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***The Sense of an Ending* by Julian Barnes: a ‘forensic memoir’**

A meditation on memory, ageing and remorse, Julian Barnes’s 2011 novella *The Sense of an Ending* also seeks to subvert the conventions of the detective story and its promise of explicative closure. Its narrator, Tony, is a retired divorcee who contents himself with ‘the story of my life. The version I tell myself, the account that stands up.’ (116) Yet Tony is forced to question this narrative when he is unexpectedly made recipient of an enigmatic bequest from his former girlfriend Veronica’s mother, Sarah, who has recently died. Tony has not seen Veronica, with whom he had a brief relationship while at university, since their separation a generation before. For Tony the bequest recalls bitter memories: Veronica had begun a relationship, soon after their parting, with his brilliant childhood friend, Adrian, who later committed suicide. Tony is perplexed as to why Veronica’s mother, whom he met only once at an unhappy weekend at his former girlfriend’s family home, should have wished to leave him £500 and, furthermore, Adrian’s diary, which had mysteriously come into her possession. When he regains contact with Veronica, however, she refuses to offer an explanation or submit the diary to him, instead offering only an extract. Providing cryptic clues into Adrian’s suicide, the extract forces Tony to re-evaluate his own role in the ‘chain of responsibilities’ (12) that led to the tragedy.

I have appropriated the term ‘forensic memoir’¹ from the 2001 novel *Atonement* by Julian Barnes’s contemporary Ian McEwan, which addresses similar issues of how we struggle to atone for past crimes through our own fallible narratives. The ‘forensic’ character of *The Sense of an Ending* is suggested in the way that Tony plays detective in analysing his memories, and the few textual traces available, to try and resolve the enigma of the bequest and of Adrian’s death. In this light I will be asking whether Tony and the reader’s desire to ‘close’ the ‘case’ (54) of his past is indeed possible, or whether the work in fact serves as a *roman à thèse* on the deeply problematic nature of transforming memory into narrative.

We can trace an ongoing preoccupation in Julian Barnes’s work with the plot-making operations of history, and the author is associated by many critics with what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction.² In this context he is perhaps best known for his 1985 work

¹ Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Random House, 2001), 370.

² See Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 78: “Historiographic metafiction [...] implies that, like fiction, history constructs its object, that events named become facts and thus

Flaubert's Parrot, a hybrid of biography, fiction and literary criticism which acknowledges, as one critic puts it, that 'history is not something that we can possess or know, but it is only a process, something that we can desire but never actually attain because historical artifacts and texts are fundamentally unreliable.'³ In *The Sense of an Ending*, history-making is similarly problematized and intertwined with issues related to memory and the narrativizing impulse that lies behind our reminiscences. It is paramount to note that *The Sense of an Ending* takes its title from an influential 1966 study by Frank Kermode on narrative, which the critic describes as an end-oriented paradigm that we use to make sense out of chaotic experience. 'Men,' he wrote, 'make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle.'⁴

Despite the narrator Tony's claims not to be nostalgic about his school days, and freely admitting that his memories may prove unreliable (4), a large section of the first part of the book is given over to recollections of precocious schoolboy discussions with his friends and history teacher. During a debate about identifying the causes of the First World War, one of his friends argues that 'everything was down to chance, that the world existed in a state of perpetual chaos, and only some primitive storytelling instinct, itself doubtless a hangover from religion, retrospectively imposed meaning on what might or might not have happened.' (11) Indeed, this might be said to be the argument of Frank Kermode in the earlier *Sense of an Ending*.⁵ By contrast, Tony's friend Adrian, who later commits suicide, quotes a fictitious French philosopher who allegedly claims that "'History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation.'" (17) Despite his history teacher's scepticism – believing, naturally, in the historian's capacity to reconstruct the past from the available data – Adrian remains unconvinced. Indeed, Adrian's view of history becomes prophetic for Tony in the second part of the novella, as he is

both do and do not retain their status outside language. This is the paradox of postmodernism. The past really did exist, but we can only know it today through its textual traces, its often complex and indirect representations in the present."

³ Christine Berberich, "'All Letters Quoted Are Authentic': The Past After Postmodern Fabulation in Julian Barnes's *Arthur & George*," in *Julian Barnes – Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Sebastien Groes and Peter Childs (London: Continuum, 2011), 117-118.

⁴ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 56: "History, so considered, is a fictive substitute for authority and tradition, a maker of concords between past, present, and future, a provider of significance to mere chronicity. Everything is relevant if its relevance can be invented, even the scattered informations of the morning paper."

confronted with incomplete or inadequate documentation that challenges his imperfect memory.

Tony tells us that ‘school is where it all began,’ (4) without really telling us what ‘it’ is. Certainly his life did not begin as a precocious teen preparing for university, but there is no concrete indication as to what status Tony’s narrative is supposed to have: is it a private diary, a memoir, or even a novel? We don’t know. He makes a number of references to ‘my story’; even urging himself not to digress onto subjects that are not ‘part of the story,’ (55) without clearly stating what story he is seeking to tell. Elsewhere he refers to previous formulations of his ‘life story,’ at one point explaining that: ‘I did a slightly odd thing when I first met Margaret. I wrote Veronica out of my life story. [...] The odder part was that it was easy to give this version of my history because that’s what I’d been telling myself anyway.’ (69) In the context of what we learn later, however, we come to regard Tony’s schoolboy historical debates as a speculative ‘beginning’ of sorts for a new story of his past that he must now rewrite.

It is worth looking elsewhere in Julian Barnes’s oeuvre to trace the development of these ideas. Seeds of *The Sense of an Ending* can be found, for example, in his autobiographical work on his fear of death, two years earlier, entitled *Nothing to be Afraid Of*, in which he writes:

... if, as we approach death and look back on our lives, we ‘understand our narrative’ and stamp a final meaning upon it, I suspect we are doing little more than confabulating: processing strange, incomprehensible, contradictory input into some kind [...] of believable story – but believable mainly to ourselves.⁶

Consider this in comparison to *The Sense of an Ending*’s more notionally fictional treatment, in which our narrator Tony asks:

How often do we tell our own life story? How often do we adjust, embellish, make sly cuts? And the longer life goes on, the fewer are those around to challenge our account, to remind us that our life is not our life, merely the story we have told about our life. Told to others, but—mainly—to ourselves. (95)

Here Tony’s observations find parallels in critiques of narrative in psychology. Roy Shafer, for example, argued that when we tell stories about ourselves to others, we are also

⁶ Julian Barnes, *Nothing to be Afraid Of* (London: Vintage, 2009), 189.

simultaneously telling ourselves, implying that there is in fact ‘a self to tell something to, and a someone else serving as an audience who is oneself or one’s self.’⁷ It could be argued that this is deliberately problematized in *The Sense of an Ending* with Tony’s regular addresses⁸ to a common-sense reader. Identified in the text as ‘you,’ this imagined reader seems no more than an objectification of his own self. Despite all the apparently candid and even philosophical quality of Tony’s narrative, we sense that it is also a distancing strategy that enables him to objectify his experience and, in effect, turn them into someone else’s.

As Roy Schafer argued, ‘the stories we tell about ourselves are life historical or autobiographical [...]. For example, we might say, “Until I was fifteen, I was proud of my father” or “I had a totally miserable childhood.” These histories are present tellings.’⁹ By saying ‘school is where it all began,’ Tony is simultaneously suggesting some later moment of transmission, some ‘present telling’ of the past that we now read, and which anticipates an ending on which he will ‘stamp a final meaning.’ At one point, Tony evokes his youthful fear that ‘Life wouldn’t turn out to be like Literature.’ (15) You might take this as a common observation that we tend to entertain more romantic notions about ourselves when we are younger. Yet it becomes ironized as Tony is forced to acknowledge that in reality it is not possible to ‘live as people in novels live,’ (93) as the past does not always yield so easily to plot-making.

One type of plot *The Sense of an Ending* brings to mind in particular is the detective story. Indeed, Julian Barnes is no stranger to the genre. As well as having written four crime novels under the pseudonym Dan Kavanagh in the 1980s, he also won acclaim for his 2005 novel *Arthur & George*, based on a true-life Victorian crime story in which Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the original Sherlock Holmes stories, turns detective himself to overturn a miscarriage of justice. Tony’s narrative is peppered with references to the difficulty in having memory ‘corroborated’ by ‘evidence’ and ‘proof,’ (39) or by ‘witnesses,’ (59) without which he recognizes it is impossible to be sure how genuine his recollections are. ‘That’s how I remember it now,’ he says at one stage, ‘though if you were to put me in a court of law, I doubt I’d stand up to cross-examination very well.’ (119) Elsewhere, he comments on his

⁷ Roy Schafer, “Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue,” in *On Narrative*, ed. WJT Mitchell et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 31.

⁸ See, for example, Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (London: Vintage, 2011), 36–37: “Yes, I know. I expect you’re thinking: The poor sap, how did he not see that coming? But I didn’t. [...] Yes, you can say it again: You poor sap.”

⁹ Schafer, *Psychoanalytic Dialogue*, 31.

inability to access further memories, complaining that ‘the case is closed. Which is why you seek corroboration, even if it turns out to be contradiction.’ (120) All of this suggests not only Tony’s struggle to verify the truth of his memories, but also implies that he has committed some kind of crime for which he must atone. The first indication of this is the short extract of Adrian’s diary that is relinquished to him by Veronica, in which Adrian is found speculating on the ‘application of logic to the human condition’ and the suitability of the metaphor of ‘links’ in a ‘chain’ in determining ‘responsibility’. (86) The extract abruptly ends with ‘So, for instance, if Tony...,’ Veronica having withheld the rest of the diary (she later claims she has burned it) leaving the reader to speculate as to what ‘responsibility’ Adrian refers and in what way Tony fits into the chain.

The ‘chain’ metaphor in particular brings to mind the detective genre. Its use predates Sherlock Holmes and can be traced back at least as early as William Godwin’s 1794 novel *Caleb Williams*,¹⁰ considered by many critics to be a prototype detective novel in its use of the *récit à rebours*¹¹ or backwards text, the narrative organized around a gradual reconstruction of a past crime. In the development of the genre the chain emerges as one of the dominant metaphors for describing the causes and effects leading up to the commission of a crime, and expresses a particularly rational view of the world that can be best summarized by Baker Street’s Consulting Detective, who declared: ‘So all life is a great chain, the nature of which is known wherever we are shown a single link of it.’¹²

As Doctor Watson does Sherlock Holmes, Tony marvels at Adrian’s ‘logical thought,’ (53) yet even Watson often expresses exasperation at Holmes’s cold, almost inhumanly analytical approach to experience.¹³ A similar accusation might be levelled at Adrian, whose diary contains equations aimed at ascertaining ‘to what extent might human relationships be expressed in a mathematical or logical formula.’ (85) Adrian’s equations include the ‘integers’ b , a^1 , a^2 , s and v , Adrian presumably being a^1 , Tony (real name Anthony), a^2 . The other integers we can later deduce as v for Veronica, s for Sarah Ford –

¹⁰ See, for example, William Godwin, *Caleb Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 135: “All are but links of one chain. A blow! A murder! [...] fortune favoured me. She favoured me beyond desire. The guilt was removed from me, and cast upon another ...”

¹¹ Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder – A Social History of the Crime Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 18.

¹² Arthur Conan Doyle, “A Study in Scarlet,” in *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Stories* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), 22.

¹³ See, for example, Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Sign of the Four,” in *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Stories* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), 105: ““You really are an automaton – a calculating machine. [...] There is something positively inhuman in you at times.””

Veronica's mother, and *b* for baby. Rather than see the writings as evidence of a troubled mind, Tony praises Adrian's 'rational arguing' and capacity for 'setting thoughts in order,' (87) while simultaneously failing or refusing to identify himself in the equation, coyly claiming that he 'was never any good at maths.' (104) Setting aside the possible explanation of these values for now, the equation could be read as a cipher, a trope of the detective story as far back as Edgar Allan Poe.¹⁴ Indeed, the code-breaking convention had become such a cliché that a group of famous crime writers outlawed the practice in a list of rules for the genre published in the 1920s.¹⁵

Tony thus emerges as a reluctant detective of sorts, 'setting thoughts in order' even if perhaps unwilling to crack the code of his old friend's suicide. Indeed, his failure situates the novella at least partly in a tradition of postmodernist re-workings of the genre, referred to variously as 'anti-', 'doomed,' or 'metaphysical' detective stories,¹⁶ one characteristic of which is 'the detective's apparent inability to decipher the mystery.'¹⁷ One of the canonical works of detective fiction said to inspire these reworkings is Edgar Allan Poe's 1844 story *The Purloined Letter*.¹⁸ One of the curious aspects of Poe's story is that the reader never learns the contents of the original stolen letter, whose task it is the amateur detective Auguste Dupin's to retrieve. The absent text becomes a metaphor for the absent crime which, as Todorov explained,¹⁹ is characteristic of narrative discourse in classic detective stories. In Todorov's typology of the genre, he uses the Russian formalist distinction between *fabula*

¹⁴ See Shawn Rosenheim, "The King of 'Secret Readers': Edgar Poe, Cryptography, and the Origins of the Detective Story," *ELH* 56/ 2 (1989): 378: "Detective fiction applies to one's sensory experience the same analytic tools used to break a code, merely extending the use of these procedures from the two-dimensional page to the three-dimensional world."

¹⁵ See S.S Van Dine, "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories," in *The Art of Suspense*, ed. John Yeoman (Leighton Buzzard: Village Guild, 2010), 222: "I herewith list a few of the devices which no self-respecting detective-story writer will now avail himself of. They have been employed too often, and are familiar to all true lovers of literary crime. To use them is a confession of the author's ineptitude and lack of originality [...] (j) The cipher, or code letter, which is eventually unravelled by the sleuth."

¹⁶ See Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, "'Subject-Cases' and 'Book-Cases': Impostures and Forgeries from Poe to Auster," in *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, eds. Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 248–49.

¹⁷ Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, "The Game's Afoot: On the Trail of the Metaphysical Detective Story." In *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, eds. Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8: "... the characteristic themes of the metaphysical detective story: (1) the defeated sleuth, whether he be an armchair detective or a private eye; (2) the world, city, or text as labyrinth; (3) the purloined letter, embedded text, *mise en abyme*, textual constraint, or text as object; (4) the ambiguity, ubiquity, eerie meaningfulness, or sheer meaninglessness of clues and evidence; (5) the missing person, the "man of the crowd," the double, and the lost, stolen, or exchanged identity; and (6) the absence, falseness, circularity, or self-defeating nature of any kind of closure to the investigation."

¹⁹ See, Tzvetan Todorov, *Poétique de la prose* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1971), 58.

and *sjuzet*, or story and plot, to show how the detective's investigation, the plot, recovers the absent story of the crime. An absent or stolen text, like Adrian's diary and Poe's purloined letter, or even Tony's fallible memory, becomes emblematic of the lost story that must be recovered by the reconstructive act of narrative.

Confronted with Veronica's refusal to explain the bequest to him, and her continued bitterness towards him, Tony observes that 'an enigma is a puzzle you want to solve. I didn't want to solve Veronica, certainly not at this late date.' (82) Is Tony's unwillingness, like his professed inability at maths, a refusal to acknowledge that his rejection of Adrian's friendship led to his suicide, or something more complex? Establishing guilt from innocence is another trope of the detective story. As the poet W.H Auden famously wrote of the interwar, so-called Golden Age of detective fiction, the expulsion of the guilty permits society to regain its innocence and restore the 'state of grace' of the Garden of Eden.²⁰ Tellingly, while Auden compares Sherlock Holmes's genius to being in a 'state of grace',²¹ Tony too uses this expression to describe Adrian's intellectual prowess (87). However, this urge to establish blame in order to restore a state of grace is critiqued by Barnes in the way that Tony seeks a way to rid himself of his sense of remorse. As Adrian argues in Tony's memories of the school discussions, '... isn't the whole business of ascribing responsibility a kind of cop-out? We want to blame an individual so that everyone else is exculpated.' (12)

Tony is later forced to acknowledge some guilt when Veronica furnishes him with a poisonous letter that he wrote to her and Adrian on discovering they had begun a relationship. In it, he tells Adrian that even Veronica's mother warned him off her daughter and urges him to ask Sarah Ford 'behind Veronica's back' about emotional and psychological 'damage' suffered 'a long way back.' (96) Could Tony's spiteful letter have driven Adrian into Sarah Ford's arms? Could this liaison have led to the existence, we discover later, of a mentally handicapped child? We glimpse in Tony's memories a dysfunctional relationship between Sarah and Veronica Ford, and a tendency, on the mother's part, to flirt with her daughter's boyfriends. Yet none of this satisfactorily explains why Veronica remains so embittered with Tony himself. Nor does it explain why Sarah sought to bequeath Adrian's diary to Tony,

²⁰ See W.H. Auden: "The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on the detective story, by an addict." *Harper's Magazine*. May, 1948. Accessed 25/05/2014. <http://harpers.org/archive/1948/05/the-guilty-vicarage>, 407-408: "The detective story requires [...] an innocent society in a state of grace, i.e., a society where there is no need of the law [...] and where murder, therefore, is the unheard-of act which precipitates a crisis."

²¹ *Ibid.*, 410.

along with £500, a sum ‘bigger than nothing, not as big as something,’ (63) and that Veronica refers to as “‘blood money,’” (81) without explaining why. Could Tony, too, have had sexual relations with Sarah Ford that he is refusing to admit, suggested by the secret ‘horizontal gesture at waist level’ (30) he remembers her making to him upon leaving the Ford family home as a young man? Could Tony himself, in fact, be the father of the handicapped child? The novel refuses to answer all its questions, and the narrator’s attempts to do so are met with the repeated retort from Veronica: “‘You just don’t get it, do you? You never did, and you never will.’” (126) As Tony muses, ‘They say time finds you out, don’t they?’ (79) suggesting that his guilty secrets are finally coming to the surface. There is an implication that Tony’s narrative is an act of atonement, a ‘forensic memoir’ that will enable him to restore the state of grace of a ‘peaceable’ (35) mind. He writes:

... the chief characteristic of remorse is that nothing can be done about it: that the time has passed for apology or amends. But what if I’m wrong? What if by some means remorse can be made to flow backwards, can be transmuted into simple guilt, then apologised for, and then forgiven? What if you can prove you weren’t the bad guy she took you for, and she is willing to accept your proof? (107)

Here he seems to be expressing a desire that his guilt be expelled in the reconstructive act of narrative, which makes time ‘flow backwards.’ This image is literalized in the text by Tony’s memory of witnessing the Severn Bore, a natural tidal phenomenon in the Bristol Channel, which causes a wave to travel upstream. Tony’s desire to return to a state of grace finds a synergy in critical readings of nostalgia. As Svetlana Boym writes, the word nostalgia literally comes from the Greek *nostos*, which means return home, and *algia*, which means longing. It is, she adds, ‘a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed.’²² Similarly, Susan Stewart refers to the fact that ‘the nostalgic’s utopia is prelapsarian,’²³ which echoes what Auden identified in detective fiction as the desire to return to an innocent state of grace by expelling the guilty.

Moreover, Tony’s desire to make time flow in reverse seems to suggest the backwards text²⁴ that is typical of the classic detective story. Such narratives entail a return, through the

²² Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xiii.

²³ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 23.

²⁴ See Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 41: “...the best detective stories are constructed backwards and in the knowledge of the paradox that the circuitous and even painful path in fiction [...] is also the path of pleasure.”

investigative work of the hero, to the scene of the crime, the re-enactment of which, as Dennis Porter explains, releases the innocent ‘from the trauma of the crime.’²⁵ In this sense, classic detective fiction makes explicit a function common to all narrative, as Peter Brooks observed, in the way that the investigation, like all plots, ‘presents itself as a repetition and rehearsal [...] of what has already happened.’²⁶

Despite Tony’s apparently honest insistence that his memory is letting him down,²⁷ is he in fact obscuring the truth from us? All narrative, as Roland Barthes taught us, is hermeneutically coded. That is to say, it posits a mystery or question of some sort, the answer to which the narrative discloses progressively through a system of delays and obstacles.²⁸ Once again, detective fiction is the most pure example of this, as the red herrings and blind alleys of the investigation very artificially set out to delay the exposition of the truth.²⁹ In Tony’s case, the delays are caused by his forgetting, or failing to remember, details from his past. As one critic put it, such a figure of an amnesiac ‘brings together two functions of the detective story: the detective and the corpse. He is simultaneously the one who advances and the one who blocks the story. [...] Little by little, this narrator reconstructs fragments of his past ...’³⁰

The motif of reconstructing fragments is of particular pertinence to *The Sense of an Ending*, as well as to the detective genre at large. Many of Tony’s memories take the form of fragmentary images and sensations to be endowed with meaning, much as a detective has been said to attribute significance to crime-scene clues.³¹ ‘I remember, in no particular order,’ (3) the novella begins, immediately scattering disparate pieces of the puzzle before us, some of which have the forensic character of a crime scene. Beginning the narrative in this way confronts the reader immediately with a hermeneutic challenge that might be described as

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁶ Peter Brooks, *Reading For The Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 25.

²⁷ See Barnes, *Sense*, 120: “For years you survive with the same [memory] loops, the same facts and the same emotions. [...] There seems no way of accessing anything else, the case is closed.”

²⁸ See Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970), 81-82.

²⁹ See Porter, *Pursuit of Crime*, 100.

³⁰ Anna Botta. “Detecting Identity in Time and Space: Modiano’s *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* and Tabucchi’s *Il Filo dell’orizzonte*,” in *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, eds. Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 218.

³¹ See D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 33: “... the text [of the detective novel] winnows grain from chaff, separating the relevant signifiers from the much larger number of irrelevant ones, which are now revealed to be as trivial as we originally were encouraged to suspect they might *not* be.”

‘the crisis of the sign,’³² in which we are offered signifiers without any obvious signified, images with no clear representational context. Here again we find a synergy with the detective genre, which, as one critic has suggested:

... comments upon the process of sifting through signs, and ultimately upon the possibility of deriving order from the seeming chaos of conflicting signals and motifs. The unravelling work of the detective within the story mirrors and assists the work of the reader, as both try to piece together the disparate signs that might eventually solve the mystery.³³

The self-conscious engagement with the reader in detective fiction predates formulations of metafiction, and can be traced back at least as far as attempts to establish rules for the genre. Indeed, the first of S.S. Van Dine’s ‘Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories’ in 1928 states that the ‘reader must have equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery.’³⁴ What is commonly given the short hand ‘Fair Play’ thus situates the reader in the position of detective as an active participant in the resolution of the crime.

Moreover, as William V. Spanos influentially argued, the detective who sifts through signs to determine a coherence and order to experience, makes him an emblem of rational Western discourse. Spanos was one of the first critics to identify a trend within the postmodernist imagination for what he calls ‘anti-detective’ stories which challenge ‘the monolithic certainty that immediate psychic or historical experience is part of a comforting, even exciting and suspenseful [...] drama or novel – more particularly, a detective story.’³⁵ In such stories, the detective may discover that he himself is the victim or the perpetrator of the crime, a kind of ‘anti-epiphany’ of which some critics have identified roots in the *Oedipus* myth.³⁶ *The Sense of an Ending* is suggestive of both models. It hints simultaneously at Tony’s culpability while refusing to explain exactly where his role in the ‘chain of responsibilities’ lies, wherein we return to Barnes’s engagement with historical process, and

³² Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 20.

³³ Jeffrey T. Nealon, “Work of the Detective, Work of the Writer: Auster’s *City of Glass*,” in *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, eds. Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 117.

³⁴ S.S. Van Dine, *Twenty Rules*, 219.

³⁵ William V. Spanos, “The Detective and the Boundary: Some Notes on the Postmodern Literary Imagination,” *boundary 2* 1/1 (1972): 150

³⁶ See, for example, Sweeney, *Subject-Cases*, 248-249: “[a metaphysical detective] may even learn that he himself is the victim he avenges, the criminal he seeks, or both at once. [...] Detective fiction had always acknowledged the *possibility* that such a search for truth might lead to the mystery of one’s own identity. Such a dénouement occurs, in fact, in *Oedipus Rex*, which some critics call the first detective story [...] an epistemological nightmare also explored in metaphysical detective stories, which often allude to *Oedipus*.”

the schoolboy Tony's classroom debates on the nature of responsibility. As reader-detective, when Veronica repeatedly chides Tony, "“You still don't get it. You never did, and you never will. So stop even trying,”" (144) we too feel his frustration.

In the classic detective story closure is, as critics have argued, 'the sort of conclusion by which the preceding narrative comes, in hindsight, to "make sense", and thus, reciprocally, to make the conclusion itself seem inevitable.'³⁷ For erudite fans of the genre like W.H. Auden as well as critics like Dennis Porter,³⁸ the tendency of classical detective stories to explain themselves entirely at the end renders them disposable thereafter. Despite the genre's palpably self-conscious gesture to implicate the reader as a participant in solving the mystery, the tendency of detective fiction to answer all its own questions would make it, according to Roland Barthes's theory, a *texte lisible* or 'readerly text'. In seeking to unify all its plot threads at the end, Barthes argued that such a text creates a catastrophic effect for the reader, signalling as it does 'the end of discourse.'³⁹

Unlike the detective genre, the ending of Barnes's novella resists totalizing explanation. While a wealth of such attempts can be found online, the diversity of these interpretations suggests that Barnes was playing a game with readers, but not – according to the rules of the detective genre – playing *fair*. Indeed, in the final paragraphs Tony finally claims 'I understood. I got it,' (148) while failing to fully explain his conclusions to the reader. It is my belief that Barnes was asking us to reflect on our *need* to know the answers to an enigma whilst withholding the clues needed to do it, thus impelling readers to actively write the ending themselves. *The Sense of an Ending* is thus transformed from a 'readerly' text into Barthes's *texte scriptible*, or 'writerly text', which offers readers freedom to inscribe their own interpretations into the text,⁴⁰ to be an active producer of meaning in a way that the reader of classic detective stories can never fully do.

At one stage Veronica replies sarcastically to Tony's request to meet with the question "“Is this about closing the circle?”" (113) Here again we are reminded of Frank Kermode's original critique of narrative. He writes: '... in "making sense" of the world we

³⁷ Patricia Merivale, "Gumshoe Gothics: Poe's "The Man of the Crowd,"" in *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, eds. Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 102.

³⁸ Porter, *Pursuit of Crime*, 7.

³⁹ See Barthes, *S/Z*, 69.

⁴⁰ See Barthes, *S/Z*, 10.

still feel a need [...] to experience that concordance of beginning, middle, and end which is the essence of our explanatory fictions.’⁴¹ In the closing paragraphs, as Tony reflects on the ‘end of life [...] not life itself, but of something else: the end of any likelihood of change in that life,’ (149) we understand him to be talking about the narrative of his past, rewritten to accommodate the revelations induced by the bequest. Instead of restoring him to the state of grace of a ‘peaceable’ (35) mind, however, Tony ends his narrative by acknowledging ‘great unrest.’ (150) Given the discourse of the novel concerning the unreliability of memory and the difficulty of having our past corroborated by evidence, how are we to know whether this new account – this ‘explanatory fiction’ – will also prove to ‘stand up’ under ‘cross-examination?’

⁴¹ Kermode, *Sense*, 36.

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