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## ***QUESTIONING THE LIMITS OF THE NOVEL IN JULIAN BARNES'S A HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN 10 ½ CHAPTERS***

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this paper is to analyze to what extent Julian Barnes's A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters questions the limits of the novel as genre. Considered by critics not as much a novel as a collection of short stories, A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters is nevertheless claimed by its author as a novel in its own right, built around a well-defined structure and recurrent characters and themes. The use of different types of discourse and points of view, as well as the overall ironic perspective on mankind's ability to achieve historical knowledge are some of the means by which Julian Barnes calls into question the very perception of the novel as genre within the context of postmodernity.*

As soon as it was published in 1989, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* received mixed criticism and appraisal from reviewers, who considered the book as anything from a collection of short stories to another typical Barnesian narrative experiment following in the footsteps of *Flaubert's Parrot*. At a first glance, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* does seem like a volume that brings together ten separate stories (with different protagonists) that happen to have one or two things in common and share a few recurrent themes or motifs. In fact, there are more things that link the different chapters and turn them into a novel, whatever may be understood by that term within the context of postmodernity.

Any traditionally accepted definition of the novel as genre would mention that it is a "lengthy prose fictive narrative with a protagonist" (Smiley 14). These characteristics certainly correspond to most conventional novels written in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, but there are also novels that go beyond the constraints of a chronological succession of actions and "adventures" involving a set number of characters.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the ways in which Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* undermines the traditionally-accepted and characteristic features of the novel, thus leading the way to a reconsideration of the genre within the context of postmodernity. After the extensive experimentation that characterized the novel during the modernist period, the genre as such seems to have lost some of its unity or features that distinguished it from other genres. Postmodernity is a period particularly marked by

unpredictability, and postmodernist novels could best be described as mixtures of elements belonging to different genres, a *mélange* of fiction and non-fiction that makes it very difficult to classify them using any of the traditional taxonomies. The novel has moved from the centre of the narrative genre to the margin of other genres, extending its limits beyond the boundaries of the latter. As the topic of this essay is not to discuss the postmodernist novel in general, I shall limit myself to analyzing just one of Julian Barnes's works, a book that probably best illustrates the ideas stated above.

*A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* consists of ten individually-constructed stories and a "Parenthesis" (the "half" in the title) that takes the form of a highly subjective essay written in the first person. Each chapter has its own story line and protagonists, but what links them is the connection and seemingly random references to the biblical story of Noah's Flood and the Ark he built to save his family and the animal kingdom. The very title of the novel questions the idea of wholeness that usually applies to published works of literature. If there were only ten chapters, then Barnes's *History* would have been complete, but the addition of a half chapter, or a parenthesis, seems to undermine and reject the ability of achieving completeness. Nothing is given a definite form, and every story is open to a wide range of interpretations and meanings. A brief look at each of the chapters would best exemplify Barnes's skillfulness in handling both fictional and non-fictional elements in the stories that eventually make up his history of the world.

The first chapter, "The Stowaway", is in fact a retelling of the Flood, from the point of view of a woodworm (a stowaway on the Ark, for obvious reasons). As a stowaway, the first person narrator is able to provide us with a different account of the facts and thus challenge, undermine and question almost everything we thought we knew about the Flood. The narrator in the first chapter is somewhat problematic and paradoxical: he is nothing more than a woodworm, a minuscule creature that managed to survive to this day only due to his ingenuity in finding a way to get on and off the Ark without being found. Yet he also seems to know a lot about world history, science and the general evolution of the human race. He even questions the supposed superiority of the humans, compared to the animal kingdom. Noah and his family (and with him, the entire humanity, since we all share Noah's genes) are described as depraved, low beings unable to think and judge for themselves. Noah is presented as a very vengeful and cruel man, who contributed to the disappearance of many animal species by eating them during the journey or by not allowing them to get on the Ark. According to the woodworm, the disappearance of some species during the Journey is what accounts nowadays for the missing links in the evolutionary chain.

The choice of a woodworm as a narrator is very interesting, since the woodworm is probably one of the most subversive beings in the world. At times its presence can be heard, but it can hardly be seen until its work is almost complete. It works almost in the same way as irony does in a text. To be fully effective and appreciated, irony must lie

underneath the surface of the text and reveal itself only at the end, when the time comes to achieve its complete effect.

The point of view of the first chapter narrator is seemingly detached, denying all responsibility for the facts and pretending only to report what the birds or some of his fellow passengers had said. Most of the time the tone is ironic; the woodworm seems to be amazed at how gullible we humans can be, and how we are willing to take a lot of things for granted, without asking even the simplest questions. The whole chapter takes the shape of a long monologue that turns into a confession at the end.

After a first chapter dealing with the story of the Flood, one may expect the second chapter to continue in the same line, or at least focus on a moment in history that closely and chronologically follows the biblical Flood. Instead, the second chapter and the ones following it tell stories that move freely from one century to another, completely disregarding any chronological order. “The Visitors” is the story of the terrorist hijacking of a cruise ship in the Mediterranean (1985), with Franklin Hughes as protagonist. The 3<sup>rd</sup> person narrative starts with Hughes’s observation that the tourists boarding the ship were like the animals that must have boarded Noah’s Ark in pairs, and thus marks a connection with the previous chapter. Franklin Hughes is a speaker on comparative cultures, hired to give a series of lectures on the cruise ship. His job is to explain the past by means of references to the present, in order to make it accessible and attractive for the tourists. He tells stories inspired by History and considers the past from a multiplicity of angles. The cruise ship is like a modern Ark on which passengers get on board “in obedient couples”, to be “saved” from a sea of indifference, to rise above the lack of knowledge that seems to take over the world.

Franklin Hughes aspires to become a writer and produce his own “personal history of the world”, and from this point of view we may consider him as an alter-ego of Barnes himself. *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* is ultimately Julian Barnes’s personal history of the world, reduced to a series of essential events that cover a span of several thousands of years, but always come back to the same central theme – the Flood and the Ark.

The “visitors” in the second chapter are in fact a group of Arabian terrorists who hijack the cruise ship and eventually start killing some of the tourists held hostages. The modern-day Ark doesn’t manage to protect and save all of its passengers, just like the original one had lost some of its “passengers” along the way.

The next chapter (“The Wars of Religion”) carries us back to 16<sup>th</sup> century France, as it is based on some manuscripts that describe the church trial against a group of woodworms. The story seems to be a translation of a transcription of the original court documents; the sentence structure is quite complicated, following the style of 16<sup>th</sup> century writings; the chapter is divided into “pétition”, “plaidoyer”, and “conclusion”, just like the structure of a trial. The (presumed) court documents are turned into fiction, and this leads to a mixture of registers and styles. The woodworms are presented as the ultimate

malefactors and bringers of death upon the “God-fearing parishioners” and during the trial the question of whether or not the woodworm was on the Ark arises.

The fourth chapter is inspired from the nuclear accident at Chernobyl and tells the story of a woman who tries to escape from an imminent catastrophe. The narrative starts in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, and then switches to the 1<sup>st</sup> person (taking the form of a diary), to make the account of the events more personal and subjective. The boat on which the woman tries to escape is a sort of a miniature Ark carrying just a pair of cats on it. Yet the woman is sure that there must be other people doing the same thing (that is, escaping on miniature arks and carrying different animals); Noah’s Ark seems to have been divided into a multitude of mini-Arks, all trying to save people and animals alike. The narrator firmly believes that “everything is connected” and this may also be taken as the motto of the entire book. No matter how disparate and unrelated the chapters may be, there are in fact connections and links between them, which turn the ten and a half stories into a novel and a “history”.

“Shipwreck” (Chapter 5) is a mixture of narrative and essay. The chapter is divided into two parts: the first part relates the story of a 19<sup>th</sup> century expedition from France to Senegal, consisting of four vessels and 365 people. One of the ships gets caught in a reef in shallow waters and the people on board have to build a raft in order to save themselves from the shipwreck; the second part is an analysis of a painting by Géricault (“The Raft of the Medusa”), starting from the question “How do you turn catastrophe into art?”. This part is a very well-organized and systematic inquiry into the reasoning behind the production of a work of art. The style is similar to what we may find in an art history book, as it is part historical facts, part essay, part critical analysis and part meditation and scrutiny of a work of art (whose color reproduction is inserted in the book). It is almost as if the readers were given a lecture in understanding and interpreting art, and initiated into the secrets of looking at a picture in such a way as to get its full range of interpretations and meanings. At the end of the chapter, we stumble upon one of the recurrent characters in the book, namely the woodworm (who had infested the frame of the painting).

The following chapter focuses on the expedition to Arghuri organized by Amanda Fergusson in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in search of Noah’s vineyard. Amanda believes in the reality of the Flood, and is determined to find evidence to support her belief. She decides to climb Mount Ararat to get pure water from the snows on its top, but after injuring her leg on her way down, she asks to be left to die in a cave on the mountain.

Chapter seven is in fact a succession of “three simple stories”, all related in some way or another to the idea of being lost at sea: the story of a survivor from the *Titanic*, the biblical parable of Jonah (retold from a contemporary perspective), and the story of the *Saint Louis*, a ship that carried the Jews fleeing from Germany in May 1939. *Saint Louis* is another modern-day Ark, as it carried its passengers to a place of safety, away from persecution and war.

Chapter eight is made up of a succession of letters and telegrams sent by a British actor to his fiancée while he is filming on location in the Amazonian jungle. We only get a one-sided subjective account of the events, as the letters sent from the jungle never receive an answer. Chapter nine relates the adventures of another expedition to Mount Ararat, this time taken up by Spike Tiggler, one of the American astronauts that landed on the Moon. He presumably hears God's voice telling him to go and find Noah's Ark, but when he reaches Mount Ararat, he comes across a skeleton in a cave and assumes he has found Noah himself. In fact, the skeleton was only that of Amanda Fergusson, the protagonist from the sixth chapter.

The last chapter in the book provides a surprising new insight into what happens after death. The narrator has a dream that he woke up in heaven, where everything is perfect, but also very democratic. Everyone is entitled to get what they want, and eventually die off when they decide to do so. The narrator gradually discovers that an eternity spent doing what you want without ever getting tired or feeling pain is quite boring. His inquisitive mind can't help wondering who is behind this "New Heaven", where is the God who was supposed to judge his life. His expectations about afterlife are totally different from the "reality" of Heaven. Heaven is what you make of it, but perfection inevitably leads to boredom and a desire to die off.

Julian Barnes moves freely between first, second and third person narratives, thus marking the passage from a highly subjective account of events, to a seemingly detached or objective point of view. The ten chapters in the book follow their own plot line and succession of events, yet they somehow revolve around the same (albeit few) recurrent characters (the woodworm, Noah – who only appears physically in the first chapter, but whose existence triggers the plot of several other chapters) and themes (the Flood, the Ark). The central image of the Ark and all the forms it takes throughout the chapters (ranging from a cruise ship to a mere raft) and the constant references to the flood myth act as a backbone for the novel, a common framework on which the different plot lines of the chapters are woven together and thus achieve the unity that distinguishes them from a collection of short stories and turns them into a novel (unconventional as it may be). The references to the flood myth give structure to the novel and establish an orderly pattern within the mixture of different genres and styles.

As a whole, Barnes's *History* questions not only mankind's general perception of history, but also its very ability to attain historical knowledge. The different (hi)stories that make up Barnes's *History* are not only about events, but also (and above all) about the connections and the possible sets of relationships that exist between those events. The book may be considered a hybrid as far as genres are concerned, as it brings together chapters that are anything from plain narratives to a series of letters or diaries.

*A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* also mixes fiction with myths or historical events and dates, in an attempt to reconsider the place of the novel as a genre within the context of postmodernity. Most contemporary novels manifest a tendency towards the mixing of genres, fictive and non-fictive elements or characters. The novel

nowadays seems to have become an all-encompassing form of writing, a genre that is in a continuous transformation and whose limits tend to stretch and gain more flexibility up to the point of dissolving. As George Lukacs pointed out in his *Theory of the Novel* [*Théorie du roman*], unlike other literary genres that seem to reach a more or less definite form, the novel seems to be in a continuous process of becoming (“Ainsi, alors que la caractéristique essentielle des autres genres littéraires est de reposer dans une forme achevée, le roman apparaît comme quelque chose qui devient, comme un processus” [Lukacs 67]). The novel is described as a meeting-place for elements coming from many different literary genres, and the resulting heterogeneous combination questions itself and the genre as such (“La composition romanesque est une fusion paradoxale d’éléments hétérogènes et discontinus appelés à se constituer en une unité organique toujours remise en question” [Lukacs 79]).

Self-reflexivity is another feature of most contemporary and postmodernist novels, and this is also visible in Barnes’s book. The “Parenthesis” inserted between chapters 8 and 9 is nothing more than the narrator’s meditation on love, in which he leaves aside any authorial mask and looks straight at the reader, just like El Greco does in his *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*. This half chapter may be considered the key to interpreting the rest of the novel. It makes a connection between love and truth (“Love makes us see the truth, makes it our duty to tell the truth” [290]) and it also defines history not necessarily as a science of the past, but rather as a subjective account of events.

History isn’t 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. (291)

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. We lie here in our hospital bed of the present (what nice clean sheets we get nowadays) with a bubble of daily news drip-fed into our arm. We think we know who we are, though we don’t quite know why we’re here, or how long we shall be forced to stay. 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 round them. Our panic and our pain are only eased by soothing fabulation; we call it history. (292)

If the ten chapters seems to leave out the possibility for salvation (most of the Ark-like vessels in the stories fail to carry their passengers to safety), the “Parenthesis” suggests that love may be the way to salvation, at least for the narrator.

Julian Barnes constantly works on setting up expectations in the mind of his readers, only to subsequently undermine them and direct his stories into completely unforeseeable paths. His novels almost never develop in an expectable or predictable direction, and this may be one of the keys to his success as a writer. His ability to cast a

fresh look on historical facts and stories makes his novel remarkable from every point of view, from composition to style and narrative techniques. The mixture of fiction and non-fiction genres may have resulted in an unstable composition, which would have led the reader into confusion. Yet the subtle connections Barnes establishes between the (seemingly) randomly chosen stories, the recurrent characters and references succeed in creating a unified image of a possible history of the world told from ten different points of view, with the help of ten different stories, ranging from letters and diaries to medieval legal documents. No matter how great their diversity, the stories manage to connect and thus prove that the limits of the postmodernist novel can stretch beyond any boundaries imposed by genres.

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