

Memory Revisited in Julian Barnes's The Sense of an Ending

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Abstract: An accumulation of years brings with it an accumulation of experiences. The revision of such experiences usually becomes more recurrent after retirement, a transition time from one period of life to another and, as such, a time in which we, human beings, have a tendency to take stock of our lives. This is actually one of the main issues present in Julian Barnes's last novel *The Sense of an Ending* (2011). When the main protagonist, a retired man quite comfortable and contented with his present life, receives an unexpected inheritance from the mother of a girlfriend from his university years, he is forced to track down a part of his life that he had left at the back of his mind a long time ago. As he explains his story, the protagonist and narrator of the novel raises a number of questions related to the quality and function of memory as one gets into old age. He experiments the unreliability of memory and questions to what extent memory is constructed through the remembered emotions that invaded him over that episode of his life rather than through the events as they actually took place. On the other hand, the act of revisiting and revising that specific episode, brings with it feelings of guilt and remorse as the protagonist realises that his past acts were not as noble as he remembered them to be. However, these acts are part of the past and they cannot be changed; thus, another question that the novel raises is how to account for those actions of which one does not feel proud and, more importantly, how to manage those bad memories as one gets older.

Keywords: the ageing process, memory, narrative

The increasing interest in the study of ageing and old age has brought with it the emergence of two disciplines known as narrative gerontology and literary gerontology. Both disciplines intend to provide insight in the study of the ageing process by studying and analysing cultural images transmitted through narrative, either coming from autobiography or biography, self-narratives and life-writing by ageing and older citizens when referring to narrative gerontology, and from literary works when referring to literary gerontology. The word *narrative* has actually become key in ageing studies, as Heike Hartung and Roberta

Maierhofer state in the introduction to their edited volume *Narrative of Life: Mediating Age*, “[t]he concern with the analysis of narrative structures has become a focus in both the humanities and the life sciences after the *narrative turn* has drawn attention to the ways in which narrative shapes knowledge across disciplinary boundaries” (2009: 5).

In fact, researchers from different fields of study point out to the fact that the study of human ageing requires the combination of traditional disciplines such as gerontology and sociology with disciplines closer to the humanities. In that sense, gerontologists Jan-Erik Ruth and Gary Kenyon in their article “Biography in Adult Development and Aging” acknowledge the need to deepen the understanding of the ageing process moving forward from more traditional disciplines. For Ruth and Kenyon, “many studies in gerontology view aging from the “outside,” analyzing, for example, changes in health in aging organisms, or appropriate roles for the retired in society. The “inside” of aging has largely been forgotten” (1996: 1). Thus, they analyse biographical and autobiographical narratives as rich sources to obtain insight into the manifold aspects that take place in the ageing process, the physical and biological aspects but also the sociocultural and experiential ones. Ruth and Kenyon acknowledge that academic as well as professional communities are interested in understanding the ageing process since “[t]he way people perceive their lives is of vital importance, not only as a means of exploring the aging process, but also as a guideline for social policy and the delivery of care in an aging society” (1996: 2). Moreover, by getting closer to the lived experience of old citizens through biographical and autobiographical narratives, Ruth and Kenyon have been able to approach ageing, both as an individual and as a social process, from a more comprehensive perspective and to observe to what extent “cultures, subcultures, or family patterns” (1996: 2) influence individual lives either because those patterns are challenged and expanded or, contrarily, they are seen as immovable and kept so.

In their study *Ageing and Identity. A Humanities Perspective*, Lagretta Talent Lenker and Sarah Munson Deats go one step further when considering the importance of resourcing to narrative and the humanities in order to understand the human ageing process and to challenge limiting cultural pre-conceptions attached to old age. According to Lenker and Deats, “cultural forms construct as well as encode the conventional perceptions on individuals in a given society; they intervene in history as they reflect history” (1999: 19). Thus, for Lenker and Deats, “literature, the arts, and the media not only mirror society’s conventions, but also create them” (1999: 19). It is in that sense that Lenker and Deats consider that by analysing the images created through fictional narratives and by challenging them, negative stereotypes in regard to the ageing process can be modelled and reconstructed. In 2000, gerontologist Mike Hepworth resources to literary works in order to analyse contemporary conceptions in relation to the ageing process in his study *Stories of Ageing*. For Hepworth, contemporary fiction is a valuable resource to understand conceptions and dynamics related to contemporary ageing because “it allows the writer, through the exercise of imagination, access to the personal variations and ambiguities underlying the common condition of growing older” (2000: 4). Hannah Zeilig establishes a difference between narrative gerontology and literary gerontology by pointing out that whereas in narrative gerontology real-life informants retell their life stories as they perceive them, the stories in literary gerontology are works of art that directly or indirectly seek to

“appeal to our minds” (2011: 22). Still, literary narratives in which the process of ageing and old age are addressed are based on the writers’ individual experience as well as on their social and cultural backgrounds. Despite the fact that literary works usually part from everyday experience, they tend to reflect on the multiple and diverse aspects that make a human life.

One of the words associated with narrative is memory; using one’s memory, narrative is constructed and, as narrative progresses, identity is built. The postmodern turn which was deeply rooted around the seventies and eighties and which helps find a meaning to a fast-changing contemporary society has contributed to the present conception of identity as a fluid entity which is constructed and negotiated through the life span. Within this context, life narratives have the function of providing a sense of continuity and logical meaning to a long life trajectory. In “Identity Construction in the Third Age: The Role of Self-Narratives”, Gerben J. Westerhof analyses the role of self-narrative in identity development between the ages of sixty and seventy-five by interviewing one informant. Westerhof reaches the conclusion that narratives are used “to create unity and purpose in the manifold experiences occurring across the course of one’s life and thereby to find meaning in life” (2009: 56), especially after retirement. In fact, Westerhof goes one step further and acknowledges that the construction of an ongoing life narrative is specially needed to keep a “healthy identity development” because it guarantees a balance between “maintenance of structures and openness to new experiences” and thus, “self-narratives can be seen as important means to coordinate existing identities with changing situations” (2009: 57).

This is precisely what Tony Webster, the narrator and protagonist of Julian Barnes’ last novel, *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), is forced to do when he receives a small inheritance from someone he knew in his university years. *The Sense of an Ending* is the story of a man who has crossed the line of retirement and who is quite contented both with his present life and with his life trajectory up until the moment in which something forces him to review his life narrative. This is how the narrator and protagonist, Tony Webster, takes stock of his present life:

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 ward 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. (2012: 56)

By using the first person, Webster rewrites his life narrative speaking directly to the readers. As he rewrites a specific episode from his own life story, he reflects on the deceitfulness of memory driven by human beings’ need to go on with their lives despite having gone through negative episodes. However, as memory is revisited and revised in his last life stage, the protagonist also rediscovers a remorse that was hidden deep inside himself and that he had managed to ignore by modifying what he remembered from that episode of his life.

Daniel L. Schacter has researched and published on memory over the life span and defines memory as intrinsic to human beings but volatile at the same time: “Sometimes we forget the past and at other times we distort it; some disturbing memories haunt us for years. Yet we also rely on memory to perform an astonishing variety of tasks in our everyday lives” (2001: 1). However, “[m]emory plays such a pervasive role in our daily lives that we often take it for granted until an incident of forgetting or distortion demands our attention” (2001: 1). And memory will be a pervasive element in Tony Webster’s narrative as he recounts an episode from his life story. When revising his memory, Webster realises that time as well as a superposition of feelings he had felt at the time had seasoned his remembrance of what happened in that specific episode in his life. As he revises it, as well as the consequences derived from it, Webster realises that, contrarily to what he thought, memory is not a reliable scrapbook of the most relevant moments of his life. In that sense, Daniel L. Schacter explains that our memories are strongly influenced by our feelings, beliefs and the knowledge obtained after living a specific experience. As Schacter explains, “[w]e extract key elements from our experiences and store them. We then recreate or reconstruct our experiences rather than retrieve copies of them [...]. In other words, we bias our memories of the past by attributing to them emotions or knowledge we acquired after the event” (2001: 9).

The novel starts during the university years of the protagonist and narrator when he meets a girl named Veronica and they start a relationship which lasts around two years. Tony Webster visits Veronica’s family in Kent and Veronica also visits the protagonist’s friends in London. However, at one point over their second year together, Veronica tells the protagonist she feels their relationship is at a stagnant point and they decide to split up and follow different paths. Veronica tries to recover their relationship by seducing Webster but he neither understands Veronica’s complaints regarding their relationship nor shows any sign of intending to amend them. They finally decide to follow their own ways and the protagonist never feels guilt or remorse for not having taken more care of the relationship. Over this period, Webster remembers himself as a carefree young man interested in discovering the intricacies of sex more than in understanding relationships or in analysing the behaviour of his peers: “the more you liked a girl, and the better matched you were, the less your chance of sex, it seemed” (2012: 23).

Some time later, Webster receives a letter from one of his best friends, Adrian, in which he asks for his permission to go out with Veronica. In the protagonist’s memory, his reaction at the time was to write a short letter to Adrian in which, half-jokingly, he expressed his lack of interest in Veronica and in their relationship. After this episode, the narrator goes on with his life without news from either Veronica or Adrian until they finish their degrees. The first part of the novel finishes when the narrator is informed about Adrian’s death. After having graduated, Adrian commits suicide for no apparent reason, apart from the fact that he was of above average intelligence. As Webster retells this first part of the story, he keeps referring to the deceitfulness of memory as a new discovery in his life: “Again, I must stress that this is my reading now of what happened then. Or rather, my memory now of my reading then of what was happening at the time” (2012: 41). Webster is reorganising his particular scrapbook and, with it, he is becoming aware that every decision one makes,

even if insignificant, may mean a different turn in one's life.

In the second part of the novel, the reasons that make Tony Webster wonder about the truth of memory and to revise his life story are clearly stated. The narrator receives a letter from a solicitor in which he is informed of the fact that he has received an inheritance from Veronica's mother, a person he only saw once in his life. The inheritance consists of five hundred pounds and a personal diary, Adrian's personal diary, which has been safeguarded by Veronica. Without understanding, the perplexed narrator tries to contact Veronica. From Veronica he only gets the letter he had sent to Adrian when Webster finds out that Adrian and Veronica had started a relationship. To his surprise, the letter is not jokey or brief at all as he remembered it to be. In it, the narrator had poured out his anger and disillusionment against both Veronica and Adrian, accusing Veronica of having been damaged in her childhood and of having a domineering and uncontrollable character and asking Adrian never to get in touch with him again. After reading the letter, the protagonist finds himself at a crossroads forty years after that episode of his life had taken place:

At first, I thought mainly about me, and how – what – I'd been: chippy, jealous and malign. Also about my attempt to undermine their relationship. At least I'd failed in this, since Veronica's mother had assured me the last months of Adrian's life had been happy. Not that this let me off the hook. My younger self had come back to shock my older self with what that self had been, or was, or was sometimes capable of being. And only recently I'd been going on about how the witnesses to our lives decrease, and with them our essential corroboration. (2012: 98)

That carefree young Webster who had inhabited the protagonist's memory for many years had turned into someone he found difficult to recognise. In his personal narration, Webster had constructed his younger self as not far removed from the boys of his age at that specific time and place, mid-twentieth century England. Thus, as he reconsiders his relationship with Veronica, he compares its innocence and lack of sexual intercourse with a sexually-loaded story he had recently heard from one of his friends whose daughters is at university. In his mind as well as in his personal narration, the relationship he had had with Veronica would respond to a common and harmless relationship for their age at that time. In *Narrative and Identity: Studies in autobiography, self and culture*, Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh explain how we construct our lives as well as create them through narration and, as we do so, we mould our identity as individuals but also as cultural beings (2001: 1, 2). In Webster's memory, Veronica's relationship as well as her starting an affair with his best friend had been an insignificant episode which did not have any negative consequence in his carefully-woven life narrative. As he is forced to revise his life narrative at sixty-five, Webster realises that the number of people who were around him when this episode of his life took place is decreasing in number, either because they have died – which is the case with his parents and Adrian –, or because they have followed different paths in life – which is the case with his close friends at college. After receiving part of Adrian's diary from Veronica, Tony Webster is left alone reconstructing his memories as well as his own identity. Moreover, he has to come to terms with a number of emotions he thought would be well under control in his old age and which he finds flourishing and floating at ease.

Tony Webster feels remorse because his viperous letter was the last contact he had with

Adrian. But more importantly, he feels remorse because he had treated Veronica in a very unfair way. The narrator decides to keep on investigating about the months before Adrian's death; he tries to get some information from Veronica but failing to do so, he decides to follow her. By the end of the novel, he discovers that Adrian had had an affair with Veronica's mother which resulted in pregnancy and, to make things more complicated, the baby was born disabled. Webster imagines that the pressure caused by this situation had brought Adrian, a twenty-two year old man, young and brilliant, to commit suicide. Moreover, Veronica had been the person who had taken care of her brother after her mother's death and realises that by simplifying Veronica's character as selfish and domineering and erasing her from his mind and his life narrative as he had done, he had manipulated both his memory and his life story. The narrator, Tony Webster, realises that the emotions triggered by the fact that he and Veronica had split up and she had started going out with his best friend had had a negative effect on the memorised episode in his life narrative and he is aware that, at the present time, when his feelings are completely different, the plot of that episode will be changed in his memory too. As he puts it:

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 and Veronica, the tape runs, the usual stuff spools out. [...] But what if, ever at a late stage, our emotions relating to those long-ago events and people change? That ugly letter of mine provoked remorse in me. [...] 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. (2012: 120)

Tony Webster imagined the beginning of his old age as a quiet period in which he would suffer the pains of biological ageing and the deserved emotional tranquillity of lived and past experiences: "Later in life, you expect a bit of rest, don't you? You think you deserve it. I did, anyway. But then you begin to understand that the reward of merit is not life's business" (2012: 59). Instead, he realises that his life narrative is a never-ending narrative until death and that remorse and guilt are two emotions one has to come to terms with whether one is ready to do so or not: "What you fail to do is look ahead, and then imagine yourself looking back from that future point. Learning the new emotions that time brings. Discovering, for example, that as the witnesses to your life diminish, there is less corroboration, and therefore less certainty, as to what you are or have been" (2012: 59). Instead, as he points out in other passages of his narration, he realises that getting into old age makes your memories less reliable due to the accumulation of years and experiences but also because those who had been acquainted with your life trajectory are gradually disappearing.

Thus, Tony Webster, the narrator and protagonist of the story, goes from a state of accepting the beginning of his old age with its expected nuances, to a deep revision of his remembered young self and the realisation that memory is deceitful and remorse is a feeling that can emerge at any time over a human life. Once he accepts all this, he realises he has to find a solution so that his life narrative can continue. 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, 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. As the narrator explains: “You get towards the end of life – no, not life itself, but of something else: the end of any likelihood of change in that life. You are allowed a long moment of pause, time enough to ask the question: what else have I done wrong? [...] There is accumulation. There is responsibility. And beyond these, there is unrest. There is great unrest” (2012: 150). He has to rewrite his life narrative by taking remorse into account. As Gerben J. Westerhof points out when analysing the healing role of life narratives in old age, it is not only necessary for the narrator and protagonist of the novel to go on rewriting his life narrative but also a sign of healthiness since when one’s life narrative is reconstructed and adjusted new experiences can be fitted into it.

By presenting a specific episode of the life narrative of a retired character, Julian Barnes allows the reader into the growing character’s awareness of the fact that when entering into old age one is not automatically freed from the same feelings and emotions that have invaded him or her in their previous life stages. On the contrary, the fact of having more free time to review one’s memories together with the deceitful quality of memory may force those in old age to come to terms with negative memories and to absorb remorse and guilt as feelings which need to be integrated in order to go on writing one’s life narrative. In fact, Tony Webster himself acknowledges the fact that it was actually easier for him to manage memories when he was a young man. As he explains: “When you are in your twenties, even if you’re confused and uncertain about your aims and purposes, you have a strong sense of what life itself is, and of what you in life are, and might become. Later...later there is more uncertainty, more overlapping, more backtracking, more false memories. Back then, you can remember your short life in its entirety. Later, the memory becomes a thing of shreds and patches” (2012: 105). At the age of sixty-five, Webster did not expect to find himself in this position because he had interiorised the message that old age was a time of peace and quietness in which one had to wait for the end without making much fuss about it. In one of the first studies on literary gerontology, *Safe at Last in the Middle Years: the Invention of the Midlife Progress Narrative*, Margaret Moganroth Gullette analyses the emergence of a new kind of novel she names “the progress narrative of the middle years” (1988: xi). Gullette is aware of a number of contemporary Anglo-American authors who, instead of depicting middle age and the entering into old age as a time of constant loss and decline which will lead to social oblivion, they present ageing heroines and heroes entangled in “new plots of recovery and development in those years” (1988: xii). In that sense, as time cannot be defined in a straight line, the entering into old

age is not a continuum through which one can go quietly; instead, crisis and coming to terms with them are also part of the game, as they are in the other life stages. As Tony Webster points out, “[we] live with such easy assumptions, don’t we? For instance, that memory equals events plus time. But it’s all much odder than this. Who was it said that memory is what we thought we’d forgotten? And it ought to be obvious to us that time doesn’t act as a fixative, rather as a solvent” (2012: 63).

Literary gerontology helps understand the process of ageing in a more comprehensive way in the sense that it allows the reader to go into mental processes which are quite difficult to express and define in scientific terms. By getting into the life narrative of Tony Webster who addresses us as if we were listening to him, we side with him in the fact that memory is a double-edged weapon. It is the door towards our past and the construction of a logical life narrative but it is also the reminder that everything we did in the past and will do in the future is seasoned by feelings and emotions which give subjectivity to our memories and which require constant reconsideration and rewriting of who we are, whatever the age.

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