

‘You still don’t get it. You never have
and you never will.’:
Memory as an Echo Chamber in
Julian Barnes’s *The Sense of an Ending*

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Abstract. Julian Barnes’s 2011 novel, *The Sense of an Ending*, begins with a carefully careless list of images that the narrator claims to remember ‘in no particular order’. As the novel progresses, these images are revealed to be significant for the narrator because he associates them with two events from his time at University: a failed relationship and the suicide of his close friend. By the end of the novel, however, it becomes clear that the narrator has falsely attributed significance to these memories and that — within a broader context — there were other moments which could have shed far more clarity on the events of the past. This article closely examines the narrator’s list of memories, in order to demonstrate that they are comparable to a sequence of echoes that reflect the plot of the novel. It argues that this process of echoing enables the reader to consider the distortive effects of memory, by emphasizing certain aspects of the story over others and thus altering the sequence of events, just as echoes distort sound. Through this line of reasoning, it draws upon the work of Peter Brooks and Roland Barthes to consider how memory acts as an echo chamber for the narrator, permitting him to use remembered events to create a false narrative which continually perpetuates itself, even when faced with contradictory evidence. The article goes on to argue that the beginning of the novel even exploits the reader’s own memory, forcing them to become complicit in the narrator’s echo chamber.

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The fact is that echo is structured by delay, by time. Moreover, the delay always marks a decay. Something is missing from the sound source, and as a consequence the “mirroring” is more than simply reversed; it is systematically imperfect.¹

John Mowitt’s definition of ‘echo’ seems a striking place to begin any discussion of the way echoing and remembering can be productively compared. The terms

¹ John Mowitt, *Sounds: The Ambient Humanities* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 2015), p. 27.

employed by Mowitt make it particularly easy to see how the word ‘memory’ could be substituted for ‘echo’: memory, too, is ‘structured by delay’ and consequently ‘marks a decay’ since that which we remember is rarely a direct, cinematic reproduction of events.² Indeed, remembering something, even in the immediate aftermath of that event creates a space in which things can go missing and other things can be gained, whilst still maintaining the illusion of authenticity. Memory, like the echo, ‘is systematically imperfect’ without us ever quite realizing that it is the case. As a consequence of this, the metaphor of echo for memory is used often, implemented within neurological research, cultural studies and poetry, to name a few. The aforementioned metaphor demonstrates how memory functions within our brains, how it can be passed between generations, and the powerful emotions associated with remembering.³

In this article, I will focus on a specific dynamic of echoing in order to further explore the depiction of memory in literature. When we hear an echo, what amazes us is the fact that we hear a sound from the past — that by rights should have faded away — come back towards us. We focus less on the things that we have lost and more on what we have gained; the echo acts to place a retrospective significance on that which we retain. Therefore, the amplification in echoing, at least where there is a human listener, is two-fold. First, there is the amplification of the sound itself, second there is the mental amplification wherein we focus our attention on this new ‘systematically imperfect’ version of the sound. To demonstrate this, I will draw upon Julian Barnes’s 2011 novel, *The Sense of an Ending*, to argue that this two-fold amplification is central to the text’s depiction of memory. I will suggest that the text is structured in such a way that we see how it is possible to prioritize the echo of memory, over its original source. In doing so, I demonstrate how memory in the novel acts as an echo-chamber for the narrator’s perceived version of past events.

The Sense of an Ending tells the story of Tony Webster who, after receiving a surprise bequest from an ex-girlfriend’s mother, decides to find out why. The first part of the novel describes Tony’s adolescent life, detailing: his school-aged friendship with the brilliant Adrian Finn; his turbulent student relationship with Veronica Ford; Veronica’s subsequent relationship with Adrian; and Adrian’s suicide during his postgraduate degree. The second part of the novel describes Tony’s bequest from Veronica’s mother of £500 and Adrian’s diary, and his pursuit of Veronica to discover what Adrian’s diary contained and how her mother came to have it. Veronica refuses to relinquish the diary from her possession and, by way of explanation, takes Tony to meet a disabled man in his forties. At the close of the novel, a waiter at a pub informs Tony that the man is not Veronica’s child (as he had assumed), but rather her brother. Tony then

² Mowitt, p. 27.

³ Mark E Wheeler et al., ‘Memory’s Echo: Vivid remembering reactivates sensory-specific cortex’, *PNAS*, 97 (2000), 11125–29; Desmond Manderson, ‘Memory and Echo: Pop cult, hi tech and the irony of tradition’, *Cultural Studies*, 27 (2013), 11–29; Christina Rossetti, ‘Echo’ in *Poems*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1906), p. 51.

understands that Adrian and Veronica's mother had an affair and that the man he met is both the product of this affair and the reason for Adrian's suicide.

Throughout the novel, Tony continually draws upon his memories of the past to find a reason for the bequest and guess at the identity of the man. Yet these consistently lead him down the wrong path, leaving him ultimately unable to understand. Given this constant recourse to the past within the novel, the theme of memory in *The Sense of an Ending* is difficult to overlook. Indeed, Justine Jordan, reviewing the novel for *The Guardian*, described it as 'a highly wrought meditation on ageing, memory and regret'.⁴ However, as I will illustrate, the interconnected motif of echoing is equally embedded into this strand of the narrative. I argue that understanding Tony's narration to be an echo chamber for his own version of events, is key to understanding how the novel has been constructed.

The echo chamber is characterised by confinement and containment; this confinement leads to amplification, forcing the sounds that have been reflected to be repeated and distorted, creating a new version of the original sound. As a result of this, in contemporary culture the term echo chamber is often used to describe a person's tendency to surround themselves with like-minded individuals in order to perpetuate their world view. Roland Barthes, in particular, has paid critical attention to the echo chamber. He argues that 'in relation to the systems which surround him,' man is

an echo chamber: he reproduces the thoughts badly, he follows the words; he pays his visits, i.e. his respects, to vocabularies, he *invokes* notions, he rehearses them under a name; he makes use of this name as of an emblem (thereby practicing a kind of philosophical ideography) and this emblem dispenses him from following to its conclusion the system of which it is the signifier.⁵

Barthes's description of an echo chamber relates to the way in which people absorb and restate in their own terms philosophical and critical notions such as 'bourgeois'. Barthes argues that in re-expressing these terms 'words are shifted' away from their original meanings.⁶ However, this concept need not only apply to complex concepts. It can also be used to understand the way in which we interact with the world around us. Indeed, this is exactly the process that Tony experiences in *The Sense of an Ending*, as he attempts to find a sequence of events that could have led to Veronica's mother being in possession of Adrian's diary.

A prime example of this comes after Tony meets the man who is later revealed to be Veronica's brother, for the first time. Tony says that '[t]his was Adrian's

⁴ Justine Jordan, 'The Sense of an Ending by Julian Barnes — review', *The Guardian*, 26 July 2011 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jul/26/sense-ending-julian-barnes-review1>> [accessed 12 June 2020] (para. 8 of 8).

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (California: University of California Press, 1977), p. 74.

⁶ Barthes, p. 74.

son. I didn't need a birth certificate or a DNA test — I saw it and felt it'.⁷ After this revelation, Tony reconstructs his version of the past through the lens of a letter he wrote in response to Adrian and Veronica forming a couple. In this letter, Tony wrote that 'part of me hopes you have a child, because I'm a great believer in time's revenge' (p.138). Using this letter as a prompt to construct the narrative of the man's existence, Tony decides that he has 'some answers to the questions [he] hadn't asked' (p.139) and writes Veronica an email in which he apologises for his letter and refers to Adrian as 'the father of [her] son' (p.143). However, Veronica later emails Tony back to inform him that he 'still [does]n't get it' (p.144).

In the above sequence of events we can clearly see how Tony has 'reproduce[d]' his own past thoughts 'badly'.⁸ He has, quite literally, 'follow[ed] the words', by only paying attention to what he immediately surmised, rather than considering other possible meanings.⁹ As a result, he has created a version of events which — despite making sense to him — has no bearing on reality. The echo chamber of his own mind has prevented him from seeing what past events truly signify.

Perhaps the most interesting function of the echo chamber in *The Sense of an Ending*, is the way Barnes frames the narrative to encourage his readers to participate within it. The novel begins with a list of specific moments that Tony remembers from his past:

I remember, in no particular order:

- a shiny inner wrist;
- steam rising from a wet sink as a hot frying pan is laughingly tossed into it;
- goutts of sperm circling a plughole, before being sluiced down the full length of a tall house;
- a river rushing nonsensically upstream, its wave and wash lit by half a dozen chasing torchbeams;
- another river, broad and grey, the direction of its flow disguised by a stiff wind exciting the surface;
- bathwater long gone cold behind a locked door.

This last isn't something I actually saw, but what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed. (p. 3.)

This list provides the reader with seemingly random fragments of the plot to come, without context. We are, therefore, encountering the echoes of the plot before being given the opportunity to read it within a wider frame. In effect, we are stepping into the world of echoes without ever hearing the original sound.

Structuring the novel in this way has a profound effect on the experience of reading it. Indeed, the way in which we usually read a text is reversed. In a normal narrative situation, as described by Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot*,

⁷ Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (London: Vintage, 2012), p. 137. [All further references to *The Sense of an Ending* will be made by page number in the body of the text unless otherwise specified.]

⁸ Barthes, p. 74.

⁹ Barthes, p. 74.

reading is characterized by ‘the active quest of the reader for those shaping ends that [...] promise to bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and the middle.’¹⁰ We are, therefore, encouraged by the author to search for hermeneutic “clues” throughout the text which will give us some indication as to where the plot is going. However, in *The Sense of an Ending*, rather than being presented with a narrative that we must use to scour for significant information, we are presented with significant information that we must search for within the narrative itself.

It is through this shift that the extent to which Tony’s narration works as an echo chamber becomes evident. In searching for Tony’s pre-selected memories in the text, we are ensuring that his version of events perpetuates itself. We attribute significance to the same events as Tony, and therefore we make the same mistakes as him when we try to resolve the mystery at the heart of the novel. This is not an uncommon feature in first-person narration; the reader is often trapped in the errors of the narrator. However, in *The Sense of an Ending*, we are not simply observing the erroneous narrative that Tony constructs, but we are also constructing it for ourselves. Just as Tony tells his story by hanging it on the points that he has already highlighted as significant, the version of the story we make for ourselves is focused around our earliest memory of the text. As Oliver Paynel has put it, these ‘anchoring points’ demonstrate how it is easy to ‘ris[k] distorting and perverting our understanding of history.’¹¹

The Independent’s review of *The Sense of an Ending* describes how ‘the concluding scenes grip like a thriller — a whodunnit of memory and morality.’¹² Indeed, taunted by the novel’s refrain of ‘you don’t get it do you?’ (p.100), the reader arrives at the final pages of the novel with the same sense of questioning that characterizes a ‘whodunnit’ novel. This confusion — our inability to ‘get it’, which mirrors Tony’s inability — is a direct consequence of the list of memories which begin the novel. We have borrowed Tony’s memories and created the only narrative that seems to make sense, demonstrating the extent to which *The Sense of an Ending* is shaped by the echoes that begin it. The sounds we first hear are amplified back to us, often several times, and at each repetition the volume of their significance increases.

Take, for example, the ‘shiny inner wrist’ which begins the list. This image reappears three times throughout the narrative. The first comes early in the novel and offers the context of the image. We are told that, as a compromise for their lack of ‘full-sex’ (p.22), Tony ‘would place [his] hand flat on the floor and

¹⁰ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 19.

¹¹ Oliver Paynel, “‘Serious about being serious’: History and the Claims of Memory in Julian Barnes’s *The Sense of an Ending*”, *STET*, 4 (2014), 1–17 (p. 3); Paynel contextualises his argument within Frank Kermode’s notion of ‘consonance’. However, my own argument is grounded with Brooks as, whilst the links between the two versions of *The Sense of an Ending* are clear, the relationship between Barnes’s text and detective fiction such as those used by Brooks, merits further attention.

¹² Boyd Tonkin, ‘*The Sense of an Ending*, by Julian Barnes’, *The Independent*, 5 August 2011 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-sense-of-an-ending-by-julian-barnes-2331767.html>> [accessed 15 June 2020] (para. 6 of 6).

[Veronica] would rub herself against [his] trapped wrist until she came' (p.33). The 'shiny inner wrist', then, becomes a slightly surreal indicator of the extent of Veronica's unwillingness to have sex with Tony. Indeed, Tony testifies to his 'resentment' (p.33) of this arrangement, describing how he 'was, presumably meant to feel closer to her, but didn't' (p.34). This first echo, then, becomes a sign of their relationship as fundamentally flawed, with Tony as its hapless victim.

This depiction of Tony's relationship with Veronica as ludicrous and with Tony as its victim, is again perpetuated in the echo's second repetition, when Tony tells his ex-wife Margaret that Veronica's mother has left him a bequest in her will. Margaret asks Tony if he would 'start rolling up [his] sleeve and taking off [his] watch?' (p.76) if Veronica were to walk in at that moment. In response to this, Tony blushes, confirming his relationship with Veronica to be ridiculous. However, the fact that it is Margaret rather than Tony who says this is significant; through this frame the reader is presented with a view of the echo-chamber that they find themselves in. Tony has told Margaret this memory and thereby highlighted it as important and accordingly, Margaret has reflected the memory back to him and increased its importance. Indeed, Tony's exchange with Margaret seems to lay bare the cracks in Tony's narration. For example, Margaret refers to Veronica by the nickname '[t]he Fruitcake' (p. 74). However, Tony notes that 'it was [his] account that had given rise to the nickname' (p. 75), since when he told Margaret about Veronica '[he]'d laid it on a bit, made [himself] sound more of a dupe, and Veronica more unstable than she'd been' (p.75). What is interesting here is the focus that Tony puts on his amplification of events. In retelling his story, he has made it 'more', placing emphasis in particular places to shape it to his version of events. Just like the echo dynamic described at the start of this article, retelling Tony's story has distorted its focus, drawing Margaret into Tony's version of events to such an extent that she herself begins to perpetuate it.

The third repetition of this image comes towards the end of the novel when Tony, increasingly desperate for an explanation, writes to his solicitor requesting that he seek 'a speedy resolution of the issue' (p.132). At this point, Tony 'allow[s] [him]self a private nostalgic farewell' (p.132) and thinks 'of [his] 'inner wrist looking shiny, of [his] shirt sleeve furled to the elbow' (p.132). The repetition of this image then, serves both as 'nostalgia' and as justification for Tony's actions: it returns the reader to the image of Veronica as '[t]he Fruitcake' whose interactions with Tony are marked by what he perceives as 'instability' (p.132). Echoing this image throughout the novel, then, both places it within a context and confirms Tony's perception of events, trapping us within the echo-chamber of his narration and leaving us powerless to see past this view.

This process of echoing and amplification is repeated to some extent, for all the memories on the list. The result is that the original story is so distorted that any attempt to read it with impartiality is futile — our perspective of events and

the memories of them we have formed through reading, are too bound up with Tony's for us to solve the mystery. Thus, we are ultimately left clueless. Indeed, the end of the novel testifies to the fact that the only way to understand what has happened is to break it down and re-evaluate it. Tony says that 'later, at home, going over it all, after some time, I understood. I got it' (p.148). Rather than focusing on specific incidents, he has taken the story in holistically, hearing the sounds that he had previously omitted. The novel ends with another, far less structured, list. Tony presents us with a new set of memories, none of which are new to the story but that have never previously been marked as significant. The list describes the images that Tony has called upon, in finally being able to make sense of what has happened:

I thought of a bunch of kids in Trafalgar Square. I thought of a young woman dancing for once in her life. I thought of what I couldn't know or understand now, of all that couldn't ever be known or understood. I thought of Adrian's definition of history. I thought of his son cramming his face into a shelf of quilted toilet tissue in order to avoid me. I thought of a woman frying eggs in a carefree, slapdash way, untroubled when one of them broke in the pan; then the same woman, later, making a secret horizontal gesture beneath a sunlit wisteria. And I thought of a cresting wave of water, lit by a moon, rushing past and vanishing upstream, pursued by a band of yelping students whose torchbeams criss-crossed in the dark (pp.149-50).

Like Tony, we come to realise in reading this list that all the information we required to 'get it' was present in the story. However, such was the amplifying effect of Tony's first list, we let the true significance of the events evade us. Brooks has described how 'memory — as much in reading a novel as in seeing a play — is the key faculty in the capacity to perceive relations of beginnings, middles and ends through time, the shaping power of narrative.'¹³ However, by the close of *The Sense of an Ending*, we realize that memory has not worked with us but rather against us: the 'shaping power of narrative' is one of chaos rather than cohesion.

The intertwining of our own memory into the story is significant because it uses the reader's mind to call into question the dynamics of memory. Indeed, the list at the beginning of the novel poses the question: do we remember things because they are important or are things important because we remember them? Ironically, one possible answer to this dilemma can be located in the form of the opening list.

Tony claims that this list is presented in 'no particular order' (p.3) and, at an initial glance, this is plausible: the events listed are not in chronological, alphabetical or any other recognisable order. However, upon further inspection, the form of the list suggests that it works as a mnemonic, indicating the extent to which remembering these events has become ritualized for Tony. Perhaps the most obvious indicator of the list as a mnemonic is the fact that it is bullet

¹³ Brooks, p. 11.

pointed. As bullet points are highly unusual in a literary text, the information in this list is marked as significant. The list begins with a colon, thereby suggesting that it should be read as a single entity. Automatically then, the fact that Barnes has begun the novel with one long, heavily structured sentence encourages us to search for a sense of unity between these images. Despite the protestation that the list is in 'no particular order', its structure creates a desire to find further significance in its order.

The obvious uniting point between these images is that they all — to a certain extent — can be linked to water (two describe sinks, another two describe rivers). However, the images in the list are depicted in such a way that the word 'water' is deliberately avoided until the final memory on the list. This structure, of emphasizing water by avoiding explicit use of the word, results in the list building in a steady crescendo towards the mention of 'bathwater'. The effect of this is that all the events on the list are tied to this last one, which we later come to realize pertains to Adrian's suicide rather than Tony's relationship with Veronica, as is the case for the other memory points. A byproduct of the amplifying effect of delaying the use of the word 'water' is that it brings a sense of theatricality to these opening scenes. Barnes creates the impression that Tony's memories are deliberately stylized into striking, memorable images, designed to bring to mind something larger. For example, the image of 'bathwater, long gone cold behind a locked door' describes the location of Adrian's suicide. However, the image has been deliberately and self-consciously over stylized to focus on the bathwater — which is what we will subsequently try to locate — rather than its gory contents.

The list, then, is an exercise in repetition, of the same motif repeated several times without using the same language to replicate it. Douglas Hintzman has noted that 'the fact that repetition improves retention [...] seems beyond dispute.'¹⁴ As such, both the memorable form of the list and the fact that the images themselves seem to have been chosen to facilitate remembering, imply that Tony has selected these moments as important and then deliberately gone about remembering them.

Through the ritualised and performative memory seen on the opening page of *The Sense of an Ending*, we come to understand how the echo chamber, which has caused both us and Tony so much difficulty in our efforts to 'get' what is going on, has been constructed. Barnes demonstrates neatly, through this opening list, how easily the simple repetition of particular memories distorts a story through the same two-fold process of amplification that occurs in echoing. Sabine Sielke describes how 'remembering in fact weakens memory, puts it at risk by irritating the reconsolidation process.'¹⁵ It is this effect that the initial list

¹⁴ Douglas L. Hintzman, 'Repetition and Memory', *Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, 10 (1976), 47–91, (p. 47).

¹⁵ Sabine Sielke, "Joy in Repetition"; or The Significance of Seriality in Processes of Memory and (Re-) Mediation', in *The Memory Effect: The Remediation of Memory in Literature and Film*, ed. By Russel J. A. Kilbourn and Eleanor Ty (Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2013) pp. 37–50, (p. 46).

of memories has on both Tony's experience in the story and our experience of the story. The echoing of specific parts of a wider story makes them stand out from the rest of the narrative, but it also encourages us to earmark these parts as important, prompting a search for significance in them. Yet this is a fallacy; the parts of the story that Tony repeatedly returns to, are simply parts of a wider whole, just as the echo is part of a wider sound. The amplification, as much with memory as with sound, is simply an accident of nature, leaving what we hear 'systematically imperfect'.