

**STORIES WE TELL ABOUT OURSELVES  
AND OTHERS: IDENTITY AND NARRATION  
IN JULIAN BARNES'S OEUVRE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Julian Barnes's second to last book to date, *The Man in the Red Coat* (2019), is a work of non-fiction, devoted to the life of the renowned Parisian surgeon Samuel Jean de Pozzi. It is, however, a special kind of non-fiction – in fact, the book illuminates in many ways the narrative practices in Barnes's work in general. At the same time, it touches on a theme that permeates all of Barnes's fictional work, namely the construction of identity through the stories we tell about ourselves and that others tell about us. Storytelling thus emerges as a fundamental human trait: it is our responsibility to narrate, for it is only in telling stories that we can grasp the world around us.

**Keywords:** fiction; contemporary British literature; narration

For twenty years, since the publication of his first book, *Metroland* (1980), Julian Barnes's books have been remarkably consistent in quality. At the same time, they form an impressively compact whole, in which several themes (love, death, memory, the veracity of what we tell), interests (visual art, music, France) and genres (Barnes's fiction straddles the line between prose and essay) are interwoven. The author's oeuvre today comprises thirteen prose works, three short story collections, nine books of essays, memoirs and reminiscences, and also four books written under the pen name Dan Kavanagh.

One topic, however, stands out – the topic of identity and its relation to narrative, in particular the stories we tell about ourselves and those that others tell about us and, consequently, our personal histories and history at large. Both histories, personal and general, consist of random events that can be given meaning only by a narrative. The question that Barnes asks is whether such narration is indeed possible. Whereas in the case of general history, his answer seems to be sceptical, in the case of personal histories he seems to see a certain chance, however slight.

The author's second most recent book, *The Man in the Red Coat*, published in 2019, is a perfect illustration of this attitude. *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) showed that our lives and identities are mosaics of stories we create for ourselves in retrospect to justify ourselves, to weave memories through a chain of causality, and to die with the peace of mind that our lives had meaning. In *The Man in the Red Coat*, Barnes shows to what extent our

identities are created by stories supplemented by the fragmented memories of others and how often these identities are multiple.

*The Man in the Red Coat*, whose central figure is the eminent French gynaecologist and surgeon Samuel Pozzi, owes its origins to a chance encounter. The doctor's portrait, entitled *Dr Pozzi at Home*, painted by the American painter John S. Sargent in 1881, was first seen by Julian Barnes in 2015. That was when the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles loaned it to London's National Gallery. For the English writer, the fascination with the painting had two dimensions: the first was the visual impression, where Pozzi's personality managed to overwhelm the mesmerising red colour of his coat (or perhaps his dressing gown); the second was what Barnes learned about Pozzi when, under the influence of a powerful visual experience, he began to gather information about the physician.

Julian Barnes is widely known for his close relationship with France and his excellent knowledge of its culture – in fact, he made his first major success with a book inspired by Gustave Flaubert's life and work, *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984). Yet encountering Samuel Pozzi was a surprise for him. Barnes began to find out details about his life and in doing so discovered that this doctor – a pioneer of many modern medical practices, especially abdominal surgery, surgical hygiene and gynaecology – was actually at the very centre of the social and cultural life of Paris at the time. He knew practically everyone, whether directly as their doctor, the doctor of their partners, or simply as a friend: Pozzi was a celebrity in Paris at the time. It is no coincidence, after all, that he also appeared on the cards that accompanied Félix Potin's chocolates – in fact, these were similar to today's popular athletes' cards, but with the difference that they depicted not only athletes but also prominent writers, artists and other celebrities of the society of the time. These portrait cards, called *Celebrités contemporaines*, were published in three series between 1898 and 1922 and can now serve as an interesting document of the period. Barnes makes extensive use of them in the book, and the portrait photographs from the cards accompany us throughout the book. In fact, they form its axis.

Samuel Pozzi came from a Protestant pastor's family of Italian-Swiss origin. He lost his mother at the age of ten and his father remarried an Englishwoman, making Pozzi bilingual from a relatively early age, and his close relation to the English-speaking world marked his career significantly: he pioneered the adoption of new scientific knowledge in medicine from England and the United States, where he himself travelled to lecture. After studying medicine in Paris, Pozzi quickly established himself professionally and socially. He became a sought-after physician and, because of his attractive appearance and refined manners, a popular companion of the Parisian elite.

Six years after his graduation, in 1879, Pozzi married a wealthy heiress, Thérèse Loth-Cazalis, with whom he had three children, but the marriage was not a happy one and lasted only formally for many years. In the meantime, Pozzi reportedly seduced one of his patients after another and had a number of extended love affairs, most notably with Emma Sedelmeyer Fischhof, with whom he made scandalous public appearances. Nonetheless, because of his discretion, these affairs remain shrouded in secrecy.

As Barnes's account proceeds, Pozzi's mature years are marked by a series of successes. He is a wealthy man who can devote himself to collecting art, befriending leading artists and writers such as Marcel Proust, and becoming a senator for Bergerac. At the same time, he becomes involved in the Dreyfus affair and stands firmly on the side of the

wrongly accused officer. When Dreyfus is shot by a deranged journalist after his acquittal, Pozzi rushes to treat him. “Chauvinism is one of the forms of ignorance” (Barnes 2019, 142), Barnes quotes Pozzi himself, and it is at this time that Pozzi appears most sympathetic. His tumultuous love affairs and a certain vanity recede into the background, while his education and insight come to the fore. For Barnes, Samuel Pozzi becomes the prototype of the European, the kind of man the author’s fellow citizens rejected in the UK referendum – and yes, *The Man in the Red Coat* is also a Brexit book.

Yet Barnes is not trying to write Pozzi’s biography. After all, Claude Vanderpooten wrote a fairly comprehensive one in 1992. The key question remains: how does the text relate to Pozzi? Barnes has written several texts inspired by the lives of real people: the most successful of them all being *Flaubert’s Parrot*, and more recently, *The Noise of Time* (2016), about Dmitri Shostakovich. But these are texts in which he combines factual bits and pieces with fictional narratives. “The traditional, academic approach to biography – the search for documentation, the sifting of evidence, the balancing of contradictory opinions, the cautious hypothesis, the modestly tentative conclusion – has run itself into the ground; the method has calcified” (Barnes 1982, n.p.), as Barnes explains in his review of the English translation of Sartre’s *The Family Idiot*, implying that it is fiction which expands life, gives it a real meaning, which is something he himself accomplished in *Flaubert’s Parrot*. In *The Man in the Red Coat*, he offers yet another perspective: “Biography is a collection of holes tied together with string, and nowhere more so than with the sexual and amatory life. For some, there is nothing easier than understanding the sex life of someone you’ve never met, and easier still when they’re conveniently dead; or in posthumously adding another conquest to the dance card of a known Don Juan. Others simplify things by maintaining that human sexual habits have always been more or less the same, the only variables being the degree of hypocrisy and cover-up” (Barnes 2019, 112).

It is true that Barnes writes almost nothing about Pozzi’s love life because the famous gynaecologist was extremely discreet. And we do not actually learn much of his life either, but the gaps that would otherwise be filled by a fictional narrative are now – since this is a work of non-fiction – acknowledged. Throughout the book, Barnes reiterates countless times that he knows nothing about most of Pozzi’s life. He only has access to what has survived in the recollections of his (not very reliable) contemporaries, or what official historical documents have preserved. For such a famous and influential figure, there is surprisingly little extant. What is even more interesting, the blanks in the information about Pozzi’s life constitute a multiplicity. By acknowledging that he knows very little, that this information comes from many unreliable sources and is sometimes contradictory, Barnes presents us with many Pozzis, not just one. On a superficial level, these identities may seem mutually exclusive; on a deeper level, they point to the fact that there is no such thing as “identity”: the identity of a person as such which is the same as himself/herself is never there at the present moment. It is always in retrospect that these identities are constructed. In a way, this book of non-fiction provides a rather unique key to the best of Barnes’s novels, such as the above-mentioned *Sense of an Ending*, in which an unreliable narrator retrospectively reconstructs his life, to give his life meaning that would reconcile him with the coming of old age and eventual death.

We meet Samuel Pozzi at the beginning of the book as one of a trio of French dandies who arrived in London in 1885 to make purchases of an “intellectual and decorative

nature” (Barnes 2019, 21). The other two are Prince Edmond de Polignac and Count Robert de Montesquiou-Fézensac. Count Montesquiou in particular is a remarkable figure through whom Barnes’s book transcends into the realm of literature. Also, he is the case in point as far as multiple identities are concerned, for he is present several times in the text – as himself (although the information is almost as scarce as in the case of Pozzi), but mainly in the form of his fictional images. The eccentric dandy served as a model to Marcel Proust for the character of Baron de Charles, to J.K. Huysmans for the character of Des Esseintes, to Edmund Rostand for the character of Chantecler, and finally to Jean Lorrain for the character of M. de Phocas (Barnes wittily remarks that the English pronunciation of this name shows an allusion to the Count’s homosexuality). With this multiplication, Montesquiou, a descendant of d’Artagnan, takes on truly gargantuan proportions and it is a testament to Barnes’s stylistic skill that he does not let it completely take over the book. Unlike Pozzi, neither of his contemporaries are professionals in any field but are simply men of leisure. Pozzi is the only one who can navigate the snobbish echelons of high society, but he is also an excellent scholar and a man behind an extraordinary amount of often ground-breaking scientific work.

While Barnes admits that “we may speculate, as long as we also admit that our speculations are novelistic, and that the novel has almost as many forms as there are forms of love and sex” (21), there is not much of this sort of speculation in the book. “We cannot know” is a phrase that appears most frequently in the text. Nor are speculations needed, because Pozzi’s life really serves more as a kind of skeleton structure. At times, the reader feels as if he or she is in the salon where Pozzi’s friends come and go. The author will make a remark about this or that, or switch into an essayistic mode when he does not have enough information. Sometimes he will present some cultural reflection, mainly on the differences between the French and the British:

The British are thought to be pragmatic, the French emotional. Yet in matters of the heart, this order was often reversed. The British believed in love and marriage – that love led to and survived marriage, that sentimentality was an expression of true feeling, and that Queen Victoria’s loving marriage and loyal widowhood were a national example. The French had the more pragmatic approach: you married for social position, for money or property, for the perpetuation of family, but not for love. Love rarely survived marriage, and it was a foolish hypocrisy to pretend that it might. Marriage was merely a base camp from which the adventurous heart sallied forth. (42)

Sometimes he comes up with a *bon mot* that is in tune with the times: “Nothing dates like excess” (103).

It is, however, remarkable – and perhaps telling – that in a text which quotes so many French authors, the principal one, Michel de Montaigne, is absent. The meandering structure of the book, not even divided into chapters, is stylistically closest to a work of a brilliant essayist. The absence of Montaigne in a book which may serve as a key to Barnes’s oeuvre is all the more conspicuous. Indeed, Barnes owes much to Montaigne, both stylistically and in his approach to life and the past.

Alongside the picture of French literature – Huysmans and Proust featuring most prominently here – the book also offers a picture of society. And it is by no means a flattering one. Barnes certainly does not idealise the Belle Époque, quite on the contrary. He

might depict the period, which he believes was mercifully ended by the First World War, too bleakly – as a harbinger of our own time. It is a time of disruption when society is convulsed by irrational passions (the Dreyfus affair being the best example), and rife with violence in the form of duels (“According to one conservative estimate, there were at least one hundred and fifty duels in Paris between 1895 and 1905 – and that was in the fields of politics, journalism and literature alone”, 48), but also assassinations. And it was also, of course, a time of rising nationalism across Europe.

This multi-layered book, depicting individual fates but also relations between two nations, ends in a tragic finale. It is a book that may be read in many ways: as a portrait of the age, as an essay on French literature, as a Brexit book, or as a book on the impossibility of biography and the ubiquity of gossip and hearsay. It is also a valuable contribution to discussions on history and our possibilities to know it. Having given the reader various, often contradictory accounts of people and events, Barnes states: “On the other hand, none of this means that truth is negotiable. Wilde once declared that ‘between two truths, the falser is truer’. But this is mere sophistry posing as paradoxical wisdom” (114).

For Barnes, identity is never present but always constructed as historical – with all the ambiguity this implies. Again, this is best exemplified by the above-mentioned *Sense of an Ending*, but we will find it already in his novelistic debut *Metroland*. Identity, thus constructed, is closely related to general history and serves as something that establishes community, belonging, and order. On the other hand, one must always be aware of the fact that this order, often created out of despair, is something that is not natural but made. In *Levels of Life*, commenting on the grief he experienced after the loss of his wife, Barnes writes:

Perhaps grief, which destroys all patterns, destroys even more: the belief that any pattern exists. But we cannot, I think, survive without such belief. So each of us must be prepared to find, or re-erect, a pattern. Writers believe in the patterns their words make, which they hope and trust add up to their ideas, to stories, to truths. This is always their salvation, whether griefless or griefstruck. (Barnes 2013, 86–87)

This sentence seems to echo ideas presented in the rather eccentric, and very ambitious, 1989 book *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, namely the 1/2 chapter which is not a chapter at all and is called “Parenthesis”.

That chapter does not seem to even belong in the book. The varied mosaic of stories from human history, presented in different styles and narratives, is suddenly complemented by a personal, rather intimate confession, which differs from the rest of the book mainly by the absence of irony. The author seems to remove the mask – but does he really remove it? Can the sudden change of tone be trusted? – and moves to a personal level. The latter claims a more “authentic” status, as if he wants to speak the “truth”, although we know from previous stories how tricky truth is, especially historical truth. In the book, Barnes returns to questions that resonate strongly already in *Flaubert’s Parrot* and that will haunt him for the rest of his writing career: how can one write about the past? Can we know history? And the truth? The “parenthesis” is meant to somehow bring the texts fragmented across a variety of genres and themes together and make a whole out of a set of seemingly disparate narrative units. By suppressing irony and switching to a personal

mode, it appropriates history and gives it “its” meaning. In a later novel, *The Sense of an Ending*, the protagonist says:

Someone once said that his favourite times in history were when things were collapsing, because that meant something new was being born. Does this make any sense if we apply it to our individual lives? To die when something new is being born – even if that something new is our very own self? Because just as all political and historical change sooner or later disappoints, so does adulthood. So does life. Sometimes I think the purpose of life is to reconcile us to its eventual loss by wearing us down, by proving, however long it takes, that life isn't all it's cracked up to be. (Barnes 2011, 105)

The “Parenthesis” seems out of place not only by virtue of its style but also in the ambivalence or paradox it contains. The sub-chapters present world history in accordance with the view we have come to label “postmodern”. The picture of history is necessarily idiosyncratic, fragmentary, ignoring the “big history” and focusing instead on marginal episodes. Yet it depicts these in such a way that their meaning is highly problematic. The theme of violence, of the division between the pure and the impure, the chosen and the damned, constantly emerges and winds its way through history like a red line. History as a whole is incomprehensible and makes no sense. The only meaning available is a personal history, which in turn is highly purposeful. One of the book's many characters dreams of a “personal history of the world”. Such a history is necessarily non-objective but rather subjective in the strongest sense of the word, where emotion must be an integral part of the story. It is no coincidence, after all, that couples feature so strongly in the ten and a half chapters of *A History of the World* – even personal histories are meaningful only if they are in relation to the other. Historical solipsism is not recognised by Barnes. But with this message, the “half-chapter” goes against the rest of the book by – it seems – bringing liberal humanism back into play.

Salman Rushdie criticised the “Parenthesis”, claiming that Barnes the essayist should make way for Barnes the fully-fledged novelist, and that instead of talking about love, he presented the thing itself (Guignery, 64). Such criticism, however, is a misunderstanding of Barnes's book, which is best viewed from the perspective of the aforementioned *Levels of Life*. Barnes is faithful to his role model and mentor Montaigne, and the essayistic dimension of the text is crucial to him. Rushdie can be argued against precisely because Barnes takes one position of contemporary writing to the extreme by his radical approach to the genre of the text (simplistically, a novel is, in his view, whatever he declares to be a novel). The personal, essayistic dimension is thus necessary, for at the level of the genre (or at least “genre” as we are accustomed to perceiving it) it exemplifies what is claimed in the text. Let it be immediately added that, as an author, Barnes is most convincing precisely in those texts that defy clear classification and slip into the plane of the essay; by contrast, his “full-blooded” novels of the *Arthur & George* (2005) type are much weaker.

It is the relation to another person, the intimate connection, the stepping out of oneself and the motif of survival – or the relationship to death, if you like – that establishes Barnes's relationship to history. “That's one of the central problems of history, isn't it, sir? The question of subjective versus objective interpretation, the fact that we need to know the history of the historian in order to understand the version that is being put in front of us” (Barnes 2011, 12), says the precocious Adrian, one of the characters in *The Sense*

*of an Ending*. In *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, this is also a major topic. In the book, history is viewed from various subversive positions, for example, the very opening story of Noah's Ark is told by a woodworm that has infiltrated the Ark as a stowaway. Thus, world history breaks down into disparate and often conflicting narratives, until the reader is left with the impression that history is in effect just a haphazard collection of subjectively motivated narratives, so that the "Parenthesis" necessarily comes with a question calling for objectivity, for truth. Barnes perceives this in close connection with love, although his conception is not – as it might seem – Christian, but rather atheistic and pragmatic. Love is the guarantor of truth, and belief in truth, some truth, intersubjective, if not objective truth, is necessary for survival. Love is our only hope, as the narrator says. We all know, continues the narrator, that objective truth is unattainable, that when an event occurs, a number of subjective truths emerge before us, which we somehow evaluate and then fabricate into history, into some God's-eye version of what "really" happened. But this top-down version is false – it is a charming but impossible fake, says the narrator. He then adds that, despite the above, we must believe in the attainability of objective truth. And if not, we must at least believe in its 99 percent attainability. And if we cannot believe even that, we have to believe that 43 percent objective truth is better than 41 percent. We have no choice, or else we are lost, falling victim to deceptive relativity, valuing one liar's version as much as another liar's, giving up in the face of the intricacy of it all, admitting that the victor has a stake not only in the spoils but also in the truth.

Barnes touches on a number of further interesting questions here. The first is the subjectivity of historical narrative, hence the relationship between historical truth (whatever we mean by that) and fiction or even falsehood; the second is the question of history and its connection to human finitude or ending as such.

The problem of the fictive nature of historiography, or the notion of history as a construct in the creation of which the author (historian) uses the same linguistic and narrative tools as the author of a fictional work, is one of the most debated in contemporary historiographical theory. The questioning of historiography's automatic claim to historical truth is a legacy of the 1960s and 1970s. It stems mainly from the cogent studies of Hayden White, but other interesting perspectives have been offered by Paul Veyne, Roger Chartier, and Paul Ricoeur. While the sceptical charge of these theories was characterised by its punch and impact, difficulties began to emerge when the authors in question wanted – if they indeed wanted – to step beyond scepticism. Are historiography and fiction any different? The problem, it seems, has no formal solution. Purely formally, it is impossible to establish criteria at the level of the text that would distinguish a text of a fictional nature from a historiographical text. Hayden White does not even attempt to do so; Chartier and Ricoeur come up with intriguing solutions, but these are ultimately based on their religious faith.

In *History and Truth*, Paul Ricoeur presents some interesting reflections that are close to the way Julian Barnes works with history. Ricoeur speaks of a subjectivity that is yet to be constituted by history. "We expect history to be the history of man, and that this history of man will help the reader, instructed by the history of historians, to construct a subjectivity of a higher order, a subjectivity not of self but of man", the French philosopher writes, before noting the following:

But this concern, this expectation of a passage – through history – from self to man is no longer, strictly speaking, epistemological but philosophical: For we expect from the reading and mediation of historical works a subjectivity of thought: but this interest no longer concerns the historian writing history, but the reader, especially the philosophical reader, in whom every book and every work is completed – at his risk and peril. (Ricoeur, 24)

In the essay, Ricoeur goes on to say that to consider the subjectivity of the historian is to ask about the way in which this subjectivity is constituted by the historical fabric (28).

The problem outlined by Ricoeur turns out to be extremely relevant to Barnes and, at the same time, it can be used as a major criticism against the theory presented by Hayden White. White's theoretical model is based on the premise that there is a subjective historian (historiographer) and a "chronicle" (sequence of events). The historian takes these events and constructs a narrative from them, which, White says, he or she exposes in a chosen mode: he or she may portray the events tragically, ironically, or as a farce. If we read Ricoeur's essay carefully, especially the passage on historical material, we realise how much more prescient he is than White. For White uncritically assumes the isolation and neutrality of historical material: in his construction, the historian works with hard facts, which he somehow assembles into a sequence and uses linguistic tropes to create a story out of them. But is this not too much of an abstraction?

The model put forward by Hayden White is highly reductive. It assumes the existence of some set of facts that are unencumbered by narrative in their facticity. But local history has shown very clearly how problematic such an abstraction is. In writing local history, historians often find that they have no choice but to use rumour, hearsay, or legends as historical material. On a theoretical level, White's theory is then challenged by David Carr, who points out that the "historical record" is not just documents, dates, names and events, but also narratives (Mayer, 66).

We have come full circle back to Barnes. What may at first glance appear to be a "sentimental" excursus or an evasive manoeuvre from novel to essay is a key component that ties the book together and gives it its essential idea. One cannot write about history without thinking about subjectivity. A purely formalist point of view will never allow one to distinguish between truth and falsehood, between historiography and fiction. Historiography and fiction, Barnes suggests, are located very close to one another, yet they are two distinct fields. One can certainly enrich the other, yet they remain separate.

History without a personal dimension does not exist for Barnes. But this does not simply mean mere relativity. It is only from a personal perspective that one can speak about history, and not only for the sake of a subjective perspective and for stepping out of oneself. The personal dimension is still framed by its finitude. Reflections on history and its depiction in the text are thus linked in Barnes to two other themes: the aforementioned love and death, or, better still, the relation to death and one's own finitude. Without this limitation, history as such is impossible. It is impossible to talk about it. Only finitude and the relationship to it establish the perspective from which the past can be viewed.

For Barnes, history is always personal, and the relationship to finitude establishes its meaning. *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* is just one of many histories (as the indefinite article suggests); it is a history that is necessarily fragmentary, yet these fragments have a coherence – and at the same time they have meaning in themselves. They are not stages on some long journey, simply because for the agnostic Barnes, universal

history is impossible. Any attempt to capture the great history of the world is doomed to failure in advance: in the end, it is an attempt to grasp eternity, which is, of course, something beyond where the rational Barnes refuses to go.

Barnes concentrates entirely on life here and now, which he wants to capture in its historical perspective. As a writer, he is interested in looking back at life and in the essentially human effort to somehow capture one's own life, to give it meaning, which in turn means to write one's story on the basis of a selective choice of events. We find this moment already in the author's debut, *Metroland* (1980). This is a "Bildungsroman" that does not take itself entirely seriously. The narrator views his youth and his fascination with French culture and existentialist philosophy in retrospect and with considerable irony. He plays off against each other a stereotypical image of metropolitan Paris and suburban London ("Metroland"), which are seen from two temporally distinct perspectives, with the former treated with a certain condescension. In the past, suburban England stands out as limited, backward and repulsive, while Paris is portrayed as an unassailable model, a symbol of metropolitan culture and progress. In retrospect, however, the perspective changes. It is as if the disillusionment with the radical politics of the 1960s is being echoed here: the reaction to the events of 1968 leads to the separation of the two protagonists. As young men, they looked back on French existentialism and their opposition to everything that symbolises or remotely resembles bourgeois values.

Chris, the main protagonist, sees his Parisian period as a youthful infatuation and his turn to suburban life as a sobering experience that gives his life its proper order, while Toni sees his former fascination with existentialism as formative for his later life and the start of his career as a committed left-wing freelance writer. As readers, we are in no position to make an impartial judgement, as the story is narrated by Chris, who understandably sees the difference from his perspective and fits it into his conservative framework. However, another thing is yet more interesting: Chris needs his life to make sense, and so he must write his "history", and it is obvious that this history must culminate in the present state, i.e. life in the suburbs. Chris's history is thus the apotheosis of settled suburban life. Barnes, however, is too subtle an author to let the novel sound black and white. Authorial irony seeps into Chris's narrative, especially at moments when it is clear that the narrator wants to justify his own choices and life above all else – for example, when he repeatedly assures the reader of how cultured he is and that he can quote Mallarmé even while mowing the lawn. It is obvious that history, as he gives it to us, is very personal and very purposeful – with some exaggeration one could say that it is a means of survival.

A very similar motif can be found in *The Sense of an Ending*. Here, finality is already present in the title and the book further develops the basic ideas or themes of Barnes's work overall: history, human life and its finitude. Barnes's peers have recently taken up the same theme: Martin Amis conceived of this looking back in the form of a farce, a look at a time in his life that once seemed like an open future, only now the hourglass has turned and the narrator cannot identify with what he once was. Similarly, in his remarkable prose *The Sea*, John Banville presents his readers with a sombre meditation on the passage of time and the indifference of the world, or nature. Barnes is much more playful, however. His narrator, Toni, a man in his sixties, is viewed with the same irony and is as unreliable as all the author's previous narrators: very little can be trusted, and the impression gradually grows in the reader that all the seemingly pro-

found reflections on the unreliability of memory are ultimately supremely ironic (on the author's part) rather than being a kind of self-defence against the insight that he has not actually lived his life at all. In a roundabout way, we have returned to *Metroland* and the same narrative strategy. The narrator appropriates history as a means of self-preservation. He creates meaning in order to survive.

Where do these other takes on the meaning of history and storytelling leave *The Man in the Red Coat*, though? Samuel Pozzi, as captured by Barnes, has no stories to tell, and the same applies to his companions, especially Montesquiou-Fézensac. Their lives, or to be more precise, the narratives of their lives, are told by others. These narratives are often contradictory, elusive, yet they are told and as such, they constitute their identities. The implication, in my view, is clear: while we can hardly speak of an identity that is not a narrative, we must also speak of a responsibility that man has to narrate. For it is only in narration that we make sense of the world and of ourselves.

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#### RÉSUMÉ: PŘÍBĚHY, KTERÉ VYPRÁVÍME O SOBĚ A DRUHÝCH: IDENTITA A VYPRÁVĚNÍ V DÍLE JULIANA BARNESE

Poslední kniha Juliana Barnese *Muž v červeném kabátě* je non-fikce, věnovaná dílu pařížského lékaře Pozziho. Je to nicméně zvláštní literatura faktu – kniha totiž v mnohém osvětluje vypravěčské postupy v Barnesově díle obecně. Zároveň se dotýká tématu, který prostupuje celým Barnesovým fiktivním dílem, totiž konstrukce identity prostřednictvím příběhů, které vyprávíme o sobě a které o nás vyprávějí druzí. Vyprávění příběhů se tak jeví jako zásadní lidská vlastnost: je naší odpovědností vyprávět, neboť jen ve vyprávění dokážeme uchopit svět kolem nás.

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