

# NEGATING NARRATION, CRUSHING COMMUNICATION: THE NONNARRATED AND THE DISNARRATED IN *THE LEMON TABLE*

## 1. THE NEGATIVES TO THE NARRATED: THE NONNARRATED AND THE DISNARRATED

The main thematic concern of Julian Barnes' collection of linked stories, *The Lemon Table*, is old age in its many forms. Apart from this theme, however, obvious and explicit as it is, an analysis of the narrative techniques employed in Barnes' collection may help reveal another major theme: interpersonal communication as narration, or, rather, its almost complete absence. In order to approach the collection's many narrative gaps and distortions, it seems appropriate to employ the theoretical framework put forth by Gerald Prince in his article entitled "The Disnarrated" (1988). He deals here with the narrated and its negatives, the 'nonnarrated' and the 'disnarrated.'

Gerald Prince defines the 'nonnarrated' as 'something [that] is not told (at least for a while).' This would, according to Harold Mosher, include

strategies of implication like not naming or delaying the names of characters or objects, eliding words in dialogue, referring to but not reporting words characters must have said, not identifying antecedents for pronouns, leaving referents vague in characters' thoughts and speech, suppressing the thoughts of characters whose thoughts are otherwise revealed, [...] and entirely omitting the narration of acts that must have happened. (1993: 407)

The responsibility for the nonnarrated more often than not rests solely with the characters, as it is usually a dramatization of their deceptions, including their self-deceptions. It is to be distinguished from the 'nonnarratable,' which is, according to Prince, what 'cannot be narrated or is not worth narrating' (Prince 1992: 28).

Prince defines the 'disnarrated' as 'the events that do not happen.' Mosher further elaborates this as 'words that are not expressed but could/should have been, acts that could/should have been performed but are not, states that could/should have existed but do not, and objects that could/should have been produced but are not' (Mosher 1993: 407). He later adds that the term is also applicable to 'those

narrating cases in which one does not do what one intends, [...] that one loses what one has (as opposed to keeping it), that one does not obtain what one expects, and that one is not what one seems to be or could be.' (Mosher 1993: 415)

Disnarrating creates alternative, imagined or fabricated worlds often juxtaposed with the 'real,' narrated one, and Prince does not bestow this world-making faculty exclusively on the narrator; he is 'adamant on distributing the ability to 'disnarrate' equally among narrator and characters.' (Christensen 2004: 43) In Prince's own words, 'terms, phrases and passages that consider what did not or does not take place [...] *whether they pertain to the narrator and his or her narration [...] or to one of the characters and his or her actions* constitute the disnarrated' (Prince 1988: 3). Actions of the characters that conjure up nonexistent worlds such as lies, fantasies and rationalizations would thus also qualify as the disnarrated.

Texts rife with the negatives to the narrated seem to be more compatible with the unreliable narrator. Mosher goes so far as to assert that one of the main purposes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century move to eliminate the omniscient narrator was to 'encourage the reader to imagine, to 'write' (perhaps wrongly), the missing (nonnarrated) parts of the story or the alternatives (disnarrated) to the story' (1993: 419). *The Lemon Table* is demonstrably illustrative of this tendency. The vast majority of its narrators and focalizers are unreliable to a disturbing degree and the nonnarrated and the disnarrated abound on all narrative levels. Communication is virtually nonexistent.

## 2. THE NONNARRATED AND THE DISNARRATED IN *THE LEMON TABLE*

Nonnarrating begins with the opening lines of *The Lemon Table*. Referentless personal pronouns go on for a full page before the figural narrator of "A Short History of Hairdressing" is referred to by his first name, and he is only given a last name another thirteen pages and at least half a century further into the story. Gregory Cartwright seems to be particularly prone to the variety of nonnarration Prince refers to as 'repression' (Mosher 1993: 409): he tends to omit or delay narrating the events that he finds unpleasant or unmemorable. It is three pages after her name is first mentioned that we discover 'Allie had broken it up,' and when an 'Allie' is brought up in a cursory way again, after years have apparently lapsed, we do not even know if it is the same woman. Their reconciliation and subsequent marriage can be written into the story by the reader, but are never narrated.

The disnarrated in the first story pertains mostly to the misapprehensions, intentional or unintentional, brought about by the 'customer banter' between Gregory and his hairdressers, especially the wrong impressions they get of each other. Certain that the barber is a homosexual paedophile, young Gregory envisages an entire scenario of being seduced by the 'perve' on a camping trip in the woods. Gregory the 'revolutionary' student mentally paints an unfairly acrimonious picture of the 'provincial mister two-point-four children, pay the mortgage, wash the car and put it back into the garage' (Barnes 2005: 11) that is cutting his hair. His own retort that his 'shave' is 'the way she likes it' alludes to a

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nonexistent relationship which the hairdresser further disnarrates into a marriage. The misunderstanding remains unclarified for as long as it does because Gregory seems to be unable or unwilling to express his views. He, however, keeps coming up with imaginary rejoinders he never uses. This is the context in which the phrase ‘wanted to say,’ a fairly frequent signal of the disnarrated as ‘words that are not expressed but could/should have been,’ first appears in the collection.

It appears once in “The Things You Know,” but Merrill does not really want to reveal Bill’s homosexual tendencies to his widow Janice, and Janice herself is quite happy to keep Merrill unaware of her late husband Tom’s infidelity. The truth about the two men is nonnarrated – significantly delayed for the reader and thoroughly repressed for the two widows. Both disnarrate their late husbands as needed. Janice uses Bill’s ‘posthumous corroboration’ whenever confused and lies outright about the state of his teeth, while Merrill reinvents Tom, who ‘had been drafted,’ as a military man. Neither woman seems to be capable of envisaging a single unflattering detail about her deceased spouse and the reader can only learn about these from the other woman, by means of the story’s variable focalization. The two widows subsist on their idealized, disnarrated versions of their late husbands.

Major Jacko Jackson’s life in “Hygiene” is also sustained by his disnarrated ‘love affair’ with Babs. As the story’s figural narrator, he is responsible for much of its nonnarrated, by means of repression: the delay in revealing his name, with the consequent personal pronouns without antecedents that precede it, and the belated hints, barely sufficient for the reader to write into the story that Jacko is indeed having an affair, that the woman in question is in fact a prostitute much older than himself, and that they have not had intercourse in years because he is impotent. He also fails to acknowledge, and thus nonnarrates, the fact that he is crying – all the reader is told is that Jacko receives a handful of tissues with which he then dries his face. Other information is nonnarrated by deferral through no fault of Jacko’s, because it comes as news to him as well, like Babs’ death and the fact that her name never really was Babs.

Babs disnarrates her name to Jacko, and also his supposedly remarkable virility – this at a time when no trace of it whatsoever is left. Jacko disnarrates his potency to himself, as well as his purported reasons for no longer needing condoms. His attempt at narrating to himself a justification for his adultery is, in light of that, a disnarration too: ‘All he was doing was making sure *his* machinery was still in working order. Old Father Nature still lubricating the parts’ (Barnes 2005: 72). The rationalizations he declines to use qualify as the disnarrated, being both untrue and an alternative to what is expressed: ‘He didn’t say to himself, Oh it’s because I was all newted and owly at the time, and, Oh it’s because Pam is like she is nowadays. Nor did he say, Oh it’s because Babs is blonde and I’ve always gone for blondes.’ (Barnes 2005: 73).

Interestingly enough, dramatized intrusive homodiegetic (‘first-person’) narrators seem to be even less informative and nonnarrate more. The narrator of “Vigilance” never introduces himself, delays the introduction of his live-in ex-lover Andrew, and only hints at being male (and therefore homosexual) ten pages into the story. The reason the couple broke up is also nonnarrated – delayed nine pages

for the reader and never discussed by the characters. Whenever the topic is even remotely alluded to, it triggers an instant ‘We don’t talk about that’ from Andrew.

The narrator, developing hypersensitivity to noise upon being left to attend concerts unescorted, disnarrates entire scenes involving the culprits. He has long, elaborately admonishing conversations with them in his imagination, keeps coming up with impossible schemes for battling them, and his disnarrated excuse for tripping up a fellow concert-goer on the stairs is particularly ludicrous: ‘He was clearly in a hurry. Probably wanted to hawk and spit and cough and sneeze and smoke and drink and set off his digital watch alarm to remind him to use his mobile phone’ (Barnes 2005: 120).

The homodiegetic narrator of “Appetite” has perhaps a firmer grip on reality, but still tends to nonnarrate by omitting and delaying the narration of important information. Her own sex and age, and the nature of her relationship with the patient she visits, are all considerably deferred, which is the reason behind numerous referentless pronouns. Viv, her nickname, is only mentioned in quite a perfunctory fashion three times during the story, and he remains unidentified throughout it. ‘I never say his name to get his attention, because he thinks I’m referring to someone else’ (Barnes 2005: 172-173), she explains, and his identity, now decidedly nonnarrated, is effectively done away with. Other identities are also nonnarrated. A ‘She’ appears several times throughout the narrative, and though never explicitly identified as such by the narrator, can be inferred to be her husband’s first wife. On the other hand, nothing can be inferred about the identity of the woman whom Viv’s husband, in his delirium, repeatedly invites to have sex with him, mistakenly addressing Viv instead every time. Is it his ex-wife, a lover or an imaginary person? No clues are given.

The disnarrated in this story concerns the memories that the couple share – the only thing left to them in the situation they are in, and also the most difficult to retain. Viv’s projection from the past is sadly illusory: ‘From the start he had the better memory, that’s the joke of it. I used to think that I’d be able to rely on him, on him remembering’ (Barnes 2005: 171). Rather than remembering their past, the patient reinvents it, and Viv can only be sure that she cannot trust him.

The intrusive narrator of “The Fruit Cage” seems only too eager to share all the information at his disposal, including his entire family history, his parents’ characters, the village they live in and the old family washing machine. This chattiness, however, only masks his reluctance to divulge anything substantial about himself. His own nickname, Chris, is only revealed in passing nine pages into the story, and his suspicions that his mother may be physically abusing his father and that his father may be having an affair remain nonnarrated. They are only verbalized by other characters.

Different accounts of the same events make up the disnarrated in the story. Although common sense suggests that one of the versions could actually be true, i.e. narrated, it is often impossible to surmise which one it is, so all of them must remain at least potentially disnarrated. Both Dorothy and Stanley disnarrate Stanley’s bruise as being the consequence of ‘a fall.’ Elsie, on the other hand, claims Dorothy hit him on the head with a frying pan. There are three versions of how Stanley’s Wednesday afternoons are passed – playing billiards at the British Legion

club (the official story), having an affair with Elsie (the narrator's presumption voiced to his father) and Stanley's own final confession: 'I mostly was down the club, son. I said billiards to make things simpler. Sometimes I just sat in the car. Looking at a field' (Barnes 2005: 189). Dorothy and Elsie have sharply contrasting accounts of Stanley's final pre-paralysis days and particularly of what caused his condition.

Characters have disnarrated versions as well: Dorothy, for instance, entertains a distorted image of Elsie, or, as she refers to her, 'Joyce' Royce. The narrator also has a preconceived idea of what the 'homewrecker' would be like: 'I wanted to see scarlet fingernails and scarlet toenails. But no such luck' (Barnes 2005: 192). Even the old washing machine has different versions in the memories of different family members.

In the epistolary "Knowing French," the entire other side of the correspondence is nonnarrated by complete omission. All the reader is presented with are the letters Sylvia Winstanley writes to 'Julian Barnes' and two letters he receives from 'J. Smyles (Warden)'. The letters 'Julian Barnes' writes have allegedly been destroyed and their content can only be deduced from Sylvia's. Sylvia disnarrates 'Julian Barnes' as a character of Julian Barnes' – Dr Geoffrey Braithwaite, the narrator of *Flaubert's Parrot*. She (quite astoundingly for someone actually versed in French literature) believes him to be a doctor in his sixties because he 'said' so in his book. She also reflects on what the life of a 'Famous Person in art' who was in love with her when they were children and her own would be like if they had married, disnarrating the past and the present.

"The Silence" is written in the form of a journal. The name of the person keeping it is nonnarrated throughout the story, but it can easily be deduced to be Jean (Janne) Sibelius, the famous Finnish composer. His wife, referred to only as 'A.' (Sibelius' wife's name was Aino), 'operat[ing] with silence,' writes him a letter 'after Gothenburg' which he promises to carry on him 'until rigor mortis sets in.' Two pages and at least ten frantically revolving thoughts later, we finally get the rough contents of the letter and an account, nonnarrated via this delay, of the drunken incident in Gothenburg.

One of A.'s chief merits seems to be her ability to refrain from speaking on painful topics. They 'do not speak of' the narrator's alcoholism and he is also happy to report that 'unlike everyone else she never asks when my Eighth will be ready.' Apart from disnarrating their never spoken words, the narrator also disnarrates his working habits: 'At nights I compose. No, at nights I sit at my desk with a bottle of whisky and try to work.' Others disnarrate him as successful: they 'see only fame, applause, official dinners, a state pension, a devoted family, supporters across the oceans' (Barnes 2005: 207). He, however, despises these 'trappings of success' and feels old, depleted and not overly satisfied with himself.

Another ageing artist's indiscretions are tackled in "The Revival." The exasperatingly intrusive heterodiegetic ('third-person') narrator hides nothing; he only leaves Turgenev's name nonnarrated until the very last page and completely omits that of the actress he falls in love with. The other narrative gaps can be more safely described as the nonnarratable – what cannot be narrated because it is in this case unknown to the narrator. The disnarrated, however, abounds in this

story, mainly through the courtesy of Turgenev's tendency to daydream and create alternative realities in which he is united with his love. According to the narrator, his is 'a love predicated upon renunciation, whose excitements [are] called if-only and what-might-have-been' (Barnes 2005: 90). After a shared train journey of which differing accounts exist in his letters, all of them probably wildly inaccurate, he disnarrates an entire episode in which he abducts her. He then projects their fantasy relationship into the future only to verify its impossibility. This does not prevent him from envisaging elaborate scenarios of their journeys to Italy, traveling with her 'in the past conditional.' Most notably, they disnarrate each other: to her, he is the author of the play she has fallen in love with; to him, she is Verochka, his own creation, literally narrated by him.

The authorial narrator of "Bark" does not need to nonnarrate too much – the characters are sufficiently successful at doing that. Delacour delays the revelation of his companion's name to Lagrange, only to have him forbid the affair while withholding his reasons for doing so. It is not until Lagrange's funeral that Delacour learns the deceased was Jeanne's father. Once he recognizes the nature of his feelings for Jeanne, he does not even consider sharing them with her. Prior to that realization, he disnarrates their relationship in terms of necessary 'hygiene,' and misconstrues the motive behind Lagrange's admonition as jealousy of this function she performs for Delacour's health. Investing so much in his physical well-being, he cannot even envisage any outcome of the tontine other than his outliving the other thirty-nine subscribers. This clearly proves to be illusory when he is the thirty-seventh one to die.

"The Story of Mats Israelson" is the story of the story of Mats Israelson, a story never really told. It is a doubly nonnarrated and doubly disnarrated embedded narrative. When Anders Bodén makes his first attempt at telling it to Barbro Lindwall, his words are not reported. All we learn is that 'he told it in the wrong order, and too quickly, and she did not appear interested. She did not even seem to realize that it was true' (Barnes 2005: 31). The story itself is then delayed for two more pages, when the reader has the privilege of witnessing the telling of it being practiced by Anders, who is unaware that he will not be given another chance to do so.

In its first rendition, the story is disnarrated – mistold and misunderstood – and for that very reason it develops into the narrated, as the matrix narrative becomes analogous to the embedded one. In other words, the story within the story affects the final outcome of the main story. Because of the way the story within the story is told, it becomes true – Barbro and Anders' hearts remain frozen in time like Mats Israelson in the copper mines of Falun. Anders convinces himself that 'if he were to tell the story of Mats Israelson correctly, it would make her say once more "I would like to visit Falun." And then he would reply "I shall take you there." And everything would be decided' (Barnes 2005: 34). The very act of narrating thus becomes the chief disnarrated of the story.

Anders fantasizes about all the other things he could have told her and their effect on her, and Barbro has her own disnarrated 'if only': 'if only he could have read my heart before I did. I do not talk to men like that, listen to them like that, look them in the face like that. Why couldn't he tell?' (Barnes 2005: 36) She also has an unfounded fear that her daughter will marry his son.

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Their story has many versions, and even the omniscient narrator cannot help establish which one is 'true.' Their respective spouses, as well as 'gossip' (almost personified), decide, after many vicissitudes, that Anders and Barbro have had an actual affair. Barbro and Anders' disnarrated, if-only, almost mythical version of their relationship, which sustains their entire lives, actually proves to be more real than what, now 'sobered up,' they disnarrate to themselves and to each other during their final misunderstanding in the Falun hospital.

### 3. NARRATION AND COMMUNICATION

Misunderstandings abound in *The Lemon Table*, and some happen despite the best efforts to the contrary. Gregory knows he has 'got it wrong' the first time he tells Allie he loves her, and does not 'seem to be saying it right' when he tries to engage in small-talk with his hairdresser, although he claims to have finally managed to 'get the right tone' in 'customer banter.' The narrator of "Vigilance" gets it right when he admits 'It's hard to get it right.' Those who choose not to communicate achieve this via prevarication and repression, the latter often verbalized as 'we don't talk about that,' 'we do not speak of this,' and 'he/she wanted to say' (but never did).

Sound metaphors heighten the prevalent mood of verbal isolation. Gunshots 'awaken the echoes' in Falun, and echoing that, echoes are what a large portion of Janice and Merrill's conversation boils down to (the rest of it being reserved for parallel monologues). After such an exchange, the statement 'We're sharing,' made in reference to the bill, resounds with sarcasm. One of Anders' favorite tourist sites is the deaf-and-dumb asylum. The sawmill laborer is run down by the steamboat because he is deafened by the water in his ears, and Gregory also gets water in his ears at the hairdresser's. Sylvia is self-admittedly deaf, and Anders, Stanley and Viv's husband lose their powers of lucid speech towards their end, but all the characters are metaphorically both deaf and dumb to varying degrees. Perhaps this is deemed necessary to prepare them for the oft mentioned 'silence' which the collection's 'submerged population group' (O'Connor 1965: 18, 20-21), the elderly, is unavoidably journeying towards.

Finally, considering the great number of letters exchanged, postcards sent and dialogues reported, there is surprisingly little actual communication in *The Lemon Table*. In fact, the only successful articulation of genuine emotion in the book, Stanley's 'Just glad to see you' spoken to his son, merely causes 'alarm' in Chris, being such a 'rare expression of direct pleasure.' The seeming impossibility of any real communication whatsoever demonstrably makes for one of the collection's main themes.

The nonnarrated and the disnarrated in *The Lemon Table* quite frequently refer directly to acts of narration, most obviously so in "The Story of Mats Israelson," where we are dealing with the difficulty of communicating an undeniable narrative. In terms of narrating as telling, relating, recounting, this tendency is obvious throughout the book. Communication can be defined in the book as the willingness and ability to narrate on all levels, and characters, narrators and even the author himself (when he conveniently has his side of the

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 correspondence destroyed in “Knowing French”) are deficient in one or both. The narrative techniques of nonnarration and disnarration are thus closely intertwined with the theme of absent communication-as-narration in *The Lemon Table*, making narration its own thematic focus.

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## SUMMARY

NEGATING NARRATION, CRUSHING COMMUNICATION:  
 THE NONNARRATED AND THE DISNARRATED IN *THE LEMON TABLE*

This paper analyzes the narrative techniques of nonnarration and disnarration employed in Barnes’ collection of short stories, *The Lemon Table*, and links them with one of the book’s main thematic concerns – narration as communication – or, rather, its almost complete absence.

**KEYWORDS:** Narration, nonnarrated, disnarrated, communication, *The Lemon Table*.