Julian Barnes's *The Only Story* – Within and Beyond the Author's Idiosyncrasies

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Abstract

Although Julian Barnes's fiction is diverse in its generic, stylistic and narrative metamorphoses, in terms of its subject matter it has always been preoccupied with the theme of memory, with searching for the truth of what, how and why events happened in the past. The device of an ageing person recalling his younger years or attempting to reveal the secret of another's past can be traced throughout Barnes's career, but it has become especially prominent in his later works, which tend to be more grim and rueful. Their narrators are almost obsessed with the meaning of their existence as they contemplate its approaching end and mortality in general. The Only Story *(2018) follows this course as it is told from the perspective of a retired man retelling the story of his youthful love affair and its consequences for his subsequent life. This paper discusses how the novel thematically and stylistically follows up on his 2011 Booker Prize winner* The Sense of an Ending*, but also how it offers a distinct narrative which, while responding to the previous works, still comes up with an original and invigorating variant of the novel of recollection Barnes has successfully exploited before.*

Keywords

Julian Barnes, *The Only Story*, the novel of recollection, history, memory, intertextuality

Although the body of Julian Barnes's work of fiction can be said to be multi-faceted in its generic, stylistic and narrative diversity, settling "on a combination of social satire, Swiftian irony, and experimentation," yet with a "strain of melancholy […] elegising as much as eulogising over existence's inability to deliver wish-willed expectations,"[1] in terms of its subject matter it has always been preoccupied with one central motif and theme: searching for, though actually rarely finding out,[2] the truth of what has happened in the past as well as how and why.[3] Almost all the acclaimed and prize-winning author's novels focus on an individual, or individuals, trying to discover the real character of certain past circumstances, the actual causality which has led to them, the unnoticed connections between individual past events, their own as well as other people's role in them, the true motives behind their and other people's acts, and the true nature of the consequences of these acts. In doing so, the works naturally ponder the numerous factors which hinder us from fully getting to know the past, both one's own or someone else's recent past along with a distant past which lies beyond the reach of our memory.

As a result, Barnes's protagonists, who often coincide with their stories' narrators, are idiosyncratic truth-seekers destined to fail: sometimes eager and sometimes reluctant, sometimes curious and sometimes ostensibly indifferent, sometimes frank and sometimes secretive, sometimes laughable and sometimes touching, but always with a past unfortunate and regrettable in some way. Since their own life, values and beliefs, be it directly through their bygone actions or indirectly

1 Peter Childs, *Julian Barnes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 5.

2 As a writer closely associated with postmodernism, Barnes's fiction recurrently hints at the inherent fallibility or even unattainability of unequivocal knowledge.

3 This lack of epistemological certitude is, as Lilia Miroshnychenko notes, further underscored by these individuals' ambivalent position between the secular and the religious conception of the world and their existence in it.

through their life experience, intersect with the history they are trying to discover and disclose, they always end up anything but objective and impartial in the construction of their versions of the past. Moreover, many of the newly revealed facts turn out to be rather inconvenient for them, as they undermine their carefully built up self-image of a likeable, blameless person who is telling the story merely for the sake of the audience and whose position within the described events was either that of a detached outsider or even a victim. Therefore, in this process, they are susceptible to falling prey to various forms of bias, misconception, self-delusion, self-idealisation, wishful thinking and (other) psychological defensive mechanisms which, together with the naïve belief in the slippery workings of their selective and faltering memory, make them and their narratives fairly unreliable and untrustworthy. The result is, as Vanessa Guignery points out, essentially self-reflexive writing which both resorts to and subverts realistic narrative strategies.[4]

The narrative device of an ageing person recalling his younger years or trying to find out the truth about someone else's past life can be traced, throughout Barnes's career in numerous metamorphoses, including his earlier novels such as *Metroland* (1980), *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) and *Talking It Over* (1991). His later works, however, namely the memoirs *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (2008) and *Levels of Life* (2013) and his Booker Prize winning novel *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), tend to be more grim and rueful, as their narrators are not only elderly men in their sixties and early seventies recollecting the earlier stages of their lives, but are also excessively preoccupied with the meaning of their existence while contemplating its approaching end and mortality in general. One of the reasons for this change of tone was the fact that Barnes himself had turned sixty, but the deciding factor was the death of his beloved wife, Pat Kavanagh of a brain tumour in 2008. *The Only Story* (2018), Barnes's latest novel to date, fits into this mould as it takes the perspective of a retired man retelling the story of his fateful youthful love affair and its consequences for his later life. The aim of this paper is to discuss how this novel follows the crucial thematic, stylistic and narrative patterns he successfully employed in *The Sense of an Ending*, but also how it abandons some of its characteristics of the earlier works, offering a distinct narrative which still serves up an original and invigorating variant of the novelistic subgenre he has mastered before.

The Novel of Recollection

As in Barnes's debut novel, the first part of *The Sense of an Ending* takes place in the suburban "Metroland", a stockbroker-belt village not far from London, where the main protagonist grows up. *The Only Story* invites a complex and multi-layered comparison with *The Sense of an Ending* since both the books exemplify what can be identified as "novel of recollection."[5] This genre is characterised by a relatively short but compact narrative in which the main protagonist, a middle-aged or retired person who is generally also the story's narrator, recalls his or her past or, more precisely, a certain period from this past which has preceded and followed an event or accident he/she felt as traumatic, painful, wrongful, embarrassing or otherwise unpleasant and which somehow,

4 Vanessa Guignery, *The Fiction of Julian Barnes* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1.

5 For a more detailed description of this genre see my article "The 'Novel of Recollections' – Narration as a Means of Coming to Terms with the Past".

mostly negatively, affected his or her later life.[6] The novel of recollection shares a few aspects with trauma fiction but cannot be regarded as a subcategory since neither the event nor experience in question is actually traumatic for the narrator. Even if the narration involves a traumatic event, it happens to someone else and the narrator is touched by it only indirectly. Notable examples of this genre are John Banville's *The Sea* (2005), Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007), Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* (2007) and Graham Swift's *Tomorrow* (2007).

The crucial characteristic is that the initial impulse for telling the story is not the narrator's desire to find out and reveal the truth, but to be presented as the victim, the wronged party, or at least an artless individual who can hardly be blamed for honestly meant acts. The layout of such story is rather simple: something bad happens in the past for which the narrator is at least in part responsible either as an active participant in the action or as someone who remains evasively passive when an active response is needed. Subsequently, in order to get rid of the feeling of guilt, the narrator displaces this event from memory and instead fabricates a many-times retold version of the past which, aided by the defensive mechanisms of the psyche, comes to be believed as the "truthful" account. The narrator's motivation is thus largely auto-therapeutic, i.e. to defend and justify him/herself, which is why the story is being told primarily to him/herself. Conversely, the narrator's troubled conscience keeps forcing him/her to repeatedly recall originally displaced, distorted or forgotten details as long as with the help of diverse external stimuli his/her memory is able to compose a more likely version in a process which in effect undermines the laboriously created self-presentation. Instead, we learn that the past actions were in reality driven by motives far from admirable, such as selfishness, envy, greed, jealousy, and cowardice. And there is one more crucial property of the genre: apart from the above mentioned elements of the story it should also contain something that goes beyond it, some added value for a more discerning reader to detect and enjoy such as stylistic vividness, narrative complexity, intertextual and/or metafictional playfulness, philosophical questioning or historical referencing.

Given these characteristic features, *The Sense of an Ending* represents a perfect specimen of the novel of recollection. It is narrated by a retired historian, Tony Webster, who is looking back on his youth roughly through the period of secondary school and university studies. In this recollection, Tony presents himself as a tolerant and easy-going person. After having broken up with his then girlfriend Veronica, Tony not only does not mind that his friend Adrian wants to start going out with her and gives his consent, but he even wishes the couple good luck. At the end of the first part of the book, Tony tells us that half a year later to everyone's surprise Adrian commits suicide for unknown reasons. The turning point of the story comes when Tony learns that Veronica's late mother has bequeathed to him Adrian's diary which, however, Veronica has kept to herself. In order to obtain the diary, Tony begins to pressure Veronica to give up what rightfully belongs to him. Yet through her letters, emails and later their personal meetings he merely learns a number of inconvenient truths about himself: what has driven his past acts was in fact mostly annoyance, vindictiveness and vanity. Thus out of this narration Tony is made out to be a cowardly

6 Lara Fiegel suggests that the novel's title might refer to Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1915), the original title of which was *The Saddest Story. The Good Soldier* is an impressionist novel about a love gone sour told in retrospect by an unreliable narrator which can be taken as one of the predecessors of the novel of recollection.

and self-interested hypocrite who may not have directly harmed Veronica and Adrian, but whose response to his friend's sincerely meant request was mean and malicious.

As for the added level transcending that of the story, *The Sense of an Ending* contains a meditation on Barnes's favourite theme of the unreliability of memory and history and, in consequence, the credibility of historical records and their making, employing his creative principle of "exploitation of doubt as a productive force."[7] Tony, his classmates and their history teacher frequently debate the discursive and volatile nature of historical knowledge, the relationship between power and truth, and the thin line between reality/history and fiction, aptly summarised in Adrian's observation that "[h]istory is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation."[8] This disputation is further interlocked with the intertextual dimension of the novel, namely with its subtle and ironically playful[9] polemics with the famous 1967 study of the same title by Frank Kermode. This resonates in particular with Kermode's central thesis that literature has the potential to offer consolation to the reader by providing an illusion of a story's intelligible ending, i.e. the reader always finds him/herself at some point in the middle of existence and therefore suffers from a worm's eye view from which it is impossible to discern the overall world order and one's position within it. This "concordance of beginning, middle, and end which is the essence of our explanatory fictions"[10] evokes in the reader a sense of the integrity of life in a feeling which bolsters his/her belief in the possibility of perceiving existence as a coherent whole.

The relatively narrow delineation of the novel of recollection suggests that the potential of this genre is not entirely bottomless. Nevertheless, the form remains viable enough if the author imparts it with originality through the employment of distinct stylistic and narrative devices and/or through ingenious variations of the added value dimension. The fact that this may be increasingly difficult but not impossible can be demonstrated, for instance, by Graham Swift's *Mothering Sunday* (2016), which variegates the genre's prototypical pattern by setting the crucial events of the story into the specific socio-historical context of interwar Britain and by making the protagonist a recognised writer capable of critical self-reflection, In this regard, Julian Barnes's *The Only Story* also invites comparison with *The Sense of an Ending*.

The Only Story and *The Sense of an Ending* as Novels of Recollection

The basic frameworks of both the books are similar. Paul Roberts, the main protagonist and narrator of *The Only Story*, a retired man who has just turned seventy, tells the story of his first big love. The events he describes started when he was nineteen and his recollection covers a period of some ten years till he was in his late twenties. He soon reveals that this first love did not last and the exact reason why remains kept back from the readers for more than half of the novel. The

7 Sebastian Groes, and Peter Childs, eds., *Julian Barnes* (London: Continuum, 2011), 8.

8 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), 17.

9 This ironic playfulness is only underscored by the fact that Adrian's surname, Finn, itself suggests the need of finding out the sense of his "ending."

10 Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 35–36.

break-up of this relationship is thus the central "secret" around which Paul's narration seems to revolve. Like Tony, Paul's recollection relies almost entirely on his memory, as he never kept a diary and there are no witnesses left or available to ask for their account of the occurrences in question. However, at a closer look, the reader sees that differences, though sometimes rather subtle, between the stories prevail over similarities. In the first place, *The Only Story* is truly a story about love, and also about the courage to follow one's feelings against all odds as young Paul falls for Susan Macleod, a married woman almost thirty years his senior and with two grown-up children older than himself. In the provincial environment of the middle-class greater suburbia of London of the early sixties, symptomatically nicknamed by the locals as "The Village," dominated by conservative values and strict and conventional small-town morality as a hangover of the preceding decade, such an irregular romance is automatically doomed to be classified as scandalous, unacceptable and deplorable. Not even the fact that Susan's loveless and sexless marriage has been maintained solely due to social conventions, as her husband is an arrogant ruffian with a strong tendency towards alcoholism, can be taken as an excuse for such a transgression.

Unlike Tony, who when indirectly advanced by a mature woman, Veronica's mother, withdraws in panic and confusion and prefers to stay in the more appropriate relationship with Veronica, though he feels largely uncomfortable in it, Paul throws away all restraint and lurches headlong in the direction his heart is taking him. The primary motivation for his enterprise is neither the need to revolt against the parental generation and their values or show off in front of his friends, but the deep emotion he feels for Susan. Armed with his absolutist belief in the indomitable power of unconditional love,[11] he is ready to do anything to win her. Ironically, his choice of partner goes contrary to both the traditionalist values and morality of The Village as well as to the oncoming free spirit of the late 1960s sexual revolution, as while he was trying to establish a monogamous long-term relationship his peers were enjoying carefree lives in the pursuit of fleeting one-night stands. Apart from the afore-mentioned difference in age and social status, the development of Paul and Susan's relationship proceeds more or less typically – from mutual sympathies, guarded exchanges of compliments, diffident dating, amorous attempts, as it slowly becomes a genuine love affair, with all of these phases having to be kept secret for almost two years until Susan decides to leave her husband and the couple move away to London.

This covers roughly one half of the novel, so the reader can surmise that the real troubles for the lovers and the key incidents in their cohabitation are yet to come. Interestingly, it almost impossible to anticipate the true cause of their break-up, although the narrator disperses several hints suggesting that the relationship did not withstand the forthcoming trials. For example, he speaks about the naïve youthful absolutism of his being in love, a state in which he began to see the outside reality and daily practicalities as earthbound trivialities; he also admits that at the same time he felt doubtful and anxious that he was not yet prepared for such responsibility and, moreover, that he was not aware of how panic-stricken Susan was since she was leaving behind much more than him. And so his generally sounding observation that such panic "takes some to God, others to despair, some to charitable works, others to drink, some to emotional oblivion, other to a life where

11 Julian Barnes, *The Only Story* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018), 73.

they hope that nothing serious will ever trouble them again,"[12] is thus the only foreshadowing of the future course of events. At the end of part one, Paul simply remarks that in London they were together for some ten more years, after which he still continued to see her regularly, though the frequency of their encounters decreased. He goes on the comment that when she died a few years before he realised that the fateful phase of his life had finally ended, which is why he promised himself to always think of her well. This statement can hardly serve as a satisfactory resolution, as it implies unanswered questions, including the cardinal ones of how and why they broke up. The last line of this part, in which he notes that "this is how [he] would remember it all, if [he] could. But [he] can't"[13] thus not only implies that the previous turbulent incidents in Paul and Susan's relationship can in fact be considered as joyful compared to what came later, but also promises that the subsequent parts of the book will be no less gripping.

And indeed, as a whole part two is considerably gloomier, as it reveals that in London the once hearty, ironic, independent and thoughtful Susan has become a heavy alcoholic whose addiction gradually ruins both her physical and mental condition. This comes rather as a surprise since in the first part Susan is a confirmed abstainer as a result of her bitter experience with her husband's drunkenness. Yet only in London, alone most of the day while Paul is trying to earn money to support them she comes to understand that she has lost more than she has been willing to admit: the house and garden she was used to looking after, and, most importantly, the company, affection and respect of her two daughters, who have taken the side of the father and now refuse to communicate with her. The lengthy divorce proceedings and property settlement also stress her, as do the discussions with her husband, who alternatively intimidates her, emotionally blackmails her and begs her to return to him. This situation grows so detrimental and unbearable to her that the very foundations of her identity began to crumble. She begins to see her life as an utter failure and turns to drink in a desperate need to cheer up. The second part of the novel thus evolves into an immediate and unembellished probe into an intimate relationship with an alcoholic, particularly into the devastating emotional volatility and instability in this situation.

In part two, Paul recalls some of the crucial circumstances of the collapse of the relationship, its stages and the emotions he felt in them. He describes in crude detail his initial denial of the existence of any problem as well as how he later downplays the situation and attempts to justify Susan's and his desperate acts. He comes to admit the problem to himself, but denies its existence to the outside world even after a number of unsuccessful attempts to solve the problem, and he finally becomes resigned to hopelessness and resignation. His former moments of his ease and happiness are becoming more and more rare and transitory, and the narrator comes to acknowledge that the common denominator of all these stages was lying, in its various forms, on both sides: Susan lies about her drinking, making excuses and unrealistic promises, while Paul's succumbs to self-deception and his false illusions about the strength of Susan's character, feigning belief in her excuses and promises, lying to their friends about her true condition, and taking comfort in the fact that the situation is not yet so bad that it could not be resolved by the two of them. The most forceful moment of this part is Paul's gradual confession of his share of responsibility for the breakup,

12 Barnes, *The Only Story*, 76.

13 Barnes, *The Only Story*, 83.

largely caused by his youthful idealism and naivety, resulting from his eventual understanding of what happened between him and Susan in London and why. He discloses that behind most of his lies and self-deceptions was not a sincere and unselfish effort to protect Susan and their precious relationship, but his own weakness and fear of admitting and facing the truth: that Susan might have been the free spirit as he came to know her in The Village, but that she was also "a damaged free spirit."[14] In London Susan feels far more lonely and isolated than in her former household, no matter how dysfunctional this had been; she becomes an unacknowledged alcoholic because she had left her family to live with him in London. Paul was not able to protect her from her past, from her husband's violence and her daughters' disapproval; that somewhere deep down in her soul was the importunate feeling of shame from personal failure. Susan was drinking not to hurt Paul, but to destroy herself as a worthless being. Paul was in fact not an uninvolved observer of the break-down of her family, but the catalyst of its destruction in his naïve youthful idealism which hindered him from acting as the supportive strong personality Susan needed in times of her crisis. The whole situation is far more complicated than Paul had assumed.[15] Paul comes to realize that this long-standing stress and emotional strain exhausted and numbed him to such an extent that he felt no remorse or blame.

The third, and last, part of the novel is then quite short. Paul kept on struggling to preserve their relationship for a few more years before he came to accept the futility of all his efforts and decided that if he could not save Susan and his love for her, he should at least try to save himself. Filled with feelings of (self-)pity and humiliation, he asks Susan's daughters to take care of their mother. Susan thus at first returns to her former home and later is put to palliative care, as due to her damaged brain she does not recognise even the people closest to her. The reader also learns how these trials affected Paul's subsequent intimate and professional life – disappointed by the failure of a love in which he had put all his hopes and beliefs, he has always looked for independent women who did not long for deep affection based on strong attachment and regular cohabitation. Similarly, he preferred to choose jobs which involved travelling around the world and only short-term stays in one place. He claims that he has never regretted the years with Susan, only the fact that he was too young and inexperienced when they met. His loss of belief in love and inability to form emotional attachments to others are the high price he has paid for this frustrating and traumatising experience. The story closes with Paul's description of his visit to the residential care where Susan, already unconscious, is dying. At her bed he is recalling the happy moments from the beginning of their affair, but deep inside he feels empty and, eventually, notes that the wound in his soul "will stay open" until his death.[16]

Beyond the (Only) Story

The framework story thus offers everything the novel of recollection requires, namely the narrator's memories of some problematic past, revelation of some unexpected occurrence or turn of events,

14 Barnes, *The Only Story*, 107.

15 Barnes, *The Only Story*, 114.

16 Barnes, *The Only Story*, 212.

the coming to terms with a disturbing or traumatising experience, self-reflective re-assessment of the narrator's role in crucial moments of his life, and admission of some sort of responsibility or guilt for what he earlier asserted to be a mere witness of. Moreover, *The Only Story* also offers other levels reaching beyond its story in terms of both the form and content. The first interesting narrative device is the varying person of narration from which the story is presented. Part one, which focused on the outset of Paul and Susan's affair up to their departure for London, is narrated in the first person by Paul, which only supports his claim that the "first love always happens in the overwhelming first person."[17] Part two also starts in the first person, but after a few pages it is interrupted by a section told in the second person. For the rest of this part, the sections in the second person become more and more frequent and eventually turn into its dominant narrative perspective. The reader soon finds out the strategy behind this narrative scheme: the narrator in the first person still recalls the earlier stages of the relationship and its happy moments later in London; the passages in the second person describe the unpleasant events and moments as each of them mentions something that disrupted the relationship and led to its gradual break-down, such as Susan's secret drinking, Paul's fruitless attempts to prevent her from complete addiction, their lies and quarrels. And so along with the love fading away from their home, the narrator becomes depersonalised, as if the bad things did not really happen to him. The second person also reflects Paul's unavoidable calming down and apathy as his subsequent steps are increasingly driven not by affection but desperate pragmatic rationalism.

In the final part, in which Paul already appears as a mature but emotionally empty man weary of life and unable to form a fully-fledged intimate relationship with a woman, the narration switches to third person. This further reflects his growing alienation and numbness with respect to his own life, which he has purposely reduced to a series of seemingly unproblematic pragmatic routines of day-to-day existence. This omniscient narrator confirms that the raucous first person in Paul has been "stilled" due to his unfortunate youthful experience, which is why he has begun to look at his life and live it as if from without, "in the third person," which he has assumed would allow him to perceive and judge it more exactly and objectively.[18] However, later he admits that this need for objectivity was illusory and in reality it served as a defensive mechanism to protect his "grievously damaged"[19] soul from another, and potentially fatal, disappointment. The narration switches back to the first person once more in the very last scene of the book – Paul's visit to Susan's deathbed – but only to reveal that this does not work anymore: instead of focusing on happy memories of Susan and their love, his mind keeps wandering "outside," preoccupied with such mundane practicalities as whether he has enough fuel in his car and what is on TV that night. Emotionless and feeling no blame, he thus exits the room to retreat back to the "safety" of his life in the third person.

The second notable narrative strategy is the manner in which the story is presented. Unlike the narrator Tony's evasive strategy full of sophistry, artful self-presentation and clever reasoning in which meaning must be carefully sought for in details and hints in between the lines

17 Barnes, *The Only Story*, 71.

18 Barnes, *The Only Story*, 162.

19 Barnes, *The Only Story*, 211.

or in instances when the narrator inadvertently contradicts himself, Paul's narration is driven by his honest effort to retell his life as, in his view, it really happened. His recollection also hovers in concentric circles around the most crucial moments and events, not to avoid deceiving himself and the reader in his attempts to justify his behaviour as does Tony, but because Paul is trying to crystallise his memories as much as possible – as he says: "I'm not trying to spin you a story; I'm trying to tell you the truth."[20] The novel and its three parts are not divided into chapters but broken into short subsections which cover from the maximum of three pages up to one paragraph or just a few lines. This fragmented narration plausibly mirrors the essential process which generates and constitutes it – the disorderliness and selectiveness of recollecting memories which are frequently incoherent, inconsistent, fragmentary, and jumbled in terms of their succession in time. And so even though the individual subsections are always in some way thematically linked with the main plotline, only very seldom do they follow one another chronologically. On the contrary, they are mostly diverse digressions in time and/or thought, or they serve as specifications or completions of some previously mentioned facts, commented retrospections and flashbacks which the narrator repeats recurrently, with each such return some sidelight or a new piece of information is added to what has been said before.

This narrative strategy goes hand in hand with the major theme of the added value, that is the metafictional, level of the story. What *The Sense of an Ending* and *The Only Story* have in common is that the actual historical context is mentioned only indirectly and it merely plays the role of the story's framework background. Instead, idiosyncratically Barnesian themes are foregrounded through the protagonists' musings and inner struggles. As indicated earlier, *The Sense of an Ending* is dominated by contemplations regarding the sense and understanding of history and historical knowledge. Compared to Tony, Paul is even more "ahistorical," as he does not seem interested in world affairs. Moreover, he is so dedicated to and consumed with his connection with Susan that it is in effect as if the relationship abstracted from the outside world. Later as a narrator he is almost equally avid to disclose the truth about what happened with his affair with Susan, which is why the theme of memory and the peculiarities of its working is what his mind is obsessed with while recounting his past. Unlike Tony, who, though he questions the human ability to know the past and is sceptical concerning the possibilities of history as a scholarly discipline, never really doubts the trustworthiness of his own memories, Paul continues to ruminate on how unreliable and subjective memory is, as in its workings it tends to select, embellish and suppress thoughts. Recollection prioritises certain facts at the expense of others, the algorithms of which we can never fully comprehend. Paul is surprised that he still remembers various petty trifles, such as the scores of their tennis matches, but cannot, for instance, recall Susan's naked body or their first lovemaking. He uses the metaphor of cutting a log with a log-splitter – remembering the past can also be seen as "a split down the grain"[21] without a trace how the individual grains evolved in time. Yet still he is struggling to arrive at some truth, no matter how incomplete, which is why he warns the reader that he is "remembering the past, not reconstructing it"[22] exactly from beginning to end.

20 Barnes, *The Only Story*, 33.

21 Barnes, *The Only Story*, 98.

22 Barnes, *The Only Story*, 33.

This process entails an attempt to correctly recollect at least some significant aspects like aspects of character, moods, or the atmosphere of certain moments. Therefore, Paul sets himself the goal of recalling Susan as she was when he fell in love with her, and although he almost succeeds in this enterprise, he realises that no such memory can heal the wound in his soul caused by the pain and disillusion from the loss of her.

Paul repeatedly admits that in connection with Susan he can hardly recall bygone events exactly as they were and in their right chronological order, and in some cases even whether they actually occurred at all.[23] Yet, at the same time, he points out how important the very process of recollection of this part of his past is for him to be able to perceive it through the prism of his life experience and through this process see it in its complexity and thus potentially cope better with the consequences. This inevitably shifts the interpretation of the novel's title, which in fact turns out to be a lie as there can never be just one story:[24] the story Paul is presenting to the reader is neither the only existing one nor the only one worth retelling, but the only one he is capable of recalling and piecing together at this time of his life. Along with the theme of the nature and relevance of one's memory, the novel alludes to the borderline between reality and fiction, and the question of the relationship between retelling the past and the truth of this retelling. Paul's narration repeatedly turns to Susan's proposition that, although within the course of our life we experience countless events which we afterwards transform into stories, each person has in reality only one story worth (re)telling – the story of their love. While in his youth he identified with this proposition, with the benefit of hindsight he grows less certain, as he realises the inconsistences: how truthful is this most frequently (re)told story, particularly to oneself? How reliable is the current "final" version of such story when we so often lack the proper words and expressions to express our feelings and emotions precisely and appropriately? And what if our unreserved concentration on the story of our love causes us to overlook and displace other stories which may also have cardinal impact on our identity? Paul indirectly answers the latter question by the recollection of an incident in which he betrayed his best friend Erik, the shadow of which has haunted him for the rest of his life: when they were assaulted by a gang of unknown rowdies he ran away in a cowardly way, leaving Erik to a fate of being badly beaten. Almost at the end of his narration thus Paul admits that the sad story of his first true love may have been determinant for his subsequent life, but that it is by no means the only one his conscience has had to cope with.

Like *The Sense of an Ending*, *The Only Story* also possesses an interesting intertextual level through polemics with other texts. However, while *The Sense of an Ending* responds to Kermode's seminal study, in *The Only Story* Barnes is communicating primarily with himself and his own writings. Along with memory, Paul's ruminations reaching beyond the actual story are preoccupied with love – its character, meanings, forms and metamorphoses. The theme of love permeates the whole of Barnes's oeuvre, fiction and non-fiction alike, but Paul's inauspicious experience and his subsequent meditation can be read in particular as a response to *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989), a hybrid novel in stories, in which this theme is explicitly and coherently explored

23 Barnes, *The Only Story*, 165.

24 Alex Clark, "Julian Barnes's latest novel, *The Only Story*, is a tale of absolute devastation," *The New Statesman*, January 28, 2018, available at: <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2018/01/julian-barnes-s-latest-novel-only-story-tale-absolute-devastation>.

for the first time. In this work and ironically labelled "half-chapter" entitled "Parenthesis" is in fact a contemplative essay implicitly addressed to his wife[25] on its author's favourite themes such as our understanding of history, the nature of truth and, above all, on love. Paul's story and his views on love (and truth) can therefore be taken as fictional exemplification of some of the pivotal ideas presented in "Parenthesis."

At its end, the Barnesian narrator[26] draws a parallel between love and our belief in truth: as we must believe in the possibility and obtainability of truth, otherwise "we're lost" since we easily "fall into beguiling relativity"[27] and eventually become susceptible to manipulative lies, so we must believe in love, though it may evade us or make us miserable. Despite all the potential troubles – love may go wrong, wear off or betray the lover – we must keep alive our belief in love alive, since if we fail to do so we "merely surrender to the history of the world and someone else's truth."[28] *The Only Story* thus reads as an intriguing fictional and meditative variation on this theme through the story of a person whose painful early experience caused a loss of belief, as "a requiem for love that starts to depart as soon as it first it first insinuates itself and yet is less easily erased […] than anything else,"[29] or as "a kind of phenomenology of love as it unfolds in human consciousness in its different stages."[30]

The basic premise "Parenthesis" proposes about love is that although in most cases it may go wrong and thus may not make us happy, we must still believe in it (just as we must believe in truth) since love is our only hope in a world in which so much appears to be entropic in nature. Moreover, we should go on believing in love not only despite the fact that it may fail us, but also because bad love is still better than no love at all. It claims that, strictly speaking, love is of little practical use for us: it does not help us survive, it does not sustain the perpetuation of humankind, in fact it can be said to be incompatible with the functioning of rational civilization. Yet, we must keep on trying to love, as this makes us human and our life meaningful. It defies the material and the mechanical, insisting that these aspects need not always have the upper hand. From a pragmatic point of view, love is unnecessary, it rarely affects world affairs, but still it is essential for us since it "teach[es] us to stand up to history,"[31] not to stoop under its weight and ostentatious pomp. The crucial connection is drawn between love and truth in the sense that love has the power to make us more truthful, not only to others but also to ourselves. However, it is wrong to think of love as of an active agent that makes the lover and the loved automatically happy, or that it can transform them into more amiable people. In reality, love is merely endowed with a latent force

25 Yet this implicitness is undermined by the fact that the book is in fact dedicated to Pat Kavanagh.

26 Barnes admits that this chapter is openly autobiographic, but adds that he does not wish to be confessional, although he is "quite willing to use [his] own life as an example of something" (Guignery and Roberts, 165).

27 Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (London: Picador, 1990), 296.

28 Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, 296.

29 Peter Craven, "*The Only Story* review: Julian Barnes' powerful requiem for a love lost," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 8, 2018, available at: <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/the-only-story-review-julian-barnes-powerful-requiem-for-a-love-lost-20180508-h0zrpp.html>.

30 Thomas. J. Millay, "Annotations of Pain: First Love in *The Only Story*," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 17, 2018, available at: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/annotations-of-pain-first-love-in-the-only-story>.

31 Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, 290.

that helps people be more humane and "release in [them] the capacity to be happy."[32] It is only up to those involved how they deal with such activated potential. Thus, love's "primary effect is to energize,"[33] to fill those in love with vigour, stamina and confidence to face up to the whims of fate. Yet, in spite of all this, the narrator is sceptical concerning the line from Philip Larkin's poem "An Arundel Tomb" which declares that love is the only thing that will survive us. Although the narrator admits that it would be nice to have love as some transcendental entity, he is convinced that a person's love disappears with his/her demise, giving Larking's poetry – which survived its creator rather than his love – as an example.

The Only Story then can be interpreted as a case in point with regards to the above line of argument. In part one, love indeed features as an energising force: in its fresh and pure form, almost wholly abstracted from the interference from the outside world; it gives Paul and Susan confidence, independence, carefreeness and wit by which it stirs in them the capacity to be happy. It takes them out of the routines of their mundane lives and suddenly makes their existence feel exciting, exceptional, and therefore much more meaningful than before. It also allows them to defy and put aside the material, conventional and practical sides of life in favour of emotionality and spirituality, to concentrate on the complexity, intensity and truthfulness of their affection. Paul goes as far as to choose "[t]ruth and love" as his credo – "I love her and I see the truth"[34] – which echoes a similar line, "[l]ove and truth, that's the vital connection,"[35] from "Parenthesis." However, this parallelism lasts only for the first part of the story, as in the second and third their love ceases to energise them in the above sense any more. Thrown into the practicalities of life in London, Paul gradually abandons his former position of a pure lover, as he is suddenly placed in charge of providing for the household and spends most of his time earning money to pay the rent, while Susan, feeling lonely and useless in the small semi-detached house, sinks into depression. And so as troubles and disagreements seep in where ease and concord used to reside, lies and insincerities drive truth away from their relationship while the couple, Paul due to his inexperience and Susan due to her broken self-respect, must helplessly watch their love turn into a mixture of anger, panic, (self-)pity and (self-)deception.

The most devastating effect of this failure on Paul was that he lost his belief in love and fell into embittered resignation and extreme self-control as a protective mechanism against another heart-breaking disappointment. In this he has succeeded, yet at the cost of an emotional shallowness and sterility which have reduced his existence to a series of pragmatically "safe" decisions and choices regarding interpersonal relationships. In contrast to the height of his love, he now faces the world's heterogeneity with mere material comfort and conformity of ideas, substituting happiness with contentment, and deluding himself that his life does not lack anything substantial. Just as he has lost his capacity for love, he has also lost his capacity for truth, most of all being truthful to himself, and, along with this, his capacity for hope, since his life has curdled into the day-to-day present with little if any prospects for the future. And so, when standing at Susan's deathbed he

32 Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, 279.

33 Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, 281.

34 Barnes, *The Only Story*, 74.

35 Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, 290.

cannot feel anything, positive or negative – love or loss, appreciation or grief,[36] finding himself rather embarrassed concerning what would be the appropriate thing to do. Therefore, love will hardly survive him, as his emotional life is now one of circumspection and confusion.

Conclusion

Although Barnes introduces several new elements into both the fictional world and the narrative strategy of *The Only Story*, the novel falls perfectly into the particular oeuvre of his later work. It follows the generic framework of the novel of recollection, by which it inevitably invites comparison with *The Sense of an Ending*, one of the most successful examples of this genre. On the one hand, *The Only Story* is preoccupied with idiosyncratic Barnesian themes, yet it features a different kind of narrator who, though still quite unreliable,[37] is capable of detached self-reflection with regards to his (in)ability to retell the past and reassess his role in it. Paul admits that his memory is incoherent and fallible, which is why he will never be able to fully reconstruct what happened some fifty years before, but still he is trying to define as close to a truthful account of the events in question as possible. He does not strive to conceal crucial facts, nor does he deceive himself and the reader that he is absolutely blameless when it comes to the critical or obscure incidents from the past he is about to reveal. He is being honest and sincere, and the power of his story does not rely so much on the revelation of some unexpected or even shocking turn of events, but rather in the immediacy and frankness with which he presents the crude details of the gradual breakup of his affair with Susan,[38] no matter the actual trustworthiness of the account.

The Only Story stresses the importance of stories in our life. Not only does Barnes's narrative "full of little rebarbative asides aimed at the process of storytelling"[39] toy with shifting perspectives and the notion of the credibility of any story, it also directly responds to its author's own texts, "Parenthesis" in particular. Once Paul gave up on practice, he at least attempts a theoretical grasp of love by collecting observations and aphorisms other people have said about it. Still, all the entries are gradually discarded as inaccurate, indicating that "[p]erhaps love could never be captured in a definition; it could only ever be captured in a story."[40] This is precisely what Barnes does: the story of Paul's love is simultaneously a story of his surrender, if not to the history of the world then no doubt to someone else's truth.[41] The manner in which his story is narrated echoes the beginning

36 Barnes, *The Only Story*, 213.

37 Even Barnes does not consider him unreliable and prefers to label him a "partial narrator" who is "trying to tell us the truth" which, however, can "only be the truth as he sees it" (Cooke).

38 Interestingly, in his Afterword to the Czech translation of the novel, Petr Fantys mentions several affinities with *The Sense of an Ending*, particularly on the level of character, plot and setting, only to conclude that thanks to Paul's will to survive *The Only Story* in effect represents its antipole (260–263).

39 Alex Preston, "*The Only Story* review – Julian Barnes goes back to Metroland," The Guardian, February 4, 2018, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/04/the-only-story-review-julian-barnes>.

40 Barnes, *The Only Story*, 206.

41 As Kate Clanchy notes in her review, Barnes as an experienced narrator also presents in glimpses other forms of love – perhaps less ostentatiously romantic but all the more generative. Paul in his youthful blindness fails to notice these moments, such as Eric's kindness or Martha's patient care for her ill mother.

of "Parenthesis," in which the narrator notes that the novelist's art "proceeds by indirection"[42] – the less direct the narration, the more the true nature of the most critical moments are disclosed. In addition, this narrator observes that for poets it is easier to write about love, as "they own that flexible 'I,'"[43] thanks to which they can turn bad love into good love poetry, while prose writers "can only turn bad love into prose about bad love."[44] In Barnes's novel the flexible "I" gives way to the less flexible, and more indirect, "you" and "he," only to add to the number of subtleties which make it a truly engaging and resourceful work about a love gone bad.

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42 Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, 273.

43 Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, 274.

44 Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, 274.

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