“Traditions and transitions.” I have one of each: a tradition, the formal one of tragedy, and a transition. I want to argue that within Barnes’ novella, The Sense of an Ending – it won the Mann Booker Prize in 2011 – is embedded a meditation upon Aristotle’s observations on that genre. Ends and endings – entelechy – were central to Aristotle’s thought: think final causes in the Physics and, in relation to the Poetics: the way that a text is actualised by the fusion of form and material. Barnes’ title is immensely ambiguous: might it suggest, among many other things, the impossibility, in these contested times, of writing a modern tragedy? It is also a Zeitgeist text, and I am venturing a couple of passing comparisons to two recent novels by Sally Rooney.

Barnes’ title certainly renders homage to Frank Kermode’s The Sense of an Ending. One of Kermode’s epigraphs is by the poet Peter Porter:

we can only
Walk in temperate London, our educated city,
Wishing to cry as freely as they did who died
In the Age of Faith. We have our loneliness
And our regret with which to build an eschatology.

(Porter 1961, ‘The Historians Call up Pain,’ lines 27–32)

Porter is suggesting that conventional signs of mourning are now generally suppressed. Barnes’ protagonist, Tony Webster, seems fairly representative of this buttoned-down world. In contrast, the raw pity and fear described by choruses in Greek tragedy were kindled by the grim forces of fate (moira) and justice (dike), in which we suppose people believed. In mitigation, the ancients offered tentative comfort in a qualified assertion of free will contained within the paradox of “putting on the harness of necessity” – the phrase occurs in the Agamemnon of Aeschylus. There may be something positive, as we shall see, in Tony’s eventual acceptance of the past.

But can tragic awareness and a sense of the ends of life be forged out of feelings alone? For many people these days, this is not an age of faith, and there are no reasons for believing in fate. Yet most tragedies seem to engage with, even if they do not endorse, some sort of philosophical or religious system. Therefore, for people like Tony, values have to be drawn from Porter’s vague world of “loneliness and regret” where, according to Nietzsche, it feels as though not only the Greek gods but the Christian God is dead. Barnes’ hero wonders whether “character develop[s] over time” and concludes that we are “stuck with what we’ve got [...] that would explain a lot of lives [...] our tragedy” (Barnes 2011, 103) – the familiar observation made by Novalis in 1802 that “character is destiny.”

The Story
Events are remembered by the protagonist. The narrative starts during the 60’s, when the brilliant Adrian Finn joins Tony’s group of precocious sixth formers. Robson, another boy at the school hangs himself, seemingly after getting a girl pregnant. There are discussions in class of history, and whether the truth can be known. Adrian goes to Cambridge, Tony to Bristol. There Tony starts “going out with” his first girlfriend, Veronica Ford. He submits to a comically embarrassing weekend with her mother, Sarah, her father, and her brother Jack (also at Cambridge). Their relationship finishes before they finally get to sleep with each...

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1 This was published as Michael Hattaway, ‘Aristotle and Julian Barnes’s The Sense of an Ending’, Traditions and Transitions, ed. Emilia Slavova et al., 2 vols, (Sofia, St Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2020), 2, 290-303.
other. In Tony's final year, Adrian writes to ask permission to "go out with" Veronica. Tony replies to his letter. He reflects that Veronica had been previously "damaged". He departs for the States and there enjoys an uncomplicated relationship with Annie. Later he is told that Adrian had cut his own wrists in the bath, leaving a note for the coroner stating that all thinking people have a philosophical duty to examine their lives – and may then choose to end them.

The narrative skims over forty uneventful years until Tony's retirement. He had married Margaret, by whom he had a daughter, Susie. Margaret left him for another, who subsequently left her.

The second part begins with a letter from a lawyer: Veronica's mother, Sarah, has bequeathed Tony £500 along with two documents. He tracks down Veronica, who returns to him one of these: the vicious letter he had written to her and Adrian when the two were about to get together. He later retrieves the first page of Adrian's diary, willed to him, but burnt by Veronica. After a number of meetings, he is forced to recognise the lack of veracity in his narrative in the first part of the novella. (Sarah had had a "damaged" child by Adrian - the young Adrian ...)

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_The Sense of an Ending_ is not, of course, a stage play, but a post-modernist prose text. As John Jones taught us, back in 1962, it is not appropriate to tear down the concept of a tragic hero – that is a Romantic invention. Greek tragedies concern groups upon whose lineage the gods had placed a curse as much as individuals. Tony is certainly no "hero" in the common sense of the word, but he is representative of a host of frustrated young men of his age. Although the action is refracted through Tony's consciousness, this modern story is that of a group of young people who, in the 1960's, expected a brave new world.

He has an uncanny role in the plot: his vile slut-shaming letter, in which he wished a deformed child upon Veronica and Adrian, was no mere prolepsis and turns out, Tony reflects, to have functioned "like some ancient curse," an action "that still has a shiver of the other-worldly about it" (Barnes 2011, 138).

Here is part of that letter from the young Tony to Veronica and Adrian:

I hope that when you break up [...] you are left with a lifetime of bitterness that will poison your subsequent relationships. Part of me hopes you'll have a child, because I'm a great believer in time's revenge. But revenge must be on the right people, yea unto the next generation and the next [...] So I don't wish you that. It would be unjust to inflict on some innocent foetus the prospect of discovering that it was the fruit of your loins, if you'll excuse the poeticism. (Barnes 2011, 95)

However, the young Adrian, with his special needs, had been born to Sarah and not Veronica. Does any sort of positive, any eschatology, emerge from Barnes? We encounter the phrase "great unrest" in the schoolroom scene near the beginning, and it recurs at the very end. We later have glimpses, from the scorched page from Adrian's diary, of a mathematical formula that seems to signify accumulation without increase (Barnes 2011, 85, 149). The "unrest" being the material, the "formula" a form. Does this make possible the creation of significant substance? Again, I shall have to return.

Indeed, forms can restrict as well as create: here is Kermode on De Quincey:

Certainly De Quincey saw the horror, where others see the depth, of _the prison of modern form_, the place where we accept the knowledge that our inherited ways of echoing the structure of the world have no concord with it, but only, and then under conditions of great difficulty, with the desires of our own minds. (Kermode 1967, 173, emphasis added)

In contrast, here is Barnes in praise of novels – there is truth, he claims, in their lies:

_Writers should have the highest ambition: not just for themselves, but for the form they work in._ Flaubert once rebuked Louise Colet for having the love of art yet lacking 'the
In this encomium he also recalls Henry James: his phrase "the beautiful, shapely lies" surely derives from a passage in Henry James’s Preface to "The Lesson of the Master": "the beautiful and blest nouvelle... the shapely nouvelle." Yes, Barnes has written a novella. But obviously there are other possibilities: for some it might be like a conte philosophique – Voltaire’s Candide would provide an example. Moreover, Barnes has confronted death if not tragedy – as author of a meditation upon death (Nothing to be Frightened Of, 2008), essays on art, as well as crime fiction under the nom de plume of Dan Kavanagh. Are there similarities with detective novels which are dominated by endings?

Its title resonates in both formal and material ways. First, formal or metafictional. There are proleptic episodes that plant in the reader a sense of ending. They also, by subliminally telling us what is going to happen, make us think that the ending, if not inevitable, is at least apt or, perhaps, true. Upon reflection, we realise that Robson’s suicide, after getting a girl pregnant (Barnes 2011, 13), turns out to prefigure that of Adrian. This repetition creates a matter of substance. When Tony is leaving after paying his visit to his girlfriend Veronica’s family, Veronica’s mother Sarah seems ambivalently sexual, and, while standing beneath some wisteria, farewells him with “a sort of horizontal gesture at waist level” (Barnes 2011, 30). Tony recalls the gesture and its setting on the penultimate page of the text (Barnes 2011, 149). Later, Tony’s school-mate and former friend Adrian actually sleeps with Sarah, to him a kind of mother-in-law, and the damaged result of that unfortunate union is the young Adrian. Intergenerational desire and sex occur, of course, in Greek tragedy – there are also significant examples elsewhere in Barnes’ fiction. In The Only Story, published in 2018, the tennis partner of the protagonist, 30 years his senior, becomes his long-term lover, a “place of safety”: “I’ve got the book-learning, she’s got the life-learning”, he reflects (Barnes 2018, loc. 665). Not surprisingly, this does not end well – there are a lot of crass young men in Barnes’ fiction.

Many people have been programmed, I imagine by Aristotle, to seek the meaning of a tale in its ending or “conclusion”. Do these prolepses generate ironic detachment so that we attend as much to the unfolding of the tale as to its ending? Repeatedly we are invited to distinguish endings from conclusions: the novella ends not with a “conclusion” but rather with an “accumulation” (Barnes 2011, 150). “Accumulation” is an image immediately from betting on horses (Barnes 2011, 85, 103), in general from the economic theory of interest.

Voltaire’s Candide, as well as being engaged with the philosophy of optimism, is a portrait of an age, a Zeitgeist text. So is The Sense of an Ending. Does the ending come early, signifying an end of innocence? Or were ages of innocence actually ages of hypocrisy? Is the novella fuelled by what D.W. Harding, writing about Jane Austen almost eighty years ago, called “regulated hatred” (Harding 1940) directed against the abjection and awkwardness generated by genteel and life-denying “respectability”, and by the repression and fear of sex that survived until the 1960’s in middle-class Britain? Was Tony – and we might dare to say Barnes – against the morality of “Englishness”, or at least its suburban version, embedded in the snooty tennis club in The Only Story? Remembering his school in central London, Tony remarks that his group “considered school sports a crypto-fascist plan for repressing our sex-drive” (Barnes...
Barnes had played every variation on that theme in his first novel, *Metroland* (1980). In 2007 Ian McEwan had published a novella *On Chesil Beach* which looks back in fury rather than regret on a disastrous 1962 wedding-night, which featured an explosive combination of sexual ignorance and innocence.

The film of the book has just come out: Billie Howle plays the screwed up young man in that as well as young Tony in the film of the Barnes. You might of course feel these are hackneyed variations on very old themes: back in 1891 Shaw described Ibsen's demonstration that "the real slavery of today is slavery to ideals of goodness" (Shaw 1986, 141).

Barnes took the same kind of quizzical view of innocence as did Philip Larkin. Here are the famous first two stanzas of a period piece, Larkin's "Annus Mirabilis", his ironic ode to the so-called "sexual revolution":

Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(which was rather late for me)
– Between the end of the 'Chatterley' ban

*And the Beatles' first LP.*
*Up to then there'd only been A sort of bargaining,*
*A wrangle for the ring,*
*A shame that started at sixteen*
*And spread to everything...* (emphasis added).

This is Tony on Veronica:

Veronica wasn't very different from other girls of the time. They were physically comfortable with you, took your arm in public, kissed you until the colour rose, and might consciously press their breasts against you as long as there were about five layers of clothing between flesh and flesh. [...] And then, as the relationship continued, there were certain implicit trade-offs, some based on whim, others on promise and commitment – up to what the poet called "a wrangle for a [sic] ring." (Barnes 2011, 22, emphasis added)

The ring is both sexual and the symbol of the marriage bond.

More Larkin: "And as the poet pointed out, there is a difference between addition and increase" (Barnes 2011, 88). That formulation comes from "Dockery and Son", in which Larkin considers his own childlessness against thoughts of Dockery, his old schoolmate, who has a son:

Why did he think adding meant increase? To me it was dilution.³

Does Barnes show a tragic inevitability kindled by ideology, by what we might call "The Myth of Liberation"? Larkin suspected that sex and parenthood would diminish his artistic energies. Tony hints that both careers and parenting would not lead anywhere much.

The social Darwinism of the English middle classes always remained implicit [...] In those days, we imagined ourselves as being kept in some kind of holding-pen, waiting to be released into our lives. And when that moment came, our lives – and time itself – would speed up. How were we to know that our lives had in any case begun, that some advantage had already been gained, some damage already inflicted? (Barnes 2011, 8–9)

Respectability always seems to prevail.

There are obvious comparisons with D. H. Lawrence, but also interesting contrasts with the *Bildungsromane* of Sally Rooney (much-celebrated at the age of


3 See Colm Tóibín's review of the novel in *The New York Review of Books*, May 10, 2012. Toward the end of the novel the narrator also quotes "the poet": "May you be ordinary, as the poet once wished the newborn baby (144)." The phrase comes from Larkin's poem "Born Yesterday".


5 See Colm Tóibín's review of the novel in *The New York Review of Books*, May 10, 2012. Toward the end of the novel the narrator also quotes "the poet": "May you be ordinary, as the poet once wished the newborn baby (144)." The phrase comes from Larkin's poem "Born Yesterday".
twenty-seven): Conversations with Friends, published in 2017, and Normal People (2018). She is, of course, Irish and now lives in Dublin. She maps similar desire-driven rites of passage to those chronicled by Barnes, and she narrates the progression from the provincial to the metropolitan, from school to university, the losing of virginity, then the social falterings and complicated copulations of millennials in Dublin after its sexual revolution. That moment of Irish liberation, precipitated by the collapse of the authority of the Catholic church, came half a century after the English one. Social obstacles to sexual gratification along with Larkin’s “shame that spread to everything” may have disappeared, but different realities emerge to curb the freedom of the female Dublivers: social inequality, and then endometriosis in the first novel, masochistic tendencies, catalysed by a brother’s abuse, in the second. Both Rooney’s novels resist closure: having accumulated, they simply end but they do not conclude.

Back to The Sense of an Ending: it falls into two parts. In the first Tony and his school-friends survive “the girl-drought of gawky adolescence together, trading in affectations, in-jokes, rumour and wit” (Barnes 2011, 9). His relationship with Veronica, his loss of virginity (Barnes 2011, 23), his carefree affair with Annie in the States, Adrian’s suicide, Tony’s jobs, his marriage to Margaret and his parenting of Susie (54), his divorce, his affairs, his retirement – “those years of stagnancy” (Barnes 2011, 62) – are all briskly reviewed.

The second part charts the effects of an unexpected letter from Veronica’s mother. This generates meetings with both Margaret and Veronica, as well as encounters with Adrian’s son Adrian. I suggest this recovered letter is an Aristotelian peripeteia, a reversal of circumstances, leading eventually to anagnorisis, recognition. But for Tony, it’s not the “calm of mind, all passion spent” of Milton’s Samson. Rather, “There is accumulation [cf. 103]. There is responsibility. There is unrest. There is great unrest” (Barnes 2011, 150) – a phrase that had figured in the history lesson that comprises the novella’s first episode (5). “Unrest” – in society, in culture, in collective and singular identities.

not the “calm of mind, all passion spent” of Milton’s Samson

Letters and postcards in fact figure large in the text, to supplement the imperfect knowledge of Tony, who is therefore as much a typical modernist unreliable narrator as a tragic protagonist, owing as much to Conrad’s Marlow as to Sophocles’ Oedipus. Eight letters and a postcard serve only to reveal “The Inadequacies of Documentation”. At first, after rereading his fatal letter, he pleads, “I didn’t recognise that part of myself from which the letter came” (Barnes 2011, 97). (Incidentally, letters and postcards are replaced by emails and texts in Rooney.)

As well as acting as a refractor, Tony is a reflector, a ruminator. Around any knowledge swirl mists of time, history, and language. Underlying these hindrances is an epistemological one, one that derives from the problem of time. In Barnes’s Flaubert’s Parrot, the question is put: “How do we seize the past? Can we ever do so?” (Barnes 1986, 14). We could track back to Henri Bergson, who distinguished duration or “lived time” (durée réelle) from clock or mechanistic time, and Bergson’s distinction emerges in Tony’s reflection on subjective and objective time (Barnes 2011, 122). Objective time is essentially disorganised: Adrian: “all you can truly say of any historical event [...] is that “something happened” (Barnes 2011, 5). This had been elaborated by Kermode:

— The clock’s ‘tick–tock’ I take to be a model of what we call a plot, an organisation which humanises time by giving it a form; and the interval between ‘tick’ and ‘tock’ represents purely successive.

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5 First letter from Sarah (39); Letter from Adrian and postcard (41–42); Two letters about Adrian’s death (48); Adrian’s letter to coroner (48); Second Letter from Sarah (65); Photocopy of a fragment of Adrian’s letter (85–6).
6 The latter likely to be distorted for us because it is created by the superimposition of spatial objects, so that time is perceived as procession of separate constructs.
7 Compare Dóra Vecsernyés, “With His Watch on the Inside of the Wrist: Time in Julian Barnes’s The Sense of an Ending.” disorganised time of the sort we need to humanise. (Kermode 1967, 45).
Kermode connected time, narratives, and apocalyptic thought: “Those who postulate an ‘end of times’ (see Daniel [Hebrew Bible] and Matthew and Luke [New Testament]) impose a pattern on history, a satisfying consonance with the origins and the middle.” “However, our expectations are perpetually confounded, and, to mirror this, fictions and narratives very often create a peripeteia, a sudden turn of narrative or reversal of situation” (Kermode 1967, 18, 53).

Rooney studded her novels with metafictional peripeties. They are very much novels of conversation, and many chapters begin in the middle of a conversation, without revealing what has happened to engender it. Rooney often withholds this information for three to five pages before doubling back to explain or imply.

However, The Sense of an Ending is not a “novel of ideas”, not a text that would stand or fall on the quality of its rumination or philosophising, let alone its historical truth, but a record of how, in one man’s mind as he thinks with them, ideas are tentatively reimagined, intermingled, tested. Sometimes these are rendered in emblems, as in the precociousness of the boys’ watch-faces worn on the inside of their wrists (Barnes 2011, 6), a kind of personal time.

The novella is much concerned with time past, and time past is, as Proust reminds us, tempsperdu. Adrian quotes “Patrick Lagrange” [a name invented by Barnes] in the history lesson sequence: “History is that uncertainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation” (Barnes 2011, 17) Our own memories fade with age (Barnes 2011, 105). The notion is pictured on the original cover: we see seeds (from “dandelion clocks”), and the edge of paper blackened when Veronica burnt the rest of the diary. (A new edition derives from images in the film, which I shall consider at the end of this paper.) Tony is disempowered by scepticism:

[…] perhaps it’s the same paradox again: the history that happens underneath our noses ought to be the clearest, and yet it’s the most deliquescent. We live in time, it bounds and defines us, and time is supposed to measure history, isn’t it? But if we can’t understand time, can’t grasp its mysteries of pace and progress, what chance do we have with history – even our own small, personal, largely undocumented piece of it? (Barnes 2011, 60)

He sees the Severn Bore; “it looked and felt quietly wrong […] nature was reversed, and time with it” (Barnes 2011, 36), and later he can’t tell the direction of the tide in Thames (Barnes 2011, 90)

As well as writing in his concerns with time and history, Barnes shares with Geoffrey Braithwaite, the central character in Flaubert’s Parrot of 1984, the great nineteenth-century novelist’s anxieties concerning language.

“I am bothered by my tendency to metaphor, decidedly excessive. I am devoured by comparisons as one is by lice, and I spend my time doing nothing but squashing them.” Words came easily to Flaubert; but he also saw the underlying inadequacy of the Word. Remember his sad definition from Madame Bovary: “Language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, while all the time we long to move the stars to pity.” So you can take the novelist […] as one who considered language tragically insufficient.” (Barnes 2011, 19, emphasis added)

However, for me, the novella demonstrates the ways the “lies” of fiction and the deceptions of language can be deployed to reimagine the familiar, it is a lucid and unforgiving meditation on youth, sex, memory, fictions, ageing, mortality, cultural change … and the ways we both “get it” and “don’t get it” – a key phrase to which I shall return.

I invoked Candide: I wish to reassert that Barnes moves through and beyond Voltairean moral fable or philosophical tale to tragedy. In the first half, Barnes uses mantras from pop music implicitly to indict Tony for having failed to seize the day. “Ti-yi-yi-yime is on my side, yes it is” sang the Rolling Stones, in 1965 (Barnes
2011, 45). Then Tony misremembers Morrissey’s “Everyday is like Sunday” of 1988: “Every day is Sunday” – [he misquotes] that wouldn’t make a bad epitaph, would it? (Barnes 2011, 62), he muses. Later Tony reflects: “I had wanted life not to bother me too much, and succeeded – and how pitiful that was.” (Barnes 2011, 100)

As the plot rolls forward, Tony is forced to reconsider his actions, at moments that, in a way displaced from Sophocles, reveal what he had not known or overlooked. The first peripety comes in his second encounter with the mentally disabled young Adrian (Barnes 2011, 124 ff.): the words of the minder work upon him as those of the shepherd work upon Oedipus. This Adrian was the son of Sarah the mother, not Veronica the girlfriend (Barnes 2011, 148).

At this stage it is convenient to cite one of the most important passages in The Poetics:

Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men’s qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. (Poetics, vi)

Any kind of hamartia, error of judgment, is not necessarily “characteristic.” Like Oedipus, Tony is determined to know who he is, and that implies recognising what he has done. He moves towards perception: “I looked at the chain of responsibility. I saw my initial in there” (Barnes 2011, 149). Sophocles found an explanation for endings in myth, notions of pollution, and curses – forged together into concepts of fate. Ibsen, as Shaw pointed out, does not, as writers of “well-made plays” did, explain exactly the chains of responsibility that generated the catastrophes of his tragedies (Shaw 1986, 160–172). We are never certain whether Engstrand accidentally or deliberately caused Mrs Alving’s orphanage to burn down, and it seems that Ibsen knew that Oswald could not, as the wretched son assumes, have inherited his syphilis from his father.

In The Sense of an Ending, the overwhelming question for Tony remains whether he was actually responsible. Before we attempt to decide for him, we have to remind ourselves of the dangers of confusing descriptions with explanations. In turn this takes us back to the problem of language. Tony was tempted to translate Adrian’s formula for an “accumulation” (Barnes 2011, 85) into a “chain of responsibility” (Barnes 2011, 149). He had forgotten Adrian’s question, “[...] is ‘link’ a false metaphor?” (Barnes 2011, 86). Like Oedipus, Tony doesn’t die, but he eventually learns. He hears Veronica’s voice speaking clearly in his head, “You just don’t get it [...] You never did, and you never will.” By virtue of sheer accumulation, he does, finally, “get it” – surely a wonderful translation of Aristotle’s anagnorisis, recognition.

What is “about”? If I am right, this is an ingenious (too clever by half?) and comparatively cheerless book. When it transitioned to last year’s film, Tony (Jim Broadbent) ends up by making his living as a seller of second-hand Leica cameras. “I am a camera”: Tony was both able to record – the novella begins and ends with a selection of images – but was also constrained by what is masked by the frame of a photograph. The aborted conversation with the young Adrian is interrupted by flashbacks to the history lesson at the beginning of the book.

However, the hard ambiguities and truths of tragedy were supplanted by the squishy sentiments of romance – a simplistic option. Yes, Shakespeare turned from tragedy to romance, but the scriptwriter, Nick Payne, was no Shakespeare. I admit that Barnes’ “story” may be in danger of sinking under its cargo of ideas, ingenuity, and rumination, and metafiction may have swamped fiction. But the film’s ending? That Tony should meet and offer an apology to Veronica (Charlotte Rampling) – in the novella he writes a letter – and be revivified by being present at the birth of a baby son to Susie, his daughter (Michelle Dockery), says it all. At the birth he confesses everything to her. He also apologises to his ex-wife Margaret. She sends him a watch to replace the one that had stopped. Susie brings the baby round to see
him. Romance in the form of a Shakespearean family reunion shoves tragedy aside. Does this signal a failure of nerves on Tony's part? Perhaps it has taken a talent like that of Sally Rooney to discern a way out of the dark wood created by the literary traditions of the past. Equally, however, her texts reveal that the irrational forces of desire, deified by the Greeks, have survived transition into the now.

References: