



The Pain and Irony of Death in Julian Barnes's *Memoirs Nothing to Be Frightened Of and Levels of Life*

Maricel Oró-Piqueras

Universitat de Lleida

Abstract

Julian Barnes is one of the best-known contemporary British authors, not only for his taste for formal experimentation well-documented in the novels and short stories he has published since the 1980s, but also for his obsession with death. Despite the fact that death – as a prime concern expressed through his characters' discussions, particularly when they are in their old age – has been present in most of Barnes fictional works, the topic becomes centre-stage in the two memoirs that he has published, namely, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (2008) and *Levels of Life* (2013). In his memoirs, Barnes connects his personal experience with the works of philosophers and writers and with the experiences of those around him with the aim of trying to discern how he himself and, by extension, his own contemporaries and Western society have dealt with death. For Barnes, writing becomes a therapy to confront his own existential fears as well as traumatic experiences – such as the sudden death of his wife as described in *Levels of Life* – at the same time that he reflects on the place death occupies in contemporary times.

Keywords: Julian Barnes, death, memory, contemporary fiction

Resumen

Julian Barnes es uno de los autores británicos contemporáneos más conocidos, no solo por su gusto por la experimentación bien documentada en las novelas y cuentos que ha publicado desde los años 80, sino también por su obsesión con la muerte. A pesar que la muerte – como una de sus principales preocupaciones expresada a través de la narrativa de sus personajes, particularmente cuando se encuentran en la vejez – está presente en muchas obras de Barnes, la muerte se convierte en tema principal en sus dos memorias, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (2008) y *Levels of Life* (2013). En sus memorias, Barnes conecta su experiencia personal con trabajos de filósofos y escritores reconocidos, así como con su propia experiencia personal con la finalidad de discernir como se aborda la cuestión de la muerte en la sociedad contemporánea. Para Barnes, escribir se convierte en una terapia para afrontar sus propios miedos existenciales, así como sus experiencias traumáticas – como sería la muerte inesperada de su esposa recogida en *Levels of Life* – al mismo tiempo que reflexiona sobre el lugar que la muerte ocupa en la época contemporánea.

Palabras clave: Julian Barnes, muerte, memoria, ficción contemporánea

Introduction

Julian Barnes is one of the best-known contemporary British authors, not only for his taste for formal experimentation, which is evident in the novels and short stories he has published since the 1980s, but also for his obsession with writing about and reflecting on death in order to try to understand life itself. In fact, Barnes confessed in a number of interviews that his decision to become an author was a response not just to his love for words and language but also to his fear of death (Holmes 2009, 25). Despite the fact that death – as a prime concern expressed through his characters' discussions, particularly when they are in their old age – has been present in most of Barnes's fictional works, the topic takes centre stage in the two memoirs he has published, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (2008) and *Levels of Life* (2013). Whereas in the first memoir, Barnes connects his personal experience and the experiences of those around him to the works of well-known philosophers and writers with the aim of trying to discern how contemporary Western citizens relate to death, in the second one he focuses on grief, following the death of his wife.

Despite the fact that both *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* and *Levels of Life* can be classified as memoirs, following Julian Barnes's tendency to experiment with different genres, the novels blend fact with fiction and personal experiences with meditations

on the studies and treatises of well-known writers who have written on death and grief as part of the human condition. As he himself stated, for Barnes, each book represents a new beginning because 'in order to write, you have to convince yourself that it's a new departure not only for you but for the entire history of the novel' (Childs 2011, 5). Robert Kusek (2015, 149) actually defines Julian Barnes's works as 'powerfully resistant to the 'law[s] of genre[s]' which have eagerly welcomed generic 'impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity''. In fact, Barnes plays with the idea that any book is the result of the interplay between one's background and knowledge and one's subjective interpretation of memories. In this respect, and to draw on the definitions provided by Craig R. Barclay (1988) and Paul J. Eakin (1985) in their respective works, autobiographical writing offers a reconstructed version of one's memories filtered by time and experience. Thus, whereas for Barclay, autobiography 'is an artefact, not based on precise recollections but manufactured to best represent one's contemporary view of self' (84), for Eakin 'autobiographical truths are not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation' (3). Meanwhile, Jerome Brumer (2001) has defined autobiography as 'an act of entrenchment [...]. We wish to present ourselves to others (and to ourselves) as typical or characteristic or 'culture conforming' in some way' (29). In his memoirs, Barnes is not only very aware of the artificial element in the memoir genre, but he actually exploits that part in order to enrich his own descriptions and reflections of the events that have marked his experience, while commenting on those cultural beliefs and values that have delineated contemporary Western society, the pain and irony of death among them.

Memoir as Coming to Terms With One's Fear of Death

Ageing, old age and death are topics that have been present in Barnes's fiction since he published his first novel, *Metroland*, in 1980. However, it was not until he was in his sixties that he published his first memoir, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (2008), followed by his second memoir, *Levels of Life* (2013), published only a few years later, after the sudden death of his wife. Thus, his two memoirs are interrelated not only with his own process of ageing but also with the death of his parents – a topic with which he deals in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* – and the loss of his wife, the main topic in *Levels of Life*. Whereas *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* is written from a first-person narrator perspective, *Levels of Life* is divided into three clear-cut parts that run together through the metaphor of ballooning, with Julian Barnes narrating his own experience in the third part of the book. Research on narrative and narratology highlights the fact that an author builds their own identity as well as their own experience of the world

according to their cultural background, because, as Jan-Erik Ruth and Gary Kenyon (1996) and Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh (2001) have argued, we are storyteller beings with narrative as 'a central hinge between culture and mind' (Brockmeier 2001, 10). For Ruth and Kenyon, 'storytelling is basic for the organization of experience'; thus, 'human beings are always constructing narratives or stories which reflect an intersection of genetic disposition, past experience, and choice or interpretation' (1996, 3). On the other hand, Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh highlight the fact that 'more and more scholars have become aware of the meandering, discursive web of narrative in which all our knowledge – what in German is called *Wissen* and in French *savoir* – is entangled' (2001, 4). Through narrative, and, in this case, through memoirs, not only knowledge but also cultural information together with values and beliefs are transmitted, something which Barnes states, comments on and questions in his two memoirs.

Barnes's works are placed within a late-twentieth-century Western – more specifically, British – tradition (Moseley 1997, Holmes 2009, Childs 2011). His characters, plots and point of view draw on his own experience as a contemporary British man of letters with a broad background in French language and culture as well as worldwide history. However, the concerns he addresses have a universal resonance, as they are ingrained in concerns attached to humankind. For Vanessa Moseley (1997, 13), 'what is constant [in Barnes's works and characters] is the human heart and human passions', together with 'what will save them from the forces of history'. On the other hand, Peter Childs considers that Barnes's fiction 'essentially addresses the spiritual void of the middle-class man' and that it does so through characters who 'are striving for some way of finding meaning in an increasingly depoliticised, secularised, localised and depthless world' (2011, 11). The personas that Barnes develops in his memoirs are actually not far away from the characters that the author introduces in his fictional novels. In this respect, Barnes presents himself as a narrator who intends to come to terms with his fear of death – understood as his own extinction as well as the loss of his parents and his wife – but also as a writer and person who intends to build some kind of meaning in his own life and, by extension, in the lives of his contemporaries. Social and narrative gerontologists Ruth and Kenyon (1996) and Cohler and Cole (2004), among others, have theorised about the fact that a coherent life narrative actually has a positive effect on the ageing process, because, as they argue, 'within contemporary society, maintenance of a sense of coherence or personal integrity, making sense of unpredictable life changes is essential for morale and positive well-being' (Cohler and Cole 2004, 63). For Barnes's persona in his memoirs, writing in itself is a way of keeping this integrity despite the fact that

this narrative is always subject to alteration and re-interpretation, a process that Ruth and Kenyon (1996) and Randall and Kenyon (2004) consider as actually leading to wisdom. Freeman, for his part, defines the process of 'rewriting the self' as being both an interpretative one and also a recollected one 'in which we survey and explore our own histories, towards the end of making and remaking sense of who and what we are' (1993, 6). Similarly, Woodward (1997, 4) defines memoirs as reminiscences 'of familiar past events' which are both 'generative and restorative' (1997, 4). With his two memoirs, Barnes tries to discern the meaning of living – of his own life but also those of his contemporaries – and, with it, the meaning of dying because, as the author states in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, 'I understand (I think) that life depends on death. That we cannot have a planet in the first place without the previous deaths of collapsing stars.' (2008, 182) Glennys Howarth starts her sociological treatise on death and dying by stating that 'mortality may be a universal feature of human societies, but the form it takes and the ways in which we deal with it is complex and reflects the social and cultural diversity among and within every human society.' (2007, 2) In *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* and *Levels of Life*, Barnes not only demonstrates the complexity of understanding death – and with it, life and ageing – but also the extent to which the way we perceive it is a combination of social and individual beliefs, in which his own experiences and those of his contemporaries are included.

Nothing to Be Frightened Of: **Reflecting on the Meaning of Life and Death**

Nothing to Be Frightened Of starts with Barnes's persona stating, 'I don't believe in God, but I miss Him' (2008, 1) and continues with the author introducing his brother, maternal grandparents and his own parents as referents to his own construction of life and death. It is through recollections of his family that Barnes revises the beliefs and values that he inherited from his family context, because, as Kenyon states, 'as human beings, we are locked in by our earlier experiences and by a particular view of death' (1996, 31). Barnes's persona states right from the beginning that '[t]his is not, by the way, my 'autobiography'' (34) and, in fact, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* is 'so bursting with voices that it seems almost to be a novel' (2008, 1), as Penelope Lively described the book. In the first pages of his memoir, Barnes recalls the fact that his maternal grandmother had actually left her Methodist background and turned to socialism. As a consequence, and also partly because of her very British character, as Barnes describes it, his mother inherits a very practical way of looking at the world that Barnes defines in the following terms:

In my childhood, the three unmentionable subjects were the traditional ones: religion, politics and sex. By the time my mother and I came to discuss these matters – the first two, that is, the third being permanently off the agenda – she was 'true blue' in politics, as I would guess she always had been. As for religion, she told me firmly that she didn't want 'any of that mumbo-jumbo' at her funeral. (2008, 5)

Thus, Barnes explains that, as a result of his family's agnostic background, he and his brother resorted to literature and philosophy, respectively, to try to make sense of the world. As he states, 'I left philosophy to my brother and returned to literature, which did, and still does, tells us best what the world consists of.' (2008, 151) For Barnes, narrative, and, in this case, fictional narrative is a plausible way of making sense of the world, with one's own narrative at the centre of it. At the end of the day, fictional narrative departs from an author's own experience and view of the world, and it is through this sieve that the author creates their art.

Together with having a consistent narrative, death is an essential part of life and, through the different authors to whom Barnes refers in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, he tries to discern why death has become an almost taboo topic in the contemporary Western world. The author actually attributes this clear-cut, and at the same time, unproductive separation between life and death to modern philosophy; as he states, '(Montaigne) is where our modern thinking about death begins; he is the link between the wise exemplars of the Ancient World and our attempt to find a modern, grown-up, non-religious acceptance of our inevitable end. *Philosopher, c'est apprendre à mourir.*' (2008, 39) Barnes states his admiration for this theory, according to which, 'since we cannot defeat death, the best form of counter-attack is to have it constantly in mind' (41) because, according to Montaigne, through thinking about death, one is actually released 'from its servitude' and melancholy is substituted by 'reverie' (40). However, as Barnes's narrative voice argues, also quoting philosopher Philippe Ariès, one of the reasons death seems to be increasingly feared and, thus, made invisible from Western societies is actually increased longevity, to the point that the author argues that 'it has become morbidly bad manners to raise it' (40) in everyday conversation. Since death is being erased from our day-to-day realities, as sociologists such as Norbert Elias and Glenys Howarth have theorised, we are also less equipped to confront both old age and death. For Elias (1985), the fear of death is intrinsic to advanced societies, in which a promise of eternal youth through constant consumption and production takes us further away from the inevitable and at the same time desired – if one intends to have a long life – ageing of the body. This implies not only one's death but also the death of those surrounding us; thus, in a way, we are also less equipped to deal with

mourning and grief. Howarth refers to the sequestration theory supported by Giddens (1991) and Mellor (1993), according to which death is 'removed from the public realm'. This sequestration precisely occurs because death 'poses problems of meaning for the lives of individuals in complex, postmodern societies' to the point that death becomes 'publicly absent but privately present' (Howarth, 2007, 35). For his part, Elias (1985) named his book *The Loneliness of the Dying*, referring precisely to the tendency he attributes to advanced societies to make ageing and death increasingly invisible. In this respect, Barnes states, 'I have seen two dead people, and touched one of them; but I've never seen anyone die, and may never do so, unless and until I see myself die. If death ceased to be talked about when it first really began to be feared, and then more so when we started to live longer, it has also gone off the agenda because it has ceased to be there, with us, in the house.' (2008, 133) Thus, Barnes concurs with Elias in considering that '[n]owadays we make death as invisible as possible' (133) by resourcing to institutionalisation and professionals who deal with infirmity, extreme old age and death itself; as a consequence, the author considers that we do not give a proper farewell to our loved ones because we distance ourselves from the experience of death by keeping the process of dying medicalised and sanitised.

Thus, according to Barnes in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, one possible way of actually surviving an inevitable death – as the result of the ageing of the body, if lucky, is memory. For Barnes, individual and collective memory, understood as either family memory or community memory is key in order to survive as an individual and as a community. As he states, '[m]emory is identity. I have believed this since – oh, since I can remember. You are what you have done; what you have done is in your memory; what you remember defines who you are; when you forget your life you cease to be, even before your death.' (2008, 140) Thus, the writing of *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* responds precisely to this act of recollecting and reminiscence that Freeman (1993) and Woodward (1997) point to when defining life writing, as Barnes himself states in his first memoir:

This is not, by the way, 'my autobiography'. Nor am I 'in search of my parents'. I know that being someone's child involves both a sense of nauseated familiarity and large no-go areas of ignorance [...]. Part of what I am doing – which may seem unnecessary – is trying to work out how dead they are. My father died in 1992, my mother in 1997. Genetically, they survive in two sons, two granddaughters and two great-granddaughters: an almost indecent demographic orderliness. Narratively, they survive in the memory, which some trust more than others. (2008, 35)

Thus, while stating that his book cannot be defined as an autobiography, despite the fact that he refers to episodes in his life and to his own family in order to present the foundation of his mind-set in relation to life and death, Barnes also recognises memory as a tool by which not only one's fear of death, but also death itself, can somehow be overcome. As the author himself states, his own parents have survived both genetically through their offspring but, more importantly, by being remembered by those who knew them. Although Barnes also questions the reliability of memory, not only in his first memoir but also in many of his previous novels, he believes that narrative – either in the form of philosophy, literature or self-narrative – becomes a powerful tool for finding meaning in one's existence, while at the same time leaving an imprint for later generations after one's death. Thus, through his first memoir, Barnes not only revises his own fear of death – which is partly grounded in the atheism and agnosticism inherited by his family – but also tries to discern the extent to which human beings remain alive after death, proving that family inheritance, but also creativity – either in the form of positivist writing or through fictional writing – contributes to putting death within the perspective of life. It is precisely through his writing that Barnes realises that his sense of mortality is clearly influenced by Christian tradition, the cultural background in which he grew up. However, as the author states, 'what if you lived to sixty or seventy with half an eye on the ever-filling pit, and then, as death approached, you found that there was, after all, nothing to be frightened of? What if you began to feel contentedly part of the great cycle of nature?' (2008, 111) Thus, Barnes aligns his persona with Montaigne and Ariès, and more recently with Elias and Howarth, in insisting on the need to make death more visible in order to have tools to deal with it. For Barnes, as for the philosophers and sociologists mentioned in his memoir, life and death are two sides of the same coin, and by making death invisible, life cannot be fully grasped.

In the collection of short stories entitled *The Lemon Table* (2004), Barnes already referred to the need to discuss death as part of quotidian conversations. The collection actually takes its name from a lived experience by the composer Sibelius, the protagonist of the last story in the collection, according to which, at the turn of the nineteenth century, there was a particular restaurant in Helsinki that had a 'lemon table' and anyone who sat there was obliged to talk about death, as Barnes explains in an interview (O'Regan 2003). By making death more present in our lives, it would probably be less feared but, more importantly, it would give us tools to face the deterioration of the body that may come with advanced years. This increasing invisibility of death in our Western societies is one of the reasons why Barnes's persona in his memoir *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* considers that both his parents and

himself were unprepared to deal with his parents' increasing physical vulnerability, which led them to death. Both his parents had strokes that made them dependent in their old age; as the author explains, 'My father had a series of strokes which reduced him, over the years, from an erect man of my height, first to a figure hunched over a Zimmer, his head cocked in that awkward angled lift the frame compels, and then to the half-humiliated occupant of a wheelchair. [...] This slow physical crumbling was paralleled by an erosion of my father's speech: of his articulation, and memory for words.' (2008, 102) Julian Barnes's mother also had a stroke a few years after his father: 'Her initial stroke was far more immobilizing than Dad's first one: she was largely paralysed down her right side, and her speech was more damaged than his. She showed herself most coherent when in greatest rage at what had happened.' (104) Despite the physical deterioration of his parents, the author observes how both of them keep their particular personalities, especially in the case of her mother who, following her very practical character described in the first part of the memoir, keeps on mocking 'professional optimism' and declining a 'hypothetical recovery' (104). In his memoir, Barnes's persona questions the extent to which his parents' deterioration will mirror his own deterioration into old age and death.

One of the recurring tools present in his memoir, as well as in some of his fictional works, is irony. In *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, Barnes quotes Jules Renard who believed that 'irony does not dry up the grass. It just burns off the weeds' (2008, 49); thus, for Barnes, humour and irony are a way of looking directly at deterioration and death and accepting the liminality of the body. Before narrating his parents' actual deterioration and death, the author imagines his own death: 'The best case, in my fantasizing, used to turn on a medical diagnosis which left me just enough time, and just enough lucidity, in which to write that last book – the one which would contain all my thoughts about death.' So, he imagines the scene in which he tells the doctor "Tell me straight, Doc, I need to know. How long?' 'How long? I'd say about 200 pages. 250 if you're lucky, or work fast.'" (2008, 100) By contrasting his imagined death with his parents' actual deaths, Barnes points to the extent to which all narrative is constructed, whether it is fictional or based on real life. As Hartung argues in relation to *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, '[w]hat is highlighted is that, while narrative ends can be manipulated, actual endings are beyond control, outlining the difference between time in life and in fiction.' (2016, 172) In both cases, humour and irony are a way by which the author not only reflects on death from both imagined and lived experiences but also allows the reader to get involved in his arguments on living, ageing and death. For Barnes, the only plausible way of dealing with death is either through art or through religion. As he states at the beginning of his memoir, religion is not a real

option for him; thus, he turns to art precisely because he considers that 'the very art I practice also runs counter to the idea of a calm farewell to a thinned self. Whatever the writer's aesthetic – from subjective to autobiographical to objective and author-concealing – the self must be strengthened and defined in order to produce work. So you could say that by writing this sentence I am making it just a little harder for myself to die.' (2008, 88) However, Barnes rejects the idea of finding some kind of finalised sense to one's life when one sees death approaching; as he states, he does not agree with the notion that 'the time preceding death is our last opportunity to find meaning in the story that is about to end' (188); rather, as Randall and Kenyon (2004) and Ruth and Kenyon (1996) argue, one's life story is constantly being rewritten based on the way one remembers one's stories and the way one modifies these stories based on what others remember of the same events. Thus, Barnes imagines different farewell notes that could announce his death. One would be 'LONDON MAN DIES. NOT MANY HURT' (2008, 178) versus a more elaborate personal one such as 'He wrote books, then he died. Though a satirical friend thought his life was divided between literature and the kitchen (and the wine bottle), there were other aspects to it: love, friendship, music, art, society, travel, sport, jokes. He was happy in his own company as long as he knew when that solitude would end. He loved his wife and feared death.' (178) As Hartung states, '[I]n thus inventing expressions of a writer's posthumous fame – however unreliable and precarious – Barnes takes up different imaginary narrative perspectives on his own death' (2014, 149). In other words, by reflecting on the concept of death through narrative and irony and contrasting it with his parents' dying processes, Barnes manages to reflect on death from different perspectives at a time when death is mostly invisible in our day-to-day lives.

Levels of Life: Researching into Grief

In *Levels of Life*, written and published after the death of Pat Kavanagh, his wife, Barnes goes more deeply into exploring grief and loss. In a review of the book, Scarlet Baron (2013) defines it in the following terms: '*Levels of Life* is also about life as ballooning – with all its exhilarating accelerations, its phases of level-headed calm, and its sudden, terrifying crashes. Through metaphor and anecdote, Barnes writes about departures from the 'level' of everyday life – the intoxicating heavenward soar of love, the hellish plummeting catastrophe of loss.' (1) As mentioned previously, the book is divided into three different parts; the first two parts are dedicated to a story about ballooning with three main protagonists, namely, Fred Burnaby, Sarah Bernhardt and Félix Tournachon. Whereas part one focuses on Félix Tournachon and the fact that 'he put

together two things that hadn't been put together before: photography and aeronautics' (Barnes 2013, 18), part two focuses on the very short but equally intense love story involving Fred Burnaby, a professional balloonist, and Sarah Bernhardt, a famous actress. It is in part three, entitled 'The loss of depth,' in which Barnes narrates his own experience after the loss of his wife: 'We were together for thirty years. I was thirty-two when we met, sixty-two when she died. The heart of my life, the life of my heart. [...] It was thirty-seven days from diagnosis to death. I tried never to look away, always to face it; and a kind of crazy lucidity resulted.' (68) For Barnes, falling in love and building a life together is compared to the magic of ballooning or, in other words, to the result of putting two things together that work and create something greater than what already existed. Thus, when his wife died, Barnes felt as if he had 'dropped from a height of several hundred feet, conscious all the time' (77). Trying to find solace, some kind of explanation and even answers to his experience, he realises that, as he had already explored in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, one of the problems our contemporary Western societies have to face is the fact that '[w]e are bad at dealing with death, that banal, unique thing; we can no longer make it part of a wider pattern. [...] So, grief, in turn, becomes unimaginable: not just its length and depth, but its tone and texture, its deceptions and false dawns, its recidivism' (69) and, in his particular case, Barnes decides to face the fact that 'only the old words would do: death, grief, sorrow, sadness, heartbreak. Nothing modernly evasive or medicalising. Grief is a human, not a medical, condition.' (71) In the same way as the process of dying has been medicalised and made invisible, it seems that the processes related to mourning also create discomfort in Western society.

In *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, Barnes's persona talks about his GP who seems to be 'appalled at the over-medicalization of dying, at how technology has shunted out wise thoughtfulness, so that death is viewed as shameful failure by patient as well as doctor'; that is why, as the author states, '[s]he argues for a reconsideration of pain, which is not necessarily a pure enemy, but something the patient can turn to use.' (2008, 188) Thus, in *Levels of Life*, Barnes notes the extent to which not only physical pain but also moral pain are erased from our everyday considerations, despite pain being intrinsic to both being and feeling alive. In this sense, Hartung, when dealing with 'illness, death and dying in modern culture' argues that the meaning of life and death changed radically after the two world wars and, quoting both Michel Foucault and Paul Rabinow, Hartung considers that 'the disciplining of the human body and regulation of the 'species body', have extensive cultural repercussion that affect the experience of ageing, but also those of illness and dying' (2018, 11); in other words, social and cultural disciplining conventions control the ways in which death and pain,

either physical or psychological, become acceptable. Thus, whereas in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* Barnes refers to the ways in which our society manages death, in *Levels of Life* he tries to discern how our society deals with grief, drawing on his own experience in the first person. As the author states,

We grieve in character. That too seems obvious, but this is a time when nothing seems or feels obvious. A friend died, leaving a wife and two children. How did they respond? The wife set about redecorating the house; the son went into his father's study and did not emerge until he had read every message, every document, every hint of evidence left behind; the daughter made paper lanterns to float on the lake where her father's ashes were to be cast. (2013, 70)

For Barnes, grief may establish a reordering of ones' priorities as well as social relations: 'I swiftly realised how grief sorts out and realigns those around the griefstruck; how friends are tested; how some pass, some fail. Old friendships may deepen through shared sorrow; or suddenly appear lightweight.' (73) Thus, despite being a highly individual emotion, as each of us experiences grief in our own particular way, it also provides us with a perspective on our social background which, at the end of the day, is also defined by cultural conceptions of death. As Barnes argues, grief also 'reconfigures' time, 'its length, its texture', and it reconfigures 'space', as he considers that one enters 'a new geography, mapped by a new cartography.' (84) Thus, in a way, love and grief are set at the same level, as both the protagonists of the story of ballooning – Fred Burnaby and Sarah Bernhardt – and Barnes and his wife, were struck by love and their match meant entering a new dimension in terms of time and space. Similarly, Barnes is struck by grief with the sudden death of his wife, which makes him enter into another dimension in terms of time and space, probably a darker one. In *Levels of Life*, Barnes realises that the only way to deal with grief is by accepting it and being aware of the way one is dealing with it; that is why Barnes confesses that 'I mourn her uncomplicatedly, and absolutely. This is my good luck, and also my bad luck. Early on, the words came into my head: I miss her in every action, and in every inaction.' (81)

In *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, Barnes cites art and religion as the only two plausible ways to make sense of death. As shown in the previous section, his writing allows him to approach, analyse and reflect on death from different perspectives – recalling how his parents fell ill and died and how they lived through that process according to their particular personalities, analysing the relationship between living and dying that well-known philosophers established and imagining future farewell notes that may

be written after his death. In his analysis of Barnes's oeuvre, Holmes argues that it is through 'religion, art and love', recurring topics in Barnes's novels, that the author investigates 'the extent to which any of these can counteract the miseries of life and the grim finality of death' (2009, 25). Thus, the question that follows is to what extent art, understood both in a wider sense but also as his own writing, can provide solace and understanding to those who are grieving. In this respect, Barnes refers to someone he knew whose husband was dying of cancer who decided to compel a list of 'classic texts of bereavement' in preparation for his loss, something which, as Barnes explains, 'made no difference when the moment came' (2013, 69). However, Barnes's own writing, more specifically *Levels of Life*, may become a cathartic process in which he describes some uncomfortable human processes and feelings through which one will probably go after the loss of loved ones. Thus, one may argue that the third part of *Levels of Life* is not only a treatise in which Barnes explores how to deal with grief when someone as close as your spouse of thirty years dies but also an ode of his love to his wife. In the book, Barnes refers to his own grief and tries to number the many ways in which he misses his wife, among which he misses her 'morally' – this missing her morally is precisely what he considers to encapsulate the purest form of love; as he states, '[l]ove may not lead where we think or hope, but regardless of outcome it should be a call to seriousness and truth. If it's not that – if it is not moral in its effect – then love is no more than an exaggerated form of pleasure. Whereas grief, love's opposite, does not seem to occupy a moral space.' (82) As Hartung comments, '*Levels of Life* links love and grief in a personal and aesthetic response to the catastrophic loss of the loved one' (2014, 155). Ultimately, it is through his writing that the author expresses his grief but also his love and deep admiration for his wife; to put it in Hartung's words, 'Barnes draws on the metaphors of height and depth, the patterns of ballooning and photography he has provided in the first two parts, in order to make his formula of loss understandable.' (156) As in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, not absolute answers exist in order to make complete sense of either death or grief, but they need to be made more present in our day-to-day lives in order to give us tools to deal with them when they become present in our lives which, inevitably, they will one way or another.

Taking on Holmes's definition of the recurring topics in Barnes' fiction, it is through creativity – his literary writing clearly based on his own experience and views of world – and love that the author is able to deal with grief and integrate death as part of his life; that is, the death of his parents followed by the unexpected death of his wife. As Baron writes in a review of *Levels of Life*, '[s]eeing ourselves from a height starkly reveals our dwarfish insignificance. In that realisation, the sin of height, otherwise

known as the sin of getting above yourself, is purged.' (2013, 1) Once the writer starts integrating grief into his life, he actually realises that, once again, memory is a valuable antidote against the loss and emptiness that death may bring with it. In this respect, Barnes finds it reassuring when someone brings up a memory of his wife, either an episode he did not know about or a piece of advice she gave someone. Barnes comments on these pieces of memory that come from others: '[s]uch fugitive moments excite me, because they briefly re-anchor her in the present, rescue her from the past-present, and delay a little longer that inevitable slippage into the past historic' (2013, 108). This is when the author confirms that grief and love come together, through a narrative that recollects and rewrites memories of those who are not here anymore.

Conclusion

For Barnes, writing, understood as his particular art, becomes a form of therapy to confront his own existential fear as well as traumatic experiences related to death, and also a medium in which he expresses contemporary society's inability and increasing refusal to deal with pain and death. As Brockmeier and Carbaugh state in their work on narrative and identity in autobiography, it is mainly through narrative that 'we make sense of the wider, more differentiated, and more complex texts and contexts of our experience', an assertion that, according to the authors, 'has been both generalized and broadened as well as specified in a wide spectrum of inquiries that include studies on the ways we organize our memories, intentions, life histories and ideas of our selves or personal identities' (2001, 40). In Barnes's singular memoirs *Nothing to Be Frightened* and *Levels of Life*, sharing his own views on and experiences with death, loss and grief and comparing and contrasting them with works of various authors ranging from Montaigne to Emily Dickinson to the specific experiences and views of friends and colleagues, Barnes offers an in-depth treatise on death and grief but also life and love. When analysing Barnes's works, Moseley considers that 'what is constant is the human heart and human passions', which he interprets as an 'ambitious treatment of the importance of love' which 'is what will save them from the forces of history' (1997, 13). Thus, despite the 'pit-gazing experience' that looking at death may represent and despite the despair that the loss of loved ones brings with it, Barnes's memoirs are not really just one more testimony to reflect on death and grief from nuanced perspectives as they do, but they actually become rich ones in which looking at life and death, as well as the culturally-based meanings associated to life and death, are informative of the ways one may deal with them. As Freeman explains, a key characteristic in life writing is that 'by most indications, there is no great and wondrous absolute endpoint

to which human lives lead. We're not acorns that grow inexorably into trees of a specific sort. We're people, living in history, affecting and being affected by all the things that happen around us.' (1993, 9) This is precisely what Barnes's memoirs show: our individual perceptions of death and grief are inevitably informed by our contextual characteristics, and it is only by narrating them and knowing about them that we can make sense of them. Childs defines Barnes's works as representing 'life marked by a sense of loss and disappointment but also of continued hope underlined by stoicism and pragmatism. Love and life fail but there is much that is beautiful and amusing in the mismatch between human beings' reach and grasp.' (2011, 6) In Barnes's life writing, narrative and memoir become those forces through which life and love can be reconstructed in order to leave way to death and grief in an incessant circling movement, at the same time informed by those philosophers and writers who have reflected on our cultural and social conceptions of life and death.

Works Cited

- Barclay, Craig. 1986. 'Schematization of autobiographical memory.' In: David C. Rubin (ed.), *Autobiographical Memory*. Cambridge: CUP, 1986, 82-89.
- Barnes, Julian. *Levels of Life*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2013.
- Barnes, Julian. *Metroland*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1980.
- Barnes, Julian. *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2008.
- Barnes, Julian. *The Lemon Table*. London: Picador, 2004.
- Baron, Scarlett. 'Balloons for Ballast.' *The Oxonian Review*. 29 April, 2013.
- Brokmeier, Jens and Donal Carbaugh (eds.), *Narrative and Identity. Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2001.
- Brumer, Jerome. 'Self-making and world-making'. In: Jens Jens and Donal Carbaugh (eds.), *Narrative and Identity. Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co, 2001, 25-38.
- Childs, Peter. *Julian Barnes*. Manchester University Press, 2011.
- Cohler, Bertram L. and Thomas R. Cole. 'Studying Older Lives: Reciprocal Acts of Telling and Listening'. In: James E. Birren et al. (eds.), *Aging and Biography. Explorations in Adult Development*. New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1996, 61-76.
- Eakin, Paul John. *Fictions in Autobiography. Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985.
- Elias, Norbert. *The Loneliness of the Dying*. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985.
- Freeman, Mark. *Rewriting the Self. History, memory, narrative*. London: Routledge, 1993.

- Hartung, Heike. 'At times it feels as if life is the greatest loser': Old Age, Death and Grief in Julian Barnes's Later Works.' In: Brigitte Johanna Glaser and Barbara Pschmann-Nalenz (eds.), *Narrating Loss. Representations of Mourning, Nostalgia and Melancholia in Contemporary Anglophone Fictions*. Trier, Germany: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2014, 141-160.
- Hartung, Heike. 'Introduction. The Concept of Embodiment in Modern Culture.' In: Heike Hartung (ed.), *Embodied Narration. Illness, Death and Dying in Modern Culture*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2018, 9-19.
- Holmes, Frederick. *Julian Barnes*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Howarth, Glennys. *Death & Dying. A Sociological Introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007.
- Kenyon, Gary. 'The Meaning/Value of Personal Storytelling.' In: James E. Birren et al. (eds.), *Aging and Biography. Explorations in Adult Development*, New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1996, 21-38.
- Kusek, Robert. 'Challenging Generic Conventions: *Levels of Life* by Julian Barnes and the Genre of (Auto)thanatology.' *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies*. 2015. 26 (2): 149-160.
- Lively, Penelope. 'Before Darkness Falls.' *Financial Times*. 1 March, 2008.
- Moseley, Merrit. *Understanding Julian Barnes*. University of South Carolina Press, 1997.
- O'Regan, Nadine. 'Cool, clean man of letters.' *The Post.IE, The Sunday Business Post*. 29 June, 2003.
- Randall, William and Gary M. Kenyon. 'Time, story and wisdom: Emerging Themes in Narrative Gerontology.' *Canadian Journal of Aging*. 2004. 23 (4): 333-346. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cja.2005.0027>
- Ruth, Jan-Erik and Gary Kenyon. 'Biography in Adult Development and Aging.' In: James E. Birren et al. (eds.), *Aging and Biography. Explorations in Adult Development*. New York: Springer Publishing Company. 1996, 2-20.
- Woodward, Kathleen. 'Telling Stories, Aging, Reminiscence and the Life Review.' *Doreen B. Townsend Center Occasional Papers 9*. Doreen B Townsend Center for the Humanities, UC Berkeley, 1997, 9-32.

About the Author

Maricel Oró-Piqueras is Associate Professor at the Department of English and Linguistics, Universitat de Lleida. She is also a member of research group Dedal-Lit since it started working on the representation of fictional images of ageing and old age in 2002. Her research interests include ageing and old age in contemporary British

fiction as well as representations of gender and ageing in film and TV series. She has co-edited the volumes *Serializing Age: Ageing and Old Age in TV Series* (2016) and *Re-Discovering Age(ing): Narratives of Mentorship* (2019) and has published in journals such as *The Gerontologist*, *Journal of Aging Studies* and *Critique: Journal in Contemporary Fiction*.