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Age and vulnerability in Julian Barnes' fiction : Metroland (1980) and The Sense of an Ending (2011)

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Acknowledgements

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Contents

Introduction

As an author writing in the postmodern era, Julian Barnes has explored various literary genres and narrative focalisations. There have been short-stories (*Pulse*, *The Lemon Table*), a memoir (*Nothing to Be Frightened Of*), fictional biographies (*The Noise of Time*, *Levels of Life*), detective stories (*Duffy*, *Fiddle City* under the pseudonym of Dan Kavanagh), non-fiction (*Letters from London*, *The Pedant in the Kitchen*) and, of course, novels. In his novels, Barnes pursues the hybridity he introduced when experimenting with literary genres. They are now well-known for their versatile and protean forms, especially since his essay-like *Flaubert's Parrot* and his collection-looking *A History of the World in 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ Chapters*.

However, his first published novel – *Metroland* (1980) – endorses a traditional form, that of the coming-of-age narrative, as pointed out by Vanessa Guignery and others: "[*Metroland*] stays true to the form of the *Bildungsroman*, focusing on the personal development of the main character, especially his sentimental and sexual education." (Guignery, *Fiction* 10) Indeed, *Metroland* describes a transition – or rather an absence of transition – into adulthood, from the point of view of Christopher Lloyd, a man in his thirties reflecting upon his adolescence and early adulthood. The novel is divided into three parts which are dated, located and bear an epigraph. The first one, *Metroland (1963)*, pictures adolescent Christopher and his friend Toni Barbarowski as they over-intellectualise most things in life, discuss high arts and literature (especially French literature), and worry about sex. In the second one, *Paris (1968)*, Chris reflects upon the time he spent in the French capital for his thesis while the 1968 social upheaval was taking place unnoticed by him; he also comes back on his first love, Annick, and the encounter with his soon-to-be

English wife, Marion. The third part, *Metroland II (1977)* tackles present-day Chris, in his thirties, as he finds a stable job, has a comfortable suburban adult life, and gets constantly reminded of it by Toni: "we've grown out of that, haven't we? No, I just thought you'd appreciate a certain historical overview of your contemplated action." (Barnes, *Metro* 137) The first part of *Metroland* contains thirteen sub-sections, the other two six each. Some of those sub-sections are just two-page long, and they tend to describe daily events from Christopher's life, which are often coloured by the cynicism of his adult gaze. Even though Christopher's voice is often derisive about his own early life, one cannot help but notice that he appears to have failed to sustain his early ideals and concerns, especially since he comes back to Metroland, the place where he grew up and which he loathed. However, even though Barnes, in an interview with Shusha Guppy, said his first novel was "about defeat," (quoted in Guignery and Roberts 68-69) one should be careful in the analysis of such a theme. The literary genesis work conducted by Vanessa Guignery in *Julian Barnes from the Margins: Exploring the Writer's Archives* underlines that: "[Barnes] insisted on not making Christopher's return to Metroland a synonym of defeat and resignation but the result of a maturation leading to some nuanced happiness." (35) Yet, this might be one of the numerous tricks Barnes uses to confuse the reader's interpretations by being inconsistent in his interviews, thus playing around the idea of truth and his own authority as the author, because, as we shall see, the notion of playfulness is often crucial to understanding narrators in Barnes' postmodernist[1] fiction. It nonetheless raises the question of defeat which is no longer to be understood within the simple frame of the dichotomy failure or success. Defeat, like vulnerability and fragility, tends to urge Barnes' ageing characters onwards, and it allows them to grow as individuals by accessing different kinds of knowledge and perspectives.

While the narrator of *Metroland* recalls his adolescence from the vantage-point of his thirties, in *The Sense of an Ending* Tony Webster goes through a similar process when

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1. In this dissertation, we shall be using the adjective *postmodernist* to refer to the artistic movement and its various aesthetics, and the adjective *postmodern* to refer to the time-period in which such movement took place.

in his sixties. Barnes' 2011 Man Booker winning novel does not offer the proliferation of anecdotes that is the hallmark of *Metroland*. Instead, it focuses on a few episodes of Webster's adolescence and early adulthood which make an unexpected come-back in his later monotonous life. In *The Sense of an Ending*, the narrator's memories go back to his schooldays, a period in which he is "not very interested" (Barnes, *Sense* 4). More precisely, it focuses on the narrator's relationships to Veronica Ford, his first serious girlfriend – and subsequently ex-girlfriend – and to Adrian Finn, a bright adolescent who joined Webster's group of friends in late high-school. Though Webster met Veronica after starting university, she later became Adrian's girlfriend. When Webster learnt about it, he felt the urge to write them a bitter letter which is recovered in the late second part of the book. Like this letter, other elements and characters from the past come back to people Webster's present. This progressive haunting is prompted by the death of Veronica's mother, the latter having designated Webster in her will as her beneficiary for some money and Adrian's diary, an item which Veronica refuses to hand over.

Most of the plot revolves around the insufficiencies of Webster's memory, the latter being rather self-deceptive – he tends to keep his defects silent instead of facing them. The sense of responsibility he avoids throughout the novel becomes crucial when he learns that Adrian committed suicide, and it leads him to wonder about the responsibility of the letter he wrote to him: "Then I thought about Adrian. My old friend who had killed himself. And this had been the last communication he had ever received from me. A libel on his character and an attempt to destroy the first and last love affair of his life." (108) *The Sense of an Ending* is divided into two unlabelled parts, the first one presenting the narrator as he recollects moments and stories from his early life, the second one taking place some forty years later in the narrator's present life as he comes to acknowledge the failures of his memory and the fact that he has been rewriting his life-story for a long time. Thus, rather than a coming-of-age novel, Barnes' *Sense of an Ending* has been described as a "being old" one (Deresiewicz). Indeed, the time-span it covers is longer than in *Metroland*, and the voice of the narrator is more aged – it coincides with the age

of Barnes who was 65 when *The Sense of an Ending* was published, while he was just 34 when his first novel was. The amount of time that elapsed between these publications will allow us to reflect upon the evolution of Barnes' first-person narrative voices and on the various themes and elements the two novels share.

As the brief presentation of the two novels has shown, ageing is at the core of the tensions faced by the two narrators[2]. They embrace a retrospective gaze on what they used to be, on their past ideals and on the individuals they have been turned into by time and life. They both share a similar idea of life as an active force, forming and shaping their selves. However, if Chris in *Metroland* is rather at peace with his uneventful suburban adult life, Webster in *The Sense of an Ending*, feels remorse when he realises his lack of agency throughout his life: "I thought of the things that had happened to me over the years, and of how little I had made happen" (Barnes, *Sense* 157). As the two novels are based on the same persons encountered by Barnes, and as *The Sense of an Ending* was first intended as a sequel to *Metroland* (see Guignery, *Margins* 219-223), the point here will be to show that they both use the theme of ageing in a similar fashion: ageing as a transition process initiated in adolescence with the rejection of one's failures but leading to a broader acceptance of one's vulnerability in old age. It shall be demonstrated that, unlike traditional *Bildungsromane*, the two novels, by depicting the thoughts and feelings of older narrators, underline the never-ending introspection that occurs throughout a life. While typical *Bildungsromane* often lead to a clear resolution and transition into a later stage of life, the self-examination in Barnes' novels entails infinite reassessment and a great lack of serenity. The purpose of the coming-of-age narratives might thus be extended to a later stage of life; Barnes' novels may be helping to make sense of existential questionings and doubts that sometimes prevail over tranquillity in old age. Indeed, *Metroland* and *The Sense of an Ending* raise related concerns throughout the lives of their protagonists:

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2. There is a tendency among barnesian critics to call Christopher Lloyd simply by his first name or his shorter "Chris" and to keep Tony Webster's full-name (see for instance Guignery's *Margins* which tackles both books). This is probably related to the age and maturity of the two protagonists, and their distance to their younger selves – Webster only refers to some events of his youth while Chris depicts a wider and richer picture. However, as we shall often be prone to write about Toni, Christopher's best friend, we shall avoid any misleading homophones and proceed to call Tony Webster only by his last name.

the problem of self-definition, the fear of fragmentation, and the feeling of hollowness. By setting these contemporary concerns at the core of his narrations, Barnes offers a renewal of the coming-of-age narrative in his novels; they are not focused on the single transition from childhood to adulthood anymore, but rather tackle the failings one is likely to experience in the course of a life-time.

We shall try to show that all these new concerns are linked to an increasing feeling of vulnerability that came along the entry into the postmodern era. Indeed, while early *Bildungsromane* would often display the process of ageing as a fairly straightforward progression and as a usually positive maturing process, since the early twentieth century and the two world wars, they have endorsed new forms. Both in literature and in the world, the transition from youth to adulthood has shifted: historical events and social changes have distorted this progression, whether by accelerating the transition into adulthood or by containing it. The path has grown blurred, its outline is not so clear anymore. Thus, authors of coming-of-age novels have become increasingly innovative regarding the form of their narration. Their explorations led them along various paths, often straying away from realism and endorsing new forms of narration, thus offering readers a kaleidoscopic vision of what the paths to adulthood could be. After modernism, coming-of-age narratives could not possibly unfold as they used to. The mind and its formation had been deeply redesigned, modernity and wars undermined the idea of progress and paved the way for new fears and new vulnerabilities. These fears and vulnerabilities had to be addressed through a new approach to education which was not centred on progress anymore. As Claude Burgelin points out: "avec le roman du xx$^{\text{e}}$ siècle, c'est l'éducation de la conscience (de l'intelligence, de la mémoire, de la sensibilité) qui prévaut, parallèlement à celle de la relation lecture-écriture." ("Roman d'éducation")

If a shift did occur in the themes and approach to education in coming-of-age novels during the twentieth century, a deeper one appeared regarding the form of those narratives. It is especially the case with postmodernist literature which is known for its propensity to fragment and dislocate conventional narratives, allowing room for the expression of

unexplored emotions and concerns. That is the case of *The Sense of an Ending*, for instance, as the novel seems to extend the boundaries of the coming-of-age narrative, showing emphatically that old age is not an age of wisdom: the narrator who is part of "the world on the farther side of adulthood" (*Nothing* 5) is probably twice as aged as David Copperfield, a traditional *Bildungsroman* narrator, who is middle-aged when he tells his life-story. Similarly, *Metroland* explores new narrative temporalities, namely through its use of ellipses, while other coming-of-age fictions like Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* tend to focus on a continuous and shorter time as they aim at a slice-of-life effect.

Regarding Barnes' ageing characters, vulnerability is to be understood in the broad sense of the word, as complete exposure. As underlined by the Merriam-Webster definitions of *vulnerable* (1. "capable of being physically or emotionally wounded," 2. "open to attack or damage"), the main feature of vulnerability is its openness, its lack of protection. It truly is a capacity in the primary sense of the word, that is the property of containing a quantity of something. It is more precisely the potential to receive, often involuntarily, the external world into oneself, hence the emphasis on exposure in the idea of vulnerability as defined by Jean-Michel Ganteau: "a liability to harm, an exposure to risk [...] a disposition to damage" (*Aesthetics of Vulnerability* 5). Thus, as these definitions underline, vulnerability is to be closely linked to trauma which, in the manner of a wound, sparks a yawning gap which is always reactivated by the repeated traces of intrusions of the external world into the self, intrusions that are potentially harmful. Repetition over time, which is at the core of trauma, for it is the symptom which reveals its existence, also partakes in the idea of vulnerability: as one ages, empirical experiences pile up and add layers which act as a protective armour over one's bare fragility. Vulnerability is thus supposed to grow more and more concealed over time. Yet, concurrently, as one's life unfolds, situations and reactions are repeated, betraying the presence of a forgotten trauma. Trauma are thus usefully tackled through fiction, a place where time is highly malleable, and especially through *Bildung*-like narratives, as the act of telling may reveal patterns of repetitions. Besides, the throes of evolution and self-definition are mainly visible in ageing characters.

We shall thus try and see whether or not the understanding and acceptance of vulnerability evolve through the lives of the protagonists of Barnes' fiction, from adolescence to old age, as those lives fill up with events that are more or less accurately remembered. As vulnerability can either lead an individual to enclosure and self-centring, or to sympathy for others and evolution, we shall try and demonstrate that ageing at times increases characters' vulnerabilities but is also a way for them to handle their failings once they become older. Could the acceptance of one's vulnerability be the ultimate strength of older age?

To address this tension, we shall first see that adolescence is a time for definition and construction against the world; adolescents in Barnes' fiction tend to take part in a generational conflict which is both a means to assert themselves as individuals and a way to fend off vulnerability. However, if the adolescent protagonists tend to underline the age gap and to discard their failures, they are nonetheless on their way to becoming adults and sometimes fall victim to their own fears. Then, we will try and figure out the reasons why adulthood can be synonymous with erosion and fragmentation. Indeed, the formlessness that sometimes overwhelmed the characters in their youth tends to come back, thus allowing for a return of vulnerability in their more secure lives. Finally, we shall explore the ways in which, in old age, one can turn one's vulnerability and incompleteness into a strength, using them as a source of authorship and writing empowerment.

PART ONE

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ADOLESCENCE & CONSTRUCTION
Building One's Armour Against The World

Adolescence is traditionally associated with a time of in-betweenness which places the subject in a position of vulnerability, as most moments of transition do: when one has few landmarks, one is most likely to lose one's bearings. It is all the more true regarding identity and its formation – adolescence implies gradual definition toward an ideal of stability. If that period is often perceived in terms of rebellion, it is also to be viewed in terms of intensity, as suggested by the French idea of "crise d'adolescence" (teenage angst): adolescence is expected to lead to a climactic crisis, a moment of emotional intensity which can only bring a rupture – a change in the very self of the subject. Indeed, the early adolescent crisis leads the subject to evolve, either by reproducing inherited patterns by himself or by confronting those patterns. When displayed in fiction, such a transitional moment often depicts the ways in which adolescent protagonists deal with their recurring vulnerability. More often than not, they try and conceal it as is the case of Webster and Christopher in their adolescent years. As their social spheres are fairly limited (basically home and school), they often try to play a role which is erected as a protection between their inner weaknesses and the world which tends to be very harsh on them. This role-playing, which is at the core of their defence mechanism, is often accentuated and built against others so as to create a better protection – an even thicker armour. Invariably, this two-sided identity raises fundamental questions on the ideals and definition of the narrators. Moreover, if such a distance forms a protection in some aspects, it also leaves room for a constant return of vulnerability – as characters' insecurities are rarely answered during their adolescence.

In this section, we shall first tackle the urgency of adolescence which is pictured by fictional characters as a moment for definition – if not the only one – and the various components young characters use in order to build a homogeneous role for themselves. Then, we will try and analyse why the process of construction is understood by both protagonists as an opposition to adults, and especially to parents, and how this definition

as opposition quickly meets its own shortcomings. Finally, we will focus on the return of vulnerability, which prevents unity of character and thus forbids any clear transition from adolescence into adulthood.

1.1 Defining One's Future as a Self-Centred Adolescent

1.1.1 *"We knew that we grasped life [...] far more clearly than our compromised elders." (*Sense *12)*

One of the main features shared by the two protagonists of both novels is their clear-mindedness. They feel that time is playing against them, that they are inexorably pushed onwards toward a less clear future, and they know it for a fact, hence the feeling of urgency the two of them feel. It is now or never. The urgency is even greater because the young protagonists come across a great variety of unexplored things, so they need to select with care while they still see "far more clearly."

As Christopher underlines in the second sentence of the first chapter of *Metroland*, "[a]t that age, everything seemed more open to analogy, to metaphor, than it does now. There were more meanings, more interpretations, a greater variety of available truths. There was more symbolism. Things contained more" (*Metro* 13). This plurality of interpretations and possible meanings, which may sometimes overwhelm the young protagonists, is the basis of their difference with adults. This point is actually crucial, especially regarding colours, in Christopher's evolution from adolescence to adulthood: while the novel opens with a scrutiny of his mother's reversible coat and lipstick in the orange sodium lighting (they both seem to change colours, "[o]nly in suburbia, I thought, could this happen." 14), by the end of the novel, the plurality of colours and interpretations is calmly discarded:

> The orange light has turned the stripes in my pyjamas brown. [...] I follow a half-factitious line about the nature of the light: how the sodium with its strength and nearness blots out even the fullest moon; but how the moon goes on nevertheless; and how this is symbolic of ... well, of something, no doubt. But I don't pursue this too seriously: there's no point in trying to thrust false significances on to things. (176)

In his later analysis, Chris knows that what he is thinking is half-false and is not backed up with anything other than his own interpretation. While young Chris might have

devoted a whole day to the analysis of the phenomenon, adult Chris simply blots out his interpretative impulses. His "line" unfolds in an anaphoric accumulation which is cut short by a prosaic full stop and its "But." If our analysis here tackles a later evolution, it is to underline the ambivalence of the retrospective gaze which is important to keep in mind in both books: the narrators will sometimes provide quite a precise rendition of what they used to be, but at other times, their gazes will also come to interfere and add a cynical tone which tends to either enhance or conceal the narrator's past failures.

The plurality of the aforementioned interpretations partakes in the process of building and defining the narrators' identity without exactly revealing what they are aiming at. They live in a state of formlessness, expecting to sort life out. As Barnes puts it in a 1999 interview, when you are young, you imagine that your "task [...] is to become free, discover what you are, and what your capabilities are, and to construct your own life, invent your own life in some way which accords with your essence" (interview with R. Freiburg, quoted in Guignery and Roberts 35). In the midst of all these possibilities, Toni and Chris have no other choice but to narrow down what they are and what they like. This "task" is their only purpose as adolescents, and it thus feels all the more crucial to them. Even though they try to fight it by adding a more definite aspect to their lives, this undecided nature seems to remain a part of their essence as adolescents: "'What shall we be today?' Toni and I would sometimes ask each other. It was a direct denial of adult status. Adults were always themselves. We, by popular insistence, were not yet grown up, not yet formed" (Barnes, *Metro* 66). This difference appears as the root of the adolescents' defiance towards adults and authorities: they feel belittled by adults, as though kept – for the time being – in a separate, lesser form of identity ("not yet [...] not yet"). Their projection "How are you going to turn out?" is thus followed by the absurd and formless-related replies they make (jelly, light, Sandhurst cadet). The "denial of adult status" which is cast down upon them by authorities is felt by both adolescents as a denial of their identity altogether, while it is only intended by parents as a constriction into

adolescence[3]. Nonetheless, Toni and Chris end up embracing their formlessness, and they start to feel that their absence of definite form is precisely what defines them. What is more, it seems to allow them to explore uncharted territories: "Being protean was our only consistent shape. Everything was justifiable. Everything was possible." (66) Later in adolescence, as shown in *The Sense of an Ending*, protagonists begin to experience a fear of fragmentation: identity is not a playful thing anymore, and the characters crave for stability. Webster, when in his early twenties, admits to be envious of his girlfriend's period, "this regular reminder of something so wholly female and defining" (*Sense* 27) because it appears to him as some rock-solid proof of a circumscribed identity.

However, they soon start to think that they need to set down their identities as quickly as possible because they believe that their tastes will not evolve anymore once adulthood is reached. This creates a strong feeling of urgency because they still live by the myth of the clear transition from adolescence to adulthood (cf. 1.3.2). Because of this belief, failing to define oneself during this crucial, limited time implies suffering from it for the rest of their lives. As pointed out by Erik Erikson, a psychologist specialising in psychological development, this feeling of urgency acts as an active force upon the undefined adolescent: "with dire urgency [new identifications] force the young individual into choices and decisions which will, with increasing immediacy, lead to commitment 'for life.'" (Erikson 155) Adults are thus designated as "compromised" (Barnes, *Sense* 12), because it seems to the adolescents that adults are now on the other side of the line, at the point of their existence when the business of life has been settled once and for all into an irreversible monolith of dullness. Marguerite Duras describes this feeling of being suddenly pushed onwards by time: "on m'a parlé de cette poussée du temps qui vous frappe quelquefois lorsqu'on traverse les âges les plus jeunes, les plus célébrés de la vie. Ce vieillissement a été brutal." (Duras)

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3. We are using the verb *to constrict* to convey the idea of an inward force imposed by parents upon adolescents in order to maintain them in a certain place and state of mind. In Barnes' memoir, this constriction is directly expressed as his mother's "opinionated" conception of the world was felt "restrictive in adolescence" (*Nothing* 9–10).

The parts of Christopher's adolescence that are referred to in *Metroland* convey the image of a self-assured and flawless individual, ready to jump into adulthood at any time – he feels that everything has been decided as to what one shall and shall not be. This is why, as Chris pictures it, his notebooks will be the same once he is grown up, but instead of lists of things he wished he could do, they would be filled with lists of things he had actually done, "only with a heart-stopping change of tense" (Barnes, *Metro* 51). The time in which Chris pictures himself seems to have stopped: he presents himself at the pinnacle of his life, leaving all his flaws and insecurities aside while in public. The retrospective gazes of the narrators help in the sense that they often mock their past beliefs and they come back to underline the facts that had remained unknown to them when they were younger. Had they been written in the spur-of-the-moment fashion of *The Catcher in the Rye*, the narrators' shortcomings might have been concealed beneath an erudite tone. However, thanks to this retrospective narration, readers have access to the narrator's own concealed failings, for instance Christopher's undisclosed lack of knowledge about John Stuart Mill in *Metroland* (36) or Webster's secret dances in his hideaway, far from Veronica's eyes (*Sense* 23).

While they may not remember all the precise details from their adolescence, when they talk about it, the two narrators tend to present themselves in an ambivalent light, sometimes concealing their past and sometimes utterly honest about what they used to be. The common trait that comes forth is the constant challenge of the authority of adults through which the two narrators assert themselves as true individuals. It leads them to bury their adolescent vulnerabilities and uncertainties under an ethos, an homogeneous mask.

1.1.2 *Adolescent Ethos and Caricatural Intellect*

We are here using the notion of ethos in its original meaning: not as the moral stance of the narrator but as his social behaviour, the ways in which he presents himself to others. In the wake of Roland Barthes (in *Le Degré Zéro de l'écriture* 17–18), we borrow this

definition from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* where he describes it as one of the three modes of persuasion, along with λόγος (*logos*, arguing with reason) and πάϑος (*pathos*, appealing to emotions). It seems important to underline the notion of persuasion at this point because the two narrators use their ethos to convince both other characters and the reader. The persuasion of readers will be developed later on (cf. 3.3.1). The narrators set forth a seemingly homogeneous mask so as to hide their adolescent vulnerability which lies in the formlessness and inconsistency of this transitional period. This mask is displayed both to adults and to their peers, and also, at times, to themselves.

For instance, regarding the lack of knowledge about sexual matters, Christopher notes: "You couldn't ask, because all jokes and conversations on the subject implied mutual and equal knowledge; to admit ignorance would have undefined but dreadful consequences" (*Metro* 24). This lack of knowledge is construed as a flaw, a failure. It would be proof of incompleteness, which is why in *Metroland*, the narrator tends to hide and dismiss his supposed not-yet-formed quality: "They say that adolescence is a dynamic period, the mind and body thrusting forward to new discoveries all the time. I don't remember it like that. It all seemed remarkably static." (52) While this statement evokes the monotonous life of the suburbia, it is also in keeping with the feeling of being at the peak of one's life, mentioned previously, as it underlines that Chris feels ready: in his view, his incompleteness is only imposed upon him by adults ("they say"). To define oneself, as the narrators do, is to determine oneself and implies to set oneself into a static idea. Christopher thus emphasises on his stasis, and on the fact that his notebooks should remain identical once he is grown up. This is one of his numerous attempts at contradicting the labels adults set upon him. During their adolescences, both narrators aim at these homogeneous masks, and this is mainly done through lying, something which will prevail during their lives: if not to others, at least they will get used to lying to themselves. As pointed out by Chris and Toni's "Mendacity Curve," their "pilot study of lying" (47), the lying peaks are reached at ages sixteen and sixty. In a deleted passage of *The Sense of an Ending*, Guignery found that the narrator toned down the responsibility of the other

side of the curve as "there are fewer professional and social consequences at speaking your mind" (Guignery, *Margins* 221) when one is sixty. Thus, even though it shall diminish throughout his life, Chris starts off with the idea that lying is the one great option available to conceal truth and vulnerability. In adulthood, lying shall be used to ease difficulties, to smooth life down by retelling it. The re-definition of truth and identity as things that are now plural and often made of approximations or lies is an idea that has been around in literature since the beginning of modernism, as pointed out in Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit*: "Comme la vie n'est qu'un délire tout bouffi de mensonges, plus qu'on est loin et plus qu'on peut en mettre dedans des mensonges et plus alors qu'on est content, c'est naturel et c'est régulier. La vérité c'est pas mangeable." (Céline 461)

Until this point, we have taken most of our examples from *Metroland* because of the two novels' different levels of narrative detachment (i.e. Ricœur's *distanciation narrative* which lies in "la propriété remarquable qu'a le récit de pouvoir se dédoubler en *énonciation* et *énoncé*" Ricœur 92). Indeed, the two narrators do not speak from the same vantage point, hence a more ironic gaze on adolescence in *The Sense of an Ending* than in *Metroland*. While Christopher's voice provides us with many hints on his adolescent psyche, which is only fifteen years past him, Webster's recollections of his adolescence are more factual. They are made of quotations and daily gestures ("Fucking bastards, parents" 8; "as a symbol of our bond, [we] used to wear our watches with the face on the inside of the wrist" 6). Indeed, in *The Sense of an Ending*, the narrator speaks from a more distant stand point, as he reflects upon his adolescence from his sixties[4]. Thus, he describes the mask under which his adolescent self used to cover his flaws with a hint of irony. He writes:

> If Alex had read Russell and Wittgenstein, Adrian had read Camus and Nietzsche. I had read George Orwell and Aldous Huxley; Colin had read Baudelaire and Dostoevsky. This is only a slight caricature.
>
> Yes, of course we were pretentious – what else is youth for? We used terms like "*Weltanschauung*" and "*Sturm und Drang*," enjoyed saying "That's philosophically self-evident" and assured one another that the imagination's first duty was to be transgressive. (Barnes, *Sense* 11)

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4. Another example of long-distance narrative detachment in Barnes' work is *Staring at the Sun* which opens with this line: "Other people assumed it must be a strain, looking back over ninety years" (5).

As the latter quotation shows, the protagonists and their friends build for themselves an ethos that is steeped in pedantry and erudition, but also overgeneralisation (the narrator appears as fond of political and ethical dystopias, Adrian as mainly interested in nihilist-leaning philosophy). While they appear to be tackling prestigious subjects (high arts and literature), it mainly seems that it is a way to reach self-marginalisation and to exclude their classmates and parents as Vanessa Guignery underlines: "Like Flaubert's protagonists [Bouvard and Pécuchet], Toni and Chris adopt a superior stance towards their families and friends, pretending to have access to a knowledge others are deprived of, but their supposed erudition proves to be hollow and useless." (Guignery, *Fiction* 14) Indeed, by the time they grow into adults, the two narrators become increasingly detached from the passion that inhabited them. This passion for literature is later reduced to a simple occupation in the characters' lives – Christopher's career in advertising as a copywriter, and Webster's "traineeship turned into a long career" (Barnes, *Sense* 59) in art administration as well as his volunteering at the hospital's library. As other critiques summed it up about *Metroland*, those novels can be said to be "account[s] of overbright adolescence" (Edward Blishen, quoted in Guignery, *Fiction* 9). In *Metroland*, this is obvious through the protagonists' permanent use of French language and references. "Remember your Maupassant," Toni warns (Barnes, *Metro* 28). They make bilingual puns to each other all along adolescence, as if over-intellectualising everything was their only way of pursuing their rebellious duties, and of asserting their uniqueness: "Deconning, as we called it, savouring the pun, was the duty of every self-respecting adolescent" (41). According to Vanessa Guignery, this use of French can be seen as an "antilanguage" (Brian McHale quoted in Guignery, "Brouillage" 232). She ascribes the adolescents' borrowing from French as much to a will for marginalisation as to pedantry: "les tics langagiers de Toni et Christopher participent sans doute davantage d'une posture adolescente somme toute conventionnelle. Malgré leurs prétentions il semble exagéré de les qualifier de socialement 'déviants'" (232). Still, as she notes later on, the anglicisation of accentuated French words ("we flâned on at top speed. [...] Think I épated him much?" 18) allows the two friends to create their own code

and uniqueness: "ce code linguistique partagé par les deux adolescents est ouvertement assimilé à la langue d'accueil car les vocables apparaissent sans italique" (242). These borrowing from French are directly integrated into the adolescents' language, and this pedantry becomes part of their identities and cultures. It provides a legacy as well as a form of stability.

The aim of their ethos, of this mask they build for themselves, is indeed to conceal their formlessness, and what better way to do so than by overstating one's individuality, and by artificially setting oneself outside the pack. This assertion of uniqueness sometimes leads them to a paradoxical denial of others' pasts: "Master and parents used to remind us irritatingly that they too had once been young, and so could speak with authority. [...] But back then we declined to acknowledge that they had ever been anything like us" (Barnes, *Sense* 12). Thus, by asserting a false permanence and uniqueness, they more or less manage to hide their vulnerability and formlessness. They seem at least contained as the characters grope their way towards what they expect to be their static selves.

1.2 Construction as Opposition: Protecting Oneself from the World

1.2.1 *Anger and Separation: "we're in there, aren't we, being Angry?" (*Metro *41)*

Despite all the effort adolescents put in their ethos and individuality, they are nonethe-less brought down by their parents who euphemise and infantilise the narrators, especially Christopher. When adults keep referring to the ephemeral state of adolescence, they often prove to be very unhelpful and do nothing but feed the protagonists' resentment. They tend to impose their adult gaze upon adolescence, seeing it from their point of view instead of putting themselves in their children's shoes. This unhelpful and categorical imposition coming from the top, from the ones who know, is strongly rejected, as seen just above. Moreover, as adolescents' means to interact with the world – both intellectually and materially – are fairly limited, they have few other means to signify their disapproval than doing more mischiefs. Interestingly, adolescents in Barnes' fiction seem to crave being turned down or punished for their behaviours. Punishments and scoldings are somewhat giving them more legitimacy and fuel to sustain their anger against the world.

Thus, the narrators in both novels tend to compare their reasons to be angry about their parents, which is the main authority they can be angry about. As Christopher notes about his mate Toni: "he had a much cushier time being Angry than I did. Toni's parents [...] were (a) religious, (b) disciplinarian, (c) possessively loving, and (d) poor. All he had to be was an idle, agnostic, independent spendthrift, and there he was – Angry." (*Metro* 41) Thus, Toni could easily be punished because of his parental environment whereas even when Christopher does his most to be destructive or obstinate, he is disappointed by his parents' response: "[they] would merely identify my condition for me ('It's always a tricky time, Christopher, growing up'). That identification was the nearest I could get them to come towards reproach." (42) This passage underlines Christopher's dichotomous understanding of the world which is split into two poles. In his view, one should systematically repel adults coming into one's pole and shamelessly reject the values of the other side. His listing of the characteristics of Toni's parents is supposed to make it look more objective,

almost like a scientific demonstration. It also contrasts with his own less rigorous parents. However, in the list Chris draws up for Toni and his parents, he subtly omits the love part, only "possessively" is answered with "independent." Regarding Christopher's speech about adults, readers might have expected hatred to answer love.

Even though other adolescents sometimes express strong feelings, they might not actually feel them since they crave independence but cannot detach themselves from their families (this ambiguity shall be developed further in 1.2.3). Thus, Chris does envy Toni for the harshness of his parents, but, like him, he is unable to answer their love and solicitude properly. A similar envy strikes Webster and his friends in *The Sense of an Ending* regarding Adrian:

> And yet, it seemed to us, [Adrian] had more cause than most. His mother had walked out years before, leaving his dad to cope with Adrian and his sister. [...] This ought to have given him a whole storetank of existential rage, but somehow it didn't; he said he loved his mother and respected his father. [...] Having made this analysis, we envied Adrian the more. (*Sense* 9–10)

Love is expressed by the only character who does not join in the parent-bashing frenzy of his friends. Like Chris, who envies Toni, Webster admits that he would have liked to grow up in a more complicated household: "our house, as far as I could tell, contained no mysteries, to my shame and disappointment." (17) The latter statement also points at Webster's adult gaze on what he now perceives as an absurd yearning, underlining the overreaction of his adolescent feelings.

This raging adolescence is deeply undermined by their social environment, but Christopher sees it as a determining part of his identity as an adolescent: "After all, we were part of the Anger generation." (*Metro* 41) When Chris refers to this generation later in the book with Janet ("the first girl with whom I exchanged kisses of respectable duration" 80) he insists on the unpredictable character of anger, somewhat echoing his identity as a formless adolescent: "we thought about the capital-F Future; I explained that I was part of the Anger Generation; she asked me if this meant I wasn't going to take a job; I said I wasn't sure – you could never tell which way Anger was going to jump" (80). Indeed, the anger on which adolescent Chris builds his whole world proves to be as fluid as him. Even the

"Angry Young Men" movement, which Chris probably refers to, is loosely circumscribed and indeed "[t]he anger expressed in the "Angry Young Man" [sic] movement [...] does not come from having lost what one possessed, but from having never possessed what one feels he or she deserves to possess." (Horner 34) If Chris identifies to such a literary movement (which ended in the early sixties, that is when the first part of *Metroland* takes place), it might be because its blurry lines allow many to identify to this undefined anger, which is sparked by desire rather than loss.

Along with the idea of generation, in which anyone the same age can take part, it should be added that the way Chris puts it also emphasises the separation between two worlds: adolescents on the one side and all the others on the other. Anger somewhat turns into a place or a time period in Christopher's words: "we're part of the Anger generation" becomes "we're in there, aren't we, being Angry?" (Barnes, *Metro* 41). The implied separation is almost sought by Chris and Toni, as a way of asserting their difference and individuality. What is more, while readers might expect them to seek communion with the other members of their supposed generation, it turns out that they also look for separation *inside* their generation. They indeed seem very pleased with the idea that they will turn out differently from the other schoolboys: "'what if the whole school, apart from us, became bank managers. Wouldn't that be great?' It would be terrific. It would be perfect" (69–70) This echoes the pedantry of the two protagonists who use French in order to assert a difference from their family and the other schoolboys (cf. previous sub-section).

While, like Philippe Meirieu (see "Adolescent à l'école : est-ce possible ?"), one would expect school and the discovery of otherness to open the youngsters to the world, for Chris they only reinforce his opposition to the world and his isolation inside his social sphere. Indeed, Chris and his friends' constant opposition to the world quickly grows into a characterising trait, but it is also a way to prevent the outside world from invading their interiority. Thus, even though Toni and Chris try and assert their identities everywhere they can, there is less room available, and the last place they can think of is the in-betweenness of the railway journey, a time for definition and redefinition between two

spaces that function according to different rules: "But there was a point of balance in the oscillation between home and school. The journey. An hour and a quarter each way, a time of twice-daily metamorphosis" (58). Paradoxically, the two adolescents find a "balance" in their formlessness – their "metamorphosis" – as well as in the highly symbolical journey by train which, as it moves from one place to another, also evokes the in-betweenness of adolescence.

As for anger, it is to be connected with teenage angst and the idea of crisis (*crise d'adolescence*). Anger is supposed to carry them up to a point of no return, in which passions are so intense that they lead to a deep shift, a *mise en crise* of their adolescence. They will either follow the path of their parents or go in the opposite direction, towards more extreme behaviours. Moreover, the young characters' continuous opposition to the world may act as a way of hiding their vulnerability during this period of change. The opposition of adolescents forms a continuum in which every adult character ends up; the words they use are so stretched that they come to encompass a great number of characters who are despised for various reasons. Holden Caulfield, from Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, creates a similar impression on the readers: every adult seems to share the same features because of Holden's constant accusations of "phoniness."

This opposition is also a way of dodging the insecurities and shortcomings of adolescence; it appears in the history lesson in the beginning of *The Sense of an Ending*, when the youngsters do not know the answer to a tricky question such as "What is History?" (*Sense* 18). They will tend to cover up their flaws by using provocation, an attitude which adults "dismi[ss] as puerile cynicism – something else we would grow out of." (19) While on the inside they feel very concerned about themselves and care very little about the world, on the outside they act as if the world were their main concern, reducing and never expressing anything about their inner emotions. This incoherence in the character's relationship to the world appears in *Metroland* with Christopher's fear of death which he mentions only once to his brother in the chapter "Big D," and in *The Sense of an Ending* with young Webster's inability to start a proper relationship with a girl without questioning his whole

identity or the dating conventions of his time. Thus, adolescent Chris and Webster pretend to care about the world and its complexity while they are only concerned with their own world and interiority.

This craving for conflict during times of self-definition can be linked to Hegel's work on the forming of the mind. The process of recognition is at its core. In order for one to show oneself as a self, one has to confront other selves. The term confrontation is even mild regarding the terminology used by Hegel: he calls it "the *fight* of recognition," saying "this process is a *battle*" (Hegel §431–432. Emphases added). This violence appears metaphorically in the process of "Scorched Earth" as imagined by Toni and Chris who define it as a "systematic rejection, wilful contradiction, a wide-ranging, anarchic slate-wipe" (Barnes, *Metro* 41-42), using very absolutist but also very vague terms, denoting a dichotomy of thought that is underlined by Webster ("Back then, we were most of us absolutists. We liked Yes v. No [...] We liked a game that ended in win and loss, not a draw." *Sense* 11.) (Un)fortunately, the characters never yield to the actual violence of their plan and readers never get to see the second part named "Reconstruction" which is supposed to come after the end of "Scorched Earth." Though "[Reconstruction] was on the schedule, anyway" (42), Chris and Toni never actually plan or define it, invoking a reluctance to commitment to avoid thinking about this part. This two-speed system, in which the characters craft great plans but never deploy the means to achieve them, is central in the relationship between youngsters and adults in Barnes' novels. It allows the characters to develop an identity of their own without going as far as becoming a misfit. They can thus confront other selves without engaging in the violence underlined by Hegel. And in his later years, Christopher recalls his adolescent use of the word "enemy" to refer to parents. He sadly notes: "The enemies who had given us common cause were no longer there; our adult enthusiasms were bound to be less congruent than our adolescent hates." (97) Thus, even from a more adult perspective on adolescence, this period is still seen by Chris as a time for rebellion against authority, a position which also allows for a

22

lack of nuanced approach to any complex or serious matter. Even though his opposition has remained intellectual, it was always centred on one authority: parents.

1.2.2 *"Fucking bastards, parents": From Overgeneralisation to Isolation*

Most of the young characters' hatred is pointed at parents. However, we shall see in 1.2.3 that the narrators are more ambiguous in their stance towards the special kind of adults that parents are. This could explain why the most virulent expressions against parents are not uttered by the narrators themselves, but by their friends (respectively Toni in *Metroland*: "One thing about parents. They fug you up." (38), and Colin in *The Sense of an Ending*: "Fucking bastards, parents" 8). Both narrators also take part in the loathing of parents because it helps creating a differentiation between two generations and thus furthers the cohesion and self-definition among the young characters. This shared behaviour is enhanced by smoothing the specificities of each parent and indulging in over-generalisation. Indeed, the zero article that is used in both cases can be underlined as a sign of the great abstraction parents are in the adolescent minds[5].

Such an over-generalisation can be found in other *Bildung*-like novels relating the adventures of youngsters, such as J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* in which Holden Caulfield, the seventeen-year-old narrator, labels most things that are unlike him as "phony," hypocrite. Parents and all those who abide by their rules are the first to be called that way. A mild equivalent in *Metroland* would be "old fugger" which is repeated seven times across the novel (a small number in comparison to the forty-six mentions of "phony" in Salinger's novel). Chris uses this phrase to discredit any adult – not just parents – to readers' eyes, with his Uncle Arthur for instance. He also employs this over-generalisation to avoid facing his own insecurities and vulnerability: at the end of the fifth chapter, in the first part, Chris is trapped in the train with an older man who reminds him of what

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5. In a different fashion, but still echoing Toni's "they fug you up," Philip Larkin evokes the abstraction of parents in "This Be The Verse":
   They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
      They may not mean to, but they do.
   They fill you with the faults they had
      And add some extra, just for you.

Metroland used to be, and of what it has become (i.e. the dwelling of the bourgeoisie). This revelation strikes Chris and forces him to face the paradox of his cosiness: "[i]t was as if someone had dropped a bag of cutlery inside my head." (38) To undermine the effect of the man's words, the latter is early on dismissed as an "elegiac old fugger" (37).

Indeed, in *Metroland*, the word "fugger" is mainly used to display the age gap between two generations the narrator depicts as opposed. Later in the novel, because of Christopher's older age (now that he could almost be one of the "old fuggers" he mocked in his youth), the age gap is also displayed from the other point of view. Indeed, older Chris uses similar over-generalisations (plural and zero article) as a way of setting a distance between himself and today's youth: "The fact that pubescents nowadays are getting stuck in before their testicles are fully descended doesn't bother me in itself." (78) But it does bother him, hence his recurrent opposition to the younger generation. This opposition from the point of view of an older narrator is also central in *The Sense of an Ending*. Even though the narrator tends to focus on the few individuals that went through his life, he keeps contrasting his experience with "nowadays" (which is repeated eleven times in the novel), and he explains what some phrases he uses meant "back then" (which is repeated fifteen times in the novel).

Linked to the narrator's overgeneralisation and exaggerations during adolescence, some have criticised *Metroland* for being deprived of secondary characters, which Paul Bailey calls a "curious lack of people" (quoted in Guignery, *Fiction* 12). As Merritt Moseley and Vanessa Guignery put it, this is rather an element of characterisation than an easy narrative option. In *The Fiction of Julian Barnes*, Guignery thus quotes Moseley's answer to Bailey: "The 'lack of people' is not a sign of careless writing but apt characterisation of a self-absorbed adolescent, impatient of other people because his categories are so selective and literary that hardly anybody *can* exist for him." Guignery then adds: "Christopher is a man of words who is more interested in language, art and literature than in the 'real thing.'" (12). Indeed, Christopher's engrossment in himself appears throughout the novel: he tends to use synecdoches in order to reduce adults' identities to mere objects. For

instance, he refers to a clerk as "tie-pin" (Barnes, *Metro* 18), to adults in his carriage as "the pinstripes and the chalkstripes" (59), and to his father in the car as "Front Seat" (46, though the latter is rather a metonymy). However, it is to be noted that this engrossment fades out by the end of the novel as he is able to name most of his other school friends when meeting them at the "old boy's dinner" (164–172).

This process of dehumanisation is particularly striking with the narrator's own family as he describes his brother Nigel and his sister Mary as having both "bland, soft-featured, unresentful faces" (40), thus somewhat portraying them only in comparison to himself and his own violent anger. Chris almost sees himself as a standard gauge, which anyone should aspire to resemble regarding anger and intellectual commitment. In the first chapter, it shows through the high vision Christopher has of himself: "we knew that by the time we were grown up, the state would be paying people like us simply to exist" (15). That is why he says he does not have to worry about his career and instead "worri[es] about large things [...] the purity of language, the perfectibility of self, the function of art, plus a clutch of capitalised intangibles like Love, Truth, Authenticity..." (15) Those "capitalised intangibles" are numerous in *Metroland* and *The Sense of an Ending*, as they are often used as an implicit way of asserting the narrator's ironical distance from his past self (see 2.3.2 and for instance "a Quest to Discover the Truth" in *Sense* 17).

In *The Sense of an Ending*, a similar erasing of secondary characters is performed by Webster: "Annie was part of my story, but not of this story" (*Sense* 50), "My mother-in-law (who happily is not part of this story)" (47). However, as many have noted, Webster's self-centredness also has to do with his manipulation of his own story, more than with his engrossment in himself. As Michael Greaney explains, the purpose is to centre the story told by the narrator on himself: "Webster is a narrator who won't stop talking about himself even though he insists that there is nothing to know" (Greaney 233). The manipulation of Webster's narrative is suddenly shed light on as he "goes about cutting and pasting and editing the story of his life." (234) and admits that "[he has] been tempted

somehow, by the notion that we could [...] cut and splice the magnetic tape on which our lives are recorded[6]” (Barnes, *Sense* 143).

As a reaction against the perceived blurriness and lack of characters that surrounds the young narrators, they tend to craft for themselves a definite idea of their future selves. This is also a way of finding an escape from their vulnerability and formlessness, this intermediate state in which they feel contained by their parents. It is to be added that adolescents' pretended lucidity is also steeped in a fear of the future: the young protagonists feel compelled to take definite decisions in order to create a protection against the outside world which keeps reminding them of their fluid character. It leads Chris to unburden his apprehensions onto Toni as he lacks confidence to take decisions for himself in his early years: “‘And how do you see us?’ I usually deferred to Toni on matters of the future.” (*Metro* 70) It could thus be said that they aspire to being what Oró-Piqueras calls “ageless selves,” those whose “yearnings from their youth have not changed much in their old age” (21). As we shall see later on, that is not the case for Christopher.

In the end, the identity aspired to by Toni and Chris is mainly built against others, and mainly against parents and relatives. Indeed, Christopher's descriptions of his siblings and schoolfriends precisely lays the emphasis on their difference from himself. The absolute thinking evoked earlier has been described by psychologist Erikson as the result of too difficult a self-definition:

> Where the resulting self-definition, for personal or for collective reasons, becomes too difficult, a *sense of role confusion* results: the young person counterpoints rather than synthesizes his sexual, ethnic, occupational, and typological alternatives and is often driven to decide definitely and totally for one side or the other. (*Identity, Youth and Crisis* 87)

This sense of the absolute appears as a symptom of the mindset adolescents are in, as they have not encountered enough alterity yet: anything that is unlike oneself is seen as *other*, that is a danger to one's composure and fragile identity. It is illustrated a page later with Webster who denies adults' long-gone youth and authority: “parents used to remind us

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6. Even though the two narrators share the same self-engrossing behaviours, they do not seem to be doing so for the same reasons. Following Greaney's analyses, Lecomte adds: “Le narrateur est plus qu'un simple récitant : il devient metteur en scène de son récit et procède au montage des événements qu'il souhaite raconter. Il semble alors éprouver le besoin de supprimer certains éléments, d'en déplacer d'autres et d'organiser le récit à sa convenance” (Lecomte 96).

irritatingly that they too had once been young, and so could speak with authority. It's just a phase, they would insist. [...] But back then we declined to acknowledge that they had ever been anything like us" (*Sense* 12). The use of the modal "would" with a repetition value underlines the emphasis of adults' grasp and their alleged refusal to take a different look at life, that is from the point of view of their offspring. More importantly, this is one of the numerous reminders that adolescent characters aspire to grow up in opposition to their parents, but is this commitment as staunch and irrevocable as the narrators say?

1.2.3 *Parents and the Paradox of Autonomous Definition*

The main ambiguity regarding parents and self-definition is that, no matter how much the narrators hate their progenitors, they always need them to have some point of reference against which to direct and measure up their anger, like a beacon to steer their boat on the raging sea. Even though Toni and Chris in *Metroland* pride themselves on being rootless, they cannot help needing parents: "Just as blasphemy implied religion, we argued, so a blanket of expungement childhood impositions indicates some endorsement of them." (*Metro* 42) No matter how autonomous their definition might be, it can never be a pure self-definition, as this term refers both to the definition of an identity, and to the "evaluation *by oneself* of one's worth as an individual" (Merriam-Webster dictionary, emphasis added). Parents are the ones allowing for comparison and thus definition, but this definition can never be completely detached from them. As pointed out by Christopher: "You accepted bits, you reacted against bits" (85), thus it does not matter which way one goes, the values and habits shared by parents are either accepted or confronted. However, in *Metroland*, even when Christopher realises the ambivalent quality of his parents, he keeps on acting as if *he* mastered everything, as if parents were only puppets:

> Adults were boring, with their rationality, their deference, their refusal to punish you as severely as you knew you ought to be punished. Adults were useful because they were boring: they were raw material; they were predictable in their responses. (66)

The latter quotation underlines the ambivalence of the young narrator regarding his parents: the same value ("boring") is deemed both positive and negative as long as it

serves his interests. This passage also underlines the fixed function of parents in the mind of the adolescent – they can be merely nothing but the representatives of morals and authority, as stressed by the modal "ought."

In later age, parents can also be useful when they act as the gatekeepers to their children's identity, those who remind of what one used to be in order to prevent the dissolution of the self. Their memory may never fail but it might lead them to stay focused on the past, as pointed at by this anecdotal passage in *The Sense of an Ending*: "[my mother] cooked me what was still referred to as my 'favourite dinner,' and which I accepted as such, not having updated her for a while on my taste buds." (51) Thus, if parents are softer and more permissive, they will fail to meet their children's expectations, which will also be used against them. Adolescents can be very harsh and judgmental regarding their progenitors' unsuccessful parenting (or what is seen as such), and it is sometimes almost frowned upon as amateurish by Chris: "Parents were obviously unreliable: double agents who got blown early on when trying to feed you some deliberate piece of misinformation." (22)

In order to qualify what has been said earlier, we should say that adolescent narrators actually need parents and authority. They need them for their precious gaze upon adolescence. They are able to define themselves as adolescents and rebels thanks to the consideration they are given by others. This craving for the gaze of authority is mainly visible in *Metroland*, in which Toni and Chris go for what they call "épats" (as in Baudelaire's *épater la bourgeoisie*). The aim of their game is to shock as many adults as they can (clerks, prostitutes,...) through the means of witty puns in order to leave the épated ones dumbfounded. The gaze of others is thus needed for their wit to operate. Here lies all the fun, because it is a risky game, a win or loss: "the rules of the épat declared that you should neither giggle nor give ground." (18) Christopher's need for the gaze of authority becomes even more apparent when he admits he likes to be called sir: "It was that time of life when being sirred is of inestimable importance" (19).

This attitude underlines the linguistic gap which separates adolescents and adults. Adolescents tend to move from a linguistic paradigm to another, a movement which echoes the in-betweenness of adolescence. In the meantime, the individual is vulnerable as it is difficult for them to assert their (linguistic) identity. Similarly to the processes of opposition to parents depicted earlier, adolescents will tend to emphasise their difference from adults in the language they use. This is precisely what Toni does in the épat of the clerk: it consists in fooling around the clerk of a "Man Shop" by asking for "[o]ne man and two small boys" (18) as if the shop were selling actual people; Toni first apes a "dogged-customer voice" so as to create a greater contrast when he starts cursing: "'For God's sake,' said Toni quite brusquely, 'call yourself a Man Shop? I can see I shall have to go elsewhere.'" (18) Toni is suddenly changing linguistic fields as his vocabulary and tone become salient in contrast with the clerk who remains polite. What is more, with this épat, he wilfully breaks what Paul Grice describes as the *cooperative principle*, that is the idea that two interlocutors should share the same set of linguistic rules. Language is thus another field in which adolescents remain ambiguous: they both mimic the manners of adults and try to confront them as much as possible.

With these behaviours, we can come back to Hegel's definition of the forming of the mind. Definition and recognition arise from a contradiction: that I, myself, am an ego and that I see in another self an ego alike mine, but independent from me. "This contradiction gives either self-consciousness the impulse to *show* itself as a free self, and to exist as such for the other: – the process of *recognition*." (Hegel §430) This idea is in keeping with the position of the two narrators who aspire to complete independence and absolute autonomy. As pointed out by Webster, the things that are not part of the adolescents' egos are clearly identified – or, one might say following Hegel, clearly recognised – and are felt as imposed upon them without consent: "we wanted to believe in our own things, rather than what had been decided for us." (Barnes, *Sense* 8)

The same idea was formed more recently in Saussure's linguistics and in Lacanian philosophy. Indeed, landmarks and references are at the core of modern linguistics as

we understand it, especially since structuralism. As Linda Hutcheon underlines in the section "Decentering the Postmodern" in *Poetics of Postmodernism*, language is all the more referential as it unites the couple formed by the signifier and signified. She concludes: "Meaning can be created only by differences and sustained only by reference to other meaning" (Hutcheon 65). For instance, in *Metroland*, the narrator's youth is filled with meanings: "[t]here were more meanings, more interpretations, a greater variety of available truths." (Barnes, *Metro* 13) The main example of this occurs with Christopher's perception of colours – apparently inherited from Baudelaire – which is altered by the new sodium street lamps, thus creating a difference ("[o]range on red gives dark brown" *Metro* 14) and subsequent meaning ("They [adults] even fug up the spectrum"). During his adolescence, this interpretation was part of a larger system of signs perceived as the intolerable oppression of adults upon the youth. Yet, when Christopher enters adulthood, he slowly stops fighting those whom he considered his enemies until then and the interpretation he gave earlier in the book is carelessly dismissed in the last page – the original meaning is not sustained anymore and fades away: "there's no point in trying to thrust false significances on to things." (176)

In order to shape their uniqueness and repress the vulnerability of their incompleteness, adolescent characters thus need to oppose authority. However, this opposition makes them reliant on the very authority they reject. No matter where they try and confront this authority – streets, schools, shops, homes, linguistics – they are doomed with a paradoxical need of its gaze upon them. They believe that they will free themselves from the authoritarian gaze of adults only when they reach the threshold of adulthood. However, as we shall now see, the transition from adolescence to adulthood keeps being postponed.

1.3 The Return of Vulnerability or the Impossible Transition into Adulthood

1.3.1 *Eros and Thanatos: Nothing to Be Frightened Of?*

In the midst of all this adolescent rage, which seems to supplant all other emotions, the irremediable vulnerability of adolescence comes back to the narrators. As they are brought to deal with change and ageing almost daily, vulnerability can never be wholly dismissed as the narrators are often reminded of their own fragile and changing nature: "both the ageing body and death become vivid reminders of frailty and mortality" (Oró-Piqueras 16). Actual reminders appear in the novels, with the suicide of Robson, a schoolboy, early on in *The Sense of an Ending* (13–15) and with the death of Uncle Arthur in *Metroland* who leaves tokens of his unfinished business after an unexpected death, almost acting as a *memento mori.* For some reason, though, those two reminders of life's frailty do nothing but upset both narrators: "[Robson] had offended us by making a name for himself with an early death" (Barnes, *Sense* 14) and "what upset me when Nigel and I went to clear up the bungalow was the pathos of objects. [...] I grew melancholy at the half-finished things which a death persuades you to focus on." (*Metro* 160) Both narrators seem to be upset because of death's irrevocable nature: it leaves absolutely no room for discussion or furtherance – Robson's name will remain coloured by his early suicide and Arthur's bookmarks will remain at "the point beyond which Arthur would never read."[7]

However, even though the reminders do not spark existential angst on the spur of the moment, it nonetheless strikes the narrators at more random times, as it is described in *Metroland* when Christopher discloses his fear: "There were a few private things which

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7. The permanent nature of death can spark a wide range of emotions as shown throughout Barnes' fiction. In *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, it sparks anger: "His decrepitude [...] set off in me a general adolescent anger against life and its inevitable valedictory condition" (172), and in *Staring at the Sun*, it sparks irony from the gaze of the narrator (see Oró-Piqueras 19). The fear of death also appears to be undermined by the perception of the narrator in *Metroland* when he relates the existential crises of his younger self: "A picture of endlessly retreating stars, taken I expect – with the crass bathos [sic] of the unconscious – from the opening credits of a Universal Pictures film" (*Metro* 54). Such a distancing is only possible because the narrator has grown out of his teenage angst: "I suddenly realised I was contemplating [non-existence] almost without fear." (161)

I didn't confide to Toni. Actually, only one: the thing about dying" (53). Christopher describes his nocturnal fear of "Big D" as follows:

> A sudden, rising terror which takes you unawares [sic]; a surging need to scream, which the house rules forbid (they always do), so that you lie there with your mouth open in a trembling panic; total wakefulness, which takes an hour or so to subside; and all this as background to and symptom of the central image, part-visual, part-intellectual, of nonexistence. [...]

> a sensation of total aloneness within your pyjamaed, shaking body; a realisation of Time (always capitalised) going on without you for ever and ever; and a persecuted sense of having been trapped into the present situation by person or persons unknown. (54)

Christopher is physically struck by this fear, more than he is affected by the grown up and bourgeois society he rattles on in the first part of *Metroland*. First of all, it should be noted that his use of second-person narration contrasts with the numerous personal details in this passage. Chris somewhat manages to endorse his fear only partially, referring to items from his own experience but the narration he uses sets a distance, as if he was trying to depict this feeling as a universal one. It is also a way of expressing a fear which comes from everywhere, in a fashion similar to what Malcolm Lowry describes: "not so much a fear as a medium in which one lived." (*Dark as the Grave* 32) Even here, at the core of his vulnerability and existential fear that surpasses everything else ("total" is used twice), Christopher still tries to blame it on some external factor. He goes on denouncing the "house rules" and expresses "a persecuted sense of having been trapped."

Similar to his second-person address which tries to universalise his experience, Christopher may be summoning the authority of others to avoid acknowledging his primal fear (which is viewed as a weakness and never discussed: "Toni and I never discussed basic fears" *Metro* 54). Like most narrators in Barnes' fiction, Christopher enters the mode of confession as Guignery underlines: "Tôt ou tard, [les narrateurs barnesiens] adoptent le mode de la confession et font part au lecteur de leurs sentiments ou des drames qui les taraudent." (Guignery, *Mélange* 65) (see 3.3.3 for other occurrences of this theme in Barnes' work). Here, he acknowledges his fears and confides them to the reader. However, as pointed out by Michael Greaney, readers might sometimes be misled by these avowals,

especially in *The Sense of an Ending* where "every confession in Webster's narrative is a cover-up, every silence an involuntary confession"(Greaney 239).

As they have to turn to readers to find room for expression, we can suggest that these narrators are unable to find a proper *mise en crise* in their present. Even this "rising terror" does not rise high enough for the narrator to break free from his tempestuous feelings. No feeling or experience seems strong enough to step beyond the threshold of adulthood. The narrators thus have to numb their insecurities instead of answering them. The way Barnes' protagonists refer to death is especially telling: quite a few of them acknowledge their fear but avoid naming death altogether, as Chris does with his "Big D" (Barnes, *Metro* 53) and as retired Major Jacko Jackson fears "the whole damn thing" ("The Things You Know" in Barnes, *Lemon* 75). Barnes himself occults it from the title of his memoir *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* which nonetheless tackles the various deaths the author dealt with during his life.

Most of the narrators' insecurities are dealt with in a similar fashion – that is leaving fears unanswered and expecting them to fade away – especially regarding the couple "Eros and Thanatos" referred to by Adrian in *The Sense of an Ending* (7). Indeed, sexual matters are part of a linguistic field where innuendos are plentiful, and it is not rare for the subject to only be hinted at: "But then, no one told the whole truth about sex. And in that respect, nothing has changed." (*Sense* 25) These taboo matters are scarcely stated explicitly, but they are often prone to metaphors, for instance in *Metroland* with Toni and his sport-and-competition-based comparisons: "'Scoring, shooting, hurling, hitting a home run. Why do you make it sound so competitive?' 'Because it is, it is. And if you don't look out, you'll get relegated.'" (*Metro* 81)

All these metaphors and innuendos are subterfuges for adolescents to mutually engage in a topic that is in each and every one of their minds but that none of them masters. They add the right amount of distance between the speakers and the topic, which is also a way to make it sound healthy while most of them are truly obsessed and frustrated by it. It shows through the narrators' attention to clothes and daily gestures, which are

often understood through the prism of sex: "we spent quite some time not undressing each other" (81); "[Veronica and other girls] might consciously press their breasts against you as long as there were about five layers of clothing between flesh and flesh." (*Sense* 24) As explained earlier, sexual knowledge is deemed to have the utmost importance: it defines adolescents' belonging to a group and prevents them from becoming outcasts. Admitting a lack of knowledge comes down to disclosing a weakness and to exposing one's vulnerability to the teasing of one's peers. For weakness and fear there are indeed, as Webster points out regarding his not having "full sex" with Veronica: "[t]his acceptance of less than others had was also due to fear, of course: fear of pregnancy, fear of saying or doing the wrong thing, fear of an overwhelming closeness I couldn't handle." (128) Turning sex into a competition, as Toni does, is a way of emphasising peer-pressure.

When taking a glance at gender studies to try and clarify this adolescent behaviour, one could find answers in a theory by Alfred Adler, the founder of individual psychology. His theory was summarised by R. W. Connell as follows: "Children of both sexes, being weak *vis-à-vis* adults, are thus forced to inhabit the feminine position [which was for a long time associated to weakness]. They develop a sense of femininity and doubts [sic] about their ability to achieve masculinity" (*Masculinities* 15). Thus, children and young males might tend to exaggerate their knowledge of sexual matters because it is seen as a means to reach the statuses of both adult and man. However, these statuses are never so straightforward, especially in postmodern times when official rites of passage have grown scarce. One step that has been deemed crucial – especially for men – in the transition into adulthood, losing one's virginity, is discussed by the narrator in the first chapter of the second part "Paris (1968)" of *Metroland*. But the end of the second paragraph might lead readers to think that it is a question the thirty-year-old narrator has not completely answered: "The fact that pubescents nowadays are getting stuck in before their testicles are fully descended doesn't bother me in itself. Not really. Not very often." (*Metro* 78) It is as if the narrator was still seeing a large patch of his life through the prism of sexuality, a behaviour which is expected to be dropped after adolescence.

Thus, both narrators seem to be trapped in a prolonged stasis that has made their lives monotonous. As Webster bitterly notes in his later years: "I had wanted life not to bother me too much, and had succeeded – and how pitiful that was." (*Sense* 109) The monotony that the narrators feel stems from the adolescent belief in a clear transition into adulthood that never occurs – and the frustration it results in.

1.3.2 *The Myth of Transition: "Out There Living" (*Metro *51)*

Both Webster and Christopher expect a clear transition from adolescence to adulthood. Because they sustain a belief in the idea of an unchanging identity, they tend to contain their vulnerability and keep their fears unexpressed. It is as if one should repel any crack that could alter the ideal and definite identity the protagonists crave. In doing so, they remain entrapped in a snowballing illusion, as no definite state can ever be reached. The narrator's craving, especially in *Metroland*, leads to a paradoxical repudiation of the world of grown-ups, while at the same time aspiring to adult status and its stasis (that is, all in all, a state which is diametrically unlike the constant change of adolescents).

The myth of transition is explicitly uttered by both adolescent narrators: Webster and his friends imagine themselves as "being kept in some kind of holding pen; waiting to be released into [their] lives." (10), and Christopher is "excitedly waiting for [his] great leap into adulthood" (*Metro* 15), "Out There Living" (51). Whether endorsing a passive or active form (note the use of "released" *vs.* "great leap"), both narrators sustain the idea of a clear-cut transition that shall never come. This ideal transition was deeply established in the past by a precise set of traditions and rites of passage. However, those landmark key-moments, which turned individuals into adults in the eyes of society, started to fade away after World War Two and the beginning of the postmodern era. There were gradually less early weddings, less early parenthood, less early access to stable jobs, less early home buying, etc. As pointed out by sociologist Olivier Galland, there used to be a simultaneous transition in both public and private spheres: a shift from school years to paid work, and from life with parents to life in a couple. He writes as follows: "Le modèle « traditionnel »

se caractérise par une relative synchronie du franchissement de ces différents seuils et donc par une relative homogénéité des définitions d'âge qui en découlent." (Galland §19) In earlier coming-of-age novels, one can still perceive this vision of a shift that is still held in high esteem. Céline, who graduated from the faculty of medicine in the 1920s, uses the voice of Ferdinand Bardamu in his *Voyage* to convey how the end of studies could be perceived back then: "Les études ça vous change, ça fait l'orgueil d'un homme. ll faut bien passer par là pour entrer dans le fond de la vie. Avant, on tourne autour seulement. [...] On rêve de trop. On glisse sur tous les mots." (307)

Because adolescent lives are deprived of the traditional landmarks, any hint or non-event strikes the young postmodern narrators with the force of major experience. This may explain the generational gap between adolescents and their parents, as the latter have known nothing but the traditional model: "[o]n our behalf, they dreaded the closeness of adolescent friendship, the predatory behaviour of strangers on trains, the lure of the wrong kind of girl. How far their anxieties outran our experience." (Barnes, *Sense* 11) This is another hint from the narrator on the inability of his parents to put themselves in his shoes, an inability which is emphasised and extended by a quasi-hendiadys and parallelisms. As the adolescent narrators bear the expectations of their parents but lack the socio-cultural context to carry them out, the two novels bring forth a perception of the world and of others that is mainly the negative of their aspirations. Webster sees his own books as defining his future self rather than his past and present: "[books were] straining to describe a character I hoped to grow into." (26) (note the preposition "into" and the movement the narrator aspires to.) The great attention granted to non-events is a recurring theme of coming-of-age narratives: as pointed out by Guigney in her thesis, Braithwaite in *Flaubert's Parrot* recalls the end of *L'Éducation sentimentale*, a book which Chris has just started reading when leaving Paris (*Metro* 130):

> Frédéric and his companion Deslauriers are looking back over their lives. Their final, favourite memory is of a visit to a brothel years before, when they were still schoolboys. They had planned the trip in detail [...]. But when they got to the brothel, Frédéric lost his nerve, and they both ran away. Such was the best day of their lives. (*Parrot* quoted in Guigney, "Brouillage" 184)

Even though the narrators are rejecting the world of adults and its inhabitants, they aspire for a higher status so much that they crave for the fantasised transition to happen. The division of the world according to the age of individuals is nothing neutral, as studied by Lévi-Strauss with indigenous tribes. Any separation, be it between tribes or inside the tribe, implies a hierarchy, and when it comes to age, it means that some are less men than others: "si les hommes peuvent parvenir à coexister à condition de se reconnaître tous *autant* hommes, mais *autrement*, ils le peuvent aussi en se refusant les uns aux autres un degré comparable d'humanité, et donc en se subordonnant." (Lévi-Strauss 170) The subordination of adolescents, who are often deemed less human than adults but more than children, may explain why, still today, they crave for signs of adulthood. The aping of adults' social codes and habits appears as a sign of both envy and rejection. See for instance Toni mimicking the behaviour of a "dogged-customer voice" (Barnes, *Metro* 18) with contempt during his épat. However, a symbol of this ambivalent aspiration is the umbrella Christopher carries with him every single day of a rainless summer: inside school, it is used for plays and tricks with his peers, "but outside, it made a man of you. [...] As long as you had your umbrella, there was always an outside chance you might collect a *sir* from someone." (19) More than a prestige value, one may also see this umbrella as a metaphor for the protection of their vulnerabilities from the outside world, a protection which adolescents in Barnes' fiction seem to need though they only admit it implicitly, as we have endeavoured to demonstrate in this first part.

Still, encompassed in the myth of transition, there is another myth that is prompted by the narrators' Bovary-like tendencies: they tend to imagine their upcoming lives as novels. As Elizabeth Kastor puts it, *Metroland* is "about people growing up, when art seems more real than life" (quoted in Guignery, *Fiction* 15). While Christopher mildly observes: "our book was not yet written" (Barnes, *Metro* 29), this turns out to be an actual fear for Webster in his youth: "This was another of our fears: that Life wouldn't turn out to be like Literature." (*Sense* 16, note the ironical capital letters of the sixty-year-old narrator looking back on his youth.). Webster even becomes annoyed when things do not turn out

as they would if they were stories in books, a meta-literary comment which sparks humour because he and his friends *are* characters in a novel: "In a novel, Adrian wouldn't just have accepted things as they were put to him. What was the point of having a situation worthy of fiction if the protagonist didn't behave as he would have done in a book?" (17). Later on, once he has understood that there was no such thing as a clear-cut transition from adolescence to adulthood, Webster gazes upon his uneventful life and comes to wonder if some change has occurred at all:

> Does character develop over time? In novels, of course it does: otherwise there wouldn't be much of a story. But in life? I sometimes wonder. [...] Perhaps character resembles intelligence, except that character peaks a little later: between twenty and thirty, say. After that, we're just stuck with what we've got. (113)

The whole paradox here is that Webster, being a character in a novel, does not seem to have changed a bit in the course of his fictional life. No transition seems to have occurred to him, as if he were a simple stock character. This is what his ex-girlfriend Veronica keeps reminding him of throughout the novel. The blatant determinism he expresses at the end of the quotation is brought forth at other moments of the novel in order to undermine his actions and responsibility. Indeed, Webster seems unable to face the fact that he does not play the role he expected in this story, and when the masks fall, it is all the more violent for him, as we shall see in the next subsection.

As both characters note, this feeling of change only occurs *a posteriori*: "Why haven't I spotted some signal changing to green, [...] some celestial nod (not too public) letting me know I'm there?" (*Metro* 133) Once narrators reach adulthood, they become able to gaze upon their past selves – though not always with pleasure. Afterwards, as they grow older and leave adolescence and its myths, they face other issues. The costly energy that was until then dedicated to their never-ending construction is reallocated to more serious, adult matters. The passing of time and active life bring about other struggles and doubts to the narrators who become deprived of their masking ethos. Thus, their incompleteness and incoherences resurface in newly formed gaps – the cracks in the armour unveil their adult vulnerability.

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ADULTHOOD & EROSION
Dealing with the Gaps in One's Armour

Adolescence, as we have seen, is as much a moment of definition as a moment in which one attempts to contain one's vulnerability and incompleteness. Yet, both seem to come back and haunt Barnes' narrators as they grow older. Indeed, Chris and Webster both discover at their expense that they had wrongly pictured adulthood during their youth. When they are adolescents, the main feature that differentiate them from older characters is their incompleteness. They imagine most adults as devoid of any failures and relying on a rock-solid identity. But since they do not feel anything similar when they reach adulthood, they keep carrying their sense of incompleteness for years. They resort to the same strategies to conceal their vulnerabilities, but they lack the energy to sustain them. Time may not be on their side anymore. It becomes the main component of the characters' vulnerability as they become adults. Therefore, since the protagonists reach middle and old age, how do they escape the complete fragmentation of the self under the influence of time?

First, we shall try and understand the influence of time upon the two characters, the ways in which it creates gaps in their armours and leads to the fragmentation of the identity they had tried to build. Then, we shall focus on the passivity and vulnerability the two characters feel as time imposes itself upon them. Finally, we shall scrutinise the various attempts the struggling narrators set up to bridge the gaps that time is creating.

2.1 Letting the Mask Loose: Fragmentation and Unstitching of a Made-Up Unity

2.1.1 *Adulthood and Concealment: "Regarde donc le joli masque." (Musset 47)*

As Webster and Christopher know so well, the purpose of an adolescent ethos, when directed against the world, is to hide flaws in order to distract others from taking too close a look. It is supposed to act as a mask among their peers and should remain unnoticed, but once characters are caught up by time, they put less and less effort in sustaining this ethos and light is shed on their lack of unity as well as on the artificiality of their hiding process. They must feel like the only ones whose masks are noticed in the parties Musset describes in *Lorenzaccio.* It is more vicious than ever since all adolescents self-consciously take part in a game of masks and roles with their peers. Thus, it is all the more unfair for the one whose mask is mocked by the rest of the group since everybody else is trying on different roles as well: "As a teenager, whatever the intensity of your preoccupations, you usually know that you are also trying on ideas and attitudes; sketching versions of the self you might settle down to be." (Lanchester)

However, when the narrators reach a made-up unity, time soon disunites it. For instance, Webster drops his adolescent habit of wearing his watch on the inner side of his wrist as soon as it is noticed by his first girlfriend, Veronica: "I couldn't justify it, so I turned the face round, and put time on the outside, as normal, grown-up people did." (Barnes, *Sense* 27) It used to be a gesture he shared in high-school with his friends, but it also provided a symbolic mastering of time: "[i]t made time feel like a personal, even a secret, thing." (6) In *Metroland*, what is most noticeable is Christopher's gradual softening. When losing his adolescent ethos, he also loses many ideals and the complicity he shared with Toni: "'were you going for an épat or something?' 'Shit, no, we've grown out of that haven't we?" (*Metro* 137) This softening starts in France with the second part, as Moseley notes: "having spent an adolescence building up an image of France as a home of alienation and political roughness, Christopher misses all the reality [mainly of May

1968] and substitutes a romantic life of nearly complete domesticity." (quoted in Guignery, *Fiction* 10).

Christopher's "domesticity" – that is his interest in taking care of his house and family – becomes explicit in the beginning of the third part of *Metroland* which opens on a list containing: "House: Yes/With Mortgage: Yes [...] Pets: No, because they mess up" (Barnes, *Metro* 133). As Guignery points out, his shift in interests was even more obvious in the first drafts of the novel since they mentioned Chris joining a committee for the promotion of zebra crossings (Guignery, *Margins* 33), an involvement his younger self would have despised. Similarly, Greaney developed on the meaning of hobbies in Barnes' fiction. He argues that hobbies are always characterised by a never-ending component – a stamp collection can never be complete for instance – and that it distracts characters like Chris from thinking about death: "in their very unfinishability, hobbies provide an engrossing distraction from the ending that haunts Barnes's writings, the big finish of death." (231) Since adults are deprived of their masks, it seems that they resort to strategies like this one to conceal their insecurities.

This burying is at the core of characters' strategies to cope with their vulnerabilities once they reach adulthood. Post-adolescent erosion leaves the characters with a feeling of exposure since their idea of definite identity is challenged by their physical transformation and their transition into adulthood. Barnes' characters thus feel an urge to justify themselves in order to back up a sense of identity, as Mrs Lindwald does in *The Lemon Table*: "She felt entirely vulnerable – if someone should merely prod her, she would start explaining her life, her purposes, her virtue." (40). Later, she makes use of the same strategies of concealment as the ones occurring during adolescence: "Her vulnerability began to disguise itself as irritation." (41) She even seems unaware that she is doing so, as underlined by the agency of her vulnerability in the sentence. It is almost as if she was going back to past strategies instinctively, in order to avoid facing the unmasking induced by the passing of time.

This unmasking process is doubly violent: it both discloses the hidden part of one's personality through gaps in the made-up armour, and it sheds light on the hiding process itself, ascertaining a second weakness. As time forces one to keep going while keeping an eye on one's previous self, it can lead to a sense of fragmentation – it acts as an unstitching force. The disillusion brought by time appears in the idea of maturity which is gazed upon with a certain irony and bitterness by both narrators. In the first part of *Metroland*, Christopher re-asserts his adolescent beliefs with his thirty-year-old voice: "Life didn't really get under way until you left school; we were mature enough to acknowledge this point." (Barnes, *Metro* 42) While Christopher's expression can be seen as ironic and mildly amused, Webster is much more bitter in his statement: "But time... how time first grounds us and then confounds us. We thought we were being mature when we were only being safe" (*Sense* 102) (here, Webster seems to address the cosiness he has lived in, and the "cosy, controlled rootlessness" Chris evokes in *Metro* 33.) This illusion is also set forth by Barnes: "at some point you have the illusion that as far as you're ever going to be [in life], there is some sort of integrity now to your existence and your personality, and that it's called maturity [...] a sort of balance and harmony." (interview with R. Koval quoted in Guignery and Roberts 125) In the end, even when the characters reach a stable point and find some harmony to their lives, the voices of their older selves, whose masks have fallen, undermine their stance.

The transition into adulthood thus seems to undermine the characters' confidence in the masks they build for themselves. They answer this weakening with strategies of concealment so as to keep their composures, often resorting to past strategies. This attention given to both past and present behaviours tends to induce a sense of fragmentation and influences the characters' relation to their memories.

2.1.2 *Letters and Fragments: "How does adolescence come back most vividly to you?" (*Metro *71)*

As time goes by, the erosion of the narrator's made-up identity is accompanied by a loss of memories. This partial amnesia tends to smooth down the differences between the narrators and their younger selves, even though they may not be aware of it right away. While Webster was sometimes unsure about his evolution (cf. "Does character develop over time?" *Sense* 113 in 1.3.2), when corroboration is provided, he is forced to acknowledge the plurality of his identity and the difference between the selves he has been.

When Webster reads the bitter letter he wrote to Adrian who was having a relationship with Veronica, Webster's first ex-girlfriend, he goes through an actual epiphany. He writes: "My younger self had come back to shock my older self with what that self had been, or was, or was sometimes capable of being" (Barnes, *Sense* 107). The narrator is correcting his use of present perfect into a preterite in order to assert further distance between his present identity and his past self. This division between past and present is also a way for Webster to dodge his responsibility by asserting that he is now a different person: "All I could plead was that I had been its author then, but was not its author now." (107) As Amélie Doche points out, this justification is only possible because Western cultural productions are steeped in the conception of the self as a unit. Consequently, "scepticism is dismissed and so is the plurality of the sign." (Doche 14) In Barnes' texts, this multiplicity comes as a shock for the characters who have spent decades abiding by "Western's philosophical rhetoric on the unicity of the self" (15) and perceiving themselves as a constant unit which is only dismissed when corroboration from the past is provided: "I didn't recognise that part of myself from which the letter came" (Barnes, *Sense* 107). This feeling of multiplicity is at the core of adolescence, as Paul Auster describes in his extensive *4 3 2 1* when Archie Ferguson begins his transition towards adulthood (708):

> he had several selves inside him, even many selves, a strong self and a weak self, a thoughtful self and an impulsive self, a generous self and a selfish self, so many different selves that in the end he was as large as everyone or as small as no one.

Bringing up the question of wisdom, Ruth Ray argues that "a person is truly 'wise' when she is able to see life as an evolving story and to create some distance between self and story by reflecting on it from multiple perspectives" (quoted in Oró-Piqueras 18). However, as Christian Moraru explains, at first "multiplicity terrifies because it obstructs identity remaking and identity altogether" (Moraru 68). Webster is thus ill at ease after reading the "all too unwelcome corroboration of what [he] was, or ha[s] been" (Barnes, *Sense* 107) because it underlines the multiple attitudes he took on throughout his life. A similar unease strikes Chris when he discovers his inability to understand French in context while he seemed to master it back in high-school: "Does *Merci* mean Yes thank you or No thank you, shit I can't remember." (*Metro* 88) It also underlines the great abstractions Chris used to dwell upon during his early youth. In *The Sense of an Ending*, it may come as a surprise, but Webster warns his readers of his unreliability from the beginning of the book: he says he will retell "some approximate memories which time has deformed into certainty." (*Sense* 4) The loss of memories thus has a direct impact on the perception the two characters have of their pasts since it smooths down their multiple perspectives.

Following Jean-Michel Ganteau's analogy, memories and corroborations appear in Barnes' novels as ruins, as a presence of the past which haunts the present without providing any explicit meaning. Barnes shortly describes this fragmentation and gradual loss of meaning in *Flaubert's Parrot*: "it isn't so different the way we wander through the past – lost, disoriented, fearful, we follow what signs there remain; we read the street names but cannot be confident where they are" (quoted in Oró-Piqueras 17). It echoes Christopher's description of adulthood as a place deprived of indications: "when we were both sixteen and had yet to enter the land without signposts" (Barnes, *Metro* 156). Ganteau describes "ruinous fragments as quotation or allusion that comes to invade the text" (Ganteau, *Aesthetics of Vulnerability* 60) and which, like ruins, allow the past to invade the present. In *The Sense of an Ending* and *Metroland*, those quotations are mainly corroborations of the past self of one individual, but on a wider scale, it could be argued with Chateaubriand that, like actual ruins, the fragments in the text also act as reminders

of change and vulnerability: "Tous les hommes ont un secret attrait pour les ruines. Ce sentiment tient à la fragilité de notre nature, à une conformité secrète entre ces monuments détruits et la rapidité de la vie." (*Génie du christianisme* III, V, 3. 163-164) In a nutshell, the presence in the text of memories as ruinous fragments influence the telling of the story in two ways: they bring a reinforcement of the feeling of fragmentation for the narrator, and they increase a fluid perception of time. The perception of time will be analysed in the following sub-subsection.

Ruin-like memories are embodied in the textual fragmentation that pervades the texts. This fragmentation both occurs in the narration (with letters of secondary characters that are inserted in both novels) but also in the visual organisation of the texts, through the use of lists. This literary device has been studied at length by Robert Belknap who dedicated an entire book to it. Even though lists fragment the continuity of the narrative, Belknap writes that their role is "the creation of meaning, rather than merely the storage of it" (Belknap 3). In both novels, lists are mostly used to put forward an accumulation of things, whether it be memories (as in the incipit of *The Sense of an Ending*), actions (as when Christopher lists the possible future decisions of his adult life in *Metro* 43), or comforting life achievements (as when adult Christopher tries to contain his nightly fears by ticking "all the appropriate boxes" in *Metro* 133, or when he lists the reasons why he married his wife Marion in *Metro* 140). If Barnes had gone on with his project of writing *The Sense of an Ending* as a sequel to *Metroland*, more similarities would have appeared as Guignery showed in *Margins* (220). Indeed, early drafts featured Webster confessing about making lists in his youth, and especially lists of the reasons why he loved his wife.

Consequently, lists can either help sort out and dominate what is in one's life, or on the contrary show how fragmented one's life is. Those two aspects appear in Barnes' 2013 autobiographical text which he wrote for *Areté*. It consists in a list of things Barnes recalls or not, brought together under the title "I Remember." For instance, it features references to Alex Brilliant, Barnes' schoolfriend who killed himself and whose story inspired Adrian in *The Sense of an Ending*. The opening list of the latter novel is analysed by Lecomte who

sheds light on the simultaneous effects of fragmentation: "Les tirets au début de chaque ligne sont à la fois vecteurs d'organisation de la liste et de discontinuité" (Lecomte 14). We can further her statement with Belknap who notes that literary lists "generally progress horizontally, moving along the page through the sentence" (Belknap 21), which the incipit of *The Sense of an Ending* does not. In *Metroland*, the form of the list progresses through the book, and we could assume that this formal progression follows Christopher's fall into averageness. It starts with the unconventional vertical lists in his adolescent dialogues with Toni (Barnes, *Metro* 43) but turns into horizontal ones when he lists the adult boxes he has checked (133).

This list aesthetics also brings about two interwoven questions: accumulation and objects. Indeed, Christopher answers the question "How does adolescence come back most vividly to you?" with a simple "things" (71). Each of the three parts of *Metroland* ends with a chapter entitled "Object relations" (71, 128, 174). They all begin in the narrator's room as he lists the objects he is surrounded with. In the last one, though, the narrator reflects upon his current life without giving too much attention to his surroundings. Through this accumulation of objects, he creates a memorial system with the individual at its core[8].

Even more than Webster – who is more concerned with the psychological accumulation of memories – Christopher seems to attach importance to objects. For instance, after the death of his Uncle Arthur – which does not move him much – Christopher is struck by the "pathos of objects" left behind by Arthur: "But everywhere I was impaled by objects that lay freshly abandoned, severed, discarded." (160) Following Marta Caraion's "objets-temps," we may assume that objects are the main means for characters to catch a glimpse of their personal histories: "le temps se visualise à travers les objets supports de la mémoire." (quoted in Lecomte 17) Indeed, the last page of *Metroland* reads "Objects contain absent people." (Barnes, *Metro* 176) followed by several examples of memories

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8. Although objects and their accumulation have been studied at length by Jean Baudrillard, he does not admit any relation between them if they do not fill their purpose: "Un lit est un lit, une chaise une chaise : il n'y a pas de relation entre eux tant qu'ils ne servent qu'à ce à quoi ils servent." (Baudrillard 26) However, in *Metroland*, objects seem to share a link as soon as they are owned or remembered by someone.

connected to other characters or places. Objects thus bring back memories and characters from the past into present time.

By using lists and references to objects, both novels manage to display a narrator facing his own fragmentation. This is furthered by the narrator's distorted perceptions of time, as they skim through their fragmented memories.

2.1.3 *Time's Fluidity: "A river rushing nonsensically upstream" (*Sense *3)*

The fragmentation of the text and of characters' memories influences their perception of time; corroboration and recurring memories sometimes obstruct the continuous flow of time which, by essence, is always pointed at the future. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Webster mentions the accumulation of memories more than once. While he first seems confident in the idea of storing memories as they come ("we gradually build up a store of memories. There is the question of accumulation, but not in the sense that Adrian meant, just the simple adding up and adding on of life." Barnes, *Sense* 97), Webster later qualifies his statement after reading his own letter by saying: "Life isn't just addition and subtraction. There's also the accumulation, the multiplication, of loss, of failure." (113) Thus, the narrator argues that time is not a one-sided, linear increase. There can be fluctuation across one's life.

One well-known fluctuation imposed by time has been studied by psychologists like Daniel Schacter who specialises in memory and the formation of the self. He identifies what he names the seven sins of memory, one of which precisely describes the influence of time and new experiences on memories. He argues that all subjects have a sin of bias which changes their perception of past events based on their present state ("The Seven Sins of Memory" 193-194). Webster is a fine example of this bias, and along the novel readers only have access to his past through the filter of his present perspective on his life. That may be why he keeps underlining the effects of accumulation, so as to justify the cuts he makes in his own story: "the accumulation of years and experiences as well as emotions associated to each memory has a modifying effect on them" (Oró-Piqueras 19).

The fragmentation between young and older selves in the two novels creates the ruinous fragments Ganteau writes about. In *The Sense of an Ending*, they are made of letters, e-mails and diary entries. Adrian's diary, especially, and Webster's bitter letter are the most significant ruinous fragments. Lecomte describes the diary as follows: "[une] méditation en deux parties qui organise un va-et-vient constant entre passé et présent." (Lecomte 6) Adrian's diary is thus very important to Webster who "decides to go back to the past to make sense of [his] present" (Oró-Piqueras 17). Other diaries appear in Barnes' work and life, for instance in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* when he describes his grand-parents' habit of picking up a day and comparing what they wrote in their respective diaries. Unexpectedly, they often find discrepancies and the "Reading of the Diaries" (6) tends to cast doubt and to prompt mild rows about the weather from a past day. It seems to underline that the diary's "médiation" is not deprived of loss or conflicting memories. As Webster notes: "even if you have assiduously kept records – in words, sound, pictures – you may find that you have attended to the wrong kind of record-keeping." (Barnes, *Sense* 65)

Following Brecht de Groote's analyses, Lecomte later describes Adrian's diary as the inscription of his voice, his prosopopoeia, into the story told by Webster (Lecomte 49). Adrian – and especially his voice – acts like a ghost haunting the present. Ganteau evokes this haunting past in relation to the genre of traumatic realism. He describes this past that keeps coming back (especially through trauma) as "an era that fails to end" (Ganteau, *Aesthetics of Vulnerability* 73). Because of trauma, Ganteau notes, time is not flowing freely anymore for the subject who is forced to live the past again (trauma and the haunting of the present shall be analysed further on in 3.2.3). For instance, in *Metroland* Toni somewhat embodies trauma on the scale of the novel since he keeps coming back and bringing up past memories: "I felt assailed by the images I had started up of my own accord" (Barnes, *Metro* 148). Unlike Chris who seems to have willingly prompted Toni's come-back, in *The Sense of an Ending* the return of Adrian and Veronica into Webster's life is not solicited at all and is therefore all the more similar to the recurrence of trauma.

Early in the novel, Webster chooses to write them out of his life: "I wished them good luck, burnt [Adrian's] letter in an empty crate [...] and decided that the two of them were now out of my life for ever." (*Sense* 46)

According to Ganteau, this repetition of past events is the symptom of a wider perception of time that is altered. Thus, he describes "liquid time" as "a temporality that is both here and already flown away" (Ganteau, *Aesthetics of Vulnerability* 48). This is the paradox of memories in time; since they feel at the same time past and present, they can both help and endanger the remembering process of the narrator. On the one hand, time brings back unexpected fragments from the depths of memory, but on the other hand, it scatters those same fragments, possibly making one's evolution through life harder to picture a posteriori. The image of time as a liquid has been around since modernism, for instance in T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" which features various water-related images. He mentions scattered objects acting as testimonies which should be carried by the Thames:

> Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.
> The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
> Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
> Or other testimony of summer nights. (Eliot 48)

We can even find an earlier parallel between water and time in the character of Janus, the Roman two-faced god of thresholds and passages. His story underlines the function of time as a link between past and present: gazing both towards the past and the future, Janus was originally the Sumerian god of water (Jairazbhoy 227), an element which surrounds some of his myths. For instance, water coming from the doors of Janus' temple is supposed to have wiped out a part of the Sabines' army which attacked Rome under the mythical reign of Romulus. In *Metroland*, water seems to be the linking component that turns adolescents into adults according to the headmaster's extended metaphor: "it's like watching a mighty river of boys flowing down to the great sea of adulthood. And we masters are a bit like lock-keepers. We tend the banks; we keep traffic flowing; [...] we know that this mighty river will get to the sea in the end." (Barnes, *Metro* 172) In the end of the second-to-last paragraph in *The Sense of an Ending*, Webster also mentions a rush

of young people near a river: "I thought of a cresting wave of water, lit by a moon; rushing past and vanishing upstream, pursued by a band of yelping students whose torchbeams crisscrossed in the dark" (*Sense* 163).

This is one of the many occasions in *The Sense of an Ending* when time and movement are linked to the imagery of water: from the beginning, there is something wrong with a "river rushing nonsensically upstream" (3), and Webster compares his adolescent boredom to "stagnancy" (68). When this stagnancy is brought up by Veronica, he imagines it as a patch of filthy water: "'I don't stagnate.' I thought about this for a while, or tried to. But instead kept seeing an image of stagnant water, with thick scum and hovering mosquitoes." (37) The aforementioned image of the reversed river occurs in the book when the forgotten memories come back to the narrator. Webster's memory of the Severn Bore, a phenomenon which produces a "river rushing nonsensically upstream," is brought up to highlight the power of forgotten memories when they suddenly rush back into the present:

> That night a group of us went to Minsterworth in quest of the Severn Bore. Veronica had been alongside me. My brain must have erased it from the record, but now I knew it for a fact. She was there with me. [...] Moonlight caught the breaking wave as it approached. The others whooped at its arrival, and whooped off after it, chasing into the night with a scatter of intersecting torchbeams. (130)

Those rushing and stagnating waters echo Webster's ambiguous memories. They bring him to ponder upon the idea of subjective time, which he describes as "the true time, [which] is measured in your relationship to memory" (133). Ganteau's "liquid time" thus seems appropriate to tackle Webster's evolving relationship to his memory and past self since his present is often disrupted by remote memories suddenly coming back.

Upon entering adulthood, time has become the main unstitching force in the characters' lives. Their ethos is debunked or outdated, and fragmentation comes to pervade their existence. This is the first step towards the narrators' understanding of their evolution through time. As with Aragon, time has come for them to acknowledge their other self: "Sur le Pont Neuf j'ai rencontré / Mon autre au loin ma mascarade" (Aragon 17).

2.2 Vulnerability and Passivity: a Disposition to Be Changed by Time

2.2.1 *"We live in time – it holds us and moulds us" (*Sense *3)*

When introducing the history of vulnerability and of the ethics of care, Ganteau goes back to Levinas' understanding of vulnerability as passivity regarding the other: "In Levinas's words, then, vulnerability is devoid of volition and is not envisaged in terms of decision, being an ethical decision." (Ganteau, *Aesthetics of Vulnerability* 6) In his later years, Webster underlines his own lack of agency and volition: "I thought of the things that had happened to me over the years, and of how little I had made happen" (Barnes, *Sense* 157). Webster's passive life is precisely what Adrian tries to avoid by committing suicide. In his letter to the coroner, he mentions: "the superiority of the intervening act over the unworthy passivity of merely letting life happen to you" (54). The end of *The Sense of an Ending* displays the bitterness of a protagonist who went from being secure and in control to insecure and full of doubts. Furthering this idea of vulnerability as passivity, Ganteau later quotes Magrit Shildrick's *Embodying the Monster* (2002), giving a more precise definition of vulnerability as passivity: "a negative attribute, a failure of self-promotion that opens the self to the potential harm." (Shildrick quoted in Ganteau, *Aesthetics of Vulnerability* 15) The openness of both characters is mainly psychological and it rarely prompts any physical harm. Consequently, the unease or panic it prompts also remain psychological. For instance, when Chris openly asks his wife Marion if she has ever cheated on him, he is faced with the ultimate reality: "'the answer is Yes I did once, and Yes it was only once, [...] and No you haven't met or heard of him.' Christ. Shit. Fuck. She looked at me, directly, openly, with calm eyes. I was the one who looked away. It was all wrong." (Barnes, *Metro* 163)

In relation to the idea of passivity, we shall demonstrate that time is the main force that reveals the character's vulnerability in both novels. Indeed, as time goes by, physical and psychological flaws tend to burden the characters' lives. The passing of time and its

52

inexorability, that is the fact that neither time nor its effects can be avoided, has been expressed at length in modernist and postmodernist works. This inexorability prompts a feeling of bareness and openness – since one cannot but accept the passing of time – which can paradoxically lead to the closure of a character onto himself. Vulnerability acts in a similar fashion: it can either lead an individual to enclosure, or to evolve. Webster tries to avoid facing the endless passing of time by assuming that identity becomes stable after some time, as if the impact of time on character could be avoided: "Perhaps character resembles intelligence, except that character peaks a little later: between twenty and thirty, say. And after that, we're just stuck with what we've got." (*Sense* 113) Nonetheless, Webster describes time from the very beginning of *The Sense of an Ending* as a force that shapes characters and in front of which they become passive: "[w]e live in time – it holds us and moulds us" (3).

The effects of time's action upon characters and habits are more explicitly put by Webster than by Christopher, who does not seem to care a lot about it once he is middle-aged. On the other hand, Webster knows that he has to explain again some past habits to his readers, like that of "going out [...], because time has changed it." (23) Time's agency could not be clearer in Webster's eyes. He tends to use the agency of time as an excuse for his own passivity throughout his life: "[a]nd then life took over, and time speeded up. In other words, I found a girlfriend" (21). Webster seems to genuinely feel the impact of time upon himself, but he also seems to conceal his actions behind it, so as to avoid facing responsibility for them. Indeed, it might be one of the unreliable narrator's strategies to bring readers to accept that time has also changed him, since "time delivered [him] all too quickly into middle age" (70), and that he is not responsible anymore for the offensive letter he wrote in his twenties.

Time's inexorability also brings out fears in the characters, starting with the fear of being changed by time. It is linked to a lack of control over time and to a fear of the unknown; since the characters are happy with their present state, they are afraid of what time could turn them into. The fear of losing one's identity especially appears in the

first part of *Metroland*: "[w]e couldn't even count on being ourselves any more." (*Metro* 14–15) Interestingly, this piece of text was translated into French as "conserver notre identité" (*Metroland* trad. Jean-Pierre Aoustin, 21) thus laying the emphasis on identity as something that one is given but that can also be lost. The inexorable quality of time prompts in the characters a fear which goes further than the fear of change; it also raises the fear of being forgotten by time. Going back to Christopher's nightly fear of death evoked on page 32, his passivity in front of time shows through the vocabulary he uses: time is said to "realis[e]" itself, giving him a sense of "persecu[tion]" and of entrapment (*Metro* 54). He ends up mentioning the fear of death as the fear of time going on without him.

Time in both novels goes beyond the creation of fears in the characters, it discloses that they can be changed. The main erosion of adulthood resides in this: by letting time and the outside world into one's room, the narrators give up their active role in their own construction.

2.2.2   *"Average, that's what I'd been" (*Sense *109)*

During adolescence, Webster was used to keeping his watch on the inside of his wrist: "It made time feel like a personal, even a secret, thing." (*Sense* 6) However, once the narrator reaches adulthood and lets the outside world into his own, once he abandons his idiosyncrasy, time is put back to its normal place. Indeed, Webster drops his symbolical control over a time felt as personal and he surrenders to the injunction of social time. This is only a small, symbolical episode of a wider change that softly strikes both characters: the slow collapse into averageness.

Here again, Webster is much more bitter than Christopher in his observation of his averageness. He sees it as a fatality: "by the law of averages, we're most of us bound to be average. Not that this brought any comfort." (109) By speaking of the "law of averages," Webster invokes pseudo-statistical reasons for his own fall into averageness. Indeed, the law of averages (which, in Webster's case, is a common belief rather than a mathematical principle) is defined by the Cambridge Online Dictionary as follows: "the idea that over

a period of time a particular thing will happen because it is just as likely to happen as the other possible events." However, Webster tries to justify his current way of life by a statistical principle, a "law," which is hardly more than a likeliness since it is not really relevant regarding social and subjective matters. This assertion of the "law of averages" is probably just another point Webster tries to make in order to avoid facing responsibility.

In Adrian's fragment, Webster reads his friend's thoughts on the question of responsibility: does it work like an extending chain linking distant individuals influencing each other's decisions (relatives for instance), or is it more narrowly distributed to the scale of one individual? While readers might expect Webster to lean towards the determinist option, he asserts that you should "[s]tart with the notion that yours is the sole responsibility unless there's powerful evidence to the contrary" (114). On the same page, he seems to pride himself on having reached the same conclusion as Adrian, but he also admits his incompetence in this matter: "[Adrian] used logic where I use common sense – but we came, I think, to more or less the same conclusion. [...] But then I was never any good at maths." (114)

While Christopher confesses a mild uneasiness when talking about his lack of action during May 1968, on the other hand, Webster falls into some sort of self-loathing regarding what he has become: "I had wanted life not to bother me too much, and had succeeded – and how pitiful that was" (109). Webster comes to question the inactivity and cosiness which defined his whole life: "What did I know of life, I who had lived so carefully? Who had neither won nor lost, but just let life happen to him?" (155) On the other hand, he also wishes his daughter to be unexceptional: "May you be ordinary, as the poet once wished the newborn baby" (157), and as Greaney argues "[Webster] seems quietly proud of his unexceptionality, pleased that he has outgrown any youthful idiosyncrasies" (231).

In his article, Greaney tackles oddness and ordinariness in Barnes' fiction (that is characters depicted as "the crank, hobbyist or obsessive"). He underlines that most of Barnes' fictional characters are ordinary and average persons who, like Major Jacko Jackson in *The Lemon Table*, are "orderly [men and women], with orderly expectations

and pleasures" (*Lemon* 71). However, parallel to this averageness, Greaney argues that uncommonness (especially in *Metroland*) is "usually unmasked as a bit of a sham. In Barnes, those who actively *want* to be different succeed only in achieving a kind of studied and predictable unconventionality." (Greaney 233) Webster even considers his own oddness as not sufficiently odd and a case for his fall into averageness: "I suppose the truth is that, yes, I'm not odd enough not to have done the things I've ended up doing with my life." (Barnes, *Sense* 71)

In *Metroland*, the fall into averageness is only suggested by Christopher's narration: "Ask me what I did in 1968 and I'll tell you: worked on my thesis [...]; did some drawing; made some friends; met my wife." (*Metro* 128) The main, serious interest of his life at that time is clear: "finding the key to some vital synthesis of art and life." (128) Political events are thus quickly dismissed by the narration, and as Guignery notes in her thesis: "le personnage est passé à côté de l'histoire nationale pourtant si proche et le *Bildungsroman* s'est résolument fixé sur l'évolution individuelle de Christopher." (Guignery, "Brouillage" 571) Disillusion and disappointment are at the core of this novel, but Barnes remains ambiguous about it. He alternatively said that his first novel was about defeat and that it was not. As Guignery underlines, Barnes' handwritten notes on the first draft insist on: "not making Chris' return to Metroland a synonym of defeat and resignation but the result of a maturation leading to some nuanced happiness" (*Margins* 35). On the other hand, he said in 2000 that "*Metroland* was about defeat. I wanted to write about youthful aspiration coming to a compromised end" (interview with Shusha Guppy quoted in Guignery and Roberts 68–69). The epitaphs of the novel do not help clearing the doubts. The final one conveys a belief in determinism which echoes Christopher's late conventionality while at the same time simply suggesting a lack of interest in interpretative meanings: "*Things and actions are what they are, and the consequences of them will be what they will be; why then should we desire to be deceived?* – Bishop Butler" (Barnes, *Metro* 131)

The two novels remain similar in the ways in which they display averageness. In both cases, it is manifested in the narrators' loss of adventurousness. In *The Sense of an*

Ending, the matter-of-fact narrator states the shift that occurred earlier in his life. For him, adventurousness is to be linked to the quixotic, Bovary-like will to live like characters in novels:

> I remember a period in late adolescence when my mind would make itself drunk with images of adventurousness. This is how it will be when I grow up. I shall go there, do this, discover that, love her, and then her and her and her. I shall live as people in novels live and have lived. [...] There was a moment in my late twenties when I admitted that my adventurousness had long since petered out. I would never do those things adolescence had dreamt about. Instead, I mowed my lawn, I took holidays, I had my life. (*Sense* 102)

Webster is once again dissociating entities so as to avoid acknowledging the shift in his identity: even though he says "I admitted," he does not recognise the past dreams as his own. Instead, he attributes them to "adolescence" which he personifies so as to set distance between him and his past. As Barnes says – and as illustrated by both narrators – ageing can be described as "a journey which everyone makes which is from being adventurous to being less adventurous" (interview with C. Holland, quoted in Guignery and Roberts 9). For Webster, this shift in adventurousness is mainly backed up by emotions which also shift from intensity to practicality:

> When you're young [. . .] you want [emotions] to overturn your life, create and define a new reality. Later, I think, you want them to do something more practical: you want them to support your life as it is and has become. You want them to tell you that things are OK. And is there anything wrong with that? (Barnes, *Sense* 121)

This is precisely the transition Chris goes through from his adolescence to his thirties. The intensity of the emotions he felt towards art and life is quickly numbed by his secure domesticity, as he concludes from his own life: "usually, [theories] die by attrition; lingeringly, circumstantially. And afterwards you wonder: how seriously did we mean them anyway?" (*Metro* 135)

There is a sign, though, that both narrators are not completely at peace with what they have become. At one point in their respective stories, they both question what they could potentially have been. They seem to keep in mind the underlying and dream-like potential of another life: "someone else – someone who might have been you – is now sledding through a birch forest in Russia, pursued by wolves." (174) As underlined by this image, Christopher's mind is still steeped in adventurousness. On the other hand,

Webster's concern is more straightforward and existential: "If Tony hadn't been fearful, hadn't counted on the approval of others for his own self-approval... and so on, through a succession of hypotheticals leading to the final one: so, for instance, if Tony hadn't been Tony" (*Sense* 97). Paul Auster's *4 3 2 1* developed this idea of multiple potential selves into a thousand-page long novel. The principle Auster's novel relies on is fairly simple: "imagine how things could be different for [Archie Ferguson] even though he was the same. The same boy in a different house with a different tree." (Auster, *4 3 2 1* 54) In the scope of several years, during the transition from childhood to early adulthood, Auster manages to depict the ways in which someone can grow up into four different versions of the same person, depending upon their environment and personal history.

While the two narrators can be bitter or oblivious about their averageness, they are nonetheless protected by their ordinariness which eventually characterises their existences. In a way, their unexceptional selves allowed them to survive through time: "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5.5). "History isn't the lies of the victors [...]. It's more the memories of the survivors, most of whom are neither victorious nor defeated." (Barnes, *Sense* 61) By being average and unexceptional, Chris and Webster managed to survive to tell the tale.

2.2.3 *Witnesses and Survivors: "You need them to tell you" (*Levels *98)*

While Barnes' characters are usually aware of the effects of time upon them and of their passivity in front of it, they are often quite concerned with corroborations from the past. Even though proofs of what they were or did and people from the past can jeopardise the unity and identity of the characters, they are sought because they also attest what the characters lived and used to be. Webster for instance expresses his satisfaction and reassurance when Veronica confirms the existence of a common memory: "with this moment of corroboration, I began to feel a return of confidence." (126) In *Levels of Life*, Barnes discussed the importance of others as corroborators especially during grief. As he puts it, they act like witnesses that help you remember the past when you are not able to:

> You need your friends not just as friends, but also as corroborators. The chief witness to what has been your life is now silenced, and retrospective doubt is inevitable. So you need them to tell you, however glancingly, however unintendingly, that what you once were – the two of you – was seen. Not just known from within but seen from without: witnessed, corroborated, and remembered with an accuracy of which you are yourself currently incapable. (*Levels* 98)

As the survivor is often confused in the throes of grief, the latter needs corroboration for the past to seem true. This is what Webster discovers in *The Sense of an Ending*: "as the witnesses to your life diminish, there is less corroboration, and therefore less certainty, as to what you are or have been." (*Sense* 104)

In *The Lemon Table*, Janice also reflects upon the remembrance value of corroborators. She argues that during childhood one does not have friends but only allies who disappear as one's life goes on: "[there was] Bill, and the children, and the children leaving, and Bill dying. And then? Then you needed allies again, people to see you through until the end. Allies who remembered Munich, who remembered the old films [...]" (*Lemon* 63) And when corroborators can scarcely be found, Janice admits that she deforms the past to soothe her insecurities: "'That's what Bill used to say.' Bill hadn't said anything of the kind, as far as she could remember, but his posthumous corroboration was useful when she got flustered." (55)

Those various expressions of the need for corroboration are sparked by the lack of proofs from the past. Characters in Barnes' fiction feel compelled to find proofs of what they were or did, for it seems to them that without the appropriate proofs, they will simply dissolve into time and disappear in the gaps of their own memories. Webster is as clear as clear can be: "I wish I'd kept that letter, because it would have been proof, corroboration." (*Sense* 43) This need for testimonies and witnesses is expressed in *The Sense of an Ending* with judicial metaphors, and Webster even imagines his trial (130–131) in a court of law "which deals with fact" and being shamed for his "sentimental lucubrations." Earlier in the novel, Webster also tends to justify his acts using legal analogies. For instance, he refers to Veronica's brother, Jack, as "the appointed judge when she asked publicly of me" (47) and he "plead[s] youth as a mitigating circumstance" (46) for his melodramatic burning of a letter from Adrian. Lecomte analyses all these judicial metaphors at length in her

dissertation (146–147). Even though Webster tries to present himself as lame and lost in this trial, it should be kept in mind that along the novel he has willingly modified his own life-story. Webster cannot deny his unreliability and his agency in the rewriting of his own memories. Barnes' narrators try to undermine their active role in this process, for instance, in the first chapter of *A History of the World in 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ Chapters* the narrator admits that "it was more complicated than that, of course, but we'll let the details pass" (25).

However, because witnesses act as corroborators to the narrators' pasts, they perform the role of a remainder and a reminder of things past. In the third part of *Metroland*, the character of Toni has a crucial role. As a witness to the narrator, he is like a haunting fragment of memory. The narrator has no control upon Toni, and the latter comes back to Christopher to remind him of their adolescent ideals on which he has given up. Toni thus tries and challenges Christopher's remaking of his past, because the narrator has self-convincingly covered up his young years with a muffling veil of irony. Describing temporality in Peter Ackroyd's fiction, Ganteau writes that the past "[is allowed] to repeatedly bleed into the present." (Ganteau, *Aesthetics of Vulnerability* 57) Here, this return of the past is embodied by Toni in the second chapter of part three. Toni's comeback is thus turning their adolescence into "an era that fails to end." (73)

Similar witnesses can also be found in holes – i.e. silences and absences – that shape the narrator's life and memory. In *The Sense of an Ending*, the suicide of the narrator's brilliant friend, Adrian, prompts an absence reminding him of their shared past, "back before our lives began" (Barnes, *Sense* 52). Although the word trauma may be too strong to depict the narrator's feelings – he is surprised, shocked, angry at the newspaper report, but mainly puzzled by Adrian's reasons to commit suicide – Ganteau speaks of surviving as a traumatic time. Surviving is painful because the narrator and the relatives of the dead "are led back to the tyranny of some sort of first occurrence or original scar that is always on the brink of being re-activated into an open wound." (Ganteau, *Aesthetics of Vulnerability* 77) Because of memory, the past is both inaccessible and omnipresent to the surviving witnesses.

Following Ganteau's analyses, it can be said that surviving is similar to witnessing in the sense that it makes the absence palpable through memory. In the elegiac discourse studied by Ganteau, the narrator "keeps calling forth third parties as witnesses the better to summon the absent loved one" (76). They do so in order to bring legitimacy to their grief and testify that absence cannot be overlooked. The narrator of *The Sense of an Ending* initially follows the same elegiac pattern:

> A year on, Colin and Alex suggested a reunion. On the anniversary of Adrian's death, the three of us met for drinks at the Charing Cross Hotel, then went for an Indian meal. We tried to invoke and celebrate our friend. [...] We were already turning our past into anecdote. (Barnes, *Sense* 58)

The ones that remain thus endorse the role of building and conveying the memories of the past. Furthering on passivity, here, Webster is not the one who "suggest[s]" the reunion. However, even when mentioning Adrian, his friends do not manage to bring him back. The memory of Adrian does not act as the cement that could have brought the three surviving friends together. Just a few lines later, the narrator explains: "our lives were already going in different directions, and the shared memory of Adrian was not enough to hold us together." (58)

Witnesses to the narrators can thus be seen as helping them remember their past correctly, but besides they are the proof of the characters' softening or absence of evolution. Those testimonies of the narrators' past selves provide them with a first understanding of their fragmentation. They come to understand that passivity towards time, if unrestrained, can lead them to forget their pasts completely and dissolve into the world. These witnesses and testimonies nonetheless prompt the first step in the narrators' refusal to be vulnerable.

2.3 Bridging the Gaps: a Denial of Vulnerability and Fragmentation

2.3.1 *"I have some instinct for survival, for self-preservation" (*Sense *45, 70, 143)*

Even though fragmentation pervades their lives, the narrators resist it in order to remain one. They try and dismiss the change they undergo through their lives even though it is set forth by Webster's letter in *The Sense of an Ending* and by Toni in *Metroland.* Webster often speaks of survival and of the preservation of the self: he believes that there is still a means for him to remain one and to avoid sinking into complete fragmentation. The characters refuse to acknowledge their vulnerability and thus, they keep on trying to bridge the gaps in their lives.

Following Hutcheon's analyses, it may be important to note that the ambiguity between fragmentation and preservation is also present in the postmodernist school of thoughts: "The subject is absolutely indispensable. I don't destroy the subject; I situate it." (Derrida quoted in Hutcheon 159) As underlined by the title of *Metroland*, in this novel the notion of place is crucial, since Christopher appears shaped by his cosy environment and unable to achieve the rootlessness he craves during his youth. In this regard, one passage of the book can be deemed symbolical: when Christopher is asked by his Uncle Arthur to uproot an "enormous fugging tree-stump." (Barnes, *Metro* 48) Because he wants to annoy his uncle, he does not remove it and instead digs a shallow circle around the stump, "occasionally cutting off the odd spindly, unimportant root, but never remotely threatening the solidity of the thing." (49) The stump remains rooted in the ground like Chris remains rooted in Metroland throughout the years.

The self and the subject have also been thought in relation to history, namely with the idea that things from the past never completely elude the subject, which allows him to experience fragmentation and forgetting all the while knowing that things can eventually be reconstructed. Foucault wrote about self-fragmentation and reconstruction in relation to history, saying "continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject: the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored

to him; the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity" (Foucault quoted in Hutcheon 158).

Both narrators struggle, in their own ways, to keep their composure and unity. It shows through Christopher's habit of making "comforting lists" (Barnes, *Metro* 133, 140), as a way of mastering his own fragmentation and insecurities. It seems to be efficient since in the last part of the novel Chris realises that he has outgrown his fear of death:

> [I] let my brain idle over my own future non-existence. I hadn't thought about it for years. And then I suddenly realised I was contemplating it almost without fear. I started again, more seriously this time, masochistically trying to spring that familiar trigger for panic and terror. But nothing happened; I felt calm (161)

The neat suburban context in which he returns as an adult seems to have numbed his fears and left him deprived of anxieties. From the beginning, for instance, the church bell that rings on Sundays simply manifests a mild religious background, and does not seem to strike the hours. Chris writes that "the bells nagged you awake, persisted with irritating stamina, and finally gave up with a defeated half-clunk." (44) Those "irritating" bells do not act as reminders of the passing of time, and they seem very mild in comparison to other bells in literature. For instance, Big Ben in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* keeps emphasising the anguish of the characters by repeating the inexorable passing of time: "There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air." (Woolf 2 *et passim*) As Christopher finds relief in his suburban life, his way of life is only challenged when he confronts Toni. The discrepancy between the two friends namely appears through their two types of housing: "'Oh, me, gee, shucks, I'm into life.' [...] 'You mean you don't live in a rented room any more'" (Barnes, *Metro* 146–147).

Going further on housings, in *The Sense of an Ending*, the denial of fragmentation appears clearly in the narrator's refusal to interpret the cracks in his house as symbolic of his relationship with his wife before they divorced: "Towards the end of my marriage [...] cracks appeared here and there, bits of the porch and front wall began to crumble. (And no, I didn't think of it as symbolic.)" (*Sense* 91) This passage is in the wake of Webster's wider tendency to retell his own life story. Indeed, by being unreliable, Webster presents himself as the master of his life which he depicts as a coherent unit. As aforementioned,

Webster admits to have ruled many side characters out of his story (cf. page 25). The second time Webster mentions his instinct for self-preservation, it is related to having "successfully put Veronica out of [his] mind, out of [his] history" (70), but later in the book he is not so sure anymore: "as I tend to repeat, I have some instinct for survival, for self-preservation. And believing you have such an instinct is almost as good as actually having it, because it means you act in the same way." (143) Webster thus tries to convince himself by "repeat[ing]" the existence of his placebo instinct. He later dismisses this so-called instinct: "I who had lived so carefully [...] Who avoided being hurt and called it a capacity for survival?" (155)

In *Metroland*, Barnes thus managed to "make [life] sound *enjoyable*" (Guignery, *Margins* 35). The great difference with *The Sense of an Ending*, though, is that the comfort in which Webster tries to write himself ends up crumbling down along with his certainties. He suddenly comes to understand that the integrity of his self is only preserved by the stories he told himself.

2.3.2 *Failing to Remain One: "My younger self had come back" (*Sense *107)*

Despite all the narrator's strategies to think of themselves as remaining the same, it is clear that those strategies face many shortcomings. The idea of a self as a unity is too deeply challenged and both narrators have to acknowledge their fragmentation and evolution. In *The Sense of an Ending*, the most salient element is of course Webster's letter. He refuses to acknowledge its authorship once he is older: "All I could plead was that I had been its author then, but was not its author now. Indeed, I didn't recognise that part of myself from which the letter came." (Barnes, *Sense* 107) The temporal split Webster tries to invoke ("then" *vs.* "now") leads to the virtual fragmentation of the essence of the self, since Webster claims that he is made of "part[s]." In *Metroland*, the only unity the narrator manages to reach is through lists and accumulation of objects. Thus, the clear unit he aspires to for his self remains virtual, and he is never able to reach the sort of solipsistic identity he seems to fantasise about. This lack of unity can be linked with

Greaney to the more factual incompleteness of hobbies. Greaney notes that characters in Barnes' fiction tend to be hobbyists to escape their fear of death, as mentioned above.

Characters' vulnerabilities often surface since the unity they reach remains virtual and is undermined when they face their own duality and fragmentation. Webster, for instance, avoids disclosing his reactions when he is confronted with challenging moments. When he reads the letter or when he comes to understand the final enigma of the story, his narration first focuses on what he is eating or drinking: "Whisky, I find, helps clarity of thought." (107); "Automatically, I ate a chip. Then another. There wasn't enough salt on them. That's the disadvantage of fat chips." (161) He tries to distract the readers' attention from his discomfort in those moments of redefinition. This strategy is part of what has been described as the reluctant narrator, a figure of contemporary fiction which is defined as someone "who has seen, experienced or caused something so traumatic that he must approach the telling of it through indirections, masks and substitutions" (M. Leon Higdon quoted in Guignery, *Voices* 3). Webster remembers that he used similar indirections in his youth, for instance right after he learns Adrian's suicide: "I looked at [my father] and found myself wondering if baldness was inherited – would be inherited" (Barnes, *Sense* 51).

This narrative strategy comes about to hammer down Webster's inefficiency as a narrator. While he fails to tell what he feels, he also fails to witness properly: he cannot help but set himself to the foreground. As Lecomte wrote, furthering Greaney's idea of re-narrativisation, Webster is a secondary character usurping a central role: "[il est un] personnage secondaire de cette tragédie familiale dont il tente de devenir un héros en se positionnant comme récitant, chœur tragique qui intervient après les faits et offre une vision rétrospective du déroulement des faits." (Lecomte 75–76) Thus, when Webster finds Adrian's son, he admits that his first reaction was "solipsistic" (Barnes, *Sense* 150) and focused on his last letter to Adrian and Veronica. Not only is Webster often engrossed in himself, he also admits in a tongue-in-cheek statement that his relating skills are poor:

"how it might affect my reliability and truthfulness. I'm not sure I could answer this, to be honest." (48–49)

Paradoxically, Webster's honesty regarding his unreliability has a contrary effect on readers who might begin to feel that they can trust him. Webster is indeed very different from other unreliable narrators, he is "not cracked or creepy or especially obtuse like Dostoyevsky's Underground man or Humbert Humbert [in *Lolita*] or John Dowell in *The Good Soldier*. He's unreliable because we all are. [...] Still it all seems overblown" (Deresiewicz). Deresiewicz seems right in qualifying his statement since Webster's influence on his readers is still tremendous. Webster remains a filter in the account of a familial tragedy in which he takes no actual part. In a study on the use of cognitive verbs in *The Sense of an Ending*, Doche demonstrated that "the narrator realises more mental processes than any other character – he is the principal Senser of the book." (Doche 45) Moreover, she underlines that mental verbs are the only ones to be negated (it is all the more true for the verbs think, know and mean) and she concludes that "one may argue that readers' interpretations are influenced by the fact that mental verbs only are negated – and thus foregrounded" (47). Thus, in doing so, the sixty-year-old narrator evinces his restlessness, and light is shed on the constant redefinition and retelling of his self and story.

Both narrators, whether in their thirties or sixties, are characterised by a deep sense of irony regarding their younger selves. The only way narrators find to re-connect with their past selves is through irony, but by doing so they also set a distance and imply that they have changed. Irony allows what Steele describes as "critical self-distance"(quoted in Oró-Piqueras 17). Christopher goes as far as seeing irony as something you start to master when growing old: "isn't part of growing up being able to ride irony without being thrown?" (Barnes, *Metro* 135) Because of the retrospective first-person narrative voice, the narrators' irony shows up early in both books[9]. Christopher, for instance, identifies the

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9. Going further on irony, we should add that distance is part of the modern toolkit of contemporary *Bildungsromane*. Speaking of Sartre's *Les Mots* and others, Burgelin notes that coming-of-age narratives in the twentieth century are displaying the explicit gaze of an adult in their fiction, which is the purpose of irony in *Metroland* and *The Sense of an Ending*: "[ces romans] dessinent les voies de ce que pourrait être le roman d'une éducation au xxe siècle – passablement (trop ?) distanciés à l'égard d'une certaine idée de l'enfance et ne cherchant pas à masquer en quoi ils sont des réflexions d'adultes sur la genèse d'un adulte."

circularity of his life and of the novel in the very first part: "London was where you started from; and it was to London that, finally, stuffed with wisdom, you returned." (27) The most efficient way to be ironical for the narrators is to use capital letters. This is a way to both note and discard their youthful idealism, as Chris notes about "capital-L Life" (58). In *The Sense of an Ending*, it starts with the capitalisation of words that are thought to be grand: "another of our fear [was] that Life wouldn't turn out to be like Literature" (*Sense* 16), but it climaxes into some obvious grandiloquence that underlines the narrator's stand-point: "[we] should have gone off on a Quest to Discover the Truth." (17) By using irony the narrators thus assert a temporal distance with their past selves, but on the other hand, they also get closer to the readers by creating a sort of complicity in which they both mock the narrators' past ideals.

In his book on vulnerability, Ganteau quotes Jakob Winnberg's work on Graham Swift: "irony is precisely the simultaneous evasion and acknowledgement of suffering" (Winnberg quoted in Ganteau, *Aesthetics of Vulnerability* 24). Through the precedent section, we have seen that the distance between the selves of the narrator proves to be unbridgeable. Irony is just another means to show the gaps that cut through the narrator's life and disclose his vulnerability, but it also brings him closer to the readers. When growing old, the characters thus have to accept themselves as plural and give up on filling gaps and aspiring for unity. As Barnes told Guignery, he rejects the stasis of biography and embraces blurriness: "I have mixed feelings about biography, partly because I am so wary of its certainties. A biography makes too much sense of a life, it seems to me." (Barnes in Guignery, "Brouillage" 711) Thus, we shall finally study how the uncertainties brought by ageing, far from being only failures, can become opportunities for (re)writing.

PART THREE

⚗

OLD AGE & REWRITING
Fiction Writing as Empowerment

Even when adolescence belongs to the past, the narrators cannot help but feel a sort of discrepancy at some point in their lives. The stability of adulthood inevitably comes to be undermined by a feeling of fragmentation, and the narrators' vulnerabilities become all the more visible. While it seems that the problem of fragmentation is a dead end and does not allow for any relief for the narrators, we shall try to describe how the ageing subjects can find empowerment in staging fictional versions of themselves (namely through the character of Webster but also by exploring Barnes' other works). Fictional writing and rewriting could be a means to deal differently with one's vulnerability and failures and gaps. Indeed, it seems that, in his fiction, Barnes plays with the memory gaps and uncertainties of both his characters and readers. Does fiction writing help avoid complete passivity in front of one's fragmented memory and evolving self? Or does this division in autobiographical fiction bring an even greater risk of fragmentation?

Firstly, fiction writing can be a field for older authors to display their new understanding of time and memory. Barnes' gradual mastering of fictional time shows through his fiction as we shall see by comparing the structures of *Metroland* and *The Sense of an Ending*. And, as well as other works, they also display that the imperfections of memory can be surprising. The flaws in one's memory lead Barnes to tackle the question of corroboration. His fictions display how vulnerable certainties are when met with the right proof, but also how flexible human memories and minds can be. Barnes uses both gaps and repetitions to make his point and to bring his readers to reflect upon their own memories. Finally, Barnes furthers the implication of readers in his work by staging autobiographical elements in his fiction and leaving enough room for interpretation and co-creation.

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10. O you who hear within these scattered verses
    the sound of sighs with which I fed my heart
    in my first errant youthful days when I
    in part was not the man I am today;
    (opening stanza of *The Canzoniere*, trad. Mark Musa.)

3.1 Fictional Time and Gaps: Understanding One's Multiplicity

3.1.1 *Ellipses and* Sommaires*: "something you get better at" (Barnes)*

Even though the ageing subject may face the shortcomings of memory as he or she enters old age, this is no fatality, especially for those who, like authors, are already used to writing stories. Those gaps can be perceived either negatively as a lost memory or positively as a crack in the story allowing for creative remaking. What is more, as subjects age, they also learn more about the functioning of their own memory through time. This new knowledge is all the more striking when it is accessed through empirical experience (as Webster discovers at his expense). Indeed, as Barnes explained to John Freeman, getting older and having fading memories allowed him to have a better understanding of the ways in which (fictional) time functions:

> As you get older, you understand time, you understand fictional time better, how to move in time, how to move through time in fiction. For example, in *The Sense of an Ending*, you get to the end of part [one] where he's 21, or 22, and then 40 years go by in a paragraph. I wouldn't have done that when I was young. It is just something that you get better at. (Barnes in interview with Freeman)

This specific aspect of time in fiction comes to be illustrated in the different structures of the two novels. Indeed, it can be surmised that the thirty years that separate the publication of the two novels have influenced the way Barnes structured them. In *Metroland*, even though the narration is retrospective, the story is still divided in three parts and inner chapters. It thus uses temporal ellipses between the three periods of Christopher's life. Moreover, those temporal ellipses are doubled with spatial ellipses: readers never have access to the journey from one place to the other, and, like Christopher, they find him suddenly rooted in a new place with each new part.

The Sense of an Ending presents a much looser structure than *Metroland* – its lack of chapters creates a sense of fluidity in fictional time. For Guignery, who reviewed the drafts of both novels, Barnes' authorial mastery shows through the fact that *The Sense of an Ending* was "seemingly written in a free flow with relatively few corrections, thus testifying to the mature writer's greater assurance." (Guignery, *Margins* 9) The novel is

indeed exempt from any inner chapters and its two parts are simply entitled "One" and "Two," but the most interesting feature regarding fictional time is the transition between them. Within a few paragraphs, the novel skims through four decades of the narrator's life. It is not *per se* an ellipsis – it is more similar to what Gérard Genette calls a *sommaire* (translation of the English "summary") – but its elliptical value is undeniable: "Life went by." (Barnes, *Sense* 59)

Genette developed the idea of acceleration of fictional time which he applied to Proust's *La Recherche du temps perdu*. His analysis of this acceleration could be applied to the transition in *The Sense of an Ending*: "[la réduction du récit] pousse l'accélération jusqu'à franchir les limites qui séparent le récit sommaire de l'ellipse pure et simple." (Genette, *III* 132) This *sommaire* is for instance evinced in the narrator's retelling of his early husband life which could hardly be more succinct: "Then I met Margaret; we married, and three years later Susie was born. We bought a small house with a large mortgage; I commuted to London every day." (Barnes, *Sense* 59) The use of semi-colons underlines the juxtaposition of those life events[11], and they evince the absence of articulation in a time felt as fluid, in which events happen one after another, seemingly without any causality nor salience – those days deprived of events keep crumbling together into a mash of ordinariness. *The Sense of an Ending* was thus described as a "life review" (Hartung quoted in Oró-Piqueras 18), because it has a profound encompassing value.

Barnes has expressed his new understanding of fictional time in other interviews: "As a young writer, you have a great sense of nowness. As you get older, you allow yourself a bolder treatment of time, with such jump cuts [...] maybe I'm compressing more as I'm getting older" (interview with Lee quoted in Guignery, *Margins* 228–230). This density and compression can indeed be found in other late works by Barnes as in *The Lemon Table* (2004). This book portrays various characters as they enter or are in old age, and

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11. Other barnesian characters seem prone to condensing their lives, often using semi-colons, as in the chapter "Project Ararat": "if Spike tried to reduce his life to a comic strip, as he sometimes did, he would first of all see himself standing on the dunes at Kitty Hawk, looking out to sea; then grabbing at Mary-Beth's breast without being rejected and thinking, 'God can't strike me dead for this, he can't'; and then driving at dusk with Buck Weinhart waiting for the early stars to come out." (*History* 234)

the fact that it is a short-story collection is telling: it allowed Barnes to explore various time-densifying effects with characters who, alike Webster, feel that "time goes faster for [them] nowadays" (Barnes, *Sense* 60). Indeed, the first short story ("A Short Story of Hairdressing") is built on a structure similar to *Metroland*'s, with three parts linked to childhood, adulthood and old age, each separated by an ellipsis of several years. The second short story, "Story of Mats Israelson," rather uses the *sommaire* technique, similarly to Webster's "Life went by." (59). They use short preterite verbs which are usually associated to the gerundive form of a process going over a period of time. Readers can thus feel the speed of life as it is felt by the narrators, because of the discrepancy created between the shortness of the preterite form and the length of the action described – which sometimes goes over several decades: "The children grew." (*Lemon* 36), "Axel became a fat man" (39), "Gertrud Bodén went grey" (39). Deresiewicz explained this recurring use of the *sommaire* in Barnes' fiction as follows: "Barnes is not interested, much, in the middle of life; he is interested in the parts that come before and after." Barnes' writing is reversing the traditional narrative development of characters. Instead of filling them up with events and anecdotes from the beginning, he displays them almost empty of any life-story. For instance, unlike Barnes, Kurt Vonnegut opens his *Cat's Cradle* with a great number of things his narrator is full of: "When I was a younger man – two wives ago, 250,000 cigarettes ago, 3,000 quarts of booze ago..." On the other hand, Barnes have his characters present themselves as empty in order to slowly unveil the past they are made of along the novel.

Indeed, in Barnes' writing, lifetimes are sometimes so emptied of their contents that they are reduced to a simple tool for measuring time. This meter helps readers understand how far some events are to the narrators, but it also underlines the tendency of older narrators to blend all events into an all-encompassing idea of what life has been. While arguing with Toni in the last pages of *Metroland*, Chris refers to his time in Paris by replacing the traditional measurement with his own lifetime so as to emphasise that it cannot be a defining time anymore: "[Paris] Which is a decade ago. Which is all my

adult life ago." (*Metro* 166). In a discarded incipit to *The Sense of an Ending* analysed by Guignery, Webster uses lifetime in a similar fashion to assert a greater distance and unburden himself from some of his responsibility: "You have to understand that all this was/happened a long time ago. At the other end of my life. Or, to put it more exactly, at a distance from my birth which is the same as the distance now to my probable death." (quoted in Guignery, *Margins* 225) Similarly, in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, Barnes evokes old age from the vantage point of childhood: "the adult world – or rather, the world on the farther side of adulthood" (Barnes, *Nothing* 5). In "I Remember," Barnes' short text published in *Areté*, he wrote about the suicide of Alex Brilliant, his schoolfriend with whom he had lost touch and who inspired the story of Adrian. Barnes explains that he himself had gone on with his life, occasionally imagining what Alex's might be like until he learnt that "he had killed himself almost half a lifetime back" ("I Remember").

Not only do these narrative strategies underline an actual mastery of fictional narration and its possibilities, they also shed light on Barnes' tendencies to focus on crucial transitional periods of life, rather than on more common slices of life. Even though they do not seem to, his characters tend to be always questioning the meaning of their lives, even when it is at its quietest moment.

3.1.2 *Fading Memories: "Mnemosyne, one must admit, has shown herself to be a very careless girl." (Nabokov 13)*

Not everyone can be as serene about their flawed memories as Nabokov is in the beginning of *Speak, Memory*. Barnes, for one, is not, and he tries to share his lack of serenity through his fiction which he describes as corrective: its purpose is to say that "life is not like that, it's like this. Those things you've been told about life, they're not true. Old age isn't a time of serenity" (interview with X. Fraga quoted in Guignery and Roberts 146). However, in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, Barnes admits that he somewhat trusts his memory, though he knows it sometimes fails: "I am more trusting [than his Cartesian brother], or self-deluding, so shall continue as if all my memories are true." (Barnes, *Nothing* 7) Many of his characters, though well settled into their lives, lack

this serenity regarding the flaws of their memories. This is the case for Webster, whose multiplicity is underlined all along the novel by the gaps in his memory. He knows that, even with all the experience he has acquired, his memory will be his final, ever-lasting vulnerability, because his failing memory will allow gaps to appear and rewriting to occur. Oró-Piqueras thus underlines in the conclusion of her article that Barnes depicts a "view from old age [that] is not always a view from serenity, but rather one in which emotions such as anger and frustration, or curiosity and desire are also present" (20). Her conclusion thus points at a redefinition, in Barnes' fiction, of the stereotype of old age which is a stage of life that is often associated to calm and quietness in Western culture.

However, as pointed out by La Rochefoucauld (whom Barnes quotes in the title of *Staring at the Sun* and in *Metroland* 116), this quietness is often forced upon ageing characters by the gradual physical decrepitude they grow into: "Les vieillards aiment à donner de bons préceptes, pour se consoler de n'être plus en état de donner de mauvais exemples." (La Rochefoucauld 118-119. Maxime morale 93.) It echoes Christopher's idea of maturity as a social convention which he forms in his thirties: "At times, I suspect that the concept of maturity is maintained by a conspiracy of niceness" (Barnes, *Metro* 134). The stereotype of the quiet old person undermined by Barnes and Oró-Piqueras did not appear out of the blue – there is an undeniable growth of vulnerability regarding the subject's physical ability. This increasing vulnerability, as pointed out by La Rochefoucauld, comes with a new approach to life and morality which is often quieter than the early stages of life. In the end of *The Sense of an Ending*, Webster comes to the bitter realisation that he has settled for this quiet way of life much more promptly than expected:

> What did I know of life, I who had lived so carefully? [...] Who avoided being hurt and called it a capacity for survival? Who paid his bills, stayed on good terms with everyone as far as possible, for whom ecstasy and despair soon became just words once read in novels? (*Sense* 155)

This realisation is prompted by a new understanding of one's past and a discovery, if not of one's true nature, at least of one's multifaceted self. In Céline's *Voyage*, the narrator aspires to a similar understanding of life: "On découvre dans tout son passé ridicule tellement de ridicule, de tromperie, de crédulité qu'on voudrait peut-être s'arrêter tout

net d'être jeune" (Céline 325). These realisations are painful because they underline the inconsistencies in the characters identities and intensify the gaps between their past and present. They bring in a multiplicity of identities which frighten most ageing characters (see Moraru 68). As the narrators come to understand that their selves are no monolithic identities, but mixtures of events and tastes that were mashed together into a seemingly coherent identity, they also realise that this implies an absence of control over what can be kept or dismissed in their very self.

If such a remaking is difficult to achieve in old age – as one's inconsistencies have grown numerous – and if the late period of life is not a time for serenity as pointed out earlier, we could call the timespan of traditional *Bildungsromane* into question: why should it only cover the initial growth of a character into adulthood, if no finite identity can ever be reached? Isn't it burdening old age with the injunction of impossible coherence? Barnes' novels are rarely introduced as *Bildungsromane*, but it is clear that they further the psychological growth of their protagonists beyond early adulthood. Indeed, Webster does not accept the state of his memory in late age: "[I tried to] liberate new memories of Veronica, but nothing emerged. Maybe I was trying too hard, pressing on my brain." (Barnes, *Sense* 133); and as he points out at the end of the novel, the stasis that is expected to happen after adolescence actually occurs much later: "[y]ou get towards the end of life – no, not life itself, but of something else: the end of any likelihood of change in that life" (163). What is more, by using the polymorphous forms of the novel, Barnes also underlines that the understanding of the self is diverse: a structured comprehension in *Metroland*, with the idea that early life encompasses several distinct key-moments; in *The Sense of an Ending*, a more fluid vision of life as enveloping both forgotten events and made-up memories.

Thus, far from distorting conventions by mixing genres, we shall try to explain why postmodernist techniques do not deny the *Bildungsroman* tradition. For a start, we will try to further what Catherine Bernard wrote about Graham Swift: "[il s'agit pour les auteurs postmodernes de] réexplorer les possibilités du matériau romanesque de l'intérieur d'une

tradition qu'ils se refusent à renier." (Guignery, "Brouillage" 255) The sense of legacy is dimmer with postmodernist authors than with modernist authors, hence a quicker diversion of traditional rules. However, this play around tradition is often a way of reappropriating literary genres (see for instance Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* which uses the codes of detective novels without pastiching them). Moreover, this generation of writers is often more self-aware regarding their relationship to their readers, they know what their expectations[12] are and often play with them: "I quite like it when people disagree about the endings of my books. Several of my books end in a deliberately ambiguous or a neutral way" (interview with R. Freiburg (1999) quoted in Guignery and Roberts 146). Even though the *Bildungsroman* is sometimes taken away from its conventions by contemporary writers, it does not reduce its teaching power, as Claude Burgelin notes: "Même les textes des romanciers tout contemporains qui cherchent à se débarrasser du personnage et des conventions fictionnelles restent des textes didactiques puisqu'ils enseignent à comprendre les limites et les pouvoirs du langage et de l'écriture." (Burgelin) Indeed, by using unreliable narrators who try to gain the trust of their readers and older protagonists who rewrite their lives, postmodernist fiction remains able to teach something about the power of words with an unconventional coming-of-age narrative[13].

The traditional end of the *Bildungsroman* is to display a character finding his place in society or fulfilling a social role. For instance, it is soon decided for David Copperfield that he should became a proctor and start an apprenticeship, and even in Italo Calvino's *Baron in the Trees*, in which Cosimo's alternate lifestyle first casts him out of society, the Baron ends up meeting Bonaparte and the European high society. Barnes' work sometimes tries

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12. *Staring at the Sun* is a great example of this. The novel starts in a similar fashion as *The Sense of an Ending* and *Metroland*, with the narrator recalling her life, but the third part goes in a totally different direction. It depicts a dystopic future where "Old people are to be loved more" (Barnes, *Staring* 143) and where a science-fiction-inspired "General Purposes Computer" is used to numb some of the characters' existential throes.

13. It is to be added that the effect is all the more striking for the readers when the narrator is conscious of his own role and when he announces what will be told (as Webster does: "school is where it all began, so I need to return briefly to a few incidents" *Sense* 4). But by doing so, he creates an expectation which he is free to fulfil or frustrate. In her thesis (298), Guignery explains the shift in narration that occured in *Flaubert's Parrot* and other postmodernist fiction by using Benveniste distinction between *histoire* (objective retelling of facts) and *discours* (which involves a listener and a teller who has the intention to influence the former). The postmodernist narrators are not on the side of *histoire* anymore, they are aware of their readers whose expectations empower them in their telling.

to display adulthood and old age in a similar fashion, that is showing protagonists falling into the averageness of an easy and neat life while at the same time painting a wider picture in which the future does not seem sealed out after sixty. His work precisely tries to show that each age and each period in life has its values and specificities (cf. Oró-Piqueras 16), and that Anders Bodén in *The Lemon Table* is wrong when he asserts: "'A tree is like a man,' he said. 'It takes three score years and ten to arrive at maturity, and is useless after a hundred.'" (30) No, Barnes seems to tell his readers when portraying the complexity of Webster, old age is neither a time of serenity nor a time of stagnation. One can find a place in society, without matching the cliché of the wise, quiet old man.

Indeed, Barnes, by departing from the traditional path to old age, underlines in *Metroland* and especially in *The Sense of an Ending* that a character can be flawed even though he or she does not acknowledge it. The cracks in a character's memory, even though they do not cripple him, still erode his identity without his knowing. In addition to his fictional works, Barnes evoked this "sense of self" in a 2015 article: "most of us think of ourselves as having a sturdy, continuing sense of self, built up over the years. And again, we mostly take it for granted, and end up appreciating it negatively." (Barnes, "A Sense of Self | What's the Best Sense?") Both *Metroland* and *The Sense of an Ending* could thus be summarised as a display of all the techniques an ageing character can use to deal with an eroding sense of self – ranging from delusion to rewriting. If this sense of self is mainly undermined by the failures of memory as we have seen, other time-disrupting phenomena such as trauma sometimes cancel a sense of identity that was slowly built along the years. As Ángeles de la Concha notes, trauma functions in such a way that it completely dismisses the sense of self a subject usually feels: "it is the circle of silence created around the victim, the loss of identity, and the impossibility of forgetting that trigger the trauma which results in the collapse of the self" (de la Concha quoted in Ganteau, *Victimhood* 75).

After a lifetime of experiences, one is more likely to have encountered several traumatic events than none. Even though the gaps created by trauma can be easily identified as they

contrast with the perceived continuity of one's identity, effort is nonetheless required from the part of older characters to remain one. One aspect of trauma, grief, is especially telling in this regard: a widowed character of *The Lemon Table* faces difficulty to use pronouns only for herself after years spent dissipating her sense of self in her couple – "even after three years of widowhood, [she] couldn't bear to slip back into 'I'" (52). This difficulty of speaking for oneself also strikes Webster: "A friend of ours – I still say that instinctively, though Margaret and I have been divorced for longer than we were married" (Barnes, *Sense* 68). On the scale of the novel, it also takes time for Webster to fully endorse his own actions and to use pronouns accordingly: *The Sense of an Ending* opens with the idea that time influences everyone in the same way using first-person plural narration ("We live in time – it holds us and moulds us" 3), he then continues using himself as a pseudo-neutral example with a third-person narration ("Imagine someone, late at night, a bit drunk [...]. He addresses the envelop, puts on a stamp [...]" 115) and it is not before the end of the novel that he finally understands that his stance towards time and life is his very own, and he reinvests the first-person singular narration ("What did I know of life, I who had lived so carefully?" 155).

As people age, memory grows more and more flawed, and narratives such as Barnes' shed light on natural tendencies of the mind. First, the gaps created by the inconsistencies of memory are often filled up by made-up – yet coherent – experiences, since the mind cannot stand any form of contradiction. Then, temporal breaches in memory can also take place with the mental repetition of traumatic experiences. The past suddenly "bleeds into the present" (Ganteau, *Aesthetics of Vulnerability* 57) because such experiences are deemed important for the subject's survival. Those natural tendencies that Barnes illustrates in *Metroland* and *The Sense of an Ending* gave way to narrative novelties which shall now come under scrutiny.

3.2 Proofs *vs.* Loops: Taming One's Memory

3.2.1 *Flaws and Evidence: "Is my memory sanitized ?" (*Nothing *6)*

Most of our memories tend to be flawed because we lack the proofs to sustain them, as Schacter underlines in his thorough analysis of what he named *The Seven Sins of Memory*. In Barnes' fiction, the protagonists tend to fight this blurring of memory by creating the imagined proofs they need, while the antagonists tend to accentuate doubts by deleting or retaining corroborations. In *The Sense of an Ending*, for instance, the main plot is focused on Adrian's diary which is withheld by Veronica and which Webster somewhat comes to crave simply because it is a proof from the past: "[t]he 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, *Sense* 84–85)

Webster attaches more importance to this evidence of the past than Christopher, probably because the latter is younger and because his memory contains less holes and less far-distant memories than Webster's. Though Webster is mainly unaware of his discovery – that Adrian had a son with Veronica's mother – for most of the novel, he still has this deep need for corroborations. Even though the revelations do not concern him, they actually spark a great discomfort as they force him to acknowledge the wider picture of his comfortable life. His behaviour is understandable because, as individuals age, they tend to become more aware of the rewritings they indulge in (as pointed out in 1.2.2 by the characters Webster wrote out of his life), without being able to precisely identify which memories were changed over time. Barnes is conscious of these flaws as he explained in a 2011 interview with Jeffrey Brown: "It's probably one of the preoccupations that you have as you age. You have your own memories of life, you've got the story that you tell mainly to yourself about what your life has been. And every so often these certainties are not." (in "Art Beat | Conversation: Julian Barnes")

While, as we shall see later, such memory gaps might sometimes come as a boon for the authors using autofiction, for Barnes' fictional characters they tend to prompt angst

and fear of multiplicity. In *The Sense of an Ending*, the imperfections of memory are at first perceived quite neutrally – though with a resigned tone: "Was this their exact exchange? Almost certainly not. Still, it is my best memory of their exchange." (20) – but later, they take on a less positive connotation as the narrator begins to understand that this imperfection implies a more loosely-defined identity: "later there is more uncertainty, more overlapping, more backtracking, more false memories." (114) Even though such imperfections could be referred to negatively – i.e. in terms of gaps or voids – it is to be noted that the narrator seems to be beset by an overload of meanings, hence his repetition of "more." It should also be added that this last sentence features a gradation which subtly adds a negative connotation to the idea of multiplicity. Starting with two similar prefixed words, a subtle gradation is achieved as the first one neutrally refers to the plurality of meanings ("overlapping") while the second implies a failure and a loss of meaning ("backtracking"), eventually culminating in "false memories."

When proofs are missing, as is sometimes the case in Barnes' fiction, new gaps in memory are created and filled up by the characters. Under such circumstances, certainties are only sustained through repetition and time, as pointed out by Adrian's definition of history which Webster repeats later: "History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation." (18, 65) This phenomenon is for instance illustrated in Barnes' memoir, when he tells a story about his grandfather beating his brother: "Actually, my brother doesn't remember any of this – neither the onions, nor the beating. He was just told the story repeatedly by our mother." (*Nothing* 7) When tackling such issues, Barnes' works mainly revolve around a question asked just before in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*: "Is my memory sanitized [...] ?" (6). Older characters such as Webster are often led to ponder over the vulnerability of their own memory.

Thus, when several proofs are destroyed or retained, new gaps are created and the story is retold once again since no corroboration can back it up. For instance, in *The Sense of an Ending* and *Flaubert's Parrot*, diaries and letters are burnt by secondary characters. Even

though Webster's reasons to lay hands on his document are opposite to Braithwaite's – the latter seeks Flaubert's correspondence for the sake of science while the former seeks his friend's diary for the sake of his own memory – the destruction of proofs nonetheless sparks confusion and anger in both of them. Indeed, in *Flaubert's Parrot*, Braithwaite curses the "bald pyromaniac" (*Parrot* 47) who burnt Flaubert's letters according to the dead author's will[14]. While Braithwaite needed corroboration to sustain his study and fulfil his curiosity, Webster, for his part, is faced with the "all too unwelcome corroboration of what [he] was" (*Sense* 107). He thus comes to the opposite wish of deleting this proof from his past, so that he could forget or deny what he has been: "[i]f only this had been the document Veronica had set light to" (107). This panicky position on the part of a character runs counter to the stance of the postmodernist authors who often find enjoyment in misleading their readers thanks to the gaps in the memories of their characters.

3.2.2   *From Emptiness to Invention: Writing On the Edge of Memory*

The opportunities in which one is likely to create a made-up past are not exclusively literary. This is something most people do without being conscious of it as Schacter underlines in his study of the *Seven Sins of Memory*. Thus, readers find their own interest in the fictions which mislead them, since such stories help realise that everyone's memory is vulnerable and fallible. Self-remaking is greatly used in fiction to unfold a character's evolution, but Barnes also uses it to tackle actual memory degenerations, as he underlines in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* with his mother's dementia: "I kept wondering where all this stuff was coming from, and how the brain was manufacturing this counterfeit reality." (12) And, as he showed in his novels, emptiness and lack of evidence often lead characters to fill in the gaps and to retell their own life stories, firstly to themselves. The resulting story is not only false, it is also "counterfeit" from the French *contrefaire* (which points at the action of *making* something up). Barnes also knows that he is no exception

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14. It is to be noted that Winterton, the aforementioned maniac, still believes that literary critics should keep some record of the letters he burnt – or rather of their existence. It seems that he couldn't resolve himself to create an absolute gap and felt the moral urge to let someone know about it: "at first I decided not to tell anyone at all, but then I remembered you. I thought that one person in the business ought to be told. Just for the record." (*Flaubert's Parrot* 46)

when faced with empty space: in his short text "I Remember" he goes on about his own tendency to fill up emptiness and the "parallel existence, presumably in one of the liberal professions" he keeps inventing for his ex-schoolfriend Alex Brilliant. Because he had no proof of the contrary, Barnes continued to occasionally imagine his life for twenty-five years, until he discovered that Brilliant had killed himself soon after high-school. Alex Brilliant and Adrian Thorne are the two schoolboys who attended the City of London School in the same period as Barnes, and whose stories inspired him for both *Metroland* and *The Sense of an Ending*, though Brilliant killed himself with pills unlike Adrian in the fiction (Guignery, *Margins* 215–217).

As pointed out by Greaney, this lack of proof is as disconcerting to the characters as it is to the readers. He refers to the moment when Webster uses Google Earth to try and locate the house where he met Veronica's family decades before, but his expectations for corroboration are only met with a gap. Greaney thus lists the questions that beset the reader's mind: "Has the house been demolished in the intervening years? Was it even there in the first place? This moment of dizzying unreliability undermines any firm confidence we may have in our readings of Webster's (mis)readings." (Greaney 239) This play with reality, around the presence and absence of corroboration, brings uncertainties but also adds depth to the written work. This has to do with *carnavalisation,*one of Bakhtine's notions which Guignery develops with examples taken from Barnes' fiction. Bakhtine's idea is that when mixing literary genres, some pieces of text have an in-between position, as is the case with letters and diaries: "l'un des modes de carnavalisation de la littérature et de décloisonnement des genres consiste précisément à introduire des genres 'intercalaires' tels que les lettres, les manuscrits trouvés, les confessions ou encore les journaux intimes." (Guignery, "Brouillage" 30)

These fragments appear both in *Metroland* (letters from Toni) and in *The Sense of an Ending* (Adrian's diary, correspondence between Webster and Veronica through letters

and e-mails)[15]. As underlined earlier, those pieces of corroboration are truly defining for the plot (cf. Webster's slanderous letter being sent back to him decades later) and for the characterisation of the protagonists. Indeed, it is thanks to letters and diaries that the narrators momentarily leave their monologues. In those fragments, the readers might find elements that further – or contrast – the characterisation of the protagonists. For instance, Christopher's lack of political commitment while in Paris is backed up by a letter, years later: "Recently, Toni showed me a letter I'd written him from Paris, which contained a rare comment on the crisis" (Barnes, *Metro* 76). Likewise, Adrian's complex psyche is better grasped, if not understood, in the page of his diary which contains the enigmatic equation whence the solution to Webster's conundrum will come: "$a^2 + v + a^1 \times s = b$?" (*Sense* 94)

Conversely, when these documents are absent, readers might tend to have no choice but take the narrator's words for it (though this is obviously a trick as both narration and letters are the product of the author's mind): "[t]he letter I wrote to Toni the next morning had been lost (or so he says); perhaps he's being kind in not reminding me of the extravagant glee of my prose" (*Metro* 96). As Guignery explains, excerpts from letters and diaries often act as corroborations and help to create verisimilitude in the eyes of readers, but they sometimes induce confusion:

> Les lettres apportent ainsi un élément de vraisemblance générale : elles contribuent à accréditer la fiction en produisant le fameux 'effet de réel' dont parle Roland Barthes. [...] En outre, plusieurs extraits de lettres [dans *Flaubert's Parrot*], loin d'apporter des informations claires, tendent à introduire un mystère; ils révèlent alors les écueils auxquels la méthode épistolaire conduit parfois (Guignery, "Brouillage" 33–34)

This is especially the case in *The Sense of an Ending* and the e-mail correspondence Webster and Veronica have decades after their relationship. The direct yet enigmatic first answer Veronica provides Webster – "Blood money?" (Barnes, *Sense* 90) – leaves the latter dumbfounded: "I looked at the words and couldn't make sense of them. [...] Veronica was hardly suggesting that her mother was offering money in exchange for the pain her

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15. Yet, a distinction should be made between the fragments in *The Sense of an Ending* and *Metroland* and the fragments in *Flaubert's Parrot*. Even though they both partake in this "décloisennement des genres," the fragments of letters and diaries in our novels remain entirely fictive while those in *Flaubert's Parrot* exist in the real world and can be found in actual archives, outside the novel. On a side note, other postmodernist writers went even further in blurring the line: Malcolm Lowry for instance used actual letters he received from his wife and inserted them as a character's letters in *Under the Volcano*.

daughter had caused me, was she? Or was she? [sic]" (90) Here is one of the pitfalls of written correspondence: how can one make sense of such a message when one is unable to perceive the state of mind of the sender, which could be either serious or ironical?

In his article, Greaney underlines that, rather than sporadic misunderstandings, those fragments of corroboration actually reflect a whole view of the world in Webster's narration: "History and reality, in *The Sense of an Ending*, are experienced as an archive of texts – diaries, wills, letters, suicide notes, emails – that demand to be read but that are always somehow tantalizingly incomplete in what they can tell us about the past." (Greaney 238) Thus, even though Webster's stance is sometimes nostalgic (Barnes, *Sense* 89), he is nonetheless struck with a need for corroboration that prevails throughout his life. Yet, when such a corroboration is provided, he comes to feel the discrepancy between his past self and the sugar-coated story he told himself and his readers.

The effect is even more striking as the factual letter from the past is at first left uncommented which creates a contrast with the beginning of his narration when Webster's voice was acting like a filter, suppressing people from his story for instance, as previously mentioned. Webster feels the violence of this discrepancy but also tries to split himself between the person he was and the person he is now: "My younger self had come back to shock my older self with what that self had been" (107). Indeed, narrators are often very much aware of the signs they have carelessly abandoned behind them, especially when they try to appear open and close to the readers (for instance by addressing them directly). In *Metroland*, when Chris leaves Paris, he goes over the fragments he left behind him – including letters – in "a wastepaper basket which I had, with deliberate negligence, failed to empty; though I hadn't actually planted evidence, I was certainly conscious of what was in it." (*Metro* 130) One could easily argue, as Greaney or Lecomte do, that Barnes' narrators can be as aware as Chris regarding the fragments of their lives that they offer readers with deliberate negligence.

Both narrators keep bringing up corroborations and fragments from their pasts, because it brings them comfort and often helps them assert the continuity of their selves which

appear looser and looser as they grow old. As we shall now see, this repetition and recurring assertion of memories and corroborations sometimes lead the characters to feel a sense of entrapment in a never-ending reiteration of the past.

3.2.3   *Repetition and Trauma: "The same loops, the same facts and the same emotions" (*Sense *131)*

Indeed, at the end of a life spent accumulating memories, Webster feels a sort of entrapment. He uses various metaphors to evoke this absence of renewal in his memories: "we let life happen, we gradually build up a store of memories." (*Sense* 97); "For years you survive with the same loops, the same facts and the same emotions" (131). This should be linked to the question of accumulation that lasts through the span of the novel. Webster first expects life to be only positive accumulation (hence the image of the store, a stock of memories which are supposedly kept there for life) until he discovers that "[l]ife isn't just addition and subtraction. There's also the accumulation, the multiplication of loss and failure" (113). Webster soon understands that his memory is more flexible than the gradual storing process he had in mind, and he is flabbergasted that he can break the memory loop in which he is: "All I can say is that it happened, and that it astonished me." (131) Webster then tries to unlock new memories of Veronica as a way of breaking free from the identical memories he has been repeating to himself for decades: "I spent a week trying to liberate new memories of Veronica, but nothing emerged" (133).

Webster's sense of entrapment is built on the repetition of the same memories, a process which is close to post-traumatic stress. Indeed, while a traumatic event occurs only once, the event is reiterated in the mind of the person suffering from such a stress. Time is thus crucial in the comprehension of post-traumatic stress, starting with Freud's idea of afterwardness (*Nachträglichkeit*). As Ganteau summarises, trauma is linked to time from the beginning, as it implies a first wound, and then a reminiscence of this wound as it is reactivated by a later event. The two sides of trauma are thus connected through time: "time is conceived of as bound or linked time, in so far as the traumatic moment is

necessarily dependent on an original wound or piercing that gets the past to be repeated in the present" (Ganteau, *Aesthetics of Vulnerability* 58).

It is less the case with *Metroland*, but *The Sense of an Ending* presents memories that come back to the mind of the narrator in a trauma-like fashion. Though this novel is not *per se* a trauma narrative (the closest thing to trauma experienced by Webster would be Adrian's suicide), Webster experiences memories as if they were not part of the past anymore. Like the past, his memories keep "bleed[ing] into the present" (57) as we have explained with Ganteau and his idea of "liquid time" (cf. 2.1.3). Moreover, these memories come back harshly to the narrator: "Remorse, etymologically, is the action of biting again: that's what the feeling does to you. Imagine the strength of the bite when I reread my words [in his slanderous letter]" (Barnes, *Sense* 151). Jankélévitch, who refers to remorse as "le passé en nous," explains in *La Mauvaise Conscience* that remorse is linked to a past that is far too present in the subject: "le regret voudrait prolonger, mais le remords voudrait anéantir; celui-là déplore un passé absent, celui-ci, au contraire, un passé qui n'est que trop présent" (Jankélévitch 47).

This overwhelming presence of the past is often described in literature with the trope of ghosts. It ranges from *Hamlet* to postmodernist fiction like Auster's: "[he is] lost in a fogland of ghost-like beings and broken memories as he searches for an answer to the question that haunts him." (*Travels in the Scriptorium* 16). While the ruins evoked in 2.1.2 are motionless fragments of the past that happen to survive in present time, the ghostly imagery is endowed with an active connotation. It highlights the great unease when something abnormally trespasses the boundaries of memory to come back and haunt present time. This attention given to the reiteration of the past sparked a whole cultural movement in the 2000s: hauntology. Derrida coined the term *hantologie* (portmanteau word of *hanter* and *ontologie*) in *Spectres de Marx* (1993) to refer to the spectral grasp of Marxism after the fall of communism. The movement gained popularity, especially its

musical aspect, and gradually referred to pieces of art built upon traces from the past[16].

Though *Metroland* was published not so long after the era it describes, it is built upon a past memory of suburban life and features a ghost-like figure: Toni. Indeed, Christopher's friend is very present in the first part, then only hinted at through letters in the second, and he comes back to confront the narrator twice in the last part (chapter 2 and 5). By the end of the book, Toni physically invades the present days of the narrator in his house, while in the second part of the book his assertions are remotely contained in letters. His physical anchoring occurs, for instance, when he brings up suggestive movements from the past: "'By the way,' he said, working his elbow up and down in a licentious gesture from the past, 'had a bit on the side yet?'" (Barnes, *Metro* 147). Barnes' first novel tackles the presence of other ghost-like figures, especially in relation to objects ("[o]bjects contain absent people" *Metro* 176) after the death of Uncle Arthur.

On the other hand, in *The Sense of an Ending* the narrator is only invaded by Adrian's spiritual presence since the latter has been dead for years. Interestingly, he does not perceive this as haunting since the only time he uses this verb comes after the resolution of the novel in the second-to-last page and it refers to his own words and to the future: "I replayed the words that would forever haunt me" (*Sense* 162). Webster first expected to have locked Adrian and Veronica in the past and "out of [his] life for ever" (47) but all along the novel, he feels Adrian's presence especially after reading the fragment of his friend's diary: "I didn't feel as if I was examining some historical document [...] I felt as if Adrian was present in the room again, beside me, breathing, thinking. And how admirable he remained." (95) Adrian's presence also appears in the words of the narrator who feels compelled to compare his life to his friend's: "I don't envy Adrian his death, but I envy him the clarity of his life." (114) It seems that once Webster has had access to the fragment of the diary, the ghost of Adrian keeps walking by his side, and the narrator

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16. This aesthetics of the repeated fragment grew in parallel with that of traumatic realism but, as pointed out by Gallix in a 2011 Gardian article, it is "not-so-new." He demonstrates that authors' craving for past material has existed for longer than postmodernism even though it was exacerbated by this movement. He quotes Julian Wolfrey's *Victorian Hauntings* (2002): "to tell a story is always to invoke ghosts, to open a space through which something other returns."

acts as he did when he was younger: "We wanted [Adrian's] attention, his approval; we courted him, and told him our best stories first [...]. Was this just to disguise the fact that we were dependent on him?" (21).

Webster, who keeps being haunted by characters from the past, is not at all master of his own memories. For instance, as Lecomte notes, every time he mentions his memory of Veronica dancing in his room, she takes on new features that were eluded beforehand: "Le souvenir diffracté se transforme en une multitude d'instantanés, faisant du souvenir l'écho du réel, voire l'écho de lui-même." (Lecomte 59) This also has to do with the highly subjective narration of *The Sense of an Ending*, a narrative feature which has also been a trait of trauma fiction since the 1960s. As Roger Luckhurst observes, they are not just narratives of ruptures and fragmentation anymore, they have become narratives of potentiality: they focus on "narrative *possibility*, the potential for the configuration and refiguration of trauma in narrative." (Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* quoted in Onega and Ganteau 268) Moreover, in *The Sense of an Ending*, Barnes unfolds many intertextual references (see Doche 13–25) which is another element that characterises trauma fiction as described by Whitehead: "intertextuality, repetition and a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice. Novelists draw, in particular, on literary techniques that mirror at a formal level the effects of trauma." (Whitehead 84) For instance, the fragments of text that are repeated throughout the novel are either part of the diegesis (Adrian's definition of history that Webster later quotes) or come from outside the novel (Mick Jagger's "Ti-*yi-yi-yime* is on my side, yes it is..." (Barnes, *Sense* 49, 98)). Both fragments (whether intra or extradiegetic) are repeated with confidence through the novel because they are backed-up by corroboration. Though, as the same fragments are repeated in different contexts, the meanings attached to them slowly shift. Mick Jagger's fragment seems more ironical when it reappears in the second part of *The Sense of an Ending.* Indeed, time does not seem to be on Webster's side anymore as he is now older and as he spends the time he has left waiting for Veronica to answer an irrelevant e-mail. Concurrently to Webster's altered memories, his mind also dysfunctions by reiterating the same corroborated recollections,

once again in relation to age but also to trauma: "L'expérience traumatique peut donner naissance à un dysfonctionnement du souvenir, menant à une récurrence de certains épisodes qui s'inscrit dans le texte comme un disque rayé du souvenir" (Lecomte 54).

Metroland features another repetition that occurs on the scale of the novel[17]. It is the movement of the narrator from one place to another, and back to the first place: "London was where you started from; and it was to London that, finally, stuffed with wisdom, you returned." (Barnes, *Metro* 27) However, even though it participates in entrapping the character in a set of repeating loops, it should be underlined with Deresiewicz that it is not an exact repetition:

> A-B-A: that is Barnes's favorite structure. Three parts, the third returning somehow to the first. Metroland-Paris-Metroland. Youth-adulthood-age. Beginning-middle-end. But you never can go home again, and so it's really A-B-A'. You return, instead, to a place that is shadowed by your memory of what it was, and your passage through the middle. [...] The point, in fact, is to pretend you've never left, not just to resist change, upheaval, unfamiliarity, but to deny it altogether.

The feeling of stagnancy is thus better accepted by the protagonist in *Metroland* than in *The Sense of an Ending*, because it is mainly spatial for Chris while it is mainly psychological for Webster who is stuck with the same memories over and over again: "There seems no way of accessing anything else; the case is closed" (*Sense* 131). Veronica is the only character who was always clear-minded about Webster's stagnancy and who ironically entraps him even more by repeating the same words to underline his lack of evolution: "You just don't get it, do you. You never did, and you never will." (110, 138, 143, 157)

Memories sometimes burst violently into the present, in the manner of traumatic repetitions which create a sense of entrapment that prevents the characters from going forward. The effect of these repetitions is twofold as the present is unwillingly contaminated by the past, and as the past comes to be solely perceived depending on the present situation.

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17. On a wider scale, *The Sense of an Ending* brings repetition and intertextuality to the level of the paratext as its title is borrowed from a 1967 book by literary critic Franck Kermode entitled *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. This intertextual reference adds another layer of meaning to a book title which is already highly polysemic. Indeed, the "sense" is at the same time a meaning, an intuition or even a sensation regarding an "ending" which is also undefined. This "ending" echoes both the conclusion of a story and the end of a life without being too clear-cut (cf. the indefinite article and the gerund verbal noun). Somehow, the phrase "the sense of an ending" belies and postpones the very possibility of an end.

Indeed, memories more often remain quietly shadowed by the present perception of the narrators, similarly to the memory of places evoked by Deresiewicz. Furthermore, they are usually limited to a small number of elements on which Webster relies for his present vision of himself. This is what Schacter describes as the sin of bias, the fact that present knowledge tends to alter our perception of past things: "Memory encoding and retrieval are highly dependent on, and influenced by, pre-existing knowledge and beliefs." (Schacter, "The Seven Sins of Memory" 193) For instance, Toni's view of his common past with Chris is somewhat tainted by his present left-leaning beliefs:

> 'I'm more left-wing, if that's what you mean. Man is never not political.'
> 'Come on. We were totally passive about [politics] as adolescents. Totally scornful and uninterested, don't you remember? [...]'
> 'I remember that we were totally Tory.' (Barnes, *Metro* 145)

Unlike Webster and Toni, some of Barnes' narrators are sometimes aware of this bias: "Would he have any memories, any past, that would remain untainted by what had been confirmed tonight?" (*Lemon* 47).

Schacter's theory can be usefully applied to *The Sense of an Ending* as he quotes some findings by McFarland in "The Seven Sins of Memory" (193) which manifest that this bias is more present among men and especially among those who perceive themselves as stable and unchanged by time: "People's recollections tend to exaggerate the consistency between their past and present attitudes, beliefs, and feelings." In the beginning of the second part of *The Sense of an Ending*, when the narrator shifts to the present tense, he also sets forth a perceived consistency of character, which he illustrates with his music tastes: "I still play a lot of Dvořák, by the way." (*Sense* 67) He later comes to understand his own bias; not only does he face the false image he had of himself, he also deconstructs his memories of others: "[t]he version of my relationship with Veronica, the one I'd carried down the years, was the one I needed at the time" (133).

By depicting characters who come to grasp the complexity of their remembering process, Barnes allows his readers to reflect upon their own flawed memories and to question their need for corroboration. If one can suffer from an unwanted evolution of memories or a

traumatic repetition of some buried feeling, the flexibility of the mind can also be used to rewrite one's narrative. Indeed, as we shall now see, the gaps in one's story also brings empowerment to the authors who stage parts of their life in their fiction.

3.3   Reading and Writing: The Empowering Mask of Autofiction

3.3.1   *Staging One's Written Self: "This is not, by the way, 'my autobiography'"* (Nothing *35)*

The fragmentation embraced by early postmodernist authors also created gaps in their narratives. Those gaps were later used to insert parts of the author's life in the narrative. As the form of literary works grew more and more fluid after the nineteenth century, the distinction between fiction and reality also tended to grow more and more blurred.

While it might be surmised at first that the best way of handling trauma is by trying to forget it, we shall try and evince that the recursive and haunting aspect of trauma cancels any choice one could have to counteract it. Indeed, the memory of the traumatic experience constantly comes to haunt the individual who is forced to accept it. There is no possible rejection or forgetting. It might thus be surmised that trauma is more efficiently dealt with when it is given a place in one's narrative, instead of the forgetting and remembering loop. The characters of Barnes' work are faced with a similar issue: even though they do not encounter traumatic events, they are still invariably brought back to their past by their friends. Even when the narrators try to stay away from their acquaintances or when they have forgotten about them, the latter always come back in more or less expected forms (Toni as a failed poet in *Metroland*, and Adrian through his diary in *The Sense of an Ending*). It is for instance significant that when Toni comes back to remind Chris of his past ideals and to underline his *bourgeois* way of life, the scene takes place inside Christopher's home and garden (*Metro* 142–151). Thus, upon encounters which, like traumatic stress, are directly linked to the past, the characters have only two choices left: denial or acknowledgement. The latter choice is often followed by re-narrativisation of the repressed event, that is the insertion in one's personal narrative

of an external or forgotten piece of story. In Barnes' novels, this rewriting underlines the flexibility of one's personal narrative, which can be modified both to edit past things out or to add lost memories in: "How often do we tell our own life-story? How often do we adjust, embellish, make sly cuts?" (*Sense* 104).

Voicing and narrating one's traumatic experiences, as Webster does, is a first step towards overcoming them: "By articulating their suffering, by speaking out and speaking back, the unsung and unheard fight to come to terms with the traumas they have experienced and to reconstitute a sense of self, identity, memory and history" (Guignery, *Voices* 6). Regarding Barnes and writers of trauma fiction, we shall now demonstrate that one can create a fictitious version of oneself in order to overcome one's vulnerability. Indeed, literature has been described as an essential place for the insertion of traumatic events into a life-story: it can be "a basis for making the wound perceivable and the silence audible" (Hartman quoted in Onega and Ganteau 16). Rewriting does not lead to overriding memories and traumas, on the contrary, it is a means of reclaiming them. Moreover, it allows to anchor them in a specific moment instead of aiming at total obliteration; it can thus help contain the never-ending return that has been described earlier.

Consequently, traumatic events are often inserted in what has been described as autofiction since the late 1970s, in which the authors blend fictional and actual events or persons from their life while remaining distant and hidden under a different mask. Indeed, when traumas appear in literature, it is often in relation to a staged self which remains under the control of the author[18]. As autofiction can never be completely honest – because a distance always remains between the actual person and the written persona – this mode of writing is also a way for the author to imply their need for a protective mask, and to tacitly acknowledge their vulnerability. Autofiction thus favours plays between

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18. It should be added that we try to avoid falling into the "therapeuto-autobiographical fallacy" which Barnes disapproves of in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (97). Our point is rather to underline that traumatic events or difficult matters tend to recur in a writer's work and especially in autofiction. This recurrence might be helpful because it is expressed in public and in a context that is under the control of the writer (i.e. fictional literature).

fiction and autobiography: "l'*autofiction*, c'est l'auteur qui prête son nom à un personnage fictif. L'*autofiction* viole la règle d'or leujeunienne: le nom propre n'est plus un critère distinctif." (Jaccomard 185) For instance, in "Parenthesis" – the half chapter in *A History of the World in 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ Chapters* – Barnes describes his longing for his remote wife and stages himself physically and emotionally without acknowledging that it is Julian Barnes writing the words. He stages his physical presence in his description of himself ("I'm writing this at the home of a friend in Michigan" *History* 232) while implying distance and aching: "I'm away from her at the moment; perhaps you guessed" (230).

In her thesis, Guignery dedicated a thorough analysis to this half chapter (279 *et seq.*): on the one hand, the author seems to be surrendering his self to the readers' eyes, giving insights into his private life and feelings as if he had entered the mode of confession. "Le romancier semble en effet parler en son nom propre, sans le masque rassurant du narrateur extradiégétique de Genette ou de l'auteur implicite de Booth" (Guignery, "Brouillage" 278). In an interview, Barnes even told Alexander Stuart: "You have all these masks as a fiction writer and every so often you think, 'Well, actually, no, I'll just write the truth" (quoted in "Brouillage" 280). On the other hand, the narrator establishes an uncertainty regarding his identity: "when I say 'I' you will want to know within a paragraph or two whether I mean Julian Barnes or someone invented" (Barnes, *History* 227). The play between masks and identity brings more uncertainty and distracts readers from the possible vulnerability of the author. It follows that traumatic events are more easily inserted in fiction: by blurring the line between fiction and reality, the author protects himself and remains in a position of control.

Thus, fragmented fiction often favours postmodern authors to insert fragments of their own lives in their works and to play with this blurred line. It is important to note, though, that even when it is the author's will to write himself down in a book – that is to be as autobiographical as possible – his narrative persona remains an implicit author, different from the actual person, as Wayne C. Booth explains:

> Cet auteur implicite est toujours différent de "l'homme réel" et il crée en même temps
> que son œuvre une version supérieure de lui-même. [...] Ce second moi présente le

> plus souvent une version de l'homme extrêmement raffinée et purifiée, plus avisée,
> plus sensible, plus réceptive que la réalité. (Booth quoted in Barthes et al. 92–93)

This written self and its staging in fiction is described by Moraru using the example of Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* which he quotes: "when I write, I have a real existence that is proper to the activity of writing – an existence that takes place midway between me and the sphere of artifice, art, pure language. This language is beginning to invent another me." (Hoffman quoted in Moraru 62). Moraru later explains that this whole renewal of self-definition through fiction is closely linked to the postmodern narrative aesthetics: "self(re)-making is the postmodern effect of narrative representation *and* re-presentation" (68). These narratives stress how difficult acknowledging one's multiplicity is; maybe the real wisdom lies in the embracing of plurality and "on the fact of acknowledging that it is very difficult to find a unique irrefutable version of any event." (Oró-Piqueras 18)

Multiplicity first led authors to fragment their narratives and assert a protective distance through autofiction. Yet, it also created a safer writing space in which one could more easily build up confidence because one's vulnerability remained concealed beneath layers of indiscernible fiction. Indeed, readers can rarely make out the difference between autobiography and pure fiction in these narratives. Autofiction writers thus come to be relieved from readers' gazes on their exposed selves, and they tend to find empowerment by playing with this blurring multiplicity.

3.3.2 *Autofiction and Multiplicity: From Protection to Empowerment*

Autofiction can thus be a way for authors to embrace their multiplicity as a positive feature which allows for re-writing. This positive aspect is rarely the first one that is encountered, and it takes time to acknowledge one's lack of coherence. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Webster is at first unable to face his tendency to rewrite. He simply asserts a difference between young and old of which he seems exempt: "When we are young, we invent different futures for ourselves; when we are old, we invent different pasts for others" (Barnes, *Sense* 88). However, as the plot of the novel demonstrates, we, like Webster, also invent a different past for ourself.

94

However, autofiction is more than the rewriting of a personal and anonymous life, and it involves more components than the author and his work. As the line grows blurred between authors' fictions and their lives, we shall now see that it also reduces the distance between authors and readers (cf. "Parenthesis"), and between author and literary legacy (cf. *Flaubert's Parrot*). Older authors like Barnes can find empowerment in this proximity but also in the fact that they have a long history of published works behind them (Barnes has been publishing his work for more than forty years) and a wider sense of history ("I've followed all the official history that's happened in my own lifetime – the fall of Communism, Mrs Thatcher, 9/11, global warming" *Sense* 66).

Even though Julian Barnes' presence remains implicit in most of his fiction, his narrators sometimes endorse a persona that is midway between himself and fictive characters. *Metroland* especially, as a first novel, takes on a lot of Barnes' life features. As Barnes himself puts it, *Metroland* is "at times all too convincingly autobiographical." (*Nothing* 192) Even though Barnes did not name himself or his family in *Metroland*, he explained in a 1980 interview that "the spirit of it was autobiographical, and the topography was autobiographical, but the actual incidents were invented and attached to a much more adventurous character than [he] was at sixteen" (interview with Ronald Hayman quoted in Guignery and Roberts 3). For instance, one common feature Barnes shares with Chris is the rootlessness the latter feels. As Guignery quotes: "despite having lived nearly a half century in the same area of northwest London, [Barnes] lacks 'any sense of having roots here.'" (*Margins* 171) It should be added that this transfer of features onto fictive characters is not a one-way process in Barnes' writing. Some books like *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* take on an autobiographical aspect but also feature some elements of fiction. Barnes warns the readers of his essay: "This is not, by the way, 'my autobiography.'" (Barnes, *Nothing* 35). Even though the narrative voice of this book is as close as possible to Barnes', one should not believe that everything it contains is a truth about its author. It seems that Barnes is pleased whenever he can add some blurry areas between him and his work.

Furthermore, by blurring their authorial identity and by addressing the readers, post-modernist writers challenge both past literary traditions and their own inactive positions as authors. Some aged authors have gained legitimacy thanks to their previously published works, and thus find empowerment when reaching old age. Unlike younger writers, it is thus generally more accepted when they trespass literary codes and endorse a different stance towards their readers. For instance, postmodernist works and autofiction writings often obsolete Lejeune's "pacte d'autobiographie" (autobiography pact), which states that the distinction between author, narrator and character should be crystal clear. This is especially true in *Metroland* as we have seen that Christopher's whole geographical frame was also Barnes'. Autofiction can thus be understood as furthering the idea that the novel genre is formless and malleable – it is the primary component of what Bakhtine calls the "carnavalisation de la littérature" (Bakhtine, *Problèmes de la poétique de Dostoïevski* quoted in Guignery, *Mélange* 161). Autofiction thus adds another mask and another layer to the novel by breaking Lejeune's pact and making the genre all the more fluid.

In relation to the literary tradition, the choice of autofiction can also lead us to reflect upon Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence. Bloom states that the long-lasting belief in the "ideology of authorship as origination" (Moraru 15) prompts anxiety as most authors' writings feel influenced or inspired by their reading of previous writers. For instance, Moraru quotes Michael Marr who demonstrates that Nabokov's *Lolita* was probably inspired by a 1916 German short-story by Heinz von Lichberg in a process which Marr names "cryptomnesia." According to Bloom, if an author's work derives or unconsciously borrows from another's, the value of the former might be lessened. Barnes' work, and especially *The Sense of an Ending*, has been described as influenced by Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1915) which Barnes "particularly admires for its use of the unreliable narrator [named John Dowell]" (Greaney 232). Indeed, as Guignery points out in the archives of the first incipits for *The Sense of an Ending*, Barnes wrote in the margin of one of his drafts "Not like this – it's too Dowell – but use ideas" (Guignery, *Margins* 235). Coming back to autofiction, we could think of it as an empowerment for

the authors who reinsert and reassert their presence in their fiction, a presence which has been deeply undermined in literary criticism since Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author." Barnes' statements in *Flaubert's Parrot* seem to "heral[d] the return of the author." (Wexler, "Chasing the Writer") and they might explain the important part of autobiographical elements in his fiction.

Following the empowerment implied by the return of the author in his fiction, we will now develop on the ways in which a literary work can be seen as a system which sometimes echoes itself. In Barnes' case, readers will feel increasingly at ease as they read books from the same author, since they will start to recognise those echoes and internal references between books. Such a cumulative knowledge is less efficient with authors who often quote from others' works. Indeed, intertextual references do not necessarily add up to the understanding of an author's favourite themes or forms. Thus, the more one reads Barnes' work, the more one tends to understand the things that matter to him, which is less the case with authors who resort to intertextuality more than him. In *Metroland* and *The Sense of an Ending*, echoes come from the fact that the latter was at first intended as the sequel to the former. Both novels were sparked by the same autobiographical memory, and they are only modulated by the narrators: "The examination of the genesis of [*The Sense of an Ending*] reveals that it found its origin in the recollection of two boys Barnes knew at school and started with echoes of *Metroland*, published some thirty years earlier" (Guignery, *Margins* 215). Barnes' work can thus function as a system smaller than the whole literature, a system in which readers can be easily set in a trustful position. It further empowers the author who is able to play with the reader's confidence.

Readers who read more and more from the same writer not only become knowledgeable about the author's work, they will also be less disconcerted by the author's tendencies to blur the line between fiction and reality. For instance, in *Flaubert's Parrot*, the fictional narrator Braithwaite corrects a mistake Barnes made when writing *Metroland* (107), regarding an inexistent first suppressed version of *Madame Bovary*: "I read the other day a well-praised first novel [...] I expect the young novelist (it seems unfair to give his name)

was thinking of the 'first suppressed edition' of *Les Fleurs du mal*. No doubt he'll get it right for his second edition; if there is one." (quoted in Guignery, "Brouillage" 186) As evinced by this example, there is still plenty of room and plenty of masks for the narrator to insert autobiographical elements in his fiction. These new masks appear as authors age and gain literary recognition from a widening audience. Authors such as Barnes can thus allow themselves to blur the line between reality and fiction even more, but consistent readers will also find comfort and pleasure in the internal references of such a work.

3.3.3 *Repetition and History: "It just repeats, Sir. It burps." (*Sense *18)*

By consciously building a system of one's own, living authors like Barnes also secure a safe space for themselves. Even though their books will be under more and more critical scrutiny over the years, their basis of consistent readers will be larger and larger. This probably allows for a serenity regarding the themes they can insert in their fiction. This can be a first step in overcoming traumatic events, that is by first voicing them in fictive narratives. Even though Barnes describes few trauma-like events in the novels under scrutiny here, it should be underlined that some themes recur in his work in the manner of traumatic reiterations of the same memory. The fear of death is a quasi-leitmotiv in his work, as pinpointed by various critics: "Barnes seems to have been born old (which may be why he has spent his life obsessed with death)" (Deresiewicz).

The "fear of being dead," (Barnes, *Metro* 54) as renamed by Chris, pervades most of Barnes' work, whether it be in his novels or in his essays. In his fiction, he stages many widowers or characters reflecting upon death: Christopher in *Metroland* and Webster in *The Sense of an Ending*, but also Geoffrey Braithwaite in *Flaubert's Parrot*, many ageing or widowed characters in the collection of short-stories *The Lemon Table*, or more recently, with a fear of a more violent death, Shostakovitch in *The Noise of Time*. When using his own voice, Barnes is no less prolific. *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* is an entire essay he dedicated to this question, and the third part of *Levels of Life*, his grief memoir, tackles the throes of his own widowhood. As Thomas Jones notes in his review, Barnes expresses this

fear with a variety of narrative stances: "The narrative voice in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* is less complacent than *Metroland*'s Christopher Lloyd, less irascible than Geoffrey Braithwaite, but has the same enviable suavity that marks out all Barnes's writing."

This fear of death is always reiterated with variations according to the narrators uttering it. Same goes for the suicides of schoolboys in Barnes' work, as Guignery argues: "[those suicides] reveal by their presence in several fictional and non-fictional texts that their self-destructive act remained vivid in the writer's mind for several decades" (Guignery, *Margins* 217). One can understand this recurrence as themes constantly haunting Barnes in the manner of traumatic memories, or as Barnes' willing re-enactment of the same themes which allows him to reach a better understanding of death and time. As Deresiewicz writes in the conclusion of his article, the insecurities evoked by Barnes in his fiction are actual fears which can sometimes only be looked at through the numbing filter of fiction: "If Barnes' prose is contained, then what it is containing is just this – this knowledge, this terror, this sorrow. [...] You can't really gaze at the pit – that would be like staring at the sun – but you can hold your fingers up and do your best."

As pointed out earlier about the speed variations in fictional time, Barnes came to master his fiction by exploring different possibilities of telling his stories. His insertion of traumatic events or fears had a similar effect – it somewhat empowered him as it allowed him to explore similar subjects in a wider context. For instance, *A History of the World in 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ Chapters* came to lift some topics to a wider scale, namely the topic of collective trauma according to Ganteau. Indeed, the latter studies Barnes' collection-looking novel as a trauma narrative, in the sense of a "collective, historical trauma [whose persistence] is perceptible through a highly repetitive, fragmented and echoic text" (Ganteau, "Of Ramps and Selections" quoted in Nadal and Calvo 195). Interestingly, in *A History of the World in 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ Chapters*, Ganteau notes that the traumatic echoes of collective history are resolved through the vulnerable perception of the individual. Indeed, the half chapter "Parenthesis" seems to offer a solution to the traumatic events described in the rest of the book through human love, truth and faithfulness. Thus, Ganteau describes "Parenthesis"

as "a call that risks naivety and mawkishness and takes pride in the vulnerability of its form so as to forcefully make a point, suggesting a solution for the contemporary subject's coming to terms with the nightmare and trauma of history" (Ganteau, "Of Ramps and Selections" quoted in Nadal and Calvo 203). Barnes thus offers a similar build-up of trust and faithfulness to his readers. By displaying a seemingly honest voice, he asserts that his work is not only about playfulness around the reader's role, but that his work can also be a place to build a shared confidence.

Barnes' work thus appears to be simultaneously empowering for him and engaging for readers. Indeed, whether it be by being self-referential or by displaying well-known themes to his readers, Barnes always manages to challenge their role with playfulness and benevolence. Consequently, his use of autofiction and unreliability is often inviting to sympathy.

3.3.4 *Filling In The Gaps: Readers as Co-Creators*

Furthermore, as we shall now see, postmodernism's narrative modes not only allow authors to assert themselves back into their fiction, they also lead readers to endorse a different approach to fiction. Indeed, because they are often addressed to, readers are set in a different position, but they also acquire a better understanding of the author's position. For instance, Barnes often displays self-mockery and self-deprecation when speaking with his own voice or through the voice of a narrator: "My own delicate and appalled imagination couldn't cope with such stuff [Nigel's SF stories], neither with the prose nor the ideas" (Barnes, *Metro* 56); "At the time, I smirked to myself, as any aesthete going up to Oxford would." (*Nothing* 227).

This self-criticism is at the basis of the sense of sympathy readers might feel for the narrator or the author. This feeling is even stronger when readers recognise examples of daily life they might have experienced in autofiction. Furthermore, when Barnes uses self-mockery in a text that is deliberately made to be read by unknown persons, he establishes a link with his readers by sharing an awareness of being multiple and of changing through

time. His vulnerability and fragility are thus accessed by readers through the indirect mode of fiction in which the author is still in control.

Irony and self-deprecation create a paradoxical effect: they are used by authors to distract the attention of readers from their own failures, but by doing so, they underline the fact that they need protection and thus that they *are* vulnerable. Webster's narrative mode has a similar double-edged effect: "Webster is a narrator who won't stop talking about himself even though he insists there is nothing to know." (Greaney 233) Barnes is rarely explicit when acknowledging his vulnerability, since it is often concealed under layers of humour or irony. Thus, if writing implies empowering, as previously explained, it also implies weakening since it indirectly unveils what one tries to conceal through humoristic devices.

Consequently, the authorial stance made of both honesty and performance sets readers in a different position towards Barnes' literary work. Since the narrator directly addresses readers, the latter are forced to have an active reading and to reflect upon the link that unites them to the author. As Doche underlines with her study of you-narration: "It seems that the intradiegetic narrator relies on two stylistic features to encourage readers to get actively involved in the story: the progressive tense and the attribution of cognitive verbs to the reader." (Doche 35) She demonstrates that the progressive aspect creates a perceived simultaneity between the reading experience and the writing process ("I wasn't exactly a virgin, just in case you were wondering." Barnes, *Sense* 25) and that the cognitive verbs placed onto readers underline that the speaker is "very much aware of the readers' expectations" (Doche 37): "You can probably guess" (Barnes, *Sense* 43); "You might think" (48).

These strategies can be repulsive to readers who might be used to the traditional distance between author and narrator. As Doche warns, the instinctive reaction is not to accept this intrusion of the narrator: "each time, the reader has to decide whether they recognise themselves as the referent of the pronoun you." (Doche 36) Why would Barnes thus nourish this unusual narrative stance? One reason we might think of is his

distaste for certainty, which he expressed regarding biographies: "A biography makes too much *sense* of a life, it seems to me" (Guignery, "Brouillage" 711). Indeed, even Barnes' biographical works like *The Noise of Time* or *The Man in the Red Coat* allow room for discussion on other topics and do not tackle a person's life from birth to death. Using unreliable narrators might thus be useful to insert an element upon which the author has no control.

Indeed, the author can hardly predict what the readers' reaction to an unreliable narrator can be. The latter's addresses to the readers can become obnoxious but they can also be understood as invitations to actively co-create a piece of literature which would remain half-finished without someone on the other end[19]. These calls can prompt the reader to co-fill a void by inviting to the creation of meaning. This is the very basis of the metaphorical process, but it can be more or less hinted at: "In the first drafts, the reader was thus offered a fairly high level of guidance as to the interpretation of the Severn Bore metaphor [another water metaphor in *Sense* 131, see 2.1.3] while the published book demands a more active participation" (*Margins* 233).

Doche further analysed the intertextual aspects of *The Sense of an Ending* by describing them as new meanings that should be co-created by author and readers. For instance, Larkin's poetry only shows through hints and slant references: "Larkin's name is never explicitly mentioned in the text; as such, it is up to readers to co-construct the underlying intertextual patterning." (Doche 20) It leads her to bring up Genette's idea of the reader as a *bricoleur* (which Genette borrows from Lévi-Strauss' *La Pensée sauvage*): "Genette believes that the intertextual anchorage of a text greatly impacts the ways in which it is – or rather the ways in which it should be – interpreted by readers." (25)

By using an engaging narrative mode in his fiction, Barnes leads his readers to get involved more than they would normally do. The narrator of *The Sense of an Ending* may be unreliable, but he is relatable: "He's unreliable because we all are." (Deresiewicz)

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19. In the wake of Allan Kaprow's happenings, earlier, more experimental postmodernist authors pushed the idea of reader participation even further: John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* encompasses a virtually infinite short-story – "Frame-Tale" – which consists in a never-ending sentence printed vertically and instructions for the reader to craft a loop of paper out of it.

Because Webster's vulnerability is brought back to the front stage against his will, readers are most likely to engage in the novel, and, in their turn, open up to the fiction they grow involved in.

Conclusion

> *When I was younger, so much younger than today*
> *I never needed anybody's help in any way*
> *But now these days are gone and I'm not so self-assured*
> *Now I find I've changed my mind, I've opened up the doors*

> The Beatles, "Help!"

By providing the subjective gaze of two narrators upon their whole lives, Julian Barnes' novels manage to display both the change that occurs to them and the ways in which they handle it. In both novels, the narrators easily embrace their evolution but they face more difficulties when dealing with its consequences. Indeed, they both assert a distance between their present self and the one they used to be. This virtual discrepancy is often stated thanks to ironical mockery or hyperbolic descriptions. Whether by acknowledging their change of perspective (Webster: "What did I know of life..." *Sense* 155) or by dismissing their past perspectives (Christopher: "there's no point in trying to thrust false significances on to things" *Metro* 176), both narrators express a distancing from what they have been.

The position of the characters demonstrates that the process of ageing appears more like the containment of a continuous fragmentation, rather than the construction of the self as subject. In the beginning of the protagonists' lives, the threats to their integrity mainly come from the outside world. Formlessness is their main vulnerability, but it is more often imposed on them rather than felt by them. However, when the characters reach adulthood, it becomes clear that most of their weaknesses come from their inner selves. From the flaws of their memories to their inability to cope with change and multiplicity, the two adult narrators deploy strategies of avoidance without answering their insecurities. This is what Webster names his "instinct for survival, for self-preservation" (Barnes, *Sense* 45). By the end of his story, Webster finally sees the fuller picture of what he has been. Vulnerability then shows through the inconsistencies of his self, and the ultimate challenge for the ageing protagonist is to find a means to cope with his incoherences.

Barnes' ambiguity regarding his characters lies in the fantasised uneventfulness of their lives, not in their actual lack of consistence: "For Barnes, there is no shame in wanting to lead a normal life, but there is something decidedly odd about those who believe they have never done anything else." (Greaney 233) It explains Barnes' choice to turn his self-convinced characters into unreliable narrators. In *Metroland*, the emphasis on Christopher's contentment underlines the ways in which he betrayed and discarded his past ideals as if they had never existed. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Webster's blindness and self-engrossment indicate how one can be deceived by a life felt as normal. In both cases, the protagonists' unreliability is prompted by an assumed stillness of character and a distorted perception of time.

In Barnes' fiction, the characters do not offer any answer to this existential fragmentation. Middle-aged Chris keeps bathing in his suburban beatitude and Webster hardly finds a better conclusion than Robson's "there is great unrest." (Barnes, *Sense* 5, 163) If a solution exists, it is to be found in the writer's posture. Indeed, in the midst of all the transitions and crises that pervade a life story, the authorial figure and his fiction offer a way out through the reappropriation of one's failings. This rewriting remains double-edged since it can also increase the fragmentation of the self and turn oneself into the unreliable narrator of one's own life. Even though the empowerment evoked in our last part appears as authors' privilege, we have nonetheless tried to demonstrate that all readers can benefit from Webster's example. Novels like Barnes' are essential, especially since the building and sustaining of a sense of self is a "story of aging" (Margaret M. Gullette quoted in Oró-Piqueras 20). By extending the span of the *Bildungsroman*, they underline the time and effort it takes to remain one throughout the span of a life.

All things considered, vulnerability in Barnes' fiction is never entirely accepted nor mastered until late age. Even in old age, characters like Webster tend to prefer versions of themselves rather than confronting what they have been. This allows Barnes to re-explore coming-of-age narratives while at the same time implementing recurrent postmodernist themes such as unreliable or reluctant narrators, visual fragmentation of the text, flawed

human relationships and so forth. Reunion and unity thus seem only attainable by numbing one's memory and by rewriting one's life story – or a version of it. Both narrators are disunited from their past selves but they refuse to acknowledge this discrepancy until they are forced to by secondary characters.

As the narrators age, their vulnerability shifts from incompleteness to forgetfulness, but it allows readers to explore with them the powers of language and narration. Their flawed memory and perception of time tend to isolate them from their friends and from their pasts. Both Webster and Christopher end up enclosed in a domestic or solipsistic way of life as former friends and lovers turn their backs on them. Even though their narrations are flawed and unreliable, the protagonists nonetheless manage to obtain sympathy from their readers. Indeed, their gradual softening and forgetting makes them all the more life-like and, to a certain extent, relatable. Ageing characters may lose some things on their way, but they get better at narrating what remains.

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Index

111

Abstract

This work aims at providing a better understanding of the role and representation of ageing in Julian Barnes' fiction. Both *Metroland* (1980) and *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) depict the retrospective gaze of a male narrator upon his past. This joint narrative stance allows us to study the evolution of a fictional identity in relation to the protagonists' vulnerability, that is the several uncertainties and insecurities they face as they age. Indeed, each period in the narrators' lives is related to a shortcoming. Whether it be confusion during Christopher Lloyd's adolescence or gaps in Tony Webster's memory, both novels depict the strategies set up by the narrators to cope with their evolving vulnerabilities. However, the two novels differ in a number of way and do not focus on the same periods, especially since Christopher is in his thirties while Webster is in his sixties. Thanks to this age gap, our comparative study almost covers the span of a lifetime in contemporary England. It also allows us to investigate the various threats to the psychological integrity of a fictional self throughout a life.

Résumé

Ce travail vise à proposer une meilleure compréhension du rôle et de la représentation du vieillissement dans la fiction de Julian Barnes. *Metroland* (1980) et *The Sense of an Ending* (*Une fille, qui danse*, 2011) mettent tous les deux en scène le regard rétrospectif d'un narrateur sur son propre passé. Cette posture narrative commune nous permet d'étudier l'évolution d'une identité fictionnelle à la lumière de la vulnérabilité des protagonistes, c'est-à-dire des nombreux doutes et incertitudes auxquels ils sont confrontés alors qu'ils prennent de l'âge. En effet, chaque période de la vie des narrateurs est marquée par un défaut ou une faille. Entre la confusion de l'adolescence pour Christopher Lloyd ou les trous de mémoire pour Tony Webster, les deux romans décrivent les stratégies que les narrateurs mettent en place pour faire face à leurs multiples vulnérabilités. Cela étant, les deux romans diffèrent et n'évoquent pas les mêmes périodes de la vie. C'est notamment le cas parce que Christopher est dans la trentaine quand il narre son histoire, alors que Webster a plus de soixante ans. Cette différence d'âge permet à notre étude comparative de couvrir presque toute la durée d'une vie dans l'Angleterre contemporaine. Elle offre également la possibilité d'examiner les différentes menaces qui pèsent sur l'intégrité psychologique d'une identité fictionnelle tout au long d'une vie.