

Historicity in Narratology: A Case Study of Julian Barnes' Latest Two Novels

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Keywords: Historicity; Narratology; Kermudian Fiction Paradigm; Stream of Consciousness; Space

Abstract: Seeking truth and historicity is the everlasting theme in Julian Barnes fictions. Barnes' perception of history presents gradual but evident changes in his novels. From the failure of tracing historicity in *Flaubert's Parrot*, to endowing historicity to individual history with the ending in *The Sense of an Ending*, and then to the description of Shostakovich's feelings and thoughts with stream of consciousness in *The Noise of Time*, Barnes narrates his perception of truth and historicity with totally different narratology approaches. This paper will analyze Barnes perception of history with the narratology approaches applied in his latest two fictions. And from this analysis, we can see that narratology is not merely an approach of telling stories in Barnes' fictions, but also a presentation of his understanding of historicity.

Introduction

Before *The Sense of an Ending*, Julian Barnes has long been regarded as an outstanding representative of post-modernism, as his themes and narratology styles are typically post-modernistic and experimental. Deconstruction of history and New-historicism are quite prominent in his previous novels. But deconstruction is not his purpose of writing. Seeking historicity and the truth of life is the profound motive of his writing. In 2011, *The Sense of an Ending*, earned Barnes the Man Booker Prize for that year. It is a great success for both Barnes and Frank Kermode. The latter is the narratologist with whose narratology paradigm applied in that fiction. In this novel, Barnes endows the protagonist's individual history with historicity through Kermudian fiction paradigm, and finally arrives at certainty in history after tens of years of writing. It can also be called as a success for modernistic narratology in this post-theory era. As to Barnes latest novels, *The Noise of Time*, is narrated in another modernism narrative approach, stream of consciousness, with which Barnes depicts Shostakovich's moods and thoughts in three spaces during three phases, presenting a true power-pressed Shostakovich. The present writer holds that Barnes is quite sensitive to his narrative approaches. In an interview, Barnes introduces that before each composition of his novel, he would select the most proper narratology way first. A perfect form is a necessary premise for a perfect content [1]. His latest two fictions prove that construction individual historicity is what Barnes has been devoted to within the latest decade, and the two approaches applied also indicate Barnes latest perception of history: knowing the textuality in history and subjectivity in grand narrative, Barnes has no longer been obsessed with details in history, which use to make he be skeptical and uncertain about historicity; but turns to reconstruct historicity with narrative and narratology, so that readers can hold a more honesty attitude toward life and history.

Tracing Historicity in Tony's Individual History with the Ending

Frank Kermode introduces his ideal fiction paradigm in his *The Sense of an Ending: Studies of Fiction Theory* thoroughly. Kermode holds that an ideal ending of a fiction should "bestow upon the whole duration and meaning" [2]. It should illuminate the previous plots and reveal latent senses of those previous words and plots. The function of an ending to a fiction is so much like a "tock" to a

“tick”: it endows significance to both the previous plots and itself, and makes them as a whole. We may also call this ending paradigm as a “tick-tock” ending. Kermode deems that we human-beings cannot see our life as a whole, as we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle [2] (8). But no one can escape the ending when it comes. Each individual will be judged, and they will be able to recognize what their responsibilities and faults are when the ending comes. It is almost impossible for us to tell when an event begins and ends in life, but it is inevitable for a novel to have a beginning and an ending [2]. Therefore, the ending should enlighten the whole duration, and reveal the latent senses of the previous plots and discourse. As an authoritative representative of both theology and modernism, Kermode’s fiction theory is deeply influenced by the Bible narrative and modernism, thus he weights much on latent sense and certainty in his fiction paradigm. Fictions should reveal truth of life for readers, thus only these endings containing certainty and revealing latent senses can be regarded as ideal ones.

Illuminated by Kermode’s fiction theory, Barnes steps out of his previous new historicism confusion, offering a certain ending to the protagonist’s individual history in his *The Sense of an Ending*. In this novel, Barnes narrates the protagonist’s individual history with his immediate memory and forward memory in Kermodian fiction paradigm, endowing certainty to the protagonist’s individual history. Barnes chapters this novel into two parts: stories happening in Tony’s school life narrated by old Tony with his forward memory and sensory memory; experiences of old Tony’s tracing of his immediate memory and history. In this novel, Tony is selfish, coward, and evil. Tony spends his school life in the 1960’s and grows up in a working-class family. The social system and sub-culture of that time influence him negatively. Among his good friends, Adrian is an outstanding student who is enrolled by Cambridge, but commits suicide suddenly when he is at college. Tony has an attractive girl friend named Veronica, who is from a middle-class family. But according to Tony’s narration in chapter one, Adrian and Veronica hook up, and they two write him a letter to tell him that they have become lovers. According to Tony’s narration, he is mild and coward. He just wishes them good luck in his letter. Chapter two topples Tony’s narration and his forward memory in the previous chapter. When time moves to the 21st century, old divorced Tony realizes that his memory may not be very reliable, and Sarah’s testament opens his tracing of his true individual history and memory. Sarah is Veronica’s mother. She tells Tony that she leaves him Adrian’s diary and letters. Tony is quite interested in these files, as he wants something to prove that his memory is true, or to test whether it is true or false. In this process, he contacts and interrupts Veronica again and again, obtaining the letter he himself writes to them, which is full of evil words and curses. This letter proves that he is envious about and evil to his friends. When he discovers Adrian and Sarah’s extramarital affair, he realizes what his faults and responsibilities are: he instigates Adrian to ask Sarah about Veronica’s personality secretly, which causes the first step of their affair, and then their baby, and finally Adrian’s suicide. Tony always rewrites and cancels memories which are negative to his image. But when the ending comes, when the insufficient documents and imperfect memory meet, immediate memory will be released, and certainty in individual history found.

It is for the first time that Barnes offers a certain ending in his novel. This certain ending indicates that Barnes believes that individual historicity can be traced and tested. Although memories are imperfect and documents are insufficient and cannot avoid subjectivity, when the two meet, they test each other, and dig the immediate memory out for us. Thus we will arrive at the only truth and historicity. Besides, we should hold the sense of an ending, knowing that no matter what we do, the ending will come to judge us, and no one can escape from time’s judgment. With this sense of an ending, we will be able to avoid the accumulation of faults and responsibilities.

Presenting Shostakovich’s True Feelings with Stream of Consciousness

Having long been interested in Shostakovich’s music and life, Barnes decided to take him as his protagonist in *The Noise of Time*. And this novel reflects Barnes latest understanding of truth and history. In the “Author’s Note” of this novel, Barnes writes: “Shostakovich was a multiple narrator of his own life. Some stories come in many versions, worked up and ‘improved’ over the years.

More broadly, truth was a hard thing to find, let alone maintain, in Stalin's Russia. Even the names mutate uncertainly: so Shostakovich's interrogator at the Big House is variously given as Zanchevsky, Zakrevsky and Zakovsky. All this is highly frustrating to any biographer, but most welcomed to any novelist" [3]. After decades of writing, Barnes is quite familiar with textuality of history, unreliability of memory as well as grand narrative. He is no longer mainly obsessed with absolute historicity, just as what he does in *Flaubert's Parrot*; he turns to construct certainty and truth in life and history: such as love, art, as well as the battle between individual and authoritarian regime.

Compared with historians, novelists enjoy more freedom in their books, as novelists could treat these uncertain details as historicity in their works [4]. Their works are to find out the truth of life for their readers rather than absolute historicity. For writing this novel, Barnes has done a lot of research about Shostakovich to ensure its reliability. And while reading a novel, no matter what genre it is, he hopes that readers would believe that the content of that book is true [1]. Barnes used to hope that historians would read his works. This indicates that he used to be quite interested in the way how we understand history. But when a historian reviews his *The Noise of Time* negatively in *London Review*, as that historian thinks that the name of the integrator in the Big House is not true, Barnes finds this annoying. And he says that the historian knows little about novel and fiction [1]. This anecdote shows that Barnes is quite aware of the difference between history and novel. He holds that novels should depict and reflect truth of life and history, but it is impractical for novelists to construct absolute historicity in their novels. Even the authorized historical records cannot deprive themselves from textuality.

As to the debates on *Testimony: The Memories of Shostakovich*, which is one of the two main resources of his writing of this novel, Barnes says that he treats that book as a private diary: "as appearing to give the full truth, yet usually written at the same time of day, in the same prevailing mood, with the same prejudices and forgetting" [3]. This indicates that Barnes holds that as to *Testimony: The Memories of Shostakovich*, it presents Shostakovich's true thoughts and moods, but it cannot avoid prejudice and unreliability of memory. Thus the best narratology approach for him to write about Shostakovich should be stream of consciousness which focuses on the protagonist's thoughts and moods.

According to Abrams, stream of consciousness "is the name applied specifically to a mode of narration that undertakes to reproduce the full spectrum and continuous flow of a character's mental process, in which sense perceptions mingle with conscious and half-conscious thoughts, memories, expectations, feelings and random associations" [4]. With stream of consciousness narrated in the third person, Barnes could present Shostakovich's inner world and outside world freely. Barnes chapters this novel into three parts with three different spaces: "On the Landing", "On the Plane" and "In the Car". These three spaces symbolize Shostakovich's decreased moral selection in three phases during which he dialogues with the totalitarian regime: Firstly, on the landing, Shostakovich could still step out and contact with the outside world; secondly, on the plane, Shostakovich seems to stay in a space far away the Soviet Union. But instead and indeed he is trapped in that place and could not step out. The direction of the flight has already been set for him; finally in the car, which indicates privilege along with captivity. In these three spaces, Barnes shifts the stream of consciousness narration between consciousness and half-consciousness naturally with interruption coming from different interrupters. Thus Shostakovich's moods and feelings are presented naturally with the mentioning of various personal and political events in his life. With this narrative approach, Barnes tries to present a true Shostakovich, especially his true feelings and moods caused by distressful and shameful political and personal moments, explaining the reason why Shostakovich regards himself as a coward, and discussing about the selection of being a hero or a coward when faced with oppressive regime.

Chapter one is placed on the landing. It is the Shostakovich's first contact with his totalitarian regime. He has stayed there waiting for being arrest for ten nights. That is the only thing he can do to protect his wife and child, so that they would not see his being arrest. Staying on the landing, his consciousness and half-consciousness flow though the cause of his arrogation, the negation of his

music, and his success as a composer... Horrors and worries are the key moods in chapter one. At that time, Shostakovich thinks that it is the worst time. But the following two chapters prove that some times can be worse than the worst.

Chapter two begins with the same sentence of chapter one “All he knew was this was the worst time” [3]. This is Shostakovich’s second phase of his dialogue with the totalitarian regime. As he is selected as an ideal representative to attend the New York Peace Conference by Joseph Stalin, he regains some of his freedom and right as a composer. It seems that he wins the upper hand in the telephone dialogue with Stalin, but on the flight back from New York Peace Conference, sense of shame and self-abasement torture him greatly. In that conference, he is arranged to announce several statements written for him. Most of these statements betray his belief and conscience. The worst of all is that his time with these western reporters and audiences also proves how cowardly and dishonest he is. In the conference, he is interviewed about his personal opinion, but he dares not to state his true thoughts, he has to announce for his regime, the one that tortures him and negates him. In his opinion he turns to be the very one who he despises.

Chapter three moves into “the worst time of all” [3]. He is selected to be the chairman of the Soviet Composers’ Association, thus the government requires him to join the Party. Shostakovich refuses first, but his refusal is in vain. He has no choice but to join the Party at last, and becomes the chairman of the Composers’ Association. The positive significance of this event is that he can join more freedom in his music, and compose his true thoughts and feelings into it; the negative influence is that he has to sign more statements and documents which are against his will and thoughts. To protect his music, his family and friends, Shostakovich has to compromise again and again. His compromise is a great torture to his conscience. Shostakovich despises and even hates that self. Sometimes, Shostakovich thinks that death is even better than living, for death could make him a hero rather than a coward. But if he dies as a hero, his music would be erased by the authorities, and his children would be cultivated in the way which is against his faith; besides, his death would also cause danger to his family and friends. Thus, his only choice is to survive under political and censorship press. In Barnes’ opinion, this is the only wise choice in that circumstance. At least, Shostakovich protects his music and family, and lets his voice be heard after the ending of that regime. Music, an art without words, expresses exactly its composer’s true feelings and thoughts.

In this novel, Barnes depicts the unreliability of both government and personal documents, and presents the cause of their unreliability. Grand narrative cannot avoid subjectivity and textuality. But our consciousness is true. It is a perfect and honest way to present the protagonist’s thoughts and moods. Drifting along with Shostakovich’s consciousness and half-consciousness, we also experience his true feelings and his tortured life.

Summary

Barnes’s latest two novels prove that he is quite aware of textuality of history, the difference between history and fiction, along with the moral function of fictions. Different from his previous novels, new historicism and deconstruction are no longer the keynotes in his fictions. He turns to construct certainty and historicity with Kermudian fiction paradigm and stream of consciousness in these two novels. Construction, love, music, and truth in life and history become the keynotes in his latest novels. In his construction and narration, Barnes shows his keen awareness of narrative. His selection of the most proper narratology approach displays both his perception of history and his outstanding narrative art.

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