

Memory, Loss, and Identity in Contemporary Fiction *Narrating the Self Through Absence*

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Abstract

Contemporary fiction returns obsessively to the entangled problem of memory, loss, and selfhood, treating remembrance not as a transparent window onto a stable past but as an unstable, revisable act through which characters construct rather than recover their identities. This paper examines how four novelists working in distinct registers of loss—Kazuo Ishiguro's studies of professional and biological curtailment in *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*, Toni Morrison's reckoning with the afterlife of slavery in *Beloved*, Julian Barnes's meditation on retrospective self-deception in *The Sense of an Ending*, and Jenny Offill's fragmented portrait of marital collapse in *Dept. of Speculation*—deploy unreliable narration, non-linear structure, and formal fragmentation as devices that mirror the unreliability of memory itself. Drawing on the philosophical tradition running from John Locke through Paul Ricoeur, and on trauma and postmemory theory associated with Cathy Caruth and Marianne Hirsch, the paper argues that these texts collectively stage a shift from a Lockean model of identity as continuous psychological retrieval toward a narrative model in which the self is an ongoing act of authorship performed in dialogue with what has been lost. The comparative analysis suggests that contemporary fiction's formal experimentation with memory is not merely stylistic but constitutes a sustained argument about the ethics and epistemology of remembering.

Keywords: Memory; Loss; Identity; Contemporary Fiction; Narration; Selfhood; Unreliable Narration; Trauma; Postmemory; Narrative Identity;

I. Introduction

Since the closing decades of the twentieth century, a significant strand of literary fiction has organized itself around a deceptively simple question: what remains of a person once their past has been altered, suppressed, or lost? The question is not new to literature—memory has been a subject of narrative art since Homer—but its contemporary treatment carries a distinctive philosophical weight. In the wake of poststructuralist critiques of the unified subject, the historical trauma of the twentieth century's wars and genocides, and a broader cultural anxiety about the reliability of personal and collective narratives, novelists have increasingly used memory not as a stable resource that characters draw upon to explain themselves, but as a contested and generative site where identity is made and unmade.

This paper argues that a defining feature of contemporary fiction's treatment of selfhood is its refusal to treat memory as retrieval. Where an earlier realist tradition often assumed that a character's past could, in principle, be accurately recounted and that identity followed from an accumulation of such facts, the novels examined here treat memory as a construction shaped by desire, trauma, forgetting, and narrative necessity. Loss of a beloved, of a future, of a coherent record of one's own history, of language adequate to describe what happened becomes the very engine that forces characters into the act of self-narration. Identity, in these texts, is not discovered beneath the wreckage of loss; it is built out of it, provisionally and often unconvincingly, in real time before the reader.

To develop this argument, the paper proceeds in three movements. First, it establishes a theoretical framework linking philosophical accounts of personal identity to narrative theory and trauma studies. Second, it offers close readings of four contemporary novels chosen for the range of loss they dramatize: professional, biological, historical, retrospective,

and domestic while remaining unified by their formal reliance on unreliable or fragmented memory. Third, it draws these readings together to identify cross-cutting techniques: unreliable narration, non-linear structure, the body and objects as mnemonic archives, and strategic silence. The paper concludes that contemporary fiction's formal innovations around memory constitute not merely aesthetic experimentation but a considered argument about what it means to be a self after loss.

II. Theoretical Framework: Memory, Narrative, and the Self

The philosophical starting point for any discussion of memory and identity is John Locke's argument that personal identity consists not in the sameness of substance but in the continuity of consciousness, secured through memory. On this view, a person today is the same person as some earlier self only insofar as they can, in principle, remember being that earlier self. This model, though influential, has long attracted the objection that memory is neither complete nor accurate, and that a self built entirely on psychological continuity is vulnerable to any gap, distortion, or fabrication in that continuity. Contemporary fiction exploits precisely this vulnerability: its narrators remember partially, selectively, and self-servingly, exposing the Lockean self as a construction rather than a discovery.

Paul Ricoeur's work on narrative identity offers a more productive frame for understanding what these novels do with that vulnerability. Ricoeur argues that the self is not a substance that narrative merely describes but a configuration achieved through the act of emplotment the organizing of disparate, often contradictory events into a story that makes a life intelligible to the one who lives it. Identity, in this sense, is always a narrative identity, continuously revised as new events, or new interpretations of old events, are incorporated into the ongoing story a person tells about themselves. This reframing is essential to reading the novels in this study: their narrators are not failing to access a true self hidden beneath faulty memory; they are performing the very activity by which a self is constituted.

Trauma theory adds a further dimension. Cathy Caruth's account of traumatic experience emphasizes its belatedness the way an overwhelming event resists full registration at the moment it occurs and returns instead in fragments, intrusions, and repetitions that the survivor cannot fully narrate or control. Where Ricoeur's model presumes a self capable of organizing experience into story, trauma theory identifies the limit case in which experience refuses that organization, producing a self structured around an absence or a wound rather than a coherent plot. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory extends this logic across generations, describing how the descendants of trauma survivors inherit memories they did not personally experience, mediated through family narrative, photograph, and silence. Together, these frameworks Lockean continuity, Ricoeurian emplotment, and trauma's resistance to narrative provide the interpretive vocabulary for the readings that follow.

Finally, it is worth noting the distinction, developed by Maurice Halbwachs and later Jan Assmann, between individual and collective or cultural memory. Halbwachs argued that even our most personal memories are shaped by social frameworks family, nation, religious community that supply the categories through which we interpret our own past. This insight matters for a novel like *Beloved*, in which an individual character's memory of trauma cannot be separated from the collective, historical memory of slavery that produced it. Contemporary fiction's treatment of memory, then, operates simultaneously at the level of the individual psyche and at the level of shared cultural inheritance, and the strongest of these novels hold both registers in view at once.

III. The Unreliable Archive: Kazuo Ishiguro

Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction offers perhaps the clearest demonstration of memory as self-protective revision rather than retrieval. *The Remains of the Day* is narrated by Stevens, an English butler whose account of his decades of service is continually undercut by details he includes without seeming to register their significance. Stevens insists on the professional value of "dignity," a term he returns to as though repetition could stabilize its meaning, even as the events he narrates his father's death treated as an interruption to service, his failure to acknowledge his feelings for the housekeeper Miss Kenton, his employer's complicity with fascist sympathizers accumulate into a portrait of a life organized around the suppression of exactly the personal history his narration claims not to need.

What makes the novel a study in narrative identity rather than simple unreliability is that Stevens is not lying so much as performing, in real time, the construction of a self that can survive its own losses. His memory is organized around professional narrative because a personal one would require him to confront grief and romantic loss he cannot yet bear to narrate directly. The reader witnesses, across the novel's retrospective journey, the slow and only partial breakdown of this professional emplotment, culminating in a moment near the novel's end when Stevens allows himself,

briefly, to acknowledge what his heart was actually doing during the years his narration insisted were given wholly to service. Ishiguro's achievement is to make the gap between what Stevens narrates and what the reader infers into the novel's primary source of meaning: identity here is legible only in the space between memory and its evasions.

Never Let Me Go extends this technique to a still starker situation of loss. Kathy H., the narrator, is a clone raised for eventual organ donation, and her memories of childhood at Hailsham function as the only form of possession available to a life without a future. Where Stevens edits his memory to protect a professional self-image, Kathy curates hers because memory is, quite literally, all that will remain of her once her biological purpose has been fulfilled. The novel's elegiac tone derives from the disproportion between the smallness of what Kathy remembers—a cassette tape, a schoolyard argument, a half-understood lesson—and the enormity of the loss those memories are being asked to hold against. Ishiguro's two novels, read together, suggest that the more radical the loss a character faces, whether social, temporal, or biological, the more intensively memory is called upon to perform the work of sustaining a self that has little else to draw on.

IV. Traumatic Memory and Historical Loss: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

If Ishiguro's narrators construct identity through the selective ordering of memory, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* dramatizes what happens when memory refuses to be ordered at all. The novel's central figure, Sethe, is a formerly enslaved woman haunted, literally, by the daughter she killed rather than allow to be returned to slavery. Morrison's coinage of "rememory"—memory that exists independently of the rememberer, that can be encountered by others who were not present for the original event, and that persists physically in place even after the person who experienced it has died or moved on—gives narrative form to Caruth's account of trauma's resistance to ordinary recollection. Sethe does not remember slavery and its violence as a story with a beginning and an end; the past erupts into her present without warning, and the novel's fractured, non-chronological structure enacts this eruption at the level of form.

The ghost of the murdered child, who returns to the household in bodily form under the name *Beloved*, literalizes the concept of postmemory: she is a figure through whom trauma that Sethe cannot fully narrate is nonetheless transmitted, embodied, and confronted by the living. *Beloved*'s presence forces Sethe into a reckoning that language alone could not accomplish, suggesting that for Morrison, some historical losses are too great to be metabolized through conventional narrative and must instead be given a kind of literal, haunting persistence. Sethe's identity, throughout the novel, is inseparable from this haunting; she cannot become a self organized around a coherent life story because the collective historical memory of slavery has made such coherence unavailable to her. Only through the intervention of a community—the neighbourhood women who eventually help exorcise *Beloved*—does Sethe begin to move from a self-defined entirely by an unspeakable past toward one capable of a tentative future, underscoring Halbwachs's point that even the most intimate memory is ultimately a social achievement.

Morrison's novel thus operates at the register Ricoeur's model of narrative identity struggles to accommodate: a trauma so total that emplotment itself becomes an ethical and political labor, requiring not only the survivor's effort but the participation of a community willing to hold what one person alone cannot narrate.

V. Retrospective Revision and the Unreliable Self: Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*

Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* approaches the instability of memory from a quieter, more domestic angle, but arrives at conclusions no less unsettling. Tony Webster, its narrator, recounts the friendships and romantic entanglements of his youth, confident in the accuracy of a story he has told himself for decades, only to discover—through the intervention of a will, a diary, and a series of letters he had forgotten or suppressed—that his account has been quietly self-serving in ways he never suspected. The novel's structure, split between an assured first half and a destabilized second half in which Tony is forced to revise his own history, formally enacts its central claim: that identity, sustained over decades by an uncorroborated personal narrative, can rest on a foundation the narrator has unconsciously reshaped to protect himself from responsibility.

Barnes is interested less in dramatic trauma than in the ordinary, almost invisible distortions memory performs on behalf of a comfortable self-image. Tony's eventual confrontation with documentary evidence—written records that contradict his remembered version of events—dramatizes the gap Ricoeur identifies between lived experience and its narrative organization, showing that the gap need not involve catastrophe to be consequential. The novel's famous insistence that history is "the certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation" captures precisely the epistemological problem this paper has been tracing: neither memory nor record offers unmediated access to the past, and identity must be built, uneasily, in the space between them. Tony's late-novel

recognition of his own culpability does not restore a truer self so much as replace one provisional narrative with another, more painful one – a revision rather than a correction.

VI. Fragmentation, Domestic Loss, and the Aphoristic Self: Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation*

Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* pushes the formal argument of this paper to its most explicit register: the novel's fragmented, aphoristic structure, composed of short paragraphs that jump between scientific trivia, literary allusion, and scenes from a marriage under strain, is not decoration but the direct formal expression of a consciousness struggling to hold a coherent self together under the pressure of grief and betrayal. The unnamed narrator, referred to for long stretches simply as "the wife," loses not only the security of her marriage but, in the novel's telling detail, the use of her own name, a small but pointed enactment of the depersonalization loss produces.

Offill's fragments mimic the way memory actually surfaces under emotional strain: not as continuous narrative but as intrusive, associative bursts, arriving out of order and refusing to resolve into a single explanatory story. The novel's form thus performs the same argument Morrison makes through the ghost of *Beloved* and Barnes makes through Tony's revised history, but compressed into the texture of nearly every page: a self under the pressure of loss does not narrate in tidy retrospect but assembles itself, moment to moment, out of whatever fragments memory happens to offer. That the narrator eventually reclaims something like a stable voice by the novel's end – without ever fully reclaiming her name – suggests that for Offill, as for the other writers considered here, recovery of identity after loss is partial, provisional, and formally inseparable from the act of narration itself.

VII. Cross-Cutting Patterns

Unreliable Narration as Identity Performance

Across all four case studies, unreliable narration functions not as a puzzle for the reader to solve but as a direct enactment of the narrative-identity thesis: the unreliability is itself the visible seam where a self is being made rather than reported. Stevens, Kathy H., Sethe, Tony, and Offill's narrator all narrate imperfectly, but the imperfection is diagnostic rather than incidental – it shows the reader exactly where loss has applied pressure and exactly what kind of self has been fashioned in response.

Non-Linear and Fragmented Structure

Formally, each novel abandons strict chronology. Ishiguro folds present-tense travel around extended retrospection; Morrison interleaves present haunting with fragmented flashback; Barnes splits his narrative into a confident first half and a destabilized second; Offill dispenses with continuous scene almost entirely. In each case, structure does not merely house content but argues for it: the discontinuity of the telling mirrors the discontinuity trauma theory locates in the experience of loss itself.

The Body and Object as Mnemonic Archive

Where language falters, these novels frequently turn to bodies and objects as repositories of memory that narration cannot fully access. Sethe's scarred back, Kathy's cassette tape, Stevens's meticulously polished silver, and the physical documents that undo Tony's self-narrative all function as external archives evidence that persists independently of, and sometimes in contradiction to, what a character consciously remembers or is willing to say.

Strategic Silence

Finally, what these narrators decline to say is as significant as what they narrate. Stevens's clipped references to Miss Kenton, Sethe's inability to speak directly of the killing until forced to, Tony's initial omission of a cruel letter, and the unnamed narrator's refusal, for most of Offill's novel, to name the affair that has broken her marriage, all demonstrate that identity in contemporary fiction is constituted as much by curated absence as by any positive act of remembering.

VIII. Conclusion

Read together, these four novels suggest that contemporary fiction has developed a sophisticated and largely convergent set of formal strategies for representing identity as an achievement made in the aftermath of loss rather than a fact recovered from an intact past. Ishiguro shows memory functioning as protective revision under the pressure of professional and biological curtailment; Morrison shows memory refusing containment altogether under the weight of historical atrocity; Barnes shows memory quietly rewriting itself to preserve a bearable self-image; and Offill shows memory surfacing in fragments that only provisionally cohere into a survivable voice. In every case, the novel's form – its unreliability, its non-linearity, its reliance on object and silence – is inseparable from its argument about the self.

This convergence has implications beyond literary criticism. If Ricoeur is right that identity is always narrative identity, then the ethical stakes of how a culture tells stories about memory and loss are considerable: the way contemporary fiction represents remembering shapes, in turn, the way readers understand their own relationship to their

pasts. These novels resist the comforting fiction that a true self waits, intact, beneath the damage loss has done, offering instead a more demanding but arguably more honest proposition that selfhood is something continually authored, imperfectly and often at great cost, out of exactly the material that loss leaves behind.

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