

## "YOU CAN'T GET BY WITHOUT THE DREAM": BELIEF IN JULIAN BARNES'S *A HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN 10 ½ CHAPTERS*

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**Abstract:** *This paper presents a less examined dimension of Barnes's writings, which is the dominant role that belief plays in the development of his characters in A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters. The main argument of my essay is whether love can be considered as the most significant proposition of the novel. A content-based analysis of the novel's "The Survivor" chapter demonstrates Barnes' sceptic attitude towards postmodern rationalism, while the examination of "Parenthesis" and "Dream" chapter shows that hope, which becomes synonymous with belief in the novel, is actually the most permeating phenomenon in the novel.*

**Keywords:** belief, narrative, spirituality, temptation, uncertainty

### 1. Introduction

In a few months or so devoted scholars or journals of contemporary literature will certainly discuss Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* due to the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his much debated novel. Despite a few critical reviews, the novel was celebrated for its generic hybridity and has been widely discussed ever since by numerous scholars such as Merritt Mosely, Bruce Sesto, Matthew Pateman, Vanessa Guignery or Frederick M. Holmes. This paper attempts to shed some light on a less researched area of Barnes's fiction which has only partly been mentioned in previous studies on the author. "I don't believe in God, but I miss Him" is a quotation from Julian Barnes, which gave inspiration to my research on Barnes's attitude towards faith and God. Although Barnes is notorious in using biblical references and religious motifs in his fiction, the spiritual undercurrent of his writings is a dimension less examined by literary scholars. *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* (from this point onward referred to as *A History of the World*) engages with several religious themes. However, Barnes's tendency to subject religious issues to ironic presentation, reinforces the image of the writer as an irreligious artist of the postmodern tradition. Still, I propose that many of his writings have a spiritual domain which has been excluded from the main scope of literary research.

The primary aim of this paper is to elaborate on the significant role that belief plays in the development of Barnes's characters in *A History of the World*. The introductory part of the essay deals with the generic hybridity of the book to show the relationship of the individual chapters and the theme of uncertainty crucial in most Barnesian novels. The analysis of the novel begins with the narrative mode of the novel, particularly that of "The Survivor" chapter, which leads to the analysis of the double use of the word 'temptation'. A clear distinction is made between spiritual temptation and 'temptation to believe' and their crucial role in character construction is examined. Afterwards, I compare Barnes's proposition of love in the

"Parenthesis" chapter with Katherine's 'temptation to believe', both of which are offered as remedies against the oppressing nature of history. Finally, I examine the importance of belief and dreams, elaborated in the chapters "Parenthesis" and "Dream", and reach the conclusion of that belief is the most essential need of man (at least of the characters) in *A History of the World*.

## 2. Analysis

At the time of publication, there were several scholars who were unable to regard *A History of the World* as a novel, and considered it rather as a collection of short stories. Although the book combines documented historical events with fictitious elements, "the writer [Barnes] . . . rejects the appellation of 'short stories' as the book consists of various strands which are carefully woven into all the chapters through echoes, repeated phases, details and themes" (Guignery 2006:62). I consider *A History of the World* a novel, but a narrative which consciously stretches, in certain cases even violates, the limits of the conventional novel.

The primary goal of *A History of the World*, according to Frederic Holmes, is to demolish any confidence of the readers that is to obtain objective truth about the past and the history of the world. Barnes uses textual fragmentation to hinder the totalizing representation of the past. The chapters are written from numerous different perspectives in a variety of stylistic registers and genres varying from fables to legal transcripts. According to Claudia Kotte (1997:108) "the novel's mixture of the factual and the fabulous violates the standard expectations that historiography must treat actual rather than fictional events". Yet, according to Barnes, historians, just like fiction writers, also need to mix the factual with the fictional: "if history attempts to be more than a description of documents, a description of artefacts, (it) has to be a sort of literary genre" (Guignery 2006:67). Several critics have analysed the book through the postmodern concept of historiographic metafiction, a phrase which was officially coined by Linda Hutcheon (2004:5), referring to such works that "are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages". However, with the mixture of the fictional and the factual the authority of historical texts is strongly undermined.

Barnes's eccentric and highly selective history of the world centres on individual characters. The novel juxtaposes several narrators, whose viewpoints obviously seldom concur. In parallel with the postmodern epistemological doubt regarding the past, the fragmented narrative of the novel strengthens the uncertainty of reaching absolute knowledge. The chapters' diversity, their clearly subjective rewriting of history, as well as their self-reflexivity, all call attention to their factitious constructions and reduce their level of validity. "The Survivor" chapter is unique in comparison to all the other chapters, since it does not only defy the notion of the master narrative as the others, but also starts deconstructing itself due to the presence of two contrasting narratives within this single chapter. One level of the narrative is Katherine on the island in the company of two cats, while the other level is Katherine tied to a hospital bed. The first few pages are written in third-person narrative and give a glimpse into her life and daily acts of defiance, for instance raising her voice against feeding radioactive reindeers to minks. The change of narrative to first-person takes place when Katherine reports how she set out on her voyage. There is no consistency in the shifts of the narrative modes, but rather (it is as if) the two narrative voices start fighting for dominance. It would be logical if her assumed reality on the island she finally comes upon remained in the first-person, and her nightly trials with the doctors were narrated in the third-person, signalling that the latter, the dream world is reality. However, each narrative level exploits

both narrative modes; therefore, the unreliable narrative adds to the indeterminacy of the real and the unreal, fact and fiction.

The most fundamental characteristics of Katherine, the narrator of "The Survivor" chapter have crucial significance in proving my thesis on the importance of belief in the world of the novel. Katherine believes in supernatural things, such as "if only you could believe that the reindeer can fly, then you'd realize anything is possible" (Barnes 2009:84). Her seemingly childish beliefs are neglected by her surroundings; however, her insight is in line with the woodworm's recollection from the first chapter, therefore her perceptions of worldly matters gain more credibility. "Everything is connected" (Barnes 2009:84) is a sentence of hers which occurs repeatedly, on the one hand referring to Barnes's meticulously intertwined strands that connect the chapters on the level of motifs, themes, characters and plot, on the other hand considering some organic unity between man and nature. Nature in the eyes of Katherine is superior to the binding forces of man's rationality. Katherine states that women are more in touch with the world as they are more closely connected to all cycles than men. She contrasts natural cycles with the violent history of humanity and concludes that what is wrong with the world is that "we've given up having lookouts. We don't think about saving other people, we just sail on...Everyone below deck" (Barnes 2009:96). She articulates the loss of our humanity and our concern for non-materialistic things, which manifests itself in the patriarchal history of the world. However, having given up lookouts also underscores humanity's lack of belief in the ordinary and the extraordinary miracles, a phenomenon which fundamentally permeates the modern world perceived by Barnes. Katherine spiritual struggle is against the binding forces of this modern world.

Katherine's resistance to the modern world echoes that of the narrator in the "Parenthesis" chapter. Both narrators criticize the oppressive nature of history. Katherine states "I hate dates. Dates are bullies, dates are know-alls" (Barnes 2009:99). She revolts against the authoritative and confining nature of history. Similarly to her rejection, the narrator of the "Parenthesis" writes "we get scared by history, we allow ourselves to be bullied by dates . . . Dates don't tell the truth . . . They want to make us think we're always progressing, always going forward" (Barnes 2009:241). Both narrators turn against dates which sustain the progress fallacy within history, as it is designed to cover the often chaotic, repetitive violent and destructive history of man. Both chapters reflect on the act of fabulation: "We make up a story to cover the facts and spin a new story round them" (Barnes 2009:242), which has been deployed to cover the hopelessness and despair of our own existence, and soothe the pain of uncertainty regarding our past, present and future.

Katherine calls the men in her dreams "tempters". Due to other biblical references, I chose to apply the biblical meaning of the term. Yielding to temptation means, in short, committing some kind of act that goes against the will of God, therefore considered a sin, which if not repented will surely lead to the damnation of the soul. Katherine's tempters charge against her spiritual self, which believes that the morality of man has to be reformed in order to reach a more meaningful level of existence. Katherine identifies her tempters as her rational self striving to destroy her spiritual: "the mind was producing its own arguments against reality, against itself, what it knew" (Barnes 2009:100). However, the interpretation of temptation is challenged in the following:

She didn't believe in God, but now she was tempted. Not because she was afraid of dying. It wasn't that. No, she was tempted to believe in someone watching what was going on, watching the bear dig its own pit and then fall into it. It wouldn't be such a good story if there was no-one around to tell it. Look what they went and did-they blew themselves up. Silly cows. (Barnes 2009:103)

Katherine's willingness to believe in a God, who possibly is just a passive observer of the world, is also a form of temptation, but not in a traditional sense. Barnes ingenuity lies in the

fact that the reader's mind is transfixed with the biblical meaning of temptation, which, therefore, assigns a sinful characteristic to spiritual belief. Yielding to this aforementioned temptation would mean defying the predominantly secularized world and rational thinking of man. In this light, a wish to have faith in God and the spiritual is inherently something that has to be overcome. Theological scepticism is a fundamental postmodern trait of Barnes's oeuvre, yet scepticism is not equal to disbelief. At the end of the chapter Katherine overcomes her spiritual temptation and rejects her evil tempters, the world of reason represented by men. Therefore, by defying the rationale, she yields to the other form of temptation, which is a 'temptation to believe' in something that goes beyond man and his history of the world. The chapter ends with Katherine being back on the island and closes with the lines "She felt such happiness! Such hope!" (Barnes 2009:111). The factual and the fabulous undermine each other's authority, and, therefore an undecidability permeates the reading of the story. The text allows the reader to decide whether we got an insight into a delusional mind or witnessed a spiritual redemption, if not both, side by side, without neutralizing each other's meaning. Temptation to believe is the hope of breaking the cycle of human history, which in the eyes of Barnes is a desperate voyage on which people are vainly seeking deliverance from various kinds of disasters, or the hope of a future spiritual realm that will once nurture a truly humane mode of existence both on the physical and spiritual level.

Although all the narrators of the novel tend to echo each other, Katherine is the single narrator who explicitly repeats the major ideas of the narrator from the "Parenthesis" chapter. Some scholars consider this chapter to be the key to interpreting the rest of the novel, although it breaks the pattern of the novel, as it turns into a personal creed on history and love. Introducing the topic of love at such a late stage upsets the novel's finely tuned mechanism of themes for a brief period. Love is said to be essential as it is "unnecessary" (Barnes 2009:236), and it "makes us see the truth, makes it our duty to tell the truth" (Barnes 2009:240). Whereas history covers and distorts the truth by means of fabulation, love unveils the truth and is able to turn against the oppressive forces of history: "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" (Barnes 2009:240). History dismisses the importance of the individuals and makes them feel daunted and insignificant; while love enables people to see the absurdity and the trivial nature of history. The narrator states that to defy history we have to put aside our scepticism about truth and continues: "we must still believe that objective truth is obtainable; or we must believe that it is 99 per cent obtainable; or if we can't believe this we must believe that 43 per cent objective truth is better than 41 per cent" (Barnes 2009:246). This sudden endorsement of the concept of truth is seen by Vanessa Guignery (2006:68) as "the postmodernist strategy of inscribing and subverting, installing and deconstructing". Barnes ingenuity lies in the fact that he reverses the postmodern process: he first deconstructs the notion of objective truth and then re-inscribes it. The narrator's proposition of obtainable certainty is similar to Katherine's temptation to believe, in the terms of that both deeply rely on an act of faith. Unless we believe in certain things that have no rational bases, we are left with complete despair regarding our world and human existence.

In regard to "Parenthesis", Andrew Tate states that Barnes's defence of love is "lyrical, persuasive and moving but . . . no more rational than an apologia for Christian faith" (Tate 2011:62). In agreement with Tate, Barnes's reasoning does fall short in fulfilling for instance the requirements of an argumentative essay, however the line "So religion and art should yield to love" epitomises the stations of Barnes's search for meaning. Wojciech Drag identifies three novels as the major milestones of Barnes's pursuit of meaning. She concludes that while *Flaubert's Parrot* offers that the meaning of life is actually the search for meaning itself and *Staring at the Sun* offers no consolation in religion, *A History of the World* supplies the most solid foundation for a meaningful existence, which is love "even if it fails us,

although it fails us, because it fails us" (Barnes 2009:245). I agree with Drag's major findings; however, I believe it is not wise to interpret the other chapters simply as a prelude to love.

I do not wish to deny the importance of love in Barnes's later fiction and that of the empowering experience of love in "Parenthesis". Furthermore, from the viewpoint of ethical criticism, love can be considered as the novel's most significant proposition, as it could be the foundation of an "anti-materialist" (Barnes 2009:244) system of moral values that would fill the space left by Christianity in the Western culture. Nevertheless, apart from "Parenthesis", all the other ten chapters conspicuously lack this phenomenon. Barnes excels in presenting an unreliable set of narratives of the history of the world, in which humanity is seemingly always headed towards entropy. Yet, simultaneously the cyclical structure of a greater narrative is enforced, since the fragmented narratives of the world are actually woven together by the reoccurrence of major themes, motifs, and characters throughout the novel. But only one set of phenomena permeates all the chapters of the novel, and that is hope and despair: "we are lost at sea, washed between hope and despair, hailing something that may never come to rescue us"(Barnes 2009:137). In an existentialist reading of the text, hope is present to counteract the violent and ruthless acts of man, for instance in the face of extinction ("Stowaway"), despair ("Shipwreck"), massacre ("The Visitors"), violent death ("Three Simple Stories"), and unexplainable tragedy ("Upstream"). Hope is more explicit in certain chapters than others, and is just as multi-faceted and indeterminable as the chapters of history in the novel, but the temptation to believe in change of events, ordinary or extraordinary miracles, even though they go against the voice of reason is present in every chapter. Hope in "the Survivor" chapter is Katherine's 'temptation to believe', which defies both the inhuman acts of man and the secularized world of reason, however later it is synonymous with faith in "The Mountain" and "Project Ararat" chapters, which convey the clash between belief in the spiritual and the rational. In the former, the sentence "where Amanda discovered in the world divine intent, benevolent order and rigorous justice, her father had seen only chaos, hazard and malice" (Barnes 2009:148) epitomizes the irreconcilable nature of the scientific mind and the strongly religious one. Nonetheless, Miss Logan (an outside observer) realizes that "There were two explanations of everything, that each required the exercise of faith, and that we had been given free will in order that we might choose between them" (Barnes 2009:168) conveys that the ambiguity of the world cannot be resolved; and, therefore, neither the spiritual nor the rational domain should be excluded.

The last chapter underscores another analogy of hope which is repeated in the title, "Dream". The chapter unfolds "an iteration of eternity free from judgement" (Tate 2011:62), which is designed to be so democratic that all individuals get acceptance and are provided with their own personalized version of eternity. Ironically, Barnes deprives the characters of final certainty even after death, as even God appears to be absent. This picture of heaven uses and abuses modern consumerism as its frame, resulting in a mockery of both sacred and profane ideas of the current age. After having spent a few hundred years in perfect happiness, the narrator starts yearning for some form of certainty, longing to be judged: "I'd always had this dream . . . dream of being judged. It's what we all want, isn't it? I wanted, oh, some kind of summing-up, I wanted my life looked at"(Barnes 2009:293). Dreams gain great importance by the end of the chapter that will complement both the motif of 'temptation to believe' and that of hope. The protagonist's evaluation of his life is disappointing as he receives a simple "You're OK" (Barnes 2009:294) pat on the shoulder. His discomfort remains and his lines of enquiry lead to Margaret (who most closely resembles an angel of some sort) telling him that sooner or later everyone takes the option to die off. Margaret states "we often get people asking for bad weather, for instance, or for something to go wrong. They miss things going wrong. Some of them ask for pain" (Barnes 2009:305). This underlines the "contradictory

nature of human desires, needs and hopes" (Tate 2011:62), according to which we can only appreciate the sun behind the clouds of rain.

The first-person narrator is unable to express what is actually wrong with his personalized eternity. He can only complain about Hitler being in heaven, and not having dreams ever since he has supposedly died. He reaches the conclusion that "Heaven's a very good idea, it's a perfect idea . . . but not for us. Not given the way we are" (Barnes 2009:309). Again, he is not explicit, but his words are indicative of another crucial element of human nature. On the very last page of the book he asks "Why do we have Heaven? Why do we have these dreams of Heaven?" to which Margaret answers "Perhaps you need them . . . you can't get by without the dream" (Barnes 2009:309). What dreams are manifestations of and how dreams should be interpreted is a separate field of studies; however the "Dream" chapter foregrounds the idea that dreams are manifestations of the very essence of man, his hopes and desires. While "Parenthesis" claims love to "give us our humanity, and also our mysticism" (Barnes 2009:245), all the other chapters propose that belief as such is vital part of what makes us humans. Believing in something does not require reasoning, as it implicitly builds on hopes, desires and feelings. Despair and pain cannot be erased from the world, however if such a place existed then the balance between hope and despair would be disturbed. However, the world is presented as off balance in which reason and power has oppressed faith and love. *A History of the World* underscores the necessity of belief because faith in either ordinary or in extraordinary miracles constitutes our very essence and our mysticism.

### 3. Conclusion

This essay has covered a wide range of crucial terms from 'temptation to believe', through hope and dreams to faith. The presence of belief in the works of Barnes reflects a temptation to believe in the irrational that goes against secularized modern thinking of man. The world of the reader is as embedded in rationality as that of the characters; therefore believing in something that goes against the world of reason is a 'modern' form of temptation. This is the reason why I differentiated between two forms of temptation: temptation of the rational (believing in miracles) and temptation of the spiritual (believing in reason). Although the motif of 'temptation to believe' and hope in a world of unordinary miracles is permeated with Barnes's religious scepticism, Barnes always offers his characters and his readers an interpretation that validates the spiritual, a chance to choose faith over reason. The fact that Julian Barnes, who regards himself an atheist writer, proposes this chance in a dominantly secularized postmodern tradition reveals that he himself is occasionally tempted to believe.

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