

**“We’re a narrative animal, aren’t we?”:  
Remembrance in the Fiction of Julian Barnes**

**Jelige: Homo Narrans**

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## Introduction

“We’re a narrative animal, aren’t we?” suggests contemporary English novelist Julian Barnes (1946- ) in an interview, claiming that people “tell stories all the time,” constantly turning their lives into narratives (qtd. in Wachtel). Indeed, alone on planet Earth, the human being is essentially a storyteller, as well as a story hearer, i.e., ‘homo narrans’, with these two faculties lying at the very basis of human intelligence and identity formation (Niles 65). As narrative psychology has shown, narratives provide the indispensable medium of human perception, cognition, understanding, knowledge, and memory: while observing the world – even if unconsciously – people establish cause-and-effect relationships and evaluate, re-evaluate and interpret experiences based on what they have encountered before, creating stories out of the surrounding world, other people, events, and themselves (László 7). In addition, storytelling plays a central role not only in the mind of the individual but also in the collective thinking of humanity. According to Roland Barthes, “under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative . . . narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself” (Barthes 79). Thus, the current belief is that both personal and social identities are created in a narrative manner.

As an emblematic figure of postmodernism, Julian Barnes often engages in self-reflexive discussions of narrativity. In the “Preface” to his collection of essays *Through the Window* (2012), Barnes argues “We are, in our deepest selves, narrative animals; also, seekers of answers. The best fiction rarely provides answers, but it does formulate the questions exceptionally well” (*n. pag.*). In accordance with this statement, in his novels, he reflects on the large-scale narratives of culture and history as forms of collective storytelling, while asking unsettling questions about the reliability of these narratives, their role in collective memory, and their applicability in humanity’s search for truth. Barnes’s version of narrativity is permeated with issues typical of postmodern discourse like the subjectivity of observation, the imperfections of memory, the concepts of culture and cultural memory, the inaccessibility of the past and truth, and the subjectivity of history writing – concerns which provide a way of defining the otherwise hardly graspable concept of postmodernism. In addition to collective narratives, Barnes often experiments with narratives of personal remembering, individual life stories, and personal testimonies as well. The characteristically Barnesian, self-reflexive view

of life-writing occurs the most notably in Barnes's two fictional autobiographies, *Metroland* (1980) and *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), which introduce the highly unreliable self-narratives of distinctively Barnesian male characters – the former that of the thirty-something Christopher Lloyd, the latter that of Tony Webster, a retired man in his sixties. These novels raise the dual problem of presenting an idealised, often self-deceptive, version of one's life, while resenting the unreliability of memory and striving for objectivity and corroboration. At the same time, due to the application of subjective viewpoints, unreliable narrators, and irony, as well as the author's control over the amount of information provided, these novels lead the reader on according to various underlying purposes, while creating a sense of suspense, distrust, and unease, paired with the need to constantly revise one's understanding of the novels.

Through analysing the multiple phenomena of remembering in Julian Barnes's self-narratives *Metroland* and *The Sense of an Ending*, this paper attempts to gain an understanding of the particular motivations and psychological states of Barnesian self-narrators and the narrative structures underlying their life stories. First, I will illustrate how Barnes's oeuvre is in interaction with postmodernist theory and its typical concerns mentioned above, primarily focusing on the current significance of life-writing as opposed to grand narratives of culture and history. As it is with the help of narrative psychology that the psychological processes and motivations can be the best grasped in life-writings, using concepts provided by narrative psychology, the second chapter will deal with the narrators Christopher Lloyd and Tony Webster as developing their narrative selves and individual narrative modes. The third chapter will provide an insight into the concept and operation of memory in the novels, showing that they feature such key aspects of narrative remembering as the subjectivity of observation and remembering; self-editing, idealisation, and self-evaluation; the hierarchy of memories and of the various versions of the self presented; and the confronting, as well as corroborating role of the outside world in individual life-stories – aspects which have a crucial influence on the temporal and narrative structure of the novels in focus. Based on the analysis outlined above, this paper is aimed at providing a detailed understanding and a coherent reading of Julian Barnes's fragmentary and often misleading narratives *Metroland* and *The Sense of an Ending*, claiming that their seemingly impenetrable narrative structures can, in fact, be comprehended when one bears in mind the psychological motivations of life-writing.

## 1 Homo Narrans: Grand Narratives and Writing the Self

It is particularly revealing to discuss Barnesian narrativity in the light of the postmodern attitude to storytelling, “seizing” the past, and the narratives affecting individual and collective identity formation (Barnes, *Flaubert’s* 7). As will be demonstrated in this section, Barnes’s attitude to collective and individual narratives is in line with postmodernist thinking, while it has its own peculiarities as well.

However significant a role grand narratives might play in establishing social, historical, and cultural truths that serve as the basis for individual and collective identity formation, it is important to note that some of these defining narratives have been questioned and often even overwritten, primarily due to scientific and technological development resulting in a changed view of the position of humanity. While the Enlightenment promoted the utmost primacy of reason, claiming that both the universe and the human being within it can be known and understood through the rational approach of science, modernist and postmodernist thinking in particular seem to have lost faith in the existence of ordered, reliable objectivity and hence in the rational knowability of the world (Stott 21-22; 24-25). Thereby, the eternal and definite truths produced by science have been destabilised, evoking a sense of disorder. These issues are treated not only by theorists of postmodernism, but also by fiction writers, peculiarly Julian Barnes, whose narrators and/or characters reflect on postmodernist concerns and so function as the mouthpieces to postmodern authors’ self-reflexivity.

According to literary theorist and critic Linda Hutcheon, modernists are aware of the lack of objective truths, lament it and are frustrated by it, whereas postmodernism “no longer attempts to mirror reality or tell any truth about it,” but celebrates the multiplicity of truths instead (40). The postmodern view of the inaccessibility of truth is illustrated famously in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989) by Julian Barnes: “We all know objective truth is not obtainable,” only “a multiplicity of subjective truths which we assess and then fabulate into history” (45). Consequently, when it comes to investigating truth, knowledge, and memories, a method frequently applied by writers of postmodern fiction is the categorisation and systematisation of facts, often presented in the form of lists or mathematical formulas, reflecting the urge to find some degree of objectivity in human perception, or at least a way of simulating it. For instance, Adrian Finn in Julian Barnes’s *The Sense of an Ending* asks “To what extent might human relationships be expressed in a mathematical or logical formula?”

(Barnes, *SE* 85)<sup>1</sup> With the help of “ $a^2 + v + a^1 \times s = b$ ” he hopes to gain insight into the operation of chains of responsibility and to see whether accumulation, multiplication, and division might characterise human relationships; nevertheless, the solution eventually provided by the narrator Tony Webster can be applied only to a particular situation, not universally (85). The lack of proper facts is further manifested in Barnes’s *Staring at the Sun*, which presents the “General Purposes Computer” and “The Absolute Truth” as databases of all human knowledge (144; 146). However, the answers generated by these supposedly objective, factual, and reliable sources of information turn out to be subjectively manipulated and controlled, or even produced entirely by human operators, suggesting that there is, in reality, no objective human knowledge, not even a scientifically generated one.

In addition to truth, the accessibility of the past is also a key concern of postmodernism, especially with regards to the imperfections of memory and its indispensable role in narrativity, as no narrative can be produced or understood without remembering. Notably so in the case of Julian Barnes, whose oeuvre is permeated with definitions and discussions of memory, and attempts at grasping the nature and exploring the boundaries of recollection. One can find a general distrust towards memory, as well as an awareness of its subjective and artificially created nature as peculiar of a wide range of Barnesian characters. In his autobiographical piece *Nothing to be Frightened of*, Barnes himself claims “My brother distrusts the essential truth of memories; I distrust the way we colour them in” (29). Also, Martha in *England, England* is suspicious of a supposedly true memory of hers, as “it was true, but it wasn’t unprocessed” (6). That is, even if retrieved exactly with respect to fixed data, recollection can never be the same as experiencing. As Frank Kermode puts it, “the experience as remembered is not, affectively, of the same quality as the experience itself” or “the experience as remembered is not the same as the experience remembered” (“Memory” 292). In fact, subsequent events and the distance between past and present may cause re-evaluation and changed impressions of certain memories: a “pain recalled is recognised as a pain, yet it may be recalled with pleasure; a past joy may be recalled with intense sadness” (Kermode, “Memory” 292). Often in Barnes’s novels, it is due to nostalgia or remorse that past experiences are come to be seen in a different light, as to be discussed later on in the case of *The Sense of an Ending*. Last but not least, the artificially created gap between recollection and experience in life stories – similarly to history – is pointed out by a character named

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<sup>1</sup> *SE* will be used as short for Barnes, Julian. *The Sense of an Ending*. 2011. London: Vintage Books, 2012. Print.

Oliver in *Love, etc.*: “The story of our life is never an autobiography, always a novel . . . Our memories are just another artifice” (Barnes, *Love, etc.* 13).

As can be seen, Barnes accommodates the essential self-reflexivity of postmodernism that, according to postmodernist thinkers, induces the acute questioning of the reliability and truth value of human narratives: as observed by Linda Hutcheon, postmodern self-reflexivity is aimed not only at the “investigation of the nature, the limits, and the possibilities of the discourse of art,” but also at describing a “parodic relation to the art of the past” (22). That is, confrontations with history, politics, culture, and the external world in general are fuelled by parody, as it offers an ironic view not only of the past, but also of the present through a perspective “which allows an artist to speak to a discourse from within it, but without being totally recuperated by it” (Hutcheon 41; 35). Clearly, it is not only the assessment of the contemporary that is problematic with respect to objectivity, but also the artistic representation of the contemporary, bringing forth the need for some kind of distance that can aid observation. Somewhat similarly, novelist, literary critic, and philosopher Umberto Eco argues that however fragmented and uncertain the past may be, it should not be ignored; instead, it needs to be viewed from an ironic distance (Stott 32). Thus, by adopting a quasi-outside point of view and being aware of this distance, postmodernist writers and Julian Barnes in particular examine and challenge not only the formal and thematic features and boundaries of fiction, but also those of human culture and consciousness.

In line with the above, Julian Barnes tends to experiment with the definition and redefinition of Englishness from the inside, as a representative of English culture, but taking a step back to create the distance needed for observation and evaluation, occupying a quasi-outside perspective. In this manner, Barnes often defines Englishness in relation to French culture, for instance, in his journalistic output entitled *Letters from London* (1995), in a collection of short stories *Cross Channel* (1998), and to some extent in *Flaubert’s Parrot* and *Metroland* (1980) as well. It is in *England, England* (1998) that Barnes famously deconstructs English culture into a simplified, highly subjective list of national symbols and stereotypes, thereby providing a critique of the contemporary reductionist way of presenting and interpreting culture. Description and interpretation of English culture and Englishness occur both in the context of collective, as well as individual identity formation in Barnes’s fiction. Hence, the linguistic and self-defining roles of culture-based identity will occur as significant aspects of the Barnesian fictional autobiographies in focus.

In addition to narrating culture, Barnes also investigates the narrative nature of history, which too has an impact on collective and individual identity. Based on the perception that

facts are destabilised and memories are unreliable, history writing and the traditional concept of one true history have been undermined as well in postmodernism. Hayden White in his ubiquitous piece “The Burden of History” introduces the idea that historians “treat their ‘facts’ as though they were ‘given’” without recognising that “they are not so much ‘found’ as ‘constructed’” based on the questions and approaches used by them as researchers (127). Moreover, White argues that historians use the same narrative techniques as writers do; eventually, history itself is no more than a narrative with heroes, villains, and conflicts (127). As a result, history is seen as subjective and unreliable, lacking proper facts, and is often criticised by postmodern authors, including Julian Barnes. However, though uncertain, hardly reachable, and subjectively created, the past needs to be known and processed, as it provides the basis for identity formation. Consequently, postmodernism is presented with the task of finding new ways to explore the past in order to provide narratives that can be incorporated into collective and individual identity. One such approach is offered by Linda Hutcheon, who argues that “History is not made obsolete: it is, however, being rethought—as a human construct . . . entirely conditioned by textuality,” while ‘historiographic metafiction’ provides the medium of “rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” (16; 5). That is, the textual (or narrative) nature of history-making is seen as essential – in fact, the creation of the fictional is described as “another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality” (Hutcheon 40). Hence, fiction might provide the coherent narratives needed for collective and individual human thinking.

In line with the general postmodern view, the narrator Geoffrey Braithwaite in *Flaubert’s Parrot* claims that “history is merely another literary genre: the past is autobiographical fiction pretending to be a parliamentary report,” that is, a narrative created from a subjective, individual viewpoint (137). Furthermore, in *The Sense of an Ending* history is defined in the following terms: “History is the lies of the victors” and “the self-delusions of the defeated;” “History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation” (16-17). As can be seen, history is considered to be subjective, as well as bearing the marks of the insufficiency of human memory and recordkeeping. Likewise, in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* Barnes provides a critique of traditional history by claiming that “History isn’t what happened. History is just what historians tell us” (242). With this in mind, he creates alternative versions, such as a woodworm’s account of the story of Noah’s Ark, according to which “Your species [i.e., humanity] has its much repeated version, which still charms even sceptics,” but “You aren’t too good with the truth . . . You keep . . . ignoring the bad things,” and so the traditional

human presentation of history is rather self-deceptive (Barnes, *A History* 4; 29). Thus, Julian Barnes, along with other postmodernist thinkers, introduces a critical and ironic view of the past, history, and general truths, while highlighting the interplay between fact and fiction.

When it comes to analysing *Metroland* and *The Sense of an Ending*, it will become apparent that Barnes subverts not only the supposedly factual, reality-based narratives of the past, but also the purely fictional accounts provided by his narrators and characters, applying the postmodern ironic distance in a unique way, targeted at his own fictional creation. Nevertheless, it is important to note the generic difference between collective and personal narratives, whether factual or fictional. Amidst the fragmentation and destabilisation of the concepts of history and culture, a solution suggested by Lyotard in lieu of grand, universally accepted narratives is the turn towards mini-narratives, or “the little narrative [*petit récit*],” which “remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly in science” (60). Such mini-narratives are “situational, provisional, contingent, and temporary, making no claim to universality, truth, reason, or stability,” in line with the postmodern distrust of universal truth claims (Stott 25). Moreover, while little narratives present the individual in his/her social, historic, and cultural context, their narrow focus might lack the politically and ideologically motivated distortions of grand narratives. Therefore, instead of grand narratives of nations and societies, it is individual life stories that represent culture and history in a more credible way, although still coloured by subjectivity and various psychologically-induced phenomena to be discussed later.

The postmodern upsurge of interest in (auto-)biographies and (auto-)biographical fiction has been also substantially motivated by the current atmosphere, in which scientific research on identity has induced debates whether the self is only “an illusory by-product of brain activity” (Stott 10). As Dan P. McAdams psychologist and advocate of narrative identity argues, when people in modern societies begin to define their identity in adolescence or young adulthood, they “reconstruct the personal past, perceive the present, and anticipate the future in terms of . . . an integrative narrative self that provides modern life with some modicum of psychosocial unity and purpose” (187). Accordingly, identity exists in the form of a dynamic, ever-evolving life story created based on autobiographical facts through a process of selecting details and aspects in order to “vivify and integrate life and make it more or less meaningful” (McAdams 187). Therefore, especially when it takes the form of a coherent narrative put into

writing, biography or ‘life writing’<sup>2</sup> can be seen as a reassuring manifestation of tangible selfhood.

Then again, like everything deemed postmodern, postmodern biographies too require readers to play an active, interpreting role. Instead of being simply presented with a chronological account of events, they often encounter fragmentary segments of life stories lacking a temporal order – notably so in the case of Julian Barnes’s life-narratives. Furthermore, traditional boundaries of genres are blurred; thereby the distinctions between fictional and factual biographies and autobiographies, biographical, autobiographical, and fictional novels are rendered difficult, especially in the case of Barnes’s works, which often resist straightforward categorisation. Probably the most well-known example is Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot*, a quasi-biography of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century French author Gustave Flaubert, famous for completely subverting traditional biography writing. It presents three versions of Flaubert’s chronology and experiments with the fact–fiction dichotomy by repeatedly depicting fiction as fact, while presenting itself to be well-researched and meticulously detailed. At the same time, it raises the question “How do we seize the past? Can we ever do so?” (Barnes, *Flaubert’s* 7) Hence, *Flaubert’s Parrot* is an embodiment of the postmodern attitude to fact and history. In fact, it can be seen as an illustration of Linda Hutcheon’s definition of historiographic metafiction as a means of investigating questions like “How do we know the past (or the present)? What is the ontological status of that past? Of its documents? Of our narratives?” (Hutcheon 50)

Still, however fragmented and unsettling these life stories may be, there is one feature shared by all of them: they are all created by human minds in the narrative mode inherent in human thinking and perception. It is thus a question remaining to be answered whether the interpretation of postmodern texts is aided by the inalienable narrativity always necessarily lying at the basis of such texts, or if the essentially narrative mode of human understanding acts as a burden on comprehending fragmented, seemingly incoherent texts. It is with the help of narrative psychology that the underlying psychological phenomena, as well as the structure and motivations of remembrance can be the best understood. Therefore, the following chapters will provide a narratological and narrative psychological analysis of Barnes’s novels *Metroland* and *The Sense of an Ending*, aiming at an understanding of their fragmented structures and unreliable narratives.

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<sup>2</sup> Originates in the Greek βίο- ‘life’ and γράφειν ‘to write’ (“Biography.” *The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology*. 1993. Print.)

## 2 Barnesian Self-Narrators in *Metroland* and *The Sense of an Ending*

As discussed above, Julian Barnes's oeuvre presents a wealth of approaches to grand narratives of history and culture. On the other hand, Barnes has written narratives of individual lives as well, demonstrating an interest in personal identity formation and little narratives. According to Merritt Moseley, the first book in a novelist's oeuvre is highly likely to be autobiographical, especially when it is a coming-of-age story (18). Julian Barnes's debut novel *Metroland* is in line with this pattern, echoing much of Barnes's youth, although, as the author often points out, fact is intertwined with fiction in it. Later in his career, Barnes claimed "I think my attitude towards using myself and bits of my life in my books is that I'm willing to, if I can get the right distance from it . . . I don't think I have any desire to be confessional, but I think I'm quite willing to use my own life as an example of something" (Guignery and Ryan 165). Therefore, he claims to have chosen the autobiographical mode for his memoir or essay on life, death, and religion entitled *Nothing to be Frightened of* (2008) in order to illustrate his discussion of universal topics with the examples of his own life story (Guignery and Ryan 165). Indeed, it is the fragments of Barnes's life presented that launch each section of meditation on issues like fear of death and humanity's relationship to God. Similarly, Barnes's autobiographical piece revolving around the stages of life entitled *Levels of Life* (2013) consists of essay-like segments on neutral topics like ballooning and photography set against the third part dealing with grief, inspired by his own sense of loss following the death of his wife, literary agent Pat Kavanagh. Barnes indeed uses his own experiences not as the primary data of his works but interwoven in the fabric of his fiction, especially in his first-person narratives.

The problem of the intermingling of fact and fiction, of course, might be seen as irrelevant in the case of novels openly labelled fictional, but the accessibility of truth is a significant issue in such life stories as well. In Barnes's oeuvre, it is *Metroland* and *The Sense of an Ending* that, read as fictional autobiographies, illustrate the Barnesian view of memory, truth, and the past in relation to identity formation and life-writing, in line with Lyotard's concept of the postmodern little narrative. *Metroland* and *The Sense of an Ending* will be discussed in the following sections as instances of highly subjective personal remembering and self-narration, while elaborating on the formation of the narrative self amidst the postmodern perception of the human condition, as well as on the resulting temporal and thematic structures accommodated by the two novels.

To begin with, the first-person narrative of *Metroland* is written from the perspective of Christopher Lloyd, predominantly in the form of reminiscence, presenting the 30-year-old Christopher's view of his past and present in a tripartite structure. Part One, "Metroland (1963)" depicts Christopher at the age of 16, living along the Metropolitan Line in the suburban area called Metroland, commuting to his school in London day by day. Claiming to be members of the "Anger generation," Christopher and his best friend Toni Barbarowski demonstrate a typical adolescent strife for identities unaffected by their roots and surroundings (Barnes, *M* 40)<sup>3</sup>. They theorise about art, life, adulthood, love, marriage, and the mysteries of sexuality and the female body – all embedded in descriptions of everyday experiences such as school, family dinners, and visits to Uncle Arthur. In Part Two, "Paris (1968)", Christopher's dominant preoccupation as a 21-year-old young adult is his virginity. Consequently, when he spends a few months in Paris on occasion of a grant for his thesis, instead of witnessing the students' revolution, his attention is entirely taken up by Annick, a French girl, to whom he loses his virginity. Moreover, while spending his days in museums, cinemas, cafés, and the Bibliothèque Nationale, reading, writing, drawing, and contemplating life and art, he encounters a group of English youngsters, Dave, Micky, and Marion. By Part Three, "Metroland II (1977)", at the age of 30, Christopher has settled down with his wife Marion and daughter Amy back in Metroland, no longer demonstrating his initial disdain on suburban life. As he encounters such issues of married life as temptation and faithfulness, he is repeatedly confronted and criticised by Toni, who is a manifestation of their youthful plans, a struggling writer showing passionate interest in politics. Finally, the novel ends on a rather ambiguous note regarding Christopher's feelings about the contrast between his juvenile plans and eventual actions and achievements.

*The Sense of an Ending* is narrated by Tony Webster, a retired man in his sixties. Part One provides an overview of Tony's past, emphasising the formative importance of his schoolboy years spent with his friends, Colin, Alex, and Adrian. Induced by History classes with Old Joe Hunt and English classes with Phil Dixon, as well as by their interest in philosophy, they engage in discussions of time, history, literature, and death. Part of Tony's growing up is his first relationship with Veronica described in detail, including issues like meeting Veronica's family; virginity and sexuality; and a break-up followed by an affair between Veronica and Tony's friend Adrian. After a description of some time spent in the USA and an affair with Annie, Tony is faced with Adrian's suicide. Part One ends with a brief

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<sup>3</sup> *M* will be used as short for Barnes, Julian. *Metroland*. 1980. London: Picador, 1995. Print.

overview of Tony's adult life involving jobs, marriage, becoming a father, divorce, and retirement. By Part Two, the narrative reaches the present: embedded in further meditations on time, history, and life, Tony's present life unfolds. A letter received after the death of Veronica's mother results in the unsettling of Tony's life story presented so far – in fact, it forces Tony to face his past mistakes. His re-evaluation takes the form of revisiting and rewriting memories described in the first section. Along the way, Tony arranges a couple of meetings with his ex-wife Margaret, as well as with Veronica. Eventually, his search for the truth about the connections between Veronica, Adrian, and Veronica's mother succeeds, leaving Tony in a state of distress and hopelessness.

## 2.1 Formation of the Narrative Self

Regarding Barnes's choice of genre, Caroline Stott points out that the bildungsroman mode is applied in *Metroland* in a special manner: while the traditional bildungsroman involves a character undergoing a process of maturation and becoming a rounded and finished personality, Christopher Lloyd from a "teenager who thought himself special turns into an average adult," failing to produce accomplishments that could serve as the regular motivations for writing an autobiography (Stott 107). Similarly, Tony Webster in *The Sense of an Ending* settles for mediocrity instead of noteworthy achievements and taking risks. According to Stott, such a use of the bildungsroman mode is in line with the postmodernist scepticism regarding "stable and coherent subjects," and so instead of focusing on character development, Barnes uses this "deceptively simple form to introduce readers to complex issues and to pose questions about them" (107). However, it is important to note that despite the lack of a spectacular and tangible progress, Christopher and Tony's narrative selves do undergo a maturing process. Through a series of events and formative confrontations paving the way to adulthood, they learn about the problems of narration, such as the imperfection of memory and the harmful nature of self-deception.

Both Christopher Lloyd and Tony Webster can be seen as typically Barnesian male characters, resembling Geoffrey Braithwaite in *Flaubert's Parrot* and Gregory in *Staring at the Sun*. They are characterised by a considerable degree of passivity, meditating about life instead of living it, and failing to be in proper control of their lives. A curious and uniquely Barnesian contrast is generated by the fact that despite their average, rather mediocre lives and personalities, these characters theorise about highly philosophical matters such as art versus life; history versus reality; time, memory, and remembering; the general progress of human life; death and suicide; and religion – that is, preoccupations which permeate Barnes's

entire oeuvre. Conspicuously, these male figures function as Barnes's mouthpieces, providing the author with the means of articulating his concerns, experimenting with them, and asking questions about them – in line with Barnes's concept of fiction as a means of asking questions quoted at the beginning. At the same time, these Barnesian characters are fundamentally self-reflexive: their fictional autobiographies being means of self-presentation, they continuously contemplate their past and their achievements. While they are prone to self-deception, they are also preoccupied with the truth value of their narratives, lamenting the imperfection of their memories and collecting proof to support their stories. Their self-reflexive comments and manipulations of their memories inevitably evoke a sense of distrust and suspense in the reader, resulting in unreliable narrators, as there are discrepancies between their storytelling and the reality of the novel and their interpretation of events are highly questionable ("Narrator"). These narrators' unreliability and self-deception will be subject to further discussion in the chapter focusing on narrative remembering.

One key subject of Barnesian characters' self-reflexivity is their identity formation. Naturally, identity formation and becoming an autonomous narrative self are the results of a learning process. Though Christopher and Tony are fictional characters, their progress can be analysed based on the general pattern characterising the development of all human beings. As described by Dan P. McAdams, it is in adolescence or young adulthood that people first truly reflect on their identities and face the phenomenon of growing up (188). It is indeed as adolescents that Christopher and his friend Toni Barbarowski begin to theorise growing up and adulthood. They imagine "marriage, and sex eight times a night, and bringing up your children . . . having a bank account and going to strip clubs and owning cufflinks, collar studs and monogrammed handkerchiefs" – a selection of status symbols they associate with being a grown-up man (Barnes, *M* 69). They project an idealised version of adulthood as "vague and marvellous as the Empyrean . . . capital-L Life" and believe that being "Out There Living" means one is not condemned to do things one does not want to; instead, "your Deeds Book would read like your Fantasy Book did now" (64; 54). Rather similarly, Tony Webster and his friends imagine (here, too, capital-L) Life to be intense and eventful like Literature, featuring "love, sex, morality, friendship, happiness, suffering, betrayal, adultery" and also "good and evil, heroes and villains" (Barnes, *SE* 15). Until then, they feel like they are "being kept in a holding pen, waiting to be released into our lives," looking forward to adult life as free, autonomous, and filled with action, just like Christopher and Toni (9). During their seemingly uneventful, non-changing teenage lives it is such gestures as being "sirred" when buying his

“first pair of longs” (Barnes, *M* 14) that makes Christopher feel less of a child and being addressed as “Gentlemen” by his English master in the case of Tony (Barnes, *SE* 6).

It is also in adolescence that a crucial stage in identity formation takes place, namely, being faced with choices reflecting one’s own identity: in what is termed the “identity versus role confusion,” adolescents experiment with occupational and ideological options, social roles, life plans and projects, so that, eventually, there emerges a unified configuration of thoughts, ideas, roles, and activities – identity itself (McAdams 188). It is of crucial importance to find an integrated configuration of the self in the aforementioned process: integrated both in a synchronic sense (as in accommodating a number of differing roles and relationships) and in a diachronic sense (as in combining elements of the self separated in time) (McAdams 188-189). Christopher in *Metroland* is aware of the various roles and self-presentations he is required to perform: “School, home, university, friends – all in their different ways offered a consensus of values, ambitions, approved styles of failure” (96-97). Illustrating the synchronic integration of various roles, in Christopher’s case, it is the everyday journey to school that is seen as “a time of twice-daily metamorphosis” (Barnes, *M* 64). This journey provides “a point of balance in the oscillation between home and school,” between the “clean, tidy, hardworking, conservative, responsibly questioning” self presented at home and the “lazy yet smirkingly confident, obsequious and deceitful, contemptuous of authority, mad about art” version of himself performed at school (64). Though described in less detail, the same transformation is referred to in *The Sense of an Ending*: “The school was in central London, and each day we travelled up to it . . . passing from one system of control to another” (7). At a later stage in adulthood, it is with the help of ‘imagoes’ that one may experiment with “possible selves” or idealised personifications of the self, which embody a great variety of self-characters with different voices and functions in the narrative, and yet enhance the inclusion of different versions of the self in the same narrative (McAdams 193). Such versions of himself are presented by Christopher when he is concerned with the impression he is trying to make. When preparing for his first date with Annick, in an attempt to present an ideal version of himself, Christopher carefully designs his appearance, including his clothing, his hair, and the book he wishes to be seen reading, bearing in mind possible expectations, driven by “a sensitive desire to please” (Barnes, *M* 104).

The formation of the narrative self involves the creation of one’s own narrative mode through experimentation with content and form, such as the alternative narratives created by Christopher for Uncle Arthur and the ones produced by Tony and his friends about Robson’s suicide (McAdams 190). Interestingly, creating the language for one’s own narrative mode

plays a significant role in both novels. In *Metroland*, Christopher and Toni's speech is permeated with French expressions and a stereotypical French attitude as a revolt against their mediocre suburban surroundings: "The mottoes we deemed appropriate to our cause were *écraser l'infâme* and *épater la bourgeoisie*" (9). Later in Paris, Christopher gets immersed in French culture and mimics French gestures: "I brushed the side of my jaw with the backs of my fingers to indicate boredom. I learned to shrug up my shoulders while turning down my mouth" (123). Though he first enjoys this game, he soon becomes disturbed by this new version of himself, feeling "a kind of internal stirring . . . as if one part of me was being faintly disloyal to another part" (124). At this point, Christopher's French and English versions of himself fail to be unified, but this transitional state of unsettlement is over when he returns to England. On the other hand, in *The Sense of an Ending*, Tony and his friends sprinkle their conversations with German expressions learnt from their readings in philosophy: "We used terms like '*Weltanschauung*' and '*Sturm und Drang*'" (10). Quite unsurprisingly, these juvenile modes of expression are left behind in both novels by the time the characters reach adulthood. While his adolescent narrative is filled with comparing himself to various French authors and claiming to observe the world through Baudelaire's concept of colours, the adult Christopher, when referring to Louis XVI, says "if you'll forgive the comparison," already aware of its disproportionate nature (Barnes, *M* 86). On the other hand, Tony Webster comments on their use of German philosophical expressions as "of course we were pretentious" (Barnes, *SE* 10). Thus, while English is initially depicted as everyday and mediocre, by adulthood both Christopher and Tony refine their concept of uniqueness, assigning a new position to Englishness within their narrative selves.

## 2.2 Autobiographies: 'I' versus 'me'

As can be seen above, the self is nothing like a static, fixed essence to be known only, but an entity being in constant change. Thus, one can find a number of revising, self-editing processes characterising the creation of self-narratives. First of all, as Stephen Crites points out, "there is always some hiatus between the 'I' who recollects and the self who appears as a character," that is, between the narrating self and the narrated self (159). In Frank Kermode's terms, "all autobiographers take on the properties of doubles" through some kind of "personal ambiguity" ("Memory" 291). In postmodernist fiction, notably in Julian Barnes's novels, there is a certain degree of interaction between the two versions of the self. Christopher and Tony are such narrators, as their remembering is first and foremost an inward-looking and self-reflexive process. As will be shown, their successes are described in a way that they

identify with their past selves, whereas negative experiences and past mistakes induce detachment on behalf of their present, narrating selves.

A theoretical framework has been created for this issue by narrative psychologist János László and his colleagues based on the narrative perspective and the temporal position of the narrator. Accordingly, there might be “an *observer*, when the narrator is located in the ‘here and now’ and the narrated event is located in the ‘there and then;’” a “*re-experiencing perspective*” in which “both the narrator and the narrated event are located in the ‘there and then;’” an “*experiencing narrative perspective*” in which “both the narrating person and the narrative event are located in the ‘here and now;’” and a fourth case in which the “narrator is located in the ‘there and then’ and the narrated event is in the ‘here and now’” (László 67). Moreover, Tibor Pólya and his colleagues have outlined three identity states corresponding to the aforementioned narrative perspectives (the fourth perspective is not dealt with due to its scarce incidence). The *observer*, being distanced from the narrated events, is in a “coherent and settled” state of identity, “well adjusted” (Pólya, László, and Forgas 788). On the other hand, both the *re-experiencer*, a participant of the events, and the *experiencer*, reporting the events, are in a more intense identity state, the *re-experiencer* being the most problematic viewpoint “burdened by unresolved identity-conflicts” (788).

The distinction between the two versions of the self is considerably clear-cut when it comes to self-reflexive comments like “At school I would have called myself serious . . . but I was probably only attaching an inordinate, legitimating importance to unreflecting pleasure. Nowadays I’m serious about different things; and I don’t fear my seriousness will collapse beneath me” (Barnes, *M* 177). Here, the narrating self takes the observer position; the past and the present selves of Christopher are entirely separated. Similarly, a self differing from the narrated self emerges from ironic comments like “As you can see, we worried about large things [such as bureaucrats controlling colours] in those days . . . When else can you get to worry about them?” (8) Here, the younger self is looked upon with a forbearing smile, again, from the observer perspective. In these cases, Christopher’s identity state is settled and coherent, indicated by his awareness of change and the clear distinction between his mature and sincere current self and his adolescent self.

However, the distinction is not so straightforward in the case of certain explanatory notes and comments. For instance, upon asking his parents about “what’s an oonuch?” (17), Christopher reflects on the situation while it is being described, in a commentary fashion: ““Oh, I’m not quite sure, dear, really,’ she answered in a level voice. (It could just be true that she wasn’t.) ‘Let’s ask your father. Jack, Christopher wants to know what a eunuch is . . .’

(Good play that, correcting pronunciation but disguising knowledge)” (17). This is an ambiguous case, as the one commenting might be either the narrating self, or the recalled version of the characteristically rather critical adolescent self. That is, one can find some overlap between the past and present self. Even more so in the case of purely re-experiencing accounts, in which the borderline between the two versions of the self is almost entirely blurred. For example, when recounting his date with Annick, Christopher reflects on it as “I’d kissed her! Hey, I’d kissed a French girl! She liked me!” (107) Similarly, when finding out that even Robson, the rather mediocre boy who committed suicide, used to have a girlfriend, Tony Webster reacts as follows: “Fucking bastard! Why him and not us? Why had none of us even had the experience of *failing* to get a girlfriend?” (Barnes, SE 14) In these cases the narrating self becomes so deeply absorbed in the narrated event of the past that he entirely identifies with the recalled version of his past self, demonstrating a more intense identity state.

Finally, the gap between the narrating self and the narrated self is the most conspicuous, and yet the most problematic, when one is accused of a past mistake. Typically, one’s unwillingness to accept one’s past self and identify with it results in distorting the past and blocking it with the aim of producing a satisfying narrative and an idealised version of the self (Crites 160). This problem is manifested in *The Sense of an Ending*: when recounting his reaction to the affair between his ex-girlfriend Veronica and his best friend Adrian, Tony Webster blocks the memory of his past actions and fails to face them. He claims to have sent a short note saying “everything is jolly fine by me, old bean,” meaning he is not hurt by the affair (Barnes, SE 42). However, in Part Two, Veronica sends him the letter he himself wrote decades earlier cursing them and their prospective child. Facing this version of the past, Tony claims “My younger self had come back to shock my older self” (97-98). As can be seen, when the problem is encountered in the present from the experiencing perspective, an unresolved identity-conflict comes to light, bringing with it an immense sense of remorse. Although Tony “could scarcely deny authorship” of the letter, he wonders about the question of responsibility: “All I could plead was that I had been its author then, but was not this author now . . . But perhaps this was simply a further self-deception” (97). Naturally, claiming to have changed is by no means an acceptable argument in denying responsibility. In fact, according to Jean Starobinski, it is precisely the constant presence of the personal pronoun ‘I’ that obliges one for “permanent responsibility,” while the changing self is characterised with the help of “*verbal and attributive elements*” (qtd. in Kermode, “Memory” 291). Thus, Tony Webster must take responsibility for his past actions, cease to live in self-deception, and learn

to make a meaningful connection between his 'I' and 'me' to create a continuous narrative self capable of producing a coherent life story.

### 3 The Phenomena of Narrative Remembering

Life-writing, due to its involvement with highly subjective psychological processes and imperfect memories, presents a number of phenomena affecting the quality of the narrative in terms of style, structure, and reliability. These key aspects are – in addition to the discrepancy between the narrating self and the narrated self discussed above – the subjective presentation of memories in relation to the present or the future; the idealisation and self-deception induced by self-evaluation; confrontation with other people's versions; and a need for corroboration and documentation.

#### 3.1 Constructing Past, Present, and Future

Evidently, biographical and autobiographical writings are genres of remembering, as they are predominantly compiled of memories. When it comes to fictional biographies and autobiographies, too, memory is one of the central aspects to be taken into consideration, though this time with respect to fictional characters. Christopher Lloyd and Tony Webster are typically self-reflexive narrators of postmodern fiction in that they both contemplate the question of memory and its impact on life-stories in the form of metafictional remarks. First of all, Christopher faces recollection as a process distorting and overwriting the past when his memories of Annick quickly fade after their first encounter: "I'd thought about Annick so much that I couldn't remember what she looked like. It was like putting layer after layer of *papier mâché* over an object and gradually seeing the original shape disappear" (Barnes, *M* 103). The limits and errors of memory and the role of recollection in storytelling are the subject of detailed discussion in *The Sense of an Ending* as well, particularly in the form of self-reflexive comments like "At least that's how I remember it now. Though if you were to put me in a court of law, I doubt I'd stand up to cross-examination very well" (Barnes, *SE* 119). The most straightforward definition of memory presented in the novel is the following: "memory equals events plus time" (63). However, as pointed out by Tony, the results of recollection are rather unpredictable, because "what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed" (3). Furthermore, as time "doesn't act as a fixative, rather as a solvent," memories become blurred with time, or might even get entirely lost. In addition, while youngsters have no trouble remembering their short lives, older people's memory

“becomes a thing of shreds and patches,” so the capacity of one’s memory is apt to change, again, in an unpredictable manner (105). Apparently, in spite of Tony’s repeated attempts at defining and systematising memory, he cannot grasp its operation exactly in its entirety.

As for the processing of memories, it is during a course of subjective selection, interpretation, and attributing significance that certain memories are highlighted as self-defining memories, whereas others are labelled as insignificant, or get completely forgotten by Tony and Christopher (McAdams 196). Self-defining memories are described by Singer and Salovey as “vivid, affectively charged, repetitive, linked to one another memories . . . related to an important unresolved theme or enduring concern” (qtd. in McAdams 195). Interestingly, the hierarchical system of memories based on importance is in constant alteration, too: what previously seemed significant might become irrelevant, and vice versa, induced by retroactive experiencing (i.e., when a thing sensed, but not experienced or attended to, subsequently comes to light) (Crites 161). It is such self-defining memories that make up the backbone of *Metroland* and *The Sense of an Ending*, with the fluctuation of the hierarchy of memories characterising primarily the latter.

Christopher’s self-defining memories include his conversations with Toni Barbarowski, the first occasion he was sirred, typical schoolday memories, family dinners, his first time to live as an adult in Paris, losing his virginity, and the like. He presents parts of the past considered irrelevant with respect to his identity formation as follows: the civil unrest in Paris, 1968 is described as “I can’t, to be honest, remember even a smudge of smoke in the sky . . . Neither can I remember the newspaper headlines of the time” (Barnes, *M* 86). On the other hand, Tony Webster recalls experiences such as History and English classes, his relationship with Veronica, and his formative friendship with Adrian. However, as observed by Caroline Stott, too, no description is given in *Metroland* of such fundamental events as Christopher’s wedding and becoming a father (Stott 118). Similarly, Tony in *The Sense of an Ending* provides no detailed account of his marriage and fatherhood. According to Stott, Barnes “deconstructs conventional biographical elements and thus questions their value,” a technique also applied in *Flaubert’s Parrot* (118).

In accordance with the vivid nature of self-defining memories, both novels provide extremely detailed accounts of these past events, including conversations, then current moods, and the evocation of circumstances and impressions of the time. Both Christopher and Tony’s self-defining memories are presented in the form of distinct scenes with slide-like changes between them, illustrating the haziness of unimportant episodes, with meditative parts on time, death, life, history, and love, as well as metafictional reflections on narration and

remembering inserted among them. The thus fragmented narrative is roughly linear in the case of *Metroland*, with the occasional comments coming from the current self indicating the interplay between past and present. However, *The Sense of an Ending* offers a non-linear narrative with frequent jumps in time, flashbacks and flashforwards. Part One in *The Sense of an Ending* covers Tony's past with comments of the current self (similarly to *Metroland*), while Part Two focuses on his present constantly broken by flashbacks, and returns to memories already narrated in Part One, as well as new ones. Moreover, at the very beginning of the novel, six images are listed, which frequently reoccur throughout the novel and by appearing at the very end as well they provide the story with a framework.

As a result, the choice of memories and images, as well as the frequent repetitions serve the thematic coherence needed in autobiographies. The four types of coherence identified by Habermas and Bluck as characterising conventional storytelling and life-narratives are *temporal*, *biographical*, *causal*, and *thematic coherence* (McAdams 192). The need for a *biographical coherence* is presented both by Christopher and Tony, as they attempt to provide a coherent account of their lives, while *thematic coherence* can be observed in their choice of images and themes to be included in their narratives. Tony Webster occasionally dismisses elements of his past as irrelevant with respect to the aspects of his life discussed in the novel: "Annie was part of my story, but not of this story" and his current female acquaintances are "not part of the story either" (Barnes, *SE* 46; 55). Eventually, it is with hindsight, in relation to Part Two, that the significance of the memories presented in Part One becomes conspicuous. Similarly, the repetition of central themes and images demonstrate how carefully constructed *Metroland* is, too. Both novels are permeated with recurring images and overarching themes, thereby conforming to Frank Kermode's definition of autobiographical writing. Accordingly, writers of autobiographies wish to "achieve some measure or simulacrum of closure, and thus a substitute timelessness" – however, based on Nabokov's "artful autobiography" composed along the lines of repetition, "the true purpose of autobiography" should be the finding of such thematic repetitions in one's life story, echoing Habermas and Bluck's concept of thematic coherence (Kermode, "Memory" 296-297).

### 3.2 Self-Evaluation

Clearly, autobiographies present a highly subjective treatment of memories. As Oliver argues in Barnes's *Talking It Over*, "Memory is an act of will, and so is forgetting," therefore, "My way with memory is to entrust it only with things it will take some pride in looking after" (14; 9-10). That is, life-narratives or autobiographies tend to be tailored to provide

comfort and suit the needs of the autobiographer. Hence, memories are modified – consciously or unconsciously – along subjective lines, primarily in the form of idealisation and the presentation of achievements, but also in a heavily edited form that often serves the justification of past actions. Remembering, then, is coloured by the urge to look upon one’s life as meaningful and successful – hence, evaluation is integral to life-narratives. As for the types of evaluation inherent in life-narratives, Craig R. Barclay has created a system for the analysis of coherent biographical narratives. As described by Barclay, there are *progressive*, *regressive*, and *stable narratives*: a *progressive narrative* begins with a negative emotion or evaluation and arrives at a positive one; a *regressive narrative* starts out with positive evaluation and ends in a negative tone; and evidently, a *stable narrative* presents no change in evaluation (Barclay 102). As life-narratives are often evaluated and re-evaluated, various versions tend to come into being. In the case of Barnesian self-narrators, as it will be demonstrated, there is no simple progressive narration, because their self-evaluation is frequently unsettled by conflicts with the versions of their fellow characters.

First of all, every part of *Metroland* is ended with a chapter entitled “Object Relations”, offering reflections on and evaluation of the preceding section of Christopher Lloyd’s life. At the end of the first part, Christopher recalls sitting in his old room claiming “The whole room is full of things I don’t have” and “It is all to come,” recalling his adolescent thirst for growing up and capital-L Life, presenting adolescent waiting as stable in terms of evaluation (81). Part Two, the Paris episode, ends with “worked on my thesis . . . fell in love, had my heart chipped; improved my French . . . met my wife,” making it a progressive narrative (153). Finally, at the beginning of Part Three Christopher produces lists of his achievements such as the following one:

If you came and inventoried me, I’d have ticks in all the appropriate boxes. I’m surprised how well camouflaged I seem. Age: Thirty / Married: Yes / Children: One / Job: One / House: Yes / With mortgage: Yes / (Rock solid so far) / Car: Arguable / Jury Service: Once, finding accused not guilty after long discussion of ‘reasonable doubt’ / Pets: No, because they mess up / Foreign holidays: Yes / Prospects: Bloody better be / Happiness: Oh, yes; and if not now, then never. (Barnes, *M* 159)

As can be seen, Christopher reasserts the indicators of adulthood they were looking forward to as teenagers, highlighting material possessions, financial stability, and considerable independence. In this respect, his narrative can be seen as a progressive one, as having reached these goals evokes a sense of pride in him. However, this also indicates a shift in his way of thinking: by now, suburban permanence is seen as favourable instead of mediocre and

boring. Nevertheless, Christopher seeks reassurance about his past decisions, for instance, in the form of a “comforting list” of reasons why he married Marion, concluding “Because I have said that I love her, and there is no turning back. No cynicism is intended . . . Marriage moves you further away from the examination of truth, not nearer to it. No cynicism is intended there either” (Barnes, *M* 170). As making such a list in itself can be seen as sceptical and cynical towards marriage, Christopher’s comments on cynicism are rather ironic. At the same time, Christopher clearly needs self-justification here: encountering temptation on behalf of a twenty-something woman and being criticised by Toni for his faithfulness, the previously undisturbed progressive narrative is now unsettled.

Even more so at the end of Part Three, when Toni voices his condemnation of the vegetable patch in Christopher’s garden: “So this is it?” and Christopher reacts thus: “why let someone else cut in on your self-reproaches?” and “Saturday afternoons, as I track the lawnmower carefully . . . don’t think I can’t still quote Mallarmé” (211). The anger and defensiveness induced by Toni’s question indicates Christopher’s awareness of the discrepancy between their shared youthful plans and what his life eventually turned out to be like. As a result, his positive evaluation is undermined and he feels the need again to justify his decisions by claiming “I’d call myself a happy man” (212). According to Merritt Moseley, this happiness arises partly from Christopher’s “willingness to settle” (Moseley 30). Yet, Christopher does show some degree of disillusionment in his final remarks, turning the novel into a regressive narrative: while his youth is described as “everything seemed more open to analogy, to metaphor, than it does now. There were more meanings, more interpretations, a greater variety of available truths. There was more symbolism. Things contained more,” his present attitude is that “there’s no point in trying to thrust false significances onto things” and in searching for hidden meanings (Barnes, *M* 13; 214). In the end, “The lamp snaps off, and I am left with a lozenge-shaped blue-green after-image. I continue to stare; it diminishes, and then, in its turn, and in its quieter way, snaps of,” standing for the loss of a youthful, imaginative self, passivity in the present, and questioning the possibility of change in the future – Metroland is where the story begins, as well as where it ends, there is no way out (214).

As for *The Sense of an Ending*, in contrast with Christopher’s youthful determination to be satisfied and optimistic, Tony Webster produces more of an ironic, detached evaluation of his life. In Part One, Tony enumerates his achievements: his jobs, his marriage with Margaret (though ended by a divorce), their daughter Susie, their grandchildren, and his retired life spent in his flat with his possessions, still having “drinking pals” and “women

friends – platonic, of course,” being member of “the local history society,” and running the library at the hospital (Barnes, *SE* 55-56). Then he adds “at least I shall know my way around the hospital when my turn comes” and “And that’s a life, isn’t it? Some achievements and some disappointments . . . I survived” (56). Though seemingly keeping an ironic distance from his life-narrative, Tony, as any other autobiographer, is preoccupied with creating a coherent, pleasing narrative. However, as seen earlier in the case of the letter episode, Tony does not only deceive himself in the process, but also other people. For example, “when I first met Margaret . . . I wrote Veronica out of my life story” and when he eventually reveals their relationship, he makes himself “sound more of a dupe and Veronica more unstable than she’d been” (69; 74-75). Also, upon meeting Veronica for the first time after decades, he tells him the idealised story of his life in “The version I tell myself, the account that stands up” (116).

It is in Part Two, when confronted with other people’s narratives, that Tony repeatedly has to modify his view of the past and re-evaluate his life and actions, thereby overcoming self-deception. When finding out about the truth and Veronica’s perspective, many of Tony’s previous accounts are changed. As a result, his initially critical presentation of his relationship with Veronica and the visit to her parents’ house are transformed into a positive experience accompanied by the acknowledgement of his own mistakes, no longer blaming Veronica exclusively. Similarly, while he at first imagines Adrian’s suicide as an idealised and idolised act based on philosophical considerations, induced by “mental and philosophical courage” to take command of his own life, he later comes to realise that Adrian’s suicide resembles that of their fellow student Robson, motivated by getting his girlfriend pregnant and being “unable to face the consequences” (88; 140). While confronting the truth about the past and himself, however, Tony’s self-evaluation is completely undermined, resulting in a dramatically regressive narrative. By the end, Tony Webster concludes “there is unrest. There is great unrest” (150). Unrest in terms of the definition of his identity, as well as a loss of coherence in his life-narrative, and a daunting lack of chance for a change in the future, accompanied by an unsettling ending to the novel.

As life stories are oriented towards future plans and goals, the past is always viewed from the present in relation to the future, so that memories are retrieved in a way that the self currently working towards the future may make use of them (McAdams 194). As we have just seen, the future is problematic both in *Metroland* and in *The Sense of an Ending*: the former presents an all too predictable future, whereas the latter shows the absence of the future, so that instead of using the future as a reference point, it is with respect to the unfolding story that certain memories are chosen and are presented in particular ways. In terms of the plot

itself, then the ending could be the quasi-future that the story is headed towards – as Peter Brooks argues, all plots are aimed at reaching an ending, as “The desire of the text (the desire of reading)” is “desire for the end” (qtd. in Kermode, “Forgetting” 309). It is precisely the discrepancy between this desire and the lack of a proper – if not comforting than at least finite and well-defined – ending that results in considerable unrest on behalf of Tony himself, as well as the reader. In this respect, the dual meaning of the title *The Sense of an Ending* comes in handy: on the one hand, ‘sense’ means a sensation, and so the title can be read as the elderly Tony’s approaching death; on the other hand, ‘sense’ understood as a synonym of point, meaning, or reason raises the question of what sense an ending could have with respect to Tony’s life or the novel itself. However, the gloomy ending is not necessarily the result of postmodern passivity and pessimism; instead, it is precisely Tony’s collapsed life-narrative lacking coherence that necessitates the lack of a future perspective.

### 3.3 Confrontation and Corroboration

It is important to note that memories and life stories are created collectively, with the participation of the family, friends, and any surrounding social group (McAdams 200). In fact, as one’s life story is embedded in culture, it necessarily follows some cultural models about selfhood and coherent life stories (Bruner 210). Thus, the need for being autonomous creatures with freedom of choice, while at the same time conforming to cultural norms and social groups, turns self-making narratives into a “balancing act” between autonomy and commitment (Bruner 218). Curiously, both Christopher and Tony have a friend whose influence reaches them even when they are not in contact, as if constantly present in the form of an underlying narrative: Toni’s presence is felt even when Christopher is away in Paris, while Tony Webster looks upon Adrian as his role-model even decades after Adrian’s suicide. According to Stott, this phenomenon signifies Christopher’s lack of autonomy; thus, the writing of his autobiography can be seen as an act of taking control over his life (117). This reading can clearly be applied to *The Sense of an Ending* as well, although one should bear in mind that this act is by no means proactive; detachment occurs due to the changed perception of the previously admired figures.

In addition to the influence of others, the expectations of society, too, affect not only what one presents to the outside world, but also what one tells oneself: people “conform to a tacit *pacte autobiographique*” even when they are telling themselves about themselves (Bruner 211). In addition, one relies heavily on other people’s (supposed) versions of oneself. Tony Webster is aware of this phenomenon and reflects on it thus: “How often do we tell our

own life story? How often do we adjust, embellish, make sly cuts? And the longer life goes on, the fewer are those around to challenge our account, to remind us that our life is not our life, merely the story we have told about our life. Told to others, but – mainly – to ourselves” (Barnes, *SE* 95). Apparently, he considers self-narration to be an extremely subjective activity, involving a considerable amount of self-editing. However, he also expresses the importance of confrontation with witnesses and a need for corroboration supporting his own version. He discovers that “as the witnesses to your life diminish, there is less corroboration, and therefore less certainty, as to what you are or have been” (59). Thus, in order to define one’s identity without self-deception, it is not only confrontations with differing versions of one’s story, but also witnesses that are needed, such as fellow characters or, in another sense, the reader.

Aside from corroboration received from surrounding figures, Christopher and Tony themselves produce and consult various forms of documentation in order to find proofs: Christopher Lloyd engages in “practicing my memory exercises, which I had lately begun to ignore,” primarily in the form of writing prose poems and drawing for the purpose of documentation (Barnes, *M* 150). Furthermore, he writes a diary, sends personalised accounts of his time in Paris to Toni and his parents, and consults theatre programmes and tickets to recall and reflect on his past dates: “bundled up chronologically . . . Look, it all happened, they said . . . See how you reacted here, and here . . . And Christ, look at this, now if you don’t feel ashamed about this, I give up on you . . . OK, now you can look at this one – you didn’t do at all badly here” (156). Similarly, Tony Webster keeps returning to a significant document of his relationship with Veronica, a photo depicting the girl surrounded by Tony’s friends. In addition, Tony often relies on letters and regrets when they are not available any longer: “I wish I’d kept that letter, because it would have been proof, corroboration. Instead, the only evidence comes from my memory” (Barnes, *SE* 39). These attempts at finding corroboration are unequivocally aimed at a single true and valid version of the past and illustrate the need for one objective truth, even if hardly or not reachable at all, refuting Hutcheon’s theory of the acceptance of multiple truths in postmodernist fiction described at the beginning. In Barnesian fiction, it is not only Tony Webster who spends months investigating the truth about the past, but several other characters too, like Geoffrey Braithwaite in *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), who would go to any length to identify the authentic parrot used by Flaubert. Barnes – rather characteristically – encourages search for truth by claiming that “we must still believe that objective truth is obtainable; or we must believe that it is 99 per cent obtainable; or if we can’t believe this we must believe that 43 per cent

objective truth is better than 41 per cent” (Barnes, *A History* 245-246). Though aware of the inaccessibility of the past and universal truths, he keeps embarking on quests for the unreachable. While the postmodern notion of truth is that “there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness *per se*, just others’ truths,” Barnes and, by extension, his characters are in search of a singular objective truth, even if attainable only in part, in 43 or 41 per cent (Hutcheon 109).

## Conclusion

Julian Barnes’s fiction has been in a prolific interaction with postmodernist concerns such as the inaccessibility of the past, the imperfection of memory, and the subjectivity of history writing. In *England, England* and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* he provides a critique of the traditional grand narratives of culture and history, whereas his interest in individual life stories and personal testimonies is manifested in his two fictional autobiographies *Metroland* and *The Sense of an Ending*.

Illustrating the postmodern turn towards little narratives, Julian Barnes’s novels *Metroland* and *The Sense of an Ending* each present the narrative identity formation and the self-narrative of a fictional autobiographer against parallel and contrasting versions provided by other characters. Both narratives are permeated with problems of narrative remembering, such as ways of coping with the imperfection of memory, facing the gap between the narrating and the narrated self, overcoming self-deception, and searching for corroboration in the form of witnesses and documentation. As demonstrated in the present paper, the underlying psychological phenomena of life-writing inevitably affect the structure of the narratives in focus, legitimising an analysis based on narrative psychology. Accordingly, non-linearity and the frequent jumps in time are motivated by the autobiographers’ need for revision and self-evaluation; fragmentedness and the insertion of meditative sections illustrate the true nature of remembering; and based on the narrators’ particular aims, there emerges a thematic coherence built on overarching themes and recurring images. Thus, applying the concepts of narrative psychology, the unreliable and unsettling Barnesian narratives of *Metroland* and *The Sense of an Ending* can be successfully interpreted.

Based on the insights provided by narrative psychology, it is apparent that certain general attitudes to postmodernism need to be reconsidered. The fragmentation and unreliability postmodernism is often accused of are in actual fact built on psychological phenomena that shape human narrativity. Therefore, rather than earlier, strictly linear,

straightforwardly structured, and seemingly reliable life-narratives, it is undoubtedly postmodernist fiction that is capable of providing an authentic representation of human narrativity and remembering, inviting a reconsideration of the by now traditional distrust towards postmodernist fiction. Moreover, as ubiquitously advocated by cognitivist researchers of forgetting, the natural state of the human mind is to forget and so anything remembered is seen as extraordinary. Hence, the imperfections of memory need not be so harshly criticised as done by readers and critics of postmodernist fiction. Finally, it is necessary to rethink Hutcheon's view of the relationship between truth(s) and postmodernism, especially as it is not only Barnes whose characters strive to reach the truth, but also those of a number of other postmodern novelists, especially when relating memories and life stories. Both Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000) and Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) offer one essential piece of truth that needs to be discovered. Similarly to Geoffrey Braithwaite in Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*, Max Morden in John Banville's *The Sea* (2005) embarks on a journey into his past, reluctantly facing the truth. Interestingly, even if the pieces of truth in focus are not traumatic *per se*, they are treated the way traumas are: these memories take considerable difficulty to retrieve, yet they need to be processed to ensure that the characters are able to move on with their lives. Hence, instead of accepting and cherishing the multiplicity of truths, it is in effect a single objective truth that these postmodern characters are in search of.

All in all, relying on narrative psychological analysis is a fruitful approach to postmodernist fiction, particularly bearing in mind the assumption that as long as we are all narrative animals – the author, the narrator, all the characters, as well as all the readers – and belong to the species 'homo narrans', there shall always be a degree of narrativity facilitating comprehension. After all, human narrativity is built on the mimetic circle described by Jerome Bruner as "Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative" (qtd. in László 3).

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