

Deliberate Deletion, Persistence and the Weight of Memory on and of the Characters in Julian Barnes's *The Only Story*

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Abstract

Memories come with many aspects embedded in them, and there are efforts of deliberate deletion, yet the memory persists and weighs on the rememberer. This paper examines how the attempts of deliberate deletion and persistence of memory, and the weight of it, affect and influence each other in the novel *The Only Story* (2018) by Julian Barnes. Barnes's novel is a meditation on love, ageing and narrative reliability. It offers a layered study of how characters intentionally erase, suppress, reconstruct and are haunted by memory. Focusing on the voices of Paul, Susan, and the peripheral characters who shape their trajectories, it is attempted to establish that Barnes has staged memory as both an ethical burden and an aesthetic device: it is a force that reshapes identity, occasions narrative unreliability, and operates as a social technology for self-preservation and survival. By analysing the narrative strategy, metaphoric vocabulary, and the novel's formal appeals to retrospection and omission, this paper explores how deliberate deletion functions alongside involuntary persistence to produce a double-bind in which characters are both liberated and imprisoned by their memories. The analysis of Barnes's novel is attempted through a wider literary tradition of memory studies and tries to demonstrate how in the novel *The Only Story*, memory is used to interrogate love's promises and failures.

Keywords: memory, identity, trauma, ageing, individual memory, history.

Julian Barnes's *The Only Story* (2018) is at once a love story and a meditation on the fragility and stubbornness of memory. More than a story of an affair that is a generation apart, it is an exploration of how the past is recorded, repressed, manipulated, and reinterpreted by the characters in the novel. The novel ultimately reveals that, in spite of memory being a neutral record is but always an act consisting of selection, creation, deletion and recollection. Barnes treats memory as a gift and as a burden as well, a means of self-condemnation and a mode of self-survival. The novel shows that even when attempts of erasure are made, the memory persists. It corrodes when attempted to save, and eventually the memory has such weight on the lives of characters with far-reaching consequences.

Paul, the narrator, frames his own past as a story he can only partly tell, hesitating between revelation and reticence. He recalls his love affair with Susan, a married woman nearly thirty years his senior, with both passion and remorse, and the retrospective voice through which he recounts it is shaped by decades of brooding. From the very first pages, Paul reveals that remembering is selective: "You understand, I hope, that I'm telling everything as I remember

it?... I think there's different authenticity to memory, and not an inferior one. Memory sorts and sifts according to the demands made on it by the rememberer...I would guess that memory prioritises whatever is most useful to help keep the bearer of those memories going." (Julian Barnes *The Only Story* 16) He reminds his readers that he will omit certain details, soften others, and in places refuse to describe too closely what happened. He admits that the memory of his affair is not stable but shifts with time, subject to the perspective of ageing and the self-protective instinct of forgetting: "So, that familiar question of memory. He recognized that memory was unreliable and biased, but in which direction? Towards optimism? That made initial sense. You remembered your past in cheerful terms because it validated your existence." (Barnes 162). This openness about incompleteness is more than a stylistic quirk; it enacts deliberate deletion within the very texture of the narration. The reader is always reminded that what is being presented is not "the past" but a filtered, edited reconstruction of it.

Susan's part in the story is equally marked by deletion, though hers is less an act of narrative shaping than of lived survival. When the relationship between the teenage Paul and the older married woman becomes public, she is exposed to scorn, humiliation and the risk of social ruin. Her means of coping are often to minimise, to act as if nothing matters, or to retreat into routines that obscure the pain beneath the surface as seen in the novel *The Only Story*: "She is neither cynical nor idealistic; she lives without the mental clutter of theorizing, and takes each circumstance and situation as it comes. She laughs at things, and sometimes that laughter is a way of not thinking, of avoiding obvious painful truths." (Barnes 72-73) Later, when alcoholism and decline overtake her, her silences and evasions testify to a desperate effort to erase unbearable realities. Susan's forgetfulness is not simply a lapse but a defence mechanism, a way of limiting the claims of memory upon her already fragile existence: "You notice there are times when she seems, not squiffy, but out of focus. Not bleary of face but bleary of mind." (Barnes 113) Barnes portrays her forgetting not as innocent but as tragic, for it deprives her of the ability to confront her own suffering with clarity. "Susan's mind has slipped a little more each time you see her. Short-term memory disappeared a while ago, and long-term memory is a shifting, blurry palimpsest from which clear but unconnected phrases will occasionally be picked out by her fading brain. What often rises to the surface are songs and catchphrases from decades previously." (Barnes 187) Yet he also renders it with compassion, recognising that sometimes deliberate deletion is the only way a person can continue to endure.

If forgetting can be voluntary, memory in the novel is also inescapably persistent. Paul cannot rid himself of Susan even when he wishes to. Her face, voice and gestures return to him in his memory, sometimes unbidden. "And this is how I would remember it all, if I could. But I can't." (Barnes 83) The years do not soften these memories so much as entrench them. "Susan had predicted that one day he would have an act of his own, and she had been proved right. His act, which had developed without his really noticing, was that of someone who had never- not really, not truly- ever been in love." (Barnes 210) They appear as sensory fragments, bodily reminders that intrude upon the present. Here Barnes comes close to the claims of trauma theory as articulated by Cathy Caruth, who argues that traumatic memory often returns in belated and intrusive ways, arriving unbidden rather than being deliberately summoned. Paul's recollections are not always matters of choice but are sometimes eruptions of persistence, as if memory refuses to let him go (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 2). The narrator's awareness of this fact imbues the novel with a melancholy that underscores its meditations on the power of recollection: "It was a question of what heartbreak is, and how exactly the heart breaks, and what

is left of it afterwards.” (Barnes 210). The memory returns quite often and he is left with the memories and affected by his relationship inasmuch as he is never able to love anyone else: “Oh, likes to keep himself to himself.” (Barnes 204)

The persistence of memory is not merely private but social. Maurice Halbwachs, in his theory of collective memory, insisted that individuals remember within the frameworks supplied by society. In *The Only Story*, Paul’s and Susan’s memories are constantly shaped and haunted by the perspectives of others: family members who judge them, neighbours who gossip, acquaintances who raise eyebrows. No matter how much Paul may attempt to reframe or delete certain details from his personal narrative, the social world ensures that those details persist in another form: “I was surprised that some of them didn’t find my relationship with Susan a cause for Cheer. Instead, they reacted much as their parents would have done: alarmed, threatened, moralistic.” (Barnes 110) Reputation, gossip and social knowledge function as external repositories of memory that the characters cannot easily escape. Susan’s suffering is deepened not only by her private sense of shame but also by the relentless public memory of her transgression. “You realize that, even if she is the free spirit you imagined her to be, she is also a damaged free spirit. You understand that there is a question of shame at the bottom of it. Personal shame; social shame.” (Barnes 107)

The novel suggests that the act of remembering is as much about identity as it is about the past. Paul’s retrospective narration is an effort to shape himself at present by shaping the memory of his affair with Susan. Paul Ricœur has argued that narrative identity is constituted through the act of recounting the past; to tell a story about one’s life is to construct the self (Ricœur). Paul is acutely aware of this fact, and he frames his love affair with Susan as the defining story of his life — “*The Only Story*” he believes truly mattered: “Most of us have only one story to tell I don’t mean that only one thing happens to us in our lives: there are countless events, which we turn into countless stories. But there’s only one that matters, only one finally worth telling. This is mine.” (Barnes 03) But because that story is one of both love and destruction, his identity is haunted by guilt and grief. Every time he remembers, he must balance passion against regret, and in doing so he experiences the weight of memory as a shaping force that defines who he has become.

This weight is also materialised in the body and in the experience of ageing. Barnes is deeply attentive to how memories are carried not only in the mind but in physical being. Paul’s recollections are tied to sensations: the taste of drinks, the feel of a tennis racquet, the atmosphere of a room. As the years advance, these sensations transform into melancholic reminders of what has been lost. The longer Paul lives, the heavier his memories become, until recollection itself feels like a burden: “Love was a Duty in and of itself. You had a duty to love, the more so now that it was your central belief system. And Love brought many Duties with it. So, even when apparently weightless, Love could weigh heavily, and bind heavily, and its Duties could cause disasters as great as in the old days.” (Barnes 169) Aleida Assmann, in her work on cultural memory, identifies functional and storage memory. Functional memory is actively used to sustain identity, and storage memory lies dormant but can be reactivated. In the novel, Barnes illustrates both types in Paul’s narration. Some memories remain are functional, which sustains his sense of who he is, while others lie deep buried, only to resurface with painful insistence. The narrator is unable to control which memories remain active highlights the theme of persistence and its emotional cost (Assmann 119).

The heaviest weight that memory imposes in the novel is guilt. Paul is aware, even in his later life, that his youthful love may have contributed to Susan's eventual decline: "And because you inevitably believe that one of the reasons she is on anti-depressants is because you are failing to make her so happy that she doesn't need them, you feel guilty, and this guilt forbids you from questioning her." (Barnes 120) He struggles with the thought that what he saw as an idealistic devotion may in fact have been selfishness. When Paul visits Joan for the last time he is confronted by her on his decision to hand Susan back. And he admits it as self-protection: "He couldn't save her, and so he had to save himself." (Barnes 174) The act of remembering is never neutral for him; it is always combined with ethical self-judgement. The author's narrative technique highlights this by allowing Paul to confess certain things like his falling in love while withholding others like his confrontation with Susan's Husband, creating a voice that is both remorseful and defensive: "What he didn't.... So now, along with pity and anger, he had self-disgust to deal with as well. And this was part of his shame." (Barnes 177) Confession becomes his way of bearing the weight of memory, but his confession is incomplete, it is always shadowed by what is omitted. The silences in Paul's narration become as ethically significant as his admissions. It works as a reminder that forgetting, too, is an act that has moral consequences.

The fragmentary structure of the novel, its self-conscious asides, shifts between youthful immediacy and older retrospection, which reflect the workings of memory itself. Memory in the novel is not linear but episodic, not all encompassing but selective, and the writing style of the author reflects this process. There are pauses in the narration of the narrator. These pauses tell the readers that he will not describe a scene in detail, or that he cannot now recall exactly how something felt, or that he prefers to leave a particular incident vague. These moments attract the reader's attention to the process of remembering, making the gaps visible. Silence is part of the story, and deletion is a part of the narration. As Marianne Hirsch has argued that silence and absence can be as powerful as presence in shaping the narrative of the past (Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 120). Barnes demonstrates this insight in practice: the omissions are themselves eloquent, resonating with the weight of what is unspoken.

If memory is both deletion and persistence, it is also profoundly relational. Paul's memories of Susan are never solely his own; they are shaped by her responses, her silences, her refusals: "Susan's own acts of forgetting or denying alter how Paul remembers. Paul attempts to bake Susan's famous upside-down cake. It turned out well, and it failed to set off any memory though after two slices of it he throws it into the bin because he is suspicious of his own motif. (Barnes 193), He picks up playing golf. And "he did occasionally hear, as if in a whisper, the sweet, laughing opinion of Susan Macleod that it was plain unsporting to hit a stationary ball." (Barnes 194) The presence of the memories of Susan in his life is indeletable. The novel shows how relationships are mediated by memory, how intimacy depends upon what is remembered together and what is deliberately erased. The use of the phrase 'my fine and feathered friend' and his violent reaction to protect the phrase that was unique to Susan and him, and his being sensitive to the language of the lovers, iterates the kind of impact Susan has had on his life. Barnes emphasises the fragility of this dynamic.

The Only Story can be read as Barnes's meditation on the doubleness of memory: its power to construct and its power to wound, its necessity for identity and its danger for peace of mind. Memory is revealed to be neither entirely voluntary nor wholly involuntary, but an unstable mix of deliberate deletion and stubborn persistence.

As the narrative style of the novel is concerned, Paul's narrative voice reveals the complexity in its stylistic instability. His account begins in the first person, full of the confidence of youth: "Her innocence, my overconfidence; her naivety, my crassness." (Barnes 63) then the narrative switches to second-person narration and towards the third part of the novel the narration retreats to third person, which the narrator's attempt to distance himself from the story. This seems as if the narrator is struggling under the weight of memory from which he is unable to escape or face upfront. The first-person voice is too raw, too close to the pain; the second person creates a distance between subject and experience, while the third person indicates detachment, almost as if the story belongs to someone else: "But nowadays, the raucousness of the first person within him was stilled. It was as if he viewed and lived, his life in the third person. Which allowed him to assess it more accurately, he believed." (Barnes 162) This shift in person is in order to enact the struggle of memory itself: the narrator, Paul, struggles with the question of how to speak of the past without being consumed by it, how to narrate trauma without collapsing under its weight. The instability seems not simply a stylistic ornamentation but an embodiment of Paul's own indecisiveness and conflict between deletion and persistence. He wishes to erase, but the very act of telling betrays the persistence of what he would suppress, as reflected in the novel *The Only Story*:

Did he feel regret at what he always thought of as his 'handing back' of Susan? No: the proper word for that might be guilt; or its sharper colleague, remorse. But there was also an inevitability to it, which lent the action a different moral colouring. He found that he simply couldn't go on. He couldn't save her, and so he had to save himself. It was as simple as that....And by that time he had made the most terrifying discovery of his life, one which probably cast a shadow over all his subsequent relationships: the realization that love, even the most ardent and the most sincere, can, given the correct assault, curdle into a mixture of pity and anger. His love had gone, had been driven out, month by month, year by year. (Barnes 174)

Barnes places Paul's struggle within a broader cultural memory of English suburbia and post-war social conventions. The scandal of his relationship with Susan, a woman, married and much older, disrupts not merely familial expectations but social expectations of decorum. The memory of this transgression persists not only for Paul but for the community that witnesses and silently condemns, as it is reflected through their expulsion from the tennis club and the judgmental demeanour of Susan's daughters. The recollections of Paul are heavily influenced by the weight of disapproval that he faces from society, which in turn makes the story a personal account of events rather in relation, and contrast with the norms that the narrator tries to fight and defy. Thus, the memory becomes communal as well as individual, and the force of the weight of the memory is felt more because of the presence of social meaning attached to it.

The memory persists but avoids uniformity; It is selective, lacks stability and is prone to distortion. The author has repeatedly shown Paul uncertain about many details of his past, lapses in confession, acknowledging revisions, and questioning the reliability of what he recounts. This friability echoes Paul Ricœur's reflections on memory and forgetting, where he points out that the fidelity of memory is always threatened by the distortions of narrative reconstruction: "He recognized that memory was unreliable and biased, but in which direction?" (Barnes 162) In telling his 'only story,' for Paul, it is not only recalling, but he interprets, edits, and reconfigures

his memory and past. The very act of narration gives away how memory is constructed, how deletion and persistence operate in tandem. The act of forgetting is never complete deletion, and remembering is never complete accuracy; both are intertwined in the processes of narration and self-fashioning to one's liking.

One of the most salient manifestations of memory's weight is Paul's persistent return to images of Susan's decline. What began as a love affair marked by vitality and defiance transforms into a life overshadowed by alcoholism, bitterness, and eventual disintegration as it happens towards the end of the novel, *The Only Story*:

She seems to know that you are, or were, something in her life, but not that she once loved you, and you loved her in return. Her brain is ragged, but her mood is strangely stable. The panic and pandemonium have drained out of her. She is alarmed by neither your arrival nor your departure. Her Manner is satirical at times, disapproving at others, but always a little superior, as if you aren't a person of much consequence. You find all this agonizing, and try to resist the temptation to believe that you deserve what you are getting. (Barnes, 188)

Paul's recollection of Susan is not static; it shifts as he ages, acquiring new meanings and new burdens. Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma's belatedness is apt here: trauma is not experienced fully in the moment but returns later, insistent and unresolved. Paul's youth is lived with the exhilaration of passion, but the trauma of Susan's decline and the relationship's failure reverberates later, colouring his adult life with melancholy: "We may go on as if nothing has been lost, nothing done, nothing said; we may claim to forget it all; but our innermost core doesn't forget, because we have been changed for ever." (Barnes 197) Over time, the weight of memory becomes heavier, and its persistence is an unforgiving weight that Paul is unable to escape from.

Paul repeatedly attempts to distance himself from the memory. This motif of deletion appears in many places in the novel. Memory is seen as a ledger by Paul in which he can conveniently strike out the painful entries, or it can be abandoned halfway. However, his attempts at deletion bear no fruit, and his story persists in being told. The same is reflected through the prose style in which the sentences tend to trail into reflective asides, and his digressions insistently come back to the moments that he claims to have forgotten: "And this is how I would remember it all, If I could. But I can't." (Barnes 83) The same structure of the novel resists the attempts of erasure and reveals the compulsive return to the repressed. Where deletion is sought, the memory persists and is pervasively present, overshadowing the narrative.

The weight of memory is embedded in morality as well. The reflections of Paul do not only have things that have happened, but also entail things that could have been done differently. Also, how his choices might have led to Susan's decline and ultimately how his love might have been destructive. The moral weight, with the amalgamation of emotional weight, falls heavily on his memory saturated with guilt and responsibility. "But he certainly never regretted his love for Susan. What he did regret was that he had been too young, too ignorant, too absolutist, too confident of what he imagined love's nature and workings to be." (Barnes 204) Even as he keeps on insisting of his not being a cause to Susan's decline, he could never completely absolve himself of the same. The guilt is never fully settled as ensured by the persistence of memory, and

the act of narration serves as both an act of penance and a rehearsing of liability that resists erasure.

The interplay of deletion and perseverance appears in the way Paul reconstructs his own identity. He wonders whether he would have been a different man had he never met Susan, whether the trajectory of his life was irrevocably altered by this early experience. The persistence of memory thus is seen shaping identity in retrospect, confining him to a narrative he cannot escape from. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, though usually applied to generational transmission, offers insight here: Paul's life after Susan is lived in the shadow of memories that dominate the present as if they were still unfolding. "So his life consisted mainly of observation and memory." (Barnes 203) His adult self acts as less an autonomous agent than a custodian of memory, weighed down by an inheritance of experience that refuses deletion and all his attempts are driven by "Damage limitation." (Barnes 211)

At the same time, the novel interrogates the reliability of Paul's memory. His admissions of uncertainty, his rhetorical questions to the reader, and his acknowledgement of distortion all cast doubt on the accuracy of what persists: "He sometimes asked himself a question about life. Which are truer, the happy memories, or the unhappy ones? He decided, eventually, that the question was unanswerable." (Barnes 161) The lack of reliability of memory cannot diminish the weight on his psyche; rather, it is only heightened as Paul's burden is driven by the inescapable ambiguity of memory instead of the certainty of the past.

Memory persists as it is bound to desire. Paul's desire is not only the memory of Susan but also his preoccupation with the idea of love that defined him and his relationship with Susan. Despite being painful, Paul is unwilling to let go of the memory. He is not ready to give up this experience that irrevocably shaped and made him what he is. Susan is to him ruin yet revelation, and because of this duality, he is a captive to her memories. The deletion of these memories would mean losing the meaning of his life, yet its persistence is a cause of suffering to him.

There is irony and poignancy in the prose of Julian Barnes. There is an interjection of Paul with observations that are cynical; he distances himself from his younger self, yet the ironies crumble into regret. The attempts of deletion and its persistence reflect the relation between irony and sincerity. Paul is reluctant to embrace memory, and he is mocking it at the same time, mourning his own past.

As the novel moves towards the end, Paul has an increasingly resigned tone, which seems as if he acknowledges the futility of his efforts at deletion. The persistence of memory and the weight he must bear and endure. However, his resignation is not out of despair rather the acceptance that, regardless of its weight and baggage, it defined who he is. His identity is determined by his past, notwithstanding how burdened and scarred they might be. Thus, the closure is not an escape from memory, rather a sobering acceptance of its permanence and pervasiveness to his self and his identity. His only story remains and persists, not because he desires it but because it is not escapable.

As the narration of memory in the novel continues, it also reveals its own limitations. Paul is speaking his heart out because he cannot remain silent, however, his account is also tainted by the realisation that words cannot fully express the width and depth of his lived experience. This, in turn, reflects the paradoxical nature of memory itself: the memory that persists is never identical to what it actually was, though what remains is a close approximation to the truth. Paul is in this paradox. He is a believable witness but not an entirely reliable narrator. Thus, he is a victim and at the same time an agent of memory. This is how the novel

joins in the broader literary tradition at explores the weight of remembering, in line with literary works that explore the perseverance of memory and how it shapes the act of storytelling. What endures most powerfully is not the external details of the relationship—dates, places, orders—but the affective core of passion, regret, and loss. Paul does not remember with precision; he remembers with intensity as seen in the novel *The Only Story*:

You understand, I hope, that I'm telling you everything as I remember it? I never kept a diary, and most of the participants in my story- my story! my life!- are either dead or far dispersed. So I'm not necessarily putting it down in the order that it happened. I think there's a different authenticity to memory, and not an inferior one. Memory sorts and sifts according to the demands made on it by the rememberer...But I would guess that memory prioritises whatever is most useful to help keep the bearer of those memories going." (Barnes 16)

This intensity marks memory as affective rather than archival, a process closer to feeling than to fact. Ricœur describes memory as always entangled with imagination, never pure record but always interpretative reconstruction. The story of Paul effectively showcases this entanglement. There is an acknowledgement of the possible distortions, yet emphasis on the emotional truth. What persists is not the exact chronology but the significance of the experience that has been engraved into his being.

The ethical aspect of memory is inseparable from the emotional weight. The narration attempts to raise the question of responsibility to himself, to Susan, to his family, and to the society that influenced his decisions and made him what he became towards the end of the novel. As he remembers, he judges himself and while he does that, he acknowledges the moral implications his love brought into the picture. The persistence of memory seems to ensure that actions can never be fully erased, but they echo across time with consequences that cannot be undone. The story becomes a testimony of a passionate love and the consequences it entailed. When he is unable to delete, he is also unable to escape responsibility, and moral consequences weigh heavily on the weight of memory.

The theme of persistence of memory in *The Only Story* aligns with Barnes's broader reservoir of writings, where memory, history, and the burden of the past significantly dominate. From *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) to *The Noise of Time* (2016), Barnes has explored how, through the act of remembering, individuals have constructed identity, how the act of deletion liberates and wounds. The novel *The Only Story* is unique in its intimate portrayal of love and is in consonance with Barnes's enduring preoccupation with the philosophical aspects of memory. It showcases his style of blending narrative dexterity with existential inquiry, demonstrating as a result how fiction can illuminate the most elusive aspects of human experience. The novel ends with neither catharsis nor despair but with a quiet acknowledgement of memory's inevitable weight, leaving the reader with the recognition that to live is to remember, and to remember is to bear the burden of persistence without the solace of deletion.

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