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NOT *THE ONLY STORY*: NARRATIVE, MEMORY, AND SELF-BECOMING IN JULIAN BARNES' NOVEL

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ABSTRACT. *Not* the Only Story*: Narrative, Memory and Self-becoming in Julian Barnes' Novel.* Julian Barnes's *The Only Story* depicts the affair of the narrator, Paul, with an older, married woman, Susan. Yet while the obvious subject matter may be trite, the writer's treatment of it is noteworthy. More specifically, the present paper aims to explore the manner in which this story is remembered by the narrator. Using Paul Ricoeur's work on the narrative self, we suggest that the protagonist does not wish to deliver an accurate account of the events that shaped his life, but rather he attempts to come to terms with the latter through storytelling. Thus, "the only story" is not necessarily that of Paul's first love. It is, rather, the only story that matters to him, which must include all others and which he must tell in order to shape and understand his own process of becoming.

Keywords: The Only Story, *Julian Barnes, Paul Ricoeur, memory, storytelling, self-becoming, identity*

REZUMAT. *Nu doar* Singura poveste*: despre narațiune, amintire, și devenirea-de-sine în romanul lui Julian Barnes.* Romanul lui Julian Barnes, *Singura Poveste*, dezvoltă relația amoroasă a naratorului, Paul, cu Susan, o femeie căsătorită, mai în vârstă decât el. Tema este banală, însă modul în care aceasta este abordată de către autor este remarcabil. Mai precis, lucrarea de față explorează felul în care naratorul își amintește povestea sa. Cu ajutorul teoriei despre sinele narativ a lui Paul Ricoeur, sugerăm faptul că protagonistul nu își dorește să prezinte un raport meticulos al evenimentelor care i-au modelat viața, ci mai degrabă să se împace cu acestea prin povestire. Așadar, "Singura poveste" nu expune, neaparat, prima iubire a lui Paul. Este povestea care le include pe celelalte și pe care el trebuie să o spună pentru a-și înțelege devenirea de sine.

Cuvinte-cheie: Singura poveste*, Julian Barnes, Paul Ricoeur, amintire, povestire, devenire-de-sine, identitate*

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Julian Barnes' 2018 novel, *The Only Story*, follows the account given by the narrator, Paul, of his own life from adolescence to the present, particularly through the lens of his affair with an older, married woman, Susan MacLeod. Thus, what begins as an innocent love story in the first chapter of the novel is subsequently complicated by Susan's abusive marriage, Paul's devotion to put an end to her suffering, as well as the failure of the two to live together in London after leaving their homes. In an agonizing turn of events, Paul ultimately loses Susan to alcoholism and decides to "return" her to one of her daughters for care. Overtly, then, his narrative is one of love and of loss, while its telling is seemingly motivated by his duty to "remember [Susan] correctly" (197). Yet, his story is, at the same time, about responsibility, guilt and shame, albeit less declaratively so. Paul, in other words, does not merely convey memories, nor does he attempt to tell a story that is equally comprehensive about all of its characters. The novel is the only story that matters to him and, furthermore, the story that can help him make sense of and come to terms with his past and consequent present. His focus is not necessarily to achieve objectivity in this telling of events, but rather the desire to reach an understanding of the latter and, perhaps, to find some form of reconciliation. The narrative, then, is an essential step towards Paul's self-understanding, and a way for Paul to assess his life from an ethical point of view. In this respect, the novel closely follows Paul Ricoeur's theoretical work on the issues of self-understanding, narrative identity, and memory. Accordingly, the chief concern of the present paper is that, while "the only story" that actually matters may indeed be about love, the novel is more importantly an overarching life story, an attempt to bring together other, often disparate events into a coherent and therefore meaningful whole.

Paul Ricoeur's philosophy explores the idea that the self is at least partially the product of the internal life story that each individual more or less knowingly constructs. This has become a widely debated topic not only in literary criticism, but also in the fields of psychology and neurology. It has thus been proposed by philosophers, humanists, and medical researchers that identity emerges as a result of the internal elaboration of a life story (cf. Hydén 33; Herman b 1) or identity is what Antonio Damasio refers to as "self-as-knower" (18). The latter is made up of several layers that work together in order to give rise to what we commonly call subjectivity and without which there can be no consciousness (cf. Damasio 20). Perhaps one of the most noteworthy aspects of the neurological definition of the self is that it is acknowledged not as a rigid thing-in-itself, but as a dynamic process (cf. Damasio 19). Indeed, it seems that the human propensity to employ narrative devices in order make sense of experience is so inherent to the human nature that even those suffering from "severe memory impairments (…) maintained a strong sense of sameness, in fact, of self-continuity – despite

the chaos in their minds and lives" (Medved and Brockmeier 22). Maintaining a coherent identity is likely part of a primordial self-conservation mechanism that human beings share and that endures for as long as one is conscious. Psychologists emphasize the relational aspect of this process, which is why they employ the term narrative identity when referring "to the stories people construct and tell about themselves to define who they are for themselves and for others (…). [These are] the stories we live by" (McAdams et al. 4).

In literary studies, certain scholars, such as Monika Fludernik, argue that the primordial feature of any story is its experientiality, namely its "quasi-mimetic evocation of 'real-life experience'", its ability to evoke "consciousness or (..) the representation of a speaker role" (9). Although stipulating a hierarchy between narrative features does seem to become problematic for defining and working with other narrative categories, there is no doubt that every story originates from a self whose particular body is responsible for creating it. David Herman refers to experientiality as "the 'qualia' (or felt, subjective awareness) of real or imagined consciousnesses undergoing [a] disruptive experience", (Herman a 9) without necessarily favouring it over emplotment or the driver of the plot. The problem with achieving this narrative coherence of the self is that memory is never equivalent to experience. It is rather a blend of real experience and the story resulting thereof, which is altered, in time, through the workings of memory. Memory, as such, is an interpretive act. It is not "recounting the past but (…) making sense of it" (Freeman 29). In addition, the fact that we remember only the highs and lows of a particular experience is firmly grounded in scientific inquiry. Not only is lasting memory formed after the fact, but its very formation is highly susceptible to certain physiological processes, the most impactful of which seems to be arousal (cf. McGaugh 2). The resulting disparate recollections are difficult for the human mind to comprehend and, as such, to accept, in the absence of narrative coherence, which is precisely the topic of much of Ricoeur's philosophy, as well as of Julian Barnes' *The Only Story*.

As is the case with several of Barnes' novels, including *The Sense of an Ending* and the more recent *Levels of Life*, the workings of memory, its ties to identity, as well as its shortcomings permeate Paul's narrative in *The Only Story*. From the very beginning, the protagonist directly addresses the narratee in order to draw his attention to the unreliability of memory which must, nevertheless, serve as the link and guide to one's past:

> I'm not necessarily putting [my story] down in the order that it happened. I think there's a different authenticity to memory, and not an inferior one. Memory sorts and sifts according to the demands made on it by the rememberer. (…) I would guess that memory prioritises whatever is most useful to help keep the bearer of those memories going. (21)

Elsewhere, Paul returns to the same topic and describes recollection by analogy to "an electric log-splitter in action" (117). He argues that, when committed to memory, his life was sectioned down the middle as a log would have been when placed in an electric splitter. The happy or, at the very least, the acceptable memories remained on the one side, while the events more difficult to come to terms with were neatly isolated on the other. This explains why, in the first part of the novel, the protagonist depicts only his seemingly joyous relationship with Susan, in isolation from the rest of the world, as well as barring details that did not necessarily fit in with the picture of innocent love and happiness. Throughout the narrative, some memories become more important, while others are lost altogether, no doubt, as Paul himself observes, for the purpose of "retrospective reorderings of life", which are "always likely to be self-serving" (209). For instance, the protagonist recalls that he and Susan finally "managed a brief holiday." Yet, although the event was anticipated and the two even took pictures, he finds it impossible to remember those days, together with "what we said, thought, discovered about one another." More importantly, Paul is aware that, with the help of the pictures, at least, "you could, if you wanted, (…) deduce the season; also, no doubt, the weather" (77), but this, according to him, is not the purpose of his story. Indeed, he notes, when first describing the setting of the story, the weather and "other stuff as well" escape his memory and become unimportant:

> When I gave you my estate agent's sketch of the Village, some of it might not have been strictly accurate. For instance, the Belisha beacons at the zebra crossing. I might have invented them (…). I suppose I could do some real-life research – look for old postcards in the central library, or hunt out the very few photos I have from that time, and retrofit my story accordingly. But I'm remembering the past, not reconstructing it. (…) You might be used to more. But there's nothing I can do about that. I'm not trying to spin you a story; I'm trying to tell you the truth. (40)

Paul's attitude to the weather and setting is not limited to the sphere of the trivial. It is rather a reflection of his manner of storytelling and, more specifically, of the fact that, as we will see, he may have altered several details of this "only story." Like in the case of the contested existence of "Belisha beacons at the zebra crossing", he could set matters straight, but chooses not to. He could, for instance, use the photographs he has of Susan to more accurately describe her and "remember her correctly." Nevertheless, he finds that "photographs were useful, but somehow always confirmed the memory rather than liberating it" (198). In all of these instances, then, a seemingly peculiar phenomenon of memory is suggested. On the one hand, the narrator feels that it is his duty to

work through his memories in order to find the truth about himself, Susan, and their time together. At the same time he discredits the help of various documents, research and pictures, all of which are commonly viewed as "hard evidence" and associated with truth more readily than one's fallible recollections. For Paul, therefore, the truth is not necessarily to be found in the most objective recounting of events. This seems contradictory, to begin with, but it acquires new meaning when viewed through the lens of Paul Ricoeur's theories on the narrative self.

Ricoeur's philosophy of life can be distilled, more or less, to one of his many statements on the importance of narrative. Indeed, for him,

> self-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative (…) a privileged form of mediation; the latter borrows from history as well as from fiction, making a life story a fictional history or, if one prefers, a historical fiction, interweaving the historiographic style of biographies with the novelistic style of imaginary autobiographies. (Ricoeur 1992, 114)

In other words, it is essential for one's understanding of the self that they read their life as a narrative or, better still, by using the interpretative tools offered by the narrative form. The story resulting thereof is a mix of truth, as characteristic of historic writing, and of fabulation, which is commonly subscribed to the sphere of fiction. There is, in fact, as Ricoeur himself maintains, a continuity or overlap between these two forms of narrative that come together in the telling of one's life story. History and fiction are not, as one might immediately be tempted to consider, analogous to fact and lie. Unlike fiction, history is, of course, viewed as a "scientific discipline" in that it "aims at the truth and deals with historical facts." Yet, in order to arrive at this truth, the historian must always perform an analysis of certain known events. Thus, "the very act of interpreting [the] facts in the name of truth leaves open the way for alternative explanations, and thus destroys objectivity" (Simms 88). This is relevant for our understanding of Julian Barnes' narrator in *The Only Story* not because the latter is a historian, but because the task he undertakes in telling his life story is, according to him, motivated by the desire to remember his past correctly. Yet, as Ricoeur would likely respond to such an endeavour, "to narrate a story is to 'reflect upon' the event narrated" (Ricoeur 1985, 61), which naturally leads to the conclusion that "no ethically neutral narrative" can ever be formulated (Ricoeur 1992, 115). If the protagonist of the novel alters certain details of his story, then, this is because the narrative would otherwise be impossible to tell. As Paul himself notes about his attempt to keep a journal, even as he was

"searching to be objective, the subjective kept undermining" him (162). To reach some form of truth, the narrator was compelled to renounce the idea of an objective life story. After all, according to Ricoeur, one must not "ignore the fact that sometimes fictions come closer to what really happened" (Ricoeur 1992, 162), simply because they have the ability to reach "the meaning beyond or beneath the facts" (Ricoeur 1992, 162). In other words, what is related through storytelling is more than "a supposedly neutral set of facts" which "cannot be separated from the discourse in which they are articulated" (McCarthy 197). As such, any narrative goes beyond the exposition or transcription of events and, by bringing these events together into a coherent plot, creates additional meaning. It is from this point of view that we may begin to understand Paul, as well as his narrative in *The Only Story*.

One of Ricoeur's formulas thus becomes particularly relevant. Indeed, the philosopher argues that the understanding of narrative follows "the destiny of a prefigured time that becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time" (Ricoeur 1983, 54). When extended, this formula proposes that a reader brings to the narrative his or her prior understanding of the world, referred to as "prefigured time", which is then employed in order to make sense of the events described. Once the reading is finished and the story is understood, the reader enters a "refigured time" or, in other words, a new or deeper understanding of the world that is implied by the narrative itself. The two states are mediated by "configured time" or emplotment, which is the time of the story and the manner in which events pertaining to it have been ordered into a larger whole. One of the functions of the plot is therefore that of Aristotelian "phronesis" or practical understanding in the sense that "by engaging the text hermeneutically I am touched by the world it presents to my imagination. (…) Thus, narrative understanding crosses over into self-understanding: I gain perspective on myself by gaining perspective on the narrative" (Hall 55). The phenomenon is not unlike that experienced by Paul in the telling of his own story. Not all readers will interpret a given text in the same manner, however, and this is closely linked to the idea of "prefigured time." According to Ricoeur, each individual is "tangled up in stories" (Ricoeur 1991, 30) prior to their encounter of the text. "This entanglement then appears as the pre-history of the story told, the beginning of which is chosen by the narrator. The pre-history of the story is what connects it up to a vaster whole and gives it a background" (Ricoeur 1991, 30). On the one hand, this view of the human being proposes that the individual is already influenced by various cultural and social stories prior to their encounter of any narrative proper, which further justifies the notion that self-understanding can be reached by means of interpretation. On the other hand, Ricoeur also suggests that the reader is decidedly influenced by their pre-

history in the interpretation of any new story and, as such, in their interpretation of and engagement with life.

In *The Only Story*, Paul grapples with precisely this issue for much of his narrative and even refers to his and Susan's pasts, prior to their meeting, as their "pre-histories." In fact, to a certain degree, their backgrounds, and particularly the cultural and social context of their affair, seem to impose an inevitable conclusion to their relationship before the latter even begins. For instance, the affair takes place in and nearby London at a time when "the chemist would sell verruca plasters and dry shampoo in little puffer bottles, but not contraceptives", when "sexual items" were not accessible in the suburbs (5). Issues such as homosexuality and high-school pregnancies were deemed marginally tolerable by parents, but adultery and particularly those affairs between young men and older women were "so far beyond the pale that [they] could not even be admitted, much less sensibly discussed" (31-3). The language the two lovers speak further affects their ability to comprehend and come to terms with their feelings for one another, for light, "tabloid terms" like "cougar" and "toy boy" had not yet been coined, while French novels describing the "older woman teaching 'the arts of love' to younger man" were too far removed from their context. They had, as the narrator contends, "only those morally laden English words to deal with: words like scarlet woman, and adulteress" (16), which, in retrospect, had no doubt played their part in Susan's eventual breakdown and Paul's inability to prevent or even understand it. Susan, furthermore, had been abused by her uncle when young and, upon the death of a man she loved in her early life, found herself in a violent marriage with Gordon MacLeod, whom she believed when he referred to her as "frigid" (37). Although they are having an affair, Paul does not seem to be able to grasp the implications of the stories Susan shares about her past. He airily dismisses her "frigidity" and only later in life does he ponder whether she felt any satisfaction during their time together: "How many orgasms had she had? Indeed, did she ever have one? There was pleasure and intimacy, surely; but orgasm? At the time he couldn't tell, nor did he ask; nor know how to ask. To put it more truthfully, he had never thought of asking" (242). Eventually, perhaps as a means to accept the agonizing turn of events in his relationship with Susan, Paul considers that while some view life as an expression of free will, others see it as "all inevitability" under the immutable rule of "pre-history." Thus, during his youth, he had thought that "a life – his own, of course – could be lived first under the dispensation of inevitability, and later under the dispensation of free will" (299), but given the outcome of his and Susan's sorties, he can no longer support such a perspective with equal conviction (209). Nevertheless, there remains a justification to Paul's retelling of his own life story in spite of all the events he cannot and could not alter and that may or may not have shaped it. This justification is at least twofold.

To begin with, as we have already gathered from Ricoeur's work on the importance and the nature of narrative, the telling of one's life story is key to one's ability to achieve self-understanding. In the philosopher's own words, this is the case because emplotment "'grasps together' and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematising the intelligible signification attached to the narrative as a whole" (Ricoeur 1983, x). Often, like in the case of the narrator Paul, an individual's existence can seem chaotic and nonsensical, while disasters occur randomly and without explanation. To humanise such disparate happenings, one must develop them into a story or life narrative, which casts "a retrospective glance over existence from the past to the present; the story I erect around the events that have happened to me organizes my existence into a meaningful whole" (Hall 40). A kind of synthetic, but absolutely necessary unity results from this, as Ricoeur himself contends:

> [T]he plot serves to make one story out of the multiple incidents or, if you prefer, transforms the many incidents into one story (…). [T]he recounted story is always more than the enumeration, in an order that would be merely serial or successive, of the incidents or events that it organizes into an intelligible whole. (Ricoeur 1991, 21)

For Paul, this is "the only story", not because it grasps entirely the lives of its protagonists, who could undoubtedly tell other stories, but because it is the only one that matters to him. More than coincidentally, it is, perhaps, a love story centred on his affair with Susan, but more importantly, it is also the narrative that is told in order to link events of his existence, some more random or traumatic than others, all with the hope of finding new meaning and understanding. The intelligibility or connection Paul seeks is not necessarily "the kind of intelligibility that scientists generally seek" (McCarthy 153) when they describe the world in terms of cause and effect, which is why he never attempts to distil the objective truth of his memories. Instead, the unifying connection established by his narrative order is "the interpretation of human events as a part of a larger frame or story whereby each event becomes meaningful in relation to the whole and vice versa" (McCarthy 153). In this manner, Paul desires to fathom Susan, their relationship, and, ultimately, himself.

When Susan shares more or less arbitrary details from her past, Paul observes that "things like this tumbled out of her in no particular order, and in response to no particular enquiry on my part, other than the tacit one of wanting to know everything about her. So she laid them out, as if expecting me to make sense, to make order, of her life, and of her heart" (70). Only the narrator's perspective is accessible to us in this exchange, which makes it impossible to determine whether or not Susan actually expected the former "to

make sense" of her tumultuous existence. What is clear, however, is that Paul felt the duty and, indeed, the need to do so, at least partly for the sake of a deeper understanding of his lover. The same holds true for their time together, which further explains why, for the first part of the novel, the narrator chooses to recall only those aspects of their relationship that made them happy, as if to draw out the essence of their love and separate it from everything else. In the process, he includes some events, but discards others, often unintentionally, depending on their link to the "intelligible whole", or that meaning which he desires to attribute to his and Susan's lives.

Paul remembers, for instance, that it was his mother who suggested that he joined the local tennis club, which he accepted "in a spirit of nothing but satire" (6-7), a sentiment that characterized him at the time and that no doubt contributed to his willingness or even excitement to break the social norm regarding amorous engagements. He also considers that after three weeks of play, he took part in a "Lucky Dip Mixed Doubles tournament", where he drew Susan MacLeod for his pair "by lot" or, as he now muses, "by destiny" (8). Predictably, he brings to mind moments essential for the definition of any relationship, including their first kiss, the first time they made love, meaningful conversations they had together and even their first disagreements. However, other details and even entire other stories that one would expect the protagonist to discuss given the nature of his affair are pushed to the margins of the narrative. Susan's husband, Gordon MacLeod, is hardly ever mentioned and, for the better part of the novel, is referred to by the childish nickname of "Mr E.P." or "Mr Elephant Pants", which further serves to project him as not real. Susan's daughters, Martha and Clara, receive a similar treatment and are addressed as "Miss G" and "Miss NS" or "Miss Grumpy" and "Miss Not So (Grumpy)" (55). Susan's entire family and past are thus minimised by the narrator, who projects them merely as catalysts for the woman's alleged desire to escape her current condition. Only when Paul discovers that Susan sometimes returns home from London after their departure does it occur to him that he had, perhaps, miscalculated how significant his lover's past, her pre-history, continued to be for her.

It is furthermore notable that Paul shares certain memories which are apparently trivial, but which are nevertheless given great significance, not necessarily because they change his relationship with Susan in any noticeable way, but precisely because they occupy a privileged position with respect to the meaning of the overarching story as configured by the narrator. He remembers, for example, the time when the car he was driving with Susan malfunctioned and continued to accelerate even though he pushed the break. In doing so, he considers that "it never occurred to me to ask Susan what to do. I thought, this is my problem, I've got to fix it" (48), which, in retrospect, appears to be analogous

to the way he decided to handle his relationship once it began to slide out of control. Elsewhere, Paul recalls an endearing episode at his lover's house:

> I remember her, one afternoon, wearing a print dress with flowers on it, going over to a chintz sofa and plumping herself down on it.
> 'Look, Casey Paul! I'm disappearing! I'm doing my disappearing act! There's nobody here!'
> I look. It is half-true. Her stockinged legs show clearly, as do her head and neck, but all the middle parts are suddenly camouflaged. (60)

Although seemingly trivial, the event becomes pregnant with entirely new meaning when Susan turns unrecognizable due to alcoholism. Later in life, Paul sees this as "another disappearing act" (173), whereby "her body is still there, but what lies inside – her mind, her memory, her heart – is slipping away. (…) And all the sweetness of her nature, the laughingness and trustingness central to the woman you fell in love with can no longer be seen" (173-4). Of course, this is not to say that Susan's innocent trick on her living room couch could have anticipated, in any way, the drastic turn of events in the following years. Yet this turn of events took place nevertheless and, for Paul, inexplicably so. As such, in his attempt to understand it, he draws connections between otherwise disparate episodes of his and Susan's time together, all the while looking for clues that might elucidate some kind of explanation.

Finally, Paul addresses the fact that, after several years, he decides to assign Susan's care to one of her daughters, who accepts this responsibility without further questions. Although this is rarely stated as such, it is this act in particular that brings about his feelings of shame and guilt. This draws attention to a purpose of the story that is intimately linked to, but goes beyond self-understanding. Ricoeur's philosophy is once again of assistance in this respect. Indeed, according to Ricoeur, to live a "good life" means to maintain an "ethical intention" or, in other words, to aim "at the good life with and for others, in just institutions." To evaluate whether one's life has been good, one must read it as if it were a story (Ricoeur 1992, 171-2). Paul's narrative, then, serves not only his better comprehension of his past, but also his scrutiny of his own life and actions. According to a Maria Duffy, for instance, who discusses the notion of "pardon" from the perspective of Ricoeur's work, there can be no forgiveness until "memory has been dealt with", since memory is essential towards understanding and acceptance, and the latter are "forms of reconciliation and healing in their own right" (46). Inspired by Freud's thought, she concludes that the work of remembering is similar to that of mourning. Both can be painful exercises, but are nonetheless necessary to achieve reconciliation with oneself and with one's losses (Duffy 52). Certainly, Ricoeur agrees, one cannot undo the

past yet, this past remains perpetually open to new interpretations. "One cannot undo what has been done, nor pretend that what has happened has not. On the other hand, the *meaning* of what has happened to us, whether we have actively done it ourselves or have undergone it, is not fixed once and for all" (Ricoeur 2000, 33). The work of remembering is viewed, in this respect, as one's answer to and deliverance from the weight or "debt" of the past. In *The Only Story*, Paul's duty to "remember Susan correctly" can be better understood from such a perspective.

Indeed, the narrator of Barnes' novel inevitably blames himself for the turn Susan's life takes after the two move to London in order to live together. However, like Gordon MacLeod, Susan's husband, this is rarely discussed overtly. For instance, when Paul mentions the issue of early alcoholism with Joan, one of Susan's oldest friends, she advises that "if everything goes belly-up and pear-shaped, you'll probably get over it and she probably won't" (139). The protagonist repeats this statement several times throughout the rest of his narrative and this clearly continues to haunt him once he leaves Susan and attempts to carry on with his life. Undoubtedly, Paul does everything in his power, at least as far as he can fathom of the matter, to prevent Joan's foresight from materialising. Revisiting the past, he attempts to reconcile with his decision to "hand back" Susan by arguing that there was a certain "inevitability to it, which lent the action a different moral colouring. He found that he simply couldn't go on. He couldn't save her, and so he had to save himself. It was as simple as that" (210). The details Paul brings together to compose his story make this point all the more convincing. After all, given her past, Susan was prone to self-destructive behaviour long before they even met. Her eventual mental deterioration was foreshadowed by episodes such as her "disappearing act." The cultural and social context of their affair, described in some detail by Paul as part of their "pre-histories", placed too heavy a weight on their psyches. Under the circumstances, neither of them had any choice. Retrospectively, at least, this much seems obvious and must be stated as such as a form of "duty" to the past:

> He had a duty to see back to how she had been, and to rescue her. But this wasn't just about her. He had a duty to himself. To see back and… rescue himself? From what? From 'the subsequent wreckage of his life'? No, that was stupidly melodramatic. His life had not been wrecked. His heart, yes, his heart had been cauterized. But he had found a way to live, and continued with that life, which had brought him to here. And from here, he had a duty to see himself as he had once been. Strange how, when you are young, you owe no duty to the future; but when you are old, you owe a duty to the past. To the one thing you can't change. (202-3)

Yet Paul cannot help but note that "all those years ago", while "there was her shame to deal with", there was "also, he knew, his shame" (204). Neither at the time of their affair, nor later in his life, however, does Paul earnestly contemplate this fact or the effect it has had on him. Meanwhile, considering that he has never been able to love again and that his life becomes a complacent routine, the effect is, indeed, great. His remorse is rarely mentioned or hinted at, although it becomes increasingly obvious as the narrative perspective begins to shift. As such, the first-person perspective of the first part of the novel, which describes Paul and Susan's affair at its happiest, drifts into a second person perspective during the second part of the novel, when their relationship gradually dies out, suffocated by the woman's addiction to alcohol and the protagonist's inability to comprehend or "save her." At times, it is as if, in his attempt to justify his actions, Paul invites the narratee to empathise with him, as well as to confirm his decisions and to reassure him that he has done everything conceivably possible for someone in that particular situation. By the third part of the novel, which largely describes Paul's life after leaving Susan, the narrative is in the third person, so as to suggest, perhaps, that the protagonist, emotionally detached from a life without his lover, can no longer recognize himself in his own actions. By now, "it was as if he viewed, and lived, his life in the third person" (195-6).

By and large, it is quite possible that Paul and Susan's story was headed toward its catastrophic end from the very beginning, merely because of each of their pre-histories. Yet, shame and remorse resulted from their relationship nonetheless, which, for Paul, brought about a life without any further vitality. Having remembered his past, Paul considers an image that had haunted him for the entirety of his life. Often, he would think of himself at an upstairs window with Susan hanging on the other side. In this portrait, he would try to hold on to his lover by her wrists, but would eventually let go and have to witness her fall. Late in life, Paul touches upon something he has previously repeatedly ignored as he wonders:

> if he had always misconstrued that indelible image which had pursued him down his life: of being at an upstairs window, holding on to Susan by the wrists. Perhaps what had happened was not that he had lost strength and let her fall. Perhaps the truth was that she had pulled him out with her weight. And he had fallen too. And been grievously damaged in the process. (256)

From the reader's point of view this certainly appears to be the case in *The Only Story*. Indeed, if we are to accept Ricoeur's theory that the answer to

the question "Who is this?" is inevitably "the story of a life" (Ricoeur 1988, 246), then this final conclusion to Paul's narrative best explains his own identity to himself. It suggests that, by means of telling his story, Paul has, at last, reached a form of understanding and acceptance, excruciating as it may be, of his past and his present self. Certainly, Paul's life intersects more than this "only story", which, ultimately, is the only story that matters to him. This is precisely because it links and endows all other events with a coherent meaning, while at the same time allowing the narrator to discern whether or not his life has been "good."

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