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MEMORY, TRUTH AND *DIFFÉRANCE* IN JULIAN BARNES' *THE SENSE OF AN ENDING*

English novelist Julian Barnes has always been absorbed in the problematic relation between history and truth in general, narration and irony in particular. This is perhaps the main topic in the whole work of Barnes, from *Before She Met Me* (1982), focusing "on the blurring of ontological frontiers between fiction and reality" (Guignery 2006, 26) to *Arthur & George* (2005), a fiction in which the reader is "being presented with differing interpretations that fuse to become the same story" (Berberich 126). Even more profoundly, this topic is dominant in what is perhaps Barnes' most famous novel, *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), a work of fiction in which "the past is unrecoverable, the truth is ungraspable, and attempts to capture the writer are full of holes" (Childs 49). *Flaubert's Parrot* is a novel systematically blending into something else, as it contains unusual sources such as dictionary entries, essays, guides, (auto)biographies, bestiaries, manifestos, etc., in a typically postmodern blurring of boundaries between genres. As Julian Barnes himself said:

> I thought of *Flaubert's Parrot* when I started writing it as obviously an unofficial and informal, unconventional sort of novel – an upside down novel, a novel in which there was an infrastructure of fiction and very strong elements of non-fiction, sometimes whole chapters which were nothing but arranged facts. (quoted in Guignery 2002, 259)

For this reason, the craft of novel-writing is an important part of the text and it intertwines with the struggle between truth and fiction. While using devices from both realist and modernist literature,[1] in fact, "the question of verisimilitude in fiction is implicitly interrogated in the novel, as art has a different relationship with social and personal reality from history's" (Childs 47). It is in some way symptomatic that Chapter 4 ends with a remarkable sentence that can be seen as the summary of the whole novel: "What happened to the truth is not recorded" (Barnes 1990, 63).

The question of truth and the question of history are strictly related, as history can never be interpreted as completely true, if anything as a collection of evidences that flow into a not-fully-completed puzzle. After scrutinizing a picture painted by Arthur Frederick Payne through which the narrator is trying to reconstruct Flaubert's neighborhood, he can only downheartedly conclude: "Is this history, then – a swift, confident amateur's watercolour?" (Barnes 1990, 86)

More or less on the same ground stands the collection of short stories *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*[2] (1989), a reflection on the human need for narrative, "for stories that contain truth without necessarily telling the truth, like fiction" (Childs 72). The major difference is that in this case Barnes is able to find an antidote to the overwhelming impossibility to find the truth, this antidote being love:

> We must believe in it [love], or we're lost. We may not obtain it, or we may obtain it and find it renders us unhappy; we must still believe in it. If we don't, then we merely surrender to the history of the world and to someone else's truth. (Barnes 1989, 246)

This sentence seems to satisfy the human need for something to believe in: as we cannot believe in the truth of history, as there is no truth, we can at least believe in that strong, powerful emotion called love. In other words, even if "Love won't change the history of the world," at least "it will do something much more important:

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[1] Specifically, the accumulation of details, so typical of realist novels, and the continuous references to the mind construction of modernist fiction.

[2] It is important to notice the ambiguous status of this work: halfway between a short-stories collection and a novel, it presents different stories (with considerably different styles) that in some way echo each other, in the end framing a unique picture.

teach us to stand up to history, to ignore its chin-out strut" (Barnes 1989, 240). But it is still to prove how much an unstable sentiment such as love can withstand the test of time against that unstoppable monster called history. Barnes' latest-but-one novel so far[3], *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), in effect inserts itself in this tradition, but does love seem to be capable of soothing the inaccessibility of truth in this case also?

The protagonist of the novel, Tony Webster, is an arts administrator, now retired. In the first part, Tony recalls his relationship with Veronica, a relationship he had a few decades prior, during the Sixties. In any case, this relationship did not last for long, as they broke up after spending an awful weekend with Veronica's family. What astonished Tony the most, as he remembers, were Veronica's father (described as an uncivilized man) and brother (a presumptuous boy). Nevertheless, he found her mother a likable, although a little weird, woman. It is important to notice that, the second day Tony spent at Veronica's house, he had been left alone with her mother while the rest of the family was out for a walk. Even more significantly, Tony explicitly says that this weekend "consists of impressions and half-memories which may therefore be self-serving" (Barnes 2012, 27-28). After they break up, Veronica starts dating Adrian, a brilliant and cynical friend of Tony's. A few months later, though, Adrian commits suicide leaving a note in which he writes that if a thinking person "decides to renounce the gift no one asks for, it is a moral and human duty to act on the consequences of that decision" (Barnes 2012, 48).

Throughout the first part of the novel Tony explicitly makes references to the fallacy of his own memory: "(I have) some approximate memories which time has deformed into certainty. If I can't be sure of the actual events any more, I can at least be true to the impressions those facts left. That's the best I can manage" (Barnes 2012, 4). Thus speaks Tony at the very beginning, and he reiterates this impossibility to remember properly until the end of the narration, continuously alluding to memory: "What had begun as a determination to obtain property bequeathed to me had morphed into something much larger, something which bore on the whole of my life, on time and memory" (Barnes 2012, 130). This could mean that the way Tony tells his story does not necessarily correspond to the truth.

The second part of the novel is set forty years later. Tony has now a daughter, an ex-wife and he is living by himself, satisfied enough with his life. Nonetheless, a letter disrupts his serenity: Tony finds out Veronica's mother, Sarah, has passed away and left him £500 and the diary Adrian wrote during the last months of his life. As Tony is not able to understand the reason for this inheritance, he starts questioning his own memory again. Tony met Sarah only once, during that weekend he has not been thinking about for many years; the letter asks Tony to find Veronica and therefore to explain what has happened since the last time he met her. Eventually, he realizes that his relationship with Veronica had not been exactly what he remembered it to be. Veronica herself makes Tony read a letter he wrote when he found out Adrian was dating Veronica: Tony is appalled by the aggressive and vulgar language he used to refer to Adrian and Veronica, but still he cannot recall himself writing such a piece of baseness:

> 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 recognise that part of myself from which the letter came. But perhaps this was simply further self-deception. (Barnes 2012, 97)

As already said, Tony insists on the fact that his narration is not completely reliable. His memory fails in re-elaborating the past and this is especially apparent in this case. And after a while Tony goes on saying that:

> 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. And only recently I'd been going on about how the witnesses to our lives decrease, and with them our essential corroboration. Now I had some all too unwelcome corroboration of what I was, or had been. If only this had been the document Veronica had set light to. (Barnes 2012, 97-98)

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[3] Barnes's latest novel, *The Noise of Time*, has been published this year but it is less concerned with history, despite being a biographic novel about Dmitri Shostakovich. In fact "its central preoccupation is the sense of artistic compromise that Shostakovich struggled with during Stalin's reign of terror that tipped over into the Khrushchev era and left deep scars on his soul" (Akbar 2016).

Here Tony seems to be unquestionably sincere in his astonished stupor, in a very typical postmodern device for which it is impossible even to interpret one's own writing. As Daniela Carpi wrote, "(t)he world is actually a reality that is 'other', a reality of non-progress, a reality of Thanatoic and infernal stasis" (Carpi 13). And yet, it will be argued later on that Tony's unreliability is not only the consequence of a vanishing memory, but it has also to do with his intention of not being true.

Eventually, Tony starts believing that Adrian's suicide was the consequence of Veronica's pregnancy, but this conclusion turns out to be wrong as well. In fact, Tony discovers there had been a baby (a baby that is now a middle-aged disabled man living in a nursing home), but he also discovers that the baby was named Adrian after his late friend and, by talking with Adrian's caregiver, that he is not Veronica's son, but apparently the fruit of an intercourse between Adrian and Sarah. The novel ends with Tony re-evaluating his entire life and his relationships with Veronica, her mother and his friend Adrian.

In any case, to understand the novel as a whole, it is crucial to observe that its title is taken from a seminal 1967 treatise written by Frank Kermode, in which the author "argued that the sense of an ending functions to shape how stories unfold and how characters' lives develop in good fiction" (McAdams 304). Quite curiously, very few of the scholars who analyzed Barnes' novel referred to the book from which he took the title. The sole exception, perhaps, is Dan P. McAdams's *The Art and Science of Personality Development* (2015)*,* a recent work in which the author studies Barnes' novel from the point of view of personal intellectual growth. Kermode's theories are here considered important because, according to McAdams, what is true about fiction is also true in real life. "Outside the pages of literary fiction," he maintains,

> Real people imagine how their lives will end up, and those projections for the future feed back to color the way people see the present and understand the past. For everyday autobiographical authors like you and me, who I am in the present and who I was in the past are shaped in my own mind by how I believe things will end for me in the future. (McAdams 304)

The lack of reference to Kermode becomes, under this new light, even more curious than it appears at first glance. Sure enough, Barnes' novel moves precisely in this field: the entire work is in fact a constant attempt to reshape the past (hence, the present and the future) of the main character, incidentally the narrator. But even if we know (or maybe, just because we know) of this creative reshaping, the finale as presented in the above summary of the plot raises at least two sets of problems:

1. The readers should all of a sudden trust Tony, while trusting him has been impossible since the beginning of the narration. The readers, obviously, have a "desire to impose a sense of causality and teleology on the narrative," (De Lange 146) and this is the reason why they tend to believe Tony's last words. As there will not be other explanations, the last pages apparently turn out to produce the only possible interpretation. It will be later demonstrated that this is not necessarily the case;

2. Tony's final speech is not presented in a plain way. The readers should be able to understand what Tony is implying by deduction. As a matter of fact, Tony does not explicitly affirm that (the disabled) Adrian is the son of (his former friend) Adrian. On the contrary, commenting Adrian's diary, he uses a mathematical elucidation to guide the readers, as well as himself, into what Tony wants them to believe.

> Thus, how might you express an accumulation containing the integers b, a1, a2, s, v?' And then a couple of formulae expressing possible accumulations. It was obvious now. 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. (Barnes 2012, 149)

These two factors frankly deny Kermode's treatise, if anything, they overturn it in a parodic way by denying what Kermode called "confidence of the end" (Kermode 18).[4]

If at all, the ending of the novel recalls other postmodern literary theories, more or less contemporary to Kermode's, such as Umberto Eco's *opera aperta* ("open work") and Roland Barthes's *texte scriptible* ("writerly text")[5]. Particularly interesting is what Eco says about

> (t)he poetics of the 'open' work (which) tends (…) to promote 'acts of cognizant freedom' in the interpreter, to make him the active centre of a web of inexhaustible relations, among which he establishes his own form, without being determined by a *necessity* that prescribes him the definitive modes in the organization of the read work. (Eco 2013, 35-36)[6]

As it will be later seen in more detail, Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* gives the readers this freedom; actually, it spurs the readers to use that freedom in order not to interpret the finale as something given, but to reinterpret it over and over again. In other words, *The Sense of an Ending* fully represents that typically postmodern disillusion towards "those grand stories or explanations which make sense of the world according to one overarching truth" (Marshall 6).[7]

The plot of *The Sense of an Ending* as described above is present in most of the texts which have tried to analyze the novel (White 61-64; Oró Piqueras 87-95; McAdams 301-303). Nevertheless, that is only one of the possible explanations of the ending, not necessarily the most perceptive, and perhaps the most superficial one.

What is certain is that the narrator is unreliable (by his own admission, later proved by the circumstances) and all those critical essays insist on this point, remarking the importance of memory in making Tony a fallible narrator. Maricel Oró Piqueras, in particular, gives us a very fascinating explanation of how misleading memory and narration intersect:

> The first step is to come to terms with the fact that memory and reality do not always match and that memory is strongly influenced by the feelings that invaded someone regarding a specific event. Secondly, the narrator has to admit and include the changes in his life narrative. The following logical step is to try to find a way to come to terms with the reality of the facts as well as his feelings of remorse and guilt since change is impossible at this stage. Being aware that Veronica will not accept seeing him again, (Tony) Webster decides to send her an email in which he expresses his apologies for his negative interference between her and Adrian as well as for having erased her from his life altogether. Despite this, the narrator has become aware of a new reality he never considered before. In other words, getting into old age does not always mean to have come to terms with the past as it does not mean that a quiet path will lead the old person towards the end. Old age, as a part of life, requires readjustments as well as an ongoing narrative, which will be told with more experience, but also with unrest. (Oró Piqueras 92-93)

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[4] Kermode wrote his essay during the peak of postmodernity, he was aware that this pursuit of meaning in the ending of a novel is not a rigid rule: "The degree of rigidity is a matter of profound interest in the study of literary fictions. As an extreme case you will find some novel, probably contemporary with yourself, in which the departure from a basic paradigm, the peripeteia in the sense I am now giving it, seems to begin with the first sentence. The schematic expectations of the reader are discouraged immediately. (…) And so we have a novel in which the reader will find none of the gratification to be had from sham temporality, sham causality, falsely certain description, clear story. The new novel 'repeats itself, bisects itself, modifies itself, contradicts itself, without even accumulating enough bulk to constitute a past—and thus a «story,» in the traditional sense of the word.' The reader is not offered easy satisfactions, but a challenge to creative co-operation" (Kermode 19). Barnes's novel more easily resembles this kind of fiction, but this should not make us forget that Kermode's thesis is an attempt to "make sense of the world" through literature, and that "we should make more sense of (it) if we could reduce it from the status of myth to the status of fiction" (Kermode 28). Hence Barnes's novel could be seen only as a parody of Kermode's theories.

[5] For the English translations, see Umberto Eco 1979 and Barthes 1975.

[6] Translation mine.

[7] Whether Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* should be considered as a postmodern novel or not is not of any relevance here.

Yet, it will be pointed out how memory is not the only factor making Tony completely unreliable, and in doing so the ending of the novel as so far presented is going to be discredited. Specifically, that finale does not give account of a few pieces of evidence scattered in the novel that for this reason remain unclear. First of all, when Tony tries to give us an explanation of the integers he found in Adrian's diary, he simplifies too much in associating *a1* to Adrian and *a2* to himself. De facto, the meaning of the two "*A*s" can be easily interchanged, meaning that Tony had a sexual intercourse with Veronica's mother and is actually the father of the baby. That is precisely the assumption of the present article.

If Tony is (the disabled) Adrian's father, that would explain at least two otherwise unexplainable events occurring in the novel:

1. The reason why Veronica's mother left £500 to Anthony (there would be no other reason, as Tony would otherwise be only a boy she had seen four decades before or, even worse, the boy who caused Adrian's suicide and that for sure does not deserve any inheritance);

2. The reason why Veronica and her brother behaved in such a strange way during that remote breakfast:

> Veronica became more openly affectionate; over tea she was happy to put her hand on my arm and fiddle with my hair. At one point, she turned to her brother and said,
> 'He'll do, won't he?'
> Jack winked at me; I didn't wink back. Instead, part of me felt like stealing some towels, or walking mud into the carpet. (Barnes 2012, 29)

The readers do not know what Veronica and Jack are talking about in this quick dialogue, but they seem to allude to possible outcomes of Tony's remaining alone with Veronica's mother. It can be inferred that they know she is not trustworthy and even the readers are given a sort of proof when, in a previous passage, Tony suspects Veronica's father is not actually her father:

> He was large, fleshy and red-faced; he struck me as gross. Was that beer on his breath? At this time of day? How could this man have fathered such an elfin daughter? (Barnes 2012, 26)

We could deduce that not only does Tony's memory fail to recall his past, but also that he is deliberately lying in order to manipulate the way readers would see the events. He analyzes how some memories come back to him in a very self-conscious way and still his recollection increases every time he comes to it. Probably, Tony slept with Sarah that morning in which they were alone in Veronica's house; that is the reason why he is not very explicit in narrating that morning. Also, this could explain Adrian's suicide: perhaps he killed himself because she was pregnant, the same thing that had happened to Robson, another schoolmate of Adrian and Tony. But Adrian (and Tony) considered that suicide "unphilosophical, self-indulgent and inartistic: in other words, wrong" (Barnes 2012, 14). Why would Adrian commit such a "wrong" action himself if he was so bothered by Robson's? Simply, he killed himself for a completely different reason: he had started a relationship with Veronica's mother and only later he had discovered that she was pregnant with Tony's baby. That would also explain the reason why Veronica keeps telling Tony "you don't get it" (Barnes 2012, 62; 100; 126; 131; 144) when he exposes his attempts to find a solution. Actually, Tony did get it, but he lied in order to look innocent.

What makes *The Sense of an Ending* such a well-constructed novel is that readers know Tony is unreliable by his own admission, and yet s/he tends to trust him when Tony is not explicitly raising doubts about his memory. Yet Tony lies throughout the whole narration, and this is particularly apparent when he constructs a narrative fiction out of impressions, without ever using any proof. For instance, when he tries to interpret Veronica's reaction to his awful letter, Tony constructs her reaction and makes readers believe it:

> Of course, she wanted to point out what a shit I was. But it was more than this, I decided: given our current stand-off, it was also a tactical move, a warning. If I tried to make any legal fuss about the diary, this would be part of her defence. I would be my very own character witness. (Barnes 2012, 98)

"I decided," Tony frankly admits, and he is so aware he is lying that after a while he pretends, in his own mind, to be charged in a trial, trying to defend his version:

> At least, that's how I remember it now. Though if you were to put me in a court of law, I doubt I'd stand up to cross-examination very well. 'And yet you claim this memory was suppressed for forty years?' 'Yes.' 'And only surfaced just recently?' 'Yes.' 'Are you able to account for why it surfaced?' 'Not really.' 'Then let me put it to you, Mr Webster, that this supposed incident is an entire figment of your imagination, constructed to justify some romantic attachment which you appear to have been nurturing towards my client, a presumption which, the court should know, my client finds utterly repugnant.' 'Yes, perhaps. But –' 'But what, Mr Webster?' 'But we don't love many people in this life. One, two, three? And sometimes we don't recognise the fact until it's too late. Except that it isn't necessarily too late. Did you read that story about late-flowering love in an old people's home in Barnstaple?' 'Oh please, Mr Webster, spare us your sentimental lucubrations. This is a court of law, which deals with fact. What exactly are the facts in the case?' (Barnes 2012, 119-120)

Tony exploits the narrative aspects of trials by quoting further stories because he is aware that law is not only "rules and policies," but that it "must always be intimately intertwined with rhetoric and narrative" (Brooks 1996, 14). Perhaps, the romantic side can convince the jury of Tony's innocence, above all because the jury is only a product of his mind. Here Barnes is playing from the point of view of law narrative, as in a concrete trial the jury is a decision maker that should choose among competing stories in order to have a plural vision of the facts in the case (Tiersma 148). That is not what happens: in his usual way of distorting reality in order to appear innocent, Tony creates a trial with no competing narratives (as his is the only one), without any evidence and, even more importantly, in which the jury is not a decision maker, since it would never come to a verdict. That means that even when he is performing in a problematic situation, he is doing so only to suggest his innocence with the awareness that nobody would ever punish him. In doing so, Tony is apparently strengthening his position, while he is actually undermining it by implicitly admitting to the reader that only with such a subterfuge can he make his guiltlessness evident. As a matter of fact, the real decision maker here is the reader himself, who must choose whether to believe or not in the only participant narrative. As it "always seeks to induce a point of view(,) Storytelling, one can conclude, is never innocent" (Brooks 1996, 16). And as Tony cannot reply with any facts, he blames his non-collaborative memory:

> I could only reply that I think – I theorise – that something – something else – happens to the memory over time. For years you survive with the same loops, the same facts and the same emotions. I press a button marked Adrian or Veronica, the tape runs, the usual stuff spools out. The events reconfirm the emotions – resentment, a sense of injustice, relief – and vice versa. There seems no way of accessing anything else; the case is closed. Which is why you seek corroboration, even if it turns out to be contradiction. But what if, even at a late stage, your emotions relating to those long-ago events and people change? That ugly letter of mine provoked remorse in me. Veronica's account of her parents' deaths – yes, even her father's – had touched me more than I would have thought possible. I felt a new sympathy for them – and her. Then, not long afterwards, I began remembering forgotten things. I don't know if there's a scientific explanation for this – to do with new affective states reopening blocked-off neural pathways. All I can say is that it happened, and that it astonished me (Barnes 2012, 120).

In other words, Tony is a pure narrator, not only as narrator of the novel, but also as a creator of fiction inside a world of fiction. In doing so, he is "confronting his own mortality and trying to make sense of what life has amounted to now that he is retired" (Barlow 195). A confrontation with one's own mortality that is characteristic of postmodern fiction, for which "writing means tending towards the absolute; it represents the Midrash, the interpretation of an absolute that still continues to be elusive" (Carpi 13). Tony exploits memory, and at the same time is exploited by memory, in order to interpret his own absolute. Yet, it is an interpretation that is not going to be performed, as this mutual exploitation unavoidably makes Tony lose his bearings.

"I continue to be troubled," wrote Paul Ricoeur, "by the unsettling spectacle offered by an excess of memory here, and an excess of forgetting elsewhere, to say nothing of the influence of commemorations and abuses of memory – and of forgetting" (Ricoeur 443). Obviously, that means that the impossibility to rely on Tony is still present when he is narrating the finale, even though the reader longs for an explanation and hence believes his words. But why does Tony lie? Mainly because:

> (n)arrative is one of the large categories or systems of understanding that we use in our negotiations with reality, specifically (…) with the problem of temporality: man's time-boundedness, his consciousness of existence within the limits of mortality. And plot is the principal ordering force of those meanings that we try to wrest from human temporality. (Brooks 2012, XI)

To put it in another way, Tony knows he is guilty but does not want to be considered as such, and not only by others (the readers), but by himself, too. Lying in his narration allows him to feel guilty for a minor sin (sending an awful letter to his former girlfriend) so that he can still feel innocent for his major sin, that of impregnating his girlfriend's mother and in doing so causing Adrian's suicide. According to Levinas, what Tony feels is some sort of "neurotic guilt," a "unrealistic and (…) undeserved tormented feeling of self-absorption, self-loathing, worthlessness and misery" that occurs as the result of "the much more painful, threatening and identity-subverting experience of what has been called genuine or real guilt" (Marcus 54). By lying, Tony is then avoiding his genuine guilt, that is, the:

> unconscious sense, that one really did, in reality (often elaborated in conscious and/or unconscious fantasy), rupture, if not permanently damage or destroy relations with the Other, especially the positive relations associated with such significant others as a spouse, parent, child or friend. (Marcus 54)[8]

Basically, this unconscious self-absolution meddles with the construction of Tony's self, making the narration collapse into the deconstruction of autobiography. Tony has imprisoned himself in a comfort zone from which, realistically, he will never escape.
But it is probable that also the inheritance Tony received, and all that happened because of it, turned out to be salvific for him. His retirement is in fact so quiet and peaceful it almost seems to be killing him:

> I'm retired now. I have my flat with my possessions. I keep up with a few drinking pals, and have some women friends – platonic, of course. (And they're not part of the story either.) I'm a member of the local history society, though less excited than some about what metal detectors unearth. A while ago, I volunteered to run the library at the local hospital; I go round the wards delivering, collecting, recommending. It gets me out, and it's good to do something useful; also, I meet some new people. Sick people, of course; dying people as well. But at least I shall know my way around the hospital when my turn comes. (Barnes 2012, 55-56)

The sequence of events he goes through thanks to the inheritance at least permits him to tell the story as he wants us readers to know it:

> I survived. 'He survived to tell the tale' – that's what people say, don't they? History isn't the lies of the victors, as I once glibly assured Old Joe Hunt; I know that now. It's more the memories of the survivors, most of whom are neither victorious nor defeated. (Barnes 2012, 56)

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[8] It is worth noticing that the description of this nerve-wracking conflict between neurotic and genuine guilt fits perfectly Tony's case: "for Levinas, such genuine guilt as we are calling it, reflects the awareness on some level, that one has in a crucial way let down, if not radically abandoned or betrayed the other person. That is, in the Other's summoning me to responsibility, despite myself as Levinas would argue, I have failed, miserably failed, to adequately respond with empathy and care, to the needy other's call" (Marcus 55).

Tony is neither victorious nor defeated, but he surely is a survivor and his survival is also due to the possibility to narrate, to the fact that he now has a need, the need to defend himself from the accusation of being the cause of his friend Adrian's suicide and his son Adrian's dreadful existence. "The lack of need is more wretched than the lack of satisfaction,"[9] Georges Bataille said (4). These new needs, therefore, give Tony a new reason to live.

In his Seminar VII, Jacques Lacan reminded us that the problem of truth is that it never adapts to his subject, because "every truth has the structure of fiction" (Lacan 12). Therefore, one could invent everything s/he is saying and yet the truth would not be impaired. What actually matters is the shape of the discourse, the subjective investment and the signifier recursion: in other words, what matters is the intrinsic form of language. The question is never about the presumed reality the speaker is making reference to, if at all it is about the kind of reality that the discourse itself produces and the pleasure it supports, because "the characteristic of pleasure, as that dimension which binds man, is to be found on the side of the fictitious" (Lacan 12). More or less, we can bestow the same meaning (slightly more cynical) on what the narrator says, at a certain point, in Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), one of the most self-aware postmodern English novels:

> A character is either 'real' or imaginary'? If you think that, hypocrite lecteur, I can only smile. You do not even think of your own past as quite real, you dress it up, you gild it or blacken it, censor it, tinker with it... fictionalize it, in a word, and put it away on a shelf – your book, your romanced autobiography. We are all in flight from the real reality. That is a basic definition of Homo Sapiens. (Fowles 82)

Here lies the main difference between *The Sense of an Ending* and Barnes' previous novels, as well as other contemporary English novels concerning the status of reality in fiction and the importance of history, those works which Linda Hutcheon defined historiographic metafiction.[10]

The Sense of an Ending also "refuses the view that only history has a truth claim," (Hutcheon 93) and it does so "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 93).

Barnes is not the only novelist of his generation obsessed with doubts towards what is truth and what fiction. A great deal of authors who published their first work at the beginning of the eighties can be found struggling with the same reluctance to believe in witnesses and documents, and especially History starts to be seen as a fraud, as an official truth that has no correspondence in reality. Therefore, novelists began to consider truth as something unachievable and, in order to take shelter from this disconsolate vision of History, to use personal histories to obtain at least a hint of historical knowledge.

In particular, Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983) appears to be extremely concerned with the same lack of certainty as Barnes' work:

> So I began to demand of history an Explanation. Only to uncover in this dedicated search more mysteries, more fantasticalities, more wonders and grounds for astonishment than I started with, only to conclude forty years later... that history is a yarn. (Swift 62)

Not only does the main character of the novel have to wait the same amount of time (around four decades) to find out that there is no solution in interpreting the past, but in the end he also draws the same conclusions as Tony's, that "by forever attempting to explain we may come, not to an Explanation, but to a knowledge of the limits of our power to explain" (Swift 108)

So what is the difference between Tony and Henry Crick, *Waterland*'s protagonist? And, generally speaking, where do the two novels diverge? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that in *Waterland* "the narrator (and the novel) is always ambivalent about stories and their function and value. Stories save Henry Crick from the scars of war" (Malcolm 96). Here is the great contrast between the two novels: in Swift's the past (symbolized by the

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[9] Translation mine.

[10] Perhaps, *The Sense of an Ending* can be described, broadening Hutcheon's field of study, as a metafiction of the past.

scars of war) is a menace from which stories (that is, memories) can save the narrator as well as the audience; on the other hand, in Barnes' the past (symbolized by the inheritance) is the savior that rescues Tony from those memories that can prove him guilty. Apparently perfectly similar, the movement is actually equal and opposite in the two novels: in *Waterland* the power of stories can save both the narrator and his audience while in *The Sense of an Ending* the past can save the narrator and the narrator only.

Moreover, *The Sense of an Ending* represents a further evolutionary step in Barnes' work as well. If, for instance, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* reflects on the human need "for stories that contain truth without necessarily telling the truth," (Childes 72) in *The Sense of an Ending* the truth is a huge problem for Tony, for whom the truth must be erased, or at least submerged in a sea of fiction in order to make it impossible for us to find it.

In the above mentioned Lacanian terms, then, *The Sense of an Ending* lacks pleasure in the fictitious, and this is what makes the novel so peculiar. It is not by making the reader constantly aware s/he is reading fiction that the status of reality surrenders, for the same thing happens basically in all Barnes' previous novels, as well as in *Waterland* and a lot of other contemporary novels. But fiction, even when brought into the open, can be truth due to subjective investment. However, when in the finale Tony himself stops believing in his reality the reader too cannot help stopping believing in it. And as the subjective investment fails, the enjoyment inexorably fails as well. Paradoxically, and here lies Barnes' stroke of genius, in the very moment in which the narrator would like his reader to believe in every word he is saying, while through the rest of the novel he had always recommended the reader not to believe in his weak memory, in that precise moment truth is demolished and we, the readers, cannot trust in the narrator any longer. Now we know he is lying on purpose and, not surprisingly, during his attempt to explain the meaning of Adrian's diary page in his own way (that is, Adrian as the father of the baby), Tony himself does not seem so self-confident as he is expected to be, and his explanation is not clear at all. On the contrary, it requires some sort of interpretation even to understand Tony's bogus version of the truth:

> Thus, how might you express an accumulation containing the integers b, a1, a2, s, v?' And then a couple of formulae expressing possible accumulations. It was obvious now. 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 2012, 149)

And that is all, no further explanation is given to the reader. Still, the subjective investment is undoubtedly lacking, but this lack produces a sort of unintelligible feeling that can only be individuated through a very deep reading of the novel. In spite of its appearance, this makes *The Sense of an Ending* a very refined narration concerned with psychological allusions much more than with historical and documentary references.

In order to fully understand this finale, and hence Tony's *weltanschauung*, it is necessary to turn to a line of succession of French thinkers that during the last century have wisely investigated the ambiguity between consciousness and morality or, rather, the ambiguity between "conscience as knowledge of fact and conscience as knowledge of moral urge" (Whitman 106).

On closer inspection, in fact, Tony seems to be a post-modern descendent of French existentialism, closely related to Roquentin, protagonist of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*:

> If anyone had asked me what existence was, I would have answered, in good faith, that it was nothing, simply an empty form which was added to external things without changing anything in their nature. And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence. (Sartre 2007, 179)

Much less idealistic than Sartre's character, Tony needs a concrete object to turn his life from an empty form into a real existence: clearly, the diary page Sarah left him. Tony's astonishment in rediscovering his past, in elaborating new information (as are the letter he wrote to Veronica and the existence of young Adrian) corresponds to the beginning of a new life in which everything contributes to overturn Tony's idea of the world. And if "existentialism […] begins with the astonishment of existing," (Foulquié 41)[11] then Tony is a purely existentialist character. It is after all an existentialist truth that only those who freely choose to be, do have an actual existence: "I recognize no allegiance except to myself," (Sartre 1974, 14) as Mathieu says in *The Age of Reason*. Tony rebels to his own past in order to reconcile with it, and that is his free deliberate choice, his way to allege himself. And this insurrection against the past is another typical existentialist theme: "the past against which I rebel is not […] identical to that which is, or becomes, when I reconcile with it," said Gabriel Marcel (1942, 75). It follows that our past is but the rebuilding of it, and it only occurs in our mind. Marcel himself wrote that

> though we are given certain such luminous fragments out of the past, the mind, all the same, has to work hard to rebuild the rest of the past around them; and in fact this rebuilding of the past is really a new building, a fresh construction on an old site, modelled (sic) more or less on the former edifice there, but not identical with it. (Marcel 1950, 156)

Ultimately, Tony does not do anything else than overstate this fresh construction up to making any rehabilitation of the truth completely impossible, as no reader would ever be certain where Tony stops telling the truth and where he starts to lie.

In Heideggerian terms, the only existing world is a work of our consciousness: "I am the being by whom 'there is' (*es gibt*) Being," (McBride 353) and this is true not only for Tony, but for every creator of fiction (and in Julian Barnes' fiction, Tony is in turn a creator of fiction). But moving from Heidegger back to Sartre, it is possible to see how the existentialist thought is particularly relevant to Tony's situation:

> I am in a public park. Not far away there is a lawn and along the edge of that lawn there are benches. A man passes by those benches. I see this man; I apprehend him as an object and at the same time as a man. What does this signify? What do I mean when I assert that this object is a man? (…) The distance which unfolds between the lawn and the man across the synthetic upsurge of this primary relation is a negation of the distance which I establish – as a pure type of external negation – between these two objects. The distance appears as a pure disintegration of the relations which I apprehend between the objects of my universe. It is not I who realize this disintegration; it appears to me as a relation which I aim at emptily across the distances which I originally established between things. It stands as a background of things, a background which on principle escapes me and which is conferred on them from without. Thus the appearance among the objects of my universe of an element of disintegration in that universe is what I mean by the appearance of a man in my universe. (Sartre 1993, 254-255)

So existence, which would appear as the supreme necessity if there was but a single consciousness, becomes evil because someone else exists.[12] Adrian (not by chance an existentialist himself)[13] is that element of disintegration and it is his appearance that, in the end, dismantles Tony's world. During his youth, in fact, Adrian is the one who steals Veronica and, as it will be later known, even Sarah from Tony. Forty years later, Adrian's diary page is what makes Tony's certainties collapse, what prevents him from being the "Great Everything" and reduces him to a human being who has lost his dignity and self-confidence, and tries to recover it by inventing his past: "(t)hus original sin is my upsurge in a world where there are others; and whatever may be my further

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[11] Translation mine.

[12] A similar line of reasoning is present also in Levinas: "Thus, for Levinas, the Other challenges my selfhood by revealing to me that my freedom and powers for intervention and making a difference are limited and inadequate" (Marcus 43).

[13] "If Alex had read Russell and Wittgenstein, Adrian had read Camus and Nietzsche" (Barnes 2012, 10). A further reference to Camus and his ideas about suicide is made by Adrain at page 14. At page 140 Tony remembers Adrian as a repudiator of Camus exactly because of his suicide.

relations with others, these relations will be only variations on the original theme of my guilt" (Sartre 1993, 410).

Before receiving Sarah's inheritance, Tony had left the past behind and for him Adrian was only an obscure presence in his mind, a remote entity about which it was senseless to overthink. But it is Sartre again who reminds us that the existent cannot be reduced to a finite series of manifestations, as any of these manifestations is in relation with a subject constantly changing. And if it is quite certain that Tony is a changing subject, it is perhaps more unexpected that the late Adrian is still changing as well: as a matter of fact, it is not the tomb that finishes the human dimension as existent, and one's legacy can make a subject speak even four decades after his passing:

> Although an object may disclose itself only through a single Abschattung (that is, a profile), the sole fact of there being a subject implies the possibility of multiplying the points of view on that Abschattung. This suffices to multiply to infinity the Abschattung under consideration. Furthermore, if the series of appearances were finite, that would mean that the first appearances do not have the possibility of reappearing. Which is absurd, or that they can be all given at once, which is still more absurd. (Sartre 1993, XLVII)

The object, in order to be defined, must be transcended towards the total series of which it, as one of the possible appearances, is a member (Eco 2013, 54). Tony is not able to transcend Adrian, therefore his impossibility to define Adrian's status makes it impossible to define himself as well. This is possibly the reason why he is lying throughout the whole narration: incapable of understanding his own life, he is compelled to recreate it in a much more acceptable and accessible existence, so that he can now fully understand and recount it.

This relation between a phenomenon and the polyvalence of its perceptions is further emphasized by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who wondered: "How can any thing ever really and truly present itself to us, since its synthesis is never a completed process, and since I can always expect to see it break down and fall to the status of a mere illusion?" (Merleau-Ponty 385) The answer the French philosopher gives is the fatalist deduction for which there is no answer:

> Belief in the thing and the world must entail the presumption of a completed synthesis – and yet this completion is made impossible by the very nature of the perspectives which have to be inter-related, since each one of them, by virtue of its horizons, refers to other perspectives, and so on indefinitely. (…) The contradiction which we find between the reality of the world and its incompleteness is the contradiction between the omnipresence of consciousness and its involvement in a field of presence. (…) This ambiguity is not some imperfection of consciousness or existence, but the definition of them. (Merleau-Ponty 385-387)

Or better still, the answer is that our pursuit for a clear definition of our consciousness is a struggle bound to fail. So it is Tony's consciousness, that somehow tries to be as plain as possible, but it ends up being an anthill of confusion and contradictions because "consciousness, which is taken to be the seat of clear thinking, is on the contrary the very abode of ambiguity" (Merleau-Ponty 387).

It appears evident that Tony is not to be blamed for his bewildered consciousness (if anything he is to be blamed because he purposely exploits this bewilderment in order to prove himself innocent), as it can be considered the ordinary human condition. And this leads us to the concept of what Derrida called *différance*, a particularly useful device to understand the ending of Barnes' novel, and the role of the disabled Adrian in particular.

> 'We are going to the shop,' he told me formally.
> 'What are you going to buy?' I asked with equal solemnity.
> This took him aback, and he thought about it for a while.
> 'Stuff we need,' he eventually replied. He nodded to himself and added, helpfully, 'Requisites.'
> Then he did his formal little neck-bow, turned, and put his badge-heavy hat back on his head.
> 'He seems a very nice fellow,' I commented.

> But she (Veronica) was putting the car into gear with one hand and waving with the other. I noticed
> that she was sweating. Yes, it was a hot day, but even so. (Barnes 2012, 128)

Adrian's disability does not allow any interpretation, thus he is both a synchronic *différance* – a radicalization of the synchronic differences between father and son – and a diachronic *différance* – a temporal deferment which continuously deploys its origin elsewhere, or better, "elsewhen" (Derrida 1981, 28-30). And if "an element functions and signifies, takes on or conveys meaning, only by referring to another past or future element in an economy of traces," (Derrida 1981, 27) the relation between Tony and Adrian is quickly recognizable as a *différance*: but exactly what kind of relation? *Différance* is to be distinguished from difference, as *différance* is what produces difference and without any spatial or temporal (synchronic or diachronic) separation, no difference is given. And as "(n)othing is independent of its exteriority to other things in a field of spatio-temporal differences, intervals, alterities," (Lucy 27) therefore, the *différances* between Tony and his son would be both the time past and Sarah, the connections between the two men. By lying, Tony tries to escape from this reality, but the *logos différance* betrays him: "without differance as temporalization, without the nonpresence of the other inscribed within the sense of the present" (Derrida 1982, 71) nothing has meaning, and for this reason Tony falls in a vicious cycle in which he needs the presence of the difference (Adrian) to tell a story in which the difference is apparently eluded. It is in fact important to notice that the tense of the narration is always a past tense, therefore Tony is not discovering anything while he is telling his story. On the contrary, he already knows how it is going to end, and for this reason his identity as a liar can easily find its origin also in the identification of the difference between himself and his son. But what exactly is Adrian? In Derrida's terminology, Adrian can represent both a temporal deferral and a spatial deferral[14]. But given that *différance* is a mechanism through which identity must undergo a linguistic process, namely identity is created by means of our identification with language, identity will forever be an incomplete event with no definitive answers, exactly as Tony's narration is incomplete and with no definitive answers.

Tony's identity, then, can be explained only through Adrian: "there can be a difference between two identities only if there is some system, network, or eld of relations," (Colebrook 57) but this explanation is doomed to be partial and unsatisfactory:

> As soon as we think this condition for the difference between or among terms we are returned to
> an identity (...), and we have then already assumed some distinction between the system of
> differences and the cause or ground of those differences. (Colebrook 57)

This is because identity can only be defined through difference, "being can only be attributed to becoming" (Pearson 16) in Gilles Deleuze's words.

But if Tony and Adrian's identities are unintelligible, at least they can be conferred a name, a label that allows them to be recognized. And Adrian's name, such a shocking reference to Tony's former friend, appears to him as natural as it is:

> He looked at me rather as the barman had.
> 'It's about Adrian.'
> 'Adrian,' I repeated. Why had I never wondered about his name? And what else could he have
> possibly been called? (Barnes 2012, 147)

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[14] "When Derrida argues for a radical notion of text or writing, this is not because he believes in the primacy of language as some organizing system, for any such system of constituted and *dispersed* differences or terms is given through time and space via the operation of traces (such as sounds, material inscriptions, and constantly repeated but different differences). This means that our usual or 'vulgar' understanding of time as chronological succession is contaminated by space, precisely because it relies upon a point that gauges time passing. Similarly, our understanding of space relies on time, or the capacity to synthesize a eld of dispersed points or distances into some plane within which these points and distances differ from each other. Before there are differences (between now and the past, or here and there, or subject and object) there is *différance*, which is both temporal deferral and spatial dispersal" (Colebrook 65-66).

But why Adrian then? Because *différance* "cannot be spoken of, designated, or described. (It) can be elucidated or shown perhaps, but not named" (Morgan 327). This is the reason why Sarah's son has been named Adrian: because this name confuses his possibility to be recognized, it deprives him also of that label that was the only certainty of identity. Adrian, that secondary character around which Tony's vicissitudes can finally find an elucidation, is basically an impenetrable shield, a point in the landscape impossible to focus. Furthermore, Adrian can be seen, more than as a difference, also as what Deleuze called a "disguised repetition," a repetition which adds something to the original, the original being his father Tony:

> Repetition is truly that which disguises itself in constituting itself, that which constitutes itself only by disguising itself. It is not underneath the masks, but is formed from one mask to another, as though from one distinctive point to another, from one privileged instant to another, with and within the variations. The masks do not hide anything except other masks. There is no first term which is repeated, and even our childhood love for the mother repeats other adult loves with regard to other women, rather like the way in which the hero of *In Search of Lost Time* replays with his mother Swann's passion for Odette. There is therefore nothing repeated which may be isolated or abstracted from the repetition in which it was formed, but in which it is also hidden. (Deleuze 17)

And in Deleuze's opinion this repetition provides the principle of the Other One, namely Adrian provides the principle of Tony. Adrian would therefore be the ultimate truth, the only possible explanation, "the truth of the uncovered" (Deleuze 24). Where Derrida and Deleuze converge is in sanctioning this truth as out of reach, although Tony's (and the reader's) attempt can get very close to it.

A last observation about difference can be made interpreting the integers Tony had found in his late friend Adrian's diary. The use of an expression is an interpretative game which transcends language, and to which a structure of meaning is given "dividing the world into identifiable entities, that allows an ongoing sense of that which remains the same through time" (Colebrook 59). Actually, the entities in this formula are not identifiable at all, as Adrian and Tony are given the same denomination, and it is for this reason another non-interpretable object. The formula is apparently an imposition made by Adrian when he had written his diary, and as such it appears as a traditional type of difference, a difference "imposed on the world" (Somers-Hall 22). But that diary, as a matter of fact, was conceived in order to be read by Adrian himself only, and this would turn it into a second type of difference, a difference which "emerges of its own accord, or immanently from the world," (Somers-Hall 22) and so tied to "immanence and univocity" (Somers-Hall 22). As ambiguous as the formula is, in fact, it had been clear for Adrian when he was writing it. It is Tony, in the exact moment in which he interprets someone else's difference, that returns it back to the first type of difference, and in doing so he gives it a representation value, thus making it interpretable. His interpretation, as one would expect, is used as a defensive tool, to easily understand the first *a* as Adrian and the second one as Anthony. This way, Adrian's diary page turns from the definitive charge onto Tony into his aegis with which to be forever safe.

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