

The Ethics of Memory: Self-Reconstruction and Character Narration in *The Sense of an Ending*

Tang Yili

Abstract: In *The Sense of an Ending*, Julian Barnes explores self-reconstruction and its ethical implications in the dynamics of memory by use of character narration. This article examines the narrative rhetoric and ethics of character narration in *The Sense of an Ending* in the broader context of rhetorical theory. It argues that Barnes's experiment with character narration sets up interpretive and ethical traps for readers, encouraging them to initially bond with the unreliable narrator Tony but offering signs of estrangement. The indirect rhetorical mode continues Barnes's ethical and philosophical reflection on memory as well as his humanistic exploration of life and its meaning.

Key words: *The Sense of an Ending*; Julian Barnes; memory; ethics; character narration

Author: Tang Yili, Ph.D. in Literature, is Assistant Professor at Shanghai Jiao Tong University (Shanghai 200240, China). Her research interests in scholarship include narrative theory, contemporary Anglo-American fiction and Ethical Literary Criticism(Email: milkytang2008@sjtu.edu.cn).

标题：记忆的伦理：《终结的感觉》中的自我重建与人物叙述

内容摘要：在《终结的感觉》中，当代英国作家朱利安·巴恩斯运用人物叙述的手法呈现了记忆动态运作中的自我重建和伦理意蕴。本文基于修辞性叙事理论，探讨了小说人物叙述中涉及的各种修辞运动和所隐含的伦理意义。巴恩斯的叙事试验为读者设置了阐释以及伦理的陷阱，其行文策略在于由最初对人物叙述者托尼不可靠叙述契约的鼓励转变为对其疏远的暗示。这一叙事模式承载了巴恩斯对记忆的深层伦理和哲学思考，也体现了其深切的人文关怀。

关键词：《终结的感觉》；朱利安·巴恩斯；记忆；伦理；人物叙述

作者简介：汤轶丽，文学博士，上海交通大学长聘教轨助理教授，主要学术研究领域为叙事学、当代英美小说研究与文学伦理学批评。本文系国家社科基金重大招标项目“当代西方伦理批评文献的整理、翻译与研究”【项目编号：19ZDA292】以及浙江省哲学社会科学规划课题一般课题“朱利安·巴恩斯作品的叙事策略和伦理思想研究”【项目编号：21NDQN205YB】阶段性成果。

In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, the British novelist Julian Barnes claims: “memory is closer to the imagination than it is to recorded newspaper fact” (qtd.in Wachtel). Barnesian readers who are familiar with his oeuvre will easily find that he regards the fallibility of memory as a human faculty. Just as Vanessa Guignery shrewdly notes, “among points of interest in Barnes’s production which make it distinctive but also situate it within contemporary trends are his treatment of historiography and biography in fiction (and the blurring of the boundaries between them) and his focus on the fallibility of memory” (Guignery 153). In his memoir, *Nothing to Be Frightened of* (2008), Barnes admits that he and his brother often disagree about the basic facts of their childhood, and that his memories are often faulty when he talks about his own life. When faced with this kind of disagreement, his brother prefers imaginative truth and a coherent self-narrative to historical accuracy. Barnes highlights the fallible, elusive, and manipulative nature of memory in *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), which offers many reflections on the mechanics of memory.

The Sense of an Ending presents us a dual structure. In the first part of the novel, the character narrator Tony Webster, a cautious and divorced man in his 60s, is approaching the end of his relatively unexceptional life. He embarks on a personal journey to reflect on his life from the vantage point of late middle age, where he presents the importance of his adolescence spent with his clique and first girlfriend. For the most part, Tony unfolds his recounting in a linear fashion, moving chronologically and logically. However, Tony is skeptical about his personal memory and reminds readers that he is no longer certain of his narrative and memory. As Barnes notes in the interview, the novel’s “first part takes place—unrolls—in the mode of memory, and then the second part, which is where the work starts now, as it were, then unrolls at the pace of life, and it quickens, and it quickens” (qtd.in Wachtel). The shattering “peripeteia” in part two that breaks the pace of part one, accompanies a series of dramatic disclosures wreaking havoc in Tony’s perception of his memories, life, and self. The lack of correspondence between his memories and factual evidence reveals Tony’s unreliability and culpability. It forces him to recognize his mistakes in the past and to re-evaluate his life by revisiting memories described in the first part. The novel thus transforms the monologic text in Part One into a dialogic text in Part Two. The handful of scattered recollections in the first part seems uneventful; almost none of them are notably important to him. However, the mediocrity of Tony and his youth makes his distorted memory and unreliable narration even more remarkable because it is relatable to anyone.

The crucial argument among critics is the reason behind Tony's fallibility. Critics such as Frederick Holmes, Chen Bo, Liu Zhihuan, and Yang Jincai draw attention to the construction and operation of memory. Holmes adopts a Kermudian perspective on the manipulation of time in the narrative construction, arguing that Tony's inability to truly grasp the nature of time is reflected in his imperfect memory (Holmes 27). To Liu and Yang, Tony's unreliable narration encapsulates the unreliability of the "imitation of forgetting". Tony's memory is distorted because he merely presents his evaluation and interpretation of events, rather than shaping the evidence (Liu and Yang 49-50). Chen argues that Tony's unreliability reveals the cognitive error of memory and hence the inherently constructive nature of memory (Chen 96). Rather than focusing on the mechanics of memory, other critics concentrate on Tony's self-construction. James Ramsey Wallen explains that it is Tony's need to construct his own fictionalized history by adopting a new life narrative while rejecting the old that causes his memory distortion (Wallen 332). Dhananjay Jagannathan states that Tony's unreliability does not stem, or certainly not entirely, from a failure of memory: his real problem is a failure of self-knowledge (Jagannathan 111-112).

Given the reasons for Tony's unreliability, the difference between these arguments lies in the problematic relationship between memory and the self. It should be stressed that neither memory nor identity can be eschewed in the analysis of Tony's unreliability. How, then, is identity constructed in the service of memory? Is there an ethics of memory, a duty of remembrance? How does Tony assume the responsibility of remembrance? To approach these questions, this article probes the techniques and ethics of character narration in *The Sense of an Ending* in the broader context of rhetorical theory. It argues that Barnes's use of character narration succeeds in alternating the distance between the authorial audience and the narrator, encouraging readers to reflect on the mechanics of memory and identity. Rather than being a victim of friendships and romantic relationships, Tony reconstructs himself and thus reconciles with the past in the process of narrating.

Estranging Unreliability and Bonding Unreliability: A Rhetoric of Character Narration in *The Sense of an Ending*

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Tony plays the dual role of a character participating in the storyworld and a narrator in the discourse. James Phelan refers to this type of narration as character narration, in which an implied author uses a single text to address at least two different audiences (their own and the character narrator's narratee) to accomplish at least two different purposes (their own and the character

narrator's) (Phelan 2005, 1). Like character narration, unreliable narration is also a mode of indirect communication. Put another way, we have one text (*The Sense of an Ending*), two speakers (Tony is explicit, Barnes is implicit), two audiences (Barnes's and Tony's), and at least two purposes (Barnes's and Tony's). Phelan identifies six types of unreliability—misreporting, misreading, misregarding, underreporting, underreading, underregarding (Phelan 2007, 225), each of which may have bonding or estranging effects. In estranging unreliability, the authorial audience feels estranged from the narrator upon realizing that he/she cannot be taken at face value. In bonding unreliability, on the contrary, though the authorial audience reaches the conclusion that the narrator is unreliable, that unreliability actually reduces the distance between the narrator and the audience.

In the first reading of part one, Barnes allows the audience to interpret the text in the tradition of the memoir so that the audience can turn to the pattern of memoir as a map for reading Tony's story, closing the gap between unreliable narrator (Tony) and audience. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator warns the audience about his memory:

We live in time—it holds us and moulds us—but I've never felt I understood it very well... No, I mean ordinary, everyday time, which clocks and watches assure us passes regularly: tick-tock, click-clock.... I'm not interested in my schooldays, and don't feel any nostalgia for them. But school is where it all began, so I need to return briefly to a few incidents that have grown into anecdotes, to some approximate memories which time has deformed into certainty. If I can't be sure of the actual events any more, I can at least be true to the impressions those facts left. That's the best I can manage. (Barnes 3-4)

The paragraph prefaces Tony's narration with a disclaimer, which from the beginning sets him out as an unreliable narrator. He is aware of the gap between factual events and their reconstruction. The reflection on the nature of time is theorized by Koermode's assertion that time is chaotic and disorganized. However, Tony's recollection attempts to impose order on the chaos of time, even though time which is expected to be fixed turns out to be disordered. The reliability of recollection is more likely foregrounded and told by the narrator himself. In the opening lines, Tony is constructed as an unreliable narrator but who is honest on the summary of his experience and representation of memory. Tony is a reliable reporter of his memory deficits here, but the question of reliability becomes more interesting if we consider his role as the memoirist and narrator. On the one hand, Tony is an

authority on the reporting of his memory deficits, and so as the authorial audiences we have a strong trust in taking his reporting and interpretation as reliable, since Tony is the only one who knows his past. On the other hand, if we perceive Tony as fully reliable, then the implied author (Barnes) will lead us to find some ethical deficiency in Tony's narration. The fiction opens at the point of depicting Tony as a qualified memoirist and a "reliable" narrator.

Even though readers are aware of his unreliable narration pertaining to facts, characters, and events that Tony warned about from the beginning, it seems that his unreliability is innately the nature of memory. In this way, Barnes's central technique of fusing fiction and memoir helps us to understand his unreliability. This technique shows that Barnes is more concerned with the subjective truth or the illusion of truth-telling. This approach to truth has consequences for understanding the narrative distance between the narrator and the authorial audience. Tony's recollection requires readers' cooperation to decipher this connection. Incorporating this type of interactive analysis draws the reader in with unreliable narration, and then feeds on the readers' curiosity. This fusion results in gaining readers' trust and shortening the distance between the narrator and the audience. Barnes's play with the relation between the mimetic and the synthetic components of Tony's role raises an amusing dilemma. For the authorial audience, Tony is as synthetic as any of the elements in Barnes's fiction, and so the distinction between truth and imagination that he makes within that synthetic fiction does not hold. The implied author, however, is inviting his authorial audience to go back to Tony's distorted memory and to search for the truth. Furthermore, we recognize that Barnes seems to license Tony's unreliability in his "memoir writing". Barnes allows himself to appear on the same diegetic level as Tony, transforming himself from the author of the fictional *The Sense of an Ending* to the historian who investigates Tony's life and then writes a book about it. It thus falls upon Barnes's audience to realize that as the creator of the diegetic level, he gives Tony a license to find fault in his "memoir writing". In this regard, it somehow fits Phelan's subtype of estranging/bonding unreliability, the playful comparison between implied author and narrator, in which the former playfully uses unreliable narration to call attention to both similarities and contrasts between himself as teller and the narrator as teller. It can be seen in Tony's narration of two suicides in the workplace.

Upon hearing of their schoolmate Robson's suicide, who hangs himself after having impregnated his girlfriend, Tony and his friends measure Robson's death by philosophical and aesthetic standards:

After a long analysis of Robson's suicide, we concluded that it could only be considered philosophical in an arithmetical sense of the term: he, being about to cause an increase of one in the human population, had decided it was his ethical duty to keep the planet's numbers constant. But in all other respects we judged that Robson had let us—and serious thinking—down. His actions had been unphilosophical, self-indulgent and inartistic: in other words, wrong. As for his suicide note, which according to rumor (Brown again) read "Sorry, Mum," we felt that it had missed a powerful educative opportunity. (Barnes 15)

Their approach to analyzing Robson's suicide is intellectual rather than emotional. Their limitless intellectual snobbery and emotional standoffishness can be seen in their reaction to Robson's reason for the suicide. They conclude that Robson died in an arithmetical sense. Besides, these schoolboys are jealous of "his making a name for himself with an early death" and getting a girl pregnant, complaining "Why him and not us? Why had none of us even had the experience of *failing* to get a girlfriend?" (Barnes 15-16, italics in original). Apparently, the dispassionate and naïve voice or vision is located in the past. When Tony draws the conclusion on Robson's suicide and his failure, his fallacious value system results in the consideration that respect for another's life is inferior to the youth's envy of fame and sex. Here, Tony is misreading and misregarding. His disregard for respect denies the importance of human sympathy. It seems that the death only serves a higher philosophical or intellectual purpose.

As a self-centered young schoolboy, Tony seems to be unable to properly evaluate the suicide or death. It seems that he is more concerned about the educational value of Robson's note than his death. The emotional effects of the suicide become powerful, as the dismissal reaches its peak in Tony's jealousy of Robson's sexual relationship. The unreliability implies discrepancies between Tony as a narrator and as a character. The narrator seems to be honest in presenting his younger self by using a dispassionate voice without commenting on what he has done from the beginning. Tony tries to convey the essence of the past episode. It's more attentive to perception and understanding of narrating Tony than the impression of narrated one. This contrast is just a small glimpse at why he seems unreliable. The implied author emphasizes another essence of Tony's narration, namely self-reflexivity. Duly cognizant of the fickleness of memory, Tony's modest proclamation of being the narrator reflects the importance of reflection in memoir. Jane Taylor McDonnell emphasizes this: "The reflective voice is so important to memoir writing because self-revelation without reflection or understanding is

merely self-exposure. We want the author of a memoir to have grown up, to have learned from earlier mistakes or experiences, and to be the wiser for it. A writer who merely tells us (or even shows us) how awful life was will quickly lose our interest” (McDonnell 136). Based on the previous impression, Tony is a reflective memoirist who has already shown his reflection on his past and experiences. Therefore, the memoirist’s audience will reject the character’s words and reconstruct a more satisfactory account. They believe that the memoirist shares the same feelings with them and sees sorrow and loss in Robson’s suicide emotionally rather than judging his death intellectually and unsentimentally. The emotional and ethical effects mostly depend on the genre element of memoir. That is, the awareness of reading memoir leads us to read with the tacit knowledge that the naïve, smug, and unkind young Tony has evolved into the sophisticated, honest, and compassionate narrator.

Before the second suicide, Tony and his school friends part ways. The narrative then shifts to the account of his relationship with his first girlfriend, Veronica, during his studying history at Bristol. In Tony’s narration, Veronica is depicted as an arrogant and manipulative girl. She seems to belittle her boyfriend intellectually while Tony is more concerned with whether Veronica will sleep with him. We see this dynamic during an unpleasant encounter with her family. Instead of excitement or joy of bringing the boyfriend home, Veronica neglects and leaves Tony behind. He deems himself humiliated by her supercilious father and brother. Only Sarah, Veronica’s mother, shows him kindness. Shortly after, they split up. Adrian later writes a letter to Tony asking permission to date Veronica. As far as Tony remembers, he sends a long letter to Adrian as such: “I also advised him to be prudent, because in my opinion Veronica had suffered damage a long way back. Then I wished him good luck, burnt his letter in an empty grate (melodramatic, I agree, but I plead youth as a mitigating circumstance), and decided that the two of them were now out of my life forever” (Barnes 46). It seems to be understandable for Tony to express his anger and hostile feelings. However, he appears to harbor a relatively tolerant attitude toward them. At this point, events become increasingly provocative. We learn that Adrian cuts his wrists, leaving a note about the philosophical decision to choose suicide. Compared with Robson’s death, Tony’s tone seems more emotional, but he soon restores enough mental balance to analyze Adrian’s suicide.

Unlike the mundane explanation of Robson’s youthful act, Adrian’s suicide is more like a result of philosophical speculation on life:

But my mind kept returning to all those fervently innocent discussions we’d

gone in for when Robson hanged himself in the attic, back before our lives began. It had seemed to us philosophically self-evident that suicide was every free person's right: a logical act when faced with terminal illness or senility; a heroic one when faced with torture or the avoidable deaths of others... None of these categories had applied in the case of Robson's squalidly mediocre action. (Barnes 52)

This time, Tony and his friend draw the conclusion that Adrian only commits suicide for philosophical reasons; at least he has not killed himself for some mundane reason like getting a girl pregnant. Tony exalts Adrian's suicide, viewing it as a logical, heroic, and glamorous act. Unlike Robson's method, Tony perceives Adrian's method acceptably Roman and blames Veronica for failing to save Adrian. On the surface, Tony seems to be deeply touched by Adrian's death. However, his voice is still casual, and his speculation on his friend's death shows that he has no knowledge of the reason behind Adrian's act, and he is innocent in relation to it. He depicts himself as an onlooker and an outsider. Even though his audience will question Tony's conclusion, it probably won't doubt his innocence. In other words, the audience is not sure about Tony's reliability here. However, if the narrator gives an insufficient or wrong interpretation of the reason, it is most likely due to the lack of information about why Adrian ends his life. Tony is aware of the existence of his audience and of his position in the telling. Despite his own defects, partiality and unreliability, his straight confession of unreliable memory and employment of the specific narrative technique basically win audiences' trust.

Tony's narration of the past is full of ambiguities and conflicts when referring to Veronica and her family. For instance, in recounting the relationship with Veronica, Tony proposes his "damage theory". From his letter to Adrian, Tony warns him that Veronica could not be trusted, because in his opinion she had suffered damage a long way back, and then repeatedly stresses that he is not clear himself what he meant by "damage". He mimics Freud's theory of repressed memories, but he fails to figure out who is damaged and what are the consequences. Instead, he even implies that the damage will also result in the repression and distortion of his certain memories, like the sequence of having sex with Veronica and their breakup. In this sense, Tony is an unqualified memoirist, who confuses the audience's judgment of his past and increases the difficulty of decoding his unreliability.

Consequently, an effect of the playful comparison is to align Tony with the implied author along the axis of perception. However, there are some important warning signals against bonding too closely with Tony on the ethical axis. Tony's

evaluation of his memory raises the question of whether he distorts it unconsciously or consciously, and whether this is the result of memory or his own ethical deficiency. That is to say, the implied author uses playful comparison so that an element of the memoir's essence and nature which he allows Tony to present, allows the authorial audience to regard Tony as a reliable interpreter. However, this disposition changes as the narration proceeds to part two of the novel.

In the second part of the novel, the letter destroys our trust with "inadequacies of documentation". It opens with a riddle. Veronica's mother, Sarah, bequeaths Tony with a mysterious letter, including some money and Adrian's diary. When Tony hunts for the diary which Veronica withheld, he and the audience are forced to revisit and re-evaluate his distorted memory. The factual document that serves as the important evidence of Tony's unreliability is a copy of his original letter full of vitriol:

Dear Adrian—or rather, Dear Adrian and Veronica (hello, Bitch, and welcome to this letter), Well you certainly deserve one another and I wish you much joy. I hope you get so involved that the mutual damage will be permanent. I hope you regret the day I introduced you. And I hope that when you break up, as you inevitably will... that you are left with a lifetime of bitterness that will poison your subsequent relationships. Part of me hopes you'll have a child, because I'm a great believer in time's revenge, yea unto the next generation... Even her own mother warned me against her. If I were you, I'd check things out with Mum... (Barnes 104-105)

At this point, reliability of Tony's memories and his authorial authority suffer the first major blow. This passage is a case of unreliable narration. Considering the mild letter in the first part, Tony misreports along the axis of characters, facts, and events. Instead of giving a kind warning and blessing, Tony's letter is explosively emotional. He and the audience both absorb the contents of the letter not expecting such depth of hatred. Tony has to concede that "indeed, I didn't recognize that part of myself from which the letter came" (Barnes 97). With the initial feeling of remorse and guilt, Tony realizes that he might fail to hold his position on moral high ground. However, he soon regains composure and offers a profound self-reflection by claiming that "[a]ll I could plead was that I had been its author then, but was not its author now" (Barnes 107). Tony tries to separate the younger self from the old one. He cannot deny the fact of having written the letter. However, it is the younger Tony who did it. His unreliable reporting of this event seems to be the consequence

of a vanishing memory. Nevertheless, it is the old Tony who distorts and deletes the memory to construct a kind and generous self. Tony's memory is strongly influenced by his then-current emotional and mental state after living a specific experience. Therefore, the image of the "generous and kind" young Tony is not only the reconstruction of the past self, but also a reflection of the present self who invents the story to escape the past. In this respect, Tony's unreliability also has to do with his intention of not being truthful. Furthermore, it also represents his feelings of remorse and guilt as he realizes that his past is not as noble as he rewrites it.

When Tony tries to use the philosophical meditation on changeability as the reason of misreporting, he is also misregarding. He misregards his memory of the letter, and his pseudo-moral self-reflection suggests that at some level of consciousness he is aware that it is untrue. In the audience's first reading, when Tony misregards Robson's death, although the authorial audience recognizes Tony's unreliability, they also move toward his growing maturity and honesty. Whereas in this case, the authorial audience begins to recognize that adopting the narrator's perspective is far away from that of the implied author. Having used the playful comparison to make us accept Tony's interpretation of memory, the implied author uses that disposition to his advantage. We have no trouble recognizing that Tony is literally unreliable, and the documents destroy his well-built image of self. Furthermore, the nature of memory reminds us that it is the present Tony who is emotionless towards Robin and Adrian's deaths, and he tries to construct his past self as a kind, generous boy. As a result, audiences become warier as they continue to read. Thus, the bonding unreliability in the first reading turns into the estranging unreliability when the authorial audience revisits Tony's narration.

To regain our trust and construct the new version of events, Tony is determined to research Adrian's diary, explaining that it is evidence. He also keeps exchanging emails with Veronica. After the investigation, he finally figures out a direct causal link between Adrian's suicide and the birth of his son. The philosophical perception of Adrian's death has withered, since it turned out to be another mundane suicide like Robson's. Furthermore, the rediscovery of his malicious letter makes him realize his curse was fulfilled, since Adrian's son is mentally disabled. Thus, Tony has to confront his misreading of Adrian's suicide. He cannot hide his disappointment claiming that:

back then, if you got a girl pregnant, and if she didn't want to have an abortion, you married her: those were the rules. Yet Adrian couldn't even face this conventional solution... nothing to do with cleverness; and even less with

moral courage. He didn't grandly refuse an existential gift; he was afraid of the pram in the hall. (Barnes 154-155)

Under the misapprehension that the disabled child is Veronica's son, Tony draws a casual logical conclusion that the child's disability is attributed to Veronica's trauma from Adrian's suicide. The fulfillment of Tony's curse in his letter is the result of Adrian's evasion of obligation. He then goes back to the recollection and reflects that, "none of us had thought about the child, or the future. Now, for the first time, I wondered what had happened to Robson's girl, and to their child" (Barnes 154). It needs to be pointed out that in Part One even though we recognize Tony's misregarding and misreading of two suicides, we come to accept Tony's implication of the distance between the narrating-I and narrated-I. However, Tony now reveals that when he narrates Robson's suicide, the narrating-I still had not realized his misregarding. Furthermore, despite the standard remorse and guilt, Tony's casual logic is another way of self-justification. He tries to find excuses for his early misdeeds and rationalizes his unreliability. Barnes constructs the narration of Tony's memory process so that it is ultimately estranging rather than bonding. The more one reflects on Tony's claims upon the first reading of part one, the more they seem to realize the contrast between Barnes as teller and the narrator as teller. The implied author allows Tony's intermittent passages of bonding unreliability as the story proceeds. However, Tony's own engagement with the revisiting and revision of his memory leads us to see the irreparable harm he has done to Veronica and Adrian more clearly. As a result, he eventually cannot sustain his purpose of building up an imaginative self on the distorted memory. He starts to accept the responsibility of his past and to face the truth of memory. Accompanying these changes is Barnes's increased use of bonding unreliability through the reflection on memory and self.

Tony is a highly self-conscious narrator, who is very much aware of his agency and purpose as a memoirist and a narrator. Yet his purpose is sometimes different from Barnes's. As the authorial audiences, we appreciate Tony's honesty and remorse which strengthen our trust in him. However, Tony's self-delusion and evasion of responsibility make the authorial audience wary of his memory and confession. Tony offers warning signals against bonding too closely on the axis of events or perception, but the bonding effects on the ethical axis remain strong. As the narration proceeds, the narrator's reports, perceptions, and evaluations are questionable even if he makes effort to rationalize his unreliability and expresses remorse. Barnes's strategy is to encourage our initial bonding with Tony and to offer the signals of estrangement. Whereas Tony's continuous engagement with the task of reconstructing new version

of events and experience leads him to discern self-deception and the “damage” to others. Thus, he eventually cannot sustain his purpose.

It is a remarkable achievement for Barnes to change the authorial audience’s distance to the narrator from beginning to end and to make us reflect on the mechanics of memory and identity. The division of the complex coding of Tony’s unreliable narration into two parts largely rests on Barnes’s use of genre and structure. It is not surprising that some readers who have picked up on the pattern of bonding unreliability in part one want to push the progress in the direction of estrangement, even when backtracking to the first part. In this way, Barnes’s experiment with bonding and estranging unreliability brings into question our common understanding of memory. In the case of Tony’s “memoir writing”, imagination makes up for what is absent. Rather than being a way of escaping reality, imagination is a form of provocation, whereby Tony’s illusions slide away to leave a space in which the truth and lies can coexist.

The Ethics of Tony’s Memory: Reconstructing the Self in Character Narration

“Are we obligated to remember people and events from the past? If we are, what is the nature of this obligation? Are remembering and forgetting proper subjects of moral praise or blame?” (Margalit 7) These questions are asked by Avishai Margalit in his book *The Ethics of Memory* (2002). Is there an ethics of memory, a duty of remembrance? Margalit argues that if you are caught up in “thick” personal relations, family relations, or relations of love or friendship or community, then you do have obligations of memory (Margalit 7). Margalit weaves a wonderful account of how to relate memory to emotions, ethics, and forgiveness. If we follow Tony’s memory as one of the effective tools of the past, the significant ethical question regards not only what he must remember, but also the role that his memory should play in the relationship between him and others, and between the young and the old selves. It explores the relationships between Tony and Veronica, Sarah, Adrian, and the authorial audience, which enables us to examine how Tony reconstructs the self in the process of narration. By taking the duty to remember, Tony is motivated to reach a reconciliation with the young self, and thus, to correct his relationships with others in his revision of memory. The unreliability of memory does not mean that the subject can evade the duty of remembrance. On the contrary, Tony can achieve the self-identification only by accepting the responsibility to remember. To explore the ethics of Tony’s memory, the article will start with Tony’s complicated relationships with Veronica and Adrian.

Every piece of Tony’s explicit memory distortion is triggered by a set of

empirical documents including the letter from Veronica and Adrian, Mrs. Ford's will, Adrian's suicide note and diary, Tony's letter to Adrian, and the e-mail exchanges between Tony and Veronica. His first explicit memory distortion is his letter to Adrian. He does not recognize or remember consciously that his words are so "evil" until the document proves it. We see both his reporting and interpretation are opposing and inconsistent. The unreliable narration also further complicates the unstable relationship between his presentation and factual events. When reading Tony's distorted recollection, audiences' attitude towards his narration undergoes changes along with the progression of narration. Once the authorial audiences have identified Tony's self-justification and his lack of responsibility, they will make negative associative judgments of his inaccurate account. It needs to be pointed out that although the unreliability of Tony's memory has the potential to be the foundation of our strongly negative ethical effect, Barnes implicitly provides guidance for a more complex response, which continues to underline his distorted memory and errors while also mitigating our tension with him on the ethical axis.

In the process of reading, the authorial audiences will find that Tony's unreliability stems from his "cowardice" and instinct for self-preservation. In his relationship with Veronica, Tony seems to be uncomfortable, his tension growing in relation to his sense of inferiority to her. In Tony's memory, Veronica's well-tamed artistic taste for music and upper-middle-class upbringing make him feel subpar. Thus, when Veronica accuses Tony of cowardice, he replies:

"You're quite cowardly, aren't you, Tony?"

"I think it's more that I'm... peaceable."

"Well, I wouldn't want to disturb your self-image." (Barnes 38).

After a few years, Tony mentions again that "I'd never thought of myself as peaceable—or its opposite—until then" (Barnes 38). Tony's sense of inferiority and cowardice lead to their breakup. This theme of humiliation and failure is reflected in his first relationship as well as in the visit to Veronica's family. As a result, his recollection relating to her and her family has negative associations. He offers a subjective monologization of Veronica, transforming her from a subject to an object. He portrays her as a difficult, obstructive, and unpredictable ex-girlfriend. Tony's ambiguity in the sequence of sex and breaking up with Veronica is a compelling order of events. From the recollection, the two had sex shortly after their breakup, whereas Tony implies that the order of events is flipped. The inconsistency shows that Tony tries to evade his responsibility before and his "damage" to Veronica. We

see then that distortion in narration is paralleled with Tony's internal conflicting emotions.

In comparison, Tony heroizes his most admired friend Adrian. His worship of Adrian as a hero can be seen in his reaction to the friend's relationship with Veronica and his suicide. When receiving the letter from Adrian, Tony obviously feels betrayed. He peaceably suppresses his actual feelings and constructs a cliché tale of youthful heartbreak in which the innocent young man is dumped by the snobbish and cold ex-girlfriend for the enigmatic and highly intelligent friend. Tony blames Veronica, implying that she is not good enough to be Adrian's girlfriend. Tony believes that Veronica is undeserving, further bolstering Adrian. We see Tony's description of Adrian's suicide as "first-class degree, first-class suicide", which is a philosophical antipode to Robson's death. Tony views Adrian's short life and death as the "novel-worthy" and philosophical action. He comes to reflect on the sharp contrast between Adrian's heroic disposition with his own mediocrity. In this sense, I would suggest that Adrian is the construction of Tony's ideal self. As an idealized version of self, Adrian possesses qualities that Tony wants to have. He is most likely a combination of all the qualities and attributes that Tony most admires. This shows a psychological component of Tony's self, partially conscious and subconscious, composed of his desired future and the comprehensive sense of core identity. Therefore, it is not hard to understand that his protection of Adrian's image manifested as a way of self-defense. Thus, the role of fear and avoidance motivates Tony's recollection to arouse a strong personal vision.

However, with the revelations in the set of empirical documents, the memory of the "victor" becomes self-delusions of the "defeated". Tony begins to challenge the de-heroization of Adrian. Inconsistencies with Adrian's actions and Tony's ideal self start to surface. Adrian commits suicide because of his ethical-emotional entanglements with his girlfriend's mother, which breaks the well-constructed image of Tony's ideal self. By re-judging and re-evaluating Adrian and his suicide, Tony realizes that he is not the perfect embodiment of his ideal persona. Once his sense of purpose is crushed with factual events, the implied author explains that Tony is disillusioned to his self-narrative. However, if we regard Adrian's heroic story as one of the most "literary" or "novelistic" aspects of Tony's original self-narratives, the question arises: what can be uncovered by the mundane version of Adrian's story?

The ending of the novel finally reveals that the disabled man is the son of Adrian and Sarah. However, based on the insufficient information about Adrian and Sarah's communication, the authorial audiences must re-enact Tony's engagements with other characters to figure out the truth. Throughout the narration Sarah appears

in three guises. First, she is the mother of Tony's girlfriend, Veronica, when they visit her home. In Tony's recollection, Sarah is the only person in this family to treat him with kindness. This trait, however, is also excessive. Compared with other mothers, she seems to be overly protective of Tony rather than of her own daughter. Sarah is even uncomfortable with him being close to her daughter, warning him that: "Don't let Veronica get away with too much" (Barnes 31). The memory is more vivid in the episode of her cooking an egg for Tony's breakfast:

She eased another egg onto my plate, despite my not asking for it or wanting it. The remnants of the broken one were still in the pan; she flipped them casually into the swing-bin, then half-threw the hot frying pan into the wet sink. Water fizzed and steam rose at the impact, and she laughed, as if she had enjoyed causing this small havoc." (Barnes 31)

After breaking one of the eggs in the pan, Sarah tosses the broken one casually in the garbage and makes another one without asking Tony's opinion. This act of cooking a new egg shows just how much she cares for Tony and it implies a closer relationship than initially narrated. Tony's portrayal of Sarah might also hint that she is not just the simple, middle-class homemaker who he thought her to be. It indicates a deeper relationship between them. It isn't until the second reading that these small details seem relevant since the authorial audiences know about Sarah and Adrian's affair. Given the retrospective scenes in the opening lines, Sarah's broken eggs could be associated with "gouts of sperm circling a plughole" (Barnes 3), which can take on a sexual connotation as a symbol of amorous relations. Therefore, Tony's memory implicitly suggests another possible scenario: Sarah and Tony have a sexual relationship during this visit.

When Sarah returns to the fiction in the guise of Mrs. Sarah Ford, Tony and readers are surprised that Mrs. Ford leaves the money and documents with Tony, not her daughter Veronica. Tony interprets it as a way of "maternal apology" to compensate for her daughter's "damage" caused to him. This is where Barnes signals the inadequacy of Tony's narration of Sarah due to his fragile and unreliable memory. Tony emphasizes his unfamiliarity with Sarah, whose name and handwriting is unrecognizable to him, while intentionally (perhaps subconsciously) omitting and covering his actual involvement with Adrian, Veronica, and Sarah. Tony disguises true relationships with false ones. In the end, Sarah shocks Tony and readers when she appears in the third guise, the disabled child's mother.

It is challenging for the authorial audiences to reconstruct the new version of

the story that is hidden beneath Tony's fictional depiction. Thus, if we refer to the meaning of the broken egg, the implication of the horizontal gesture, the legacy Sarah gave, the incomplete documents to construct the entire story, coupled with Tony's unreliable narration, new questions arise. At issue is whether Tony's remorse or confession only stems from his letter given to Adrian. What is his original sin? If Tony has had a sexual escapade with Sarah, then he is faced with a dilemma that mirrors Adrian's ethical dilemma. His paradoxical ethical identities are that: when loving Veronica, he is Sarah's future son-in-law; while when having sex with Sarah, he is Veronica's future father-in-law. To end this ethical dilemma, Adrian chooses to commit suicide. Tony, who cannot easily succumb to actual suicide, chooses another way to end his predicament. He achieves this during the process of remembering and narrating where he reconstructs an ordinary character who recognizes his mistakes. This character is Adrian who is a manifestation of Tony. Tony's remorse is actually a call to attention to the fact that his memory distortion or the revelation of his unreliability has been a way of psychological protection. He creates a fictitious narrative to avoid facing ethical dilemmas and assuming responsibility for his actions. However, his reflections on memory and truth, and revelations of his self-delusion imply how difficult and ambivalent it is for him to suppress the shameful memory. Hence, the self-justifying and compensatory ethical pattern he weaves into the fabric of fiction are both pitiable and repulsive. Barnes tacitly uses misidentification of our reading experience to lead the authorial audiences to reconstruct the "self" in Tony's narration within his fiction.

Given the interrelations among the implied author (Barnes), the character narrator (Tony), other characters, and the authorial audience, Tony's memory is ethically related to his personal relations. Rather than being a victim in friendships and romantic relationships, Tony reconstructs himself as the injurer in his relations with Adrian, Veronica, and Sarah. Tony's memory, in a sense, is knowledge from the past rather than knowledge about the past. The narrative techniques that Tony employs serve as the normative bridges connecting the past, the present, and the future. The call for remembrance and reconstruction helps Tony to show his care for others, and thus to achieve value in his life. The ethical concern in Tony's duty to remember underlines an important theme in Barnes's fiction: love is a source of redemption.

As the character narrator of the story, Tony edits, distorts, and deletes his past to remain peaceable and ordinary and to avoid further "damage" to other characters and to himself. Barnes's technical brilliance allows him to create the possibility for Tony to falsify, beautify, and symbolically imply the real self and cruel story. The

novel challenges us to find the clues to Tony's self-invention, and accordingly to reconstruct the past through multileveled communication. Barnes's experiment with unreliable narration sets up interpretive and ethical traps for readers, and challenges them to recognize and avoid those traps. By using different strategies of indirection, Barnes shows a deep trust in readers' ability to reconstruct their own version of events and memory. His communications with readers, in contrast with Tony's, are a generous offer to share his belief in the meaning of memory. Although not engaging in direct disclosure about himself, Barnes is concerned with the representation of memory on the present stage.

Works Cited

- Barnes, Julian. *The Sense of an Ending*. London: Vintage Books, [2011]2012.
- 陈博: “论《终结的感觉》中的记忆叙事伦理”, 《当代外国文学》1 (2018): 96-103。
[Chen Bo. “Ethics of Memory Narrative in *The Sense of an Ending*.” *Contemporary Foreign Literature* 1(2018): 96-103.]
- Guignery, Vanessa. “Julian Barnes.” *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Contemporary British and Irish literature*. Ed. Richard Bradford. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Ltd. 2021:149-158.
- Holmes, Frederick M. “Divided Narratives, Unreliable Narrators, and *The Sense of an Ending*: Julian Barnes, Frank Kermode, and Ford Madox Ford.” *Papers on Language & Literature* 51.1 (2015): 27-50.
- Jagannathan, Dhananjay. “On Making Sense of Oneself: Reflections on Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*.” *Philosophy and Literature* 1A.39 (2015):106-121.
- 刘智欢、杨金才: “论《终结的感觉》中的记忆书写特征”, 《湖南科技大学学报》(社会科学版) 6 (2016): 48-52。
[Liu Zhihuan and Yang Jincai. “The Writing of Memory in Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*.” *Journal of Hunan University of Science & Technology (Social Science Edition)* 6 (2016): 48-52.]
- Margalit, Avishai. *The Ethics of Memory*. Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 2002.
- McDonnell, Jane Taylor. *Living to Tell the Tale: A Guide to Writing Memoir*. New York: Penguin, 1998.
- Phelan, James. *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2005.
- . “Estranging Unreliability, Bonding Unreliability, and the Ethics of *Lolita*.” *Narrative* 15.2 (2007): 222-238.
- Wachtel, Eleanor. “Julian Barnes Interview.” *Writers and Company with Eleanor Wachtel*. CBC, 20 Nov. 2011. Web.12 Sept. 2012.
- Wallen, James Ramsey. “The Evils of Banality: Shallowness, Self-Realization, and Closure in Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* and Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 58.4 (2017): 325-339.