



Memory as a Metaphor: A Reconsideration of Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*

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Abstract: The paper endeavors to investigate the poetics of memory as is found in Julian Barnes' novel *The Sense of an Ending*. It will address alongside the poetic reconstruction of memory, a psychological inspection into the mnemonic footprints that are left behind, and a matured gaze at one's past, here that of the narrator's. The paper also seeks to understand forgetting as an important attribute of memory, a means to fulfil and redress the uncouth hiatuses and the gaping gaps of one's past.

Keywords: memory, poetry, recollection, reconstruction, self-deception, forgetting.

The complex of the eye's perception and the mind's reception is masterfully addressed by a cogent intervention of the imagined in Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*. The design of the novel as a memory novel, a *bildungsroman* of sorts, is deliberate to accommodate the imagined in the real, the received in the perceived, the poetry in the prose. Perfunctorily, the narrator clarifies at the very offing, any and all recollections recorded were susceptible to modification, alteration and poetic exaggeration- a clarification that establishes soundly the premises of this immaculately structured experience of the novel.

'...but what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed.' (Barnes,3)

Memories, the ghosts of times past, reappear in the mind's eye with changed and altered shapes and contexts. Even exchanges, conversations are morphed, unwittingly, unconsciously. It is the imagined that enters, almost imperceptibly, into the domain of the memory reshaping the mundane into something memorable, something worth being a memory. The narrator keeps on questioning the verisimilitude of his remembrances and yet, every time, gives in, surrenders, to a poetic truth that replaces the real, the pathos that intensifies the tragedy, the music that embellishes the prosaic. He even uses superlatives for adjectifying,

'Was this their exact exchange? Almost certainly not. Still, it is my best memory of their exchange.'(Barnes,19)

A continuous, structured memory, that is what the novel shapes up into. The letters the four friends, Tony, Colin, Alex and Adrian, wrote to each other after they parted their ways, were constructed with wit, the language pleasantly archaic, quite visibly demonstrates the narrator's propinquity towards an elevated style- polished, refined and definitely not a mundane, plebian elocution of events. The whimsicalities like wearing their watches in a way that made them feel that time was a personal secret and the grinding anxiety that their lives 'wouldn't turn out to be like Literature.'(Barnes,15)- constantly impose the element of adventure, deviation, idiosyncrasies that challenges life's usual monolithic structure. Such ambiguities and paradoxes, such challenges and desires, requires a way more palatable and specially devised language *au contraire* to the usual available narrative prose for novels. Barnes seems to truncate the memories of the narrator into a translucent plot, a lucidity that verges on the esoteric almost- an uncanny Proustian remembering, poetically and palpably expressing experiences that time has stretched and bent.

'The novel was about character developed over time.' (Barnes,15)

Time delivers us all too quickly into middle age and then old age. Anthony Webster, as he is now, gentler, milder, old, narrating a time/space where he was not so. A retelling of his story to his wife Margaret, but mostly to himself, a visual re-representation of his past, a composite of half-forgotten images. A long, unmitigated, stubborn regret persists. An abiding suspense holds the narrator as well as the reader captive. Tony seems to be driven by an obsessive need to know a part of his memory that he was not introduced to. He stalks Veronica, and is shown compulsively badgering his wife with his recollections of the time, investigating all the nook and crannies of this particular slice of his past.

Throughout the entire body of the novel, but particularly the first part, Tony explicitly refers to the fallacy of his own memory.

'Some approximate memories which time has deformed into certainty.'(Barnes,4)

Tony Webster, one fine day, suddenly receives a letter from a law firm communicating him that a Mrs. Sarah Ford has bequeathed him with a meagre sum of money and a journal, that she felt, before her death, rightfully belonged to him. Mrs. Sarah Ford was the mother of his one-time sweetheart, Veronica. And the journal in question was the property of Adrian Finn, Tony's best friend. Quite naturally, he is transported to this part of his life and an obsessive investigation into it follows. He starts stalking Veronica, and in course, comes

to this understanding that Veronica has a special child with Adrian. After his relationship with Veronica (a very platonic and cold affair), came to an end, he was informed by Adrian, by way of a letter, that Veronica and Adrian were seeing each other. Infuriated, Tony writes a very nasty letter back, an appallingly aggressive letter. And sometime later he learns, Adrian has committed suicide and has left a note in which he wrote 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,48)

Adrian, the brightest of the lot, had the prowess of structuring his thoughts with dexterity and aplomb. He could see into things, like no other of them could. Robson, a fellow student commits suicide, and it was understood that his girl friend was pregnant- his girl friend who was supposedly 'an experienced older woman.' (Barnes,13). In one of the History classes, Adrian uses Robson's suicide as an instance, in the context of academic historical posturing and the inanity of the same. 'Something happened' and nothing more can ever be attributed since the person in question, the perpetrator of the event, the boy who has committed suicide, is no longer available to divulge the details that caused the perpetration of the event. Adrian quotes Patrick Lagrange in connection,

'History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation.' (Barnes,17)

Later, Adrian commits suicide, and just like a metaphor his end ricochets Robson's. It comes a full circle as Tony realizes that Veronica has a son named Adrian, and everything suddenly falls in place. And yet quite not so. Soon he comes to terms with the tremendous information that the son was of Adrian's and Mrs. Ford's, Veronica's mother, 'an experienced older woman'. An information that crumbles and scatters the memory of the past he has been telling himself incessantly. A rupture in the momentum of his memory.

A missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle remembered as his past. As was quite evident, right from the beginning of the novel, something was laying heavy on his heart, as if a burden that somehow made his demeanour slightly irksome, mildly cantankerous and evidently aloof to the present. He is constantly indulging in self-deception, delinquent of his present crises, his daughter who was to give birth to a child and raise it singly, along with his selfish hoarding of his separated wife's time in seeking an answer from his past, which again he remains quite intentionally impervious of, a mutable memory,

'Internal narrators tend to deceive themselves when they try to maintain a positive self-identity in the process of self-construction under no interpersonal pressure.' (Zhu et al,2016: Fan et al,2017).

The malice Tony channels towards Adrian and Veronica by way of the letter, when he is communicated by Adrian of the latter's engagement with Veronica, and the subsequent suicide of Adrian, has been registered and recorded in his memory as a bleak and dismal part of his past, which he desires to keep at a distance, a guilt he unwittingly carries with himself, and which he is not ready to acknowledge. The revelation of the truth about Adrian's son with Mrs. Ford, opens a portal to certain smaller details of his memory, which, owing to his 'peaceable nature', he has chosen not to remember. But suddenly it all starts coming back to him. He suddenly is remembered of the subtle flirtations of Mrs. Ford when Tony visited Veronica's family. 'The experienced older woman', the coquette, who had the allure of a vixen, sharp, attractive and one who was partial to the poetry of Larkin- she appealed inexorably to the off guard, impressionable young man, a poetry enthusiast- and though he understandably chooses to hide the memory of the attraction he felt towards her, now things were starting to make more sense. And as they fall in place, his entire memory is poetically restructured, as if all this while there was a cog missing, a piece of the jigsaw puzzle of his past. The resolution is both heart-wrenchingly beautiful and terribly unsettling. 'Something happened'- someone got pregnant, someone died. In the words of Daniela Carpi,

'...the world is actually a reality that is "other", a reality of non-progress, a reality of Thanatonic and infernal stasis.' (Carpi, 13).

Tony was vehemently under the impression that Adrian's suicide was a consequence of Veronica's pregnancy. But sooner he discovers that there has been a baby (one who is now a specially-abled middle-aged man) who was named after his deceased friend Adrian, but that its mother was Mrs. Ford, and not Veronica. The novel spirals towards the end re-evaluating his entire life and his relationships.

'Poets don't invent poems

The poem is somewhere behind

It's been there for a long time

The poet merely discovers it.

-Jan Skacel (Quoted in Milan Kundera's *The Art of the Novel*)

Every story, every sound, every fable, every experience appears to the artist as a symbol, a metaphor, an improvement on the real. Every single experience is constantly being metamorphosed into a fiction. Thus, quite evidently, even in the 'recollection' there is always a 'reconstruction'- altering, incorporating, details. Tony's recollection too is quite subjective, while he remains quite alive to the volatility of memory and the viscosity of time.

'How often do we tell our own life story? How often do we adjust, embellish, make sly cuts? And the longer life goes on, the fewer are those around to challenge our account, to remind us that our life, merely the story we have been told about our life. Told to others, but mainly to ourselves. (Barnes, 95)

Mutatis Mutandis, the poetry of memory is not missed upon by Barnes. The allegorical guilt that Tony is made to carry the better part of the novel, has been deployed with utmost preciousness. A vehement occlusion of a significant vent is constructed carefully. The fiction blurs the past beyond retrieval, until chance brings in a missing, crucial and perhaps the most significant slice of information from the past. And ineluctably, the poetry of his memory provides a riposte- a more complex, a more elaborate, a more vivid poetry.

Maricel Oro Piqueras's take on this context of the intersection of half remembered memories and narration is quite insightful,

'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.' (Oro Piqueras,92)

In other words, a homeostatic equilibrium of memory and poetry. Barnes seem to negotiate the paradigm of narrative by a subtle but strong poetic intervention. The narration thus evokes a surrender to the sublime, and its fluidity keeps the flow of the narration unhindered and steady. Grafting such a language necessarily requires a deliberate effort on the part of the author, and Barnes seems to have excelled it to the level of perfection.

The tremendous struggle to perceive and engage in a transparent, simple understanding of one's consciousness is to end in failure, inevitably. Though Tony tries to make sense of his memories, they constantly defer into confusions, contusions, contractions and contraries, into metaphors, always in deference of the real, if at all a 'real' is ever possible to perceive or conceive. As Merleau Ponty quite pertly observes,

'Consciousness, which is taken to be the seat of clear thinking, is on the contrary the very abode of ambiguity.'

Memory also includes 'forgetting' in tandem with remembering- the peripheral, the marginal, the addendums are often conveniently ostracized from the fabric of one's past. From a distance of time and space, events appear fantastic, like lore and tales- an emphatic notion of fantasy percolates, and gives it a more agreeable shape- an improved modification of an otherwise humdrum event, a poetic rendering of a mundane or plebian occurrence. Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, sacrosanctly remains a gnomon relaying his childhood days as he remembers it, in a vertical stream of thoughts and by the end when he has the epiphanic revelation that directs him to his vocation, there is a rupture in the thought process, and the language bleeds poetry as the woman standing on the sea-beach is magically transformed into a bird and takes flight- a metaphor carved with utmost excision and beauty. David Copperfield's remembrance of his old home, which was like a dream he could never dream again, a haze, a blur, a beautifully complicated coming back to. Jane Eyre's memory of the hallucinatory, surreal call, leading her back to Thornton, a remembrance serving as a metaphor for life's fulfilment, rendering answers, filling the uncouth hiatuses, the puddles of the past. A transcendence, a going just a step farther beyond the 'what might have happened' precision. A reconstruction in recollection. As Paul Ricoeur aptly suggests,

'I continue to be troubled 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 forgetting.' (Ricoeur,443)

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