



# The rhetoric of factuality and fictionality in Julian Barnes's *the noise of Time* and *the Man in the Red Coat*

Yili Tang<sup>1</sup>

Published online: 6 April 2022  
© Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, Hungary 2022

## Abstract

This article deploys a rhetorical approach to fictionality and factuality to analyze how Julian Barnes builds the portraits of real individuals through these modes in *The noise of time* and *The man in the red coat*. Conceptualizing fictionality and factuality as rhetorical resources allows us to understand Barnes's writing as a separate form. His works foreground the limits and conventions of generic fiction, and he deliberately employs these resources as communicational strategies, subverting readers' expectations to both biographical and novelistic ends. Barnes uses the biographical mode as a resource for interpretive, affective, ethical, and aesthetic effects in fictional writing, taking his work beyond the novel proper. He also demonstrates the power of fictionality in nonfiction, which can be wielded as an effective tool for coming to terms with the uncertainties and difficulties of biography. In this sense, the novelistic narrative, and biographical craft on display in *The noise of time* and *The man in the red coat* enable Barnes to achieve the effect of truth-telling, which, in turn, strengthens generic assumptions about both fiction and fact in the story. Ultimately, his works blur the boundary between imagination and facts, and demand evaluation that takes into consideration the characteristics of both genres.

**Keywords** Fictionality · Factuality · Rhetorical approach to fictionality and factuality · Julian Barnes · Biography and fiction

In his latest work, *The man in the red coat* (2019), the British novelist Julian Barnes tells the story of the French gynecologist Samuel-Jean Pozzi as a nonfictional account bursting with facts rather than adopting a novelistic approach. In an interview with

---

✉ Yili Tang Ph.D.  
milkytang2008@sjtu.edu.cn

<sup>1</sup> The School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, P.R. China

*The Guardian* in 2019, Barnes, who had once said that his main interest was fiction,<sup>1</sup> explained why he chose not to tell Pozzi's story as a novel, in contrast with his approach to *The noise of time* (2016) which focuses on the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich:

He [Pozzi] is known to us by a real portrait [...] I somehow felt that if I did it as a fiction it might be more ordinary, you might think these melodramatic Technicolor episodes were just invented by the writer. It is good to get back to the rigor of non-fiction occasionally (Allardice 2019).

In his new work, Barnes caters to readers' expectations of "truthfulness." His handling of these real portraits encompasses two genres, fiction and biography. This is not Barnes's first experimentation with these two forms; as Vanessa Guignery shrewdly notes, "among points of interest in Barnes's production which make it distinctive but also situate it within contemporary trends are his treatment of historiography and biography in fiction (and the blurring of the boundaries between them) and his focus on the fallibility of memory" (Guignery 2021, pp. 153). In Barnes's celebrated novel, *Flaubert's parrot* (1984), the narrator, Geoffrey Braithwaite, self-reflexively subverts biographical conventions, making the point that the biographical enterprise is "a collection of holes tied together with string" (Barnes [1984]2009, p. 38). Barnes's narratives relaying the personal experiences of these real people illustrate that there is no such thing as pure fiction or pure history. As the author himself remarks, "I regard biography with some suspicion as a genre. I am frequently made uncomfortable and even disapproving of the certainties with which biographers describe lives" (Guignery 2006, p. 45). According to him, "fiction is untrue, but it's untrue in a way that ends up telling a greater truth than any other information system—if that's what we like to call it—that exists. That always seems to me very straightforward, that you write fiction in order to tell the truth. People find this paradoxical, but it isn't" (Freiburg 1999, pp. 54). Given Barnes's reservations about the genre of biography, how does one analyze the difference between his nonfictional approach to Pozzi's life and his fictional approach to Shostakovich's? How does Barnes achieve his objective of "truthfulness" in *The man in the red coat*?

To approach these questions, I discuss how Barnes depicts real portraits through the modes of fictionality and factuality. In this article, I propose a rhetorically-oriented theoretical framework of factuality and fictionality within which to analyze the communication between Barnes and his readers. I theorize fictionality and factuality as rhetorical resources, which helps to decipher the meaning of Barnes's hybrid of fiction and history. In particular, I focus on a comparative reading of *The man in the red coat* and *The noise of time*.

This analysis thus undertaken makes two main contributions to criticisms of Barnes's work and the study of factuality and fictionality. First, it elaborates on Barnes's fictional and nonfictional writings, offering a deeper understanding of various means of life-telling deployed by the novelist. Secondly, it enhances the study of narrative competence by highlighting the crucial roles that factuality and fictionality can play within fictional and nonfictional narratives, respectively. Furthermore, this

<sup>1</sup> See Interview by Mark Lawson, "Mark Lawson talks to Julian Barnes," BBC Four Television, 30 March 2014. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03zq4cd>.

article argues that the novelistic narrative and biographical craft on display in *The man in the red coat* and *The noise of time* enable Barnes to achieve the effect of truth-telling, which, in turn, strengthens generic assumptions about the fictionality and factuality of the story. Barnes's works foreground the limits and conventions of generic nonfiction and fiction, and he deliberately upends his readers' expectations for both biographical and novelistic ends. He extensively deploys fiction and nonfiction to better illuminate life experiences. Therefore, a comparative examination of *The man in the red coat* and *The noise of time* requires suitable theorizations of fictionality and factuality that reveal how these works diverge from the conventions of the two genres in question.

## The theoretical framework for the analysis of fictionality and factuality

To study fictionality and factuality, one needs to first establish a clear understanding of the two concepts. This, however, is not a straightforward exercise and there exists little scholarly consensus about their definitions. As Fludernik puts it, fictionality (as well as factuality) is “not a simple object of analysis but a concept with its own history, diverse instrumentalization, and complex conceptual range” (Fludernik 2018, pp. 70). Jean-Marie Schaeffer (2012) notes that although factual and fictional narratives are generally defined as a pair of opposites, this division is not founded on any clear evidential or rational logic. He proposes four competing definitions, including semantic, syntactic, pragmatic, and narratological definitions, which are derived from multiple schools of thought with divergent focuses. The semantic definition is grounded in analytic philosophy and logic, focusing on the truth value of the subject matter; the syntactic definition places attention on stylistic and linguistic features; and the pragmatic definition is founded on speech act theory (Browse et al. 2019, pp. 250–252).

Among these varying approaches, the rhetorical approach to fictionality proposed by Nielsen, Walsh, and Phelan, which stems from the pragmatic tradition, receives considerable attention in narratological circles. In *The rhetoric of fictionality* (2007), Richard Walsh famously reframes fictionality by linking his discussion to the fictional speech act. Nielsen et al. (2015, pp. 62–63) streamline this approach, treating fictionality as “not a turning away from the actual world but a specific communicative strategy within some context in that world, a context which also informs an audience's response to the fictive act.” Rather than being reliant on pure imagination and invented objects, fictionality, then, is understood as being part of a communicative situation between a sender and a receiver. Understandably therefore, this rhetorical approach to fictionality puts more emphasis on tellers, readers, and purposes. Furthermore, this approach distinguishes between global and local fictionality, which operates at the sentence level. The merit of this method is that fictionality is defined as a pragmatic quality of a speech act or performance, which locates it in the context of narrative communication rather than at the textual level.

Compared to fictionality, serious scholarly attention on factuality has been long overdue. *Narrative factuality: A handbook* (2019), edited by Monika Fludernik and

Marie-Laure Ryan, is largely responsible for the current interest in factuality in the field of narrative studies. It presents a narratological analysis of factual narrative, both methodologically and practically, revealing parallels between the study of factuality and the study of fictionality. Factuality can be “rhetorized” in three ways. First, if fictionality, as defined by Phelan (2017, pp. 235), refers to any rhetorical act in which “somebody on some occasion intentionally signals his or her use of a discursive invention to someone else for some purpose(s),” then factuality may be taken to refer to a similar fundamental rhetorical mode, understood as a means of communication between the author and his readers for some purpose(s). Therefore, only the pragmatics of communication matter when distinguishing between fictionality and factuality. Second, it is important to distinguish between factuality as rhetoric and the genre of nonfiction. Third, as a speech act, the use of factuality is distinct from truth-telling. Describing his rhetorical practice of factuality, Samuli Björninen claims that “factual rhetoric is distinctive as it involves *an appeal to something that has the authority to inform opinion,*” and proposes four distinct types of authority: referential, institutional, experiential, and speculative (Björninen 2019, pp. 360–361, italics in original).

One reason Barnes’s works have been difficult to define or categorize is the continued focus on the problem of fictionality or factuality as genre-specific issues. His writings create meaning in their divergence from the conventions of biographies and novels. Barnes presents a formidable challenge to anyone attempting to distinguish the uniqueness of the biography as a genre and violates a convention that we have previously identified as a resource particular to fiction. His genre-bending work, thus, calls for a rhetorical approach to fictionality and factuality, wherein they are not taken to be indicative of a genre. Rather, fictionality and factuality need to be understood as being qualities of fictive and factual discourse, respectively, which can be either local or global in nature. More specifically, fictionality and factuality in Barnes’s works are best treated as specific communicational strategies that can appear within a text that belongs to a different generic framework. A rhetorical approach enables us to articulate how it is possible for fictionality and factuality to appear together in the same text, and helps distinguish between global generic frames and local discursive features. Such an approach can facilitate not only fine-grained analyses of the communicative effects of Barnes’s works but also a revised perspective on the mutual dependence of Barnes’s use of generic frames and the modes of fictionality and factuality.

**The rhetoric of factuality and fictionality in *The noise of time*: Appeals to factuality in fiction.**

*The noise of time*, which focuses on the artistic life of well-known Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich, is an experiment in life writing. Shostakovich has been the subject of many biographical works, having been at the center of a great deal of controversy. In this case, the temptation to speak for the dead is strong, because history, in the form of Stalin, did not allow Shostakovich to speak for himself. The complex portrait of Shostakovich under Stalin’s regime of terror calls for Barnes to learn from historical knowledge to reinforce readers’ emotional investment in the story. Instead of covering all aspects of Shostakovich’s life, *The noise of time* concentrates on three critical moments: waiting for the authorities to arrest him at the elevator door

in May 1937; the humiliating trip of a Soviet “peace delegation” to America in 1949; and joining the Communist Party in 1960. According to paratextual information, we know that Shostakovich was a composer who survived the terrors of Stalinism and that his relationship with Soviet authorities was always difficult. Of the many facts and anecdotes surrounding Shostakovich, Barnes selects, polishes, and implements those that best suit his purpose. The novel can, thus, be interpreted with reference to the historical figure of Shostakovich within the context of his biographies. As far as its hybridity is concerned, Alex Preston (2016) claims that the work appears to be a fictional biography, comparing it to J. M. Coetzee’s fictional biography of Dostoevsky, *The master of Petersburg*. Arifa Akbar (2016) points out that it reads less as a fictionalized biography of “the man” than of “the composer.” Barnes himself always refers to it as fiction, thereby reinforcing the paratextual identification of his narrative as fictional. He explains that the novel is “an incredibly generous genre,” claiming that *The noise of time* “is a fiction about a real life. But then fiction has often been about real lives.”<sup>2</sup>

How, then, are fictional and factual elements mixed and balanced to such an extent that it is possible for Barnes to problematize truth-telling in the conventional genre, and to fulfill his purpose of revealing the greater truth in *The noise of time*? The generic frames of narrative suggest that *The noise of time* would have us largely presuppose the fictionality of discursive details. However, Barnes spares his own readers such embarrassment by ambiguously disguising his novel as a “biography,” that is, as a collection of statements offering hints of factual elements. He is extremely self-conscious about his use of the biographical medium for the purposes of fiction. It can be seen in the way he emphasizes historical figures’ biographical backgrounds and life experiences to inform the extensive factuality of his work, where he constantly combines fictionality and factuality.

Within a global frame of fiction, Barnes employs factuality as a communicational strategy. *The noise of time* uses some traditional or generic rhetorical signals of factual discourse. When dealing with Shostakovich’s life, Barnes spent some time reading and meditating to familiarize himself with the historical world he was going to write about. Barnes reveals that much of the material he used is posthumous evidence. His portrait of Shostakovich is in “dialogue” with “two main sources” (Barnes 2016, p. 184): Elizabeth Wilson’s *Shostakovich: A life remembered* (1994) and Solomon Volkov’s *Testimony: The memoirs of Shostakovich* (1979), of which the factuality of the latter is challenged. The novel in consideration is filled with historical details of Shostakovich’s life; for instance, the sinister warning from the *Pravda* editorial, the interrogation in the ‘Big House,’ the speech in New York, and Shostakovich’s decision to join the Communist party. By appealing to the authority of the biographers, the novel creates a certain kind of referential connection to the reality outside the text. However, such biographies do not offer all the facts of Shostakovich’s life at that time. For instance, records of the proceedings in the Big House in Leningrad exists only in a single version, told many years after Shostakovich’s death. His interrogator at the Big House has been given various names, such as Zanchevsky, Zakrevsky, and

<sup>2</sup> See Cathy Rentzenbrink: *Julian Barnes: Interview*. January 15, 2016. <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/julian-barnes-interview-320358>.

Zakovsky. Besides, Solomon Volkov's *Testimony*, which Barnes uses as a source for factual elements, is highly unreliable, as Volkov himself declares that some memories were lost. Its authenticity has also been strongly questioned by many musicologists and scholars, which triggered the so-called "Shostakovich Wars" (Barnes 2016, p. 184). Paradoxically, the unknowability of the past and the difficulty of pursuing reliable facts in the form of biography become an important aspect of the novel's rhetoric. In the *Author's note on The noise of time*, Barnes states that he treats *Testimony* as a "private diary: as appearing to give the full truth, yet usually written at the same time of day, in the same prevailing mood, with the same prejudices and forgettings." He adds: "[a]ll this is highly frustrating to any biographer, but most welcome to any novelist" (Barnes 2016, p. 184). This kind of argumentation justifies Barnes's use of fictionality in *The noise of time*. If the facts and truth of Shostakovich's past cannot be fully known, they can be imagined. The novel signals the movement to the mode of fictionality by directly addressing of the reader and through the fictional techniques such as the Joycean interior monologue and free indirect discourse.

Shostakovich's emotional and psychological state that Barnes describes in the novel is documented in Wilson's and Volkov's books, which, in turn, rely on the accounts of Shostakovich's contemporaries and friends. Volkov writes the following in the "Introduction" to *Testimony*:

The constant anticipation of arrest affected his mind; for nearly four decades, until his death, he would see himself as a hostage, a condemned man. The fear might increase or decrease, but it never disappeared. The entire country had become an enormous prison from which there was no escape. ([1979]1984, pp. xxiv-xxv).

For Shostakovich's "First Conversation with Power," Barnes appeals to the authority of composer Venyamin Basner's statement documented in Wilson's book. According to Basner, a friend of Shostakovich, the *Pravda* editorial in 1936 "took a heavy toll on him" (Wilson 1994, p. 123), and he feared "that his end was nigh" (Wilson 1994, p. 124). Barnes focuses on Shostakovich's intense panic and constant sense of fear through an intimately close third-person point of view, depicting the manner in which the composer's mind is possessed by the fear of being arrested. The story begins with Shostakovich's night-time vigils at the elevator door:

Faces, names, memories. Cut peat weighing down his hand. Swedish water birds flickering above his head. Fields of sunflowers. The smell of carnation oil. The warm, sweet smell of Nita coming off the tennis court. Sweat oozing from a widow's peak. Faces, names. (Barnes 2016, p. 7)

The cacophony of sounds in his head. His father's voice, the waltzes and polkas he had played while courting Nita, four blasts of a factory siren in F sharp, dogs outbarking an insecure bassoonist [...] (Barnes 2016, p. 8).

These noises were interrupted by one from the real world: the sudden whirr and growl of the lift's machinery [...] He waited, suddenly empty of memory, filled only with fear. Then the lift stopped at a lower floor, and his faculties reengaged. He picked up his case and felt the contents softly shift. Which made his mind jump to the story of Prokofiev's pyjamas. (Barnes 2016, p. 8–9)

The excerpt above begins with a sequence of fragmentary images with these random or seemingly disjointed memories and captures Shostakovich's mental process in which sense perception mingles with his memories, consciousness, and feelings,

as he jumps from one thought to another. Barnes adopts a Joycean interior monologue style to insert exposition into Shostakovich's thinking. We later learn that the composer sits night after night, smoking, as he waits by the elevator to keep his family away from the authorities. Barnes mimics Shostakovich's internal thoughts to give readers the impression that they are inside Shostakovich's mind as he waits to be taken away to the Big House during Stalin's great purges, facing the possibility of death. The inventive nature of the imaginative task is openly communicated to the reader in this stream-of-consciousness model. Barnes invites his reader to follow Shostakovich's conflicted state of mind, haunted by a pastiche of deliberately ambiguous images, ranging from his childhood, past lovers, family, and dead friends to the disgrace of his only opera.

In the opening of Barnes's 2011 novel *The sense of an ending*, five memories are connected by water imagery, each of which proves to be of significance as the novel unfolds. Images occupy a similarly meaningful role in *The noise of time*. For instance, the peat that Shostakovich remembers from childhood reappears when he is asked the question, "So: your talent lies beneath you like a swathe of peat. How much have you cut? How much remains uncut?" (Barnes 2016, p. 172). The "cut peat" in this context represents art's capacity to be corrupted by authoritarian power. Barnes uses these disconnected images to help convey the conflicts between integrity and corruption in Shostakovich's mind, between life or family and art. In other words, what wears down his integrity are death threats from the authorities, love for his family, loyalty to his friends, and music. Trying to inventively imitate Shostakovich's way of thinking is a risk for Barnes, as the two differ substantially in their cultural backgrounds and are separated by decades of history. Yet, by imagining the workings of the protagonist's mind and the motives behind his actions, Barnes convinces his readers that he is taking them inside Shostakovich's head and, in doing so, manages to evoke an extraordinary level of empathy. He bridges gaps in the historical events of Shostakovich's life using intuition and empathy. Barnes reconstructs his character's life from the facts as well as by working with fictional techniques such as Flaubert's style of free indirect discourse, through which he insidiously assimilates the distinction of fact and fiction in the protagonist's mind.

The narrative choice of third-person narration also allows Barnes the freedom to slip into the character's consciousness and then pull back out. The "Third Conversation with Power" is the most controversial part of Shostakovich's life, which has tested the extent of his courage and cowardice. It is also one of the great biographical mysteries of his life, as the composer's sudden and unexpected decision to join the Communist party provoked harsh critical reactions. The truth of Shostakovich's decision and his conversation with authorities has been concealed between the lines of different reports and narratives, which has had many different versions. In *The noise of time*, however, Barnes presents this conversation in the direct form of dialogues:

I cannot join a party which has banned my music?  
 What music of yours is banned, Dmitri Dmitrievich? Forgive me for not...  
*Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. It was banned first under the Cult of Personality, and banned again after the Cult of Personality was overthrown.

Yes,” replied Pospelov soothingly, “I can see how that might appear to be a difficulty. But let me speak to you as one practical man to another. The best way, the likeliest way, for you to get your opera performed is for you to join the Party. You have to give something to get something in this world.

The man’s slipperiness enraged him. And so he reached for his final argument. (Barnes 2016, p. 154)

The direct speech of the excerpt gives the illusion of authenticity, with no interference from Barnes. We have learned that although Shostakovich was no longer in danger of being arrested and killed, power still reached out for him. By highlighting the textual world’s similarity to the external one, Barnes invites readers to believe that the conversation happens in a real world. By signaling factuality, the novel contests reliability, but at the same time, certain fractures of reliability are significant to Barnes’s communicated purpose of life writing. He achieves a balance between his sympathetic understanding of Shostakovich’s morally compromised decision and factual reality. Barnes’s use of the fictional mode in the novel helps readers uncover the truth hidden in the subtext of Shostakovich’s compositions. For the composer, the moral suicide places him in a stronger position to finally liberate his music from the constraints of his life and allow it to stand for itself. In this sense, the outer world of biographical facts regarding Shostakovich’s life is seen not in reference to history but in connection to the composer’s inner world, which is the creation of Barnes as a novelist.

The first conclusion to draw here is that the reader’s experiences of reading fiction support the argument that we should treat or judge the novel in a manner similar to the way we treat or judge biographies. First, biographical context functions as an important factor in achieving the authorial intention. In other words, the value of Barnes’s fiction is determined in part by the biographical circumstances of his subjects. Characters with real names from history keep the biographical mode fresh in readers’ minds, and Barnes harnesses the truth-seeking mindset of the biographical reader to spark a level of interest and curiosity that the lives of characters in a conventionally fictional novel may not receive. Barnes’s choice to use historical characters and their biographical information is a key part of his fiction: the biographical mode is used as a resource via which Barnes achieves a balance between describing lives and narrating lives as evocative and powerful stories. *The noise of time* leads readers to wonder how much of what they read is biographically factual. Like Braithwaite in *Flaubert’s parrot*, who realizes the impossibility of finding the “real” parrot, the reader realizes that authenticity is not inherent in Barnes’s works, and this adds intrigue to the greater truth that Barnes pursues. Barnes’s form of truth becomes increasingly significant to his readers, who become gradually aware that their emotional responses to Shostakovich’s life and fictional indulgence are more important than the factual information about him. Secondly, Barnes wants his readers to recognize how he turns to fictionality to make them experience Shostakovich’s life as truth, confirmed by the novelistic treatment of the subject matter at the expense of purely factual information that could be verified by external evidence. Readers’ acceptance of Barnes’s license to use both factual and fictional discourse causes them to evaluate his novel as the work reflective of real life. Ultimately, Barnes’s works



transcend the existing boundaries of fiction and biography; hence, his unconventional works call for evaluation with consideration of both genres.

**The rhetoric of factuality and fictionality in *The man in the red coat*: The pleasure of fictionality in nonfiction.**

Of particular relevance to this analysis is Barnes's latest nonfiction work, *The man in the red coat*. Compared with *The noise of time*, *The man in the red coat* signals its genre status as nonfiction. Leo Robson (2019) notes that it could be described as a nonfiction *Flaubert's parrot*. In this nonfictional account, Barnes largely centers on the historical tale of Pozzi, a pioneering French gynecologist, along with Prince Edmond de Polignac and Count Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac. The book begins with the three men's trip to London for some intellectual shopping, and then builds around the protagonist through a web of connections and relations. As an extension of the narratives of the three men's lives, Barnes takes his readers on a branching journey through the history, society, art, and culture of the Belle Époque. Immersed in the spirit and atmosphere of that era, we are introduced to a wide array of events and characters, ranging from Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust, and Sarah Bernhardt to Gustave Flaubert. However, compared with the comprehensive biography of Pozzi written by Claude Vanderpooten in 1992, Barnes's nonfictional account is more like a mixture of theory, criticism, art, and the scandals of the Belle Époque. He manipulates the chronology of events in the book, such that readers find themselves reading about 1875, then 1880, and back and forth. Pozzi's story is often interrupted by meta-commentary on the risks of reconstructing the past before it circles back to Pozzi.

The generic assumption about *The man in the red coat* is that its global frame is factual, and its purpose is to intervene directly in its reader's engagement with these actual events. Unlike in *The noise of time*, readers have no problem in identifying the narrative as factual in this text, as a result of both communication from Barnes, and their conventional expectations about factual discourse. Barnes tells the story in the mode of this genre. Deeply involved in the Belle Époque, he assembles pieces from these historical figures' lives with a wide variety of documents, including letters, diaries, biographies, excerpts from novels, newspapers, and individual photos of most of the people he writes about. His incorporation of photographs within the narrative reaffirms the work's archival nature, which helps us to drop any resistance we might have against the veracity of this past. In addition, Barnes presents the concepts and fashions of that period as defined by the records of what people have said about them, allowing the reader to make observations directly from the "facts." In this way, the authenticity and factual accuracy of his writing are established.

In *The man in the red coat*, Barnes insists and emphasizes many times that there is so much that "we cannot know" from biography:

'We cannot know'. If used sparingly, this is one of the strongest phrases in the biographer's language. It reminds us that the suave study-of-a-life that we are reading, for all its detail, length and footnotes, for all its factual certainties and confident hypotheses, can only be a public version of a public life, and a partial version of a private life. Biography is a collection of holes tied together with string [...] (Barnes 2019, p. 112).

In this context, Barnes makes the point that the biographical enterprise is "a collection of holes tied together with string" (Barnes [1984]2009: 38) that appears in *Flau-*

bert's parrot to echo the biographer's frustration. With regard to *The man in the red coat*, these "strings" can be interpreted as signifying the fraction of facts accessible to the biographer through documents, and the "holes" can be understood as the unwritten parts of or the textual silences on Pozzi's life. Barnes acknowledges the perils he faces while venturing into this nonfictional genre. The question of sources and material is one that he must confront, regardless of whether he is writing a novel or a biography, and regardless of whether the subject in question is obscure or renowned. A biography presents just a fraction of the facts that a biographer could catch in their metaphorical net; the "ones that got away" or the things we cannot know might well have contributed to a completely different picture. In *The noise of time*, Barnes welcomes factual uncertainties as they grant him the freedom to use fictionality to plug holes in the facts and paint his own picture of Shostakovich's troubled life. He deploys fictionality as a communicational strategy, which allows him to take more liberties with the readers' imaginations. In *The man in the red coat*, however, Barnes gives up his novelistic prowess, as the genre conventions undergirding this work imply that the narrator and the author to be the one and same person, who should tell readers only what he knows to be true. Therefore, Barnes conspicuously withholds any fictional imagination. In fact, he repeatedly cautions readers that information derived from a single source should be taken with caution as its truthfulness cannot be ascertained. In addition to this, at the beginning of the book, Barnes contemplates a series of possible opening paragraphs:

In June 1885, three Frenchmen arrived in London [...] Or we might begin in Paris the previous summer, with Oscar and Constance Wilde on their honeymoon [...] Or we could begin with a bullet, and gun which fired it... we might even begin across the Atlantic, in Kentucky, back in 1809 [...] Or we might begin, prosaically, with the coat [...] (Barnes 2019, p. 1–3).

Barnes has the choice of many different beginnings, each of which has the potential to lay different foundations for Pozzi's story. These possible beginnings foreshadow the historical indeterminacy of biographical writing. The author's concerns about authenticity inevitably raise questions about the biographer's use of facts, as his choice and interpretation of factual materials profoundly affect the telling of the past and the way that the facts are understood.

Barnes is fully aware of most problems concerning biographical writing. These problems are mainly caused by the temporal gap between biographer and biographee, the difficulty of obtaining reliable facts, and the question of representing these facts. In the course of his writing, Barnes inserts meta-narratives to ponder the nature of historical writing and displays the struggle between the inventive instincts of the novelist and the factual form of nonfiction. In particular, *The man in the red coat* not only exudes a novelist's philosophy about writing and art but also presents a different portrait of Pozzi. According to factual documents and history, Pozzi was known as a doctor, a senator, a campaigner, a village mayor, a scientific atheist, and a Don Juan or possibly a sex addict, famous for his romantic liaisons with prominent female figures of the time. Pozzi's reputation as a sex addict, however, is more of a speculation than a verified fact, and it is possible that changes in language over time is responsible for the conflation of "Don Juan" with "sex addict." When Barnes tries to reconstruct Pozzi's life from wholly from factual evidence, he is cognizant of this

boundary between fact and speculation. He is attracted to the parts of Pozzi's life that lie outside the picture, similar to his accounts of the inscrutable events of Shostakovich's life. In Barnes's work, Pozzi thus emerges as a melancholy and empathetic figure with a sad love life, despite commonly held suspicions about his supposed sex addiction. In her diary, Pozzi's disagreeable daughter, Catherine, mercilessly depicts Pozzi's unhappy marriage and the damage it inflicted upon her. Pozzi had a deeply troubled relationship with his wife and children, which is evident in Catherine's accusation, "[a]nd yet, I did love him, this *moral wreck* of a father" (Barnes 2019, p. 173, italics in original). Barnes's depiction of Pozzi as melancholic and empathetic, and his inclusion of Catherine's accusations, serve to demonstrate the paradox of Pozzi the doctor saving women's lives, and Pozzi the "Lothario" wrecking his own marital and family life. Yet, despite Catherine's damning accusations, Barnes maintains that there exists no record of female complaints against Pozzi. He is skeptical of the gossip that surrounds his subject's personal life, stressing repeatedly that "we cannot know." He summarizes Pozzi's character in a carefully weighted sentence, "Pozzi was a highly intelligent, swiftly decisive, scientific rationalist—which meant that life was comprehensible, and the best course of action obvious to him, in all areas except those of love and marriage and parenthood" (Barnes 2019, p. 54). We cannot know the truth of these less credible assertions about Pozzi's personal life, as language changes with the times, turning "Don Juan" into a "sex addict." Barnes's portrait of Pozzi is thus an apt one, informed equally by what we do know and what we cannot know: it incorporates facts, but makes allowances for gaps in knowledge and the ambiguities of language.

Barnes is shrewd in presenting how a biography "can only be a public version of a public life, and a partial version of a private life" (Barnes 2019, p. 112). Towards the end of the book, he enumerates a list of what "we cannot know" about Pozzi, and wryly comments, "[a]ll these matters could, of course, be solved in a novel" (Barnes 2019, p. 251). Here, the book signals the movement to the fictionality mode by directly addressing Barnes's reader. Barnes approaches the problem of the unknown part of the past or the uncertainties of the biography by highlighting the fictionality of the starting point of his and his readers' imaginary play. If the truth of the past cannot be fully known, it should be imagined, which becomes the unwritten rule of *The man in the red coat*. Barnes finds a solution to this challenge of portraying Pozzi's personal life by presenting the reader with the definitions of love and fidelity, without directly initiating any ethical discussion on the character's choices. This approach avoids the assertion of unverified facts, but simultaneously suggests to readers the possibility of engaging in fictional indulgence. Readers are, thus, drawn both to the facts and to the way the facts are told. The integration of fictional discourse within authorized zones of invention nudges readers into realizing that reading a biography not only entails the passive acquisition of facts but is an active, highly emotive exercise that involves gathering factual information and empathetically engaging with the same. Although Barnes does not apply novelistic discourse to the representation of Pozzi's life, he still constructs a novelist's vision of Pozzi's life and world, borrowing from history to ameliorate disbelief and spark fascination among his readers. In this sense, when viewed rhetorically, fictionality plays a strategic role in Barnes's nonfictional work. As discussed above, classifying a narrative as fictional or factual involves framing it

not only in terms of its genre or discourse but also in terms of its mode of communication. The issue of consideration regarding this text is not whether the discourse or genre is fictional or factual but rather whether Barnes intends his text to be factual or his intention is to blur the line between the factual and the fictional. He probes with a historian's skepticism and a novelist's imagination. This conclusion sheds further light on Barnes's pursuit of greater truth in different forms. As he reflects, "[w]e may speculate as long as we also admit that our speculations are novelistic, and that the novel has almost as many forms as there are forms of love and sex" (Barnes 2019, p. 113). In Barnes's works, every life takes its own form. In Pozzi's case, the author invites us to actively interpret the facts, to speculate when they are missing, and to absorb the essence of Pozzi's life experience by ourselves, by fictional means. Fictionality provides a double exposure of the imagined and the real world of Pozzi, which can affect the reader's sense of reality. In this way, fictionality pervades the factual discourse in *The man in the red coat*, as a persistent ghost in a castle, with the capacity to shape readers' beliefs about truth and reality.

In analyzing Barnes's works, we realize that theorizing nonfiction and fiction as separate genres is problematic. His works are phantasmatic and hybrid as they appear to be two contradictory forms. Conceiving fictionality and factuality as rhetorical resources allows us to understand Barnes's biographical writings as their own separate form. On the one hand, the works draw from and rely upon the high valuation of authoritative experience, which is powerful on account of its ability to represent reality. Barnes uses factuality to accentuate the cultural and affective potential of texts; he uses the biographical mode as a resource for interpretive, affective, ethical, and aesthetic effects in fictional writing, which goes beyond the boundaries of the novel. On the other hand, Barnes demonstrates the use of fictionality in nonfiction, which can be a powerful tool for coming to terms with the uncertainties and difficulties of the biographical mode. In this manner, Barnes turns a biographical work into a novel and demonstrates through the narrative that the novelistic work itself is biographical. These works merge all forms of storytelling and have a dual relation to both writing and life: Barnes tells stories to make sense of our lives, and his reader reads his stories for the same reason. His writing is characterized by an interdependence of truthfulness and strong emotional participation on the part of readers who are able to experience the effects of fictionality and factuality simultaneously. *The noise of time* and *The man in the red coat* use the rhetorical strategies of both factuality and fictionality to demonstrate Barnes's paradoxically persistent pursuit of truth in a world which, as Guignery observes, "has nevertheless lost its faith in the reassuring stability and teleology of grand narratives" (2021, pp. 153).

**Acknowledgements** This work was supported by the National Social Science Fund of China (Grant Number: 17ZDA281) and the Zhejiang Provincial Philosophy and Social Science Planning Project (Grant Number: 21NDQN205YB).

## References

- Akbar, A. (2016, January 7). *The noise of time* by Julian Barnes, book review: Author misses a beat. *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/noise-time-julian-barnes-book-review-author-misses-beat-a6801251.html>
- Allardice, L. (2019, October 26). Interview Julian Barnes: “Do you expect Europe to cut us a good deal? It’s so childish”. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/26/julian-barnes-europe-deal-interview-man-red-coat>
- Barnes, J. ([1984] 2009). *Flaubert’s parrot*. Vintage Books.
- Barnes, J. (2016). *The noise of time*. Jonathan Cape.
- Barnes, J. (2019). *The man in the red coat*. Jonathan Cape.
- Björminen, S. (2019). The rhetoric of factuality in narrative: Appeals to authority in Claas Relotius’s feature journalism. *Narrative Inquiry*, 29(2), 352–370.
- Browse, S., Gibbons, A., & Hatavara, M. (2019). Real fictions: Fictionality, factuality and narrative strategies in contemporary storytelling. *Narrative Inquiry*, 29(2), 245–267.
- Fludernik, M. (2018). The fiction of the rise of fictionality. *Poetics Today*, 39 (1), 67–92.
- Fludernik, M., & Ryan, M-L. (Eds.). (2019). *Narrative factuality: A handbook*. De Gruyter.
- Freiburg, R. (1999). Novels come out of life, not out of theory: An interview with Julian Barnes. In R. Freiburg, & J. Schmitker (Eds.), “Do you consider yourself a postmodern author?” *Interviews with contemporary English writers* (pp. 39–66). Lit Verlag.
- Guignery, V. (2006). *The fiction of Julian Barnes: A reader’s guide to essential criticism*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Guignery, V. (2020). Julian Barnes. In R. Bradford (Ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell companion to contemporary British and Irish literature* (pp. 149–158). John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- Nielsen, H. S., Phelan, J., & Walsh, R. (2015). Ten theses about fictionality. *Narrative*, 23(1), 61–73.
- Phelan, J. (2017). Fictionality. *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 32 (2), 235–238.
- Preston, A. (2016, January 17). *The noise of time* review – Julian Barnes’s masterpiece. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/17/the-noise-of-time-julian-barnes-review-dmitri-shostakovich>
- Robson, L. (2019, December 4). Julian Barnes’s *The man in the red coat*: Gently rambling, lightly polemical non-fiction. *The New Statesman*. <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2019/12/julian-barnes-s-man-red-coat-gently-rambling-lightly-polemical-non-fiction>
- Schaeffer, J. (2012). Fictional vs. factual narration. *The living handbook of narratology*. <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/fictional-vs-factual-narration>
- Volkov, S. ([1979]1984). *Testimony: The memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich* (A. W. Bouis, Transl.). Limelight.
- Wilson, E. (1994). *Shostakovich: A life remembered*. Princeton University Press.

**Publisher’s Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.