

The Creative Launcher

Journal Home URL: <https://www.thecreativelauncher.com>

ISSN: 2455-6580

Issue: Vol. 7 & Issue 3, (June, 2022)

Publisher: Perception Publishing

Published on: 30 June 2022

Peer Reviewed & Open Access: Yes

Journal DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.53032/issn.2455-6580>

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Article History: Complete article received: 15 May 2022 | Revised article received: 25 May 2022 | Accepted: 12 June 2022 | First Published: 30 June 2022

☞ Research Article



Narrating History in Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2022.7.3.05>

Pages: 35-41

Abstract

History, though it can be revived, rewritten and altered, always functions as a source of inspiration and encouragement for the upcoming generations. Although it is prone to be distorted, contrived and re-interpreted by the following generations yet it constantly serves as a guiding light for future generations leading them in right direction without committing the mistakes which the human forefathers had mistakenly committed. History, an umbrella term,

incorporates all the facets of traditions, myths and the past of a particular nation or many nations. Intermingling all these elements Julian Barnes's chapter 'Parenthesis' in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* is embellished with various literary techniques as narrating English history, tradition, myth and the past through postmodern narrative strategies. The novel shares many concepts and trends with postmodern skills of writing fiction. Incorporating all the above elements *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* rigidly confirms to the trend of postmodern fiction. This paper critically evaluates the half chapter entitled 'Parenthesis' from Barnes's novel, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*.

Keywords: History, Myth, Culture, Tradition, Past, Narrative Technique, Postmodern Fiction

Nestled between chapters eight and nine is an unnumbered half chapter entitled 'Parenthesis'. Here Barnes can be seen removing his authorial mask and speaking as himself. He puts aside the persona of mouthpiece narrator and speaks with and comments directly to the reader, "When I say "I" you will want to know, within a paragraph or two whether I mean Julian Barnes or someone invented" (227). The tone is highly personal and subjective in this chapter unlike other chapters in the novel. The narrator is seen lying in bed with his sleeping wife in the middle of the night contemplating the nature and possible connectedness of love and history.

In the opening part of the chapter, the narrator quotes the last line of Philip Larkin's "An Arundel Tomb": "What will survive of us is love." (228). Barnes asks for the response from reader in the form of rhetoric: "Is it true? Is it love what will survive of us? It would be nice to think so" (228). He further interrogates whether it is true or just a poetic flourish. The reader plays an active role in differentiating the actual identity of author from that of narrator. The narrator seems to disbelieve the line and remarks that "If anything survives of us it will probably be something else" (229). Referring to the identity of narrative voice Guignery refers to the chapter as "an eloquent non-fictional essay on love and history, it stands apart and raises questions as to the identity of the narrative voice" (*The Fiction of Julian Barnes* 63). In an interview, Michael Ignatieff asked Barnes: "How autobiographical was that "Parenthesis"? To which the author answered: 'entirely'. Barnes seems to remove the mask and accept the responsibility for his reflections about love and history, "I just emerge from the wings" (Ignatieff). Barnes further confessed; "you all have all these masks as a fiction writer and every so often you think, well, actually, no, I'll just write the truth". Referring to history he further claims:

What do we put against this horrible 24-wheeler called history that's thumping along with a tiny little trailer called politics behind it? And if we don't think that religion is true, it would be very nice, because we're novelists, to think that art was the answer. But art doesn't work for everyone, so love seems to be the one you accept. (Stuart 15)

The relationship between love and survival, love and history hovers throughout the novel. The narrator analyses the sentence "I love you" very minutely and asks that "are there tribes whose lexicon lack these words" or "have they all died out". The narrator seems to be

doubtful whether love can save us from the troubles of life and death. He says: “We must look at it as clearly as we should learn to look at death. Should love be taught in school? First term: friendship; second term: tenderness; third term: passion. Why not? (231)”. The narrator further questions whether love can make us happy or not, can solve the problem or not:

Love makes you happy? No. Love makes the person you love happy? No. Love makes everything all right?... What would love be for if it didn't solve everything? Surely we can deduce from the very strength of our aspiration that love, once achieved, eases the daily ache, works some effortless analgesia? (231)

The narrator seems to be obsessed with the concept of love and goes on to analyse the famous quotation “We must love one another or die” from W.H. Auden's famous poem “September 1, 1939.” Auden later thought it a damned lie and altered the line by replacing preposition ‘or’ with conjunction ‘and’. The narrator feels that the first line conveys the sense that there is no option except love whereas the altered line conveys a broader sense of living life, while being in love: “We can build dams, like the beaver, without love. We can organize complex societies, like the bee, without love. We can travel long distances, like the albatross, without love. We can put our head in the sand, like the ostrich, without love” (234). The narrator is very conscious while evaluating the pros and cons of being in love. He goes on to elaborate on different states and stages of love and their eventual impact on lovers' lives: “I don't know if prudent or reckless love is the better, monied or penniless love the surer, heterosexual or homosexual love the sexier, married or unmarried love the stronger” (240).

The narrator does not impose his views on the reader, “I can't tell you who to love or how to love” (240). The narrator projects love something as revitalising and inspiring force which leads to a surer ground of truth and safeguards history from being absurd. Focusing on different aspects of love he tackles its impact upon history:

But I can tell you why to love. Because the history of the world, which only stops at the half-house of love to bulldoze it into rubble, is ridiculous without it. The history of the world becomes brutally self-important without love. Our random mutation is essential because it is unnecessary. Love won't change the history of the world, but it will do something much more important: teach us to stand up to history, to ignore its chin-out strut. (240)

‘Parenthesis’ opposes history and orthodoxy with the vital force of love. The narrator states that although love would not change the history of the world but what it can do is subvert it, undermine it, challenge it. That is why the narrator considers love in very high degree, “I want to make the world safe for love”. As ‘Parenthesis’ is accorded no number in the novel, it entertains the liberty to sit within or outside the novel. Having no number it has the status of half chapter which also conveys the sense of unfinished or missing another half. It also seems to convey the sense that half chapter may represent half story or half truth which may be “marginal but also central” (Childs 74). The overall structure of Barnes's novel hovers around the construction and deconstruction of history and Barnes may have thought to include half chapter as an alternative explanation, or commentary upon the overall novel. Regarding this idea Vanessa Guignery writes:

In the half-chapter, the narrator is countermanding what other narrators have been doing in preceding chapters by rehabilitating truth, not as a scientific and absolute truth, but as a goal and a safeguard against the dangers of ‘beguiling relativity’ and political passivity. (*The Fiction of Julian Barnes* 68)

Being a true postmodernist author Barnes does not consider his task to propagate history but to inquire radically into the nature of history and validity as well as believability of historical knowledge. Commenting on the narrative technique of Barnes, Salman Rushdie writes “here one wishes that Barnes the essayist had stepped aside for Barnes the full-blooded novelist; that instead of a disquisition on love, we could have been given the thing itself” (Rushdie 242, 243). ‘Parenthesis’ remains in the central point and serves as a focal axis which echos, comments and subverts the historical knowledge and discourse of the other chapters. The half chapter goes on elaborating upon the process of construction of history and historiography. It refutes the “historian’s positivist assumptions of fidelity, objectivity and truth” (*The Fiction of Julian Barnes* 68). For a convenient study one can assume that pseudo or half truth is better than no truth and we can prefer the best one in the array of various indefinite and distinct meanings and interpretations. Expressing the very sense Barnes states:

We all know objective truth is not obtainable, that when some event occurs we shall have a multiplicity of subjective truths which we assess and then fabulate into history, into some God-eyed version of what ‘really’ happened. This God-eyed version is a fake- a charming impossible fake. But while we know this, we must still believe that objective truth is obtainable; or we must believe that it is 99 percent obtainable; or if we can’t believe this we must believe that 43 per cent objective truth is better than 41 per cent. We must do so, because if we don’t we’re lost, we fall into beguiling relativity, we value one liar’s version as much as another liar’s. Whose truth do we prefer, by the way, the victor’s or the victim’s? (245-46)

The narrator conveys the sense that there is not a single version or story but layers of multi-faceted versions and subjective truths and as a consequence, “the book does not pretend to be ‘the’ complete, absolute and monologic history of the world but is ‘a’ partial, subjective and multi-faceted one in which no single discourse or voice achieves outright authority” (*The Fiction of Julian Barnes* 68). Gregory Salyer is another critic who strikingly pictures the mentality of reader who gets confused in the array of versions: “The bottom line is whose fabulation you choose to believe, which is the same as saying whose history or whose reality you shall believe” (Salyer 226).

It is noticeable idea that Barnes does not totally deny the possibility of valid and authentic historical knowledge but consider the higher and higher value and validity of it. For Barnes, love serves as a firm adament of faith and belief upon which truth sprouts:

Love and truth, that’s the vital connection, love and truth. Have you ever told so much truth as when you were first in love? Have you ever seen the world so clearly? Love makes us see the truth, makes it our duty to tell the truth. Without love history would be barren and a mere bumble of facts and love and history are inseperable: “If we look at the history of the world, it seems surprising that love is included. (236)

Barnes further assumes a very satiric tone regarding the facts and members included in history. The narrator brutally satirises the historian's accountability of dates, months and years: "Dates don't tell the truth. They want to make us think we're always progressing, always going forward" (241). Barnes is of the view that history does not progress in dates but shuttles back and forth like a ferry. It just runs in circles in different coloured versions: "Does history repeat itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce? No, that's too grand, too considered a process. History just burps, and we taste again that raw-onion sandwich it swallowed centuries ago" (241). Keeping the fallibility of dates in mind the narrator gives a striking example. He states that why the world celebrates 1492; the year of discovery why not 1493; the year of returning of Columbus. He recalls how "Before departure a prize of 10,000 maravedies had been promised to the first man to sight the New World" (241). The narrator claims with historical evidences that it was not Columbus but an ordinary sailor who had won this bounty, but after returning the clever Columbus claimed it for himself: The sailor went off in disappointment and became a renegade. The year was 1493. This incident recalls the story of the raven and the dove in first chapter "Stowaway". Both incidents indicate towards the fallibility and unauthenticity of history. It stresses how the marginal and inferior are erased from the pages of history by dominant political groups. Dominant ideology erases the marginal one from the scene. These marginalised details and identities are melt into oblivion with the passage of time and the dominant form of history is circulated all over the world with ideologically charged propaganda.

The numerous echoes of themes and motifs such as sea, water, art, catastrophe etc. in different chapters convey the sense that history is not linear but circular and cyclical. Narrator is of the view that history is not a true portrayal of events but the subjective interpretation of events by the historians. History is not innocent but ideologically and politically charged. Here Barnes gives the most famous statement of the novel regarding the constructive process of history:

History is not what happened. History is just what historians tell us. There was a pattern, a plan, a movement, expansion, the march of democracy; It is a tapestry, a flow of events, a complex narrative, connected, explicable. One good story leads to another...all the time it's connections, progress, meaning, this led to this, this happened because of this. And we, the readers of history, the sufferers from history, we scan the pattern for hopeful conclusions, for the way ahead. (242)

The narrator further states that history is not made up of solid, seizable events but the images, symbols and icons that are created and with the passage of time they are faded into the smoke of oblivion. The narrator exclaims: "The history of the world? Just voices echoing in the dark; images that burn for a few centuries and then fade; stories, old stories that sometimes seem to overlap. Strange links, impertinent connections" (242). The practice of writing history is not fact oriented. There takes place a perfect amalgamation of fact and fancy. The greatest weapon of historiography has been fabulation which means "not turning away from reality, but an attempt to find more subtle correspondences between the reality which is fiction and the fiction which is reality" (Scholes Robert 04). The narrator says: "And while we fret and writhe

in bandaged uncertainty – are we a voluntary patient? – we fabulate. We make up a story to cover the facts we don't know or can't accept; we keep a few true facts and spin a new story around them. Our panic and our pain are only eased by soothing fabulation; we call it history" (242). Regarding the fabulation of the novel Vanessa Guignery writes:

Barnes emphasises the similarities between fiction and history, stories and History, underlining their discursive and narrative dimension, their fictive and constructed character. Thus, Barnes deliberately mixes imaginary and historical material so as to shatter the certainties of historical knowledge, and redefines history as fabulation. (*The Fiction of Julian Barnes* 66)

In an interview to Vanessa Guignery, Barnes himself claimed the fictional aspect of history : "Either you only write the history for which there is evidence, or, if you try to write more than that, if you try to write a more complete history, then you have to fictionalise or imagine. And so, to that extent, history has to be a sort of literary genre. But often the greatest historians write narrative as well as the best novelists" (In Guignery History in question 53).

Being a very intellectual author Barnes seems to sketch the reader's psyche and he tries to decipher the problems in understanding of history. He seems to console the reader with the idea that it is nothing but faith and belief in love than can provide consolation to mankind: "But what Barnes is interested in is not religious belief but religious history, which is part of his larger attention to history. The two major themes of the book are history and love . The more difficult proposition is that they are related" (Moseley 119). Regarding this relationship Barnes further claims:

You can think of this complicity between the reader of history and the historians: the reader of history wants to be told the whole story, wants to understand all the motivations, wants to know exactly what happened. And historians ought to say more often, "I don't know, I don't know why, I don't know why he did that, it was completely out of character. We'll never understand it. All the evidence has been lost (In Guignery History in question 55).

The narrator consoles the reader as:

We must believe in it, or we're lost... If we don't then we merely surrender to the history of the world and to someone else's truth... Still we must believe in love, just as we must believe in free will and objective truth. And when love fails, we should blame the history of the world. (246)

It can be concluded that Parenthesis, very strikingly, puts forward the merits and demerits of history. It not only projects the hardships and difficulties in writing and understanding of history but provides the solution in full spectrum. Love emerges as the greatest vision which has the capability to surmount the hazards of history. Firm faith and unshaken belief in love can save the world from the cruel march of history. To have a feeling of love and proper understanding of history the world needs faculty of fancy and imagination so that the fabulation of history can be deciphered.

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