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***REITERATIVE ATTEMPTS OF RETRIEVING
THE PAST IN FRED D'AGUIAR'S THE LONGEST
MEMORY (1994) AND JULIAN BARNES'S
THE SENSE OF AN ENDING (2011)¹***

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Abstract: *A driving force in both Fred D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory* (1994) and Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), memory is self-defining for the protagonists of the two novels whose association becomes possible due to their common message regarding the condensation of time both in life and fiction.*

Providing a psychological as well as a psychoanalytic interpretation of D'Aguiar's and Barnes's novels, this paper follows the characters' attempts of retrieving repressed memories starting from the assumption that traumatic memory needs to be inhibited. Nevertheless, personal time has its own meanders leading to a continuous (re)construction of memory and implicitly to the revelation of a different facet of reality which might completely undermine previous beliefs. Our intention is to prove that the novelists under scrutiny change either the perspective of the same character or of different characters in order to question the idea of individual and historical truth. If in D'Aguiar's novel individual traumatic memory is turned into collective traumatic memory leading to centuries of slavery equivalent to a loss of personal and social identity, in Barnes's novel the first person narrator tries to prove that the same phenomenon holds valid in the sense that what happens to the protagonist of the story at an individual level could be applied to a wider and more complex historical level reflecting the mechanisms functioning at the level of an entire society. Whether voluntarily or not, the main characters pass through a memory reconstruction process which becomes imperative but too painful to withstand since the traumatic episodes had far too greater repercussions upon the protagonists' lives.

Condensed in their luring lyricism, Fred D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory* (1994) and Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) immediately fascinate their readers both by content and narrative style. Their association and comparison relies upon the two novelists' treatment of the memory process which affects the construction of the literary texts as well as the fictional lives of the protagonists

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engaged in reiterative attempts of retrieving a past constantly escaping their comprehension skills. Although set against entirely different backgrounds, D'Aguiar's and Barnes's novels similarly revolve around the devastating effects of repressed memories whose inhibition is undoubtedly necessary but it might implicitly lead to the emergence of neurotic symptoms, hence their indispensable recovery².

Our analysis will start from the assumption that "memories exist, are repressed and can be retrieved and that a history either of real experiences or of feelings and impulses can be reconstructed" (Kara and Patterson 100). Whether the voluntary or involuntary reconstruction of such memories is beneficial or not we shall see in the following pages tracing the destinies of ordinary people whose lives are representative for the society and century they belong to. Apparently, Whitechapel, the Black slave on an 18th-century Virginia plantation, the main character in D'Aguiar's novel has nothing in common with Tony Webster, the dull middle-class 21st-century protagonist of Barnes's novel. What brings them together is their passiveness and readiness to accept whatever life might have in store for them; they are the perfect embodiment of the average man unable and unwilling to pass through major transformations or face the consequences of their lack of involvement. Their fumbling belated attempts to understand the relevance and influence of their own past actions will prove that they are incapable of facing the impact of traumatic memory.

In D'Aguiar's novel *The Longest Memory*, the distortions of Whitechapel's individual memory reflect the complexity of a collective memory turning slavery into "memory of a trauma passed down through the generations" (Low 11). So deep and profound is the main character's trauma³ that the first chapter suggestively entitled 'Remembering' is narrated by Whitechapel in the first person but with him refusing to assume a name or a specific identity: "You do not want to know my past nor do you want to know my name for the simple reason that I have none and I would have to make it up to please you" (D'Aguiar 2). Being forced to powerlessly witness the death of his only son whom he mistakenly betrays to their white master, Whitechapel painfully declares:

Memory hurts. Like crying. But still and deep. Memory rises to the skin then I can't be touched. I hurt all over, my bones ache, my teeth loosen in their gums, my nose bleeds. Don't make me remember. I forget as hard as I can (D'Aguiar 3).

Defined as "a healthy and indeed necessary repression of memorized material" (Bornedal 380), forgetfulness might acquire positive connotations in

² According to Freud (311), a neurotic symptom is in fact the expression of a repressed memory and the first implication would be that once the memory is recovered the symptom will disappear.

³ On the same wavelength, Caruth explores the intricacies of the concept of memory highlighting the dual effect of a past psychic trauma which "involves intense personal suffering, but it also involves the recognition of realities that most of us have not begun to face" (VII).

Whitechapel's case who has to face the guilt of his son's death. Losing one's identity might be the result of utter pain hence Whitechapel's confusion: "What was I before this? I forget. Did I smile? Laugh out loud? Don't recall" (D'Aguiar 7). The circular structure of the book with the final chapter entitled "Forgetting" mirroring the first chapter entitled "Remembering" emphasizes the idea that the entire novel becomes a plea in favor of forgetfulness and since this is impossible the only logical solution allowing Whitechapel to join his son and regain his peace of mind is death. Otherwise, "Memory is pain trying to resurrect itself" (D'Aguiar 138) and ceases to represent an answer for the old and wise Whitechapel whose death is symbolically used to pinpoint to the degradation and future disappearance of an unjust system of slavery.

Since his own memory is too painful to be reconstructed, Whitechapel's tragic story is gradually recomposed from the memories of all the other protagonists involved in what happened. In his case, Prozan's theory could be employed to explain repression and dissociation as "defense mechanisms" (XVII) to which victims of a certain abuse resort to in order to protect themselves from any future oppression. Consequently, the story shifts backwards and forwards in time highlighting the relativism of the concept of individual truth. In Chapter 2, Mr. Whitechapel, the plantation owner engages in an interior monologue with himself, Whitechapel or Sanders Junior, the slave overseer. He is much more preoccupied by the inconvenience the incident with Whitechapel's son has created than by the dramatism of the situation in itself. He does not feel any remorse for Chapel's death; on the contrary, he is ready to blame anyone else for the unfortunate incident which he perceives as a pecuniary loss. He even blames Whitechapel for not being able to rein in his son as well as Sanders Junior who has ignored his order to wait with the slave punishment until his return on the plantation. Besides the fine he applies to his overseer, he chooses to reveal to him the fact that Chapel, the slave he whipped to death was in fact his half brother, the result of the miscegenation between Sanders Senior and Cook, Whitechapel's second wife.

The explanations for the tragic outcome of the story lie in the past, even before Chapel's birth which should have never happened in the first place; it is another sample of traumatic memory inhibited not only by Cook, but also by all the other people who had any knowledge of the respective incident. As long as Cook was grateful to pass over the entire episode, this could only have been recounted by the other person directly involved, Sanders Senior, former slave overseer on the plantation. His brief journal entries are an expression of his lust for the new slave, Cook whom he sexually brutalizes before and after her marriage to Whitechapel. When she summons her courage to tell the truth to her husband and her landlord, Mr. Whitechapel's punishment is to fine the aggressor and to condition him into marrying a woman he does not like in order to be able to preserve his post and reputation on the plantation. The slavery system imposed forgetting the episode altogether and the protagonists as well as the entire community silently consented to overlook something that would be in contrast with the official norms and standards of the community. Nevertheless, the incident proves that memory has its own meanders and the past might return to haunt the present when it is least expected.

Without actually having any control over her destiny, Cook is ascribed two interludes which she dedicates to her husband whom she is thankful to veneration and to her son whom she is extremely proud of and she wants to protect.

The only chapter in which the readers may hear Chapel's voice is written in poetic form so as to allude to the fact that memory relies upon a flux of associations related to those events which take precedence in front of the others in an individual's life. From Chapel's verses the readers understand that it is only his devotion for his mother that keeps him on the plantation. When she dies he feels that nothing else could keep him in a place where he is not treated as a human being, where he has to forget that he knows to read and write, where his own father proliferates obedience, where he cannot be with the person he loves.

Mr. Whitechapel's voice is heard again in Chapter 6 when he becomes a part of the larger community of plantation owners whose rejection he fears and whose approval he desperately needs. In opposition to Mr. Whitechapel's cowardice and indifference bearing on cruelty towards his slaves, his own daughter falls in love with Chapel and Chapters 7, 9 and 10 are her confession regarding the development of her relationship with Chapel. Three years older than him, she acts as his sister, tutor, companion and finally lover. When Mr. Whitechapel incidentally discovers that she has secretly taught Chapel to read and write, the latter has to promise that he will no longer do forbidden things that would be in contradiction to the ordinary beliefs of the time concerning the intellectual performance of a slave. His cultural acquisitiveness makes him ask Lydia to memorize passages from literary texts belonging to Shakespeare, Spenser, Homer and Virgil, Goethe or Chaucer and then reproduce them to him. Not only does he enjoy culture, but he also has literary inclinations as he creates poems which Lydia writes down for him. They even dream of a future life together somewhere in the North where their love would no longer suffer the opprobrium of the entire community clearly depicted in Chapter 11 where the editorialist of *The Virginian* newspaper voices the general attitude towards an outrageous liaison considered as such due to racial prejudices and no justifiable argument.

Shifting forward in time, Chapter 12 is narrated by Whitechapel's great granddaughter whose ideal image of Africa is shattered by his story. Through her eyes, the readers can witness Whitechapel's withdrawal into a world of loneliness and ultimately his death which is deeply regretted by the repentant Sanders Junior who belatedly apologizes for his mistakes. In Chapter 13, Sanders Junior's interior monologue focuses upon his atonement and his words represent the greatest tribute he could have paid to Whitechapel: "If you were white I would have wanted you as my father" (D'Aguiar 134).

Unlike in Fred D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory* (1994) where the story is reconstructed from the confessions of multiple narrators, in *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) the story is told in the first person. Interviewing Barnes, Freiburg acknowledges the fact that "memory [...] is one of the keywords" in the writer's fictional work (Guignery and Roberts 38). The novel starts abruptly with a confession sprung from the internal memory:

I remember, in no particular order:

a shiny inner wrist;
steam rising from a wet sink as a hot frying pan is laughingly tossed into it;
gouts of sperm circling a plughole, before being sluiced down the full length of a tall house;
a river rushing nonsensically upstream, its wave and wash lit by half a dozen chasing torchbeams;
another river, broad and grey, the direction of its flow disguised by a stiff wind exciting the surface;
bathwater long gone cold behind a locked door (Barnes 11).

The narrator's initial message is that "what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed" (Barnes 11)⁴. A normal function of our memory is to bring the past into the present, but this happens under different circumstances since the person remembering things from another temporal axis has passed through various situations and changes in the meantime and is situated on different coordinates. In comparison with other psychological processes, memory is a cognitive process which could be defined on the basis of some major characteristics: activism, selectivism, situationality, relativism, mediation and rationality or logic.

The activism of memory refers to its capacity to transform both a person and the information he or she has memorized at a certain point in time. The beginning of the novel warns the readers that "it takes only the smallest pleasure or pain to teach us time's malleability. Some emotions speed it up, others slow it down; occasionally, it seems to go missing – until the eventual point when it really does go missing, never to return" (Barnes 12). Subsequent restructuring and reassembling of the information is inevitable and memory does not simply reproduce the past; it reconfigures it in order to fit a new paradigm. From this perspective, the two main parts on which Barnes's novel is organized reflect the parallel between past and present following an episode in Tony Webster's life which occurred in his adolescence but has apparently never been fully understood and consequently has haunted his life ever since.

The selective characteristic of memory helps us retain only certain aspects of all the things that happen to us and repress others according to our age, cultural level, preoccupations, desires or interests. Thus, Tony returns to a few incidents during his schooldays when he used to hang out with a gang of three other boys, Alex, Colin and Adrian. The fact that they wear their watches with the face on the inside of their wrist acquires symbolic connotations: at that age they do not feel the pressure of the passage of time. Different from the rest of them, Adrian Finn intrigues his friends and impresses his teachers with the complexity of his personality and the depth of his thinking. Through Adrian's voice, the problem of the credibility of historical truth is tackled as he raises "The question of subjective versus objective interpretation, the fact that we need to know the history of the historian in order to understand the version that is being put in front of us" (Barnes

⁴ From this perspective, a psychoanalytic interpretation is possible if we resonate with the idea that this "is concerned with the workings of and the formation of unconscious memory" (Kara and Patterson 96).

30). Finn's definition of history is memorable and it refers to individual as well as collective history: "History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation" (Barnes 40) quoting Sir Patrick Lagrange. In their naivety and impetuosity, the four teenagers engage in philosophical controversies which lead them to the definition of literature itself which in their mind would be "about psychological, emotional and social truth as demonstrated by the actions and reflections of its protagonists" (Barnes 37).

The selectivism of memory is again visible in an incident from Tony's adolescence which he has recorded in association with what will later happen to Adrian. The protagonist of the incident is Robson, one of their former colleagues, a rather dull and unimaginative boy who had got his girlfriend pregnant, hanged himself in the attic and not been found for two days. Robson's suicide note read "Sorry, Mum" (Barnes 41) in a true psychoanalytic fashion⁵. The image of the mother will undoubtedly haunt and ultimately ruin Adrian's life as well. From Tony's recollections, the readers learn that Adrian's mother has left her family and his father raised him and his sister. Upon hearing the story his friends fail to understand his lack of interest in retrieving the past, namely in finding out why his mother left her family. Later in his life he will probably try to find a substitute for a mother in Veronica's mother and failing to find what he was seeking for he refuses life altogether.

Tony's reminiscence of his relationship to Veronica Ford represents an argument in favor of the idea that our memory is situational in the sense that it depends upon the spatial and temporal coordinates assigned to an event in our life as well as upon our state of mind. In addition, the relativism of memory takes into account the fact that we are not talking about a photographic copy of reality and consequently a multitude of other factors intervene and individuals do not memorize and later reproduce the information with absolute accuracy. Tony reflects on the imperfections of memory: "I must stress that this is my reading now of what happened then. Or rather, my memory now of my reading then of what was happening at the time" (Barnes 93). The visit Tony pays to Veronica's house where he meets her parents and her elder brother Jack is never forgotten and never quite understood by Tony who suspects child abuse in Veronica's case either from her father or from her brother. He even tries to justify her behavior starting from the assumption that people's reaction to the damage they suffered is extremely interesting:

Some admit the damage, and try to mitigate it; some spend their lives trying to help others who are damaged; and then there are those whose main concern is to avoid further damage to themselves, at whatever cost. And those are the ones who are ruthless, and the ones to be careful of (Barnes 98-9).

⁵ In our analysis, we shall resort to the effects Yung ascribes to the mother complex according to whether it appears in a son or a daughter: "Typical effects on the son are homosexuality and Don Juanism, and sometimes also impotence. In homosexuality, the son's entire heterosexuality is tied to the mother in an unconscious form; in Don Juanism, he unconsciously seeks his mother in every woman he meets" (162).

A reconsideration of the entire scene in Veronica's house as well as the things he discovers after many years make Tony realize that the oppressor must have been her mother who will end up stealing Adrian from Veronica and even having a baby with him. Because he cannot understand why Veronica breaks up with him and has a relationship with his best friend Adrian, she will act as his oppressor and he will blame her for all his frustrations and disappointments. Between the lines, readers gradually embrace the idea that Tony's individual truth about what happened to Veronica and Adrian is fractured and reflects only a facet of reality. On the other hand, for Veronica her own mother will come to embody what Storr has qualified as "the image of woman as devourer and destroyer" (2) in the Jungian analytical psychology.

Adrian's suicidal act leaves many unanswered questions for Tony whose life was not an exceptional one, but it is one of which he seems content:

"He survived to tell the tale" – that's what people say, don't they? History isn't the lies of the victors, as I once glibly assured Old Joe Hunt; I know that now, It's more the memories of the survivors, most of whom are neither victorious nor defeated (Barnes 123).

Philosophizing again on the idea of memory, Tony confesses that "What you fail to do is look ahead, and then imagine yourself looking back from that future point" (Barnes 126). From this perspective, Tony has not so many things to tell: he marries Margaret with whom he has a daughter (Susan), who marries Ken and they have two children. Margaret leaves him for another man and she is afterwards left for a younger woman. A rather prosaic existence disturbed only by his reminiscence of Veronica and especially Adrian whose gesture projected him beyond Tony's power of understanding.

Concrete objects, words or thoughts can trigger long forgotten memories to the surface because they are part of the mechanism that helped us memorize a certain aspect. On the other hand, logic determines the classification and organization of the information we assimilate throughout our lives. The thought that Mrs. Ford has chosen to leave him 500 pounds and Adrian's diary is the factor that unleashes Tony's fears and reminiscences. He cannot understand why Veronica refuses to give him the diary and he is willing to do anything to get possession of it because "The diary was evidence; it was – it might be – corroboration. It might disrupt the banal reiterations of memory. It might jump – start something – though I had no idea what" (Barnes 164). Giving in to Tony's insistence, Veronica accepts to see him and gives him a photocopy of the letter he once sent to Veronica and Adrian, a reason now for him to meditate upon the relativism of memory:

How often do we tell our own life story? How often do we adjust, embellish, make sly cuts? And the longer life goes on, the fewer are those around to challenge our account, to remind us that our life is not our life, merely the story we have told about our life (Barnes 202).

The distinction the psychologists make between the voluntary and involuntary memory lies at the foundation of the novel under discussion since the main character has to face the effects of (un)expected memories from a past that keeps haunting him:

And so the brain will throw you scraps from time to time, even disengage those familiar memory loops. That's what, to my consternation, I found happening to me now. I began to remember, with no particular order or sense of significance, long-buried details of that distant weekend with the Ford family (Barnes 238).

After meeting Veronica, new memories of their common past rise to the surface, determining Tony to meditate upon objective versus subjective, personal time and its relationship to memory:

I know this much: that there is objective time, but also subjective time, the kind you wear on the inside of your wrist, next to wear the pulse lies. And this personal time, which is the true time, is measured in your relationship to memory. So when this strange thing happened – when these new memories suddenly came upon me – it was as if, for that moment, time had been placed in reverse. As if, for that moment, the river ran upstream (Barnes 260).

Together with Tony, the readers question the truth beneath his story. Whenever he thinks he has managed to grasp the meaning of the past events and the motives lying at the core of Veronica's or Adrian's decisions he does nothing but admit his failure and discover another facet of reality. Witnessing Veronica's affectionate gestures towards a man strikingly resembling Adrian he immediately draws the conclusion that Veronica and Adrian had a handicapped son carrying the culpability of his parents. Under the circumstances, Tony feels remorse because he perceives this child as the impersonation of his predicament in the letter he has written to Adrian and Veronica forty years ago.

After he writes an email apologizing to Veronica for his letter, she tells him that he still does not understand anything of what happened in the past. Incidentally, Tony uncovers an unexpected truth: the man he has first taken to be Veronica's son is in fact her brother, the result of her mother's affair with Adrian. This final revelation throws Tony's credibility into darkness questioning his version of the truth once more.

In the Freudian tradition, memory distortions arise due to the exclusion of painful memories from consciousness and in the context the protagonist's attempts to reconstruct the past should be read as part of a psychoanalytical process allowing the patient to retrieve lost traumatic memories. New connections and a reconfiguration of the past episodes are possible if we take into consideration McClelland's assertion: "my memory of any episode or event will tend to reflect the influence of what I have learned from many other episodes or events" (70). The character's misremembrance of certain aspects is in fact the result of his focusing upon other aspects of the same event, aspects which seemed relevant at the time the event took place. Spatial and temporal distance allows for a change of perspective and for a different interpretation of the truth.

To sum up, the parallel between D'Aguiar's and Barnes's protagonists supports the idea that the memory reconstruction process has a complexity involving more or less expected risks. The protagonists' attempts of retrieving the past have initially been designed to either diminish the pain and terror of an audacious event or to provide an explanation meant to offer tranquility and peace of mind; subsequently, the futility of such attempts has proven that forgetfulness and even death are preferred instead of the open confrontation with hidden demons emerging from the depths of the subconscious.

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