Notes on Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren't reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described here, theorized here. All comments and criticism are welcome!)

**Why Write Average Books?**

Why bother writing a book like this? That's what I asked myself that as I read this, thinking not as a reader but as writer. I'd bought it because reviews suggested it dealt with a number of themes I'm trying to manage in the novel I'm writing: an elderly narrator remembers his life imperfectly; the people he has known all say, in one way or another, that he has never understood them; he's shocked into semi-awareness of his state by a letter he'd written years ago and conveniently forgotten; there are meditations on whether life, and people, progress or remain static.

The book is "brilliant," in the loose way that word tends to be used in book reviewing. Barnes is master of English / British public school nuances. The characters are given to subtle counterfactuals, conditionals, the subjunctive, multiple qualifications, evasions, feints, and coynesses, and when they're forthright they immediately doubt themselves and the people to whom they're speaking. Ironies pile on misdirections and misunderstandings. I don't find that sort of thing entertaining -- in order to take pleasure in it, I think you'd have to see yourself in it -- but I do appreciate it. And yet the wrigglings of imperfect understanding seem to be there mostly for the fun of writing them, and only secondarily to support the narrative about the delusions of the main character.

And the book is "brilliant" in its structure: it feels plotted in advance, like Ian McEwan's novels. I felt all the time as if a novel, for the author, is a project: one finds one's theme; one concocts a twisted, imbricated, temporally folded structure; one writes from the first page to the last. Needless to say that may not have been the process of writing, but it feels that way: like a professional job, well done. As if Barnes needs, for his English audience, to display a virtuosity parallel to that of a scientist or an engineer: each to his metier. But what sense does it make to write about a disastrous life, inadequately understood and minimally controlled, lived by a narrator who has to fumble his way to a minimal understanding of his relationships, in a form that presents itself as utterly professionally controlled?

And there's a "brilliant" ending, which makes the book dramatic. But why go in
for improbable plot twists (for example, an inherited diary that is only seen in the form of one ripped-put, photocopied page -- how often does that happen?) when the story is about everyone's utterly ordinary, nearly inevitable loss of control over memory and age? Why spice things up with puzzles and oddities? It's as if the story itself wouldn't be of interest if if didn't have Hollywood-style surprises. (There's even a website where someone attempts to figure out some of the book's complexities -- see the review on www.ratracerefuge.com.)

My feeling, as a writer, is that this book is the product of a professional novelist, who feels he needs to produce books at reasonable intervals in order to keep his career going. But these subjects -- the loss of control over our own sense of ourselves, the sense that we invent our own histories, that we don't really know the people we love -- are so interesting and complex that there is little point in dressing them up as brilliant writing.

"The Sense of an Ending" is larded with philosophical prose-poems, aphorisms, Wittgensteinian fragments, Stoic proposals: the author collects them like corals and gemstones. Any one page of this book could be twenty or a hundred pages, or simply another book, in the hands of writers more reflective than Barnes. Some of the ideas in the book are potentially seriously corrosive of sense and meaning: but the novel itself, in its brilliance, insists that they are ornaments to prose.

In terms of the history of the novel, "The Sense of an Ending" adds nothing: not that every book can, and not that every author must try, but that if you aren't trying then you are producing entertainment. Barnes is ten years older than me: time to try to do something other than continue the traditions of the mid-twentieth century English fiction.