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FROM WAR MEMORY TO PLANETARY CONSCIOUSNESS: ECOLOGICAL POSTMEMORY AND RECONSTRUCTIVE METAMODERNISM IN RICHARD FLANAGAN'S *QUESTION 7*

DE LA MEMORIA DE GUERRA A LA CONCIENCIA PLANETARIA: POSTMEMORIA ECOLÓGICA Y METAMODERNISMO RECONSTRUCTIVO EN QUESTION 7 DE RICHARD FLANAGAN

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Richard Flanagan's *Question 7* (2023) as a transformative work of postmemorial literature that fuses personal, historical, and ecological trauma within a metamodern framework. Drawing on the theories of Marianne Hirsch, Martin Heidegger, and Charlene Spretnak, the analysis traces how the novel expands postmemory beyond familial inheritance to encompass planetary crisis and ecological interconnectedness. Through narrative fragmentation, ethical self-reflection, and a poetics of care, Flanagan's text models a reconstructive metamodernism that resists nihilism and affirms the profound communion of all life. Ultimately, *Question 7* offers an ethics of love and responsibility, inviting readers to dwell authentically and respond to contemporary crises with renewed relationality and hope.

KEYWORDS: Richard Flanagan, postmemory, metamodernism, ecological ethics, trauma, reconstructive postmodernism

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza *Question 7* de Richard Flanagan como una obra transformadora de la literatura postmemorial que fusiona el trauma personal, histórico y ecológico dentro de un marco metamoderno. Basándose en las teorías de Marianne Hirsch, Martin Heidegger y Charlene Spretnak, el análisis muestra cómo la novela amplía la postmemoria más allá de la herencia familiar para abarcar la crisis planetaria y la interconexión ecológica. A través de la fragmentación narrativa, la autorreflexión ética y una poética del cuidado, el texto de Flanagan ejemplifica un metamodernismo reconstructivo que resiste el nihilismo y afirma la profunda comunión de toda la vida. En última instancia, *Question 7* propone una ética del amor y la responsabilidad, invitando al lector a habitar auténticamente y responder a las crisis contemporáneas con renovada relacionalidad y esperanza.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Flanagan, postmemoria, metamodernismo, ética ecológica, trauma, posmodernismo reconstructivo

1. Introduction

Richard Flanagan's *Question 7* (2023) reimagines the boundaries of postmemory by fusing personal trauma with planetary crisis, offering a narrative that is as formally experimental as it is ethically urgent. As the world approaches the 80th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the time of writing this article—a moment that marked both the dawn of the nuclear age and a catastrophic rupture in human and ecological history—the novel's call for memory, care, and responsibility resonates with renewed force. One of the book's most haunting threads is the paradox at its heart: while the atomic bomb killed tens of thousands of Japanese civilians, Flanagan acknowledges that it also saved his father's life as a prisoner of war in Japan and thus made his own existence possible. This moral complexity is woven throughout the narrative, as Flanagan reflects on the "butterfly effect" of history and the impossibility of any simple calculus of suffering and survival. As Tara June Winch observes, *Question 7* is "his finest book"—a novel that not merely pulls at a thread but "unravels an entire tapestry" of personal grief, historical trauma, colonial violence, and ecological consequence (Winch). And this thread begins with the conception of the atomic bomb.

Flanagan's text immerses readers in the textures of lived experience, where the legacies of war, colonization, and ecological collapse are not only remembered but felt in the body and landscape. Flanagan's narrative style—its attention to the mundane, its affective immediacy, its refusal of linearity—

enacts a form of ecological postmemory. This is a mode of remembrance that is not only about inheriting trauma, but about being moved by the ordinary in ways that make planetary consciousness felt, not just understood. Thus, moving beyond the familial and cultural frameworks articulated by Marianne Hirsch, the novel extends postmemory into the ecological domain, foregrounding how environmental destruction and historical violence are intimately entangled. Through its fragmented chronology and affective intensity, the broad premise of this article is that *Question 7* crafts a mode of literary remembrance akin to reconstructive metamodernism—one that insists on the ethical imperatives of care, relationality, and planetary consciousness, a demand made ever more urgent by the enduring shadow of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Building on Hirsch's foundational conception of postmemory as "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before" (5), *Question 7* reimagines this concept through a distinctly contemporary lens. Rather than offering a linear account of suffering or redemption, the novel fragments and refracts memory, drawing attention to the porous boundaries between the individual and the collective, the human and the non-human, the historical and the speculative. What begins as a classic narrative of filial remembrance then expands into a broader meditation on the entanglements between personal trauma, colonial history, nuclear anxiety, and ecological collapse. In doing so, the novel gestures towards what this article refers to as ecological postmemory: a mode of literary remembrance that acknowledges the persistence of trauma not only across generations, but also across species, landscapes, and planetary systems. Flanagan thus aligns the personal and familial with the environmental, confronting not only the aftermath of historical violence but also the slow, cumulative crises of the Anthropocene.

Flanagan himself has explained that the title *Question 7* is both structural and thematic, inspired by Anton Chekhov's puzzle-like question—"Who loves longer, a man or a woman?"—and intended to foreground the central affective and ethical inquiry of the book: Flanagan writes: "perhaps the only reply that can be made to [the why of] Hiroshima is to ask question 7. If it is a question that can never be answered, it is still the question we must keep asking, if only in order to understand that life is never binary, nor reducible to cant or code, but a mystery we at best apprehend. In Chekhov's stories, the only fools are those with answers" (*Question 7* 25). Yet as Tara June Winch, in her review of the novel, observes, "Flanagan doesn't just present

Chekhov's Question 7 – appearing as a thread, he doesn't just pull at it but unravels an entire tapestry" (Winch)—a tapestry woven from interlaced strands of personal grief, historical trauma, colonial violence, and ecological consequence. In *Question 7*, each moment of love or loss resonates within a broader network of entangled causality, where seemingly isolated experiences reverberate across time and space. The novel recounts, for instance, H.G. Wells's love for Rebecca West—not simply as a historical anecdote, but as a formative thread whose emotional and creative consequences ripple outward, shaping the lives and futures of others in unexpected ways. Flanagan's very existence, in fact, is also contingent on this love. Love, in this context, becomes both a generative force and a connective tissue within the tapestry of history, binding together personal desire, literary legacy, and global catastrophe. Thus, the novel reveals how affect, memory, and responsibility are not discrete but braided into a shared fabric of human and planetary history. Framed through a metamodernist lens, love in *Question 7* functions not as sentimentality but as an affective and relational force—one that enables ethical reflection across scales of memory, from familial trauma to ecological collapse, and gestures toward forms of care and connection that resist postmodern cynicism and restore meaning in an entangled world. In this sense, the very heart of *Question 7* lies in what cannot be measured or definitively answered—a mystery that resists quantification but remains profoundly and inescapably human.

Thus, this article broadly argues that *Question 7* operates within a paradigm of reconstructive metamodernism: a literary sensibility that oscillates between the affective depth and formal experimentation of modernism and the self-aware multiplicity of postmodernism, while seeking ethical and relational forms of meaning-making.[1] Flanagan's narrative is neither nostalgic nor nihilistic; rather, it reworks postmemory into a mode capable of grappling with fragmented temporalities, ecological entanglement, and global interdependence. Crucially, the novel affirms meaning through its emphasis on ecological and historical interconnectedness, care for the other, and enduring love—gestures that serve as quiet but powerful forms of resistance to contemporary planetary and historical crises. As Charlene Spretnak notes, "Reconstructive postmodernism seeks to retrieve and

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reintegrate aspects of life—bodily, ecological, spiritual, communal—that were devalued or suppressed in modernity, while simultaneously recognizing the necessity of transformation in the face of contemporary crises" (*The Resurgence* 6). *Question 7* exemplifies this approach, offering not only a meditation on inherited trauma, but also a visionary reorientation toward relationality and ecological care in the face of global precarity.

Furthermore, by employing an affective narrative strategy, *Question 7* not only evokes the emotional depths of inherited trauma but also enacts its themes through innovative formal techniques that draw readers into a more immersive, relational experience of memory and history. This expanded postmemorial framework exemplifies what this article terms "ecological postmemory"—a mode of inherited consciousness that moves beyond familial trauma to encompass planetary crisis and environmental destruction. This approach aligns directly with Spretnak's vision of reconstructive postmodernism, which critiques the meaninglessness and nihilism of deconstructive postmodernism and instead affirms the "Noble Truth" of ecological connectedness—"the profound communion of all life" (*States of Grace* 76). By foregrounding the embodied, everyday textures of experience and the relational entanglements of memory, trauma, and place, Flanagan's novel exemplifies Spretnak's call for a "resurgence of the real" (*The Resurgence)* that counters modern ontological homelessness through authentic dwelling and care. The novel's formal experimentation—its fragmented chronology, shifting perspectives, and incorporation of Indigenous temporalities—serves not merely as aesthetic innovation but as ethical strategy, enacting the interconnectedness that Spretnak identifies as fundamental to meaningful existence. In doing so, *Question 7* represents a pivotal evolution in postmemorial literature, demonstrating how reconstructive metamodernist approaches can transform inherited trauma into a foundation for ecological consciousness and planetary care.

2. Postmemory and the Inheritance of War

This section briefly situates postmemory theory within its evolving contexts, linking its Holocaust origins with postcolonial and ecological concerns. It then frames the subsequent discussion of World War II-related narratives by introducing Nigerian-British author and film director Biyi Bandele-Thomas's *Burma Boy* (2007) as a comparative example alongside *Question 7*. The main aim is to situate Flanagan's work within the evolving trajectory of postmemorial literature, highlighting how it engages inherited

war trauma through postcolonial and planetary ethics. An, albeit brief, comparative reading with *Burma Boy* further illuminates these dynamics, emphasizing shared concerns with memory, trauma, and the global legacy of conflict.

A foundational premise for this discussion is Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, first articulated in her analysis of Holocaust narratives, which has become foundational in trauma and memory studies. Defined as "the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (5), postmemory challenges traditional views of traumatic memory as solely firsthand experience. For Hirsch, it operates through "imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (5), mediated by stories, images, and silences within families or cultural communities. This framework has been widely applied to literary works that explore inherited trauma from war, genocide, or migration—for instance, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986) and Viet Thanh Nguyen's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Sympathizer* (2015), to name two works written over thirty years apart—where characters carry the psychic weight of histories they did not directly live.

Nevertheless, since Hirsch first articulated the concept in the mid-1990s, postmemory has undergone significant theoretical expansion, evolving in response to a socio-political and cultural generational shift that broadens its scope beyond familial and Holocaust memory to encompass postcolonial legacies and, more recently, ecological entanglements. This widening of scope reflects a growing recognition that inherited trauma is not confined to European or familial histories, but reverberates through global, cross-cultural, and environmental contexts. Scholars such as Jane Fernandez and Xiaomeng Lin have extended Hirsch's concept into postcolonial and diasporic contexts, analyzing fragmented narrative forms and emotional dislocation—such as characters experiencing inherited grief or alienation from their cultural roots—as modes of dramatizing intergenerational haunting. This dynamic of postmemory is exemplified by the narrator's conflicted identity and cultural estrangement in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer,* previously mentioned*,* where inherited trauma gives rise not only to affective and psychological fragmentation but also to a drive toward narrative repair. In keeping with a reconstructive metamodernist literary sensibility, such texts oscillate between irony and sincerity, rupture and continuity, and enact an ethical imperative to witness trauma even without

direct experience (Rothberg; Erll). They do so not merely to represent the past, but to reimagine memory as a relational, material and affective practice—significantly, one capable of fostering ethical responsiveness across temporal and cultural distances.

This leads us to a second development in postmemory theory which reflects the influence of the Material and Ecological Turns in literary criticism. Scholars such as Stef Craps and Jessica Hurley critique the anthropocentric bias of traditional trauma studies, calling instead for a "more-than-human" approach—one that recognizes trauma as embedded in damaged ecologies and disappearing species. Whereas Hurley addresses the environmental and infrastructural impacts of nuclear trauma, especially in the context of American literature and the nuclear complex, Craps focuses more specifically on postmemory. Nevertheless, both recognize trauma as embedded in damaged ecologies and disappearing species—a concern explicitly present in Flanagan's depiction of Tasmania's clear-felled forests and irradiated Pacific ecosystems.

Thus, this focus on World War II postmemory in Bandele-Thomas's *Burma Boy* not only illuminates the intergenerational transmission of trauma and memory, but also sets the stage for considering how such historical legacies intersect with contemporary questions of environment and ecology—issues that become increasingly urgent in Flanagan's later work, where the scars of war and colonialism are inseparable from the damaged landscapes and threatened ecologies of the Anthropocene. Like Flanagan's prize-winning novel *Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2014) and his latest novel to date *Question 7* (2023)*, Burma Boy* similarly channels the postmemory of the author's father's experience as a young Nigerian soldier in the British army during World War II, recovering and reimagining a chapter often marginalized in Western narratives (Howes). Both novels explore war's psychological and generational impacts on families and communities while interrogating colonialism's broader legacies—how imperial conflicts shape identities, landscapes, environments, and the stories passed down. Anticipating the Anthropocene turn in postmemorial literature, *Burma Boy* focuses on the vulnerability of human and more-than-human bodies, paralleling Flanagan's concern with the entanglement of war, colonialism, and environmental crisis. Through the lens of a young African conscript in *Burma Boy* and a second-generation narrator in *Question 7,* both Bandele-Thomas and Flanagan portray generational trauma not merely as inherited psychological wounds, but as complex reckonings with histories of violence,

colonialism, and ecological collapse. As Craps terms it, these kinds of narratives exemplify 'postcolonial postmemory', where the legacy of imperial conflict is refracted through the lived realities of the Global South (Craps). Both the Burmese jungle and Flanagan's Tasmanian landscape function as mnemonic terrains—haunted by war and exploitation yet deeply entangled with the non-human world (Howes; Nixon). Thus, both authors offer compelling examples of World War II postmemory beyond Euro-American frameworks, illustrating a contemporary global postcolonial consciousness in dialogue with ecological trauma deeply rooted in western modernity.

Crucially, the two novels advance a relational and interconnected vision of memory, responsibility, and care. Rather than dwelling in despair, they signal a metamodern sensibility defined by ethical responsiveness and hope—what Charlene Spretnak (1997) identifies as the reconstructive impulse toward wholeness in the aftermath of cultural and ecological fragmentation. Their postmemorial narratives anticipate current literary engagements with the Anthropocene, recognizing that histories of war, colonialism, and racial injustice are inseparable from planetary crises (Chakrabarty; Hurley; Ghosh). As I have argued elsewhere, *Burma Boy* repositions African wartime experience within a global framework of trauma and ecological devastation (Howes) while *Question 7* extends this planetary ethics through its attention to irradiated landscapes and clear-felled forests. Implicit in both texts is a critique of modernity's disconnection from the biosphere—and, following Haraway, a call to restore ecological kinship through embodied memory, intergenerational care, and relational consciousness (Haraway).

To conclude this section, by bridging postmemory, postcolonialism, and ecological consciousness, Bandele-Thomas and Flanagan exemplify postmemorial acts within a reconstructive metamodern literary sensibility—one oscillating between historical witnessing and ethical responsibility for the future. Their narratives suggest that remembering the past involves not only honoring personal or familial legacies but also recognizing entanglement in ongoing histories of injustice and, increasingly, environmental change (Craps; Nixon; Rothberg).

3. Reframing Postmemory: Responsibility and the Turn to the Ecological in Flanagan

Richard Flanagan's work has long engaged with inherited trauma and the ethics of memory, situating itself within Hirsch's framework of postmemory, such as *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997), *Goulds Book*

of Fish (2001) and *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2014). In his novels, postmemory is characteristically brought to life through characters shaped by historical violence. For example, in *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* postwar displacement and parental trauma reverberate through the lives of second-generation Slovenian migrants in Tasmania, who inherit emotional and narrative silences manifested as linguistic fragmentation and emotional withdrawal, while *Gould's Book of Fish* reanimates the erased voices of colonial convicts through fantastical historiography (Lin; Pons). Flanagan's work uniquely combines intimate psychological portraits with broader postcolonial contexts, revealing inherited trauma as both personal burden and cultural legacy. Indeed, critics such as Xiaomeng Lin and Jane Fernandez argue that his characters often navigate fractured identities and unresolved grief, illustrating how postmemory operates not just within families but across landscapes and national histories (Lin; Fernandez). In *The Narrow Road,* Flanagan continues to explore the transmission of trauma across generations, depicting the suffering of Australian prisoners of war in Burma reverberating through familial and national memory. Recent scholarship on this novel highlights how it interrogates the complexities of trauma, postmemory, and ethical witnessing, depicting the embodied and often fragmented nature of memory while challenging binaries of victim and perpetrator (Šlapkauskaitė; Reeve).

Question 7, however, reframes postmemory through two key shifts. First, it deepens ecological haunting and broadens the reckoning with contingency and interconnectedness. Second, it moves from confronting World War II complicity to addressing ecological destruction driven by western modernity and capitalism. While earlier novels focus on embodied memory, *Question 7* expands to planetary trauma, exploring how violence, war, and colonialism intertwine with environmental devastation and the vulnerability of more-than-human worlds. This aligns with Nixon's concept of "slow violence", where environmental harm unfolds gradually and often invisibly (Nixon), and engages Craps' notion of "postcolonial postmemory", highlighting the inseparability of imperial conflict and ecological crisis (Nixon; Craps). Flanagan explicitly links colonial violence to ecological devastation in his account of British colonization in Tasmania, illustrating how imperial conflict and planetary crisis are inseparable, with humans and their cultures as integral participants:

> For millennia on millennia, [the Aboriginals] stories wrote the land and the land wrote them. [...] the way meaning was bound into the material world of rock and river and sea and fish and tree and grass and

> bird and animal now meant nothing to the conquerors. Wherever the surviving Aboriginal people went there had been words, names, practices, ideas, spirits, laws, songs, dances and stories but these were now deemed irrelevant. Their island was stolen by the English [...] and the invasion was a sacrilegious act. Perhaps the gaping absence that haunts contemporary Tasmania is the loss of that sacred world. [...] the violent rage that feels the need over and over in Tasmania to destroy what is unique and beautiful, no matter the loss; all this comes from something deep within us, for which the word guilt is inadequate [...]. (*Question 7* 220-21)

The British didn't just exterminate the Aboriginal people; they erased a way of life woven into the land through replacing it with deforestation, industrial agriculture, and the logic of extraction to feed their capitalist agenda. But significantly, what they could not erase was love, "the great love the first Tasmanians had of their country [which] was not so easily vanquished, nor so easily extinguished" (*Question 7* 222). Flanagan articulates his deep affection for Tasmania's landscapes, suggesting that love not only for another human being but for nature and homeland can offer healing and hope even amid devastation—"I only write this book that you are now reading, no more than a love note to my parents and island home, a world that has vanished, [...]" (*Question 7* 237).

The second evolution in Flanagan's postmemorial work is the clear generational and ethical shift in *Question 7*. Rather than simply bearing witness to inherited trauma or assigning blame for violence and ecological destruction, the novel moves from passive inheritance to active moral engagement, mirroring Hannah Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil" and the need for moral reckoning (Arendt). This is overtly exemplified in the narrator's self-questioning: "would I have done the same as Mr. Sato? [...]. If Mr. Sato who seemed a decent man, was capable of being a guard, doing evil or just standing by when evil was done, would I be any different?" (*Question 7* 10). This shift from passive inheritance to active moral engagement in *Question 7* resonates with contemporary calls for accountability and self-reflection, as societies confront the enduring legacies of historical violence and their own complicity in present injustices.

Yet, Flanagan's novel extends the ethical interrogation of complicity far beyond the temporo-historical confines of World War II, linking it to the enduring violence of colonialism and the ongoing crisis of ecological

destruction. As Adele Wilby observes, Flanagan is deeply critical of the British tendency to shift responsibility for the Tasmanian genocide onto the colonized, yet he ultimately resists singling out any group as uniquely guilty (Wilby). Instead, Flanagan insists, "it is not because I think they are uniquely guilty [...] it is because they cannot conceive [...] that we all are" (*Question 7* 229). Wilby rightly notes that this shift to the plural—"we" and "our"—reflects his recognition that all members of society, whether colonizer or colonized, are implicated in the creation and maintenance of oppressive systems. With clear parallels to questions of World War II Holocaust complicity, Flanagan writes, "We as convicts were made to be our own convict-constable, our own convict hangman [...] our own convict archivists [...] recording our own suffering in neatly compiled volume after volume of letters [...] written in our own elegant longhand [...]. We were, we are, we will and no one is exempt from the guilt" (*Question 7* 229-30), underscoring how even the oppressed can become complicit in the machinery of violence and erasure. Flanagan hammers this point home by describing the institutionalized racism he encountered at Oxford—an institution of supposed learning, free thinking and civilization—calling it "the language of hate" (*Question 7* 235), thus linking it directly to the enduring legacies of empire (Wilby).

Significantly, the author draws a direct line from this historical complicity to present-day ecological harm, noting his own participation in systems of environmental destruction—"we are all complicit: I fly in planes, drive a car, I live surrounded by plastic and I think these matters are extraordinarily complex" (Flanagan qtd. in Wilby). In this way, Flanagan universalizes the characteristic postmemorial question of "what would I have done?" from the memory of World War II, inviting readers to confront their own roles in both historical and ongoing injustices, whether colonial or ecological.

In conclusion, Flanagan's trajectory reframes postmemory from familial trauma to a broader, metamodern reckoning with responsibility, interconnectedness, and ecological consequences. This evolution prepares the ground for the formal innovations and narrative strategies discussed in the next section. As we shall see, the ethical turn discussed here is further deepened by Flanagan's engagement with Indigenous perspectives on time and memory, which challenge western linearity and fixed historical narratives, emphasizing relationality and ecological connectedness (Flanagan, "The Voice"). This sense of disorder in self, time, and nature is mirrored in the novel's fractured narrative structure, which emphasizes multiplicity and

interconnection over linearity and the logical coherence characteristic of Western Renaissance philosophy (Spretnak, *States of Grace*).

4. Narrative Fracture as Formal and Ethical Strategy

In *Question 7,* narrative fragmentation is not merely a stylistic flourish but a deliberate strategy that enacts the novel's core concerns with memory, trauma, and ecological connectedness. This metamodernist interplay between modernist experimentation and postmodern multiplicity is not just aesthetic; it enacts a deeper narrative ethics rooted in disruption and entanglement (Al Omari et.al; Dember; Vermeulen and Van den Akker). Flanagan's fractured form mirrors the disordered realities of both personal and planetary histories, reflecting a reconfigured subjectivity attuned to the interconnected crises of memory, identity, and ecology. As Flanagan reflects,

> Is it because we see our world only darkly that we surround ourselves with lies we call time, history, reality, memory, detail, facts? What if time were plural and so were we? What if we discovered we begin tomorrow and we died yesterday, that we were born out of the deaths of others and life is breathed into us from stories we invent out of songs, collages of jokes and riddles and other fragments? (*Question 7*, 11)

This question destabilizes the foundations of narrative and historical understanding, inviting readers into a world where time and identity are multiple, porous, and unstable—framing both as inventions of narrative.

Significantly, Flanagan explicitly engages with the Yolngu concept of time, drawn from an essay by Siena Stubbs, a young Yolngu woman from Arnhem Land. This Aboriginal Australian perspective challenges Western linear temporality and aligns with the novel's narrative fracture as an expression of ecological consciousness. Flanagan explains this "fourth tense" both in the novel and in his essay "The Voice and Our Inauthentic Heart": "[It] implies something profoundly different: that we exist in a relationship with the larger world that is outside time yet also the guarantee that time continues; that by building the fish traps today we ensure they continue being built both in the past and in the future" (Flanagan, "The Voice"). This Indigenous perspective is not merely thematic but a structural principle that, as Flanagan notes, "informs the book deeply" (qtd. in Winch). Rooted in ecological connectedness, it shapes the novel's fragmented form, emphasizing

how individual lives and memories are woven into broader, more-than-human networks of time and responsibility.

Flanagan is certainly not alone in interrogating the arbitrariness of temporal metrics in contemporary literature; similar concerns animate Samantha Harvey's 2024 Booker Prize-winning novel, *Orbital*—first published in hardback the same year as *Question 7*—which similarly foregrounds the instability of time and its impact on relationality. In this novel, astronauts orbiting Earth 16 times daily experience time as an "arbitrary metric" (Harvey 7)—a cosmic relativism that dismantles terrestrial chronology. Like Flanagan, Harvey leverages this temporal fluidity to explore metamodern relationality: her characters' meditations on planetary interconnectedness echo Flanagan's ecological and historical entanglements, positioning both authors within a literature that transcends postmodern fragmentation through embodied time.

Building on modernist explorations of time as fragmented, plural, and non-linear, this metamodern approach to time is especially evident in Flanagan's own narrative practice, where the movement between personal, familial, and global scales—and the discontinuities and temporal slippages that result—serve to unsettle traditional conceptions of time. Distinct from modernist and postmodernist treatments, however, the metamodernist perception of time here is fundamentally relational and ecological, foregrounding the entanglement of human and more-than-human worlds. This is reinforced in moments of environmental perception, such as at the Ohama mine: "All of nature there seemed exhausted and disordered and me somehow part of it" (*Question 7* 10). Here, narrative and nature converge in a shared state of disorientation, positioning the self as embedded within, not outside, history and environment. Narrative fracture thus becomes a formal correlate to ecological awareness and relationality: a way of representing the entangled, unstable systems that shape both human lives and planetary history.

Syntactic rupture further enacts this temporal collapse. In the passage, "No comma no commas ever a world without punctuation fences gates trespassing signs for time that's where I lived there a borderless world there with stunned gratitude there" (*Question 7* 262), Flanagan's overtly unpunctuated prose dissolves grammatical boundaries, embodying a borderless world where human and environmental histories merge. This recalls James Joyce's modernist syntactic experiments in *Ulysses,* where the elimination of conventional grammar mirrors the unspoken, unacted thoughts of people

in the way they occur (Joyce). Yet, where Joyce's technique captured psychological interiority, Flanagan's fragmentation aligns psychological with ecological rupture, expanding modernism's scope to planetary trauma.

Furthermore, as we have seen, Flanagan's rendering of memory as a permeable, affective ecology draws from the Yolngu concept of time where past, present, and future coexist. Yet it also echoes Virginia Woolf's modernist poetics of temporal fluidity and her attempt to "record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order they fall" (Woolf 160). Through a metamodernist lens, Flanagan thus repurposes modernist interiority to recognize the interconnectedness of human consciousness and environmental crisis.

Yet, Flanagan's postmemorial act does not merely recount his father's story; it engages in deep self-reflection and weaves in echoes from his own literary canon, notably *The Narrow Road* and *Death of a River Guide*. These earlier works serve as a fractal mirror—*The Narrow Road* grapples with his father's POW trauma, while *Death of a River Guide* revisits his own near-death experiences and ancestral hauntings. By revisiting Ohama and refracting it through these personal narratives, Flanagan underscores how trauma reverberates across place, text, and generation. For instance, his exploration of H.G. Wells's *The World Set Free* and Szilard's role in the atomic bomb's development further illustrates the unforeseen consequences of scientific and literary endeavors, emphasizing the intricate web of historical and ecological interconnections. This logic of interconnectedness is made explicit in the novel's chain-reaction metaphor: "That kiss would, in time, beget death which would, in turn, beget me and the circumstances of my life that lead to the book you now hold, a chain reaction which began over a century ago, and all of which will lead to the unlikely figure of my father, unlikely in that he is to appear in a story with, among others unknown to him, H. G. Wells and Rebecca West" (*Question 7* 37). This narrative approach not only reflects the interconnectedness of events and the ripple effects of individual actions on a global scale but also foregrounds the impossibility of finding a single thread or ultimate truth:

> Sometimes I wonder why we keep returning to beginnings—why we seek the single thread we might pull to unravel the tapestry we call our life in the hope that behind it we will find the truth of why. But there is no truth. There is only why. And when we look closer, we see that behind that why is just another tapestry. And behind it another, and another, until we arrive at oblivion. (*Question 7* 4)

Thus, by weaving together Indigenous temporalities, modernist experimentation, intertextuality and metamodernist ethics, Flanagan's fractured narrative becomes both a mirror and a method for engaging with the entangled crises of our era. Only by embracing fragmentation and multiplicity, the novel suggests, can literature begin to represent—and reckon with—the profound interconnectedness of personal, historical, and ecological realities.

5. Love, Care and Ethical Interconnection: A Metamodern Response

Question 7 transcends literary expression to become what Hirsch terms a work of "advocacy" and "activism"—broadening the historical archive by amplifying neglected voices and mobilizing memory as a tool for resistance and repair (16). The novel draws urgent attention to what has been lost—Indigenous cultures, ecological integrity, and relational ways of being—while mapping a path toward reconciliation through Martin Heidegger's concept of authentic ontological dwelling ("Building Dwelling Thinking"). For Heidegger, dwelling is not mere habitation but a profound engagement where humans "cherish and protect" their environment, cultivating belonging through care for all ("Building Dwelling Thinking"). This directly informs Charlene Spretnak's critique of postmodernism's "denial of meaning" which she counters with the one "Noble Truth"; that is, ecological connectedness: "the profound communion of all life" (*States of Grace* 76). *Question 7* synthesizes these frameworks, positioning love and interconnectedness with the universe as the active embodiment of dwelling—resisting estrangement through attentiveness to place, memory, and more-than-human kin.

This theoretical framework is vividly realized in Flanagan's narrative through his lived experiences of loss and renewal. His near-death experience on the Franklin River restores his capacity to notice not only the "food and drink and worn chairs" that offer creaturely comfort, but also to see people once again "as people", finding himself "astonished by the small everyday acts of kindness too easily dismissed as everyday" (*Question 7* 261-262). This renewed attentiveness to his surroundings exemplifies Heidegger's call for authentic engagement with the "things" that make up our world ("The Thing"). In his essay "The Thing", Heidegger explores what it means for something to be a "thing" using the example of a jug to discuss its essence and its role in gathering what he calls "the fourfold"—earth, sky, mortals, and

divinities—emphasizing that true dwelling is rooted in a receptive, caring relationship in attunement with the world around us.

Furthermore, for Heidegger, dwelling well is inseparable from authenticity: it requires not just inhabiting a place, but belonging to it in a way that is open, receptive, and responsive to its unique character and to the relationships it enables. Authentic dwelling is thus a mode of being that resists the alienation, falsities and superficiality of modern life, cultivating meaning and connection through attentive care for people, things, and place. In stark contrast to this vision of dwelling well, Flanagan's depiction of his time at Oxford University exposes a social environment marked by inauthenticity and institutionalized racism. He describes a future prime minister as "charming and you couldn't believe a word he said [...] true Martians" (*Question 7* 234). This direct critique is metamodern in its ethical urgency—oscillating between sharp exposure of hypocrisy and a longing for genuine authenticity, rejecting both postmodern detachment and naive sincerity.

Love emerges in *Question 7* as both intimate resistance and planetary care, serving as the ethical core of Flanagan's vision. His reflection on his parents embodies Spretnak's "Noble Truth" of interconnectedness: "My mother and my father in their stories and jokes, in their generosity and kindness to others, asserted the necessary illusion their lives might mean something in the endless tumult of this meaningless universe. For them to live, love had to exist [...] they lived that love and they fought for that love and defended that love" (*Question 7* 187). This militant love is not merely personal but acts as a force against both historical amnesia and ecological indifference, providing a model for reconciling with the legacies of violence and loss.

Flanagan links this ethic of love directly to Tasmania's colonial trauma, where British genocide "erased a way of life woven into the land" (Wilby) and to contemporary ecological crisis, emphasizing that collective complicity in environmental destruction cannot be ignored. In this way, he echoes Heidegger's call to "till the soil, to cultivate the vine" ("Building Dwelling Thinking"), suggesting that authentic dwelling requires not only remembering and caring for the past but also actively nurturing wounded landscapes and communities through ongoing responsibility and care. Spretnak's reconstructive postmodernism explicitly rejects deconstruction's nihilism by centering the "resurgence of the real"—embodied, emplaced, and ecological existence (Spretnak, *The Resurgence*). *Question 7* brings this to life through its fragmented narrative structure, turning feelings of

dislocation into moments of connection. The novel's disjointed temporality mirrors Heidegger's assertion that authentic dwelling requires confronting "homelessness" as intrinsic to being, with Flanagan's narrator finding solace in a "Borderless world" beyond "punctuation fences", where love, care and attention to the "everyday" anchors meaning amid chaos (*Question 7* 262). This embodies what Vermeulen and Van den Akker term metamodernism's "structure of feeling" oscillating between despair and hope. Flanagan's refrain, "What if time were plural and so were we?" (*Question 7* 11), epitomizes this stance, using uncertainty not as nihilistic endpoint but as catalyst for Spretnak's "ecological communion" (*The Resurgence*).

The novel culminates in a metamodern ethics of dwelling, where confronting the postmemorial yearning for "what we have lost" (Hirsch), and embracing love as defense against ontological homelessness becomes the foundation for authentic responsibility: "The indescribable warmth of laughter the incandescent human comfort of being alive with others [...] I heard [...] the planet breathing in and out as if it were some living thing to which I was clinging [...] and I would never let go" (*Question 7* 262-74). In this vision, love extends to human and non-human alike, answering Heidegger's and Spretnak's call for an ontological "return-home" grounded in the "Noble Truth" of interconnection.

6. Conclusion: Towards Reconstructive Metamodernism

Richard Flanagan's *Question 7* marks a pivotal evolution in postmemorial literature, expanding Marianne Hirsch's foundational concept beyond familial and Holocaust memory to encompass ecological postmemory—a mode of inherited consciousness that recognizes trauma as embedded not only in human lineages but in damaged landscapes, poisoned rivers, and irradiated ecosystems. By weaving together his father's POW experiences with Tasmania's colonial violence and ongoing environmental destruction, Flanagan demonstrates that postmemory in the Anthropocene must account for both human and more-than-human legacies, where personal trauma reverberates through planetary systems.

This expanded framework aligns with Charlene Spretnak's reconstructive postmodernism, which rejects the nihilistic tendencies of deconstructive thought in favor of what she terms the "Noble Truth"—"the truth of our existence: the profound communion of all life" (*States of Grace* 76). *Question 7* embodies this vision through its narrative architecture, where fragmentation becomes not a symptom of postmodern dislocation but an act of ecological

communion. Flanagan's oscillation between despair and hope, fragmentation and connection, exemplifies the metamodernist "structure of feeling" that Vermeulen and Van den Akker identify as characteristic of contemporary cultural production—one that seeks meaning and ethical engagement while remaining aware of complexity and ambiguity.

Central to this reconstructive vision is Martin Heidegger's concept of authentic dwelling, which the novel enacts through its attention to what has been lost and what remains to be cherished. Flanagan's renewed capacity to notice "the small everyday acts of kindness too easily dismissed as everyday" (*Question 7* 261-62) after his near-death experience exemplifies Heidegger's call for attentive engagement with the "things" that constitute our world. This authentic dwelling requires confronting both historical complicity and ecological responsibility—recognizing, as Flanagan writes, that "we all are" implicated in systems of violence that span from colonial genocide to contemporary climate crisis (*Question 7* 229).

Love emerges as the novel's central ethical imperative, functioning not as sentimentality but as what this article argues is a form of militant care—a practice of dwelling that resists both historical amnesia and ecological indifference. When Flanagan describes his parents as those who "lived that love and they fought for that love and defended that love" (*Question 7* 187), he positions love as an active force of resistance against the forces that fragment communities, devastate landscapes, and rupture the profound communion of all life that Spretnak identifies as foundational to meaningful existence.

The novel's formal innovations—its fragmented chronology, syntactic ruptures, and incorporation of Indigenous temporalities—serve not merely as aesthetic experiments but as ethical strategies. By drawing on the Yolngu "fourth tense", where past, present, and future coexist in relational interdependence, Flanagan offers a temporal framework that challenges Western linear causality and opens possibilities for what we might call "reparative time"—a mode of being that acknowledges damage while nurturing possibilities for healing.

This reconstructive approach has significant implications for contemporary literature's engagement with planetary crisis. Rather than offering either naive optimism or cynical despair, *Question 7* models a metamodern sensibility that can hold both trauma and hope, complicity and care, fragmentation and connection. It suggests that postmemorial literature in the Anthropocene must move beyond witnessing trauma to actively

imagining and enacting forms of care that extend across species, generations, and scales—from the intimate spaces of family memory to the planetary systems that sustain all life.

Ultimately, Flanagan's achievement lies in demonstrating that confronting "what we have lost"—Indigenous cultures, ecological integrity, authentic ways of dwelling—need not end in despair but can become the foundation for what Spretnak calls the "resurgence of the real" (*The Resurgence*). By positioning love as both resistance and reconstruction, *Question 7* offers a model for postmemorial literature that is simultaneously historically grounded and ethically oriented toward futures that remain possible, and perhaps tentatively hopeful. In this vision, memory becomes not just a burden to be inherited but a practice of care to be cultivated—one that recognizes our profound interconnectedness with all life and calls us toward more authentic ways of dwelling on this wounded but still breathing planet.

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