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Exploring the path to death through Barnes's older characters: Between irony and melancholic meditation

Maricel Oro-Piqueras

Universitat de Lleida, Department of English and Linguistics, Pl. Víctor Siurana, 1, 25003 Lleida, Catalunya, Spain



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ABSTRACT

This article aims at analysing four of Julian Barnes's novels with protagonists either entering or in their old age in order to discern to what extent conceptions of ageing, old age and death are depicted in Barnes's fiction and develop throughout his writing career. Barnes's memoir *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (2008) will also be central in the discussion, since, in it, the author reflects on conceptions of old age and death from different philosophers and authors intermingling them with his own personal experience and that of his family, specially his parents. For Barnes, death represents another part of life, even though he himself has confessed to have been obsessed with death since his early adolescence. On the other hand, in Barnes's novels, and from the point of view of his protagonists, ageing and old age is not that different from other life stages, since, one's essence does not change throughout one's life course. By resorting to irony and imbuing the narrative voice of his novels with what he calls melancholic meditation, Barnes approaches the reader to the experience of ageing, old age and death pointing to the fact that existential questions and life concerns are intrinsic to human beings rather than to specific ages.

Introduction

After almost three decades of fiction and journalistic writing, Julian Barnes's works have been widely analysed for his constant narrative experimentation as well as for the recurrent exploration of a number of topics present in his novels and short story collections; namely, the unreliability of memory and history and the position of art and love against the inevitability of death. In terms of form, Barnes's works have been described as replete with intertextuality, a characteristic that Frederick M. Holmes attributes to the author setting the focus on “the impossibility of complete artistic originality” (2009: 14), together with his constant questioning of truth and reality as absolutes, something that Barnes achieves through his use of “metafictional games” (Holmes, 2009: 15). With both his narrative experimentation and constant revision of topics, Barnes's fictional writing allows the reader to glimpse into the life and inner thoughts of his protagonists from the perspective of old age in order to prove that old age is neither associated to decline nor to wisdom. As Barnes states in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, “I have always mistrusted the solution that old age brings serenity. The old are just as tormented as the young” (Barnes, 2009: 175). In Barnes's novels and short stories, characters in their old age provide a pragmatic view not only into the circumstances that have guided their life course, but also into the extent to which human beings are ultimately the result of the time and place they inhabit.

This article will focus on Barnes's four novels with protagonists in their old age; namely, the two novels with narrators who tell their stories from their mid-sixties, just after retirement, as is the case of Geoffrey Braithwaite and Tony Webster in *Flaubert's Parrot* (Barnes, 1984) and *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) respectively; and the two novels in which their main protagonists, both of them female, reach their old age. This is the case of Jean Serjeant in *Staring at the Sun* (Barnes, 1986), who reaches her hundredth birthday in the third and last part of the novel, and the case of Martha Cochrane in *England, England* (Barnes, 1998), who is described as an “old maid” (1998: 259) in her nineties in the last part of the novel. This division, which will guide the structure of the article, responds to the structure and narrative voice of the novels as well as to the ages from which the main characters tell their stories. Whereas in *Flaubert's Parrot* and *The Sense of an Ending* the narrators recount their stories from their mid-sixties in order to make sense of some of the decisions they had made in their younger years, *Staring at the Sun* and *England, England* are organised in chronological order – with the first part of the novels corresponding to childhood and early adulthood, the middle part to middle-age and the last part dedicated to old age. Moreover, Barnes's memoir *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (2009) will also be central in the discussion of the four novels considered here. Barnes wrote *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* when he was in his early sixties. In it, he reflects on his intimate and, at the same time, controversial relationship with death through the

E-mail address: maricel.oro@dal.udl.cat.

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combination of episodes of his own life, his parents' older age and dying process, relating his own and his family's experience to a number of philosophers and artists who have written about life and death throughout history. This article will aim at revising the way in which conceptions of ageing, old age and death are portrayed and to what extent they are challenged in Barnes's fiction with a focus on the novels aforementioned. The voice of the older character is conveyed through the use of the first-person (in *Flaubert's Parrot* and *The Sense of an Ending*) and third-person indirect discourse (in *England, England* and *Staring at the Sun*). The combination of these narrative voices allows the insertion of irony and humour in the discussion of matters that have increasingly been dealt with as serious and even taboo.

What lies at the core of Barnes's fiction has been discussed by the same author in a number of interviews and by some academics who have studied his works, who actually agree on defining Barnes's works as combining irony with melancholic meditation (Paterman, 2002: 3). In this respect, Holmes includes a quote to one of Julian Barnes's interviews conducted by Rudolf Freiburg in which the author admits that "there is probably a pervasive melancholy in a lot of what I write. I think that this partly comes from the objective assessment of the human condition, the inevitability of extinction – and also from an objective look at how people's lives turn out and how rarely achievement matches intention" (Holmes, 2009: 19). In his monograph on Julian Barnes published in 2011, and after revising previous critical work on the author's oeuvre, Peter Childs defines Barnes's fictional work: "as a balance of moral comedy and sceptical nostalgia in portraits of a fallen human condition" (Childs, 2011: 11). For Merritt Moseley, Barnes is "a modern liberal thinker, aware of complexity" who "writes books richer in the exploration of serious ideas than in the delivery of finality and doctrinaire answers" (Moseley, 1997: 16). In her review of *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, Kate Saunders sees Barnes's works as "deeply concerned with the state of being alive; of having a pulse and five senses; of being a living piece of solid flesh" (Saunders, 2011: 1). Thus, as these critics have already argued and the author himself has stated, Barnes's fiction and memoirs do not aim to provide answers to specific questions but, rather, to bring to the surface concerns and topics which are not usually part of conversation, with old age and death among them. Moreover, Barnes's works acknowledge the impossibility of reaching a truthful version of either public history or individual memory. It is in this sense that Barnes considers that literature is "the best way of telling the truth; it's a process of producing grand, beautiful, well-ordered lies that tell more truth than any assemblage of facts" (Guppy, 2000: 1).

Ageing, old age and death: from taboo to irony

Old age and death have become taboo topics in Western societies, particularly with the proliferation and establishment of consumer culture. The wide offer of products and techniques available in the market imply that the ageing body can be constantly monitored and serviced in order to conceal the signs of ageing (Blaikie, 1999: 25). In fact, social gerontologists Bryan S. Turner (Turner, 1995) and Elizabeth Hallam establish a very close relationship between keeping a healthy and youthful body, the concept of identity and self-identity, and death. As Hallam states "when emphasis is placed upon control and the regulation of the body as a prerequisite for the maintenance of self-identity, the dying body and the dead body acquire terrifying qualities" (Hallam, 1999: 21). In other words, both the ageing body and death become vivid reminders of frailty and mortality, words that, as Norbert Elias argued in his *The Loneliness of the Dying* (Elias, 1985), are increasingly made invisible in advanced societies. As Elias states, "life grows longer, death is further postponed. The sight of dying and dead people is no longer commonplace. It is easier in the normal course of life to forget death" (1985: 8). In this state of affairs, we tend to forget that we are actually mortal and, according to Elias, it is more difficult for us to both understand the ageing process and give solace to those close to death. For Glennys Howarth, the advancement of medicine and technology

have even set death further away not only from our day-to-day reality, but mainly from our condition as mortal beings; in other words, "[t]he promise of control over mortality is extended in the shape of medical advances and risk-aversion strategies" (Howarth, 2006: 257).

Death, understood as the culmination of the process from the time we are born to the time we die, is one of the recurrent topics in Julian Barnes's works. As Barnes has confessed in different interviews and in his memoir *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, he has been concerned by death from a very young age. In his memoir, Barnes combines episodes of his family and his own life with writings of philosophers and thinkers who have theorised about death – and life, which is actually indissoluble from death – such as Gustave Flaubert, one of the most influential authors in Barnes's writing. One of Barnes's observations in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* is precisely the fact that contemporary relationship to death – and also ageing – is problematic, in tune with Elias's and Howarth's arguments. Barnes refers to Michel de Montaigne's work and explains that whereas in Montaigne's times to die of "extreme old age" was something "rare, singular and extraordinary", "nowadays we assume it is our right" (2009: 40); and refers to both Montaigne and Philippe Ariès, a twentieth-century French philosopher, as stating that the only way to "defeat death" (2009: 41) is both to have it in mind and talk about it, something that is not quite present in nowadays society. For Barnes, having death present and actually talking about it is a way of learning about both life and death since, as he himself quotes from Flaubert "everything must be learned, from speaking to dying" (2009: 98). However, as Barnes explains in his memoirs and, as it can be discerned from his novels, being an agnostic, he misses the "the underlying sense of purpose" (2009: 53) fulfilled by religious belief. Through his writing, Barnes reflects on death, but also on the sense and purpose of life, both topics very much present in the four novels with older protagonists and narrators that will be considered here. As Barnes explains, his concern for death has always been present in his life, regardless of his age. That is why in Barnes novels old age is not that different from any other life stage since, each of them, has its positive and negative side with specific wishes, hopes and concerns. In his works, as Frank Kermode states in one of his interviews with the writer, Barnes represents old age from multiple perspectives, as he actually does with most of his recurrent topics: "sometimes comical, sometimes curious, and sometimes notable for the purity with which the prose matches the seriousness of the themes" (Kermode, 2004: 1).

The four protagonists considered here – Geoffrey Braithwaite and Tony Webster in *Flaubert's Parrot* and *The Sense of an Ending*, and Jean Serjeant and Martha Cochrane in *Staring at the Sun* and *England, England* – reflect on the options and choices they have made during their lives, at the same time as they observe and analyse the relationships they have established with their closer ones to try to find a sense to their existence. Thus, memory and the re-telling and reconstruction of the past become key concepts in the four novels at the same time as humour and irony are recurrent resources. However, memory and history turn out to be unreliable tools to reconstruct one's past and find a trustworthy meaning to our collective and our individual story; thus, the four characters find it difficult to discern their own 'truth'. As Geoffrey Braithwaite states in *Flaubert's Parrot*, "I'm not surprised some people prefer books. Books make sense of life" (1984: 86). A common characteristic in the four older protagonists is the acceptance of the fact that reality can only be partially grasped, thus, accepting uncertainty as part of a human life. However, in the novels considered here there is also the acknowledgement that "love and life fail but there is much that is beautiful and amusing in the mismatch between human beings' reach and grasp", as Childs (2011: 6) states in his monograph when referring to the author's fictional works. As it is present in the collection of stories *The Lemon Table*, in which each story features a main character in their old age, getting to one's sixties, seventies and eighties neither guarantees wisdom nor tameness. In other words, it is precisely this uncertainty that proves to be one of the attractiveness of being alive and getting to a very old age, if lucky.

In *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, Barnes acknowledges the use of irony to deal with polemic or taboo topics. For Barnes, “irony does not dig up the grass. It just burns off the weeds” (Nothing 2009: 49), a maxim he quotes from the writer Jules Renard. In *Irony and the Ironic* (1982), D.C. Muecke refers to irony as a concept difficult to define and classify since it is still “vague, unstable and multiform” (Muecke, 1982: 7). However, within the literary work, Muecke considers irony to have a balancing function in two directions: it adds a humorous touch with topics that are dealt with too seriously, but it also adds a serious counterpart when the tone is overly humorous. As Muecke puts it, irony “is like a gyroscope that keeps life on an even keel or straight course, restoring the balance when life is being taken too seriously or, as some tragedies show, not seriously enough, stabilizing the unstable but also destabilizing the excessively stable” (1982: 4). Muecke also refers to an evolution in the use of the ironic narrator and considers that the “traditional ironic narrator” as found in Henry Fielding and Jane Austen’s works evolved towards the “Flaubertian or Jamesian impersonal ironic narrator” (1982: 16) to the contemporary narrator who does not offer any guide of judgement to the reader. Frederick Holmes argues that Barnes borrows the technique of the free indirect discourse to present narrators and characters who share a familiar tone with their readers at the same time as to imbue his narrative with irony and humour. As Holmes states, “the technique of free indirect discourse is an outgrowth of his belief, shared with Flaubert, that the novelist should be in his work as God is in the universe, everywhere present and nowhere visible” (2009: 17). As a number of researchers and critics have argued, it is precisely Barnes humorous and ironic look at those topics recurrent in his fictional works that achieves to bring them closer to the reader at the same time as commenting and reflecting on them openly. According to Kate Saunders, “When he is being purely funny, Barnes can observe with wince-inducing accuracy” (2011: 2).

Brent J. Steele has theorised about the use of irony in establishing a distance from emotions in scholarly work. For Steele, irony allows a “critical self-distance” (Steele, 2010: 90) through which any topic can be analysed; and quotes James Brassett who, referring to British irony specifically, considers that it is very much related to the collective sense of loss of British people: “loss of empire, loss of the moral high ground, loss of economic and military credibility, loss of ignorance” (2010: 90). Although Barnes also uses humour to refer to a constructed image of Britishness, the focus of this article will be set in his use of irony in order to reflect on the meaning of life and death in the four novels specified from the view of the old age of the protagonists. In this sense, gerontologist William L. Randall establishes a relationship between narrative in old age, the use of irony and wisdom. For Randall, the use of irony in life narrative in old age is a sign of wisdom in the sense that it is a sign that the older person has been “[f]ed by age-related changes on a variety of levels, and suitably nurtured through autobiographical reflection”; thus, for Randall “a heightened sense of irony can play a subtle but vital role in meeting the challenges of later life with openness, resilience, and a deepened self-awareness” (Randall, 2013: 164). The fact of including death and old age at the centre of the four novels analysed allows Barnes to reflect on these topics from multiple perspectives and considering different situations. His view is neither a naïve one nor a completely pessimistic one, but one in which a few ideas seem unavoidable: the unreliability of memory as well as of recordings of either public history and private story, the inability to fully grasp the direction and sense of one’s life – despite finding some solace in love and art – and, as he writes in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, the fact that “[d]eath’s rate is no lower than a 100 per cent” (2009: 107).

Geoffrey Braithwaite and Tony Webster: the unreliability of memory

Geoffrey Braithwaite and Tony Webster in *Flaubert’s Parrot* and *The Sense of an Ending* respectively, are two retired men in their mid-sixties who decide to go back to the past to make sense of their present. In the

case of Braithwaite, he is presented as a retired doctor whose wife committed suicide, and who becomes obsessed in finding Flaubert’s real parrot, the one that inspired his short story “Un coeur simple”, as well as Flaubert’s real life story, and, in the way, he also intends to find out about his own truth. Braithwaite is the one who leads the reader throughout his particular research using different genres and sub-genres to try to make sense of his findings. He is presented as a reflexive and melancholic older man who has to finally admit that truth is actually unattainable. *Flaubert’s Parrot* has been widely analysed for its originality within postmodernist culture. As Vanessa Guignery states, “When *Flaubert’s Parrot* appeared [...], it proved baffling to reviewers, who found it hard to define, being a hybrid book which challenges any attempt at categorisation, classification and genre taxonomy” (Guignery, 2006: 37). However, one of the novelties of *Flaubert’s Parrot* is precisely the fact that the main protagonist and narrator is a man in his late sixties who, trying to find out the truth about his favourite author, also looks back at his own life and actually realises that he had always been a melancholic being – from his youth to his old age. For Frederick Holmes, *Flaubert’s Parrot* is primarily about loss; as he states, the novel “is obsessed with the problem of loss; with the transience of life and the perishability of people and things; and with the questions of how loss can be overcome” (2009: 72). For both Geoffrey Braithwaite and Julian Barnes – in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* –, it is not so much age that brings loss with it, but rather life itself. The more you live, the more you are prone to live through different situations; however, this sense of “loss” is present in both the character and author from an early age and it is enhanced by the unreliability of both history and memory. As Braithwaite states, “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 we are” (1984: 60). This sense of loss is reinforced by the acknowledgement that, despite being a powerful tool, language can also be misleading to make sense of what surrounds us expressed by Braithwaite as “[w]e no longer believe that language and reality match up so congruently” (1984: 88).

These same concerns are also present in *The Sense of an Ending*, in which Tony Webster, a retired man in his late sixties, must go back to his university years after receiving an unexpected inheritance letter. The letter was sent to him by the mother of an ex-girlfriend from his university years. Webster had had a relationship with Veronica in his early twenties and had visited Veronica’s parents only once, a visit he remembers with contempt. Apart from the bewilderment that the reception of the inheritance causes in Tony, he is also imbued by memories of his school and university years and of the friends he left behind. He particularly remembers Adrian, the cleverest of his four best school friends, who had also had a short relationship with Veronica after the protagonist and the girl had split up, and who had committed suicide around that time, in his early twenties. By re-tracing his own story and the story of those involved in the mystery he will solve throughout the novel, that is, why Veronica’s mum leaves him some money and a private diary that Veronica is unwilling to share, he realises that he could trust neither his memory of the events nor his interpretation of what was going on at the time. As he himself states, “[w]hen you are in your twenties, even if you’re confused and uncertain about your aims and purposes, you have a strong sense of what life itself is, and of what you in life are, and might become. Later...later there is more uncertainty, more overlapping, more backtracking, more false memories” (2011: 104–105). Tony Webster reflects on the unreliability of memory which, as a life extends, gets more complicated, since memories overlap and play tricks due to being contaminated by both emotions and memories closer to the present time, as Schacter contends in his *Seven Sins of Memory* (Schacter, 2001: 8). For Geoffrey Braithwaite, in *Flaubert’s Parrot*, growing older is closer to wisdom, which he compares to the seasons: “I like those out-of-season crossings. When you are young, you prefer the vulgar months, the fullness of the seasons. As you grow older, you learn to like the in-between times, the months that can’t make up their minds” (1984: 83). In both novels, despite the

uncertainty in which the narrators admit to live, even after their sixtieth birthday, their wisdom lies on the fact of acknowledging that it is very difficult to find a unique irrefutable version of any event and, thus, one is forced to constantly revisit and restructure memories and the emotions triggered by them, and, thus, to rewrite or retell their life stories.

Flaubert's Parrot has been seen as presenting a pessimistic view of life due to his narrator's inability to find complete truth; however, Holmes considers that it actually represents "a honest recognition that life can only be known partially, from limited, ever-changing perspectives" (2009: 80). *The Sense of an Ending* has also been interpreted as portraying a man on the verge of old age who has failed to understand both himself and his own life story by misreading the reactions and the intentions of those around him in his youth years. For Heike Hartung, the novel may be read as "a life review which represents [Webster's] belated coming of age as a failure of self-understanding" (Hartung, 2014: 151). Nevertheless, both narrators are able to look back and realise that there were bits and pieces that they both misread and misinterpreted. Both characters go back to their memories, contrast some of the events and realise that their view was probably not the right one, or at least, not the only one to interpret the events. As Geoffrey Braithwaite states, "books are where things are explained to you; life is where things aren't" (1984: 86); whereas Webster is constantly pointing out that "this is my reading now of what happened then. Or rather, my memory now of my reading then of what was happening at the time" (Barnes, 2011: 41). Thus, whereas Braithwaite realises he will never be able to discern neither the reasons behind the suicide of his wife nor why his marriage ended up being an unhappy one, Tony Webster will have to admit that he was extremely cruel with both Veronica and Adrian when they started going out and had the deference of asking him for his approval of the relationship, to which he responded with a letter in which he wished not to see them ever again. Webster had almost erased those episodes from his life, believing that they – Adrian, Veronica and Veronica's family – were the ones who had been unfair to him. Well into his sixties, he realises he was the one who had acted impulsively, partly due to his youth and inexperience, and was never able to say goodbye to neither Adrian, who committed suicide, nor to Veronica, who disappeared from his life. Thus, by the end of the novel, he reflects "[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. You are allowed a long moment of pause, time enough to ask the question: what else have I done wrong?" (2011: 149). Against the belief that entering into old age is a quiet stage in which one's achievements and one's failures are already established, Braithwaite and Webster actually review their own life stories together with their failures in order to reconstruct them. As Jan Erik-Ruth and Gary Kenyon state in *Aging and Biography*, "as we grow, mature and age in time, we gradually form and reform ourselves and the stories we tell about ourselves" (Ruth and Kenyon, 1995: 7). Thus, despite the underlying melancholy in both narrators' voices, and as pointed out earlier, the fact of rewriting their own stories is actually part of the maturing process to which one is exposed throughout one's whole life. Ultimately, Braithwaite acknowledges that life is "like soup with lots of hairs floating on the surface" (1984: 34); however, his heart "remains intact" (1984: 36).

In both novels, suicide is a common element, committed by Braithwaite's wife, in the case of *Flaubert's Parrot*, and by Webster's school friend Adrian, in the case of *The Sense of an Ending*. In both cases, suicide represents a tragic death that shakes the protagonists and narrators deeply. It is around these suicides that the protagonists' need for understanding is enhanced and, thus, their need to go back to their pasts – and Flaubert's past in the case of Braithwaite – to make sense of their own stories is also highlighted. As Braithwaite states, "Ellen's a true story; perhaps it is even the reason why I am telling you Flaubert's story instead" (1984: 86). They may be melancholic beings, but they have been able to go through their lives accepting their mistaken focus and redirecting it when necessary, also – or maybe specially – in the aftermath of their old age, the closest life period to death. However,

death is constantly brought centre-stage under the umbrella of irony. In the case of Braithwaite, he admits: "No, I didn't kill my wife. I might have known you'd think that. First you find out that she's dead; then, a while later, I say that I never killed a single patient. Aha, who *did* you kill, then? The question, no doubt, appears logical. How easy is it to set off speculation" (1984: 97). As a doctor, Braithwaite is aware that life and death are two sides of the same coin; so, he is never tragic about death. However, he is aware of the fact that old age is still stigmatised as a period which is not as significant as youth; as he explains:

Whereas in fact the young are much crankier than the old – far more egotistical, self-destructive and even plain bloody odd. It's just that they get a more indulgent press. When someone of eighty, or seventy, or fifty-four commits suicide, it's called softening the brain, post-menopausal depression, or a final swipe of mean vanity designed to make others feel guilty. When someone of twenty commits suicide, it's called a high-minded refusal to accept he paltry terms on which life is offered, an act not just of courage but of moral and social revolt. Living? The old can do that for us. Pure crankery, of course. I speak as a doctor (1984: 180).

Suicide is seen as a heroic act when performed by a young person, which is also perceived as a great loss. According to Braithwaite, it is a loss no matter the age of the person who decides to end his/her life. In the case of Adrian in *The Sense of an Ending*, Webster believes that his reaction to Adrian's relationship with Veronica had had something to do with his decision to commit suicide. It is in his old age that Webster discovers that neither his viperous letter to Adrian and Veronica about their new relationship nor Adrian's relationship with Veronica had anything to do with Adrian's decision; but rather, his affair with Veronica's mother as well as finding out that she was pregnant. Through their narratives, the two older protagonists and narrators prove that living a long life and revising it through memory and storytelling is part of human nature. In this respect, Randall quotes Ruth Ray who states 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" (2013: 167). Despite their somehow melancholic and even, to some extent, especially in the case of Webster, lethargic characters, Geoffrey Braithwaite and Tony Webster address their concerns about the unreliability of memory, the constructed nature of public history and private story and the need to revise both. Moreover, they address the topics of ageing and death, using their characteristic ironic tone which, as Muecke argues, has a balancing effect on the reader through which these topics are brought centre-stage at the same time as they are treated openly, as integral parts of life.

Jean Serjeant and Martha Cochrane: the extraordinary in ordinary lives

Barnes's *Staring at the Sun* (1986) and *England, England* (1998) focus on the life of two female protagonists from their childhood to their very old age. In *Staring at the Sun*, Jean Serjeant is a woman who has apparently lived an ordinary life and who gets to her hundredth birthday. She married young but had a child late in life, when she was thirty-nine, after which she decides to leave her domineering husband and explore the world with her baby and, later, on her own. In *England, England* Martha Cochrane becomes the director of the company that turns the Isle of Wight into a theme park version of England that ends up substituting the 'real thing'. In terms of form, Holmes argues that "the novels incorporate elements of bildungsroman, historical fiction, political satire, and futuristic, speculative fiction"; this combination of genres produces a tension in which "readers are denied the ability to activate one consistent set of codes with which to interpret the novels" (2009: 124). It is through this combination of genres together with the use of the third person indirect discourse that Barnes conveys the characters' thoughts and inner feelings in relation to their personal experiences, but also in relation to their beliefs about specific topics such as love, death, authenticity and suicide. Both Jean and Martha are

presented as quite inquisitive persons from an early age. Jean's childhood is marked by the war, a time in which she lived with her mother, her uncle Leslie and a pilot who stayed with them for a while, Sergeant-Pilot Thomas Prosser, also known as Sun-Up Prosser. Jean grows up between the indifference of her mother, the tricks her uncle teaches her and Sun-Up Prosser talking about the only beauty he knows about, which is the fact of seeing the sun rise twice on a same day from his aeroplane. In the case of Martha Cochrane, she is presented as a very clever girl whose father left for good while playing on a puzzle of England, taking Nottinghamshire with him. In her late thirties, Martha starts working for Pitman House in a massive project in order to turn the Isle of Wight into a version of England. The project is successful to the point that the British prefer the imitation to the real one. However, Martha comes to the conclusion that building a version of authenticity and selling it to "the market-driven animal" (1998: 184) that human beings had become didn't have much sense either and, in the aftermath of her old age, she decides to go back to old England, neglected and in decline at the time, and have a quiet life. Mathew Pateman refers to *England, England* in the following terms: "[a]s with *Staring at the Sun*, the main character is a woman looking back on her life. Not only that, Martha looks back and asks pretty much the same questions as Jean and arrives at pretty much the same sort of answers" (2002: 74). For Jean Serjeant "the serious questions always remained unanswered" (1986: 107). According to Pateman, Jean looks for some "narrative logic" (Pateman, 2002: 39), even at the end of her life when she admits that she just wanted a film "to run out properly, correctly, in accordance with its own logic" (2002: 94). By her part, Martha Cochrane became aware of the unreliability of memory from a very young age when she realised that "there is always a memory just behind your first memory and you can't quite get at it" (1998: 3). However, it is in their old age when their memory is less reliable, since, as in the case of Geoffrey Braithwaite and Tony Webster, the accumulation of years and experiences as well as the emotions associated to each memory has a modifying effect on them. Whereas Jean considers she has "too many memories" to rely on them anymore due to her hundred years of life (1986: 140), Martha believes that "the operation of memory was becoming more random; she had noticed that" (1998: 242). However, it is precisely their old age that helps them appreciate the in-betweenness of life; in other words, the fact that absolute binaries can barely define the life course.

Merritt Moseley has described *Staring at the Sun* as a novel that "is not just about being ordinary, but about the extraordinary that lies beneath or beyond the ordinary, about the transfiguration of the mundane about "ordinary miracles" (1997: 101). Following this line of reasoning, *England, England* can be considered to deal with how the ordinary is downgraded and the extraordinary is turned into a consumerist interest by Sir Jack Pitman and his enterprise by designing and re-building the Isle of Wight to offer tourists England's biggest sight-seeing and most important historical episodes and characters available in a concise time and space. As it is advertised, "[i]n our time-strapped age, surely it makes sense to be able to visit Stonehenge and Anne Hathaway's Cottage in the same morning, take in a 'ploughman's lunch atop the White Cliffs of Dover', before passing a leisurely afternoon at the Harrods emporium inside the Tower of London" (1998: 180). Whereas Jean tries to make the most of her life once divorced by visiting the seven wonders of the world through which she combats a sense of having been enclosed in a sterile relationship for a long time, Martha is temporarily soothed by the love they share with Paul, one of his work colleagues, with whom they develop an intimacy unfamiliar to both of them. As it is described in the novel, "[Martha] smiled at him. Maybe things could be simple again. In any case, she was grateful to him for taking the risk. She stayed with him, watching, attending, following, leading, approving. She was careful, she was honest; so was he" (1998: 89). However, specifically in the case of Martha, neither the Project nor her relationship with Paul seemed to provide her with the ingredients she needed to achieve happiness. As the narrator explains,

"[s]he made the Project work, even though she didn't believe in it; then, at the end of the day, she returned home with Paul to something she believed in, or wanted and tried to believe in, yet didn't seem able to make work at all. She was there, alone, without defences, without distancing, irony, cynicism, she was there, alone, in simple contact, yearning, anxious, seeking happiness as best she could. Why did it not come?" (1998: 193). Martha finally accepts the fact that this is the way things are and establishes herself in old England, on her own, in order to lead a simple life with which she feels content enough. In the same way as Barnes, Jean Serjeant and the male protagonists in *Flaubert's Parrot* and *The Sense of an Ending*, she is an atheist at heart. However, she goes to church and sits through the sermon stoically, she helps in the neighbours' activities and has a quiet life, no less fulfilling than her previous life as the CEO that turned to be one of the most important companies in the U.K. As the narrator in the novel states, "[a]nd eventually she herself fitted into the village, because she herself no longer itched with her own private questions. She no longer debated whether or not life was a triviality, and what the consequences might be if it were. Nor did she know whether the stillness she had attained was proof of maturity or weariness" (1998: 257). Peter Childs analyses *Staring at the Sun* as a novel in which it is implied "that human beings have to stare courageously at the fact of a godless universe: stoically face life as chaotic, but beautiful and marvellous and death as final, without the consolations offered by religion" (2011: 60). In the novels, both female protagonists do so with courage by taking their own decisions and choosing their own paths within the possibilities they have, as it is proved by the fact that they reach their very old age living on their own, in the communities they have chosen for themselves and accepting the senselessness and, at the same time, the beauty of life. This double meaning of life is also present through the main metaphor in *Staring at the Sun* represented by Sergeant Pilot Sun-Up Prosser and his trick with the aeroplane to see the sun rise twice – it is dangerous and threatening, but beautiful at the same time; in other words, something ordinary made extraordinary.

Old age and death are indeed present in the last part of the novels, corresponding to the last life stage of the protagonists; however, death is underlying Jean Serjeant's life story since her childhood, whereas the death of authenticity and simplicity is also present in *England, England*. Jean Serjeant's childhood is marked by the Second World War, very much related to death, as well as by the appearance of Sun-Up Prosser in their lives, the pilot who plays with death any time he flies and who commits suicide in one of his ascensions to see the sun rise twice. Death becomes very much present again when Jean's son Gregory grows up and becomes obsessed with finding out the existence of a higher being and the meaning and purpose of life. Jean actually realises of the personality of her son when he was just a teenager: "studious, melancholy, methodical Gregory did the worrying for her" (1986: 94) and, not later, she becomes aware that there is actually nothing that keeps Gregory grounded and stable, highlighted by the fact that he moves from one job to another without having a special interest in anything he does. When Jean is about to get to her hundredth birthday, set in 2021, and is actually starting to look at death as getting closer – her son Gregory spends hours, days and weeks with the "General Purposes Computer" (1986: 144), trying to get simple answers from this high intelligent computer that the government put at the disposal of the population. However, Gregory does not seem to find clear answers to his long life concerns. He finally decides to make the questions to his mother and Jean has clear and straightforward answers; with the following questions: "Is death absolute? [...] Is religion nonsense? [...] Is suicide permissible" (1986: 185). And Gregory reflects: "He thought of all the hours he'd wasted with the Memory Man, a machine constructed out of the best parts of several thousand human brains, and how he'd got much clearer answers from his mother's ageing mind. Yes, dear. Yes, dear. No, dear. Spoken from a hundred years of life; spoken from the edge of the grave" (1986: 186). The narrative voice is particularly ironic when referring to Gregory, since it highlights his existential

concerns as well as his obsession with death is not that far away from that of any human being. In the case of Jean, the simplicity of her mindset and discourse humorously represents to what extent advanced societies – such as the one represented in the novel – are moving away from the close relationship between life and death.

For Jean and within the novel, courage has to do with looking directly at one's own fears; thus, one could argue that the novel is filled with courage in front of death since, as Jean states it “was impossible to look at either death or the sun without blinking” (1986: 155). This is the case of Pilot Sun-Up Prosser, very much touched by his experience in the war, the case of Uncle Leslie who has to face cancer and death in his old age, and finally the case of Jane Serjeant who dies at the end of the novel while she and Gregory are watching the sunset and the sun actually sets twice, reminiscing of Pilot Sun-Up Prosser's trick. In the case of *England, England*, death is understood as the death of simplicity and the rise of simulacra in front of a world increasingly ruled by the illusion of power, fame and happiness achieved through consumerism. Vanessa Guignery defines the novel as a “satirical public story of Sir Jack's megalomaniac venture against the private story of Martha's development from teenager to elderly lady” (2006: 104). The novel already starts with Martha questioning the reliability of her own memory but, it is precisely through distorted memory, a lack of knowledge and a narrowly understood patriotism that Jack Pitman turns the Isle of Wight into a successful imitation of old England, provoking the falling down of the real England. Thus, the same British citizens choose the imitation led by Jack Pitman and a number of intelligent collaborators he is cunning enough to recruit over the authentic one. As it is explained in the novel, “Once there was only the world, directly lived. Now there is the representation [...]. It is not a substitute for that plain and primitive world, but an enhancement, an enrichment, an ironisation and summation of that world” (1998: 55). In the same way as in *Aldous Huxley's Brave New World* (1932), in this re-designed England, death does not exist either, since, anything and anybody can be substituted when not serving their specific function or role. Thus, just as Jean in *Staring at the Sun*, Martha ends up living an ordinary life that turns to be more extraordinary than the one in the perfect imitation of the island.

In *Staring at the Sun* and *England, England* references to the ageing of the main characters are prominent in the last part of the novels. In terms of their physical ageing, none of them cares to look at herself in the mirror anymore; whereas Jean avoids it completely, Martha only gets back to the mirror when one of the neighbours in her community tells her she looks like an old maid. As Jean explains, “You grow old first not in your own eyes” (1986: 139), implying to what extent the loaded cultural meanings attached to the biological ageing of the body do not match with the person inside, as Mike Hepworth and Mike Featherstone have argued extensively (1990). In the case of Jean, she actually starts having new experiences in her old age. Apart from the travelling she had started in her mid-fifties, she has her first lesbian relationship in his sixties and actually starts smoking in her eighties. In the case of *England, England*, Martha does stick to the myth surrounding old maids when she moves to Old England: “What did old maids do? They were solitary, yet took part in village affairs; they had good manners, and appeared unaware of the entire history of sexuality; they had, sometimes, their own story, their own lived life, whose disappointments they were reluctant to divulge; they went for healthy walks in all weathers, knew about mustard baths, and brought nettle soup to invalids; they kept small souvenirs whose poignancy evaded the comprehension of outsiders; they read the newspaper” (1998: 259). After a long life, Martha resources to the extraordinary little pleasures of ordinary life, as so does Jean Serjeant, when the narrator explains that “Jean enjoyed sitting in the sun” (1986: 140). However, Barnes himself has stated that the reading of his novels is never a straightforward one, since he intends to present questions without answers (Guignery 2006: 59). In this respect, Guignery defines *England, England* as having an “opaque” and “ambiguous” conclusion (2006: 113), a statement that can easily be applied to the four novels discussed here.

Conclusion

The four older characters who are the protagonists of *Flaubert's Parrot*, *Staring at the Sun*, *England, England* and *The Sense of an Ending* present their life stories as a continuum that links youth, middle age and old age; thus, conforming to the idea of a continuous and inter-related life course rather than as life understood as differentiated stages, with old age as a stage characterised by loss and decay (Cruikshank, 2002; Woodward, 1991). On the contrary, the four characters in Barnes's novels come to appreciate the in-betweenness of their present moment, as expressed by Braithwaite in *Flaubert's Parrot*, precisely thanks to their lived experiences as well as them reflecting on their past, despite acknowledging the impossibility of trusting either personal memory or public history completely. In this respect, Margaret Gullette refers to identity as being “a story of aging” and adds that “most of us recognise that our identities have changed over time” (Gullette, 2004: 122–123). Thus, Barnes's protagonists keep on re-writing and re-defining their identities through their storytelling and, as Barnes states in relation to *The Lemon Table* (Barnes, 2004), the view from old age is not always a view from serenity (Smith, 2004: 2), but rather one in which emotions such as anger and frustration, or curiosity and desire are also present. Through the voices and views from his older characters in these four novels published from 1984 to 2011, Barnes presents ageing as a “totalizing experience” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000:1); in other words, an experience in which the essence of a human being together with the stories and experiences that accompany him/her as well as the vigorous and contradictory effect of one's emotions are a source of richness and also of complexity. In this respect, Barnes's views on ageing, old age and death as complex experiences that must be devoid of narrowing clichés is reinforced throughout his fictional writing. In *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, Barnes refers to an episode in which he finds out that his GP is actually writing a book on death too, not so much from a scientifically objectifiable perspective but from the limited vision from which old age and death seemed to be viewed nowadays: “Like me, she is a non-believer; like Sherwin Nuland, she is appalled at the over-medicalization of dying, at how technology has shunted out wise thoughtfulness, so that death is viewed as shameful failure by patient as well as doctor” (2009: 188). However, Barnes explains that his GP “sees life as a narrative” (2009: 188), an argument with which he does not completely agree in the sense that he refuses to see a life as having a “progression towards a meaningful conclusion” (2009: 190). In the four novels considered here, neither the idea of death as a failure nor the idea of death as a final meaningful conclusion are present. Rather, the characters reinforce the idea that death is the only certainty that one can have; the path from birth to death is a sometimes stony one, sometimes a pleasurable one in which one's story has to be constantly remade and reconfigured. As Jean Serjeant from *Staring at the Sun* states, “how do you tell a good life from a bad life?” (1986: 139).

As it is present in all the novels considered here as well as in his memoir, Julian Barnes approaches the topic of death from an ironic and humorous point of view in order to invite discussion and avoid both, an overly dramatic view of it and a superficial one, as Muecke theorises in relation to the use of irony in literature. In *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, Barnes explains that in order to overcome one's fear, one has to face it and talk about it; thus, he had imagined his own death in the following terms: “in my fantasizing, I used to turn on a medical diagnosis which left me enough time and enough lucidity in which to unite that last book – the one which would contain all my thoughts about death. [...] I had the first line planned and noted many years ago: ‘Let's get this death thing straight’” (2009: 100). At the end of the day, as Barnes states, “[d]eath is a multiple-choice not would you rather, and prodigally democratic in its options” (2009: 122); a piece of information that all the characters acknowledge in their own particular way. It is precisely in this sense that the four older characters achieve some kind of wisdom since, as Barnes states, “[i]t is not just pit-gazing that is hard work, it is life-gazing; it is difficult for us to contemplate the possibility, let alone

the certainty that life is a matter of cosmic hazard” (2009: 175). Whereas Braithwaite and Webster acknowledge the impossibility of having complete knowledge, Jean Serjeant and Martha Cochrane accept the bits and pieces of extraordinariness in their ordinary lives, acknowledging the fact that, looking at it closely, there is little control over one's own life. In this respect, Randall conceives wisdom in old age as being aware “of the gap between the limits of our aging body and the yearnings of our “ageless self”” (2013: 171). In this respect, the four main protagonists of the novels analysed here can be considered ageless selves in the sense that the yearnings from their youth have not changed much in their old age; still, their experiences have added to looking at their past, present and future as well as at their background from some distance, acknowledging that time and age does not make you any wiser, but neither the contrary.

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