



Documents, Archives, and the Materiality of Memory in *The Sense of an Ending*

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ABSTRACT: *The novel, 'The Sense of an Ending' (2011) by Julian Barnes, explores the working of memory through material objects. The novel flows through documents, artefacts, and many other objects, but not merely memory: a letter by a lawyer that is informing the novel's narrator, Tony Webster, about his inheritance of five hundred pounds. The letter also informs him about a woman through two documents whom he met once, who is the mother of his girlfriend from the same university where he studied. This paper contends that to effectively understand the novel's approach to memory, one must address the material objects that appear within it. By approaching Derrida's theory of 'archive fever' and 'archival memory' by Pierre Nora, the paper analyses the 'will' that is Sara Ford's letter, the single photocopied page, the diary of Adrian, the own letters of Tony, and the postcard of Clifton Suspension Bridge as an archive. These archives do not conserve Tony's past but construct it. The novel changes the usual take on the working of memory and records together, as documents are not merely frozen proof of what happened in the past but active instruments or agents that compel the narrator to find what he has misremembered, erased, or forgotten. The 'sense of an ending' is reached only when the narrator, Tony Webster, capitulates his narrative happening inside to the outer archive, a surrender that involves him in the actual past he had forgotten. This paper treats the readings against the dominant gerontological and psychological perspective to the novel, which has views for memory as an individual agent and does not theorise documents and archives.*

KEYWORDS. *Julian Barnes; The Sense of an Ending; memory; archive; Derrida; materiality; documentary fiction*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The novel 'The Sense of an Ending' (2011) unfolds with an old man named Tony Webster, who is remembering, and it is enticing to read it, as most of the criticism has approached the novel about how reliable memory becomes in older ages. The retired narrator, Tony Webster, shares how his life fell apart. At the start, he recalls his early time at university and his brilliant friend Adrian Finn and his romantic relationship with Miss Veronica Ford. Later, 40 years after the incident, Tony reflects on it upon receiving an inheritance from Veronica Ford's mother, Sara Ford. The inheritance included \$500 and our personal diary, which belonged to Adans. Which was kept secured by Veronica Ford; the early existing studies and criticism have followed the novel's own emphasis on the psychology of memory through literary and narrative gerontology, the study of ageing and old age, whose two disciplines, known as 'narrative geology' and 'literary geology', argue that the narrator's revisit of his past unfolds memory to be false and old age to be a state of regret and repentance rather than self-realisation and self-reflection (Oró Piqueras 87-95). Most criticism treats memory as an individual internal agent; recollection of Tony is mostly affected by the thoughts and the feelings that have embedded themselves in him, which is opposite to what he had in mind. Memory is an untruthful album of the largest incidents of his life (Oró Piqueras 88-89). Daniel L. Schacter explains this sense that our memory and our recalls are vigorously influenced by our feelings, thoughts, ideology, beliefs, and the prior information and knowledge received after living life in a particular manner and having a particular experience. As Daniel explains, "We extract elements from our experiences and store them. We then recreate our reconstructions, our experiences, rather than retrieve copies of

them: "In other words, we bias our memories of the past by attributing to them emotions or knowledge we acquired of the event" (9).

What this kind of critical approach and tradition miss and leave unquestioned and unexplained is the truth that the plot of the novel is propelled by objects and archives, not by self-analysis. The object, the diary, the endowment, the letter, the postcard, the single photocopy page—these are the facts, the actual heroes, the actual protagonists of the novel until the end after the first half. The narrator changes his mind about the past, not because he thinks too much, but because of documents that arrive, are withheld, are returned, or are burnt. The archives are the main engine of the story, not only as a point in the plot. This paper proposes that the novel is in fact at least studied and understood as an investigation of the materiality of memory, uploading about what happens when the act of remembering is external, delivered to a paper, and forwarded for correction to be stolen and then destruction. The theoretical framework is based on Jagers Darda's theory of archival shift in contemporary perspectives. Jacques Derrida's 'Archive Fever' proposes that the archive is not just an inactive storeroom of the past but a power that constructs and produces memories. The Greek root 'arche' names once the 'commencement' and the 'commemoration' of memory (Derrida 1).

Pierre Nora talks about traces. The archive and documents are traces, traces of our thoughts, which lead to our inner thoughts. For Tony, his way of remembering the past and present experiences gets altered after he receives the documents. Nora further describes the working of memory as the following:

Modern memory is, above all, archival; that is, it "relies entirely on the materiality of the trace. Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, and the visibility of the image. What began as writing ends as high fidelity and tape recording. The less memory is experienced from the inside, the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs—hence the obsession with the archive that marks our age, attempting at once the complete conservation of the present as well as the total preservation of the past.

She further sees that our approach for memory has lived experience, and feelings are just a storehouse of material stock. In the case of Tony Webster, all his documents and archives are his storehouse of memory. A stockpile of a series of emotions and thoughts compiled in the form of archives. Each delicate page holds a powerful remembering of his past which has the capability to shake the present. Nora further sees how public archives play an active role in setting up memory and emotions collectively. The novel, "The Sense of an Ending" (2011), changes the usual understanding of memory's relation with archives. The archives do not preserve the narrator's past; they construct and produce it. The act of remembering and forgetting continues until the body and the mind it holds are erased or destroyed. Until then, the circle of erasing, producing, and altering continues. The "sense of an ending" is attained only when Tony surrenders the narrative he holds inside to the outer archive; this step reveals the archive as both an ethical and epistemological agent, holding Tony accountable for a past he had completely forgotten and erased.

II. THE ARCHIVE THAT PRODUCES MEMORY:

The book, *Archive Fever*, by Derrida, unfolds with the word "archive" and its root "arkhe" from Greek origin, which names it (Derrida 1). Therefore, an archive is not merely a repository but also acts as an authority. Those who own the archive are its protectors and interpreters; they utilise its power to command, recall, coordinate, and set up what will be treated as memory. By archiving sets and systems and selecting the order of occurrence of memory thoughts, Derrida also sees the inherent threat of archives: the drive towards destruction, erasure, and amnesia. The records possess memory and, meanwhile, risk their own destruction inside. For the Barnes's novel, this dual moment is very necessary. The most important object in the novel is the diary of Adrian, but its experience is absent. It is owned, preserved, revealed, and burnt. The authority of the diary majorly depended on its physical existence. Still, the meaning is never available. Nora shares a harmonising perspective on modern memory. He argues that double modern memory is primarily archival, as it "relies on dresses, records, and images rather than on a continuous environment of shared remembrance" (Nora 12). The difference between live memory and archival memory is exclusively beneficial for Barnes's novel. The life Tony lived at the university is the past; it no longer exists as a shared world. Many of his closest friends, including Adrian and his parents, have passed away, along with many others who witnessed his past. What remains in the end are objects, documents, and partial memories and recollections. The two consequences that arise are, first, that the documents in the novel are not passive props. They perform archiving. Authority that Derrida explains. Secondly, the novel shows the fragility of archives. The objects can be accessed, hidden, misread, copied, or destroyed. Because of this, memory is not protected by materiality. It is made possible and also endangered by it.

III. THE WILL AND SARAH'S LETTER

The Posthumous Archive serves as a postscript to the novel, functioning as a command. Tony receives five hundred pound and two documents: a letter and Adrian's diary from Sarah Ford, a woman he met once. This inheritance starts his memory work and compels him to process it. Sara, from beyond this world, decides what Tony must revisit, and he is still unaware of why she has chosen him, as Tony says,

"I was informed that I had been left £500 and two documents. I found this very puzzling. For a start, to get a bequest from someone whose Christian name I had either never known or else forgotten. And five hundred pounds seemed a very specific sum. Bigger than nothing, not as big as something. Perhaps it would make sense if I knew when Mrs Ford had made her will. Though, if it had been a long time ago, the equivalent sum now would be quite a bit larger and make even less sense" (Barnes 63).

The inheritance is in material form, still it matters. Five hundred pound is not a treasure; its importance lies in the fact that it accompanies the other archives. The real inheritance is not always economical, but in the form of archives, Veronica Ford labels the money 'Blood money', a phrase that transforms the money into a symbol of obligation (Barnes 81). The letter by Sarah Ford also shows that the archive may be insufficient without being senseless. She found out that the last months of Adrian were joyful, but she denies explaining the statement fully. Thus, the letter works as a hint and a secret at the same time. It's great; it get some meaning to its meaning after Tony gets to know that Adrian had a relationship with Sarah Ford and that relationship led to a son who was born disabled. The document doesn't merely preserve this information. It arranges the situation under which Tony can't eventually disclose it. The posthumous quality of the letter gives it further importance and meaning. The passing away of Sara Ford has taken her out as a speaking witness, deserting Tony with a letter, a written address that is unable to answer his questions. The archive preserves her existing intervention, but not her full explanation. In this scenario, the document becomes a typical example of the archival problem: it ensures partial access to the past.

IV. ADRIAN'S DIARY: THE WITHHELD AND DESTROYED ARCHIVE

The diary of Adrian is an important document of the novel. It is presented with double nature. Tony inherited it from Sarah, but Veronica, who safeguarded it, cared for Mother in her letter years ago. The diary is mostly present in the novel but as an absence. It is like an object that anyone can discuss but cannot be read by Tony. Desire of Tony for the diary is clearly archival. He thinks that it will give him confirmation for his own situations and confirm that he is not held accountable for Adrian's death. This assumption indicates usual speculation about documents: an exterior record will validate the self. Still, the diary does not execute that purpose. The diary of Adrian carries a personal perspective within itself, and the chances of his knowing that his diary might be treated as evidence later make it difficult to treat the document as transparent or true. The circumstances of knowledge are that Tony has been controlled by Veronica because she possesses the diary and controls it. She decides and controls the excess of the diary. She controls Tony's access to the diary by sending him one photocopied page containing information about how Adrian tries to display relationships using mathematical formulas and to recognise the "chain of responsibility". Tony is unable to understand the documents, contexts and their importance until he is presented with all the contexts of the events. The diary also has been torn down so that she, Veronica, informs Tony that she has burnt it, a declaration that creates the archive's literal drive toward erasure (Barnes 87). It does not matter much if every fragment of the diary has been burnt or not; Tony is abandoned with part of the remembrance of the remaining fragments as a whole. The absence of the whole diary turns out to be fecund: it compels him to create meaning from other things and objects and from the outcomes of his own decisions and steps.

V. TONY'S LETTER AND THE POSTCARD: DOCUMENTS THAT CORRECT RECOLLECTION

The novel's most accurate and straightforward expression that archives create memory is the return of Tony's own letter to Adrian. At first, he recalls his response as a compact and humorous letter in which he confessed how he had little curiosity for Veronica or her newly formed relationship. The moment the letter is returned, he finds that it is just the opposite of what he thought it would be. It is poor and threatening. The material archive goes against the reality and identity he has erased through memory. The letter was returned to Tony when he met Veronica on the Millennium Bridge. This scene is an archival transfer: the curator hands over the document to its creator, and the document instantly topples the creator's memory. The letter is exterior to the present time of Tony, but it was written by his younger self. The material progression connects the void between the two Tonys more forcibly than reminiscing can. The document stops older Tony from controlling the meaning of his younger action. The response of Tony portrays archival effects and consequences. He realises that he was "chippy, jealous, and malign" as a youth and recognises that his memory had produced a more favourable story of his young days.

Consequently, the archive does not only rectify a historical error. It recreates his ethical grounds from his own history. Turning the archive into a piece of proof against himself. The postcard is even more compact than the material. Signing it and remembering it by Tony is a sign of joyful indifference, but it holds a resemblance to Clifton Suspension Bridge, a place correlated with suicide. The postcard holds a meaning Tony either did not acknowledge or denied remembering later. The postcard also says that a document did not have a precise language to create memory. It becomes meaningful when Tony learns to know the emotional context in which he sent it. The archive stays material unaltered; in the meantime, Tony's elucidation changes. The archive does not have a fixed meaning. It changes with context, like a material whose meaning and importance are produced when a reader reads it, feels it, and lives it. Later in the novel, Tony accepts that he can see his early actions. The archive reversed his original expectation. He wanted to show his innocence through the diary, but the document actually discloses his self-deception. When Tony says sorry to Veronica, it becomes the correct response to the archive. He should accept that remembrance and actual reality do not correlate, including the alterations in the narrative of his life (Ore, Piqueres 93).

The apology and acceptance do not cure past actions, but they recognise the authority of the documents and those who safeguard them. In this sense, the ending of the novel is not psychological as a whole, but it is archival. Tony does not find a new real memory hidden inside him, but he creates it with the dresses and fragments left in the form of letters, postcards, diaries, and other stuff and sciences. This thing made him go back and revisit the memory he had for 40 years. Derrida explains the archive as a question of future responsibility, not merely a repository of old days (Derrida 14).

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed that the novel "The Sense of an Ending" is not only about the unreliability of personal memory. It is a novel about material objects and material consequences, which memory saves, analyses, interprets, and transmits them and about how they lead to destruction. The wind, Sarah's letter, Adrian's diary, the photocopied page, Tony's lute, and the postcard all work together in generating parts of Tony. They do not merely talk about what he recalls and forgets; they produce new remembering. The archival reading surpasses the psychological in gerontological study. It gives new dimensions to criticism of the novel. The novel also provides this archival system with a new dimension—an ethical dimension. Documents play an especially important role in the novel because they can make the narrator responsible to those whose memory was erased. All the objects, including Veronica's withheld diary, Sarah's posthumous letter, and Tony's own letter, enter and disrupt his control over the past. The documents work as a medium to create a bridge between one identity itself that Tony records and the other self that the material records unfold. The sense of an ending is therefore not something Tony apprehends within his consciousness. Instead, it is made possible by the trace that was left behind by the paper trail. Tony comes to his final knowledge only when he realises that his own remembering is incomplete. The traces left behind by the long-gone days continue to exist. The novel portrays memory in an archival sense: it is not a repository of mind and memories but also lives in objects that continue to exist, even after the people who withheld them once no longer exist in the world; in the people who hold them; and in the journey of reading and interpreting those documents. In this way, the novel tells how bygone days – the past – can eventually unfold themselves with the help of those who survive them.

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