

**Univerzita Karlova**

**Filozofická fakulta**

Ústav anglofonních literatur a kultur

# **Bakalářská práce**

Aneta Chaloupecká

## **Theme of Memory in Julian Barnes' Later Works**

Praha 2019

Vedoucí práce: PhDr. Zdeněk Beran, PhD

**Prohlášení:**

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně, že jsem řádně citovala všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

V Praze, dne 14. srpna 2019

Aneta Chaloupecká

**Klíčová slova (česky)**

Paměť, Julian Barnes, postmodernismus

**Klíčová slova (anglicky):**

Memory, Julian Barnes, postmodernism

## Abstrakt (česky)

Tato bakalářská práce zkoumá téma paměti, jak je zobrazena v pozdějších dílech Juliana Barnes. *Arthur & George* (2005), *Nothing to be Frightened of* (2008) a *The Sense of an Ending* (2011). Barnes patří do generace poválečných autorů inspirovaných postmoderním myšlením, konkrétně problematizací historie. Dle postmodernistů totiž neexistuje objektivní způsob poznání historické reality, jelikož jediným důkazem jsou nevěrohodné výpovědi svědků a zkrácené historické dokumenty. Historiografie je považována za nevěrohodný zdroj informací o minulosti, jelikož používají stejné narativní strategie jako texty fiktivní a jsou často psány z perspektivy vítězů. Paměť je klíčový koncept v této problematice, jelikož jsou kromě historických dokumentů jediným způsobem, jak poznat minulost. Pro Barnes paměť znamená komplexní mechanismus, který umožňuje vzpomenout si na minulost, ale také určuje veškeré naše chápání každodenní reality. Ve třech diskutovaných knihách Barnes zvolil rozdílnou strategii, s jakou k problematice přistupuje. Memoár *Nothing to be Frightened of* funguje jako teoretický základ práce, jelikož v něm Barnes prezentuje vlastní chápání složitého mechanismu paměti. *Arthur & George* kombinuje fakta a fikci, jelikož vypráví fiktivní verzi událostí z pohledu George Edaljiho, a realitu založenou na známých faktech z života a díla Arthura Conana Doyle. *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) uvádí protagonistu, který musí čelit kolapsu veškeré reality tak, jak ji zná, protože byla založena na konstrukci vytvořené z falešných domněnek a nespolehlivé paměti.

## Abstract (in English):

This thesis explores the theme of memory as seen in later works of Julian Barnes, namely *Arthur & George* (2005), *Nothing to be Frightened of* (2008) and *The Sense of an Ending* (2011). Barnes is part of the postwar generation of writers who have been highly influenced by the postmodern thought, specifically the problematisation of history. According to the postmodernists, there is no possible way to objectively learn about the historical reality, as all there is to give evidence are the unreliable testimonies of eye-witnesses and biased historical accounts. Historiographies are considered to be unreliable sources of information about the past since they employ the same narrative strategies as fictional texts do and they are often written from the position of power. Memory is a key concept in this discussion since apart from historical documents, it is the only way of knowing about the past. To Barnes, memory represents a complex mechanism which enables to recall the past, but also defines our entire understanding of the everyday reality. In the three books that this thesis discusses have chosen a different strategy to approach the problem of memory – *Nothing to be Frightened of* is a memoir which provides for the theoretical background of this thesis, as it presents Barnes understanding of the complex mechanism of memory. *Arthur & George* (2005) combines fact and fiction as it narrates the fictional version of the events as seen by the solicitor George Edalji, and the facts deriving from the known life and work of Arthur Conan Doyle. *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) then introduces a protagonist who faces the collapse of his reality by realising that the version of his past that has constructed his entire present being was based on a false assumption and unreliability of memory.

## OBSAH

<b>1. Introduction to Julian Barnes and memory</b> .....	1
<b>1.1. Memory in context</b> .....	1
<b>1.2. Julian Barnes in context</b> .....	3
<b>1.3 Memory in the work of Julian Barnes</b> .....	7
<b>2. <i>Nothing to be Frightened of</i> (2008)</b> .....	10
<b>2.1. Memoir as a genre</b> .....	10
<b>2.2. Memory in <i>Nothing to be Frightened of</i></b> .....	11
<b>3. <i>Arthur &amp; George</i> (2005)</b> .....	20
<b>3.1. Context of the Work</b> .....	20
<b>3.2. Memory in <i>Arthur &amp; George</i></b> .....	23
<b>4. <i>The Sense of an Ending</i> (2011)</b> .....	30
<b>4.1. History and its interpretation</b> .....	30
<b>4.2. Memory in <i>The Sense of an Ending</i></b> .....	32
<b>5. Conclusion</b> .....	40
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	43

# 1. Introduction to Julian Barnes and memory

## 1.1. Memory in context

Before it became a subject of study with the publication of *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* by Frederic C. Bartlett in 1931, memory had been considered to be a valuable instrument for remembering lines of poetry and pieces of information. The memory studies have been initiated by theories of Bartlett and Freud who examined the complexity of the memory mechanism, including “unreliability of recall, the issue of traumatic memory and the narrative construction of remembering.”<sup>1</sup> The ideas that have been developed in the field of psychology has influenced generations of thinkers and artist, who then used the faulty mechanism of memory as a theme in their work, as Patricia Fara and Karalyn Patterson describe: “since the invention of psychoanalytical techniques, insights into how we remember, forget and interpret the past have been indelibly incorporated into our daily perceptions, thus permeating literature, art, and the writing of history.”<sup>2</sup> Anne Whitehead observes that after the Second World War, there has been a proliferation of memory work, as people felt the urgent need to preserve the memory of the war in order to prevent it from happening again in the future. An immense amount of work has been done in order to establish institutions that would commemorate the tragedy of the Holocaust, and to familiarize the public with the facts through popular media such as books and movies, so that the objective history is harder to manipulate. “This trend has noticeably intensified since the 1980s, and the last decade or so has witnessed the inauguration of an ever-increasing number of museums and memorials to human suffering,”<sup>3</sup> says Whitehead. The need to preserve the memory of the past in its accuracy suggests that there should be a single objective version of the truth. With the rise of the postmodern thought, however, the certainty in unambiguity of historical experience has decrease, and memory has been determined as one of the main reasons for the inaccessibility of an objective view of the past.

In 1984, the French historian Pierre Nora has noticed that there has been an “advent of the era of memory and commemoration” in the form of “fundamental shift in the perception of the past” and “critique of history as a tyrannical approach to the past.”<sup>4</sup> The rise of

---

1 Wojciech Drag, *Revisiting Loss: Memory, Trauma and Nostalgia in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014) 5.

2 Patricia Fara and Karalyn Patterson, *Memory* (Darwin College: Cambridge, 1998) 5.

3 Anne Whitehead, *Memory* (London: Routledge, 2009) 153.

4 Drag 3.

memory as an institution, according to Nora, was the consequence of the experience of decolonisation of human on global, internal and ideological level: “the emancipation of social, religious and sexual minorities, (...) liberation from the sway of totalitarian regimes,”<sup>5</sup> extension of human rights and the need to preserve democratic values gave rise to the trend of memorials of times when none of such privilege was a matter of course. Nora recognized a change in understanding history as it gained a position of an institution dictating one correct interpretation of the events and suppressing others. Stories written by members of minor communities narrating the experience of the oppressed that the official history has been quiet about, was in great demand with the rise of postmodern thinking. The idea was that “the novel stages a failure of representation, and a failure of a collective time sense,”<sup>6</sup> as Peter Boxall puts it. With the rise of the hectic lifestyle fuelled by the rush of information coming from mass media and the era of the internet, the perception of time itself has changed, Boxall says, into something that “moves too fast to capture but too slowly to animate, (...) everything is in a process of newly becoming, and yet everything is already over.”<sup>7</sup> Modern life requires to live in the moment, to focus on what is going on now rather than what had happened in the past. Retrospection suddenly lacks purpose and history is considered to be a story that has not much relevance or importance for everyday life.

The postmodern worldview gave rise to tendencies among historians to cast doubt upon the concept of historiography. Scholars such as the New Historians challenged traditional versions of history and questioned the possibility to know the objective truth through historical documents. History was viewed as a system too complex to be adequately rendered into a narrative, and thus for the purpose of comprehensibility, it needs to be reduced. “The postmodern logic of the novel,” says Boxall, claims that “there is no way of capturing an unmediated historical truth; past time is always lost to us, and recaptured only as a story manufactured after the event.”<sup>8</sup> Historiography thus represents a product of interpretation, a version of the past as seen through the perspective of an interested side, which renders the take on the events biased.

Boxall believes that postmodern thinking was brought to an end with the terrorist attacks on the towers of the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001.<sup>9</sup> According to him, the

---

5 Drag 3-4.

6 Peter Boxall, “The Ends of Postmodernism,” *British Literature in Transition, 1980–2000: Accelerated Times*, ed. Eileen Pollard and Berthold Schoene (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2018) 33.

7 Boxall 29.

8 Boxall 38.

9 Boxall 31.

event induced the realisation that history has not been concluded after relative prosperity and long-time peace has been acquired, and that balance of global power is much more fragile than it seemed. He proposes that the sudden necessity to bear witness to history being a continuing reality gave rise to a new kind of realism that appeared in the 1990s and 2000s. As a reaction to the failings of traditional historical records to represent the past accurately, it is distinguished by the commitment to “articulate a more layered political reality, and to a history that imposes itself upon the imagination.”<sup>10</sup> Memory in this regard functions as a mechanism with key influence on the way historical reality is interpreted, as well as having creative potential to complete its the picture.

## 1.2. Julian Barnes in context

Julian Barnes, born 1946 in Leciester, is a contemporary British writer, author of seventeen novels, four of them published under a pseudonym, as well as number of collections of short stories and nonfiction. He studied modern languages at Oxford and after graduation he worked as a lexicographer for the *Oxford English Dictionary*. He published his first novel called *Metroland* in 1980, for which he was awarded the Somerset Maugham Award for writers under the age of 30. In 1984 he published the critically acclaimed novel titled *Flaubert's Parrot*, in which we watch as the protagonists' passion for Gustave Flaubert dispatches him on a quest to look for the novelist's stuffed parrot. Other recognized novels written by him includes *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989), *England, England* (1998), *Arthur & George* (2005) or *The Sense of an Ending* (2011). In his fictional works he often explores the problem of memory, time, history and its interpretation; in his essays he discusses French culture, the role of a writer, the purpose of storytelling, as well as the burden of dying and grief. Barnes position in the literary context has been a matter of debates and there has been a number of proposals of how to categorize his work.

Barnes belongs to the *Granta* generation – named after *Granta Magazine's* 1983 list of Britain's best young novelists, which includes, among others, Martin Amis, Pat Barker, Kazuo Ishiguro or Salman Rushdie.<sup>11</sup> The group is characterised by Boxall as having

a nascent sense that the motors of history have stalled, a sense that this is related to a loss of faith in our mechanisms for

---

10 Boxall 38.

11 Boxall 33.

representing reality, and the search for a new form in which to represent a kind of etiolated or dematerialised condition<sup>12</sup>

This generation of writers seems to be influenced by the postmodern notion of history reaching its ending and feels a need to compensate for the absence of a medium that would provide for a way to reproduce historical reality adequately.

Petr Fantys distinguishes a section of contemporary British prose-writers who have been part of the literary scene since the 1960s, and who, he claims, capture the tension between narrative's indisputable moral value of an anthropological necessity as opposed to its inevitably fabricated nature. The irreplaceability and wholesomeness of a story is confronted with its fictional and instable nature, he says.<sup>13</sup> Boxall recognizes an ongoing pattern of thought in the work of writers from Barnes' generation in which they observe that "the contingency of history and the faultiness of our apparatuses for recording it is routed through a recognition that a due acknowledgement of historical reality is our most urgent ethical and aesthetic task."<sup>14</sup> The pivotal work in this regard seems to him to be Ian McEwan's 2001 metafictional novel *Atonement* which captures Briony, a writer by profession, as she attempts to redress great harm she had inflicted due to misrepresentation through fiction. Aware of her culpability, Briony wants to narrate an alternative version of history to compensate for the inaccurate workings of memory of her younger self which was the initiating factor in a sequence of events with tragic ending for her sister and her lover.

According to Ladislav Nagy, the themes of history, human life and its finality that Barnes repeatedly approaches in his works have been used similarly in works by Barnes's contemporaries: Martin Amis, whose 2010 farce *The Pregnant Widow* depicts an ageing narrator unable to identify with his former self, and John Banville, whose *The Sea* (2005) is a sombre meditation on the inescapable flux of time and on nature being remorselessly indifferent to the human fate.<sup>15</sup> What seems to connect their works is the workings of time on human identity and the impossibility to capture individuals and events in their complexity. Barnes has depicted the struggle to reach an all-embracing comprehension of a human being – whether it is oneself or some other person – which is condemned to be vain effort, in the novels such as *Before She Met Me* (1982), *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), or *The Sense of an Ending* (2011).

---

12 Boxall 34.

13 Petr Fantys, "Anatomie koncu Juliana Barnese," *Host* 15 Sep. 2015: 45.

14 Boxall 38.

15 Ladislav Nagy, "Julian Barnes a smutek," *Host* 15 Sep. 2015: 52.

Early on, Barnes' work had been considered to be a part of the postmodern tradition. Reasonably so, as argued by Alexandra Mitrea, since his books contain the items that fall within the main focus of the postmodern thought, such as interest in historiographic metafiction, work with hybridity, self-reflection and heterogeneity. "Though highly marked by postmodernism," she says, Barnes's work "departs from it in the keenness and passion with which it questions the world and the emphasis it places on ethical issues."<sup>16</sup> Other critics such as Frederick Holmes and Linda Hutcheon also regard Barnes to fall into the postmodern category<sup>17</sup> given his interest in historiographic metafiction, which according to Hutcheon is a genre proposing that "both literature and the world are equally fictive realities. (...) both history and literature [are seen] as human constructs, indeed, as human illusions."<sup>18</sup> The main protagonist of Barnes' first novel, *Metroland* (1980), aims to make sense of his settled life in the suburbs of London by calculating his narration of the story in favour of his current situation, Nagy claims.<sup>19</sup> The novel *Flaubert's Parrot*, an example of historiographic metafiction, is by Mitrea classified as postmodern because the way it "doubts historiography's claim to scientific truthfulness, objectivity or exhaustiveness, emphasizing ideas of incompleteness, impartiality and manipulation which are specific of fictional discourse."<sup>20</sup> In *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* from 1989 Barnes presents the postmodern view of history as idiosyncratic and fragmentary, focusing on marginal episodes rather than the great narrative. No objectivity is possible in narrating history, and the only purposeful fraction of history to tell is that of individuals, though it is necessarily biased.<sup>21</sup> At one point of the book, it says "history isn't what happened. History is just what historians tell us."<sup>22</sup> History is thus presented as a malleable material which is being processed through the interpretations and established narrative techniques of the historians, making the objective truth unreachable. The very existence of an objective truth is questioned, and a stress is placed on every person's moral responsibility of choosing a version to believe and promote.

---

16 Alexandra Mitrea, "Julian Barnes and the Sense of History," *Revista Transilvania*, no. 1, Jan. 2013: 46.

17 Christine Berberich, "The Past After Postmodern Fabulation. Fact and Fiction in Julian Barnes's *Arthur & George*," *Julian Barnes: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Peter Childs and Sebastian Groes (London: Continuum, 2011) 118.

18 Linda Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction. Parody and the Intertextuality of History," *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. P. O'Donnell, and Robert Con Davis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) 4.

19 Nagy *Host* 51.

20 Mitrea 46.

21 Nagy, *Host* 51.

22 Julian Barnes, *History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (London: Cape, 1990) 239.

In the view of his more recent work, however, Peter Childs and Sebastian Groes propose that a reevaluation of the notion that Barnes is a postmodern writer is necessary. They argue that his later work expresses “seriousness and intellectual intensity of the writer’s engagement with the world beyond the subjective self.”<sup>23</sup> According to Groes and Childs, it is unfortunate to connect Barnes and postmodernism; they view his work as having shaped high postmodernism of the 1980s rather than being its immediate participant. Barnes seems to share similar themes with postmodern writers, yet his take on them does not necessarily corresponds with the postmodern reading.

After more than a decade after its publication, critics and scholars now recognize *Arthur & George* (2005) as a novel that is situated at the borderline between two phases of Barnes’ work. His previous novels like *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984) or *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989) are usually considered to be postmodernist given their claim that historical experience is impossible to record objectively. Even though there are features that might be categorised as postmodern in the novel from 2005 – such as subjectivity of perception of reality, problematisation of official historical narrative or the idea of unknowability of truth – critics agree that the book’s attitude to the past differs, as it is “more straightforwardly historical in the sense that it is less experimental and self-reflexive.”<sup>24</sup> Usage of the third-person omniscient narrator seems to add to the objectivity of the narrative and the historical research that is clear from the range of the factual background of the book suggests resorting to a more traditional historical novel. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Mitrea claims, “Barnes swerves in the direction of social responsibility, a concept outside the scope of the postmodernism which had imbued his early novels.”<sup>25</sup> The moral problem of the story narrated in the book is based on whether the protagonist is going to accept blame for establishing a distorted interpretation of the past over another, less pleasant, for it exposes some of his deplorable actions. Finally, Mitrea argues that the one feature that definitely detaches Barnes from the postmodern tradition is his belief of love as a “stabilizer which gives meaning to life and to the individual. (...) Only love can help us discover truth, an emotional, highly subjective truth, no doubt, but a form of truth which validates the individual.”<sup>26</sup>

---

23 Peter Childs and Sebastian Groes, eds. *Julian Barnes: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (London: Continuum, 2011) 3.

24 Berberich 119.

25 Mitrea 50.

26 Mitrea 49.

### 1.3 Memory in the work of Julian Barnes

As a writer, Barnes is fascinated by the complicated mechanism of memory and the role it plays in the process of storytelling. One must know the past in order to narrate a story, but the faulty nature of memory places the storyteller in a difficult position. For Barnes, literature expresses truth, and therefore it needs to reflect historical reality faithfully. Because of unreliable memory of witnesses and historical documents, a truthful depiction of reality is impossible. The gaps in the narrative that are caused by imperfect memory need to be filled by fabrication in order for it to be a coherent story. Barnes presents the idea of coexistence of fiction and truth, and shows, as Ryan Roberts puts it, that “a work of fiction has the power to function as truth.”<sup>27</sup>

Memory of everyday reality is the one thing that we keep in our consciousness all the time and it defines the way we see the world. The process of interpreting reality is a fundamental feature of everyday life and it uses memory as a provider of information about the past. In order to know one’s way around reality, one needs to interpret it – as if filter it through one’s worldview, and thus establishing a very subjective reading of reality, an individual version of events. New information coming to the brain from the outside need to fit the narrative that has been being compiled up to that point. In this regard, the process of interpretation is similar to the process of narrating a story. Any holes in our narrative need to be filled in using the creative mechanism of memory: events and details are reorganized, repressed or emphasised so that the incoming data suit the overall picture. This view of memory corresponds to the way Drag perceives it; he claims that memory “creatively reconstructs rather than faithfully reproduces past experiences, a property which accounts for memory’s capacity to distort and manipulate the past.”<sup>28</sup>

Inspired by the postmodern notion of human inability to access a single objective version of the past, Barnes seems to suggest that every reading of the reality is original, defined by an individual subjective experience which is based on a specific combination of lapses in memory, misinterpretation and fabrication. Thus, the process of narrating history – either personal or collective – necessarily results in abundance of different versions of the story. Barnes uses characters who suffer the consequences of faulty

---

27 Ryan Roberts, “Inventing a Way to the Truth: Life and Fiction in Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot*,” *Julian Barnes: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Peter Childs and Sebastian Groes (London: Continuum, 2011) 29.

28 Drag 5.

memory and misrepresentation of events in order to examine how the mechanism of memory works. As basically all our knowledge is based on memory, by showing its faulty nature Barnes depicts the human experience as founded on very fragile certainties. “Is our life our life or is it merely the story we’ve told ourselves about our life?” asks Barnes in an interview, when discussing the relationship between memory and time as it appears in his books. “To what extent do we clearly remember, record things and to what extent is that self-delusion?”<sup>29</sup> The characters that Barnes depicts are subjects to such self-delusion, as they build up a personal history using the creative potential of memory. These characters are then placed into a situation in which they need to adopt the role of an attorney and defend their version of the truth against the postmodern abundance of other truths.

In his memoir *Nothing to be Frightened of* (2008) Barnes presents his understanding of the workings of memory which he derives from personal experience and works of literature. He shares various memories involving his family and friends and discusses their accuracy. By perceiving them from different viewpoints, consulting them with the interpretations of other people, and tracing back the context in which those memories originated, he presents a complex theory of memory that he applies in his fictional work. He observes that there is a number of factors that influence the state in which we encode a memory. Among these factors are the person’s age, beliefs or the amount of attention being paid at the moment of encoding of the memory. What ends up encoded into the memory thus seems to be a matter of mere chance, as the circumstances constantly change. Memory, Barnes understands, conditions the way we construct identities of ourselves and other people. Through differentiating between separate identities, we find our bearings in the world, he suggests, and therefore memory is a fundamental factor in the comprehension of everyday reality.

*Arthur & George* (2005) is Barnes’ example of the possible coexistence of fact and fiction in a single story. The historical novel follows two narrative lines, one is the life of George Edalji, a fairly unknown solicitor working in Birmingham, and the other is of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, whose life has been narrated in detail on numerous occasions. The fictional account of the otherwise unknown personal history of Edalji, convicted of a series of livestock slashings in 1903, is combined with the notoriously known facts of the life and work of Conan Doyle, whose endeavour to prove Edalji’s innocence made the case famous.

---

29 “Speak, Memory: ‘An Ending’ That Uncovers The Past,” *NPR*, 19 Nov 2011  
<https://www.npr.org/2011/11/19/142468838/speak-memory-an-ending-that-uncovers-the-past?t=1560537878491&t=1565742057152> 2 Aug 2019.

By giving the equal amount of space to the versions of the events of the two men, the idea of an entitlement to create own narrative is stressed as universal and accessible; irrespective of social position. The two men thus appear in roles of an attorneys, both of them fighting for the same cause, while their interpretation of the events, it is indicated, differ in number of ways.

The final book discussed is called *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) and it narrates an episode in the life of Tony Webster, as he sees the self-delusion he had manipulated himself into when he was young drop. Now, lonely and retired, he comes to realize that the gaps in his memory caused that the version of the past he had always believed was based on false assumptions and misinterpretation. In this book, Barnes discusses how eroded memory becomes with time, and how fragile can the personal narratives in which we store our memories be. As he sees through the self-deceitful veil, Tony realises that all his life has been built upon lies, and that he knows nothing of his past or himself.

## 2. *Nothing to be Frightened of* (2008)

### 2.1. Memoir as a genre

In an interview with John O’Connell Barnes discussed the process of writing his 2008 memoir *Nothing to be Frightened of*, stressing the main topic of the book to be dying and the fear of it. “I regarded it as an examination of the case rather than as an autobiography,”<sup>1</sup> he said. The authorial voice of the book maintains a sceptical approach to the different ways and channels through which the reality is communicated to us, and which should therefore define our knowledge of the world. Christian interpretation of death is approached with scepticism, and the author who identifies as agnostic turns to reason to seek comfort in the face of inevitable death. He presents arguments and analyses the topic thoroughly, but still his approach is conditioned by a very subjective point of view, all the questions stemming from a specific personal experience based on memories of the life and death of his father and mother. Passages of argumentation and references followed by memories and impressions forms a genre that blends together essayistic writing with meditation concerned with dying, history and memory. In her 2008 review for *The Guardian*, Hilary Spurling categorises the book a family memoir<sup>2</sup>, since the incidents that Barnes recounts feature members of his family – mainly his older brother Jonathan, a scholar specializing in antique philosophy, and his late parents and grandparents.

To write a memoir differs greatly, as Barnes claims, from writing fiction. When writing it, he says, “you wonder how you’re getting on with the reader. That’s very important to you. (...) It’s different from writing fiction where you have different sorts of voices in your head as responses to what you’re writing.”<sup>3</sup> Spurling recognizes Barnes’ different approach to fiction and nonfiction in the way he presents characters. “Barnes believes fictional characters to be intrinsically superior – sharper, clearer and more cohesive than their counterparts” in real life, she says. In the memoir, on the other hand, his relatives seem to be portrayed in a very shallow, two-dimensional manner. “Barnes’s clinical approach tends to reduce other people (...) to extensions of himself, figments,”<sup>4</sup> Spurling concludes. When writing fiction, Barnes employs imagination to present reality

---

1 John O’Connell, “Julian Barnes: Interview,” *Timeout*, 13 Mar 2008

<https://www.timeout.com/london/books/julian-barnes-interview> 2 Aug 2019

2 Hilary Spurling, “Colder but wiser,” *The Guardian*, 2 Mar 2008

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/mar/02/biography.julianbarnes> 2 Aug 2019

3 O’Connell.

4 Spurling.

as a complete picture, and to provide the story with complex characters whose psychology is elaborated on the page. In the case of nonfiction, however, there is no space for fabrications as the author needs to derive from his own knowledge of the world, and therefore the capability to contain reality in a complex way is limited. Defined by Barnes' subjective point of view, the memoir presents shallow figures based on lack of insight into their psychology, which in fictional works is much easier to do through fabrication. "The better you know someone," Barnes writes, "the less well you often see them (and the less well they can therefore be transferred into fiction)."<sup>5</sup> In the memoir, he does not work with fictional occurrences while narrating the family history, and needs to derive from personal experience, which is too fragmented and ungraspable to present in a complex and expressive form. *Oxford English Dictionary* defines memoir as "records of events or history written from the personal knowledge or experience of the writer."<sup>6</sup> Barnes' knowledge of the world is necessarily restricted to his own experience with interpreting the past that is based on memory and its faulty mechanism. Memory is obviously the main source from which writers derive when writing memoirs, in fact, another definition of the term memoir provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is "something kept in memory of someone; a memento."<sup>7</sup> Barnes claims to examine the issue of memory from a non-scientific point of view that is largely based on findings of his own, coming either from own experience or readings of literature. "Perhaps I should warn you (especially if you are a philosopher, theologian or biologist)," says Barnes, "that some of this book will strike you as amateur, do-it-yourself stuff. But then we are all amateurs in and out of our lives."<sup>8</sup>

## 2.2. Memory in *Nothing to be Frightened of*

The mechanism of memory as Barnes presents it appears to be defective due to several factors that may intervene in any of the phase of the remembering process, which are as follows: first, the immediate interpretation of an event, followed by saving, storing and restoring of the particular memory of the event. The most crucial factor in the process is the miscellaneous combination of attributes of the person at the time of adoption of a memory and its recollection – features such as age, mental condition, attentiveness, but also personal beliefs and worldview condition the way memories are encoded to the brain.

---

5 Julian Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* (London: Vintage Books, 2009) 157.

6 "Memoir," def. 2. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2019.  
[www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/116334](http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/116334). 2 August 2019.

7 "Memoir," def. 4. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2019.  
[www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/116334](http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/116334). 2 August 2019.

8 Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* 38.

Perhaps the person was too young or too old to remember the events accurately. Were they paying enough attention to fully comprehend what is going on around them? Does the person firmly believe in something that denies other possible interpretation of the events they have witnessed? People's characters differ from person to person and so does the memories they maintain represent individual and self-contained interpretations of the past. In the course of the memoir, Barnes illustrates this on number of occasions: he realises that as a child he would more likely remember physical features of people rather than personality traits. His age and viewpoint thus has affected which information he had remembered and which he had left out. "Is my memory sanitized, or his infected by films about the French Revolution?"<sup>9</sup> asks Barnes when retelling his and his brother's diverging memories of being introduced to death through assistance to their Grandfather at the execution of chickens, pointing out the various ways in which events can be remembered due to the diversity of individual experience. Memories seem more distinct if the span of time that has passed since the event they record took place is short. Barnes' memories of his parents can thus be considered to be more accurate than those of his grandparents, since they have been recorded not so long ago into a mind of an adult rather than a child. The memories of his grandparents are often visual, and as a child he remembered mainly their physical features, which left him deducing specific character traits only later from their behaviour in specific situations or their habits that he remembers. Still, when recalling memories from childhood, Barnes may have interpreted them inaccurately since there would be a pressure to read the events in the context that he had since established. Rather than recalling them as individual and self-contained events, there is the tendency to locate them as a part of a story of his life, to put them somewhere on the imaginary timeline of his personal history.

Knowledge of objects and people we get in contact is defined by the impression they had left in our memory. We remember an appearance or behaviour in certain situations that then condition the identity we assign them. It applies to external subjects as well as to our own personality: "Memory is identity," Barnes says. "What you have done is in your memory; what you remember defines who you are; when you forget your life you cease to be."<sup>10</sup> The theme of misinterpreting people, events and self-identity appears in several of Barnes' fictional books: the narrator in *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) comes to realise his

---

9 Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* 4.

10 Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* 140.

understanding of the past to be the result of self-manipulation and memory erosion. In the nonfictional *Nothing to be Frightened of* Barnes derives from personal experience with memory determining our relationships to others: “I look around at my many friendships, and can recognize that some of them are not so much friendships any more as memories of friendships.”<sup>11</sup> The importance of memory here increases, as its role expands from being simply a mental database to determining the context of the past in which we construe current events and which therefore defines our entire understanding of the world at the present moment.

Barnes tests the accuracy of memories by comparing them with the experience of others. He talks of discussing with his brother the memories of events they had both been part of, such as the games they had played as children, or the passion of stamp-collecting they used to share. Oftentimes they had remembered certain events differently. The death of their father is for example the point on which they disagree: while Julian is certain about his father deteriorating in the final years of his life due to Hodgkin’s disease, his brother Jonathan claims to remember their father being in full health and then suddenly dying. The differing interpretations of their common history Barnes characterises as “completely fanciful reinventions.”<sup>12</sup> His brother, who is four years older, then figures as a consultant rather than an authority in the question of accuracy, for he had expressed his uncertainty about the reliability of his own memory: “If your memory conflicts with mine,” his younger brother paraphrases him, “go with yours because it’s probably better than mine.”<sup>13</sup> Barnes the novelist seems to be more positive when it comes to reliability of his own memory. He attributes the different approach of the two siblings to the dissimilar worldview which is bound to their professions. “As a philosopher, he believes that memories are often false, (...) none is to be trusted, unless it has some external support. I am more trusting, or self-deluding, so shall continue as if all my memories are true.”<sup>14</sup> Barnes’ fictional work, in order to be written, demands of him to seek out for characters that yield to this illusion of knowing their own identity, of being the architects of their own past. “As a novelist,” he argued in an interview, “you judge people by the richness of their

---

11 Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* 174.

12 Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* 154.

13 O’Connell.

14 Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* 5.

experience and by their moral nature and intelligence rather than their cleverness.”<sup>15</sup> Being a writer, he needs to focus on the emotional, subjective accuracy to bolster his imagination.

Barnes claims to have collected a whole corpus of family documents, storing fragments of history of his family such as “certificates of birth and marriage and death; the wills and grants of probate; the professional qualifications, references and testimonials; the passports, ration cards, identity cards (and *cartes d’identité*)...”<sup>16</sup> As a family archivist, he understands that documentation functions as a support of memory, a reserve in case our past needs to be proven. In the shallow drawer that contains the family’s documentation and photographic archive he stores detailed testimony of the personal history of the members of his family. At his disposal are the memories that have been misinterpreted, forgotten or repressed, such as his grandfather’s service in France during World War One. History seen through the archive thus seems to be more enlightening about the past than people’s own subjective and unreliable memories are. Yet the reliability of documentation should be considered as well – many historical documents derive directly from testimony of a witness, which again is a subjective statement. Evidence of historical events in form of official records, government documents and reports from the media Barnes receives sceptically. “In an oppressive society,” Barnes notices, “the truth-telling nature of literature is of a different order, and sometimes valued more highly than other elements in a work of art.”<sup>17</sup> Unable to believe neither personal testimonies nor documentation due to its possibly biased character, we are forced to abandon the prospect of ever having the access to objectively know the true history.

At one point of the book, Barnes suggests that memories recorded at a young age are perceived as individual pieces of history within a specific context that fit a continuous narrative. “When we are young, we think we are inventing the world as we are inventing ourselves,” is how he puts it. “Later, we discover how much the past holds us, and always did.”<sup>18</sup> As time passes, the edges of memories are worn off and our concept of the past starts to appear as a fragmented collage of memories. Later in life, certain memories are selected to the exclusion of others to make a clearer sense of the chaos. Records of the past that do not fit the version that we continuously build up diminish, while the significance

---

15 O’Connell.

16 Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* 27.

17 Shusha Guppy, “Julian Barnes, The Art of Fiction No. 165” *The Paris Review*, 157 (2000) <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/562/julian-barnes-the-art-of-fiction-no-165-julian-barnes> 2 Aug 2019.

18 Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* 123.

of other records that support a certain interpretation is exaggerated. Barnes looks back at his childhood and the memories are filtered through the perspective of an adult – a writer – as he picks out those that are relevant to the topics he discusses. When he talks about the death of his mother, he describes being fascinated by the preceding decline of her mental abilities caused by advanced dementia; his motives to observe her downfall coming more from “writerly curiosity than filial feeling.”<sup>19</sup> Though he talks of it in a very detached manner, the nature of memories he had chosen for narrating the final days of his mother’s life suggests the selection has been influenced by sentiment. His memories of the visits in the residential home, the projection of her death or the final goodbye at the undertaker’s – not missing out the compulsory and emotionally charged image of kissing her on the forehead – show that sentiment has reshaped his memory of her, demonstrating that emotional attachment can work as another influence that contributes to the reinterpretation of the past.

Selectiveness of memory is given by our relationship to the subject remembered: he loved his mother and therefore his memories of her are filtered through emotion. Similarly, the narrator of *The Sense of an Ending* felt respect and guilt towards his friend Adrian and created a heroic aura around him in the face of the circumstances of his suicide. In the memories of him that Tony had kept, Adrian’s intelligence and superiority is displayed, while the memories of the narrator’s former girlfriend are related with bitterness and scorn. In the memoir, Barnes talks of inventing a future for a friend he had lost touch with by the time he was twenty years old. He had based an image of his future identity on the memories of him, but when he found out about his death long time ago, he had recognised such “biography-giving” to be false, artificial, “idle fantasy.”<sup>20</sup>

We tend to reinterpret our knowledge of the past in light of the present. Barnes characterises this phenomenon by using the metaphor of a paint brush, with which we colour in the fragments of the past that has remained in our memory.

My brother distrusts the essential truth of memories; I distrust the way we colour them in. We each have our own cheap mail-order paintbox, and our favourite hues. Thus, I remembered Grandma a few pages ago as ‘petite and unopinionated’. My brother, when consulted, takes out his paintbrush and

---

19 Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* 11.

20 Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* 13.

counterproposes 'short and bossy'. (...) My memories of all this is faded sepia, my brother's still lurid. (...) Our differing adjectives reflect scrappy memories of half-forgotten feelings.<sup>21</sup>

In this passage Barnes stresses the subjectivity of individual memory by claiming that it is mainly his feelings, rather than images or words, that constitutes the fragments of his "mental album."<sup>22</sup> The whole concept of memories that are coloured-in resembles Freud's notion of *Nachträglichkeit* (translated by Jean Laplanche as 'afterwardsness'<sup>23</sup>), which is characterised by Wojciech Drąg as follows:

[it is] memory's dependence on the events that occurred in between the encoding and the retrieval of a particular memory. (...) Memories are never faithful records of the original experience, as they are inevitably coloured by what happened afterwards (...) Memory therefore emerges as a creative mechanism, since it reconstructs the memory content in view of the present situation.<sup>24</sup>

With time, memory gradually becomes eroded and we tend to confuse events and forget connections between them as well as the context in which they originally took place. Recalling the past thus represents an imaginative process, as the blank spots that emerge with forgetting need to be filled so that the narrative is coherent. With the opportunity to complete the picture of our own past, and therefore our identity, comes the temptation to present oneself in a more favourable position. The version of ourselves that we produce is then processed by the subjective perspective of others; knowing someone well then paradoxically provides no assurance of actually knowing who they are: the more you know someone, Barnes says, "the less well you often see them. (...) They may be so close as to be out of focus. (...) We are referring back to the time when we first properly saw them, when they were held in the most useful – and flattering – light at the correct focal distance."<sup>25</sup> The process of interpretation is complicated by the abundance of information gained through frequent interaction, as there are too many perceptions to convey them into

---

21 Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* 29.

22 Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* 29.

23 Drąg 11.

24 Drąg 8-11.

25 Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* 157.

a cohesive and comprehensible message. Thorough acquaintance then, oddly enough, results in failure in understanding the subject as it does when the acquaintance is insufficient and there are considerable gaps in its cognizance.

The reason behind the struggle to interpret events and individuals is then the lack of knowledge (or lack of it in any comprehensible form). “What you can’t find out, and where that leaves you, is one of the places where the novelist starts. (...) We begin with a silence, a mystery, and absence, a contradiction.”<sup>26</sup> The gap in knowledge, the mystery is what introduces the perfect writing situation: the novelist then has to try to fill in the picture with narrative that would compensate for the lapses of memory. Barnes’ view of his role as a novelist is to be “someone who remembers nothing yet records and manipulates different versions of what he doesn’t remember.”<sup>27</sup>

In *Nothing to be Frightened of*, Barnes illustrates the notion of lapses of memory inspiring storytelling through his experience with tracing the details of his Grandfather’s participation in the First World War. Having no personal testimony, he is dependent on historical documents, which as a family archivist he can access easily. Brigade’s diary, medals, photographs – those are the only traces to be found, while the connections between them need to be deduced. Inspired by the lack of information, Barnes had fabricated great amount of possible scenarios and various experiences that his Grandfather might have gone through. The novelists’ imagination was thus set in motion due to a gap in a narrative that needed to be filled. The interpretative strategy of filling the gap in historical memory appears also in his novel *Arthur & George*, in which he presents known information of the life and work of Arthur Conan Doyle and completes them with the unrecorded world of George Edalji. In *The Sense of an Ending*, the main protagonist pursues the memories he had forgotten and tries to fill the gaps in the story of his own past.

Barnes seems to acknowledge the creative mechanism of memory and uses it as a theme in his work. The fundamental purpose of the novel is, according to Barnes, to communicate the truth about life. He characterises the novel as

the best way of telling the truth; it’s a process of producing grand, beautiful, well-ordered lies that tell more truth than any assemblage of facts. (...) I think a great book (...) is recognized by those who read it as telling new truths—about

---

26 Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* 238.

27 Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* 243.

society or the way in which emotional lives are led, or both—  
such truths having not been previously available, certainly not  
from official records.<sup>28</sup>

On a different occasion he had said that literature is telling “the truth about life in a way that the authorities around me do not (...) Essentials of ordinary everyday life (...) is best and most intimately dealt with by the novel,” the one feature that marks out the best writers out there is “the most truth-telling.”<sup>29</sup> In his books, Barnes combines his fascination with the workings of memory and the necessity to remain truthful to the human experience by realistically reflecting the flawed mechanism of memory as an essential feature of everyday life with its impact on individual lives and interpersonal relationships. “I trust them [memories] as workings of the imagination, as containing imaginative as opposed to naturalistic truth,”<sup>30</sup> he claims in *Nothing to be Frightened of*. By imaginative truth he means the perpetual self-delusion that we experience through roles into which we project ourselves and those around us, and by using these roles to narrate own history from a position that is always subjective and unreliable. The one who narrates own past naturally conveys own position in a favourable manner to avoid responsibility for any behaviour or beliefs that might be considered reprehensible. As they fill the narrative with bits of information that are suitable for their positive image, the interpreters resemble attorneys who need to present the best version of themselves in front of the jury – the public. Coherence of the autobiographical narrative then compensates for the requirement of presenting a truthful story: “We keep the doubt at bay by retelling that familiar story, with pauses and periods of calculated effect, pretending that the solidity of narrative is a proof of truth,”<sup>31</sup> is how Barnes puts it. To determine one’s own personal narrative is then to establish own identity through which we are going to be regarded by the society.

Since his early works, Barnes had discussed the inaccessibility of history by incorporating characters who struggle to interpret their own past. Chris, the narrator of Barnes’ first novel *Metroland* (1980), narrates his history in a very personal and calculated manner, as Nagy suggests, in order to give purpose to his suburban life.<sup>32</sup> Alexandra Mitrea

---

28 Guppy.

29 Will Gompertz, “Barnes: ‘Novels tell truth about life’” BBC, 2 Nov 2012  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-20179787> 2 Aug 2019.

30 Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* 244.

31 Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* 37.

32 Ladislav Nagy, “Julian Barnes a smutek,” *Host* 15 Sep. 2015: 51.

notices that the protagonist of *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), Braithwaite, will never fully know the circumstances of Flaubert's life, whose biography documented in books he had thoroughly studied, nor will he understand his own wife, whom he had known directly.<sup>33</sup> *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989) then captures the problematic aspect of history through its marginal episodes, showing that approaching history as a whole is nonsensical while personal history is necessarily purpose-built, Nagy says.<sup>34</sup> In *The Sense of an Ending*, Tony Webster reaches similar conclusion as he realises that all the past that he had remembered is a product of his own misinterpretation.

Creating an identity either for us or for others means establishing roles that we imagine we play in the world, or the way we wish to present ourselves in public. "The brain is a lump of meat and the soul is merely "a story the brain tells itself." Individuality is an illusion,"<sup>35</sup> Garrison Keillor quotes Barnes in a review of the memoir. By its creative nature, the endeavour to interpret the world with constructed identities then resembles fictional narration, as we need to appropriately fill the blank spaces created by the flaws of memory to fit the whole story. In this manner, the authenticity of any (auto)biographical history – and in broader sense any history – may be doubted, as it due to unreliability of memory and biased nature of documentation inevitably employs narrative elements and strategies applied to fiction writing. In this respect, Barnes' logic of the novel corresponds to that of postmodern theory, which according to Peter Boxall says that "there is no way of capturing an unmediated historical truth; past time is always lost to us, and recaptured only as a story manufactured after the event."<sup>36</sup> Barnes explores the impossibility to know history by presenting memory as a flawed device transmitting information between the past and the present. There is often too much temporal distance and too many obstacles in the way for the transmission to run smoothly. "Barnes pokes fun at those who claim that knowledge of history is easily attainable," Mitrea comments, "since history is nothing but a slippery discourse with no more claim to truth than any other discourse."<sup>37</sup>

---

33 Mitrea 48.

34 Nagy, "Julian Barnes a smutek," *Host* 15 Sep. 2015: 49-50.

35 Garrison Keillor, "Dying of the Light" *The New York Times*, 13 Mar 2008

[https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/05/books/review/Keillor-](https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/05/books/review/Keillor-t.html?mtrref=julianbarnes.com&gwh=AA9FA39E062B722DEABB556E7C6390AE&gwt=pay)

[t.html?mtrref=julianbarnes.com&gwh=AA9FA39E062B722DEABB556E7C6390AE&gwt=pay](https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/05/books/review/Keillor-t.html?mtrref=julianbarnes.com&gwh=AA9FA39E062B722DEABB556E7C6390AE&gwt=pay) 2 Aug 2019.

36 Peter Boxall, "The Ends of Postmodernism," *British Literature in Transition, 1980–2000: Accelerated Times*, ed. Eileen Pollard and Berthold Schoene (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018) 38.

37 Mitrea 47.

### 3. *Arthur & George* (2005)

#### 3.1. Context of the Work

As several commentators have noticed<sup>1</sup>, British fiction written in the course of the last thirty years has been strongly influenced by the discussions about the nature of historical narratives that have been taking place among the scholars interested in new historicism. Historians and philosophers have been debating on to what extent do historical narratives adopt narrative strategies similar to those of fictional narratives and if their entitlement to claim historical truth should be doubted.<sup>2</sup> As the reliability of virtually any historiographical text was questioned, thinkers have been asking whether there is any objective way of knowing the past. British fiction writers have found their way into the subject as well, as they searched for means through which they would be able to express their doubts on the possibility of capturing an unmediated historical truth.<sup>3</sup> British literary scene thus saw a renewed interest in historical fiction and its postmodern sub-genre, historiographic metafiction, appeared.

The theoretical implications of historiographic metafiction, as Linda Hutcheon explains, “coincide with recent historiographic theory about the nature of history writing as narrativization (rather than representation) of the past and about the nature of the archive as the textualized remains of history.”<sup>4</sup> She defines the genre as “fiction that is at once metafictional *and* historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past.”<sup>5</sup> To certain extent, such definition does apply to Barnes’ 2005 novel – part of the narrative are *intertexts*, as Hutcheon calls the authentic historical texts that metafiction allude to, such as excerpts from official documents related to the case of the “Great Wyrley Outrages,” correspondence between the protagonists, or Arthur Conan Doyle’s own published writings. However, several critics have claimed<sup>6</sup> that in this case the novel’s approach is much more realistic

---

1 See Richard Bradford, *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction* (Malden: Blackwell Pub., 2007); Ladislav Nagy, *Palimpsesty, heterotopie a krajiny: historie v anglickém románu posledních desetiletí* (Praha: Karolinum, 2016); Ryan Roberts, “Inventing a Way to the Truth: Life and Fiction in Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot*,” *Julian Barnes: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Peter Childs and Sebastian Groes (London: Continuum, 2011): 26.

2 Nagy 88.

3 Peter Boxall, “The Ends of Postmodernism,” *British Literature in Transition, 1980–2000: Accelerated Times*, ed. Eileen Pollard and Berthold Schoene (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018) 38.

4 Linda Hutcheon, “Historiographic Metafiction. Parody and the Intertextuality of History,” *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. P. O’Donnell, and Robert Con Davis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) 8.

5 Hutcheon 3. Emphasis original.

6 Christine Berberich, “The Past After Postmodern Fabulation. Fact and Fiction in Julian Barnes’s *Arthur & George*,” *Julian Barnes: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Peter Childs and Sebastian Groes

and less experimental compared to his earlier works *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) and *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989), which they are willing to label as historiographic metafiction. In his later books in general, they say, Barnes has moved away from his previous approach to “reinvent the traditional historical novel” as he “attempts to re-create its historical setting rather than continuing postmodern fabulation.”<sup>7</sup> According to Elsa Cavalié, the novel “signals a temporal as well as a generic shift in Barnes’s fiction, for it forgoes the patently postmodern conundrum for a more subdued approach of story-telling and what one might call a “retro-Victorian” style.”<sup>8</sup> The temporal setting of the novel seems to be following the then popular historical periods for novelization. There is a pattern of three dimensions that Richard Bradford recognizes in the influx of historical novels on the British literary scene in the last few decades. Apart from narratives inspired by the Renaissance and Reformation period and the two world conflicts, he talks about novels set in “High Victorian Britain, with the empire at its zenith, the industrial revolution at full pelt and individuals enmeshed in a stultifying network of social and moral codes.”<sup>9</sup> Barnes’ novel appears to be attractive for its depiction of the period legal procedures, social conventions and an appearance of a popular figure of the Victorian era.

Another feature of British literature of the last decades that appeared alongside the critical view of great historical narratives seems to be focus on small, individual history. “Most British fictions of the period provide an ‘inward turn’ as they explore passages of unrecorded history that have otherwise been lost,”<sup>10</sup> says Dougal McNeill. Peter Childs and Sebastian Groes add that Barnes’ interest in “individuals’ “inner voices” and their own truths rather than the ultimate Truth”<sup>11</sup> stems from an impossibility to have a single official version of history. This enlargement of the historical narrative with more individual experience gives way to justification of members of the lower class to take part in forming history, their experience thus counterbalancing and equalizing that of the elites: “that which is “different” is valorized in opposition both to elitist, alienated “otherness” and also to the uniformizing

---

(London: Continuum, 2011) 117; Alexandra Mitrea, “Julian Barnes and the Sense of History,” *Revista Transilvania*, no. 1, Jan. 2013: 46.

7 Berberich 117-119.

8 Elsa Cavalié, “Constructions of Englishness in Julian Barnes’s *Arthur & George*”, *American, British and Canadian Studies*, 13, Dec. 2009: 89.

9 Bradford 91.

10 Dougal McNeill, “Historical Fiction and Political Regeneration,” *British Literature in Transition, 1980–2000: Accelerated Times*, ed. Eileen Pollard and Berthold Schoene (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018) 46.

11 Peter Childs and Sebastian Groes, “Julian Barnes and the Wisdom of Uncertainty,” *Julian Barnes: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Peter Childs and Sebastian Groes (London: Continuum, 2011) 5.

impulse of mass culture,”<sup>12</sup> claims Hutcheon. Doyle’s social significance entitles him to be part of the process of establishing the great historical narrative, yet in the novel the same opportunity is given to George Edalji, son of a vicar of Parsee origins living with his family on the topographical and social periphery of the nation. In the narrative, both are given equal chance to expose their viewing of the world including perceptions, interpretations of events and memories. Together with few other characters who get to focalise several chapters of their own, the inner lives of both main protagonists equally participate in the narration process, as the information given by the omniscient, third-person narrator consists mostly of the information that are stored in their minds. The presence of the narrative voice is crucial, since it provides for placing the two narrative lines in parallels, giving them equal amount of space without passing any judgement or hinting on whose interpretation of events might be closer to the truth. The narrator merges facts with fiction – that is, the value of information verifiable from historical resources coincides with that of information that are unknowable, such as the characters’ thoughts and memories. This narrative strategy, as Roberts puts it, stresses that “fiction and truth can coexist and, more importantly, that a work of fiction has the power to function as truth.”<sup>13</sup> In an interview with Vanessa Guignery, Barnes characterises the technique as establishing a more complete history:

Either you only write the history for which there is evidence, or, if you try to write more than that, if you try to write a more complete history, then you have to fictionalize or imagine. And so, to that extent, history, if it attempts to be more than a description of documents, a description of artefacts, has to be a sort of literary genre.<sup>14</sup>

The facts that have been entered in the official historical records and from which they are now retrievable, are, however, not always regarded as objective sources by the narrator. The information provided by the archives – newspaper reports, proclamations by the officials, decisions of the court – represent the official interpretation of the events. The truthfulness of these facts – or rather, historical claims – is repeatedly questioned in the course of the book. Media are the primary sources that provide information about current

---

12 Hutcheon 12.

13 Roberts 29.

14 Vanessa Guignery “History in question(s): An Interview with Julian Barnes.” *Sources* (Orléans) 8 (2000): 63, as quoted by Mitrea 47.

events, yet newspaper reports that are being published in the course of the trial are characterised as misleading and even mendacious.<sup>15</sup> The accusation is never articulated by the narrator, it is rather inscribed in the way the protagonists react to the alarmingly inaccurate reports. George Edalji is portrayed as a modest man without any need to seek attention, yet he cares about his own reputation and is anxious to see how he is presented in the press. The scenes in which George expresses his anger at his position depict how as an individual he is stripped of his own identity and becomes a character in the official narrative, over which he has no power. Similar situation is established as George's reaction to the indictment is presented: "it was just a story, George knew, something made up from scraps and coincidences and hypotheses; (...) something about the repetition of the story by an authority in wig and gown made it take on extra plausibility."<sup>16</sup> George's confidence in his own innocence and his belief in the judicial system naturally makes him doubtful of the likelihood of being convicted, which results in his subsequent denial of the final verdict.

### 3.2. Memory in *Arthur & George*

The central part of the book that narrates the trial with George Edalji presents a complex discussion on the issue of memory. The key factor in testimony, it is said at one point in the narrative, is memory,<sup>17</sup> which tends to be unreliable given the inaccuracies that necessarily step into the process of recalling details from the past. The unreliability of witnesses summoned to testify – policemen, members of George's family – is obvious from the many contradictions and inaccuracies that make their way into the light in the course of the hearings. When discussing the reliability of eyewitness memory, Wolciech Drąg notes that "studies indicate that having had a direct, personal experience of a certain event does not necessarily guarantee the witness's ability to provide a strictly factual and impartial representation of it."<sup>18</sup>

At one point, George's parents are characterised as "bad witnesses"<sup>19</sup>, even though they testify in accordance to what the narrator presents as truthful, providing seemingly harmless information. The prosecution manages to twist their testimony and provoke them into intense emotional reaction so that they discredit themselves in the eyes of the jury. The trial therefore appears not to be an attempt to find out what had really happened but rather a

---

15 Julian Barnes, *Arthur & George* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005): 111, 116.

16 Julian Barnes, *Arthur & George* 121.

17 Julian Barnes, *Arthur & George* 123.

18 Drąg 14.

19 Julian Barnes, *Arthur & George* 140.

contest of which side the jury decides to believe. Both the defence and the prosecution look for ways of how to make their version more trustworthy, not being afraid to apply means of manipulation, trickery and racist ideology. The jury then needs to determine which side will be given the stamp of truth; the courtroom thus becoming a space where reality is being reinterpreted and official history established. By showing on how fragile grounds can such a crucial, life-changing resolution be built, the book examines relativity of one's experience, unreliability of memory and ideological implications of the jury's resolution.

The counterargument to the official interpretation of events is also represented in the structure of the book. The narrative is, with few exceptions, divided into chapters focalised by the two main protagonists: the popular author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and the half-Indian solicitor George Edalji. The two narrative lines share one omniscient narrator which provides them with equal level of credibility and importance. The memories of George are constantly paralleled with those of Arthur's, and there is not any signal of one version being superior to the other: they are simply narrated without any judgement from the narrator. Arthur's elitist life, Berberich reminds us, is well documented by his contemporaries, as well as literary historians and biographers; the events of his life "have been chronicled in detail elsewhere and can be checked."<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, there is scarce information about George and his personal life. The account of his life, therefore, is mostly fictitious to compensate for the absence in the narrative of the official memory.

In her book on the concept of memory throughout history, Anne Whitehead claims that lately, "there has been a marked rise in concern with popular memory, and a proliferation of archives, particularly oral archives, established to preserve memories of ordinary people."<sup>21</sup> Whitehead's book was published in 2009, *Arthur & George* in 2005, it is therefore conceivable to distinguish Barnes' novel as part of the trend that Whitehead describes. "Public media and official archives memorialize the experiences of the powerful," she says, "and it has therefore been necessary to turn to alternative archives."<sup>22</sup> There is not any archive where to look for some of the information provided in the novel: there are not many records on the life of George Edalji, neither are there specific accounts of Doyle's intimate life, nor the mental condition of either of them, including memories. Therefore, to complete the picture, a fictional archive of such features needs to be created.

---

20 Berberich 126.

21 Anne Whitehead, *Memory* (London: Routledge, 2009) 2.

22 Whitehead 13.

The amount of space given to George's version of the events seems to echo what Whitehead characterises as "growing public interest in restorative justice and aim to promote healing and reconciliation in the aftermath of political violence."<sup>23</sup> By having a distanced narrator reporting the story in equal portions without any judgement, the narrative seems to be aiming for objectivity, which in this case means shedding light on the events through several subjective perspectives. Here, justice means showing the versions of the participants. Race, presumably, was in the end a determining factor in the verdict, as the prejudicially affected testimonies and pieces of evidence forced the jury to turn against George. By having the biased nature of the trial described in detail together with a view inside George's mind, objectivity of the result is infirmed. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the narrator at no point in the course of the narrative presents a clear standpoint or in any way implies which version of the events is the correct one and thus validates the idea of truth consisting of more than one interpretation.

Berberich points out to the fact that *Arthur & George* is the only Barnes' novel to include an Author's note.<sup>24</sup> In the span of two pages, Barnes gives a sequence of events and facts that concisely conclude the character's stories. It might seem insignificant, but it demonstrates the thorough research behind the book. In order for the narrative to work, the author needed to use much of the many available records about Conan Doyle's life and time and combine it with his fictional idea of George Edalji. Therefore, he manages to incorporate a missing memory of a life within a recorded memory of life and time. "Memory," Whitehead notes, "is historically conditioned; it is not simply handed down in a timeless form from generation to generation but bears the impress or stamp of its own time and culture,"<sup>25</sup> including its forgettery.

Although historical records tend to display lives of the elites quite exhaustively, there are details of personal life of the people that oftentimes remains unknown. The fictional part of Arthur's life consists of his most intimate thoughts and memories that help to delineate the little details of the psychology of the character; the motivation behind actions and reactions to events are established so that they fit the portrayal in a realistic way. Memories of his late wife cause him to feel guilty and sentimental, which motivates him into taking part in George's case. A lot of times, memory serves as a characterisation device, as the two main protagonists have their own experience with remembering past events and their

---

23 Whitehead 153.

24 Berberich 122.

25 Whitehead 4.

individual relationships to their own history distinguishes one from another. While Arthur has many happy memories, including those of listening to fantastic stories that his mother used to tell him when he was a child. When capturing his first memory, the narrator questions its accuracy<sup>26</sup> and therefore Arthur's reliability. Arthur, later in life a storyteller himself, clearly does not detest fabrications. His imagination perhaps makes his memory to be more prone to inaccuracies, even if they are established unconsciously.

George, on the other hand, had been brought up in respect for truth, and as a solicitor esteems justice and objectivity highly and claims not to have that many memories. He remembers growing up at his father's vicarage in Great Wyrley, listening to the vicar's recounting the history of the Parsee community, their collective memory and heritage. George seems to live for the present, as he starts commuting to Birmingham for work, and takes interest in the recent history of the city, regarding it to be matter of "real things, relevant things."<sup>27</sup> Later, as the trial develops, he notices he starts to lose the certainties and stabilities he once had, as he becomes a mere character in the official history through articles in the press and stories circulating in the social circles: "his character no longer of his own authorship but delineated by others."<sup>28</sup> Near the end of the book, he acknowledges the role of few of the memories he had, such as the one happy memory of spending time with his sister: "holding to the memory he had made into certainty by repetition."<sup>29</sup> Memories then seem to provide for stability, assurance, sense of belonging.

Moral values of the protagonists seem to be established by memories as well. Arthur remembers the way he learned the difference between right and wrong through the stories he was told when a little child. These stories about chivalrous knights represent for Arthur the greatest moral authority and provide him with "long-gone, long-remembered, long-invented world of chivalry."<sup>30</sup> Having his own strong moral values, Arthur as a teenager proposes thinking outside of the box and being independent from the pressure of institutions, which in his case is a Jesuit school that he attends. His faith weakens due to the practices of the Church that opposed his reason and conscience, one of the priests being to him "a storyteller he no longer believes"<sup>31</sup>. At the same time, his believe in his own exceptionality rose: "the Christian virtues could be practiced by everyone (...) but chivalry was the

---

26 Julian Barnes, *Arthur & George* 3.

27 Julian Barnes, *Arthur & George* 150.

28 Julian Barnes, *Arthur & George* 148.

29 Julian Barnes, *Arthur & George* 329.

30 Julian Barnes, *Arthur & George* 23.

31 Julian Barnes, *Arthur & George* 15.

prerogative of the powerful.”<sup>32</sup> From here stems the role he assigned himself later as his fame provided him with power and social influence life: the chivalric saviour of the unlucky and the marginalised.

When reading Arthur’s autobiography, George recognizes few adjustments that were made by the author. His sense for truth and objectivity makes him question the possible reasons for such behaviour on Arthur’s side and he analyses the possibilities<sup>33</sup>. In *Memories and Adventures*, as Arthur titled his memoir, there is a part in which he mentions George’s case and his role in it. When George reads through this bit and notices that Arthur’s retelling of the events and some of the details differ from how George interpreted them. It is important that Arthur’s memoir is viewed through George’s perspective so that it can be compared to his own experience and thus establish the problem of subjectivity and unreliability of memory.

The lines that George underlined in his copy of the book make Arthur seem “rather too determined to annex for himself the whole credit and thanks,” for he claims to have incidentally come across George’s case in the press and deciding to help the family tormented by “upper helplessness.”<sup>34</sup> George argues that members of his family were far from being helpless due to their continuous efforts in appealing to the authorities and that it was actually an explanatory letter written by himself that brought Arthur’s attention to the case at all. Some of the information provided even shed a new light on the relationship between the two men, as Arthur implies that, were he not looking for distraction from grieving after his wife has died, he would not have been interested in the case at all.

Naturally, George believes his own version of the events and accuses Arthur of manipulating with the facts on purpose. Then, however, he acknowledges the possibility of time having an impact on the way Arthur perceived the events. He concludes that his memory was probably faulty due to his advanced age. As a solicitor, he understands how the “constant recounting of events smoothed the edges of stories, rendered the speaker more self-important, made everything more certain than it had seemed at the time.”<sup>35</sup> Even though Barnes here derives from an authentic source – Doyle really did publish his memoirs in 1924 – George’s reflections, the lapses that are recognized in the narrative, are completely fictional. We have no evidence of George actually reading the book and there is no way we

---

32 Julian Barnes, *Arthur & George* 23.

33 Julian Barnes, *Arthur & George* 335-336.

34 Julian Barnes, *Arthur & George* 335.

35 Julian Barnes, *Arthur & George* 336.

can know his response to it. By creating an alternative view to the events as Doyle understood them, the idea of subjective interpretation and unreliability of memory comes to the centre of attention.

Doyle's 1907 article titled "The Case of Mr. George Edalji" that he had written to summarize the findings of his investigation is alluded to at one point in the narrative, as the author sits down to his table to write it down. "He was where he belonged. A man at a desk with a pen in his hand, eager to tell a story and to make people see things differently."<sup>36</sup> A figure of an author is assigned the task of an attorney, whose aim should be to persuade their readers into believing the one version of events that they defend. It is mentioned that part of Arthur's writing process is knowing the conclusion before writing a story.<sup>37</sup> This does not apply only to detective fiction: he decided to believe in George's innocence and according to this conclusion he had then built a narrative around it to justify his position. In a sense, this reflects the problem of biased historiography: past events are usually interpreted from a position with certain ideological stance and with a clear purpose: to justify the victorious side and retell history from their point of view. Similarly, Barnes assumes the role of an attorney as he needs to make the narrative concise and believable for the readers: all the fictional accounts of the protagonists' psychology need to fit into the corpus of official documents of the times that are retrievable – press articles, memoirs, diaries, correspondence, official documents – all need to be processed so that in the end, the dichotomy between fact and fiction cannot be distinguishable.

*Arthur & George* is composed of glances into consciousness of the protagonists mediated by an unspecified, omniscient narrator. The narrative voice provides for a unifying element that evens all the testimonies so that in the end they all have an equal importance. Every remark is relevant, every theory possible, yet the discrepancies that appear in the consciousnesses of the protagonists confirm subjectivity of everyday experience. As unreliability of much of the testimonies is proved, all of the notions and interpretations of the characters' can be questioned, and thus there is no possibility in establishing a single true version of the past. The novel presents how multiplicity of possible truths and discussion among them is the closest that we can get in search for answers. Memory then functions as a pivotal factor in the process of finding the truth, and its unavoidable unreliability necessarily determines the result to be a failure.

---

36 Julian Barnes, *Arthur & George* 256.

37 Julian Barnes, *Arthur & George* 267.

## 4. *The Sense of an Ending* (2011)

### 4.1. History and its interpretation

The underlying theme of Barnes's 2011 novel *The Sense of an Ending* can be said to be that "forgetting is a necessary requirement for personal and civic health,"<sup>1</sup> as Anna Whitehead puts it. The author's 11<sup>th</sup> book earned him the highly awaited Man Booker Prize which he had received 27 years after being nominated for the first time; the other three nominations being for the novels *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), *England, England* (1998) and *Arthur & George* (2005). The much-praised novel, Alexandra Mitrea says, is "highly marked by postmodernism," yet it "departs from it in the keenness and passion with which it questions the world and the emphasis it places on ethical issues."<sup>2</sup> The moral debate central to the story is about whether we are willing to hold ourselves accountable for the harm we have caused in the past. Memory then functions as a device which mediates the version of our history that we have established through subjective view of the events from the past to the present. As opposed to objective perception of time, which is implied to be impossible to reach, the only relevant way of viewing reality is through a subjective point of view that is deformed by misinterpretations, personal aims and relationships to other people. "The true time," the narrator claims, "is measured in your relationship to memory."<sup>3</sup>

The leading voice of the book is that of Tony Webster, a retired divorcee who is forced to go forty years back in memory in order to resolve the mystery of a heritage he was left by the mother of Adrian Finn, his friend from high-school days. Mrs Finn had left him a fragment of Adrian's diary and some money, which leaves Tony puzzled since there was little connection between Tony and her; he did not understand why she would leave it to him. Therefore, he contacts his former girlfriend Veronica, who happened to be in a relationship with Adrian at the time he committed suicide, few years after Tony had severed his ties with the couple. Tony's interpretation of their common history suddenly clashes with that of the other participants, as their testimonies, material evidence and repressed memories emerge, leaving Tony wondering to what extent had he fabricated his own past and whether it is possible to ever know objectively the history that we have been part of.

In Part One of the book, Tony narrates the past as he remembers it, starting with the high-school days during which the group of his friends admitted among them Adrian who

---

1 Anne Whitehead, *Memory* (London: Routledge, 2009) 157.

2 Mitrea 46.

3 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (London: Vintage Books, 2011) 122.

then became an intellectual leader. Adrian was an exceptionally brilliant student whose friends had looked up to him for his clear thinking and confidence. Tony's portrayal of Adrian is thus necessarily distorted as he is shown through the perspective of utter admiration and respect. The character of Tony's former girlfriend, on the other hand, is depicted as very unflattering, and the choice of situations and their subsequent interpretations are meant to make her look egoistic and cruel. Such resentment towards Veronica probably derives from his outrage at her and Adrian getting together soon after his and Veronica's relationship had fallen apart.

Part Two of the novel then narrates Tony's pursuit of the past he had forgotten. Through the restored communication with Veronica, some forgotten correspondence between them re-emerges, exposing Tony's vicious acting towards his friends, and his position in their relationship appears to be much more problematic than he had claimed. Suddenly, his interpretation of events up to that moment collapses, as he is faced with repressed memories and manipulation of the past on his part. He is forced to acknowledge he had distorted the past to justify his own poor behaviour and to make himself appear to be the victim. Central event of the novel then in this respect appears to be when Tony understands that one's knowledge of the past is based on the faulty mechanism of memory, which with time deteriorates in evoking the events that had been already encoded in a very subjective and biased manner.

In the course of the narrative, Tony finds out that history that one has been part of is more difficult to process than history that one simply learns about and has no connection with. "History is the lies of the victors,"<sup>4</sup> argues young Tony during a history class, already understanding that in order to examine history, it needs to be interpreted first. This applies to great historical narratives as well as personal history. Playing a role in the events that constitute history leaves Tony struggling to establish an interpretation of it, as he cannot rely on his own memory. He feels "safer with the history that's been more or less agreed upon."<sup>5</sup> By adopting a certain interpretation of past events, one achieves more certainty and stability in life, as the past appears to be a knowable, graspable story. Adopting and retelling an interpretation of the past then resembles narration of a fictional story. The analogy between narrative strategy in historiography and fiction has been pointed out by postmodern thought.<sup>6</sup>

---

4 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* 16.

5 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* 60.

6 Peter Boxall, "The Ends of Postmodernism," *British Literature in Transition, 1980–2000: Accelerated Times*, ed. Eileen Pollard and Berthold Schoene (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018) 38.

As Tony comes to realize the difficulty of defending such simplifying approach, his definition of history as he understood it in his youth evolves, later seeing it as “the memories of the survivors, most of whom are neither victors nor defeated.”<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the book, Tony acknowledges to have fabricated an interpretation of history in order to justify his actions in front of himself and the readers. Forty years back, he had destroyed all evidence of unwanted history – correspondence, photographs – shared between him, Veronica and Adrian. These documents are testimonies of Tony’s unscrupulous and malevolent behaviour. In his mind, he had reassembled the events and characters involved so that they present him in a favourable light to shake off the guilt and remorse. Similar strategy can be seen within totalitarian narratives, Jacques le Goff suggests, in which the manipulation of mechanisms of collective memory reveals gaps in history created by forgetting and intentional concealment motivated by personal profit or need of censorship.<sup>8</sup> In ideologically charged narratives, memory is used to recover the past only to benefit the present and the future.<sup>9</sup> A certain ideology is applied onto Tony’s constructed history with the aim to censor undesired memories and present convenient interpretations and conclusions.

#### **4.2. Memory in *The Sense of an Ending***

In her essay on the theme of memory in art, A. S. Byatt discusses the role of a long list of memories that appears at the end of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*. She comments on the passage presenting experiences which have formed the whole novel, saying, “these lists, these recapitulations, give to Proust’s long, winding sentences the form of memory and searching and connecting itself. (...) It is a recapitulation of the memories already elaborated in the preceding narrative.”<sup>10</sup> The same feature appears on the first page of Barnes’ novel which presents a list of images, fragments of unrelated visual, almost impressionist memories, introduced by the narrator’s note: “I remember, in no particular order,” which suggests his memories are retrieved through unrelated details in a random manner, without any continuity and out of context, and concluded by the line: “what you end up remembering isn’t always the same as what you have witnessed,”<sup>11</sup> which highlights the mechanism of memory as a creative process of reconstruction of past events. Such indirect characterisation

---

7 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* 56.

8 Jacques le Goff, *Paměť a dějiny*, transl. Irena Kozelská (Praha: Argo, 2007) 70.

9 Le Goff 112.

10 A. S. Byatt, “Memory and the Making of Fiction,” *Memory*, ed. Patricia Fara and Karalyn Patterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 68-9.

11 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* 3.

of the workings of memory anticipates the way they are to be presented in the novel: as unreliable and partly fabricated misinterpretation of past events rather than their accurate representation.

Driving force of the novel than seems to be Tony's development in interpretation of mechanisms of memory, as he comes to realise its capacity for fabrication and omission. In his initial attempts to define memory, he talks of "approximate memories which time has deformed into certainties."<sup>12</sup> That means, if a memory is retrieved in a short time after its encoding, it will be fixed in a stable state as it waits for the next retrieval. He believes that memory as a mechanism can store information related to the past, anytime at disposal to be retrieved in the same form it had been encoded. Yet as he learns of the flawed nature of his own memory and how misinterpreted is the version he has believed, he starts to acknowledge memory as "a mechanism which reiterates apparently truthful data with little variation."<sup>13</sup> Such definition is much more accurate, as it emphasises how subjective a person's interpretation of events usually is, as well as the obstinate belief in truthfulness of their version.

Tony has moved on with his life and what in the beginning was a consciously conducted strategy now appears to him to be an uncontrollable process of memory loss. As he muses on the things he had forgotten and suppressed, he comes to realise that the identity that he has built over the years is mostly based on untruth, leaving him bewildered at the idea of not knowing one's own life by his own efforts.

One of the possible explanations of Tony's memory loss, however uncommon such reading of his situation might be, is the influence of health problems on his capability to use his memory properly. Literature on memory loss caused by illness distinguishes between organic and functional memory disorders. As Barbara A. Wilson explains, organic memory disorders are usually caused by brain injury or a disease of the brain. Though not as common in practice, functional memory disorder is much better known to the public as it is oftentimes a consequence of some kind of emotional trauma.<sup>14</sup> In his bitter letter to Adrian, Tony claims to have warned him from Veronica's mental health being affected by an unspecified traumatic experience. He then questions the provability of such claim, and addresses the

---

12 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* 4.

13 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* 46.

14 Barbara A. Wilson, "When Memory Fails," *Memory*, ed. Patricia Fara and Karalyn Patterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 121.

reader by reflecting upon the possibility of himself being the one who unconsciously suppresses an emotional trauma and what it would mean for the reliability of his narrative:

You might even ask me to (...) explain what damage I had suffered a long way back and what its consequences might be: for instance, how it might affect my reliability and truthfulness. I'm not sure I could answer this, to be honest.<sup>15</sup>

Due to the lack of evidence, the narrator seems to be reluctant to either confirm or refute the possibility of having experienced a trauma. We might theorise about the nature and specifics of such trauma, for example, whether he had any role in Adrian's decision to end his life. As the narrative provides no further clues, the possibility of such interpretation remains open.

Tony never talks of being diagnosed with any memory disorder, yet as a former student of history, he understands how problematic the process of learning about the past can be, as Fantys points out.<sup>16</sup> Since the beginning of the novel there are implications of the narrator being doubtful about the truthfulness of his claims: "was this their exact exchange? Almost certainly not. Still, it is my best memory of the exchange,"<sup>17</sup> and later: "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."<sup>18</sup> In her article, Wilson mentions her patient Jack describing to her his everyday struggle with amnesia which is very similar to the way Tony talks of his problems with memory. Since he is aware of his illness, Jack acknowledges his own unreliability: "I might be mistaken in this," Wilson quotes him, "I cannot gauge how accurate any of my memories are."<sup>19</sup> As Tony's story develops and he becomes more and more aware of how many situations he has misinterpreted or remembered differently than other people have, he becomes more assuring in his own unreliability, which escalates in his addressing the reader directly and proposing his narrative to be most likely untrue.

Another possible explanation of an excessively faulty memory that Wilson proposes is that of a neurodegenerative illness such as Alzheimer's disease that is indicated by a gradual memory erosion.<sup>20</sup> Considering the narrator's advanced age, such reading of the situation is plausible, but given the information that emerge in the course of the narrative it is more probable that Tony's memory is faulty partly due to the natural process of forgetting

---

15 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* 45.

16 Petr Fantys, "Anatomie koncu Juliana Barnese," Host 15 Sep. 2015: 46.

17 Fantys 19.

18 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* 39.

19 Wilson 124.

20 Wilson 122.

connected with the long stretch of time between the event and evocation of its memory, partly due to his alternation of the story to place himself in a better light. Sometimes, Wilson claims, memory of an event and its interpretation can be revised in one's mind out of "need for sympathy or some other secondary gain."<sup>21</sup> Traces of similar motivation for alternating his interpretation appears several times in the course of Tony's narration and seems to be one of the factors that in his case contributed to the extensive lapses between the events and the way he has remembered them.

In his short overview of history of memory studies in psychology, Wojciech Drąg derives from the theory of memory formulated by Frederic C. Bartlett in *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (1931). "The mechanism of recall," as Drąg puts it, can be "motivated by the effort to construct anew the material being remembered in a way that would "justify" the "impression" that it originally left in one's mind," which causes that oftentimes, "certain events are remembered differently by different people." According to Bartlett, Drąg says, the process of remembering is "an imaginative reconstruction, or construction, built out of our attitude towards a whole active mass of organised past reactions or experience."<sup>22</sup> The act of remembering thus appears to be a very creative process, a product of a certain narrative strategy consisting of rearranging the events, omitting certain ones and overvaluing others, which in the end serves to justify one's actions in the past.

Example of such strategy being applied in Tony's narrative is the way his ex-girlfriend Veronica is depicted. The narrator stresses her self-seeking and snobbery every time he tells a story that involves her and takes care to narrate these scenes in a light that make her seem genuinely bad and callous character. When recalling a moment from the times they were still together, there is a moment when Tony even considers the possibility of being biased and depicting Veronica as being the one to blame for their breakup soon afterwards: "In my mind, this was the beginning of the end of our relationship. Or have I just remembered it this way to make it seem so, and to apportion blame?"<sup>23</sup> Other remarks in similar tone indicate that Veronica's portrayal is biased, based on selected memories that emphasise her blame and lessen Tony's own responsibility.

Tony's biased characterisation can also shed a positive light: Adrian Finn is idealised throughout the book, representing moral and intellectual authority. "We wanted [Adrian's]

---

21 Wilson 122.

22 Drąg 7.

23 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* 35.

attention, his approval,”<sup>24</sup> says Tony, as he praises Adrian’s brilliant mind and mysterious character. The admiration and envy that Tony and his friends felt towards Adrian must have impacted the way they remembered him. Adrian committed suicide at a young age and his motivation, as it is documented in fragments of his diary, contributed to the aura of heroism that Tony and his friends have always associated with him. The notes written in the diary indicate that he had used philosophical debate to argue himself into committing suicide. The discussion concerns one’s incapability to determine the course of own life and in Tony’s view, such argumentation seems to make Adrian’s action legitimate and understandable. Yet when compared to his take on suicide of his other schoolmate Robson, whose suicide note says simply “Sorry, Mum,” and whose death is considered to be result of cowardice rather than sophisticated argumentation (“his action had been unphilosophical, self-indulgent and inartistic”<sup>25</sup>), it becomes clear that the depiction of Adrian has been significantly idealised. It is even more evident as it is indicated that the real motivation behind the action of both had been unintended pregnancy.

Tony’s conscious rewriting of own history is apparent from his behaviour as he meets his future wife Margaret. As he acquaints her with his personal history, he naturally presents his version of the events, saying “I viewed my time with Veronica as a failure – her contempt, my humiliation – and expunged it from the record. I had kept no letters, and only a single photograph, which I hadn’t looked at in ages.”<sup>26</sup> By destroying documents of the past, he makes his version more believable, as there is not any source of information that would prove it wrong: “I wish I’d kept that letter, because it would have been proof, corroboration. Instead, the only evidence comes from my memory.”<sup>27</sup> Here, documents such as letters, diaries, and suicide notes are presented as historical evidence and seem to be superior sources of information to one’s subjective memory. Lack of such documents or their incompleteness then means that the true version of history cannot be reached as the only evidence left is the selective memory of the participants.

When discussing the problem of objective learning of history during a history class, Adrian claims that “history is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation.”<sup>28</sup> That means, obstacles in knowing the

---

24 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* 19.

25 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* 14.

26 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* 69.

27 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* 39.

28 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* 17.

past are presented in faulty memory and often biased documentation. An example of such documentation is Adrian's diary – a source that documents the writer's current state of mind in a fragmented manner. "In the private life," says Tony, "you can infer past action from current mental states."<sup>29</sup> The fragment of his friend's diary that Tony gets hold of enables him to witness Adrian's train of thought, which he assumes to be an analysis of the difficult situation and a possible way out. By seeing a glimpse of the document, Tony is able to deduce what mental processes had led his friend to commit suicide, and thus he peeks inside the otherwise inaccessible piece of history. The final sentence of the diary excerpt is incomplete, but the mention of his own name leaves Tony wondering about what role he might have played in the argumentation and if the role had been a crucial factor in Adrian's decision to end his life. Adrian's view projected on the paper is of course very subjective, yet given the fact that the author of those lines can no longer testify, the record of his thoughts then is probably a better account than he would have provided were he able to do so all those years later.

Four decades after their parting, Tony gets in contact with Veronica to get hold of the heritage that was left to him by Adrian's late mother. Evidence of Tony's misrepresented interpretation of their common history is exposed as documents such as Tony's letters addressed to Adrian and Veronica appear. Specifically, the letter he wrote to Adrian soon after he had learned about Veronica and him getting together, which he has previously characterised by saying, "As far as I remember, I told him pretty much what I thought of their joint moral scruples. (...) Then I wished him good luck (...) and decided that the two of them were now out of my life for ever."<sup>30</sup> Rather innocent response as marked in Tony's memory is then showed to be inaccurate, as he receives the real letter, which beyond other hateful remarks involves lines such as "I hope you get so involved that the mutual damage will be permanent. (...) I can't do anything to you now, but time can."<sup>31</sup> The moment of Tony's awakening as he reads the letter written in his own hand represents a starting point in the process of realising to what extent he had misinterpreted his own history:

The longer life goes on, the fewer are those around to challenge our account, to remind us that our life is not our life, merely the story we have told about our life. Told to others, but – mainly – to ourselves. (...) I could scarcely deny its authorship or its

---

29 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* 44.

30 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* 42-43.

31 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* 95-97.

ugliness. All I could plead was that I had been its author then,  
but was not its author now.<sup>32</sup>

He recognizes his former self in the words that appear on the page, yet finds it hard to identify with the cruelty of the letter. The harsh tone used in it is explained as a momentary outburst of jealousy and malevolence which stems from his insecurity based on what in his eyes is Veronica's social and Adrian's intellectual superiority. Offended by being left behind, he leaves no trace of their common past by destroying the documents and prepares the ground for time to blur the edges of memories. He admits striving for rewriting his own history to justify his actions and manipulating himself into believing he was the victim and others were to blame. This defence mechanism is supposed to make his story seem more coherent and meaningful, which would help to define him as a morally stable and thus reliable narrator. According to Fantys, such strategy is similar to the way historical narratives are arranged, as they intentionally distort facts to the benefit of the interpreter.<sup>33</sup>

Just like totalitarian historiography tends to shape its narrative ideologically by assigning information uneven degree of importance, withholding some of them and emphasising others, censoring existing documents and fabricating new ones, so does Tony's memory arrange the events in such a light that makes his actions seem legitimate, and thus creates a narrative which he seeks to defend against versions of other participants. He represents another example of Barnes' characters who become attorneys defending their own subjective version against the postmodern abundance of all other possible versions of the past. Nagy characterises Barnes' take on history as liberal humanist approach, saying that Barnes seems to suggest that history cannot be learned objectively in its full picture, and only personal history narrated with the emphasis on interpersonal relationships – though such histories are usually highly subjective and biased – is relevant to examine.<sup>34</sup> The untrustworthiness of Tony's memory was most likely caused by a combination of a conscious strategy to eliminate unwanted memories by destroying evidence and an unconscious process of memory loss due to the long period of time between encoding of the memories and their retrieval. The narrator then appears to be unreliable in front of the readers

---

32 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* 95-97.

33 Fantys 46: "Už od počátku pocítujeme jemné tření mezi nutnou a nevědomou potřebou dát vlastnímu životu řád, což s sebou nutně nese i vytěšňování určitých událostí, a záměrným překrucováním a uhlazováním faktů, které vypravěč před čtenáře klade. Vyprávění dějin a soukromá historie tak z určitého hlediska splývají."

34 Ladislav Nagy, "Julian Barnes a smutek," *Host* 15 Sep. 2015: 49-50.

as well as himself, for he has not lived the life he remembers, and does not remember the life he has lived.

## 5. Conclusion

To Barnes, the topic of memory seems to provide for an unlimited supply of fascination. His position in the literary circles is inherently connected to the issue of memory and related problems, such as history, identity and time. In his most recent book *The Only Story* (2018), Barnes presents memory as a system that works on a principle that we cannot figure out, yet recognizes that the purpose of its creative potential is probably rooted in our biological longing for survival:

Memory sorts and sifts according to the demands made on it by the rememberer. (...) [it] prioritises whatever is most useful to help keep the bearer of those memories going. So there would be a self-interest in bringing happier memories to the surface first.<sup>1</sup>

However, the optimistic view on memory that he seems to possess now was preceded by a much more sceptic interpretation. In his earlier works Barnes presents memory as a mechanism that follows ambiguous principles; both in the fictional and nonfictional works he had written he examines the process of remembering from different points of view, always interested in its immense power over people's understanding of everyday reality. The realization of the importance of memory has shaped Barnes' view of it into an uncontrollable force against which influence is the human being powerless. With time he had discovered the creative potential of memory, manifested for example through the invented context and connection between remembered events.

The present thesis has examined the way memory is presented in three books written by Barnes in the time around the first decade of the twenty-first century, namely the memoir *Nothing to be Frightened of* (2008), the historical novel *Arthur & George* (2005), and the novel *The Sense of an Ending* (2011). Looking at different genres enables to see the problem of memory being discussed through diverse perspectives. The memoir is a meditation that is mainly concerned with dying and grief, the discussion however touches many different topics as well, such as the role of writers and the question of identity. The book serves as a theoretical background as Barnes explains many of his concepts related with the issue of memory that he explores within his fictional work. It is interesting to

---

<sup>1</sup> Julian Barnes, *The Only Story* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018) 19.

compare the way he discussed memory in his historical novel, mainly the way he presents that reality and fiction, the two factors that memory works with, can coexist in a single narrative. The whole book symbolizes a fictional memory of the events, and Barnes employs the strategy of combining fact with fabrication in a way that it is hard to distinguish one from another. By making the narrative smoothly cross from fictional accounts to depictions based on historical reality, the boundaries are erased, and the truth is established equally by both factors. *The Sense of an Ending* introduces an encounter of an elder man with the fabricated nature of his personal history. The book narrates the unfortunate impact workings of memory sometimes have on people, and one of the way its creative potential can be realised. The protagonist is shown to fall a victim to the falseness of his memory, who have spent his whole life building his story around memories that are inaccurately manipulated. His life falls apart for his identity was based on the things he carried from the past; his interpretation of the life recorded in memories has proved to be fatally wrong.

The creative potential of memory, as Barnes sees it, gives rise to the extensive amount of possible interpretation of the past. Memory constitutes personal identity of each of us, and therefore the entire knowledge of the reality stands on the incalculable workings of memory. Given the amount of various versions of reality that we hold, it is difficult to defend one against another, and Barnes in his texts presents characters that are forced to call their versions to question and face the threat of it falling to pieces and with it their life as they knew it.

To Barnes, memory is a fundamental instrument in getting to know the world around us. Its narrative potential fascinates him as a writer and a human. People are beings who need stories in order to understand themselves and their past. The need to position oneself in a certain context of a family, history, has always been there, and memory holds the post of a dominant device in the process of identifying and finding common grounds with other people.

## Bibliography

- “Memoir.” Def. 2, 4. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2019. [www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/116334](http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/116334). 2 August 2019.
- “Speak, Memory: 'An Ending' That Uncovers The Past,” *NPR*. Radio interview. 19 Nov 2011 <https://www.npr.org/2011/11/19/142468838/speak-memory-an-ending-that-uncovers-the-past?t=1560537878491&t=1565742057152> 2 Aug 2019
- BARNES, Julian. *Arthur & George*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2005.
- BARNES, Julian. *History of the World in 10½ Chapters*. London: Cape, 1990.
- BARNES, Julian. *Nothing to be Frightened of*. London: Vintage Books, 2009.
- BARNES, Julian. *The Only Story*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2018.
- BARNES, Julian. *The Sense of an Ending*. London: Vintage Books, 2011.
- BOXALL, Peter. “The Ends of Postmodernism.” *British Literature in Transition, 1980–2000: Accelerated Times*. Ed. Eileen Pollard and Berthold Schoene. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018.
- BRADFORD, Richard. *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*. Malden: Blackwell Pub., 2007.
- BYATT, A. S. “Memory and the Making of Fiction.” *Memory*. Ed. Patricia Fara and Karalyn Patterson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- CAVALIÉ, Elsa. “Constructions of Englishness in Julian Barnes’s *Arthur & George*.” *American, British and Canadian Studies* 13. Dec. 2009.
- CHILDS, Peter, and Sebastian Groes. *Julian Barnes: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. London: Continuum, 2011.
- DRĄG, Wojciech. *Revisiting Loss: Memory, Trauma and Nostalgia in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014.
- FANTYS, Petr. “Anatomie konců Juliana Barnese,” *Host* 15 Sep. 2015.
- FARA, Patricia and Karalyn Patterson, eds. *Memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

- GOMPERTZ, Will. "Barnes: 'Novels tell truth about life'" *BBC*, 2 Nov 2012  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-20179787> 2 Aug 2019.
- GUPPY, Shusha. "Julian Barnes, The Art of Fiction No. 165" *The Paris Review*, 157 (2000)  
<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/562/julian-barnes-the-art-of-fiction-no-165-julian-barnes>. 2 Aug 2019.
- HUTCHEON, Linda. "Historiographic Metafiction. Parody and the Intertextuality of History." *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*. Ed. O'Donnell, P., and Robert Con Davis. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.
- KEILLOR, Garrison. "Dying of the Light" *The New York Times*, 13 Mar 2008  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/05/books/review/Keillor-t.html?mtrref=julianbarnes.com&gwh=AA9FA39E062B722DEABB556E7C6390AE&gwt=pay> 2 Aug 2019.
- LE GOFF, Jacques. *Paměť a dějiny*. Transl. Irena Kozelská. Praha: Argo, 2007.
- MITREA, Alexandra. "Julian Barnes and the Sense of History," *Revista Transilvania*, no. 1, Jan. 2013.
- NAGY, Ladislav. "Julian Barnes a smutek." *Host* 15 Sep. 2015.
- NAGY, Ladislav. *Palimpsesty, heterotopie a krajiny: historie v anglickém románu posledních desetiletí*. Praha: Karolinum, 2016.
- O'CONNELL, John. "Julian Barnes: Interview," *Timeout*, 13 Mar 2008.  
<https://www.timeout.com/london/books/julian-barnes-interview>. 2 Aug 2019.
- POLLARD, E., and Berthold Schoene. *British Literature in Transition, 1980–2000: Accelerated Times*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2018.
- ROBERTS, Ryan. "Inventing a Way to the Truth: Life and Fiction in Julian Barnes's Flaubert's Parrot." *Julian Barnes: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Peter Childs and Sebastian Groes. London: Continuum, 2011.
- SPURLING, Hilary. "Colder but wiser," *The Guardian*, 2 Mar 2008  
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/mar/02/biography.julianbarnes>. 2 Aug 2019.
- WHITEHEAD, Anne. *Memory*. London: Routledge, 2009.

WILSON, Barbara A. "When Memory Fails." *Memory*. Ed. Patricia Fara and Karalyn Patterson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.