the sentences are made up of various units, short (“yes”) or long (“dwellings which were used comparatively recently”). Their arrangement, especially when the units are amassing as in the example above, tears the sentences asunder: their linearity and logical accumulation of information is effectively undermined. In fact, the particular arrangement disperses and atomizes the sentence structures and leads them to resemble a patchwork, a montage of dismantled images (“there is a castle here”) and of disparate dismantled words or phrases (“did Tony tell me”). In combination with their status as seemingly spontaneous and narratively simultaneous, the sentences become provisional collections of various textual material composed *ad hoc* instead of being rigidly constructed, incremental, information-saturated units of chapters. They are not the result of a pre-imposed order of syntactic elements, but rather of free association in the narrator’s mind. Thus operates *syntactic fragmentation*: the sentences are constructed with various units in such a way as to transgress dominant syntactic principles; the units metonymically accumulate around a specific idea, impression, thought or memory according to the rule of free association; this makes them arbitrary and completely narrator-dependent. The syntactic fragmentation also bears a functional resemblance to

the one tackled at the level of structure (see Jordan, "For Recuperation" 747); it elevates the status of individual phrases, words and even sounds so that they are of equal significance in the semantic process.

One consequence of the syntactic fragmentation is an explicit metaliterary quality of the narration because of two reasons. Firstly, the narrator's spontaneous narration is significantly fragmented due to a considerable accumulation of a surplus of words and their repositioning against standard syntactic rules. In this way the reader cannot help but notice and take the narrator's verbal operations into account: from self-intrusions to musicality. This leads to the second reason: the reader struggles to pick up the fragmented large semantic figures such as space, time or character from the mass of disparate and discontinuous textual material. This effect, in turn, deautomatizes the reading process and makes considerable demands on the reader's attention. Consequently, the vehicular function collapses, and we are dealing with a self-conscious and anti-realist work of fiction *par excellence*.

Evidently, *The Unfortunates* violates numerous principles of narrative fiction. Although, to my knowledge, nobody has questioned the status of Johnson's iconoclastic work as a novel, a considerable number of critical voices demonstrate that it did break a contract between the author and his audience (Kermode; Norledge 54; Buchanan 55; Tew, "(Re)-acknowledging" 22). The latter, as a result, need to try and tackle the novel's particular and peculiar "methodology".¹³

"Methodology", to recapitulate, is "a group of opinions intentionally incorporated in a novel, implicitly or explicitly, regarding a group of its literary operations and the material in which they operate" (Głowiński 99).¹⁴ In other words, a novel constitutes "its own theory" (Głowiński 105), a group of cues that guide its reception (Indyk 5–27). In the case of *The Unfortunates*, the "methodology" is both explicit and implicit. Johnson, as Coe quotes in his introduction, strived for the "absolute fidelity" of his memories of Tony. Its inherent aspect was randomness, "directly in conflict with the technological fact of the bound book: for the bound book imposes an order, a fixed page order, on the material" (Coe ix). In this way Johnson explicitly spelled out his motivation for the typographical fragmentation of his work. Other dimensions of the methodology are implicit, entailing the narrator and the ontological status of the novel as a book, and eventuate a redefinition of narrative.

Taking a cue from Głowiński (107–119) and from my examinations above, it is legitimate to argue that a critical aspect of the methodology in *The Unfortunates* is the narrative subject. Specifically, Johnson's novel, first and foremost, could be considered as an expression of the narrator's intimate memories and innermost feelings. Spurned by the visit to "this city", Johnson begins a double life: in the present and in the past;

¹³ One example of an alternative approach is provided by James (28), yet it is my contention that the novel itself provides sufficient ground on which to rest the hypothesis of its coherence.

¹⁴ "[M]etodologia literacka jest to zespół mniemań zawartych świadomie w sposób jawny lub utajony w dziele na temat zespołu użytych w nim operacji literackich i materiału, w jakim się dokonują" (translation mine).

these two realms interconnect and interweave and constantly return to their point of origin: Johnson himself. Therefore, the visit determines his motivation to narrate, and his memory verifies the quality of the recollections; his knowledge is evidently limited and fragmentary and his psychological circumstances explicitly subjective. Constant negotiation between the present and the past, and obsessive wrestling with his mnemonic capacities make it clear that the narrative functions as the ultimate reflection of the narrator's consciousness. As a result, the first coherence mechanism at the reader's disposal to "naturalize" the material is to adapt the narrator as *the* centre of the narrative at the cost of the represented reality. He self-consciously serves as the only unshakeable point of reference that unifies this anachronous and discontinuous work. Not only is this status manifested formally and syntactically, but also thematically; "I remember" and "I fail to remember" might function as the mottos of the novel.

However, the self-consciousness also has an ontological dimension, as it is generated in the book format itself. *The Unfortunates*, to borrow Kermode's words, revolutionizes the novel due to a particular use of "'devices' intended to disrupt ordinary forms of attention by involving the physical book itself, the material base of writing, in unusual ways, as if to take revenge on it for a long history of tyranny". The need to materially, palpably and tangentially manoeuvre the novel exposes its artificiality, physicality, constructedness and arbitrariness, and considerably deautomatizes the reading process: the readers are, on the one hand, to intensely engage and emotionally immerse in the events depicted (James 29) and, on the other, made exceptionally aware of interacting with a "book in a box". The assignment of the specific role to the reader as a participant or even co-creator can be understood as the utmost violation of the vehicularity of the novel. *The Unfortunates* unabashedly flaunts its status as a piece of fiction and as an artistic artefact, for the unbound substance of the story is to be assembled not only mentally, in the recipient's mind, but also physically, in the recipient's hands. As Mitchell argues, "What pleasures there are here lie in the act of reconstruction: for the narrator, the piecemeal remembering of Tony delays the process of forgetting and repays a debt of friendship ... [and] for the reader, the activity of ordering invokes a pleasure in perceived agency and intentionality" (63). Such a gesture demanding action questions the novel as a familiar product of tradition and culture and transforms it into a self-interrogating artifice and a self-doubting poseur whose processual constructedness is at all times in the foreground. As a result, the readers are not at fault if they read this peculiar participatory game as an invitation to interactive story making. Mitchell makes a good point by stating that "the work always exists *for the reader*, rather than *in itself*" (56; italics in the original). Jessica Norledge adumbrates another scholar's idea of a "figured trans-world", "generated when the reader is required and/or directed by the text into a performative role in the discourse world, a role that calls upon corporeal activity and insinuates, to a greater or lesser extent, active reader involvement in the narrative" (55).

Finally, let us reposition *The Unfortunates* narratologically from the perspective of the influence of its various fragmentation strategies on the concept of the narrative. Traditionally, the story is defined as a group of events, the discourse as a group of events with certain connectivity (such as cause and effect) and the narrative as a representation of the events (see Ryan 23–26). As noted, in *The Unfortunates* there is no one discourse, and the story cannot be inferred from it without running into contradictions, for example chronological ones. Therefore, at the global level of the entire text, the narrative becomes a void concept. However, in the more or less recent reconceptualizations, the narrative does not at all rely on eventfulness and temporal sequencing. Instead, as Monika Fludernik suggests in her 1996 *Towards a "Natural" Narratology*, the term can and should be treated as an expression of consciousness, not a representation of events (12–13). "In my model there can therefore be narratives without plot, but there cannot be any narratives without a human (anthropomorphic) experiencer of some sort at some narrative level", claims Fludernik (13). Likewise, in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, David Herman broadly defines "narrative" as "a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change" (3). In this understanding, the narrative is closely correlated with the reflection of experience; the aspects of "time, process, and change" are mere manifestations of human consciousness.

Both approaches, of considerable theoretical scope, do justice to texts such as Johnson's because they refocus the whole narratological methodology on new problems. These relate, in the case of *The Unfortunates*, to the narrator and his preoccupation with "time, process, and change" rather than with a sequence of events, incremental characterization and vehicular narration. In consequence, the narrative in Johnson's novel becomes a representation of consciousness.

The impulse to combine the concept of the narrative with the narrative subject in *The Unfortunates* originates in two types of fragmentation, structural and syntactic, and results from the fundamental transition from the contents to the act, that is, from the narrated to the narrating. In other words, the present-tense intrusions in the past-tense accounts, orality markers, verbosity, or the non-incrementality of sentence structures are all indicative of the narrator's coming to terms with his experience (memory and grief). The novel becomes less concerned with the past and more with the present. In the narrator's own words, "Not how he died, not what he died of, even less why he died, are of concern", but that fact that "he is dead" now and what it means now: "the loss to me, to us".

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