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The Ageing Confessor and the Young Villain

Shadowy Encounters of a Mirrored Self in Julian Barnes's *The Sense of An Ending*

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In his discussion of Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), Ivan Callus claims that the British novelist reveals connections with the post-modern aesthetics that remain "a little less evident than in, say, *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) or *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989)" (2012: 55). While in fact his first two literary works display a flamboyant inventiveness that has also contributed to widening the boundaries of postmodern fiction, *The Sense of an Ending*, both because of its brevity and because of the apparently unpretentious ways of its narrator, does not appear as a trend-setter. Nevertheless, *The Sense of an Ending*, reviewed as "a page-turner" (Wallen 2017: 1) or as "a strange and oddly powerful book" (Tóibín 2012: online), is a novel that perceptively plays with the inner constituents of confessional fiction with such a craft as to hide them at times from the reader. The plot of Julian Barnes's literary work, to start with, creates a duality between past and present sequences that interact with, echo, contradict and, ultimately, re-write each other, displaying the quintessential obsession found in such works of fiction "with the question of how we can come to know the past today" (Hutcheon 1989: 47).

The whole story then is told to us by a narrator who defends his unreliability from the very first page. This happens before the reader has even had the chance to understand that this tale relies entirely on a work of

memory, the narrator has already marked his own territory: "what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed." (Barnes 2011: 4) Incidentally, in dealing with contemporary literature originated from memory, Shields has made a sharp comment that seems to be in keeping with the narrator, Antony Webster, and his convoluted efforts at remembering his past: "Anything processed by memory is fiction," he writes (2010: 57). A vague and indistinct capriciousness on the part of the narrating voice directly calls into question the centrality of subjectivity that in this story plays the lion's share. Its function in postmodern writing is explained by Bram Nichol who claims that "[s]ubjectivity, postmodernism asserts, is always changing, always 'in process' rather than stable" (2009: 118). In his own way, in fact, Tony Webster by awkwardly examining his past actions and relationships, tries to re-define his own spaces, and shapes a story that insists on the confusing nature of identity. In addition, a novel that, like so many others in our contemporaneity, makes its way in relation to the rules and whims of memory cannot but challenge and subvert the traditional chronology, offering instead "a non-linear narrative with temporal fragmentation and frequent flashbacks and flashforwards" (Vecsernyés 2014: 35). Furthermore, as I mean to demonstrate in this paper, Tony Webster's fiction artfully, if gently, plays with the modes of a parodic form of a narration seemingly inspired by a confessional novel.

Linda Hutcheon is the scholar who has worked most widely on the reverberations of parody in postmodern literature and she has substantiated her theory by arguing that "[o]n the surface, postmodernism's main interest might seem to be in the processes of its own production and reception, as well as in its own parodic relation to the art of the past" (1987: 179). Barnes's novel, then, offers an outstanding example of how the narrative process in the late modern age is the product of a manipulative action endorsing any kind of strategic approach and/or artifice in order to simulate reality. Finally, in order for us to fully understand *The Sense of an Ending* within the wide frame of postmodern fiction and, by implication, infer its entire corollary, it is also important to briefly allude to the centrality of pastiche, defined as "the mixing of styles and genres, and the juxtaposition of 'low' and 'high' culture" by Nicol (2009: 2), and that Barnes appropriates without reserve. For instance, House finds in it affinities with the detective fiction of "Ruth Rendell" (2011: online), Jordan discusses a possible correspondence with the sensational plotlines of "Roald Dahl['s]"

(2011: online) short fiction, while Kakutani argues that it "manages to create genuine suspense as a sort of psychological detective story" (2011: online). If Carroll writes about it in terms of "a novella" (2015: 157), Greaney confidently locates it within the tradition of "the romance of the archive" (2014: 238). Alternative perspectives possibly include the psychological novel and the Bildungsroman: in this paper I will mainly adopt the stance of confessional fiction.

The confessional novel is an odd literary genre that, in recent times, has experienced a remarkable revival. Basically, it works on the splitting of the self, with a persona staging two distinct roles and identities in strict relation with the flow of time. In the past, in his younger years (most of the protagonists of confessional novels are male) he is described as a sinner, whereas in the present, after achieving maturity and a higher ethical perspective, he overlays a new image of himself as a penitent. The confession is the rite of passage enabling him to have access to a superior principled life that his current expectations and inner balance now require of him as a crucial step in his evolution. In terms of narratology, this duality becomes evident in the splitting of his persona into two separate narrative entities: narrator and protagonist, in fact, appear to be in dialogic opposition, and this explains why this literary genre shows an enhanced narrative distance enabling the chronicle to keep the two ends under control. More in detail, in some cases the narrator may wish to increase the distance and the dissociation from his past self, while in others he may desire to reduce the space from his past self and share his emotions. This will lead him to atone for his iniquity and achieve the cathartic stage of soul cleansing that, when he starts his narration, is precluded to him. If the splitting of the self appears to be a pre-requisite of the confessional novel, *The Sense of an Ending* openly brings this issue to the very surface of the narration, creating a psychological case. The manifestation of his division occurs at various times in the plot and the following is but an example: "My younger self had come back to shock my older self." (Barnes 2011: 92) Of course, the paradox – and the fascination – of the genre lies in the fact that the same individual is subject to a powerful polarization of his own self, in terms of ethical judgment, age and narrative roles. In his insightful essay on the repetition of oddness in the fiction of Julian Barnes, Greaney (2014) writes about the importance of the number three, invariably regulating the life of a man-woman relationship in Julian Barnes's literary output, but in

particular in *The Sense of an Ending*, where the creation – and multiplication – of love triangles markedly characterizes the story. While this theory retains a certain fascination, I claim that *The Sense of an Ending* seems to display a thematic structure, creating a system with elements displayed in a binary opposition instead. My proposal to view the novel as referring to a polarized antinomy of two elemental components soon finds confirmation in the structure of the plot, divided into two macro-sections no better qualified than 'One' and 'Two'. These narrative fragments, however, mainly refer to the two time units in which the tale is narrated, the past and the present. *The Sense of an Ending* further develops this systematic polarity by creating a motivating opposition between the truth of the present clashing with the truth of the past. The already mentioned splitting of Tony Webster into narrator vs. protagonist also originates an additional contrast between youth vs. older age, which spices the fictional account. The moral re-assessment on which the confessional novel creates its assumption, in addition, produces counter discourses between candour and guilt, earnestness and unreliability, University of Bristol and University of Cambridge, as well as forgetfulness and memory. Along these lines, one cannot help but notice that the all-pervading duality between past and present also constructs two imaginary roles for the young and the elderly Tony, featuring alternatively as a villain or as a magistrate in their respective time-layers within a recurrent trope alluding to a trial. What seems to be relevant to stress at this point is that this complex set of opposed dichotomies exists in conformity with the rules of narration in confessional fiction. Nonetheless, *The Sense of an Ending* creates further oppositions also outside of the perimeter of the confessional tale, as it polarizes the perspectives of normalcy vs. disability, as well as those pertaining to gender.

Within this set of antagonistic attitudes, the splitting between the two stages of the narrator's life – youth vs. elderliness – provides a particularly prominent context from which the whole plot of *The Sense of an Ending* continuously draws life. In consonance with how the remaining key elements in the story are analysed, Tony Webster's age identification is never actually clarified, but remains a blurred issue throughout the narration. In part, we can easily ascribe this vagueness to the intrinsic characteristics of the problem, since:

Age identity embodies more than just recognition of chronological age. In large measure, personal assessments, regardless of age, reflect a complex set of socioeconomic or lifestyle factors, perceived age norms and age-appropriate behavior, social and anticipated timetables, health and physical limitations, and interaction patterns in both formal and informal networks. (Hendricks 2001: 37)

Having said this, it remains a fact that Tony cautiously avoids tackling the issue directly but disseminates a number of apparently irrelevant details that the reader ought to find and assess appropriately. Among other important factors, *The Sense of an Ending* is a charming reading exactly because we are demanded to fittingly ponder not only what Tony candidly confesses, but also what he omits, shuns, ignores, or forgets in the course of his monologue, with the result that one may also come to the conclusion that his oversights and exclusions generally occupy the very core of the narration. A discourse about his age needs to be contextualized in this frame: indeed, not only is his age in the present time never determined, but also his classification either as a 'middle-aged', 'elderly' or 'old' man is skilfully eluded. In a crucial passage, however, he identifies himself as a 'pensioner':

I'm retired now. I have my flat with my possessions. I keep up with a few drinking pals, and have some women friends – platonic, of course. (And they're not part of the story either.) I'm a member of the local history society, though less excited than some about what metal detectors unearth. A while ago, I volunteered to run the library at the local hospital; I go round the wards delivering, collecting, recommending. It gets me out, and it's good to do something useful; also, I meet some new people. Sick people, of course; dying people as well. But at least I shall know my way around the hospital when my turn comes. (Barnes 2011: 54)

To start with, it is meaningful that one of the very first characterising elements of his age is lack of sexual activity, which in his chauvinistic frame of mind is never irrelevant: in his youth it was also the main factor to determine up to what extent his relationship with Veronica could be said to be satisfying. Another interesting aspect in this phase of his life is that he admits that death is among his preoccupations, a common concern for people of advanced age. The rest of the plot clearly illustrates that he is a character who suffers from isolation and who is alarmed at his likely mental deficiencies, in particular in relation to his frequent lapses of memory. This

clearly responds to an old person's identikit, however confident and reassured about one's expectations, and is in keeping with many observations made by the Mass Observation Project in their research on age-defining issues. In a way, Tony seems to be part of the group of volunteers who "showed a powerful resistance towards the idea of considering themselves as 'older' or 'ageing'" (Bazalgette et al, 2011: 53) and who rejected the idea of age advancement since "ageing is something that is always on the horizon, rather than imminent" (Bazalgette et al, 2011: 53). Since Tony's inclination towards avoiding taking the risk (and the responsibility) of showing a definite opinion regarding any matter in life seems a constant in his persona, one may be surprised about his sudden decisiveness and clear-cut identification of age in a lifetime when he comes to one of his sharpest and most memorable declarations: "when we are young, we invent different futures for ourselves; when we are old, we invent different pasts for others" (Barnes 2011: 75). This binary system that the narrator uses in order to categorize the natural development of the ageing process in two subsequent stages clearly recognizes his age identification along the two time layers that concur to form the plot of *The Sense of an Ending*.

Matters in relation to ageing are seldom straightforward, in this novel as elsewhere. If these appear to be negative connotations of ageing, advanced age also brings with itself a number of positive counter-effects. The 1992 Mass Observation Project made reference to subjects who claimed to have experienced "greater confidence, peace and self-acceptance" (Bazalgette et al 2011: 11) in old age, with the scholars explaining such beneficial effects both in terms of a diminished weight of responsibilities and as an increased sense of wisdom and experience. If Tony is a witness of many debilitating ageing processes, he also shows the typical self-confidence and sense of judgment that securely drive him to face an assessment of his young self. Even if his story repeatedly turns on his alleged dim-wittedness, the reader cannot fail to notice that he also narrates his autobiography elevating his conscience up to the level of a judge, and uses the trope (and the authority) of the magistrate when needed. The narration of *The Sense of an Ending* stems from this contradictory ambience, but it is most evident that Tony's attitude as a narrator largely benefits from both the sense of wisdom and freedom in judgment that his old age ensures him.

If, however, due to its own intrinsic characteristics the confessional novel originates a split in the subject, Julian Barnes's confessional novel exasperates the range between the contrasting elements to the utmost. A comparison between narrator and protagonist may offer a particularly intriguing result in terms of characterization and reveal (part of) the finesse with which this work of fiction has been conceived. As a protagonist of the story, Tony Webster can hardly be said to have contributed to the appeal of this short fiction, if assessments of the novel describe him as "a not very attractive man" (Cartwright 2011: online) when the reviewer is well-inclined to it, but also as "perhaps the most boring and least likable protagonist in years," (Martino 2012: 56) when the reviewer uses a more severe yard-stick. If not attractive, however, he remains an interesting and puzzling figure. His baldness seems to allude gently to a couple of literary models: Tony in fact incarnates both the ideal of Philip Larkin's 'ordinariness,'[1] and Prufrock's quintessential indecisiveness and procrastination. Accused by his ex-girlfriend of being "cowardly," (Barnes, 2011: 34) he retorts that he is "peaceable" (Barnes 2011: 34) instead, takes shelter in a noncommittal passivity, avoids having expectations and hurries to dismiss others' inattention to him. Around him, Julian Barnes constructs a myth of slow-wittedness that echoes throughout the plot and that brings the narrating voice – his alter ego – to jollily mock him, imagining the inscription on his tombstone: "Tony Webster – He Never Got It." (Barnes 2011: 137)

On the other hand, Tony Webster the narrator possibly shares with him his name only. Whereas as a character he always remains cautiously unconcerned, as a narrator he gains much more self-confidence. He leads his way, skilfully – sometimes unpleasantly – avoiding other people's interferences, deciding – apparently on the spur of the moment – what to tell, what to leave out, what to abridge and what to leave unfinished. Even if he pretends to share a sense of awkwardness and lassitude with his own homonymous self, one cannot miss that he shows a complete mastery of the situation. With his own peculiar ways of telling his story, he invariably manages to drive the reader toward irritation, frustration, sympathy,

1 Colm Tóibín (online) and Michael Greaney (2014) show a number of affinities between the English poet of Hull and the dull protagonist of *The Sense of an Ending* share.

distress, rage, pity, reproach, conspiracy and numberless other reactions. In this sense, it is his unreliability – even if seemingly candidly confessed from the very beginning of the plot – that shows the spectrum of his artfulness and his deceitfulness. In his role as a narrator, Tony is a histrionic play-actor, a creative entertainer and a vicious deceiver so that Greaney hits the mark when he claims that "Webster is a narrator who won't stop talking about himself even though he insists there is nothing to know" (2014: 233). Therefore, while his 'writer' self always shows a resourceful activity, his 'written about' self helplessly displays his irritating passivity: while the former reaps successes, the latter whines about his failures. The narrator's cunning lies in avoiding making his behaviour just too visible, and remaining safely hidden behind the mask of a boring protagonist. This strategy sometimes pops up in his discourse, and this is one of its transparent manifestations: "I was determined to be polite, unoffendable, persistent, boring, friendly: in other words, to lie." (Barnes 2011: 78) Hence, it is their joint action as a couple, made up of one dull and one smart component – like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, for instance? – who secures the story success and liveliness.

It is evident then that in this novel one of the main challenges facing the reader is to make a selection from the constant flow of material that the narrator floods him with. By alternating gross lies with candid revelations, he manages to blur the boundary between fact and fiction, cajoling his audience to believe every single word he says. For this reason, I support the view that *The Sense of an Ending* "has an 'ambush' in place for any naive reader who takes Webster at his word as a decent if dull narrating voice" (Greaney 2014: 239). Webster's self-centredness, turning into various forms of conceitedness and self-absorption, in fact, not only edits his own memory in order to cut a nice figure, but also his memories of other characters, whose portraits appear to be deformed under the narrator's lens. Tony has evidently a score to settle, in particular with Adrian, yet for most of the narration he pretends to remain captivated by his friend's intellectual charm. Of the two, Tony is certainly the least alluring, with Adrian therefore crediting the role of the villain in the situation. Adrian, however, seems to me to be a real champion of heartlessness and selfishness: he does not hesitate to start a relationship with a friend's ex-girlfriend as soon as their story is over (but the time of the switch is not clear), he then betrays her with her mother and, on discovering that the woman is pregnant, he

quits his responsibilities and commits suicide. Neither of the two excels in sympathy. Nonetheless, unsympathetic as he may be, Tony Webster could hardly be said to be as insensitive to ethical matters as his best friend. Of course, one may claim that Tony's unreliability as a narrator is mirrored in Adrian's way of managing relationships. Of course, the focus on the relationship between Tony and Adrian is crucial for a correct reading of the plot because (an unfavourable) comparison with the intellectually-gifted friend echoes throughout the plot and becomes a real obsession for the narrator. His fixation even reaches peaks of pure paroxysm, since his form of mania with his brilliant school-friend does not end with Adrian's suicide: in a Hamlet-like fashion, the protagonist is haunted by the ghost of Adrian's intellectual stature throughout his life. In a curious passage, Tony's mother concedes to him that, even though "a clever boy," (Barnes 2011: 47) he would not dare to stage anything like Adrian's suicide. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that shortly afterwards Tony makes one of his typical sharp-tongued and cynical comments that, on the one hand, reveals his regard for his defunct friend but, on the other, shows a creeping malice: "first-class degree, first-class suicide" (Barnes 2011: 48). The invisible link creating this conflicting friendship and connecting the two boys can be explained if we think of Adrian as Tony's double: both of them have a relationship with Veronica, they become targets of her mother, are clever and fond of philosophy, express the will to be cremated, display a shyness tending to a marked form of self-centredness. Adrian has "clarity and logic," (Wilhelmus 2012: 706) though, as well as a more practical and unswerving attitude regarding his objectives. I will shortly return to this important issue but in the meanwhile I will switch my attention to an analysis of the confessional novel in *The Sense of an Ending*.

Although criticized for its brevity – a number of commentators[2] were left somewhat perplexed when it received the Man Booker Prize in 2011, – *The Sense of an Ending* does not seem to lack in imaginary power, nor in material for a discussion. In terms of the rhetoric adopted and discourse practice, it shows more than a simple affinity with the confessional novel. Furthermore, its artful narrator shrewdly blends what Gill identifies as the main ingredients for the genre: "subjectivity, truth, authority, representation." (2006: 8) This notwithstanding, its author seems to be even

2 Cp. for instance Rachel Carroll 2015: 157.

shrewder than its narrator in creating a blurring motive around this "elegant, careful, and stylish" (Tóibín 2012: online) novel, so that its classification as confessional fiction is not always linear or granted. In her seminal work devoted to this literary genre, Susannah Radstone has analysed the evolution of this narrative pattern starting from Augustine's Confessions, written around 400 A.D., and has argued that if the literary form has obviously undergone modifications in the course of time, a great part of the structure has remained unaltered since then. The unravelling of the plot in a confessional tale goes through a development in four main stages (I will number them in order to better discern them) that the scholar spots as: "(1) recognition that some change is required; (2) distanciation from that which is causing difficulty; (3) articulation of the problem and of the projected future self; (4) and finally appropriation of a new way of life." (Radstone 2007: 22) As for points number 1 and 4, Tony Webster's evolution seems to follow the normative path. A mystifying aura invests *The Sense of an Ending* as one tries to verify a possible association of points number 2 and 3 of Radstone's outline with its plot. This is not to say that there is not a connection, but rather that it is not as straightforward as one may wish it to be.

Tony's progress, in fact, simultaneously matures on two parallel paths. Morality, as one may surmise, is an important field of development crossed by the protagonist-narrator in this fictional account. Actually, Tony needs to fight against his memory, and against his need to neglect episodes and reactions that involved him in the past. However, since the postman always rings twice, he receives two crucial letters – one from "a firm of solicitors" (Barnes 2011: 59) forwarding him the effects of the will of Veronica's mother, and another from Veronica herself, who after 40 years mails him back his letter to Adrian and herself with his rancorous comments about them – that start a long re-evaluation of his own youth and life. Tony does not suspect having any dealings with the will of Mrs Ford, while memory has erased any trace of his enraged reaction to the news that Veronica had started a new relation with Adrian. As a consequence, this double surprise makes the reading of the missives particularly intriguing. If, then, the first of the two letters piques his curiosity, it is the second that for a number of hazy reasons flares his sense of guilt. This message originally came in response to "the hypocrisy of a letter" (Barnes 2011: 40) from Veronica and Adrian, who had informed him of their new relationship, and contained

some vituperative statements about the young couple. Whether he actually feels guilty about this after forty years seems a little hazardous to believe in such a rational subject, but his unrestrained confession returns to his regret at various times in the plot. He better qualifies his feelings declaring that "it wasn't shame I now felt, or guilt, but something rarer in my life and stronger than both: remorse" (Barnes 2011: 93). This sorrow is further amplified at his discovery that Adrian's natural son is disabled and, since his venomous letter to him and Veronica contained an ominous prophecy about their possible child, he seems to feel responsible for having had such an evil purpose. Afraid of seeming superstitious, however (maybe more than causing evil to the couple), he hurries to distance himself from this belief, arguing: "Of course I don't – I didn't – believe in curses. That's to say, in words producing events." (Barnes 2011: 131)

Now, although realistically Tony cannot claim to have had a crystal-clear conduct to Veronica and Adrian in the past, the motives that would now create such a consistent pang in his conscience seem a little too weak to support the entire structure of a piece of confessional fiction, that involves a complete transformation of a subject on the basis of the adherence to a new moral system. His sense of responsibility, in fact, appears to have been hardly involved in the chain of dramatic events which occurred following his reproachable behaviour. Gill's questions about modern confessional fiction seem to address the case in hand appropriately:

> On turning our attention to modern confessional writing, we are faced immediately with a sense of its complexity, its indeterminacy and its apparent incomprehensibility. We are faced with numerous questions: who confesses? Why do they choose so to do? Is there an element of choice or is confession coerced in some specific and individual or general and social way? What, if anything, distinguishes confessional writing from other forms of confession (psychoanalytic, legal, religious?). (2006: 1)

Therefore, if modern confessional writing can be said to be characterized by the choice of a somewhat cloudy purpose, I argue that *The Sense of an Ending* possibly goes further than this. Of course, critical accounts devoted to this work could not underrate the weight of Webster's conscience in this story, and scholars have dealt with this knot. Many, however, have cautiously discussed his moral evolution and his noticeable sense of guilt in terms of the real engine to the story. Vecsernyés, for instance, claims that

"Tony demonstrates considerable reluctance to remember, presumably out of guilt and remorse," (2014: 32) whereas McAdams summarizes the end of the story in these terms: "Adrian's son – is not her son. He is instead her (half) brother, born of the affair that Adrian had with Veronica's mother. The affair, the deepest secret in the story, is revealed in the end. And Tony realizes that he may, in a sense, be culpable for the affair." (2015: 303)

If not in connection with the adoption of a superior moral system, Tony's evolution can alternatively be understood as intellectual growth. The whole plot has in fact Tony the narrator describing Tony the character as the personification of dullness: this drives characters around him – his ex-wife Margaret and Veronica in particular – to experience various degrees of amusement, irritation and exasperation, due to their incredulity at his lack of understanding. The question, as rhetorical as it seems, "You don't get it, do you?" (Barnes 2011: 59, the first time) rings in the plot no less than five or six times and contributes to the reader's figuration of Tony in terms of a thick and brainless character. This image, however, is removed at the very end of the novel when Tony finally grasps the truth about the disabled Adrian, and evenly claims: "And later, at home, going over it all, after some time, I understood." (Barnes 2011: 141) His switching to a higher intellectual level – from someone who never got it to someone who does – certainly elevates him, but hardly on a moral stage. Therefore, even if the novel seems to have the typical frame of a confessional novel, in this perspective *The Sense of an Ending* might not be eligible as such, but, in line with the standard in postmodern fiction, it may constitute a parodic use of confessional fiction.

It is needless to say that the shift from confessional fiction to a parodic use of this genre does not involve a mere problem of classification, but formally shows that the narrator is not offering a confession. Or, rather, his pleading guilty seems to be a mask used to cover a different activity. This feeling may possibly find confirmation if we focus our attention on another important element in confessional fiction: the narratee. The fictional persona to which a narration is addressed in a confessional fiction acquires an importance that seems to be inversely proportional to its presence in the text. In fact, this literary genre produces a discourse that magnifies subjectivity, self-centredness and, at times, even forms of narcissism, on the grounds that not only should its narration be seen as the result of a psychological torment met by the narrator, but also – and mainly – that his

act of narration is intended as a salvific and soothing power for him. In these conditions the readers acquiesce in – and sometimes endure – the omnipresent selfhood of the narrator, who splits his persona into two distinct entities, who moves back and forth in his narration on the wave of his own emotions while possibly disregarding the readers' needs, and who makes use of melodramatic rhetoric. In the course of his narration, it is clear that the excessive presence of his selfhood is an artful strategy of the representation of his pain. It is true, however, that he actually shares the stage with another subject, the narratee, who happens to be a collaborative, friendly, kind but – most importantly – a silent figure. Whereas in the text the space assigned to the narratee shows a remarkable disproportion in favour of the narrator, the former is a figure of great magnitude since, by simply listening – sometimes even talking – to the narrator, he manages to have the narrator purified of his impurity, and cured of his malaise. Despite confining him to a (limited) space, *The Sense of an Ending* designates the narratee with a moderately sizeable place so that his presence is realistically felt: yet, his voice is never heard, but only echoed in Tony's long soliloquy. Below, I quote a meaningful example of this strategy:

> You might think this is rubbish – preachy, self-justificatory rubbish. You might think that I behaved towards Veronica like a typically callow male, and that all my 'conclusions' are reversible.
> For instance, 'After we broke up, she slept with me' flips easily into 'After she slept with me, I broke up with her.' You might also decide that the Fords were a normal middle-class English family on whom I was chippily foisting bogus theories of damage; and that Mrs Ford, instead of being tactfully concerned on my behalf, was displaying an indecent jealousy of her own daughter. You might even ask me to apply my 'theory' to myself and 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. (Barnes 2011: 44)

While this mode of narration is widely used in confessional fiction, what seems to be a little uncommon is the clouding around the narratee's identity that invites us to wonder who the (fictional) entity is to whom this entire tale is addressed.

Of course, the immediate answer one is tempted to offer is that the narratee is the implied reader because he adopts the same manner of approach. However, no textual evidence in the plot drives us to a clear identification of this persona in terms of the implied reader, nor is there any allusion to the fact that the story we are reading is in a book-form; that would create the assumptions for a recipient in the text as an implied reader. In Graham Swift's *Waterland*, for instance, another English postmodern novel that may be interpreted along the lines of a confessional novel, the narratee has a clearer identification with Tom Crick's pupils and, at times, with one of them in particular, Price. What I am arguing here is not that the recognition of the addressee of the narration in *The Sense of an Ending* cannot be an implied reader: he may seem to be coincident with the narratee, but since we have no proof in the text, we cannot be sure about it.

Alternatively, one may imagine that the fictional 'you' to whom the narration is addressed is not someone different from Tony, but simply a projection of Tony's personality. Considering that the narratee is intended to help the narrator in his trip toward an inner liberation, I would suggest viewing him in terms of what Sigmund Freud called the 'superego,' a part of our self that represents our conscience, briefly defined as "that moral judgment which will be used in determining future behaviour" (Strickland 2001: 637). Interpreted in this way, *The Sense of an Ending* would be a tale that a troubled narrator is only pretending to tell to a listener, since the text would actually be the recollection of an entire lifetime narrated to his own double. Tony Webster is arguably not a very sociable person and one of his main difficulties in relating with others lies in his bar to communications, a limit he thinks he can overcome with a fervid imagination. He has a penchant for creating identities to whom he fancies he talks about his problematic past and who severely judge his conscience: one such imaginary persona is what he calls "the barrister in my head" (Barnes 2011: 114), with whom his tortured self creates a fascinating confrontation.

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. 'And yet you claim this memory was suppressed for forty years?' 'Yes.' 'And only surfaced just recently?' 'Yes.' 'Are you able to account for why it surfaced?' 'Not really.' 'Then let me put it to you, Mr Webster, that this supposed incident is an entire figment of your imagination, constructed to justify some romantic attachment which you appear to

have been nurturing towards my client, a presumption which, the court should know, my client finds utterly repugnant.' 'Yes, perhaps. But –' 'But what, Mr Webster?' 'But we don't love many people in this life. One, two, three? And sometimes we don't recognise the fact until it's too late. Except that it isn't necessarily too late. Did you read that story about late-flowering love in an old people's home in Barnstaple?' 'Oh please, Mr Webster, spare us your sentimental lucubrations. This is a court of law, which deals with fact. What exactly are the facts in the case?' I could only reply that I think – I theorise – that something – something else – happens to the memory over time. For years you survive with the same loops, the same facts and the same emotions. (Barnes 2011: 112)

The possibility that Tony Webster is therefore telling the story of his life to a part of his self – whether the fictional barrister, or any similar creation of his imagination is trivial – exists, even though, as in the previous case, this cannot be properly documented but remains on the level of pure hypothesis. However, the switch in interpretation is not inconsistent here. Again, the idea that Tony Webster is not making amends in front of an authoritative figure who may clean his conscience, but simply pretending to do so, while actually simply waiting for his own approbation, reinforces the possibility that the entire narration is shaped in terms of a parody rather than of a frank confession. This in fact would dismantle the entire architecture of a confessional fiction, the foundations of which directly respond to a relation of power engaging the penitent to the confessor. In a revealing passage, Michel Foucault argues:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile. (1978: 71-72)

If, then, confessional fiction does not solve all the problems concerning a correct interpretation of *The Sense of an Ending*, we should look for an alternative solution that fully gives sense to this complex, if brief novel. Although the narrator illustrates a dramatic story, burdened by a pervading sense of disorientation, remorse, anguish, frustration and dealing with

suicides and broken relationships, the conclusion at least seems to offer a sense of relief and to remove a pessimistic aura from above the main character, so that Carroll has argued that it ends in an unconcealed note of triumph.[3] This should be possibly read less in relation with his final access to a superior understanding than with his discovery that his friend Adrian had a disabled son (named after him). Constructed as his own Doppelgänger, Adrian (the father), in fact, with his intellectual appeal has more than simply disturbed Tony, and his relationship with Veronica, Tony's ex-girlfriend, has further hurt the narrator's male ego. As in ordinary tales dealing with the double, therefore, a final balance is reaffirmed only on the condition that one self prevails over the other, in a solution typical of Stevenson's fiction. However, in Julian Barnes's hands the terminal duel between Doppelgänger extends further than to the lives of the two challengers, since Tony, as we have seen, still feels Adrian's pressure choking his sense of liberty after he has committed suicide. In a way, for Tony, Adrian has not yet died after cutting his veins "diagonally" (Barnes 2011: 48). Since the whole story – both the perspective and the chronicle – is subordinate to the narrator's subjectivity, the duel between the counterparts reaches its conclusion only when Adrian's image in Tony's mind has been definitively suppressed. In this sense, the homonymy of father and (disabled) son is not a mere coincidence. Wuthering Heights displays a parallel situation where the main character Catherine has a daughter who has the same name as her mother: in a famous essay, Linda Gold claimed that this is a strategy enabling the multiple narrator to create a connection between the two women, because "the youthful and passionate Catherine Earnshaw both dies and lives transformed in the person of her daughter and namesake, Catherine Linton" (1985: 71). It is meaningful that Catherine Earnshaw dies in childbirth when Cathy is born, whereas in *The Sense of an Ending*, Adrian Finn possibly commits suicide when he becomes aware that Sarah Ford, mother of his 'official' girlfriend, is pregnant with his child. Both stories seem to represent an ideal switching of identity between parent and child. As a result, Adrian Finn and his son are not necessarily to be seen as two distinct characters (only), but can also be

3 "Webster's narrative does conclude with a revelation which prompts him to declare triumphantly: 'And later, at home, going over it all, after some time, I understood. I got it.'" (Carroll 2015: 160)

interpreted as two distinct projections of the same identity. Adrian the father is the impeccable intellectual, whose image remains confined to the past, whereas his disabled son corresponds to Tony's representation in the present of his ex-school-friend, a representation that is obviously tinged with hate and revenge. In this perspective, Carroll's observation that "[t]he juxtaposition of Finn's exceptional intellect with Adrian's learning disability seems designed to deliver a decisive narrative irony" (2015: 168) appears particularly acute. More explicitly, the description of the disability in Adrian's son is equivalent to a murder of (the image of) Adrian Finn, in the mind of the narrator so that, after this crucial revelation, the story can swiftly reach its conclusion. Tony appears to be a little less "peaceable" (Barnes 2011: 34) than he claims, but Tóibín in his inspired review of *The Sense of an Ending* warns the readers that "it is easy to misread it" (2012: online).

I was amused to read in a note to Greaney's article on the oddness in the English novelist that "Barnes, in interview, has said that when he was writing *The Sense of an Ending*, he wasn't aware that the novel-in-progress shared its name with one of the twentieth century's most celebrated works of narrative theory" (Greaney 2014: 232). If one cannot trust Julian Barnes how can one trust his narrators, one is tempted to ask. Tony Webster is in fact one of those captivating postmodern storytellers who will swear to tell the untruth, the whole untruth and nothing but the untruth.

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