Banville's Anti-Ageing Narrative in *The Sea* and *Ancient Light*

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Abstract

The theme of ageing has drawn constant attention in literary studies since the 1990s. As a resistance to the traditional declining narrative for older adults, accomplished writers have developed various anti-ageing narratives in their works. In his most well-known novels, *The Sea* and *Ancient Light*, John Banville adopts effective narrative strategies to exhibit the vitality, insight, and wisdom of the elder males. The reminiscent first-person narrative leads the narrator to re-experience his youth, and the vivid recollection of the exciting details revives the elder protagonists' passionate sensitivity. The leaping anachrony that juxtaposes present and past reveals the narrators' complicated mental activities and brings about a more thorough understanding of life. The recurrent pauses break the flow of the time in the narration and indicate the narrators' self-reflection and growing wisdom.

Keywords: Banville; anti-ageing narrative; *The Sea*; *Ancient Light*

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Introduction

William John Banville (1945–) is renowned for his sensitivity and productivity. His novels cover a wide range of themes showcasing his fresh and brilliant craftsmanship. Banville has won many literary prizes including the Man Booker Prize and the Franz Kafka Prize. Among his works, *The Sea* (2006) and *Ancient Light* (2012) were both written when Banville was in his sixties, and the two male protagonists of the two novels were also in their sixties. As Hannah Zeilig (2011, 31) has put it, "Fictional stories can be invaluable for considering the various manifestations of age and aging." These two novels show Banville's critical concern towards the conventional ways of thinking of age, especially the issue of widower ageing. Edwards H. Thompson Jr. (2018, 1) argues that for a long time in history, "age relations have been and remain a key basis of inequality, and many writers have already called attention to the moral discourses accompanying different stages of life," which mean that age, like other categories such as class, gender, and race, has become a new focus in cultural studies. As a writer approaching his senior years, Banville expresses his thoughts on time and ageing through many of his works. Heather Ingman (2018, 100) thinks that "John Banville's unreliable, solipsistic, dissembling narrators are often highly conscious of signs of aging in themselves." Nicholas Taylor-Collins (2020, 159) focuses on Banville's philosophical understanding of time and the ageing process in his novels and concludes that "Banville's characters' evoking preference for Bergsonian and Einsteinian tropes indicates an acceptance and happy engagement with the aging process," while Michaela Schrage-Früh (2022, 138) emphasises the widowers' "uncanny reflections as manifested in pivotal mirror scenes and how the uncanny influence Max's aging masculinity." That said, there is still more to be explored in this topic. In the literary field, studies on ageing females are comparatively more prevalent than those focusing on ageing males. Compared to aged women studies in the literary field, the studies of aged males are far from enough. As noted by Gabriela Spector-Mersel (2006, 67), "For decades the study of men seems to have been lost in a quagmire that thinks in terms of ageless, or more precisely, 'never-aging' masculinities." Therefore, "contemporary Western cultures offer old men an incomplete masculinity script" (67). The older males' masculinity and self-identification demand more attention.

At the same time, as a writer of well-crafted prose, Banville's extraordinary narrative techniques are non-negligible. Since the end of the last century, there have been many theoretical discussions on the importance of form analysis in literature studies to find the concordance between the writer's formal design and his cultural stance. As Huifang Li and Ying Li argue (2023, 1), "how a story was told weighs as much as what was told." In the decade following the publication of *The Sea*, there has been a lot of discussion on Banville's narratology and cultural concerns. As Elizabeth A. Weston (2010, 10) puts it, "the creative narrative provid[es] the time and space for grief." Bozena Kucała (2016, 9) thinks that "Banville's splitting narrative indicates the splitting of self-identity in *The Sea*." Marta Cerezo Moreno (2015, 51) analyses how the narrative configuration of Banville's *The Sea* shows an internal dialogue between an inner and

outer movement. In a later article, Moreno (2018, 124) discusses "the multi-layer narrative in *The Sea*." Petr Chalupský (2016, 92) categorises *The Sea* as a "novel of recollections" and points out that "the narrator's motivation for presenting their life's story is essentially auto-therapeutic." Therefore, in this case, the narratology helps the protagonist cope with his traumatic past (92). In this article, Banville's narratology will be studied from the perspective of his anti-ageing aspiration embodied in these two novels. However, this anti-ageing stand is not conveyed through his depiction of what Gilleard and Higgs (2011) call "transgressive" figures, who disrupt the social order by performing "aging disgracefully" (137) or what Rowe and Kahn (1997, 433) call "successful aging," a concept indicating low disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and active engagement with life, both of which emphasise the external side of aged life; rather, it is embodied through his ingenious exhibition of the exhaustive inner world of the senior protagonists and their "desperate" contemplation of meaning and significance in their shattered lives. In this regard, Banville aims to counter the traditional declining narrative of ageing by not only depicting the self-searching lives of two retired men but also by portraying their efforts to counter their traumatic past, extreme loneliness, and death temptation through his narrative techniques.

The Elder Protagonist as Experiencing-I: A Journey Towards Rejuvenation

Monika Fludernik (2010, 155) states that the "experiencing-I is the first-person reference character in a first-person narrative. Specifically, in retrospective first-person narration, the younger self who underwent the experiences recounted by the older 'narrating-I.'" As the narrating-I restricts themselves to a more limited internal focalisation of the experiencing-I at the story level, the first-person narrative gains a higher resemblance to the original events. It is noteworthy that there is a separation of voice and perception in the experiencing-I. The concept of voice pertains to the speaker or narrator, while perception relates to the observer or witness within fiction. Therefore, in the internal focalisation of the experiencing-I, the voice of the narration still belongs to the narrating-I, while the perception of the first-person narrator belongs to the experiencing-I. Shen Dan and Wang Liya (2010, 93) support that "when the first-person protagonist gives up their present external focalization and turns to see the past from the experiencing-I, there will be more suspense and dramatic effects in the fiction." When it comes to the older narrator who recounts their past, the internal focalisation of the experiencing-I they choose also endows them with a kind of sensation of being personally in the past scene. This enables the narrator to transcend the cruelty of senescence and relive the memorable moments of youth. Nicola Smith's (2009, 431) article on ageing music cultures highlights that "reliving one's youth through involving oneself in a pastime once undertaken in youth can be understood as a method of maintaining and supporting the aspects of their personhood and selfhood informed and constructed via that involvement." Such activities within music culture provide avenues for individuals to maintain connections with their past selves and identities.

In *The Sea*, Banville's experiencing-I narrative allows Max to vividly enter into the past world, particularly when Max encounters the Graces for the first time: "from upstairs the sound of bare feet running on floorboards and a girl laughing. I had paused by the gate, frankly eavesdropping, and now suddenly a man with a drink in his hand came out of the house" (2006, 6). Surely the ageing Max knows the girl is Chloe and the man is Mr. Grace while he narrates, but he abandons his current external focus to adopt the internal focus of the experiencing-I, which renders those people new to him. In the present, Max tries to imitate intentionally some actions happening in childhood, by which he enables himself to relive the past more closely. This can be observed also in the following quoted lines in the story:

> I walked down Station Road in the sunlit emptiness of the afternoon. (10)
>
> I am walking down Station Road. (12)

Attention should be given to the tense of these two sentences. The first one is past tense while the second one, two paragraphs later, is the present continuous tense. Thus, we can conclude that the narrator Max is recalling his experience of going through the same place 50 years ago while revisiting Station Road at present. He is reliving the road he once travelled and the things he once did. To make his perception closer to the original scene that took place 50 years ago, he also chooses internal focalisation to represent his first encounter with Chloe's twin brother Myles: "A boy of my age was draped on the green gate … [He] looked at me with an expression of hostile enquiry. It was the way we all looked at each other, we children, on first encounter" (10–11). Banville uses phrases such as "a boy of my age" and "we children" to indicate that Max is perceiving his encounter with Myles through the experiencing-I, which introduces the reader to the world of Max's childhood and forgets Max's age for the time being. Nonetheless, the freshness gained by the experiencing-I causes some uncanniness when ageing Max reflects on it: "How is it that in childhood everything new that caught my interest had an aura of the uncanny, since according to all the authorities the uncanny is not some new thing but a thing known returning in a different form, become a revenant?" (10). The uncanniness arises from the disjunction between voice and perception in the experiencing-I. From the perspective of the child Max, everything he encounters for the first time is new to him, whereas this is not the case for the ageing Max. While Max employs the perception of his younger self to observe past events, the narrative voice remains that of his present self. He retains full awareness of past events, even as he adopts a transcendent perspective through internal focalisation. Consequently, when Max reflects on past events from the standpoint of his present self, he perceives the novelty of the experiencing-I as a familiar entity re-emerging in a different guise.

When Banville describes some erotic scenes, he also shifts to internal focalisation to make the character of Max gain a more real experience, which is a way for Max to relive the passion of youth because as Hershbein (2000, 301) says, sex is a symbol of youth, "the association between rejuvenation and restoration of sexual function is a

longstanding one." As Thompson (2018, 2) has commented, "aging men are routinely melded into the social category of 'seniors' and collectively viewed as degendered, even genderless." Therefore, internal focalisation is more suitable for Max to review and relive the passion of boyhood. A case of such employment of internal focalisation of the experiencing-I is Max's peeping at Mrs. Grace's private parts at the picnic: "With a heaving sigh, she turned and reclined on her back with her head leaning back on the grass and flexed one leg so that suddenly I was allowed to see under her skirt along the inner side of her thigh up to the hollow of her lap and the plump mound there sheathed in tensed white cotton" (Banville 2006, 117).

On the verdant bank of the picnic, Mrs. Grace reclined on her side directly in front of Max (115), a great place for him to sneak a peek: "I stared and stared, my brow growing hot, and my palms wet" (117). Such an erotic scene is perceived through Max's internal focalisation as experiencing-I to increase its vividness. This description can make the reader sympathise with the excitement experienced by Max, his hot brow, and his wet palms. If the scene were narrated from Max's external focalisation, it would betray the misunderstanding of his younger self. In the concluding part of *The Sea*, Max comes to understand the truth about Mrs. Grace's wardrobe mishap during the picnic through a conversation with the landlady, Miss Vavasour, who is revealed to be Rose, the governess of the Grace family: "And I thought, too, of the day of the picnic and of her sitting behind me on the grass and looking where I was avidly looking and seeing what was not meant for me at all" (263). Rose had a romantic tendency towards Mrs. Grace (262). Therefore, such an erotic exposure was prepared for Rose, not Max. The younger Max could not know the truth because Rose just sat behind him. Besides, Rose's position has been repeated twice in the fiction, giving readers a hint at Max's misunderstanding.

Despite the internal focalisation of the experiencing-I having its limitations in knowledge and understanding, it offers a more authentic immersion in the past event. This enables the narrator to vividly relive significant moments from their past. The adolescent Max owns the most authentic first experience of passion, which also corresponds to the ageing Max's desires. Many years later, old Max corrects his self-deception but then loses his excitement and passion for youth. As Fonioková (2020, 390) argues,

> the objectification of the past self may facilitate a positive evaluation of oneself in the present, as past mistakes can be attributed to the protagonist of the life story rather than its teller. … The narrating self disassociates itself from the experiencing self and criticizes it as an "other," flaunting the narrator's current wisdom or standards of morality.

The past self and the narrating self are equally important for Max in his senescence. The narrating-I can let Max rethink the past and correct his own mistakes, forming what the gerontologists call "healthy old age." The experiencing-I provides Max with an opportunity to temporarily escape ageing and return to his youth. The past is alive for

Max when he chooses the internal focalisation to review his life; as he says, “The past beats inside me like a second heart” (Banville 2006, 13). That is to say, Max continually moves back and forth between a remembered past and an ageing present. His experiencing-I is his second heart, experiencing all his past first-hand. Max cannot live without the past, for his past consists of his present. The past is a large and significant part of him since his future is taking a smaller part of his whole life.

In *Ancient Light*, Banville also employs the technique of internal focalisation to enable the protagonist, Cleave, to relive his youth. At the beginning of the story, Cleave conceives the idea of finding Mrs Gray, his illicit lover from half a century ago, in an attempt to fall in love with her once again. “What if I were to set off in search of her? That would be a quest. I should like to be in love again, I should like to fall in love again, just once more” (2012, 3). For Cleave, falling in love with his first lover again is a way to experience his youth anew and relish in the surging rapture of that love, even if only in his memories. As he indulges in recalling the erotic pastime with Mrs Gray, Cleave feels as if he is “fifteen again” (26), truly reliving his youth through these amorous recollections. One such recollection involves a moment when Cleave hears rapid footsteps behind him after he peeps at Mrs. Gray in the bathtub from the bathroom mirror and imagines they may belong to Mrs. Gray, sprinting towards him in a wild and passionate desire. However, Cleave as the experiencing-I could not confirm whose footsteps these were. If they were from the naked Mrs. Gray, he would get into rapture, but if they were not, it would be a scary event for him. Cleave’s conflicting impulses—to flee or to embrace this “lavish and unlooked-for gift of womanhood” (31)—reveal the depth of his longing and desire. However, as it turns out, the footsteps belong not to Mrs. Gray, but to her daughter Kitty, whom the younger Cleave had not yet met. Through Cleave’s internal focalisation, Banville masterfully captures the paradoxical and passionate sensations experienced by the self, along with the uncertainty and unpredictability inherent in memory and desire.

The analysis above notes that the use of the experiencing-I allows the reader to temporarily forget the ageing characters’ senescence and enter into the world of their childhoods. This technique is particularly effective in scenes of eroticism, where the experiencing-I conveys the excitement and passion of youth. However, the limitations of the experiencing-I mean that Max’s and Cleave’s perceptions may not always be accurate, as evidenced by Max’s misunderstanding of Mrs. Grace’s wardrobe malfunction and Cleave’s unawareness of the footsteps behind him. Therefore, Banville’s experiencing-I narrative suggests that narration is a powerful instrument of human experience. In youth, an imaginative or even false narrative can evoke their most vivid and intense mental reactions, while in old age, they may regain vitality through a remembered or corrected narrative. For Banville himself, writing serves as an effective means to counteract the wearisome effects of ageing.

Rearranging Temporal Order against Ageing as a Linear Decline Narrative

The Sea and *Ancient Light* are narrated by Max and Cleave, respectively, in their sixties, and their retrospections take up the main parts of the fiction. However, they do not recall their pasts in chronological order. There are various juxtapositions between the present and the past, and different timelines always shift back and forth during their narration. Tóibín (2010, 67) argues that "for a writer, the blurring of time present and time past is a way of freeing the imagination." The vagueness of two different timelines in *The Sea* and *Ancient Light* could be considered as Banville's resistance to the monotonous ageing narrative. When people approach an older age, they live a less active, or even monotonous, life because they are withdrawing from the centre stage of material production. Through this leaping narrative, Banville exercises his fresh imagination and resumes his youth time. Deviating from chronological order in narration introduces anachrony. Patrick Colm Hogan and Lalita Pandit (2010, 14) suggest that "anachrony is a deviation from strictly chronological storytelling." Just as Gerald Prince (2003, 5) says, "It is discordance between the order in which events occur and the order in which they are recounted."

According to Gérard Genette (1980, 40), there are two main types of anachrony: *prolepsis* and *analepsis*. Prolepsis, in Marshall Alcorn's (2010, 468) expression, means the "anticipation of a future episode that results in a non-chronological presentation of events," namely, a flashforward. Analepsis, in Hogan and Pandit's words (2010, 14), is "to go backward in time to cover an earlier episode," namely, a flashback. As Genette (1980, 48) argues, "every anachrony constitutes, concerning the narrative into which it is inserted—onto which it is grafted—a narrative that is temporally second, subordinate to the first in a sort of narrative syntax." In other words, if the narrative of one event appearing in front of or after the narrative of another event is treated as non-chronological, then an anachrony is formed, and the former is the second narrative subordinate to the latter, which is regarded as the first narrative. Genette (1980, 67) thinks that "an anachrony can assume the role of the first narrative with respect to another that it carries." That is to say, if another anachrony appears within an anachrony, the latter can be regarded as the first narrative for the first anachrony. Taking an excerpt in *Ancient Light* as an example, there is an episode involving a Christmas gift:

> That Christmas he had given me a manicure set in a neat pigskin case—yes, a manicure set, with a pair of scissors and nail clippers and a file, and a polished ivory stick, shaped at one end like a tiny flattish spoon … I wonder now, suddenly, if it was his mother who bought the manicure set for him to give to me, a coy and secret gift, delivered by proxy, that she thought I might guess had come from her. This was some months before she and I had become—oh, go on and say it, for God's sake!—before we had become lovers. (Banville 2012, 10–11)

Ancient Light is narrated by the first-person protagonist Cleave, and thus the narrative of events occurring in the present moment should be considered the primary narrative

throughout. The Christmas episode, which occurred approximately 50 years ago, represents an instance of anachrony. On Christmas Cleave's best friend, Billy, gives him a manicure set as a gift purportedly from his mother, although Cleave harbours doubts about its true source. Later, Cleave alludes to his impending love affair with Mrs. Gray, which is set to unfold several months later. Therefore, the narrative of Cleave's love affair is a prolepsis within the anachronic narrative of Christmas. Such prolepsis is achieved by the intrusion of Cleave's external focalisation, for the young Cleave cannot know what would happen some months later. As Genette (1980, 67) observes, "the 'first-person' narrative lends itself better than any other to anticipation (*prolepsis*), by the very fact of its avowedly retrospective character, which authorizes the narrator to allude to the future and in particular to his present situation, for these to some extent form part of his role." The prolepsis made by Cleave's external focalisation can also be found in the reminiscence of his first encounter with Mrs. Gray in the bathroom mirror. Therefore, anachrony in the first-person retrospective narrative can be a common phenomenon. Both prolepsis and analepsis are employed by Banville to compose *The Sea* and *Ancient Light*, and they make the timelines of retrospection non-linear and complex, showing his distinctive grasp of the ageing narrative.

The Sea begins with Max's return to the Cedars, and his life there is regarded as the narrative starting point. Therefore, all events that happened before Max's current life in the Cedars belong to his retrospection. However, because of Max's double focalisations as narrating-I and experiencing-I, there are both prolepsis and analepsis in his reminiscence from the microscopic scale of the temporal order. Since Max's return to the Cedars is considered the present moment, the encounter that occurred 50 years ago is a clear analepsis narrated by the ageing Max. However, when Max reminisces about this event, he confines his perception to the internal focalisation of his younger self. Then Max tells the reader in advance that he "first saw her, Chloe Grace, on the beach" (Banville 2006, 26). This is a prolepsis made by the partial intrusion of Max's external focalisation within the analepsis, for the child Max did not see Chloe at the beginning until she was preparing to jump down from the dune several pages later: "I do not know for how long Chloe had been standing on the dune before she jumped" (29). Max fails to notice Chloe at the outset because of his position in the story, and he cannot identify Chloe from her silhouette, too. It is after Chloe's jumping that he sees Chloe clearly. Hence, the prolepsis appearing on page 26 is external and extends beyond the scope of Max's experiencing-I. If the reader follows the perception of child Max, they would see Mr. Grace first, then Myles, then Mrs. Grace. Besides, the present tense "I do not know" also indicates that it is the narrating-I who inserts the prolepsis into the past event.

In *Ancient Light*, there are also various anachronies. The fiction begins with Cleave's writing about his past, implying that what he narrates has the feature of written form. If the very beginning of Cleave's writing activity is taken as the starting point of the story time, then Lydia's reporting of the phone call from the film woman Marcy Meriwether occurred after Cleave's writing.

> My wife just now climbed up here to my eyrie under the roof, unwillingly negotiating the steep and treacherous attic stairs that she hates, to tell me that I have missed a telephone call. At first, when she put her head in at the low door—how smartly I encircled this page with a protective arm, like a schoolboy caught scribbling smut—I could hardly understand what she was saying. I must have been concentrating very hard, lost in the lost world of the past. (Banville 2012, 16–17)

When Cleave's wife Lydia climbs up to his eyrie (attic) to inform him about the missed call, Cleave stops his writing, as indicated by his action of encircling the page. If the past tense is *considered*, this event happened before Cleave's writing activity. The phrase "just now" confirms this flashback. The reason why the analepsis appears is that the present time moves forward during Cleave's writing activity. In the novel, the lapse of the time present is marked by blank lines between the paragraphs. Now the present moment has leaped ahead, and Lydia's reporting becomes an analepsis compared to the new present moment. Such analepsis is what Genette (1980, 50) calls internal analepsis, since its temporal field is contained within the temporal of the first narrative. The internal analepses can also be found in other places of the fiction, such as Cleave's retrospections of Meriwether's second call.

Furthermore, *The Sea* and *Ancient Light* will be examined from a macroscopic perspective of temporal order, utilising the analytical framework outlined by Genett. To aid comprehension, simplifying the timelines is necessary. In Max's narrations, some events lack obvious story-time boundaries or occur within a continuous timeline, such as Anna's last year after her encounter with Mr. Todd. For analytical convenience, these events will be considered part of the same story time. Additionally, each novel comprises two content parts, which share similarities in temporal order. To prevent redundant interpretation, only one part will be analysed. The 17 narrative sections in part one of *The Sea* are as follows:

(A) Max's return to the Cedars; (B) Max's first encounter with the Graces; (C) Max's life in the Cedars; (D) Mr. and Mrs. Grace in the car and Myles on the green gate; (E) Anna's meeting with doctor Mr. Todd and subsequent life at home; (F) Colonel's life in the Cedars; (G) Max's dream before returning to the Cedars; (H) Max's encounter with the Grace family on the beach; (I) Miss Vavasour's life in the Cedars; (J) Max's revisit to the Cedars with daughter Claire; (K) Claire's childhood, youth, and love story; (L) The rest part of Max's revisit; (M) Max's passion for Mrs. Grace; (N) Anna's worst nights in her illness; (O) Max's first encounter with Anna and marriage with her; (P) Max's picnic with the Graces; (Q) Max's observation of his image in the mirror.

Similarly, 17 narrative sections have been identified and distributed among eight temporal positions. These positions are as follows, in chronological order: (1) Max's first encounter with the Graces, which can be dated to 50 years ago; (2) Max's passion for Mrs. Grace; (3) Max's first encounter with his wife, Anna; (4) Daughter Claire's childhood, youth, and love story; (5) Anna's last year after the illness; (6) Max's dream; (7) Max's revisit of the Cedars with his daughter; (8) Max's present life in the Cedars.

The formula of the positions is then the following: A8—B1—C8—D1—E5—F8—G6—H1—I8—J7—K4—L7—M2—N5—O3—P2—Q8.

The formula above shows that Max's narration moves constantly between his present life and his recollection of the past as a whole. However, the complexity of hierarchical interlocking between narrative sections is also revealed in the formula, since, for example, K depends on J and O depends on N. Certain anachronies, such as D1 and E5, are juxtaposed without an explicit return to the present time.

Similarly, we can analyse *Ancient Light* likewise, and divide the first part of the novel roughly into the following 18 narrative sections: (A) Cleave's love affair with Mrs. Gray; (B) Cleave's encounter with the Lady on Bicycle; (C) Cleave's dream last night; (D) Cleave's best friend Billy; (E) Meriwether's first call; (F) Lydia's sleepwalking; (G) The death of Cleave's daughter Cass; (H) Meriwether's second call; (I) Cleave's sexual activities with Mrs. Gray and his confession; (J) The film material sent by Meriwether; (K) Cleave's first tryst with Mrs. Gray; (L) Mrs. Gray's life before Billy's birth; (M) Cleave's rendezvous with Mrs. Gray; (N) Billie Stryker's arrival and Cleave's rest activities; (O) Kitty's birthday party; (P) Cleave's talk with Dawn Devonport; (Q) The Grays' habit of watching films; (R) Billie Stryker's call.

These sections are generally distributed among seven temporal positions: (1) Mrs. Gray's life before Billy's birth over 60 years ago; (2) Cleave's encounter with the Lady on the Bicycle, which happened over 50 years ago; (3) Cleave's love affairs with Mrs. Gray 50 years ago; (4) The death of Cass 10 years ago; (5) Cleave's dream the previous night; (6) Cleave's present life related with the film. The formula of the temporal positions in the narrative sections is as follows: A3—B2—C5—D3—E6—F5—G4—H6—I3—J6—K3—L1—M3—N6—O3—P6—Q3—R6.

The two formulas above illustrate the clear non-linear temporal structure of the two novels. In *The Sea*, the retired Max does not adhere to the chronological pattern of life (from childhood to old age) in narrating his story. Instead, he oscillates between reminiscence and reality, thereby disrupting the linear temporal order of his retrospective narrative and creating a web-like structure. In *Ancient Light*, the narrative begins with Cleave's recollection of his love affair with Mrs. Gray 50 years ago. Cleave does not delve into his present life until the narrative section E, leading readers from the outset into Cleave's lost world of the past. Then there is a hierarchical interlocking between F5 and G4, demonstrating the analepsis based on the subordinate position of G4 to F5. Next, the narration sections from H6 to R3 (excepting L1) shift back and forth between the two timelines, depicting a zigzag movement between the past and the present. The density of the curves between the temporal positions 3 and 6 confirms that the narrative focuses on Cleave's present life and his reminiscence of his love affair with Mrs. Gray. Such zigzag movement represents a non-linear narrative mode, reflecting the characteristic feature of ageing Cleave's narration: intertwining his present life with past events. Indeed, not only Max's memories of different past events

are interwoven, but his present and past are also mingled together. Through reminiscence, he reinterprets his past and reshapes his present by correcting some misunderstandings of the past. The non-linear narrative breaks the spatio-temporal synchronisation and chronological order, interspersing different timelines and spaces to carry out the ageing narrative into practice in the new century literature. Zhang Wenbin (2017, 31) argues that "there is a common phenomenon in the spatio-temporal structure of the aging narrative: the interlacement between the reality and the memory." Scholars Michaela Schrage-Früh and Tony Tracy (2022, 2) argue that "cultural gerontologists and age scholars have pointed out that the cultural narrative of aging is often presented as a linear narrative of decline." Therefore, Banville's non-linear temporal setting indicates his disagreement with this kind of declining narrative and points towards a twisting and productive narrative for older adults.

Pausing Story Time for Contemplation and Inner Growth

Another significant aspect of Genette's narrative time is narrative speed. Duration is determined by the relationship between the actual duration of events and textual length. A narrator may devote several hundred pages to events occurring within a single day or provide a brief summary of events spanning a longer period of story time. Genette (1980, 95) discerns four types of story-discourse relations in duration: pause, scene, summary, and ellipsis. Banville adopts all these techniques in these two novels; among them, the recurrent appearances of pauses contain particular significance in his ageing narrative.

A pause occurs when there is discourse time but no story time. In both novels, the protagonist tells their own life story and can control the narrative speed through external focalisation. By stopping the storytelling to comment on their past or fix on scenic descriptions, the protagonist produces pauses. Hence while the time elapsing in the story world stops, the protagonist can ponder over a specific moment to form a deeper understanding of present life in his ageing years.

In *The Sea*, the protagonist Max frequently interrupts his storytelling with reflections on his past. As Max grows older, his life experiences become richer. Consequently, when he reminisces about the past, he can engage in deeper reflection compared to his younger self. One such moment occurs when Max recalls the day the Graces drove their car over the bridge, and he pauses to insert his thoughts about the cruelty of time: "It is still there, that bridge, just beyond the station. Yes, things endure, while the living lapse" (Banville 2006, 9). Although the bridge remains unchanged—"still intact, still in place!" (47)— Mrs. Grace and Mr. Grace have passed away with time, which shows the fleeting nature of human existence. Such an insight or wisdom is gained through the ageing Max's pause during his reminiscence. Max's use of pauses allows the reader to experience the same reflection and contemplation that he feels. The pause gives us time to consider the passage of time and the transience of life. By stepping back from the narrated world, Max gains a deeper understanding of his mortality and the impermanence of the world around him. Additionally, as an art historian in fiction, Max

often employs ekphrasis to immortalise a special moment on the canvas of his memory. Ekphrasis is a literary technique where the author describes a visual work of art or scene using words. According to Huang Beibei (2009, 31; italics in original), "Through *ekphrasis*, Banville incorporates a notion of space into the temporal verbal medium, creating moments in which the flux of time seems to be momentarily suspended to experience an immediacy of presence." Therefore, ekphrasis has the effect of what Prince (2003, 19) calls a "descriptive pause," for it is a pause occasioned by the visual description of static art or a scene.

An example of ekphrasis occurs in the portrayal of Max's mother: "I picture her sitting at the oil-cloth-covered table in that little wooden house, a hand under her head, nursing her disaffections as the long day wanes. She was still young then" (Banville 2006, 35). Through the use of ekphrasis, Banville creates a vivid image in the reader's mind. This description allows the readers to visualise and imagine the scene as if they were before a painting, in which the time is paused under Max's pen of imagination. Because of the suspension of time, Max's parents become ageless in that fixed moment of his memory in contrast to his senescence with time in his real life. Art's power of pausing time is also reflected in Max's appreciation of one of Bonnard's oil paintings. Though Bonnard's wife Marthe was in her seventies, Bonnard retained her youth in his paintings, "depicting her as the teenager he had thought she was when he first met her" (218). Marthe can stay youthful and "ageless" (152) in the painting forever, for the time in it has stopped. Similarly, when Max recalls his mother in the canvas of his memory, she remains young and ageless. This ekphrastic depiction of his parents provides a pause in Max's narrated world, allowing him to reflect on his ageing self. The contrast between the youthful image of his parents and his ageing self leads Max to contemplate the strangeness of the situation.

In *Ancient Light,* the use of pauses is particularly notable. Dashes are frequently employed throughout Cleave's recollections, with the majority of them serving to indicate his intrusion as the narrating-I into his past. These pauses create a momentary suspension of time within the narrative, allowing Cleave to reflect on his past experiences and memories, and for the reader to contemplate the implications of his recollections. This effect is further emphasised by the introspective and contemplative nature of Cleave's narration, which is often characterised by a deep sense of nostalgia and yearning for the past. Thus, the use of pauses in *Ancient Light* serves to heighten the novel's introspective and reflective tone and encourages the reader to engage with the novel's themes of memory, time, and the transience of human experience.

The storytelling of Cleave's past moves off and on because of the dashes among sentences, which slow down the narrative speed. When Cleave pauses to contemplate his past from the present point of view, he finds some discordance between his youth and his ageing process. The pause after Cleave's recollection of his desire to make Mrs. Gray pregnant is a good example of discordance, which shows how ageing has changed the narrator's perspective on life and his priorities. Cleave is "on the brink of old age"

(2012, 72), and there is almost no possibility of having a baby with his wife Lydia. Yet, if Cleave were to have a child with Mrs. Gray, he would find the idea too absurd and shameful. Now, at 65 years old, Cleave contemplates the ethical and age-related implications of a potential child conceived from his illicit affair with Mrs. Gray, who would now be 50 years old, nearly his age. This presents a significant moral dilemma for him. Despite the absurdity and impossibility of the situation, Cleave still harbours a longing to have a daughter with Mrs. Gray. This desire stems partly from the loss of his beloved daughter, as Cleave imagines that a child conceived with Mrs. Gray could serve as a substitute for his deceased daughter. This can be seen from his preference for a baby daughter, as he manifests, "I would have preferred a daughter. Yes, definitely a daughter" (72). This desire for a replacement of a child highlights the psychological impact of grief and loss on individuals and their subsequent coping mechanisms. Nevertheless, such an illusion is shattered by Cleave's conversation with Kitty, where he learns the truth that Mrs. Gray died of "endometrial carcinoma" (240) 50 years ago. His bereavement cannot be mitigated by his guesswork of Mrs. Gray's pregnancy. As he faces his own mortality, he longs for a sense of purpose and connection through the possibility of having a child. However, he also recognises the impracticality of such a desire in his ageing years and how it would only add to the comedic nature of his predicament. Cleave's impractical fantasy of Mrs. Gray's pregnancy highlights the bittersweet nature of ageing, where regrets and longing are tempered by the realisation of life's absurdities.

From the analysis above, it can be concluded that the pause of narrative speed provides the ageing narrators with the opportunity to ponder over their pasts and gain a deeper understanding of their lives in their older years. This may correspond with Tornstam's (1997, 143) adaptation of Jung's "gerotranscendence," which "is regarded as the final stage in a natural progression towards muturation and wisdom." Through the pauses during storytelling, Max and Cleave gain truth and insight into the meaning of life and the passing of time. The pause in narrative speed creates a space for the first-person narrators to contemplate and reflect, allowing the reader to glimpse their inner thoughts and emotions. This technique not only adds depth to the character but also allows for a deeper exploration of the themes of ageing, memory, and loss that are central to the novels. Furthermore, the ageing protagonists' use of reflection during these pauses allows them to form a deeper understanding of their pasts and their relationships with the people in their lives. It is through these moments of reflection that they gain insight into the nature of their own characters and the events that have shaped their life. As Mike Hepworth (2000, 2) says, "Aging is never simply a fixed biological or chronological process, but an open-ended subjective and social experience." According to research on the relationship between wisdom and old age satisfaction conducted by Monika Ardelt (1997, 15), "wisdom can be described as a combination of cognitive, reflective, and affective qualities." Kekes (1983, 278) describes wisdom as a kind of "interpretative knowledge"; "in descriptive knowledge, one knows facts; in interpretative knowledge, one knows the significance of the descriptively known facts" (278). Through his revisiting, memory tracing, and paused reflection, Banville's heroes

rediscover the truth of life through a profound understanding of phenomena and events. As one ages, the acquisition of wisdom becomes a significant source of fulfilment, almost like a reward for the passage of time. Through deftly navigating moments of pause and reflection, Banville suggests that old age does not diminish one's sense of curiosity, exploration, or personal growth. Rather, by taking time to ponder, both ageing protagonists come to terms with their mortality and find deeper meaning in the journey of life.

Conclusion

When talking about Canadian novels, Gabriele Helms (2003, 7) once observed that "narrative techniques are not neutral and transparent forms to be filled with content, and that dialogic relations in narrative structures are ideologically informed," and the same applies to Banville's novels. Through his careful mobilisation of the above narrative strategies, Banville exercised his perceptions and reflections on the issue of male ageing. Ageing is part of life, and more importantly, it is a phase when people can recollect and relocate their earlier years. He could write about his young age to relive those exciting moments in his life or revise his false understanding of his earlier life. He could blend the past life with his present life to work out the logical or illogical side of life. The heroes' initiative and curiosity in these two novels indicate ageing does not mean the end of life, but a new beginning to it. In retirement or as one ages, there are opportunities for introspection and exploration into the mysteries of life. In both novels, Banville revitalises his ageing protagonists by infusing their past experiences with vitality, enabling them to confront the challenges of old age through intricate storytelling. As Ansgar Nünning (2010, 192) says, "stories, and storytelling, are not only the most important means of making autobiographical selves, but an equally important means of worldmaking." Banville does not just convey his anti-ageing stance in his novels, but he is also striving to portray a world where the elderly play a positive role in contemporary society. They can reflect on their past experiences, find strength in their memories, unravel the mysteries of their earlier years, and live fully in both the present and the past. Moreover, they can share their valuable life experiences through writing or storytelling, imparting wisdom to the younger generation. They may have lost their vigour and passion, but they are becoming more understanding, more tolerant, and wiser; their frustrated grievance and rage from ageing eventually become a quiet acceptance of their new identity. As Betty Friedan (1994, 33) states in *The Fountain of Age*, "It is time to look at age on its own terms, and put names on its values and strengths as they are experienced, breaking through the definition of age solely as deterioration of decline from youth."

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