Julian Barnes and the Postmodern Problem of Truth

Abigail G. Dalton

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Prerequisite for Honors
in English

April 2008

Table of Contents

I: Introduction

"Of course 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."[1]

Julian Barnes is a name that neither academics nor recreational readers are very familiar with. As one of the lesser-known authors among his contemporaries, his work is often overlooked before it even receives the benefit of study. Yet Barnes's work, ranging from novels with a traditional narrative, to novels that defy convention, to short stories and essays, experiment with themes and forms which prove that he is, ultimately, worthy of study, and an author to whom readers should look with greater seriousness and academic interest. Those who know him are most familiar with his book, Flaubert's Parrot, a novel which is neither story nor biography, intertwining the life of Gustave Flaubert with that of the narrator, Geoffrey Braithwaite, a man whose own story becomes just as convoluted and elusive as Flaubert's. But the fascinating thing about Barnes is the extent to which his works differ so distinctly from each other, while clearly and consistently maintaining and exploring specific issues again and again. In each of these works, he pursues subjects central to humanity in different – and innovative – literary contexts. Love, for instance, and its elusiveness and contradictions is explored in nearly every work. Truth, similarly, and the problems in its interpretation and representation, its relation to the "real" and the "fictional", remains a constant source of inspiration and confusion for him – at times to a point of obsession.

[1] Rudolph Freiburg and Jan Schnitker, eds. "Do you consider yourself a postmodern author?": Interviews with Contemporary English Writers, 54.

My own interest in Barnes began entirely by accident, while slacking on the job at work at a Barnes & Noble in high school. While stacking the Bs in the literature section, I came across A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters, and began to read rather than shelve. It was, I think, a wise decision academically if not professionally; and over the years the breadth of Barnes material – including his novels, essays, and interviews – has sustained my interest. Each book, I've found, attends anew to fundamental questions: why do people look towards literature as a solution to life? How can a novelist portray truth through a form that is inherently fictional? And what, after all, is the relationship between fiction and reality? Has fiction become more real to us than what we actually experience outside of fiction? Do fiction and reality blend? "Books," he says in Flaubert's Parrot, "are where things are explained to you; life is where things aren't."[2] But in consistently experimenting with the novel form, in raising again and again the problems provoked by explorations of truth, art, the nature of humanity, he proves otherwise – books, his books, can be just as confounding and uncertain as life. Without ever providing clear truths or answers, he elucidates more about the human condition than most readers acknowledge, and proves how essential the study of literature can be to the study of life.

In order to understand Barnes's novels, we need context. Barnes has often been categorized as a postmodernist, and an exploration of what, exactly, that term contains is a useful point to begin a discussion of how his texts function. Postmodernism itself invokes innumerable definitions, depending on the field and the scholar. In Postmodern Literature, Ian Gregson provides an apt summation for the literature student:

[2] Julian Barnes, Flaubert's Parrot, 168.

> . . . for many of the American literary critics who brought the term postmodernism into circulation in the 1960s and early 1970s, post-modernism is a move *away* from narrative, from representation . . . the complexities of the term can be reduced this far: humanizing narratives are anti-postmodernist for these purposes, and the move is very much *away* from representation.[3]

Postmodernism, then, as this necessarily reductive definition suggests, can be taken as non-narrative and anti-representational. The traditional linear plot is often, if not always, replaced with a far more abstract form, and further, traditional literary elements such as a conclusive ending which satisfies the needs of both reader and character are often absent. Postmodernism defines itself against the narrative linearity of the realist novel. As literature defined as "modern" often steps away from a conventional structure, focusing instead on stream of consciousness rather than story –Virginia Woolf is a particularly good example here – so does postmodern literature. Yet postmodernism goes one step further, insisting that readers recognize the page as a page, and the novel as an object. Barnes himself often abandons traditional narrative form, as Flaubert's Parrot exemplifies. It is not a story with a beginning, middle and an end, as an Austen or Eliot novel is. Yet here we begin to see the ways in which Barnes strays from the postmodern form; for however non-traditional his novels may be, they are not anti-representational. A narrative exists, though in an untraditional form.

To distinguish Barnes from a more recognizably postmodern novelist, one must look not only to form but also to theme. The themes of the postmodern novel are self-consciously and unremittingly anti-humanist. This impulse distinguishes the postmodern novel from both its realist and modernist predecessors. The issue, Gregson explains, is its

[3] Ian Gregson, Postmodern Literature, 2-3.

departure from the realism of the traditional novelists, and the humanism of the modern writers:

> This is an obsessive theme and characteristically postmodernist in its anti-humanist tendency - a point which becomes clearer if it is contrasted with the value placed upon love by classic realist novelists. The centrality of its role in novels by Jane Austen and George Eliot, for example, is tied to a celebration of the human capacity for imaginative sympathy and self-transcendence, and the narrative linking of love and marriage reinforced a send of social stability based upon individual happiness. Postmodernist desire contrasts starkly with this humanist concept: it is an anarchic force that tears selves apart.[4]

Here we find further evidence of Barnes's departure from postmodernism; Barnes, though his novels and stories in no way fulfill the traditional conception of love stories culminating in marriage – the so called "marriage plot" of many realist novels – is nothing if not humanizing. His novels may not contain satisfying conclusions, coherent characters, or linear plots, but their entire focus remains firmly with humanity. His novels are anchored by love and human imagination, and this in itself puts him on the margins of postmodernism. He is neither one thing nor the other.

Also essential to the postmodern attitude is a ubiquitous pessimism – a consistent lack of faith in human nature as capable of poignancy or true meaning. Barnes does exhibit undertones of this version of postmodernism; as he states in an interview,

> Yes, I think there is probably a pervasive melancholy in a lot of what I write. I think that this partly comes from the objective assessment of the human condition, the inevitability of extinction – and also from an objective look at how many people's lives turn out and how rarely achievement matches intention. And I recognize such

[4] Postmodern Literature, 6.

> pessimism in the sorts of English writer whom I like and admire . . .[5]

Those authors, he states, include Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, and Ford Maddox Ford – writers who certainly didn't use Austen and Eliot novels as templates. There is no forced optimism in his novels, it is true. But melancholy alone does not a postmodernist make.

Where we find the closest resemblance between Barnes and postmodernism is in his crossing the boundaries that separate the author and his fiction. Gregson quotes J.G. Ballard's description of this ever-mingling convolution: "The balance between fiction and reality has changed significantly in the past decade. Increasingly their roles are reversed."[6] What Ballard is describing is the idea that fiction now does more than mirror reality – it can literally *be* reality, not merely a representation of life but an element thereof. In Barnes's novels, the separation between reality and fiction disappears to varying degrees. We are either presented with a narrator who very much engages our participation, thereby demolishing the wall between narrator and author, novel and reality, or with a story that is itself a discussion of where a novel stops and life begins. The problem extends even to the definitions of what is "real" and what is "true." While in Barnes's work the two are often convoluted, and sometimes synonymous, the "truth" of a situation is what is sought but rarely attained by the novel's end. "Reality," or what is "real," is the world around us, or around the characters. Or, put simply, "reality" is what we and the characters see, the facts with which we and the characters are faced; and "truth," or a lack thereof, is what we and the characters look for when we try to interpret

---

[5] "Do you consider yourself a postmodern author?": Interviews with Contemporary English Writers, 51.
[6] Postmodern Literature, 2.

what we've seen. Fiction may be representative of reality, as Barnes's books reveal – but unlike reality, they can search for a deeper truth otherwise potentially unattainable. Thus, a connection between reality, fiction and truth is formed. Even his more recognizably realist novels, books which respect traditional narrative form, offer examples of the confusion between life and art. One of Barnes's earlier novels, Before She Met Me, is a poignant example. In it, the protagonist, Graham, falls victim to an obsession with his wife's history as an actress. The novel dramatizes the blurring line between what is true in art and what is not through Graham's inability to tell the difference. But crucially, the validity of both truth and reality are open to dispute. His friend, Jack – a novelist by profession, and perhaps Barnes's mouthpiece – describes the problem of telling the truth through fiction:

> "Every time I tell a story it's different. Can't remember how most of them started off any more. Don't know what's true. Don't know where I came from." He put on a sad look, as if someone had stolen his childhood. "Ah well, just part of the pain and pleasure of the artist's life." He was beginning to fictionalize his fictioneering already.[7]

Jack's confusing statement aptly describes the problem of interpreting truth from reality, and provides an early example of the intersection of novel and theory. Barnes introduces theoretical questions into his fiction, albeit in a seemingly benign manner. In doing so, he adheres to a nearly textbook element of postmodernism. Other novels take up the issue; In England, England, for example, a theme park of British history and quintessential "Englishness" is built. By the end of the novel, the project has gone awry, the paid actors and managers so completely confused by their creations, unable to separate reality and

[7] Julian Barnes, Before She Met Me, 71.

unreality that the project falls into a shambles. Dr. Max, the project historian and intellectual, explains the problem:

> The pseudonymous author of Nature Notes smiled benignly. "R-eality is r-ather like a r-abbit, if you'll forgive the aphorism. The great public – our distant, happily distant playmasters – want reality to be like a pet bunny. They want it to lollop along and thump its foot picturesquely in its home-made hutch and eat lettuce out of their hand. If you gave them the real thing, something wild that bit, and, if you'll pardon me, shat, they wouldn't know what to do with it. Except strangle it and cook it. As for being c-onstructed, . . . well, so are you, Miss Cochrane, and so am I, constructed. I, if I may say so, a little more artfully than you."[8]

In both Before She Met Me and England, England, the issue is representation. Jack demonstrates the problem of the artist, the inherent human fallibility that results in trying to find the truth in reality and ending up with fiction, which is merely an endless search for that truth; and Dr. Max deals more with the problem of a conscious misrepresentation of reality. We are all "constructed," he argues – but how those constructions are represented and interpreted are what make the ultimate difference. When we interpret reality, we are searching for truth. What Dr. Max is commenting on may be perceived as Barnes's own comment on, and perhaps admonition of, the average consumer of literature. Reality, particularly realist fiction, is constructed – but what Barnes attempts to do is deconstruct it, to force an interaction and a questioning that other authors do not. But even here, the mere fact of such self-conscious exploration does not make Barnes a postmodern. He explores its themes, but does not follow their form. He tells stories of those who confront it; and it is that investment in telling stories – and significantly,

[8] Julian Barnes, England, England, 136.

stories that center on a human interpretation of reality and life – that makes him a liminal author, standing on the borders of the realist, modern, and postmodern novel.

Barnes himself explicitly convolutes the term and denies any participation within it. He points out his problems with the label of "postmodernist" in an interview with Rudolf Freiburg:

> *Well* – I once got into trouble in Italy where I was at a *British Council* evening – I don't know how many years ago but it was certainly after *Flaubert's Parrot*, possibly after *History of the World* – and so the whole question of postmodernism came up, and the question of literary theory. And someone from the audience was asking the question and I said, 'well actually, you know, I haven't read any literary theory,' and everyone laughed – because they knew this was the British sense of humour – but then I said, "no, actually I really haven't, you see," and they suddenly began to realize that I was serious and a terrible chill fell over the audience because many of them had worked in universities and devoted several years of their lives to theory and liked to fit my novels into some constructed grid. But at the risk of offending you in turn, I would say that I have never read any literary theory. I've read a few pages of Derrida, I've occasionally been sent theses on my work where there would be a paragraph of quotation from me, in which my purposes seemed to me self-evident and self-explanatory; and then two pages of a sort of Derridaish prose which seemed to me to make the whole thing much less clear than it was in the first place [laughs]. To answer your question straightforwardly: in my case there is no continuing dialogue between writing fiction and literary theory. I'm deliberately unaware of literary theory. Novels come out of life, not out of theories about life or literature, it seems to me . . . I think that when literary theory drives literature, the danger is you get something fundamentally arid as the nouveau roman.[9]

What Barnes denies – any knowledge of literary theory or adherence thereto – shouldn't discourage readers from considering the theoretical impulse at work in his texts. Rather,

[9] "Do you consider yourself a postmodern author?": Interviews with Contemporary English Writers, 52.

such a denial points out Barnes's immensely contradictory tendencies. At the same time that he denies any knowledge of theory or postmodernism, his novels deal in intensely theoretical concepts. He does not fit comfortably into a postmodern paradigm – crucially, he is not anti-representational, nor anti-emotion – on the contrary, he offers the reader an omniscient narrator (as in Arthur and George and Before She Met Me) and a plot and characters with emotional lives whom we recognize as individual subjects. But to whatever extent he may claim to ignore literary theory, his work remains grounded in and influenced by novels which question and alter realist forms. He states that, in his case, "there is no continuing dialogue between writing fiction and literary theory," that he is "deliberately unaware of literary theory" – but an examination of his influences proves otherwise. Literature appears out of life, as he says – it does not appear out of nothing; he distinguishes literature from life, but continually calls the distinction into question. But what Barnes makes clear in his work is that each novel is an attempt to find some sort of truth – to comprehend human nature, the interpretation of reality, and why people act the way they do. As he states, fiction "ends up telling a greater truth than any other information system we have." He is, despite his insistences otherwise, applying a very theoretical idea to what he claims as simple storytelling. So while Barnes may profess no knowledge of or adherence to theory, an examination of the novels and authors to whom he has pointed as inspirational or admirable – novels which address many of the same theories and ideas as Barnes does – are a crucial beginning from which to examine his work.

So we turn from theory to the influences that Barnes owns. Ford Madox Ford's The Good Soldier, the story of two married couples and the infidelities that result from

their meeting, is a work which Barnes has identified – first in an interview with the Sorbonne,[10] and later in an interview with Jay McInerney[11] – as one of the underrated novels of the 20th century, and a particular favorite of his own. It is therefore an apt place to begin. As he writes in a review of O Unforgetting Elephant, Max Saunders's biography of Ford, "He [Ford] believed in what he called the 'true truth' of the matter, the veritable heart of things rather than the dull factual cladding."[12] Even Barnes's description focuses on that separation of "truth" from fact and reality; and by examining what Barnes finds intriguing in Ford's work, one can attain a better understanding of his own novels. From the first page of The Good Soldier, Ford invokes the complex relation between truth and fiction. In his review, Barnes describes the novel's modernism in terms relevant to his own work. He notes

> [Ford's] immaculate use of a ditheringly unreliable narrator, the sophisticated disguise of true narrative behind a false façade of apparent narrative, its self-reflectingness, its deep duality about human motive, intention, and experience, and its sheer boldness as a project.[13]

Take, for example, Ford's first sentence: "This is the saddest story I have ever heard," Ford's John Dorwell announces to the reader. Immediately, the reader is alerted that this will be a different sort of story, one in which we're presented with a particular point of view – and a highly unreliable one at that. Barnes produces an engaging close reading of the sentence that reveals his own novelistic preoccupations:

> The first part of the sentence takes our attention, and rightly so. It cannot logically be until the second reading (and it may not be until the third or fourth) that we note the falsity

[10] Julian Barnes, "Julian Barnes in Conversation."
[11] Julian Barnes, Julian Barnes and Jay McInerney.
[12] Julian Barnes, "'O Unforgetting Elephant.'"
[13] Ibid.

> of the final word. Because it's not a story the narrator has "heard." It's one in which he has participated, has been right up to his neck, heart, and guts in: he's the one telling it, we're the ones hearing it. He says "heard" instead of "told" because he's affecting distance from his "tale of passion," declining to admit complicity. And if the second verb of the first sentence of the book is unreliable—if it gives a creak under the foot as we put our weight on it—then we must be prepared to treat every line as warily: we must prowl soft-footed through the text, alive for every board's moan and plaint.[14]

What Barnes notes so thoroughly of Ford's writing is also indicative of his own style. This technique of directly addressing readers in such a way as to force them to question the reality of the story before them is one that Barnes utilizes and repeats, particularly in Flaubert's Parrot, Talking It Over and Love, Etc. The latter two, significantly, deal with infidelity and the uncertainties of love, much like The Good Soldier. "You may ask why I write," says Dorwell,

> And yet my reasons are quite many. For it is not unusual in human beings who have witnessed the sack of a city or the falling to pieces of a people to set down what they have witnessed for the benefit of unknown heirs or generations infinitely remote; or, if you please, just to get the sight out of their heads.[15]

The novel is presented as exactly that – a piece of writing, and a recounting – and the problem of truth thrusts itself forward within the first chapter. "And yet I swear by the sacred name of my creator that it was true," Dorwell states on the third page, but he tells us several pages later, "I have forgotten the aspect of many things,"[16] and later still, "I see

[14] "'O Unforgetting Elephant.'"
[15] Ford Madox Ford, The Good Soldier, 2.
[16] Ibid., 13.

that I have intentionally misled you . . ."[17] And when Barnes turns his attention to Ford's life, he tellingly zeroes in on the literariness of the life:

> Ford's was an intensely literary life, in its origins, deeds, companionships, and fine detail. It seems entirely appropriate that his commanding officer was called Alexander Pope; that one of his daughters lived with a certain Charles Lamb; that when he shot rats it was with a rifle called a Flobert; and that the toad which burglarized his marrow frame looked just like Henry James. More centrally—and more problematically for the biographer—it was intensely literary in its complete lack of a demarcation line between the lived life and the written word.[18]

Barnes's comment echoes that distinctly postmodern sentiment – life as fiction. The two, he claims again and again, are inextricably interconnected. Here, the significance is not only in Barnes's commentary on the literary aspect of Ford's life, but the very fact that Barnes has noted them and found them important. And not lost is the ever-present connection to Flaubert, a "rifle" in this instance, and a pointed inclusion in the list. With Ford, we see undertones of Barnes's own struggles with representations of truth and with the relationship between fiction and life. At the conclusion of the review, he comments on "A final Fordian moment, for those who know that fiction is about transforming life rather than disguising autobiography" – a remarkably telling statement. Barnes notes repeatedly the fascinating confusion of Ford's relationship with truth, both in his literature and in his life, and this – the problem of truth in the novel, and the indistinguishability of the true and the fictitious – is what he explores unrelentingly in his own work.

---

[17] The Good Soldier, 51.
[18] "'O Unforgetting Elephant.'"

Whereas Ford is an example of literary influence from a generation before Barnes's own, Barnes's contemporaries offer a closer context in which to place him. Ian McEwan, and Atonement in particular, provide a contemporary example of potential influence on Barnes's work. The fact that both authors investigate similar themes suggests that the influence of theory is abundant in contemporary authors, whether or not they are aware of the fact. Atonement from its onset offers a supposedly realist narrative trajectory. As Briony Tallis's story unfolds, the reader puts faith in the narrator. Briony, as protagonist and eventual novelist, is McEwan's mouthpiece. The reader's trust is betrayed as McEwan reveals that the narrator is not omniscient, but instead was really the work of the character of Briony; what we have heard, and the fate of characters for whom we wished the provided outcome, was an elaborate, literary falsification. "Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love?" writes Briony;

> Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism? . . . I know there's always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, but what *really* happened?[19]

Just as in Ford, the reader confronts fiction as fiction – distinct from truth, but in a way that calls attention to that distinction and causes one to wonder if they might, in fact, overlap. Novels invite us to search for truth, but the truth is that the novelist can thwart the reader to no end. Barnes's characters are an endless series of unfulfilled desires and truth-twisters, and his novels full of events that leave one wondering the exact question McEwan (or Briony) poses: what really happened? "Like policemen in a search team, we go on hands and knees and crawl our way toward the truth."[20] The "we" implies that

[19] Ian McEwan, Atonement, 350.
[20] Ibid., 339.

Briony refers to the collective – it is not merely the reader, but the novelist as well in search of that elusive truth. But McEwans's final point elucidates the perpetual quandary of the novelist, one which we readily apply to Barnes:

> The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all.[21]

The passage reveals the problem with placing McEwan in a clear postmodern context. Like Barnes, his story is not anti-representational, and is very much based in humanity. McEwan's version of postmodernism mirrors Barnes's; in both, the representation of and journey towards truth is inherent to the story. The goal is not simply plot, but also theory. A discussion of the novel form is just as central to McEwan's point as the characters' actions, and in this way, he, like Barnes, is dealing in greater themes that transcend the realist form. At the conclusion of Atonement, we wonder at the truth of Briony's sudden confession. If she has lied to us for three hundred pages, why should we believe her now? In McEwan, truth and representation, reality and fiction, are at the crux of the matter, just as in Barnes. But more important than the doubts these novels raise are the purpose of those doubts. By questioning the novel, we are engaging with it. In doubting the narrative, we doubt the author and his purpose – and in this way, the literature dramatizes a postmodern theory. As McEwan frustrates the reader's hopes for his characters, he accomplishes the far more significant act of frustrating the reader's conception of what,

[21] Atonement, 350-51.

in a novel, is truthful, and how we ought to engage with it. It is a practice – and, importantly, a postmodern theoretical practice – that Barnes takes up repeatedly. The effect of theory is evident among his contemporaries, and what he unconsciously takes from Ford, he similarly finds in McEwan.

Yes though Barnes and McEwan explore similar themes, they have had markedly different degrees of success. McEwan has received far more critical and popular attention than Barnes has (and not only following the recent success of the film of Atonement). This is likely related to the different approaches to narrative each author takes. Barnes's novels may deal in the same ideas as McEwan's, but they lack the plot-driven element of a novel such as Atonement. Where Barnes seems willing to give up a fair portion of his potential readership in order to pursue theory and abstractions, McEwan's work keeps much closer to a realist plot and narrative. The readers to whom these two authors are appealing, however intellectually and literarily curious they may be, would likely rather read a novel with consistently engaging characters and stories, rather than the abstracted novels of Barnes which stray so often from any linear, engaging plot.

However essential an understanding of Ford and McEwan may be to understanding Barnes, one cannot attempt to place him in a literary context without an investigation of Flaubert. Though Barnes begins to toy with postmodern concepts in his earlier work, Flaubert's Parrot marks a crucial turn in Barnes's style and structure. The interest isn't superfluous; Barnes has admitted an obsessive admiration for Flaubert, and a strong case of "writer worship," as Barnes dubs it in an essay from 1985:

> Toward the end of the visit [to the Flaubert museum in Rouen, Flaubert's hometown] I came across the unlikeliest exhibit - a stuffed green parrot. The label explained that this was the very parrot that Flaubert had borrowed from

> the local natural history museum when he was writing his story "A Simple Heart." It appears there as Felicité's parrot Loulou, a bird that increases in symbolic significance as its owner gets older and more fuddled. "A Simple Heart" is one of the most perfect short stories ever written: the combination of this, the strangeness of the relic before me and the improbability of its survival seemed very touching. It was a small epiphany. This parrot had once stood on the writer's desk; now, a century later, it stood in front of me. It was as though the parrot were a relay runner who had just passed on some invisible baton. I felt closer to Flaubert.[22]

Worth noting is that use of the Joycean "epiphany" – a distinctly modern element, even if, as here, it comes in miniature form ("small"). And as in Joyce, what follows the epiphany is disappointment, a supremely anti-climactic moment; out of that anti-climax the novel Flaubert's Parrot arises. The folly of eventually finding a similar parrot with the same claims as the first clearly haunted Barnes, and it was from this incident that he formulated the central theme of Flaubert's Parrot – a writer in search of the reality behind fiction, the author behind the novel. But Flaubert gives more to the novel than a fake parrot. This same essay begins with a discussion of a piece of Somerset Maugham's gate which Barnes owns:

> My chunk of literary wood came from the vicarage at Whitstable where Maugham spent part of his unhappy boyhood. Decades later local graybeards with lips untouched by a lie would assure you that they had often seen the future novelist swinging on the vicarage gate. When it fell into disrepair some 20 years ago, I greedily acquired a section of it - a spar about a yard long, with a nail at each end and a thick carapace of white paint. I kept it under the stairs, alongside other pointless yet favored items - the half-finished brass rubbing, the broken typewriter, the tennis racquet with strings burst into a mad spaghetti. From time to time I would take out my private

[22] Julian Barnes, "The Follies of Writer Worship."

> trophy, examine it with half-embarrassed fondness, then put it back.[23]

Why not, then, call the book "Maugham's Gate?" It may be, in part, a matter of literary significance – how much more compelling to chase two parrots, rather than harp on a splintered piece of wood – but more than that, Flaubert's writing embodies the discontentment, uncertainties, and unfulfilled anticipatory hopes which Barnes explores. Madame Bovary, in oversimplified terms, is the story of a woman continually dissatisfied with her own life, her own loves, never content with what next arises, always hoping for a more satisfactory end – and instead, committing suicide. Yet even here Flaubert does not provide dramatic closure; instead of concluding with that scene, the drama continues with a series of deaths, failures, and tragedies. Charles Bovary also dies, Emma's lovers all disappear with little genuine remorse, and her child is sold to a cotton-mill. There is no satisfaction for any of the protagonists. A Sentimental Education reads in much the same way. After half a novel's worth of pining after the older Madame Arnoux, the protagonist, Frédéric, encounters her later:

> "What happy chance brings you here?"
> He did not know what to reply; and after a little chuckle which gave him time to think, he said:
> "If I told you, would you believe me?"
> "Why not?"
> Frederick explained that a few nights before he had had a horrible dream.
> "I dreamt that you were seriously ill, at the point of death."
> "Oh, neither my husband nor I are ever ill."
> "I have only dreamt of you," he said.
> She looked at him calmly.
> "Dreams don't always come true."[24]

[23] "The Follies of Writer Worship."
[24] Gustave Flaubert, A Sentimental Education, 197.

In Flaubert's Parrot, Barnes gives a Cliff's Notes version of the last chapter of L'Education Sentimentale, boiling down Flaubert's scene to a Flaubertian kernel of pessimism:

> Besides, I remember the end of *L'Education Sentimentale*. Frédéric and his companion Deslaueriers are looking back over their lives. Their final, favourite memory is of a visit to a brothel years before, when they were still schoolboys. They had planned the trip in detail, had their hair specially curled for the occasion, and had even stolen flowers for the girls. But when they got to the brothel, Frédéric lost his nerve, and they both ran away. Such was the best day of their lives. Isn't the most reliable form of pleasure, Flaubert implies, the pleasure of anticipation? Who needs to burst into fulfillment's desolate attic?[25]

Barnes listens to Flaubert, to our occasional dismay. Where McEwan toys with the readers' emotions, giving them what they want and then yanking it away, Barnes simply leaves us, quite literally, hanging. In Flaubert's Parrot, we never discover the truth about the parrots, and are instead left with another 30 identical birds with which to contend; neither do we find out the truth about our narrator, Geoffrey Braithwaite, and the wife he obsessively mentions in passing with consistently infuriating ellipses. Where Flaubert ends his novels with dejection and shattered ideals, Barnes simply leaves a proverbial set of ellipses.

Barnes's refutation of any application of theory is not a matter of disingenuousness; rather, it provides a better understanding of the duality of his work. In this way he parallels Flaubert in an unlikely form. As Naomi Schor writes in her introduction to Flaubert and Postmodernism, "Postmodernists . . . recognize . . . 'the collision and collusion of the representational and antirepresentational' bodied forth in

[25] Flaubert's Parrot, 13.

Flaubert's writings."[26] What one finds in Madame Bovary and L'Education Sentimentale – a seemingly realist form that simultaneously does not conform to the 19th century realist novel conventions– is similar to the combination of a representational narrative in conjunction with postmodern theory that one finds in Barnes's work. Schor writes of "the productive tensions between the traditional and the antitraditional aspects of Flaubert's aesthetics and novelistic practice"[27]; the same description could be applied to Barnes. The link between Flaubert and Barnes isn't merely an interesting parallel. It reveals an essential source for Barnes's work, and enlightens the reader to those recurring contradictions between realism and theory essential to his work.

Barnes seems a divided author. To say that his work is entirely uninformed by theory is to suggest a defiance of postmodernism. But his novels clearly and consistently address issues steeped in theory – truth and reality, life and fiction. We are left with a sort of anti-postmodern postmodernist, and an author whose work – replete with intense literary and theoretical complications – is worthy of academic consideration. Despite his denials, Barnes's novels are a fascinating study of the way that literature can adopt theory and reality, and transform the reader's notion of where fiction ends and life begins. In the following chapters, I will offer an in-depth analysis of four of these books: Flaubert's Parrot, A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters, and Talking It Over and Love, Etc. Each explores truth, subjectivity, love, and humanity in distinctly different ways. In reading Barnes's collected works, one finds that certain ideas – and in some cases, very specifics theses and concepts – repeat themselves, albeit in drastically different contexts. These reappearing concerns may at times seem conspicuous to the point of careless

[26] Naomi Schor and Henry F. Majewski, eds., Flaubert and Postmodernism, xii.
[27] Ibid., xii.

repetition. But in reality, they reveal a prevailing belief which Barnes espouses, as well as an element of obsessive attention to the connections between life and fiction. "I never start my novels wanting to prove something, I never start my novels with any sort of thesis. I think it's usually a mistake . . ." he says; and yet throughout his work, those "mistakes" – repetitions and thematic consistencies– reveal a very pointed ideology. All are connected to another contiguous theme – that of what "really" happened, either in recent or ancient history, as well as human memory. Barnes has been accused of making the subjects he addresses – life, fiction, truth, and love – more complicated than they actually are. In light of this criticism, one wonders whether postmodernism offers an easy solution to Barnes. Rather than ever needing to find a conclusive answer or a conclusive truth, he can take the postmodern view and assume that truth and a conclusion are unobtainable; indeed, he never claims to do any more than search for a truth without finding it. Taking these novels one by one, we can begin to investigate and comprehend the ways in which Barnes's literature is unique; in defying postmodern conventions, he is also shaped by them.

II: Chasing the Writer in Flaubert's Parrot

"Why does the writing make us chase the writer?" asks Geoffrey Braithwaite, Julian Barnes's narrator in Flaubert's Parrot. "Why can't we leave well enough alone? Why aren't the books enough?"[28] What Braithwaite struggles with in fiction, Barnes similarly contemplates in life. "Why do we disobediently pursue?"[29] he asks in his 1985 essay, "The Follies of Writer Worship";

> We persuade ourselves that a writer's life helps illuminate his work, but I wonder if we really believe this. The life offers false and easy explanations.[30]

To examine Barnes's work is to examine his negotiations of art and life, fiction and biography; and Flaubert's Parrot, published in 1984 and one of Barnes's first departures from the realist novel form, is central to that investigation. In the novel, Barnes combines biography and fiction in order to produce what he has on several occasions referred to as "an upside-down sort of novel."[31] At times a fact-book of Flaubertian information, and at other moments the story of our "biographer," Braithwaite, the novel takes us through an examination of the interaction between readers and writers, and the ways in which we look towards fiction and biography for truth and meaning in our own inexplicable lives. Yet more than that, the novel is about the insatiable desire of the reader for that knowledge. Through Braithwaite and Flaubert's stories, Barnes, though often self-contradictory, demonstrates the real problem of finding what, exactly, lies beyond the text, and how that search changes the biography, the reader, and even the author – be it Flaubert, or Barnes.

---

[28] Flaubert's Parrot, 12 (Subsequent citations in this chapter appear in the text).
[29] "The Follies of Writer Worship."
[30] Ibid.
[31] Julian Barnes, "When Flaubert Took Wing."

The inclusion of biography in Flaubert's Parrot, and the presence of a narrator-cum-biographer who addresses his subject in a way unique to his biographical and critical predecessors, allows Barnes to raise larger questions about the connection between life and art than either a pure novel or pure biography might do. As Barnes writes in the essay, "When Flaubert Took Wing,"

> I . . . found myself excitedly wondering how far I could push the constraints of traditional narrative: how far I could distort and fragment the narrative line while still keeping (I hoped) a continuous and rising expectation in the reader.[32]

Flaubert proves a worthy subject for the novel for multiple reasons; to begin with, his own views on biography, and Barnes's desire to live up to them, are clear in novel's epigraph:

> "When you write the biography of a friend,
> you must do it as if you were taking *revenge* for him."
> Flaubert, letter to Ernest Feydeau, 1872

Barnes's sort of biography, as he makes clear, adds another challenge. The act of biography, and especially a biography which incorporates fiction, becomes a sort of mystery, or puzzle. To simply fictionalize biography – to write an overtly, explicitly fictional account of a real life, for instance – does not allow nearly the same level of examination of Flaubert, or of the interaction between reader and author, as Braithwaite's search does. In the novel, Braithwaite tries to convey as best he can the many different mysteries and connections that belie Flaubert's life; but process, and presentation, matter tremendously as well. While there is a constant desire to live up to this author, viewed as almost God-like, and a palpable obsession with finding the truth behind everything – an obsession which culminates in his search for the "true" parrot – the reader's journey

[32] "When Flaubert Took Wing."

towards that "truth" will be ultimately just as, if not more, important than whatever final solution we hope to find. Barnes's own desires and frustrations illuminate the way in which the novel was formed, and how reluctant he originally had been to underline the enterprise:

> I can identify exactly the moment at which the novel began – even if I didn't recognise it myself at the time. I had first read Madame Bovary at about 15; had done a special paper on Flaubert at university; and felt that at some point I would want to write about him. All I knew was the sort of book I didn't want to write - any kind of biography, for instance, or something in that charmingly illustrated Thames & Hudson series about writers and their worlds (not that I'd been asked).[33]

His distaste for the biographical form as it stood seems to have provided an impetus for finding a new way of approaching the life of the author. As Barnes writes in "The Follies of Writer Worship,"

> There seemed other things wrong with the biographical form, especially when applied to someone as long dead and as long famous as Flaubert. Each new biography is another layer of papier-mâche applied to the funeral mask, making the features more stylized. It is another layer of holy turf added to the tumulus, burying the writer even further underground. Worse, the come-lately biographer is forever condemned to that dutiful trudge in the footsteps of his predecessors, reinterpreting here, questioning there, being a little more judicious, being fair. I wanted to write about Flaubert, though in quite what form I didn't as yet know. All I knew was that I didn't want to be fair or judicious; I wanted the process, and the result, to be somehow more active, more aggressive. Flaubert himself seemed to approve this stance. In a letter of 1872 to his friend Ernest Feydeau, he urged: "When you write the biography of a friend, you must do it as if you were taking revenge for him."[34]

[33] "When Flaubert Took Wing."
[34] "The Follies of Writer Worship."

Again, the epigraph appears, and with it the desire to live up to its instructions. Biography itself was not the issue. Rather, Barnes and his narrator are disgusted with what traditional biography had become; and what Barnes despised as a university student he perhaps realized could be rectified and reversed as an author. Flaubert's Parrot tries to be more than a layer of papier-mâche; it tries to get underneath that build-up, to something more true and revolutionary than its predecessors. Its unconventional approach to the life of the author – and its moving back and forth between fiction and biography – makes it something altogether different from those "charmingly illustrated Thames & Hudson series" which Barnes was so set against, and thereby moves closer to the "justice" he seeks. Braithwaite also addresses the issue: Flaubert, he tells us, had no desire to be submitted to sentimental or critical rambling in that way. "[Flaubert] died a little more than a hundred years ago," says Braithwaite,

> and all that remains of him is paper. Paper, ideas, phrases,
> metaphors, structured prose which turns him into sound.
> This, as it happens, is precisely what he would have wanted;
> it's only his admirers who sentimentally complain (12).

The fictional approach of the novel then becomes essential to the "revenge" that Barnes hoped to pursue, if he is to do justice to this reluctant author. If Flaubert is a text – "paper, ideas, phrases" – then a text is the only proper representation of him. Barnes's revenge on other biographers is therefore to mock the attempt to get around or beyond fiction – even as Braithwaite tries to do so.

Then why the parrots? I have mentioned Barnes's similar attachment to Maugham's gate; but the duplicitous nature of the parrots, and the quest which they afford, prove just the futile, poignant red herring for a study of Flaubert that Barnes sought. I have also mentioned that the incident draws from Barnes's own experience.

This inspiration from life – a "biographical" inspiration – reveals significant parallels between Barnes and Braithwaite. While it is often useless to draw parallels between character and author, the nature of Flaubert's Parrot renders it necessary. The connection is even self-identified. In the author's "Note," Barnes states that, "The translations in this book are by Geoffrey Braithwaite," a comment which the reader knows is untrue, but furthers the point that Braithwaite is easily identified as a vehicle for Barnes's own experience. And Barnes's language in describing the inspirational event points to parallels between Braithwaite and himself and, consequently, the evolution of the novel. A journal entry from Barnes's trip to Rouen reveals the following:

> Then, crouched on top of one of the display cabinets, what did we see but Another Parrot. Also bright green, also, according to the gardienne & also a label hung on its perch, the authentic parrot borrowed by GF when he wrote UCS!! I ask the gardienne if I can take it down & photograph it. She concurs, even suggests I take off the glass case. I do, & it strikes me as slightly less authentic than the other one: mainly because it seems benign, & F wrote of how irritating the other one was to have on his desk. As I am looking for somewhere to photograph it, the sun comes out - this on a cloudy, grouchy, rainy morning - & slants across a display cabinet. I put it there & take 2 sunlit photos; then, as I pick the parrot up to replace it, the sun goes in. It felt like a benign intervention by GF - signaling thanks for my presence, or indicating that this was indeed the true parrot.[35]

The moment of "benign intervention" – a likely intentional and ironic rhyme with "divine" – echoes the sentiments of Braithwaite's encounter in the novel:

> Then I saw the parrot. It sat in a small alcove, bright green and perky-eyed, with its head at an inquiring angle . . . Loulou was in fine condition, the feathers as crisp and the eye as irritating as they must have been a hundred years earlier. I gazed at the bird, and to my surprise felt ardently

[35] "When Flaubert Took Wing."

> in touch with this writer who disdainfully forbade posterity
> to take any personal interest in him (16).

The moment is significant for a number of reasons; it begins, importantly, as a new paragraph. Braithwaite has just concluded a discussion of Flaubert's relationship to Emma Bovary, when the Barnesian moment of "benign" intervention occurs, indicative of a sort of dramatic pause. This, the indentation implies, is something important, something meaningful. Just as Barnes means to describe his own moment with the parrot as one reminiscent of religious significance, Braithwaite too experiences that same nearly divine moment. He "gazes" at the bird, the language similar to what one might use for the image of a saint or deity. And the word "ardently" implies something stronger than closeness; there is an emotional connection that transcends time and death which has, again, an almost passionate feel to it that one might feel towards a religious figure. Saints purport to hear the words of God; Braithwaite and Barnes think that they connect with Flaubert, their own figure of near-religious devotion. The ultimate significance of the moment, for both Barnes and Braithwaite, is the intertwining of author and reader, and the desperate hope that in something so insignificant and, ultimately, inauthentic, there is a connection between the adoring reader and the long-dead writer. By using his own moment of supposed union with Flaubert, Barnes found a way to convey the reader's desperate – and often futile – search for truth in the life of the author.

If Flaubert's Parrot is an "upside-down novel," then the "upside-down" presentation of Flaubert's biography warrants examination. The novel is divided into chapters, each containing information on Flaubert focusing on something often excluded from traditional biography. In each chapter on Flaubert, we're also given many different

facts, with many different interpretational possibilities. Barnes explained his motivations in an interview:

> I had one image when I was writing it, which I did not use at all in the book, but it was the idea that a great novelist lies in a sort of unofficial burial mound – something Anglo-Saxon or Egyptian – and there is always an entrance to it, through which he was taken in, and then he was buried and the entrance sealed up. What biography tends to do, understandably, is to unseal the entrance: it goes in, it finds the body, it finds all the artifacts that the great writer has been buried with, and it is re-creating him backwards from that moment of burial. And *I* thought – my semi-image in my head for what I was doing was: what happens if you sink in tunnels at lots of different unexpected angles into the burial chamber? Perhaps this will result in some insights that you don't get by using the official entrance.[36]

The language is familiar; Barnes has spoken before of biography "burying" the writer. It is somewhat contradictory, then, for him to claim here that "biography . . . unseal[s] the entrance," where once it merely covered him up. He may be confusing his imagery, but his point is clear: traditional biography, in either instance, either stifles the author like a tomb, or tends to unceremoniously raid the grave. And of course, it *is* a metaphor that Barnes uses in the book, though it isn't explicitly laid out for us. Braithwaite is clearly performing his own careful literary tomb raiding of sorts, from every angle he can. The first chapter devoted to Flaubert biography offers a variety of facts which begin to elucidate the nature of biography within the book. As Braithwaite leaves the museums in which he has seen the respective parrots, the competing birds and the unsolvable puzzles which they represent follow him: "After I got home the duplicate parrots continued to flutter in my mind: one of them amiable and straightforward, the other cocky and interrogatory" (22). Immediately afterwards, we are presented with a chapter entitled,

[36] "Julian Barnes in Conversation," 259-260.

"Chronology." Divided into three parts, labeled "I," "II," and "III," "Chronology" offers three different timelines of Flaubert's life. Multiple chronologies are the embodiment of multiple entryways. The first offers an altogether optimistic view of his life, starting with "A stable, enlightened, encouraging, and normally ambitious background," and concluding with his death: "Full of honour, widely loved, and still working hard to the end, Gustave Flaubert dies at Croisset" (23-27). The second portion offers a decidedly pessimistic view, beginning with the numerous deaths which preceded his birth, and concluding with what appears to be a miserable end to a miserable existence: "Impoverished, lonely, and exhausted, Gustave Flaubert dies" (27-31). The third, and most cryptic of these chronologies, offers Flaubert's life as told through his own metaphors, and concludes with his comments on a book that would never be finished:

> When will the book be finished? That's the question. If it is to appear next winter, I haven't a minute to lose between now and then. But there are moments when I'm so tired that I feel I'm liquefying like an old Camembert (37).

Why these multiple versions? Traditional biography, just like the realistic novel that grew out of it, offers a single interpretation of events, though it may contain multiple ambiguities. In "Chronology," Braithwaite – and Barnes – is offering us multiple interpretations of a single life, just as there might be multiple interpretations of a Flaubert text, and just as there are multiple parrots. Truth may be singular, but a variety of "tunnels" must be drilled to pursue that singular destination. Barnes, in an interview, offers a simple explanation for the inclusion of the three different versions:

> It's like my second chapter – the three biographies of Flaubert. I thought, it is your duty as a writer (any sort of writer) to establish facts for your readers, so it was my duty to give some sort of account of Flaubert's life early on so that people knew exactly who he was, what he'd done, and

> so forth. But it seemed to me that the conventional account of his life should be undermined in two ways: you can read almost anyone's life as a triumph – I am talking about the sort of people who get biographies written about them (*ipso facto*, their biographers usually see their lives as triumphs), or you can equally read most of these lives as failures, which is what they often appear to the subject him- or herself (and that's "Chronology II"). And then "Chronology III" says: "But seeing someone's life either as triumph or as disaster does not actually tell us half as much as just seeing their lives in terms of metaphors" . . . in fact, I think that maybe, of the three chronologies, the one that evokes Flaubert the best is the third . . .[37]

This third chronology of metaphors, in providing Flaubert's use of metaphor to describe his own life, also shows us how Flaubert attempted to find truth through comparison and relation. Without any explicit statement, a metaphor tries to articulate a truth about something by relating it to something else; and by being, in its own way, indirect, a metaphor dramatizes the same indirectness that Barnes implies. Flaubert's rather literary method of describing the truth about himself creates the same problems as Barnes's attempts. Yet it also generates similar possibilities; from the multitude, one may – or may not – find truth.

Barnes's approach applies to other chapters as well. In "The Flaubert Bestiary," for example, Braithwaite attempts to figure out which animal – and again, which metaphor – might best have applied to Flaubert. He moves from the bear, punning "Flaubear" and "Gourstave," to a camel, a sheep, a dog, and, of course, a parrot. After a commentary on the dog and Flaubert's relation to the animal, Braithwaite tells a story of a greyhound Flaubert owned – Julio – who may or may not have been named for Julia Herbert, a potential lover/fiancée of Flaubert's. After stating that "Flaubert died in the

[37] "Julian Barnes in Conversation," 260.

spring," Braithwaite starts a new paragraph, which says simply, "What happened to the dog is not recorded" (63). This sentence repeats itself two more times, until the final sentence of the chapter, which concludes a story about Flaubert in Greece. "What happened to the truth," writes Braithwaite, "is not recorded" (65). In each of these instances, Braithwaite's goal is to find some larger truth that he might be able to piece together once he has every possibility in front of him. But the conclusion does not live up to the search. Despite the numerous ways into the tomb, Barnes seems to be saying, what you'll find at the end is a corpse unable to illuminate what you hadn't known before.

For all of his research into Flaubert's life, Braithwaite attacks a different sort of tomb-raider – the critic. "He despised critics," Barnes writes in "The Follies of Writer Worship"; "criticism, he wrote to Louise Colet in 1853, is 'lower than rhyming games and acrostics, which at least demand a modicum of invention.'"[38] Braithwaite's attacks may be seen as a purer form of revenge, a straightforward way of attacking grave robbers whose only purpose, in Braithwaite's eyes, is to pick apart a corpse unable to defend itself. In "Emma Bovary's Eyes," Braithwaite goes for the proverbial jugular:

> Let me tell you why I hate critics. Not for the normal reasons: that they're failed creators (they usually aren't; they may be failed critics, but that's another matter); or that they're by nature carping, jealous and vain (they usually aren't; if anything, they might be accused of over-generosity, of upgrading the second-rate so that their own fine discriminations thereby appear the rarer). No, the reason I hate critics – well, some of the time – is that they write sentences like this: "Flaubert does not build up his characters, as did Balzac, by objective, external description; in fact, so careless is he of their outward appearance that on one occasion he gives Emma brown eyes (14); on another deep black eyes (15); and on another blue eyes (16)" (74).

[38] "The Follies of Writer Worship."

The quotation, Braithwaite says, comes from Enid Starkie, "Reader Emeritus in French Literature at the University of Oxford, and Flaubert's most exhaustive British biographer" (4). He goes on in this chapter to pick apart Starkie, her argument, and the lectures of other assorted scholars, in what is supposedly an attempt to rectify the errors of "academia." Starkie was wrong, we learn; Emma's eyes remain consistent, and really, "Does it matter?" asks Braithwaite (78). This passage into the tomb, he seems to say, is all wrong. But more than that, Braithwaite (and Barnes) seems to be separating himself from the academic approach to Flaubert. After all, they're often more error-ridden than the errors they attempt to point out. Yet he is also making a point: as a reader, rather than an academic, he can be closer to the writer than any critic. For the first time here he also incorporates his own personal life into an argument concerning Flaubert, and thereby creates a connection between him as the reader and Flaubert as the writer which, he argues, supercedes that of the critics:

> Look, writers aren't *perfect*, I want to cry, any more than husbands and wives are perfect. The only unfailing rule is, If they seem so, they can't be. I never thought my wife was perfect. I loved her, but I never deceived myself. I remember . . . But I'll keep that for another time (78).

That fierce defense – one that treads, when he isn't looking, into the personal – is what supposedly separates Braithwaite's biographical aspirations from those of literary critics and theorists.

Yet even in his repudiation of academia, Braithwaite crosses into critical, academic territory. "Emma Bovary's Eyes" isn't a chapter written in anger behalf of a fan, nor is it an angry and defensive reader pointing to the absurdities of the nit-picky. It is a profound example of Barnes's use of reality – real people, real events, real errors –

into the fictional. Enid Starkie and Christopher Ricks – two targets of the chapter – aren't imagined academics; they're quite real. In engaging with their critical practices, Barnes is taking up a critical practice. To acknowledge the practices is to engage with them. In spite of all of his insistence on separation, Braithwaite actually has a great deal more in common with the literary critics than he might realize. As Peter Brook wrote in a review of the novel:

> Since Mr. Barnes the novelist shows how well he understands what is at stake in reading Flaubert, one is perplexed by some of Braithwaite's curmudgeonly remarks about literary critics, for example: "Contemporary critics who pompously reclassify all novels and plays and poems as texts – the author to the guillotine! – shouldn't skip lightly over Flaubert. A century before them he was preparing texts and denying the significance of his own personality." Far from skipping lightly over Flaubert, those critics Braithwaite seems to have in mind have themselves been obsessed by Flaubert, seeing him as the very fountainhead of modernity, and indeed of our postmodernity, of which "Flaubert's Parrot" is very much a product.[39]

The quotation from Flaubert's Parrot that Brook adduces reveals Barnes's engagement with theory that he so often claims to ignore. Mocking critics who "reclassify all novels and plays and poems as texts" by extension undermines Derrida and deconstruction. Barnes's attention to the modern and postmodern emerges in other chapters as well. "Snap!" for instance, deals with coincidence, and the overlapping of the realist with the modern and the postmodern. In true Barnes fashion, Braithwaite claims to be merely pointing out the evidence, not investing any meaning in it. "I don't much care for coincidences," Braithwaite says at the opening of the chapter.

[39] Peter Brooks, "Obsessed With the Hermit of Croisset."

> There's something spooky about them: you sense momentarily what it must be like to live in an ordered, God-run universe, with Himself looking over your shoulder and helpfully dropping coarse hints about a cosmic plan. I prefer to feel that things are chaotic, free-wheeling, permanently as well as temporarily crazy – to feel the certainty of human ignorance, brutality and folly. 'Whatever else happens,' Flaubert wrote when the Franco-Prussian war broke out, 'we shall remain stupid.' Mere boastful pessimism? Or a necessary razing of expectation before anything can be properly thought, or done, or written? (67)

But far from denying the significance of coincidence, this chapter elevates its position. That isn't to suggest that Braithwaite's continual references to and analysis of coincidence make them meaningful or miraculous, but merely by pointing them out, he is giving them critical significance of the sort that he purports to scorn. He points out, for instance, the ironic similarities between Flaubert's life and Madame Bovary. The scene in the cab in which Emma is seduced was, he says, drawn from Flaubert's own attempts to avoid being seen by his on-again off-again lover, Louise Colet, in order to avoid seduction; and the final line of Madame Bovary, "He had just received the Legion of Honour," then echoes in Flaubert's life, when, "Barely ten years after that final line of *Madame Bovary* was written, Flaubert, arch anti-bourgeois and virile hater of governments, allowed himself to be created a *chevalier* of the *Legion d'honneur*" (68).

An even more pronounced theoretical moment takes place in the next section of the chapter, "Dawn at the Pyramids." Braithwaite recounts what occurred at the top of the Great Pyramid in Egypt when Flaubert visited in December 1849:

> The rising sun lit up the topmost stones of the Pyramid, and Flaubert, looking down at his feet, noticed a small business-card pinned in place. "Humbert, Frotteur," it read, and gave a Rouen address (69).

Braithwaite notes the potential critical significance of the moment:

> What a moment of perfectly targeted irony. A modernist moment, too: this is the sort of exchange, in which the everyday tampers with the sublime, that we like to think of proprietorially as typical of our own wry and unfoolable age (69).

The significance is in the name: Humbert, as in the Humbert of Nabokov's Lolita fame. The moment is defined as "modernist," both in acknowledgment and, maybe, derision. Each consequent section – "Desert Island Discs," "The Snap of Coffins" – provides an equally interesting, sometimes skeptical, but always critical approach to irony and coincidence in the life of Flaubert and his work. Each suggests a combination of reality, and fiction. For all of Braithwaite (and Barnes's) supposed distaste for the theoretical, he is chiseling into the tomb in a very theoretical manner. Braithwaite points out the potential uselessness of the information:

> Perhaps Nabokov had read Flaubert's letters before writing *Lolita*. Perhaps H.M. Stanley's admiration for Flaubert's African novel isn't entirely surprising. Perhaps what we read as brute coincidence, silky irony, or brave, far-sighted modernism, looked quite different at the time. Flaubert took Monsieur Humbert's business-card all the way from Rouen to the Pyramids. Was it meant to be a chuckling advertisement for his own sensibility; a tease about the gritty, unpolished surface of the desert; or might it just have been a joke on us? (73)

There might be no real meaning to these events, but in providing them in the first place, he creates a double-edged sword of dismissal and critical acknowledgement. More importantly, they become a piece of the puzzle. These modern and postmodern moments, however dubious their value, remain useful in figuring out Flaubert's life, and whatever greater meaning or truth Braithwaite is searching for.

Barnes has described his methods for finding truth and meaning in Flaubert's biography; less clear is Braithwaite's purpose in the novel, besides his position as biographer. One obvious point is that Braithwaite is the fictional hinge between Barnes and Flaubert:

> I began to have Geoffrey Braithwaite with me and then I wrote a version – quite a close version, I think, of the first chapter – as a story, a separate story. But it was clearly a fiction, a piece of fiction.[40]

When Barnes calls it a fiction, he isn't wrong; in featuring Braithwaite, our fictional narrator, and providing a narrative line that strays from Flaubert's life, it does identify as a fiction. But biography appears in ways that Barnes might not have anticipated. The novel is also, in a way, the biography of Braithwaite; despite his attempts to hide behind the life of Flaubert, the novel is at its heart the story of Braithwaite's life in addition to Flaubert's – the former as elusive as the truth behind the parrots. In Flaubert's Parrot, Barnes is writing a biography for the reader, as well as the biography *of* the reader. Braithwaite is representative not only of Barnes and his own moment of connection with a writer, but of all of us, and the way we employ literature and authors to explain ourselves. As Barnes writes in the essay, "When Flaubert Took Wing":

> So I came up with my narrator: a retired English doctor, a widower and war veteran, returning to the Normandy beaches as well as to Rouen. I also shifted the inner narrative of the parrot encounters: the first makes the reader-pursuer feel warmly close to the writer-hero, while the second acts as a rebuking reply – Ha, don't be so sentimental, don't think you can get in touch with the artist as easily as that. I began writing what I intended as a freestanding short story, but then felt increasingly that I was on to something with this mix of fact and fiction, something which might be elastic and capacious. So: not a

[40] "Julian Barnes in Conversation," 258.

> story but the beginning of a novel, one in which an at times attenuated fictional infrastructure would support a factual superstructure. Or (as I would have more likely put it to myself): my narrator Geoffrey Braithwaite is about to tell you a load of stuff about Flaubert because he is unable to tell you the real story he is loaded down by. It will be a novel about emotional blockage, about grief.[41]

Barnes moves from the bizarrely complicated language of the academic – "attenuated fictional infrastructure would support a factual superstructure" – to language which is, by comparison, remarkably straightforward and true: " . . . my narrator Geoffrey Braithwaite is about to tell you a load of stuff about Flaubert because he is unable to tell you the real story . . ." By providing Braithwaite, a fictional narrator, with a story of his own, Barnes provides a search for truth which becomes just as, if not more important than the search for the truth about Flaubert. More than the real parrot, the reader wants to know about the real Braithwaite. As he states, Braithwaite is giving us one biography – a biography that he can try to make sense of – in order to hide his own, less clear one. He can attempt to make sense of Flaubert – however many different interpretations that search may yield – in a way that he cannot begin to make sense of his own life. As Braithwaite says,

> Books are where things are explained to you . . . life is where things aren't. I'm not surprised some people prefer books. Books make sense of life. The only problem is that the lives they make sense of are other people's lives, never your own (168).

But Braithwaite's statement, however concise and explanatory it may sound, is flawed. Books aren't where things are explained to you; we've learned that much from Flaubert in this novel. Madame Bovary, and A Simple Heart, lack the sort of conclusive solution and explanation which Braithwaite seeks. Their author – Braithwaite's focal point – is,

[41] "The Follies of Writer Worship."

we have seen again and again, just as complicated and solutionless as Braithwaite's own life. Books, and in this case, Flaubert's books, don't make sense of life at all; not the author's, not the characters, and certainly not Braithwaite's. The real meaning is in the attempt. In attempting to figure out Madame Bovary, A Sentimental Education, A Simple Heart, and the author behind the work, Braithwaite might be able to figure out his own life. Rarely do we meet the biographer within the biography, and Braithwaite proves a compelling narrator. "I begin with the statue," he says, "because that's where I began the whole project" (12) – that "I" is our first introduction to the first-person narrator of Braithwaite, and from there whatever information concerning his life is fleeting and far between. His own background is uncertain, and the largest information he provides contains ellipses – literally – elapsing information which we will eventually hope to obtain:

> I thought of writing books myself once. I had the ideas; I even made notes. But I was a doctor, married with children. You can only do one thing well; Flaubert knew that. Being a doctor was what I did well. My wife . . . died. My children are scattered now; they write whenever guilt impels. They have their own lives, naturally. 'Life! Life! To have erections!' I was reading that Flaubertian exclamation the other day. It made me feel like a stone statue with a patched upper thigh (13).

Even as he tells us about himself, Braithwaite redirects the attention to Flaubert as soon as possible. The mention of his wife – Ellen, whose name we later discover – is also essential. We cannot forget that statement in "Emma Bovary's Eyes" – that writers are just as flawed as husbands or wives. His defense of Flaubert, then, might be seen as a defense of his own wife; or perhaps, a defense of his own life. And his desperate desire to understand the author and the works – a desire whose fulfillment he believes possible, as

that dubious quote implies – are therefore easily and understandably his redirected attempts to understand what he *knows* to be impossibly complicated: Ellen, and himself.

In "Cross Channel," we meet the most personal side of Braithwaite since the novel's beginning. It is also where he reveals his more intimate feelings on the connections between life and literature, and the way the two are battling it out:

> Just getting braced to tell you about . . . what? about whom? Three stories contend within me, One about Flaubert, one about Ellen, one about myself. My own is the simplest of the three – it hardly amounts to more than a convincing proof of my existence – and yet I find it the hardest to begin. My wife's is more complicated, and more urgent; yet I resist that too. Keeping the best for last, as I was saying earlier? I don't think so; rather the opposite, if anything. But by the time I tell you her story I want you to be prepared: that's to say, I want you to have had enough of books, and parrots, and lost letters, and bears, and the opinions of Dr. Enid Starkie, and even the opinions of Dr. Geoffrey Braithwaite. Books are not life, however much we might prefer it if they were. Ellen's is a true story; perhaps it is even the reason why I am telling you Flaubert's story instead (85-86).

What exactly does Braithwaite mean by calling Ellen's story a "true story"? Does he mean to imply that Flaubert's story is not? The problem with both is that they seem equally fragmentary, equally uncertain. Ellen, we realize later, killed herself; she led a life which seems to have confounded her husband, which left him uncertain of what she was really all about, much like his relationship with Flaubert. Ellen left behind a confused husband, and Flaubert left behind a confused reader, though the latter provided a considerable wealth of material to investigate. In each instance, Braithwaite is piecing together bit of information after bit of information. From the critics and theories and parrots that followed in the wake of Flaubert's death, he can try to solve a mystery; he can try to find out which parrot was real, who Flaubert really loved, what books he might

have written. In the pursuit of the parrots, as in the pursuit of his wife, Braithwaite is trying to "seize the past," as he says on multiple occasions; though of course, he cannot turn Ellen's story into the sort of mystery story which he has turned Flaubert's life into. We see it first in the opening chapter: "How do we seize the past? Can we ever do so?" (14). And it appears on multiple occasions in "Cross Channel":

> How do we seize the past? How do we seize the foreign past? We read, we learn, we ask, we remember, we are humble; and then a casual detail shifts everything (90).

Note that "we read" appears as the first item on the list – indicative that, perhaps, that is the first step towards his goal. But truth and answers are still unattainable; a few pages later Braithwaite repeats, "So how do we seize the past?" (100), a repetition reminiscent of his comments that "what happened to the truth is not recorded."

Barnes's chapters – some dealing exclusively with Flaubert, and some with Braithwaite – therefore do more than whimsically present the story of Flaubert in succession with the story of Braithwaite. As stated, they are proverbial pieces to a puzzle that is never really solved. In his attempts to discover which parrot is the real parrot, Braithwaite is searching, in his own way, for some sort of truth about Flaubert, something which will create a lasting and significant bond between him and the writer. But he is also searching for answers to his own life, and for answers about his wife. Here, Barnes's combination of reality and fiction serves a clear purpose. It is a very postmodern concept: we are equally invested in the fictional and the real. What happened to the parrots is equally elusive and important to us as what happened to Braithwaite and Ellen. And what happened to Flaubert, and to the parrots, becomes a part of Braithwaite's life. Art and life combine. As Barnes has stated in an interview,

> It had Braithwaite, it bounced his life off Flaubert's life and work, and it ended with the second parrot, and had one wondering which was which, or whether one was the true one. And, I guess, shortly after I had finished that, I realised this was not just a short story; this was the start of a project, in which I could play off the real against the fictional and the contemporary against the nineteenth century in a productive way – and I went on to write it.[42]

Of course, the striking resemblance between Braithwaite's life and the plot of Madame Bovary cannot be overlooked. Emma, in this case, is like Ellen, and not merely by merit of their similar names (reminiscent of Barnes and Braithwaite). Emma was an adulterer, as was Ellen; Charles Bovary, like Braithwaite, was a doctor. In Flaubert, Braithwaite believes he finds truth. As he says at the end of "Cross Channel":

> "You provide desolation," wrote George Sand, "and I provide consolation." To which Flaubert replied, "I cannot change my eyes." The work of art is a pyramid which stands in the desert, uselessly; jackals piss at the base of it, and bourgeois clamber to the top of it; continue this comparison. Do you want art to be a healer? Send for the AMBULENCE GEORGE SAND. Do you want art to tell the truth? Send for the AMBULENCE FLAUBERT: though don't be surprised, when it arrives, if it runs over your leg. Listen to Auden: "Poetry makes nothing happen." Do not imagine that Art is something which is designed to give gentle uplift and self-confidence. Art is not a *brassiere*. At least, not in the English sense. But do not forget that *brassiere* is the French for life jacket (136).

But it's a double-edged sword. Braithwaite is searching for some sort of conclusive truth about Flaubert because he can find none about his own wife – and Flaubert's art, therefore, provides a measure of consolation. Art is useless, the metaphor implies; but at the same time, it isn't. It can show you the truth, Braithwaite seems to be implying, where life can't. And if it doesn't, you can make it up. Braithwaite gives us "Louis Colet's

[42] "Julian Barnes in Conversation," 258.

Version" as a possible attempt to give voice to a woman in Flaubert's life in a way that he cannot give voice to the woman in his own. And in "Pure Story," where he finally discusses Ellen, her infidelities, and her suicide in as much depth as we can hope for, he reveals the crucial difference between his story and Flaubert's: "Truths about writing can be framed before you've published a word," he says; "truths about life can be framed only when it's too late to make a difference" (169). It's an echo of his earlier sentiment – "Books are where things are explained to you; life is where things aren't." In chasing parrots, Braithwaite can hope to make sense of Flaubert; he can hope for a solution and a connection to someone dead, where he cannot with Ellen. But significantly, it is only hope. In both instances, there is no ultimate truth, and no ultimate explanation. Little is explained to Braithwaite that he didn't already know; even less is explained to Barnes's reader. It is a hopeful sentiment, and one which, as Barnes's conclusion to the novel, and his own statements conclude, is flawed.

The book, importantly, ends without a solution to the parrots or to Braithwaite; Braithwaite, and we as readers, are left in the dark. Braithwaite makes the point by providing the "Examination Paper" chapter, replete with open-ended questions which reiterate earlier chapters and ideas. In each he convolutes life with art; one question notes the similarities between Eleanor Marx, the first translator of Madame Bovary, and Emma Bovary herself. Others deal with coincidence, the purpose of critics, and the purpose of literature. And the novel ends with literal ellipses, that technique of which Barnes is so fond. The final chapter is titled, "And the Parrot . . ." and in it, we realize that there may have been a hundred more parrots where the original came from. We will never know the

answer as to which is the real parrot (or if either of them were). “I think in any case this is appropriate to the book,” Barnes has said in an interview,

> and also to the sort of novels I write: there isn’t a solution. I like the kind of novel or work of art or film which implied that it’s going on after it ends, which leaves some things unresolved. If you set up a novel in which there is a sort of symbolic chase for the writer’s voice, which is emblematised in one of two parrots, I think it’s only fair that the writer’s voice, that the feeling of getting finally in touch with the great writer, fails in the end: let him have a little privacy, and let him keep his secrets, I say.[43]

It’s a departure from his earlier statement, in which he claimed, “I didn’t want to be fair or judicious . . .” So which is it? Does Barnes want to be, ultimately, fair? Has he abandoned, by the end of the novel, his hopes of “process,” and reverted only to a quiet acceptance of letting Flaubert keep his secrets? It’s unlikely. Barnes, and Braithwaite, are torn between a clear and desperate desire for solution and truth, and the nobler cause of accepting that they have no right to find it; that it matters, and yet it doesn’t. It may be due, in part, to Barnes’s own realization that in unattainability, we can find meaning:

> My encounter with Flaubert's two parrots roosted in my mind. It was a joke, a lesson, a warning. You may feel "close" to a writer when you walk round his house and examine a lock of his hair, but the only time you are truly close is when are reading words on the page. This is the only pure act: the rest – from fandom to Festschrift – is dilution, marginality, betrayal – the higher sentimentality. Biography is only sophisticated hair- collecting.[44]

But even in defining a “pure” act, there’s a level of double meaning. It’s sentimental to believe that there is “purity” in the act of reading without searching beyond the text. Ironically, and pertinently, it echoes postmodern, Derrida-esque theory, while combining

[43] “Julian Barnes in Conversation,” 268.
[44] “The Follies of Writer Worship.”

with it a love for the writer and their wishes for interest only in their work. Flaubert certainly, we've learned, wished for the work to speak for itself. But at the same time, Barnes knows it is neither possible, nor true; the reader, he has proven, always searches for more. The writing, as he has stated, makes us chase the writer. And it isn't true because it isn't a "pure act," just as the chapter "Pure Story" is not a "pure" story of any kind. Ellen's is a true story, but to define it as "pure" is misleading, and just a little hopeful. Neither is "reading words on the page" a pure act, regardless of Barnes's wishes. He acknowledges at one moment that you cannot separate the writer and the circumstance from the novel, that both connect and transcend the idea of "pure" fiction. He cannot then reverse that sentiment, and claim that in the end it all doesn't matter, that one should only pay attention to the work. The most revealing moment – concerning both Barnes's and Braithwaite's attitude towards the story – or stories – may come in that very chapter: "why don't they understand about love's relentless curiosity?" Braithwaite asks (165). He is talking about Ellen, but he is also talking about Flaubert. The very act of combining fiction and biography convolutes the "purity" of the act. Simply saying otherwise doesn't negate the process. Books are not where things are explained to you, and neither is life. Flaubert's statue, as Braithwaite tells us on the first page, "doesn't return the gaze" (11), but that doesn't keep the reader from looking up at him. Thus, to whatever degree fact and fiction "shake hands,"[45] as Barnes says, in the end the truth is no less clear for either him or for Braithwaite, or, for that matter, us as readers. The ellipses remain the final answer, and Barnes, despite his insistences that we be content with that conclusion, knows that the complication is in our inability to remain content. By

[45] "Julian Barnes in Conversation," 261.

combining fiction and biography, he has thwarted coming to any real conclusion in either.

III: Objective Truth in A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters

Where Flaubert's Parrot chased after fiction and biography in order to find consolation and truth, A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters turns toward human history, with all its complications, in order to make some greater claim about truth, life, and love. As Joyce Carol Oates wrote in her review of the novel,

> Post-modernist in conception but accessibly straightforward in execution, Julian Barnes's fifth book is neither the novel it is presented as being nor the breezy pop-history of the world its title suggests . . . [it] is most usefully described as a gathering of prose pieces, some fiction, others rather like essays.[46]

A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters is complicated in that it is neither a novel nor an anti-novel. Without containing a single, narrative line, it nonetheless seeks to follow the most universal narrative line of all: as the title states, the history of the world. By beginning with the story of Noah's Ark, Barnes has the advantage of working with a universal theme subject to vast interpretation. It a defining myth; and significantly, it is *a* beginning without being *the* beginning of history. And crucially, from that beginning comes a myriad, indeed uncountable number of interpretations, experiences, and beliefs which ultimately confuse the search for a single answer, and a single truth, to no end. Where Flaubert's Parrot attempted to raid the tomb of a single author and thereby come to some conclusive truth, this novel attempts the far more difficult task of raiding the tomb of human history and its interpretations. Multiplicity of interpretation, as each chapter suggests, is the only way to get at any truth. The history of the world may be a narrative line, but, in a now recognizable way, Barnes realizes the postmodern problem: the narrative of the history of the world is not linear. Human nature forbids any such

[46] Joyce Carol Oates, "But Noah Was Not a Nice Man."

simplicity, and linearity is an interpretation – its own fiction. As in Flaubert's Parrot, point of view and objectivity cloud any conclusive truth; but here, the stakes are higher. Barnes is no longer confined to finding truth in the relatively familiar world of fiction and writing. In A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters, Barnes deals with point of view, history, memory, and the influences of art and storytelling mingled with far more ambitious subject matter.

In the history of the world, perspective is infinite, and Barnes makes that point beginning with his first chapter, "The Stowaway." From the first sentence the reader senses that something is amiss, and that this story differs from what we might have heard: "They put the behemoths in the hold along with the rhinos, the hippos and the elephants."[47] We may not recognize a "behemoth," but the narrator satisfies our curiosity as to where, exactly, we are, in the second paragraph: "There was strict discipline on the Ark: that's the first point to make" (3). Noah's Ark is a nearly universal image, and whatever our preconceptions may be, we immediately know where we are and to what our strange narrator is referring. Yet this retelling seems unorthodox. The establishment of an eyewitness, and the story to follow, will undoubtedly change our perspective. It is Barnes's first step towards questioning our own ideas, and of moving towards a different version of the truth than the nursery rhyme-esque certainty that we had previously held:

> It wasn't like those nursery versions in painted wood which you might have played with as a child – all happy couples peering merrily over the rail from the comfort of their well-scrubbed stalls. Don't imagine some Mediterranean cruise on which we played languorous roulette and everyone dressed for dinner; on the Ark only the penguins wore tailcoats (3).

[47] Julian Barnes, A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters, 3 (Subsequent citations in this chapter appear in the text).

This chapter, and this account, begins with an awakening of sorts. Human history from the very beginning, argues the narrator, is inaccurate. The Bible, with its careful descriptions of gopher wood and animals marching two by two – an account which begins, supposedly, the whole of human history – is a fable. Our narrator's perspective produces itself as the "real thing":

> Now, I realize that accounts differ. Your species has its much repeated version, which still charms even skeptics; while the animals have a compendium of sentimental myths. But they're not going to rock the boat, are they? Not when they've been treated as heroes, not when it's become a matter of pride that each and every one of them can proudly trace its family tree straight back to the Ark. They were chosen, they endured, they survived: it's normal for them to gloss over the awkward episodes, to have convenient lapses of memory (4).

The point is well taken. History is, in its way, a narrative written by the captors and victors, a skewed perspective which, by merit of its own narrator, prevents the whole truth from emerging. The narrator's next step establishes his perspective as different, and consequently, perhaps (and he certainly believes) more accurate. "But I am not other species," he says; "I was never chosen" (4). His outsider perspective, the statement implies, affords him a greater chance at the truth. Further, he argues for his own neutrality: "When I recall the Voyage, I feel no sense of obligation; gratitude puts no smear of Vaseline on the lens. My account you can trust" (4). This narrative trick may be old, but it is effective. When told a story from a perspective not previously heard, particularly from the perspective of an outsider, the reader may begin to trust more readily the tale and its message than he would with the traditional narrative.

Yet the problem with this narrator – who, we later discover, is a woodworm – is that however reliable his account, however impartial, ungracious, beholden to none he may be, his is still only one point of view. Despite his assurances, we cannot be entirely confident with his story. It may be more accurate than a biblical retelling or a myth, but this perspective brings us closer to the truth, not entirely to it. It is, to borrow a metaphor from Flaubert's Parrot, only one way into the tomb of the Ark. Even this narrator has his failings; he cannot, for instance, remember the name of one of Noah's sons, Japeth: " . . . and the other one, whose name began with a J," he says (5). Why, then, tell the account from the point of view of a woodworm? There may be a Darwinian, perversely anti-theological element to the decision. By providing us with a narrator of a species so entirely different from our own, Barnes is laying the groundwork for the most important element of the book: the fallibility of *human* interpretation, belief, and understanding. Humanity, the novel suggests, is exceptionally adept at getting things wrong. We fictionalize to understand, convince ourselves of falsehoods, and ignore perspectives that are inconvenient. What a change, then, to hear the perspective of a narrator – and an insect, no less – so often looked down upon. "I don't know how best to break this to you," he says, "but Noah was not a nice man" (12). The statement is conveyed with a tone of sympathetic condescension. "I realize this idea is embarrassing," he continues,

> since you are all descended from him; still, there it is. He was a monster, a puffed-up patriarch who spent half his day groveling to his God and the other half taking it out on us (12).

That is only one example of the misconceptions which we, as humans, have apparently so willing accepted over the years. The nursery rhyme is the simple, easy truth; the

wormwood's truth is decidedly more complicated and ugly. As the tale continues, we are again attacked for our simplicity of understanding:

> All right, all right, Noah had his virtues. He was a survivor – and not just in terms of the Voyage. He also cracked the secret of long life, which has subsequently been lost to your species. But he was not a nice man. Did you know about the time he had the ass keel-hauled? Is that in your archives? (20)

Again, the tone is condescending, bordering on frustration. The reference to the archives attacks the human approach to history – neat collections of data and accounts which leave out more than they ought to. And why this flawed approach to history? The woodworm has his speculations:

> That is nearly the end of my revelations. They are intended – you must understand me – in the spirit of friendship. If you think I am being contentious, it is probably because your species – I hope you don't mind my saying this – is so hopelessly dogmatic. You believe what you want to believe, and you go on believing it. But then, of course, you all have Noah's genes. No doubt this also accounts for the fact that you are often strangely incurious (25).

The inclusion of "revelations" and "fact" are our narrator's attack on dogma and theology. As a representation of Darwinian certainty and scientific empiricism, his language suggests a reliability that cannot be found in biblical storytelling. Without the woodworm's version, we would have no one to point out the inevitable folly of our own nature. "You aren't too good with the truth, either, your species," he continues.

> You keep forgetting things, or you pretend to . . . I can see there might be a positive side to this willful averting of the eye: ignoring the bad things makes it easier for you to carry on. But ignoring the bad things makes you end up believing that bad things never happen. You are always surprised by them. It surprises you that guns kill, that money corrupts, that snow falls in winter. Such naivety can be charming; alas, it can also be perilous (29).

The story of Noah's Ark, then, and the woodworm's account, is only one example of what the history of the world teaches; perspective changes everything, and the truth is therefore increasingly impossible to obtain, either due to willful self-ignorance, or the simple fact that a lack of linear structure prevents any end to the journey. Point of view cannot be ignored either; the woodworm may be an eyewitness, but he remains unreliable. The folly of memory is not relegated to the human race alone, and the woodworm's account remains only one view of the events. He, like the human race he dismisses as blind to truth, produces an unreliable testimony as well. The history of the world cannot provide an end or an answer because we could never reach it; 10 ½ chapters are only a start, only one narrative line. All that remains are stories – biblical, or told by woodworm, and each has its flaws.

The woodworm's account is simply one story, just as history is an elaborate collection of stories all attempting to convey the truth of an event. In "Shipwreck," Barnes continues the connecting motif of a sea journey, and adds a different element to the problem of perspective: art and its infinite interpretive uses. The chapter is divided into two parts; one is Barnes's own account of the sinking of the *Medusa*, and the other is a discussion of accuracy and truth in art. Both approach the same problem: in attempting to represent the truth of an event, and of history, how can one best get closest to the truth? It is a problem of representation; as this chapter demonstrates, there is a gap between the signifier and the signified. As stated, the section labeled "I" tells the story of the *Medusa* – its sinking, the creation of the rafts, and the continual failures and miseries of the crew. Notably, at the end of the novel Barnes lists his own sources for this section – survivor

narratives which he then interprets for this section. Part "II" addresses the problem of artistic interpretation. "How," asks Barnes, "do you turn catastrophe into art?" (125).

> Why did it happen, this mad act of nature, this crazed human moment? Well, at least it produced art. Perhaps, in the end, that's what catastrophe is *for* (125).

That last argument is a hard sell; catastrophe isn't *for* anything, least of all for a painting or a novel; but it's a comforting sentiment. Out of misery can come something interpretive, something reassuring. Art, then, may be consolation; it is certainly the case in Flaubert's Parrot. But what happens to the truth? "It begins with truth to life," writes Barnes.

> The artist read Savigny and Corréard's account; he met them, interrogated them. He compiled a dossier of the case. He sought out the carpenter from the *Medusa*, who had survived, and got him to build a scale model of his original machine. On it he positioned wax models to represent the survivors. Around him in his studio he placed his own paintings of severed heads and dissected limbs, to infiltrate the air with mortality. Recognizable portraits of Savigny, Corréard and the carpenter are included in the final picture. (How did they feel about posing for this reprise of their sufferings?) (126)

Despite the attempt, complete truth was unobtainable. Art, by merit of interpretation, got in the way of completely objective truth. Barnes lists what he "did not paint," and then details the very sensible reasons for the artistic exclusions. Had he included each moment and element, the problem would have been that "Too much is going on" (128). "You can tell more," says Barnes, "by showing less" (128). Does what is missing then matter? Is the painting less truthful for its exclusions? For that matter, is a novel or narrative farther from the truth because of what isn't there, rather than what is? Perhaps not, argues Barnes. Had Géricault included a famous moment involving a butterfly, for instance, "it

wouldn't look like a true event, even though it was; what is true is not necessarily convincing" (129). The process then changes. The goal is not accuracy but believability. What happens to truth in the process?

> Truth to life at the start, to be sure; yet once the process gets under way, truth to art is the greater allegiance. The incident never took place as depicted; the numbers are inaccurate; the cannibalism is reduced to a literary reference; the Father and Son group has the thinnest documentary justification, the barrel group none at all. The raft has been cleaned up as if for the state visit of some queasy-stomached monarch; the strips of human flesh have been housewifed away, and everyone's hair is as sleek as a painter's new-bought brush (135).

Despite the observer's eye for what is missing and what isn't, Barnes still embraces "truth." When "truth to life" gets pushed aside in favor of art, that crucial first word remains. Again, it is an issue of priority; does truth change, or become less significant or real or important, when it is "to art" rather than "to life"? If Barnes is arguing (however loosely) that catastrophe, and indeed human history, occurs in order for it to be interpreted by art, to be changed and morphed into something that can convey more fully than the actual event the meaning of the actual event, then perhaps that "truth" is amorphous and changing.

This chapter differs from many others in that it lacks an intermediary; there is no clear narrator to guide us, and the emphasis is wholly on art as a conveyer of what is true. Yet art has its flaws. It offers merely one point of view, one interpretation which, however moving, is subject to skepticism, change, and deterioration:

> And there we have it – the moment of supreme agony on the raft, taken up, transformed, justified by art, turned into a sprung and weighted image, then varnished, framed, glazed, hung in a famous art gallery to illuminate our human condition, fixed, final, always there. Is that what we

> have? Well, no. People die; rafts rot; and works of art are not exempt (139).

Time erodes all, however tenacious the attempts at preservation may be. Noah and the Ark, Barnes points out, rarely make it into art:

> But where are the great paintings, the famous images that these are leading up to? . . . Old Noah has sailed right out of art history (138).

Is the lack of artistic representation of Noah a result of neglect? Has time rotted away the desire to understand what really happened on the Ark? The conundrum brings the woodworm back into this chapter in a very literal way. To conclude the chapter, Barnes brings, once again, the sagacity of Flaubert to make the point:

> "No sooner do we come into this world," said Flaubert, "than bits of us start to fall off." The masterpiece, once completed, does not stop: it continues in motion, downhill. Our leading expert on Géricault confirms that the painting is "now in part a ruin." And no doubt if they examine the frame they will discover woodworm living there (139).

More significant than Flaubert is the implication of the woodworm, and its deteriorating effect on the world. Where the woodworm taught us the error of our very human desire to believe, he similarly symbolized erosion. He lives on erosion; to live (and to tell his story), he must destroy something. While claiming to hold the "real" story, he embodies the destruction of things as time goes on. "Rafts rot," says Barnes, and it cannot be lost on the reader that "rot" and deterioration are closely associated with the woodworm. His story is unreliable; the history of the Ark, and the truth of its history, rots before our very eyes. The ordinary occurrences of time – from the woodworm to the loss and changes of memory – rot away at the truth, just as art, with its myriad interpretations and reinterpretations, change truth again and again. Truth evolves and devolves.

Interpretation and perspective are examined in a decidedly different way in "The Survivor." Here, human history, and the human interaction within it, is at stake: how does the seemingly insignificant history of a single woman fit into the massive thread of history's narrative? The chapter tells the story of Kath – a woman escaping an abusive relationship and, she believes, an imminent nuclear holocaust by stealing her boyfriend's boat and sailing south. Only later do we discover that this entire journey may be only a delusion of a severely traumatized woman, and therefore unreliable. Once we make that discovery, we realize her truth is untrustworthy. Again, sailing and water recur as a theme – for the first time connected to a more fact-based moment in human history (as opposed to the potentially mythic Noah's Ark). The chapter begins with that well-known adage, "In fourteen hundred and ninety-two / Columbus sailed the ocean blue" (83). The poem is meant to represent exactly what the woodworm had earlier criticized – the blind recitation and obedience to "facts" of human history. Like the story of Noah's Ark, it has a nursery rhyme quality to it. Kath, the protagonist of this chapter, asks an essential question following the poem: "And then what?" (83). It's a question she repeats later, as she floats in the stolen boat. Kath's perspective, like that of the woodworm, is one of a marginalized character. She is abused, neglected, and disbelieved, and ultimately she – or so she believes – survives. Each character speaks for the unspoken, the historically neglected. They are outsiders. Their frustrations emerge in response to the inaccuracies and falsehoods of history as told by those in charge. Kath offers the truth of the marginalized:

> They say I don't understand things. They say I'm not making the right connections. Listen to them, listen to them and their connections. This happened, they say, and as a consequence that happened. There was a battle here, a war

> there, a king was deposed, famous men – always famous men, I'm sick of famous men – made events happen (97).

Kath's battle, like the woodworm's, is a battle against the partriarchical history of the world as it stands (and who is more patriarchical than Noah?). It is inaccurate, and misses the crucial picture, she argues. They're missing the point:

> Maybe I've been out in the sun too long, but I can't see their connections. I look at the history of the world, which they don't seem to realize is coming to an end, and I don't see what they see (97).

A marginalized subject, Kath doesn't assume there is a linear narrative to be found. She stands outside of it, and instead sees the fragments, which seem to us closer to the truth. The accounts of historians, the stories of famous men and famous events – all of the Noahs, the shipwrecks, the destruction – aren't, she tells us, anywhere near the truth.

In "The Stowaway," the woodworm narrator mentions the reindeer on the Ark – they were uneasy, he says, as if they could sense that something would go wrong in this new world after the flood. "The Survivor" takes up this motif; the one thing Kath believes in is that reindeer can fly. One of her greatest moments of horror is their irradiation after Chernobyl. The reindeer had it right, the woodworm predicts unknowingly, and Kath notes the terrible reality of the reindeer:

> She saw them fighting once, on television. They butted and raged at one another, charged headlong, tangled horns. They fought so hard they rubbed the skin off their antlers. She thought that underneath there'd be just dry bone, and their horns would look like winter branches stripped of their bark by hungry animals. But it wasn't like that. Not at all. They bled. The skin was torn off and underneath was blood as well as bone. The antlers turned scarlet and white, standing out in the soft greens and browns of the landscape like a tray of bones at the butcher's. It was horrible, she thought, yet we ought to face it. Everything *is* connected,

> even the parts we don't like, especially the parts we don't like (84).

The reindeer are a metaphor for history, and the truth about it. Pretty rhymes may hide reality, and reindeer may fly, but they also bleed. Barnes goes back to this idea, having Kath connect it more directly to the abhorrent formality of "famous men" and their version of history:

> All I see is the old connections, the ones we don't take any notice of any more because that makes it easier to poison the reindeer and paint stripes down their backs and feed them to the mink. Who made that happen? Which famous men will claim the credit for that? (97)

It's a tone similar to that of the woodworm. On each side, the frustration is with the inability of humanity to look any deeper to find truth behind the repeated schoolroom maxims. Kath's statements are almost identical to those of the woodworm; he warned us that disbelieving the unpleasant could only lead to disaster (out of which we may get art). "But ignoring the bad things makes you end up believing that bad things never happen," he says.

Yet just as the woodworm's perspective is unreliable, so too is Kath's. She may face even more obstacles to truth; Kath may be, we find out, delusional. Her recurring "nightmares" once she reaches the island suggest that she is having hallucinations, and that these "men" are really doctors trying to pull her out of it. If we can't believe Kath, then which perspective is to be trusted? Or, do these hallucinations or realities of doctors pulling her back from unreality represent the uglier history of the world, the "famous men" who seek to cover up the importance of the matter? The problem is double-edged. Kath has told us that everything is connected, that we should look straight in the face "the parts we don't like, especially the parts we don't like." If she is then unable to face the

reality of her situation – that she is trauma-struck, and imagining a world that is more sensible than her own – then we cannot necessarily take her at her word. Kath's view of the history of the world is wise but untrustworthy. And the reader is tested – who are we to believe? The men who impose upon us facts and dates and rhymes, or the potentially psychotic delusions of a woman overwhelmed by the impossible error of the history of the world?

Kath's journey and survival are essential to Barnes's theme of the oppressiveness and inescapable interconnectedness of the history of the world. Kath's story is, Barnes implies, as essential to our understanding of the history of the world as the woodworm's and the "famous men's"; each perspective, however unreliable, nonetheless gets us closer to truth than any myth could. But in his second chapter, "The Visitors," Barnes sharply juxtaposes the woodworm as a stowaway to terrorists (aboard a cruise ship) as stowaways and, in doing so, forces the reader to question the validity of interpretation within human history, and the burden it carries with it. This chapter recounts the story of Franklin Hughes, an academic and television personality who gives guided cruises through the Mediterranean to history sites, lecturing along the way. It all goes awry when terrorists slip on board. The chapter opens with a pointed reference to Noah's Ark, describing the nationalities of each tourist arriving on the boat in terms similar to the woodworm's description of the animals: "'The animals came in two by two,' Franklin commented" (33). It's the same childish mythologizing of events which the woodworm attacked. His own observations, and the obvious parallels between the Ark, are the base for the more heinous events which follow. When the terrorists stowaway on board, the language is intentionally unremarkable:

> While the passengers were ashore the *Santa Euphemia* took on fuel, vegetables, meat and more wine. It also took on some visitors, although this did not become apparent until the following morning (39).

This paralleling language continues; as "The Visitors" is placed immediately following the chapter on the Ark, the original reinterpretation of historical "fact," the echoing imagery and language become increasingly poignant and disturbing. As the "Arabs," as Barnes identifies them, explain their actions, the similarities become obvious. "We are to be moved in twos," says Franklin (44). The fate of the passengers coincides darkly with much of what the woodworm had described:

> When they reached the dining-room their passports were examined by a fifth Arab. Tricia was sent to the far end, where the British had been put in one corner and the Americans in another. In the middle of the room were the French, the Italians, two Spaniards and the Canadians. Nearest the door were the Japanese, the Swedes and Franklin, the solitary Irishman. One of the last couples to be brought in were the Zimmermanns, a pair of stout, well-dressed Americans. Hughes had at first placed the husband in the garment business, some master cutter who had set up on his own; but a conversation on Paros had revealed him to be a recently retired professor of philosophy from the Midwest. As the couple passed Franklin's table on their way to the American quarter, Zimmermann muttered lightly, "Separating the clean from the unclean" (44).

Later in the novel, Barnes will describe history as repetition – first tragically and then farcically. The events of the chapter reveal the horrifying absurdity of the concept. History, as the Arabs explain, and as Franklin realizes, has far more oppressive consequences than that. As one of the visitors explains:

> "The world is not a cheerful place. I would have thought your investigations into the ancient civilizations would have taught you that. But anyway . . . I have decided to take your advice. We shall explain to the passengers what is

> happening. How they are mixed up in history. What that history is" (51).

That first sentence is, again, reminiscent of the pronouncements in Kath's and the woodworm's versions of history. Franklin obeys, and recounts to his – literally – captive audience the repercussions of a history they already seem to know: "If he could feel a brooding hostility in some parts of the audience, there was also, strangely, a wider drowsiness, as if they'd heard this story before and had not believed it then either" (56). On the one hand, we are bored by the repetition of fact, and of interpretation we do not believe. We hear what we want to hear, and this version, the Arabs' version, does not align with that of the passengers. But at the same time, by drawing such strong connections between the account of Noah's Ark, and perverting it to the heinous reality of a modern age, Barnes is reinforcing the point made by Kath in "The Survivor": everything is, truly, connected, even the ugly bits. The passengers, as the Arab says, "are mixed up in history," one which calls on different events – mythical, like the Ark, or real, like the anti-Zionist campaign run by the terrorists. And Franklin, in being told to present the material to the passengers in such a way that they can understand it, is effectively made to fictionalize history, to present it in lecture and story form for easier comprehension and consumption.

The endless oppressiveness of such connections is strengthened in "Three Simple Stories." Even the title indicates Barnes's intent; just as Flaubert's Parrot included "A Pure Story," gesturing inimically towards its fictionality, the three "stories" which Barnes recounts all deal with the problem of retelling history and the inaccuracies of interpretation that accompany it. And however simple these stories may be, they are by no means easily dismissed or insignificant. Rather, their simplicity is offset by the

complexity of their meaning and consequences. And in each, the main problem which Barnes addresses is that of history as repetition, and the meaning of these connective echoes. In the first section, "I" (meaning, "one"), Barnes recounts the story of Lawrence Beesley, who survived the original sinking of the Titanic and lives to be a consultant on the set of a movie of *A Night to Remember*. As he tries to sneak in as an extra on the set, the director intercepts him and forces him off stage. "In particular," writes Barnes,

> he was keen to be among the extras who despairingly crowded the rail as the ship went down – keen, you could say, to undergo in fiction an alternative version of history (174).

If the suggestion in "Shipwreck" is that catastrophe occurs to produce art, then Beesely's desire – and Barnes's interest therein – is an apt commentary on the true-life catastrophe becoming art:

> Beesley, adept in emergency, counterfeited the pass required to let him board the facsimile *Titanic*, dressed himself in period costume (can echoes prove the truth of the thing being echoed?) and installed himself among the extras (175).

Barnes then provides his own insights:

> Being a violently educated eighteen-year-old, I was familiar with Marx's elaboration of Hegel: history repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce (175).

As we have seen, this sentiment is hardly universally accurate, despite its appropriate application in this instance. Barnes's own question is the thing to address: "can echoes prove the truth of the thing being echoed?" Is the interpretation of the event truer than the event, the way art can be more "true" than the event it represents? Beesley's repetition of his time aboard the Titanic perhaps would have provided some realization, some truth, to

the events which he could not have found merely by his primary moment of survival, just as some find more truth in art than in the event the art is interpreting. The sinking of the Titanic in particular is an event which lends itself well to fictionalization; it is dramatic, linear, poignant, and metaphorical. Beesley's attempts to include himself in the cinematic reenactment are then also a perfect example of the connection between life and art continually evoked in the novel. It is a repetition of history, but it is also a profoundly postmodern moment, in which history, or fact, meets interpretation, or fiction. In this way, this particular story replays Flaubert's Parrot; it is not only a connecting echo, it produces its own connections between fact and fiction. And the "farce," however inaccurate that term may be, is clear. Beesley is ultimately not allowed on the sinking ship; once again he escapes death – both factual and fictional.

In the second section of the chapter, "II," Barnes describes another biblical story involving water, that of Jonah and the whale. "What is it about Jonah's escapade that transfixes us?" he asks (177). Where the first section of the chapter dealt with "echoes" of the past, this section rejects myth: a commentary on the story of Noah's Ark and Barnes's own choice of the latter for his novel's base. The story of Jonah, he states, is unbelievable:

> Of course, we recognize that the story can't have any basis in truth. We are sophisticated people, and we can tell the difference between reality and myth. A whale might swallow a man, yes, we can allow that as plausible; but once inside he could not possibly live. For a start he would drown, or if he didn't drown he would suffocate; and most probably he would have died of a heart attack when he felt the great mouth gape for him. No, it is impossible for a man to survive in a whale's belly. We know how to distinguish myth from reality. We are sophisticated people (179).

The assertion at first seems sound, but it oddly contradicts a lot of what Barnes has already stated. People believe the story of Noah's Ark; or if they don't believe in its veracity, they accept its fictionalization. With Jonah, Barnes assumes a new level of intelligence from the otherwise foolish human race. "We are sophisticated people," says Barnes, twice, to reinforce the point, as well as to instill a (later undermined) sense of confidence. Barnes's next paragraph, which recounts the story of James Bartley, who "was swallowed by a sperm whale off the Falkland Islands" and lives, convolutes the accepted norm of disbelief.

Jonah begets Bartley; an updated interpretation replaces the old myth, and in turn, confuses the truth of the story. Is Jonah more true now that we have the story of Bartley?

> And if you are a scientist, or infected by gastric doubt, look at it this way. Many people (including me) believe the myth of Bartley, just as millions have believed the myth of Jonah. You may not credit it, but what has happened is that the story had been retold, adjusted, updated; it has shuffled nearer. For Jonah now read Bartley. And one day there will be a case, one which even you will believe, of a sailor lost in a whale's mouth and recovered from its belly; maybe not after a day, perhaps after only half an hour. And then people will believe the myth of Bartley, which was begotten by the myth of Jonah (179-180).

A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters manifests this statement. Barnes updates the story of Noah's Ark. The story is "adjusted, updated . . . shuffled nearer." The pretty myth of animals going two by two is now more real because it has connections in the atrocities and complications of modern day reality. There is more truth to it – we can see the truth more clearly – because we can see echoes of it today. Myth moves into fact. The last section of the chapter exemplifies this point. Modern retelling, and modern echoes, remind us of past stories and histories that are perhaps less believable. The story of the *St.*

Louis, that infamous ship full of Jews escaping Germany and refused in Cuba, the U.S., and everywhere else, has frightening overtones of the Ark story. Again Barnes continues the water imagery, the concept of a boat seeking safer land. Again, the story is uglier than we would like to believe:

> The *St Louis* was not meant to leave Havana empty after dropping its 937 emigrants. Some 250 passengers were booked on the return trip to Hamburg via Lisbon. One suggestion was that 250 of the Jews would at least be disembarked to make room for those on shore. But how would you choose the 250 who were to be allowed off the Ark? Who would separate the clean from the unclean? (184)

The ugliness of the original Ark, as recounted by the woodworm, is not so difficult to believe if we look at the ugliness of the echoes today.

Perhaps only "The Wars of Religion" and "Upstream!" provide moments of farcical history; and even here the comedy of the events is questionable. More than that, the chapters dramatize the interconnectedness of history. "The Wars of Religion" describes the trial of woodworm for the destruction of a bishop's throne; the woodworm are ultimately excommunicated, on the basis that God had no intention for their presence on earth: " . . . the woodworm is no natural beast, having not been on the Ark of Noah . . ." (74). The error of the court is of course known to the reader, but not the judge; the farce is only perceptible second-hand. In "Upstream!" the filming of a movie based on the experiences of missionaries in a native tribe is described. Again, Barnes enacts art's interpretation of history. Here, it is actors for whom everything goes awry. "The way I'm looking at it," says the main actor in a letter to his girlfriend, "either there's some connection with what happened a couple hundred years ago or there isn't" (216). It's not a very profound observation, but it does demonstrate the unreliability of determining that

each thing is a direct and meaningful echo; it could just as easily be random. Barnes's dissection of coincidence and Flaubert's moment of modern connectivity with "Humbert" atop the pyramid come to mind. Yet there is a connection. These chapters, like "The Stowaway" and "The Survivor," further demonstrate the fallibility of human interpretation through storytelling, judgment, or art. The truth of the matter is often unattainable – be it the guilt of a woodworm, or the connection between events a hundred years past and a tragedy on a film site, or the parrot of Flaubert. What connects them is the human desire to know; and in particular, these chapters play at the darkly comedic value – the farce – behind the repetition of events. Where so many other chapters exposed the misery of repetition, these show the vague truth behind the sentiment that history repeats itself "the second time as farce." Yet in "The Wars of Religion" and "Upstream!" even the farce obscures the greatest problem: the utter unknowability of truth, and the impossible search for answers.

The search for the truth is nowhere more literal than in "The Mountain" and "Project Ararat." If other chapters have proved "echoes" of the Ark, then these are the tangible journeys to it. Each mission is the manifestation of a journey to a different sort of Mecca; each character – Amanda and Spike Tiggler – seeks something which is fundamentally related to the beginning of history: the Ark. In doing so, they hope to reach some sort of conclusive truth. In "The Mountain," Amanda, a nineteenth-century figure, goes on a journey to Mount Ararat in order to find the Ark after the death of her father and thereby redeem his disbelief. Yet the reader knows that more is at stake. Amanda's journey is also an attempt to find a profound, conclusive truth about life and death and faith. Barnes begins with another moment of art as interpretation and echo;

Amanda and her father journey to Dublin to see *The Sinking of the Medusa* on display. Where Amanda believes in art's capacity to tell the truth in simple terms, her father instead prefers another interpretation of the event, replete with colored lights and music. Their differing enact the problem of interpretation which Barnes grapples with elsewhere:

> In part, Amanda reflected, it was a matter of how you perceived things. Her father saw in a vulgar simulacrum of coloured lights and trilling music a true portrayal of a great maritime tragedy; whereas for her the reality was best conveyed by a simple, static canvas adorned with pigment (148).

Religious faith, and eventually the Ark, work their way into this conception:

> She believed in the reality of something ordained by God and described in a book of Holy Scripture read and remembered for thousands of years; whereas he believed in the reality of something described in the pages of *Saunder's Newsletter & Daily Advertiser*, which people were unlikely to remember the very next morning. Which of them, she insisted upon knowing, with a continuing and unnecessary mockery in her eye, was the more credulous? (149)

As Barnes has pointed out, beliefs are not necessarily truth. According to the woodworm, what Amanda believes by merit of its universal acceptance and supposedly credible story line is at best incomplete, and at worst, wrong. Her journey to the Ark on Mount Ararat, the reader knows, cannot end in a conclusive truth, despite her belief in its ability to do so; ultimately, the only conclusion she finds is death. Along the way, there are moments which she perceives as meaningful and connected. The village on the mountain is destroyed after Amanda and her companion leave – a just end to a place which, Amanda believes, violated religious doctrine by serving wine from Noah's vineyard. And the reader perceives Barnes's own moment of ironic connection:

> "Ah," he said at the finish, "there was a rumour a few years ago that some Russo had managed to get to the top of the mountain."
> "Parrot," replied Miss Ferguson without a smile. "Not a Russo, I think. Dr Friedrich Parrot. Professor in the University Dorpat . . . It seems to me appropriate and just," went on Miss Ferguson, "that the first traveler to ascend the mountain upon which the Ark rested should bear the name of an animal. No doubt part of the Lord's great design for us all" (151).

This is perhaps a sly wink from Barnes; we have earlier learned that a parrot in no way indicated divine intervention of any sort. If we choose to read it this way, however, it indicates the near-comic misinterpretation and futility of Amanda's journey. Nothing is truly discovered, and Amanda dies under the assumption that she has found a great truth when, in fact, nothing is resolved. And Spike Tiggler's attempt to find the Ark in "Project Ararat" is both a futility and a symbolic necessity. Images Barnes has used before recur here; we might call Tiggler's search an "echo" of Amanda's; and similarly, we might look at this as the updated story, "shuffled nearer" for contemporary belief. Where every other chapter provided an historical occurrence either much earlier or just earlier than the present day, this chapter features the most contemporary example of the Ark's connection yet. But even his own attempts, however aided by modern technology they may be, are hindered. Is repetition progress or stasis? Does Spike Tiggler's "echo" of Amanda's search move him any close to the truth? It doesn't seem so. Truth is never obtained; he finds only the skeleton of Amanda (and in assuming it is the skeleton of Noah, provides us again with an element of farce).

But we're not done yet. Added to these chapters, Barnes inserts a somewhat odd "half" chapter, entitled "Parenthesis" (which presumably serves as the " ½" of "10 ½"). At first it strikes the reader as out of place, and remarkably unlike most of what has come

before it. Yet while it seems to bring up issues which are unrelated to the rest of the novel, it is simultaneously connected in essential ways. As Barnes explains in an interview,

> I suppose the point at which "Parenthesis" comes in is the point at which I've given a series of alternative narrations, dislocated in time and place, and it seems to me as a writer, at that point, that it is time to say something on my own part, on my own behalf. And at such a point, the reader would be quite justified in saying to the writer "Well, what do *you* think about it?" So, that part is mainly about love and truth, but it's also against part of what the book has already been doing, which is undermining traditional history. It's saying: It's no good just lying back and saying "Well, we'll never work it out" and it's no good saying "Of course we understand history, all we have to do is apply the following theories or the following principles of Marxist ideology, whatever." What we should do eventually is believe that truth is obtainable. History may not be 56 per cent truth or 100 per cent true, but the only way to proceed from 55 to 56 is to believe that you can get to a hundred.[48]

It would be easy to call Barnes contradictory – after all, most of the novel to this point has proven that truth, in its entirety, is in fact unattainable. No matter the presentation, no matter the perspective or interpretation, something will always be missing from the whole. But most crucial in the statement above is this sentence: "What we should do eventually is believe that truth is obtainable." Barnes is not advocating the possibility of finding truth, but rather the belief in love as a means towards that truth; that is the only way to progress, and the only way to save ourselves. "History may not be 56 per cent truth or 100 per cent true," he says, "but the only way to proceed from 55 to 56 is to believe that you can get to a hundred." The meaning, then, is in the belief. And the belief in love, Barnes argues in this chapter, is the reason we attempt at all – the reason we

[48] Julian Barnes, Interview with Vanessa Guignery, "History in Question(s)," 65.

strive towards that ever higher percentage of objective truth. The chapter begins with a description of the narrator – who, exactly, it isn't clear – lying next to his wife in bed at night:

> Let me tell you something about her. It's that middle stretch of the night, when the curtains leak no light, the only street-noise is the grizzle of a returning Romeo, and the birds haven't begun their routine yet cheering business. She's lying on her side, turned away from me. I can't see her in the dark, but from the hushed swell of her breathing I could draw you a map of her body. When she's happy she can sleep for hours in the same position. I've watched over her in all those sewery parts of the night, and can testify that she doesn't move. It could be just down to good digestion and calm dreams, of course; but I take it as a sign of happiness (223).

That "I" elucidates that this is the crucial point of view of the narrator. This chapter is his belief – that of Barnes, or of someone else ("When I say 'I' you will want to know, within a paragraph or two whether I mean Julian Barnes or someone invented" (225), he writes). He has stated so in that earlier interview – "it is time to say something on my own part." From there, the narrator begins a discussion of love; his interaction with this sleeping wife, and the subtle, unconscious gestures which indicate something much deeper and important:

> As I move and start to nestle my shin against a calf whose muscles are loosened by sleep, she senses what I'm doing, and without waking reaches up with her left hand and pulls the hair off her shoulders on to the top of her head, leaving me her bare nape to nestle in. Each times she does this I feel a shudder of love at the exactness of this sleeping courtesy . . . At that moment, unconsciously, she's touched some secret fulcrum of my feelings for her (224).

This unconscious movement seems to spur the rest of the chapter, which is riddled with imagery reminiscent of the rest of the novel. Love is connected to all, and love will save us, Barnes argues. "We must be precise with love, its language and its gestures," he says;

> If it is to save us, 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? They teach kids how to cook and mend cars and fuck one another without getting pregnant; and the kids are, we assume, much better at all of this than we were, but what use is any of that to them if they don't know about love? They're expected to muddle through by themselves. Nature is supposed to take over, like the automatic pilot on an aeroplane. Yet nature, on to whom we pitch responsibility for all we cannot understand, isn't very good when set to automatic. Trusting virgins drafted into marriage never found Nature had all the answers when they turned out the light. Trusting virgins were told that love was the promised land, an ark on which two might escape the Flood. It may be an ark, but one on which anthropophagy is rife; an ark skippered by some crazy greybeard who beats you round the head with his gopher-wood stave, and might pitch you overboard at any moment (229).

There we have a more direct connecting metaphor than anything else that might have tied this chapter to the novel. Love, says Barnes, is as imperfect a reality as the history of the Ark. Love, like the history of the world, is entirely non-linear. It is difficult, almost impossible to understand; and people try to understand it all too simply and in too clichéd a manner as those who think that they can oversimplify and thereby understand the history of the world. "One of the troubles is this," says Barnes: "the heart isn't heart-shaped" (230). And neither is the history of the world a linear narrative.

Barnes next approaches the problem of the purpose of love. "If we look at the history of the world, it seems surprising that love is included, he writes (234). And earlier, he states,

> So where does love come in? Is it a useful mutation that helps the race survive? I can't see it. Was love implanted, for instance, so that warriors would fight harder for their lives, bearing deep inside them the candlelit memory of the domestic hearth? Hardly: the history of the world teaches us that it is the new form of arrowhead, the canny general, the full stomach and the prospect of plunder that are the decisive factors in war, rather than the sentimental minds drooling about home (233).

And yet he argues that it is connected to the history of the world; his challenge is to convey how and why. "The history of the world becomes brutally self-important without love," he says;

> Our random mutation is essential because it is unnecessary. Love won't change the history of the world (that nonsense about Cleopatra's nose is strictly for sentimentalists) but it will do something much more important: teach us to stand up to history, to ignore its chin-out strut. I don't accept your terms, love says; sorry, you don't impress, and by the way what a silly uniform you're wearing. Of course, we don't fall in love to help out with the world's ego problem; yet this is one of love's surer effects (238).

For Barnes, love may be the belief which leads us to truth in a more effective, meaningful way than history ever could: "Love and truth, that's the vital connection, love and truth" (238). And: "We get scared by history; we allow ourselves to be bullied by dates" (239), like the Columbus rhyme which so oppressed and infuriated Kath and which Barnes repeat here. "Dates don't tell the truth" (239), he affirms, and his argument suggests that they certainly can't lead us to the truth. Only love provides the belief that we can eventually obtain truth, even if we can't.

> 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 are 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 (240).

Love, then, is a more effective belief where history, fiction, storytelling, art and religion are each interpretative and, therefore, not equal to the task of finding the truth: " . . . religion and art must yield to love," he writes. Barnes has provided thoughtful chapters on the purpose of art, religion, and their place in the history of the world. Love beats all that, he tells us here, and in that way is tied to history, while one-upping history in the most essential way.

The conclusion of the chapter returns to that most important sentiment of all:

> It's our only hope even if it fails us, although it fails us, because it fails us. Am I losing precision? What I'm searching for is the right comparison. Love and truth, yes, that's the prime connection (243).

Barnes is repeating himself here; again, his point is that truth is obtainable through love where it isn't through history:

> 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, like those medieval paintings which show all the stages of Christ's Passion happening simultaneously in different parts of the picture. But while we know this, 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 (243-44).

Barnes has asked, "Am I losing precision?" (243). The problem is that he may well be. Perhaps that is his point; his own fictioneering of history involves the incorporation of love; it is, after all, seemingly the only thing that could possibly save us from the futility of human history and the search for the truth in this novel. It gives us purpose, and we must believe in it the same way that we must believe in finding truth in history:

> And so it is with love. We must believe in it, or we're lost. We may not obtain it, or we may obtain it and find that it renders us unhappy; still we must believe in it. If we don't, then we merely surrender to the history of the world and to someone else's truth (244).

His points may be more hopeful than true, because he wants the reader to believe him; and as readers, there's a great deal of temptation to believe that this chapter and this idea are the overriding points of the narrative. It is far more optimistic. It owes more to nineteenth-century fiction than modern or postmodern fiction, and is more comforting and understandable. Where we have confronted narrators again and again telling us that we must confront the terrible and the oppressive, Barnes gives us something hopeful. Love, the chapter argues, is a way out of the oppressive impossibility of ever understanding the history of the world or obtaining truth. Love is hope and belief where we previously lacked it, and in that way it is enticing. However grandiose, the sentiment makes sense. Love is individuality, Barnes has said, even when it is universal; and it can therefore be a guide. "Yes, that's right," he says, "we can face history down" (244). Where history is so oppressive and unmanageable, so multi-faceted and non-linear, love remains the constant, regardless of its failures, disappointments, and heartbreaks. It is a more effective belief, he says, than anything in history, because it provides the impetus for the search for truth when complacency and human fallibility would otherwise win.

Despite the conclusive nature of "Parenthesis," Barnes ends the novel in the same anti-conclusive way he has ended Flaubert's Parrot. In the final chapter, "The Dream," Barnes describes heaven, in all its perfect contentedness. One does nothing but whatever one wants all day; our narrator plays sports, shops, and has sex. And eventually, he becomes weary of all that perfection. In the end, even heaven, and perfection, isn't enough, and the narrator chooses to "end" it – though what that entails is unclear. "I dreamt that I woke up," he says, as the final line of the book; "It's the oldest dream of all, and I've just had it" (307). The problem is that "The Dream" doesn't fit into the rest of the novel. It doesn't provide hypotheses and proclaimed answers the way that "Parenthesis" does, nor does it connect in any meaningful or significant way to the rest of the novel. At best, it provides a universal theme on which to end the universal theme of human history; heaven is, after all, an idea with which nearly every reader would be familiar. And if Barnes cannot end with the conclusion of the history of the world, he can take that more non-linear, individual approach and end with the conclusion to a human life. This vision of heaven also emphasizes the problem of human interpretation. Here, heaven is anything the dead subject wants it to be, and we therefore don't entirely think that we have a sense of what heaven really is. It is all very anti-climactic and unsatisfying, and not at all what we wanted from the end of our lives – or the end of the novel. "We don't impose Heaven on people any more," says the woman in charge of our narrator in heaven; "We listen to their needs. If they want it, they can have it; if not, not. And then of course they get the sort of Heaven they want" (298). Death, truth, and meaning are anything we want it to be – and this doesn't seem at all right, or anywhere

near the truth. Our own death, in Barnes's novel, is merely a fabulation, just as the history of the world is a fabulation. Even the answer to God's existence is unclear:

> "Does God exist for them?" I asked.
> "Oh, surely."
> "But not for me?"
> "It doesn't seem so. Unless you want to change your requirements of Heaven. I can't deal with that myself. I could refer you" (300).

Where the rest of the novel suggested that, however unobtainable truth may be, we must still strive for it, this conclusion tells us that rather than there being a final, "real" truth, truth is instead anything we want it to be. It is an idea that is entirely out of line with the rest of the novel, and seems to go against what Barnes himself has been developing over the course of Flaubert's Parrot and A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters.

Does Barnes mean to end with so unsatisfactory a conclusion? Or does he simply not have a conclusive way to end a novel dealing with such grandiose themes? Either way, the ending seems simultaneously a fitting conclusion – we have no answers, and no obtainable truth – and a cop-out. The last sentence is frustratingly ambiguous as well: "I dreamt that I woke up. It's the oldest dream of all, and I've just had it" (307). As a repetition of the chapter's opening sentence, it leaves the reader unclear as to where we are. Is it another death? Another heaven? Another unobtainable truth? Barnes doesn't seem to know where we are with this anymore than the reader. Love certainly has no place here; it hasn't saved our narrator, and with the exception of a few historical figures, the history of the world is conspicuously absent from heaven. We don't know whether we are meant to feel optimistic or pessimistic about this conclusion; in true Barnes fashion, it is entirely unsatisfying. But unlike Flaubert's Parrot, this conclusion is not making a

grander point about the novel. Rather, it is a classic Barnes anti-conclusion conclusion, without the poignancy to which we have grown accustomed.

IV: Memory and Obsession in Talking It Over and Love, Etc.

From fiction and history, Flaubert and Noah, Barnes moves to two later novels that address human memory and interpretation in an entirely different way from his earlier work. While A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters dealt with the problem of perspective and interpretation on a larger, more theoretical scale, Talking It Over and its sequel, Love, Etc. approach memory, love and truth on a simpler scale, through three characters and direct monologue. The novels are written entirely in the first person, with each character speaking for him or herself. They read almost like plays – Talking It Over, in fact, has been converted into a play in Slovenia and Chicago – with the name of each character preceding their "turn" at talking. As the reader hears from Oliver, Stuart and Gillian, we're left to wonder at the truth of the events they're describing. Though the novels I've dealt with so far have an intermediary – some sort of narrator, be it Barnes or a fictional third party – these novels remove any middleman. We're left to sort truth from fiction entirely from what we hear. As Josephine Humphreys wrote in a review of the novel,

> "Talking It Over" toys with some familiar questions about the nature of fiction: what's real, what's not and who's in charge? These questions are always fun, but risky insofar as they threaten the credibility of the story. Mr. Barnes deliberately flirts with the risk and escapes, allowing the story to emerge stronger for the threat.[49]

The problems which Barnes previously took up – the relation of truth to fiction, the unreliability of human interpretation and point of view – take on an entirely unique form in Talking It Over and Love, Etc. And while we're no longer examining the possibilities or impossibilities of locating truth in, around, and behind the history of the world or the

[49] Josephine Humphreys, "He Gave Up Smoking and Irony."

life of an author, the challenges arising out of our attempt to sort out the truth in these ordinary people's lives are no less confounding or unclear, but rather amplified to an almost self-conscious degree. In these two novels, the points to which Barnes attends in the other novels are addressed with an explicitness bordering on parody; each theory and idea about truth, love, and the folly of memory and reliability is emphasized and repeated in such a blatant manner as to suggest that Barnes isn't simply doing this out of habit – it is pointedly deliberate. He comes close to naming his obsessions as obsessions.

Talking It Over tells the story of three characters involved in a love triangle, whose own monologues voice the ideas with which Barnes is obsessed. Stuart and Gillian marry; on their wedding day, Oliver, who is Stuart's best friend, falls in love with Gillian. The novel goes on to tell the story of these three people after this insurmountable complication. From the beginning, Barnes zeroes in on memory as the theme. Even Barnes's epigraph reveals memory's uneasy reliance on belief: "He lies like an eyewitness," it reads, and is cited as a "Russian Saying." That phrase exposes the novel's central paradox: those closest to the event may be the least trustworthy. If an eyewitness lies, whom are we to trust? Does the "saying" imply that eyewitnesses are inherently unreliable? Is a storyteller a more steadfast source than those who actually witness the event? Much like a detective or lawyer attempting to sort out the facts from the fiction, we encounter characters with their own assessments of their memory and storytelling ability. Stuart is our first speaker, and his first line is a poignant beginning to the story. "My name is Stuart," he says, "and I remember everything."[50] It's a phrase he repeats later on as well, after some anecdotal storytelling – "You see, I remember everything" (7)

[50] Julian Barnes, Talking It Over, 3 (Subsequent citations in this chapter appear in the text).

– and at the conclusion of his first introductory comments: "I think he must have forgotten," he says of an incident involving Oliver, "But I remember, you see. I remember everything" (9). Stuart's introduction is almost repeated in Love, Etc. When we are reintroduced to him, ten years later, he assures us he remembers us. "We've met before . . . Stuart Hughes . . . It's all right – it happens. You don't have to pretend. But the point is, I remember you. I remember *you*."[51] Stuart's words, significantly placed as the opening of the novel, must be deliberate, so the opening lines of the text are at once a gateway (he opens the story for us) and a challenge (his insistence unnerves us). Stuart's continual emphasis on his own memory is another version of the woodworm's insistence that he can be trusted (and the first instance of Barnesian intertexuality). In a novel of so many points of view, reliability will matter – a fact of which Stuart, and Barnes, seem well aware.

Oliver's account also focuses on memory, though with an emphasis that differs from Stuart's. "I'm Oliver," he states, "and I remember all the *important* things" (11). Oliver's thoughts on memory are somewhat longer than Stuart's:

> The point about memory is this. I've noticed that most people over the age of forty whinge like a chainsaw about their memory not being as good as it used to be, or not being as good as they wish it were. Frankly, I'm not surprised: look at the amount of garbage they choose to store. Picture to yourself a monstrous skip crammed with trivia: singularly ununique childhood memories, 5 billion sports results, faces of people they don't like, plots of television soap operas, tips concerning how to clean red wine off a carpet, the name of their MP, that sort of thing. What monstrous vanity makes them conclude that the memory wants to be clogged up with this sort of rubbish? Imagine the organ of recollection as a left-luggage clerk at some thrumming terminus who looks after your picayune

[51] Julian Barnes, Love, Etc., 3.

> possessions until you next need them. Now consider what you're asking him to take care of. And for so little money! And for so little thanks! It's no wonder the counter isn't manned half the time (11).

However sneering Oliver may sound, his defense of his own memory does raise further questions about the reliability of Stuart's. Do we really believe that he remembers everything? Does his insistence on the perfection of his memory ultimately undermine his case? His account may prove unreliable by merit of his unwillingness to admit that his own memory might have changed events, that it is imperfect and therefore not entirely truthful. Oliver's metaphor aptly corrodes the strength of Stuart's case; yet Oliver's argument leaves his interpretation open to the same accusation – is he any more reliable or accurate? He doesn't even claim to remember everything, merely the italicized "*important*" things. What one man might classify as important, we realize, may not be important to another; the detail that reveals the truth about the matter may not be deemed "*important*." If Oliver's memory is selective (as he admits it is), then it is also unreliable. Where Stuart tries to assert total trustworthiness, Oliver not only admits to bias and imperfection, but also a total neglect of certain facts. Gillian's introduction also demonstrates a reluctance that could denote the eventual leaving out of information – absent information is just as problematic as unreliable information:

> Just because I don't have a confessional nature doesn't mean that I forget things. I remember my wedding ring sitting on a fat burgundy cushion, Oliver leafing through the telephone directory looking for people with silly names, how I felt. But these things aren't for public consumption. What I remember is my business (10).

Stuart's confidence, Gillian's reluctance, and Oliver's selection undermines our trust in the truth their monologues put before us. Within the first few pages of the novel Barnes

has provided characters whose accounts, we know, may not combine to allow the reader to see the truth of the events to come. "Memory is an act of will," says Oliver, "and so is forgetting" (16). Our direct access to the characters' own interpretations of the events may prove less reliable than an account by a narrator with a different knowledge of his own.

As the novel continues, more trivial events illuminate the versions of memory each character dramatizes, further demonstrating Barnes's own obsessive fixation on memory and truth. Stuart, for instance, recounts his first time speaking with Oliver, as schoolboys, when Oliver said, "Lend us a quid" (20). Later, Oliver informs us – with no knowledge of what Stuart has told us – that he asked, "Could I borrow a pound from you?" (29). The accounts are quite distinct, and in a novel of differing accounts, these differences matter; two of our narrators don't match up on a basic point of memory. Is it because Stuart "remembers everything" and Oliver doesn't? It may be. But the difference is merely a microcosm of the problems to come. Already we're lacking one small truth in the novel, however insignificant it may be, and this small demonstration of incongruity gives Barnes the opportunity to make a mountain out of a microcosm. A small flaw in memory can be linked to a large problem in finding the truth. "The trouble is," Barnes has said in an interview,

> you don't have a choice. You're stuck with the sort of memory you've got, which is usually very precise in some areas and hopeless in other areas and constantly – as I increasingly begin to realize – constantly interfered with by your own rewriting of your own past.[52]

[52] "Do you consider yourself a postmodern author?": Interview with Contemporary English Writers, 53.

Memory, for Barnes, rather than being a mere point of disagreement, is inextricably related to truth. "We all think that it's other people who rewrite their past," he says in that same interview,

> but that we are the arbiters of truth, and if you're a writer, you think that more than anyone else because you're helping construct the record of human existence and therefore you think, "my memory is the true one, those of other people change."[53]

As he continues to say in the interview, it doesn't work that way. Writers are no more reliable than others, and in Talking It Over, and Love, Etc. where the characters are, in a way, the writers, the problem of memory looms large. Truth is no longer a theoretical problem seen through the lens of the history of the world or the biography of a famous author; it's a problem which affects the happiness of three individuals, and the perception of the reader who, more than ever, is subject to manipulation by the three characters. Barnes's comments in the interview indicate something deeper as well; however clear his obsession with memory and truth may have seemed based on his earlier novels, this obsession reaches a climax in the characters of Gillian, Stuart, and Oliver. From their opening monologues which focus so acutely on Barnes's points, to later images and statements, Barnes's own uncertainties concerning truth and memory are manifested in the reader's uncertainty with these three characters.

As in Flaubert's Parrot and A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters, Talking It Over and Love, Etc. represent recurring interactions between art, fiction, life and truth. The theories surrounding the relationship between art and truth that Barnes began in Flaubert's Parrot and A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters become more human and

[53] "Do you consider yourself a postmodern author?": Interview with Contemporary English Writers, 53.

relatable in Talking It Over and Love, Etc., manifested here to high pitch. In these novels particularly, Barnes's choice of metaphor and imagery make strikingly obvious the connections between truth, art, life and fiction developed in other novels. Gillian's profession is one example of the explicitness of the novel. She is, significantly, is an art restorer. She quite literally uncovers the "real" picture beneath the overpaint:

> Sometimes the picture you're working on answers back. That's the most exciting part, when you take off overpaint and discover something underneath. It doesn't happen very often, of course, which makes it all the more satisfying when it does. For instance, an awful lot of breasts got painted out in the nineteenth century. So you might be cleaning a portrait of what's meant to be an Italian noblewoman, and gradually uncover a suckling baby. The woman turns into a Madonna beneath your eyes. It's as if you're the first person she's told her secret to in years . . . up here in my studio, without a word being spoken, everything came back plainly into view, as it was meant to be. All by taking off a little overpaint (61).

The metaphor is obvious. Is overpaint the equivalent of human pretension? Of misinterpretation and the retelling of story after story? If so, the continuation of the metaphor later on, after Oliver learns from Gillian the technicalities of restoration, is applicable to the story:

> "No, I mean how can you *tell* when you've finished?"
> "You can sort of tell."
> "But there must be a point . . . when you've hosed off all the much and the glaze and the bits of overpainting and your musks of Araby have done their work and you get to the point when you *know* that what you see before you is what the chap would have seen before him when he stopped painting all those centuries ago. The colours just as he left them."
> "No."
> "No?"
> "No, You're bound to go a little too far or not quite far enough. There's no way of knowing *exactly*" (122).

Oliver finds Gillian's description incredibly apt:

> It is, oh it is. Isn't it wonderful? Oh effulgent relativity! *There is no "real" picture under there waiting to be revealed*. What I've always said about life itself. We scrap and spit and dab and rub, until the point when we declare that the truth stands plain before us, thanks to xylene and propanol and acetone. Look, no fly-shit! But it isn't so! It's just my word against everybody else's! (122)

Is there then no "real" truth waiting to be revealed in this novel, just as there is none in painting or, according to Oliver, in life? Oliver's statement would imply that this is the case – there is no great, conclusive truth waiting to be revealed. As Oliver says, perhaps more accurately than he realizes, it's his word against everybody else's in the book, just as in A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters, it is one interpretation against all of the others in order to reach an unobtainable objective truth. The metaphor continues later on; in describing Oliver, as she begins to fall in love with him, Gillian uses his imagery of paint restoration:

> Oliver says it's not surprising either. He says that's what I'm like. I spend my days cleaning the gook off pictures, so naturally I do with him too. "Spit and rub," he says. "No harsh solvents necessary. Just spit and rub, and soon you're down to the real Oliver" (183).

But if Oliver has stated that there is no "real" picture, just as there is no real truth, we cannot believe that what Gillian thinks she finds – or what Oliver thinks she finds – is the "real" Oliver. Again, objective truth about people is no more obtainable than objective truth about the story or events.

Gillian's metaphorically-appropriate career choice aside, the issue of life as fiction comes up repeatedly in both Talking It Over and Love, Etc. Barnes has his characters openly debate the ideas which he develops in Flaubert's Parrot and A History

of the World in 10 ½ Chapters, and which he states in interviews and essays ("Of course fiction is untrue, but it's untrue in a way that ends up telling a greater truth than any other information system . . . that exists"[54]). In several instances, the characters ponder whether life is like a novel, or, inversely, very much *not* like a novel. Oliver in particular is focused on life as a narrative which one tells. While discussing his name – he changed it from Nigel to his middle name, Oliver, we learn – he uses language invokes the idea that after all, life is a novel: "Anyway, you can't go through the whole of your life being called *Nigel*, can you? You can't even get through a whole book being called Nigel" (15). In Love, Etc. he continues with the image: "Do we not, each of us, write the novel of our life as we go along? But how few, alas, are publishable."[55] Oliver's sense of life as a story suggests that the success is in the telling, and not in the truth. Fiction and art are believable often when they are not truthful – an idea which Barnes delivered in the "Shipwreck" chapter of A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters. Oliver is simply expanding, in an entirely different context, on Barnes's earlier commitment to "truth to art" and not "truth to life":

> It is not the subject-matter of these novels, or the social location of their protagonists, that is the problem. "The story of a louse may be as fine as the history of Alexander the Great – everything depends on execution." An adamantine formula, don't you agree? What is needed is a sense of form, control, discrimination, selection, omission, arrangement, emphasis . . . that dirty three-letter word, art. The story of our life is never an autobiography, always a novel – that's the first mistake people make. Our memories are just another artifice, go on, admit it. And the second mistake is to assume that the plodding commemoration of previously fêted detail, enlivening though it might be in a

[54] "Do you consider yourself a postmodern author?": Interview with Contemporary English Writers, 54.
[55] Love, Etc., 13.

> taproom, constitutes a narrative likely to entice the at times necessarily hard-hearted reader. On whose lips rightly lies the perpetual questions: why are you telling me this? If for authorial therapy, then don't expect the reader to pick up the psychiatrist's bill.[56]

Oliver's assertion that we write the novel of our lives is particularly important to these two novels. They are, after all, literal embodiments of the metaphor. These are the novels which tell the story of one point in these character's lives; in telling us their stories, Stuart, Gillian and Oliver construct; they don't merely recall. They are fictionalizing their lives even as they attempt to recount the truth. Oliver's assertion that the book of one's life is not autobiography, but rather, fiction, is then obviously essential to these two novels; but they are also connected to Braithwaite's search in Flaubert's Parrot, in which Flaubert's life became more than biography – it became a story. Similarly, Oliver's monologue relates to Barnes's theories in A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters – history and memory, he argues there, are fabulations. "Our memories are just another artifice," Oliver says, and urges us to "go on, admit it." If we have wondered whether memory is reliable, and which of these characters we can trust, then this statement confirms our doubts. And we must note that Oliver's un-cited quote – "The story of a louse may be as fine as the history of Alexander the Great – everything depends on execution" – is a Flaubertism which Barnes used in Flaubert's Parrot to emphasize the importance of execution in the novel. If Flaubert became a case of unobtainable truth – of the clouding and confusing quality of art in the search for the life – then Oliver's repetition of the quote here restates the problems that these two earlier novels presented.

[56] Love, Etc., 14.

Art clouds the issue, and in the reinterpretation and retelling of the events, it is impossible to find the truth.

Stuart's assessment of fiction and life is, predictably, less theoretical than Oliver's. For Stuart, fiction and life entirely misalign. "I read more than I used to," he says in Love, Etc.:

> Non-fiction. History, science, biography. I like to know that what I'm being told is true. From time to time I'll read a novel, if there's one people are going on about. But stories aren't enough like life for me. In stories, someone gets married and that's the ending – well, I can tell you from my own personal experience that this isn't the case. In life, every ending is just the start of another story. Except when you die – that's an ending that's really an ending. I suppose if novels were true to life, they'd all end with all the characters dying, but if they did, we wouldn't want to read them, would we?[57]

Stuart's approach to fiction and life, at the simplest level, reveals the differences of interpretation and opinion between him and Oliver which leads to so many complications within the novel. A reader could almost assume that Stuart is reading realist novels where Oliver is reading postmodern or anti-realist novels. Oliver's theory sticks more to Barnes's own than Stuart's. Barnes might even be using Stuart as a tool to mock the realist theory of death as an end. Stuart does say that the only ending is death; in A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters we have seen that even death isn't an ending. The sort of book which Stuart describes is more nineteenth-century than modern or postmodern. But what Barnes has Stuart say – and this is perhaps intentional – goes against what Barnes has done in his novels to this point. "History" and "biography," we have seen, hardly follow with Stuart's assessment that "what I'm being told is true." Are

[57] Love, Etc., 88.

we to follow Oliver's theory, or Stuart's? Neither offers a version of "truth to life." Each attempts to stay true to their own version – their "art." Whether realist or post-modern, in the retelling, truth becomes unobtainable. Barnes would seem to align with Oliver, who expresses quite clearly the perpetual problem of the novelist's reinterpretation of events and clouding of truth which haunts Barnes.

Unsurprisingly, given Barnes's fiction, neither Flaubert's Parrot nor A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters reveals an ultimate "truth." In Talking It Over and Love, Etc., we are even more confused than we might have been at the end of the earlier novels due to the lack of an intermediary or narrator. At the end of Flaubert's Parrot and A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters, we understand that we are no closer to the truth than we were when we began. The narrator, either directly or indirectly, makes that clear. Braithwaite wonders about the real parrot; the "dead" narrator dreams he wakes up. Talking It Over ends almost mid-story – a challenge to Stuart's insistence that novels end with a marriage. We leave Gillian and Oliver in France, at the end of a violent scene during which Oliver hits Gillian – a staged, violent scene, theatrically put on without Oliver's knowledge by Gillian for Stuart – which Stuart witnesses. This story is, supposedly, more true to life – more true because it is staged, a fiction – and more anti-realist. The novel has not come to any conclusive truth; we have heard each account, and seen where each character stands, without being able to truly side with anyone. Yet this final act of violence is the embodiment of the confusion between art and life, between what is real and what isn't and what is true and what isn't. When she concocts her plan of getting Oliver to hit her, with Stuart as a covert witness, Gillian tells the reader:

> I've got an idea. It's scarcely a plan, not yet. But the main thing about it is that I can't, I mustn't tell Oliver. There are

> two reasons for this. The first is that I can't trust him to do the right thing unless it's *real*. If I ask him to do something, he'll mess it up, he'll turn it into a performance and it's got to be real (267).

The emphasis on "real" is ironic, and turns the term on its head. The scene won't be real – it will be staged, a plan, and a performance, despite Gillian's insistence that it can't be. It will be art used to create a false truth. The irony of Gillian's use of "real" is emphasized in a later comment of hers, as the moment approaches:

> I do have this fear. Is that the right word? Perhaps I mean premonition. No, I don't. I mean fear. And the fear is this: that what I'm showing Stuart turns out to be real (271).

Gillian doesn't mean "real," here; she has her terms confused. Here, she means "true." She wants the action to be real, to be believable, but that doesn't make it true – truth to art (recall the reinterpretation of the sinking of the *Medusa*), Barnes has stated, is more believable than truth to life, and that is why Stuart will believe it. She fears that violence and unhappiness will become a truth in her life that it had not yet been. When the event actually happens, Oliver, describing it, uses language which fits with Gillian's:

> So I just hit her, hit her across the face with the keys in my hand and her face got cut, and I thought I was going to break and I looked at her as if to say, surely this isn't real, is it? Stop the film. Punch the rewind button, it's only a tape, isn't it? (273)

In the Lifeline Theater's Chicago production of "Talking It Over," this moment occurs twice – in slow motion – as if to emphasize the theatrics of the moment, the unreality of something very real. Oliver asks if it's "real" – his term, and his fear, are accurate. The moment is real, but it isn't true. Each character, however, perceives the moment in a different way – Gillian as a pretension, Oliver as unreal, and Stuart as very real, and perhaps comforting. Not only is the moment a point when truth is unclear; its aftermath

reveals the unreliability of human interpretation. None of the characters knows the weight of the moment on either of the others. What is true for Gillian is not true for Stuart, and so on. As readers, we see the confusion of truth due to multiple interpretations of events; that same multiplicity of interpretation Barnes presents as an issue over and over again.

Talking It Over ends with a moment of theatrical, artistic pretension – a moment which is staged, and is ultimately not a moment of truth. But this book allows us to see what is going on clearly. The conclusion of Love, Etc. confounds the reader in a completely unsolvable way. The moment of violence – or possible violence, we will find – is even less clear than anything up until that point. After Stuart returns in the novel, we witness a series of changing emotions and events of Gillian, Stuart, and Oliver. We don't know where everyone stands – who is in love with whom, what's going to happen, etc. As the novel comes to a close, we hear from Gillian that she and Stuart have had sex while Oliver sleeps upstairs. It's an affair, but not violent. Stuart tells a slightly different version, but no so incompatible as to raise suspicion. But later, Gillian changes her story:

> It didn't happen as I said it did. I wanted you to keep the good opinion you have of Stuart – assuming you do. Perhaps I was working out the last bit of guilt I felt towards him. The way I told you is the way I would have liked it to happen, if I knew it was going to.[58]

She then describes how Stuart raped her; suddenly, the reader doesn't know what to believe. The retelling makes the truth less obtainable. We have not one unreliable narrator but three, some of whom change their story and all of whom are witnesses to nearly the same events but whose accounts conflict. The truth here is no longer a theoretical idea; we're curious about specific events. We want to know whose account is

[58] Love, Etc., 207.

truthful – Stuart or Gillian's. In the final chapter of the novel, titled (ever so knowingly) "What Do You Think?" Gillian starts a sentence, "When we were making love – no, when he was raping me – no, let's say when we were having sex . . ."[59] It's a moment reminiscent of Hardy's Tess; is it a rape or a seduction? And the only answer we're left with is Barnes's final title: "What do you think?" Once again, we don't know what to think, and the novel ends truth-less and conclusion-less.

"When asked What The Novel Does," Barnes wrote in his most recent book, Nothing to be Frightened of,

> I tend to answer, "It tells beautiful, shapely lies which enclose hard, exact truths." We talk of the suspension of disbelief as the mental prerequisite for enjoying fiction, theater, film, representational painting. It's just words on a page, actors on a stage or screen, colours on a piece of canvas . . . Yet while we read, while our eyes explore, we believe: that Emma lives and dies, that Hamlet kills Laertes, that this brooding fur-trimmed man and his wife might step out of their portrayals by Lotto and talk to us in the Italian of the sixteenth-century Brescia . . .[60]

The shapely lies of Talking It Over and Love, Etc. never reveal their hard, exact truths. The multitude of interpretations and retellings prevent it. This problem – the impossibility of understanding and knowing each point of view and interpretation, and of coming to any truth from it, fascinates Barnes, as discussed, to a point of obsession. "You see (again) why (in part) I am a novelist?" he asks in Nothing to be Frightened of;

> Three conflicting accounts of the same event, one by a participant, two based on memories of subsequent retellings . . . a novelist is someone who remembers nothing yet records and manipulates different versions of what he doesn't remember.[61]

---

[59] Love, Etc., 220.
[60] Julian Barnes, Nothing to be Frightened of, 78.
[61] Ibid., 243.

Talking It Over and Love, Etc. embody this statement; and Barnes's fascination with the variability of human memory is equally enlightening. The novel, or at least, the novel by Barnes's standard, enables the exploration of these incompatible memories, and of the unobtainability of truth. "Fiction is made by a process which combines total freedom and utter control, which balances precise observation with the free play of the imagination, which uses lies to tell the truth and truth to tell lies"[62] he says. "It is both centripetal and centrifugal," he continues:

> It wants to tell all stories, in all their contrariness, contradiction and irresolvability; at the same time it wants to tell the one true story, the one that smelts and refines and resolves all other stories. The novelist is both back-row cynic and lyric poet, drawing on Wittgenstein's austere insistence – speak only of that which you can truly know – and Stendhal's larky shamelessness.[63]

Irresolvability is a key term; in each of Barnes's novels, there is no solution. For all of his insistence on the ability of the novel to convey truth, inherent to that truth is the lying nature of narrative and storytelling, and the complicating nature of point of view, interpretation, and memory itself. Despite Barnes's insistence on the power of fiction to tell the truth, his fiction reveals a persistent doubt as to whether or not truth can be found. At best, what Flaubert's Parrot, A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters, Talking It Over and Love, Etc. reveal is his belief in the profoundly postmodern nature of truth. What I mean by this is that though he does not write postmodern fiction – there is a narrative, and a story, and characters and structure, after all – he nonetheless believes that truth is anti-linear, anti-narrative, and amorphous and unobtainable. The meaning and the

[62] Nothing to be Frightened of, 240.
[63] Ibid., 241.

purpose are in the search, and not the end result; and this obsession appears again in his latest work. He worries "whether I am tempted – or deceived – by the idea that a human life is after all a narrative, and contains the proper satisfactions of a novel."[64] If he does believe this, he fights it by attempting to redefine the "proper satisfactions of a novel." Nothing to be Frightened of ends this way:

> [It is] Premature, I hope, to write: farewell me. Premature also to scribble that graffito from the cell wall: I was here too. But not premature to write the words which, I realize, I have never put in a book before. Not here, anyway, on the last page:
>
> THE END
>
> Or does that look a little loud? Perhaps better in upper and lower case:
>
> The End
>
> No, that doesn't look . . . final enough. A last would-you-rather, but an answerable one.
>
> Note to the printer: small caps, please.
>
> THE END
>
> Yes, I think that's more like it. Don't you?[65]

It is a mightily confounding, perhaps even arrogant, ending, but it reveals his ultimate inconclusive obsession with inconclusive truths. From fiction to history to the folly of human reinterpretation, Barnes's novels embody his belief – and his unresolved, uncertain hope – that fiction's noblest goal is in the attempt, rather than the solution.

[64] Nothing to be Frightened of, 249.
[65] Ibid., 250.

Bibliography

Barnes, Julian. Before She Met Me. New York: Vintage, 1992.

--. England, England. New York: Vintage, 2000.

--. Flaubert's Parrot. New York: Vintage, 1990.

--. "The Follies of Writer Worship." http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/02/25/specials/barnes-worship.html. February 17, 1985.

--. Interview with Vanessa Guignery. "History in Question(s)." Sources 8 (Printemps 2000): 59-72.

--. A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters. New York: Vintage, 1990.

--. Julian Barnes and Jay McInerney. New York Public Library. Rec. 7 March 2001.

--. "Julian Barnes in Conversation." *Cercles* 4 (2002): 255-269.

--. Love, Etc. New York: Vintage, 2002.

--. Nothing to be Frightened of. London: Jonathan Cape, 2008.

--. "'O Unforgetting Elephant.'" The New York Review of Books 44 (1) (9 January 1997): 23-27.

--. Talking It Over. New York: Vintage, 1992.

--. "When Flaubert Took Wing." The Guardian, 5 March 2005: 30.

Brooks, Peter. "Obsessed With the Hermit of Croisset." http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/02/25/specials/barnes-parrot.html. March 10, 1985.

Flaubert, Gustave. Sentimental Education. London: Penguin Group, 1964.

Ford, Ford Madox. The Good Soldier. Mineola: Dover Thrift Editions, 2001.

Freiburg, Rudolph, and Jan Schnitker, eds. "Do you consider yourself a postmodern author?": Interviews with Contemporary English Writers. New York: Transaction Publishers, 1999.

Gregson, Ian. Postmodern Literature. Philadelphia: Trans-Atlantic Publications, Inc., 2004.

Humphreys, Josephine. "He Gave Up Smoking and Irony." http://www.nytimes.com

/books/01/02/25/specials/barnes-talking.html. October 31, 1991.

McEwan, Ian. Atonement. New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2002.

Oates, Joyce Carol. "But Noah Was Not a Nice Man." http://www.nytimes.com/books /01/02/25/specials/barnes-history.html. October 1, 1989.

Schor, Naomi and Henry F. Majewski, eds. Flaubert and Postmodernism. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984.

Sesto, Bruce. Language, History, and Metanarrative in the Fiction of Julian Barnes. New York: Peter Lang, 2001.