

Inventing Towards Truth: Theories of History and the Novels  
of Julian Barnes

Inventing Towards Truth: Theories of History and the Novels  
of Julian Barnes

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

by

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University of Arkansas, 1995, 2000

May 2001  
University of Arkansas

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### Acknowledgements:

I would like to sincerely thank my wife Gina Bennett for her patience and support during the writing of this thesis. I would also like to thank James Katowich for first introducing me to the works of Julian Barnes and for the many profitable discussions we have had about Barnes' works.

## **Table of Contents**

Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction: Postmodernity, Novelists, and Historians	1
Chapter 1. <u>Flaubert's Parrot</u>	6
Chapter 2. Madness and (Mis)interpretation: <u>Before She Met Me</u>	23
Chapter 3. Lying Like an Eyewitness: <u>Talking It Over</u>	28
Chapter 4. (Re)imagining History: <u>A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters</u>	37
Chapter 5. Media(tion) and Interpretation: <u>The Porcupine</u>	50
Conclusion(s). Histories of the Novel and the Nature of History	58
Afterword	80
Notes	83
Works Cited	94

## Introduction: Postmodernity, Novelists, and Historians

I was first introduced to the novels of Julian Barnes, at my friend James Katowich's urging, while on Christmas break from my first semester of graduate school in the Fall of 1995.<sup>1</sup> The first of Barnes' novels that I read was Flaubert's Parrot, which I liked immediately for its unashamed display of wit, literary technique, and intelligence. What I noticed then and what continues to interest me most about Flaubert's Parrot (and about many of his other writings as I came to read them) is Barnes' focus on the writing of history and its inherent practical and philosophical difficulties. This concern with the interpretive and subjective dimensions of historical writing runs through his body of work. In several novels it is the dominant theme, and it can be seen obliquely in almost all of his fiction.

The relationship between postmodern fiction and the writing of history has vexed many literary theorists.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand there have been critics, notably Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton, who have accused postmodern art generally of ahistoricism and "depthlessness." (Jameson Postmodernism 6 and elsewhere; Eagleton Illusions).<sup>3</sup> For Jameson in particular, postmodern art becomes an evasion of history because of its use of pastiche which he defines as a "weakened" form of parody or satire, with very little of the critical potential of either (Postmodernism 17). It is certainly understandable that any critic with an interest in changing power relationships in the "real" world, rather than simply interpreting them, would be wary of such texts as the ones we will be examining. For postmodern novelists have a way of engaging the past in which the distinctions between what have traditionally been regarded as the fictive and the historical are intentionally blurred. But we can also see postmodernism, particularly postmodern novels, as a very useful means of describing not the impossibility of writing history, but rather the difficulties involved in any

attempt to do so. We can see it further as a helpful reminder that all statements about history should be stated and read with a healthy dose of skepticism. The very fact that so many postmodern novelists take such an interest in the past and in the difficulties of writing it down makes the charge of ahistoricism questionable. I will hope to show that the goal of Julian Barnes' postmodern novelistic practice is not to dwell forever in indeterminacy and linguistic or historical nihilism but to engage history, even while dramatizing the difficulties of doing so.

Pointing out the textuality of historical narratives and the historicity of fictional narratives can ultimately be a productive intellectually and, perhaps, politically liberating process. To do so leads us to a more skeptical but more accurate and inclusive vision of history and the difficulties of recording, transmitting, preserving, and interpreting it. Instead of a reified history, seemingly complete and closed off within the bindings of a book, we are invited into the complexities and negotiations involved in the transformation of the past into texts.<sup>4</sup> But, like many other poststructural critical projects, there is always the danger of choosing to dwell forever in indeterminacy. To point out the existence of play in texts is certainly beneficial, but to remain happily forever in the realm of free play is, in the last analysis, irresponsible. It is my contention that one must consider the difficulties and multiplicities of interpretation and still be willing to take a position and argue for it (without denying the instability of these chosen positions).

In Cunning Passages, Jeremy Hawthorn engages in a polemic with a wide range of theorists in order to emphasize the distinctions between narratives and the actual events which they attempt to record. He argues there is much to gain in showing the textual and literary nature of historical texts, but "textualism" (his term for extreme linguistic skepticism and/or nihilism) taken too far can



lead to serious moral dilemmas. One can easily find oneself in the same camp--and deploying the same arguments--as those who wish to deny the existence, or the extent, of the most destructive events in our history (the Jewish holocaust, the slave trade, and the colonial imperialism of the "old world" against the "new" being but a few relevant examples). The challenge for any theorist or critic concerned with history who does not want to discount the importance of literary texts or the insights of recent theory is to walk the line between the naive notion that texts reflect and record history without coloring (or altering, or omitting) it, and the often sophisticatedly argued but equally naive notion that there is no reality outside of a textual one.

The problem is that both of the aforementioned propositions are simple solutions to a complex problem. It is easy to say, on the one hand, "life is life and art is art," just as it is easy to say, on the other hand, "everything is a text." But those slogans avoid the inherent ethical difficulties of either position if its full implications are taken into consideration. To proceed too far in the first, what I would call formalist, direction and forge an artificial barrier between art and life denies the ability of art to record, comment on, and advocate for change in our daily lives. Ultimately, such a position elevates art to an object of worship (or reduces it to a fetish). Such a view of art cuts it off from the very things which nourish it and from the discourses and institutions to which it might offer critique or help to (re)define. If, on the other hand, we instead proceed too far in what Hawthorn refers to as the "textualist" direction, we can easily end up failing to see any difference between the territory and the maps by which we chart it, and denying there is any reality outside that constructed in texts. To deny historical events an ontological distance (however slight) from the methods with which we record and represent them is ultimately to deny that people bleed when they are cut.

So, in the pages that follow, I will be arguing for a view which emphasizes the historical nature of literary texts and the literary nature of historical texts and which shows the ways in which Barnes' texts often belong to both sorts simultaneously. My endeavor here has been to emphasize from the outset my own position on the parameters and limits of such a position. Theorists such as Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra, along with novelists such as Julian Barnes and Graham Swift have presented effective arguments to suggest that there is no easy distinction between literary texts and historical texts. But, even though I am sympathetic to arguments which point out these similarities, we must insure that we do not run the risk of collapsing one into the other or completely obliterating the very important distinctions between the two. I hope to show that Barnes' art is one which successfully performs these seemingly contradictory movements.

Given the complexity of the subject, I do not hope to argue a wholly original thesis here about postmodernism generally or even about postmodern novelistic practice. What I do hope to show is the ways in which these ideas and these debates are carried out in the works of Julian Barnes, which--it is to be hoped--will illuminate Barnes' works, the discourses which inform them, and those which they inform. Since most of Barnes' works are not yet widely known, I have spent more time summarizing plots than I normally would. But I have only done this to facilitate understanding.

I would like to add that it has been exciting to work on this thesis during a time in which the amount of critical study devoted to Barnes' works has grown quantitatively and qualitatively. When I first began researching Barnes, there were scarcely ten scholarly articles devoted to him (few of those were in English) and no books or dissertations which took his work as their primary subject. There have recently been several noteworthy additions to the literature which

deserve special mention here. Merritt Moseley's Understanding Julian Barnes is the first book-length work devoted to Barnes' work. Bruce John Sesto's recent Ph.D. dissertation The Fictional World of Julian Barnes is, I believe, the first dissertation devoted primarily to Barnes' works and it is soon to be published as a book. Finally, Ryan Roberts, a graduate assistant at the University of Illinois at Champaign/Urbana and post-graduate student whom I met on the world wide web is currently at work on an annotated bibliography of everything written by or about Barnes. When completed and published, this work will be an invaluable resource to future Barnes scholarship. Roberts currently maintains a smaller version of this work-in-progress as a part of his Julian Barnes Homepage (Roberts Julian Barnes Homepage).

**Chapter 1. "How do we seize the past?": Flaubert's Parrot**

The story of your life isn't your life; it's your story. (John Barth)

Art is a lie which makes us realize the truth. (Pablo Picasso)<sup>5</sup>

Julian Barnes' award-winning third novel, Flaubert's Parrot, originally published in 1984, utilizes an amazing range of techniques and a combination of genres in order to tell the story of its protagonist Geoffrey Braithwaite, a widower, retired medical doctor, and "amateur" Flaubert scholar.<sup>6</sup> Braithwaite's self-appointed quest is to find the actual parrot which his favorite writer, Flaubert, used as a model for Loulou—the absurdly named, symbolically-charged bird at the center of his famous short story, "Un coeur simple" (i.e. "A Simple Heart"). In the course of this attempt, Braithwaite challenges many accepted facts about Flaubert's life and interrogates some interpretations of his works while offering his own biographical and critical insights. Essentially, he attempts to construct a critical biography of Flaubert while at the same time parodying the genre. All of his attempts at historical recovery point to the larger concerns of the book. Barnes, in Flaubert's Parrot as in many of his other novels, continually focuses our attention on the difficulties of coming to conclusions about history by revealing its difficulties, ambiguities, and errors. But his pointing out of these difficulties is not, as I hope to make clear, a denial of the importance (or the possibility) of reaching conclusions, however tentative, about the past.

The opening pages of the novel give us some indication of the historical theme and the ways in which Barnes will develop it in the pages to follow. In the first chapter, we find Braithwaite visiting Rouen, France and commenting on a statue of Flaubert which has been erected there in the Place des Carmes. He reminds us that "this statue isn't the original one. The Germans took the first Flaubert away in 1941, along with the railings and door-knockers" (11). The

original statue's replacement, the narrator tells us, was constructed by a foundry in Châtillon-sous-Bagneux (12). Braithwaite is skeptical about the foundry's assurances that this new statue will last, noting that "nothing much else to do with Flaubert has ever lasted. He died a little more than a hundred years ago, and all that remains of him is paper" (12).

Braithwaite has many reasons for returning to Rouen. Ostensibly, he is there to learn about Flaubert, but he is also there to confront some ghosts from his own past. He fought with the allied forces here in 1944, and he visits the place where those forces landed (13). He also visits Bayeux, "to examine that other cross-Channel invasion of nine centuries earlier" (14).<sup>7</sup> Braithwaite tries to link his own historical actions with those of earlier times; he seeks meaning through continuity in history, but he remains emotionally detached: "memories came out of hiding, but not emotions; not even the memory of emotions" (14). At the end of this reflection, he poses the question "How do we seize the past? Can we ever do so?" and introduces what will be one of his many analogies for history:

When I was a medical student, some pranksters at an end-of-term dance released into the hall a piglet which had been smeared with grease. It squirmed between legs, evaded capture, squealed a lot. People fell over trying to grasp it, and were made to look ridiculous in the process. The past often seems to behave like that piglet. (14).

Metaphors for history abound in the work. Another, quite beautiful, one appears later in the novel and deserves quotation at length:

The past is a distant, receding coastline, and we are all in the same boat. Along the stern rail there is a line of telescopes; each brings the shore into focus at a given distance. If the boat is

becalmed, one of the telescopes will be in continual use; it will seem to tell the whole, the unchanging truth. But this is an illusion; and as the boat sets off again, we return to our normal activity: scurrying from one telescope to another, seeing the sharpness fade in one, waiting for the blur to clear in another. (101)

The first example stresses the sheer difficulty of reconstructing the past. Among these would be included the difficulties of finding sources, judging their accuracy, considering what artifacts might have already deteriorated and what ephemeral material might have already disappeared. The second example stresses perspective and its effects on what is perceived. There is no way to look at the shore except through one of the available lenses, and each lens only gives a partial and temporarily useful view.

The simplest of accepted historical facts about Flaubert's life are put into contention by Braithwaite's searches. During his entire life, Flaubert lived in only two places. During his early years, he lived in the surgeon's living quarters of the Hôtel-Dieu, Rouen (the municipal hospital where Flaubert's father, Achille-Cléophas Flaubert, a surgeon, practiced and where Flaubert was born in 1821). In 1844, following Flaubert's first epileptic attack, his father purchased a home just outside Rouen in Croisset, on the banks of the Seine, as a place of convalescence for his son (Steegmuller, "Childhood and Youth." 3-4).

After the author's death, a wing of the Hôtel-Dieu and a small pavilion near the Croisset estate (which was demolished after the author's death) were both established as museums to his life and work. While visiting the Hôtel-Dieu Museum, Braithwaite looks at some photographs of Flaubert and remarks, "I kept reminding myself that he had fair hair. It's hard to remember: photographs make everyone look dark" (15). This observation is later confirmed by a visit to

the Croisset Museum. Here Braithwaite finds an actual lock of the author's hair, which he describes as "blonder, naturally, than in the photographs" (21).

Braithwaite's visit to the Hôtel-Dieu is important because it is the home of one of the parrots purported to be the authentic model for Loulou. The bird's presence seems, to Braithwaite at this point in his journey, to allow him access to the essence of the writer he so admires: "but here, in this unexceptional green parrot, preserved in a routine yet mysterious fashion, was something which made me feel I had almost known the writer. I was both moved and cheered" (16). This utterance is an infrequent moment of unmitigated optimism for Braithwaite. His momentary certainty is undercut later at the Croisset Museum, the home of a second and very similar parrot (22).

### **Detective Fiction and Postmodernism**

Flaubert's Parrot begins and ends as a detective story, though a rather dysfunctional one. Braithwaite's search is for the "real" parrot and also for the "real" Flaubert. Along with these, he is motivated to understand the real reasons for his wife's suicide. In the opening scene in Rouen, we see a copper statue of Flaubert, and Barnes mentions two other stone statues in Trouville and Barentin (12). The copper statue, despite the assurances of the foundry that cast it, has already begun to streak. The stone statues, we are told, have "worn less well" (12). These statues, decaying monuments to a dead man, are echoed in the final pages when Braithwaite finds himself confronted with three stuffed parrots all of which have a more or less equal (though slim) chance of having served as the model for the parrot in Flaubert's "Un coeur simple."

Barnes begins his final chapter, titled "And the Parrot. . .," as if it were an afterthought. After spending so many pages trying to pin down the truth of Flaubert's life and trying to understand the motivations of the important people

in his own life, the original stated purpose of the novel is almost lost in the shuffle. But Braithwaite opens the chapter with uncharacteristic optimism (or, perhaps, characteristic irony): “And the parrot? Well, it took me almost two years to solve the Case of the Stuffed Parrot” (180). But the solution is not as clear-cut as this simple declaration would seem to imply. It is rather a requirement of the mystery genre that cases have solutions and that their solutions be revealed in the final pages. But Barnes' novel is a detective novel of another sort.

M. Keith Booker reminds us that detective fiction and fantasy have often been “sources of inspiration for postmodernist writers” (139). The detective novel relies on an epistemological view that postmodern fiction challenges. The genre “relies upon a perception of the world as an orderly place in which events can be explained” (141). There are twists and turns in the plot of any good detective story, but in the end confusions are cleared rather than complicated. The innocent are vindicated; the guilty are whisked off to jail. The desire for closure fuels the genre. As such, detective fiction is a particularly inviting target for postmodern irony.

Braithwaite tries to solve his case, like a good detective, in the most logical way possible. He photographs both birds—the one at the Hôtel-Dieu and the one at Croisset—and compares them with the description in “Un coeur simple.”: “He was called Loulou. His body was green, the ends of his wings pink, his forehead blue, and his throat golden” (185).<sup>8</sup> The body and wing color matches both birds, but the Hôtel-Dieu bird is closer to the description by virtue of its blue forehead and golden throat. Braithwaite tells us, “[t]he Croisset parrot had it completely back to front: a golden forehead and a bluish-green throat” (186).



For the moment, the mystery seems to be solved, but by virtue of a last minute inquiry to a M. Lucien Andrieu, a Flaubert scholar, it is complicated yet again. Andrieu relates that, according to the receipts of the Museum of Natural History, Flaubert returned the stuffed parrot that he borrowed from them as a model in 1876. The museum at Croisset was established in 1905. The one at the Hôtel-Dieu wasn't set up until about 1945, but both of them got their birds from the same place: the Museum of Natural History. And both of them used the same process of elimination: they consulted Flaubert's short story and picked the bird which most closely matched its description (187).

Andrieu complicates the picture further by revealing that when the officials from the museum at Croisset requested their "authentic" parrot in 1905, there were fifty to choose from in the Museum of Natural History's collection. There would have been considerably fewer of them, due to natural decay, by the time the curators at the Hôtel-Dieu requested theirs. But the gap of nearly thirty years between Flaubert's returning of the bird and the establishment of the older museum at Croisset does not leave much hope for accuracy either. As Andrieu reminds Braithwaite: "Stuffed animals get the moth, you know. They fall apart. Félicité's did, after all, didn't it? The stuffing came out of it" (188). Andrieu also reminds Braithwaite that Flaubert would "alter a fact for the sake of a cadence" (188).

Braithwaite decides that his trip has come to an end. But even with the possibility of finding the "true" parrot compromised, he visits, in the final pages of the novel, the Museum of Natural History. There he is led into a small attic room where stuffed birds are kept: "it was an ambivalent room, half-morgue and half-purgatory. It had an uncertain smell, too: somewhere between a surgery and a hardware shop" (190). On the final page of the novel, he finds only three of the original birds still extant: "They gazed at me like three

quizzical, sharp-eyed, dandruff-ridden, dishonourable old men” (190).

Braithwaite pauses for a moment, looks them over carefully and then concludes (his search and the novel): “Perhaps it was one of them” (190). It is this rather whimsical ending which has led some critics to conclude (wrongly) that Barnes is a complete skeptic—or, worse, a nihilist—when it comes to finding truths in history (Scott 58-9). I will explore this interpretation in detail later. For now, I'd like to turn to some other important aspects of Flaubert's Parrot.

### **The (Auto)biographical Urge**

Braithwaite's continual questioning of his own life is caught up in his search for the truth about Flaubert's. In particular, Braithwaite tells us he is trying to understand his late wife Ellen's infidelities and her eventual suicide. His difficulty in coming to conclusions about events in his personal life points out that the problems one encounters in any attempt to write history are mirrored in the difficulty of understanding one's own private life (Barnes will return to this theme in a later novel, Talking it Over). While reflecting on Ellen's death, Braithwaite describes this ambiguity:

Ellen. My wife: someone I feel I understand less well than a foreign writer dead for a hundred years. Is this an aberration, or is it normal? Books say: She did this because. Life says: She did this. 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)

Braithwaite foreshadows this comment earlier in the novel, where he more overtly points out a link between his biographical hobby and his autobiographical motivations, “Books are not life, however much we might like

it if they were. Ellen's is a true story; perhaps it is even the reason why I'm telling you Flaubert's story instead" (86). The crucial word here, of course, is "story." Whether he is recounting some aspect of Flaubert's life or of his own, Braithwaite continually emphasizes the narrativity and fictionality of his attempts to explain the past.

Braithwaite tries three times to tell the story of his wife's life. He begins with a single, fact-heavy sentence, "She was born in 1920, married in 1940, gave birth in 1942 and 1946, died in 1975" (162). Realizing the inadequacy of this statement, he starts over in the next paragraph, this time beginning with an anecdote, "I'll start again. Small people are meant to be neat, aren't they; but Ellen wasn't . . ." (162). He abandons this paragraph after half a dozen sentences and begins a third time, on a more personal note, "I'll start again. She was a much-loved only child. She was a much-loved only wife. She was loved, if that's the word, by what I suppose I must agree to call her lovers, though I'm sure the word over-dignifies some of them" (162). Finally, Braithwaite descends into paradoxes and repetitions, "I loved her; we were happy; I miss her. She didn't love me; we were unhappy; I miss her" (162).

This technique of false starts, left unresolved and contradictory, is also the substance of the novel's second chapter, entitled "Chronology," which consists entirely of three contradictory chronologies of Flaubert's life.<sup>9</sup> The first chronology is the most optimistic account of Flaubert's life and death. Its twenty entries, beginning with his birth in 1821, are a record of accomplishments and happiness. We learn of Flaubert's "stable, enlightened, encouraging" family background and his literary accomplishments (23). Even his first attack of epilepsy, in 1844, is presented with a positive spin:

Gustave's first epileptic attack puts an end to his legal studies in Paris and confines him to the new family house at Croisset.

Abandoning the law, however, causes little pain, and since his confinement brings both the solitude and the stable base needed for a life of writing, the attack proves beneficial in the long run. (25)

The second chronology is a much darker and more pessimistic record of illness, commercial and financial failures, and bereavement at the loss of close friends. In fact, the chronology begins with a death—that of Flaubert's infant sister—and continues dwelling on deaths all the way through (half of the twenty-one entries begin with the recording of one). A perfect example of the difference between the first and second chronologies can be found by comparing the entries from 1836, both of which concern Flaubert's falling in love with Elisa Schlesinger. In the first chronology, we learn that his passion for her "illuminates the rest of his adolescence," and that she "treats him with great kindness and affection" (24). The second chronology describes the same event as "the start of a hopeless, obsessive passion which cauterizes his heart and renders him incapable of ever fully loving another woman" (27).

The third chronology is composed entirely of self-referential metaphorical statements by Flaubert, taken mostly from his letters. These quotations, as if to culminate and extend the sentiments in the previous chronologies, run the gamut from triumphant to foreboding, elegant to absurd. Braithwaite mentions that Flaubert once remarked he was "bothered by [his] tendency to metaphor," a tendency he labeled "decidedly excessive" (19). Here we see both his metaphoric skills and his excesses, all marshaled together in an attempt to describe himself. The entry from 1872 is a fitting example of his eloquence:

My heart remains intact, but my feelings are sharpened on the one hand and dulled on the other, like an old knife that has been too often sharpened, which has notches, and breaks easily. (36)

Taken together, these three chronologies give us some idea of the difficulties involved in writing history and the rhetorical aspect of any historical description. What we see in each of the chronologies are gaps, omissions, and a strong authorial/rhetorical hand shaping the facts to achieve an overall idea of the author's life. The point here is not that there is no truth to be found in these chronologies; the point is that there are many truths here as well as many paradoxes, confusions, and omissions.

The previous examples from the chronologies lend credence to Hayden White's assertion, throughout Metahistory and elsewhere, that any given historical event can be "emplotted" in many rival and contradictory ways. Chronology itself is an ancient genre of historical writing. The element of subjectivity in any writing explains many of the differences inherent in historical explanation. Each historian, after all, has a different subjective experience of the history he or she studies, whether that history is witnessed unfolding before the eye or found in the archives. But deception is another possibility. In the opening paragraphs of Chapter Three of Flaubert's Parrot, Braithwaite asks "What chance would the craftiest biographer stand against the subject who saw him coming and decided to amuse himself?" (38). Without plunging into the netherworld of conspiracy theory, Barnes' own career can serve as a relevant example of just the sort of paranoia Braithwaite articulates.

Barnes is actually a writer with two very separate careers. As "Julian Barnes" he has, to date, authored eight "literary" novels, a collection of short stories, and a collection of journalism on British politics originally written (as were most of his stories and sections from some of his novels) for the New Yorker. Under the pen name Dan Kavanagh, he has written four detective novels centered around a bisexual ex-police officer turned private investigator named Duffy.<sup>10</sup> Most critics and reviewers of Barnes' work either do not know or

do not mention his other career. And since most journalists who interview Barnes never ask about Dan Kavanagh, Barnes rarely has to comment on him.

Barnes reveals very little about his own life in interviews or the “about the author” pages of his novels, most of which, besides mentioning his literary awards and the titles of his other novels, mention his life in only a single sentence: “Julian Barnes was born in Leicester, England, in 1946, was educated at Oxford University and now lives in London.”<sup>11</sup> The passage occurs verbatim in the frontispiece to all of Barnes’ volumes published in America. The paperback copies of the first two Kavanagh novels, Duffy and Fiddle City, also describe their author, but their descriptions vary a great deal. The main thing they have in common is their outrageousness. Both concur that he was “born in County Sligo in 1946” and that he currently lives in North Islington and works in London “at jobs he declines to specify.” The Duffy description adds that he left home at seventeen “having devoted his adolescence to truancy, venery and petty theft” after which he became a deckhand on a Liberian tanker, jumped ship at Montevideo, and roamed the Americas working a variety of jobs including steer-wrestler, car hop, and bouncer at a gay bar in San Francisco. The Fiddle City description has him leaving home at nineteen, but this time the ship is a Japanese super tanker. Jumping ship is never mentioned and the list of jobs is completely changed but equally sensational. According to this second description, Kavanagh has been “a pianist in a waterfront bar in Macao, a baggage handler at San Francisco Airport, and has flown light planes on the Columbia cocaine route.” The jacket copy from the hardback edition of Going to the Dogs draws from both of these earlier descriptions, but adds the disclaimer, “all that is known for certain is that he was once a baggage handler at Toronto International Airport.”

The descriptions, of course, are a joke. We can almost hear Barnes laughing in the background as we read them. Here is the subject who has seen the biographer coming and has decided to make the task more interesting.<sup>12</sup> But the joke has rather serious implications. Kavanagh's novels sold respectably in England and America (and have been recently collected into the one volume Duffy Omnibus). His work was reviewed, mostly positively, and he was taken seriously as a writer of detective fiction. Barnes' alter ego has largely remained undiscovered since the readers of his "literary" novels and his "popular" novels generally keep to their preferred genre and do very little extensive reading outside of it. But for those who read both, Barnes lays clues. In Duffy, we find the protagonist, who is going through a stage of impotence, contemplating his own flaccid genitalia, which he describes, grotesquely, as "a peeled prawn and a walnut" (60). The same strikingly odd description appears in Before She Met Me when Ann contemplates her sleeping husband Graham Hendrick's genitalia as symbolic of all the trouble sex can bring to human relationships (130).

What are we to make of Barnes' game of jacket-copy self-invention? Perhaps mentioning it at such length is to make too much of it. But his actions provide one in a series of useful reminders that what we accept as fact sometimes begins as fabulation. Forgeries and fictions passing as truths may eventually come to light, but in the interim, they masquerade as certainties, tricking us like a greased piglet, and looking remarkably clear in our telescopes fixed to the becalmed ship deck.

### **The Role of Genre in History and Fiction**

Postmodern historians, like Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra, and Peter Burke, often note that literary conventions of the nineteenth century historical narrative have become opaque to us as conventions of writing and masquerade

as the only proper techniques for writing history. If we were to describe historical writing with the vocabulary normally reserved for fiction, we might say that historical writing stopped developing stylistically once it reached realism. Burke and White have been outspoken in recommending that writers of history not close themselves off from the insights of literary modernism and postmodernism. Burke, in particular, feels that the multiple point of view techniques pioneered by Faulkner and Joyce might be of great value to historians (New Perspectives 238).

One of the greatest insights of postmodern historiography is that historical writing cannot avoid stylistics any more than philosophy can (or should) avoid metaphor. All writing makes use of conventions. And there are many useful conventions both before and after realism. Postmodern historians suggest that a variety of approaches may be necessary to reflect the plurality of a multicultural world where no one culture is seen as dominant.

Combining unlikely genres is something that Barnes does very well and to great effect. Reviewer Gary Krist calls Flaubert's Parrot a book "which virtually created its own genre." He considers it "a literary improvisation . . . combining stylistic elements from works as widely disparate as the critical biography, the medieval bestiary and the trainspotter's guide" (12). Reviewer Peter Brooks calls it "a splendid hybrid of a novel, part biography, part fiction, part literary criticism . . ." (7). Within the pages of Flaubert's Parrot, Barnes combines first-person narrative, chronology, literary and personal biography, autobiography, detective story, essay, literary criticism, literary manifesto (97-100), travel guide (chapter 8), dictionary (chapter 12), written comprehensive examination (chapter 14), and personals advertisement (95).

The decision of which genre(s) to employ is an important one for any writer, since the chosen form will have an inevitable effect on the content and,



ultimately, its perception and interpretation. The story that Melville tells in Moby-Dick wouldn't be the same as a Petrarchan sonnet. And even if Melville (a novelist with some considerable skill at poetry) had tried to fashion the same tale as an epic poem, there would still certainly be differences in the story that emerged. Such is the point which Barnes makes in using multiple genres. In doing so, he reminds us that any act of writing assumes and makes use of certain generic conventions, self-consciously or otherwise. An example of this can be found in Braithwaite's pondering about the generic conventions of the personals advertisement:

They aren't lying—indeed, they're all trying to be utterly sincere—but they aren't telling the truth. The column distorts the way the advertisers describe themselves. No one would think of himself as an active non-smoker inclined to melancholy if that wasn't encouraged, even demanded, by the form. (95)

Peter Burke makes a similar case for the writing of history. He notes that "narrative is no more innocent in historiography than it is in fiction" (New Perspectives 235). He argues that narrative history tends to emphasize the actions of leaders at the expense of other factors. And when the subject includes collective entities, the historian "is forced to choose between omitting them altogether or personifying them," the latter of which often overemphasizes consensus among the personified group (235). On the other hand, historians who abandon narrative altogether and attempt to write history as the analysis of structures (e.g. structural historians, particularly those associated with the Annales School) run the risk of presenting history as static by avoiding descriptions of discrete events in favor of long-duration trends (236). It is Burke's view that much modern historiography has been committed to one or the other of these schools (i.e. narrative or structural) at the expense of the other.

The goal of future history should be to create a synthesis incorporating the best features of these two opposing positions (237).

### **Braithwaite, Barnes, and the Critics**

One genre which interests and informs Barnes' writing a great deal is that of literary criticism. In the sixth chapter of Flaubert's Parrot, Braithwaite engages in an extended polemic against Flaubertian critic and biographer Enid Starkie. Lest Braithwaite's partial dismissal of critics and criticism be taken as Barnes' own opinion on the subject, we must consider both Starkie's work (or more importantly, her style of performing it) and some other of Barnes' comments on the function of criticism, which are available in interviews.

It is easy to see why Braithwaite, or Barnes, or any admirer of Flaubert's work would have reservations with the easy judgments and smug tone which pervades Starkie's Flaubert the Master. Braithwaite chides Starkie for her unhelpful commentary on Madame Bovary, in which she scolds Flaubert for what she sees as his confusion over the color of Emma Bovary's eyes (74). It will be beneficial to our discussion if we turn to what Starkie has to say about A Simple Heart. Starkie's approach to Flaubert, here and elsewhere, consists mainly in retelling the plots of his works and conflating them with the facts of his life. When she does turn to the matter of interpreting A Simple Heart, Starkie reduces all of the complexity of the story to one brief paragraph:

Although Flaubert had intended "Un Coeur Simple" to be consoling, it turns out to be basically as pessimistic as his other works. Its message is that all we are left with at the end, in spite of all our goodness and effort, is a moth-eaten stuffed parrot to act as the Holy Ghost. (260)

There is a sadness which pervades Flaubert's story of Félicité, but to reduce the story to a one-sentence description and the label of pessimism does not do it justice. In A Simple Heart as in most of Flaubert's other writings, we hear a narrative voice which points out the absurdities of people's lives and those of the world at large. But we cannot picture Flaubert gleefully laughing as he wrote this story (in the way that we can in the "Dictionary of Received Ideas"). We hear, rather, the sad voice of one who knows that the world could become a better place, but who also knows that it probably will not become one. Such is surely a pessimistic vision—and not without its share of cynicism—but about Félicité herself, Flaubert is rarely judgmental and never cynical. Her motivations are portrayed as completely unselfish from start to finish.

Barnes is capable, to a lesser degree, of his own dismissive view of the practice of criticism. In an interview with Patrick McGarth in Bomb (v. 21, Fall 1987, 20-3), Barnes says "You do often feel when you read academic criticism . . . that they forget that theirs is a secondary activity. They forget that however important a critic is, a first-rate critic is always less important, and less interesting, than a second-rate writer" (22). Barnes gives no justifications for this view. Just why is it, we might ask, that criticism is a priori less interesting than fiction? The view of the critic as a parasite is an old one indeed. Barnes does not identify himself overtly with such a view in the context of this interview (as Braithwaite does in Flaubert's Parrot, or as Flaubert often does in his letters) though he gets close to it by setting criticism and fiction up in the mutually exclusive categories which his own writing does so much to undermine. Peter Brooks takes issue with Braithwaite's "curmudgeonly remarks about literary critics," noting that most Flaubertian critics see Flaubert, as Braithwaite appears to, "as the very fountainhead of modernity, and indeed of our postmodernity, of which Flaubert's Parrot is very much a product" (9). Brooks wonders openly if

Barnes is being ironic at Braithwaite's expense, or if he simply fails to see how much both his novel and contemporary Flaubertian scholarship tend to agree.<sup>13</sup>

Some points arise in the remainder of the interview which seem to partially contradict Barnes's pat opening statement on the value of criticism. Barnes admits that "the extent to which you can be a critic of your own books is limited. Fortunately. There is a lot of self-consciousness about writing, but if you had total self-consciousness you'd never get anything done" (23). And many times in the interview Barnes admits that while "no doubt there are thematic connections" between his works, he does not think in terms of thematic connections while he is writing: "You think of each book as a completely separate entity when you're writing it, and you're very flattered, or dismayed, when people say, 'Ah, this book picks up this idea from that book'" (23). It would seem that a different turn of mind is necessary for the writing of fiction than for the writing of criticism, though this does not explain how some writers (e.g. Umberto Eco, John Barth, Italo Calvino, and many others including Barnes himself) are capable of excelling at both.

At least in the context of this interview, Barnes sees the role of the critic as "firstly to explain, but secondly to celebrate rather than diminish" (22). But it would seem to greatly diminish the possibility of serious criticism if all critics had to live by the kindergarten dictum, "if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all." And while certain critics do spend their time grinding axes on the reputations of writers they do not admire, the general thrust of most criticism (and, we could probably argue, all useful criticism) tends to be a blend of explanation and carefully considered, qualified praise. Flaubert's Parrot could well serve as a both a model and a contributing part of such a genre of writing.

Flaubert's Parrot, Barnes' most popular and celebrated novel, presents many ideas about the nature of historical writing, often emphasizing the difficulty of finding and interpreting facts. In the following chapter, we will examine how similar themes play out in the novel which immediately preceded it.

## **Chapter 2. Madness and (Mis)interpretation: Before She Met Me**

At this point we leave the harbour of facts for the high seas of rumour. . . . (Barnes A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters 23)

We can see the dangers of conflating art and history as the subject of Barnes' second novel, Before She Met Me. The protagonist of the novel, Graham Hendrick, having grown dissatisfied with his first marriage, enters into a second one, which begins blissfully and ends homicidally. The protagonist—who is, unlike Geoffrey Braithwaite, a professional rather than an amateur historian—becomes obsessed with the life his new wife Ann led before she met him. His second wife had been an actress who played minor roles in minor movies. She often played the part of a lover—sometimes both on and off the screen—with the men in these films. This part of her past is what obsesses Graham, who comes to think of these real and fictional sexual relationships as “adulteries” even though they happened before he and his wife ever met. One reviewer, borrowing from a phrase in Barnes' novel, rightly labeled his obsession a case of “retroactive jealousy” (Krist 12).

These circumstances would probably be enough to fuel the book, but there is another aspect which lends considerable complexity to both the novel and our reading of it. The protagonist and his second wife have—at first unbeknownst to them—a mutual friend, a popular fiction writer named Jack Lupton. It also happens that this writer and the second wife have a sexual past which they choose to keep secret from Graham. When Ann visits Lupton to discuss hiding their past from Graham, she announces “I've come to get history straight” (69). This is not a problem for Lupton, whose skills as a fiction writer don't stop with his fiction. In response to Ann's later apology: “I'm sorry to rewrite your past for you,” Lupton makes a rather revealing reply:

Don't bother, I'm always doing it myself. Every time I tell a story it's different. Can't remember how most of them started off anymore. Don't know what's true. (71)

Lupton bases many of his novels on events in his own life, and he is often unconcerned with concealing either his identity or those of his friends when he refigures them into his texts. Graham understands this tendency of his friend. One day while reading Lupton's novels, Graham comes to the (correct) conclusion that Lupton and his wife have had an affair, but he comes to other conclusions as well. Soon, he begins incorrectly to assume that almost all of the other love scenes in Lupton's novels are based on experiences with his wife. This "knowledge" obsesses Graham, and he begins to pore over every novel his friend has ever written—building a small, hidden archive of "evidence," of the most circumstantial kind, against his wife. He takes long drives to distant theaters to repeatedly watch his wife commit her celluloid "adulteries." This obsession soon turns to madness and the novel ends in a bloody murder/suicide.

If we see Barnes as a postmodern novelist, Before She Met Me presents special problems. While Flaubert's Parrot is clearly both a critical biography and—at the same time—a parody of critical biography as a genre, it is harder to see this earlier novel as both using and subverting the genre of the revenge tragedy (or of melodrama in general). M. Keith Booker has argued that the difference between seeing a given work as modernist or postmodernist depends, at least in part, on the reader. A taste for postmodern irony can lead us to finding it wherever we look for it. Textual evidence does, of course, differentiate between the two in many cases, but the line between "exemplification" and parody (to use Booker's terms), or what we might call earnest representation and ironic representation, is often effaced by postmodern writers (48). And the same

principle applies in many cases to the distinction between literary and popular fiction. Sometimes the difference between one category and the other comes down to differences in reading strategies rather than differences in writing strategies.

Regardless of whether we choose to read Before She Met Me as an example of literary fiction or as an example of pulp fiction, the novel does provide an important contribution to our reading of Flaubert's Parrot and Barnes' work generally. It argues the dangers of entirely conflating art and history. If Graham Hendrick had an ounce of the historical skepticism which pervades Geoffrey Braithwaite, he would not be willing to put so much faith in the authenticity of the "evidence" against his wife. If Geoffrey Braithwaite can be seen as having new-historicist tendencies, then Graham, by contrast, exemplifies both the most reductive historicist practices and the most dangerous tendencies of postmodernism. Like the most reductive of old-school historicists, Graham sees the work of literature as an unproblematic window into the past. He does not grant literary authors and filmmakers enough agency to refigure the events they inscribe into their texts. Like the most extreme of postmodernists, he sees no necessity for any ontological distance (however confused or slight) between literary and historical texts. These twin mistakes lead him not only into error but into murder.

The photomontage on the cover of the American trade paperback of Before She Met Me, by Jenny Lynn, captures the novel's theme quite well. We see a man's face, but his eyes are covered by three frames from a film, each of which show a man and woman engaged in a passionate embrace. If we read the man as Graham, the image makes perfect sense: he becomes completely blind to anything other than the adultery he witnesses on the screen. The strength of the visual image seems more convincing to him than the counter-evidence of his



own life. Graham suffers from jealousy, but his particular brand of it is even more neurotic than the conventional sort. Graham, if we imagine him a particularly myopic literary critic, sees only what confirms his own suspicions.

Part of Graham's confusion is fostered by the strong rhetorical nature of film. In a conference session that I attended at the University of Cincinnati, the chair of the panel presentation on film referred to film as “the literature of the illiterate.”<sup>14</sup> I do not share in the more dismissive implications of such a label, but it is undeniably true that film currently has a great amount of force—one might even say it has achieved hegemony—in presenting memorable representations of history to a large audience. And a great majority of that audience gets more of its ideas about history from movies and television than from any other source. The recent popularity of such historically based films as Steven Spielberg's Schindler's List and Amistad, and James Cameron's Titanic are but a few examples. The ability of cinema, through its illusion of realism, to convince has been noted since the birth of the genre. Woodrow Wilson, a Princeton historian himself, proclaimed that D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation was “like writing history with lightning” (Lowen 28). To our modern eyes, a more flagrant distortion of history can hardly be imagined, but, due to Griffith's formal filmmaking brilliance, his interpretation certainly had its impact.<sup>15</sup>

It is often said that most Americans lack a sense of history. Lupton gives us a nightmarish image of what a truly ahistorical life would be like. At one point in the novel, he tells Graham that “there's a bloke in America with no past, you know” (128). According to Lupton, the American he has read about “can't form any new memories either. Forgets everything straight away. Think of that—no archives at all. Maybe you'd like that?” (128). Graham is speechless, so Lupton goes on “Like staring out of a train window all the time. The cornfield,

the telegraph poles, the washing lines, the tunnel: no connections, no causation, no sense of repetition” (128). Lupton’s negative example can, conversely, point to just what is at stake in any attempt at writing meaningful history. It must show just what the man with no past can’t see: connections, causes, repetitions. Lists of unconnected facts have only the potential for meaning. By themselves, they are meaningless.

A likely source for the case study that Lupton alludes to is “David,” whose case is described in neuropsychologist Antonio Damasio’s The Feeling of What Happens. David, due to brain injury caused by encephalitis, “cannot learn any new facts at all” (43). But even worse than that, he is also only able to recall the vaguest memories from the past. So, in a very frighteningly real sense, he is a person who lives almost entirely in the present. His memory for new facts is less than one minute.

In our reading, Before She Met Me becomes, like many of Barnes’ novels, something of a cautionary tale. It warns of the rhetorical power of cinema (perhaps the only art in the contemporary period whose aura is still in need of debunking), the danger of entirely substituting rhetoric for truth (i.e. Jack Lupton’s entire approach to life), the dangers of fanaticism, and especially, the danger of completely and uncritically conflating art and history. Graham’s archive of “facts” is one that needs to be challenged. But, as his obsession brews in private, they go unchallenged and convince him—because of his misplaced certainty—to carry out an extreme and extremely unnecessary and irreversible crime.

### Chapter 3. Lying Like an Eyewitness: Talking it Over

It is impossible to write any history without some standpoint—and that means some philosophical or ideological standpoint. The only questions are whether or not we acknowledge that standpoint, and whether or not our choices have been consciously made.

(Southgate History: What & Why? 9)

Talking it Over announces its theme in its epigraph, “He lies like an eye-witness,” which is attributed as a Russian saying. Later in the novel, Oliver will mention encountering the same quotation in the memoirs of twentieth-century Soviet composer Dmitri Shostakovich (222). He does not refer specifically to the title of the book, but it is safe to assume he is referring to Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Dmitriyevich Shostakovich as Related to and Edited by Solomon Volkov. The oblique reference to Shostakovich fits into Barnes’ concerns about the writing of history since the details of Shostakovich’s life, especially his relationship to the Soviet regime, has been a point of heated debate in recent years. Some hold the Testimony to be little more than an anti-Soviet propaganda piece, designed to arouse the spirits of westerners and having little to do with the composer’s actual allegiances; others take it as a genuine autobiographical document. Whatever the truth-status of the Testimony, the statement itself is compelling, reminding us that one of the bases of our notions of what happened in the past, the testimony of eye-witnesses, is not something we can take for granted.

Talking it Over, using multiple first-person point-of-view, dramatizes the difficulty of memory, the most basic and personal form of historical recollection. Appleby, Joyce, Hunt, and Jacob (hereafter, Appleby) remind us that “knowledge of the past, however small, begins with memory” (258). Each of the labeled narrators addresses the reader, more or less, as a confidante, as if the reader were interviewing the narrators or taking depositions from them. The characters narrate the details of their lives, and in each narrative we encounter a different personality constructing the events of his or her life. For the most part, each character strives for fidelity to the truth, but these narratives, as one might expect, present many different events as well as conflicting interpretations of the same events. The reader is left to establish some idea of what the true story of the characters’ pasts really was, while being constantly reminded that his or her conclusion is yet another interpretation based on stories mediated through the characters. By the time the reader hears them, the stories are already contextualized and come with the attendant biases of the characters who relate them. As such, Talking it Over is a novel more overheard than read.

The principal characters in the novel are Stuart Hughes, Oliver Russell, and Gillian Hughes (née Wyatt), though some other characters interject their stories at various points in the course of the novel. Stuart, a very practical-minded person, gives a version of events which focuses on the details with a minimum of the rhetorical flourishes or elaborate theorizing we see in Oliver’s account. Gillian, the love interest of both men, is more taciturn than either of the

other primary narrators. When she does speak, her view is often at odds with those offered by the other characters. The action of the novel is based on a love triangle and two marriages. Stuart and Gillian are married early in the novel, and this event awakens Oliver's passion for Gillian, whom he eventually wins away from his long-time best friend Stuart.

The events surrounding the wedding of Stuart and Gillian are only one example of the way in which the same event can be variously inscribed on the memories of its various witnesses. Stuart and Oliver both describe the sky and the weather of the day. Stuart says "It was a beautiful day. The sort of day everyone should have their [sic] wedding on. A soft June morning with a blue sky and a gentle breeze" (8). Oliver, always the more verbose of the two and certainly the most bookish of the group, describes the day as "swirling clouds like marbled end-papers. A little too much wind, and everyone patting his hair back into place inside the door of the register office" (13).<sup>16</sup> Gillian doesn't mention the weather at all, but she warns us not to take her silence as a sign that she does not notice things or that she forgets them. She tells us that her memories "aren't for public consumption" (10). They are, rather, her private business.<sup>17</sup>

Oliver remembers "trying to amuse the [wedding] company" during their wait at the register's office "by looking up relevant professionals like Divorce Lawyers and Rubber Goods purveyors" in a London telephone directory, but according to Gillian, he was "leafing through the telephone directory looking for

people with funny names” (13, 10). Stuart, who tells us in his first lines that he remembers everything, doesn’t bother to record this event at all (3).<sup>18</sup>

Stuart and Gillian give similar accounts, though they differ on some points, of their first meeting (at a singles social), the details of which they try to keep secret from Oliver, knowing he would tease them about it. In fact, they make up a brief lie about having met at a wine bar after work through a co-worker of Stuart’s named Jenkins (22). Gillian describes the event as “a sensible group of people taking a sensible step about their lives” (60). Stuart also uses the term “sensible” to describe the motivation of the attendees at the social (23). Both of them recall drinking sherry. Stuart recalls Gillian’s shyness, which she describes not as shyness but nervousness (25-6). Stuart remembers himself being in fine form and amusing Gillian with “one or two of Oliver’s jokes,” but Gillian recalls them falling flat due to Stuart’s nervousness (25-6). Gillian reveals the circumstances of this first meeting with Stuart to Oliver after she and Oliver become romantically involved (148). Later, Oliver accidentally reveals his knowledge of the secret to Stuart (160). And it is the accidental relation of this fact that wounds Stuart the deepest and confirms his suspicions that Oliver is involved with Gillian. And the circumstances of Oliver’s inadvertent revelation to Stuart are, of course, remembered differently by the two participants. In particular, Oliver remembers their meeting ending with an “accident” during which he and Stuart accidentally bump heads while Stuart is lighting Oliver’s

cigarette (161). But Stuart, a page later, reveals that striking Oliver was intentional (162).

The characters occasionally make observations about the nature of history and memory. Gillian makes an astute observation about how form shapes content while musing over her lack of ability to pinpoint a moment when she and her husband Stuart fell in love. She says “You don’t know exactly when you fall in love with someone, do you? . . . I suppose you look back and select one particular moment out of several then stick to it” (75). She maintains that the only reason anyone would feel compelled to pick a particular moment is that other people require it:

And everyone has to have an answer, don’t they? I fell in love with him then, I fell in love with him because. It’s a sort of social necessity. You can’t very well say, Oh, I forget. Or, it wasn’t obvious. You can’t say that, can you? (75)

Our conversations with others follow, or sometimes subvert, existing protocols, just as any instance of writing will follow or subvert the protocols of its genre. Thus Gillian’s statement reminds us of Braithwaite’s observation on personals advertisements.

Barnes’ narration of events through multiple, subjective, perspectives hints at a problem of philosophy which dates back at least to Plato’s dialogs. In his Theatetus we find Socrates, Theatetus, and Theodorus in a debate about knowledge and perception. Their task is to discern what can be perceived truly,

apart from the obvious limits of subjectivity. In the end, Socrates concludes that the soul perceives certain things (truth, beauty) directly, while other, lesser things are perceived through the senses, which may introduce error (Plato 535). Socrates' reply is an interesting piece of rhetorical footwork. The determining of important things like what is true and what is beautiful is removed from the realm of human confusion and opinion. But such an argument is more than a bit idealistic for most contemporary readers. Without a soul which perceives directly, we are left with the limitations of our senses and thus must find other ways to determine the true and the beautiful.

Talking it Over is composed, as has already been said, of testimonies. It is no surprise that these testimonies disagree in places. We would hardly expect any of them to tell the whole truth. And we rightly expect each of them to be shaded by the motives and personality of the character who speaks it. The novel invites us to mentally construct our own master narrative of the true events. But if we meditate briefly on the novel's larger implications, we are left wondering what sort of story we would be able to construct if the testimony of one of these witnesses were missing. There are certain secrets that only one character knows. And without that character, our understanding the facts and motivations involved in this "history" would be diminished.

The ending sequence of the novel provides a particularly good example. Gillian and Oliver, in order to distance themselves from Stuart, have moved to a small village in France. But Gillian becomes aware that Stuart is spying on them



from a hotel room across the street from their cottage. Gillian fears that Stuart will never be able to distance himself from his past with her, and from his past friendship with Oliver, so she, unbeknownst to any other character in the book, stages an elaborate scene in which she antagonizes Oliver to such an extent that he finally strikes her. This argument is played out in the street in front of Oliver and Gillian's cottage, in full view of the town. And it has, as Gillian expected it would, the desired effect. Stuart gives up his obsession with the past and goes back to his life. Gillian's strategy works, but without her testimony of it we would not have the same understanding of the events. We would have something closer to Stuart's or Oliver's mistaken understanding of it.

One other aspect of Talking it Over, important to the general argument I have been making, is Gillian's job in painting restoration and how it can serve symbolically as a model for historical research. Gillian works in a small studio above the house she shares with Stuart. Oliver occasionally visits Gillian while she is working. It is during one of these visits that Oliver asks Gillian about the specifics of her work. She reveals to him that it is the removing of dirt and "overpaint" which is the true joy of restoration, not the retouching. This surprises Oliver, so he presses further by asking her how she knows when the process of scouring and removing is complete. Her first reply is a noncommittal "You can sort of tell" which leaves Oliver unsatisfied, so he reiterates his question:

But there must be a point . . . when you've hosed off all the muck and glaze and 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. (122; ellipsis in the original)

Gillian replies that any restorer is bound to go a little bit too far or not quite enough. There's simply no way of knowing exactly when to stop. She maintains that while four different restorers would, if they had the exact same painting to work on, get it "roughly back to the same level," deciding where to stop is "an artistic rather than a scientific decision" (122). She concludes: "There's no 'real' picture under there waiting to be revealed, if that's what you mean" (122).

This exchange between Gillian and Oliver harks back to Flaubert's Parrot, and to all of Barnes' works concerned with recording or rediscovering history. Some aspects of the past, due to the passage of time, are beyond historical recovery, at least in the exact sense. What we are left with, in the cases where we can know things at all, are rough estimates of what life in another time must have been like. The historian, like the restorer of paintings, lifts off the grime of past interpretations. But there is no one true painting waiting underneath the dirt and overpaint. Like the restorer's rendition of a painting, a work of history is a hypothesis—a way in which things might have happened, not the thing itself. History, understood in this fashion, becomes an artistic rather than an

empirical endeavor. Certainties give way to relative certainties. Dreams of total knowledge are humbled. But knowledge itself does not thereby become a useless category. It simply becomes a more complex and provisional one.

**Chapter 4. (Re)imagining History: A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters**

The past really did exist, but we can only know it through its textual traces, its often complex and indirect representations in the present: documents, archives, but also photographs, paintings, architecture, films, and literature. (Linda Hutcheon The Politics of Postmodernism 78)

I cannot hope, in the limited space I have here, to devote the attention to Barnes' fifth novel which it deserves. A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters is a work about which one could write volumes without exhausting it. The novel itself is comprised of many separate stories (some chapter-length, some shorter) which are connected—some more loosely than others—by themes of historical recovery, historical decay, and rescue. Some reviewers have engaged in arguments about whether or not it can legitimately be called a novel, but this is a formal distinction which I will gladly leave to others. Joyce Carol Oates, in her review of Barnes' History, offers a useful generic distinction in calling it “a gathering of prose pieces, some fiction, others rather like essays” (12). Barnes' History is, in some ways, a significantly different work from the others under discussion here (though not so different from his novel Staring at the Sun) in its willingness to include highly fantastic elements. Almost all of Barnes' other works are, though postmodern, highly realistic. But A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters is also a novel which, like all of the novels under discussion here, articulates and demonstrates some of Barnes' concerns about the writing of history.

Oates identifies one of the important motifs of Barnes' novel as “connectedness” (13). Each of the stories that are a part of the History is connected in some, sometimes oblique, way with what has come before and what will come after it. It is an almost Buddhist view of the nature of the world

(or, in keeping with Buddhist thinking, the illusion that we perceive as the world). But relying on such connections allows Barnes to include widely ranging subject matter and perspectives. And if they don't all seem to fit into some sort of narrative, then perhaps that can be seen as part of the point. We are reading here, after all, a postmodern history of the world. Actions, themes, and events resonate and repeat with variations, but there is no divine plan with which to stitch them all together. There is no ending to which the events of this history can be seen to build or conclude, whether that ending is conceived of as the apocalypse (as in the orthodox Christian tradition), the achievement of rational enlightenment (as in Hegelianism), or the end of class conflict (as in Marxism). Any conventional theory of history needs an end or purpose by which to define itself, but Barnes' theory of history is by no means conventional.

While researching for this chapter, I inadvertently came across a lucky connection of my own. An Associated Press story, hiding in the back of a local paper, carried a brief piece titled "Diggers say Jericho didn't Fall" in which the anonymous reporter tells of an archeological dig in historical Jericho led by Lorenzo Nigro and Nicolo Marchetti, two professors from the University of Rome, who were working as part of the first foreign archeological expedition to the West Bank since the beginning of Palestinian self-rule in 1994. The archaeologists found nothing which would suggest that the city was sacked during the time of Joshua, its biblical conqueror. In response, a Palestinian envoy to Italy, Nemer Hammad, said that he hoped the expedition's findings would not have negative repercussions and declared that "History must be respected" (8D).

The phrase certainly has an ominous ring to it, but perhaps owing to such a steady diet of Barnes' fiction, it also hints at another rather unintentional ironic meaning. For while we can certainly agree that history should be respected

(especially if that is taken to mean that we should not try to willfully deny that events have happened in the past), there might be considerably less agreement about what the word “history” is meant to signify. Shall we take it to mean (against Hammad’s intent) that we should respect the findings of the archaeologists? Or does it mean we should continue to believe in the story that their finding seems to challenge or overturn? If the dictum were put to us as a question rather than a command, we might be tempted to answer “Yes, but which one?”

The news article is relevant since Barnes’ History also begins with a revisionist account of a biblical story, in this case that of Noah’s Ark, as told by a marginalized stowaway who was never intended to be allowed passage on that famous ship. In so far as his narrative is taken seriously—which is quite difficult to do since it is reportedly spoken by a woodworm—Barnes’ story of “The Stowaway” can be taken as an act (or perhaps a parody) of historical revision. This retelling of the centuries-old story challenges what only fundamentalist apologists would likely refer to as the “facts.” Noah is presented in a negative light (as a bossy drunkard). The “ark” is not a single ship but a small fleet. Other differences from the biblical account, played for laughs, abound. But it is important to remember that the account of the deluge included in the Bible had also been revised from other, older, primary sources.<sup>19</sup> Even in the context of the Hebrew and Christian traditions, the flood itself can be seen as an act of historical revision, an effort to quite literally obliterate the past, except for a few privileged (in fact “chosen”) representatives of it: “So the Lord said, ‘I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground, man and beast and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry I have made them’” (Genesis 6:7 KJV).

The second chapter of Barnes' History, "The Visitors," also concerns a ship, the Santa Euphemia, which is hijacked by a group of anti-Israeli terrorists called the Black Thunder group. The protagonist of the story is Franklin Hughes, a popular historian and passenger on the ship. Hughes is not an academic historian. He began his career in television as "a mouthpiece for other people's views, a young man in a corduroy suit with an affable and unthreatening way of explaining culture" (34). By small degrees, he had come to do his own research and writing and had become quite popular with his audience due to his ability to connect the events of the past to the audience's present by way of contemporary allusions. Hughes is a featured lecturer on the Santa Euphemia which, as part of the Aphrodite Cultural Tours line, offers tourists a chance to explore the history and culture of scenic places (in this case, Greece) through guided tours and an on-board lecture series.

It is during one of these lectures that the visitors of the chapter's title, which the ship took on at its stop in Rhodes along with fuel, food, and wine, interrupt Hughes' lecture to announce that they are taking over the ship. At first they are not willing to give the passengers any explanation of why they have done so. But eventually they decide to have Hughes explain to them what is happening: "How they are mixed up in history. What that history is" (51).

The history lesson that Hughes is coerced into teaching them is, as history lessons are, ideologically situated, though perhaps a little more overtly so than most, containing as it does phrases such as these: "In the Middle East, we must understand, there are no civilians any more. The Zionists understand this, the Western governments do not. We, alas, are not civilians. The Zionists have made this happen" (56). It is with such phrases that Hughes is forced to explain the "historical inevitability" of the bit of history in which the unwitting passengers have become embroiled (57).

Besides the role of ideology and power in the telling of history, another problem explored in “The Visitors” is the possibility of mistaking the intentions of historical personages. Hughes’ decision to be the mouthpiece for the Palestinians is an act of altruism to save his girlfriend, who carries a British passport and therefore is in greater danger than Hughes who, though British, carries an Irish passport. Hughes, as a part of this act of altruism, tells the visitors that his girlfriend is actually his wife, whom the visitors agree to reclassify as Irish if Hughes will make the speech. But Hughes recognizes the likelihood that his action will be misunderstood:

Of course, it was more than probable that when he gave the lecture his audience would conclude the exact opposite—that Franklin was operating out of self-interest, saving his own skin by a foul piece of subservience. (53)

But the visitors have made Hughes no promise to save his life. They have not even indicated to him the order in which they intend to execute the passengers. They have only indicated the timetable and that they will do so according to nationality and, in their view, culpability. Passengers will be executed: “according to the guilt of the Western nations for the situation in the Middle East” (57).

In the end, the ship is overtaken by “American Special Forces” (58). But in the interim seventeen passengers are assassinated. They are killed two per hour in pairs, a mocking allusion to and reversal of the story of the ark, and thrown overboard. During the ensuing fight, six more die. Five of the eight Arabs are also killed, including the leader and second in command who were the only ones involved in the agreement to spare Hughes’ girlfriend, “so there remained no witness to corroborate Franklin Hughes’ story of the bargain he had struck with the Arabs” (58).



“The Visitors” is also an example of the violent installing of one version of history over another. The hijackers are convinced that their version of history is the only true one, and that fanatical conviction forms the base from which their violent action can spring. They possess the sort of fanatical certainty which postmodernism challenges. As we shall see later, the resistance of fanaticism, through challenging certainty might be the appropriate rubric by which to understand Barnes and postmodernism.

Chapter Four, “The Survivor,” centers on the difficulty (or, perhaps, impossibility) of distinguishing fact from fiction. The story is told in alternating sections of third and first person accounts and seems to be set in the wake of a global nuclear disaster. But the difficulty in reading “The Survivor” is that we are given very little indication of whether to take the story as a real event, a dream, or merely the thought processes of a deranged person. The story centers around Kathleen Ferris; her sexist, abusive boyfriend Greg; her male cat Paul; her female cat Linda; and her boyfriend’s quarter share boat, which becomes her “ark.”

Ferris becomes paranoid as a result of the Chernobyl accident and the resulting poisoning of livestock, including reindeer, animals with which she has a strong emotional connection. At some point, she decides that there is going to be a second, even bigger nuclear disaster and that the only way to survive it will be to take to the sea. So with two cats and only a few supplies, she takes Greg’s boat and departs (90). After some time at sea, she is convinced that the second nuclear disaster has happened, though she has no direct evidence: “Sometimes there was a shifting of the light, sometimes a distant rumbling noise. Such things could have meant nothing at all; but somewhere it had happened. . .” (91).

During her time afloat on the ocean, we are let into Ferris’ thoughts on a great many things, including history. She has become disenchanted with

modern life and what we think of as progress: “The old ways of doing things had to be rediscovered: the future lay in the past” (96). She longs for a return to cyclical time, integrated with nature and the cycle of days and seasons: “We aren’t going to measure things in days any more . . . We’ll have to go back to some older cycle, sunrise to sunset for a start, and the moon will come into it, and the seasons, and the weather” (93). These recollections are interspersed with visions, as her dreams and her waking life become indistinct: “These dreams of mine go on after I’ve woken up. It’s like a hangover” (94). Her nightmares come to center on hospital imagery, so that we are not sure whether she is dreaming that she has been rescued and taken to a hospital or if she really is in a hospital and only mistakes the entire sea experience of it for a bad dream (96). She’s sick of history from the top down—of “famous men” who make events happen (97). Instead she sees “the old connections”: rhythms of nature, birth and rebirth (97).

Toward the end of the narrative, more and more of the incidents take place in the hospital setting. Ferris dreams, or, more likely, actually perceives, a psychiatrist who tries to get to the bottom of her motivations for going to sea. Their versions conflict, of course. The bandages on her arms are perceived by her as gloves. She believes her hair to be falling out but the doctor maintains she’s been pulling it out herself. In her version, she has found land and is now being kept a prisoner in a hospital. The doctor’s version is that she was found about 100 miles from the mainland going around in circles. At the end of the story, this dementia is still present in Ferris’ descriptions. But most of our access to the story is mediated through her descriptions.

Chapter Five, “Shipwreck,” is a meditation on the way historical events are transformed into art and on the strategies with which we later read them. The chapter focuses on Géricault’s famous painting Scene of Shipwreck, better known as The Raft of the Medusa (a color reproduction of which is included in

the novel). Barnes begins with the questions “How do you turn catastrophe into art?” In the remainder of the chapter, he addresses the question through several readings of Géricault’s masterpiece, showing how the artist began by finding out as many facts of the actual shipwreck as possible and then transformed some of those facts for the benefit of the composition.

Géricault’s painting focuses on a current event, the wreck of the French frigate Medusa in 1816 and the eventual recovery of fifteen of its passengers who had been stranded on a life raft for fifteen days. Barnes tells us that the artist gathered information about the shipwreck through news accounts and interviews with three of the survivors (one of whom, the carpenter of the ship, created a scale model of the ship and its raft for Géricault’s benefit). The scene that he eventually painted is that of the stranded victims on their raft, hailing a tiny ship in the distance.

Barnes begins by considering some of the possible scenes that Géricault chose not to paint (e.g. the actual moment of rescue, the cannibalism which was known to have occurred, strife between passengers) before turning to several readings of the painting itself. First he offers a formalist reading. Then he turns to a historical reading (a view of the painting in terms of the survivor narrative of two passengers, Savigny and Corréard). And finally he combines the two, showing how Géricault modified the actual events of the recovery of the raft for formal considerations. The raft in the painting, for instance, is above water. But in the survivor accounts, it was so overly laden that the survivors were up to their knees in water. The head count aboard the raft is also off. Dead passengers and those judged to be soon dead were cast overboard in order to lighten the raft’s load and preserve the scarce provisions. But Géricault brings some of them back in order to help out with the composition (131).

Barnes' point in showing us the places in which the painting is at odds with the known facts of the event is not, as Geoffrey Braithwaite believes Flaubertian critic Enid Starkie's is, to ridicule the artist. Rather, Barnes praises the artistic transformations of fact while informing us of all the facts that are known. In the end, he tries to hold both views of the painting, the formalist one and the historical one, in mind simultaneously: "The eye can flick from one mood, and one interpretation, to the other: is this what is intended?" (133). We are reminded of Barnes' analogy in Flaubert's Parrot of passengers aboard the deck of a boat, scurrying from telescope to telescope for a view of the "distant, receding shoreline" (101). No one view through the lens shows the entire story. Whatever truth can be found is achieved through a careful consideration of possibilities.

Nestled between chapters eight and nine is an unnumbered chapter called "Parenthesis." It is a piece, like the chapter on Géricault, which stands out from the other chapters by its essay-like quality. The tone is personal. We find the narrator awake in the middle of the night, lying in bed with his still sleeping wife and contemplating the nature and possible connectedness of love and history. The argument itself is quiet and personal, more like a conversation one would have with a sympathetic friend than a cagey manifesto which anticipates every possible objection. The narrator embraces the casual freedom to make assertions with less qualification and to let the argument move from point to point with only implied transitions.

Early in the piece, Barnes complicates the narrator's identity in a brief discussion of the different uses of the signifier "I" in poetry and prose: "when I say 'I' you will want to know within a paragraph or two whether I mean Julian Barnes or someone invented: a poet can shimmy between the two, getting credit for both deep feeling and objectivity" (225). So to take every statement in the

section as exactly corresponding to Barnes' own opinion is problematic. But many of the statements made here seem to sum up the historical concerns which are the major theme of his work:

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. (243)

But this view of the nature of history doesn't keep us from seeking out causes and meaning in history, nor should it: "And we, the readers of history, the sufferers from history, we scan the pattern [of events] for hopeful conclusions, for the way ahead" (240). Understanding this multiplicity and subjectivity does not lead the speaker to nihilism. On the contrary, it strengthens his desire for attempts at objectivity: "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 percent" (243-4). Not to do so is to fall into "beguiling relativity" where "we value one liar's version as much as another liar's . . . we admit that the victor has the right not just to the spoils but also to the truth" (244).

The reference to the "victor" in this final, personal, plea underscores the relationship between power and the telling of history: how one supports the other. The passage also affirms the value of histories which stand up to the traditional historical victors. At the same time, the passage affirms the desire for truth in spite of an always present and readily acknowledged skepticism. This tension between the desire for objectivity and the acknowledgement of its difficulties lies behind the chapter as it does behind the entire book.

There are many close symbolic links between Chapter Six, "The Mountain," and Chapter Nine, "Project Ararat." Both focus on attempts to

recover Noah's ark. Both of these chapters—and, it could be argued, the entire book—focus on a theme introduced earlier in the book, that of “fabulation.” The term is introduced in Chapter Four as a “technical term” for the process of making up stories to “cover the facts you don't know or can't accept” (109). The psychologist working with Kathleen Ferris offers this definition. He further elaborates, “You keep a few true facts and spin a new story round them” (109). In these chapters, the fabulated story is that of the flood myth and the ark, without which the characters involved would have no reason to go on their pilgrimages.

“The Mountain” centers on the ideological battles between Colonel Fergusson and his daughter, Miss Amanda Fergusson. The original setting is mid-nineteenth century Dublin. Colonel Fergusson is a typical Enlightenment skeptic, while his daughter is a zealous Protestant. Colonel Fergusson dies early in the story. Following his death, Amanda Fergusson, along with her friend Miss Logan make an expedition to Arghuri, a Turkish village on the lower slopes of Mount Ararat, the mythical docking place of Noah's Ark. Amanda's goal is to intercede on the part of her heretic father. She remains obsessed with disproving his anti-religious opinions for the remainder of her life. Miss Logan remarks that Amanda often seemed “to be constantly arguing with his [i.e. her father's] shade” (162).

Amanda Fergusson interprets everything in terms of her religious convictions, just as her father, Colonel Fergusson, interprets everything in terms of his scientific convictions. To the daughter, the clicking beetle above her father's death-bed is an omen of his coming demise (144). To the Colonel, it has no symbolic significance. To the daughter, the circle of white cloud around the summit of Mount Ararat is a halo. She remarks that her father, were he still alive, would explain it in terms of hot air and laws of condensation (154).

“Project Ararat” tells the story of a similar quest of origins in which an astronaut named Spike Tiggler, who walked on the moon’s surface during an expedition in 1974, becomes obsessed with finding the physical remains of Noah’s Ark. While walking the surface of the moon, Tiggler hears a voice, which he believes to be the voice of God, telling him to find the ark. After some personal struggling, he accepts his mission and, using his celebrity as an astronaut, begins to orchestrate fund-raising events to finance a trip to the famous mountain to look for remains.

Tiggler’s mission doesn’t yield any promising results. Despite three weeks on the mountain, no remains of the ark are found. After finding an eerily well-preserved skeleton in a cave high on the mountain, Tiggler is at first convinced that he has found the remains of Noah himself. But his more pragmatic partner, Jimmy Fulgood, convinces him that they should take bone samples and have them carbon dated before announcing their findings to the world at large. The bones turn out to be far too young to be those of the patriarch. They are in fact, as the reader knows, the remains of Amanda Fergusson, who was injured on her way down Mount Ararat and chose to remain in the cave and die there. But Tiggler is not upset by this turn of events. At the end of the chapter, we find him in the planning stages of a second mission.

Amanda Fergusson’s and Spike Tiggler’s (and, for that matter, Kathleen Ferris’) obsessions are beyond the reach of rational argument. Both begin with a set of assumptions and a way of seeing new evidence which only reassures them of the strength of the original assumptions. The most obscure bit of evidence is enough to stitch together the most disparate of events. Barnes demonstrates this tendency in the structure of the entire novel, which is held together by references to Noah and his voyage, bits of bitumen, journeys to sea, and hopes of salvation.

The ability to poetically re-imagine the past provides the basis for synthesizing it into a meaningful whole—into what we call a sense of history.



**Chapter 5. Media(tion) and Interpretation: The Porcupine**

“Here comes the new boss / Same as the old boss.” (The Who  
“Won’t Get Fooled Again”)

Flaubert’s Parrot begins with a description of lawn bowling overshadowed by an enormous statue of the famous author of Madame Bovary. Statuary is a recurrent symbol in Flaubert’s Parrot. It is used to dramatize one way that history is recorded and later revised. It also is a fitting symbol for the way in which details fade over time. The statue is erected, decays, and is repaired, only to decay again. In The Porcupine, Barnes deploys the statuary symbolism with even more complexity and finesse. The looming statue of Alyosha (officially titled the “Statue of Eternal Gratitude to the Liberating Red Army”), a symbol of the communist victory over fascism, overshadows the lives of both central characters (the prosecutor Peter Solinsky and the former leader whom he is to try, Stoyo Petkanov) in the unidentified ex-soviet bloc country in which the action of the novel takes place (8).<sup>20</sup>

The prosecutor has come to hate the statue of Alyosha and everything it symbolizes, but his relation to the old regime (in this case, a communist regime) is a complex and contradictory one. Solinsky began his career as a loyal party member and used his party membership for personal aggrandizement.

The Porcupine is a postmodern novel, but its two central protagonists are not informed at all by postmodern skepticism; they are both fanatics. The prosecutor is so driven by his conviction that the former leader is guilty that he is willing to concoct bogus evidence in order to insure that he will be convicted, a maneuver which costs him the respect of his wife, Maria. The former leader is ruthless enough to kill and destroy evidence in order to cover his tracks. Both Solinsky and Petkanov are absolutely convinced that their ideologies are the only possible correct views and both are intolerant of any utterance which does

not conform to their version of the truth.<sup>21</sup> The only difference between them is that the former leader is a hard-line Stalinist Marxist while the prosecutor is an apostle of the capitalism which has recently come to the country. Their essential similarity is hinted at even in their almost reversible names.<sup>22</sup>

The entire trial is presented to us through the interpretive lens of the news camera—a point which Barnes underscores repeatedly. The role of the camera in staging public events and shaping public opinion, in the absence of ready facts, is one of the more important themes of the novel. The trial scenes are presented to us along with a Greek chorus of commentary from a group of students who are watching it on television and from the narrator's careful descriptions of the ways in which each shot is chosen for a certain effect. The camera, we are reminded, is not just an empty vessel which carries the news from its location to our living rooms and bedrooms; it also selects, shapes, and creates the images. This same line of reasoning is reminiscent of that employed by poststructuralist critics about the nature of language itself, which also shapes what it transmits.

The use of the students to help tell the story of Solinsky's trial is one of the innovations of the novel. Their comments are interjected into the narrative of the trial, italicized and set off in brackets. We have not yet met the students or even known they were watching when we hear their first often enthusiastic and sometimes flippant or cynical interjections (30).<sup>23</sup> It is not until somewhat later that they are ever described in the third person. We are given a glance at Vera better than a third of the way through the novel (51). Stefan, Atanas, and Dimiter are mentioned shortly thereafter (53-4). But for the most part, we encounter them in their verbalized responses to the ongoing trial.<sup>24</sup>

Barnes' portrayal of the students along with the trial is a part of one of the larger formal innovations of the book. Most novels focus on a central protagonist or a few protagonists of equal importance. It is very difficult to

portray larger groups as characters.<sup>25</sup> More often, groups become simply part of the background upon which the protagonist acts or reacts. But Barnes strives, in The Porcupine, to give voices to groups and allow them to speak, in a limited way, as characters. Besides the voices of the students, which are generally presented without verbal tags so that they often become the voice of a group rather than of distinct individuals, and the protests of the women in the opening pages, we also have the antics of a group of radicals, and we witness public reactions to the trial. Included among these is a satirical mock-auction of Petkanov's possessions led by a radical group called the Devinsky Society and presided over by an effigy of the former leader himself (97).

Barnes' observations in The Porcupine struck one Publishers Weekly reviewer as evidence of his "dark and cynical view of human nature and of all political systems" ("The Porcupine Man" 53). Such is a rather quick judgment and summary execution of a novel whose subtleties demand closer scrutiny. For one thing, The Porcupine, has nothing at all to say about "all political systems." It focuses only on capitalism and communism, both of which it sees as containing within them the seeds to their own failure (which in both cases can be seen as greed, a lust for power, and a tendency toward fanaticism). Some other reviewers objected to the political content of the novel, or, it may be suspected, to the fact that the novel, unlike Barnes' earlier works, is so deeply and overtly political.

But Barnes' politics, inside and outside of his fiction, are not a simple matter to pin down. And, compared to the works of a deeply committed Marxist novelist such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o', Barnes' novel seems relatively tame and unprogramatic. Perhaps it is his (legitimate) skepticism about politics and political solutions that disturbs readers most, even though it is this orientation which saves him from any charge from formalist quarters of being a

propagandist of one political position or other rather than a novelist. Many divergent views on politics are encountered in Barnes' novels. In Talking it Over, Stuart, who is certainly a sympathetic character, declares himself a materialist and then offers a brief meditation on what he means by that label: "The two great creeds that have ruled the world this century—capitalism and communism—are both materialist; one's just better at it than the other" (234). To reduce Barnes' works to one political viewpoint is an act of oversimplification. Reviewer Michael Scammel offers a more accurate summary of The Porcupine's political position, and perhaps Barnes' as well, declaring that the author "wishes to question the common view that the fall of communism in Eastern Europe has been an unmixed blessing, that it will lead automatically to a more just and democratic order" (36).<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, if we may take advantage of intertextual evidence, many of the anti-theoretical comments of Geoffrey Braithwaite would fly in the face of such a charge. He declares that "The writer who imagines that the novel is the most effective way of taking part in politics is usually a bad novelist, a bad journalist, and a bad politician" (130). Perhaps Barnes, along with Flaubert, simply does not believe in progress, or at least does not believe that we've achieved it. To that charge, perhaps he would, as Geoffrey Braithwaite does on Flaubert's behalf, cite the twentieth century as reason enough not to believe in the concept (129). The world surely does change. People continue to invent and adapt, but in the satellite countries of the former Soviet Union after the advent of the "free" market, and in America, where the gap between the rich and the poor is again and again described as among the largest in the world, hunger continues to take its toll. The most basic of human problems (e.g. finding enough to eat) are little closer to being solved than they ever were.<sup>27</sup>

Statues, like political systems, come and go. Barnes' narrator reminds us that before Alyosha there had been many other symbols which wore out their welcome:

One year, bronze Stalins had been purged at a whisper from Moscow. They had been taken from their plinths in the night and delivered to a patch of waste ground near the central marshaling yard, where they were lined up against a high wall as if awaiting the firing squad. (42)

During "the Changes," the label with which the people of the country referred to the changeover from the older state-controlled economy to the newer market-driven economy, more and more statues of old, now discredited, heroes were removed from the cities. Effigies of Brezhnev, Lenin, and Petkanov himself joined the ranks of the discarded icon. Alyosha's fate, for a good part of the novel, hangs in the balance. And the narrator, at one point, argues against his removal. The triumph over fascism, the narrator maintains, was in itself a good thing for the people of the country in question. The urge to remove anything which points to the past reveals a willingness to forget history and a lack of complexity in understanding how we came to be at the present moment, as the narrator here summarizes:

Others believed that Alyosha should stay on his hill. It was, after all, indisputably true that the Soviet army had liberated the country from the Fascists. . . . Why not let him remain where he was? You did not have to agree with every monument. You did not destroy the Pyramids in retrospective guilt at the sufferings of the Egyptian slaves. (44)

This obsession with exiling past monuments is related to the obsession with renaming which the narrator exemplifies in the many times that he refers to

current government agencies as “socialist (formerly communist).” It is also revealed in the renaming of public places: “Vera crossed the Square of St Bassily the Martyr, which had, in the course of the last forty years, also been Stalingrad Square, Brezhnev Square, and even, briefly, in an attempt to get around the whole problem, the Square of the Heroes of Socialism” (51). Barnes plays such things for laughs, but he simultaneously uses them to allude to serious issues.

In the final pages of the novel, we see that Alyosha too has been confined to the margins of history. He, along with the other effigies, is sequestered and left to decay out of the public’s sight. But it would be too easy to read this confinement as simply the uncomplicated end of an era. For, along with it, we must consider the final image of Stefan’s grandmother.

Stefan's grandmother lurks in the shadows of the novel. She seldom speaks since her long life has taught her “that most questions did not require answers” (53). The students, especially Atanas, tease her about her picture of Lenin and her silent skepticism about the new order of things. We know with whom she sides. When Petkanov turns the tables on Solinsky during the middle of the trial, accusing the prosecutor of taking advantage of what was offered to him under the old regime, we hear the grandmother chuckling to herself in the kitchen (87). When we see her, in the last pages of the novel, standing silently in the rain, holding her picture of Lenin in clenched fists as passersby mock her, she becomes symbolically linked to the protesting women in the opening pages of the novel, who take to the streets because of the lack of food in the shops since the arrival of the new government (a phenomenon that the prosecutor euphemistically refers to as an “adjustment difficulty”). That last scene of her in the rain seems contrived when described in abstract, but in the context of Barnes’ novel, it is very powerfully moving. If we do not take her as a symbol for the continuing faith in some form of communist government, then we must at least

see her as representative of the hopes which Marxism was, at least in theory, created to vouchsafe.

Besides its critique of the effect of media on interpretation of news events, Barnes' novel implies a critique on the extreme forms of linguistic skepticism which have dominated certain poststructuralist circles. In the opening scenes of the novel, as has already been mentioned, we witness a protest led by and composed of local women. Barnes tells us that the protesters "had not come for an exchange of insults" (5). Instead, they make themselves heard by banging on pots and pans carried from their kitchens, creating an "enormous protest, which contained no words but every argument" (6). This wordless speech is privileged over language:

There was no decline into words, for they had heard nothing but words and words and words—incredible, indigestible words—for months and months and months. . . . They spoke without words, they argued, bellowed, demanded and reasoned without words, they pleaded and wept without words. (6)<sup>28</sup>

Linguistic skepticism is certainly a valuable idea. Emphasizing the multiple possibilities of meaning in a given phrase or document has often allowed critics to raise or reconstruct voices and interpretations which have been overlooked or repressed. But taken to extremes, such skepticism leaves us without a basis for understanding or for action. And positions on this particular dilemma tend to polarize into what nearly amount to caricatures. I would suggest that it is impossible to be both rational and completely against linguistic skepticism in some form or other. Linguistic skepticism is a "fact" of postmodern life. But there are, of course, degrees to which one can take such skepticism. Does admitting the simplicity and inadequacy of older models of

language (as, say, an uninfluencing container which carries meaning from a distinct sender to a distinct receiver) which do not take into account the shaping power of language and the difficulties of interpretation amount to declaring that all communications are ambiguous?

Ambiguity itself exists on a sliding scale. One can have both doubts and reasonable certainties without giving away entirely to confusion. The women protesters in Barnes' novel avoid words in order to avoid misunderstanding. And while a protest consisting of women banging on pots and pans with cooking utensils can be read in many ways, it cannot be read to mean just anything or to mean nothing, especially if one considers an important context of the protest itself: a lack of food in the shops since the advent of capitalism.



## Conclusions: Histories of the Novel and the Nature of History

“One bit of information and people are immediately off into their theories” (Talking it Over 60; Spoken by Gillian)

What are we calling post-modernity? . . . I must say that I have trouble answering this . . . because I’ve never clearly understood what was meant . . . by the word ‘modernity’ (Michel Foucault. Qtd. in Smart Postmodernity 5)

A good deal of confusion about what we should think of as postmodern novels depends upon what we choose to accept as the history of the novel.

Lennard J. Davis, in Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel, sets forth three general categories of theories about the origins of the novel up until the time of his thesis and then supplies what he feels to be a more useful account. These earlier theories he calls the evolutionary model, the osmotic model, and the convergent model (2).

The first of these theories borrows from biology and, more specifically, from Darwin’s theory of evolution. This “evolutionary” model sees the novel, like an organism, changing by slow degrees and adapting to changing circumstances in order to survive. Davis counters the evolutionary metaphor, upon which this sort of theory rests, on the grounds that it does not necessarily fit the way literary forms change and grow: “There is no necessity for literary works to be guided by either slow change or adaptation. In nature, radical mutations usually die, but in literature the radical is frequently the best adapted to survive” (4).

The second, or “osmotic,” model draws on sociology and has the strength of seeing the novel as a part of its wider culture. Davis notes that in this model “many of the dominant themes of philosophy and culture are seen as permeating, in rather undefined ways, the structure of narrative and changing it”

- (5). Davis' objection here is not to the premise of the osmotic model, but with the lack of specificity in which it points out (or does not point out) the reasons for the various seepages and influences: "Has capitalism changed narrative? Certainly. But one wants to know: In what way? By what chain of causality?"
- (6). According to his description, this model assumes that everything in a given culture has some influence on everything else. And while this may ultimately be true, such an assertion is of little value if the specifics of influence cannot be traced.

The third or "convergent" model sees the novel as the sum of all previous narrative forms: "the admission here is that the novel really comes out of everything that preceded it" (6). Davis sees the weakness of the convergent model as its lack of account for "any intentionality at all" (7). There is no explanation why the best aspects of so many earlier genres would necessarily combine into one all-encompassing genre. Surely, Davis seems to suggest, there must be some causal explanation, whether it be a single force or, more likely, a combination of forces which bring about such a transformation in the history of narrative.

After describing and dismissing these three competing models, Davis describes his own theory, which draws upon the work of Edward Said and his mentor Michel Foucault. The task Davis sets before himself is to think of the novel as part of a larger discourse and to describe, as precisely as possible, the causal connections between the novel and that larger discourse.

A contributing factor to each of these models of the origin of the novel, except Davis' own, is the role of the romance, particularly French heroic romances of the seventeenth century. These prose narratives have often been seen as a primary influence on the novel, which is often thought of as either a covert continuation of romance or (more often) as a challenge or refutation of its

predecessor (25). Davis takes what he considers to be a different route, identifying the origins of the novel not in the romance but in the birth of journalism and print media.

The romance and the novel share certain characteristics, but not, according to Davis, enough for us to consider the romance the necessary precursor to this newer form of prose narrative. Part of the difference lies in what Davis calls the “pre-structure” of the novel and of the romance, which we might consider, more simply, as the intended audience, its assumptions, and its beliefs. The romance, with its interminable tales of chivalry set in the distant past, was aimed primarily at the only class of readers who had time to indulge in it: the aristocracy. The novel appealed to a different demographic: people interested in realistic accounts of the recent past. The romance, in short, has idealism as its goal, showing the chivalric past not as it was but as it should have been, while the novel, regardless of its ultimate truthfulness or fictionality, focuses on the realistic and the recent.

A part of this early journalism which became a precursor to the novel is the print ballad. The ballad and the novel, Davis argues, have many things in common. Both were absolutely dependent upon the speeding up of prose production brought about by the printing press. And both consistently made claims to the newness and truthfulness of their content. This ambiguity about the truth of content is an essential component of what Davis calls this “news/novels discourse,” out of which the novel developed.

Davis identifies one of the difficulties in tracing the history of the novel as the lack of “the language or even the theoretical framework to talk about the concept of continuity” (44). Rather than seeing forms as either a reaction to or an influence on another form, he invites us to see the history of the novel not as “a series of genres displacing each other” but as “a discourse that is forced to

subdivide" (44). Davis laments the simplicity of the former view, but notes that "much of literary history relies on this paradigm" (44).

It is interesting that even though Davis tries to distance his own account of the history of the novel from that of Ian Watt, outlined in The Rise of The Novel, the two present quite complementary views which share a fair number of assumptions. Watt, like Davis, identifies the differences between the economic position held by the audience of the romances and that of the novel: "These less affluent readers would not have been able to afford the French heroic romances, usually published in expensive folios" (41). Likewise, though in less detail, Watt acknowledges the break between the novels and previous literary forms: "Defoe and Richardson are the first great writers in our literature who did not take their plots from mythology, history, legend, or previous literature" (14). He also notes the genre's debt to journalism (35). Though there is some justice in locating Watt, as Davis does, in the "osmotic" school of theories about the novel, doing so downplays both Watt's contribution and the ways in which it complements Davis' own reading.

If we step forward a few years from the time of Davis' work, we can see the paradigm he describes at work in the endless and often profitless debates about postmodernism's relationship to what is almost always seen as its precursor, modernism. The greater part of this debate is centered in certain Marxist literary circles, where postmodernism is seen as little more than an advertisement for and endorsement of consumer capitalism. At the same time, modernism is seen as occupying a special critical space above the fray of commodity exchange. Modernism is seen as an art whose very difficulty makes it resistant to being turned into yet another commodity. I am referring here, of course, to Fredric Jameson's position, outlined in Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.<sup>29</sup> To Jameson and those who agree with his

arguments, the postmodern novel, with its combining of genres high and low, its embracing of popular culture, and its ambivalence toward the traditional distinctions between truth and fiction, history and story, is anathema.<sup>30</sup>

Rather than seeing the postmodern novel as a progress forward from modernism or a fall into decadence, I think we might find it more profitable to abandon the linearity of both of these views and see it instead as a return to the roots of the novel, to what Davis refers to as the “undifferentiated matrix” of fact and fiction which comprised early journalism and ballads. A similar concern about the truth and falsity of narrative—a similar cultural anxiety, argues Davis—existed then as now. And we might, in searching for the origins of the postmodern novel, be more wise to look to something other than just preceding literary forms.

Most critics find it easy to see modernism as a reaction to (and a form of resistance to) its contemporary culture: the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (the boom-time of industrial capitalism). I would suggest that postmodernism can also be understood in this way, and in particular as a reaction to one of the most vexing problems which is entirely unique to our times: the sheer abundance of information. The postmodern world is, after all, not the modern world. It presents different problems which require different means of understanding. And to say so is not to deny all historical continuity. Faced with such a volume of information (much of it contradictory) which no one person or even one group can hope to canvass, much less sort through and fully understand, the postmodern novel does what it can do: it presents that complexity. It is just this sort of uncertainty in the face of such an abundance of information that Jean Baudrillard often describes in his writings on contemporary culture:

it is a question here of a completely new species of uncertainty, which results not from the lack of information but from information itself and even from an excess of information. It is information itself which produces uncertainty, and so this uncertainty, unlike the traditional uncertainty which could always be resolved, is irreparable. (Selected Writings 210)

If we can look past his characteristic hyperbole, Baudrillard makes a distinction between what we might call traditional uncertainty, which results from a lack of information, and what we might call postmodern uncertainty, which results from an excess of information. There was, Baudrillard suggests, a time in the past when we could stave off uncertainty with the comforting thought that we lacked only information. He alludes to the confidence of nineteenth century scientific historians (e.g. Ranke) who believed that one bright day in the future, when our methods are finally perfected, total knowledge would be possible. But in the postmodern moment, information is abundant while knowledge lags behind. Even to the extent that postmodern art selects certain problems and suggests solutions to them, it must always be conscious of both its selection and of the tremendous tide of issues which it cannot hope to address. Hence it is partial, contingent, and often contradictory.

Postmodernism is also influenced (and here I would get no argument from anyone) by deconstruction and poststructuralism generally, which further complicates understanding. If sheer abundance of information were not enough of a problem for any person trying to make sense of the contemporary world, he or she can add to that the skepticism about language and the multiplicity of interpretations which, especially since the advent of poststructuralism, has been an unavoidable factor in any act of interpretation.<sup>31</sup>

The upshot of the argument I am outlining here is that Marxist critics of the sort I describe have picked the wrong enemy. For there is no compelling reason to assume that the handful of novels that we call postmodern are anywhere nearly as complicit with capitalism as are a great many other less formally complex genres including the paperback romance, the detective story, the “true crime” novel, the horror novel, and the ghost-written celebrity autobiography. The sales figures of the sorts of books we have been discussing make any assertion that postmodern authors present their works purely as commodities ludicrous. If that were their intention, then they have (collectively) chosen a rather dysfunctional means of pursuing it. A walk through any chain book store lends credence to this view. The huge displays at the front of the store are not, by and large, filled with postmodern. They are filled with Stephen King, Dean Koontz, the latest pseudo-psychological self-help manual, and the works of the clique of other authors who weekly vie for position atop the bestseller lists.<sup>32</sup>

What postmodern novels lay bare is the fact that all assertions of truth require a certain amount of assumption and exclusion. And this tendency, I would argue, has subversive potential in a world where so many rival groups claim to have pure, unmediated access to the truth. Such a caution is especially valuable when many of those same groups use their “truth” to justify violence against one infidel or other, however that particular infidel is defined.

An eloquent statement of this insight can be found in Hal Hartley’s film Surviving Desire. The protagonist, a literature professor named Jude, meets his friend Henry at a local bar and finds that his friend has decided to enter the monastery (a decision that Henry, according to Jude, often makes when he has been drinking). Jude offers Henry, who has also recently lost his job, some

money in order to “sustain” his newfound conviction, and this action sparks a quick debate on the value of belief:

Henry: You know, Jude, that’s your problem. You don’t believe in anything.

Jude: That’s a problem?

Henry: Of course it is.

Jude: Seems to me the people who believe in things are the problem.

Henry: How do you mean?

Jude: People who bomb embassies usually insist that they believe in things. Rival terrorist organizations machine gun women and children in supermarkets because they believe in things. Elected officials shut down hospitals and then vote for increases in the defense budget, usually, because they believe in things. Now, I’d rather not believe in things. (Hartley)

It should be noted that from this point one could descend into nihilism or assume, tentatively and cautiously, the relative truth of something. In the context of this film, and in the context of Barnes’ novels, radical postmodern skepticism does not lead deterministically to nihilism. Characters such as Jude and Braithwaite continue to search for meaning in spite of the obstacles which confront them and in spite of the fact that absolute, objective, unwavering truth is out the window almost from the beginning of their quests. The Catholic church, with its ready dogma, becomes an easy representation of the sort of master narratives toward which postmodernism, as Lyotard has argued, is incredulous.

This radical skepticism toward all-encompassing explanations which have generally functioned quite well in the past is one of the defining elements



of postmodernism generally. M. Keith Booker describes this “loss of faith” as one of postmodernism’s distinctive features (101). And while certain theorists, as we have already mentioned, see this uncertainty as debilitating to any art with political aspirations, it is also possible to see this radical uncertainty as a defense against fanaticism and tyranny in its various forms, as Booker explains:

After all, if one can never be entirely sure that one is right, then fanatical devotion to one’s ideas becomes impossible, and surely one cannot justify the employment of the most extreme means in order to accomplish one’s ends. (120)

In Telling the Truth about History, social historians Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob concur: “The effort to establish a historical truth itself fosters civility. Since no one can be certain that his or her explanations are definitively right, everyone must listen to other voices” (11). Furthermore, admitting the uncertainty, in the absolute sense, of a proposition need not be a cause for political inaction or quietism. It simply emphasizes that one’s own views, and likewise the views of others, are ultimately tentative. Such a position might be a reasonable stay against fanaticism and intolerance. We can conclude with Booker that “little is to be gained through resisting tyranny by becoming a tyrant in one’s own right” (120).

If such features define a work as postmodernist, then it should be no insult to find one’s work classified under such a rubric. Barnes’ novels, Flaubert’s Parrot especially, are often cited, with or without qualifying definition, as postmodern novels. And, according to the features described by Booker, Hutcheon, and others, such seems to be a fitting description.

### **Barnes and Historiography**

The two central questions of historiography are “how do we obtain knowledge of the past?” and “how much of the past is it possible for us to know?” There are a diverse number of positions in the literature. Below we will focus on a number of theorists whose views seem congruent with that expressed in Barnes’ fiction and which propose answers to these important questions.

E. H. Carr’s What is History?, though written in 1960, a decade before the term “postmodern” began to be frequently bandied about, anticipates many of the debates which would become central to the practice of history in the postmodern period. In many ways, Carr’s take on the practice of history resonates with the themes articulated in Barnes’ fiction. Carr emphasizes the subjective position of the author situated in history rather than in some mythical “objective” realm outside of it: “The historian, before he begins to write history, is the product of history” (40). He challenges the totalizing impulse of nineteenth century Rankeian history, emphasizing instead the principle of selection in the turning of “facts” into “historical facts”:

The facts are really not at all like fish on the fishmonger’s slab. They are like fish swimming around in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use. . . (23)

Barnes echoes this metaphor in Flaubert’s Parrot while describing the nature of biography. The biographer too is a sort of fisherman: “The trawling net fills, then the biographer hauls it in, sorts, throws back, stores, fillets and shells. Yet consider what he doesn’t catch: there is always far more of that” (38).

Carr also combated what he called the “cult of individualism” which sees an easy division between the individual person and the societal background. He emphasizes that individuals are born, live, and die in a social context and

that the relationship between individual and society is not simple or one-way: “As soon as we are born, the world gets to work on us and transforms us from merely biological into social units” (31). In fact, it could be easily argued that the process has its beginnings long before birth. Parents, after all, have expectations and aspirations for their children well in advance of the moment of birth. Along with the rejection of individualism, Carr rejected the “great man” theory of history—the idea that all significant historical actions happen, socially, from the top down (45).<sup>33</sup>

But as much as Carr’s assertions and arguments fit in with the view I have been describing in these pages—as much as he is, in some sense, a postmodernist before there was such a term—there are some dichotomies that he is unable to reconcile. He is particularly dismissive of fiction. Instead of writing history, one can turn, decadently, to other genres: “you can write propaganda or historical fiction, and merely use facts of the past to embroider a kind of writing which has nothing to do with history” (29). At another, even more dismissive, point, he declares:

history may relapse into theology—that is to say, a study not of human achievement, but of the divine purpose—or into literature—that is to say, a telling of stories and legends without purpose or significance. (124-5)

Clearly, as any familiarity with literature or anthropology would prove, stories and legends, even of the most fanciful kind, are told with a purpose and carry a significance. In fact, Carr is paradoxically fond of quoting literary sources to back up his points even though he is ultimately dismissive of literature as ahistorical. As great as he was at insisting that historians complicate the given dichotomies of the day, the boundary between fiction and history was one that he dared not cross or even complicate.

The distinction between literature and history is one which Barnes' work (and the work of other postmodernists in like vein) challenge but do not obliterate. This line of demarcation is one of those which become blurred. Fact and fiction blend in ways which can make some readers, long comfortable with the assumption that there is a clear and observable line between the two, decidedly uncomfortable. Fear of this particular ambiguity is by no means an anxiety unique to our age. Davis dramatizes a very similar anxiety about the blending of history and fiction among French novelists and commentators in the early eighteenth century (36). In fact, Davis suggests that before the birth of the novel, genres that we associate with fictional accounts and those that we associate with factual accounts were much more fluidly intertwined. Poetry, for example, was considered a serious means of recording history before the long prose narrative became the overwhelmingly popular genre. Early newspapers combined what we would consider appropriately factual articles with obvious fictions. If we trace back to a time long before that which concerns Davis, we find prose and poetry intermingled in the entries of the Anglo Saxon Chronicle.

Furthermore, Carr and Barnes' challenges to objectivity (in the empiricist sense) in history are neither the result only of what some reactionary critics dismiss out of hand as the "modish" schools of literary criticism (meaning, one would suppose, anything after the New Criticism) nor simply the result of 1960s French philosophical thought generally--not that I would deny the obvious importance of both to postmodernism. Distrust of empiricist objectivity in history began very early in the twentieth century, if not earlier. American historian Carl L. Becker was articulating a radically subjective approach in the 1930s. His essay, "Everyman His Own Historian" emphasizes many of the same themes which concerned Carr and which have concerned postmodernism. Becker emphasizes selection and interpretation: "To establish the facts is always

in order, and is indeed the first duty of the historian; but to suppose that the facts, once established in all their fullness, will ‘speak for themselves’ is an illusion” (249). He also emphasizes the essential literary nature of historical writing:

History in this sense is story, in aim always a true story; a story that employs all the devices of literary art . . . to present the succession of events . . . and from the succession of events thus presented to derive a satisfactory meaning. (248)

Nor does challenging objectivity mean an automatic flight into nihilism. And this, perhaps, is the one area in which postmodernism is most often misunderstood. Braithwaite comes closest to this sort of position in a moment of desperation halfway through Flaubert’s Parrot: “We can study files for decades, but every so often we are tempted to throw up our hands and declare that history is merely another literary genre: the past is autobiographical fiction pretending to be a parliamentary report” (90).<sup>34</sup> The work of British historian Christopher Hill has gone a long way to show that parliamentary reports are not without their own rhetorical stances. They are always spoken with a cautious eye toward the institutions they work to support and/or critique. But Braithwaite’s position, at this point in the novel, is a defeatist one. The central difference between “historical” and “literary” is, of course, that historical writing assumes a closeness to actual events that most literary writing does not pretend to. At the same time, historical writing—especially in as much as it embraces narrativity—is not simply a litany of facts. In the first place, the “facts” are not given, they are chosen from a range of possible events of which we still have some trace (which makes them still possible facts, unlike the uncountable other events which may have occurred but left no trace). In order for facts to be understandable, they must be selected, assimilated, and interpreted. And even

if historical writing were a mere litany of facts, it would not be a list which transcribes itself. It would always require a transcriber, and the transcriber—assuming he or she is not omniscient—would not know all facts and therefore could not record them all. Even if we were to grant that he or she could, it would be necessary to order the list in some way, since every item cannot occupy the same position on a list. Like Borges' image of the mapmaker making a map the exact same scale as the world, the task of creating such an omniscient history becomes both maddeningly impossible and ultimately of no human value. We already have the world; what we must continually (re)invent are interpretations of it.

### **Redefining Objectivity in Historical Writing**

A few theorists have reached useful conclusions which address the dilemma described in the last several pages. I would like to focus on three books in particular: Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob's Telling the Truth about History and Richard Rorty's Objectivity, Relativism and Truth and Philosophy and Social Hope. Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob are professional historians as well as historiographers. Rorty is a professional philosopher with an interest in the nature of truth. What all of these authors share is a belief in pragmatist philosophy as an essential viewpoint from which to define historical truth. And while Rorty's position is more skeptical than that of Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, each of them take pragmatism as the starting point for a more inclusive view of history.

What Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob argue is that historians need to rethink their model of objectivity rather than simply following the lead of nineteenth century forbears in adopting a model of objectivity based on the one used in the hard sciences. Such a model of scientific history, they maintain, relies not only

on an outdated model of history, but also an outdated model of science. Their survey of historiography touches on three basic periods: medieval, modern, and postmodern. The first of these periods is typified by its faith in God as a guiding hand in historical movements. The second period is typified by a linked faith in science and progress as having a strong shaping role in the outcomes of historical processes. Finally, the third period is typified by transition and skepticism concerning the two previous ways of organizing historical experience. Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob spend the bulk of their time describing the second and third periods (the first is largely assumed) and proposing their own solutions to the challenges postmodernism makes to modernist historiography.

The modern period in historiography was largely defined by what Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob describe as the heroic model of science. In a move to distance itself from the power that had been amassed by the church, the philosophes of the eighteenth century (taking their cue from Newton's Principia, as well as the works of Bacon and Descartes) began a movement which would eventually transfer the faith once reserved only for religion to a new, mechanistic, scientific, understanding of the world and of people's place in it. Along with this understanding came the creation of the scientist as a neutral observer existing in a world of objective observation, physical laws, and mathematical truths.

This view of the scientist as a truth seeker with access to a heretofore unprecedented neutrality existed with very little modification until World War II. It was in the wake of the Manhattan Project that "Westerners in large numbers began to see the need to understand the values and motives of the scientists who ushered in the nuclear age" (30). Skepticism toward science and a questioning of its economic and political complicities has continued to rise ever since, to the

point that “Late in the twentieth century, the word ‘science’ conveys power without the assurance of benevolence” (277).

Taking their cue from the success of the scientific method in the natural sciences, historians of the nineteenth century sought to recast history in a scientific mold. It is during this century that total history became what seemed a reachable goal. And during this optimistic period comes Leopold von Ranke’s (in)famous dictum that history should (and, in fact, could) retell the events of the past as they “really were” became the implicit motto for a scientific and objective history (74). The predominant literary device employed for the telling of such history was the omniscient third-person narrator (73).

Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob argue that nineteenth century historians overstated their case and stuck too close to a model of scientific inquiry which cannot be fully applied to history. Essentially, they argue that historians, rather than clinging to a borrowed and ill-fitting idea of objectivity (from the natural sciences), will have to recreate a model of objectivity which can be better applied to the process of writing history. Further, they maintain that historians can no longer maintain the hubris which seemed so easy for Ranke and his disciples. Historians, too, are acculturated and cannot wish away their own ethical and political beliefs in order to write history as it really was. The writing of history is, rather, a scientific as well as a creative process. The desire to tell an accurate story of the past is combined with a more standardized methodology of the treatment of sources. But, in this new historiography, there must also be the acknowledgement that historians are human beings first and historians second. And as human beings, they are informed by their own cultural values and are not mere conduits of unmediated truth from the past to the present.

In addressing the questions we have been encountering in this essay, the work of American neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty is very useful.



Rorty's view explains, better than any other I have yet encountered, how a culture skeptical of claims to absolute truth (i.e. postmodern culture) can exist without positing a new dogma or descending into relativism, solipsism, or nihilism. Rorty, an antirealist, has no faith in what he dubs the "correspondence theory of truth." Statements are not true by virtue of their correspondence to some external reality (outside of culture, language, and history) since human beings have no unproblematic access to such a world (not even enough, Rorty argues, to maintain with certainty that such a world exists). In order to objectively judge the correspondence of one culture's ideas about the world with the world itself, we would have to view the world and the theory used to explain it from outside of both. Such a "gods-eye view" (a phrase Rorty borrows from philosopher Hillary Putnam) is simply unattainable; therefore, we must make do with what we have and refrain from assuming the sort of certainty that only gods could possess.

But Rorty, an uncharacteristically optimistic postmodernist, sees this lack of absolute certainty as no occasion for weeping. We have well-established means of arriving at truths (e.g. rules of argumentation and evidence, scientific methods, etc.). And each culture or subculture has what Rorty regards as the essential context in which truths are deliberated, promoted, or rejected: the community. It is only within a given community that notions about truth and falsity have any meaning.

At first glance, Rorty's emphasis on communities and consensus in establishing truth seems akin to relativism, but Rorty employs a few other tactics to prevent such an identity of the two views. Within any community (any context) there are always differing accounts of what is true. But these differing accounts are not all considered to have equal weight. According to Rorty, what we call truths are those things about which it is relatively easy to gain consensus.

Where various interpretations are posited but no version has won out, what is to be taken as the truth is still a question. We would, for instance, have very little trouble gaining consensus that the earth revolves around the sun. Even if there were, in our culture, still some adherents to the older view that the sun revolves around the earth, or to some other theory of the orbits of the planets, the overwhelming consensus would be in favor of the heliocentric model. On any point, there is always the possibility of conflicting views, but the existence of multiple viewpoints does not mean that any view is as good as any other.

To truly understand Rorty's position requires that we describe it in more detail. The reason that Rorty's position is not a relativistic one is because both relativists and believers in absolute truth share a similar epistemological outlook that Rorty rejects. Believers in absolute truth always posit (or assume) the existence of an access to some acultural standard outside of all cultures by which cultures can be compared. So, standing on this assumed ground, the believer in absolute truth can proclaim, "culture X is closer to the truth than culture Y." The relativist position assumes the same ground. Because it is only from a standpoint outside of all cultures (and according to some acultural standard) that the relativistic claim "all cultures are equal" can have any meaning. Rorty's perspective (which he variously labels as neopragmatism, antifoundationalism, or antiessentialism) rejects this acultural ground from which either pronouncement can be made. On Rorty's view, pronouncements about the truth or ethicality of things are always made in the context of one culture or another. There's no way to escape all cultures (and even the fact of having grown up in one) and make such announcements from on high.

The view of truth common to pragmatism is quite different than that of other philosophies, but it has quite a bit in common with the view sketched by postmodern novelists and by Barnes in particular. What we describe as good or

bad and as true or false are always descriptions in a cultural context. Rorty's view on the subject shares much with William James, one of his philosophical forefathers:

In point of fact, there are no absolute evils, and there are no non-moral goods; and the highest ethical life—however few may be called to bear its burdens—consists at all times in the breaking of rules which have grown too narrow for the actual case. There is but one unconditional commandment, which is that we should seek incessantly, with fear and trembling, so to vote and to act as to bring about the very largest total universe of good which we can see. (Essays in Pragmatism 83).

James, here in 1891, articulates a view in which there are no absolute goods or evils and where ethical judgments cannot simply be delegated to received definitions of right and wrong. James' is also clearly a historical approach. What is judged right or wrong changes over time. It is significant, too, that bringing about the "total universe of good" which James describes as the goal of ethical behavior is defined culturally as "good which we can see" rather than in as good in any absolute sense.

Rorty explains the aims of pragmatism similarly in an essay from Philosophy and Social Hope. In discussing the philosophical distinction between appearance and reality, Rorty declares that pragmatists, both classical (i.e. James, Peirce, and Dewey) and 'neo-' (i.e. Rorty, Davidson, Quine, Goodman, and Putnam), "want to replace the appearance-reality distinction by that between descriptions of the world and of ourselves which are less useful and those which are more useful. When the question 'useful for what?' is pressed, they have nothing to say except 'useful to create a better future'" (27). Of course, that answer begets another question, which Rorty frames as "better by

what criterion?” to which pragmatists can only offer the admittedly vague answer “better in the sense of containing more of what we consider good and less of what we consider bad” (27). This answer, of course, leads to the question what exactly is considered good. In his reply to that self-posed question, Rorty sides with Walt Whitman by saying “variety and freedom” and with Dewey’s maxim that “Growth itself is the only moral end” (27).

These answers are admittedly less precise than one could hope for. But Rorty and James maintain they are the best we have. And, in fact, they correspond to our daily experience of the world. People make judgments of things, including the historical truth of things, based on standards gleaned from the cultures which have shaped them. This is as true of the relatively unreflective person whose cultural experiences have been limited to his or her birth as it is of those who have sought out new contexts and studied cultures of the past and the present. We can learn from other cultures. We can widen our own culture to include beliefs and practices of other cultures. And Rorty maintains that we should do so (since growth and variety are cultural aims).

In Rorty’s system, there is no definitive check on the ultimate rightness or wrongness of a particular interpretation. On his view the modifier “ultimate” has no place. The only absolute check possible would be to posit some extra-cultural yardstick of rightness and wrongness and, along with it, an extra-cultural judge to apply it: “There would only be a ‘higher’ aim of inquiry called ‘truth’ if there were such a thing as ultimate justification—justification before God, or before the tribunal of reason, as opposed to any merely finite human audience” (Philosophy and Social Hope 38). In his view, we are instead, to borrow Sartre’s phrase, “on a plane where there are only men.” But given this situation, cultures are still able to do amazing things. While we can’t prove absolutely that Capitalism is an advance over Feudalism, few would doubt that

the former seems to have some definite advantages over the latter. In fact, it's very hard to imagine, even as a thought exercise, being happy under Feudalism. And, while we can't prove with absolute certainty that the foundational principles of our science are 'true' in any absolute sense, few would doubt that the scientific method has a great deal of utility. One of the things that distances Rorty from many other philosophers who have articulated similar views is not that he finds the lack of an anchor for absolutistic statements, but that he sees it as quite possible for cultures to thrive and flourish without them. Rather than lament the lack of absolute truths or posit a god or an a priori to assure them, Rorty emphasizes that we are able to do incredible things without any mechanism for final justification. Final justification, for Rorty, is a metaphysical dream from which we should be trying to awake.

For Rorty, and for pragmatists in general, cultural inventions, including technologies as well as philosophies, are tools. And they are judged by their utility. They are created to solve particular problems. And, over time, they can become more or less useful at addressing those problems. Phrenology gave early scientists a certain amount of control over the subjects they wished to describe. For a short time, at least, it seemed a useful pursuit which promised to increase our collective knowledge. From our present historical viewpoint, it seems a misguided pseudo-science. But all that means is that we've found psychological and criminological tools which we deem more effective at describing and predicting behavior. Such is the nature of cultures: that they continue to develop more and better tools for their ever-changing purposes. And the same goes for philosophical views. The view that Rorty rails so much against was certainly useful in its heyday. He sees the 'correspondence theory of truth' along with the absolutistic view of truth in general as a view outworn.

Only time will tell if his judgments are a footnote in history or precursors to a new paradigm of understanding.

Our investigations into postmodern art and history leave many doubts still standing. Such, perhaps, goes with the territory. Barnes' novels teach us to be wary of certainty and the fanaticism that absolute certainty inspires. In his art, few things are certain; most is conjecture and hypothesis. But this attitude toward knowledge doesn't lead down a slippery slope to nihilism. Some interpretations are more reasonable, more believable, than others. As such his art serves as a useful model for the practice of literary and historical interpretation. He upsets our cherished certainties not to tell us that there is no truth, but to remind us that ours is ultimately a world of relative truths and relative certainties.

## Afterword

The division of history into periods is not a fact, but a necessary hypothesis or tool of thought, valid in so far as it is illuminating. (Carr What is History? 60).

If this study were to be carried out further, as I hope one day to do, it would include a fuller treatment of each novel. It would also be expanded in breadth, including treatments of each of Barnes' works not studied here: his three other novels Metroland, Staring at the Sun, and England, England; his collection of stories, Cross Channel; and journalism, Letters from London. Included along with these would be the four "Duffy" novels, which would likely provide an interesting dialog between "literary" and "popular" modes of artistic representation.

It has been my primary aim here to give a clear description of Barnes' novelistic practice and the recurrent themes with which it, in my reading at least, is more or less obsessed. But I have also, in the margins and footnotes as well as in the text, been arguing for a more accepting view of postmodernism—or at least for a more accepting view of a certain strand in that artistic movement. It seems relatively ridiculous that one should have to argue the multiplicity of something which defines itself primarily in terms of multiplicity, but that is in fact what I have spent a good deal of time doing. For, even in learned circles, postmodernism is very often not truly a subject of debate. Rather, crudely abstract caricatures of postmodernism, with some of its formal and philosophical traits but none of their depth, are bandied about as if they were truly representative.

It is quite time to emphasize again that postmodernism (and along with it modernism) is only definable on a continuum. Hence what we have truly are postmodernisms and modernisms. And in the case of postmodernism, the

defining element of that continuum might well be the text's orientation toward the accessibility of the past. One end of such a range might be labeled "fanaticism," or absolute certainty, though, according to the general assumptions under which we have been operating here, there would be few if any postmodern texts occupying such a position on the scale. At the other end, we might affix the label "nihilism." Here, according to my understanding of postmodernism, we would also find few if any postmodern texts, but we should entertain each extreme, for the time being, as logical possibilities, however unlikely.

This simple scheme would most likely engender as many arguments as it would solve (e.g. Does Julian Barnes' work claim greater accessibility to the past than Graham Swift's, or Don DeLillo's, or Shakespeare's?), but at least it might give us the benefit of a more profitable argument than the sort of abstract "pro" or "anti" postmodernist polemics (however much they often deny such a position) which have been popular since the advent of the term. So long as such arguments grounded themselves in a thorough discussion of specific texts or art works rather than dwelling forever in the realm of abstract theory, there would potentially be much to gain about the specific differences of the texts themselves, whether or not such an exploration proved anything significant about the nature of postmodernism (if that itself is not a dreadful oxymoron).

This is certainly not the only continuum by which postmodernism, or art in general, might be understood. Booker has suggested that another continuum might be the faith the artist has in the ability of art to create real cultural and political change. Other continua could be delineated as well, and a text's position (again, a highly arguable position) might give us some idea of what its concerns are, though such schemata would only be a starting point to a more



serious and comprehensive inquiry, for which the essay and the monograph are ideally suited.

The temptation to lapse into some sort of sentimental closing (or a parody of one), in these closing pages is almost irresistible. But for the sake of those who have maintained their interest this far, I will resist it. I would like to say though (if I can momentarily cast all postmodern irony aside) that working out these ideas has been a true pleasure. And I only hope that it might further critical thought and bring greater attention to Julian Barnes' deserving works. Barnes has, as Richard Locke put it, "an overt interest in ideas and a flair for formal innovation" (40). In the novels I have had the pleasure of describing and interpreting here, we can see the truth of both parts of that assertion.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> James Katowich received his MFA from the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. He was one of my office mates while I taught there and contributed greatly to this thesis through his comments and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> I tend to use the terms “postmodern” and “postmodernist” interchangeably, though they have more limited and differentiated meanings in some discourses (e.g. some theorists prefer to use the term “postmodern” or “postmodernity” to refer to culture in general after modernism while saving the second as an adjective to describe specific texts or artifacts).

<sup>3</sup> I'd like to note that I am quite a fan of Terry Eagleton's work, and I tend to agree with him on most every topic except the value of postmodernism. My reaction to his position and to Jameson's should not, then, be taken as reactionary. I also share Jameson's wariness of extreme forms of linguistic skepticism, though I do not, as he apparently does, take postmodernism in general as the sign of them (Postmodernism 18).

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, whose philosophical work underpins much of the New Historicist model of history and also informs Barnes' novel, warns against the tendency to see books in isolation from the discourses of which they are a part: “The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and autonomous form, it is

caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a note within a network” (The Archaeology of Knowledge 23).

<sup>5</sup>This version of the quotation is taken from a PBS documentary which aired on 10/11/98 on WHYY, Philadelphia. A very similar pronouncement can be found in Herschel B. Chipp’s Theories of Modern Art: “We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand” (264). I prefer the more concise, epigraphic quality of the version from the documentary.

<sup>6</sup> It is perhaps only a coincidence, but Braithwaite shares a significant namesake in historiography. Richard Braithwait’s A Survey of History (originally published in 1638) was greatly concerned with the moral purpose of the study of history, which he saw as “to inspire others towards the right direction in the present” (Southgate 34).

<sup>7</sup> Barnes’ reference is to the Norman Conquest of 1066. Barnes’ collection of short stories, Cross-Channel, is an extended meditation on the points of contact between English and French culture, which form much of the context of Barnes’ works.

<sup>8</sup> This translation is identified, according to the note at the beginning of the novel, as Geoffrey Braithwaite’s (i.e. Julian Barnes’). The translation in my reading copy (translated by Robert Baldick) reads: “His name was Loulou. His body was green, the tips of his wings were pink, his poll blue, and his breast

golden” (44). Flaubert’s original reads: “Il s’appelait Loulou. Son corps était vert, le bout de ses ailes rose, son front bleu, et sa gorge dorée” (Flaubert Oeuvres Complètes).

<sup>9</sup> In Talking it Over Gillian makes use of a similar technique when trying to explain why she and Oliver have decided to move to France. Her litany includes five different reasons for the move, each of which begins with “We came here because” but ends differently (248).

<sup>10</sup> Kavanagh’s career was not, as reviewer of The Porcupine Michael Scammell mistakenly assumes, a mere apprenticeship for Barnes’ career (“Trial and Error” 35). Rather, they ran concurrently. The first Barnes novel, Metroland, appeared in 1980 as did the first Kavanagh novel, Duffy. The fourth and, to date, last Duffy novel, Going to the Dogs, appeared in 1987, one year after Barnes’ fourth novel, Staring at the Sun.

<sup>11</sup> This same passage occurs verbatim in the frontispiece to all of Barnes’ novels.

<sup>12</sup> In a course on modern British literature that I took as an undergraduate, Dr. M. Keith Booker remarked that James Joyce also sometimes enjoyed confusing interviewers trying to make sense of his works. According to the account, when asked a specific question about one of his works, Joyce would sometimes offer the most outlandish interpretation possible while pretending he seriously believed it, leaving his interpreters to scratch their heads. Dr. Booker interpreted

this as evidence of Joyce's own reservations about giving too much value to authors' interpretations of their own works.

<sup>13</sup> In interviews, Barnes makes references to his character Geoffrey Braithwaite in ways which suggest that the character's views are not to be taken without a grain of salt. In one, Barnes refers to him as "a sort of crusty fellow" (Stuart 15). In another, Barnes refers to his narrator as "a tedious man" (Cook, Bruce. "The World's History and Then Some in 10 1/2 Chapters." Los Angeles Daily News. 10/7/89).

<sup>14</sup> The statement echoes one from Lee Loevinger, a member of the Federal Communications Commission during the 1960s, though Loevinger was discussing television, rather than film: "Television is the literature of the illiterate, the culture of the lowbrow, the wealth of the poor, the privilege of the underprivileged, the exclusive club of the excluded masses" (National Observer October 17, 1966).

<sup>15</sup> Of course, Birth of a Nation would not have struck Wilson as a flagrant distortion of history since it complemented his own overtly racist views and policies, as historian James W. Lowen has convincingly shown (Lowen 18-36).

<sup>16</sup> Oliver's choice of the masculine pronoun to describe women (here, Gillian) as well as men is a point of contention between him and his two closest friends. Gillian prefers "his or her," while Stuart prefers to pluralize the pronoun

regardless of its antecedent. It is interesting to note that Oliver adopts Gillian's usage after he falls in love with her.

<sup>17</sup> This reticence to divulge private information is a trait Gillian shares with her mother Mme Wyatt (146).

<sup>18</sup> Oliver maintains, in contrast to Stuart, that he "remembers all the important things" (11).

<sup>19</sup> Famous flood myths from before the time of the biblical account abound, and their similarity is striking, especially among the Assyrian and Sumerian accounts and the biblical account. Alan Dundes, editor of The Flood Myth, maintains that there is evidence demonstrating conclusively "that the flood myth has been known in the Near East from 2000 b.c. or earlier" (49).

<sup>20</sup> In an article from the New Yorker which appeared after the publication of The Porcupine, Barnes revealed that he based the character of Petkanov on former Bulgarian leader Todor Zhivkov who was, in Barnes' words, "the first former Communist head of state to hit the slammer." In reference to the historicity of the novel, Barnes said he had "used the outline of the Zhivkov trial (plus various specifics), borrowed the country's topography, and then gone off on my own." Perhaps as further evidence of the thin line between what is perceived as fiction and what is perceived as history, Barnes notes that one Bulgarian TV anchor, after relating the news of Zhivkov's seven-year sentence, held up a copy of The Porcupine and declared, "Soon you will be able to read

what an English novelist has to say about the trial of Zhivkov.” Reports stated that Zhivkov himself ordered a copy of the book to read in his prison cell (Barnes “Shouts and Murmurs: Stranger than Fiction” 140).

<sup>21</sup> In this respect the two protagonists of The Porcupine deserve the definition of fanaticism offered by Booker in his discussion of Vargas Llosa’s The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta: “like all fanatics, he [Mayta] is entirely intolerant of anyone with ideas different from his own” (112).

<sup>22</sup> Barnes also notes this similarity in names between the actual leader, Todor Zhivkov, and his prosecutor and “near-homonym,” Krasimir Zhekov (Barnes “Shouts and Murmurs: Stranger than Fiction” 140).

<sup>23</sup> Some reviewers seem to have rather prudishly objected to Barnes’ repeated use of “fuck” as an expletive in the text (particularly in the voices of Petkanov and the students), sometimes misidentifying it as a tendency of his fiction generally, which it is certainly not (Scammell 36).

<sup>24</sup> Comments by the students can be found on the following pages: 30-35, 59-62, 84-86, 100, 116-121, and 125.

<sup>25</sup> William Faulkner achieves a similar effect in “A Rose for Emily” where the town itself is represented by the narrator, labeled “we,” who often makes statements meant to reflect the perspective of the entire town distilled into a single voice.

<sup>26</sup> Some other of Scammel's interpretations are harder to agree with. His view that Petkanov is presented as the truly sympathetic character in the novel fails to explain how we can love such an avowedly arrogant misogynist who is obviously still drunk on his now failing power (and how that itself is a sign of potency, or to use Scammel's own diction, cojones, contra Solinsky's impotence as a prosecutor). Likewise, his charge that the novel contains no "other ideas of particular note" besides the one about capitalism as a mixed blessing completely overlooks the novel formal experimentation of the book and its overt focus on the ways in which media affect our collective sense of history. He also leaves us with the rather unsupported thesis that the novel inadvertently privileges Petkanov's utopian idealism (37). In the same vein, it is hard to take as earnest his claim that "Barnes, of course, cannot be held to account for not portraying [in The Porcupine] the historical Zhivkov" when he has spent the previous section of his essay doing just that (37).

<sup>27</sup> Zhivkov's thirty-five year stint as leader of Bulgaria came to an end in November 1989 (Glenny 164). According to Yoder, the new government's biggest struggle became one against inflation which rose to an incredible 460% in 1991 (121).

<sup>28</sup> Gillian, in Talking it Over, also privileges silence over speech, partly because she is rather private and taciturn by nature, and partly because she also shares a skeptic's view of language. After trying to sum up her own theory of



life, she concludes, “God, that must sound pious. Words don’t always hit the mark, do they?” (60). This understanding of the inadequacy of words is one of the reasons she enjoys painting restoration: “Perhaps that’s one of the reasons I love my work. There aren’t any words involved. . . . There’s a picture in front of me, and music from the radio if I need it, and no telephone” (60).

<sup>29</sup> In the second chapter of Postmodernism, Jameson articulates four “general positions on postmodernism” each of which, he laments, is “susceptible of either a politically progressive or a politically reactionary expression” (55-6). The positions he lists are these: 1) anti-modernist, pro-postmodernist (e.g. Ihab Hassan, Tom Wolfe), 2) pro-modernist, anti-postmodernist (e.g. Hilton Kramer of the New Criterion [reactionary] and Jürgen Habermas [progressivist]), 3) pro-modernist, pro-postmodernist (e.g. Jean-François Lyotard), 4) anti-modernist, anti-postmodernist (e.g. Manfredo Tafuri).

The first two positions see postmodernism as a radical break with modernism, for good or for ill. The latter two see postmodernism as a continuation of modernism, for good or for ill. Jameson seems to favor Habermas’ (progressive) pro-modernist/anti-postmodernist position.

<sup>30</sup> Jameson maintains that “What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally” (4). But we are left wondering at what golden age in the past was this not the case--certainly not since the advent of capitalism. And if we look at the function of patronage,

in the medieval period and into the Renaissance, we see that art there too is caught up in economics. There was perhaps some point in history in which art did not function as a commodity. But if we take Walter Benjamin seriously, and accept that art has its roots in religious ritual, we are forced to conclude that, even before the advent of the modern market, art was still complicit with power, often of a not-so-liberating kind.

Jameson argues that this capitulation to capitalism in postmodern art is the true thrust of postmodernism, whose gestures toward populism should be seen as the destructive “effacement” of “the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture” which has been abhorred by everyone from the New Critics to the Frankfurt School (2). But what Jameson has never explained overtly, at least so far as I am aware, is why Modernism, with its clearer distinction between “high” art and “pop” culture came to be the privileged mode of artistic expression among followers of his particular brand of literary theory. His most famous Marxist literary predecessor, George Lukács, after all, saw modernism as decadence and privileged realism. To be a modernist is not necessarily to be a leftist (one thinks of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Butler Yeats, hardly small names in the history of modernism). Furthermore, what exactly does modernist painting (in particular, abstract expressionism) have to say to the masses? How does one squeeze a radical political message out of an art that so resists didacticism?

<sup>31</sup> The advent of multiculturalism and the decline of one, unified, Western explanation of history as the history of the world has also played a part in the origins of a postmodern sensibility.

<sup>32</sup> Likewise, I would argue that Jameson's emphasis on Andy Warhol's art, in particular on Diamond Dust Shoes as representative of postmodern painting (and to some extent postmodern art generally) is, at best, a straw-man argument. Warhol might be better seen as a transitional figure between modernism and postmodernism or at least as a certain sort of postmodern artist among many other possible sorts. Furthermore, Jameson tends to ignore paintings by Warhol which run contrary to his thesis. How, for instance, are we to understand Myths: Mammy as apolitical, ahistorical, or entirely complicit with capitalism when the work itself has a clear historical referent and presents a clear challenge to racism and the commodification of certain caricatures of African American people as advertising copy? Likewise it is hard for Orange Disaster (Electric Chair) and Blue Electric Chair to escape political readings, portraying as they do the starkness of the electric chair and, in the latter, its result (nothingness, represented as a blank blue panel).

On a related note, we would do well to ask how Jameson's own work (which graces the bookshelves of almost anyone interested in postmodernism) escapes complicity with the very economic system which so dooms postmodernism? My used copy, if I remember correctly, cost \$16.50 and was purchased from a

national chain bookstore to which it represented simply one commodity among many.

<sup>33</sup> The false dichotomy between individuals and societies, which Carr articulates, is analogous to the simple distinctions between literary texts and historical contexts, which New Historicism has challenged.

<sup>34</sup> Scott incorrectly takes this statement as the viewpoint of the work as a whole. He claims that “if words are signifiers that, over time, can dance with a plurality of signifieds, then history becomes a fictional discourse whose signification perpetually reshapes itself like a cloud in the wind” (59). Scott’s reading would fit easily into Hawthorn’s “textualist” category.

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