Challenging Generic Conventions: Levels of Life by Julian Barnes and the Genre of (Auto)thanatography

There is a time when death is an event, an adventure, and as such mobilizes, interests, activates, tetanises. And then one day it is no longer an event, it is another duration, compressed, insignificant, not narrated, grim, without recourse: true mourning not susceptible to any narrative dialectic. (Barthes 2011, 50)

The most abstract? The equivocations of death, of the word death. (Ricoeur 2009, 7)

Book are not life, however much we might prefer it if they were. (Barnes 2002, 95)

The works of Julian Barnes have always been powerfully resistant to the "law[s] of genre[s]" and have eagerly welcomed generic "impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity" (Derrida 1980, 204). In a recent interview with Mark Lawson, Barnes confessed to a sense of unease as far as labelling and strict categorisation of his works are concerned: "If they [booksellers and readers] ask me to label it, I would just say a 'book.' Or, I would say, the author's name is the label" (Lawson 2013, n.p.). Violation of norms and refusal to fulfil a singular generic designation appear to lie at the very heart of Barnes's rich oeuvre. His best known piece, Flaubert's Parrot of 1984, is, in the words of its creator, an "upside-down novel" (ibid.), a truly hybrid text where "clarity is the hardest thing of all" (Barnes 2002, 116). Hence, the fictional story of the retired doctor Geoffrey Braithwaite is supplemented by, among others, critical and scholarly essays on Flaubert's writing, a biographical study as well as excerpts from the writer's letters and diaries, a chronology of Flaubert's life, a "train-spotter's" guide to his life and works (including animal imagery in the novels of the French master entitled "The Flaubert Bestiary"), and examination papers. Transgressing the laws of genres is even more apparent in Barnes's A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters of 1989. The volume, which one critic aptly compared to a "symphony" (Moseley 1997, 115), comprises of highly heterogeneous chapters some of which can be classified as an essay on art history ("The Survivor"), a travelogue ("The Mountain"), a memoir ("Parenthesis"), and a collection of letters ("Upstream!"). An interplay of factual and fictional genres also comes to the fore in Barnes's novel of 2005. Arthur & George narrates selected episodes from the life of Arthur Conan Doyle and, true to its generic provenience, i.e. a "biographical-novel-about-a-writer" (Lodge 2007, 10), it boasts the characteristics of a borderland text. Essentially, a 'biographical-novel-about-a-writer'

1 This quality of Barnes's writing has been noted by many, e.g. James B. Scott who called Flaubert's Parrot a "trans-generic prose text" (Scott 1990, 58) and Carlos Fuentes who, in his review of Staring at the Sun, enthused about Barnes breaking "barriers of conventional time and genre" (Fuentes 1987). When writing about Arthur & George, Bożena Kucala emphasised "the novel's challenge to classic narrative conventions" and its resistance to classification due to "a hybrid blend of fact and fiction and of different genres" (Kucala 2012, 229).
is an impure genre since it hopes to combine biography with fiction (and, hence, affirm a truth "beyond the fraudulent itinerary and chronology" (Gusdorf 1980, 43)) and, consequently, painfully negotiates its affinities between artistic/ literary demands and historical/objective functions of the narrative. Like séances in which Arthur Conan Doyle obsessively participated towards the end of his life, a "biographical-novel-about-a-writer" works best "when there is a clever mixture of the true and the false" (Barnes 2006, 491).

Hence, when, in 2013, Julian Barnes published his new work entitled *Levels of Life*, a recognition that the volume consisted of three generically distinctive parts (a biographical essay entitled "The Sing of Height," a short story "On the Level" and a memoir "The Loss of Depth") was not particularly surprising. To anyone familiar with the writer's previous experiments in de-stabilising texts and violating various norms and demarcations erected by proponents of structuralism, *Levels of Life* could well appear as just another Barnesian book. However, the volume's transgressive qualities were overshadowed by the contextual circumstances under which it was released: *Levels of Life* was Barnes's literary response to the death of his wife Pat Kavanagh, who died in 2008. Almost immediately, the book was classified as a work of (auto)thanatography, i.e. a life-writing micro-genre which ostensibly addresses the theme of death – either one's own or the other's. In the last twenty years or so, (auto)thanatographies have managed to create their own laws of genre. They do not only appear to pose a similar set of questions, but also display markers that legitimise their specific generic affiliation. The aim of this paper is, hence, to discuss conventions of (auto)thanatographies and the way Barnes's work manages to transcend them.

In the mid-1990s, when the so-called "memoir boom" (cf. Anderson 2011, 113-124) was still in its infancy, the celebrated American literary critic Nancy K. Miller wrote an essay entitled "Representing Others: Gender and the Subjects of Autobiography" in which she argued against "a cold-war rhetoric of autonomous selfhood" (1994, 3) and proposed a new view of male autobiographical identity. When analysing Jacques Derrida's *Circonfession* (an autobiographical commentary and a re-reading of Augustine's *Confessions*), Miller focuses on passages dedicated to illness and death of Derrida's mother and, consequently, makes the following conclusion: "autobiography – identity through alterity – is also writing against death twice: the other's and one's own. Every autobiography, we might say, is also an autothanatography" (1994, 12).

Though Miller did not propose to read (auto)thanatography in narrow generic terms, the category that she coined was instantly appropriated by life writing critics, including Susanna Egan who recognised (auto)thanatography as "the prime

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2 How does one write about loss and bereavement? How does one speak for the dead/the survivors? How does grief change over time? What is the purpose of such accounts? Should they be read in terms of therapeutic companionship that they offer only? Can literariness/artistry and grief be allies?

3 My spelling of (auto)thanatography, i.e. with the prefix "auto," meaning "self," in brackets, is deliberate and hopes to avoid further split into autothanatographies proper, or "monologic autothanatographies" (narratives when one narrates one's own impending death such as Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* or Harold Brodkey's *This Wild Darkness*) and thanatographies (narratives in which the narrator addresses the death of the other(s)).

4 For Miller death (like the other) is autobiography's ontological principle since "intimate and violent dialogues with living and dead others perform the bedrock of self-construction itself" (19). She also states: "One always confesses the other. (...) In order to represent himself completely, the son must represent his mother, his other, without omitting a word. It falls to the son, to recreate the dead parent through writing; to give birth to the author of one's life, and hence to authorise himself" (11).
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Synechdoche for all specifically crisis-driven autobiography, which has traditionally been, almost by definition, 'obscene': off the stage of cultural acceptance, off the margins of literary canons, marginal even to autobiography studies because its single focus seems to represent 'the life' inadequately" (1999, 226). In Mirror Talk. Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography, Egan provided an extended and insightful study of the narratives about the dying self and other. Analysing a vast body of texts, Egan acknowledged AIDS and cancer-related autobiographical narratives of the 1980s and 1990s as first instances of contemporary "death writing" (1999, 207) and claimed that death, once private and shameful, now powerfully insists on being heard:

Next to birth, death is the most absolutely singular experience of disconnection (no one can die for us or even, truly, with us), and, at the same time, the most entirely universal: no one can avoid dying. Like birth which separates each infant from a (m)other's body into its own solitary identity, death is as powerfully separating experience, because it is singular, and because living try so hard to avoid it. For these reasons, death has been a taboo subject in the Western world for many generations, hidden behind euphemisms, the dying hidden behind hospital screens, medical practitioners – dedicated to life-saving hidden behind life-extending technologies. But death will not die and cannot be ignored. The spectre of death hovers over all autobiography, usually unnamed, providing serious impetus to the activity of setting record straight, clearing old scores, avoiding misinterpretation, taking control of the absolutely uncontrollable – the "end" of the story. These forms of control make sense, however, only for so long as the story retains explanatory power; for the more sophisticated of contemporary autobiographers, narrative completion, like famous last words, can seem inappropriately romantic and contrived. (1999, 195-196)

Similarly to G. Thomas Couser's parallel discussion of the genre of autopathography, Egan also recognised that (auto)thanatography is, essentially, anti-death writing (consequently, most literally life writing), where a dying person (or their companions) want to take charge and claim agency of their story, make meaning out of life, while the narrative itself testifies to the "revealing processes of self-understanding" (1999, 200; 8, 207). According to Egan, such attempts are "less concerned with mimesis, however, than with authenticating the processes of discovery and re-cognition" (1999, 7).

Since the publication of Miller's and Egan's works, one has observed an unprecedented influx of (auto)thanatographies which has been accompanied by an arrival and proliferation of various new categories aimed to "designate narratives that focus on death" (Couser 2012, 43). Consequently, death writing has been labelled "bereavement memoir" (Jolly 2001, 568) "memoir on loss,"5 "misery memoir" (Anderson 2011, 116), "narratives of grief" and "narratives of mourning" (Smith and Watson 2010, 138), or "end-of-life memoirs" (Berman 2012, 11). Simultaneously, a set of thematic/formal characteristics that can function as markers of (auto)thanatography have emerged (Smith and Watson 2010, 138-141). Firstly, (auto)thanatographies appear to occupy a threshold space between intimacy and private mourning (contemplation and chronicle of personal loss) and "collective vulnerability and communal loss" (Smith and Watson 2010, 139). Such a narrative is a public form of mourning not only because it 'publicises' grief of an individual, but also due to a public role that it plays. Secondly, grief memoirs are means of endurance, testaments to the life of the departed that wish to commemorate the

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5 Though rarely applied by critics, the term is often used in reviews, blogs and other types of writing (e.g. in her memoir entitled With the Kisses of His Mouth, Monique Roffey refers to Joan Didion's The Year of Magical Thinking as a "memoir on loss").
(mostly beloved) dead and preserve their memory for posterity. At the same time, written in the shadow of their creators' inevitable demise, they are acutely conscious of their narrators' own impending mortality. Also, (auto)thanatographies most often function as books of consolation: they are guidebooks on how to deal with loss and bereavement, and how to recover from grief. In short, they are manuals of (self-) repair. The Prioritisation of this therapeutic function led to the emergence of another term, namely "scriptotherapy" by Suzette Henke (1998). According to Henke, the singular objective of grief memoirs (and other types of autobiographical writing dealing with trauma) is self-healing. While commenting on this category, G. Thomas Couser trenchantly points out that "the term emphasizes the work of the narrative – its goal or aim – rather than its form" (Couser 2012, 43). Couser's comment brings one to the arguably most important debate which remains at the heart of contemporary grief writing: therapeutics vs. literariness. In recent years, inundated with the products of grief memoirists, many have wondered about the role and function of (auto)thanatographies. In Nothing to Be Frightened Of Julian Barnes challenged the idea that writing about grief/telling one's story is an indispensable element of healing and labelled it "therapeuto-autobiographical fallacy" (2009, 97). In an essay entitled "Regulating Sorrow" from the collection Through the Window, he further pondered on the difficulties that (auto)thanatographies pose for interpreters:

In some way autobiographical accounts of grief are unfalsifiable, and therefore unreviewable by any normal criteria. The book is repetitive? So is grief. The book is obsessive? So is grief? The book is at times incoherent? So is grief. Phrases like "Friends have been wonderful inviting me to their homes" are platitudes; but grief is filled with platitudes. (2012, 222)

But others were less kind than Barnes. Infuriated by exhibitionism, cliché and melodrama in recently published Joan Didion's The Year of Magical Thinking, David Rieff's Swimming in a Sea of Death, Anne Roiphe's Epilogue, Joyce Carol Oates's A Widow's Story, Meghan O'Rourke's The Long Goodbye and Francisco Goldman's Say Her Name (all about the death of spouses or parents), Frances Stonor Saunders in the Guardian Book Review claimed, in August 2011, that it was "time to stop the outpouring of memoirs" and, in a crushing review of the above mentioned works of mourning, implored the memoirists: "don't give me grief" (1-3).

However, despite voices of discontent, (auto)thanatographies, those "late apprenticeship[s]" at mourning (Ricoeur 2009, 7), have become one of the most popular genre of life writing published over the last two decades. Their central position in contemporary (auto)biographical practices has been confirmed not only by the genre's international impact, but the sheer number (and profile) of those who have published their attempts at grief memoirs: from Jacques Derrida's The Work of Mourning and Paul Ricoeur's Vivant jusqu'à la mort suivi de Fragments, to Roland Barthes's Journal de deuil. Recently6, a new micro-genre of (auto)thanatographies has been identified, i.e. a "memoir of spousal loss" (Berman 2010, 8), in which memoirists write about their deceased spouses. Some of the best known specimens of the micro-genre include John Bayley's three memoirs about his wife Iris Murdoch, Joan Didion's The Year of Magical Thinking, Antonia Fraser's Must You Go?, and Joyce Carol Oates's A Widow Story. In 2013, the corpus of spousal loss memoirs was enlarged by the release of Julian Barnes's Levels of Life.

6 Though the tradition of grief memoirs by writers can be traced back to C.S. Lewis's A Grief Observed and Simone de Beauvoir's Une mort très douce of 1964.
The book was by no means Barnes's first exploration of (auto)thanatographies. In 2008, he published a memoir entitled *Nothing to Be Frightened of* in which, despite or, perhaps, precisely because he had identified himself as "thanatophile" (2009, 25), Barnes addressed the theme of death – from historical, literary, psychological and, necessarily, personal points of view. He bluntly confessed to his obsession with death:

> My friend R. recently asked me how often I think about death, and in what circumstances. At least once each walking day, I replied; and then there are intermittent nocturnal attacks. Mortality often gatecrashes my consciousness when the outside world presents an obvious parallel: as evening falls, as the days shorten, or towards the end of a long day's hiking. A little more originally, perhaps, my wake-up calls frequently shrills at the start of a sports event on television. (2009, 23)

Barnes's book was published in March 2008. In the autumn of the same year, Pat Kavanagh, Barnes's wife of twenty-nine years, died of a brain tumour. Until the release of *Levels of Life*, Barnes remained silent on the topic of his wife's death – with the exception of a review of Joyce Carol Oates's *A Widow's Story* published in *The New York Review of Books* in April 2011[^7], which, to those familiar with Barnes's own trauma, poignantly ended with a telling quotation from Dr Johnson:

> He that outlives the wife whom he has long loved, sees himself disjoined from the only mind that has the same hopes, and fears, and interests; from the only companion with whom he has shared much good or evil; and with whom he could set his mind at liberty, to retrace the past, or anticipate the future. The continuity of being is lacerated; the settled course of sentiment and action is stopped; and life stands suspended and motionless, till it is driven by external causes into a new channel. But the time of suspense is dreadful. (Johnson in Barnes 2012, 227)

Two years later Barnes published *Levels of Life*: the product of that "time of suspense." The unorthodoxy of Barnes's volume already manifests itself at the level of form. *Levels of Life* is by no means a typical first-person autobiographical account of spousal grief, but a tripartite narrative composed of three distinctive genres (of which only the last part, "The Loss of Depth," can be formally classified as a memoir[^8]) which are brought together by, among others, the unifying theme of love and loss, anaphoric beginnings[^9], and an overall metaphor of height and depth, horizontality and verticality, truth and magic, photography and ballooning.

The volume's first part entitled "The Sin of Height" is both a historical essay on ballooning and a biographical essay on three exceptional balloonists: Sarah Bernhardt, Fred Burnaby, and, especially Félix Tournachon. Remaining faithful to the generic

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[^7]: It was later included in his 2012 collection *Through the Window*.

[^8]: i.e. a subgeneric of life writing consisting of personal recollections which take "a segment of life [of one's own, or other's], not its entirety," and focus "on interconnected experiences" (Smith and Watson 2010, 274). Regardless of an on-going debate on the term and its characteristics (e.g. Couser 2012, 15-32), critics largely agree that memoirs necessarily depict the lives of real individuals – be it of the author, or, more frequently, someone they have known personally.

[^9]: "You put together two things that have not been put together before. And the world is changed" (*Levels of Life*, 3); "You put together two things that have not been put together before; and sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't" (31); "You put together two people who have not been put together before. Sometimes it is like the first attempt to harness a hydrogen balloon to a fire balloon: do you prefer crash and burn, or burn and crash? But sometimes it works, and something new is made, and the world is changed" (67).
requirements of an essay, Barnes investigates some of the first attempts to soar into the sky and master the skills of ballooning considered "a freedom subservient to the powers of wind and weather" (Levels of Life, 9). Hence, the writer introduces the first important trope of the volume: the feeling of love is compared to an ascent of a balloonist into the sky. Providing extensive quotations from the writings of the 17th and 18th century aeronauts, Barnes reminds one that being in the air (and, simultaneously, being in love) is a "moral feeling," the source of "happiness," the space where one can "hear oneself living" (Levels of Life, 12). But, as examples of Simon Magus and Icarus prove, a desire to "visit God's space," (13) this "sin of getting above yourself" (14) is often punished. Consequently, the writer's attention is turned to Félix Tournachon, also known as Nadar, who in 1863 took off from the Parisian Champs du Mars and, after seventeen hazardous hours, crash-landed near Hanover. Centrality of Tournachon – an ardent believer in "heavier-than-air flight" (Levels of Life, 25) – for Barnes's narrative is twofold. First, Nadar's story allows him to write about the man's relationship with his wife Ernestine who provided a "pattern" to his life (24), and who, after fifty-five years of marriage, died in 1909. In this way, when writing about Tournachon losing "his rudder," (25) Barnes, subtly and indirectly, introduces the theme of marital grief. Secondly, the French "journalist, caricaturist, photographer, balloonist, entrepreneur and inventor, a keen register of patents and founder of companies; a tireless self-publicist, and in old age a prolific writer of unreliable memoirs" (15) is singled out since he was the first aerostatic photographer. To rephrase the opening lines of the chapter, Nadar put together two things that had not been put before, namely photography and aeronautics and changed the world forever (18). By means of this scientific advance, Barnes concludes, "the sin of height was purged" (26). However, the figure of Tournachon does not only offer an illustration of Barnes's ideas, but, I should like to claim, it, in fact, can be seen as a component that explains and thematizes the nature of the whole volume. Nadar soared into the sky not to reveal what was "up in the clouds" (64), but to show what was "on the level" (60). Tellingly, "The Sin of Height" ends with an account of one of the members of the Apollo 8 mission, William Anders, who says: "I think it struck everybody that here we'd come 240,000 miles to see the Moon and it was the Earth that was really worth looking at" (27). It appears to me that the same principle lies at the very heart of this first chapter of the writer's (auto)thanatography. Barnes seems to write about reality exterior to his own loss, yet, inevitably, addresses a very personal grief. Discreetly, he looks at himself from afar, and "makes[s] the subjective suddenly objective" (27).

"On the Level," the volume's second chapter, is a no less exceptional piece of (auto)thanatography than "The Sin of Height." It opens as another biographical essay, but soon transmutes into a fictional story (though based on facts) about an affair between two historical figures introduced in the first part of the volume, namely Sarah Bernhardt and Fred Burnaby. Ostensibly, "On the Level" is a love story, yet a tragic one, which fulfils the premise expressed by a narrator: "Every love story is a potential grief story. If not at first, then later. If not for one, then for the other. Sometimes, for both" (36-37). For the writer, love is the "meeting point of truth and magic. Truth, as in photography; magic, as in ballooning" (ibid.) – thus, a further link between the two sections of Levels of Life is created. Moreover, identically to the previous section,
here Barnes also returns to the idea of bringing two elements together and ponders on the result of such an encounter:

You put together two people who have not been put together before; and sometimes the world is changed, sometimes not. They may crash and burn, or burn and crash. But sometimes, something new is made, and then the world is changed. Together, in that first exaltation, that first roaring sense of uplift, they are greater than their two separate selves. Together, they see further, and they see more clearly. (31-32)

As exemplified by the above-quoted excerpt, the metaphor of ballooning and the language of aeronautics permeate the pages of "On the Level." Bernhardt and Burnaby, both balloonists, are described as "soaring" (49) and "in the clouds" (54). Aware of all the differences between the lovers, the Englishman knows that in order to be with the famous actress he needs a northerly wind "which is somewhat rare and unreliable" (42). He also recognises potential non-reciprocity and incommensurability of feelings, the fact that "the winds do not always blow in the same direction at different heights" and if the right wind is not found one may end up in water (43) – the remark which Bernhardt leaves "hanging in the air" (ibid.). The narrator assists his characters in exploiting the metaphorical language of ballooning:

We live on the flat, on the level, and yet – and so – we aspire. Groundlings, we can sometimes reach as far as the gods. Some soar with art, others with religion; most with love. But when we soar, we can also crash. There are few soft landings. (36)

Unsurprisingly, there is no soft landing for Bernhardt and Burnaby. The latter believes that the future belongs to "heavier-than-air machines;" the ones that can be steered and whose ascent and descent can be ordered. In other words, he wishes to marry her. However, the former "balloonatic" (55) believes in danger and absolute freedom of unrestricted soaring in the air. She refuses to refrain from a constant flow of "new sensations, new emotions;" (56) "I shall never take that heavier-than-air machine with anyone," Bernhardt concludes (56-57). Burnaby's love story turns into a grief story and his mourning over a break-up with Bernhardt lasts, as Barnes notes, several years. Although it occupies only several pages in the narrative it inevitably prepares the readers for the final, third part of the volume: the story of another man's crash.

"The Loss of Depth" is the most personal part of the whole book delivered by an unequivocally autobiographical voice of the writer who has been "weaken[ed]" for ever (84). Once again, the section opens with an anaphoric paragraph musing on the effect of bringing two people together, but its conclusion differs from the previous closures. The narrator, who in the fourth paragraph of the chapter will identify himself as Barnes, says: "Then, at some point, sooner or later, for this reason or that, one of them is taken away. And what is taken away is greater than the sum of what was there. This may not be mathematically possible; but it is emotionally possible" (67). The "sudden spear-thrust to the neck" which terminated the life of Burnaby is, in Barnes's case, the death of his wife Pat Kavanagh, "the heart of [his] life, the life of [his] heart" (68). "The Loss of Depth" is, unequivocally, a work of mourning as incessantly acknowledged by the writer: "I mourn her uncomplicatedly, and absolutely. (...) I miss her in every action, and in every inaction" (81). It is a document of Barnes's struggles after Kavanagh's demise, his longing for her which he defines, after the German word Sehnsucht, as a specific kind of loneliness: "her-lessness" (113). Thus, what, one may and should wonder, makes this particular bereavement
story – in line with the claim expressed in the title of the present paper – specifically un- or anti-generic?

Firstly, the matter of literariness and the volume's prioritisation of the aesthetic function\(^1\). Undoubtedly, Barnes writes *imaginatively* about grief. The chapter is, once again, infused with the tropes of ballooning, of ascent and descent, of crash and by this means it becomes organically connected to the previous sections. A mourner is compared to a balloonist who comes down in the freezing ocean "equipped only with an absurd cork overjacket that is supposed to keep you alive," (69) while grief is described as "not a place of upper air" (82). Spatial imagery also plays an important role in Barnes's discussion of bereavement. The one who mourns is the one who has lost height. Simultaneously, with the loss of belief in God ("this long-standing imaginary friend of ours" [86]) or afterlife, one has also lost depth – the metaphor for the underworld where the dead still live (86-87). Moreover, grief is believed to be vertical, while mourning horizontal: "Grief makes your stomach turn, snatches the breath from you, cuts off the blood supply to the brain; mourning blows you in the new direction" (88). But it is not only the shared language of the volume that unites the three pieces. One cannot overlook a number of explicit references to Burnaby or Nadar to be discovered on the pages of "The Loss of Depth" since episodes from their lives are inherently inscribed into the diegetic framework of Barnes's personal narrative. For example, when he wants to talk about transience and evanescence of life, he turns to a story of Burnaby travelling in a balloon over the Thames and discovering that the sun projects the image of their craft onto the clouds below: "Burnaby compared it to a 'colossal photograph.' And so it is with our life: so clear, so sure, until, for one reason or another – the balloon moves, the cloud disperses, the sun changes angle – the image is lost for ever, available only to memory, turned into anecdote" (110).

As I have already remarked, (auto)thanatographies often display a tension between intimate and public forms of grief. Undoubtedly, Barnes recognises his position as another in a series of mourners (he quotes from Ivy Compton-Burnett, Ford Madox Ford, E.M. Forster, Odilon Redon, among others) and, appropriately, he does not refrain from the frequent use of such pronouns as "you" and "we," which emphasise the collective nature of bereavement and the shared lot of the bereaved. However, "The Loss of Depth" refuses to perform what appears to be the primary function of (auto)thanatology: it is not a testament to the life and work of the beloved person. Barnes hardly ever mentions his wife and not even once does he refer to Pat Kavanagh using her name. Paradoxically, one learns more about Kavanagh from a few passages from Edmund White's 2014 memoir *Inside a Pearl* (about White's years in Paris)\(^1\), than from the entire volume of Barnes's memoir. Though the writer calls himself Kavanagh's "principal rememberer" (90), Levels of Life contains no memories of Barnes's deceased spouse. Undoubtedly, the volume is a personal narrative; however, it is not intimate (Latin *intimus* meaning most private, innermost). It is a memoir of self, rather than of the other. Towards the end of the book, Barnes

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1 I do not wish to claim that all (auto)thanatographies are essentially anti-literary, since the example of Joan Didion's or Joyce Carol Oates's works prove otherwise. Nevertheless, I consider Barnes's *Levels of Life* the most literary specimen due to its unparalleled generic hybridity, thematic convergence, as well as structural patterns masterly executed and coherently applied to all three chapters of the volume.

12 On just three pages, one learns about Kavanagh's origin (from South Africa, Irish family), physical features ("a slender, beautiful redhead with high cheekbones"), professional life (actress and literary agent), pastimes (hiking in Provence with Barnes, cooking), love life (affair with Jeanette Winterson) (White 2014, 173-175).
indirectly provides his readers with an explanation of his wife's absence from the pages of Levels of Life. He draws a distinction between "binocular" memory and "monocular" memory, the former being "corroborated by the one who was there at the time. What we did, where we went, whom we met, how we felt. How we were together" (109). Two memories of the same guarantee a "surer" single memory, "by triangulation, by aerial surveying" (110). Barnes concludes:

And so that memory, now in the first person-singular, changes. Less the memory of an event than the memory of a photograph of the event. And nowadays – having lost height, precision, focus – we are no longer sure we trust photography as we once did. Those old familiar snaps of happier times have come to seem less primal, less like photographs of life itself, more like photographs of photographs. (ibid.)

Barnes is left with a monocular memory, insufficient, he confesses, to recall the life shared with his wife. This might explain why the writer turns, instead, to the documented and "shared" (or, singlehandedly imagined) lives of Sarah Bernhardt, Fred Burnaby, and Félix Tournachon.

Another important feature of "The Loss of Depth" – which, I believe, powerfully corresponds to its anti-intimate character – is analytical\(^\text{13}\) and non-descriptive nature of writing. Though based on his personal experience, the writer offers a detailed discussion of grief and enters into dialogue with attitudes that people manifest towards death, theories of mourning, family and acquaintances who (mis-)behave towards the grievers. He concludes, among others, that grief is both banal and unique (70), that it often becomes a test of friendship (77), that its truths are inexpressible (78-79), that it "does not occupy a moral space" (82), that it re-configures time and space (84), that it destroys a belief in the existence of patterns (85). Most importantly, Barnes questions and rebels against the premise which, for many, is the founding pillar of (auto)thanatographies: a faith in their pedagogical or consolatory/therapeutic mission. Repeating (and re-phrasing) after Forster, Barnes challenges what he previously called "therapeuto-autobiographical fallacy": "One grief throws no light upon another" (70), while surviving the grief does not make one a "stronger" or "better" person (83). "Do you want art to be a healer? Send for the AMBULANCE GEORGE SAND," Barnes advised in Flaubert's Parrot. And added: "Do you want art to tell the truth? Send for the AMBULANCE FLAUBERT: though don't be surprised, when it arrives, if it runs over your legs" (Barnes 2002, 160-161). Levels of Life is not a healer, either. Barnes's constrained honesty, anti-sentimentalism and refusal to comply with any "normative" accounts of grief makes his narrative particularly idiosyncratic and, one could argue, profoundly painful.

Still, I should like to claim, uniqueness of Barnesian volume against other existing (auto)thanatographies is guaranteed – next to its formal generic hybridity, literariness as well stylistic and metaphorical synchronicity, anti-commemorativeness, considerable self-concealment and critique of the anticipated therapeutic impact of a narrative – by its refusal to follow a trajectory of grief\(^\text{14}\) which, according to Freud, should end, "after a certain lapse of time," when the work of mourning is completed and "the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (Freud 1961: 244-245). Barnes

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13 Perhaps most visible in his unsentimental and "un-magical" (to contrast with, for example, Didion's approach) analysis of dreams (96-97).

does not only openly challenge the five-stage path of mourning¹⁵ and its progress, argues in favour of "accumulation" of grief, but, unlike many of his fellow (auto)thanatographers, questions the very idea of 'success' at grief. Drawing a parallel between cancer patients and grief-stricken individuals, Barnes remains doubtful about the role of mind. He reminds us that, according to cancer studies, despite one's illusion that one has beaten the disease, one always remains in its grip: the cells have only "gone away to regroup" (*Levels of Life*, 118). "We imagine we have battled against it [grief], been purposeful, overcome sorrow, scrubbed the rust from," Barnes says, "when all that has happened is that grief has moved elsewhere, shifted its interest" (ibid.).

The ending of *Levels of Life* is not consolatory; it does not show Barnes "free and uninhibited," as Freud would expect him to be. However, it is not without a promise of hope¹⁷. For the last time Barnes returns to his aerial metaphors to announce to a damaged balloonist that he has not met his end yet:

> We did not make the clouds come in the first place, and have no power to disperse them. All that has happened is that from somewhere – or nowhere – an unexpected breeze has sprung up, and we are in movement again. But where are we being taken? To Essex? The German Ocean? Or, if the wind is northerly, then, perhaps, with luck, to France. (118)

Towards the end of *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* Barnes writes about writers who "die in character;"¹⁸ (177) people such as Zola and Hemingway whose death was consistent with the way they lived. *Levels of Life* is, I am convinced of the fact, written in unmistakably Barnesian character¹⁹. Despite a very special and traumatic context for his narrative, never does the writer succumb to conventional literary paradigms and, similarly to in his previous books, he challenges generic conventions, which the present paper hopes to demonstrate.

However, consistency between *Levels of Life* and Barnes's other works does not manifest itself exclusively in their shared propensity for formal unorthodoxy. In a deeply puzzling and troubling sense, traces and foresights of Barnes's widowhood and his experience of grief can be found in, for example, "Marriage Lines" and – perhaps most powerfully – in *Flaubert's Parrot*. In hindsight, a story of Geoffrey Braithwaite, also a widower, published twenty-four years before the death of Pat Kavanagh, does appear to a reader as uncannily accurate; almost a prediction of the writer's own condition.²⁰ Braithwaite says:

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15 For example, he says the following about step three: "When it came to my turn (…) I was never tempted to bargain because there was and is no one in my cosmos to bargain with" (94).

16 For example, the last line of Mark Doty's *On Heaven's Coast* reads: "A wild and bracing wind is blowing off the Atlantic, and suddenly the biting air's alive with big white flakes swirling in a shock of sunlight, and I'm alive with a strange kind of joy, stumbling up the dune into the winter wind, my face full of salt-spray and snow" (305).

17 Iconically speaking, the whole volume and its meticulous composition can be seen as a sign of Barnes's survival (or, pretence of survival): "Each of us must pretend to find, or re-erect, a pattern. Writers believe in the patterns their words make, which they hope and trust add up to ideas, to stories, to truths. This is always their salvation, whether griefless or griefstruck" (85-86).

18 Barnes writes about two types of dying in character, i.e. in personal character or, in the case of writers, in literary character. Doing both, which, as Barnes concludes, happens to some, would imply a profoundly autobiographical nature of one's literary oeuvre (177).

19 One could also claim that *Levels of Life* is an example of grieving in character.

20 Barnes, aware of this uncanny correspondence between work and life, read a passage from the book at Kavanagh's funeral (Barnes 2013, 115).
And you do come out of it, that's true. After a year, after five. But you don't come out of it like a train coming out of a tunnel, bursting through the Downs into sunshine and that swift, rattling descent to the Channel; you come out of it as a gull comes out of an oil-slick. You are tarred and feathered for life. (191)

*Levels of Life* is a testimony of Barnes's coming out of grief; but, indeed, coming out as a man who has been "tarred and feathered for life."

**Works Cited**


