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***RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST BY MEANS OF
SUBJECTIVITY AND FICTIONALITY IN LOVE, ETC BY
JULIAN BARNES***

Keywords: *memory, history, truth, heteroglossia, biased accounts*

Abstract: *This paper aims at analyzing one of Julian Barnes's novels (Love, etc) in order to illustrate his views on the recording of history. The approach starts with examining various theories on the writing of history. Subsequently, it moves on to narratology and devices used for the specific purpose of showing the relativity of all historical recording and the epistemological difficulty encountered in writing history. Here the emphasis falls on the analysis of polyphony and the unreliability of all witness accounts. Several key issues are taken into consideration with regards to the possibility of recovering the past, the nature of truth as well as memory. Overall, the analysis makes use of Hassan's description of Postmodernism, White's helpful input on discourse and history writing together with Barthes, also McHale's theory on truth validity and Bakhtin's narratological devices. The whole paper focuses on Barnes's message as clearly foregrounding the Postmodern interpretation of history without suggesting giving up the attempt to recover the past and rather than looking for the ultimate truth, one should accept the existence of alternative, personal truths.*

It has been shown by theorists of the writing of history that history can only provide a positioned perspective of the past and that contemporary concerns focus on the loss of objective truth which engenders multiple perspectives provided by our individual interpretations and assessments of various situations, as Hassan stated: "the play of indeterminacy and immanence is crucial to the episteme of Postmodernism." (4) By splicing together the two concepts, Hassan arrives at indeterminance, the hybrid which embodies the flux of form and content, the fragmentation of the narrative, the view of history as performance and not as a given, the metafictionality of the novels and the dialogism of novelistic discourse.

Claims of true perspective are antiquated since "there is no such thing as a single correct view of any object under study but ... there are many correct views, each requiring its own style of representation." (White 47) This is exactly what the novel tackled in this paper deals with. *Love, etc* is the sequel to a novel Julian Barnes wrote ten years earlier (*Talking It Over*), a novel whose epigraph is a Russian saying "He lies like an eyewitness" which announces the theme of both books. Just like its predecessor, *Love, etc* makes use of multiple points of view in order to dramatize the difficulty of memory,

the most basic and personal form of recollection. The narrators address the reader, more or less as a confidante would, as if the reader were interviewing them or even taking down their depositions. Their narratives turn out to be conflicting interpretations of the same events. The reader is left to piece together the true story of what really happened, while being constantly reminded that the conclusion will be yet another interpretation based on mediated stories.

The main characters are Stuart Hughes, Oliver Russell and Gillian Wyatt (Stuart's first ex-wife and Oliver's current wife), but other characters interject their stories throughout the novel. Stuart is a businessman, very practical-minded and his discourse focuses on detail while keeping the rhetorical flourishes to a minimum (for him even the humble comparison seems to be distasteful). In contrast, Oliver uses elaborate theorizing and most of the ideological message of the book originates from him (he is the free spirit with aversion for office hours, occasionally pushing flyers and dealing in bootleg merchandise). Gillian is the bread winner of the family by restoring paintings and is more taciturn as if wary of language. Alongside these three, other characters intervene, each bringing its own contribution to the story. By piecing together the bits of information all of them provide, the reader attempts to reconstruct their past.

Recovering the Past

Some aspects of the past are beyond historical recovery because of the passage of time; consequently, we are left with rough estimates. Like the restorer of paintings, the historian lifts off the stain of past interpretations, but there is no true painting underneath – a work of history is a hypothesis, an artistic rather than empirical endeavour. As Martin states in *Inventing Towards Truth* “Certainties give way to relative certainties. Dreams of total knowledge are humbled. But knowledge itself does not thereby become a useless category. It simply becomes a more complex and provisional one” (20).

Grasping the past may be difficult but this does not mean giving it up as Oliver explains: “Retrovision: how much we wish we had it, eh? But we live our lives without such useful little mirrors magnifying the road just traveled. We barrel up the A61 towards Toulouse. Looking ahead, looking ahead. Those who forget their history are condemned to repeat it. The *rétroviseur*: essential not just for road safety but the race's survival” (Barnes 18-19).

Theorists of the writing of history in general agree that all historical narratives contain an element of interpretation and that this is irreducible and inexpugnable, as White explains in the *Tropics of Discourse*: “[a] historical narrative is thus necessarily a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries of established and inferred facts, at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative.” (51) In one of his perorations against the former husband of his wife, Oliver imagines St Stuart's hagiography, which despite its underlying mean streak, illuminates the biased nature of all historical recordings:

(H)is pedantic book-keeping uncovered an early Roman scam. The provincial governor's ADC dipping his paw in the grain barrel. The gubernational cover-up sadly necessitating the execution of Stuartus of Smyrna on the trumped-up charge of spitting and defecating on idols in the Temple. The local Christian rabble-rousers opportunistically proclaim him a martyr – whereupon, St Stuart! The law of unintended effect strikes again! Feast Day: April 1st. Patron and protector of the unmodified vegetable. (Barnes 84-85)

Slowly but surely Oliver becomes disillusioned with everything except his children but including love (hence the title *Love, etc* which concludes his list of disappointing items) and cynicism becomes more pervasive in his speech. Despite that, his message is still fraught with clues which point to alterations information undergoes when being mediated from past to present:

I have in my time investigated the voluminous myth-kitty which our spavined species has assembled down the millennia for its comfort and edification, and I have a word of advice for those who cannot reach the end of the day's winding path without a toke of myth. My counsel is this and thus: dream on. The pig did not fly; the stone rebounded from the helmet of Goliath, who promptly ate David for breakfast; the fox easily acquired the grapes by cutting down the vine with a power saw; and Jesus resideth not with his Father. (156)

In the introduction to his collection of essays on cultural criticism *Tropics of Discourse*, Hayden White states that “troping is the soul of discourse” and “even in the most chaste discursive prose, texts intended to represent ‘things as they are’ without rhetorical adornment or poetic imagery, there is always a failure of intention” (3). We can therefore conclude that every mimetic text can be shown to have left something out of the description of its object or to have put something into it. Historical writing cannot avoid stylistics because all writing makes use of conventions. Oliver reflects on the writing of history as being an artistic process which does not encompass all that may have occurred and at the same time involves a lot of editing:

The story of a louse may be as fine as the history of Alexander the Great – everything depends upon the execution. ... What is needed is a sense of form, control, discrimination, selection, omission, arrangement, emphasis... that dirty, three-letter word, art. (Barnes 13)

The Nature of Truth

Brian McHale argues that one can no longer speak of objective truth but rather of several truths, each valid and designed for a specific version of reality.

Granted the theory-dependency of ‘facts,’ it follows that faithfulness to objective ‘truth’ cannot be a criterion for evaluating versions of reality (since the truth will have been produced by the version that is being evaluated by its faithfulness to the truth,

and so on, circularly). ... constructions, what I have been calling versions of reality, are strategic in nature, that is they are designed with particular purposes in view. (2)

What postmodern novels lay bare is the fact that all assertions of truth require a certain amount of assumption and exclusion. However, as Oliver points out, reaching the truth may prove outright impossible:

Truth will out? ... as historians, philosophers, brute politicians and everyone else with a head halfway screwed on concurs, truth mostly does not out. It mostly ins, until the day it is interred in our bones. That's the grim norm. (Barnes 151)

Oliver insists that truth is an artistic creation: "I told her (Gillian) truth sprang from poetry" (100). It always comes in a wrapping and not crude form: "it requires wholegrain mustard, some pungent garnishing and a few fantastical side dishes to make it palatable" (131). Thus the question arises not in the form of "Where is the truth?" but rather "Which truth do you prefer?" as the men explain. While Stuart reads more than he used to, he focuses on: "(n)on-fiction. History, science, biography. I like to know that what I am being told is true" (92-92). In contrast, for Oliver:

Fiction, I replied, is the Supreme Fiction. Non-fiction is the dross on the fool's gold ... fiction – by which I was naturally referring to art in general – is the norm, the bass line, the golden mean, the meridian, the north pole, the north star, the pole star, the lodestone, the magnetic north, the equator, the *beau idéal*, the summum, the epitome, the ne plus ultra, the shooting star, the Halley's Comet, the Star of the East. It is both Atlantis and Everest. Or, if you wish to be more Stuartly, it is the white line down the middle of the road. Everything else is a deviation, a traffic light, a speed camera popping up in your *retroviser*. (95)

The Nature of Memory

The postmodern narration presupposes imagination combined with remembrance in a creative enterprise; by joining together bits of memory and flights of fancy one can reconstruct the past: "Our memories are just an artifice" (Barnes 13). Roland Barthes argues that the historian is a collector not of facts but rather a collector and relater of signifiers, organizing them to establish positive meaning and fill the pure meaningless series. While doing so, the historian is bound to leave out some signifiers perceived as irrelevant. Oliver comments on Stuart's remarks about a neighbour:

Ah, but why remember her any longer? Stuart has pronounced her wisdom 'irrelevant'. Let us erase her memory, let us delete her sole contribution to the dictionary of quotations, 'seeing as no-one actually has a valet nowadays'. (Barnes 179)

In his article entitled "Les Lieux de Mémoire", Pierre Nora talks about the acceleration of history and the disappearance of the memory-preserving entities, disappearance which engenders the existence of "lieux de mémoire", those sites where memory is embodied and where the feeling of historical continuity endures. The relationship between memory and history seems to be one of opposition. Thus, memory is life in "permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived" (8) while history is a problematic and incomplete reconstruction, a mediated representation of the past. Memory harbours that which suits it, "nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic" (8), conversely, history is the result of analysis and criticism, the outcome of an intellectual production. Memory binds together one particular group, it is collective, plural and yet individual whereas history belongs to everybody and nobody and thus claims universal authority. Memory is absolute and rooted in the concrete, in spaces, images, and objects, in contrast history "can only conceive the relative" (9).

As far as memory is concerned, the reader is given in *Love, etc* the following insights. As Stuart recollects younger Gillian, memory turns out to have its own mechanism for storing information selectively: "I do not mean that she only had green socks, just that she always did in my memory." (Barnes 154) And later on makes despite him a comparison: "The memory is like a left-luggage office." (159) Oliver seems to be aware of the complexity and intricacies of memory: "I'll pretend that memory is laid out like a newspaper." (18) While talking about his father, Oliver reveals the fact that memory is closely linked with forgetfulness and prone to alternative speculations: "Used to beat me up with a hockey stick when I was barely weaned. Or was it a billiard cue?" (28)

Storing information does not guarantee unmediated safe access to it as contaminations may occur and what is presented a "true" memory could turn out to be a total fabrication. Thus, Oliver asserts: "I can offer the visual vignettes from the distant bourn of childhood ... but how many are truly mine and how many purloined from the Cyclopaedia of False Memory I cannot at this juncture discern" (199-200).

Conflicting Accounts

Both in fiction and history the author creates a narrative. The contemporary state of affairs is that a truth is being told with facts to back it up, however a teller constructs that truth and chooses those specific facts. "The teller-of-story or history also constructs those very facts by giving a particular meaning to events. Facts do not speak for themselves in either form of narrative: the tellers speak for them making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole" (Hutcheon 58).

The result is that in *Love, etc* there are many instances in which the same event is differently inscribed on the memories of the various witnesses. One such example is the

first time Stuart and Oliver meet after their long estrangement. Stuart comments on the fact that he had to buy all the rounds:

... Oliver himself has 'several projects in development'.
Not so many that he couldn't afford to buy his own round. (52)

While Oliver's recount to Gillian casts a different light on the way things unfolded: "(Stuart) Wouldn't let me buy my own round." (55) The novel is fraught with instances in which the eye of the witness provides a subjective perspective and these instances range from trifling ones to serious downright criminal ones. Thus, a mere dinner meal is seen differently by the three narrators: Stuart talks about a "delicious vegetarian lasagna" (66) Gillian had made; Gillian drily states "I overcooked the lasagne." (69); while Oliver complains that "Gillian was so tense that she cremated the pasta" (70).

Moreover, the same person will occasionally provide two conflicting narrations of the same event as in Gillian's case. Towards the end of the novel a sexual encounter takes place between her and Stuart. Her first narration of the event has Stuart making the first step while she consents. The reader is then given Stuart's account where clearly Gillian was the initiator. Gillian claims in her second account that they were both drunk and despite her protests albeit mild ones, Stuart forced himself onto her. In all three cases, there are elements which recur; however, each time the perspective is different. It points to the unreliability of all accounts in the reader-centered approach as stated by Nunning in which the reader tries to resolve ambiguities and textual inconsistencies by attributing them to the narrator's unreliability.

The reader cannot resolve the disharmony in the text but by positing unreliable narrators, disharmony caused by the multi-perspectival accounts of the story that cannot be synthesized, the narrator's own disclosure of his or her own unreliability as Oliver acknowledges: "I also, you might have noticed, deal in subjective truth – so much more real, and more reliable, than the other sort" (Barnes 59) or once his depression starts to set in: "Add memory loss to my list of symptoms. I can't be relied upon to remember to do it myself" (221). However, as Zerweck argues, contemporary unreliable narrators represent normal features of human cognition and knowledge within our epistemological discourse. Hence, subjectivity and unreliability are accepted as realities while reliability is considered impossible.

Heteroglossia

In the introduction to *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin defines the novel as "a consciously structured hybrid of languages" (xxix) after having announced to the world the revolutionary concept of "dialogism" (polyphony) in 1929. Thus "at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between different epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the

present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form. These 'languages' of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying 'languages'" (291).

In *Love, etc* there is a diversity of social speech types and one instance of heteroglossia is the parodic stylization of the language of ceremonial speeches and of high epic style. Oliver remembers his wish for the three of them before getting involved with Gillian hoping that none of them would be hurt: "I could see from your expression at the time – sceptical to the point of farouche – that you judged this the landscape of invention, as verisimilitudinous as operetta. Yet was I not as far-seeing as St Simeon the Stylite atop his pillar at Telanissus? Hath not it come to pass just as I spake, O ye of little faith?" (132)

Another instance of heteroglossia which appears in the novel is the hybrid construction, meaning that "utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two 'languages,' two semantic and axiological belief systems" (Bakhtin 304). "Come for my wedge Mr Boss-Man, *sir*" (Barnes 148) is Oliver's line after being hired by Stuart as deliveryman and his imitation of driver talk only embarrasses Stuart in front of his assistant.

In the characters' language the reader detects several social voices. Besides those of the three main narrators, there appear: Terri, the confident American, Stuart's second ex-wife: "Mind if I join you? (...) I'm not going to be anyone's damn footnote." (33); Mme Wyatt, the sexagenarian of French origin with spicy retorts: "She was a wise woman, this expert of yours, and therefore a pessimist." (164); Ellie, Gillian's assistant with the pragmatism of her twenties: "Condoms, every time. Every single day until he's had an Aids test and I'm standing at the altar. I only trust what I can see." (107); the two girls of the Wyatt-Russell couple with their disarming childhood intuition; as well as others.

Another feature of heteroglossia listed by Bakhtin is represented by the "incorporated genres" (320). He argues that any genre could be incorporated in the novel, starting with the artistic (such as short stories, poems, and dramatic scenes) and ending with the extra-artistic ones (rhetorical, religious, and journalistic). Once introduced, they do not lose their individuality or integrity, but actually preserve it enriching the stylistics of the novel. In *Love, etc* we encounter both types as in the rhymes Oliver likes to play with or the dramatic scene of the rape/consented sex; or the confessional style used throughout the novel; furthermore, the abundance of words and phrases from other languages is a sign of dialogism between the languages of the world.

One of the outcomes of globalization is the interaction of different cultures and the voices in the novel speak for various cultures. Stuart has benefited from the British and then the American one and the comments he makes on the differences between the two point to the diverging interpretations people give to the same events. Thus he presents the outlook on his divorce: "... in England the voice would go, 'His marriage

failed after five years.' I mean the voice-over in your own head, the one that comments on your life as you live it. But in the States the voice-over went, 'His marriage succeeded for five years'" (Barnes 25) Later on he insists on the differing interpretations by means of his business enterprises: "In England it would be called 'not sticking at it' or 'not knowing what you want'. In the States, it's normal. You succeed, you look for something else to succeed at. You fail, you still look for something else to succeed at" (26).

The speaking person in the novel is an object of artistic representation, a factor introducing heteroglossia, and to one degree or another an "ideologue and his words are always ideologemes" (Bakhtin 333). Barnes's message is clear foregrounding the Postmodern interpretation of history without suggesting giving up the attempt to recover the past and rather than looking for the ultimate truth, one should accept the existence of alternative, personal truths.

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Postmodern novels have proven to be very useful means of describing the difficulties involved in writing history. They serve as reminders that all statements about history should be stated and read with a certain amount of skepticism. *Love, etc* is a novel relying heavily on multiple internal focalization, adopting the points of view of several character-focalizers whose limited perspectives project highly subjective views of history. The narrative techniques and strategies serve to challenge both hegemonic historiographic discourses and the generic conventions of the realist historical novel. The world we live in is swamped with information. Faced with such an overwhelming volume of information (much of it contradictory) which no one person or even one group can canvass, the contemporary novel (*Love, etc* included) does what it can do: it presents that complexity.

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