Hacettepe Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi
Hacettepe University Journal of Faculty of Letters
Aralık/December 2025 – *42*(2), 597-608
doi:10.32600/huefd.1638679

Araştırma Makalesi – Research Article
Geliş Tarihi / Received: 12.02.2025 Kabul Tarihi / Accepted: 04.06.2025



A Quest to Attain the Unattainable: Search of Authenticity in Julian Barnes's *The Only Story*[1]

Ulaşılamaz Olana Ulaşma Serüveni: Julian Barnes'ın *Biricik Hikâye* Adlı Romanında Sahihlik Arayışı

Cansu ÇAKMAK ÖZGÜREL[*]

Abstract

Julian Barnes (1946–) is a highly versatile and prolific British author, recognized for his broad thematic range. His thirteenth novel, *The Only Story* (2018), revisits central concerns that run through his oeuvre, including the passage of time, memory, loss, and the challenge of narrating experience in old age. This article proposes a fresh reading of *The Only Story* by consulting Martin Heidegger's philosophy of Being and authenticity, offering a perspective that brings new depth to the understanding of Barnes's narrative strategies. Heidegger's existential framework proves particularly illuminating for interpreting the protagonist Paul Roberts's retrospective storytelling as a philosophical quest for authentic self-understanding. Through its tripartite structure—a narrative form Barnes frequently employs—the novel marks profound transformations in Paul's perception of love and identity. By analyzing the shifts in narrative voice across the novel's three parts, this study argues that Paul's evolving narration reflects his existential endeavour to reconstitute meaning in the face of the loss of his love. Retrospective narration, here, is not merely a stylistic device but an ontological act: Paul's attempt to render his "only story" authentically mirrors Heidegger's notion that Being can only be fully grasped through an original and creative engagement with one's own experiences. In reconstructing his memories, Paul undertakes an inner journey to uncover the constituents of his Being, striving to narrate his love story with the authenticity it demands. Consulting Heidegger thus allows for a nuanced interpretation of Paul's narrative labor—not merely as recollection, but as an existential project—positioning this study as a novel contribution to both Barnes' critique and the broader field of existential literary analysis.

Keywords: Julian Barnes, *The Only Story*, authenticity, homodiegetic narration, authentic narrative distance and strategies.

[1] This article is a shortened and revised version of the second chapter of my PhD dissertation I am currently working on.

[*]Lecturer, TED University, English Language School, First Year English Programme. Email: cansu.ozgurel@tedu.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0001-8939-2028

◊ Alan Editörü / Field Editor: Alev KARADUMAN

This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International.

Öz

Julian Barnes (1946–) geniş tematik yelpazesiyle tanınan, son derece üretken ve çok yönlü bir Britanyalı yazardır. On üçüncü romanı olan *Biricik Hikaye* (2018), zamanın geçişi, hafıza, kayıp ve yaşlılıkla şekillenen yazma sürecinin zorlukları gibi yazarın eserlerinde sıkça işlediği temel temaları yeniden ele alır. Bu makale, *The Only Story* romanını Martin Heidegger'in Varlık ve sahihlik (authenticity) anlayışı ışığında yorumlayarak esere yeni bir bakış açısı kazandırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Heidegger'in varoluş felsefesi, başkahraman Paul Roberts'ın geriye dönük anlatımını, sahih bir kendilik anlayışına ulaşma çabası olarak yorumlamak için özellikle aydınlatıcı bir zemin sunar. Barnes'ın eserlerinde sıkça kullandığı üç bölümlü yapı, romanda Paul'un aşk ve kimlik anlayışında yaşadığı köklü değişimleri vurgular. Romandaki anlatı sesi değişimlerini analiz eden bu çalışma, Paul'un anlatımındaki dönüşümlerin, kayıp karşısında anlamı yeniden kurmaya yönelik varoluşsal bir çabayı yansıttığını ileri sürmektedir. Burada geriye dönük anlatım yalnızca bir biçimsel tercih değil, aynı zamanda ontolojik bir eylem olarak ele alınır: Paul'un "biricik hikâyesini" anlatma girişimi, Heidegger'in sahih varoluş anlayışıyla örtüşen yaratıcı ve özgün bir deneyimle kendi varlığını kavrama çabasını temsil eder. Anılarını yeniden kurgularken Paul, varoluşunun temel unsurlarını keşfetmeye yönelik içsel bir yolculuğa çıkar ve yaşadığı aşkı hak ettiği özgünlükle anlatmaya çalışır. Olgun anlatıcı Paul, aşkını tanımlamak için en uygun yolu ararken, "Belki de aşk asla bir tanım içinde ele geçirilemezdi; ancak bir hikaye içinde ele geçirilebilirdi" (Barnes, 2020, s. 229) düşüncesine varır ve böylece onu anlatma görevine başlar. Heidegger'e başvurmak, Paul'un anlatı çabasını sadece bir hatırlama süreci olarak değil, aynı zamanda bir varoluş projesi olarak okumaya imkân tanır. Dolayısıyla, bu çalışma, hem Barnes incelemelerine hem de varoluşçu edebiyat analizine özgün bir katkı sunmayı amaçlamaktadır.
Anahtar sözcükler: Julian Barnes, *Biricik Hikaye,* sahihlik, özöyküsel anlatı, sahih anlatı mesafesi ve stratejileri.

Introduction

Julian Barnes (1946-) is one of the most versatile and prolific contemporary British novelists, whose thirteenth novel, *The Only Story* (2018), touches upon the issues that are recurrent in his fiction, which are related to the passing of time, memory, grief, and the intricacies of writing based on ageing memory. As Venassa Guignery suggests, Barnes "resorts to and subverts realistic strategies; his writing is essentially self-reflexive; and he celebrates the literary past but also considers it with irony" (2006, p. 1). Similarly, in his retrospective storytelling, Paul Roberts, the homodiegetic[2] narrator of *The Only Story*, employs various stylistic strategies that could be considered authentic, concerning the Heideggerian concept of authenticity. Retrospective narration allows Paul to contemplate and highlight the intensity of what he deems his only story "that matters, only one finally worth telling" (Barnes, 2018, p. 3). The novel's tripartite form, which Barnes often prefers in his works, reveals the important changes and transitions in Paul's life and love. Moreover, what seems to be idiosyncratic is the change of voice in the narration between the three parts of the novel. The mature narrator Paul takes a long trip down memory lane of the young Paul, the lover, to narrate this only story worthy of telling. The mature Paul is obsessed with finding the most suitable words to define his love because he is convinced that only by narrating this story, can he honour the love he has experienced. Narrating this love story as authentically as it deserves becomes Paul's authentic endeavor. In the Heideggerian perspective, Paul responds to the "voice of conscience" (1962, p. 313) as the (in)authenticity of his being as the lover and the narrator is interwoven with his narration. As Heidegger underlines, conscience is the key to "authentic potentiality-for-Being" that is neither "imposed upon ontically" nor "ontologically fabricated" (1962, p. 277). Hearing the call of conscience, Paul invents creative strategies in his storytelling, which could be authentic or inauthentic, contingent on the instances he reflectively remembers and narrates while simultaneously confronting the intricate workings of his memory. This study aims to analyse Paul's authenticity, both as a young lover and a mature

[2]Gérard Genette categorises the person (as he intends in his categorisation, the voice of the narrator) in first-person narratives as heterodiegetic and homodiegetic depending on "whether or not the narrator can use the first person to designate one of his characters" (1980, p. 244). If the narrator is a character present in the story told by him/her, it is called homodiegetic (1980, pp. 244-245). Taking Genette's categorisation into consideration, Paul is the homodiegetic narrator in this narrative.

narrator/protagonist in his retrospective homodiegetic narrative. The first part of this article explains the Heideggerian notion of authenticity. The second part of this study focuses on Paul's storytelling, which demonstrates creativity and originality, as Paul invents stylistic strategies as the reliably unreliable narrator in his retrospective narrative.

The Only Story is a retrospective narration of the narrator-protagonist, Paul Roberts, born and raised in a suburban town called Village in south London. The nineteen-year-old college student Paul Roberts meets Susan MacLeod, a forty-eight-year-old married woman, at a tennis club, and they end up having an affair that is frowned upon by their community. They, however, continue to experience this unconventional relationship until they decide to elope since it becomes hard to confront judgement and disapproval of their suburban life. Yet, their love, as depicted and illustrated only by Paul slowly unravels in time, mainly due to the age gap between them and he is left with the memories and reveries of Susan and the feelings of his first and only love. For Paul, this love defines his being as a person and constitutes his identity as the narrator of his story. The first part of Paul's narration encapsulates happier memories of his relationship with Susan. He is also quite open about revealing the intimate details of the sexual relationship between them as such: "We were each other's second lover: quasi-virgins, in effect. I had had my sexual induction—the usual bout of tender, anxious scuffle-and-blunder" (2018, p. 14). Paul does not think about the age difference between them, as he thinks she is not like all "Carolines" in the tennis club but considers himself lucky to be paired with her (2018, pp. 6-7). Bored with the expected standards of suburban life, Paul does not want to end up with one of these Carolines, as he clearly states since the beginning of his narration. Rebelling against the environment his parents belong to, Paul "refuses to be a cliché, at least this early in [his] life" (2018, p. 11). Despite his conservative upbringing, he does not believe "in the classics, where there are battles between love and duty, love and religion, love and family, and love and the state" (2018, p. 4). He thinks that love has nothing to do with duty or even marriage. Ironically, Paul and Susan's story begins at the local tennis club, where his parents force him to work during his summer break to make the right kind of connections (2018, pp. 4-5).

> The tennis club: who would have thought it might begin there? Growing up, I regarded the place as merely an outdoor branch of the Young Conservatives. I owned a racket and had played a bit, just as I could bowl a few useful overs of off-spin, and turn out as a goalkeeper of solid yet occasionally reckless temperament. (2018, pp. 5-6)

Ironically, this "outdoor branch of the Young Conservatives" (2018, p. 5) becomes where he falls in love with Susan. Due to their complicated nature, love or life cannot be simplified or narrated and irony becomes a convenient tool for Paul. He reflects on his thoughts and feelings through his focalisation in the narrative. Stylistically, retrospective narration enables the mature Paul to reconsider the young Paul's memories in a more creative light. As Peter Childs claims, Barnes chooses to "eschew pretensions towards truth: to draw attention to artifice, metaphor, ludic narration, and the ineluctable potential of writing to deceive in its forlorn attempt to en-textualise the world" (2011, p. 117). Therefore, the narrator Paul imaginatively shapes those memories of the young Paul, indicating the authentic strategies in his narration. He makes sure to fill in the blanks concerning the memories of the young and inexperienced Paul by such ironic twists that construe Paul's authorial identity. This is the contextualised world of Paul and he demonstrates his style through his cynical attitude toward anything that can be called cliched. As far as he is concerned, "The time, the place, the social milieu" are all unimportant in love stories (2018, p. 4). Confidently, Paul starts his story that he thinks deserves an original beginning because this love is not an ordinary one, so the mature Paul starts narrating as follows: "Would you rather love the more, and suffer the more; or love the less, and suffer the less? That is, I think, finally, the only real question" (2018, p. 3). To answer his thought-provoking question, Paul states that he does not believe that people "have the choice" to "control how much they love" (2018, p. 3). His firm belief in the idea that to love someone is not based on a decision and that "love was by its very nature disruptive, cataclysmic; and if it was not, then it was not love" (2018, p. 73). Even though he thinks that this love is beyond his free will, narrating his love story is his conscious endeavour. His conscious choice of telling this love story is authentic, as he

aspires to eternalise Eros in the way that he has felt. Narrating this love story is a transformative act for the narrator Paul in the existentialist sense because his search for how to narrate this story authentically gives him a chance to view all the past incidents in his life and he becomes a curator of his memories of the younger version of himself.

Heidegger's Notion of Authenticity and its Relevance in the Homodiegetic Narration of *The Only Story*

Authenticity, as a word, has numerous definitions and attractions in various disciplines. Although it is a familiar word, authenticity is one of the most complex and least stable concepts. Authenticity is philosophically perceived as "a mode of existence arising from self-awareness, critical reflection on one's goals and values, and responsibility for one's [own life and choices]" (OED). It was Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) who first employed the word, authenticity to "refer to the human capacity to be fully human" (Guignon, 2008, p. 277). Authenticity, as originally employed by Heidegger, *Eigentlichkeit,* literally means "ownness" or "own hood" and hence, the concept underlines the way of being one's own, as Heidegger suggests, "Mineness belongs to any existent Dasein[3]" (1962, p. 78). Heidegger explored the concept of authenticity and repudiated many definitions and connotations of the concept, concluding that "authenticity of Dasein is neither an empty term nor an idea which someone has fabricated" underscoring that authenticity can be understood as an existential project for Dasein that can be authentic in its Being-towards-death but how it can be attested is missing (1962, p. 301). This existential expansion examines the self and attributes creative power to one's self. Even though the concept of authenticity cannot be defined due to being subjective and evasive, the search for authenticity is closely associated with inventing meaning in one's existence and nurturing the self in its lifelong formation and becoming. Thinking about authenticity matters because it aims to attain an ideal life for human beings. Heidegger's notion of authentic existence is identified by characteristics such as "integrity, intensity, lucidity, coherence and honesty" (Guignon, 2008, p. 277). In this paper, authenticity is studied as an existential concept that is related to human creativity, individuality, and responsibility concerning Heidegger's notion of authenticity. Hence, his notion of authentic existence allows space for Dasein to explore his/her potential in the way of having an authentic existence. As Heidegger states,

> Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it. But in that case, this is a constitutive state of Dasein's Being, and this implies that Dasein, in its Being, has a relationship towards that being—a relationship which itself is one of Being. And this means further that there is some way in which Dasein understands itself in its Being, and that to some degree it does so explicitly. It is peculiar to this entity that with and through its Being, this Being is disclosed to it. Understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein's Being. (1962, p. 32)

For Heidegger, the certainty among all this ambiguity—one thing is fundamental, and that is, being is an issue for Dasein, who will struggle to understand how to be. Being is not a given, but it can be potentially accomplished. Being, in Heideggerian understanding, is not to be found inside, but it is something one needs to contemplate, meaning it requires caring, understanding, and being resolute. In other words, humans are beings that care about what they are and since they care about their lives, their identity as human beings is evolving. There is no such thing as an authentic self because being is a never-ending process. Therefore, authenticity is transient and not enduring or stable. One can transiently be authentic contingent on different situations and can, therefore, be inauthentic under different circumstances. Yet, it is generally disputed that the formation of authenticity could be subject to social circumstances and could

[3]Dasein is a German word meaning existence, but it is Heidegger who uses the term to refer to the human (Inwood, 1997, p. 22).

be conditioned externally, which would make it inauthentic. Accepting the fact that individuals are not (or rather cannot be) alienated or isolated from their social and ideological surroundings would constitute them to be inauthentic individuals. The pressure of everyday existence forces people to emulate their beings without really shaping or contemplating the idea of Being. In *Gay Science*, Nietzsche proposes that being is infinite and constantly changing since there are no referential criteria that direct the fundamentals of the ideal self, the self is free to be engaged in this never-ending process of becoming (1974, p. 290). Heideggerian concept of authenticity borrows from Nietzsche's self-making (or becoming what one is) proposition that paves the way for the narrativist notion of authenticity. Charles Guignon explains that "Heidegger conceives of human existence not as a thing or object, but rather as an event, the unfolding realization of a life story as a whole" (2000, p. 65). Guignon's expansion of Heidegger's view on the narration of human existence can be searched in a retrospective narrative told in the first-person. Considering Heidegger's perspective, it can be suggested that Dasein can authentically decide to build themselves while writing their own life story through individually concentrated inspection and contemplation. Accordingly, the mature Paul, the homodiegetic narrator, is authentically engaged in narrating the story of his first love because it constitutes his being. Paul is in the transformative impact of storytelling and in the process of narrating his story that is his construction, he narrates himself as the mature narrator who tells the story of his younger version. As Charles Taylor argues,

> There is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's. But this gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for me. (1991, pp. 28–9)

Ultimately, Paul's search for authenticity in his narration is an attempt to think about the essence of being a human. It is an ambition that constitutes authenticity in his narration. Through creating the narrative of his life and love, Paul projects himself, which brings his possibilities to light. As Heidegger argues, Dasein is ontologically capable of liberating himself/herself from lostness (or from the fallen state) once s/he can "authentically understand and choose those factical possibilities lying before one's death" (1962, p. 308). Paul constructs his life story through the imaginative function of his memory that he uses as a tool to produce his narrative. As the concept of authenticity is transient and denotes a becoming process, narrating one's story authentically is never-ending. Paul chooses to inspect his life and life-long love he wants to capsulate in this story. Through this looking inside, he can invent authentic strategies in his authorship since authenticity requires the issue of authorship towards one's genuine self that is to be formed by this ubiquitously ideal self. For Heidegger, authenticity is a matter of "choosing to choose," that is, of making one's choices one's own and so being "answerable" or "responsible" (Verantwortlich) for one's life (1962, pp. 313, 334). This love is transformative for him and he willingly chooses to narrate his first love, which would enable him to contemplate and view his life more productively.

> Most of us have only one story to tell. I don't mean that only one thing happens to us in our lives: there are countless events, which we turn into countless stories. But there's only one that matters, only one finally worth telling. This is mine. (Barnes, 2018, p. 3)

Paul is highly critical of the inauthentic behaviors of the adults around him. These adults appear monotonously alike to young Paul, leading him to equate adulthood with boredom. However, he is aware that he can deliberately "feign all that stuff" to be "welcomed as a summer member, joining the year-round Hugos and Carolines" (Barnes, 2018, pp. 6-7). Barnes' characters, as Pateman notes, "are striving for some way of finding meaning in an increasingly depoliticized, secularized, localized, and depthless world" (2002, p. 2). Thus, what initially appears to be a rebellious teenage stance ultimately serves as Paul's authentic authorial identity, as he distances himself from the moral framework of his environment, which he openly critiques. With his every move to this more adult world of the tennis club, Paul recognises the surrounding inauthenticity. The more he spends time with Carolines and Hugos, the more he is convinced that everyone

is almost the same to such a shocking extent that they are no longer individuals, just Hugos and Carolines, generic figures of the 'They'. Therefore, he decides "to play [his] best shots, but winning didn't engage him. He even used to practice reverse cheating" (Barnes, 2018, p. 7). This is how he copes with the inauthenticity of the They, everydayness, and its mundanity, which is the inseparable constituent of his Being-in-the-world. Paul experiences the mundanity of the shared, social world as a constitutive of his Being-in-the-world. His choice to engage with the inauthentic environment of the tennis club is essential so that the authenticity of his stance can be analysed. Paul's self-reflective analysis of the "average everydayness" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 38) he observes in his surroundings reveals his contemplation on the authenticity of Being—or its absence. He recognizes that he is immersed in what Heidegger describes as the inauthentic modes of Being, including "everyday Being-among-one-another, distantiality, averageness, levelling down, publicness, the disburdening of one's Being" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 166).

> The everyday practical lifeworld is also always a shared, social world. As we are engaged in our ordinary involvements, we act according to the norms and conventions of the common world in such a way that there is no sharp distinction to be made between ourselves and others. The public world is the medium through which we first find ourselves and become agents. (Guignon, 2004, p. 123)

Witnessing the people around him lead seemingly artificial lives, Paul questions how they can persist in their inauthenticity despite the existence of alternative ways of Being—ways that could lead to a more authentic existence. As Heidegger asserts, "[...] all Being-with Others, will fail us when our own most potentiality-for-Being is the issue. Dasein can be authentically itself only if it makes this possible for itself of its own accord" (1962, p. 308). Paul's entanglement with others limits his potential for an authentic self because Dasein tends to conform, becoming indistinguishable from those around him unless he actively questions and reflects on his own Being. Consequently, unless one engages in such self-examination, they remain bound to the sameness of "The They" or *Das Man*—and thus, to inauthenticity (1962, pp.164-65). However, Heidegger acknowledges that while Dasein's immersion in "average everydayness" is an inherent mode of inauthenticity and an "a priori" existential condition, it is possible to reflect on and resist this state. If one chooses to challenge the complacency of conformity, they can disrupt the numbing effects of inauthentic existence. As Heidegger notes, "Dasein's average everydayness" is ultimately "a mode of fleeing in the face of it and forgetfulness thereof" (1962, pp.69-70), implying that questioning and resisting conformity are necessary steps toward authenticity. In this sense, Paul wittingly explores both the authentic and inauthentic instances defining his story.

> The sense of authenticity is always a construction, and as a construction, it is always relative to other possible self-constructions at any particular time. Speaking of authenticity versus inauthenticity or true versus false experience frees us from the spatial metaphor in a way that speaking of a true or false self or a "core" or "real" self does not. It is important to note that a sense of authenticity and inauthenticity is complexly related to the intricate textures of experience as it is composed of multiple versions of self. What may seem authentic is the context of one version of self may be quite inauthentic with respect to other versions. (Mitchell, 1993, p. 131)

In an attempt to narrate a unique story, Paul points out his role as the author of his life and reflects on the complexity of a majestic narrative called one's life story. The search for authenticity and thinking about how to live is a ubiquitous question traced back to the Aristotelian question of a good life, attempting to find the answer to the ultimate question 'How should I live?' (Varga, 2009, p. 50). Authentically, Paul feels responsible for telling this story in retrospect attempting to prove that he has experienced the sublime love that deserves to be narrated. The concept of authenticity is prevalently associated with self-fulfillment and the eudaimonistic virtue attained by a good life is rewarding for the individual (Webber, 2018, p. 19). In this respect, Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia, or human flourishing, would be the result of the individual

journey of fulfillment and self-accomplishment in one's course of life, which is required for an authentic existence. In the process of self-becoming, Dasein should actively and freely engage with their existential possibilities, contemplating how to lead an authentic life. This connection is a key link between authenticity and eudaimonia (or fulfillment). Hence, a retrospective homodiegetic narration, a product or the life story of the narrator/protagonist, can be shaped as an authentic work of art since "only within the realm of fiction can we gain access to the elusive realm of the pathos of authenticity" (Golomb, 1995, p. 12). In *The Only Story*, Paul's ability to view his life in retrospect enables him to shape his own life over time. He wants his story to be considered a work of art that reflects his storytelling's authentic instances and strategies.

Reliably Unreliable Narrator and Authentic Strategies in Homodiegetic Narration in *The Only Story*

The problematic relation between truth and retrospective narrative raises the question of the reliability of the narrator and Barnes is famously known to employ unreliable first-person narrators with hidden agendas. Wayne C. Booth first formulates the unreliable narrator as follows: "I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for nor acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not" (1961, p. 158–9). Following Booth's remark on the reliable narrator, it can be suggested that Paul, as the homodiegetic narrator, is reliably unreliable since he successfully conveys his narrational presence in all three parts of the novel. Attempting to make his story sincere and truthful, Paul seems to employ his confessional mode to be apologetic for any possible misrepresentation in the homodiegetic narrative. The insertion of the individual voice of Paul enables a reading of him as an unreliable narrator, but he does not claim to present an irrefutable account; instead, he starts to contemplate this love as he once experienced. The mature Paul is aware of the complications of narrating one's story honestly without justifying oneself. Paul's narration is marked by his idiosyncratic uses of point of view. His story is composed of three parts that are deliberately separated to underline climactic events contributing to the wholeness of his narration. The first part where he asserts his narrative voice is expectedly narrated in the first person. The focus on "I" is in the foreground to place his authorial voice and presence over his story. He is also apologetic to compensate for the possible gaps in his memory through such remarks: "And this is how I would remember it all, if I could. But I can't" (Barnes, 2018, p. 102). He expresses his doubts about the power of his memory as well as his lack of interest in reporting all the incidents concerning this story. On the very first page of the novel, Paul clearly announces that:

> But here's the first problem. If this is your only story, then it's the one you have most often told and retold, even if—as is the case here—mainly to yourself. The question then is: do all these retellings bring you closer to the truth of what happened, or move you further away? I'm not sure. One test might be whether, as the years pass, you come out better from your own story, or worse. To come out worse might indicate that you are being more truthful. On the other hand, there is the danger of being retrospectively anti-heroic: making yourself out to have behaved worse than you actually did can be a form of self-praise. So I shall have to be careful. Well, I have learned to become careful over the years. As careful now as I was careless then. Or do I mean carefree? Can a word have two opposites? (2018, p. 3-4)

The passing of time and its impact on Paul is ruminated frequently in his storytelling, which enables him to inspect his being as a lover and narrator. This retrospective story is narrated by an older and more mature Paul who is committed to telling the young Paul's love. In homodiegetic narrations, a young narrator is generally considered to be unreliable owing to his/her limited knowledge in understanding and evaluating things (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983, p. 103). Due to being inexperienced in both life and love, the young Paul may not be capable of reflecting the grandeur of this love. To compensate for young Paul's inexperience and naïveté, the older self of Paul becomes the narrator, who seems to be more capable of constructing the story of his first and last love. This manoeuvre can be identified as an authentic strategy for the authenticity of the narration and the narrator. To narrate this story means narrating his Being and as the homodiegetic narrator, he becomes the reliably unreliable narrator of his story. The older Paul, the narrator, is aware of

the impossibility of comprehending one's first love when feeling it as follows: "first love always happens in the overwhelming first person. How can it not? Also, in the overwhelming present tense. It takes us time to realise that there are other persons, and other tenses" (2018, p. 71). Paul's retrospective narration is selective of the defining moments and feelings of his personal life and since they are told from his memory, all those incidents are filtered by his perception.

In the first part of *The Only Story*, Paul begins his joyful narration of falling in love with Susan and their early days in an idyllic "Garden of Eden" using a first-person perspective. He presents himself as the powerful "I," setting the stage for his first and last love. However, as the story progresses into the second part, Paul gradually shifts from this personal "I" to a more generalized "you," and by the end, he adopts a conventionalized "he," only reverting to "I" in moments of intense pain (Clanchy, 2018, N.p.). Despite the changes in the points of view in the narrative, Paul carefully validates his story and confirms it to be true because this is the story that he regards as profoundly truthful, suggesting that he will neither seek to justify himself nor alter the course of events—a notion that proves to be true as the novel unfolds. Paul specifically emphasizes the deep connection between love and authenticity in *The Only Story*, asserting that while love is what truly matters in life, its inherently subjective nature makes it impossible to define. In his memories, the past and present remain inseparably linked, as "memory is not an organ of simple restitution, through which one makes the past present again. In memory, what has been is constantly changing" (Han, 2017, p.15). It becomes natural for him not to be able to remember correctly and he does not claim to remember everything as it has happened. Memory is seen as the only source to bridge the gap between past and present due to its creative force on the retrospective narration.

> *You understand, I hope, that I'm telling you everything as I remember it? I never kept a diary,* and most of the participants in my story – my story! My life! – are either dead or far dispersed. So I'm not necessarily putting it down in the order that it happened. *I think there's a different authenticity to memory, and not an inferior one. Memory sorts and sifts according to the demands made on it by the rememberer.* Do we have access to the algorithm of its priorities? Probably not. But I would guess that memory prioritises whatever is most useful to help keep the bearer of those memories going. So there would be a self-interest in bringing happier memories to the surface first. But again, I'm only guessing. [italics mine] (2018, p. 16)

Therefore, the order of the incidents is delivered through Paul's sorting of his memories. Paul admits that he would likely be failed by his memory. He does not promise to report any insignificant details or events of his story, but rather he is engaged in telling the definitive story of his life. As a mature homodiegetic narrator, Paul believes in the "different authenticity to memory;" that is "not an inferior one" (2018, p. 19). With a firm belief in the creative aspect of his memory, he seems to validate the constructive impact of his memory in his retrospective narrative. It is not easy to identify Paul as the unreliable narrator because he grants reliability as the narrator of his story by aligning the creative component of this story. His narration is comported with his existence, sometimes authentic and sometimes inauthentic. As Childs states, Barnes's fascination with the working of the mind and memory is evident in his oeuvre, but Childs adds that Barnes suspects the "reconstructive workings of the mind," assuming that it is a process of reconfiguration not just remembering something plainly (2011, p. 127). In other words, Barnes seems to prefer to call this process imagining rather than remembering. While connecting the incidents with people in the narration, Barnes prefers to build this imagined connection with their poor attachment to the truth even though his characters sometimes pretend to uncover the truth in their narratives (Child, 2011, p. 128). Despite the fluctuating shift from the first person to the third person in the last part, he remains committed to what he has promised at the beginning of the narration. This is his version; his story is as authentic as Paul aspires it to be.

The change of person in the second part functions to underline Paul's call for generalization. The use of the second-person point of view, the narrator Paul addresses "you," to unknown readers of his account, hence shifting the locus of the focus from himself to outside his narration, to unknown readers/audiences of his narrative. This shift could also be interpreted as the narrator's search for witnesses via addressing

unknown readers and applying them as his proxy to his (love) story, which is another authentic strategy in Paul's retrospective storytelling. Paul weaves fiction into his storytelling, and this act of fabulation can be seen as authentic when considered within specific contextual contingencies. The change in the voice in the second part coincides with the moments of Paul's self-doubts when he narrates Susan's alcoholism and as a consequence of it, their becoming estranged. Sadly, Paul witnesses that love can fade when he realizes that loving someone as passionately as they do would not suffice in their circumstances. In contrast to the fallenness of *The They*—the adults Paul mocks—Susan represents the Other, embodying "alterity as an essence" (Levinas, 1987, p. 88). While Paul's cynicism makes him increasingly self-aware and critical of the superficial motivations behind their futile engagement—perhaps even more so than they realize—he ultimately fails to comprehend Susan. He comes to acknowledge that he cannot fully grasp, possess, or truly know her as the Other. As Levinas states, "[...] this is why [Paul has] sought this alterity in the original relationship of eros, a relationship that is impossible to translate into powers" (Levinas,1987, p. 88). It is within this shared sense of alterity that Susan and Paul find the pathos of their love and since this is Paul's narration, he admits his failure to grasp her being enough to narrate her:

> We tend to slot any new relationship we come across into a pre-existing category. We see what is general or common about it; whereas the participants see – feel – only what is individual and particular to them. We say: how predictable; they say: what a surprise! One of the things I thought about Susan and me – at the time, and now, again, all these years later – is that there often didn't seem words for our relationship; at least, none that fitted. *But perhaps this is an illusion all lovers have about themselves: that they escape both category and description*. [Italics mine] (Barnes, 2018, p.10)

Considering Paul's retrospective storytelling in the first-person, Paul is an unreliable narrator. However, Paul is not invested in manipulating readers' conscience for the sake of his agenda or concealing any crucial information for speculation. Instead, he commits himself to searching for the most suitable definition to define his love until he finally admits and compromises with the impossibility of concocting the exact words or expressions to define his love. Paul realizes that love cannot be defined because of its idiosyncratic nature, so he contextualizes his love through his narration. Due to the nature of retrospective storytelling in the first-person singular, Paul remains an unreliable narrator. However, rather than distorting facts or influencing the reader's conscience to serve his own agenda, he is authentically committed to recalling past events, albeit in a non-chronological manner. He does not seek empathy or sympathy, nor does he present a moral dilemma that might undermine the sincerity of his account. Instead, he firmly upholds his belief, stating, "truth and love, that was my credo. I love her, and I see the truth. It must be that simple" (2018, p.74). In this sense, Paul can be described as a reliably unreliable narrator. The young Paul is the lover, in rapture and does not consider the impact of this love as the older version later describes him:

> You might ask how deep my understanding of love was at the age of nineteen. A court of law might find it based on a few books and films, conversations with friends, heady dreams, aching fantasies about certain girls on bicycles, and a quarter-relationship with the first woman I went to bed with. But my nineteen-year-old self would correct the court: 'understanding' love is for later, 'understanding' love verges on practicality, 'understanding' love is for when the heart has cooled. *The lover, in rapture, doesn't want to 'understand' love, but to experience it, to feel the intensity, the coming-into focus of things, the acceleration of life, the entirely justifiable egotism, the lustful cockiness, the joyful rant, the calm seriousness, the hot yearning, the certainty, the simplicity, the complexity, the truth, the truth, the truth of love.* [italics mine] (Barnes, 2018, p. 73-74)

The interchanging voice of the homodiegetic narrator as the younger and older version of Paul enables plausibility in narrating the course of this love story. Paul is consistent in his remarks on the history of this relationship: "In retrospect, perhaps it would have been different if one of us had known more. But who, in

love, looks forward to retrospect?" (2018, p. 14). The lurid realization indicates the authentic way he intends to tell his story. Stylistically, the distance between the narrator Paul, and his younger version facilitates a sense of authenticity in his narrative, which is delivered through the tripartite structure of the novel. One of the defining features of Paul's narrative is his perspective on the nature of truth and love. The authenticity of his storytelling emerges through his imaginative engagement with memory. His retrospective narration is a dynamic and creative process, one that fluctuates between inauthenticity and authenticity, aligning with his Dasein and encompassing both aspects. There are moments of self-doubt concerning the first-person narrator's search for a justification for his account, indicating the authentic way he intends to tell his story clashes with the outcome, the narrative. The change in the voice/person between the parts of the narration can be potentially identified as a clue of unreliability as it is a major stylistic shift (Nünning 2005, p. 103). As Nünning explains, "[t]he narrator's stylistic peculiarities and his violation of linguistic norms [...] play an important role in detecting the narrator's unreliability" (2005, p.103). However, the shifts in the voice of the homodiegetic narrator signal the traits of Paul's becoming both a narrator and a lover. The evolution of Paul's identity is reflected in the shifting perspectives throughout his narration. Although he is driven by an intense urge to share his story, it remains uncertain whether he even believes he can ever complete it. Paul's narrative defies a traditional, goal-oriented structure—indeed, it seems inherently unfinishable. From the very first paragraph, it becomes clear that since his account revolves solely around his one, all-consuming love—a love that never reaches a fairytale ending—it is doomed never to have a conventional conclusion. Even though Paul instinctively senses this absence of closure, he either deliberately delays it or simply remains untroubled by it. His very existence is inseparably intertwined with both his story and the act of telling it. Rather than focusing on ending his story, he is more committed to discovering the authentic way to express it, continually reexamining his approach to storytelling.

> There were two ways of looking at life; or two extremes of viewpoint, anyway, with a continuum between them. One proposed that every human action necessarily carried with it the obliteration of every other action which might have been performed instead; life therefore consisted of a succession of small and large choices, expressions of free will, so that the individual was like the captain of some paddle steamer chugging down the mighty Mississippi of life. The other proposed that it was all inevitability, that prehistory ruled, that a human life was no more than a bump on a log which was itself being propelled down the mighty Mississippi, tugged and bullied, smacked and wheedled, by currents and eddies and hazards over which no control was possible. *Paul thought it did not have to be one or the other. He thought a life – his own, of course – could be lived first under the dispensation of inevitability, and later under the dispensation of free will. But he also realized that retrospective reorderings of life are always likely to be self-serving*. [Italics mine](Barnes, 2018, pp.173-74)

The shifts of viewpoints in Paul's storytelling are quite strategic and they could serve as stances that the mature Paul who narrates this story defines himself as the authentic storyteller. The last part of his narrative is conveyed by the third-person point of view which focuses on Paul and his close inspection of love and memory. In the former two parts, he narrates Susan, his ever-lasting love and their surroundings, while the last part narrates him as an old and weary man reminiscing on what he feels like a previous chapter of his life, writing down in his notebook: "Then he wrote it in again; then he crossed it out again. Now he had both entries side by side, one clear and true, the other crossed out and false" (2018, p. 165), which reflects the process of writing. He seeks to discover remarks on love that he sometimes likes and writes down such as "In love, everything is both true and false; it's the one subject on which it's impossible to say anything absurd" (2018, p. 169). Paul "guessed that the love stories of the misled and the forsaken had become a little less authentic with each retelling" (2018, p. 191). The last part seems to function as a database of his accounts before moving on to tell his only story. This part is employed as his phase of brainstorming and sketching on how to narrate his love as authentically as his memory allows him. The fact that Paul carries on with life despite his cauterized heart becomes a source of shame, yet he confronts it with sincerity.

In response, he feels compelled to find an authentic way to tell his story—one that captures the true essence of his love. His determination to narrate this story truthfully, even in the face of love's failure, reflects his resoluteness. Heidegger defines resoluteness as the capacity to genuinely exist with others, not through vague, envious expectations or superficial social interactions, but by being true to oneself (1962, p. 344-45). By steadfastly seeking an authentic mode of storytelling, Paul reclaims himself from the anonymous influence of the "They." Paul does not confine his reflections to conventional expressions of love or being loved but instead engages deeply with their meaning. In other words, his understanding of his first love is not bound by the prevailing interpretations imposed by the "They" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 345). Resolutely, narrator Paul leaves a distance between the narration and himself to validate his story.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in Barnes' *The Only Story*, the older version of Paul narrates the story of his defining love, by filling the gaps in his retrospective account of the experiences and feelings of the lover. In terms of the Heideggerian concept of authenticity, the mature Paul is capable of making authentic strategies in storytelling. As a reliably unreliable narrator, Paul finds liberation in his decision to assert his own Being—a process that reveals itself through his choices, actions, and perhaps even his regrets and shame. His transition from inauthenticity is made possible through continuous reflection on his past behaviors, thoughts, and experiences as illustrated by the concept of Heideggerian authenticity. Paul, as the reliably unreliable homodiegetic narrator, searches for possible ways to narrate his only story. In this study, the authenticity of Paul's narrative is analyzed through two levels: as a narrator and as a lover. In narrating this love story, Paul is not merely recounting events but also uncovering layers of his own identity, while also reflecting on his failure to narrate Susan, his only love. His search for authenticity in his retrospective storytelling is valuable, as it fuels his self-exploration, his contemplation of love, and his understanding of existence. As opposed to the passive state of fallenness, Paul remains actively engaged in discovering new ways of expressing himself and deepening his understanding of his own existence and his Being-in-the-world. This ongoing process solidifies his role as the homodiegetic narrator of his only story. His storytelling reflects both creativity and originality, employing stylistic techniques that may be authentic or inauthentic depending on the context of their relationship. Through retrospective narration, Paul can reflect on the transformative force of Eros, striving to interpret and convey it in the most authentic way he can. The dynamic shifts in the point of view in Paul's homodiegetic narrative enable consistency and coherence with his idiosyncratic style while searching for authentic ways to define the love he had when he was younger. While searching for the best way to start his story, mature Paul realizes, "Perhaps love could never be captured in a definition; it could only ever be captured in a story" (Barnes, 2018, p. 206), which he sets down to narrate.

Conflict of interest:	The author declares no potential conflict of interest.
Financial support:	The author received no financial support for the research.
Ethics Board Approval:	The author declares no need for ethics board approval for the research.

References

Barnes, J. (2018). *The Only Story*. Vintage.

Barnes, J. (2020). *Biricik Hikaye* (S. R. Kırkoğlu, Trans.). Ayrıntı.

Booth, W. C. (1961). *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. University of Chicago Press.

Clanchy, K. (2018, January 26). 'The Only Story' by Julian Barnes Review: An Exquisite Look at Love. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/26/the-only-story-julin-barnes-review

Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative Discourse* (J. E. Lewin, Trans.). Blackwell.

Golomb, J. (1995). *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus*. Routledge.

Guignery, V. (2006). *The Fiction of Julian Barnes*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Guignon, C. (2008). Authenticity. *Philosophy Compass*, *3*(2), 277–290. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2008.00131.x

Guignon, C. (2000). Authenticity and Integrity. In P. Young-Eisendrath & M. E. Miller (Eds.), *The Psychology of Mature Spirituality: Integrity, Wisdom, Transcendence* (pp. 62–74). Routledge.

Guignon, C. (2004). Becoming a Self: The role of Authenticity in Being and Time. In C. Guignon (Ed.), *The Existentialists: Critical Essays on Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre* (pp. 119–132). Rowman & Littlefield.

Han, B.-C. (2017). *The Agony of Eros*. The MIT Press.

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Harper & Row.

Inwood, M. (1997). *Heidegger: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP.

Levinas, E. (1987). *The Time and the Other and Additional Essays* (R. A. Cohen, Trans.). Duquesne University Press.

Mitchell, S. A. (1993). *Hope and Dread in Psychoanalysis*. HarperCollins.

Nietzsche, F. (1974). *The Gay Science* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). Vintage Books.

Nünning, A. F. (2005). Reconceptualizing Unreliable Narration: Synthesizing Cognitive and Rhetorical Approaches. In J. Phelan & P. J. Rabinowitz (Eds.), *A Companion to Narrative Theory* (pp. 89–107). Blackwell.

Pateman, M. (2002). *Julian Barnes*. Northcote House.

Rimmon-Kenan, S. (1983). *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. Methuen.

Taylor, C. (1991). *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Harvard University Press.

Varga, S. (2009). Life as art: Concerning Some Paradoxes of an Ethical Concept. *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics*, *46*(1), 49–61. https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.51

Webber, J. (2018). *Rethinking Existentialism*. Oxford University Press.