

METAMEMOIR

In Wayne Johnston's *Baltimore's Mansion*

JACOB SANDLER

In this essay, Jacob Sandler investigates the tactics used by Newfoundlander Wayne Johnston to harness the power of metafiction in the context of memoir. Sandler argues that there are distinct tensions between fact and fiction in the genre of the memoir generated by the “constructed nature of memory, the self, and life writing.” Sandler compellingly argues that Johnston’s *Baltimore’s Mansion* defies a central convention of memoir—to actively limit and silence the constructed nature of identity formation through memory — by drawing attention to the processes that shape Johnston’s multi-generational account of Newfoundland identity. In particular, he argues that Newfoundland heritage, stories, and memory, both individual and cultural, are devices used by the text to illustrate the constructed nature of the identities of the text’s protagonists. By engaging in this study, Sandler also makes a broader claim: that memoirs that employ these tactics are best categorized as “metamemoir.”

Emily Ballantyne

The word “memoir” on the cover of Wayne Johnston’s *Baltimore’s Mansion* immediately contextualizes the book within the realm of real events. Memoir, indicative of

memory, implies an autobiographical account of experienced events. While memoirs will inevitably be tainted by the passage of time and the translation from thought to page, authors have traditionally ignored these characteristics. Most memoirs do not reflect on their constructed nature, and are instead marketed as non-fictional texts limited to the narration of what is real, or what is perceived to have been real. Yet Baltimore's Mansion does not conform to these expectations. A story of self-discovery and of coming-of-age in a time of dislocated identity, Baltimore's Mansion is a tale of fathers and sons, of heritage and inheritance, and of the way in which we are the products of our histories. In order to tackle these larger concepts while simultaneously drawing attention to the constructed nature of memory, the self, and life writing, Johnston breaks away from traditional understandings of the memoir. He uses a variety of devices that function to both directly and indirectly reflect on the very nature of memory and self-construction. Johnston creates a text with a heightened awareness of its constructed nature: he creates a metamemoir. Memoir¹ is a

¹ In this paper I will use the terms memoir,

genre traditionally perceived as being based on “verifiable facts of a life history” (Eakin, *Fictions* 3). Yet the notion that what is recorded actually occurred as described has, in the last few decades, and for a significant number of reasons, become increasingly problematized. The problems associated with life writing are

both literary and experiential, for the selves we display in autobiographies are doubly constructed, not only in the act of writing a life story but also in a lifelong process of identity formation of which the writing is usually a comparatively late stage. (Eakin, *Making Selves* ix)

In effect, not only is the text constructed, so too is the identity of the writer, two traits Johnston is clearly aware of, and reflects on in great depth throughout *Baltimore’s Mansion*.

Johnston’s memoir is a tale of self-discovery and identity formation. It is, as Herb Wylie suggests, a bildungsroman, or coming-of-age story – a genre into which most of

autobiography, and life writing interchangeably. While I acknowledge that these terms do not necessarily describe the same thing, for ease of transition between secondary literatures, and because it is only the shared characteristics of these terms that are relevant for my argument, I will not differentiate between the three.

Johnston's fictional texts also fall. His memoir, like his fictional texts before it, tells the tale of a young protagonist struggling "to unravel the secrets of [his] parents' troubled relationship and to fathom the enigmatic unhappiness and alienation of [his] father" (Wylie 86). In *Baltimore's Mansion*, Johnston's father may in fact be a more prominent character than Wayne², for it is his father, and stories of his father's own coming-of-age that occupy and define Wayne's transition into adulthood. As a child, Wayne mythologizes his father, linking him to the medieval King Arthur:

although I knew that my father was not Malory's King Arthur, I thought of him as a man whose name set him apart [. . .] who had never been a child, a man who had simply 'arrived' among us. (Johnston 12)

Wayne's coming-of-age is directly tied to the humanization and understanding of his father, for the memoir establishes solving his father's mysterious falling out with his own father,

²I have elected to differentiate between the character and author by using "Wayne" as a signifier of the character, and "Johnston" the signifier of the author.

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Charlie, as necessary for Wayne's self-creation. By the end of the text Wayne views his father as a man in exile, still haunted by the past:

was it possible that three thousand miles from home, in the heart of the continent, morning would not find him brooding at the window, that a day might pass when he did not think of Charlie and the moment of their parting on the beach. (Johnston 229)

Baltimore's Mansion is multigenerational, reflecting on heritage and inheritance, and perpetuating the notion that we are the product of our pasts. Wayne Johnston is the manifestation of his history, both national and ideological, but more predominantly familial.

In his multigenerational approach to self-definition, Johnston inevitably addresses the second characteristic of the double construction of autobiography: his development as an author, and the writing of the text itself. While he only ever indirectly refers to the writing of *Baltimore's Mansion* or its textuality within the memoir, his statements regarding writing and authorship are also self-reflexive. Johnston writes:

I have chosen the one profession that makes it impossible for me to live here. That I can only write about this place when I regard it from a distance. That my writing feeds off a homesickness that I need and that I hope is benign and will never go away, though I know there has to be a limit. And that someday it will break my heart. (Johnston 236)

Johnston claims that reconstructing/recreating Newfoundland in his mind and then writing about this reconstruction is more powerful and effective than writing about the island in its physical presence. While this meta-statement only indirectly refers to *Baltimore's Mansion's* textuality, it does directly address the status of texts in general, including memoirs, as creative works. By suggesting that he can only write of a familiar place in its absence, Johnston is stating that he can only write of a familiar place from memory.

Earlier understandings of memory perpetuated the idea that memories were stored. Contemporary research has demonstrated that memory is not simply a recollection of past events, but a re-creation. As Paul Eakin argues, "the latest developments in brain science today confirm the extent to which memory, the would-be anchor of selves and

lives, constructs the materials from the past that an earlier, more innocent view would have us believe it merely stored" (*Making Selves* 106). Furthermore, memories are dynamic, fluid, and plural, rather than singular or "static and mimetic in nature" (Eakin, *Making Selves* 107). Despite these inherent qualities of memory, Eakin argues that "the overwhelming majority of autobiographers continue to place their trust in the concept of an invariant memory that preserves the past intact" (*Making Selves* 107). *Baltimore's Mansion* is an anomaly amidst this trend. Wayne Johnston utilizes self-reflexive techniques, such as describing his status as an author, in order to draw attention to the created/constructed nature of his memoir.

A fictional text that is self-reflective of its constructed and/or linguistic nature is defined as a work of metafiction. While *Baltimore's Mansion's* self-proclaimed status as a memoir immediately discounts it from this genre, its self-reflective nature functions to make this particular memoir deserving of the *meta* prefix. In her critical text on metafiction, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, Linda Hutcheon argues that metafiction has "serious implications for the theory of the novel as a mimetic genre" (6). In other words,

the reader is forced to acknowledge the fictional, or constructed nature of the text. The paradox of metafiction lies in the way in which the reader must realize the novel's constructed nature, yet simultaneously participate in its construction. He must, "engage himself intellectually, imaginatively, and affectively in its co-creation" (Hutcheon, 7). As *Baltimore's Mansion* is a memoir, self-reflection is not so much used to emphasize a fictional status, but rather to recognize the way in which memory, and memoirs are inherently constructed.

In her analysis of the ways by which texts are self-aware, Hutcheon establishes a typology of metafiction. She suggests that some texts "are diegetically self-conscious while others demonstrate primarily an awareness of their linguistic constitution" (7). This means that some texts are narrated self-reflectively, and self-awareness is intended to draw attention to the fictional and constructed nature of story as whole, while others rely on wordplay and textuality in order to reflect on the nature of text and language. Within these two types of metafiction there is a further distinction between "the overt and the covert" (Hutcheon 7). The overtly narcissistic text reveals its "self-awareness in explicit

thematizations or allegorizations of [its] diegetic or linguistic identity within the text [itself]" (Hutcheon 7). Conversely, the covert text internalizes this process, actualizes it: "such a text is self-reflective but not necessarily self-conscious" (Hutcheon 7).

Baltimore's Mansion is diegetically, but not linguistically, narcissistic. It is concerned not with its textuality, but with the constructed nature of the narrative it tells. Yet in his memoir, Johnston does not rely solely on overt or covert techniques, but instead utilizes a plethora of literary devices to both overtly and covertly reflect on the constructed and creative nature of memory. Johnston's narrative in the first-person present, in conjunction with – and in contrast to – his use of the past tense, overtly reflects on authorship and memory construction. In contrast, his use of multiple narrative voices and the identifying pronoun "he" function as covert indicators of self-reflection.

I introduced the idea of metamemoir with a quotation in which Wayne describes his inability to write of Newfoundland while there: "I have chosen the one profession that makes it impossible for me to live here" (Johnston 236). This, however, is not the only

overt statement reflecting on authorship and memory. Towards the end of the novel Johnston writes of a solitary stay on an island that used to be a small outpost. He writes: "having been away from Newfoundland for five years, I came back three years ago and now, at the age of thirty, am trying to decide if I should leave again" (216). Johnston's use of the word "now" at this specific moment in the novel contextualizes the entire memoir temporally. "Now" implicates the time of writing; the memoir itself exists in "now," in this decisive trip, in solitude, and ironically in a promise: "I am not allowed to write" (Johnston 217). Wayne's statement regarding why he has no watch is similarly overt, but functions differently. Wayne says, "I have no watch. Any watch I wear or even put in my pocket keeps time unreliably and within a week or so stops altogether" (Johnston 218). While also a temporal signifier, this statement functions metaphorically, suggesting an inability to exist in the present, the past always unconsciously pulling Wayne back, bending time.

Johnston's use of the first-person voice in the past tense through many sections of the novel is another overtly self-reflexive

technique. By narrating using the past tense, Johnston again draws attention to temporality: “it was a long time before I realized they might not miss it as much as I missed being there” (231). When Johnston writes of the way he *acted* as opposed to the way he *acts*, he specifically acknowledges that this is not *what happened*, but what he *remembers* having happened, what he remembers having felt: “even when this feeling had passed my memories of home seemed less legitimate, almost counterfeit” (230). Johnston uses the past tense to acknowledge that these are merely the present words he uses to describe past events.

In contrast to overtly narcissistic diegetic characteristics such as narrating in the past tense, Johnston employs covert literary devices to further draw attention to the constructed nature of memory. The use of the term covert here does not imply that these devices are harder to detect. Rather, it suggests that the process of self-reflection “is internalized, actualized” (Hutcheon 7), not acknowledged or recognized by the text/narrative voice. Covert self-reflection presents itself to the reader merely as a literary device, not a characteristic of the plot. It is

important to draw attention to what covert really means in a meta-analysis, for the covertly narcissistic devices Johnston employs are not only untraditional in the genre of life writing, but are also the most obvious indicators of the creative/constructed nature of the text. Johnston writes using multiple narrative voices, sometimes inhabiting his father, sometimes his grandfather (who died before he was born), telling their stories, without ever acknowledging them as having been passed down to him,

in the morning, when he looks out the window, the horses are lined up on the hill as always. Over breakfast, his father grumbles that the line is especially long. He will spend the first half of the day fishing, the other half making shoes and shoeing horses without a break. (Johnston 24)

His sole reliance on the pronoun “he” when narrating these sections in the third-person-focalized voice further reflects on the constructed nature of memory.

Each time Johnston inhabits his father or his grandfather, creating their memories in the present, he does so using third-person-focalized narrative voice. In other words, Johnston writes as a specific character in the

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third person, he “tells us how that character sees the world, but can't, or at least doesn't, read the mind of all the characters this way” (“The Narrator”). Whether he is writing from his father's perspective, or his grandfather's, Johnston relies solely on the pronoun “he” as the subject of narration, “he knows the way home is not a straight line, but it seems to him as though they are walking one” (115). It is up to the reader to contextualize the subject and figure out whether it is Johnston's father, Arthur, or his father's father, Charlie. Reliance on the pronoun “he” is self-reflective in the way that it is indicative of memory. Johnston is intentionally inhospitable in these select passages, drawing attention to, and reflecting on, the way in which these imaginings of memories are first created in his mind, before being transcribed into words. For Johnston, memories and imaginings do not rely on names and language; this knowledge is always already internalized. It is only when we translate these thought processes to words in order to share them with others that it becomes necessary to identify subjects by name. By relying solely on identifiers such as “he” and “his father,” Johnston is intentionally tying his written narrative to an internalized process of

imagining and remembering. This process is inherently self-reflective, drawing attention to the linguistically constructed nature of *Baltimore's Mansion*.

Toward the end of the memoir, Johnston begins to use the third-person-focalized voice to describe detailed accounts of events, which he simultaneously acknowledges may not have happened the way he describes, or may not have happened at all. Through the focalized perspective of his father's father, Johnston describes Charlie's decision to vote for confederation, an act that defines him as a Closet Confederate, and supposedly leads to the falling out with his son Arthur:

He lays the paper on the table and keeps it in place with his left hand while with his right he scrawls an X. He will wonder later if his hand was God guided to do what to him seemed and always will seem wrong, if others were likewise moved to go against what they believed, perhaps more than half as many as the margin of defeat. (245)

Not long before this section of the novel, however, Johnston directly acknowledges that the idea that Charlie was a Closet Confederate is not sure knowledge, but rather an educated

guess used as an explanation for his own father's estrangement from Charlie:

Why *not* Charlie? The Closet Confederates. Apparent zealots to the cause, for whom everyone who knew them would have vouchsafed. As everyone who knew him would have done for Charlie.(238)

Johnston includes his past imaginings in his memoir; he creates affective fictions, a transcription of the memory of past musings. In contextualizing specific remembered narratives as imagined, Johnston draws attention not only to their initial fictional status, but also to the process of re-fictionalizing required when remembering. By drawing attention to this process, Johnston simultaneously draws attention to the further process of re-creation required to translate memory into language for the sake of sharing.

Baltimore's Mansion is a metamemoir, self-reflective of its status as a work of life writing, but more significantly, reflexive of the very nature of memory and remembering.³ As

³Linda Hutcheon relies on the term "reflective" in her text *Narcissistic Narrative*, but both reflective and reflexive connote self-awareness, or a process of self-acknowledgment. While both terms have been used in

a result, Johnston's memoir perhaps holds more validity than traditional life writings, for he writes with a conscious awareness of the creative and constructed nature of memory. Furthermore, the nature of Johnston's text as a bildungsroman is characterized by the inclusion of completely fictional and imagined memories. By including these constructions, Johnston draws attention to the natural way in which individuals understand themselves by filling in gaps and puzzles in memory with hypothetical fictions.

Johnston's identity is constructed through a process of narration: "narrative and identity are performed simultaneously [. . .] in a single act of self-narration" (Eakin, *Making Selves* 101). His memoir reveals that, like his father, he too is "consumed by an obsession with an imaginary Newfoundland" (Wylie 92). Johnston's multigenerational memoir seems to be as much a cathartic solution to this obsession - or a method of restructuring and organizing his own identity as an author - as it

this paper, it is important, especially here, to note that "reflexive" is also indicative of unconscious action or reaction.

is a public work. Johnston's choice to live in exile from Newfoundland gives *Baltimore's Mansion* an "ending typical of the bildungsroman, which characteristically concludes with the protagonist coming into maturity and finding his or her station in life" (Wylie 92). Johnston directly exposes readers to the notion that the writing of autobiography is "an integral part of a lifelong process of identity formation in which acts of self-narration play a major part" (Eakin, *Making Selves* 101).

As much as *Baltimore's Mansion* is a narrative of individual identification, so too is it a multigenerational work with a distinct emphasis on ideas of heritage and inheritance. In his book *Making Selves*, Paul Eakin suggests that the prevalence of traditionally autonomous perspectives in autobiography has led to an absence of autobiographical criticism that addresses "the extent to which the self is defined by – and lives in terms of – its relations with others" (*Making Selves* 43). *Baltimore's Mansion*, however, is not traditionally autonomous, for Johnston's use of multiple narrative voices directly enacts a sense of polynotomy, or the idea that individuals are products of their histories and

their surroundings. Furthermore, by employing overt and covert diegetically narcissistic devices, Johnston has created a text that is simultaneously its own first critique. The metamemoir is self-reflective and self-conscious, critically addressing and responding to the gap in autobiographical critique that Eakin has proposed: the absence of research into the ways by which “*all* identity is relational” (*Making Selves* 43).

The relational nature of identity is closely tied to the importance of imagined stories in self-construction, and is directly referenced once in *Baltimore's Mansion*. During a brief, overtly self-reflective moment, Johnston indirectly declares his purpose statement. Immediately before leaving Newfoundland, Wayne stands outside with his father, burning his childhood belongings, ceremonially purging his past. Standing there, he imagines his father's hope that Wayne will one day write about him, Arthur “cannot get the story straight in his mind and believes that when I tell it he will understand it better” (Johnston 196). In this moment, Johnston openly realizes the importance of narrative in identity formation: “the self in question is a self defined by and transacted in narrative process”

(Eakin, *Making Selves* 101). Furthermore, Johnston indirectly states that *Baltimore's Mansion* is a book for his father, intended to peacefully reconcile Arthur's identity, as much as his own.

Wayne Johnston's multigenerational metamemoire, *Baltimore's Mansion*, is inherently self-reflexive of its linguistic construction, but more significantly, it is self-conscious of its status as a memoir. Johnston employs multiple meta-devices in order to overtly and covertly emphasize the role of narrativization, relations, and heritage in identity formation. The text tells, and critiques the ways in which we constantly (re)construct our memories, and define ourselves through stories. *Baltimore's Mansion* is a narrative of self-discovery and self-creation, but so too is it a story of generations and of heritage. More than anything else, however, *Baltimore's Mansion* is a memoir that reflects on the way in which we use stories to make sense of our lives.

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