

**“PARENTHESIS” AND THE UNRELIABLE AUTHOR IN JULIAN BARNES’
*A HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN 10½ CHAPTERS***

Abstract

This paper focuses on the ambiguous status of the half-chapter in Julian Barnes’ novel *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989). “Parenthesis” stands in contradistinction to the other ten chapters in that it offers a concerted riposte to the provisionality of postmodern history by installing love as a structuring logic by which the terrifying randomness of the past can be negotiated. Much of the distinctiveness of “Parenthesis” derives from the intrusion of an authorial-narratorial figuration of Julian Barnes which, it is argued, lends the half-chapter a degree of authorial privilege and narrative stability that is not evident elsewhere. By reading the ‘honesty’ of Barnes’ discourse on love as a postmodern strategy of seduction, it is claimed that the redemptive potential of love as a way of making meaning from chaos is compromised. To recognise this is to face the prospect that Barnes lulls his reader into believing that “Parenthesis” offers an escape from the scepticism of postmodernism only to confront them with their own naïve desire for order in narrative as in history.

In the shattered aftermath of the events of September 11th 2001, the British novelist Ian McEwan wrote a movingly reflective article about the indigestible reality of what had occurred. McEwan’s piece strives to grasp the ungraspable human cost of History writ large without politicizing either victims or perpetrators. His tone is uncharacteristically emotional, his theme, the failure of empathy that has enabled humans of a particular historical, political and cultural persuasion to murder humans of divergent (and even possibly sympathetic) persuasions. What has happened, he demands, to purge the attackers of the ability to identify with the suffering of others; how can we, that have been forced only to watch an unfolding tragedy, bridge the empathetic gap to feel the passengers’ unimaginable wrench from everyday normality into the surreality of their final moments of life? McEwan’s response is curiously heartfelt: “There is only love, and

then oblivion. Love was all they had to set against the hatred of their murderers” (McEwan 2001).

That a writer of impeccable postmodernist pedigree should retrench to such sentimentality throws an interesting light on the relationship between love and late postmodernism, but the problem of what to do with sentiment has been a consistent feature of postmodern writing.¹ British fiction of the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s engages repeatedly with the “waning of affect” (Jameson 1991, 10) that Fredric Jameson sees as characteristic of postmodern cultural production but whilst the love that is presented in texts such as Jeanette Winterson’s *The Passion* (1987), Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* (1989), A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990), Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* (1991) and Graham Swift’s *Ever After* (1992) cannot be said to be a straightforward romanticism, neither can it be dismissed as inauthentic or ersatz.. As Catherine Belsey has claimed, love “occupies a paradoxical position in postmodern culture: it is at once infinitely and uniquely desirable on the one hand, and conspicuously naïve on the other” (Belsey 1994, 73). In the historiographic metafiction cited above, love is the tantalising object of a search for intersubjective connection at the same time that it is reduced to a faint echoing presence that no longer accrues to itself an efficient network of symbolical associations.² In most cases it is located instead in the horizonless postmodern past to be excavated, analysed or deconstructed but felt only through its obliquity. Love is as much an artefact as history itself and equally as contradictory; it is for Byatt and Swift the ‘thing’ itself, sought but recognised only by its fleeting reverberations. It thus stands as a symptom of a much greater mystery: the impenetrability of the emotional past. Whilst Byatt and Swift distance affect through the papers of their nineteenth-century quarries, Barker and Ishiguro condemn it to the silence of the unspeakable; even Winterson, for whom desire is characterised by its urgency and intolerance towards barriers, regards love as the paradoxical consummation of and bar to coherent subjectivity. Only Julian Barnes’ *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* seems to gesture towards a desperate need for the presentness of love under postmodernity. Like McEwan, Barnes argues in the novel’s enigmatic half-chapter that only love can make the random provisionality of history meaningful but whereas McEwan’s dumbfounded retreat to an affective empathy in the face of a quintessentially postmodern act of

spectacularity is revealing in its simplicity, Barnes' parenthetical discourse on love's power to combat chaos is disconcerting in its complexity. In what follows I shall argue that only by recognising the centrality of "Parenthesis's" discussion of love to the descriptions of history's mutable operations can we come to a judgement about the authority of the half-chapter's embedded authorial voice in "Parenthesis". To paraphrase Barnes: does how we say I love you govern how we see the history of the world?³

'Parenthesis' and Narratorial Privileging

A History of the World in 10½ Chapters is a strangely neglected text and seems to have become increasingly marginalized within criticism of Barnes' work. It is, for instance, granted only a paragraph-length discussion in two recent critical overviews of Barnes' writing (Bedgood 2005; Head 2006) and is not mentioned at all in John Brannigan's *Orwell to the Present: Literature in England, 1945-2000*. Until the publication of *Arthur and George* in 2005 however, it was considered by many to be Barnes' defining output and a landmark in British postmodern writing. To claim that its chief preoccupation is with the problems inherent in the interpretation of the past seem quaintly self-evident at this late stage of postmodernism's evolution, but it is perhaps the most explicit example of recent British writing's engagement with the politics of history-telling. The novel interrogates the discursive forms through which history is produced and received, and seeks to subvert the autocracy of official Histories by installing challenges to those doctrinaire narratives which offer coherent and totalised visions of the past. Barnes questions the validity of any historiographical metanarrative which claims to offer a complete and inclusive history of the world, proffering instead a paradigm of history based upon fragmentation, discontinuity and contingency.⁴ His 'history of the world' – which by its titular definition as 'a history' is only one of many possible accounts - is characterised by its anti-linear formulation and by its scepticism towards any progressivist vision of history. The narratives contained within the novel all represent an incompleteness within history and intimate the impossibility of containing its randomness within a single unifying system of interpretation. For Steven Connor this incompleteness is an issue of the incommensurability between the subject and the form: 'The book's title teases its reader with the ludicrous failure of fit between the largeness of world history

and the crass smallness of the ten and a half chapters in which it is to be condensed' (Connor 2004, 75). The reader is forced to engage with an approach to historical narrative based less upon aetiological sequences of events than upon the representational process by which those events have been generated and perpetuated.

The novel deliberately problematises its own interpretation through this anti-chronological and dislocating structure, but it is more overtly problematised by the apparent arbitrariness with which the stories are ordered within the text. Structurally the novel consists of ten short stories loosely connected by the theme of a Darwinian 'survival of the fittest' history and by the motifs of Noah's Ark, water and voyaging.⁵ The half-chapter is distinguished from the surrounding stories by its ostensibly non-fictional qualities allied to an authorial 'sincerity' that Brian Finney describes as "didactic, mildly professorial ... with no apparent hint of irony or humour" (Finney 2003, 49). The ruminative monologue on the metaphysical randomness of existence and the arbitrariness of history's processes takes the form of a familiar nocturnal darkness of the soul, but the madness of the insomniac contains its own method in the way the narrative pulls together threads from the surrounding stories. The thematic continuity that is undermined by the disassociated narrative strands is partially recuperated in "Parenthesis" by its narrator's mingling of motifs, borrowed phrases and images from the other ten chapters and their mobilisation to explain, or at least illustrate the contingency of history. Thematic contiguity is undermined by the fracturing narrative and connections between the stories become dependent upon sporadic moments of self-referentiality. Allied to this disjointed structure is the problematical relationship between "Parenthesis" and the narrative as a whole.

Despite its anomalous status within the text as an explicit intervention by an authorial presence that lays down a tempting expository framework for the text as a whole, the centrality of "Parenthesis" has excited less critical comment than might be expected.⁶ Particularly given the curious thrust of its argument that the history of the world can only be understood through love's palliation. Critical approaches have tended to emphasise the importance of Barnes' 'honesty' and transparency at this point, contending that, because Barnes dispenses with the convention of authorial invisibility, his narrativised presence somehow endows the chapter with the weight of extra-textual

authority.⁷ Even when critics choose not to accept the integrity of Barnes' metafictional gambit, they appear shy of questioning the sincerity of the authorial voice: Finney describes "Parenthesis" as a "rare moment of truthfulness" (Finney 2003, 50), whilst Keith Wilson stresses the 'readily recognizable authorial voice' (Wilson 2006, 363). Recognisable, one wonders, from what? It is surely the case that the intrusion of the 'figure' of the author into the text creates a palpable division between narrative as fabulation (the surrounding ten chapters) and the parenthetical discursus of the authorial *deus ex machina*, but should such a blatant self-disclosure unproblematically invite the reader into a method of interpretation founded upon the author as organising consciousness and generator of meaning? I would argue that depending upon how ingenuously we are prepared to accept Julian Barnes as a character in *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, we are led into conflicting interpretative positions. "Parenthesis" leads the reader either to accept the integrity of the half-chapter to the 'meaning' of the book as a whole, or challenges us to read the novel as a ludic, but ultimately self-negating parody.

The question seems to be one of the trustworthiness of the narrator of "Parenthesis" but such an indeterminable quality is surely redundant when the status of narration is considered across the novel as a whole. Throughout Barnes normalises narrative instability sited upon unreliable narrators ("The Survivor", "Upstream!"), or manifest in the competition between narratives for pre-eminence ("The Stowaway", "Shipwreck", "The Visitors"). The accounts of the privileged narrators are characterised by their singularity of perspective, yet claim the authority of truth, and, in the case of Noah's history, in "The Stowaway", claim the authority of Divine truth. Barnes counterpoints the self-assurance of these accounts with the acknowledgement that beneath the veneers of self-claimed authority are competing narratives which history has not privileged. It is the interplay between these conflicting histories that exposes the instability of both. Given the preponderance of subjective and specious histories in these stories, it is realistic, and indeed essential, to question the basis upon which Barnes as narrator is considered to be more reliable.

Privilege closely attends narratorial control in this text and, as Gregory Salyer argues, combines with that singular perspective to constitute an empowered reality that in

turn informs claims of historical truthfulness.⁸ Domination of the past is derived from the monologism of the narrative voice, but Barnes' point is not that history offers up a Marxian reading of the victor's right to reinscribe the record, but rather that the poststructuralist acknowledgment of history's competing voices renders each of them equally reliable and unreliable, truthful and fabulated. Which "fabulation you choose to believe," Salyer suggests, "is the same as saying whose history and whose reality shall you believe" (Salyer 1991, 226). Whereas in the chapters entitled "The Visitors", "The Survivor", "Upstream!" and the first and third of the "Three Simple Stories" the fabular histories that temporarily abut each other are political, ideological but above all material, in "The Stowaway" – the novel's position-piece opening story – the narrative of the woodworm upon Noah's Ark competes against the grander narrative of spiritual exclusivity.

The woodworm's perspective on the Ark story is that of the outsider, a counter-history that decries the arbitrary policies of selection. He is alienated not only from the systems of power, as personified by the bullying, irascible figure of Noah, but also from a sense of automatic inclusiveness that derives from not being officially numbered amongst the creatures to be saved. His narrative represents the voice of those elided from the historical record and functions as an interpolation in the dominant narrative of biblical legend in order to reveal the authoritarian and exclusive nature of that narrative. By focusing upon the materiality of the Flood legend, cutting away in the process the doctrinal licence that protects the story from narrative consistency, Barnes sets it up against the other (hi)stories in the volume as open to challenge and refutation. Explicitly and gleefully exploring such elisions from the biblical account as how the Ark's human population sustained themselves and how the animals were discouraged from eating each other, demands of the narrative a level of internal, diegetic coherence of which it is incapable and ultimately reduces it to bathos. Noah, as the representative and vehicle of God's will on earth, is conveniently positioned as the first historian of the new world, and Barnes emphasises the principles of selectivity which constitute his vision of acceptable history. The separation of the clean from the unclean leads occasionally systematically, but more often indiscriminately, to animals being excised from the historical record, either by being eaten, being thrown over-board, or being slaughtered as victims of Noah's

unpredictable temper. His wilfulness makes him a dubious chronicler but equally a powerful claimant of narrative authority and manufacturer of history. Within the terms of the novel, Noah becomes the first unreliable author-narrator.

That the subaltern history of the woodworm is equally as partial as the ‘official’ account should be obvious from the conviction with which he claims its veracity: “When I recall the Voyage, I feel no sense of obligation; gratitude puts no smear of Vaseline on the lens. My account you can trust” (Barnes 1990, 4). As whimsical as “The Stowaway” is in tone, the bastardised Darwinian struggle that leads to the survival of the luckiest that it recounts is a serious opposing of authorial positions; that both Noah and the woodworm end up as questionable historians draws attention to the malleability of the authoritarian voice in any narrative and by implication must throw into question the singular perspective offered in “Parenthesis”. Elsewhere we encounter similarly unreliable author-narrators, those whose realities are manufactured in support of their individualized world-views. Kath Ferris’ belief in the ecological holocaust that afflicts the planet in “The Survivor” brings her into direct opposition with an institutional lobby of doctors and psychiatrists equally persuaded of her delusional disorder. The narratives of entropic inevitability and psychotic instability oppose each other across a space of contested rationality with neither position ultimately able to discredit its opponent. What takes place here is not a dialectical negotiation of comparative truth-systems, but an endurance test in which the most belligerently adaptable narrative survives. Authority, Barnes implies, in no way demands immanence, but is an outcome of accident and contingency, but most importantly, presence.

Such is also the case in “Shipwreck” where the sinking of the “Medusa” in 1816 and the subsequent portrayal of the stranded survivors by Géricault enables Barnes to revisit the notion of the mutability of artistic truth-telling. “Shipwreck” acknowledges Hayden White’s contention (White 1973) that the fields of historical and artistic discourse are intimately related and that the representation of the past constitutes a continual interplay between fabulation and facticity, between empirical and artistic truths. The compositional decisions involved in the production of “The Raft of the Medusa” (or “Scene of Shipwreck” as the narrator prefers) are motivated by an impulse for internal artistic consistency that incorporates but is not overshadowed by events from the field of

recorded history: “Truth to life, at the start, to be sure; yet once the process gets under way, truth to art is the greater allegiance” (Barnes 1990, 135). Art supports its own logic which, although informed by material contexts is ultimately self-sustaining. The truth narratives of artistic and historical discourses are interdependent but not co-terminous, and whilst Barnes’ description of Géricault’s painting suggests the co-existence of dual realities, both descended from the same event and both feeding upon the other, their relationship is one of direct competition for the authority of posterity. By focusing upon the paintings that ultimately failed the test of time, and by highlighting the conflictual intrapenetration of art and life, Barnes dismisses the totalising truth-claims of any singular narrative. Instead he offers artistic and historical palimpsests of impermanent authorities whose univocality is challenged and eventually superseded by alternative, and similarly fallible truth-narratives. That which appears most substantial within history and culture is presented in this novel as insubstantial and its continued relevance is dependent upon its ability to recognise and adapt to that insubstantiality.

Clearly the ‘historical’ chapters of this novel consistently problematise the stability of authority and authoriality and reject the symbolic fixity of individual truth in favour of a Darwinian competition for narrative survival. Yet, in returning to “Parenthesis”, Barnes proffers – albeit as a case of *faute de mieux* - a single, coherent counter to history’s randomness founded upon the central authority of the authorial/narratorial voice; “Parenthesis” consequently appears to contradict the assumptions of narrative instability which have been established in the surrounding stories. However disingenuously, it sets down an author-authorized framework for the novel as a whole, self-referentially indicating the metafictional intent by incorporating elements of other stories, but whilst it privileges Barnes’ perspective (as author and narrator), it elides the competing narratives which are, elsewhere, so aggressively pervasive. Such sleight of hand subtly distances “Parenthesis” from its surrounding narratives and distinguishes it with a sincerity that would elsewhere be highly dubious, yet in seeking to contextualize that distinction in *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* it is illuminating to recognise that the deliberate privileging of a specific viewpoint has a precedent within Barnes’ writing, namely, his earlier recuperation of the past: *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984).

In *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* Andrzej Gasiorek claims that the quest of Geoffrey Braithwaite for Flaubert's parrot becomes a search for an authentic voice from the past, an objective and empirical truth living through history. The novel contains the epistemological framework of a detective fiction, involving the reader in the problematical search not only for the genuine parrot, but also for the ambiguities within Braithwaite's own studious motivations. However, whilst it "discusses the difficulties of its own interpretation [it] also informs the reader how to interpret it" (Gasiorek 1995, 159). The novel depends upon that which is not articulated in history, those areas of the past which are inaccessible to the present, or, as Gasiorek neatly puts it, "the faint presence of the parrot's voice but the regrettable absence of the bird itself" (Gasiorek 1995, 160). Braithwaite's eventual acceptance that the notion of objective truth is illusory leads him to create within his narrative a multiplicity of possible Flauberts, all existing simultaneously within history, and all of equal 'truth' to the eyes of the present. The novel thus becomes less a search for veracity and more a contemplation on the process of endless fracture which denies the past to the present. More importantly however for the current discussion is Gasiorek's contention that the narrative deliberately problematises interpretation through Braithwaite's resistance to the reader's autonomous construction of meaning around Flaubert's life. As he says:

He [Braithwaite] carries out his own interpretation, setting the novel up to be read in a certain way. He structures the narrative in such a way that the reader's approach to it is effectively forestalled because it is directed down certain paths. He impedes interpretation by anticipating the moves by which it might proceed and by setting up his own protocols for how his narrative should be read. (Gasiorek 1995, 161)

The conscious presentation of a privileged way of reading the narrative of *Flaubert's Parrot* could be seen as a direct precursor to the implicit privileging of Barnes' perspective in "Parenthesis". As Braithwaite attempts to forestall an independent readerly analysis of his evidence, so "Parenthesis" may be seen as a similar diversion by which Barnes extends a comforting rationalisation of the novel's disparate subject-matters.

“Parenthesis” does not stand as an epiphanic revelation to the reader’s search for hermeneutic logic, but it does openly address and connect recurrent tropes and motifs within the novel with an apparent clarity, which provides the reader with an interpretative entrance into the text.

Unreliable Authoring and the Wondering I

The openness and accessibility of the half-chapter is principally engendered by the self-representation of Julian Barnes as a character who directly addresses the implied reader. Conscious of the translucence of the authorial/narratorial veil and equally aware of the postmodern reader’s intolerance towards the mystified ‘I’ of any first-person narrative, Barnes strives to disavow his role in the hoodwinking of the reader, deliberately confronting the identity of his narratorial self:

Poets seem to write more easily about love than prose writers. For a start, they own that flexible ‘I’ (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). (Barnes 1990, 227)

To write about history and love, he suggests, demands not simply different literary protocols, but distinct narrative personae: the former dominated by objective clarity, the latter by subjective sentimentality. How can the two be reconciled? Ironically the answer lies in the coy self-exposure that appears in parenthesis in the above quotation: the introduction of the author’s name acts as a marrying point of the public and private, offering up the text as both an artificial fabular construct and as having a material place in the real world in the hands of the reader. In the process the objective thing-ness of the text and the fact of its production by a subjective consciousness are united and legitimise the task that Barnes as author/narrator sets himself: to collocate history and love as comparable structures for understanding the world. Having teased us with the possibility of his self-revelation and openly highlighted our desire for an anchoring presence in the text, Barnes frustratingly retreats behind the narratorial mask failing to inform us

categorically as to his identity, thereby directing even greater attention to the borderline between the text's ontological incarnations. Thus this parenthesis in "Parenthesis" appears crucial in establishing the complex relationship between what is inside and what is outside, and as secondary as parenthetical additions may be to sentence structure, here they are endowed with a central explicatory function.

That which appears most innocuous in this novel carries greatest freight and in 'opening' himself up as its producer Barnes deliberately establishes the sharp division between the fabulation of the ten stories and the apparently sincere discursiveness of the essay on love. I would argue strongly against those critics that regard Barnes' metafictional intervention here as sincere, honest or ingenuous: Barnes does not "come out from behind the narrative mask and speak to the reader as if they were discussing the novel over tea in the study" (Salyer 1991, 226) but instead stays firmly behind the mask whilst making its presence resoundingly obvious. Barnes is not seeking an *entente* with the reader any more than he is seeking a momentary respite from the sickening merry-go-round of history as it appears in the stories; instead his soliloquy is designed to lure the reader into an acceptance of the privileged interpretation by virtue of its perceived visibility at this juncture. As in *Flaubert's Parrot* Barnes invites us to read his novel through his eyes and the soft seduction of his method is ultimately nothing more than that: seduction.

As with all seductions its purpose is abandonment, in this case the abandonment by the reader of convictions about narratorial unreliability that have been established and reinforced by the preceding eight stories. Though he never explicitly lays claim to the composition of the stories in the volume, it is clear that Barnes as author/narrator intends the interlude to reflect back (and forwards) upon the surrounding material. Repeated intratextual allusions are made to "The Stowaway", "The Wars of Religion", "The Survivor", "Shipwreck", "The Mountain" and "Three Simple Stories",⁹ connecting them all within a network that implicitly places all the stories of *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* within a coherent and uniform pattern, designed as a commentary on the nature of history. Yes, history may be random and senseless, Barnes suggests, but there are sufficient similarities between its stories to bring them within a codifying system. In "Parenthesis" the reader witnesses a form of pre-emptive hermeneutic summation, a

drawing together of the disparate elements of the text into order. That that order is arbitrary and fragile in the extreme is immaterial in the context of “Parenthesis” where the primary tasks are recuperation and the establishment of frameworks within which the randomness of the past can be understood. Given that the previous eight chapters have undermined the credibility of any such framework, it is difficult to read “Parenthesis” as anything other than an ironic condemnation of such projects, but Barnes suggests that the failure of previous models of history has led in the late-twentieth century to a retreat to an affective paradigm, that is, love as the answer to history’s unanswerable questions.

Love stands alongside art and religion as a triumvirate of signifying systems that have the potential to transform the mundane everydayness of the everyday into the meaningful and the transcendent. Throughout the stories their claims to explicate, or at the very least palliate, the inexplicable and indiscriminate vicissitudes of history are put to the test. Art (particularly in “Shipwreck” but also in “Upstream!”) and religion (in “The Stowaway”, “The Wars of Religion”, “The Mountain” and “Project Ararat”) prove inadequate to the task of creating structures of understanding that could foster a totalised account of human history. The offer at best only a broken resistance to history, their internal logics too resolutely focused on maintaining their own sea defences against doubt and contradiction. In “Parenthesis” Barnes derides religion as “wimpishly workaday, or terminally crazy, or merely businesslike” (Barnes 1990, 244), whilst art, which professes a transcendence of the temporal, is accessible only to the relative few, and thus cannot be said to extend an all-encompassing asylum from the random contingency of the past. “So religion and art must yield to love” (Barnes 1990, 245), the narrator pronounces, for love is the sole defence of humanity, having the potential to be endlessly created and recreated in every single individual. Love represents an answer to the meaningless and stands in its glorious unpredictability and indiscriminacy as a riposte to history. It mimics history’s lack of system, its ebullience and continual symbolic surfeit; it is “anti-mechanical” and “anti-materialist” (Barnes 1990, 244) and reminds us that reason need not always provide the best schema for describing reality or history:

I can’t tell you who to love, or how to love [...] But I can tell you why to love. Because the history of the world, which only stops at the half-house

of love to bulldoze it into rubble, is ridiculous without it. The history of the world becomes brutally self-important without love. Our random mutation is essential because it is unnecessary. Love won't change the history of the world [...] but it will do something much more important: teach us to stand up to history, to ignore its chin-out strut. (Barnes 1990, 240)

If history offers us only indifference the argument goes, then all we can offer in return is something equally non-negotiable and illogical. The weight of human frailty is laid on the narrow shoulders of love, our inability to rationalise the provisionality of history into a digestible form is countered only by the offering up of a comparably irrational affective poultice. But, Barnes suggests, the efficacy of love's antidote is immaterial when what it reminds us is that "There is more to us than us" (Barnes 1990, 245). Love enables us to reach out to that in others that is mystified, it speaks to our humanity in ways which religion and art cannot and though happiness is not guaranteed by love (quite the opposite in fact) it is "our only hope" (Barnes 1990, 245).

Such at least is the emotive plea of the textualised Julian Barnes and the apparent artlessness with which love is declared as the 'answer' to history encourages the reader to suspend her/his cynicism towards any totalising logic. The argument could be made that Barnes is not offering love as an overarching master signifier, only as an impoverished but genuine defence, but one is forced to ask whether the evidence of the stories supports the redemptive potential of love and, I would argue, the answer has to be no. According to Brian Finney, love in this novel is "cannibalistic and highly unpredictable" (Finney 2003, 68) and where it does appear in the ten chapters (such as in "Upstream!" And "The Mountain") it is neither fulfilling nor ennobling. In fact the stories are characterised by their coldness and lack of empathetic identification leading Jonathan Coe to state that he couldn't remember "reading a novel which showed so little interest in the politics of everyday relationships – or one, at any rate, which isolated them so ruthlessly from the realm of speculative ideas" (Coe 1989, 27). With what credibility can we then read the lesson in love provided by "Parenthesis"? Surely it is misleading to locate history's signifying system on and around love when love itself is so dismissively marginalized

elsewhere rendering “Parenthesis” indicative only of its aporetic status. Love is no more the overarching meaning-maker of history than art or religion and it is no more the next best thing. The excursion into affect is readable as potentially redemptive (though with a resigned sense that this is the best that we are going to get) or potentially deconstructive (why should we believe Barnes here more than elsewhere?), but it offers only instability and thus works against the self-comforting narrative of the half-chapter. “Parenthesis” simultaneously draws attention to itself (as a stand-alone addendum) and away from itself (by suggesting that its parenthetical status is little more than a development of points made extra-parenthetically), and its treatment of love is similarly equivocal: love both is and isn’t the cohering framework for history’s long dark night of the soul.

True Love and Love’s Truth

Further evidence of Barnes’ ironic intentions in “Parenthesis” emerge from his consideration of truth. The consequence of an embracing of love as a challenge to history is that truth is made visible:

Love and truth, that’s the vital connection, love and truth. Have you ever told so much truth as when you were first in love? Have you ever seen the world so clearly? Love makes us see the truth, makes it our duty to tell the truth. (Barnes 1990, 240)

As idealistic as this may seem in such a cynical novel, such a bold statement demands to be tested against the material that Barnes lays before us. What does Barnes mean by truth here and how does such a position correspond with his subsequent assertion in “Parenthesis” that “objective truth is not obtainable”? (Barnes 1990, 245). The truth in the singular that is invoked here is a form of intuitive undertow that bypasses cognition or dialectic by speaking to fundamental human needs. “Tell the truth with your body” (Barnes 1990, 240) we are instructed as to do so is a moral duty: “Sex isn’t acting ... sex is about truth. How you cuddle in the dark governs how you see the history of the world. It’s as simple as that” (Barnes 1990, 241). That emphatic final sentence draws fully upon the authority of the author-narrator and thus, within the interpretive terms the novel has

set for itself, should be regarded with suspicion. Nothing is simple or straightforward here and to cut across the vagaries of his post-metahistorical ruminations with such bald affirmation persuades neither rationally nor as a plea from the heart. That “the heart isn’t heart-shaped” (Barnes 1990, 232) points towards the novel’s confounding of desire and anti-idealistic stance and brings sharply into contrast the marriage of love and truth that is essayed in “Parenthesis”. Yet how are we therefore to interpret the later and increasingly desperate conclusion that:

We all know that 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. (Barnes 1990, 245)

Barnes initially constructs this cul-de-sac as a depressing acknowledgement of an epistemological breakdown but subsequently proposes a positive reading that opposes knowledge with belief:

But while we know this, we must still believe that objective truth is obtainable; or we must believe that it is 99 per cent obtainable; or if we can’t believe this we must believe that 43 per cent objective truth is better than 41 per cent. (Barnes 1990, 245-6)

The diminishing returns that characterise this relativistic envisioning of objectivity increases the scepticism with which the reader regards truth: what does truth mean when it is only 43 per cent true? What value or transcendence can be claimed by such qualified objectivity? Bypassing the oxymoronic unobjectivity of objective truth in favour of an ill-defined faith in absence, Barnes suggests that without some grounding in metaphysics we are vulnerable to accept “one liar’s version as much as another liar’s” (Barnes 1990, 246). Setting aside the obvious confusion of truth and lies, it is clear that “Parenthesis” offers nothing more stable in the way of ‘explanation’ of history’s processes than any of the stories. Admittedly the section is cast as a diversionary and dislocated trawl through

nocturnal anxieties, but its privileged position in the text, its uncharacteristic openness and self-revelatory narrator and its impassioned argument for love as an organising principle promote it as, in some ineffable way, more clear-sighted and coherent than its surroundings. This is evidently not the case; “Parenthesis” is a hermeneutic aporia, offering nothing to combat the randomness of the stories but its own randomness.

That there is a consistency in the argument about love creates a subtle, but distinct distance from the other chapters meaning that “Parenthesis” becomes an authorial exposition by dint of its internal logic; its value however is dependent upon the continuing desperation of the reader for stable meaning. I would argue that Barnes intentionally draws the reader into a privileged reading of the text in order to reveal the desire of that reader for order and sense in narrative. Although Barnes’ novel develops from the acknowledgement that ‘truth’, whether it be historical accuracy, universal verity or artistic transcendence, is at best, an unattainable ideal, he simultaneously recognises the inherent need in human beings for order and meaning. As Alasdair MacIntyre has argued: “man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal” (MacIntyre 1981, 201) and though this novel displays a collision between random, nonsensical action and systematised, coherent reaction, it stresses the importance of story-telling as a means of substituting order and form for the vacuum in meaning and purpose. Models of narrative, whether historical or fictional, provide a grammar for the control and signification of those random impulses, but they are essentially artificial structures, arbitrarily placed over a patternless chaos. If “Parenthesis” is positioned as an ironic mimicking of order, then the reader becomes a victim of a futile search for meaning and pattern. The novel has been meticulously structured to show that all certainties such as truth, meaning and value have been eroded and become the subjects of change, contingency or politics. Having established that all narratives are constructed from a *mêlée* of competing demands, it is inconceivable that Barnes would present a single interpretative position from which *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* should be read. He therefore ironises the process of interpretation by which the reader seeks meaning in the novel and inverts that search back onto the reader, interrogating the pre-set paradigms by which s/he recognises a novel or a history of the world.

The qualities that make “Parenthesis” anomalous within the novel demand an interpretative strategy which addresses the relationship between the ten full chapters and the half-chapter, and which engages with the problems raised by the claims of the metafictional narratorial figure. The novel’s title draws attention to the importance which is placed upon the incompleteness of this chapter and reflects a pervasive sense of the ‘unfinishable’ nature of history. Because events in the historical field are characterised, in Barnes’ view, by their intrinsic lack of process and narrative consistency, then textualised history necessitates the application of a structure and methodology to that which is fundamentally accidental and unpremeditated. A completion of the incomplete is effected which brings the past within a symbolic teleology and which makes ‘visible’ the causal connections that underlie the chaotic jumble of events that constitute the past. *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* deliberately emphasises the crassness of its own simplifications and limitations; the stories it includes are not metaphorical exempla of a multi-faceted historicity, but tales plucked at random from past tides – they are the flotsam of history pieced together in an attempt to make a whole. The impossibility of fit that renders postmodernism’s version of history incompatible with representation allows Barnes playfully to reinterpret the form of a ‘world history’ as a series of unstable and discontinuous historicisms. The instinct for order that is imposed by a linear view of history derives from the need for stories and a desire to impose coherence over that which is not understood. History without pattern is unbearable, but equally unbearable, the novel implies, is a novel without meaning. “Parenthesis” functions as a simulacrum of orderly structure and sense that masks a central absence but in so doing it reveals the reader’s desire for these qualities. Unquestioningly to accept the ‘honesty’ of Barnes as author-narrator problematises the relationship between “Parenthesis” and the other stories, for they do not point towards the history of the world as a simplistic reduction of the triumph of love over time. But Barnes’ lecture on love as an instinctual and intuitive riposte to the terrifying chaos of history renders vulnerable the cynicism with which his reader is likely to regard his interventionist strategy. Postmodern love may exist within parentheses as an ironic raised eyebrow to the status of ‘genuine’ feeling but nonetheless the call of its simplicity is difficult to ignore. Love offers answers to history’s imponderables just as it offers answers to the novel’s problems, but the echo of sentiment

that is so difficult to grasp in Byatt, Ishiguro, Swift or Barker's buried love, is too conveniently mobilised here to imply that 'meaning' can be achieved by application of the author's guiding prompts to the rest of the text. None of us wish to believe that love under postmodernity has been reduced to fading the squawk of a disappearing parrot, but to believe otherwise in this text is deliberately to read counter to the evidence. As Barnes has stated in one interview: "the desire to reach conclusions is a sign of human stupidity" (Barnes 1987, 23) and to clutch the straw that "Parenthesis" extends is to fall headfirst into the trap of seeking what is palpably not there. "Parenthesis" is so important to this novel precisely because it is not important.

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¹ There is a precedent in McEwan’s own fictional writing for the unleashing of love in the face of trauma. *Enduring Love* (1997) opens with the death during a ballooning accident of a bystander, an act of random catastrophe that cannot be contained by the meaning-making faculties of the protagonists and initiates a downward spiral into madness and obsessive love.

² I use the term ‘historiographic metafiction’ here as it has been employed by Linda Hutcheon see (Hutcheon 1988).

³ The phrase borrowed from Barnes here reads: ‘How you cuddle in the dark governs how you see the history of the world’ (Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, [London: Picador, 1990], p.241).

⁴ As Claudia Kotte (1997) has shown, the novel posits diverse historical models, primarily Marxist, Hegelian and Darwinian, in order to establish whether a totalised history of the world could be encompassed within any of these systems. Kotte claims that ultimately the novel rejects all forms of unifying historical systems, as they are considered too inflexible and ideologically specific to incorporate the complexity of past events.

⁵ Whether *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* is a novel or a collection of short stories is a moot point. Undoubtedly the whole amounts to more than the sum of its parts, and the interconnections between the stories are sufficiently robust to suggest their interdependence, but this is not a novel in the purest sense. Gregory Salyer (1991) has decisively claimed that to read the book as a collection of stories is ‘wrong’ and in employing the term novel throughout I draw upon the precedents set by Kotte (1997 107), Isabelle Raucq-Hoorickx (1991, 47) and Andrzej Gasiorek, (1995,58).

⁶ Kotte (1997) acknowledges the problems raised by the position of “Parenthesis” in the text, but tends to deal with the half-chapter itself only in a cross-referential way, as an enlightenment of the presentation of history in the other chapters. In *Understanding Julian Barnes*, Merritt Moseley dismisses “Parenthesis” as “an apparently straightforward discussion of love spoken to the reader by Julian Barnes” (Moseley 1997, 113), whilst responses by Raucq-Hoorickx (1991), Maria Lozano (1995) and Steven Connor (1996) have adopted limited approaches to this section.

⁷ Moseley is particularly culpable of reading “Parenthesis” as an ‘honest’ confession by Barnes. As he claims: “Barnes comes as close as possible, for a novelist, to *speaking as himself*, without the distancing of narrator or implied author: he says it is himself and calls himself Julian Barnes” (Moseley 1997, 121). Gregory Salyer also installs an interpretation which accepts Barnes’ presentation of love’s triumph over doubt and confusion (Salyer 1991).

⁸ Salyer also notes that Barnes’ “presentation of history as power has affinities with the work of Michel Foucault” (Salyer 1991, 225) and provides a valuable assessment of the extent to which knowledge and power construct reality in the novel.

⁹ Page references to these allusions are as follows: “The Stowaway” (231, 236, 241), “The Wars of Religion” (245), “The Survivor” (241, 242), “The Shipwreck” (243), “The Mountain” (237), “Three Simple Stories” (242).