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JULIAN BARNES'S *BEFORE SHE MET ME* AS A STUDY OF LITOST*

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ABSTRACT

Julian Barnes has always been a novelist of wide interests and as a novelist he has been fond of experimenting on new themes in a variety of structures which are completely different from one another. In his 1982 novel, *Before She Met Me* Barnes presents a black comedy on the theme of sexual jealousy experienced by otherwise a very sensible, normal and successful professor of history, Graham Hendrick. However, this time the past he relentlessly studies is his own wife's past. The story develops mainly focusing on the consciousness of Graham as "the times before she met him," in other words "her past," start to take hold of the whole present of Graham and turns his life into a nightmare. The novel illustrates how sexual jealousy can capture our sensible, civilized self and transforms our brain into a blood thirst animal's brain once libidinal instincts become our main drives. This paper will offer a reading and analysis of Graham's situation from the perspective of Milan Kundera's concept of *litost* which is "a state of torment created by the sudden sight of one's own misery," or "an emotion formed of jealousy, melancholy, pity, resentment and revenge."

Key Words: Julian Barnes, *Before She Met Me*, Milan Kundera, litost

JULIAN BARNES'İN BENİMLE TANIŞMADAN ÖNCE ADLI ROMANININ LİTOST AÇISINDAN ANALİZİ

ÖZET

Julian Barnes, ilgi alanları çok geniş bir yelpazeye yayılan ve her romanında çok değişik konuları önceki romanlarına hiç benzemeyen anlatı tarzları içinde sunabilen bir yazardır. 1982'de yazdığı *Benimle Tanışmadan Önce*, normalde son derece mantıklı, akıllı selim bir insan olan başarılı bir tarih profesörünün cinsel kıskançlık deneyimini kara komedi biçiminde aktaran bir romandır. Tarih profesörünün titizlikle araştırdığı geçmiş ise, bu kez, kendi karısının geçmişi. Roman Graham'ın bilincine yoğunlaşırken karısının geçmişinin, Graham'la tanışmadan önceki hayatının, Graham'ın şimdiki zamanını ele geçirdiğine ve hayatını tam bir kabusu çevirdiğine şahit oluruz. Roman, normalde son derece akıllı, mantıklı olan bir insanın cinsel kıskançlık yaşadığında nasıl olup da gözü dönmüş vahşi bir hayvana dönüşebildiğini ve en ilkel dürtülerin nasıl olup da eğitilmiş, medeni bir adamı eli kanlı bir caniyeye çevirdiğini inceler. Bu makale, Graham'ın durumuna Milan Kundera'nın "bir kişinin

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kendi sefilliğinin farkına beklenmedik biçimde vardığı anda ortaya çıkan acılı durum” veya “kıskançlık, melankoli, acıma, eziklik ve öfke karışımı olan bir tür duygu” olarak tanımladığı *litost* kavramı açısından yaklaşan bir incelemedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Julian Barnes, *Benimle Tanışmadan Önce*, Milan Kundera, *litost*

Before She Met Me, published in 1982, is Julian Barnes’s second novel which can be “read on its own as a darkly comic story of paranoid love leading to violence and self-destruction” (Childs, 2011: 34).

The novel opens with two epigraphs: One is from Molière, English translation of which is “Better wed than dead”. The other is from Paul D. MacLean (an American neuroscientist) who was famous for his theory of “triune brain” in 1960s. The epigraph from MacLean reads as follows:

Man finds himself in the predicament that nature has endowed him essentially with three brains which, despite great differences in structure, must function together and communicate with one another. The oldest of these brains is basically reptilian. The second has been inherited from the lower mammals, and the third is a late mammalian development, which...has made man peculiarly man. Speaking allegorically of these brains within a brain, we might imagine that when the psychiatrist bids the patient to lie on the couch, he is asking him to stretch out alongside a horse and a crocodile.

Paul D. MacLean, Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases, Vol. CXXXV, No 4, October, 1962

Before She Met Me examines the retrospective jealousy of Graham Hendrick, a 42-year-old history professor working at the University of London. Ann, his second wife, is a former actress and now a fashion buyer. They met four years ago at a house party hosted by their mutual friend Jack Lupton, a novelist.

The first sentence of the novel refers to the second year of Graham’s marriage: “The first time Graham Hendrick watched his wife commit adultery he didn’t mind at all. He even found himself chuckling” (2014:1). Narration is in the third person and we would normally assume the title to be *Before She Met Him*. However, the title is *Before She Met Me*, where “she” stands for Ann and “me” for Graham, indicating that the whole narrative will focus on Graham’s introspections of Ann’s past.

By blending horror and comedy, the narrative focuses on Graham’s mental changes as he gradually loses the control of his mind. As Peter Childs remarks, “The story’s humor derives from the sardonic wit with which Barnes charts Graham’s gradual thought-tormented descent into psychopathological violence from his initial security conveyed by the book’s opening lines” (2011: 35), i.e., from “chuckling” to murder and suicide. A pertinent question arises in Graham when he wonders “At fortyish? What could account for such a shift in perceptions? You thought about your brain, when you did, as something you used- put things into and got out answers. Now, suddenly, you felt as if it were using you...What if you brain became your enemy?” (BSM,157). His brain becomes an enemy as its three coexisting layers—namely, human, horse and crocodile brains—mentioned in the epigraph do not form a healthy communication.

When Graham was introduced by Jack to Ann, “he had been married to Barbara for fifteen years, in the same job for ten years; halfway through an elastic mortgage; halfway through life as well, and

he could feel the downhill slope already.” (2014:4) He was 38 then and Ann was 31. They begin an affair which leads Graham’s divorce. In the second year of their marriage, Graham’s revenge-driven ex-wife Barbara suggests that Graham take their daughter to see a particular film on her weekly visit to him, a film, in which, as he discovers, Ann appears. Later on Barbara says that she wanted to give them a delayed wedding present. She wanted her ex-husband to see what a tart his second wife had been before she met him and what he had let himself in for. (37) “Prompted to see a first film featuring Ann only by deception of Barbara’s, Graham, who has eschewed cinema going for many years, repeatedly seeks out opportunities effectively to spy on Ann’s past.” (Childs, 15) Barbara’s trick becomes a success when the film traumatizes Graham. Though at first not very concerned by Ann’s role as a gangster’s lover, Graham soon finds that he is returning to see the film again and again, and that he has developed an insatiable appetite, “a hunch” to see his wife in all the films that she made, no matter how bad. He becomes obsessed by the relationships which Ann had before he met her, both on and off the screen. Neither Ann nor Jack is able to persuade Graham that he has no grounds to consider Ann unfaithful. He gradually deteriorates in his obsession and becomes convinced, by reading Jack’s novels, that Ann also had an affair with Jack which has continued after her marriage to him. Graham kills Jack and then, in the presence of Ann, kills himself. (Millington & Sinclair, 1992: 13)

In an interview with Amanda Smith in 1989, Barnes acknowledges that “the novel was a rather nasty book about unpleasant sexual feelings, jealousies and obsessions. It was meant to have a rather sour and hard-driving edge to it. I think it’s my funniest book, though the humor is rather bleak and in bad taste usually.” (qtd in Guignery, 2006: 20) Humor is conveyed by Graham’s ridiculous misery, Barnes’s attitude and the dialogues between Graham and Jack. Jack’s inner thoughts and nasty comments about Graham’s problem and his constant farts during his pseudo-psychoanalyses create a funny atmosphere. The complex feelings, serious questionings and motives of Graham, on the other hand, remain pregnant to discussions as we see that MacLean’s triune brain theory does not suffice to explain them, and that Freud’s theories should also be kept in mind as Freud’s triune psyche theory –formed of id, ego and superego- serves as the psychological counterpart of the former. Besides, in the epigraph the doctor who examines the patient’s horse, crocodile and human brains is not an anatomist but a psychiatrist.

The novel can also be read as a sociological statement “attacking on the view that the sexual revolution of the 1960s was uniformly liberating.” (Childs, 34) As, in another interview in 1987, Barnes puts it:

[*Before She Met Me*] is a sort of anti-‘60s book. It’s against the idea that somehow ‘60s sorted sex out; that everyone was all fucked up beforehand. Queen Victoria was still in charge –and then along came the Beatles, suddenly everyone started sleeping with everyone else, and that cured the lot. That’s a rough plan of English sexual history, as seen by many people. And I just wanted to say, it’s not like that; that which is constant is the human heart and human passions. (McGrath, 1987:21)

In short, for Barnes erotic love is poisoned at its roots by primitive instincts and the sexual freedom of 1960s may not always liberate a man once he suffers obsessive jealousy even in the last quarter of the twentieth century. As in the case of Graham, “Love that gets out of hand can easily turn into madness, it can easily be curdled. The croc gets loose.” (1987: 23) In another talk in 2000, when asked about the reason why jealousy figures so much in his work, Barnes answers that “it is novelistically attractive as a theme because it is dramatic, frequently irrational, unfair, obsessing and horrible for all parties. It’s the moment when something deeply primitive breaks the surface of our supposedly grown-up lives [like] the crocodile’s snout in the lily pond.” (qtd in Guignery, 21) Jealousy

is generally associated with our bestial side which is inclined to violence and primitive behavior. That's why MacLean's allegorical representation of human brain as composed also of horse and crocodile brains refers to our animal instincts. Meat is the common zone of man and beast and the novel examines this zone's function in our thoughts, emotions and drives as we witness Graham's regression from a historian to a butcher.

For Barnes, there is something pertinently existing in human nature and the chapter titled "The Feminian Sandstones", which takes its title from a poem by Rudyard Kipling, claims that humanity will go on repeating itself. Similarly the final chapter titled "the Horse and the Crocodile" suggests that these instincts are "the unchanged provinces of human brain." (Childs, 41)

Although Paul MacLean's triune brain theory is widely contested by neuroscientists today, Barnes uses it as the caricature twin of Freud's theories which focus on human psychology ignoring flesh's role in comprehending how human brain (as a physical entity) is responsible for emotions such as jealousy. According to this theory, "the most primitive brain is the reptilian brain which has the same type of archaic behavioral programs as snakes, crocodiles and lizards. It is rigid, obsessive, compulsive, ritualistic and paranoid. It keeps repeating the same behaviors over and over again, never learning from past mistakes, which can be associated with Freud's ideas on death instincts. The paleomammalian or the limbic brain is similar to lower animals' brains such as the brains of horses. It is concerned with emotions and instincts, passions and sexual behavior. Survival depends on avoidance of pain and repetition of pleasure, which can be associated with Freud's ideas on life instincts since it functions according to pleasure principle. And, finally the neomammalian brain, the newest and most developed layer, the cortex which corresponds to the brain of the primate mammals and, consequently, the human species. The higher cognitive functions which distinguish man from the animals are in this layer which is for MacLean the center of abstract thought." (Kazlev, "Triune Brain") Therefore, Graham's situation can be perceived as a regression from the neomammalian toward the reptilian; from a rational, civilized man to a savage beast; from a conscious man who always obeyed the demands of superego to an unconscious man victimized by his uncontrollable death instincts.

Before She Met Me questions the locus of mind and soul in human body through a horribly funny story which anatomizes the feeling of jealousy. As a result we find ourselves wondering the functions of offal, intestines, brain, genitals and heart in creating emotions such as passion, jealousy, rage and grief. Graham starts to suffer a mind and body duality when the machine or the body takes the control of the mind. Graham's sexual desires are transformed from a drive to pleasure to what is beyond pleasure (namely from Eros to Thanatos) when jealousy appears as a power detaining him from thinking sensibly.

Along with MacLean's and Freud's theories, which enrich the discussions on mind, body and soul triad, this paper attempts to analyze Graham's case by referring to Milan Kundera's concept of *litost*. Graham's state of despair, his crisis arising from his brain's strange commands and his inadequacy of responding to them, can be better understood by reference to the concept of *litost*.

In his novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979), Milan Kundera introduces the concept of *litost* as a psychological state which drives man to do irrational things and he states that "[he finds] it difficult to imagine how anyone can understand the human soul without it." (1999: 166) *Litost* is a Czech word which is untranslatable to other languages. As a complex emotion, it triggers a psychological state which is mixed with misery, impelling the subject to seek for compensation. Once it comes out, it creates resentment which has to be melted away by retaliation. *Litost* is similar to the

Nietzschean concept of *ressentiment* in that, it arises when subject feels weak and inferior because of another. In the fifth part of the novel, Kundera evaluates litost as a characteristic of the age of inexperience, and generally gives examples of litost through representations of young lovers. It is “a state of torment created by the sudden sight of one’s own misery” (167). Litost works like a two-stroke engine in which torment is followed by the desire for revenge (168). Either a person suffering from litost creates an excuse to attack a weaker party or that person engages in a circuitous revenge, an indirect blow, a murder by means of suicide. (206) In other words, an event occurs suddenly forcing one to understand just how miserable he or she is; when this hidden truth about the state of the person’s well-being is revealed, that person is tormented by the revelation and seeks revenge against the person or group that caused the truth-bearing event. The person who feels wounded and humiliated seeks compensation for his miserable state.

Graham’s sudden sight of his own misery emerges when he watches a film featuring Ann, where she appears in bed, half naked as a gangster’s mistress. Despite being a middle aged man, whom we assume to be mature and in control of his passion, he feels litost because of his own inexperience and inferiority in sexual affairs. His litost gradually becomes a mixture of various feelings -such as jealousy for Ann’s past, rage due to perceiving her acting career as adultery, and melancholy due to the inability to overcome the illogical functioning of the brain -all culminating in psychic trauma.

Kundera’s concept of litost finds its translation in Barnes as retrospective jealousy, however, there is no such thing as retrospective revenge to alleviate it, at least not for Graham. Hence, his litost is transformed into trauma which is fueled by death drives visible in the symptoms such as repetition compulsion, obsession, restless sleeps, masochism and the increasing tendency toward self-destruction. Zizek’s definition of trauma “as the violent intrusion of something radically unexpected, something the subject was absolutely not ready for, and which it cannot integrate in anyway” clearly describes Graham’s present condition (2010: 292). After the shock of the film, a new Graham emerges as his “libidinal unconscious undergoes a traumatic encounter; it reacts by regression, withdrawing from engagement and interaction to a more primitive mode of functioning” (Zizek, 301). Not knowing what to do destroys Graham.

The roots of his litost are apparent in Graham’s past: Before he met Ann, Graham was an impassive and sensible figure. “Everything he valued went on between his ears” (5), he looked after his body with the impassive interest that he showed toward his car. “Both objects had to be fueled, washed at varying intervals, both went wrong occasionally, but could usually be repaired” (6). He was a “cold fish” in the eye of his female students “when gusset-flashing girl students crossed their legs at him, he responded by giving them the more difficult essay options” (5), he had never been tempted. He read a great deal, gardened, did the crossword; protected his property. At 38, it felt a bit like being retired already. He was still fond of Barbara, though he hadn’t really loved her, hadn’t felt anything like pride or interest in their relationship for at least five years. He had married Barbara when he was 23 and his sexual life actually started with his marriage. Throughout the fifteen years of his marriage, he’d never been unfaithful to Barbara: because he thought it was wrong. He was not a cinemagoer and “Not going to the cinema had been one of their first observable characteristics as a couple” (22). He had a rather sheltered and predictable life; he was totally content with what was inside his head. He was a man of letters, a verbal man whose job was books, archives and research on history.

With Ann, Graham discovers his bodily pleasures, in MacLean’s terms, his horse brain is activated, and he learns to enjoy his sexual appetites. He becomes more excited and imaginative, he feels refreshed and alive. His body is no longer an object like a car but a site of pleasures to be shared

with a lovely wife. He considers his new life with Ann as an everlasting holiday at first. “Ann makes the spectrum wider for him, restores to him those lost colors everyone had right to see. After green, blue and indigo now he sees more, feels safe; existentially safe.” (21) For Graham, “With Barbara, marriage was a state of affairs, not a particularly rewarding part of life, like having a job that one does not especially appreciate, but dutifully carried on.” With Ann, Graham enters a new world that was only barely emerging at the time of his youth (8). “Ann had introduced him not just to Pleasure but to its intricate approaches, its mazy enjoyment; she even managed to freshen for him the memories of pleasure.” (7) However, although Graham enjoys learning new things, he starts to resent being less experienced than Ann, which slowly activates his crocodile brain. He feels at a state of thankfulness edged with queasy resentment. “Grateful as he was to her for teaching him, approving as he did of her having found out first, he sometimes ran up against a residual, nervous vexation that Ann had got there before him” (7). “Conventionally bourgeois, sexually timid and henpecked by his first wife, Graham becomes the victim of instincts and emotions he can neither understand nor control.” (Holmes, 2009: 106)

In short, until he met Ann, Graham’s life was not pleasure oriented, his human brain was active; his mind regarded his body as a machine and the ghost in the machine¹ was asleep. After meeting Ann, Graham experiences a physical and psychological awakening. Two years pass as years of self-discovery and happiness and Graham becomes a more passionate lover who even envies the things Ann touched. “He feels contemptuous of the years he had spent without her. He felt frustrated at not being allowed to be *her*, not even for a day.” (21)

This is how Barbara’s revenge turns out to be a crucial point in the second year of his marriage to Ann. It initiates Graham’s litost which turns into psychic trauma as the litost intensifies by his incapacity to respond adequately to it. Graham knows that “the film was the catalyst. That was what sparked it all off.” He says he already knew about some of Ann’s chaps before him; he’d even met a few of them...But it was only after the film that he started to care about them. It suddenly began to hurt that Ann had been to bed with them. It suddenly felt like adultery. And he knows that considering this situation as adultery is silly. (45) When his eyes were exposed to the visual material in the film he was not simply ready for the new colors in the spectrum. As Childs states, he was “in many ways ill-equipped to deal with the feelings Ann provoked in him.” (43) His human brain which expertised in abstract thinking -and which had adequately responded to Ann’s past before watching the film- is cancelled out by the horse brain which is shocked by the same past as it becomes visual. As his frustration intensifies we understand that the crocodile brain starts to rule over the other two. He has always been a man of words rather than images, a man who hated pictures and films all his life and now he is traumatized by “seeing his wife there, up there on the screen, which is a lot more powerful than the word” (141).

He goes to Jack to take advice. He says: “I’m just worried, I sort of can’t get over how I’m reacting to...to what it is I’m reacting to. I didn’t know about this sort of thing.” (42) As the conversation proceeds he says that the thing is jealousy, sexual jealousy; then he corrects himself by adding “retrospective, it’s all retrospective. It’s all about the chaps before me. Before she met me” (42).

¹ *Ghost in the Machine* is a 1967 book about philosophical psychology by Arthur Koestler. The title is a phrase coined by the Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle to describe the Cartesian dualist account of the mind-body relationship. Koestler shares with Ryle the view that the mind of a person is not an independent non-material entity, temporarily inhabiting and governing the body.

Graham, at certain moments, trying to distance himself from his litost, contemplates on the concept of jealousy and thinks about the reasons of it, not just for him but for lots of people. He understands that it is related to love in some way but that isn't quantifiable or comprehensible. He wonders if there is any genetic aspect of it or how it should operate retrospectively; he also questions how it can exist now, in the last quarter of the twentieth century. (135-137)

The concept of litost suggests an alternative evaluation of Graham's misery. As a feeling, litost is the synthesis of many feelings such as grief, sympathy, remorse, rage, revenge and an indefinable longing. Graham's litost is triggered by films which are fictive and visual, and the past which is immutable. In other words, Graham lacks the object to which he could direct his revenge. He cannot hold Ann responsible for the sudden sight of his own misery; Ann was not the one who sent him to the cinema, after all; and she was never the kind of person who would let her past intervene in her marriage. As a result, Graham remains helpless in alleviating his litost and as Guignery remarks "[He] suffers from a kind of foolish rage against the immutability of the past and [...] his obsessional rage is precisely what turns his jealousy into a disease of the mind" (2006: 21). In Kundera's examples, those who suffer litost can never honestly explain what bothers them. They know the reason, tend to keep it to themselves and wait for the right time to take revenge. In Graham's case the question "what bothers him" is something irrational both for the reader and Graham himself. Graham is aware that his litost has no solid ground to be compensated.

During one of his visits to Jack to take advice, Jack consults him in the way Kundera would suggest. He says: "If you want to survive, the best way to survive is to identify it, isolate it, and always make a peculiar response to it when it occurs... Go out and bang some tart for a cure; call up an old girlfriend; have a wank, get drunk, go and buy a new tie...or love her less" (51). But Graham says that all that he wants is to "take a holiday from being inside his brain" (51).

Kundera relates litost to conscious self and analyses it as an ego-oriented emotion. This is why Jack's advices can function properly for the kind of litost Kundera presents. It is a form of self-defense which secures one's well-being and restores the balance in relationships and as it satisfies ego's demands, it can be aligned with life instincts.

He knows that this is very silly to be jealous about his wife's past. Yet, he says, he felt he had a hunch: a hunch about himself which made him go back to the same film the second time...the third time, even cancelling his classes to be able to watch the same film. (44) The hunch is caused by his unsatisfied litost which spurs his death instincts. Graham is a historian, and Barnes sets his irony by choosing this profession for his protagonist. By taking not jealousy but its retrospective form as his subject matter, Barnes very wittily tests the historian's relation to past when passions are involved. Graham's profession becomes a parody when we see how he conducts keen research on his wife's past and how he is unable to handle that past when it becomes private and visual. He interrogates Ann about her previous sexual affairs, learns the names of the chaps one by one, in her absence searches her library shelves trying to find new evidence related to her past; he lists the books that were presented to her by her ex-lovers, the holidays she went with them; he examines her travel maps, her match-box collection, her foreign coin collection, he then starts to watch every film that her ex-partners appeared, collect every magazine article about those films etc. In short, his human brain becomes a subordinate to his primitive brain.

His constant state of grief makes death extraordinarily gratifying for him. His condition confirms Terry Eagleton's description of death instinct's effect on the ego: "Savaged by the superego, ravaged by the id, battered by the external world, the poor, bruised ego becomes understandably in love with

its own dissolution. Only by returning to the inanimate state from which it set out can it cease to suffer.” (2010: 107).

Something in his brain starts to bother Graham. He reflects on the mechanisms of the human brain and Jack develops a version of this theory of the lower brains, “the ones that control our emotions, make us kill people, fuck other people’s wives, vote Tory, kick the dog” (84). Can one really feel cuckolded by one’s partner’s former lovers? Graham resembles Othello in being disturbed by jealousy “that green-eyed monster”, but with a difference, “he needs no Iago; he is Iago to his own Othello” (Higdon, 1991: 179). To keep Iago or the crocodile busy and satisfy its carnivorous demands at least temporarily, he develops a secret habit of chopping meat. After watching a film of Ann each day, it becomes his routine to buy from the butcher kinds of offal such as pig brains, ox brains, bull balls, blood pudding, ox tongue, chicken and other kinds of carcass. He not only chops them but also stabs them and tests his knife on them hopelessly trying to cure his sadness and figure out how meat controls the mind.

As the narrative unfolds, Graham becomes increasingly unable to separate fact from fiction, or past from present; his trauma intensifies, his melancholy deepens. “Two nights out of three he would rail at Ann, repeating strings of names of the chaps before she met him, recounting horrible dreams of adultery, orgy, mutilation and revenge. He would sometimes interrogate her about the most impossible liaisons, suddenly fall silent and then begin to weep. His head would drop, and the tears burst out and Graham would tell her that all his incomprehensible anger was directed, not at her, but at himself; that he had nothing to reproach her for, and that he loved her” (159).

Graham internally knows that the only way to quell the crocodile is through self-destruction. When he discovers that his best friend Jack –to whom he had been confiding his problems with Ann– had a sexual involvement with Ann which started several years before she met him, Graham believes that finally he has an object to project his rage. The discovery is a fact which Ann and Jack agreed - with good will- to expunge from historical record considering Graham’s delicate condition, since they are no longer involved. Graham’s litost urges him to find an external, current and concrete cause for retaliation. He becomes convinced, after analyzing Jack’s novels as textual evidence, that Jack and Ann’s affair is continuing. He reads them and rereads them for clues that will reveal the ways Jack wrote references to Ann into his narratives. Eventually, he comes up with worrying conclusions for a historian when he feels certain that Ann is cuckolding him with Jack. According to Millington and Sinclair, “Graham’s anxiety causes a psychological projection as an extreme and primitive reaction to pain, threat, or discomfort. In projection, any negative experience or feeling which the self cannot actually accommodate internally, is disowned, projected out into the external world, where it then comes to constitute a threat from the outside.” (1992: 6) Through reading Jack’s novels as though they were history, Graham falsely decides that Jack is guilty of still having an affair with Ann: again, as with his film-going, fiction is the basis of his action. The moment he identifies Jack as a current rival and not a rival from the past, he projects his violence first against Jack and then against himself.

His end becomes a sado-masochistic performance. In the final chapter Barnes highlights the bestial aspect of our nature and returns to the battle between flesh and consciousness. It is the offal that comes on top. Graham on his way to murder Jack thinks, “he’d spent forty years fighting it, but it was all offal, blood, liver, bile, and so on. Offal was clever stuff. The battle against it was always lost. In the end your guts fucked you up.” (194-195) He first stabs Jack from his back with his favorite knife “the one with the black bone handle and a six-inch blade tapering from a breadth of an inch to a sharp point” (199). When Jack turns round in bewilderment, he slips the knife in repeatedly at Jack’s

lower body, “between the heart and the genitals” aiming the guts as he tested at home regularly. Then he waits for Ann to come, and, in her presence, he cuts deeply into both sides of his throat. According to Millington and Sinclair, “his suicide seems to suggest a continuing sense of inadequacy; it also seems to be a last, desperate means of expressing to Ann the hurt that he feels. Given the way that he stage-manages the suicide so that Ann has to witness it, Graham seems to be seeking a way of demonstrating an emotion that neither he nor she has fully been able to comprehend (15).

The incomprehensible element is not only Graham’s infliction by the irrational litost which is illustrated as retrospective jealousy. It is also the triumph of the offal over mind; the flesh over consciousness; the primitive over civilized; Thanatos over Eros. In the end Graham, emancipated from his misery by self-destruction, sadly dies as a mentally disturbed man.

The melodramatic end, which is rather gripping and shocking for the reader, becomes an ironic reversal of the second epigraph by Moliere, where “better wed than dead” can be reread as “better dead than wed”.

To conclude, Barnes presents Graham’s story as a tragedy blended with comedy to raise questions about the enigmatic nature of human instincts and emotions. As the story develops toward a shocking climax, it creates pity and fear for Graham. Besides, MacLean’s and Freud’s theories that enrich the ways of approaching to the incomprehensible, Kundera’s concept of litost provides a different interpretation of it. Barnes wrote *Before She Met Me* in 1982, three years after Kundera wrote *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. It is important to note that Kundera’s study of litost excludes the kind of litost Graham suffers and falls short in diagnosing his motives, whereas Barnes’s novel can be read as a completion which brings Kundera’s examination of litost to perfection.

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