

MEMORIES AND STORIES REDEFINING THE PAST AND HISTORY IN JULIAN
BARNES'S *THE SENSE OF AN ENDING*

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Abstract: *This essay analyses Julian Barnes's The Sense of an Ending and argues that the concepts of the past and history are redefined by the narrator's subjective memories and stories in a postmodernist manner. This essay shows that the past is reread as a letter and as a diary fragment which ask for the readers' various interpretations regarding their absolute truth.*

Keywords: *history, memories, the past, stories*

1. Introduction

Illustrating the idea supported by Linda Hutcheon (1988) who shows that in postmodernist novels, history is a fictional creation, "being rethought as a human construct" (Hutcheon 1988:16), this essay argues that Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* is a postmodernist novel which invites its readers to enter a debate on the meaning of the concepts of history and time, associating them with stories. As Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* takes a glimpse at the way fiction can redefine the past and the concept of history from different perspectives, this essay remarks that the novel is what Linda Hutcheon (1988) calls "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon 1988:105-123). It promotes and demonstrates the postmodernist idea that only one's memories and stories can recreate the past and history, attaching them a particular significance based on the storyteller's vision and conclusions. The title of the novel, *The Sense of an Ending*, is an allusion to the fact that the unique truth is open to questions and many interpretations. The title suggests that there can be different endings or meanings one can assign to the past, the present life and history. We can just have *the sense of an ending* or our own perspective on the events presented and on the concept of history approached by the protagonists of the novel. The *ending* concerns one's conclusions on the past and stories.

Julian Barnes's novel is first person narrative and is divided into two parts. The narrator, Tony Webster, highlights the importance of distinguishing between *remembering* and *witnessing* (Barnes 2017:3), which reminds us of the distinction Seymour Chatman (1978:81) makes between *story-time* and *discourse-time*. What Julian Barnes (2017) calls *remembering* can be associated with what Seymour Chatman (1978) calls *discourse-time* while *witnessing* can be associated with *story-time*. Tony Webster's memories are related to the concept of discourse time and to a subjective interpretation of history, life, the past and the present. The narrator of the novel admits that one's efforts to grasp the truth of time and history just result in creating a version of their meaning. Part One evokes Tony Webster's memories of his first love affair with Veronica and of his youth experiences with his classmates and friends at school. It also makes references to the history lessons taught by Old Joe Hunt at school, evoking Tony's memories of the discussions on the meaning of history and inviting the readers to give their own interpretation to this concept. Part Two presents Tony's analysis of the past and the conclusions he draws on it at a mature age. We are not given any information about Tony Webster's job or about the precise time when the events presented take place. Based on the

means of communication, such as the e-mail, referred to in the novel, we can infer that he lives at the end of the 20th century and focuses on this time.

Throughout the novel, history is defined as a fictional account open to our analysis and multiple interpretations. Thus, Tony Webster remarks that one of his classmates, Marshall, associates Henry III's reign with "great unrest" (Barnes 2017:5) while Adrian Finn views all historical events as marked by "something happening" (ibid.:5), suggesting the uncertainty regarding their unique truth. Adrian Finn, Tony's classmate, promotes the postmodernist idea that historians offer us access to a version of history and not to the definite historical truth: "That's one of the central problems of history, isn't it, sir? The question of subjective versus objective interpretation, the fact that we need to know the history of the historian in order to understand the version that is being put in front of us" (ibid.:12). Like Adrian Finn, Tony Webster, who is invited by his teacher, Old Joe Hunt, to define History, shows that it is "the lies of the victors" (ibid.:16), being reminded that "it is also the self-delusions of the defeated" (ibid.:16). Thus, Tony Webster, the narrator of the novel, supports the postmodernist idea that history does not offer us access to the absolute truth but to a version of it from a certain perspective. Collin, Tony's classmate, reinforces this idea by comparing history with "a raw onion sandwich" (ibid.:17) and with a repeated old story with the same leitmotifs: "It just repeats, sir. It burps. We've seen it again and again this year. Same old story, same old oscillation between tyranny and rebellion, war and peace, prosperity and impoverishment" (ibid.:16). The layers of onion stand for one's memories preserved and evoked in time. At the end of the novel when he draws his own conclusion on the past, on his life and lived history, Tony Webster makes references to these memories, which he associates with "accumulation" (ibid.:150): "There is accumulation. There is responsibility. And beyond these, there is unrest. There is great unrest" (ibid.:150). Tony Webster supports the ideas expressed in the history classes at school and alludes to them throughout this novel. His views on history as fiction echo the ideas he got familiar with at school. That is why the novel is cyclical. It ends by demonstrating the ideas presented at its beginning.

2. Memories and Stories Redefining the Past and History

Offering a postmodernist representation of the past and history as nothing but stories, Julian Barnes's novel asks for the readers' help in clarifying the meaning of the events Tony Webster has witnessed, in understanding his vision on time, life and history as well as his friends and interlocutors' perspective on these aspects. The stories Tony Webster, the first person narrator, tells us take a glimpse at the past from his perspective and demonstrate Collin's idea that "only some primitive storytelling instinct, itself doubtless a hangover from religion, retrospectively imposed meaning on what might or might not have happened" (Barnes 2017:11). The narrator admits that he just introduces us his "impressions and half-memories" (ibid.:27), offering us his perspective on the events he has witnessed. He tells us the story of Adrian Finn, one of his classmates whose ideas he appreciates and who comes to disappoint him for having an affair with his girlfriend, Veronica, and for finally committing suicide. Tony Webster shows that Adrian Finn's life story can be associated with fiction and enlarges upon the distinction between life and literature: "And the only person – apart from Robson – whose life so far contained anything remotely novel-worthy was Adrian. [...] In a novel, Adrian wouldn't just have accepted things as they were put to him. What was the point of having a situation worthy of fiction if the protagonist didn't behave as he would have done in a book?" (ibid.:15-16). To highlight the fact that we read a fictional account of the past, Tony Webster suggests that his classmates' search for the historical truth and the documentary evidence they have to account for that truth are part of a story we have to analyse and make sense of: "perhaps all four of us should have gone off on a Quest to Discover the Truth. Or would that have been

less like literature and too much like a kids' story" (ibid.:16). The narrator's attempt to emphasize the fact that his memories of Adrian Finn reflect the historical reality of the past fails to convince us as he has shown that "what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed" (ibid.:3). Therefore, the novel is what Linda Hutcheon (1988) calls "historiographic metafiction" where history is nothing but fiction. According to Linda Hutcheon (1988), "historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity" (Hutcheon 1988:93).

Tony Webster's memories and story redefine his past and history. Thus, the ideas debated on at school in the history classes, wherein history is associated with a story, are reconsidered and reinforced many years later in his account of the school discussions, of his love affair with Veronica, of his relationship with Adrian Finn, his former colleague and philosopher who committed suicide. The story of his first love affair with Veronica and his view on the way he has been treated by her family on his visit to their house in Kent define his perspective on life and the past, evincing his desire to be appreciated and his thirst for understanding his interlocutors' approach. He is affected by Veronica's coldness and by her brother and father's inquisitive and disrespectful attitude. He appreciates Mrs. Ford, Veronica's mother, who acts as a good host and who shows him affection and respect. He suggests that the aspects he presents are specific to life and not to fiction: "Had we been in a novel, there might have been some sneaking between floors for a hot cuddle after the paterfamilias had locked up for the night" (Barnes 2017:28). Tony Webster invites his readers to help him in carrying out his analysis of the past and of his relationship with Veronica whom he considers mysterious and "manipulative": "And even if I were to decide, at this late stage, that she was and always had been calculating, I'm not sure it would help matters. By which I mean: help me" (ibid.:32).

The documentary evidence Tony Webster has regarding the events of the past he recalls and describes is represented by the letters he receives from his friends and acquaintances. Thus, the letter he receives from Veronica's mother when he breaks up with her daughter expresses Mrs. Ford's regret for this event and her dearest wishes to him. Adrian Finn's letter which informs Tony of Adrian's affair with Veronica and which hurts Tony's feelings arouses Tony's desire to split hairs in order to understand the truth. Tony Webster just hints at his written reply to Adrian, focusing on his tormenting states of mind associated with what he calls "damage" (ibid.:44):

I certainly believe we all suffer damage, one way or another. How could we not, except in a world of perfect parents, siblings, neighbours, companions? And then there is the question, on which so much depends, of how we react to the damage: whether we admit it or repress it, and this affects our dealings with others. Some admit the damage, and try to mitigate it; some spend their lives trying to help others who are damaged; and then there are those whose main concern is to avoid further damage to themselves, at whatever cost. And those are the ones who are ruthless, and the ones to be careful of. (ibid.:44)

We are not presented the content of the above-mentioned letters but just the narrator's remark on them, inviting us to fill in the blanks of his story and draw our own conclusions on it. In the second part of the novel, we are shown that forty years later Tony Webster is offered the chance to reread his last letter to Adrian when Veronica gives it to him following his insistence on obtaining Adrian's diary from her. In the last pages of the novel, we are shown the whole letter which evinces Tony's revengeful and critical attitude, his meanness and the resentments he had in the past. Reanalysing this letter, he admits that his vision has changed and that he can hardly recognize his old impulses and his younger self:

I reread this letter several times. I could scarcely deny its authorship or its ugliness. All I could plead was that I had been its author then, but was not its author now. Indeed, I didn't recognize that part of myself from which the letter came. But perhaps this was simply further self-deception. At first, I thought mainly about me, and how – what – I'd been: chippy, jealous and malign. Also about my attempt to undermine their relationship. At least I'd failed in this, since Veronica's mother had assured me the last months of Adrian's life had been happy. Not that this let me off the hook. My younger self had come back to shock my older self with what that self had been, or was, or was sometimes capable of being. (ibid.:97-98)

These comments suggest that one's discourse at a certain moment defines one's vision on life at that moment. The vision can change in time and shape the protagonist's true identity revealed by his narrative. The change of vision in time is reflected in the manner of approaching the past, the witnessed events, in the manner of understanding the interlocutors' perspective on life, history, time and in the manner the story unfolds and illustrates the narrator's concerns. This idea supports the theory put forward by Mark Currie (1998) who shows that one's identity is shaped and disclosed by one's story: "the only way to explain who we are is to tell our own story, to select key events which characterize us and organize them according to the formal principles of narrative" (Currie 1998:17). By asking and answering rhetorical questions regarding these changes in terms of vision, the narrator attempts to convince his readers of the relevance of his conclusions:

Does character develop over time? In novels, of course it does: otherwise there wouldn't be much of a story. But in life? I sometimes wonder. Our attitudes and opinions change, we develop new habits and eccentricities; but that's something different, more like decoration. Perhaps character resembles intelligence, except that character peaks a little later: between twenty and thirty, say. And, after that, we're just stuck with what we've got. We're on our own. If so, that would explain a lot of lives, wouldn't it? And also – if this isn't too grand a word – our tragedy. (ibid.:103)

Rereading the letter Tony sent to Adrian forty years before can be associated with rereading the past in order to understand it much better. Tony Webster shows his bitter regret for the actions he took and for the attitude he had in the past. Nevertheless, Tony asks himself many rhetorical questions and wonders whether he was right or wrong: "Because rereading that letter of mine, feeling its harshness and aggression, came as a profound and intimate shock. [...] I was saying, confidently, how the chief characteristic of remorse is that nothing can be done about it: that the time has passed for apology or amends. But what if I'm wrong?" (Barnes 2017:107). Reanalysing Adrian's life story, his decision to commit suicide and his philosophical arguments, Tony Webster admits that his account is based on "false memories" (Barnes 2017:105), being nothing but mere fiction: "Back then, you can remember your short life in its entirety. Later, the memory becomes a thing of shreds and patches. It's a bit like the black box aeroplanes carry to record what happens in a crash. If nothing goes wrong, the tape erases itself. So if you do crash, it's obvious why you did; if you don't then the log of your journey is much less clear" (Barnes 2017:105). The past is presented as if it were a snapshot offered to the younger generations to give it their interpretation. The photo album Tony examines, and especially the photo showing Adrian and Veronica, and Tony's dialogue with his imaginary interlocutors, Alex and Collin, his former classmates introduced as if they were actually expressing their views on the past, evince the narrator's attempt to decipher the truth of the past even by taking imaginary hypotheses into consideration. This representation of the past through a photography is specific to postmodernism. According to Linda Hutcheon (1989), "postmodern photography foregrounds the notion of ideology as representation by appropriating recognizable images from that omnipresent visual discourse, almost as an act of retaliation for its (unacknowledged) political nature or its (unacknowledged) constructing of those images of ourselves and our world" (Hutcheon 1989:41).

As the past requires the future generations' appreciation and respect, Tony Webster would like his narrative to give a good impression on his life and uses an impersonal style to generalize his ideas:

You're doing it for yourself, of course. You're wanting to leave that final memory, and make it a pleasant one. You want to be well thought of – in case your plane turns out to be the one that's less safe than walking to the corner shop. And if this is how we behave before a five-night winter break in Mallorca, then why should there not be a broader process at work towards the end of life, as that final journey – the motorised trundle through the crematorium's curtains – approaches? Don't think ill of me, remember me well. Tell people you were fond of me, that you loved me, that I wasn't a bad guy. Even if, perhaps, none of this was the case. (Barnes 2017:107-108)

Tony Webster's story presents him as an old respectable gentleman married to Margaret for twenty years and divorced, being satisfied with his former married life, having a daughter, Susie, and grandchildren he gets on well with. He keeps in touch with his former wife, Margaret, goes out with her and informs her of his youth affair with Veronica and of his efforts to obtain Adrian Finn's diary from her. Mrs. Ford, Veronica's mother, has left him a bequest of five hundred pounds and Adrian's diary which Veronica refuses to give him, claiming that she has burnt it. Tony gets in touch with Veronica with great difficulty, contacting her brother Jack to ask for his help to obtain her contact details. He sends her many e-mails, trying to get close to her in order to convince her to give him Adrian's diary and tell him more details on what happened to them in the past. She briefly answers his e-mails, accepting to meet him twice but not revealing him any information about her past, about the period of forty years when they have not seen each other, about her affair with his friend, Adrian Finn, and the content of his diary. Failing to obtain this document, Tony Webster fails to have access to the truth of the past and just evokes his memories and expresses his views on it: "I recognised at that moment another reason for my determination. The diary was evidence; it was – it might be – corroboration. It might disrupt the banal reiterations of memory. It might jump-start something – though I had no idea what" (ibid.:77). Tony's former wife, Margaret, urges him to make efforts to understand what happened in the past in order to be satisfied with his present life and condition: "Then let it go. Unless you have, as they say, issues from your past that you need to confront in order to be able to move on" (ibid.:77).

In the absence of any objective documentary evidence, the analysis of the past offers multiple perspectives on it and deepens its mystery in a postmodernist manner. This idea is supported by Frederick M. Holmes (1997) whose analysis of other postmodernist novels is also valid for Julian Barnes's novel. According to Frederick M. Holmes (1997), "the novels frustrate their efforts by bringing to the fore the problematics of representation, by showing that their endeavours say as much as or more about the real nature of the past, which cannot be recuperated" (Holmes 1997:53). In his analysis of the past and of Veronica's words and e-mails, Tony Webster associates her with "mystery" and his former wife, Margaret, with "clarity" (Barnes 2017:82). To him, Veronica belongs to an enigmatic past which keeps haunting him and arouses his curiosity regarding its ultimate meaning: "I'd been tempted to set her down as the woman of mystery, as opposed to the woman of clarity I married in Margaret. True, I hadn't known where I was with her, couldn't read her heart or her mind or her motivation. But an enigma is a puzzle you want to solve" (ibid.:82). Veronica partly satisfies Tony's insatiable curiosity by sending him a fragment of Adrian's diary which urges him to put in great efforts to make sense of the past, of history and of his existence. The diary fragment focuses on a mathematical formula which attempts to represent Tony's relationship with Adrian and Veronica. The key word of the fragment is "accumulation" (ibid.:85) which stands for data gathered in time, for one's memories of and views on history which are open to our analysis. Besides the mathematical formula, the diary fragment mostly consists of rhetorical questions to be answered by the readers. It ends with an incomplete conditional sentence about Tony,

inviting the readers to fill in its blanks with their own words. Thus, this diary fragment deepens the mystery of the past and suggests that its truth is difficult to know and reveal:

‘5.4. The question of accumulation. If life is a wager, what form does the bet take? At the racetrack, an accumulator is a bet which rolls on profits from the success of one horse to engross the stake on the next one. 5.5. So a) To what extent might human relationships be expressed in a mathematical or logical formula? And b) If so, what signs might be placed between the integers? Plus and minus, self-evidently; sometimes multiplication, and yes division. But these signs are limited. Thus, an entirely failed relationship might be expressed in terms of both loss/minus and division/reduction, showing a total of zero; whereas an entirely successful one can be represented by both addition and multiplication. But what of most relationships? Do they not require to be expressed in notations which are logically improbable and mathematically insoluble?’ (Barnes 2017:85)

Tony takes this document for the voice of the past associated with Adrian Finn’s voice he seems to hear as if it were real and asking for understanding:

I don’t know how best to put this, but as I looked at that photocopied page I didn’t feel as if I was examining some historical document – one, moreover, requiring considerable exegesis. No, I felt as if Adrian was present in the room again, beside me, breathing, thinking. And how admirable he remained. I have at times tried to imagine the despair which leads to suicide, attempted to conjure up the slew and slop of darkness in which only death appears as a pinprick of light: in other words, the exact opposite of the normal condition of life. [...] He made you feel you were his co-thinker, even if you said nothing. And it was very strange for me to feel this again, this companionship with one now dead but still more intelligent, for all my extra decades of life. (ibid.:86-87)

Not only is Tony Webster a fine analyst of the past and of the concept of history but also a good detective determined to find out more details about Veronica and her acquaintances with a view to making light of the past and present state of affairs. Thus, we are offered minute details about his meetings with Veronica and her acquaintances. We are shown how Tony decides to revisit the places seen from Veronica’s car, especially the pub and the shop where her acquaintances are supposed to come. On one of his visits, he meets the group of five young citizens he could accidentally see from Veronica’s car at the last meeting with her when he understands that they are her friends. Analysing a group member’s face, physical presence and attitude, Tony draws the conclusion that he is Adrian’s son. In his attempt to get closer to Veronica’s friends, he accepts to talk to Terry, another group member, who asks him about his identity and informs him that their friend, Adrian, whom Tony suspects to be his dead friend’s son, is irritated by his presence. When Tony tells Terry that Adrian’s mother, Veronica, also called Mary, is his old friend, he is informed by Terry that Mary is Adrian’s sister and that his mother died a couple of months before. Obtaining and analysing this new piece of information, Tony claims that he understands the meaning of the mathematical formula in the diary fragment pertaining to his old friend, Adrian, who committed suicide. Tony shows that all the symbols in the formula make references to him, to Adrian, Veronica, the baby, who is now the young man Tony suspects to be Adrian’s son, and to what he calls “a chain of responsibility” (ibid.:149) which causes the present state of affairs:

And later, at home, going over it all, after some time, I understood. I got it. Why Mrs Ford had Adrian’s diary in the first place. Why she had written: ‘P.S. It may sound odd, but I think the last months of his life were happy’. [...] The first *a* was Adrian, and the other was me, Anthony – as he used to address me when he wanted to call me to seriousness. And *b* signified ‘baby’. One born to a mother – ‘The Mother’ – at a dangerously late age. A child damaged as a result. Who was now a man of forty, lost in grief. And who called his sister Mary. I looked at the chain of responsibility. I saw my initial in there. I remembered that in my ugly letter I had urged Adrian to consult Veronica’s mother. I replayed the words that would forever haunt me. As would Adrian’s unfinished sentence. ‘So, for instance, if Tony...’ I knew I couldn’t change, or mend, anything now. (Barnes 2017:148-149)

Tony Webster’s narrative turns into a philosophical debate on the meaning and the importance of life, on his vision and Adrian’s vision on their life story and its ending. The

readers are suggested to join this debate and answer the rhetorical questions asked. In Tony Webster's opinion, just like history, life does not change and is nothing but "accumulation", "responsibility" and "unrest" (Barnes 2017:150) revealed by stories which are open to many interpretations. Tony associates Adrian's concept of "accumulation" (ibid.:86) with "a store of memories" (ibid.:88), taking a distance from Adrian's approach to it:

We muddle along, we let life happen to us, we gradually build up a store of memories. There is the question of accumulation, but not in the sense that Adrian meant, just the simple adding up and adding on of life. And as the poet pointed out, there is a difference between addition and increase. Had my life increased, or merely added to itself? This was the question Adrian's fragment set off in me. There had been addition – and subtraction – in my life, but how much multiplication? And this gave me a sense of unease, of unrest. (Barnes 2017:88)

The key word of Tony's account is "average" (Barnes 2017:100), which suggests that his analysis of the past is not the perfect one, that his life and actions have not been the best but open to improvement, that the truth he has discovered is not the unique one, that his understanding of his present life, of Veronica's words and actions is not the most accurate one:

Average, that's what I'd been, ever since I left school. Average at university and work; average in friendship, loyalty, love; average, no doubt, at sex. There was a survey of British motorists a few years ago which showed that ninety-five per cent of those polled thought they were 'better than average' drivers. But by the law of averages, we're most of us bound to be average. Not that this brought any comfort. The word resounded. Average at life; average at truth; morally average. (Barnes 2017:100)

Tony Webster admits that his memory is not perfect and implies that his account of the past has many gaps the readers have to fill in. His imperfect memories and story redefine the past from his own perspective. He rewrites and redefines history based on his vision on the past state of affairs. Thus, the novel proves to be metafiction as defined by Patricia Waugh (1984): "Metafiction suggests not only that writing history is a fictional act, ranging events conceptually through language to form a world-model, but that history itself is invested, like fiction, with interrelating plots which appear to interact independently of human design" (Waugh 2003:48-49).

3. Conclusion

In Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*, the readers are invited to enter a debate on the meaning of the concepts of history and the past, the narrator's stories and memories redefining them from his own perspective in a postmodernist manner. The past is recreated by Tony Webster's fictional account and is reread as a letter and as a diary fragment which offer various interpretations. Just like the past, history is rewritten and redefined based on Tony Webster's memories which evince his version of the historical truth. The absolute truth of the past and history is impossible to grasp but just suggested by the protagonists' remembrances, analysis and by the textual evidence represented by letters and diary fragments. Both the past and history can be known in a subjective manner based on the narrator's memories open to the readers' interpretation.

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