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MISREADING EVIDENCE IN BEFORE SHE MET ME BY JULIAN BARNES

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on the novel Before She Met Me by Julian Barnes in order to illustrate his views on the writing of history. Barnes explores the relationship between history and fiction as narrative constructs by means of his male protagonists' professions, i.e. a lecturing historian and a prolific novelist. The message permeating the novel is one of postmodern vein, meaning that history can only provide a positioned perspective of the past and that any historical discourse is in fact an imaginative elaboration on past events. The analysis of the novel touches upon issues related to the mechanisms of memory and the impact of visual stimuli as opposed to spoken words and lived, yet ignored experiences. It explores the intertwining of narration and criticism while laying bare the frailty of the human mind under the mesmerizing effect of cinematic make-believe and in the absence of historical skepticism. Several key issues are taken into consideration with regard to the possibility of recovering the past, to the nature of truth as well as to the workings of memory. Overall, the analysis makes use of White's helpful input on discourse and history writing, together with Barthes's observations on the process of writing history, and also McHale's theory on truth validity. The whole paper focuses on Barnes's message as clearly foregrounding the postmodern interpretation of history without suggesting giving up the attempt to recover the past. Barnes stresses the idea that memory is inescapably unreliable and that any interpretation of the past is inherently subjective.*

Studies on the writing of history have revealed that history can only provide a positioned perspective of the past and that any historical discourse is in fact an imaginative elaboration on past events – “The historian is not so much a collector of facts as a collector and relater of signifiers; that is to say, he organizes them with the purpose of establishing positive meaning and filling the vacuum of pure, meaningless series” (Barthes 15). In *Constructing Postmodernism*, Brian McHale talks about constructions or versions of reality which are “strategic” in nature, namely they are designed with particular purposes in view. As it turns out, strategic will be the choices of the main character in *Before She Met Me* when he undertakes reconstructing his wife's past. Equally important, his reconstruction of past events will be quite imaginative.

Before She Met Me approaches several themes including love and jealousy, truth and the past, the real and the fictional. It points to some of the risks occurring

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when art combines freely with history. This conflation is exacerbated by the mesmerizing effect of cinematic make-believe and the absence of historical skepticism. The novel was first published in 1982 and starts with two epigraphs. The first one comes from Paul MacLean's *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases*, thus setting forth the theme – “Man finds himself in the predicament that nature has endowed him essentially with three brains” (*Before* 5): one inherited from reptiles, then two more from lower and subsequently late mammals. Needless to say, these brains must function properly together. The second epigraph is Molière's suggestion that it is better to be married than dead. Taken from *Les Fourberies de Scapin*, it anticipates the mixture of farce and tragedy to follow.

The 1986 edition of the novel has on its cover a photomontage meant to capture the theme of the novel. It is the head of a man who is blindfolded as his eyes are covered by three movie frames showing three sequences of a passionate embrace between a man and a woman. If we take the blindfolded man to be the protagonist of the novel, namely Graham Hendrick, and the woman in the frames to be his second wife, Ann, then the photomontage makes perfect sense as Graham becomes engrossed with the adultery he witnesses on screen.

Graham is a professor of history at London University and leads a tranquil life alongside his first wife Barbara and their daughter Alice. He becomes trapped in a routine where spontaneity gives way to careful pondering combined with a filtering and selection of words before speaking lest Barbara should become suspicious of any wrongdoing from his part. Thus he sees himself forced to adjust and edit his accounts of the actual experiences; possibly representing an allegorical image of the historian's work.

While attending a party hosted by a good friend of his, the writer Jack Lupton, Graham gets acquainted with Ann, a former minor actress, falls in love with her, initiates a romantic relationship and eventually leaves his family to marry Ann and start a new chapter in his life. However, despite initial marital bliss, Graham becomes obsessed with Ann's past. Because she often played the role of the lover in films, but sometimes off-set as well with the lead men, Graham is retrospectively jealous. When Jack asks him whether he suspects that Ann is having an affair, he retorts: “No, it's not that. Good God, that would be awful. Awful. No, it's sort of ... retrospective, it's all retrospective. It's all about chaps before me. Before she met me” (*Before* 45) – whence the title of the book.

Graham's entire vision worsens constantly, preventing him from distinguishing between real and fictional relationships. He is haunted by dreams in which Ann's former lovers taunt him and at first he tries to convince himself of the ontological dichotomy and incompatibility between dreams and reality: “Dreams couldn't be true, could they: that was why they were dreams” (*Before* 89). However, he soon starts attributing a revelatory function to his dreams, implying that they could in fact reveal truths about past reality: “So why couldn't you have post-premonitory dreams? It was, if anything, a more plausible concept. He could have easily picked up something from Ann at a subliminal level, and then his brain might decide to break the news to him tactfully in his sleep” (89).

Despite their life together and the memories accumulated, Graham begins to waver when in one of his dreams, actors tell him that Ann was keen on making love

to several people at the same time: “What if it were true? It couldn’t be true... No, it couldn’t be true. But what if it referred to a sort of truth?” (95) Because Graham takes such fantasies for reliable sources of information and solid pieces of evidence, it can be considered that he “invalidates the very concept of truth” (Guignery 25).

Perception is of paramount importance for Graham when reconstructing Ann’s past. “History” has a Proto-Indo-European root: *wid-tor-, from base *weid-meaning “to know,” literally “to see” (*The Online Etymology Dictionary*). It points to the problem concerning historians and philosophers of history alike, namely that history is a perceptive activity and perception entails subjectivity. White clearly states:

[D]ifferent historians stress different aspects of the same historical field, the same set or sequence of events, because they actually *see* different objects in that field, provisionally group them into different classes and species of historical existence, conceive the relationship among them in different terms, and explicate the transformations of the relationships among them in different terms in order to figure different meanings for them by the structure of the narratives they write about them (*Metahistory* 274).

This is exactly what Graham does with the pieces of information he manages to gather – he finds connections and explanations which are unfortunately based only on his perceptive skills.

His state of mind begins to worry Ann who, in an attempt to reduce Graham’s sources of concern, decides to rewrite the past that she had experienced together with Jack, long before she met Graham: “Jack, I’ve come to get history straight ... I’ve decided we never had an affair” (*Before* 69-70). Since giving straight, honest answers to Graham’s questions about her past love affairs has led to his present obsession, Ann’s decision to hide from Graham past truths is well-intended, but eventually has a devastating effect. It also points to the frailty of the information available about the past, highlighting the perpetual risk it is subjected to, that of being pulled at and embellished or even utterly altered.

When talking about historical emplotment and the problem of truth, White explains that “narrative accounts do not consist only of factual statements (singular existential propositions) and arguments; they consist as well of poetic and rhetorical elements by which what would otherwise be a list of facts is transformed into a story” (*Figural Realism* 28). Since historical writing cannot avoid stylistics because all writing makes use of conventions, White highlights the discursive nature of history. In *Before*, Barnes explores the relationship between history and fiction as narrative constructs by means of his male protagonists’ professions, i.e. a lecturing historian and a prolific novelist. Despite being a professional historian, Graham applies methods of investigation which lack adequacy. By taking the work of literature for an unmediated window into the past, Graham “does not grant literary authors and filmmakers enough agency to refigure the vents they inscribe into their texts” (Martin 32). In other words, Graham does not distinguish ontologically between literary and historical texts.

Theorists of the writing of history in general agree that all historical narratives contain a certain element of interpretation, an element which is irreducible and inexpugnable:

[a] historical narrative is thus necessarily a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries of established and inferred facts, at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative (White, *Tropics* 51).

There is thus an undeniable similarity between the work of a historian and the writing done by a novelist. To a certain extent, the resulting works share common features.

In an attempt to find some advice, Graham turns to Jack for guidance: "...why did he consider Jack an authority [in giving matrimonial advice]? Partly because Jack wrote books, and Graham respected books in both an abstract and a practical way, acknowledged a gut deference to their jurisdiction. And partly because Jack had had millions of affairs; always seemed to have a new girl in tow" (*Before* 53). But once he starts to suspect that Jack as well has had a relationship with Ann, the feeling of betrayal becomes overwhelming. He knows that Jack is not the most imaginative writer and that he overtly uses his own life or his friends in the novels which he produces. Thus, Graham finds "proof" in Jack's novels:

The clues were unmissable: the tear in the eye ... the lifting of the bottom, yes; the clincher, though, was the mole – even if [Jack] had moved it from her right shoulder to the left side of her neck (this would be what Jack called imagination). And even if the mole wasn't a clincher, there was the cigarette. Ann often put cigarettes into her mouth the wrong way round (161).

Even though Jack is the novelist and Graham the historian, this misinterpretation which characterizes Graham turns him into a (fiction) writer busily rewriting Ann's past by fabricating non-existing adulteries. White draws attention to the fact that the two professions have much in common: "the discourse of the historian and that of the imaginative writer overlap, resemble or correspond with each other ... There are many histories that could pass for novels, and many novels that could pass for histories" (*Tropics* 121). Graham's story of Ann's past is in his eyes the history of Ann's past. Krist calls Barnes's plot development "a clever perversion of Graham's role as a historian." ("She Oughtn't" 73)

Graham's search for evidence is one-sided because the on-screen images are more convincing even than the testimony of their life together, reminiscent of Hegel's remark that periods of human happiness and security are blank pages in history. Graham does not look for any evidence which might refute his already-established conclusion – he wrongly believes that Ann and Jack continued their affair after Graham and her got married. This is a type of selective thinking called confirmation bias meaning that Graham has built a hypothesis and now actively seeks and interprets information only in a way that confirms his premise.

Nora talks about the acceleration of history and the disappearance of the memory-preserving entities, disappearance which engenders the existence of "lieux

de mémoire”, those sites where memory is embodied and where the feeling of historical continuity endures. Memory is life in “permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived,” (“Les Lieux” 8) while history is a problematic and incomplete reconstruction, a mediated representation of the past. Memory harbours that which suits it, “nourishes recollections that may be out of focus” (8), conversely, history is the result of analysis and criticism, the outcome of an intellectual production. Memory binds together one particular group, it is collective, plural and yet individual, whereas history belongs to everybody and nobody and thus claims universal authority. Memory is absolute and rooted in the concrete, in spaces, images, and objects, in contrast history “can only conceive the relative” (9).

Thus, memory needs objects it can cling to or places to attach to; however, once these are destroyed, memory fades into nothingness. Graham’s inability to remember details of a recent holiday casts light on the impact and importance of visual stimuli:

Despite Ann’s suggestion that [the pictures] were all funny, and some of them even quite arty, Graham just grunted and threw them away. He also threw away the negatives. Later, he regretted this. He found it surprisingly hard to remember the holiday, even after five weeks. He remembered that he had been happy on it; but without the visual corroboration of where he had been happy, the memory of that emotion seemed valueless. Even a double blurry image would have been something (*Before* 139).

At first, Graham is aware of the inaccuracy of his sources; however, progressively his mind turns against itself and he loses touch with reality. Graham reaches a point where fiction and reality are undistinguishably fused together. Past and present have lost their temporal connotations blurred into a smoldering menace. Graham cannot cope with the situation since “[h]e was hostile to a past her, to a present situation, but not to a present her” (175). It is an indication that the three brains mentioned in the first epigraph cannot function properly any longer.

At work, Graham is each year faced with at least one student incensed about the past. He is surprised that the past could make one crazy with emotion and doesn’t understand the reason underlying this occurrence:

Some of his students ... did get incensed about the past. He had a case at present, that ginger-haired boy, MacSomething, ... who became quite enraged by the failure of good (as he saw it) to triumph over evil in History. Why hadn’t *x* prevailed? Why did *z* beat *y*? He could see MacSomething’s puzzled, angry face staring back at him in classes, wanting to be told that History – or at any rate historians – had got it wrong (122).

Perhaps just as his student might suffer from a case of retrospective justice, the retrospective jealousy haunting Graham is enough to drive him mad about the past.

At the end of his investigation, Graham wishes he could wipe clean the archive of evidence he has put together: “Why couldn’t you unknow knowledge?” (153), but his is a misplaced wailing. An image of a life without knowledge, nightmarishly a-historical is presented by Jack’s account of an American bloke with no past. Due to a terrible accident, this man:

can’t form any new memories either. Forgets everything straight away. Think of that – no archives at all. Maybe you’d like that? ... Wouldn’t you? No archives – just the present? Like staring out of a train window all the time. The cornfield, the telegraph poles, the washing machine, the tunnel: no connections, no causality, no sense of repetition. (128)

His last comment is a reminder of what is at stake when attempting to write meaningful history, as Martin rightly observes.

White distinguishes between three basic kinds of historical representation: the annals, the chronicle and the history proper. The annals lack the narrative component, the chronicle wishes to tell a story and aspires to narrativity, but typically fails to achieve narrative closure, by breaking off *in medias res* while histories turn the past into a story, offering order and fullness in an account of reality. By imposing order, structure and coherence onto the past, historians make connections, look for causality and moralize (“The Value” 26). In conclusion, in the case of the man with no past, what Jack actually emphasizes is what the man cannot see: the connections, causes, and repetitions.

Graham relies much on fiction for revealing Ann’s past reality, but he is not the only one to fictionalize the past and thus history. Ann and Jack are also revising their past together. When she apologizes for requesting a rewriting of his past, Jack’s reply hints at the extent to which fiction and rhetoric guide his life:

Don’t bother, I’m always doing it myself. Every time I tell a story it’s different. Can’t remember how most of them started off any more. Don’t know what’s true. Don’t know where I came from ... Ah, well, just part of the pain and pleasure of the artist’s life.’ He was beginning to fictionalize his fictioneering already (*Before* 71).

Knapp discusses the usefulness of the revisionist tendencies characterizing the contemporary world in dealing with canonical texts (“Collective Memory”). He concludes by stating that our present actions are influenced by our knowledge of and beliefs about the past and not by the actual events. So are Graham’s actions. Certainly, only a pathological mind would be as influenced by movies as Graham is; however, he could be “an extreme representation of the [current] phenomenon that people’s idea about the world, including its history, can be influenced by motion picture to great extent” (Medzibrodzky 10).

Critics of the novel have pointed out intertextual echoes among which Shakespeare’s *Othello* (1604) figures prominently. Jack ironically nicknames Graham “little Othello” (*Before* 71) implying that Graham makes a rather pathetic figure in comparison with the Shakespearean tragic hero. Medzibrodzky calls the novel “the Othello story of our time” (*Story and History* 9) with certain changes in

the cast as well as in the plot development. Thus, Othello, originally a soldier, is now Graham, a historian whose brush with battles is possible only on the pages of history books; Desdemona is Ann, a small-time film actress and second wife; Casio is Jack, a novelist and self-made psychologist; and Yago is Barbara, the resentful first wife. These changes in the leading roles entail a shift of focus, i.e. from jealousy to the problem of reconstructing the past. Having fallen prey to jealousy just like Othello, Graham ends up committing murder. There is certainly a plot twist: the double homicide closing the book refers to Graham's murdering Jack and then committing suicide.

Other reviewers brought up more recent representations of jealousy and elements of intertextuality, such as Graham Green's *The End of the Affair* (1951). This novel figures in *Before She Met Me* (64) as one of Ann's books, given to her by one of her former lovers. Green's novel is also set in London, though during World War II. It deals with jealousy and obsession within the trio of central characters: a writer (Maurice Bendrix), a civil servant and his wife (Sarah). One similarity between the two novels resides in the jealous men feverishly brooding over the past in an attempt to find proof of the guilt of the woman they love. But more importantly, Green's book deals with writing and the workings of fiction, the plot management and the manipulation of the readers.

Some critics referred to Harold Pinter's play *Old Times* (1971) where the rivalry over Kate between Anna (a former roommate) and Deeley (her husband) leads these two to inventing recollections of their own so that they could claim ownership of Kate. Leaving jealousy aside, this reference serves also to point common elements between the two pieces of writing, meaning that Pinter as well was concerned with the past and the human mind: "The past is what you remember, imagine you remember, convince yourself you remember, or pretend you remember" (qtd. in *Where These Memories*, 5).

Still, *Before* is not just a reproduction of past models, because Barnes breaks with tradition by making Graham's jealousy retrospective. Alongside clear instances of this pathology, the novel contains metatextual pauses as Graham muses over his own affliction trying to dissect its causes. Barnes attempts to provide provisional answers by explaining that retrospective jealousy usually "broadens out into a wider obsession. That previous affair, that earlier lover turn out to be mere nominee for a wider area of baffled resentment: a kind of foolish rage against the immutability of the past and a metaphysical whinge at the fact that things can actually happen despite your absence" ("Remembrance" 22).

Throughout the novel, Graham reflects on the mechanisms of the brain and Jack, upon hearing his concerns, produces the theory of the lower brains ("the Sawn-Offs" in control of our emotions) which undermine the work of the socially-acceptable higher brains ("the layer of Four-Eyes") (*Before* 79). Jack reassures Graham that the Sawn-Offs are under control: "Most people don't kill other people. Most people have got the Sawn-Offs well under their thumb, I'd say. Most people control their emotions, don't they? It may not be easy, but they do. I mean they control them *enough*, don't they?" (80).

Despite this reassurance, the reader may foresee in Graham's case the triumph of the lower brains when correlating the first epigraph of the novel with the

title of the last chapter – “The Horse and the Crocodile”. This is an echo of the extensive epigraph which ends in: “when a psychiatrist bids the patient to lie on the couch, he is asking him to stretch out alongside a horse and a crocodile.” (5) Also, there are other cumulating clues which point to a violent outcome such as Graham’s new-found meat-chopping pleasure and fascination with knives; the various bodily-harming ways he contrives as revenge against Ann’s former lovers; or his growing aggressiveness (both verbal and sexual).

Besides explicit references to other literary works, *Before* brings to mind the industriousness present in *Flaubert’s Parrot*. Since this was published two years later, *Before* serves as the hypotext which triggers Barnes’s series of books concerned with the blurring of ontological frontiers between the fictional and the real. In *Flaubert’s*, Geoffrey Braithwaite displays healthy doses of historical skepticism in his research into the past. In contrast, Graham is wrongly and utterly persuaded by the least significant details and the most unreliable sources that Ann is still involved with Jack. Readers can easily identify the protagonists’ obsession with uncovering truth and their awareness that the past is irretrievable.

Because he is a history lecturer, Graham is expected to be adept at selecting and interpreting sources of information; however, the task proves impossible for him and his version of history is utterly subjective. There is no discrimination among the archives he compiles: motion pictures in which Ann and/or her supposed lovers featured, reviews of films, photographs, international currency, and little souvenirs from her trips. Graham’s productive endeavor culminates with the creation of Ann’s biography by staying faithful to his role as a historian, but at the same time, resorting to strategies pertaining to the fiction writer. His clear obsession with uncovering the truth is not unlike that of any historian or detective; however, the message permeating the novel is one of postmodernist vein, namely the irretrievability of the past.

To sum up, *Before She Met Me* could be read, as Martin suggests, as a cautionary tale warning of the rhetorical hypnotic power of cinema, the dangers of totally substituting rhetoric for truth. However, the novel deals also with the problem of reconstructing the past. *Before She Met Me* illustrates the fact that the writing of history is the result of perceptive activities and therefore subjectivity; in addition, it highlights the distortion (deliberate or unintentional) of information undergoing mediation from past to present. Readers are shown that the possibility of getting to know the past as it occurred is epistemologically limited and, at the same time, that history is no longer seen as a grand narrative, but merely as a construct that each writer is free to create and recreate as best suited for his/her needs. Just as he has done in other novels, Barnes stresses the idea that memory is inescapably unreliable and that any interpretation of the past is inherently subjective.

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