

The Plethora of Choice as a Double Shift Retrieval in Julian Barnes's *The Lemon Table*

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Abstract: Reading experience of *The Lemon Table* (2004) challenges our memory either to retrieve the “dead” text or to withdraw it from any further links. A creative intertextual way which drives a contemporary impetus for the multiplicity of choice, its exclusive all-inclusiveness, becomes a metaphor for a nightmare vortex. A detailed literary analysis of the text shows how memory exercise, active and human, located between experience and imagination, is constantly counter-balanced by a possessive/passive consumption, leading towards modern obsessive knowledge. Thus, the double anxiety between past and present is revealed in the concept of the “translinguistic transfer” (Kristeva), performed by the text’s construction. The artificial intelligence of a modern character is challenged by a secular philosophy of mind through an emphasis on memory as a complex process of permutation and insider-outsider grasp into the “buried” text and the “dead” author (Barthes).

Key words: the short story, memory, canon, Julian Barnes, Ivan Turgenev

1. Introduction

In *Levels of Life* (2013), Julian Barnes states:

“You put together two people who have not been put together before. Sometimes it is like that first attempt to harness a hydrogen balloon to a fine balloon: do you prefer crash and burn, or burn and crash? But sometimes it works, and something new is made, and the world is changed. Then, at some point, sooner or later, for this reason or that, one of them is taken away. And what is taken away is greater than the sum of what was there. This may not be mathematically possible; but it is emotionally possible” (*Levels of Life*, p. 67).

Published in 2004, *The Lemon Table* is composed of 11 short stories that intentionally interweave silence and sound, memory and forgetfulness, emotion and intellect, consistency and fluidity. This parallel shifting is particularly well underlined in “The Revival”, the story in which the process of memory is constructed through an ambivalent interchange of backward and forward flashes:

“This is safe. The fantasy is manageable, his gift a false memory. A few decades later, the political leaders of his country would specialize in airbrushing the downfallen from history, in removing their photographic traces. Now here he is, bent over his album of memories, meticulously inserting the figure of a past companion. Paste it in, that photograph of the timid, appealing Verochka, while the lamplight rejuvenates your white hair into black shadow” (*The Lemon Table*, p. 98).

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2. Main Body

This interchange of backward and forward flashes is based on the “turn-and-turn about”¹ method of telling a story. As already mentioned in the introduction, this method foregrounds an important piece of evidence when assessing a dialectical relationship between the creative dimension of modernity and conventional fields of knowledge, supported by the organic consistency of a narrative structure. In “Vigilance”, for instance, the dialectical interconnectedness between past and present is constructed through a dynamically shifting focalization of a narrative voice echoing voices from the past:

“So, how was the Shostakovich? Loud enough to drown the bastards out?”

“Well”, I said, “that’s an interesting point. You know how it starts off with those huge climaxes? It made me realize what I meant about the loud bits. Everyone was making as much noise as possible — brass, timps, big bad drum — and you know what cut through it all? The xylophone. There was this woman bashing away and coming across clear as a bell. Now, if you’d heard that on a record you’d think it was the result of some fancy bit of engineering — spot-lighting, or whatever they call it. In the hall you knew that this was just exactly what Shostakovich intended” (*The Lemon Table*, p. 110).

In “The Story of Mats Israelson”, on the other hand, one of the main characters examines the complex relationship between past and present through an ambivalent relationship between dream and reality, trying to establish her own sense of identity:

“Though she prided herself on having little imagination, and though she took no account of legends, she had allowed herself to spend half her life in a frivolous dream. And what sort of claim was that?” (*The Lemon Table*, p. 45).

Throughout this story, the character is facing life turnings with defiant rage, resulting from her interior division between logical thinking, on the one hand, and aspiration to fantasy, on the other. The inability to deal with the controversial way in which life reveals its mysteries results from the character’s unawareness that intellect alone, based mostly on her logical thinking, cannot always serve as a real foundation for identity. The story’s narrative construction intentionally guides a reader through a dialogic interaction between a pure reality and an imaginatively conceived fantasy. The narrative leads the reader through an intensive counter-pointing exploring the extent to which a legend communes with reality:

“‘Mrs. Lindwall...’ All clarity of mind deserted him. He wanted to say that he loved her, that he had always loved her, that he thought of her most — no, all of the time. ‘I think of you most — no, all of the time’, was what he had prepared to say. And then, ‘I have loved you from the moment I met you on the steamboat. You have sustained my life ever since.

“But her irritation made him lose heart. She thought he was a seducer. So the words he had prepared would seem like those of a seducer. And he did not know her after all. He did not know how to talk to women” (*The Lemon Table*, p. 43).

The failure of communication between two characters results from their inability to connect a deceiving truth with an authentic fantasy and figure out a non-linear thematic way in which an imaginative dimension of the old legend could indeed reconstruct in a new light the perception of what really happens:

“I’m sorry”, she said, as if aware of his disappointment. “I have little imagination. I’m only interested in what

¹ For further clarification see *Translation as Collaboration* (2014), by Claire Davison, chapter 1, p. 40.

really happens. Legends seem to me...silly... He says that people will take me for a modern woman. But it is not that either. It is that I have little imagination" (*The Lemon Table*, p. 31).

The double anxiety between "simple, hard and true" life story and the "silly legends" comes hand in hand with the character's anxiety about singularity and convergence, identity and difference. The textual mastery in retrieving the past reveals an attempt to represent the new not as an innovation at all, but as a variation of similar cultural patterns. In "Hygiene", the confluence of past patterns of thought and of the present active thinking provides a real foundation for identity:

"Were you as young as you felt, or as old as you looked? [...]. But she was still what he looked forward to when he was feeding the pullets, scraping for coal, poking at the gutter with tears leaking, tears he smeared across his cheek-bones with the back of a rubber glove. She was his link to the past, to a past in which he could really tie one on and still ring the gong three times in a row" (*The Lemon Table*, p. 75).

Moving to other characters and other stories' settings, we will find even more different, though conceptually consistent, forms of textual and symbolic levels. In these levels, conventionally conceived impetus towards traditional thinking productively collaborate with an unbounded recycling drive of contemporary art.

The reading experience of *The Lemon Table* invites our memorial function either to sustain the 'dead' text or to withdraw it from further readings:

"But as we mock these genteel fumblers of a previous era, we should prepare ourselves for the jeers of a later century. How come we never think of that? We believe in evolution, at least in the sense of evolution culminating in us. We forget that this entails evolution beyond our solipsistic selves" (*The Lemon Table*, p. 92).

Here, the narrative voice considers the cyclical nature of cultural renovation, in which conceptual shadowlands from the past establish a demanding dialogical conversation with contemporary theoretical fields of knowledge.

What happens then when conventionally stored textual reference dwells on the contemporary short story's dispersive structure? Addressing the plethora of choice to which the modern mind is subjected, *The Lemon Table* examines as well a writing process in which all-inclusiveness becomes in some way aesthetically counter-productive when not balanced against the conceptual patterns of thought echoing from the historical past. The text suggestively takes into the contemporary idiom many literary predecessors and archetypal settings in order to establish 'the exact, complicated, subtle communion between absent author and entranced, present reader' (Barnes, "A Life with Books", p. XVIII).

In order to figure out a possible answer to this question, I will suggest put forward a brief analysis of the short story "The Revival", the fifth story in *The Lemon Table*.

There, an actively conceived recollection, coming from the past, is artfully embodied in the narrative voice of a contemporary author performing an imaginative response to Turgenev's train journey in Russia in 1880:

"But all love needs a journey. All love symbolically is a journey, and that journey needs bodying forth. Their journey took place on the 28th of May 1880. [...]. There is an ironic side to this precision. At one time, affectedly, he carried a dozen watches on his person; even so, he would be hours late for a rendezvous. But on May the 6th, trembling like a youth, he met the 9.55 express at the little station of Mstensk. Night had fallen. He boarded the train. It was thirty miles from Mstensk to Oryol" (*The Lemon Table*, p. 90).

Here, the biographically stated fact of Turgenev's journey is suggestively interwoven with full or half-echoed

quotes from the writer's love letters, composed in the XIX century and accessed by a narrator in the XXI century. The narrator creatively rereads the writer's letters:

"On the other hand, when everything is safe and stylized, he writes this: 'You say, at the end of your letter, "I kiss you warmly"'. How? Do you mean, as you did then, on that June night, in the railway compartment? If I live a hundred years I will never forget those kisses.' May has become June, the timid suitor has become the recipient of myriad kisses, the bolt has been slid back a little. Is this the truth, or is that the truth? We, now, would like it to be nest then, but it is rarely neat; whether the heart drags in sex, or sex drags in the heart." (*The Lemon Table*, p. 94).

The reflecting narrator not merely reads Turgenev's letters; he also invites a reader to give shape to his or her triggered imaginative response to the letters' content. Thus, the ample room left by the real letters is functionally explored through highly performative narrative dynamics, which productively occupies the silenced, emotionally conceived, spaces of the text. Those emotional spaces hide a half-present, trans-subjective encounter between the contemporary "we" and the XIX century "they":

"Here is the argument for the world of renunciation. If we know more about consummation, they knew more about desire. If we know more about numbers, they knew more about despair. If we know more about boasting, they knew more about memory" (*The Lemon Table*, p. 92).

An interest in shifting boundaries, including those of "controlled disruption that results in an exchange of energy between two conceptual systems" (Dalgarno, 2012, p. 131), might help explain how a shift occurring in contemporary fiction away from traditional clichés becomes a retrieval to the past, hiding the repressed voices which are sometimes located between a "visible that is modeled on the perspective of the desiring subject on the subject of philosophical reflection, and a quite different visible in which the subject is witness to an event created by light, that exceeds the parameters of retinal vision" (Dalgarno, 2001, p. 6).

By mobilising conventionally stated counter-discourse towards "imprudent moveable"² contemporary discourse, not by transposing the original text to make its silent spaces overtly resonant but by renaming its concealed dreams within the new linguistic and conceptual framework, the author renews both the original biographical account on Turgenev's life and his own text creation. The deconstructive practices of the modern discourse are constantly challenged by showing how traditional euphemisms can either perform or cancel out the rich dialogical debates between two epochs. A detailed analysis of the text shows how an active exercise in memory, located between reality and imagination, is constantly counter-balanced by a possessive/passive consumption, leading towards postmodern obsessive knowledge. And the narrator goes on:

"'My life is behind me', he wrote, 'and that hour spent in the railway compartment, when I almost felt like a twenty-year-old youth, was the last burst of flame!' Does he mean he almost got an erection? Our knowing age rebukes its predecessor for its platitudes and evasions, its sparks, its flames, its fires, its imprecise scorchings. Love isn't a bonfire, for God's sake, it's a hard cock and a wet cunt, we growl at these swooning, renouncing people. Get on with it! Why on earth didn't you? Cock-scared, cunt-bolted tribe of people! Hand-kissing! It's perfectly obvious what you really wanted to kiss. So why not? And on a train too. You'd just have to hold your tongue in place and let the movement of the train do the work for you. Clackety-clack, clackety-clack!" (*The Lemon Table*, p. 91).

² In chapter 3 of *Translation as Collaboration* (2014), Claire Davison underlines the significance of "an imprudent moveable" in translation: "I see such marginal echoes, where 'strangeness' is allowed to kindle, as a fine illustration of translation's power as an 'imprudent moveable' — giving a Mansfieldian edge to 'mutable mobile' theories that contemporary translation critics use to illustrate translation's power to question and deflect textual agency". (Davison, 2014, pp. 83–84).

A directly stated allusion to possessive and passive consumption, disclosed in the transgressive potentiality of the text's syntactic and lexical devices, displaces a touch of subjectivity and agency which are not mere communicative structures; they perform a complex translinguistic dialogue between two cultural situations.

The conceptual gap between "prudent fixtures" and "imprudent movables" (Davison, 2014, p. 84) is spread through heavy counterpointing. The textual dialogic destabilizing lexical arrangement renders the idea that the contemporary processes of revision and negotiation with the past give full access to this state of wavering which forms *The Lemon Table*:

"Did his imagination stop respectfully? Ours doesn't. It seems pretty plain to us in our subsequent century. A crumbling gentleman in a crumbling city on a surrogate honey-moon with a young actress. The gondoliers are splash-splashing them back to their hotel after an intimate supper, the sound-track is operetta, and we need to be told what happens next? We are not talking about reality, so the feebleness of elderly, alcohol-weakened flesh is not an issue; we are very safely in the conditional tense, with the travelling rug tucked round us. So... if only... if only... then you would have fucked her, wouldn't you? No denying it." (*The Lemon Table*, p. 96)

Thus, the double shift retrieval seems to be embodied in the intentionally performed dialogical text construction, particularly well revealed in the concept of "translinguistic transfer". According to Kristeva, "the text is therefore productivity, meaning that [...] it is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a text, many utterances taken from other texts intersect with one another and neutralise one another". (Kristeva, 1969, p. 52).³

The consumptive input of a contemporary narrator focused in the present is challenged by a secular philosophy of mind through an emphasis on memory as a complex process of permutation and insider-outsider grasp into the "buried" text and the "dead" author. This exhaustive cross-referencing offers a setting for cultural renewal, mapping qualitative understanding of complexity and confluence of traditions.

If Barthes's concept of *dérive* focuses on counter-currents to the past, whether its models or conventions, it is nonetheless true that cultural recycling is among the key dynamics of Modernity. The contemporary form of intertextual recycling, as performed in *The Lemon Table*, highlights the dialogically designed narrative process, not only the final product in a form of a text, thus underlining both the fixed historically in time and the permutatively regenerative status of canon.

Thus, the question of mediation, disclosed in such interactive, permutational text production, creates a space of textual indeterminacy, asking the reader to speculate on the significance of its gap. Therefore, dialogue and ambivalence, as intersecting and mutually neutralising processes, both contribute to maintain indecisiveness about the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of morally offensive choices explored in *The Lemon Table*.

The "imprudent moveables" both distance from and approximate to the narrator's unconventional discourse, cross-referencing also the psychological depth of Turgenev's conventional stereotyping.

3. Conclusion

"The Revival" thus lingers around the boundaries of more conventionally defined lexical practices and the unrestrained imprudent vortex. The expressive potential of lexical and stylistic devices simultaneously discomfits and legitimizes norms and conventions of the past. The collaboration between "old" and "new" becomes very well summarized by Wilson:

³ Translated and quoted by Mary Orr, in *Intertextuality* (2003), p. 27.

"The tension between our troubled encounters with those spaces and our desire to fit snugly into them is at once mundane and unspeakable. The emphasis is in a new place, not a place we can name, except provisionally, contingently, but a place that is simply 'elsewhere' than where we expected to go". (Wilson 2011, p. 88)

A double shift retrieval is located, according to the story, in the text-to-text or/and reader-to-reader relationship. The rehearsal of the past becomes the necessary interlocutor to the present. This cross-voicing (Harvey, 1995) in the history of ideas is very well stated in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (2008):

"The art, of course, is only a beginning, only a metaphor, as it always is. Larkin, visiting an empty church, wonders what will happen when 'churches fall completely out of use'. Shall we 'keep a few cathedrals chronically on show (that 'chronically' always produces a burn of envy in this writer), or 'Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?' Larkin concludes that we shall still — always — be drawn towards such abandoned sites, because 'someone will forever be surprising/A hunger in himself to be more serious.'" (*Nothing to be Frightened of*, p. 57).

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