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A New Self, History, and Truth

The Postmodern Quest in Julian Barnes's
Flaubert's Parrot, *A History of the World in
10 ½ Chapters*, and *Arthur & George*

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To my mother and Francesca, for their patience

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PART I

1. INTRODUCTION: POSTMODERNITY AS THE AGE OF NIHILISM?

There are no facts, only interpretations.
(Friedrich W. Nietzsche)

Many scholars, belonging to the most disparate schools of thought, have felt that we are now standing at the end of the modern era. Postmodernity, meant as a historical period, has to be distinguished from postmodernism, which is instead a current of thought. In order to deeply understand postmodernism, it is therefore necessary to analyse the cultural background that originated it. The epochal transformation which has led to Postmodernity does not exclusively concern economical and socio-political changes, such as capitalism and mass society, but entails a drastic modification of the very conceptions of the Self, of History, and of the knowledge of Truth, which were formulated during Modernity. Areas of knowledge of humanistic disciplines that used to be clearly separated, such as philosophy, historiography, and literary critics, now overlap and blur. A telling example is Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973), in which literary concepts such as 'emplotment' and 'tropes' are applied to historiography: history is conceived as a linguistic construction which cannot avoid a certain degree of contamination with fiction. The status of history as an objective science is therefore challenged, as the result of a broader questioning which involves the very concept of "objective knowledge" elaborated during Modernity.

As Richard Palmer (1977: 363) observes, 'the revolt against positivism is gaining ground in psychology, sociology, political science, philosophy, and other disciplines. In literature, there is the rejection of tradition, of coherence and rationality, of nameability.' Literature has translated these cultural changes into its own terms, which are roughly assembled under the umbrella-term 'postmodernism'. Indeed, almost every scholar has a different and personal conception of what "postmodernism" is, according to their own sensibilities and areas of interest. One of

the main issues that hinder the formulation of a stable and shared definition of this term is its interdisciplinary character. Indeed, the term “postmodern” has now gained wide, albeit often improper, usage. It has been applied to architecture, literature, music, painting, dance, urban planning, photography, and ‘cultural tendencies of every kind’ (Hassan, 1981: 31). The “use and abuse” of the same label for such disparate forms of artistic expression is revelatory of a new shared concern, which is this new change in consciousness which characterizes postmodernity as a new historical era

Postmodernism in literature should not be considered exclusively in terms of rhetorical devices or literary styles, but rather as a ‘representational strategy, a hermeneutical attitude’ (Ceserani, 1997: 136). This observation does not mean that there are no recurrent rhetorical devices or styles; there are indeed a certain amount of recurrent features that allows critics to label novels as postmodernist, but such techniques have already been used in the past. What is relevant and new, therefore, is not the rhetoric device *in sé*, but the ultimate purpose of its employment.

The most relevant changes in culture that have had notable repercussions on literature concern the conception of the Self, of History, and of the knowledge of Truth. Starting with Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, and through Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, postmodernity and postmodernism can be seen as having led to the end of ‘master narratives’ (Lyotard, 1978), since unifying and official narratives are no longer believed and believable. The consequence is a fragmentation of the Self, a subjective conception of History, and an arbitrary conception of Truth. The specter that is haunting Europe – and America – is no longer Communism, dismissed as a master-narrative, but Nihilism. This philosophical and cultural background will be described in Part I.

Part II, instead, will be articulated in three chapters, each of them analysing a different novel from the English author Julian Barnes. The theoretical issues risen in Part I will be paralleled in the novelistic practice of Part II. The first novel analysed, *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), can be conceived as a parody of a traditional biography, as many of the epistemological doubts and uncertainties risen by postmodernism are actualized in this re-writing of Flaubert’s life. It reflects a new conception of Self. *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989), instead, parodies conventional

historiography. The new conception of history likens the writing of the past to the creation of any artificial linguistic construct. The last novel analysed, *Arthur & George* (2005), is a detective fiction and a historical novel, since it is about the real case against George Edalji, reputed innocent by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who decides to investigate. The quest for truth, however, proves an impossible task, and the mystery remains unsolved.

The conclusion of my thesis is that, although postmodernism bears within itself a tendency towards nihilism, this cultural phenomenon can ultimately be considered positive, inasmuch as it rises an awareness in the impossibility of gaining a complete and objective knowledge of the world, the past, or even ourselves. We are left with a plurality of limited, partial, and subjective truths which created a polyphony of voices among which it is easy to discern only chaos and confusion. However, postmodernism rejects the monological and authoritative Truth, embracing instead many versions of the truth, equally worth of being listened to. While Nihilism means that nothing can be known, postmodern pluralism implies that it is possible to know *more*, not less, and that it is possible to make a truly aware choice about what to believe in. The recognition of a plurality of truths is the fundamental pre-requisite of tolerance.

2. POSTMODERNISM AND POSTMODERNITY

The modern age seems to have now ended, and this is proved by the fact that the new postmodern culture bases its identity on the difference with Modernity, while postmodernism is defined through oppositions to modernism. Indeed, its identity is chiefly based on negating or opposing certain features generally associated with Modernity. However, every attempt of historical periodization is, for its very nature, arbitrary and generalizing. Only with hindsight is it possible to interpret the past, bridging the gaps and drawing connections between diverse events. Labels as “Modernity” and “Postmodernity” are just useful tools, necessary to put order in the otherwise chaotic narration of history-as-events. Hassan indeed observes that ‘[m]odernism and postmodernism are not separated by an Iron Curtain or Chinese Wall, for history is a palimpsest, and culture is permeable to time past, time present, and time future’ (1981: 32). This process of labelling is even more complex nowadays, since there is the perception that ‘such a compact and coherent thing as an “age”, a *Zeigeist*, a “system”, a “current situation” no longer exists’ (Jameson in Ceserani, 1997: 104). The mistake scholars are more likely to make is to reduce postmodernism in art and literature merely to a certain poetics or style rather than regarding it as a cultural phenomenon which is often confounded with postmodernity (Ceserani, 1997: 28).

In his analysis, Remo Ceserani traces the turning point from Modernity to Postmodernity back in the post-war 1950s, although the effects of this epochal change started being felt only during the 1980s, under the shape of concrete and symbolic events, such as Chernobyl, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Gulf War, and mass migrations from Africa (1997: 9). The changes that took place in the 1950s involved the deep structures of our world, our ways of thinking and communicating, and our very consciousness, which led Pier Paolo Pasolini to talk about an ‘anthropological revolution’ (in Ceserani, 1997: 10-15). Ceserani compares this shift from modernity to postmodernity to the great transformations that took place in Europe between the 18th and the 19th century due to the Industrial Revolution, the political revolutions, which led to a drastic change in the public and collective cultural models (17-23). This

epochal socio-political transformation in the 1950s was mirrored in a cultural change which led to a new cultural phenomenon: postmodernism. Therefore, postmodernism is not just a poetics of a style, but a 'representational strategy, a hermeneutical attitude' (Ceserani, 1997: 136), since the way people conceive themselves, their past, and their contemporary world has changed hand in hand with the transformations in politics, society, and economy. In postmodernism, like in any historical period in which our identity is called into question, a relevant role is played by the notion of History, which, far from being rejected as by the Avant-Gardes, is re-interpreted and re-evaluated through the literary filters of manipulation, parody, and nostalgia (Ceserani, 1997: 27).

Consequently, postmodernism should be approached bearing in mind its cultural and interdisciplinary nature. Ceserani divides postmodernism into four phases, each of them lasting roughly ten years, even if the meaning of the very concept "postmodernism" varies greatly during the years, and sometimes even among contemporary scholars belonging to the very same phase. One of the constant elements characterizing the four phases is the rebellion against the so-called High Modernism, namely the great experimental literature that characterised modernism, which is instead replaced with the advent of mass culture and the abolition of the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow art (Ceserani, 1997: 30-36). Postmodernism is therefore 'both academic and popular, elitist and accessible' (Hutcheon, 1988: 44). Its very nature is multiple and intrinsically contradictory.

Ihab Hassan (1981) outlines a list of dichotomous terms which establish two contrastive definitions of modernism and postmodernism. Far from being definitive or exhaustive, the list still provides a useful starting point for any analysis of postmodernism. As the prefix post- reveals, postmodernism is ambiguously related to modernism, as it seems unable to define its own original identity but as the period, be it cultural or literary, that comes after modernism (Ceserani, 1997: 10). However, Linda Hutcheon observes that the "post-" does not only mean "after" modernism, but also "against" and "because of" modernism. The connection existing between these two cultural phenomena is not only chronological, but also one of contrast and causal

implication. Hassan underlines the fact that the differences he enlists in *The Question of Postmodernism* were just tendencies, and not dialectical oppositions (1981: 34).

MODERNISM	POSTMODERNISM
Romanticism / Symbolism	Pataphysics / Dadaism
Form (conjunctive, closed)	Antiform (disjunctive, open)
Purpose	Play
Design	Chance
Hierarchy	Anarchy
Mastery / Logos	Exhaustion / Silence
Art Object / Finished Work	Process / Performance / Happening
Distance	Participation
Creation / Totalization	Decreation / Deconstruction
Synthesis	Antithesis
Presence	Absence
Centering	Dispersal
Genre / Boundary	Text / Intertext
Paradigm	Syntagm
Hypotaxis	Parataxis
Metaphor	Metonymy
Selection	Combination
Root / Depth	Rhizome / Surface
Interpretation / Reading	Against Interpretation / Misreading
Signified	Signifier
<i>Lisible</i> (Readerly)	<i>Scriptible</i> (Writerly)
Narrative	Antinarrative
God the Father	The Holy Ghost
Symptom	Desire
Genital / Phallic	Polymorphous / Androgynous
Paranoia	Schizophrenia
Origin / Cause	Difference - Differance / Trace
Metaphysics	Irony
Determinacy	Indeterminacy
Transcendence	Immanence

Since postmodernism is a cultural and deeply interdisciplinary phenomenon, it is not surprising that Hassan's table refers to many disparate areas of knowledge, ranging from linguistics, philosophy, and literary theory, to psychoanalysis, and theology. Although Linda Hutcheon is well aware that it is not possible to define a poetics of postmodernism without considering its relationship with modernism, she warns about the risks of simplification and generalization behind any close definition. Binary oppositions are inevitably reductive, because any dichotomy implies a hidden hierarchy: one element is invested with positive values, while the other is degraded to a negative "straw man". In fact, postmodernism 'partakes of a logic of "both/and", not one of "either/or"' (Hutcheon, 1988: 49). There are indeed two theories about the possible relation between modernism and postmodernism. The first is one of total break and rupture, while the second theory focuses on their interrelations, and conceives postmodernism as an 'extension, intensification, subversion' of modernism (Hutcheon, 1988: 49). Parody is therefore a privileged literary form for postmodernism, since it implies both a relation of inscription and of subversion (Hutcheon, 1985). Indeed, many postmodernist texts take the form of a parodic re-writing of other highly conventional narratives, like biography in *Flaubert's Parrot* (Barnes, 1984), historiography in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (Barnes, 1989), and detective fiction in *Arthur & George* (Barnes, 2005).

In addition to this ambiguous relation between modernism and postmodernism, there is another problematic issue to tackle: the difference between postmodernism and postmodernity. Richard E. Palmer underlines how crucial it is to distinguish between postmodernism and postmodernity, meant as a new era of time, because '[a]s radical as postmodernism may seem to its exponents in the arts and in critical theory, it barely hints at the kind of epochal change implied in the term postmodernity' (1977: 364). As postmodernism can be defined as a reaction toward modernism, postmodernity calls into question modernity and its greatest achievements, namely liberal humanism, humanist rationality, and the concepts generally associated to them: 'autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalization, system, universalization, center, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness, origin' (Hutcheon, 1988: 57). Palmer points out three main

divergences between the frame of mind of modernity and that of postmodernity (1977: 365):

- a) 'a rise of perspective on the structure of modern consciousness', that is to say, a change in the conception of the Self, which is no longer univocal and fixed, but spatially and temporally situated;
- b) 'the Enlightenment's faith in endless progress through scientific rationality' is rejected in favour of a new conception of History, which is no longer metaphysical;
- c) modernity created the 'dichotomization between a monadic, observing subjectivity and a world of (essentially material) objects', while in postmodernism this positivist opposition subject/object which has been overcome by Heidegger's conceptualization of the hermeneutical circle.

Postmodernism is a cultural and artistic phenomenon which has to be located within the 'context of rebellious thinking' which questions modernity and proposes an attempt to overcome it. Palmer then offers ten different 'Versions of Postmodern', which all veer 'against the illusions of a one-dimensional, objectivist view of knowledge (and of man)' (1977: 366-367).

The first version of postmodern that Palmer proposes deals with the necessity to "up-date" the epistemological self-image of modern man with recent scientific discoveries; this change in the conception of man can take place '*within* scientific thinking itself' (1977: 366-367). Another version starts from Ihab Hassan's "New Gnosticism", which aims to create 'a less hostile relationship between postmodern thinking and technology' thanks to a 'mystical participation in universal consciousness' (373). Other ways to challenge modernity are the attempts to go beyond naturalism of scholars such as Martin Buber (375-376), and the elaboration of a "new consciousness", which is 'non-perspectival and holistic and has found a post-perspectival conception of time' (376-377). Further versions of rebellious thinking that challenges modernity (meant as characterised by naturalism, objectivism, and

positivism) are to be found in psychology, philosophy of language, and literary theory. In psychology, new developments of thought have led to the idea that

“objectively described” data have become objective only through an act of renouncing large blocks of subjective or otherwise nonobjectifiable reality. Empirical seeing can be a form of empirical blindness to the nonobjectifiable sides of phenomena (Palmer, 1977: 379).

As far as radical philosophy of language is concerned, it moves especially against structuralism, which represents an attempt to understand elements of culture, human thought, feeling, and perception through their interrelations to a larger structure, or system. Even in postmodern literary theory it is possible to see a movement against objectivism, as it was theorised by the New Criticism, Modernism, and French Symbolism (Palmer, 1977: 382-383). Palmer stresses the importance of Edward W. Said in denying, in literature, such concepts as “centre”, and “logos”, formerly criticised in philosophy by Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida. According to Hassan’s list, what characterised modernism seems to be precisely ‘Mastery/Logos’ and ‘Centering’ (Hassan, 1981: 34). Edward Said’s thought bears also many affinities with philosophical hermeneutics, since the interpreter of the text is conceived as a “constructor” of meaning, and not as the knower of an “origin”-truth. Indeed, meaning is no longer seen as given or universal, but as constructed in a precise historical-cultural context (Palmer, 1977: 384). This idea of a “contextual” nature of meaning is advanced by Philosophical Hermeneutics, which is another discipline that drastically questions modernity.

Three more versions of postmodern that challenge modernity are left to study. The first version concerns a ‘movement beyond Western forms of reality’ (Palmer, 1977: 373). What is usually thought to be “universal”, for instance reason-based forms of knowledge, is in fact just “Western”. As Lévi-Strauss theorised in *The Savage Mind*,

[m]ythical and scientific thought were not evolutionary stages, but parallel and equally valuable ways of thinking. Myths, rooted in orality and memory, subordinated change to a deeper timeless order and relied on analogy, classification, and metaphor; science, including historical knowledge, sought

explanation of change and relied on conceptions of temporal continuity and metonymy (Lee Klein, 1995: 279).

In addition to showing a different conception of time and historicity, going 'beyond Western forms of reality' also demonstrates how crucial the role of language is in shaping our conception of the world and of ourselves, in organizing our experience and classify the world: '[t]he study of Indian or Oriental languages makes us vividly aware that the mindset of "modernity" as we experience it is in part a phenomenon of Western linguistic realities' (Palmer, 1977: 374).

The last two versions of postmodern somehow incorporate and summarise all the above mentioned versions, and are 'the project of going beyond metaphysics' (Palmer, 1977: 367) and of 'transcending objectivism and technological rationality' (369). Metaphysics was first denied by Nietzsche, who held that no other reality existed outside the phenomenal world. This rejection has led to important consequences on both the conception of the Self and of History. The Cartesian conception of "consciousness" is seen as another form of metaphysics, since it separated the essence of man, namely his soul, from his body. Identity is therefore given to something that is beyond the biological nature of man. The same is true for history: modernity conceives History as a march of progress, or as an evolution of historical consciousness, and this implies an underlying metaphysics. The meaning of history, instead, is not inside the events themselves, but in a broader encompassing structure. Indeed, beyond the construction of a metaphysics of the Self and of History lies the desire to objectify the external reality in order to study and "know" it. This model of knowledge, however, pivots around the Cartesian (and modern) dualism between mind/body, and subject/object, which have dominated modern philosophy, because '[t]he quest for verifiable knowledge rests on the assumption of a central, verifying subject, with a method or set of definitions that gives sense to the world' (Palmer, 1977: 369). Therefore, positivist and modern knowledge is based on a subject, characterised by a fixed consciousness and undisputable identity, who uses an equally fixed and undisputable method to get to know an objectified reality. Consequently, these new trends of postmodernity challenge both the Cartesian conception of subject, the "scientific" method, and the reification of external reality, calling into question the

very conception of objectivity. Indeed, '[p]ostmodernism exploits, but also undermines, such staples of our humanist tradition as the coherent subject and the accessible historical referent' (Hutcheon, 1988: 46). The negative side of the coin is the menace of chaos, uncertainty, and nihilism, both with regard to the Self, History, and, ultimately, to any possible knowledge of the external reality.

3. A NEW CONCEPTION OF THE SELF

This fragmentation of knowledge and its subsequent repercussions on the conception of the self is not an exclusively postmodern phenomenon but is rooted in Friedrich Nietzsche, the crucial figure that ‘philosophised with a hammer’ and introduced this change in consciousness that characterises Postmodernity. Indeed,

Nietzsche questioned whether what we call “consciousness” is truly the seat and core of subjectivity; rather, he suggested that in each human being a plurality of interpretative principles or centres (*Herrschaftszentren*), like medieval fiefdoms, are in tension and competition with each other. Waking consciousness is only one of these centres, and perhaps a monitor of things rather than king of them all (Palmer, 1977: 367).

In his philosophical analysis, Nietzsche anticipates the discovery that revolutionized the conception of the self: Sigmund Freud’s theory of the unconscious. In contrast with what held by liberal humanism, identity is no longer guaranteed by consciousness, i.e. the Cartesian *cogito*, which is actually made of many discordant and conflictual forces of which we are barely aware. Only a limited part of their consciousness is indeed knowable.

This new sensibility and awareness of the complex nature of reality enters culture and becomes one of the fundamental themes dealt by Modernism. There is a “second nature” of reality, which goes beyond the tangible, rational and empirical world. The transcendence of the real can be perceived only through sudden moments of revelations, like joycean epiphanies. What in the nineteenth century was considered to be *the* physical, biological, and social reality, becomes just ‘inert matter’ (*materia inerte*) which conceals a truer ‘inner reality’ (*realtà interior*) (Bertoni, 2007: 265-266). Despite the many differences, there are also many lines of continuity between Modernism and Postmodernism; one of them is the interest in the conception and literary rendition of the subjectivity, in all its complexity.

Indeed, 'Nietzsche is commonly invoked as the prophet of the postmodern' (Gemes, 2001: 337), although the German philosopher is at the same time 'used' and 'abused' by postmodernists, who only include in their analysis the *pars destruens* of Nietzsche's philosophy, namely the Last Man, while omitting the constructive phase which deals with the creation of the Overman. In contrast to the de-centred and fragmented Last Man, the Overman manages to create for himself a truly unified subjectivity. Nietzsche, in fact, 'rejects this valorisation of disunity as a form of nihilism and prescribes the creation of a genuine unified subjectivity to those few capable of such a goal' (Gemes, 2001: 337). Indeed, those critics that are less favourable to postmodernism found their attacks on this cultural phenomenon precisely on the menace of nihilism that postmodernism brings within itself.

Utter relativism seems to be what remains after that modernity and liberal humanism have been called into question, and after that every certainty about the Self and History has been shattered; these are the ruins of the old magnificent castle of metaphysics; relativism is 'antiform', 'chance', 'exhaustion/silence', 'play', 'difference-differance/trace', 'anarchy', 'decreation/deconstruction', 'antinarrative', and 'indeterminacy' (Hassan, 1981: 34). Interestingly enough, Hassan also uses the term 'schizophrenia', as opposed to 'paranoia'. Also Remo Ceserani underlines the change in sensibility, from the existential anguish of an alienated subject in modernity, to the schizophrenia of a new fragmented subject in postmodernity (Ceserani, 1997: 84-85).

As Lyotard famously defined it, postmodernism is indeed 'incredulity towards meta-narratives', and the consequence of this disbelief is a polyphony of local narratives and a disunited Self. Nietzsche, instead, 'stresses the importance of finding a unitary voice, of finding a means to retell history as a pathway to one's own constructed self' (Gemes, 2001: 338). However, this unity of form is not pre-given by any sort of metaphysics (be it Christian, Cartesian, socialist, etc.); it is, instead, created from within. With his famous expression "the death of God", Nietzsche means that 'all the notions of an external authority that might provide some ultimate guarantor of beliefs' are at stake here, not 'simply the Christian world-view' (Gemes, 2001: 341).

In his body of works, Nietzsche used the word "unity" (*Einheit*) both in a positive and in a negative way. "Unity" assumes a negative meaning when it refers to

'the Cartesian notion of a transcendental unified soul or self-possessed free will. Nietzsche's aim here is to bring his audience to realize that there is no such unified Cartesian self and hence the construction of a self is a task for the future' (Gemes, 2001: 352). The destruction of the Judeo-Christian world-view and of the Cartesian conception of the self 'would pave the way for the advent of Nihilism' (352). From the total relativism of the age of Nihilism it would be possible to create from scratch completely new values, and to connect all the remains of the Cartesian self into a truly unified self. The work of destruction is the first stage of a broader process of construction of a new culture and of a new man, the Overman.

According to Nietzsche, the mode of destruction implied in nihilism is a fundamental step, because only by realizing that the self is actually non-unified, non-fixed, and the Cartesian unified self is just a myth, is it possible to create a really unified (and anti-metaphysical) self:

Faced with the inevitability of conflicting drives [the Overman] does not suppress, or seek to extirpate any drive, this being the typical genesis of resentment, but rather he achieves a redirection of various drives. [...] the Overman is a complete construction, a building of hierarchical forms, containing diverse elements structured towards a unitary goal. [...] Nietzsche's Overman, unlike the Last Man, is no mere assemblage of disparate pieces carded together. His understanding of the past does not indulge in the dogmatist's refuge in some transcendental authority; the will of God, progress towards the *summum bonum*. Nor is it a product of the nihilist's distance from his own projects. Rather he respects the past for the individuals it has achieved and for providing the materials from which his new subjectivity has been fashioned. For Nietzsche, where the Overman is a labyrinth whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere, the Last Man, his prescient prefiguration of postmodern man, is a labyrinth whose center is nowhere and circumference everywhere (Gemes, 2001: 358-359).

Disunity and fragmentation were considered by Nietzsche as a necessary, albeit negative, phase of a process that would eventually lead to a more genuine unity. Postmodernity, despite claiming to follow on Nietzsche's footsteps, seems to have stopped at the first destructive step, characterized by nihilism, rejecting unity as a goal.

Unity is looked at suspiciously by postmodernism, and this may be due to the fact that, according to Gemes, the constructive part of Nietzsche's reflection was carried to its extreme consequences by the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century (Gemes, 2001: 354-356). They are seen as the latest (and ultimate) attempt to total unification through master-narratives, with which to unify, and therefore they give one stable, univocal and undisputable meaning to the world.

The result of Lyotard's incredulity of meta-narratives is a polyphonic world and a fragmented self, made of internal drives, unconscious impulses, without being re-directed towards any goal. The postmodernist man seems to be Nietzsche's 'herd man; he is a mere collection of ever fluctuating, competing drives, with different drives dominating at different times' (Gemes, 2001: 343). Going back to a unifying master-narrative is no longer possible. What is left is a series of language games, of local narrations, and interpretations of the truth. However, the shattering of master-narratives and of totalitarian conceptions of the world made possible the emergence of many other narratives, which were previously unheard, silenced, or actively repressed.

Starting from the 1960s, a new counter-culture demanded to be heard, moving from the margins to the centre. Those previously silenced groups differed for race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and class, but they all offered a 'multiplicity of responses to a commonly perceived situation of marginality and ex-centricity' (Hutcheon, 1988: 62). During the 1970s and 1980s those 'ex-centric' subjects entered the theoretical discourse and artistic practice, with the creation of the so-called *Cultural Studies*, which paid much attention to the question of marginality (Bassi and Sirotti, 2010: 23). These new groups have de-centred the focus of thought and knowledge, which was based on the dichotomous opposition centre/margins, white/black, male/female, self/other, intellect/body, west/east, objectivity/subjectivity (Hutcheon, 1988: 62). Whenever there is a binary opposition, there is also a hierarchy of power at work behind it. Gayatri Spivak underlines the fact that a discourse which seems to privilege the "margin" rather than the "centre" is actually accepting a hierarchy which places the "centre" in a position of power. Instead of bringing the margins to the centre, Spivak proposes to recognize the 'wholly otherness of margins' (in Cimitile, 2010: 40), in order to avoid a mere reversal of the existing dichotomies. It is necessary

to transform the “either-or” logic” into a more inclusive “both-and” frame of mind (Hutcheon, 1988: 62).

After the revolt of the 1960s, the centre no longer holds as a universal and eternal model of unity and order, because what was conceived as a ‘universal and timeless humanist subject’ (Hutcheon, 1988: 159) is revealed for what it actually is: a masculine, bourgeois, white, and western entity. Although the notion of centre itself is seen as a ‘fiction of order and unity’ (Hutcheon, 1988: 60), and as a ‘construct’ (159), the paradox condition of such “ex-centric” groups is that it ‘always relies on the centres it contests for its very definition (and often its verbal form)’ (Hutcheon, 1988: 59). What emerges is the importance of the historical and social context, namely of the ‘enunciative situation of the discourse’ (Hutcheon, 1988: 67). Indeed, the “ex-centric” groups are far from being monolithic; there are many declinations within every group. For instance, postcolonial studies include analysis of the condition of postcolonial women, and of how western feminists represent them. “Non-white”, postcolonial women have claimed their right to speak for themselves, contesting the self-appointed duty of “white feminists” to speak in the name of all women, adopting the third-world woman as their silent and anonymous object of study (Ellena, 2010).

Despite having added race, class, gender, and sexual orientation to the postmodern analysis, these counter cultures cannot be entirely assimilated to postmodernism because they are still linked to liberal humanism and the conception of the Cartesian subject, mainly because ‘[t]heir ex-centricity and difference have often denied them access to Cartesian rationality and relegated them to the realms of the irrational, the mad, or at the very least, the alien’ (Hutcheon, 1988: 68). The “ex-centric” subjects, nonetheless, played a crucial role within postmodernism, because they provided further versions and visions of the world which contrasted with the allegedly universal vision proposed by liberal humanism, which is generally associated to certainty, universalization, authority, unity, and totalization (Hutcheon, 1988: 57).

Nietzsche’s unified Overman does not seem to be attainable in a postmodern age. However, the lack of unity is not reduced to total nihilism, but makes possible the emergence of a plurality of voices which were previously repressed and silenced. The disbelief for master narratives, indeed, has led to many local narratives, each of which

brings its own “truth”. Postmodernism offers ‘multiple, provisional alternatives to traditional, fixed unitary concepts in full knowledge of (and even exploiting) the continuing appeal of those very concepts’ (Hutcheon, 1988: 60). The very self is characterized by a plurality of tensions and pulses that can be contradictory or even unconscious. The very subject is plural, like his inner consciousness. Moreover, there are many different kind of subjects that want to be listened: blacks, feminists, gays, ethnics, and so on. They all need to be historically and culturally contextualized to be understood. Their vision of the world and categories used to decipher the external reality may be in open contrast with those generally used by western culture and liberal humanism, but they are equally viable.

The fragmentation of the Self and the multiplication of subjects can be a challenging task for novelists who want to represent a subjectivity in fiction. The realist literary techniques seem not to be adequate to represent the new reality. The task can prove even more challenging for a biographer who wants to represent on paper the whole and real life and personality of an individual. Both this issues are tackled by Julian Barnes in *Flaubert’s Parrot*.

4. A NEW CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

The same fragmentation and disunity that seem to characterize the postmodern Self can be seen, on a broader scale, as defining the postmodern conception of history as well. As for the destruction of the Cartesian unified self, Nietzsche was also crucial to the dissolving of any kind of metaphysics, thanks to his conceptualisation of the “will to power”. The “will to power” affects especially historiography, which is meant as a positivist science which aims at discovering an objective truth about the past. Nietzsche drastically challenged these pretensions of historiography by claiming that there are no longer facts, just interpretations and symbolic configurations of facts, because the interpretation which prevails becomes the norm and subsequently the official truth. The whole structure of the world as we know it is due to the “will to power” which makes it possible that, among several configurations which might give a sense to the world, just one prevails (Vattimo, 2001: 105). The crucial point is that the interpretation which prevails may not be the true or the better one. What matters is the (political) “strength” of the group that supports a certain interpretation. Indeed, the will to power should not be considered as the will of a single individual (Vattimo, 2001: 109), but as a tension of forces. The “will to power” is against form¹, it is destabilizing, it deconstructs and exposes the artificiality of all the values/systems/norms that are generally taken as “natural”, “divine”, and “objective” (Vattimo, 2001: 119).

The concept of “will to power” is extremely broad in meaning, and therefore it has been interpreted differently by several philosophers. Heidegger interpreted Nietzsche’s “will to power” as technocracy, i.e. the eventual rational and technical organization of the real by mankind (Vattimo, 2001: 97-99). What Heidegger called *Ge Stell* is the technical world, namely a world which is totally administrated and ordered. The philosopher saw in the *techné* the end of any metaphysics, since the world is completely objectified, and there is no longer the difference between essence and presence that has always characterised metaphysics, since the essence is eventually

¹ Nietzsche’s elaboration of the “will to power” may be associated to several elements listed in Hassan’s table, such as ‘antiform (open, disjunctive)’, ‘anarchy’, ‘play’ (1981: 34).

identified with the presence (Vattimo, 2001: 186). Technocracy is the final step of the metaphysical conception of the world which has characterised modernity: the subject (Cartesian, Judeo-Christian, immutable and stable, and associated to the essence) was conceived as opposed to an object (totally external to the subjectivity, and related to the presence).

As Nietzsche anticipated the postmodern man with his elaboration of The Last Man, he also seems to have foreseen what Lyotard defined as the disbelief towards meta-narratives (1978). Lyotard, indeed, played a fundamental role in the contemporary critique of traditional metaphysics, which were dominant in Modernity. Indeed, Nietzsche's "will to power" can be read between the lines of Lyotard's elaboration of master narratives:

Metanarrative is institutionalized, canonical, and legitimizing. It is in a position of intellectual mastery. It ignores the obvious pagan truism, that stories refer to other stories. Instead it pretends to represent an external object and then pretends *not* to be a narrative. Local narrative, on the other hand, is told by the subaltern. It is never omniscient, but always aware of its own narrative debts. It cannot easily be "inserted" into a master narrative. It is artistic and imaginative (Klein, 1995: 282).

A master-narrative is the interpretation that prevails and that has become the "norm", which is generally confounded with the "truth". What determines the dominance of a certain master-narrative over local narratives is not the former's intrinsic "goodness", but a "game of forces", generally related to the political influence of the group that supports a certain ideology, which produces a determined narrative about the world. Lyotard successively employed this conceptualization of narratives to draw a distinction between modern and postmodern in *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir* (1978):

Science has always been in conflict with narratives. [...] but to the extent that science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game. It then produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy. I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this

kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. [...] Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward master narratives (Lyotard, xxiii, xxiv; transl. Bennington G., Massumi B., 1984.)

Modernity is seen as the historical epoch characterised by the creation of master narratives in order to “legitimise” scientific discoveries and to give them a universal value of truth. Indeed, master-narratives are necessary to confer universal legitimacy to scientific disciplines and theories which aim at explaining the world. Examples of meta-narratives are Hegel’s philosophy of the Spirit, Marxist emancipation of the working class, and the Enlightenment conception of history as a “march of progress”. In the postmodern era, it is no longer possible to believe to master-narratives, as it is no longer possible to conceive the self as a Cartesian and Judeo-Christian unity, because ‘[d]ifferent cultures, different visions, could be contained or persuaded only within what Lyotard defined as a totalitarian system of education and information’ (Klein, 1995: 282). With the postmodern disbelief toward metanarratives, also their claims of universal truth end. As with Nietzsche’s Overman, the alternative of a polyphony of local narratives seems to be totalitarianism. Indeed, on the one hand, master-narratives imply a tendency towards totalitarianism, while, on the other hand, the great number of local narratives, often opposite and inconsistent, implies a tendency toward total relativism of knowledge and values.

Lyotard’s solution to avoid the relativism entailed by the multiplicity of local narratives is paganism. Pagans believed in “something”, but at the same time they knew it might not be they truth, since their gods were fallible; this ‘absence of omniscience, sin, and absolution’ is opposed to a master-narrative which ‘claims omniscience, it claims to refer to an external object, and it claims to be a veridical representation of that object’ (Klein, 1995: 281). Master-narratives, indeed, imply that a “universal truth” does exist and is attainable. Basically, every master-narrative claims that itself is the depository of such “universal truth”.

According to Nietzsche, the worship of truth, which also characterises master-narratives, can be seen as the secular version of the Judeo-Christian worship of God:

The worship of truth is the secular substitute for the worship of God in that in both cases the value for life is not given primary importance. More deeply, both represent a kind of transcendental longing, a desire to escape involvement in this world. The Christian escapes this world by postulating a more important world to come, the worshiper of truth similarly takes the position of being above the mere fray of worldly involvement, he digs past mere appearances to the ultimate truth (Gemes, 2001: 351).

The Christian ascetic is likened to the secular scientist because both overestimate the truth, which is conceived as universal, objective, and achievable, and both are inspired by a “will to truth”. With his choice of paganism as a way out both of the totalitarianism of master-narratives and the relativism of local narratives, Lyotard welcomed the fallibility of the gods, rejecting, like Nietzsche, this “will to truth”. Embracing fallible gods seems to be the consequence of the postmodern ‘incredulity toward master narratives’.

However, despite what Lyotard claims, ‘universal history has not disappeared’ (Klein, 1995: 294). Postmodernity seems to be characterised by a dichotomous attitude towards universal history, since, on the one hand, there is a tendency among historians to focus on cultural differentiation and on local histories, while, on the other hand, other historians put more relevance on the idea that ‘[h]istory has a direction and a purpose, and once that purpose is realized, History will end, no matter how many local wars and battles continue on into the future’ (Klein, 1995: 294). An example of such a postmodern master-narrative is Fukuyama’s *The End of History and The Last Man* (1992). Fukuyama tries to make the opposite tendencies of cultural differentiation and homologation coexist by adopting ‘the double plot for universal history’: homogenization takes place through modern economics (capitalism) and technology, while differentiation is expressed as a ‘reassertion [...] of cultural identities’.

The varied histories of Fukuyama, Rorty, Clifford, and Greenblatt evince some surprising congruences of narrative structure. All wish to find global significance in local historicities. All claim to evade “metaphysical” philosophical foundations. And all see a world in which differentiation and homogenization go hand in hand, a vast, new double plot of cultural history. Their writings map new postmodern universal

histories and project worlds in which “universal” is not a synonym for “homogenous” and in which cultural difference as cultural difference remains real, viable, and even desirable, so long as it does not become exclusive nationalism (Klein, 1995: 296).

In these scholars, Lee Klein sees an attempt to overcome the relativism that is implied in the existence of an increasingly vast number of local histories, without any universal history below them. Therefore, according to Klein, master-narratives do exist in postmodernity as the *necessary* “background” where to insert all the different local histories. In this sense, metanarratives are no longer seen as ‘totalitarian universal history and political oppression’ (Klein, 1995: 284), but as an inclusive frame that welcomes difference within itself.

This inclusive model of Universal History seems to be a possible way out of nihilism, but how it is to be practically applied remains unsolved in Lee Klein. His suggestion seems even more fragile when one takes into account the many postmodern theories that question the status of history itself as a positivist science. Not only do the questions issued refer to “which and whose truth does history tell?”, but also “can history tell the truth?”. Paul Ricoeur questioned the methodology of historical inquiry in his essay ‘History and Hermeneutics’ (1976). As the title suggests, Ricoeur based his criticism of historiography on the new reflexions introduced by Philosophical Hermeneutics, a current of thought that has deeply influenced the postmodern conception of history and of knowledge. Because of its ‘interest for knowledge’ (Ricoeur, 1976: 684), historiography aims to objectivity, and, in order to achieve it, applies the methodology of the natural sciences, i.e. the Cartesian method, to history-as-events:

One interest that rules historical inquiry [i.e. the interest for knowledge] is that historical knowledge be so constituted as to be worthy of being called scientific knowledge, hence that it exhibit an object of knowledge that responds to the general criteria of objectivity. [...] We must be able to distinguish between “objective” succession (that is, succession in the object) and “subjective” succession (in our representation of the phenomena). [...] [O]bjectivity depends on our capacity to maintain this distinction between objective, rule-governed succession and succession *per sé* (Ricoeur, 1976: 684).

The pre-requisites of knowledge, as it is traditionally conceived, is the existence of a subject separated from an object, which is analysed following a determined method. Interestingly enough, Ricoeur uses the term 'experience' to refer to the succession of events in history (1976: 686). By doing so, the scholar manages to refer to both history and biography, that is to say, to both a public and to a more private and personal succession of events. The same methodology used in history can also be used in biography. The reconstruction of the collective life of a people is analogue to the recreation of the private life of a person. What experience requires to exist as such, according to Ricoeur, is "order", "interconnectedness", "unity", and "consciousness", since '[t]here is no connectedness without unity and no unity without self-awareness' (1976: 684). The historian has to objectify the 'experience', in this way reducing the difference between the natural sciences and the human sciences. What gives order and unity to such 'experience' is indeed the subjectivity of the historian, but, as we have previously seen, the new subjectivity that characterises postmodernity is fragmented and, therefore, cannot be the stable foundation which converts 'experience' into a knowable object. The natural sciences conceive reality as an external object that can be known by using a certain method. Consequently, since historiography regards itself as a natural science, it follows that history itself is objectified as a mere succession of events, in order to apply the same method valid for the natural sciences. In fact, 'human relations throughout history are, to a considerable extent, reified to the point that the course of history is no longer distinguished from the flow of things' (Ricoeur, 1976: 668-669).

At the root of this reification of collective history and of personal experience there is a conception of memory and knowledge as "appropriation" and "internalization", i.e., an object is known when it is brought, from its external position, into the consciousness of the subject (Vattimo, 2001: 176-177):

history is knowledge by means of "traces" and the past is accessible to us only through marks, inscriptions, documents, archives, and the monuments of all kinds that play the role of "facts" for historical inquiry. Because these facts are in a sense observable, history may, to a certain extent, join observation

and explanation, following a model of intelligibility close to that used in the experimental sciences (Ricoeur, 1976: 691).

History is objectified through 'the externalization of memory' in "traces", which can be both physical objects and written documents. History, on the one hand, can be associated to the physical sciences as far as it relies on facts, but, on the other hand, history cannot be considered a physical science since it cannot prescind from explications, evaluations, and commentaries that 'follow and complement the chronological sequence of facts. Most of the selections and of the connections drawn in the writing of history are to a certain extent arbitrary' (Ricoeur, 1976: 695). Since the past is not a physical object, it is not possible to study it simply by applying the methodology of the physical sciences. Consequently, historiography may be considered as a scientific discipline only to a certain extent.

In addition to the interest for knowledge, there is a second kind of interest that, according to Ricoeur, moves history: the interest for communication. As Heidegger pointed out, there are no stable and pre-ordered structures in history, and therefore we can only dialogue with the past from the "destinal-historical place" we find ourselves in (Vattimo, 2001: 181). Therefore, it is not possible to accept the traditional and historiographical conception of History neither as a mere succession of "facts" (events or individual existences) nor as an evolution towards a *telos*, a final goal, be it the Hegelian Spirit, the Marxist class emancipation, or technological progress (Vattimo, 2001: 182). Heidegger was the first to conceive history as a transmission of messages, where every word is the answer to a "plea". The answer, however, does never entirely exhaust the plea because of what Heidegger defined as *das Selbe* (the Same), i.e. everything that is not-said and not-thought in every answer to the same plea (Vattimo, 2001: 183). *Das Selbe* allows the existence of both difference and continuity in history (Vattimo, 2001:184). The same historical material is "questioned" by different analysers, each of them coming from a different cultural-historical position, with different interests and ideologies. The questions asked therefore vary, and the very same historical material is interpreted differently, in order to find satisfactory answers to ever different questions. History is "reconstructed" through a dialogue, not through the methodology of the positivist sciences as historiography tries to do, "freezing" the

past in an allegedly “authentic” condition (194). In Heidegger, History becomes a dialogue, a game of pleas and answer which are historically limited, since every historical horizon is by its very nature limited (Vattimo, 2001: 197).

Therefore, History gains a linguistic dimension, a dialogical status, which is at the core of hermeneutics. Indeed, most of the “traces” in which history is externalized are actually in the shape of signs and inscriptions:

[historical] understanding would pose a hermeneutical problem only when it is mediated by written signs or any other kind of sign which resemble writing and which constitutes an inscription in the broad sense of the term. Then understanding is worthy of being called interpretation; that is textual exegesis. As a text, history must not just be understood, but also interpreted. Between us and our predecessors, and even, for a large part, between our contemporaries and ourselves, understanding is mediated by something like a text (Ricoeur, 1976: 692).

Since history can be read as a text, it becomes possible to apply to history itself the same categories and methods postulated by philosophical hermeneutics and used in literary criticism. Indeed, Ethan Kleinberg shows how deconstruction as theorised by Derrida could be applied as a new historical methodology. Indeed, also hermeneutics, structuralism, and post-structuralism have had ‘important implications for the understanding and for the writing of history itself’ (Kleinberg, 2007: 118). Several and different methods and concepts have been lumped together under the umbrella-terms ‘postmodernism’, ‘post-structuralism’, or the ‘linguistic turn’, which makes it sometimes difficult to distinguish the contributions elaborated by thinkers as Gadamer, Derrida, and Foucault. These theories had their greatest impact in the field of literary criticism, and later were applied to the writing of history as well. Consequently, historiography is no longer self-contained and autonomous, but it is influenced both by literary theory and by philosophy.

A telling example of the interdisciplinary nature of the so-called “intellectual history” (Kleinberg, 2007: 117-126) and “cultural history” (126-129) is the case of deconstruction. First used in literary studies and in postcolonial re-writing of the canon, deconstruction was later applied also in the re-writing of history by the “ex-centric” subjects. Even if very few historians actually apply this methodology, it does

frequently appear in their works, “haunting” them as if it were a scary ‘specter’ (Kleinberg, 2007: 113):

Deconstruction haunts history as the spirit of revision and lays open the possibility of new tellings, new readings, and new facts. It also forces the historian to confront her or himself in the creation of the history revised. This is the double, the *Unheimliche*, the ghost that terrifies us because in it we see our “darker purpose” and the limits of the project of history. [...] [E]ach time a historical account of an event is revised, the very act of revision reveals the instability of historical truth and the possibility of recounting what “actually happened” (Kleinberg, 2007: 143).

The very possibility of re-writing history means that there are many possible histories, many historical truths. Deconstruction reveals the “fictional” part of history present in any historical account, which determines the possibility of many narratives out of the same “raw material”. The scientific, objective, and universally valid aspirations of historiography are challenged and problematized:

A deconstructive critique [...] seeks to unsettle the hierarchical order that assumes that facts take priority over imagination. In doing so it announces the possibility that imagination is equally crucial to the historical endeavor whatever its relation to “reality”. [...] The proposition that imagination plays an active role in the writing of history may well be unpalatable to a discipline that models itself as a mirror of reality [...] (Kleinberg, 2007: 117).

Deconstruction reveals the role that imagination plays in the reconstruction of a historical event, ‘laying bare the authorial choices at work in it’ (Kleinberg, 2007: 116). In this regard, deconstruction bears many affinities with Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (1973), *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), and *Figural Realism* (1999). This theorization of historiography, however, has been more welcomed by literary specialists than by historians. This rejection by historian is mainly due to the fact that, according to White, when historical facts are incorporated into coherent historical narratives, they are also emplotted in a story which has a beginning, middle, and end. In devising the story line of such narratives, historians are obliged, in the same way as are authors of fictional narratives, to emplot the facts according to one or another of the principal

literary genres – comedy, romance, tragedy, irony, or satire and to use rhetorical devices or tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, or irony), one of which will predominate in generating the stories and interpretations they present. Events can be emplotted in several ways, because ‘White’s narrativist thesis insists that no meaning or interconnection is to be found in the historical facts themselves, and that any meaning or relationships attributed to them is a construction imposed by the historian’ (Zagorin, 1999: 20). Therefore, events acquire a meaning only when they are inserted into a narrative; their meaning is thus not intrinsic, but extrinsic. The consequence is that ‘[a]ll stories are fictions, which means, of course, that they can be ‘true’ in a metaphorical sense and in the sense in which a figure of speech can be true’ (White, 1973: xi). According to Perez Zagorin, *Metahistory* proposes an extreme position that leads to a total identification of history with fiction which ‘discards the concept of a real and knowable past’ (1999: 17-18). Actually, White has never denied the existence or the knowledge of the past; his purpose was to underline the fact that any historical account, no matter how objective it pretends to be, is inevitably fictional in the selecting, ordering, and arranging the events of the past into a narrative.

In White, the fictional part of history exposed by deconstruction acquires a predominant role, which seems to question the more factual dimension of history. It is important to distinguish between the concept of deconstruction as theorized by Jacques Derrida and the subsequent broadening of this term in the usage of others authors, such as Dominik LaCapra and Toews, who have somehow reduced and distorted its original meaning (Kleinberg, 2007: 125-126), or such as Lynn Hunt or Patricia O’Brien, who, instead, tend to assimilate Derrida’s deconstruction to other scholars’ reflections, especially Foucault’s (126-129). Indeed, since in his writings Foucault aims ‘to show how in every society, power shapes and unites with knowledge in the form of “regimes of truth” and dominant discourses that prescribe the limits of the knowable and sayable in particular cultures’ (Zagorin, 1999: 9), deconstruction is sometimes misused merely in the sense of a ‘destabilization of authoritative pronouncements’ (128) which are generally seen as ‘the product of the ideological and political interests of hegemonic groups whose domination shapes discourse’ (Zagorin, 1999: 9). Because of the link between power, knowledge, and ideology, every official

statement is seen as tainted with cultural imperialism, sexism, or ethnocentrism, and therefore deconstruction is often used by the “ex-centric” in their revisions of the official accounts of history. What is taking place is a crisis in the traditional conception of history. As Kleinberg explains, until the 1970s, there were just ‘variations of one general narrative, largely a white male European narrative. In the 1980s and 1990s, postmodernism in general and deconstruction in particular opened up the possibility of multiple narratives and multiple subject groups’ (Kleinberg, 2007: 141). Joan Scott pointed out that these multiple histories are written ‘from fundamentally different – indeed irreconcilable – perspectives or standpoints, none of which is complete or completely “true”’ (Scott, in Kleinberg, 2007: 131).

The deconstructive strategy is to approach a text (historical or otherwise) as a site of contestation and struggle, though one that is hidden because one element in the text asserts itself as the source of order by establishing a hierarchy of meaning. The hierarchy is constructed as an oppositional binary, but one that is presented as neutral thereby concealing the tensions within the text. This process is not the result of the intention of the author, because the construction of the text may very well invoke unconscious, unquestioned, or implicit assumptions that are at work in the ordering process itself. The purpose of deconstruction is to expose the binary construct and arbitrary nature of the hierarchy at work in a text by revealing how the binary elements in fact exchange properties with each other. Furthermore, deconstruction also focuses on what is left out of a text, what about which it is silent but on which it also depends (Kleinberg, 2007: 114).

Deconstruction stresses the unconscious dimension that plays an instrumental role in the creation of any historical account. The selection, omission, and arrangement of data is often unconsciously arbitrary, and so it is the process of “emplotting” that very data (using Hayden White’s terminology). Even the inscriptions, documents, and “traces” need to be interpreted by the historian, and in that process of interpretation lies the “fictional” aspect of documents.

Postmodernity may be seen as having had a positive effect on historiography, since the multiplying of perspectives has given voice also to marginal groups and culture. However, some scholars, such as Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret

Jacob, regard postmodernism as incompatible with the practice of history, because “postmodernism” (umbrella-term that includes also deconstruction) calls into question the objectivity, and therefore the truth, of historical knowledge. Historians feel the threat of postmodernism, which would make history lose ‘its status as a “social science” capable of providing “generally valid, shared knowledge”’ (Kleinberg, 2007: 134). Indeed, Hunt and Bonnell stressed the menace of the ‘evil spectre now named Foucault/Derrida’:

During the 1980s and 1990s, cultural theories, especially those with a postmodernist inflection, challenged the very possibility of or desirability of social explanation. Following the lead of Foucault and Derrida, poststructuralists and postmodernists insisted that shared discourses (or cultures) so utterly permeate our perception of reality as to make any supposed scientific explanation of social life simply and exercise in collective fictionalization or mythmaking: we can only elaborate in our presuppositions, in this view: we cannot arrive at any objective, freestanding truth (Bonnell and Hunt, 1999: 3).

The general trend among historians is to reject “postmodernism” and to go back to the bedrock of experience and to the stable subject, back to the certainty of the archive and to the faith in a universal truth. The path opened by postmodernism is avoided, because it seems to be leading down the perilous path of nihilism and total relativism.

A telling example of the attitude historians generally have towards postmodernism can be found in Perez Zagorin’s essay ‘History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now’ (1999). While, on the one hand, the scholar recognizes that postmodernism ‘may have served a useful purpose in provoking historians to be more self-critical and aware of their presuppositions and procedures’ (1), on the other hand, he finds the postmodern conception of historiography to be ‘deeply mistaken’. Once again, postmodernism is seen as a threat, as a ‘specter of relativism in the form of a questioning of the possibility of objectivity in the investigation of the human past’ (Zagorin, 1999: 1). This is completely at odds, according to Zagorin, with the practice of history, where the ideas of objectivity and

truth are indispensable, as it is the belief that the object of study of history, namely the past, can be reconstructed (1999: 10). If historians were to embrace postmodernist theories, history would no longer be a discipline of knowledge.

In addition to the multiplying of narratives and of subjects that challenge the objectivity and universality of historical truth, there is also another aspect of postmodernism which is rejected by historians: the conception of language as theorised in the so-called “linguistic turn”. Zagorin moves against this new ‘philosophy of linguistic idealism or panlinguism’ whose main assumption is that ‘there is no extralinguistic reality independent of our representation of it in language or discourse’ (1999: 7). At the core of the postmodern theory applied to history is the ‘linguistic idealism’:

[a]lthough numerous philosophers in past centuries well understood that language is not only our supreme means of making sense to the world but can also be a cause of systematic error, misunderstanding, deception, and falsehood, not until quite recently did some thinkers come to regard it as separating us from the reality of things by confining us to a world that is constituted entirely by language. [...] The past is inaccessible to us as an object of knowledge and cannot be the referent of historical writings, which must refer solely to other writings, texts, and discourses’ (Zagorin, 1999: 23).

What Zagorin advocates is the necessity to find a moderate position between the most extreme theories of postmodernism, which conceive history as equivalent to fiction, and the traditional conception of history as a positivist science. The past is not completely accessible but, at the same time, it is not completely lost either.

As in the case of deconstruction, theories first introduced in literary criticism are later applied to historiography. Indeed, Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., attributes to the narrator of history the same features of the third-person narrator in realist fiction, who usually is ‘external, invisible, impersonal, and all-knowing’, consequently fostering ‘the illusion that the literary text is a direct record of reality’ (in Zagorin, 1999: 12). The narrator of history plays a similar role to the omniscient third-person narrator in fiction. This narrator was meant to be “neutral” and “objective” but, as Edward Said has for the first time underlined in his ground-breaking work *Orientalism* (1978), in

most cases this voice is far from being neutral: mostly, it is a white, male, Western voice. Zagorin, as a good historian, feels strongly the difference between invented fiction and history, which ‘doesn’t profess to be a mindless and mechanical transcript of reality but an attempt at understanding’ (1999: 12). History is not just a reproduction of reality and ‘[i]ts purpose has never been to produce a verbal copy, simulacrum, or literal recapitulation of the past’ (Zagorin, 1999: 21), because every statement has to be justified, proved, and evaluated according to the sources and the evidence available.

According to Zagorin, two fundamental theses of postmodernism tend towards nihilism in history: its ‘anti-realism’ and its ‘narrativism’ (1999:14). As far as ‘anti-realism’ is concerned, since the past itself is not the direct referent of historiography, because it is possible to have access to the past through written documents, texts, and discourses, ‘postmodernism dissolves history into a species of literature and makes the past itself into nothing more than a text’ (Zagorin, 1999: 13-14); instead, postmodern ‘narrativism’ implies that

the fictional stories invented by writers and the narrations fashioned by historians do not differ from one another in any essential respect because both are made of language and equally subject to the latter’s rules in the practice of rhetoric and the construction of narratives. The manner in which historical narratives are emplotted, the connections they posit among events, and the interpretations and explanations they present, are thus seen as constructions imposed upon the past rather than being founded on, constrained by, or answerable to fact as disclosed by the evidence. From the narrativist standpoint, the tropes and literary genres employed by historians prefigure and determine the vision, interpretation, and meaning of the facts. By the same token they also place historical narratives in the same category as the fictional discourses of novelists and artists, so that it is impossible to make a distinction between histories and fiction or to adjudicate between differing historical interpretations on the basis of facts or evidence (Zagorin, 1999: 14).

There are many, equally viable yet often contradictory, versions of the same historical event because the meaning is not intrinsic in the events themselves, but is instead extrinsically imposed on them according to the kind of narrative such events

are inserted in. history is likened to fiction inasmuch as 'both are discourses and systems of significance by which we make sense of the world' (Hutcheon, 1988: 89). The "raw material" of the past is imaginatively reconstructed and systematized into a consistent narration, which 'cannot be written without ideological and institutional analysis' (Hutcheon, 1988: 91). The meaning of historical events varies according to three elements: firstly, their emplotment in a certain kind of narrative, be it a romance, comedy, tragedy, or satire; secondly, the formal argumentation moved by the historian; and thirdly, the ideology supported by the historian, which can be anarchism, conservatism, radicalism, and liberalism (White, 1973). In fact, history is traditionally conceived as following a certain pattern, which might be cyclical or, more often, linear. As far as the first pattern is concerned, events in history may be seen as repeating themselves and, consequently, anything that happens in history is not "new", but just a re-elaboration of what has already happened. On the contrary, a linear conceptualization of history implies a *telos*, an ultimate goal of history: according to Derrida, 'historiography is always teleological as it imposes a meaning on the past and does so by postulating an end (and/or origin)' (in Hutcheon, 1988: 97).

The writing of history is analogue to realism in fiction as in both cases 'the events seem to narrate themselves' (Hutcheon, 1988: 91) in an objective, neutral, and impersonal way. Such transparency of representation is no longer believed by postmodernism, which conceives it as deceitful instead. "Impersonal" historiography is a deceptive paradox in terms, since there is always an historian behind it, writing history from his subjective and historically-culturally located context, with a precise goal and ideology in mind. What postmodernism wants to reveal is the 'context-dependent nature of all values' (Hutcheon, 1988: 90), as opposed to conventional historiography which, instead, deceitfully presents its values and visions of the world as timeless and universal. Historical accounts are linguistic constructs, which need to be hermeneutically interpreted, and discourses, therefore linked to a certain ideology and power. The emergence of new subjects, the "ex-centric" groups, has given voice to different perspectives, previously neglected or willfully silenced. A multiplicity of histories is opposed to a monolithic and allegedly Universal History, which was "Universal" only for a small, white, male, and Western part of the world population.

These new histories have shattered the gnoseologic certainties inscribed in a stable and univocal interpretation of the world. Indeed, postmodernity might be defined as ‘the age of recognition of loss certainties as the state of human condition’ (Hutcheon, 1988: 101). While many detractors of postmodernism regard this plurality as a threat leading to perilous relativism of knowledge and nihilism of values, other scholars, among which Linda Hutcheon, welcome this multiplying of ‘subjects in/of/to history’ (1988: 158) and the subsequent plurality of perspectives on history as the ‘only non-totalizing response possible’ (Hutcheon, 1988: 101), which can face and challenge the impositions of any authoritative master-narrative. According to Lyotard, “consensus” ‘meant that difference, dissent, faced one of two choices; assimilation into the dominant language game or else complete exclusion from the circle of rational humanity’ (Klein, 1995: 282). Rather than nihilism, where we know nothing, in postmodern multiplicity, plurality, and polyphony we know more: an event can be A, but it can also be B, and both may be true.

The risk of relativism that lingers in postmodernism is more evident when postmodernism is applied to historiography, which finds itself in an ambiguous position since, despite being a humanist discipline, at the same time it tries to apply a method to study an object (the past), like positivist sciences. Its object of study, however, is not properly a physical object, but it is a combination of factual and fictional elements. Postmodernists have stressed and underlined the fictional part of history, in the most extremist cases even denying entirely its factual basis. This has led to an overlapping of historiography, namely the study of facts, and literary criticism, the study of fiction, which is reflected both in new conceptions of history (see Hayden White’s *Metahistory*) and in novels. Novels, indeed, even when not self-consciously experimental, are witnesses of an epoch and reflect its cultural changes. Indeed, the postmodern concern for history and historiography is the main topic of Julian Barnes’s *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989).

What characterizes postmodernity is a new conception of history, of the subject and his relation with the external reality and with his own past experience, since the methodology used in writing biographies and autobiographies are similar to those applied by historians. At the core of these cultural changes there is the question of

truth and of knowledge, namely the doubt that what we know and what we can know may not be the Truth, or at least, it may be just one version or just one part of the truth. Indeed, an objective, undisputable, universal, and immutable Truth seems to be just another master-narrative and therefore no longer believable. Postmodernity has required the elaboration of a new conception of truth.

5. A NEW CONCEPTION OF TRUTH

As the idea of a unified Cartesian self and an objective history are shattered into pieces, so is the conception of truth proposed as the result of scientific knowledge. Again, the starting point of this revolutionary re-conceptualization is Nietzsche, who introduced the idea that

human knowledge does not represent a contact with a “truth” behind phenomena: rather, it is a function of our life-goals. As Habermas has articulated it in the present decade, knowledge is interest-guided. Objective, scientific knowledge does not give us the form of the “way things are”; it is fabricated by the artistry of understanding in conformity with the purpose of gaining control over nature. If our interest or aim were different, our knowledge would take another form.

The knowledge of the world, objective and scientific as it may appear, does not reveal the “truth beyond the phenomena, but it just reflects the interests of the analyser who interprets the available data. It is the same process adopted in the case of historiography, this time extended to all human knowledge. Nietzsche, indeed, shows

the *ideological* character of human knowledge, shattering the firm underpinnings for knowledge as something grounded on immutable principles or transcendental categories. Thus, Nietzsche went beyond an attack on metaphysics to argue that knowledge itself, as the artistry of an interest-guided understanding, cannot be “truth” in the old rationalist sense. There are only different forms of “fiction”. What we call “truths”, said Nietzsche, are merely the useful “fictions” by which we live (Palmer, 1977: 368-369).

Knowledge is no longer seen as universal and immutable, but as ideological, and therefore subjected to variations, according to the interests of the power who supports a certain interpretation of the world. Knowledge is indeed connected to power, as Ricoeur observes in his *L'Archéologie du Savoir* (1969). Consequently, there are no longer facts, only interpretations, and whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power, not of truth. This is the world explained as the “will

to power” (Vattimo 105). This means that any power-supported interpretation gains officiality and legitimacy, being thus promoted to universal Truth.

Nietzsche’s reflexions on the Cartesian Christian Self and on the truth as “will to power” were further developed by Heidegger. Since truth is conceived as a historical structure and as a generic order of the world, this implies a brand-new conception of knowledge. The “being” can no longer be thought as a subject opposed to an object, an *objectum* placed in front of the subject in order to be studied, because the subject himself is a being-in-time, a historical product, and therefore it is only possible to start a dialectic relation with the world. Heidegger introduces the concept of the hermeneutical circle, which challenges both the positivist and the idealist conceptions of knowledge. The subject can perceive objects as provided with meaning, value, and function, only because the subject himself already has what Heidegger called a “pre-comprehension” of these objects. External objects can be understood and known precisely because they are already within the subject, who is not a *tabula rasa*, but has got within himself pre-judgements and pre-notions that allow him to “interpret” the world around him. Therefore, there is no longer an opposition between a unified subject and a knowable object outside him, as in the illuminist model of knowledge, but there is a cyclical and dialogical relationship between subject and object. Indeed, before having access to single “realities”, we already have a “world” of knowledge within us, and the understanding of any new object or event is based on our pre-comprehension of a more general world where we insert the new realities we meet. A particular meaning is understood in the light of a broader pre-comprehended (and linguistic) horizon, which in turn is modified by any new particular meaning we access (Massaro, 2002: 686). The hermeneutical circle introduces a new conception of knowledge, since the subject is no longer supposed to find an external and objective “truth” by applying a method to analyse the external world. Because the subject cannot leave aside his pre-judgements, his access to the object is not direct, but is filtered through his pre-comprehension of the world. Consequently, truth is to be found in this situation of co-implication between subject and object, which takes place in a precise historical and cultural context (Massaro, 2002: 559).

In the last part of his reflexion, Heidegger underlines the importance of language in knowledge, since our very experience of the world and our pre-comprehension of objects and events is, ultimately, linguistic. Only in language do objects appear as provided of meaning and of value. According to Heidegger, the “being” reveals itself in language, especially in poetry, meant as “creative language”, because language has both a cognitive and ontological function: language allows the subject to access the world and, at the same time, through language the “being” manifest itself (Massaro, 2002: 566). The “being”, like the truth, is expressed in the shape of infinite interpretations (Vattimo, 2001: 141). There is not a single external truth, but only a dialogue from different temporal “horizons”, and this is how hermeneutics found its place in the complex structure of Heidegger’s existentialism.

Richard Palmer defined hermeneutics as ‘the discipline of bridging gaps and of theorizing about what is involved in this process’ (1977: 386). Indeed, the word “hermeneutics” derives from the Greek god Hermes, who was ‘a boundary-crosser, the god of exchanges of all kinds, as well as messenger-mediator between the realm of the gods and that of men’ (Palmer, 1977: 385). The gaps that philosophical hermeneutics wants to bridge are the gaps between past and present values and conceptual models, between different cultures and languages, but also the gaps existing between individuals living in the same period of time, but belonging to different cultures. Indeed, nowadays, thanks to the mass media and the internet, we are exposed to ways of living and of thinking which are completely different from our own. Therefore, it has become increasingly more difficult to understand our very contemporaries, who might live either in remote places in the earth, or just round the corner, having migrated from a country to another, but bringing with them their own set of values and traditions. It seems more difficult to define shared values and models of understanding the world even with our very contemporaries who, despite being close in time, might be remote in space and culture (Massaro, 2002: 676).

The fundamental difference between traditional hermeneutics and Philosophical Hermeneutics is that the “text” that the latter interprets has a broader meaning than merely a “written document”. Indeed, the term “text” includes, broadly speaking, every form of linguistic production, be it written or oral. Günther Buck and

Marshall Brown (1980), indeed, analyse the very possibility of a hermeneutics of action, which becomes possible only when an action is somehow represented by language. In the case of biography and autobiography, since the concept of action can be universalized, and speech (i.e., every production of verbal structures to be taken as “texts”) can be conceived as a mode of action. Quentin Skinner agrees that “[t]he appropriate objects of interpretation, on this account, are taken to be “texts” in a special and extended sense which includes both texts in a literal sense and text analogues such as voluntary actions’ (1975: 210). Ultimately, the hermeneutics of text can be grasped as a particular form of action hermeneutics (Buck and Brown, 1980: 88). The main goal of interpretation, both of texts and of action, is to make explicit what is implicit. Sometimes, some of the meanings of a “text” that were explicit when it was produced have now become implicit because ‘historical distance has removed the text from self-evidence’ (Buck and Brown, 1980: 90). Even in action there is inexplicitness, i.e. meanings which are historically or culturally located. Therefore, ‘[a]ll forms of hermeneutics can thus be comprehended from the indicated perspective as the *bringing into consciousness of a formerly unconscious meaning*’ (Buck and Brown, 1980: 93), where “unconscious” does not mean “repressed” as in a Freudian sense, but merely “non-conscious”. Indeed, the subject is generally unaware of the pre-judgements and implicit assumptions used to interpret the world.

As it has already emerged, the current concept of hermeneutics is rather different from the meaning it used to have in the past, since ‘hermeneutics was once only a system of rules, while it is today only a theory or understanding’ (Szondi and Bhati, 1979: 18). Traditionally, there were two modes of interpreting a text, the grammatical and the allegorical mode. The former focused on the *sensus litteralis* of a text, trying to bridge the gap with the past replacing obsolete signs or verbal expressions, which are no longer understandable for the reader, with new understandable signs, or with explicatory glosses (Szondi and Bhati, 1979: 24). Indeed, ‘at the origin of the intention to determine the *sensus litteralis* is, then, the phenomenon of the changing of a language [*Sprachwandel*], the aging of linguistically fixed utterances’ (Szondi and Bhati, 1979: 21). The allegorical mode of interpretation, instead, keeps the obsolete world, but enriches it with a new meaning. The *sensus*

spiritualis 'rests on the possibility of a manifold textual significance' (Szondi and Bhati, 1979: 24). The main goals of both these modes of interpretation were to make a text more understandable and, especially in the case of the allegorical interpretation, to make a certain text "canonical", namely relevant and actual to contemporary readers, by way of adding or adapting new meanings to previous ones, as St Paul did in his interpretation of the Old Testament as the prefiguration of the New Testament (Szondi and Bhati, 1979: 22-23). However, nowadays both allegorical and grammatical hermeneutics are seen as subjected to historical change. Even if the historical nature of the allegorical interpretation is clearer to see, even the grammatical interpretation has a historical nature because 'the question of which possibilities of correction occur to the philologist, and which don't, also depends upon his own historical horizon' (Szondi and Bhati, 1979: 27). It is not possible to step out of our historically and culturally located viewpoints. Consequently, the lack of atemporal and universally valid rules of interpretation leads to a paradox within literal hermeneutics, which is no longer able to provide 'a material (i.e., arriving at praxis) theory of the interpretation of literary texts is lacking today' (Skinner, 1975: 27). Philosophical Hermeneutics, indeed, is to be regarded more as a theory of understanding than as a scientific discipline providing an operative method of analysis.

Indeed, Philosophical Hermeneutics, meant as a theory of understanding, underlines the importance and the universality of the phenomenon of interpretation, which is the basis of communication, comprehension, and therefore of knowledge, thus emphasising the 'historical nature of understanding' (Szondi and Bhati, 1979: 20). The individual is now conceived as a "dialogical being". Language is necessary to communicate and to establish a relation with other people, but sometimes language can be obscure and unclear, leading to misunderstandings. For this reason hermeneutics is needed: in order to understand a written text or an oral speech, it is necessary to analyse and interpret it, using our pre-judgements and pre-notions. As Heidegger explained in his conceptualization of the hermeneutical circle, we can understand something because it is not entirely new to us, but we can somehow connect it to our pre-knowledge of the world. Therefore, I can understand what another person is trying to communicate to me only if I know his language, his

intentions, and his view of the world. The more I try to get out of my personal world and get into the other person's world, the more I will be able to understand him. What Philosophical Hermeneutics promotes is a "fusion of horizons", i.e. our temporally and culturally determined knowledge of the world. Our relationship with other people and objects, as well as with different cultures and different periods of the past, is both a relation of familiarity and of unfamiliarity. Even our very contemporaries, who belong to our same tradition, are both familiar to us, because we share language, customs, and traditions, and are also unfamiliar, because they have different values, opinions, and thoughts (Massaro, 2002: 677).

Another philosopher who further developed Nietzsche's and Heidegger's theories was Hans-Georg Gadamer, who extended the principles previously used in the exegesis of sacred or classical texts, like the *Bible* or the *Odyssey*, to any act of understanding. For this reason Gadamer added the term "philosophical" to hermeneutics, to define a discipline which studies 'not only the nature of interpretation but, in a wider sense, the conditions of all human comprehension' (Bartky, 1979: 600). Gadamer retrieves Heidegger's elaboration of the hermeneutical circle, developing a positive conceptualization of prejudices, or rather pre-judgements, which 'constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience' and make possible that 'what we encounter says something to us' (Gadamer, in Bartky, 1979: 600). Prejudices, and anticipations of meaning, were considered harmful by the illuminists and the positivists, since prejudices were seen as hindrances to a truthful knowledge, and therefore needed to be removed in order to gain an "objective" view on the world. Philosophical Hermeneutics, on the contrary, states that under no circumstances can we gain an unprejudiced objectivity. It is not possible to have a direct access to the past, as we cannot have any direct access to the consciousness of another human being. We cannot get rid of our prejudices because they are our "present horizon" and link us to "past horizons", through the tradition. Gadamer, therefore, moves against the Enlightenment and modern frame of mind, asserting that not only are prejudices inevitable, but they are also useful, because they help us in understanding the world. Were we to eliminate our prejudices, we would eliminate our cultural identity. What Gadamer suggests is that we should become aware of our

prejudices and pre-judgements, in order to grasp that comprehension and knowledge are always historically determined. There are legitimate prejudices, namely those we are aware of, and “false prejudices”, those we are unaware of. The right attitude to assume when interpreting a “text” is of frank and open recognition of the inevitability of our prejudices and of willingness to question the legitimacy of our pre-suppositions (Massaro, 2002: 687-688). The only possible way to relate with the past is the same that we use to relate with people: through a dialogue that produces a fusion of “horizons”, namely our prejudiced, historically and culturally located standpoints².

Philosophical Hermeneutics is closely related to history, which is, broadly speaking, considered as a “text” that needs to be interpreted. As Bartky explains, ‘[t]he text [...] reveals itself not as something which possesses a meaning as some object might be thought to possess a property, but as an endless source of possible meanings, a reality whose essence it is to be indefinitely “self-presencing” or self-disclosing’ (1979: 600). Consequently, any “text” (in its broader sense that includes also individuals and events) includes in itself infinite meanings, rather than just one univocal, official, and dominant interpretation. Our pre-conceptions of the world are not only due to the historical, social, and cultural place we find ourselves living in; indeed, they are also determined by our language, which is a mode of interpreting the world that precedes all reflective attitudes. A similar point was stressed by Richard Palmer when talking about one of the aspects of the challenge postmodernity is moving against modernity, that is to say the “movement beyond western forms of reality”:

A study of Hopi language, or other American Indian languages, brings one into contact not just with a quite different perceptual field and mode of understanding “the world”. It is not just another set of words for (pre-given) Western (read “universal”) “realities.” The study of Indian or Oriental languages makes us vividly aware that the mindset of “modernity” as we experience it is in part a phenomenon of Western linguistic reality (1977: 374).

² As Weberman (2000: 47) points out, the German word *Vorurteil* should be rather translated as “pre-judgement” or “pre-commitment” rather than as “prejudice”, since prejudices has pejorative connotations, i.e. ‘judgements involving unfair, one-sided or discriminatory types of thinking’, that are at odds with Gadamer’s argument.

At the core of Philosophical Hermeneutics there is the question of truth and knowledge. The central issue in *Truth and Method* (1960) is whether truth can be found only in the experimental sciences or also in the “sciences of the soul”, namely art, philosophy, and literature. Is art just fiction, dream, and imagination, or does it has some kind of truth within itself? Gadamer’s answer is that when we relate with a work of art we experience the truth, because art brings us to modify our way of being, thinking, and feeling. What is more charming in a work of art is that it is not a detached object, a “thing”, but it is instead a “world” rich in values and in meanings. A work of art questions its readers and delivers a world and a meaning (those of the author and his historical epoch), but it also asks readers to give their personal interpretations. Therefore, a dialogue is established between the reader as interpreter and a work of art: the former ask something to the text, which, in turn, provides some answers, which, however, are already included in the questioning, in a virtuous circle which constitutes, broadly speaking, the very essence of human history (Massaro, 2002: 682). This kind of relation between a reader and a text reminds of Heidegger’s conceptualization of history, which is seen as a story of messages, in an infinite process of pleas and answers. However, the answers never completely fulfil the questions because of *das Selbe*, the Same, i.e. what is un-thought and un-said. Consequently, history itself becomes a dialogue between limited historical horizons (Vattimo, 2001: 183-184).

According to Gadamer, the mistake that has characterized Modernity is the fact that only the positivists sciences are thought to have access to the truth, while the so-called “sciences of the soul” are reduced to a mere pleasurable experience unrelated to any possible gnoseological quest. The aesthetical experience itself, instead, is a part of the comprehension of the world and of humanity, because it allows the viewer/reader/listener to understand something more about the world that surrounds him and about himself, and, therefore, a deeply-felt aesthetical experience can be ascribed to the path towards truth. Art increases the meaning of reality and is a form of knowledge both for the consumer and for the creator, because it opens new horizons of meaning, which are not pre-given merely as the author’s intentions, but which are a continuous work-in-progress. The ultimate meaning of art is given by all its

different interpretations, which are advanced in the course of time. A work of art is not bonded to a univocal meaning and to the initial situation in which it is created. Instead, art is subject to a continuous and infinite process of interpretation of its original meaning, realizing itself in language and in its manifestations (Massaro, 2002: 684), precisely like the “being” in Heidegger’s philosophy. Precisely because of its destabilizing function of the modern and positivist models of knowledge (which imply a subject, an object, and a scientific method), Philosophical Hermeneutics is listed by Palmer as the ultimate ‘critique of modernity’ (1977: 387) proposed by postmodernity.

When we read a text written in the past, we perceive at the same time its distance and its proximity. Between the reader and the author of a text there is an insuppressible historical distance which is, however, bridged by the interpretative “tradition”, namely all the voices that have previously interpreted that given text. Consequently, any access to a text is not direct, but is mediated by tradition. Our comprehension of the past is never just reproductive; it is also a productive activity. Our understanding is influenced by all the interpretations that have been done before ours, which constitute our pre-comprehension. As shown in Heidegger’s hermeneutical circle, there is no detached subject that studies an object, but the subject and the object are included in the same horizon of meaning: objects, events, texts, and actions can be understood precisely because the subject can give them a value, a function, and a sense. The same texts of the past, say the *Bible* or the *Odyssey*, have been subjected to different and original interpretations and reading in every different historical epoch, and therefore these very texts, despite being always the same (*das Selbe*), are at the same time always different, because they are transformed and enriched by every new interpretation. According to Heidegger, this is also the only way in which it is possible to access the past.

Philosophical Hermeneutics, therefore, is an important theory of knowledge, which introduces a new concept of truth: indeed, truth is dialogical, because it is the result a process of discovery through a dialogue with the “other”, be it a text, the past, or another individual. What is important is to recognize our prejudiced point of view and be willing to modify it and open it to the “otherness” of the “other” (Massaro, 2002: 680). As for the reader of a text, our cognitive experience is determined by a

relation of familiarity and unfamiliarity, proximity and distance, with other people and with the past. The familiarity is given by the fact that both past and present, both the reader and the text, belong to the same tradition (beliefs, values, prejudices, ideas, etc.), while the unfamiliarity is given by the unbridgeable historical distance and by the existence of different cultures and civilizations. Past and present are neither seen as opposite nor as separated, since they dialogue incessantly. Our world, prejudices, and tradition are the key to access the “other” in a “fusion of horizons”, in which there is no absolute knowledge because it would imply that every difference is annihilated in favour of an ultimate truth. This new model of knowledge welcomes the diversity of every voice, meant as another manifestation of a dialogical truth. It is possible to see an ethical project at the core of philosophical hermeneutics: understanding and communication are the keys to a world free from cognitive absolutism and prevarications, and based on tolerance, where the “other” is respected in its “otherness” but at the same time its “similarity” is recognized and respected (Massaro, 2002: 680).

However, scholars as Gianni Vattimo and Robert J. Matthews have frequently criticised the fact that Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics ‘offers no new canons of interpretations, no proposals for reforming hermeneutical practice’ (Matthews, 1979: 114), and that he defends his claims about language poorly. The accuse advanced by Vattimo (2001), instead, moves from the fact that philosophical hermeneutics seems to have taken and simplified concepts elaborated by Heidegger, such as “being” as language, and the hermeneutical circle. Part of the limits of Gadamer’s universal model of knowledge is also due to the fact that it simply rises awareness about the inevitability of prejudices, explaining what happens in every consciousness, without offering any solution about how to overcome metaphysics, as the final aim theorized both by Nietzsche and by Heidegger. Unity is no longer a goal, and what remains is an ever-changing “dialogical truth”.

Another affinity existing between Philosophical Hermeneutics and Postmodernism is that both have been accused of questioning objectivity. David Weberman (2000) elaborates a new defence of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, which aims to explain the grounds for Gadamer’s claims and to defend philosophical

hermeneutics from any accusation of relativism and nihilism. By saying that truth is made of a plurality of interpretations, Gadamer seems to be saying that there is no distinction of right and wrong, but this is not the case. In fact, Weberman argues that “anti-objectivism” and “interpretive pluralism” (2000: 45) that characterise hermeneutics can escape relativism by recognizing criteria which permit distinguishing correct from incorrect interpretations. He develops his argument on three premises, which can be schematised as such:

THESIS	PREMISE	EXPLANATION
<p>The unsurpassability of prejudgements (46)</p>	<p>We cannot overcome the historical specificity and parochiality of (all) our epistemic and practical precommitments (48).</p>	<p>Prejudgements are ‘not so much a set of explicitly held beliefs that are in place prior to the act of understanding, but rather an often inexplicit set of practical and theoretical precommitments (<i>Voreingenommenheiten</i>), shaped in large part by cultural traditions, that determine how we experience what we experience’ (47).</p>
<p>Prejudgements as giving access (49)</p>	<p>Our historically specific precommitments are a necessary condition for having access to any understanding of an object insofar as they share with the object a background of meaningfulness that makes the object intelligible in the first place (50).</p>	<p>We can understand only that with which we share a ‘background of meaningfulness (consisting of practices, linguistic structures, concepts, beliefs, values, etc.)’ (49). ‘Commonality’, namely prejudgements and tradition) are indispensable for understanding.</p>

The indeterminacy (underdeterminedness) of the object of understanding (51)

The object of understanding is indeterminate (underdetermined); it is constituted in part by the horizon of the specific historically situated knower and changes according to what that horizon is (52).

‘the object of inquiry in the human or historical sciences does not, *in principle*, admit of *complete* knowledge’ (52). ‘later events and later points of view always bring out new aspects of the object of understanding’ (53). ‘to say that the object always changes over time and is, as a result, never determinate is not to say that everything about the object changes. Some of its properties are indeed fixed’ (54).

The third thesis is the solution that Weberman proposes to the problem of how it is possible to have “interpretive pluralism” and “anti-objectivism” while avoiding relativism. The scholar distinguishes between “intrinsic properties” and “relational or extrinsic properties” of a given object. The former are properties that an object or event has ‘in virtue of the way that thing itself, and nothing else, is’. These properties are fixed, while relational properties are ‘those properties of an object or event that depend wholly or partly on something other than that thing’ (Weberman, 2000: 54). These properties are ever-changing, and are the cause of the different interpretations that are possible for the same object and event. Relational properties can be due to temporal or cultural distance. Weberman calls “delayed relational properties” the properties that an object acquires as time passes, while “cultural relational properties” are the properties that change during cross-cultural or interpersonal understanding. Consequently, the subject plays a crucial role in the formation of the object, and ‘the category of relational properties of the object of understanding both explains the non-fixed nature of the object and its multiple interpretations and helps to underwrite the criteria governing the validity and

nonarbitrariness of such interpretations' (Weberman, 2000: 65), while the fixed intrinsic properties provide a constraint to this 'shifting, though not arbitrary, relational properties' (Weberman, 2000: 62). It is possible to judge the legitimacy of an interpretation by considering the circumstances from which it has arisen, namely the historical cultural context that determines the interpreter's pre-judgements. For this reason, Weberman uses the term 'contextualism' to define Gadamer's 'middle position between objectivism and relativism' (2000: 63).

Though we may be unable to reconstruct these properties in a matter uninfluenced by our own historicity, we can at least endeavour to approximate such a reconstruction. The fixed intrinsic properties constitute one central source for rational constraints on validity in interpretation. [...] Although relational properties make for multiple interpretations, both intrinsic and relational properties constrain the possible range of such multiplicity and account for the indispensability of the ideals of a certain impartiality and fidelity to the act of interpretation, hermeneutically understood (Weberman, 2000: 64).

Contextualizing and situating is precisely what postmodernism itself aims to do. Every knowledge is seen as provisional and historically conditioned, and is consequently analyzed within its double-context: on the one hand, knowledge is conveyed through language, and therefore it has to be inserted in an enunciative act, where both the producer and the receiver influence the ultimate meaning of the message; on the other hand, knowledge is produced within a certain historical, cultural, and social context, which determines, for instance, what is held to be right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable. Postmodernist art, in its self-reflexivity, has thematized 'this concept of meaning existing only "in relation to a significant context": that is, the context of the once suppressed enunciative act as a whole, and that of "situate" discourse which does not ignore the social, historical or ideological dimensions of understanding' (Hutcheon, 1988: 82). Knowledge is not universal and immutable, but inevitable temporary and partial, like in a never-ending quest for truth. Although postmodernist writers, like Julian Barnes, are well aware of the epistemological uncertainty that characterizes postmodernity,

They also tend not to become paralyzed by their very postmodern realization that their own discourses have no absolute claim to any ultimate foundation in “truth”. If we accept that all is provisional and historically conditioned, we will not stop thinking, as some fear; in fact, that acceptance will guarantee that we never stop thinking - and rethinking (Hutcheon, 1988: 53).

PART II

6 JULIAN BARNES: AN OVERVIEW

Julian Barnes was effectively defined by Mira Stout as the ‘chameleon of British letters’ (1992), due to the extreme variety of themes, techniques, and genres included in his *oeuvre*. As Barnes himself claimed, ‘[i]n order to write, you have to convince yourself that it’s a new departure not only for you but for the entire history of the novel’ (Stout, 1992). So far, Barnes has written eleven novels, four detective novels under the pseudonym, and nine other books ranking from short stories and memoirs to essays and journalism. In 2011, Julian Barnes received the David Cohen Prize for Literature and won the Man Booker Prize for his book *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), while *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), *England, England* (1998), and *Arthur & George* (2005) had been previously shortlisted for the same prize. Barnes has also won several literary prizes in France, including the Prix Médicis for *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1986) and the Prix Femina Étranger for *Talking It Over* (1992). His honours also include the Somerset Maugham Award (1981), the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize (1985), the E. M. Forster Award (1986), the Shakespeare Prize (1993), and the San Clemente literary prize (2008). In 2004, Julian Barnes was awarded the Austrian State Prize for European Literature and was named *Commandeur de L’Orde des Arts et des Lettres*.

Barnes was defined as a ‘Janus-faced Writer’ by Vanessa Guignery (2006: 28) who wanted to evoke, through the image of the Roman god Janus, the striking difference existing between the most experimental (and most acclaimed) works published under the name Julian Barnes, and the conventional form adopted in the thrillers signed Dan Kavanagh. As Merritt Moseley (1997: 5) observes, although Barnes has never written the same novel twice, Kavanagh has written the same novel four times. The “Kavanagh books” seem to have stopped, but the main issue underlying any thriller, namely the solution of a mystery and the search for the truth, can be found also in most of “Barnes novels.” However, not even the “Barnes novels” can be considered as a monolithic *oeuvre*. Despite being all challenging in different ways, some “experimental” novels, such as *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989), and *Arthur & George* (2006), are closer to postmodernism than other

more mainstream and “traditional” novels, such as *Metroland* (1980), *Before She Met Me* (1982), and *Staring at the Sun* (1986), among the others. As a consequence, Barnes’s *oeuvre* is hard to define. It is generally labelled as postmodernist simply because it does not fit neither in the realist nor in the modernist tradition, in its blurring ‘the borders that separate existing genres, texts, arts and languages’ (Guignery, 2006: 1). Barnes’s work, indeed, did not start as exclusively postmodernist, although it successively contributed in the definition of British postmodernism in the 1980s (Groes and Childs, 2011: 3).

However, despite the differences of narrative modes amongst Barnes’s novels, it is possible to notice the existence of recurrent issues and themes. A fundamental role is played by the topic of love, in all its possible declinations of marriage, adultery, and fidelity. Notwithstanding the risk of falling into a *cliché* in dealing with such an used and abused topic, Barnes manages to broaden the meaning of love, generally associated with romance and human passions, to the love for truth, for knowledge, for art, and also love for a ‘foreign genius’, Gustave Flaubert, because ‘he’s the writer whose words I most carefully tend to weight, who I think has spoken the most truth about writing’ (Barnes, in McGrath, 1987: 15). The lesson of the Greek is clear: the unavoidable counterpart of *Eros* is *Thanatos*. ‘Matters of Life and Death’ (Childs, 2011: 103) are explicitly dealt with in his collections of short stories, in particular in *Nothing To Be Frightened Of* (2008), but are also underlying concerns in most of his fiction. In *Flaubert’s Parrot*, the driving force behind Geoffrey Braithwaite’s narration is his wife’s death and (probable) suicide. The ½ chapter in *A History of the World*, instead, is devoted to love as the only hope left to stand up against the force and the cruelty of the history of the world, and the conventional love triangle is the core of *Talking It Over* (1991) and its ten-year-later sequel *Love, Etc.* (2000).

How can Barnes deal with such broad (and over-used) issues in an original way? How is it possible to write something new, say, about love? The originality of his works is not so much in the plots of his stories (which can be sometimes banal, e.g. a love triangle), as in the structure of the text, the original form given to an ordinary plot. His novels, even the less experimental like *Talking It Over*, are always raising questions and casting doubts about something “more” than what is explicitly depicted in the story. As Groes and Childs observe, ‘the material of Barnes’s novels exists as much in the

interstices of the text and the often unexpressed doubts of the characters: the aporetic disjunctions that open up to reveal more truth than the facts' (Childs and Groes, 2011: 10).

The sometimes simple plots are like open windows which allow the reader to peep into a deeper layer of the narrative. Moseley, indeed, defined Barnes's works as 'novels of ideas' (16), where the exploration of the question raised is more important than any stable answer. Barnes's 'truths are contingent and hesitant' (Moseley: 17), but this does not prevent him from asking troublesome questions about the nature and the very possibility of human knowledge. What is possible to know about the present and the past? And, taking a step back, is it possible to know the past? Is there a Truth or many truths? The quest for an answer forces the problematizing of concepts and set of values too often taken for granted or passively accepted. Dichotomous oppositions such as facts and fiction, art and life are dismantled, because Barnes's works reveal the fiction of facts and the truths of art. 'To take [...] the world as ambiguity, to be obliged to face not a single absolute truth but a welter of contradictory truths..., to have as one's only certainty the *wisdom of uncertainty*' (Kundera, in Childs and Groes, 2011:7) seems to be Barnes's attitude in his quest for knowledge and for truth. Doubt is used as a 'productive force' (Childs and Groes, 2011:8) against any form of monolithic or totalitarian vision of the world.

The desire to make of any novel 'a new departure [...] for the entire history of the novel' (Stout, 1992) explains Barnes's experimentation with literary conventions, by stretching, and sometimes breaking what supposed rules there are in novels. As far as the structure of *Flaubert's Parrot* and *A History of the World* is concerned, Barnes challenges the limits of literary genres, questioning one of the distinctive features that have characterized the novel since its origins, the chronological order. The structure of Barnes's two most experimental novels, indeed, is fragmented up to the point that the chapters seems at first sight to be little more than a collection of essays linked only by recurrent images or themes. Looking at them more closely, however, 'there are principles of construction that artfully link the apparently discordant and heterogeneous parts' (Moseley, 1997: 12). This formal fragmentation raised the question, among literary critics, whether these books can be called novels at all.

What is a novel, in any case? A unanimously shared answer does not seem to be available. From its very origins, the novel as a literary genre was characterized by its polymorphism and versatility in incorporating new demands and new visions of the world. The genre, indeed, has changed mirroring the transformations of society, culture, and, in a word, humanity. Barnes's own definition of the novel is: 'It's an extended piece of prose, largely fictional, which is planned and executed as a whole piece' (Barnes, in Moseley, 1997: 9). This definition seems broad enough to include such texts as *Flaubert's Parrot* and *A History of the World*, according to Barnes. The problematic aspect of Barnes's definition is the ambiguity of the expression 'largely fictional.' When is fictional enough to be considered a novel? Does it depend on the degree of factual references present in a text or does it simply depend on the writer's intentions? How can the life of a "real" person and how can History be the main topic of a fiction? How can it be a fiction when '*all letters quoted, whether signed or anonymous, are authentic; as are quotations from newspapers, government reports, proceedings in Parliament, and the writings of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*' (Arthur & George, 2005: 505), namely a reasonable percentage of the whole text?

In the past decades, especially thanks to Hayden White's ground-breaking book *Metahistory* (1973), the presence of a certain amount of fiction was revealed even in allegedly factual and semi-scientific disciplines like historiography and its "individual" counterpart, biography. In a similar trend, Barnes seems to be showing the presence of facts into fiction, so that 'the reader is at all times caught between the poles of true and not true, so that even the conventional signification patterns (biography presents fact; fiction presents fancy) no longer function' (Scott, 1990: 65). This difficulty in distinguishing the fact from the fiction is not limited to the fictional world of the text, but is extended to the non-fictional world of the reader. This kind of epistemological doubt concerning the possibility of knowing reality, the truth, and the past is generally associate to postmodern scepticism, even if, referring to Barnes, Moseley prefers using the word 'perspectivism' (1997: 89), in order to underline the polyphonic presence of many, often contradictory, versions and visions of the "real." The existence of "reality" and of the "past", ambiguous and volatile entities as they may be, is never denied in

Barnes. What is rejected, instead, is the simplistic and naïve idea that such entities may be unproblematically known.

The awareness of the impossibility to any clear-cut distinction between “pure facts” and “pure fiction” asks for a transformation of the disciplines which formerly claimed to relate purely to facts: biography and historiography. In both these disciplines a certain amount of fictionalization on the part of the analyst is inevitable. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, *A History of the World*, and *Arthur & George*, Barnes makes of the coexistence of fact and fiction, and the subsequent impossibility to separate them, an explicit theme of analysis, mirroring his quest for truth. The recognition of ‘the fugitive quality of certitude’ (Moseley, 1997: 86) and of the existence of a plurality of voices, all of which carrying different truths, urges for a change in the conventions that have sustained both historiography and biography, basically monivoiced and deceitfully objective accounts of “facts”. These conventions, however, are not rejected: only within the tradition is it possible to subvert it. This is the idea that lays at the core of Linda Hutcheon's and Margaret Rose's conception of parody. A typical postmodern technique indeed, parody allows Barnes to highlight the limits of human knowledge through three “processes” the aim of which is to discover and reveal the Truth, namely the truth about an individual's life (biography), the truth about the past (historiography), and the truth about a certain event (a trial).

7 PARODY OF BIOGRAPHY: RECONSTRUCTING FLAUBERT THROUGH HIS PARROT

Flaubert's Parrot (1984) is the book that boosted up Julian Barnes international career. The book was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Award and the Prix Médicis in the non-fiction category. This 'hybrid book which challenges any attempt at categorization, classification and genre taxonomy' (Guignery, 2006: 37) was indeed defined as a 'novel (in disguise)' (in Pateman, 2002: 22). Facts about Gustave Flaubert's life emerge as embedded into a fictional framework, namely the fictional narrator Geoffrey Braithwaite's quest for Flaubert's parrot and his attempt to talk/write about his wife's suicide.

The verifiable truth and objectivity of any statement in the novel which regards Flaubert is dismantled by this fictional framework. Any biography is not totally objective, because the biographer's biased intentions and visions of the world surreptitiously enter the biography, hence the "fiction" behind the "facts". Although the facts are the same, their meaning changes according to the kind of narration they are inserted in, as Hyden White observes (1973). Barnes manages to write about Flaubert in an oblique way, i.e. by writing about an amateur Flaubertian scholar's attempt to "reconstruct" Flaubert. Geoffrey Braithwaite's reconstruction, however, is far from being objective and neutral, because his attempt to know Flaubert sublimates his real intention and desire: to know his wife Ellen.

This 'Postmodernist Experimentation' (Guignery, 2006: 37) challenges conventional biographies both formally and thematically. A conventional biography bears many resemblances with a Realist novel of the "great tradition," to which Flaubert himself belongs. Although telling the "truth" is the main agenda both of Realism, of biography, and of Barnes, the solutions provided are very different. After having analysed the novel's formal and thematic structure, it will be possible to compare Barnes's choices with the great realist tradition, to which he is paying homage. Since the tradition is accepted, the parody of it is possible.

7.1 STRUCTURE AND THEMES

The most strikingly experimental feature of the text is its fragmented structure: '*Flaubert's Parrot* deftly deconstructs itself into various types of competing documents: the chronology, biography, autobiography, bestiary, philosophical dialogue, critical essay, manifesto, 'train-spotter's guide, appendix, dictionary, 'pure story' and even examination paper' (Higdon, 1991: 180). In a word, Flaubert's Parrot deconstructs 'prose genre taxonomies as a means of signification' (Scott, 1990: 65). Indeed, every prose genre has got its own conventions regarding both form and content, and this influences the reader's horizon of expectations. This 'trans-generic prose text' (Scott, 1990: 58) starts with a chapter entitled 'Flaubert's Parrot' and ends with another chapter called 'And the Parrot...'. These are the only parts of the novel where the issue of the parrot actually emerges. In the remaining twelve chapters, the quest for the real parrot that sat on Flaubert's desk during the writing of *A Cœur Simple* is not directly dealt with. The parrot is the 'narrative unifier' (Pateman, 2002: 29), each time assuming different symbolic roles and meanings.

The element that set the narrative into motion is the discovery of the existence of two stuffed parrots, one at the Hôtel-Dieu and the other at Croisset, both bearing a label which certifies that *that* parrot was the very parrot that Flaubert borrowed from the Museum of Rouen for the writing of *Un Cœur Simple*, one of the three tales collected in *Trois Contes* (1877). In the course of the book, this object is invested with several meanings: it is a symbol of the Holy Ghost in *Un Cœur Simple*, and the metaphor is extended by Geoffrey Braithwaite in 'clever vocalization without much brain, [...] Pure Word' (Barnes, 1984: 10). The parrot becomes the emblem of the writer, who 'feebly accepts language as something received, imitative and inert' (11). The parrot can also be a symbol of the past: 'Sometimes the past can be a greased pig; sometimes a bear in his den; and sometimes merely the flash of a parrot, two mocking eyes that spark at you from the forest' (129). Louise Colet associates the parrot explicitly to Flaubert himself: 'Gustave imagined he was a wild beast [...] but perhaps he was really just a parrot' (180). In the last chapter, when the quest for the authentic parrot is resumed, Braithwaite 'thought about Flaubert's parrot: to Félicité, it was a

grotesque but logical version of the Holy ghost; to me, a fluttering, elusive emblem of the writer's voice' (219). Braithwaite is parroting other people: Charles Bovary, as the husband of an unfaithful wife who committed suicide; and Gustave Flaubert himself, when he decides to take on writing his own version of the *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*. As the symbolic meanings of the stuffed parrot multiply, so does the actual number of parrots in the novel. From just one parrot with a single symbolic meaning, another parrot is discovered, and this unsettles all the significance Braithwaite has naively invested to the first parrot. By the end of the novel, the possible stuffed parrots that may have inspired Flaubert are fiftish. There is a movement of progressive inclusiveness: from one Truth, there are two dichotomous versions, mutually exclusive. By the end of the text, this "either/or" logic is overcome by a more inclusive logic: it can be either one of them, or neither of them. There is no way of knowing which is the real parrot borrowed by Flaubert. What is left is a plurality of choices, of meanings, and of interpretations.

James Scott (1990: 61) compares the structure of the central chapters to a rhizome, following the model proposed by Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze (Di Maio, 2010: 91). Figuratively, the rhizome symbolizes a form with 'no centre, no periphery, no exit' (Eco, in Scott, 1990: 61), since it can develop in multiple directions. As a matter of fact, Geoffrey Braithwaite's discovery of the existence of two "official" parrots unpredictably disintegrates into a multiplicity of secondary narrations, breaking any linear or chronological development of the quest.

Each chapter is an abrupt digression from the "parrot-hunt," leading towards disparate areas of knowledge, more or less fictionally related to Flaubert. Geoffrey Braithwaite's autobiographical account of the discovery of the two parrots is followed by three chronologies of Flaubert's life, and this may seem logical enough, although the three versions of the same life are often in open contrast with each other. Another immediate association with the name Flaubert is *Madame Bovary*, the *success de scandale* which launched Flaubert's career. Less logical, but still connected to the parrot, is 'The Flaubert Bestiary', namely all the references to animals that the manic Braithwaite has found in Flaubert's works. Even less logical is the connection between Flaubert and trains. Matthew Pateman observes that Braithwaite 'is searching for truth, security, and

coherence. It might appear strange, then, that his method of striving for these goals is through contradiction, chaos, and disorder' (2002: 22). Yet, there *are* connections among these fragmented portions of the book. As it is written in 'Snap!', there are coincidences and connections, the trick is to spot them.

In addition to the discontinuous narrative line, another interesting aspect of the novel is its narrating voice. Like in a set of Chinese boxes, Julian Barnes, as we have seen, tells the story of Geoffrey Braithwaite, the first-person narrator who is both telling his own and Flaubert's life story. Higdon noticed how 'Geoffrey's actions are a classic example of displacement, whereby his ego erects a defence mechanism by unconsciously transferring emotional challenges and symbolic significances from one object to another' (1991: 181). For instance, when passionately defending Flaubert from Dr Starkie's accusation of inconsistency, Braithwaite diverts his narration in a brief autobiographical digression:

Look, writers aren't perfect, I want to cry; any more than husbands and wives are perfect. The only unfailing rule is, if they seem so, they can't be. I never thought my wife was perfect. I loved her, but I never deceived myself. I remember... But I'll keep that for another time (Barnes, 1984: 82).

Even more explicitly, in another passage Braithwaite confesses that '[t]here stories contend within me. One about Flaubert, one about Ellen, one about myself [...]. Ellen's a true story; perhaps it is even the reason why I am telling you Flaubert's story instead' (Barnes, 1984: 94-95). Braithwaite's account of Flaubert's story is therefore far from being neutral or objective. His narration is interest-driven, because he is actually trying to tell another story through Flaubert and his parrot, using parallelisms and similes. Braithwaite, indeed, is well aware that his story has already been written by Flaubert himself (Higdon, 1991: 180). His life seems to be parroting that of Charles Bovary, that is another husband with an unfaithful wife who eventually committed suicide. It is true, in this case, that Life imitates Art, as Oscar Wilde said in 'The Decay of Lying' (1891). In addition to the mixing of facts with fictional elements, also the allusions and intertextual references create another layer of meaning.

The structure of this text is further complicated by the fact that *Flaubert's Parrot* seems to be planned while it is written. For instance, after having described Flaubert's

Dictionnaire des idées reçues, Braithwaite comments: 'It tempts me to write a Dictionary of Accepted Ideas about Gustave himself' (Barnes, 1984: 96), and, later, he inserts a short a side, where Braithwaite seems to be thinking out loud, or sharing with the implied reader his ideas for the Dictionary, in a sort of "making of":

(Perhaps I should award Dr Starkie an entry in my pocket guide to Flaubert; or would that be unnecessarily vindictive? S for Sade, or S for Starkie? It's coming along well, by the way, Braithwaite's Dictionary of Accepted Ideas. All you need to know about Flaubert to know as much as the next person! Only a few more entries and I'll be finished. The letter X is going to be a problem, I can see. There's nothing under X in Flaubert's own Dictionary.) (Barnes, 1984: 138)

At last there is a whole chapter called 'Braithwaite's Dictionary of Accepted Ideas', and the letter X is the predictable xylophone ('There is no record of Flaubert ever having heard the xylophone [...]') (Barnes, 1984: 189). The genesis of another chapter, 'Louise Colet's Version,' is also recorded in brackets:

(Let me answer my own question. I think she was a pest; though admittedly we hear only Gustave's side of the story. Perhaps someone should write her account: yes, why not reconstruct Louise Colet's Version? I might do that. Yes, I will.) (Barnes, 1984: 159)

The fictional framework is fundamental for the economy of the whole novel. Indeed, Barnes himself stated that 'if you withdrew the fictional infrastructure, it would just sort of collapse [...]. [W]ithout it, the elements of the book would still be there, but it would be like taking the tentpole out of a tent...the fabric would still be there, but it wouldn't look like a tent, it would just be a load of fabric lying on the ground' (Barnes, in Guignery, 2006: 42). The fictional elements are crucial in the book precisely because they allow a game between facts and fictions, therefore introducing explicit considerations about the inaccessibility of the truth, the unrecoverability of the past, and the indeterminacy of signs (Moseley, 1997: 85; Guignery, 2006: 43).

Considering the book structure and themes, *Flaubert's Parrot* seems to be but a realist novel. Is Higdon right when he wonders: '[d]oes Barnes suffer from an anxiety of influence which turns his novel ambiguously into an act of homage and an act of rebellion as the literary son frees himself from the authoritarian patriarch?' (Higdon,

1991: 180). Being Flaubert Barnes's acknowledged master, it seems rightful to explore the relation existing between this 'trans-generic prose text' (Scott, 1990: 58) and Realism. Despite the many differences in techniques and approaches, both Flaubert and Barnes had to face the same epistemological problems: how is it possible (*whether* it is possible) to "translate" reality into words?

7.2 FLAUBERT AND BARNES

Flaubert's Parrot is generally regarded by critics as postmodernist text both because of the experimental structure and the themes confronted. The fragmentation of the narrative line mirrors the fragmentation of knowledge that characterizes postmodernity as a cultural phenomenon and as a historic era. The self is fragmented: it is impossible for Braithwaite to know his own wife Ellen and the real motives behind her suicide. All he can do is speculate and imagine, filling the blanks of his knowledge with his imagination. Paradoxically, it is easier for him to understand and sympathize with a 'dead foreigner' than with his wife (Barnes, 1984: 197). Geoffrey Braithwaite cannot even know his very self and the pulse that make him pursue Flaubert and his parrot instead than facing directly his loss and his pain.

Another feature generally associated to postmodernism is the presence of a polyphony of voices, often in open disagreement with one another, as to prove their disbelief toward master-narratives (to paraphrase Lyotard's much quoted formula). Just one official and univocal voice is looked at very suspiciously by postmodernist writers because it basically implies some sort of ideological prevarication, often gained at the expenses of the 'ex-centric' groups (Hutcheon, 1988: 57), namely the oppressed, the victims, but also women, blacks, and the formerly colonized. In *Flaubert's Parrot* there is a polyphony of voices, each and every of them carrying a different version of "what *really* happened." Emblematic is the presence of three chronologies summarizing Flaubert's life, and of a chapter entitled 'Louise Colet's Version.'

A chronology is generally part of what Genette defines the 'para-text', namely everything that is "around the text", such as the title, the preface, an appendix, and so on. The chronology of an author's life is usually provided before the beginning of a

novel in order to help the reader to better understand the novel, by knowing its author. In other words, the author's life can be seen as a key with which to interpret a text. Readers often look for the author in a novel, for parallelisms between life and fictional work. Sometimes, instead, a chronology is just seen as an objective tool with which it is possible to insert a certain text within a determined socio-political and cultural background. In any case, the chronology, as any other element in the 'para-text', influences the horizon of interpretation of the reader. The chronology is a way to 'pursue and find the writer' (Barnes, 1984: 148), which is precisely what Braithwaite is reluctantly doing with his own Flaubert.

Unexpectedly, the chronology of Flaubert's life is not part of the 'para-text' of *Flaubert's Parrot*, but is a distinct chapter. What was outside the novel, and could easily be avoided by a lazy reader, has now entered the domain of fiction. Its very epistemological nature has indeed changed. While part of the 'para-text', the chronology was unquestionable and undisputable, belonging to the "reality" shared by the author, the literary critic who draw up the chronology, and the reader. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, instead, the chronology belongs to the fictional world inhabited by Geoffrey Braithwaite and Ellen, when she was "fictionally" alive. The mere change of position within a novel change the very meaning of the events narrated. What was an unquestionable fact in a world of facts is now a questionable fact in a world of fiction.

The epistemological nature of the chronology, as a concise yet objective instrument of knowledge, is challenged in *Flaubert's Parrot* by the fact that three versions of the same "reality", namely Flaubert's life. From the same life and from the same facts, three different figures of Flaubert emerge. The overall meaning of his life, his personality, and career change drastically according to the events arbitrarily selected by the biographer. As Hayden White states in *Metahistory* (1973), the meaning of an event is not to be found in the event itself, but in the story in which it is emplotted. The only objective element is the chronological order. The first chronology sketches out a positive image of Flaubert, starting from his life and finishing with his death. The second chronology, on the contrary, starts with two deaths, those of Gustave's sibling who were born and died before him. On this way, the biographer provides the context into which to place Gustave's birth and childhood. This time, the Flaubert

that emerges is a man that lived surrounded by death, and outsider, and a failed writer. The third chronology is still different: it is made of a collections of biographic quotes by Flaubert himself. The fact that these sound-bites are written by Flaubert himself talking about his own life does not make them truer or more reliable than the previous two chronologies. The meaning of the quotes changes, because they are decontextualized.

What emerges from these three chronologies is not a living person, but just three characters, each of them bearing some resemblance with the original. Despite being opposite, the first two chronologies are not mutually exclusive. They are both “true”, in the sense that they both refer to events and actions that actually happened in the past but, still, neither of them in enough to render the “true” Flaubert. Taken by themselves, none of these chronologies are enough, but, if taken together, they can provide a better idea of how Flaubert and his life was like. More often than not, indeed, a person is made of ambiguities and inner contradictions. A life can be both A and B, even if, when reasoning following a binary logic, something is A, it cannot be B.

The same is true for Louise Colet, who deserves a double definition is Braithwaite’s *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*:

- a) Tedious, importunate, promiscuous woman, lacking talent of her own or understanding of the genius of others, who tried to trap Gustave into marriage. Imagine the squawking children! Imagine Gustave miserable! Imagine Gustave happy!
- b) Brave, passionate, deeply misunderstood woman crucified by her love for the heartless, impossible, provincial Flaubert. She rightly complained: ‘Gustave never writes to me of anything except Art – or himself.’ Proto-feminist who committed the sin of wanting to make someone else happy (Barnes, 1984: 183).

Could two representations of Louise Colet be more different? Which one is closer to the “real” Louise Colet? Which one is truer? Is there a truer version? The polyphony and plurality of voices recreated in the text lead to asking uncomfortable questions about the very nature of knowledge and of the truth, which are a constant element of meta-narrative considerations in postmodernist novels.

Despite these affinities with postmodernism, Barnes has always rejected the label of “postmodernist”: ‘I can’t afford to be too self-conscious about my writing career. I can’t say “I am a post-modernist,” because, frankly, I don’t think of myself that way’ (Barnes, in Cook, 1989: 20). Indeed, Barnes has written many novel which are very conventional in form and content, and the limits of postmodernism as a way of representing the truth are explicitly analysed by Geoffrey Braithwaite in *Flaubert’s Parrot*. Postmodernism takes its moves from Modernism and Realism, and the latter is “despised” for its naïve ambition to represent the “reality” truthfully, as it is, adopting such literary devices as the omniscient narrator. As Braithwaite states, ‘[w]e no longer believe that language and reality “match up” so congruently – indeed, we probably think that words give birth to things as much as things give birth to words’ (Barnes, 1984: 98). This is a direct allusion to the so-called “linguistic turn,” namely the interdisciplinary interest in the role played by language in constructing and interpreting reality, and in situating the verbal utterances in social action.

‘Omniscient is impossible,’ continues Braithwaite, ‘man’s knowledge is partial, therefore the novel itself must be partial’ (Barnes, 1984: 98). The omniscient third-person narrator, which is a characteristic of the traditional Realist fiction, is at odds with the ‘contemporary narrator [who] hesitates, claims uncertainty, misunderstands, plays games and falls into error’ (Barnes, 1984: 99) and who is characteristically postmodern. Geoffrey Braithwaite is this latter type of narrator, and indeed it was defined as a ‘*reluctant narrator*, who is reliable in strict terms, indeed often quite learned and perceptive, but who has seen, experienced or caused something so traumatic that he must approach the telling of it through indirections, masks and substitutions’ (Higdon, 1991: 174). The narrator in *Flaubert’s Parrot* is the master of ceremony, and the content of the story is made of his comments, observations, and demonstrations of erudition. Braithwaite is far from being omniscient: although his knowledge of Flaubert is thorough and almost borders on obsession, he is well aware of the fact that there are still many areas of darkness, that his knowledge will never be complete. The stuffed parrot is one of such grey areas, like, for instance, ‘the location of the kiss’ (Barnes, 1984: 63) Flaubert used to give to Elisa Schlesinger’s dog.

Braithwaite reveals his nature of 'reluctant narrator' when he tries to talk about Ellen. While when talking about Flaubert, Braithwaite sometimes assumes the pedant tone of the meticulous scholar who can clearly claim what is right and what is wrong, because he knows where the truth is. He could easily dismantle the argument advanced by real-life critic Dr Enid Starke, who claimed that Flaubert was imprecise in his portrayal of Emma Bovary's eyes, and also corrected the mistake made by a 'young novelist (it seems unfair to give his name)' who referred to the 'first, suppressed edition of *Madame Bovary*' instead of *Les Fleurs du mal* (Barnes, 1984: 85)³. On the contrary, when talking about Ellen, he stands undefended in front of the reader, who is free to interpret whatever Braithwaite may say: 'This is a pure story, whatever you may think' (Barnes, 1984: 190). He has no evidence, no body of proof to show to the reader to prove that he is right, he has got no documents to quote from. He has to start three times before starting talking directly about Ellen. The way he manages to tell his autobiography and Ellen's biography is via 'the Mauriac game' (Pateman, 2002: 26). In his *Mémoires*, Mauriac

finds himself by looking at the works of others. He defines his own faith by a passionate anger against Gide the Luciferian. Reading his 'memoirs' is like meeting a man on a train who says, 'Don't look at me, that's misleading. If you want to know what I'm like wait until we're in a tunnel, and then study my reflection in a window' (Barnes, 1984: 108).

What the reader gets to know about Ellen is what is reflected in Mauriac's 'window', which, in this case, is Flaubert. The French novelist works as a filter for Braithwaite, who can in this way obliquely talk about his wife's adultery and suicide: 'Ellen. My wife: someone I feel I understand less well than a foreign writer dead for a hundred years' (Barnes, 1984: 201). In 'Pure Story,' Braithwaite confesses that 'I have to hypothesise a little. I have to fictionalise (though that's not what I meant when I called this a pure story). We never talked about her secret life. So I have to invent my way to the truth' (Barnes, 1984: 197). Flaubert's teachings about objectivity,

³ The 'young novelist' is Julian Barnes himself, and the novel Geoffrey Braithwaite is referring to in *Metroland* (1980).

impersonality, and detachment are what Braithwaite needs to cope with his loss and to find a way of telling Ellen's story.

Braithwaite is paying a tribute to Flaubert, and this made some critics define this text as 'part novel, part stealthy literary criticism' (Guignery, 2006: 38). Flaubert's idea of Art and literature is inserted in *Flaubert's Parrot* by way of direct quotes, even if the source is seldom stated, like in the passage:

In the ideal I have of Art, I think that one must not show one's own, and that the artist must no more appear in his work than god does in nature. Man is nothing, the work of art everything... It would be very pleasant for me to say what I think and relieve Monsieur Gustave Flaubert's feelings by means of such utterances; but what is the importance of the said gentleman? (Barnes, 1984: 97).

This quote from Flaubert himself is emblematic of the French writer's demand for the invisibility of the author, and for a prose that was 'objective, scientific, devoid of personal presence, devoid of opinions' (Barnes, 1984: 179), a typical feature of nineteenth century Realism. Another important characteristic of Flaubert's conception of Art is the importance reserved to style: 'He believed in style; more than anyone [...]. Style is a function of theme. Style is not imposed on subject-matter, but arises from it. Style is truth to thought' (Barnes, 1984: 97).

Braithwaite's admiration for Flaubert is even more manifest when he plays the counsel for the defence of Flaubert against the accusation '[t]hat he teaches no positive virtues' (Barnes, 1984: 156):

So, briefly: Flaubert teaches you to gaze upon the truth and not blink from its consequences; he teaches you, with Montaigne, to sleep on the pillow of doubt; he teaches you to dissect out the constituent parts of reality, and to observe that Nature is always a mixture of genres; he teaches you the most exact use of language; he teaches you not to approach a book in search of moral or social pills - literature is not a pharmacopoeia; he teaches you the pre-eminence of Truth, Beauty, Feeling and Style. And if you study his private life, he teaches courage, stoicism, friendship; the importance of intelligence, scepticism and wit; the folly of cheap patriotism; the virtue of being able to remain by yourself in your own room; the hatred of hypocrisy; distrust of the doctrinaire; the need for plain speaking' (Barnes, 1984: 157).

Braithwaite pursues the writer because his own private life, and not just his works, can be a role model and a source of inspiration. Flaubert had ‘the religion of despair’ (Barnes, 1984: 197), namely the ability of gazing calmly into the black pit at our feet. ‘Some outgaze the black pit; others ignore it; those who keep glancing at it become obsessed’ (Barnes, 1984: 217), and others, like Ellen, simply are unable to look at it.

Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* was a watershed in European literature because, as Bertoni points out, it changed the relationship previously existing between literature and reality, cancelling any utopian tendency and any teleology in art (Bertoni, 2007: 217-18). Art can no longer transfigure reality, improve it, and make it perfect, according to the principles of *imitatio* and *electio*. Art must be like a science, namely impartial, objective, and disinterested (217), and its aim must be to “tell the truth,” even if it is horrible and cruel. In Flaubert, there are two contradictory forces at work: on the one hand, his ‘sense of the real’, and on the other hand his ‘sense of the romantic,’ that is to say his abhorrence for what is vulgar, ordinary, and banal (Bertoni, 2007: 219). As it is written in the entry ‘Realism’ in Braithwaite’s Dictionary of Accepted Ideas, ‘Was Flaubert a New Realist? He always publicly denied the label: ‘It was because I hated realism that I wrote *Madame Bovary*.’ Galileo publicly denied that the earth went round the sun’ (Barnes, 1984: 187). Flaubert’s secret romanticism emerges also in his “unled lives,” namely his dreams for the future. In his fantasies he wished he could escape in remote and exotic places and become, say, ‘a Turk in Turkey, or a muleteer in Spain, or a cameleer in Egypt’ (Barnes, 1984: 142). Flaubert’s romanticism is turned into derision for romantic clichés, and his disgust for reality feeds his rigorous and painful observation of the world around him (Bertoni, 2007: 221). How is it possible to write a consistent and exhaustive biography of a man with such contradictory ideals?

Flaubert rejected Realism both as a literary movement and as an artistic method (Bertoni, 2007: 224) which later led to Naturalism, a ‘scientific method applied to characters and environments’ (Bertoni, 2007: 228) which implied a perfectly transparent correspondence between the real and the written world. The

certainty that the reality was perfectly decipherable and that it could be perfectly reproduced on paper started collapsing in the late nineteenth century. The aesthetic and philosophical assumptions at the core of Realism began to falter: it was no longer possible to believe in an organic relation between object and subject, in an exhaustive knowledge of the world, and in a naïve and unproblematic relation between art and reality (Bertoni, 2007: 237).

Flaubert's work was a watershed precisely because, after him, it was no longer possible to believe in a stable, coherent, univocal, and totally decipherable world created by a novelist (Bertoni, 2007: 238). A New realism began with him. The correspondence between words and things, style and content, broke. More than content, what mattered was style (241). Literature and life are no longer comparable: life is illogical, disjointed, inarticulate, and inconsistent, while literature is the result of a rational process of selection and manipulation (243). Art is made of tricks, plans, devices and methods which aim at the creation of an illusion of reality. The impersonality of the narrator is the technical reflection of a new awareness of the ontological gap between real and written world. Reality cannot be immediately translated into language (244-246), especially because the allegedly "objective reality" is actually fragmented and unstable (253). As Flaubert knew, there is not a single Truth, but there are many points of view. The epistemological foundation of realism, objectivity, becomes to fragments into a subjective relativism of perception. The objective and impersonal realist narrator is actually just the expression of a single subjectivity (254).

Modernism and the avant-garde movements rejected the idea of Realism as the art of illusion and artifice, but did not completely severed the relationship between art and reality. What they attacked was a specific declination of realism which could no longer work in a complex, unstable, and uncertain reality as that of the early twentieth century (Bertoni, 2007: 261-262). The omniscient narrator, the narrative line developed according to causal and chronological connections are literary devices that can no longer be employed to represent this new reality, which was not merely made of physical objects, but also of souls, consciences, and unconscious. The nineteenth century devices (the teleological development of the plot, verisimilitude) cannot

reproduce the newly-discovered 'transcendence of the real.' Instead of the metonymy (literature of notations), the new trope used to depict reality is the metaphor, which hints to a 'second nature' and a further and deeper meaning of things (265). The very concept of Realism has changed mirroring the transformations of society. During the 1950s, indeed, new expressive means were required to represent a new social and human reality, characterized by new socio-economic phenomena, capitalism, the reification of the subject, the advent of the media and of mass culture (Bertoni, 2007: 302). There was the need for an 'innovatory realism' (*realismo innovatore*) which rejected the traditional mimetic devices, felt as stereotypical, conventional, and basically inadequate to represent a new conception of the individual and his place in the world (301).

Post-structuralism in the 1960s moved to the opposite direction of the "great tradition," supporting the view that there was no direct assimilation between reality and fiction. On the contrary, the written word is completely self-referential: it does not refer to an entity in the external world (Bertoni, 2007: 303). Barnes hinted to this current of thought when he had Braithwaite say: 'We no longer believe that language and reality 'match up' so congruently - indeed, we probably think that words give birth to things as much as things give birth to words' (Barnes, 1984: 98). This new awareness led to a metaliterary reflection on the very possibility of writing novels (303), which characterizes postmodernism and postmodernity as well.

In his analysis, Bertoni states that

in its various and heterogeneous articulations, the postmodernist aesthetics has tried to elude and to set aside the thousand-year old problem of *mimesis*, being such a concept not relevant to an idea of literature based on categories and methods like artifice, play, quotationism, self-referentiality, parody, literary contamination between "high" and "low" literature, and hybridization between disparate genres, codes and media (Bertoni, 2007: 304).

Bertoni gives a precise description of the main features of postmodernism, but seems not to realize that postmodernism as well subscribes the long and difficult issue that has characterized the history of realism: how is it possible to "tell the truth" and to translate truthfully the empirical reality into a system of arbitrary signs? Inevitable is

the use of literary devices which, however, are different from those used in the past, because the world, the individuals, and their concerns have changed. Postmodernism, as an ‘incredulity towards master-narratives’, cannot passively accept the “great realist tradition” also because the realist discourse is seen as authoritarian and repressive, aimed at the preservation of the ‘natural’ order of things, which is actually just a symbolic product of the dominant power, class, and culture (Bertoni, 2007: 34). Indeed, Bakhtin introduced the concept of *ideologeme* to show how ‘[e]very discourse stands for an *ideology*, for a specific *point of view* on the world’ (Bernardelli, 1997: 7).

In *Flaubert’s Parrot*, there is a remark about the limits of one of the literary devices sometimes used in postmodern fiction, namely the existence of two endings, in order to contrast the conventional teleological plot which leads to one stable conclusion:

When the writer provides two different endings to his novel (why two? why not a hundred?), does the reader seriously imagine he is being ‘offered a choice’ and that the work is reflecting life’s variable outcomes? Such a ‘choice’ is never real, because the reader is obliged to consume both endings. In life, we make a decision – or a decision makes us – and we go one way; had we made a different decision [...], we would have been elsewhere. The novel with two endings doesn’t reproduce this reality: it merely takes us down two diverging paths. It’s a form of cubism, I suppose. And that’s all right; but let’s not deceive ourselves about the artifice involved (Barnes, 1984: 99).

Postmodernism shows explicitly its devices and techniques, while traditional Realism also employed artifices and devices, but wanted to dissimulate them, to give the illusion of a perfect correspondence between word and world. Postmodernism still belongs to “Realism” inasmuch as it attempts to represent the external reality, but has to do it ‘in an age of lost innocence:’

The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently. I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, “I love you madly”, because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words

have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly". At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but in an age of lost innocence (Eco, in Bernardelli, 1997: 14).

In a postmodern age, it is possible to represent the reality only through an explicit use of intertextuality and quotations, referring to the tradition while subverting its meaning. Any quotation, indeed, when de-contextualized, changes its meaning. Traditional schemes and conventions are assumed and at the same time revisited. Were postmodernists merely to imitate slavishly the "great tradition, they would be exactly like parrots, who produce words simply by imitation, without creation. If Barnes had written a realist novel on Flaubert, adopting all the literary devices theorized by the French writer, he himself would have been "Flaubert's parrot." Although 'Flaubertian intertextuality is so extensive that Braithwaite's voice sometimes tends to disappear beneath or behind that of Flaubert', *Flaubert's Parrot* is not a 'submissive or repetitive text' (Guignery, 2006: 49). By quoting passages of already written texts, Barnes manages to create an original text out: 'repetition need not be mere mimicry, but can be a profoundly creative act' (Brooks, 2001: 159).

Is the attempt to reproduce the epistemological doubts of postmodernity enough to define *Flaubert's Parrot* a realist novel? The problem of realism is that there are different approaches with which artists represent the world, and there are many conceptions of realism, which are historically, culturally, and ideologically conditioned (Bertoni 24). This is due to the lack of a shared and univocal theoretical foundation. There is, indeed, an all-inclusive tendency in realism, because of its ambition to bridge the gap between two heterogeneous entities: art and reality (31).

Realism can be interpreted as having a narrow or a broad meaning. The former meaning regards realism as a historically localized literary tendency, which developed in the early nineteenth century, especially in France. This implies the creation of a canon, of a "great tradition" which should be used as a standard to evaluate the "degree of realism" of a certain work, often determining a judgment of its quality and not just a description of its features (33). The broad meaning of realism,

instead, concerns the epistemological problem of the notion of *mimesis* (31), that is to say the limits and possibilities of any linguistic rendition of reality.

While it does not seem very useful to apply Goodman's model to evaluate the realistic density of *Flaubert's Parrot* (in Bertoni, 2007: 315), it is possible to say that this text is deeply concerned with the issue of mimetic representation. Barnes attempts to write Flaubert's biography, knowing that it is no longer possible to use "naïve" techniques to create the illusion of an immediate correspondence between the written word and the external world, such as the external omniscient narrator. Traditional biography writing, indeed, shares many features with a traditional realistic approach, which is no longer believable in 'an age of lost innocence.' Yet, as Eco showed, it is still possible to write a biography, but in a different way.

7.3 PARROTTING ACADEMIC BIOGRAPHIES

Before analysing how Barnes managed to write the parody of a biography, it is important to clarify the terminology in use. When talking about biography, the immediate, and somehow naïve, definition that springs to mind is "the life story of a person." This is true, albeit over-simplified. As any other literary genre, also biographies and autobiographies have undergone a diachronic process of transformation. Starting from the Roman *res gestae* and *commentarii*, with Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and *Lives of the Roman Emperors* as a model, the first biographies dealt about the lives of Emperors, leaders, and important public or intellectual figures. These are public biographies where there is no room for private or everyday aspects of life, since the focus is on the *cursus honorum*, the great Works that went down in history. In the early eighteenth century, biographies and autobiographies are written about intellectuals, focusing on their *cursus studiorum*, namely their studies, the books they have read and that have inspired them, in order to set an exemplar model of intellectual, with a didactic purpose. These are still public biographies, anecdotes regarding the private sphere of life are only incidental digressions. It is only after Jean-

Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782-89) that private emotions and feelings are regarded as important as the public sphere of life.

Nowadays a biography focuses both on the public and on the private life of the subject, although the very content of the biography can prove problematic. How is it possible to reproduce a life and a person on paper, when every individual is *Uno, Nessuno e Centomila*, to say it with Pirandello⁴? A mere physical description would only depict 'No one. A poor mortified body, waiting for someone to take it' (Pirandello, transl. Weaver, 1992: 19). The "essence" of a person is more difficult to render because each and every person is at the same time *Uno*, namely the way he/she considers him/herself, and *Centomila*, because 'I was not for others what I had till then believed I was for myself' (Pirandello, transl. Weaver, 1992: 21). The same problem of a total representation is raised by Goodman in relation to painting: the old idea that it is necessary to *copy* the object "precisely as it is" in order to create an accurate painting to reality is rather disconcerting, because the "object" the painter is trying to portray is a human being, a violin-player, a friend, an idiot, and much more. None of these definitions constitutes the object "precisely as it is". These are just "modes of being" of the object, and not its "essence". It is not possible to copy all these "modes of being" at the same time, in the same painting; and in the case someone would try and fulfil such a task, the result would *not* be a *Realistic* painting (Goodman, in Bertoni, 2007: 99).

The subject is fragmented and polymorphous, the Self is at the same time one and many, and it is often impossible for the very individuals to get to know themselves. So Flaubert is, in Braithwaite's *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*,

⁴ Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936), Nobel Prize for Literature in 1934, was a fundamental literary figure in Italy at the turn of the century who, together with Italo Svevo, opened Italian literature to Europe and the world. Pirandello's vast body of works, which includes seven novels, almost three hundred short stories, and almost fifty plays, takes its moves from the literary movement which characterized European, and especially French, literature at the time: Naturalism. However, Pirandello soon distances himself from the presuppositions of Naturalism in literature and Positivism in sciences. His reflections encompass and overcome his own time and culture, anticipating the epistemological and gnoseological doubts which have gained so great an importance in Postmodernism. In his works, Pirandello analysed the condition of the individual who is forced to live wearing masks and following arbitrary and questionable codes of behaviour. Theatre becomes a metaphor of life, and individuals are likened to actors on a stage. The unity and identity of the subject is questioned, and so it is the possibility of words and language to represent reality. Clearly, such a poetics of doubt, uncertainty, and critique bears many affinities with Postmodernism, although Pirandello cannot be ascribed as a "postmodernist" writer, being more an author *sui generis*, for the originality and vastness of his reflections and production.

The hermit of Croisset. The first modern novelist. The father of realism. The butcher of Romanticism. The pontoon bridge linking Balzac to Joyce. The precursor of Proust. The bear in his lair. The bourgeois bourgeoisophobe. In Egypt, 'the father of the Moustache'. Saint Polycarpe; Cruchard; Quarafon; the Idiot of the Salons (Barnes, 1984: 184).

The task is theoretically challenging, considering the volatile nature of the subject, and even more complex practically. Indeed, the toughest issue a biographer has to face is the compulsory selection he is forced to make between all the data available in the archive. No matter how hard he may try, complete exhaustiveness is unattainable, both because much information is lost for good, and because, even if it were possible to know and remember everything, the telling of such story would take a whole lifetime, as Borges's story 'Funes el memorioso' demonstrates.

Conventional biographies limit their area of inquiry to what happened to their subjects, what they did, what they become, and the process that led them from their "beginning" to their "ending" (see *Arthur & George*, Barnes, 2005). *Flaubert's Parrot* is more ambitious: it also reserves a chapter to 'The Flaubert Apocrypha', namely the books Flaubert never wrote, and the lives he never lived. A life is made of what happened, but also of what did not happen, because '[i]t is not just the life that we know. It is not just the life that has been successfully hidden. It is not just the lies about the life, some of which cannot now be disbelieved. It is also the life that was not led' (Barnes, 1984: 141). Flaubert's unled lives, indeed, are quite revelatory of Flaubert's 'literary schizophrenia' (Bertoni, 2007: 219). As a dutiful compiler, Braithwaite lists all the lives that Flaubert wrote, or was reported to say, that he wanted to lead in chronological order, from the age of seventeen to thirty-five, when 'the real life has really begun' (Barnes, 1984: 146): he published *Madame Bovary*. Barnes's unconventional biography shows that Flaubert was a writer because he was not a 'muleteer', 'a lazzarone in Naples' (142), 'a bandit in Smyrna' or 'a Brahmin' (143).

The forced selection of the content of a biography emerges also in the choice to insert three chronologies. These chronologies depict the same life, and all the information provided is authentic. On the one hand, each chronology is true, inasmuch as it is a list of "true" information, but, on the other hand, these

chronologies are also false, because they are unavoidably partial. Flaubert's affair with Louise Colet can be interpreted as 'a prolonged, passionate, fighting two-parter (1846-8, 1851-4). Though ill-matched in temperament and incompatible in aesthetics, Gustave and Louise nevertheless last together far longer than most would have predicted' (Barnes, 1984: 19). In the second chronology, instead, the first meeting between Flaubert and Louise Colet is placed in the same entry that begins with the deaths of Flaubert's father and sister. With such an introductory background, the encounter cannot but be doomed to be troublesome: 'Is it a consolation that in the same year he meets Louise Colet? Pedantry and recalcitrance are mismatched with immoderation and possessiveness. [...] This impossible relationship drags on nevertheless for eight years; Louise is puzzlingly unable to grasp that Gustave can love her without ever wanting to see her' (Barnes, 1984: 23-24). Which is the real significance of such encounter – provided there is one meaning? It all depends on the other items selected to construct the chronology.

The biographer's selection is however restricted by the data which is actually available in the archive. Braithwaite's obsession for Flaubert is reflected in his desire of exhaustiveness which translates into the creation of lists and catalogues, following an almost encyclopaedic approach in order to 'impose order and coherence upon a set of disparate fragments' (Guignery, 2006: 40). Many chapters are structured as a list: 'Chronology', 'The Flaubert Bestiary', 'Snap!', 'The Train-Spotter's Guide to Flaubert', 'The Case Against', 'Braithwaite's Dictionary of Accepted Ideas', and 'Examination Paper'. There are also lists of sort in 'Cross Channel' and in 'The Flaubert Apocrypha'. The list reveals an attempt to organize logically the material Braithwaite has selected among the vast, yet limited, mass of data at his disposal. The logic disposition shows the lacunae of the archive. Not all the pieces of the puzzle can be found. Like there is no information about the many dogs that took part in Flaubert's life, also 'what happened to the truth is not recorded' (Barnes, 1984: 69).

Another dramatic lacuna in the archive is the lack of material about Louise Colet and Juliet Herbert. These women, silent in the tradition, could nonetheless play a part in *Flaubert's Parrot*, precisely because this is not a "conventional biography", where only provable facts can be recorded. In this novel there is space also for them,

and for their version of “what really happened”. In ‘Finders Keepers’, one of the most fictional chapters in *Flaubert’s Parrot*, Geoffrey Braithwaite relates his acquaintance with a Ed Winterton, an American academic who wants to write Gosse’s biography and who happen to come across fresh material about Juliet Herbert. Braithwaite excitement about this news is comprehensible, considering the fact that nothing is known about Flaubert’s English governess and the kind of relationship she had with her master. Her own existence and the role she played in Flaubert’s life are surrounded by mystery. The utter lack of documents and information has led biographers to put forward the more disparate theories:

For some, the shortage of evidence indicates that she was of small importance in Flaubert’s life; others conclude from this absence precisely the opposite, and assert that the tantalizing governess was certainly one of the writer’s mistresses, possibly the Great Unknown Passion of his life, and perhaps his fiancée (Barnes, 1984: 38).

The material Ed Winterton found seems to solve this mystery: from the seventy-five letters, ‘[t]hree dozen or so on each side’ (Barnes, 1984: 42), the nature of Flaubert and Juliet Herbert’s relationship emerged. They *did* have a relationship, and she was almost his fiancée. The certitude of this assumption is almost immediately shattered by the revelation that, after having read such letters, Ed Winterton decided to burn all of them. From the actual facts, what is left is just the scholar’s memory of them, and his personal opinion. He may have lied about everything, and there is no way to prove it. The motive of this work of destruction is that Flaubert himself asked Juliet Herbert to destroy all their correspondence, and, according to Winterton, ‘if your business is writers, you have to behave towards them with integrity, don’t you? You have to do what they say, even if other people don’t’ (Barnes, 1984: 47). An epistemological doubt about the reliability of any information is cast by ‘a rather strange instruction’ Flaubert gave Juliet (according to Winterton):

If anyone asks you what my letters contained, or what my life was like, please lie to them. Or rather, since I cannot ask you of all people to lie, just tell them what it is you think they want to hear (Barnes, 1984: 47).

Considering Winterton's professed moral integrity and ethics in respecting the will of the writers he is dealing with, it is legitimate to suspect that, even in this case, Winterton may be lying, or rather telling Braithwaite what he wants to hear. Consequently, it may well be that there was *no* affair between the two.

Winterton's active and deliberate tampering with the archive had substantial repercussions on the overall meaning of Juliet Herbert's relationship with Flaubert. Indeed, before Winterton's discovery both hypotheses were equally viable, while after the disclosure of the content of the letter, there seemed to be only one certain truth. The destruction of the material, however, left open the possibility that the whole story Winterton told to Braithwaite may be just a hoax. Therefore, the two opposite hypotheses that existed before the discovery are re-established. Braithwaite, and Barnes with him, does not partisan-like side with one faction, removing the other from the record and presenting just the version of the story he thinks is true. Both versions are presented, and both are equally valid.

Another instance of the limitedness of the archive regards another woman that was part of Flaubert's life, Louise Colet. Only Flaubert's side of their correspondence survived, or has been found so far, and therefore it is possible to know only what he told her, how he saw her, while there is no way to "justify" his vision of their relationship by complementing it with Colet's. In 'Louise Colet's Version', Braithwaite gives voice to Flaubert's mistress herself. She can eventually tell *her* truth, in a clearly subjective account, which openly contrasts with the traditional narrating voice in conventional biographies. The third-person narrator, deceitfully considered neutral and objective, used to be a male, white, western voice. Instead, here Louise Colet's "I" emerges strongly in her individual singularity.

Events that have already been told from Flaubert's point of view are re-told by Louise Colet. The past is never denied: she *did* make a scene at the train station, what changes is the interpretation and therefore the meaning of such event. In 'The Train-Spotter's Guide to Flaubert', this episode is narrated in one of the entries of a list of events that saw Flaubert in relation to trains and railways. Braithwaite assumes the tone of a third-person objective narrator who is impersonally reporting a fact:

Louise, of course, could play the platform scene as well. Her habit of jealousy bursting in on Gustave when he was dining with friends was notorious. She always expected to find a rival; but there was no rival, unless you count Emma Bovary. On one occasion, Du Camp records, 'Flaubert was leaving Paris for Rouen when she entered the waiting-room of the station and went through such tragic scenes that the railway officials were obliged to interfere. Flaubert was distressed and begged for mercy, but she gave him no quarter' (Barnes, 1984: 126).

From this account it is clear that Louise is the villain of the piece, pestering Gustave with her groundless jealousy. She is depicted as an obsessive and melodramatic woman, and this is proved by Du Camp's first-hand testimony. However, things seem far less certain if Louise Colet is given the right to explain the motives behind her scene:

Gustave went off on his tour of Brittany. Was I wrong to make a fuss? Three months! We had known one another less than a year, all Paris knew about our passion, and he chose three months in the company of Du Camp! [...] Was it not a direct insult, an attempt to humiliate me? And yet *he* said, when I expressed my feelings to him in public (I am not ashamed of love - why should I be? I would declare myself in the waiting-room of a railway station if it were necessary), *he* said that *I* was humiliating *him*. Imagine! (Barnes, 1984: 167-168).

Roles are reversed, and Louise Colet no longer seems a maniac blinded by jealousy. Her scene in the waiting-room is not denied, yet its meaning has changed, and so does the reliability of Du Camp as a witness, especially after the reader gets to know that Colet and Du Camp simply could not see eye to eye ('the odious Du Camp, the unreliable Du Camp', Barnes, 1984: 168). The absence of Louise Colet's side of the correspondence with Flaubert make it impossible for a reader to have both versions of the story. Somehow, the reader has to side with Flaubert, basically because his is the only version available. But this, however, is not enough to make it "true".

Indeed, another difference between *Flaubert's Parrot* and a conventional biography is polyphony. Instead than merely reporting what the biographer believes to be the "true" account of his subject's life, Barnes adds to Braithwaite's explicitly personal view of Flaubert the opinions of other people who lived and interacted with

the French writer, like Colet and Du Camp. This choice conveys indeterminacy to the account, since the different voices are often discordant, yet equally plausible. Even voices that have been silenced by the official history are now listened to, and this influences the meaning of the generally taken-for-granted “facts”. Flaubert is not simply the hero of the story, he can also be the villain. The incompleteness of the archive prevents the reduction of this polyphony, where everyone is democratically given the right to express their opinion, into a monophony, a “master-narrative” where just one stable Truth is provided. Certainty is gained by silencing discordant views.

As ‘Louise Colet’s Version’ proves, in *Flaubert’s Parrot* there are often at least two versions of the same event. Even concepts and objects, such as biographies, can be looked at from different points of view. Although they are always the same, their meaning and nature changes in accordance to the point of observation:

You can define a net in one of two ways, depending on your point of view. Normally, you would say that it is a meshed instrument designed to catch fish. But you could, with no great injury to logic, reverse the image and define a net as a jocular lexicographer once did: he called it a collection of holes tied together with string (Barnes, 1984: 35).

Dr Johnson’s unusual definition of a net implies a different view on things, opposite to what is normally accepted. This same subversion of perspectives is done with biography:

The trawling net fills, then the biographer hauls it in, sorts, throws back, stores, fillets and sells. Yet consider what he doesn’t catch: there is always far more of that. The biography stands, fat and worthy-burgherish on the shelf, boastful and sedate: a shilling life will give you the facts, a ten pound one all the hypotheses as well. But think of everything that got away, that fled with the last deathbed exhalation of the biographee. What chance would the craftiest biographer stand against the subject who saw him coming and decided to amuse himself? (Barnes, 1984: 35)

There are known facts about a person and his life, but much more is lost for good with the biographee’s death. If a biography is like a net, the discovery of new pieces of information is like pulling one of the strings that tie together the holes: all

the net is influenced by it, its whole structure may change, and it may be so drastically modified by this little string pulled as to be rendered useless. Every new piece of information has to be inserted into the narration, but sometimes it can affect the whole meaning of a life, and therefore a brand new narration is needed.

The archive is, therefore, hopelessly limited; a complete knowledge and exhaustiveness is impossible to attain. Consequently, this incompleteness can lead to falsehood: despite being “true”, an event can also be “untrue” because it is incomplete, because some aspects are missing for good, and these very little pieces of information could possibly be so crucial as to change the whole meaning of a narration. Details are ‘trivial’ and ‘crucial’ (Barnes, 1989: 101) at the same time. The absence of details is the reason why personal advertisements in magazines, which can be regarded as succinct versions of autobiographies, are not believed by Braithwaite, even if ‘[t]hey aren’t lying – indeed, they’re all trying to be utterly sincere – but they aren’t telling the truth’ (Barnes, 1984: 107). Indeed, Braithwaite, when trying to write his own personal ad, becomes a

60+ widowed doctor, children grown up, active, cheerful if inclined to melancholy, kindly, non-smoker, amateur Flaubert scholar, likes reading, food, travel to familiar places, old films, has friends, but seeks... (Barnes, 1984: 106)

And yet he is *not just* that. Even when not wilfully lying, the simple absence of details and of pieces of information can render a certain account untruthful.

Objects are generally regarded as reliable pieces of evidence, as if ‘the leavings of a life contain some ancillary truth’ (Barnes, 1984: 3). Even when a biographer relies on the ostensible factual objectivity and certitude of the archive, he might nonetheless be misled into error and falsity. Not only is the archive irrefutably incomplete, but it may also contain wrong pieces of information, or may have “promoted” unreliable sources as bearers of the revealed truth. Archives as well as museums are worshipped as unquestionable sources of knowledge where it is possible to find ‘trivial knick-knack beside solemn relics’ (Barnes, 1984: 13). However, it is in two museums that Geoffrey Braithwaite finds two parrots, both officially presented as the “authentic” parrot borrowed by Flaubert from the Museum of Rouen. At the end of the novel,

Braithwaite finds out that both these parrots, claimed to be authentic, were actually arbitrarily selected by the *gardiens* of the two museums among a choice of fifty parrots which may, or may not, have been the very parrots among which Flaubert chose the model for Loulou, less than a century before.

The criterion at the basis of their choice is the resemblance between the stuffed parrot and its description in *Un Cœur Simple*. This criterion, however, does not seem reliable enough, considering the fact that a writer is not forced to reproduce on paper reality as it actually is, but can modify it, combining *imitatio* with *creatio*. Indeed, writing is never just a process of passive reproduction, but an active process of creation. Even if the parrot the guardian chose may fit the description Flaubert made of Loulou, it is not enough to prove that it was the parrot which sat on Flaubert's desk. In this case, the arbitrary process of selection is concealed behind an official label of authenticity: the Museum of Rouen is an official institution, whose authority confers an aura of "truth" to each parrot. However, going deeper in the analysis, it ends up proving nothing.

Objects exhibited in a museum might be inauthentic because of lack of evidence which may definitely prove their authenticity. Sometimes, objects passed off as originals might just be hoaxes. Emblematic is the anecdote Braithwaite tells about Stevenson's hair:

When Robert Louis Stevenson died, his business-minded Scottish nanny quietly began selling hair which she claimed to have cut from the writer's head forty years earlier. The believers, the seekers, the pursuers bought enough of it to stuff a sofa (Barnes, 1984: 3).

Hence, what is a biography if not merely "hair-collecting"? The archive can be made of objects, but also of written documents, which nevertheless prove to be as unreliable as objects. Indeed, 'all that remains of [Flaubert] is paper. Paper, ideas, phrases, metaphors, structured prose which turns into sound' (Barnes, 1984: 2). In addition to Flaubert's own letters, diaries, journals, and novels, the archive is also made of documents produced by people who knew Flaubert personally, like Maxime Du Camp, and of people who knew him indirectly, like the scholar Enid Starkie or Sartre. As far as the first-hand witnesses who actually got to know Flaubert are

concerned, each one of them knew and experienced a different aspect of Flaubert's personality. Louise Colet was his loved-hated mistress who knew a rather unpleasant side of "Flaubert the lover", and a pedant and authoritative side of "Flaubert the writer", who wanted to instruct her about how to write poetry (Barnes, 1984: 177). Du Camp knew other aspects of his friend, which may be completely different from what Louise Colet experienced, but equally valid. As Pirandello teaches us, we are *centomila*, we are a different person for everyone we face:

[i]f for you I have no other reality beyond the one you give me, and I am ready to accept, admit that it is not less true than the one I might give to myself; indeed, for you it is the only true one (and God only knows what this reality is that you give me!); would you want to complain now of the one I will give you, with the best of intentions to depict you as far as I can in your way? (Pirandello, transl. Weaver, 1992: 65).

Individuals can only give their personal opinions and impressions, and these are not totally reliable as "facts". Indeed, Du Camp's *Souvenirs Littéraires* is the main source of knowledge about Flaubert, although it is 'gossipy, vain, self-justifying and unreliable, yet historically essential' (Barnes, 1984: 88). Du Camp unreliability emerges from one episode told in Louise Colet's voice, whose clear antipathy for Du Camp is manifest:

I knew [Flaubert] was a genius. [...] I am not like the odious Du Camp, who would proudly claim many years of friendship with Gustave, but would always deny him genius. I have been at those dinners where the merit of our contemporaries are discussed, and where Du Camp, as each new name was suggested, would with infinite urbanity correct the general view. 'Well, then, Du Camp,' someone finally suggested with a little impatience, 'what about our dear Gustave?' Du Camp smiled approvingly and patted five little fingertips against five others in a prissily judicial manner. 'Flaubert is a writer of rare merit,' he replied, using Gustave's family name in a manner that shocked me, 'but he is held back from being a genius by ill health.' You would have thought he was practicing for his memoirs (Barnes, 1984: 177-178).

The image of Flaubert that emerges from Du Camp's memoir is biased by the writer's opinion, feelings and interests. In his *Souvenirs Littéraires*, Du Camp inserted

an epitaph where he defines Louise Colet as the woman who ‘compromised Victor Cousin, ridiculed Alfred de Musset, reviled Gustave Flaubert, and tried to assassinate Alphonse Karr. *Requiescat in pace*’ (Barnes, 1984: 210). Moreover, Du Camp refused to recognize Flaubert as a genius, diminishing his talent maybe for pride, or for envy. It is not possible to know Du Camp’s motives, but what is certain is that the selection of anecdotes is arbitrary and is eventually determined by the writer’s intentions.

Even the people who were not personally involved in Flaubert’s life cannot help imposing their views on their subject of study. Such is the case of Dr Enid Starkie, ‘Reader Emeritus in French Literature at the University of Oxford, and Flaubert’s most exhaustive British biographer’ (Barnes, 1984: 80). Since she is an authoritative expert, the average reader is lead to believe that what she states must be certainly right. However, as Braithwaite rather fussily points out, even Dr Starkie can make mistakes, and therefore she can be enrolled in the ever-lengthening list of unreliable sources. Paradoxically enough, the Reader Emeritus made a mistake in her critique of Flaubert’s mistakes. She claimed that Flaubert was inaccurate in his description of Emma Bovary’s eyes, which are brown in one passage on the novel, while another time are described as deep black, and another time as blue (Barnes, 1984: 80). How can Emma’s eyes be black, blue, and brown? It is a contradiction, therefore one colour must be right, the others wrong. Yet, Braithwaite goes back to the text, to the primary source, and is able to prove that Emma’s eyes can be all these colours, according to the light, the situation, and the viewer (Barnes, 1984: 87-88). Exactly like Emma’s eyes can be multiple colours, so can Flaubert personality have many ostensibly contradictory personalities.

Another important aspect to consider, when dealing with memories, is that human memory and perceptions are fallible. For instance, Gertrude Collier wrote in her memoirs about her love for Flaubert ‘[a]dopting the style of romantic fiction, and using disguised names’ (Barnes, 1984: 76). Braithwaite wonders whether ‘Gertrude’s lush memoir might well be fanciful: what, after all, is more sentimentally alluring than a dead genius and an adolescent beach holiday? But perhaps it wasn’t’ (Barnes, 1984: 76). The benefit of doubt is allowed by the fact that when the explorer Henry Morton Stanley, the husband of Gertrude Collier’s daughter, was forced to get rid of

superfluous objects in order to survive, *Salammbô* was the third book he tried to spare, right after Shakespeare and the Bible. However, provided Stanley actually had *Salammbô* in his 'real life version of 'Desert Island Discs'' (Barnes, 1984: 77), it is questionable whether such a feeble connection is enough to prove the fact that Flaubert actually loved Gertrude. The connection does not exist until someone finds it, but it is possible to find connections only if someone is already looking for them, and therefore if someone has a precise intention and some hypotheses to prove.

The 'hesitating narrator' Braithwaite (Barnes, 1984: 100) is coping with his wife's suicide and adultery, and tries to talk about it through Flaubert. The French writer's life and parrots are just masks which allow Braithwaite to talk about his own personal life. His objective is to narrate his own and Ellen's story, and, by narrating it, he hopes to understand it. Braithwaite's real aim is revealed by the connections he finds when interpreting the mass of data about Flaubert. It is not casual, therefore, that when Braithwaite lists the interactions Flaubert had with trains and railways, he focuses on 'the function of the railway in Flaubert's affair with Louise Colet' (Barnes, 1984: 124). Since the couple had to take a train to consume their illicit love affair, Braithwaite wonders whether there is a connection between railways and adultery:

[...] if the telephone in our century has made adultery both simpler and harder (assignations are easier, but so is checking up), the railway in the last century had a similar effect. (Has anyone made a comparative study of the spread of railways and the spread of adultery? I can image village priests delivering sermons on the Devil's invention and being mocked for it; but if they did, they were right.) (Barnes, 1984: 125)

The connection between railways and adultery is spotted because the interpreter of the data available is almost obsessed with adultery, and therefore perceives the data as filtered through his obsession.

Arbitrary connections found to prove a certain interpretation of a work of art are also made by literary critics, a group of people particularly despised by Braithwaite ('I hate critics', Barnes, 1984: 80). The chapter called 'Examination Paper' is the parodic copy of a possible examination paper on Flaubert. Students are required to analyse the relationship existing between Art and Life and Flaubert's opinion about

literary criticism, basing their reflections on an arbitrarily selected list of quotes from Flaubert. 'Section B', instead, associates Flaubert with the most varied subjects, such as 'Economics' (208), 'Geography' (209), 'Logic (with Medicine)' (209-210), 'Psychology' (2010-211), 'Psychoanalysis' (211), 'Philately' (211-212), 'Phonetics' (212-213), 'Theatrical History' (213-214), and eventually 'History (with Astrology)' (214-215). Connections exist only if someone is there to see them, and emblematic of it is the section about Flaubert and 'Phonetics'.

Flaubert's name was first misprinted by the *Revue de Paris* as Faubert. There was a grocer in the rue Richelieu called Faubet. When *La Presse* reported the trial of *Madame Bovary*, they called its author Foubert. Martine, George Sand's *femme de confiance*, called him Flambart. Camille Rogier, the painter who lived in Beirut, called him Folbert: 'Do you get the subtlety of the joke?' Gustave wrote to his mother. (What is the joke? Presumably a dual-language rendering of the novelist's self-image: Rogier was calling him Crazy Bear.) Bouilhet also started calling him Folbert. In Mantes, where he used to meet Louise Colet, there was a Café Flambert. Is this all coincidence? (Barnes, 1984: 213)

'Is it all deliberate?' (Barnes, 1984: 213) is another question that seems legitimate to ask. As Gianrico Carofiglio pointed out in *L'Arte del Dubbio* (2007), a manual on the techniques used in cross-examination, the mere fact of asking, or not asking, a certain question instead of another, determine the construction of a certain narrative, structuring the facts, ordering them and therefore conditioning the overall meaning of a certain story (Carofiglio, 2007: 14). Indeed, '[h]ypothesis is spun directly from the temperament of the biographer' (Barnes, 1984: 38), and the kind of questions asked influence the answers given.

What emerges from the witnesses questioned is not *the* truth, but just *a* truth, an interpretation of reality. It is not just the case of the perjurer (*falso testimone*), who is willingly and deliberately lying, but also of the 'unaware perjurer' (*falso testimone inconsapevole*; Carofiglio, 2007: 20), who, sincerely believing to tell the truth, is actually providing an incorrect version of the events, due to defective perceptions or memories. The witness's account, therefore, is not a truthful and objective representation of past events, because it is at the same time true and false, determined both by the

subjectivity and by the intentions of who is speaking. As it is written in 'Braithwaite's Dictionary of Accepted Ideas':

Remember the Goncourts on Flaubert: 'Though perfectly frank by nature, he is never sincere in what he says he feels or suffers or loves.' Then remember everyone else on the Goncourts: the envious, unreliable brothers. Remember further the unreliability of Du Camp, of Louise Colet, of Flaubert's niece, of Flaubert himself. Demand violently: how can we know anybody? (Barnes, 1984: 184)

In a testimony, only a limited number of elements emerge, according to the questions asked, and therefore the witnesses' accounts are only half-true, like Braithwaite's personal advertisement for lonely hearts.

The inevitable 'process of selection and arrangement of data from the unprocessed historical record' (White, 1973: 5) depends on the analyser. The only objective way of relating events is through a chronicle, i.e. merely in chronological order. As soon as certain elements of the chronicle are selected and connected together in causal relations, the subjectivity of the analyser enters the narration, converting the objective chronicle into a story. The simple fact that events are arranged into a narration with a beginning, a middle, and an end is a process of fictionalization. Indeed, '[a]ll good biographers struggle with a particular tension between the scholarly drive to assemble facts as dispassionately as possible and the novelistic urge to find shape and meaning within the apparently random circumstances of a life' (France and Clair, 2002: 16-17). The "raw material" is arranged into a story, transforming past 'events' into 'facts', according to Linda Hutcheon's distinction (1988: 92). An "event" is simply something that happened in the past, while a "fact" is that very past "event", but inserted in a story, namely a teleological narration emplotted in such a way as to realize the analyser's intention. For instance, an event, like the death of a king, can play different roles and therefore bear different meanings according to the kind of narration it is inserted in. The death of a king can be the ending of a biography of such king, or the beginning of his successor's biography. Consequently, historical events do not seem to have a meaning *per sé*, since their meaning eventually depends on the narration in which they are included. For instance, the same scene that Louise

Colet made at the train station has a different meaning in Louise Colet's and in Du Camp's account.

The biographer therefore plays an important role *within* the biography itself. It is the biographer's subjectivity, indeed, which selects and arranges the raw "material", and which asks only certain questions, raises certain hypotheses, and finds certain connections. The biographer's perception of reality is "refracted" by his subjectivity: 'We look at the sun through smoked glass; we must look at the past through coloured glass' (Barnes, 1984: 106). This image may be a reference to Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher who used a similar metaphor of the coloured lenses to explain the difference between *phenomenon* and *noumenon*. The former term refers to "reality as it appears", while the latter refers to "reality as it really is". However, only the *phenomenon* is accessible to human consciousness, because our perception of the world is possible only through our physical senses, which are limited, defective, and fallible. In addition to these physical limits, human perception of the world is also influenced by mental categories and schemes, which are necessary to decipher and interpret the world. According to Kant, these mental categories and the physical limitations are like "red glasses" which individuals wear throughout their life. They believe they can "see" reality for what it is, because they have always worn such red lenses, and therefore they do not know that what they perceive is just the *phenomenon*, never the *noumenon*.

Such coloured lenses are an effective metaphor to represent how human perception of reality cannot be neutral or objective, since it is always influenced by many factors, which can be related to people's personality and to the culture and historical period in which they live. There is not a clear-cut separation between subject and object, because the object is already part of the subject's "horizon of knowledge". In accordance to Heidegger's conceptualization of the hermeneutical circle, Gadamer re-evaluated the role of tradition and pre-judgements in the process of interpreting reality, meant as a system of events, objects, and individuals. Indeed, reality is interpreted *through* tradition, in the sense that a certain event, object, or human behavior can be understood and its meaning can be established only through a comparison with what is generally shared and accepted as "proper" or "improper" by a certain culture in a certain historical period, that is to say, the "accepted ideas" of a

society. Braithwaite's *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*, indeed, is modelled on Flaubert's *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, which was 'a catalogue of clichés', and 'a handbook of fake advice, both social [...] and aesthetic': 'Study it carefully and you would never say anything wrong, while never getting anything right' (Barnes, 1984: 96). Our encyclopedia, namely our knowledge of the world, is often just made of stereotypes, conventions, and clichés, which are generally accepted without further consideration. Especially in mass culture, knowledge is often reduced to a cliché, to a quotable remark extrapolated from its context (Bertoni, 2007: 355).

A cliché is a phrase or an idea that has been used so often that it no longer has much meaning. The excessive use of such linguistic expressions has worn them out, depriving them of their original linguistic strength and reducing them to mere *simulacra*⁵. Stereotypes and generally accepted or shared information are not necessarily *true*, but still necessary to interpret the world around us. In clichés, language reveals itself for what it really is, namely a set of conventions and arbitrary signs that are necessary to represent and shape reality through 'structures of meaning' (Bertoni, 2007: 341). The meaning of clichés, linguistic expressions, and, more generally, words, depends on the *doxa* (Bertoni, 2007: 343), the shared opinion, the standard mental categories used to decipher the world. These "coloured glasses" that allow, despite influencing, any perception of the world are not immutable and constant. On the contrary, the world is perceived, decoded, and understood differently according to different cultures and historical periods, because of 'the fluid, conventional, and culturally mediated character of world models' (*il carattere fluido, convenzionale e culturalmente mediato dei modelli del mondo*; Bertoni, 2007: 345). The meaning of every word evolves in time, mirroring the changes of a culture. Since words are necessary to represent the world, they change and modify their meaning in accordance to the transformations of the world they aim at reproducing.

Not only does the referent of words change according to the culture and the passing of time, but also between one person and another, as Pirandello noticed in *Uno, Nessuno e Centomila*:

⁵ See Jean Baudrillard's philosophical treatise *Simulacres et Simulation* (1981).

the trouble is that you, my dear friend, will never know, nor will I ever be able to tell you how what you say is translated inside me. You haven't spoken Turkish, no. we used, you and I, the same language, the same words. But what fault is it of ours, yours or mine, if worlds, in themselves, are empty? Empty, my friend. And you fill them with your meaning, as you say them to me; and I, as I hear them, inevitably fill them with my meaning. We thought we understood each other; we didn't understand each other at all (Pirandello, transl. Weaver, 1992: 31-32).

This plurality of meanings affects both cultural concepts, such as the idea of "beauty", but also everyday words, such as "tall", "fat", and "mad". Indeed, Flaubert was said to be gigantic, while actually he was only six feet tall. This discovery leads Braithwaite to problematize the very possibility of knowing the past, since even little details are no longer sure:

The giants were not so tall (were the dwarfs therefore shorter too?). The fat men: were they less fat because they were smaller, and so you needed less stomach to appear fat; or were they more fat, because they developed the same stomachs, but had even less frame to support them? (Barnes, 1984: 101)

This culturally and historically determined polysemy of the language can be a hindrance to our understanding of the past, since the very same words used nowadays may have had different connotations and psychological association in the past, which are lost today. Language and imagination are closely linked, since the former shapes the latter. Primo Levi underlined these limits in a telling passage of *Se Questo è un Uomo*:

Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say "hunger", we say "tiredness", "fear", "pain", we say "winter" and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the Lagers had lasted longer, a new, harsh language would have been born; and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind, with the temperature below freezing, wearing only a shirt, under-pants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one's body nothing but weakness, hunger, and the knowledge of the end drawing nearer (Levi, transl. Woolf, 1959: 144).

How is it possible to write a biography? How is it possible to know completely a person? How is it possible to translate such a multiple life into an arbitrary system of signs? Postmodernism raises uncomfortable questions, which rarely accept an exhaustive answer. More frequently,

[i]t can only problematize what Barthes (1973) has called the “given” or “what goes without saying” in our culture. History, the individual self, the relation of language to its referents and of texts to other texts – these are some of the notions which, at various moments, have appeared as “natural” or unproblematically common-sensical. And these are what get interrogated’ (Hutcheon, 1988: xiii).

The act of writing a biography is problematized. The archive is no longer accepted an undisputable source of knowledge: since it is inevitably limited, also the “truth” that can emerge from it is limited. Moreover, many documents that are generally regarded as reliable sources prove not to be reliable at all. First-hand witnesses can just give their own personal and biased versions of the events. Neither can scholars be totally neutral and objective: the very act of selection and arrangement of data into cause-effect connections is arbitrary and reflects their personal intentions. Language itself is not a transparent medium which can unproblematically reproduce reality on paper because there is not a univocal relation between word and referent.

What emerges is a different conception of the “truth” which can be depicted in a biography. The truth about a person and a life is not monolithic, immutable, and univocal; on the contrary, it is intrinsically contradictory and mutable:

the human being acts necessarily through forms, the appearances he creates for himself, to which we give the value of reality. A value that changes, naturally, according to how the being appears to us, in that form, in that act.

And it must necessarily seem to us that the others are mistaken, thinking that a given form, a given act is not this and is not thus. But inevitably, a little later, we shift one degree, we realize we were also mistaken, and it isn’t this and it isn’t thus; so in the end we are obliged to recognize that it will

never be this or thus in any stable, sure way; but first one way, then another, and at a certain point all will seem to us mistaken, or all true, which amounts to the same thing; because a reality wasn't assigned to us and doesn't exist, and we have to make it ourselves, if we want to be: and it will never be one for all, one forever, but continuously and infinitely changeable. The capacity for deluding ourselves that today's reality is the only true one, on the one hand, sustains us, but on the other, it plunges us into an endless void, because today's reality is destined to prove delusion for us tomorrow; and life doesn't conclude. It can't conclude. Tomorrow if it concludes, it's finished (Pirandello, transl. Weaver, 1992: 62-63).

Within this postmodern context of epistemological uncertainty, a crucial role is played both by the biographer and by the reader of a biography. Indeed, the former imposes his subjectivity on the narration the very moment he interprets the raw data and emplots them into a story; the latter's subjectivity, instead, emerges when he interprets the biographer's interpretation of the data. Indeed, both the biographer and the reader are depicted in *Flaubert's Parrot*. Geoffrey Braithwaite is the narrator-biographer who is trying to reconstruct Flaubert's life in order to understand his wife Ellen. Both the biographer and his hidden intention are depicted in the novel, in order to show how the image of Flaubert that emerges is just one of many other possible and plausible images, and the fact that *this* is the images which emerges basically depends on the biographer's intentions.

In addition to the biographer, also the reader is portrayed in *Flaubert's Parrot*, and his role is stressed by the frequent and recurrent invocations to a "you": "You expect something from me too, don't you?" (Barnes, 1984: 95). Braithwaite is well aware of the reader's expectations, and this oppresses him, conscious of his nature of 'hesitating narrator' (Barnes, 1984: 100). The reader is omnipresent, and sometimes Braithwaite feels the reader's presence to be intrusive, and explicitly tries to get rid of the reader:

Listen, I hope you won't think this rude, but I really must take a turn on deck; it's becoming quite stuffy in the bar here. Why don't we meet on the boat back instead? The two o'clock ferry, Thursday? I'm sure I'll feel more like it then. All right? What? No, you can't come on deck with me. For God's sake. Besides,

I'm going to the lavatory first. I can't have you following me in there, peering round from the next stall (Barnes, 1984: 100).

Any writer, and therefore any biographer, is aware that the reader will interpret what he has written, and that the meaning that the reader extrapolates may be different from the message the writer tried to convey. While the written message is the same, its meaning varies according to the interpreter.

Despite the troublesome questions raised by postmodernism, Julian Barnes did manage to convey many pieces of information about Flaubert, maybe more than an "orthodox" biography could have possibly done. Indeed, in *Flaubert's Parrot* the holes that any biographer is forced to fill with his own imagination are explicitly revealed, instead that being secretly hidden behind a mask of certain exhaustiveness. Under this perspective, a fictional biography can be closer to the truth than a more conventional biography because, ultimately, the purpose of fiction is to 'tell the truth. It's to tell beautiful, exact, well-constructed lies which enclose hard and shimmering truths' (Barnes, from the *Observer*, 1998: 30).

8 PARODY OF HISTORIOGRAPHY: RECONSTRUCTING THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN 10 ½ CHAPTERS

A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters (1989) is generally regarded as Julian Barnes's second postmodernist novel after *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), with which it bears many resemblances. Indeed, *A History of the World* was initially conceived as a continuation of *Flaubert's Parrot* by re-employing Geoffrey Braithwaite's narrative voice. As Barnes stated in an interview, 'I was going to write *Geoffrey Braithwaite's Guide to the Bible*. Which would be the entire Bible, restructured for handy modern use, with the boring bits cut out, written by an agnostic skeptic rationalist' (in Guignery, 2006: 61). This *Guide to the Bible* now belongs to Barnes's apocrypha, though part of it can be found in the first chapter of *A History of the World*, 'The Stowaway', which is the re-writing of the story of the Deluge.

This is not the only link between the two novels. A keen interest for history and history writing is a red thread that connects Geoffrey Braithwaite's attempt to make sense of his life (by making sense of Flaubert's life) and the attempt to order the history of the world in ten chapters and a half. History has been differently described and defined in *Flaubert's Parrot*, and one of the recurrent questions risen and left unanswered is 'How do we seize the past? Can we ever do so?' (Barnes, 1984: 5). Rather than offering a straightforward answer or a technical definition of what history is, Barnes proceeds through metaphors and comparisons:

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 (Barnes, 1984: 5).

How do we seize the past? How do we seize the foreign past? We read, we learn, we ask, we remember, we are humble; and then a casual detain shifts everything. [...] 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 (100-101).

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. And when the blur does clear, we imagine that we have made it do so all by ourselves (114).

Does the world progress? Or does it merely shuttle back and forth like a ferry? (120).

Sometimes the past may be a greased pig; sometimes a bear in its den; and sometimes merely the flash of a parrot, two mocking eyes that spark at you from the forest (129).

From this collection of extracts, the past emerges as elusive, inaccessible, and irretrievable. Being it so, the very possibility of a history of the world is at stake. Yet, Barnes wrote it, and just in *10 ½ Chapters*. Every chapter is a different story, set in different places in time and space, and told by different narrative voices. As the literary nature of *Flaubert's Parrot* was questioned, also *A History of the World* was at the core of a debate about its genre. Precisely this multiplicity of characters, of narrative voices, and of events depicted is adduced as a reason to define *A History of the World* as a 'confident collection of short stories' (Nixon, 1989) and 'less a novel than a collection of linked stories and essays' (Rubin, 1990). The stories collected do not, indeed, follow any manifest pattern of progression or development, not even a chronological order. A shadow of order can be detected in the opening and closing chapters, 'The Stowaway' and 'The Dream', inasmuch as the former refers back to the story of Noah's Ark told in the Bible, in the *Genesis*, while the latter is a (unusual) description of the afterlife. The eight (and a half) chapters in the middle are jumbled in a disordered sequence which makes the reader leap from the Deluge to a contemporary cruise on the Mediterranean, from a post-nuclear future to the past, when the frigate *Medusa*

shipwrecked, and then back to the present during the filming of a docu-drama set in the jungle, until eventually leaping into the ultimate future of the afterlife. The chronological line is broken to pieces: past, present, and future are no longer accepted as ordering principles.

Although heterogeneity can be said to be the novel's defining feature, there are also many recurrent elements and motives which tie together the stories. Merritt Moseley catalogued the recurring motives in *A History of the World* into 'Woodworms and beetles', 'The ark', 'Voyages on other arklike vessels', and 'Separation of the clean from the unclean' (1997: 115-118). These are but a few of the many connections that actually exist among the chapters and that echo in the mind of the reader. Not only do several of the stories repeat themselves in their structure and development of the plot, and linguistic expressions return to link the most disparate events, but also "characters", like the woodworm and the reindeer, do cameo appearances in many stories, even when they are not protagonists.

According to some critics, such connections are not enough, or not strong enough, to justifying the novel being classified as a novel. Another of the most frequent attacks moved against *A History of the World* has already been moved against *Flaubert's Parrot*, and it is the fact that there are numerous non-fictional elements in the text, and this therefore averts its status as a novel, that is to say a work of fiction. However, Merritt Moseley backed the "novel-side" of the dispute by referring to Barnes's own definition of a novel: 'an extended piece of prose, largely fictional, which is planned and executed as a whole piece' (in Moseley, 1997: 110). *A History of the World*, indeed, is 'largely fictional', although some of the chapters revolve around real historical figures and events, like the shipwreck of the *Titanic* and of the *Medusa*, the tragedy of the *St Louis*, and the amazing adventure of James Bartley, who survived after having been swallowed by a whale. In his counter-attack, Moseley pointed out how 'books of facts, including histories, are only "largely nonfictional," if that; fiction, or making, goes into every history or biography or autobiography, if only in the ordering of data, the selection of what to omit (which is, after all, almost everything), and the use of figurative tropes and interpretive metaphors' (1997: 111). The influence of Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973) is evident in this comment.

This confusion of reality and invention is anticipated by the title itself: *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* ‘right from the first paratext – the title – pretends to be both historical – *A History of the World* – and fictional (*in 10 ½ Chapters*)’ (Guignery, 2006: 67). Moreover, the title is invested with irony through the addition of an extra ½ chapter which, according to Kotte (2001: 75), ‘challenges our culturally encoded numerical system, where decimal numbers suggest systematic order, unity, and coherence.’ Richard Locke (1989) observed that the book’s

comic grandiosity is apparent from its aggressive title. A history, then, not fiction; divided with confident precision into chapters, though we note the humorous, if whimsical precision on “10½.” The title suggests a book that will flaunt genres, categories of communication, numbers that don’t really conform to our devotion to the order of ten. This self-advertising title is a boast that mocks itself by calling attention to its literary and cognitive form.

Consequently, Barnes ‘subverts culturally encoded number systems and alludes to the incomplete nature of his supposedly universal history’ (Kotte, 1997: 109). Further ambiguity on the ontological status of the kind of history thither described is cast by the use of the indefinite article. What Barnes offers is just *A History of the World*, not “the” history of the world – with the subsequent associations with completeness, absoluteness, and certainty the definite article implies. It is just one out of many possible histories. The authority of the official and monological History is challenged by a polyphony of voices which offer different versions of the same events, often from the subaltern position of the ‘ex-centric’, like women, “Indians”, the insane, and all the other woodworms of the earth. There is a correspondence between the multiplicity of voices that constitute the main content of the novel and the form of the different chapters, their genres and narrative voices. There are both first-person homodiegetic narrators, like the woodworm, and third-person heterodiegetic narrators, who can focalize on a character, like Franklin Hughes in ‘The Visitors’, or keep the distances, assuming an impersonal tone, like in ‘Three Simple Stories’. This last chapter is made of three stories taken from the chronicle and therefore their style resembles that of journalism, while ‘Upstream!’ is a monological epistolary narrative,

since it is constituted by the unanswered letters Charlie sent to Pippa. This correspondence between form and content, between a multiplicity of literary genres and of literary voices will be analysed in chapter 8.1. The effect achieved by this polyphony of forms and contents is to underline the fact that, as there are many histories, there are also many ways of telling such histories, and the form influences the content.

The jumbled structure of *A History of the World*, framed between *Genesis* and *Revelation*, seems to mirror the structure of history itself. Indeed, history has been traditionally conceived as having a pattern, be it linear or circular. Both Judeo-Christian religion and secular Darwinism imply that history follows a linear path, which may lead either to the Last Judgment or to a constant evolution. Instead, if history is thought as following a circular pattern, the implication is that every event that happens has already happened before, and therefore past, present, and future are not as clearly distinguished as in a linear conception of history. The present is at the same time also its past and its future. Both these representations of history emerge from the stories that form *A History of the World*, but they are inscribed and subverted, and therefore parodied, according to Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody. A further conception of history is introduced: a chaotic sequence of events, without pattern, as any kind of ordering the raw material of the past is just an artificial construct. The patterns of history that emerge from *A History of the World* will be analysed in chapter 8.2.

To conclude with, in the ½ chapter entitled 'Parenthesis', Barnes advances the idea that history is fabulation, a partly fictional construction. Such a theorization of history bears many resemblances to Hayden White's concept of "metahistory." Far from proposing a nihilist vision of history, Barnes celebrates diversity and plurality as means by which it is possible to challenge the repressive voice of authority (chapter 8.3).

8.1 A POLIPHONIC RE-WRITING OF HISTORY

The most striking feature of *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* is its heterogeneity of characters, places, times, and, over all, of perspectives. In every story, be it set in the jungle or in nineteenth century Dublin, there are always at least two opposite visions of the world and interpretations of the events that are taking place. The two perspectives co-exist, without ever installing any binary opposition, because a hierarchy of value is hidden behind any dichotomy. The contrastive model right/wrong is destroyed in favour of the co-existence of many versions, none of which is completely wrong or completely right, but all together offer a truer means to interpret the world. This typically postmodernist celebration of plurality, while generally tolerated in fiction, is looked at alarmingly when applied to history and historiography.

The traditional narrator of history can be likened to the omniscient and impersonal narrator of the nineteenth century Great Realist Tradition. History, as any other narrative, has its own narrators, namely culturally and historically located people with certain opinions, prejudices, and ideologies, which, inevitably, will be reflected in the history they are going to write. Yet, reading history is different from reading fiction. Although the illusion of an omniscient and completely objective narrator can be considered as an “innocent” literary device in realist fiction, this kind of impersonal narrator can deceive the reader, if applied to history. Indeed, the narrator of history tends to “disappear” behind the events that are told, and therefore the naïve reader may misinterpret the historian’s account of history as the only unquestionable Truth. However accurate and informed, historians can provide only their own personal interpretations of the materials they have analysed. Therefore, the third-person allegedly omniscient narrator of history is deceitful. The emergence of the ‘ex-centric’ and their own histories have called the traditional historians’ bluff: far from being objective or omniscient, traditional accounts of history proved to be male, white, middle-class, Euro-centric interpretations of the historical record.

Foucault, in his *L’Archéologie du Savoir* (1969), underlines the connection between knowledge and power, arguing that ‘[p]ower operates in modern societies

through the process of knowledge and institutionalized discourses that produce it' (Mandricardo, 2010: 81). History writing was a means to wield power, as '[o]fficial history is usually written from the vantage point of dominant groups (the victors, the colonisers, men...), while minorities and subordinate communities are condemned to silence' (Guignery, 2006: 69). Also the philosopher Walter Benjamin, in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940), has pointed out how history is written by the victors to detain their power. His Theses referred in particular to the Nazi regime, a totalitarian system which imposed a univocal, monolithic narrative, turning history into a "myth of the origins".

The rise of totalitarianisms fuelled postmodernist rejection of any form of master narrative, and traditional, monological History was one of them. The omniscient and objective account of history turns out to be partial and subjective. Master narratives are replaced by the local narratives told by the outcast. Salman Rushdie, indeed, defined *A History of the World* 'as footnote to history, as subversion of the given, as brilliant, elaborate doodle around the margins of what we know we think about what we think we know. This is fiction as critique' (1991: 241). The novel's dynamic polyphony is a way to subvert traditional history: the official version is kept, either as one of the versions reported in the story, or as an intra-text which can be deduced by the reader (e.g. the Bible), and at the same time it is challenged by the very presence of other narratives which provide further data to the story, in this way changing the overall meaning of the event. As Guignery observes, 'the book articulates a resistance to the monological and totalitarian aspect of canonized history, and gives voice to a series of marginalized groups (victims, women, even woodworms!) whose narrations have been excluded from legitimate historical discourse' (2006: 69). The parodic re-writing of official history present in *A History of the World* echoes the more problematic and politically involved relationship between postcolonial literatures and the Western canon, especially the English canon.

The canon of English literature is an ensemble of "holy" texts which are emblematic of the fundamental traits that define "Englishness", meant both as civilization and as collective identity. The canon thus meant is a monolithic and essentialist identity model, which seems inadequate to represent the current

increasingly hybridized society (Dolce, 2010: 175). The canon, like history, is a form of knowledge and a discourse, and therefore is tightly bound to ideology and power, in accordance to Foucault's lesson. Not only has the canon been broadened to include voices and experiences coming from every part of the former Empire, but its very nature and function have also been questioned. Indeed, in order to enshrine the essence of "Englishness", the canon also needs to contain the representation of the "Other", whose nature is non-English *par excellence*.

Many postcolonial scholars, like Edward Said and Jacques Derrida, have pointed out that the canon has been used as an instrument of marginalization and oppression. Through a work of deconstruction it is possible to reveal the non-said and all the hidden implications which constitute the substratum of cultural imperialism implied in a text (Dolce, 2010: 176). The canon has played a vital role in creating the "Other", a necessary counterparty to the "English", as different, savage, uncivilized, inferior, and therefore needing the help of the colonizers, in order to get rid of their state of inferiority. In addition to the political and economic control on the colonies, the Empire had to colonize the mind of the subjected people, namely the way the colonized perceived themselves and the world (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986: 13). This led to a condition of schizophrenia, alienation, and cultural grunge that could be overcome only through a process of "mental decolonization".

"Writing back" is therefore a process of decolonization:

It implies a re-reading of the history of colonization, of the relationship between oppressors and oppressed, and of the reality of the Other, which is moulded and conditioned by stereotypical and partisan worldviews, which are still visible now, in a present marked by forms of cultural and ideological neo-colonization, despite its alleged "post-colonialism" (Dolce, 2010: 182).

The canon is not rejected, but is inscribed and revisited in a fruitful dialogue which aims at dismantling the dichotomous opposition centre/margins, superiority/inferiority that is promulgated between the lines of the canon. This process of de-centring and destabilizing the literary canon is applied also to history which is, ultimately, just another narrative.

From the re-writing the canon, *A History of the World* attempts to re-write history in 10 ½ chapters. In any chapter new ‘submerged voices of history’ (Salyer, 1991: 224) are represented, upholding their point of view and demanding to be at least listened to, if not believed in. A close reading of the chapters will show how Barnes manages to have at least two opposite points of view co-existing in any chapter, without creating a hierarchy of values in which one view is claimed to be the right one and therefore imposed upon the others. Polyphony is possible because any voice has the same right to exist than the others, and is consequently respected and tolerated.

a) ‘The Stowaway’: the animals’ re-writing of the Deluge

The first chapter is important because it provides the chords that will later be found, under different circumstances, in all the other stories. Indeed, as Merritt Moseley observed,

[c]ollage is not a helpful analogy [to describe *A History of the World*], but symphony is. A musical composition has no plot and no characters and, in the usual sense, no ideas; instead it has themes and motifs, and the repetition and patterning of these provide its unity (1997: 115).

‘The Stowaway’ is the re-telling of the episode of the Flood originally contained in the book of the *Genesis*. The intra-text of the story is indeed the *Bible*. Readers are not required to know the Holy Scriptures by heart to understand the parodic spirit of the story, because the mysterious stowaway narrator keeps referring back to “our” version of the story, meant as the human account of the Deluge. Only at the very end of the story do the (human) readers find out that the narrator is a woodworm, and that what they have just read is the animals’ account of the Flood. The biblical episode is told from two different points of view: the humans’ and the animals’. The two perspectives, however, are not equal, because the story contained in the *Bible* is held to be the stable, certain, undisputable Truth. Religion, indeed, emerges as just another master narrative, since it attempts to impose a unifying order and meaning on reality.

The truth contained in the holy (human) text is challenged by the fact that the animals, the other protagonists of the tragic event, are allowed to give their own version. And the result is shocking, if not blasphemous (from a human perspective, clearly).

First of all, the woodworm refers some facts that have been (wilfully?) modified or omitted from the human archive. Right from the beginning, the humans' and the animals' accounts differ. On the one hand, in the *Bible* it is said that Noah led just one Ark, that it rained for forty days and forty nights, and that the water covered the earth for a hundred and fifty days. On the other hand, Noah was the 'Admiral' (12) of a flotilla of eight vessels; it rained for a year and a half; and the water rested upon the land for four years. These are not little details: even the seemingly more objective facts cannot be relied upon. The woodworm suggests that humans have modified the historical data because of a 'quaint obsession with multiples of seven' (5). Other serious omissions from the human archive are the existence of a fourth son, Varadi, and of many other species, like the unicorn, the basilisk, the hippogriff, the griffon, and the sphinx, all of which disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Since they are not recorded in the official record, it is as if they did never exist. Consequently, the history in the *Bible* is not complete, because what is now known is merely what has survived the selection of the author, who may have acted either for artistic and aesthetic reasons, or to cover up shameful behaviours, in a process of censorship or deletion of guilt which can be likened to the concept of 'active forgetting' proposed by Aleida Assman (2010). In the woodworm's account, indeed, there is also an episode of an 'instant rewriting of history', namely Noah's decision to claim that the olive tree was found by the white dove, rather than by the black raven, simply because it seemed 'more appropriate' (25). Behind the aesthetic reason, there linger the racist idea that white is better than black, in the binary opposition white/light/right/innocent *versus* black/darkness/wrong/guilt.

In addition to these new facts that shed a new light on the account of the Deluge as previously understood, the narrator also refers the animals' perception and opinion about the human and the divinity that took part in the Flood, Noah and God. The woodworm is familiar with the biblical representation of Noah as a sage,

righteous, and God-fearing man. Nonetheless, this stowaway narrator is not afraid of providing its own outspoken description of Noah as ‘an old rogue with a drink problem who was already into his seventh century of life’ (Barnes, 1989: 6).

Noah was ‘an ignorant man in many respects’ who considered the Ark and its content as a ‘floating cafeteria’ (14) and who saved the animals just for self-interest, as ‘future lunch’ (22). The explanation the woodworm adduces to the loss of the unicorn is that ‘Noah – what point is there in not telling you the truth? – was bad-tempered, smelly, unreliable, envious and cowardly’ (16). Even in the *Bible*, there seems to be two opposite versions of Noah: Noah the righteous leader chosen by God, and Noah the drunkard who laid naked in front of his sons. The official explanation for this contradiction is a ‘[s]imple case of mistaken identity’ (29). The contradiction instead is non-existent in the case the woodworm’s account is held to be true. In conclusion, the woodworm states, rather sorrowful,

I don’t know how best to break this to you, but Noah was not a nice man. I realize this idea is embarrassing, since you are all descended from him; still, there it is. He was a monster, a puffed-up patriarch who spent half his day grovelling to his God and the other half taking it out on us (Barnes, 1989: 12).

By the use of the possessive “his”, the woodworm takes his distances from God, refusing to recognize His authority over its own life. The woodworm recognizes Noah’s God-fearing nature but adds that ‘given the nature of God, that was probably the safest line to take’ (11). Indeed, ‘that God of his was a really oppressive role-model. [...] There was something a bit sinister about Noah’s devotion to God; creepy, if you know what I mean’ (21). In fact, God emerges as brutal, whimsical, and ruthless. As there are two versions of Noah, there are also two versions of God: the ruthless God of the Ancient Testament and the loving God of the New Testament. The old version of God is more apt to explain the evil in the world, all the tragedies and the catastrophes which seem to constitute the history of the world, and which indeed are described in every story of *A History of the World*.

God’s behaviour is described as utterly inexplicable by the animals: ‘On the Ark we puzzled ceaselessly at the riddle of how God came to choose man as His protégé ahead of the more obvious candidates’ (18). Man is no longer the culmination

of God's creation, but is just one out of many other (and possibly better) candidates. Man was not selected for his recognized and undisputed merit, since the reasons for his selection are attributed to God's whimsical nature. In the woodworm's story, man is no longer the centre of the history of the world, with the animals as a means of survival at his disposal. Yet the woodworm did not merely revert the hierarchy centre/margins, superiority/inferiority, because what it does is to propose a new model of equality between man and animals, which has been lost because of humans' obsession for dividing and ranking:

I know your species tends to look down on our world, considering it brutal, cannibalistic and deceitful (though you might acknowledge the argument that this makes us closer to you rather than more distant). But among us there had always been, from the beginning, a sense of equality. [...] The fact that one animal was capable of killing another did not make the first animal superior to the second; merely more dangerous. Perhaps it is a concept difficult for you to grasp, but there was a mutual respect amongst us (Barnes, 1989: 10).

Man replaces the equality which reigned in the animal kingdom with discrimination, selection, and division. The Ark was no harmonious environment; it was a 'prison ship' (4) tyrannically ruled. Noah was in charge of selecting a pair of every species of animals existing on the planet. The question is: how is it possible to tell that the differences between similar animals are enough to constitute a different species? What makes a certain pair better than the others and worthy of being selected? Who decides which animals to choose and which creatures are "Not Wanted On Voyage" (7)? Who decides who deserves to decide? According to the woodworm, Noah did not in fact select the best couple of animals, but merely the 'first presentable pair' and, therefore, more than to 'natural selection', the loss of biodiversity is to be attributed to Noah's 'professional incompetence' (7). After the first arbitrary selection of species and of the "best" two animals of every species, there was a further selection and division of the animals in clean and unclean. The former had to enter the Ark by sevens, the latter by twos. Equality is lost, and the woodworm questions this arbitrary system, where no logical explanation can be found:

it must be said that the system – at least, the system as Noah understood it – made very little sense. What was so special about cloven-footed ruminants, one asked oneself? Why should the camel and the rabbit be given second-class status? Why should a division be introduced between fish that had scales and fish that did not? The swan, the pelican, the heron, the hoopoe: are these not some of the finest species? Yet they were not awarded the badge of cleanness. [...] If only we could have seen some glimpse of logic behind it all; if only Noah had explained it better (Barnes, 1989: 11).

According to the animals, the Flood was a “slaughter of the innocents”. Man enraged God who, rather inexplicably, decides to vent his wrath on the animal kingdom as well, wiping away entire species and killing every creature but for two (five of the seven were to be eaten) survivors. The woodworm points out how man has always blamed the animals for his own faults, and the animals, albeit innocent, have been punished for man’s sins: this is the case of the snake, condemned to crawl on the earth because it allegedly tempted Eve. But this version of the story, which is the official one amongst humans, was just ‘Adam’s black propaganda’ (6), according to the woodworm. The innocents are blamed, punished, and slaughtered together with the guilty.

The animals ‘didn’t know anything of the political background. God’s wrath with his own creation was news to us; we just got caught up in it willy-nilly’ (6). As they were excluded from God’s scheme before (and killed as a side-effect of man’s punishment), the animals were also excluded from God’s covenant with man. Noah was allowed to eat the animals, and the animals had the rainbow in exchange. Their condition is that of the outcast, blamed for the guilt of mankind and used as scapegoats, who have been created by God but are excluded by any interaction with Him. They are the innocents slaughtered together, and in stead of, the guilty.

In addition to this first “natural selection” that took place among the animals that were and were not allowed on the Ark, there was also another, even more sinister deathful selection:

[a]t times we suspected a kind of system behind the killing that went on. Certainly there was more extermination than was strictly necessary for nutritional purposes – far more. [...] We

began to suspect that Noah and his tribe had it in for certain animals simply for being what they were (Barnes, 1989: 15).

The woodworm ascribes this unnecessary extermination to Noah's fear of miscegenation and abhorrence for cross-breeds. This is the reason behind the disappearance of hybrid creatures, such as the basilisk, the griffon, the sphinx, the hippogriff, and the unicorn (15-16).

This chapter is the opening of a symphony which contains all the elements that will be repeated and echoed in the rest of the work. More than simple narratives of sea voyages and shipwreck, the stories collected in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* are a reiteration of slaughters of innocents that have taken place in history. Mankind's obsession for binary ranking and distinction has led to discrimination and, subsequently, to punishment and extermination. '[Y]ou all have Noah's genes' (25), stated the woodworm, and indeed Noah's division between clean and unclean and his obsession for the purity of race and disgust for miscegenation are present also in his descendants, with Hitler as its climax. Indeed, the "Final Solution" is the intra-text, the key with which it is possible to read and interpret this story as an anticipation of what will happen under the Nazi rule. The unchosen animals who wanted to survive had to stowaway in 'the dark, the confinement and the stench' (9), like the Jews who had to spend months in hideous hidden places. Like some animals, also the Jews were killed 'simply for being what they were' (15), and were used as scapegoats for other people's faults. Selection, division, discrimination, and slaughter of the innocents together with the guilty is echoed in every chapter of the novel and is emphasized by the polyphony of voices that are risen among the condemned slot of the innocents, the outcasts that nonetheless have to pay the consequences of other people's faults.

The woodworm appeals to its status as an outcast and claims to be more reliable than the other animals which were selected and chosen by Noah, because 'gratitude puts no smear of Vaseline on the lens' (Barnes, 1989: 4). His account is therefore very subjective, as other animals, especially the chosen one, may disagree with his version of the facts. The woodworm is not more reliable a source than the *Bible*, considering that its direct testimony is limited to what happened in a small area of the Ark, and the rest of his knowledge is an assemblage of rumours, suppositions,

and ‘what the bird said’ (18). The woodworm’s testimony should be taken into account, knowing that it is simply another version of the story of the Flood, and not “what really happened”.

b) ‘The Visitors’: freedom fighters or terrorists?

The voyage of neither the Ark nor the *Santa Euphemia* was ‘some Mediterranean cruise on which we played languorous roulette and everyone dressed for dinner’ (Barnes, 1989: 3), although the latter actually was a Mediterranean cruise liner. What happened on board of the fictional *Santa Euphemia* parallels the tragedy on the *Achille Lauro*, a cruise ship hijacked in October 1984, only five years before *A History of the World* was published. The “visitors” divided the passengers of the ship according to their nationalities, killing two of them every hour, until the rescuing forces arrived. The real-life event must have been still vivid in the minds of the first readers as to work as an intra-text.

The connection with the previous chapter is expressed clearly from the very first page, when the ‘obedient couples’ (33) of passengers are roughly catalogued by the focalizer, Franklin Hughes, according to their nationalities, approximately like Noah did when he was boarding the animals on the Ark. First there was a distinction between mankind and animals, now the separation is introduced within mankind itself, the nationalities working like “human species”. However, using nationalities as parameters for a classification of mankind is arbitrary, because nations, and therefore nationalities, are ‘historically-created artefacts, as the result of the interaction between ideology, culture, and society’ (Oboe, 2010: 58). Indeed, nations and their border are invented, as

The “national discourse” – nationality and nationalism – produces and naturalises systems of meaning which are arbitrary and which relate to procedures of self-invention and to the discovery of common origins, around which it is possible to build a foundation of identification and cohesion for a plurality of individuals (Oboe, 2010: 57).

Franklin Hughes, although born British, has acquired an Irish passport, and therefore a new nationality, without his “essence” being affected by the change. However, the possession of an Irish passport increased Hughes’s chances of survival on the *Santa Euphemia*. The pairs of passengers were shot according to their nationalities: first the British and the Americans, then the Canadians, the Italians, the French, and the Spaniards. Lastly, there were the Japanese, the Swedes, and Franklin the Irishman. The criterion behind this process of ‘[s]eparating the clean from the unclean’ (44) was whether they belonged or not to a nation which has produced terrorists, or which has at least been neutral. The mere nationality was sufficient a reason to determine their chances of survival; the personal opinion of the passengers was not taken into account (49). As far as Franklin Hughes is concerned, ‘the Gaelic on his passport meant that he was a member of the IRA’ (48-49). The passengers are not judged and subsequently killed because of their personal guilt or fault but, one again, ‘simply for being what they were’ (15). The fault of the governments are paid by innocent citizens: this is yet another slaughter of the innocents.

Following Hughes’s advice, the “visitors” decide to explain to the passengers how their cause can be advanced only if people are killed. Hughes is expected to ‘explain to the passengers what is happening. How they are mixed up in history. What history is’ (51). Hughes is expected to re-write Western history from the Arab’s perspective, having to choose ‘between two equally repellent ideas: that of abandoning his girlfriend while retaining his integrity, or rescuing his girlfriend by justifying to a group of innocent people why it was right that they should be killed’ (53). He opted for the altruist option, even if it would be regarded as a self-interested decision. A new version of history is told by Franklin Hughes, the reliable Western historian, ‘outgoing, jokey, eager to tell you things. You believed what he said’ (36). The guilty/innocent dichotomy is reverted: the Jews are no longer the victims, but the victimizers, because the Arabs are the new victims of *this* history:

European guilt over the Holocaust being paid for by the Arabs. The Jews having learned from their persecutions by the Nazis that the only way to survive was to be like Nazis. Their militarism, expansionism, racism. [...] The Arabs only asking from the Westerns Powers for the same justice in the Middle East as has already been accorded o the Jews. The regrettable

necessity of violence, a lesson taught the Arabs by the Jews, just as it had been taught the Jews by the Nazis (Barnes, 1989: 55-56).

Another feature the Black Thunder group shares with Noah is the ability to shift the blame to someone else, in a circle that passes through the Jews to end in the Western Powers.

The Arab's version of the recent developments in Middle East history clashes against the Western account of the same event, especially in the attribution of guilt and innocent. Also the concepts of "law" and "lawful" are questioned, as well as the idea of "justice", which are generally regarded as universal, while are actually subjective (see *Arthur & George*, Barnes, 2005). Despite the problematic issue dealt in this story, Barnes manages to create an ambiguous "suspension of judgment": both versions might well be true. Indeed, the "visitors" accused, borrowing Hughes's voice, the Western government of 'reckless disregard for human life' (57), refusing to negotiate and therefore forcing the Black Thunder to use violence to be listened to. Eventually, the American Special Forces managed to get on board after having trailed the *Santa Euphemia* for fifteen hours (58). The ship, however, seemed to Hughes to be going 'round in large, slow circles' (46).

c) 'The Wars of Religion': are animals guilty in front of God?

The woodworm returns as the main character of this story, too. It is, however, silent. Who talks in his place is a *plaidoyer des insects*, who is in charge of the defence of the woodworms, accused of blasphemy by the inhabitants of Mamirolle. Funny and surprising as it may seem, this chapter 'is based on legal procedures and actual cases described in *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals* by E. P. Evans (1906)', as specified by Barnes in the *Author's Note*. In the Middle Ages, indeed, animals were prosecuted in trials, because, being creatures created by God, they were considered as having a soul and therefore their actions were interpreted as intentional:

There is a chapter in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, as you will know, about medieval animal trials. Most people who look at animal trials tend to think that if in medieval times they gave judicial trial to a pig for eating the face of a man who was lying in a ditch in a drunken stupor, that this was a sign of how incredibly primitive and stupid the Middle Ages were. It seems to me that it's a sign of how wonderfully larger and more extended the sense of what life was in those days, and that when the pig was executed by an official hangman, it was actually elevating the status of the pig rather than anything else. It was putting it into the order of God's creation, it was giving it a conscience, you could say, whereas now the horizon has lowered. God is not in his sky and we treat pigs worse now than they did in the Middle Ages (Barnes, in Freiburg, 1999: 41-42).

While in 'The Stowaway' the power of fiction gives actually voice to the woodworm, in this chapter the animals are dumb because Barnes chose to "keep close to facts", and to insert in his novel the English transcription of the proceedings preserved in the *Archives Municipales de Besançon*. Paradoxically, in the episode of the Flood the animals are condemned and slaughtered even if innocents, without the opportunity to defend themselves, while in this case the woodworms are recognized the right of having a proper trial, with the possibility of defending themselves. The *plaidoyer des insectes*'s role is to give voice to silenced voices, in an 'attempt to make my speaking tongue do service for their silent tongue' (65).

The terrible event that drove the inhabitant of Mamirolle to ask for the excommunication of the woodworm is the damage provoked by such creatures to the Bishop's throne, jealously guarded in the Church of Saint-Michel. The leg of the throne had been gnawed by woodworms, so that when the Bishop sat down, he fell 'into a state of imbecility' (64). Such being the facts, the trial aims at establishing whether the woodworms should be held responsible of it and, if so, they must be excommunicated. Both the *plaidoyer des habitants* and the *plaidoyer des insectes* base their arguments on the *Bible*, and more specifically, on the episode in the *Genesis* that refers to Noah's Ark. According to the different interpretation provided, the woodworms may be either God's own creation, therefore worth of existing, or a 'living corruption' or 'creations of the devil' (78). The double possible nature of the woodworm leads to

two possible explanations of the Bishop's fall. On the one hand, if the woodworm is a creature of God, 'the infestation was either divinely ordered or divinely permitted' (76-77) in order to punish the inhabitants of Mamirolle for their sins and for not paying the tithes; on the other hand, since there is no evidence of the woodworm having ever boarded the Ark, the gnawing of the throne leg was part of an evil scheme perpetrated with 'hateful malice' by this 'vile creature' (72).

Both the *procureur episcopal* and the *juge d'Église* found the woodworm guilty and 'admonish the aforesaid woodworm as detestable vermin and command them, under pain of malediction, anathema and excommunication, to quit within seven days the church of Saint-Michel' (79). The woodworm, once again, is the outcast, cast out of the communion of God, as it was in Noah's Ark. There is no covenant between God and the woodworms. Despite being dumb creatures, the woodworms managed to express themselves rather eloquently even without the *plaidoyer des insectes*'s help: the *Sentence du juge d'Église* is lost forever, because it has been gnawed by woodworms. The dumb creatures, found guilty, silenced the authoritarian voice of the judge.

d) 'The Survivor': the madwoman's dream

The reindeer on the Ark was right to worry about '[s]omething distant, major...long-term' (13). Indeed, in the background of Kath's story, there is a nuclear disaster in Russia, which provoked a cloud of poison which contaminated lichens and the reindeers who ate them. The radioactive animals had to be killed, in yet another slaughter of innocents, where animals pay for humans' mistakes. From the North, Kath decides to move south, to Australia, to distance herself from the nuclear menace, and to feel even safer she decides to take her boyfriend's boat and to head to the open sea, where she will be found going round in circles.

In this chapter, there are many opposite perspectives facing one another. First of all, the opposition humans/animals is resumed and extended. People could not understand Kath because she felt sympathy for animals and could not accept what happened to the reindeer:

Why are we always punishing animals? We pretend we like them, we keep them as pets and get sappy if we think they are reacting like us, but we've been punishing animals from the beginning, haven't we? Killing them and torturing them and throwing our guilt on to them? (Barnes, 1989: 87).

Another opposition that emerges in this story is between male and female. Right from the beginning, Kath discovered that 'Father Christmas ran an all-male team. Typical. Absolutely bloody typical, she thought'; the reindeers that pulled the sleight were not happy couples, 'like the animals that went into the Ark' (83). This tinged machismo is present also in Kath's relationship with her boyfriend Greg, who 'drank beer, went out with his mates and drank some more beer, sometimes slapped me around a bit on pay-night' (87). Greg is a violent male chauvinist, who denigrates Kath's fear about the end of the world merely as 'pre-menstrual tension' (89), and who wants Paul, Kath's cat, fixed, because it would make it less aggressive. Men want to tame nature because they fear its violence, and yet humanity results to be far more aggressive than nature. '[M]aybe we ought to get you fixed, that might make you less aggressive' (88), Kath thought about Greg. Moreover, Kath defends her cat by saying that 'It's not a cat's fault that it's a cat'; as a recurrent motifs, there returns the punishment and killing of people and animals 'simply for being what they were' (15). Kath accepts the traditional dichotomy that conceives men as associated to reason and civilization, in contrast to women, closer to nature and feelings. Men, reason, and civilizations were considered better than women, feelings, and nature. But this is questioned in this story. The connection with nature seems to have been lost, and this is seen as a worsening rather than as an improvement for humanity.

Greg was defined as 'an ordinary bloke' (87), yet he was a drunkard and a violent. Indeed, another concept that is problematized is the idea of "normality", "sane", and "insane". As the narration proceeds, a new possible reality starts emerging, first as Kath's dreams, but later gaining increasing space, importance, and credibility. After she took the boat and started her voyage, Kath begins dreaming of men that visit her in her sleep. At first, she thinks it is due to the heat (as if there was central heating on the desert island she landed on) and to the poison in the water and in the air. Moreover, her skin and her hair start falling off. In her dream, she is wearing white

gloves and is locked in a strange cage (96), which, according to the men, actually are bandages and the bars are part of her bed (101). She was pulling her hair out, for this reason it was falling. Kath's version of the story, with the boat, the cats, and the desert island, is opposed to the equally believable explanation provided by the doctor: Kath is now in a hospital because she suffers from Persistent Victim Disorder. There was no nuclear war because things were solved at the very last moment; the reason for her distress was actually Greg, with his possessiveness, his violence, and the subsequent break-up (107). The doctor also provides an explanation for the differences between his and Kath's versions:

You were exteriorizing things, transferring your own confusion and anxiety on to the world. It's normal [...]. Well, the technical term is fabrication. You make up a story to cover the facts you don't know or can't accept. You keep a few true facts and spin a new story round them. (Barnes, 1989: 109).

According to the doctor, Kath's story of the boat is mere fabrication. But what if the fabrication was the existence of the men and the hospital? Both possibilities may equally be true. The doctor keeps referring to Kath's condition as "normal" even if, in the end, she was considered "insane" and hosted in a mental institution. Animal/human, male/female, sane/insane, and reality/dream are contrasting points of view which coexist in this story, and this plurality is never reduced to a dichotomy in which one element is true and the other is false: both options may be equally true.

e) 'Shipwreck'; truth to art or the truth to life: which is truer?

This chapter is divided into two parts, the first of which is the factual account of what happened on board of the frigate *Medusa* and the raft that was built after its shipwreck, while the second part relates the creation of the painting *The Raft of the Medusa* by Théodore Géricault. Therefore, on the one hand there is truth to life, to reality, and to "what really happened"; on the other hand there is the truth to art, and to "what is told/represented of what really happened". In both cases, there are many

subjective interpretations which may provide a meaning and an explanation to catastrophe.

First there are the facts, which Barnes drew 'from the 1818 London translation of Savigny and Corréard's *Narrative of a Voyage to Senegal*' (Author's Note). The story of the people on the raft is yet another tragic slaughter of innocents. After the frigate shipwrecked, there were not enough safety boat for all the passengers, so a raft was built. The four boats towing the raft cast aside the towing ropes, abandoning the hundred and fifty people on the raft to their destiny. This first act of egoism lead to delirium, mutinies on board, murder, and cannibalism. On board, 'the healthy were separated from the unhealthy like the clean from the unclean' (121): the wounded and the weakest were cast into the water, for the benefit of the fittest. When the *Argues* rescued them, there were only fifteen survivors.

Barnes used Lorenz Eitner's *Géricault: His Life and Work* (Orbis, 1982) to answer the question: 'How do you turn catastrophe into art?' (125). Art re-creates catastrophes; this is what Géricault did, what Charlie and the troupe are trying to do in the jungle in 'Upstream!', what the movie about the Titanic did, and, eventually, what Barnes himself does in *A History of the World*. The difference between art and journalism is that art is not merely a documentary reproduction of the fact. Even realistic art adds to *imitatio* the process of *electio* (Bertoni, 2007: 61). Art is free to modify factual events in order to reach a deeper level of meaning, and to tell a lie which, according to Barnes, is truer than reality⁶. This is the paradox and the contradiction between reality and fiction: sometimes fiction, even if lying, can be truer than reality. This is the point Barnes is trying to make when analysing the factual story of the raft and its transposition in art.

Géricault had to select the moment to depict. Barnes, like in 'The Flaubert Apocrypha' (1984:133), starts with what the painter decided not to paint. The *electio* of a certain scene can, indeed, be subject to different interpretations, according to the interpreter, as theorized by Philosophical Hermeneutics. While journalism must be

⁶ **Observer:** What is the purpose of fiction?

Barnes: it's to tell the truth. It's to tell beautiful, exact, and well-constructed lies which enclose hard and shimmering truths (1998: 30).

objective, clear, and unambiguous, a work of art is much richer in meanings. There is a plurality of interpretations, some of them opposite (e.g. is the ship on the horizon sailing away or coming to rescue them?), but equally valid. Barnes resumes this multiplicity of meaning by opposing an 'ignorant eye' to an 'informed eye' (130) both of which try to decipher Géricault's painting:

The narrator decides to let the reader decide for himself or herself rather than impose a fixed and stable interpretation on the painting. The narrative strategy of bifocalisation implemented here underlines the subjectivity of viewpoints, and highlights the vanity of trying to enforce a monologic discourse, be it visual or textual, that would reveal a supposedly unique and totalizing truth. The fifth chapter, though hybrid in form and genre, thus inscribes reflections about the representation of the past, the knowledge of reality and the interpretation of signs which can apply to the whole novel (Guignery, 2006: 66).

Why is this critical analysis of *The Raft of the Medusa*, or rather, *Scenes of Shipwreck*, catalogued together with other factual or fictional stories of catastrophes? Maybe its function is to provide a key with which to interpret the whole *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*. Like Géricault's painting, even Barnes's novel is a blurred mixture of factual and fictional depictions of catastrophes:

Catastrophe has become art; but this is no reducing process. It is freeing, enlarging, explaining. Catastrophe has become art: that is, after all, what it is for (Barnes, 1989: 137).

Art outlives history, yet it is not eternal: in the frame of *The Raft of the Medusa* there is an infestation of woodworms. Catastrophe, turned into art, is given an explanation, which makes it more understandable and therefore more acceptable. However, such explanation is just "soothing fabulation", because meaning is artificially imposed upon the event. There is also the issue of tragedy being turned into pleasurable spectacle and enjoyable entertainment. Amanda and her father, Colonel Fergusson, protagonists of the next chapter, visit two art exhibitions, the Pavilion and the Rotunda, where Géricault's painting is shown: 'the audience was constantly moved to applause by the spectacle' (Barnes, 1989: 145).

f) **'The Mountain' and 'Project Ararat': the eyes of faith and the eyes of science**

Both these stories deal with expeditions to Mount Ararat, the place where Noah's Ark is supposed to have landed. Neither the missions lead to any relevant discovery, although Spike, the protagonist of 'Project Ararat', finds a skeleton, which probably is Amanda's, 'The Mountain' main character. In each story, there is a contraposition between a religious vision of the world and a scientific, materialist, or at least problematizing explanation of events. In 'The Mountain', this contraposition is embodied by the religious Amanda and by her father, Colonel Fergusson: 'Where Amanda discovered in the world divine intent, benevolent order and rigorous justice, her father had seen only chaos, hazard and malice. Yet they were both examining the same world' (148). After her father's death, Amanda decides to go on pilgrimage to Mount Ararat to intercede for her father's soul, bringing Miss Logan as a companion. The latter's opinion, even if not so drastically secular as Colonel Fergusson's, worked as a counter balance to Amanda's fanaticism. The Colonel did not believe in that 'religious mumbo-jumbo' (143), while Miss Logan is Christian, but questions her religion from within. In 'Project Ararat', the astronaut Spike Tiggler, when on mission on the moon, hears God's voice ordering him to find Noah's Ark on Mount Ararat. Spike's scientific and questioning counterpart is Dr Jimmy Fulgood, geologist and scuba-diver.

Multiple explanations are provided for the same event. For instance, the slaughter of innocents that took place when an earthquake killed all the inhabitants of the monastery and the little community nearby is seen by Amanda as God's right punishment for the monks who dared make wine out of Noah's vineyard, while Jimmy saw it as a punishment for the Russian/Soviets who owned that side of the mountain. Natural disasters are interpreted as having a meaning *in sé*, almost a volition and an intentionality. Also Amanda's fall, therefore, should be interpreted as God's will. However, when Miss Logan later thought about that incident, it seemed to her that Amanda fell on purpose, consequently choosing her death. The God that emerges

here is the God of the Old Testament, ruthless and unforgiving. If this version of God is the true one, Miss Fergusson's 'father's soul was lost, cast out, condemned' (165), and therefore the atheist/agnostic are like the woodworms in 'The Wars of Religion', namely excommunicated, cast out of the community. To conclude with Amanda,

There always appear to be two explanations of everything. That is why we have been given free will, in order that we may choose the correct one. My father failed to comprehend that his explanations were based as much upon faith as mine (Barnes, 1989: 154).

g) 'Three Simple Stories': three slaughters of innocents

As the title suggests, this chapter deals with three stories, which are short, but far from simple. The first story is about Lawrence Beesley, who managed to survive the shipwreck of the *Titanic* by boarding an underpopulated lifeboat. Although he is an eye witness, his narration of the events is not entirely believed, not even by his family. Indeed, since his name does not appear on the list of the survivors, there are rumours that he escaped disguised in women's clothes, and that the blanket embroidered with the name of the rescuing ship *Carpathia* was just a hoax. This speculation and scepticism towards the witness's account are welcomed by the narrator of the story, who turns out to be Julian Barnes himself⁷. There are two options about "what really happened" to Lawrence Beesley, and the narrator decided to believe in the rumours, because such a hypocritical behaviour would perfectly fit in his conception of the world:

I supported this theory with pleasure, because it confirmed my view of the world. In the autumn of that year I was to wedge into the mirror of my college bed-sitting-room a piece of paper bearing the following lines: 'Life's a cheat and all things shew it/I thought so once and now I know it'. Beesley's case offered corroboration: the hero of the *Titanic* was a blanket-forgery and transvestite imposter; how just and appropriate, therefore, that I fed him false cricket scores (Barnes, 1989: 173-174).

⁷ **Guignery:** [...] Is that narrator an earlier version of yourself? Have you actually met Lawrence Beesley?

Barnes: Yes, that's true. That simple story is completely true, that's about me (Guignery, 2000: 56).

Even the presence of an eye witness and of physical evidence, like the blanket, is not enough to prove that one account is true: we just believe in what we want to believe.

During the shooting of the film *A Night to Remember*, Beesley surreptitiously boarded the replica of the *Titanic* because, in this fictional re-enactment of the shipwreck, he wanted to stay on board, and go down with the ship. Unfortunately, the director spotted him, and forced him to disembark: once again, at the very last moment, Lawrence Beesley abandons the *Titanic* just before it was due to shipwreck. Art repeats life, and life repeat itself. Like in the chapter entitled 'Shipwreck', tragedy is turned into art: the loss of hundreds of people is turned into a spectacle.

The second "simple story" shows how life can repeat and imitate fiction. After having recounted the improbable and unbelievable adventure of Jonah, narrated in the *Bible*, the narrator reports, with journalistic essentiality, a news report: James Bartley was swallowed by a whale on August 25th, 1891, and survived to tell his tale. Like Beesley, he is another survivor and, similarly, there are two interpretations: on the one hand, the case was 'worthy of belief' for a scientific editor who analysed the event in 1914, while, on the other hand, modern scientists maintain that it is impossible to survive within a whale's belly for more than a few minutes. Who is right? History seems to be repeating itself, because a myth, be it the myth of Bartley or the myth of Jonah, is just a story that 'has been retold, adjusted, updated; it has shuffled nearer' (Barnes, 1989: 180).

The last story is about another real-life tragedy: the impossible journey of yet another ship, the *St Louis*, which left the port of Hamburg in 1939 with 937 people on board. Although they were officially 'tourists, travelling for pleasure', most of the passengers were actually Jews, who were determined to leave that Nazi state. The cruise liner was supposed to land and disembark the "tourists" at the Havana harbour, but, as the access to was denied them in Cuba, so it was in the US, Chile, Paraguay, Colombia, Argentina, Venezuela, and Ecuador. The liner 'steamed in ever-widening circles' (185) for forty days and forty night, precisely as did Noah's Ark in the story narrated in the *Bible*.

The narration is almost like a journalist report, rich in dates and facts. The amount of fictionalization is reduced to the repeated comment ‘which is normal’, which contextualizes the presence of Gestapo agents, of the swastika flag, and of a quarantine flag in a “normal” cruise liner. The concept of “normality” and “abnormality” is problematized, and is shown in all its contextual-dependent nature. In an interview with Vanessa Guignery, Julian Barnes explains why he decided not to fictionalize this story:

It’s a terrible story which didn’t need amplification. It didn’t need being “written”. It needed holding back from. And so at the beginning, you anticipate a reaction of “Gosh, how extraordinary!” and you kill it with “No, that’s normal, that was normal, this was normal for the time.” So you establish that these terrible circumstances are normal, and then you let it go and it gets worse. I think I would have also felt, if I had fictionalised it, that I was unfairly playing with people’s lives. I think when you get near areas like the Holocaust, unless you are particularly a special witness of them, like, say, Primo Levi, then I think you have to be very, very careful about using them in any way. They’re almost sacred subjects (Barnes, in Guignery, 2000: 58).

h) ‘Upstream!’: the West and the Rest on film

This chapter is an epistolary narrative made of letters and telegrams that English actor Charlie sent to his lover Pippa from the heart of the jungle, where he is shooting a movie based on the real story of two Jesuit missionaries who went there to convert the Indians to Christianity. Despite being an epistolary narrative, this story is monological, because Pippa never replied to Charlie’s letters. However, polyphony is still present, because Charlie reports in his letters the opinion of the crew about the Indians, which is opposite to Charlie’s. The figure of the “Indian” living in the rainforest has already emerged in two passages of the novel: Amanda refers to them as ‘the ignorant savage in the darkened jungle who could not possibly have known the light would be treated with gentleness and given a second chance’ by God (147); Kath, instead, wonders: ‘How do tribes in the jungle measure the days? It’s not too late to

learn from them. People like that have the key to living with nature. They wouldn't castrate their cats. They might worship them, they might even eat them, but they wouldn't have them fixed' (93). The presence of a chapter set in the jungle is almost like the concretization of a déjà vu.

From these two extracts it is possible to see the two opposite conceptions of the "Indian": on the one hand, there is 'the ignorant savage', the 'silent and sullen peoples', 'fluttered folk and wild / Your new-caught, sullen peoples, / Half devil and half child' described in Kipling's *The White Man's Burden* (1899); on the other hand, there is the "noble savage" who lives in contact to nature and is therefore purer than the Western man, corrupted by civilization, as theorized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Charlie supports this latter idealized vision of the Indians: 'They're so open, so direct. There they are, not a stitch on them, they say what they mean, do what they want, eat when they're hungry, make love as if it's the most natural thing in the world*, and lie down to die when they reach the end of their lives' (200). The fact that the Indians do not have a radio and do not know how to act is interpreted in opposite ways by Charlie and by the crew:

All the crew here think the Indians are fantastically primitive just because they don't have radios. I think they're fantastically advanced and mature because they don't have radios (200).

The crew think they're such a primitive civilization they haven't discovered acting yet. I wonder if it's the opposite and they're a sort of post-acting civilization, maybe the first one on earth. Like, they don't need it any more, so they've forgotten about it and don't understand it any longer (203).

As a proof of the Indians' honesty, Charlie adduces the fact that they cannot tell the difference between reality and fiction. As Rousseau believed that mankind was good at heart, and that was corrupted by civilization, the same is held by Charlie:

Well that's not really living, the way we do in cities, is it? Also I think cities make people lie to one another. [...] These Indians never lie, same as they don't know how to act. No pretence. Now I don't think that's primitive at all, I think it's bloody mature. And I'm sure it's because they live in the Jungle not in cities. They spend all their time surrounded by nature and the one thing nature doesn't do is lie (205).

When Charlie and Matt dress up like Father Firmin and Father Antonio, the Indians really believe that they are two different people. After a while, however, the Indians started believing that Charlie is actually Firmin pretending to be Charlie. Reality and fiction are blurred and reversed, fiction becomes reality, and this leads to dramatic consequences. The past is repeating itself for real, not only in fiction: the raft really capsizes again, as it happened in the past with the two Jesuit missionaries, and the fictional missionary Matt dies for real. Was this an accident due to the fact the Indians cannot distinguish between reality and fiction, or was it a planned, yet inexplicable, murder? Should it be explained as God's will? No answer is provided, only a plurality of options.

Both the negative and the idealized conception of the Indians proved wrong. The Indians should neither be denigrated and considered inferior, nor be idealized and exalted as superior. Indeed, as Charlie discovered, they look extraordinarily young and healthy because their life expectancy is thirty five years. As far as their absolute honesty is concerned, they did lie to Charlie when they were teaching him their language. Reversing the dichotomous binary primitive/mature, inferior/superior is not sufficient; it is necessary to dismantle it.

i) 'The Dream': a consumerist re-writing of Heaven

This chapter is the re-writing of 'St John's vision in Revelation from the perspective of disenchanted, late twentieth-century consumer culture' (Tate, 2011: 62). The 'new Heavens' (Barnes, 1989: 303) are democratic, in the sense that they are personalized according to the wishes of every "customer". Even Heaven has become plural, as to reflect the plurality of subjectivities existing in the world. Heaven is therefore the ultimate dream: the fulfilment of every desire, be it playing golf, going shopping, meeting famous people, and having sex, as in the case of the unnamed narrator. The activities he has done recapitulate most of the stories told in *A History of the World*: indeed, he 'went on several cruises', a reference to the Santa Euphemia, St

Louis, and *Titanic*; he went mountaineering, like Amanda and Spike on Mount Ararat; he 'got into all sorts of dangers and escaped', like all the survivors of catastrophes; he 'explored the jungle', with Charlie and the crew; he 'watched a court case (didn't agree with the verdict)', maybe it was a trial against woodworms; he 'tried to be a painter', (like Géricault?), '[...] and a surgeon', a reference to the surgical examination of the heart in 'Parenthesis'; he fell in love, and love is precisely the topic of 'Parenthesis'; and, eventually, he pretended that he was 'the last person on earth (and the first)', like what happened to Kath (299).

However, the most striking difference with all the other stories is that, in these 'new Heavens', there is no separation of the clean from the unclean, or of the innocents from the guilty. There is no opposition between Heaven and Hell; the latter actually does not exist: it 'was just necessary propaganda' (301). As a matter of fact, Hitler himself is in Heaven. In this 'eternity free from judgement' (Tate, 2011: 62), there is no God, unless explicitly asked for in the 'requirements of Heaven' (Barnes, 1989: 302). Yet, what the narrator wants is to be judged and to have his verdict, which was, rather disappointingly, 'You're OK' (294). After a life spent dividing, ranking, and discriminating, it is felt as a mocking disappointment the fact that there is no Last Judgment, after all.

The fulfilment of every wish is felt as a damnation in the long run, as proved by the fact that a hundred percent of the "customers" eventually decide to die off. Heaven is just a dream people need to get by and to accept their mortality; or maybe *this* Heaven is merely part of the narrator's dream, in which '[he] dreamt that [he] woke up' (283).

As this close analysis of *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* has shown, the traditional monological and univocal perspective that characterizes the narrative style of conventional historiography is fragmented into a polyphony of perspectives and subjective opinions. What was held to be the univocal and universal Truth is revealed for what it really is: just one out of many possible truths. Canonized history is de-centred and subverted by the voices of the outsider the victim, the dispossessed, and

the outcast. Tate observed that '[t]he absurd, defamiliarizing twist of an articulate larva reminds us that canonical versions of history are normally delivered by those in power: the woodworm, a despised species, typifies the position of the outcast, the figure whose viewpoint is rarely heard' (2011: 58).

In addition to this polyphony, the structure of this novel contrasts with conventional historiography, too. The ten chapters and the additional parenthesis, rather unexpectedly, do not follow neither some king of logical or causal sequence, nor a chronological order. The narrative is fragmented into single episodes taken randomly from the temporal continuum, challenging both the conceptions of history as a linear and a circular pattern.

8.2 THE PATTERN OF THE NOVEL AND THE PATTERN OF HISTORY

The very act of historiography, namely the writing of history, implies the existence of a certain pattern behind the raw material of the past. Indeed, traditional historiography is a narrative which underlines the connections existing between past events, which are therefore interpreted as logically consequential. One event follows another, not only chronologically, but also logically, in a cause-effect relation. Generally, history might be seen as following either a linear or a circular pattern. In *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, both models proposed to explain history's development are proposed, yet parodically inscribed and subverted. Neither model is totally rejected as wrong, but both are challenged in their assumptions as master narratives, as systems that claim to be absolute and exhaustive explanations of the world. Barnes does not replace an absolute pattern of history with another one; instead, he problematizes the implications of both patterns, linear and circular, leaving the door open for doubt. Indeed, history may follow no pattern at all.

A linear conception of history is underpinned both in Christian religion and in secular Darwinism. Religion is a crucial theme in *A History of the World* and emerges from several of the stories narrated. The very structure of the chapters seems to

subscribe to a divine plan, which starts with *Genesis*, in 'The Stowaway', and ends with St John's Revelation in 'The Dream'. Consequently, the history of the world is in fact only the history of mankind, from the ancestor Noah who survived the Flood to the afterlife, through a series of deadly catastrophes. However, this human-centric conception of the history of the world is destabilized in the course of the novel. The world, in fact, includes other living creatures as well, and the dramatic lot of humanity is often shared with the animals, as it is pointed out in 'The Stowaway' and 'The Survivor'. The narration is de-centred and the focus is broadened as to include the animal kingdom, together with humanity.

The interpretation of the world and the past as a divine plan, which is decided, ordered, and realized according to God's (often unfathomable) will, is dealt with especially in 'The Mountain' and its sequel 'Project Ararat'. Amanda's faith in God's intervention invests everything that happens on earth with a transcendental meaning. For instance, the first man who was said to have climbed Mount Ararat – although specifically forbidden by God – was named Parrot. What could otherwise be interpreted as a curious coincidence was instead seen by Amanda as 'appropriate and just [...] that the first traveller to ascend the mountain upon which the Ark rested should bear the name of an animal. No doubt part of the Lord's great design for us all' (Barnes, 1989: 151). Again, the halo of clouds that enfolds the summit of the mountain is interpreted as a proof that Mount Ararat is a holy place, because the religious explanation is explicitly chosen instead of the scientific one. Nature, like the animals in 'The Wars of Religion', is accorded volition and intentionality, since everything that happens on earth is a message from God to his favourite creatures, human beings.

Amanda's interpretation of events and phenomena as part of God's plan may seem legitimate and even positive. However, this system of decoding the world has got also another, and cruel, face. Indeed, if everything that happens is wanted by God, also tragedies and catastrophes gain a new meaning and function: they are meant as punishments from God. For instance, Amanda ruthlessly rejoiced when 'every roof and every wall of the monastery church and of the little community they had left only that morning had been thrown down by the violent commotion' (162). According to

Amanda, all those people were killed as a justly deserved punishment for having fermented the grapes of Noah's vineyard, although it was forbidden by the *Bible*. If the word of God is not respected, devastation and slaughters are the fair punishment. Consequently, it strikes as an inexplicable contradiction the fact that Amanda, Miss Logan, and the silent Kurd were spared from God's wrath. Indeed, they are climbing a mountain which was not accessible to man, according to both Christians and Mussulmen. As the priest rhetorically asked,

was it not so proven by Holy Scriptures? The mountain before them was the birthplace of mankind; and he referred [...] to the authority of Our Saviour's words to Nicodemus, where it is stated that a man cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born once more' (155).

Leaving aside the chauvinism behind Our Saviour's reported words, the Holy Scriptures are proved wrong by the facts: Dr Parrot first, Amanda and Miss Logan then, and eventually Spike and Jimmy, all climbed the forbidden Mount Ararat without any natural disaster taking place to punish them. Yet, God killed all the inhabitants of that community 'while leaving intact those vines which - if Miss Fergusson should be believed - were the very source of their temptation and their punishment' (167). According to the American Jimmy, this slaughter had happened 'when the Soviets had owned this slice of the mountain' (273), and therefore the inhabitants of Argheri were punished retrospectively, for the future faults of their Soviet descendants. The meaning of such earthquake changes according to the interpretation of the Bible which is thought to be true. Moreover, most of the victims of the slaughters referred to in *A History of the World* were innocents, or at least there was no understandable reason which might justify or explain God's wrath. Since God punished Jonah by having him devoured by a whale, does it logically mean that He also decided to punish James Bartley, who was swallowed by a whale on August 25th, 1891? Amanda state that 'the ignorant savage in the darkened jungle who could not possibly have known the light would be treated with gentleness and given a second chance' (147). In 'Upstream!', the Indians *are* given a second chance, as the first attempt of conversion is repeated in art. Yet, they do not listen to the word of God,

but kill one of the missionaries, again, as they did in the past. Is it a message from God? Is the dramatic lot of European Jewry justified as part of God's righteous plan?

Amanda justified the fact that God works in mysterious ways by saying that '[y]ou expect God to be like Lord Chief Justice in London. You expect a whole speech of explanation. The God of this mountain is the God who saved only Noah and his family out of the whole world. Remember that' (163). This appeal to the inscrutability of God's divine plan clashes against the somewhat too facile condemnation of the victims of catastrophes who are supposedly punished because guilty in front of God. Were they really guilty of some unfathomable crime, or were they punished because they 'simply were what they were' (Barnes, 1984: 15)? The narrator of the second of 'Three Simple Stories' analyses the story of Jonah and the whale, narrated in the Old Testament, and likens God to 'paranoid schizophrenics' (177), because of His unreasonable, unfair, ruthless, and unpredictable behaviour. Since the Old Testament is supposed to have been dictated by God himself, '[i]f we examine God not as protagonist and moral bully but as author of this story, we have to mark him down for plot, motivation, suspense and characterization' (177). Religion and a divine plan might provide a means to interpret and order the past and history, yet this pattern is challenged and questioned in the novel. The question of free will is at stake here, because people, animals, and natural disasters seem all to be just pawns in God's unfathomable game. There are many Falls, but no Redemption.

Creationism, namely a religious conception of the world as created by God and ruled following His divine plan, is opposed to Evolutionism, a secular view of the world which is based on Charles Darwin's theories. Darwinism provides a scientific explanation of the world which contrasts with the religious interpretation of the world as part of God's design. In its function as an alternative to religion, Darwinism can be associated to the Enlightenment trust on reason and science. According to this empiricist and mechanist worldview, the world can be understood and explained without appealing to the existence of a creating God. The world functions according to natural and predictable rules, and man could dominate the world through the application of reason to all areas of knowledge. Thanks to the power of reason and universal science, historical progress was perceived to be certain and inevitable. History

is therefore seen as a constant and continuous progress and improvement, from a condition of ignorance and barbarity to knowledge and civilization.

A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters inscribes this idea of history as progress and improvement but, as it did with Creationism, also subverts Evolutionism. Indeed, those who survive in the struggle for life are not the heroes, the noblest men and creatures, but, more often than not, ‘the cowards, the panickers, the deceivers’ (174). If ‘life amounted to the survival of the fittest: did not the Beesley hypothesis prove that the “fittest” were merely the most cunning? [...] Was this not the deft proof of how the gene-pool was constantly deteriorating, how bad blood drove out good?’ (174). Lawrence Beesley, whose real life-story is told in ‘Three Simple Stories’, was one of the few men that managed to survive the shipwreck of the *Titanic*. Rumours say that Beesley was actually able to board a lifeboat because he was disguised in woman’s clothing. What saved him was his slyness in taking advance of the situation for his own benefit, while other nobler men sacrificed their lives for the sake of other people. The same can be said for the loss of Varadi, ‘the youngest and strongest of Noah’s sons’ (5). Inexplicably, his ark disappeared overnight. The woodworm comments that, ‘whatever the truth behind Varadi’s disappearance, it was a severe loss to your species. His genes would have helped you a great deal’ (6). Instead, what survived is the gene-pool of ‘a hysterical rogue with a drink problem’ (8).

Additionally, on the raft of the *Medusa*, ‘it was not virtue that triumphed, but strength; and there was little mercy to be had’ (128). The fifteen men survived because they were the strongest, not morally the best. Rather, they survived precisely because they were *not* morally the best, but they were ruthless enough to cast into the water and condemn to sure death all the wounded and the weakest. Another factor that might determine extinction or survival is mere luck: ‘My line held, Matt’s line broke. That’s how it was, that’s my luck’ (216). Charlie survived the capsizing of the raft because he was luckier than Matt, not better than him. The whole history of the world might be conceived as a history of surviving, without any progressive improvement of the species. On the contrary, there seems to be a progressive deteriorating of mankind in a world where “the fittest” are merely the strongest or the most cunning.

Explicit or implicit references to Jews and to the Final Solution are present in many chapters of *A History of the World*. The Jews who survived the concentration camps are the “survivors of history” *par excellence*. Primo Levi is the prototypical witness-survivor who directly experienced the life in the Lager of Buna-Mònowitz, one of the forty Lagers that, together, constituted the concentration “system” of Auschwitz. Levi was a partisan who was captured by the Nazis on December 1943, imprisoned in the concentration camp of Carpi-Fòssoli and then, when the camp was taken by the Germans, Levi was sent to Auschwitz. He managed to survive for several reasons, especially because, after the battle of Stalingrad in 1943, the Germans needed manpower, so they had to use Jews. Levi was a chemist who could speak German, and for this reason he was selected to work in the laboratory of Doktor Pannwitz. Levi got scarlet fever in January 1945, when the Red Army was approaching Auschwitz and the Germans decided to abandon the camp. The ill were left to their fate, while all the others who could walk had to leave the camp. Most of them (around 20000 people) died during the march, either out of exhaustion or killed. Levi, one of the ill left behind, survived.

The witness may be a survivor, namely someone who survived to tell the tale. In the case of the Holocaust, the survivors were the fitter, or luckier, exception to the anonymous murdered mass that constituted the rule. Their experience, therefore, is exceptional and unusual. The survivors are those who somehow managed to survive, but it does not mean that these individuals were saved because of their moral values. On the contrary, it could happen that they survived precisely because they were more cruel and ruthless towards their fellow prisoners, in the struggle for survival that constituted the life on camp, where there was no room for solidarity, generosity, friendship, camaraderie, and gratitude⁸. This is clearly exemplified by Primo Levi in

⁸ In the Lager every man is alone, there are no neighbours, no society, no laws that could support men. They were left to themselves. Life under extraordinary circumstances is what Marlow experienced sailing down the river Congo: ‘You can’t understand. How could you? – with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums – how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man’s untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude – utter solitude without a policeman – by the way of silence – utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbor can be heard whispering of public opinion?’ (Conrad, 1899: 77).

the chapter 'The Drowned and the Saved' Tellingly enough, the individual that survived better, and that seemed to fit perfectly in the context of Auschwitz, is Elias Lindzin:

Elias has survived the destruction from outside, because he is physically indestructible; he has resisted the annihilation from within because he is insane. So, in the first place, he is a survivor: he is the most adaptable, the human type most suited to this way of living. If Elias regains his liberty, he will be confined to the fringes of human society, in a prison or a lunatic asylum. But here in Lager there are no criminals nor madmen; no criminals because there is no moral law to contravene, no madmen because we are wholly devoid of free will, as our every action is, in time and place, the only conceivable one (Levi, transl. Woolf, 1959: 112).

What saved Elias was his 'insanity' and his 'deceitful bestiality' (Levi, transl. Woolf, 1959: 113). In the Lager a prisoner would either become a *Prominent*, an *Organizator*, a *Kombinator*, or would succumb within three months (81). Indifference and mediocrity lead to sure death. Consequently, their actions while inside the camp would influence their account of their experience in Auschwitz.

There was also another kind of witness, namely the passive by-standers who saw and knew what was going on in the camp but did nothing, maybe because

We are the untouchable to the civilians. They think, more or less explicitly with all nuances lying between contempt and commiseration, that, as we have been condemned to this life of ours, reduced to our condition, we must be tainted by some mysterious, grave sin (Levi, transl. Woolf, 1959: 141).

The fact that civilians knew what was happening inside the concentration camp does not imply that they could actually understand the meaning of the events they were witnessing. Whether ignorance could be adduced as a sort of moral justification is, however, questionable.

The conception of history as a linear progressive improvement is challenged in *A History of the World*. The Darwinian principle of the survival of the fittest is inscribed, but the concept of “fittest” is problematized:

Anyone would think, looking at us, that Greg was the fitter to survive: he’s bigger, stronger, more practical in our terms anyway, more conservative, more easy-going. I’m a worrier, I’ve never done carpentry, I’m not so good on being on my own. But I’m the one that’s going to survive, or have the chance to survive. *The Survival of the Worriers* (97).

The act of surviving seems to have nothing to do with virtue or goodness. It is rather a matter of luck, of ruthless strength, or of slyness. Even the very concept of evolution is questioned by the woodworm, when it states that ‘man is a very unevolved species compared to the animals. [...] you are, as yet, at an early stage of your development. We, for instance, are always ourselves: that is what it means to be evolved’ (28). More than a linear improvement, humanity seems to be cyclically repeating the very same mistakes: dividing, ranking, and discriminating. History itself seems to be a reiteration of tragedies and catastrophes.

Indeed, another pattern used to give shape and order to the past was cyclical. According to Alice Mandricardo (2010: 150), the model of history that is proposed in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* is recursive and cyclical. History ‘does not lead towards a better future, because there is not a linear movement aiming at a definite goal. It is a false progress, made only of repeated disasters’ (Mandricardo, 2010: 159). Barnes does indeed refer to a cyclical pattern of history especially in the chapter ‘The Survivor’, where this theme is explicitly confronted. Kath refuses to keep count of the days because ‘[d]ates are bullies, dates are know-alls’ (99), in the sense that the chronological sequences of days, one after the other, creates the illusion of a linear progression of time, while history actually goes round in circles, exactly like Kath, going adrift on the boat. She wishes for a return to a pre-civilized world, in contact with nature:

I don’t keep count of the days. There isn’t any point, is there?
We aren’t going to measure things in days any more. Days and weekends and holidays – that’s how the men in grey suits

measure things. 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).

The rhythm of nature is opposed to civilization like in 'Upstream!', when Charlie idealizes the Indians and the life in the jungle as honest and direct, while civilization leads to lying. The problem of this vision of nature is that the past is nostalgically idealized. For instance, Kath 'wondered if primitive people had nightmares. She bet they didn't' (103). Both Kath and Charlie idealize primitive people and denigrate the contemporary world, but this view is basically the same as that of colonizers, only that the parameters of good and bad are reverted.

After the atomic disaster that, according to Kath, has taken place in the North, the only way to progress is to go back to the past:

Everything was connected, the weapons and the nightmares. That's why they'd had to break the cycle. Start making things simple again. Begin at the beginning. People say you couldn't turn the clock back, but you could. The future was in the past (104).

The old ways of doing things had to be rediscovered: the future lay in the past (96).

There is no inevitable progress towards a better future, but a cyclic return to an allegedly better past. The connections, repetitions, and echoes refer to a cyclical pattern of history. Indeed, while in a line one event follows the other, in a cycle the same event can both follow *and* precede another. It is in a cycle that everything is connected. Not only does this conception of history emerge as an explicit theme in 'The Survivor', but also implicitly in the repetitions and connections that link the heterogeneous stories of *A History of the World*. Indeed, 'history repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce' (175). Events do seem to be repeating themselves, as a constant division of the clean from the unclean, the guilty from the innocent, which has frequently led to slaughters of innocents. Events repeat themselves even within the novel itself. Amanda's expedition to Mount Ararat is repeated by Spike a hundred and fifty years later; what happened to Father Firmin and

Father Antonio, when they were trying to convert the indigenous tribes of the jungle happened again to Charlie and Matt during the making of a movie. Indeed, art repeat catastrophe: Lawrence Beesley tried to 'undergo in fiction an alternative version of history' (174), that is to say, he wanted to sink with the Titanic, while in reality he surreptitiously boarded a safety boat. However, the director spotted him among the extras and Beesley, for the second time, 'found himself leaving the Titanic just before it was due to go down' (175). While in the case of Géricault *The Raft of the Medusa*, art imitates life, in the adventure of James Bartley, it is life that imitates fiction. The story of a man who is swallowed by a whale and manages to survive parallels the fictional story of Jonah and the whale.

A cyclical conception of history is therefore based on repeated events and on connections. Yet, these connections are not objective; rather, they are subjective:

They say I don't understand things. They say I'm not making the right connections. Listen to them, listen to them and their connections. This happened, they say, and as a consequence that happened. There was a battle here, a war there, a kind was deposed, famous men - always famous men, I'm sick of famous men - made events happen. Maybe I've been out in the sun too long, but I can't see their connections. I look at the history of the world, which they don't seem to realize is coming to an end, and I don't see what they see. All I see is the old connections, the ones we don't take any notice of any more (97).

The connections that are drawn between events in the past are arbitrary, as Hayden White elaborates in *Metahistory* (1973). The connections are not "out there" but depend on the interpreter who analyses the data, on his ideology and on the point he wants to make. Basically, it seems that both the linear and the cyclical conceptions of history are just artificial patterns, created to make sense and order out of the chaotic material of the past. Do connections and coincidences really exist or is the interpreter who creates them?

The first chapter of *A History of the World* is based on the *Book of Genesis*, the last one is a re-writing of *Revelation*, while all the other chapters are just jumbled: we know that we are born and that we die, all the rest is chaos.

8.3 HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION AS PARODIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters challenges conventional historiography both by replacing monophony with polyphony and by problematizing the patterns which are at the basis of any writing of history. As Hayden White explained in the *Preface to Metahistory* (1973), historical works are not simply made of data, but also of theoretical concepts to explain those data and of narrative structure for their presentation. Indeed, since form is not neutral, but influences the overall meaning of the content, the historical work becomes ‘a verbal structure, in the form of a narrative prose discourse with the aim of explaining what the past were by representing it’ (White, 1973: 3). There are fictive elements in any historiography, no matter how objective the historian attempts to be. The same issues raised by Realism in fiction may be transferred to the writing of history. How is it possible to access the past? How is it possible to represent “what really happened” in language, a medium which is arbitrary, ambiguous, and open to multiple interpretations? Is therefore the knowledge of the past unavoidably limited, partial, and temporal? While in the nineteenth century History was considered as a scientific discipline and the past was seen as a knowable object, nowadays the ‘unambiguous answers’ of the past are challenged by pointing out the ‘fictive character of historical reconstruction’ (White, 1973: 1): the explicit aim of White’s *Metahistory* is to establish the ineluctably poetic nature of the historical work.

As there is a certain amount of fiction in historiography, there is also a certain amount of history in novels. Indeed, Barnes deliberately blurs the distinction between imaginary and historical material, in order to problematize the certainties of historical knowledge, both in *A History of the World*, in *Flaubert’s Parrot*, and in *Arthur and George*. Indeed, ‘the confusion between invention and reality fails to grant credibility and verisimilitude to the fictional world, in contrast to what happens in traditional historical novels. Instead, it throws doubts on the validity of historical facts and raises the question of whether we can ever know the past, a typically postmodernist stance’ (Guignery, 2006: 67). Barnes himself recognizes the fact that any historiography is partially fictional because

[e]ither you only write the history for which there is evidence, or, if you try to write more than that, if you try to write a more complete history, then you have to fictionalise or imagine. And so, to that extent, history, if it attempts to be more than a description of documents, a description of artefacts, has to be a sort of literary genre (Barnes, in Guignery, 2000: 53).

The issues of historical knowledge and of the representation of the past are the main themes of the ½ chapter, ‘Parenthesis’, in addition to the topic of love. The narrative voice of this non-fictional essay is Barnes’s himself, who seems to be writing while lying in bed, suffering from insomnia. In this “parenthesis” of the history of the world, the sequence of tragedies, disasters, and slaughters of innocents pauses a little, allowing Barnes, or the implied author, to ‘write the truth’ (interview with Stuart, in Guignery, 2006: 64), namely what he personally thinks about history. Pateman underlines the importance of the positioning of his ‘Parenthesis’. Indeed, Barnes decided to place his theorization of history neither at the very beginning, nor at the end, but after eight, out of ten, chapters:

When, therefore, the novel provides its theory of history as “fabulation”, there is a twofold sense of recognition. First the reader is aware that this is what the novel has been doing and so proves the theory; and, secondly, he or she will have been aware that this is what he or she, as a reader, has been recognizing, and so again the theory is proven (2002: 43).

The very fragmented and heterogeneous structure of *A History of the World*, in addition to the multiplicity of perspectives present in the stories prove with the practice what is theorized in ‘Parenthesis’:

History isn’t what happened. History is just what historians tell us. There was a pattern, a plan, a movement, expansion, the march of democracy; it is a tapestry, a flow of events, a complex narrative, connected, explicable. One good story leads to another. [...] [A]ll the time it’s connections, progress, meaning, this lead to this, this happened because of this. And we, the readers of history, the sufferers from history, we scan the pattern for hopeful conclusion, for the way ahead. [...] The history of the world? Just voices echoing in the dark; images

that burn for a few centuries and then fade; stories, old stories that sometimes seem to overlap; strange links, impertinent connections. [...] We make up a story to cover the facts we don't know or can't accept; we keep a few true facts and spin a new story round them. Our panic and our pain are only eased by soothing fabulation; we call it history (Barnes, 1989: 242).

It is necessary to distinguish history from the past. Indeed, history 'is an ambiguous term, because it both refers to what happened in the past, and to the narration of such past. Basically, history is a discourse about the world, an interpretation of the past which aims at finding a meaning of the world' (Mandricardo, 2010: 11). History is also connected to identity, both personal and public. The past gives sense to the present. People need to turn their life into a narration, in order to give a meaning to their existence by following something like a "plot", which orderly develops from the past up to the present, in an apparent teleology. Yet, this ultimate *telos* is just an illusion: in its progression, life, like history, does not follow a linear path which brings to a determined destination. The path followed can be seen only retrospectively, never looking onward. Societies, people, and nations are equally defined according to their past. A "myth of the origins" is necessary for the creation of a nation, meant as an ensemble of people who share a certain culture:

the idea of nation is inseparable from its narration: at the basis national life there is always a tale about its origins, in which history is a function of the process of foundation, because it identifies and combines the space and time of the beginnings which are necessary to represent the imaginary community (Oboe, 2010: 67).

The culture of a people is based on tradition, which is the survival of the past in the present. Historians decide for whom histories are written and, according to this, the kinds of narrations they provide will change. If history is 'just what historians tell us' (Barnes, 1984: 242), also the linear or cyclical patterns that structure historical narrations are invented by historians themselves, in order to support their personal and subjective interpretation of the past. The artificiality of any possible pattern of history may explain the existence of different and sometimes opposite accounts of the

same historical event. Depending on what historians want to prove, the history they are going to write will be emplotted in a certain way as to be based on certain cause-consequence implications, which will *appear* as objective and self-evident, while in reality they are arbitrarily selected and created by historian. As dates are ‘bullies’ (Barnes, 1989: 99), connections are ‘deceitful’ (242). Indeed, while dates make believe that the mere chronological order implies also some sort of logical or causal relation, the undeniable existence of connections and coincidences make believe that there must be a further meaning hidden behind the reiteration of certain occurrences. Barnes provides his own re-writing of Marx’s elaboration of Hegel:

does history repeat itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce? No, that’s too grand, too considered a process. History just burps, and we taste again the raw-onion sandwich it swallowed centuries ago (Barnes, 1989: 241).

The progress of history is just an illusion, and Geoffrey Braithwaite, the narrator of *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984) wonders: ‘Does the world progress? Or does it merely shuttle back and forth like a ferry?’ (Barnes, 1984: 120). Yet, not even a cyclical pattern seems adequate to give shape to a past which is irretrievable, like a greased piglet:

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 (Barnes, 1984: 5).

If it is impossible to retrieve the past, history, like biography, is a net, ‘a collection of holes’ (Barnes, 1984: 35) and of lacunae, a narrative based on the limited and (often unreliable) amount of information stored in the archive. Historical knowledge is limited, partial, and temporary, because any new information discovered may change the meaning of the whole narration:

How do we seize the past? How do we seize the foreign past?
We read, we learn, we ask, we remember, we are humble; and

then a casual detail shifts everything. [...] 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 (Barnes, 1984: 100-101).

The subjectivity of any historical account, however, does not deny the existence of the past and the possibility of knowing it. What is at stake here is the certainty of an absolute, total, and objective knowledge of the past. *This* is not attainable. Above all, Barnes's and postmodernist problematizing of conventional historiography does not re-write history in order to shift the guilt from one faction to the other; on the contrary, postmodernists (and Barnes can be listed among them) want to show how difficult it is to 'separate the clean from the unclean', the totally guilty from the totally innocent. More often than not, right and wrong are never so clear-cut divided that one part does not have also part of the other (Manzoni, 1840). The existence of the past is never questioned; what is challenged is the illusion that historiography can represent the objective "Truth" about past events, since there are as many equally valid truths as there are many different subjects (for instance, the "ex-centric" groups, namely feminists, black, postcolonial). According to Philosophical Hermeneutics and postmodernism, there is no absolute knowledge where every difference is annihilated in favour of an ultimate Truth. This new model of knowledge welcomes the diversity of every voice, meant as another manifestation of a dialogical truth (Massaro, 2002: 689). Multiplicity and polyphony 'may be less satisfying than a resolved dialectic, but it may be the only non-totalizing response possible' (Hutcheon, 1988: 101), and the only tolerant solution, too.

The kind of history that emerges from *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* is a reiteration of catastrophes, which sometimes are natural (or divinely planned) disasters, but more often are caused by mankind itself. Such tragedies are the product of violence, hate, fear, and desire for power and dominion, which have brought mankind to forget the outcast and the weakest, destroying everything that lays on its path and cannot be used by the "fittest" for their personal advantage. The silent and

invisible outcasts are like the victims of a shipwreck, lost at sea, and too small and distant to be heard and seen by traditional historiography:

Nowadays you can drift in the ocean for weeks, and a supertanker finally comes along, and it goes right past. The radar won't pick you up because you're too small, and it's pure luck if anybody happens to be hanging over the rail being sick. There had been lots of cases where castaways who would have been rescued in the old days simply weren't picked up; and even incidents of people being run down by the ships they thought were coming to rescue them (Barnes, 1989: 95).

What is the sense of all the catastrophes that compose history – providing there is a sense? And what is the sense of history and historiography, if they are just fabrications? The meaning of history seems to be the same meaning of art: '[i]t is freeing, enlarging, explaining' (Barnes, 1989: 137). As Barnes wrote in *Flaubert's Parrot*, the difference between a novel and life is that in fiction things are explained to you, while in life they are not

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 (Barnes, 1984: 201).

Only fabrication, be it in fiction, in biography, or in historiography, can give a sense and an explanation to the chaotic material of the past. Events just happen; they do not have a meaning in themselves, but their meaning depend on the narration they are inserted in. Seeing an order, a meaning, and an explanation behind the tragedy that characterize the history of the world is soothing and consoling:

What is brutal, frightening, and degrading about the history of the world is not the stories that link events together (this is "soothing" fabrication), but the events themselves, those moments in time, moments in space, where human ignorance, stupidity, violence, and hate are laid bare (Pateman, 2002: 44).

History itself, like *A History of the World*, is not composed of ‘absolute historical narratives’ but of ‘fragmentary ones’, which are ‘kaleidoscopic, seemingly unconnected – a collection of disparate events and times’ (Pateman, 2002: 44-45), which nonetheless present links, connections, and recurrent elements. Precisely these connections create the illusion of an underlying meaning and of causal relations existing between the disparate local narratives told in each chapter. Like in *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), in the chapter entitled ‘Snap!’, the idea of coincidences is problematized. Do coincidences exist or do the analysers of the historical flux just see what they want to see, what fits best with their “prefiguration of what really happened”? Indeed, Hayden White maintained that “[t]he historian prefigures the historical field to which he will apply the theoretical concepts that he’ll use to explain what “really” happened’ (White, 1973: x). These ‘acts of prefiguration’ are the ‘four modes of historical consciousness’, namely, an historian can interpret the succession of events in the past as a metaphor, a metonymy, a synecdoche, or with irony. These four tropes of poetic language are the ‘deep structural content’ of any work of history, and constitute its ‘metahistorical basis’ (White, 1973: ix-x). Consequently, connections and coincidences ultimately seem to depend on the kind of explanation a historian wants to provide. Connections seem undisputedly objective to the historian who draws them, because these acts of prefiguration are mostly unconscious. Basically, connections are arbitrary, in the sense that they depend on the subjectivity of the analyser and on the overall explanation he wants to give to history. Connections are necessary to give order, structure, and a meaning to the otherwise chaotic past. The idea that there *are* order, structure, and meaning is just a soothing illusion, supported by historiography: inevitably, *any* narration is ordered, structured, and meaningful, even the most fragmentary ones like *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*. The very fact that there is a beginning, a middle, and an end is enough of an ordering structure, which nonetheless does not exist in the past itself. The very same event, for instance the death of a king, may be both at the beginning of a narrative, an event in the middle, or at the end of, say, a biography of such king. The meaning of this event, therefore, changes according to the narrative it is inserted in. In the past, such event simply happened. Barnes’s novel ‘mimics the pattern of biblical narrative’ (Pateman, 2002:

44) by enclosing the chaos of the middle chapters within a stable frame which starts from the *Genesis* and ends with the afterlife. Every narration begins and ends, but the beginning and the ending are arbitrarily chosen. The chapters in the middle do not follow any chronological or spatial order, yet are connected through echoes and repetitions, precisely like the events in the past that constitute history. The chaotic and fragmented array of characters and events is almost unacceptable as the basis of a history of the world. The need for order reflects the need for meaning inasmuch as an ordered structure is inevitably seen as teleological, as aiming at a goal, and this goal determines history's meaning. However, what is the *telos* of *A History of the World*? Its meaning is not fixed, stable, or universal. On the contrary, despite being always the same, the connections present in the novel may be interpreted differently according to the subjectivity of the analyser. Only certain connections are seen, and only some of them are considered relevant, while others are omitted. What seems to be unquestionable, instead, is the existence of tragedy, catastrophe, cruelty, and evil throughout history.

Barnes has advanced some possible ways to face history, and therefore catastrophes: religion, art, and love. These themes have already emerged in the course of the novel and, in 'Parenthesis', the author explicitly analyses the limits of each option, which might stand against history precisely because they seem to be *outside* history (Pateman, 2002: 47). By "religion", however, what is really meant is just Western religion, namely Christianity, which 'has become either wimpishly workaday, or terminally crazy, or merely businesslike - confusing spirituality with charitable donations' (Barnes, 1989: 244). Once more, what seems to be universal is actually specific and culturally determined. Christianity emerges as a topic right from the very first chapter, in the woodworm's account of the Flood. The *Bible* itself seems to be just another fabulation, a narrative where a few true facts are kept, while others are changed for artistic, or political reasons.

Like religion, also art is not enough to face the catastrophes of history. Although art can help in understanding and explaining tragedies by way of representing them, art 'isn't accessible to all, or where accessible isn't always inspiring or welcome' (Barnes, 1989: 245). Art is neither universally valid an answer to the

catastrophes of history, nor it is eternal, as proved by the description of the state of decay in which statues depicting Flaubert can be found now (see *Flaubert's Parrot*, Barnes, 1984: 1-2). The very meaning of art is subjective, partial, and temporary. According to Pateman, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* is aware of the 'failure of art to provide a defence against history' because its structure is in a 'permanent state of collapse' (2002: 49).

The third option advanced by Barnes, i.e. love, is considered as 'beautiful and moving without the force to persuade' by Merritt Moseley (1997: 122). Barnes himself recognizes that love is liable to failure, albeit it is necessary to believe in it. A certain amount of faith is indeed necessary to overcome utter relativism and scepticism. Barnes clearly observes that love may be just a hope or a wish, for this reason he *believes* in it, and does not *know* it. What is the role of love in the history of the world? It is not a chapter, but just a "parenthesis", something extra which does not make much sense with the rest of the story and yet it is necessary in order to understand it. Love is 'a monstrosity, an excrescence' which perhaps 'is essential because it is unnecessary' (Barnes, 1989: 236). Love is not necessary for surviving; on the contrary, the "fittest" manage to survive precisely because they do not base their actions on love, but on cruelty and self-interest. Indeed, '[l]ove won't change the history of the world [...], but will do something much more important: teach us to stand up to history' (Barnes, 1989: 240), meaning that love is not the force that will make historical events happen – that changing force seems rather to be violence, greed, and the "will to power", but it is what allows us to accept the history of the world as a succession of recurrent catastrophes, ruthless slaughters of innocents, and meaningless chaos, which is neither heading towards a better future nor hopefully repeating itself so to go back to a better past. The history of the world, and also private existences, do not have a meaning in themselves, do not have an order, and do not have a *telos*. These concepts are soothing fabrications, artificial concepts that make life and history more bearable. We need to believe in love, because the history of the world is 'ridiculous' and 'becomes brutally self-important' without love (Barnes, 1989: 240).

Postmodernism has been accused of questioning every certainty and previously accepted values, until what was left was only utter relativism and nihilism. Barnes offers a solution to avoid what he defines 'beguiling relativity' (1989: 246): even if we *know* that objective truth is not obtainable, because there is 'a multiplicity of subjective truths that we fabulate into history' (245), yet we need to *believe* that objective truth is obtainable. In order to avoid nihilism, it is necessary to believe in love, as the source of our humanity, in free will, and in the possibility to know a certain amount of objective truth. Without these three (soothing) ideas, the history of the world and our very existence would be simply unbearable.

A *History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* can be described as a "historiographic metafiction", because it

Manages to ironize both metafiction's (modernist) trust in the imaginative power and the closed, reflexive structures of art and also its opposite, history's assumed correspondence between narration and event, between world and thing. This mutual critical irony functions as a mode of internalized self-conscious theorization that is as paradoxical as any postmodern theory today: it inscribes and then undercuts both the autonomy of art and the referentiality of history in such a way that a new mode of questioning/compromise comes into being (Hutcheon, 1988: 56).

Like in *Flaubert's Parrot*, the metafictional element of self-scrutiny allows Julian Barnes to write *a* history of the world, which celebrated polyphony and plurality, in a very postmodern way.

9 PARODY OF THE TRIAL: RECONSTRUCTING A PLURALITY OF TRUTHS

Arthur & George was published in 2005, and that very year was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Since *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989), Barnes has published several novels, such as *Talking It Over* (1991), *The Porcupine* (1992), *England, England* (1998) – shortlisted for the Booker Prize, and *Love, etc* (2000) – sequel to *Talking it Over*. Consistent with his desire to write something entirely new and different, these novels cover a most varied range of topics and settings, moving from the almost stereotypical love-triangle in *Talking It Over* and *Love, etc*, to the trial of a post-communist dictator of a fictional country in *The Porcupine*. *Arthur & George*, instead, seems to resume and develop most of the themes previously dealt with in *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989):

Whereas Barnes's early playful and experimental engagement with historical metafiction contributed to shaping high postmodernism, at the beginning of the twenty-first century the author again proves a significant influence on the transformation of our conception of the relationship between the past and the present (Berberich, 2011: 117).

Indeed, in *Arthur & George* Barnes has abandoned the explicitly metafictional reflections which characterize his two most experimental novels, choosing instead to provide a more conventional form for this new reconstruction of a past event. The epistemological issues relating the possibility to have access and to know the past are still present, but emerge in a more subtle and sublimated way, as a consequence of the plot itself. Barnes re-constructs the parallel biographies of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and of George Edalji, focusing especially on the moment in which their paths crossed: three quarters of a year spent by Sir Arthur investigating the so-called Edalji Case.

In 1903, a series of mutilations of horses and other livestock known as the "Great Wyrley Outrages" occurred. From 1 February 1903, when a horse was maimed, to 29 June 1903, when two horses were similarly wounded, a number of animals

received injuries that resulting in them being put down, and the series of attacks provoked a public outcry far beyond the area of Great Wyrley, Staffordshire. Pseudonymous letters were sent to the police, naming real people as members of the gang of culprits, including George Edalji. Other people named in the letters were schoolboys with whom Edalji regularly commuted to reach his office in Birmingham. After Inspector Campbell began to focus on Edalji for the mutilations, and a letter was sent, threatening that "little girls" would be the target of the next attacks, Chief Constable Anson agreed to a watch being kept on the Vicarage, where George lived with his family. Eventually, George Edalji, a Birmingham solicitor of Scottish-Parsee origins, was accused, albeit on circumstantial evidence, and was later found guilty of having sent anonymous defamatory letters to himself, and of having mutilated a pit pony. This mutilation was considered to be part of the widespread work of maiming cattle and livestock in the area surrounding George's native village of Great Wyrley. George was suspected to be a member, if not the leader, of the so-called "Great Wyrley Gang", which claimed authorship of the maiming in the pseudonymous letters.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, famous creator of the infallible consulting detective Sherlock Holmes, became interested in the case and led his own investigations, which aimed at demonstrating George's complete innocence, pointing at Royden Sharp as the real culprit. The case proved to be more ambiguous and entangled than it first appeared: despite having been found guilty and deserving seven years of penal servitude, George Edalji was unexpectedly released after only three years spent in prison, without explanations and without a free pardon. It was, therefore, impossible for him to resume his work as a solicitor in Birmingham. After the publication of Sir Arthur's pamphlet 'The Story of George Edalji' (1907) and as the culmination of much sensation and stirring of public opinion, George Edalji was granted a free pardon, but he received no compensation for the three years spent in prison.

Julian Barnes heard about the Edalji Case while reading a book about another, and more notorious, case of miscarried justice: the Dreyfus Case. However, when Barnes decided to examine in depth the mysterious mutilations, he could find nothing:

So I thought that I wanted to read about it and try to find something about it and, to my amazement, I went on the Internet and Googled it and went to Abebooks and all that, and no one had written about it, no one had touched it since the day nearly a hundred years previously when Conan Doyle wrote his article. So it was part out of frustration that there was nothing written about it that I thought I might write something (Barnes in Fraga, 2006: 134).

Barnes had in fact no intention to write the Conan Doyle version of *Flaubert's Parrot*. Indeed, the focal point of the narrative is the English and, before the publication of *Arthur & George*, forgotten correspondent to the Dreyfus case: 'a horrible crime, a miscarriage of Justice, handwritten evidence was very important, a sentence of hard labour in both cases, and a famous writer coming to the rescue' (Barnes, in Fraga, 2006: 134). Captain Alfred Dreyfus (1859-1935) was a Jewish officer who was accused of having transmitted secret information to the German military. Sentenced to life imprisonment in 1894, Dreyfus was sent to the penal colony at Devil's Island in French Guiana. Two years later, in 1896, a French Army major named Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy was identified as the real culprit because of the discovery of new evidence, which, however, was suppressed by high-ranking military officials and Esterhazy was absolved. The Dreyfus affair was a political scandal that divided France from its inception in 1894 until its resolution in 1906. After the Army accused Dreyfus of additional charges based on false documents, many tried to prove Dreyfus's innocence; among them, there was the famous French novelist Emile Zola, who published *J'accuse* in 1898, an open letter which stirred public attention. The Dreyfus case was re-opened in 1899, but the French officer was found guilty again, until 1906, when he was exonerated and re-admitted to the army. This case is often seen as an exemplary case of miscarriage of justice, in which a major role was played by the press and public opinion. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was well aware of the similarities existing between the Dreyfus affair and the Edalji Case, and his aim was to 'make the Edalji Case into as big a stir as they did with Dreyfus over there in France' (Barnes, 2005: 339). In the novel itself and in the documents that Barnes researched there are explicit references to Dreyfus, especially because there seems to be racial prejudice and anti-Semitism at the root of these miscarriages of justice. However,

the name of Dreyfus had constantly increased in fame, and was known around the globe, while that of Edalji was scarcely recognized in Wolverhampton [...]. [George] suspected that his obscurity was something to do with England itself. France, as he understood it, was a country of extremes, of violent opinion, violent principles and long memories. England was a quieter place, just as principled, but less keen on making a fuss about its principles [...]. This has happened, now let us forget about it and carry on as before: such was the English way (Barnes, 2005: 467).

Despite George's almost immediate 'obscurity', his case led to the creation of the Court of Criminal Appeal, making George's ordeal 'a footnote in legal history' (Barnes, 2005: 443).

Julian Barnes has often proved to be extremely interested in the pursuit of justice and truth also in real life, and not only in his fiction. Indeed, Barnes read for the bar and qualified as a barrister in 1974, but he never practiced because, as Barnes confessed in an interview with Amanda Smith (1989: 73) 'I was getting more pleasure out of doing a round-up of four novels for a provincial paper than I was out of preparing what I might say defending some criminal'. Moreover, at the beginning of his literary career, Barnes has published also four detective novels: *Duffy* (1980), *Fiddle City* (1981), *Putting the Boot In* (1985), and *Going to the Dogs* (1987), under the pseudonym Dan Kavanagh (his late wife's surname). Barnes has not written any of the so-called "Kavanagh book" for twenty-six years, but evidently his fascination for detection is still alive, though expressed under false pretences in a historical novel.

Trials, courts, and matter of justice appear also in *Flaubert's Parrot* and in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*. Chapter 10 of *Flaubert's Parrot* is entitled 'The Case Against' and is structured as a heart-felt defence of Flaubert from the accusations that have been moved against him in the course of time. The 'charge-sheet' (Barnes, 1984: 149) lists fifteen offences, among which the fact that 'he hated humanity' (149), 'he hated democracy' (150), 'he didn't involve himself in life' (154), 'he was a pessimist' (156), and that 'he teaches no positive virtue' (156). As a response to the

allegation that Flaubert ‘wasn’t interested enough in politics’ (151), Braithwaite, mocking the tone of a attorney for the defence, concludes his address by saying:

The present looks back at some great figure of an earlier century and wonders, Was he on our side? Was he a goodie? What a lack of self-confidence this implies: the present wants to both to patronize the past by adjudicating on its political acceptability, and also to be flattered by it, to be patted on the back and told to keep up the good work. If this is what you understand by Monsieur Flaubert not being ‘interested enough’ in politics, then I’m afraid my client must plead guilty (Barnes, 1984: 152).

Flaubert ‘must plead guilty’ to most of the charges moved against him. The issue at stake is the very idea of guilt and innocence, of right and wrong. Who decides that being guilty is wrong? All the allegations against Flaubert are indeed true, but their meaning and value changes. Why is being pessimist wrong, one may wonder. There are implicit assumptions and social conventions which play an important role in any assessment of guilt. As this defence of Flaubert demonstrates, the value of the very same statement shifts from positive to negative according to the narration it is inserted in.

In *A History of the World*, one of the 10 ½ *Chapters* is devoted to ‘The Wars of Religion’ (Barnes, 1989: 59), which, notwithstanding the grandiloquent title, does not refer to grand and noble enterprises of Templar Knights, but, more prosaically, to a trial against woodworms. The citizens of the French town of Mamirolle accused the woodworms, inhabiting the Church of Saint-Michel, of having gnawed the Bishop’s throne in order to humiliate Hugo, Bishop of Besançon, in front of his parish. The trial shows two opposite interpretations of the same event: on the one hand, the *plaidoyer des habitans* maintains that the woodworms are ‘diabolic’ (Barnes, 1989: 63), ‘malevolent’ (64) creatures of the Devil which work with ‘hateful malice’ and ‘cunning odiousness’ (72) and for this reason they deserve to be exiled from the church; on the other hand, the *plaidoyer des insectes* portrays the woodworms as ‘blessing creatures of the Lord’ (72) which operate following a divinely ordered plan, which aims at punishing mankind for its sins. Eventually, the *jugé d’Église* found the woodworm

guilty and sentenced them to ‘malediction, anathema and excommunication’ (Barnes, 1989: 79). Are the woodworms really guilty of the crime they are accused of? It rather seems that sometimes the distinction between guilt and innocence depends upon an arbitrary opinion, a choice between two opposite narrations. The *juge d’Église* which one he decided to believe in. Consequently, the notion of guilt might appear as relative, arbitrary, and therefore fallible. This idea of a fallible justice, based on opinions more than on indisputable facts, is one of the principal themes in *Arthur & George*.

The miscarriage of justice in the Edalji Case, despite being the climax of the novel, is inserted into a longer narrative which starts from the early childhood of the two protagonists, and ends with Sir Arthur’s death and spiritualist meeting at Albert Hall in 1930. *Arthur & George* can indeed be regarded as a historical and biographical novel which reconstructs the lives of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and George Edalji, inserting them in their Edwardian background. Some of the issues related to the knowledge and narration of the past, which have already emerged in *Flaubert’s Parrot* and in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, constitute the necessary premise to analyse the “narrativization” of the past in *Arthur & George* (Chapter 9.1). This novel, however, follows also the rigid conventions of detective fiction. In this case, reality seems to imitate art. Sir Conan Doyle, like his consulting detective Sherlock Holmes, is leading a parallel investigation, searching ‘for clues, truths, answers, in amongst the false memories, circumstantial evidence, virulent rumour and concealed prejudice’ (Childs, 2011: 10). It is a quest for justice, for truth, and for knowledge, which, however, turns out to be opinions, interpretations, and beliefs (Chapter 9.2).

9.1 HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY WRITING AS NEW FORMS OF DETECTION

The process of discovering the past can be likened to the sleuth’s hunt for clues and traces which would lead him to find out “what really happened”. The historians and the biographer have to proceed in their investigations in a similar way. Materials

and documents in the archive have to be researched and evaluated; false tracks have to be spotted and avoided; the possibility to discover new pieces of evidence must left open. Indeed, *Flaubert's Parrot* was defined as an 'intellectual whodunnit', and a 'kind of detective literary story' by Andrzej Gasiorek and Marina Vaizey respectively (in Pateman, 2002: 23). Not only is the 'Case of the Stuffed Parrot' (Barnes, 1984: 216) a mystery to solve, but also Flaubert's life itself is a mystery which will never be totally solved. Despite the almost obsessive research lead by Braithwaite and his thorough knowledge, there will always be areas of darkness and ambiguity which is impossible to clarify. Consider, for instance, the kind of relation possibly having existed between Flaubert and Juliet Herbert, or, even more telling, the very case of the parrot.

Braithwaite, the scholarly sleuth, failed to find the "true" parrot which sat on Flaubert's desk and, similarly, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a more active sleuth, could not find the "true" author of the mutilations and the writer of the libellous letters (provided they were the same person, or people). Indeed, Sir Arthur's investigations lead him to a certain Royden Sharp, who seems to have all the requisites expected by a criminal: he was expelled from Walsall school (the key of which was found in front of the Vicarage door), he had a record of mischief, cheating, and forging letters, was sent to sea from 1896 to 1903 (the years the persecutions stopped), and worked in a cattle ship (therefore he knew how to handle animals). Unsatisfied with merely the facts, Conan Doyle welcomes also rumours and village talk, like the fact that Royden Sharp used to laugh like a maniac when the moon was full (Barnes, 2005: 407). Mrs Greatorex's testimony is used as an indisputable evidence against Sharp, who showed her the instrument which was probably used for maiming the cattle. Sir Arthur, albeit eager to demonstrate George's innocence, proves a rather incompetent detective: his desire to secure the horse lancet, in order to have concrete proof, proves to be self-defeating. Indeed, without it, all they had was just circumstantial evidence. They had a few facts, and they built a narration around them, to create a story which explains and demonstrates that Sharp is guilty in the 'Statement of the Case against Royden Sharp' (Barnes, 2005: 424). However, the very same accusatorial story had previously been constructed to explain and demonstrate that the culprit was *George*. The kind of narratives advanced by the Staffordshire Constabulary and by Sir Arthur respectively

are both ascribable to the concept of 'fabulation' advanced in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*: 'the technical term is fabulation. You make up a story to cover the facts you don't know or can't accept. You keep a few true facts and spin a new story round them' (Barnes, 1989: 109).

Julian Barnes himself, indeed, had to "fabulate" to write *Arthur & George*. He had to do a lot of research, as shown in the 'Author's note':

Apart from Jean's letter to Arthur, all letters quoted, whether signed or anonymous, are authentic; as are quotations from newspapers, government reports, proceedings in Parliament, and the writings of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (Barnes, 2005: 505).

All these sources are not enough to cover every aspect of the historical period and of the people involved. An important role had to be played by historical imagination, assumption, deductions, and hypotheses. Despite using a third-person narrator, Barnes is well aware of the distinction between recounting a fact and a supposition about the implications and meaning of such fact. This awareness is explicitly shown from the very beginning, when Arthur sees his grandmother's corpse:

A small boy and a corpse: such encounters would not have been so rare in the Edinburgh of his time. [...] Perhaps the door had been deliberately left ajar. There might have been a desire to impress upon the child the horror of death; or, more optimistically, to show him that death was nothing to be feared (Barnes, 2005: 3).

The narrator's knowledge is overtly limited and partial, for this reason he keeps a close focalization on the two protagonists, and occasionally on secondary characters like Campbell and Captain Anson. The reader knows what the characters know. However, the continual alternation of points of view - entitled with the name of the focalizer - demonstrates how *every* perspective is biased and partial. Even Sir Arthur, who 'knows' George's innocence and decides to demonstrate it, is baffled when Captain Anson produces the letter in which George is begging his colleagues for money. The meeting between the two men resembles a trial which culminates in the two addresses, one from the attorney for the defence, and one from the attorney for the prosecution. From the very same pieces of evidence, documents, and testimonies,

they produce opposite narratives, one demonstrating the innocence of the subject, the other his guilt:

‘[...] Once you became convinced of the wretched youth’s innocence, everything fell into place.’ [Captain Anson to Conan Doyle]

‘Whereas once you became convinced of the youth’s guilt, everything fell into place.’ [Conan Doyle to Captain Anson] (Barnes, 2005: 374).

Every new element which is discovered is interpreted according to those acts of prefiguration⁹. What emerged during the trial was only part of the data available. The jury had to base their decision on a limited, partial, selected and arranged amount of material. Captain Anson, to prove George’s guilt and to provide a possible motive, shows to Conan Doyle a letter, undoubtedly written by George himself five weeks before the first maiming, in which the solicitor is asking for ‘any aid’ because he was ‘reduced from a fairly comfortable position to absolute poverty, primarily through having had to pay a large sum of money (nearly £220) for a friend for whom I was surety’ (Edalji’s letter, in Barnes, 2005: 378). George’s situation appears desperate: he is on the verge of bankruptcy and has to beg for money. In Captain Anson’s view, George is clearly lying, and his debts are actually due to gambling and a misuse of clients’ funds. As a consequence, George decided to take his revenge against the neighbourhood who refused to help him by mutilating their livestock. According to Conan Doyle’s interpretation of the letter, George’s debt are the unfortunate result of his generosity towards a friend. The real meaning of the letter is stretched and fashioned in order to make it fit to their respective prefiguration of “what really happened”. However, like Conan Doyle, also the reader is rather baffled by this new piece of evidence. Because of the focalization close to the characters, the narrator is not omniscient. Not a single hint of such debts is ever made in the sections devoted to George, although the risk of bankruptcy is a rather important issue which cannot be omitted. Moreover, it seems odd, to say the least, that George was willing to indebted himself of such a large amount of money for a friend, when it has been stated and

⁹ Acts of prefiguration determine also the historian’s reconstruction of “what really happened” in history (White, 1973).

repeated that he had no friends whatsoever, let alone a friend to risk bankruptcy for. This new piece of material, like the alleged discovery of Juliet Herbert's letters in *Flaubert's Parrot*, changes everything: the focalizers are revealed in all their unreliability. If such an important aspect of the story is not recorded, also many other elements might have been left out of the narrative. Who decides what is relevant? What should be stressed and what should be omitted? The selection and arrangement of the available data is arbitrary and functional to the interest of the analyser. Indeed, Conan Doyle, despite his eagerness to solve the mystery and reveal the truth, decides not to investigate further on George's debts, probably because he senses that what he would discover would not "fit" in his prefiguration of "what really happened". As Nietzsche's observed, knowledge is always interest-guided (see Palmer, 1977: 369).

Another point of divergence between Captain Anson's and Conan Doyle's reconstructions of the events regards George's eyes. Captain Anson resorts to tradition and superstition to support his thesis, claiming that George's 'grotesque appearance' (Barnes, 2005: 389) is due to an 'unhealthy degree of sexual desire' (388). Any young man relieves his urges and desires that feels in three possible ways: by 'carnal self-indulgence', by 'sporting activities', or by 'criminal behaviour' (389). George has never been a sporty fellow, and, because of the mysterious and inexplicable sleeping arrangements at the Vicarage, even the first possibility is to be excluded. What is left is therefore criminal behaviour. Captain Anson's argumentation proceeds from logical deductions which point out connections of cause and effect, and this 'nomological-deductive argument' is the same used in the 'explanation by formal argument' in Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973: 11). Common sense, 'conventional generalizations', and 'putatively universal laws of causal relationship' (White, 1973: 11) are all used in the construction of history. Science is limited to the description of the evidence (and this attitude is embodied in Dr Butter), while the insertion of such unconnected events into a narrative which follows the general laws of causation belongs to the fictional component of historiography. Indeed, the evidence produced by Captain Anson is that, since bulging eyes are commonly associated to excessive sexual urges, George is *logically* a criminal.

Indeed, the theme of eyes and sight is recurrent throughout the novel, and it is strictly linked to the issue of knowledge. According to empiricism and rationalism, we know only what we can see and/or perceive with our senses, and therefore a malfunctioning of the eyes implies a “corrupted” perception of the world, both literally and figuratively. Indeed, George is literally suffering from *exophthalmos*, a disease which causes bulging eyes, and of a severe myopia; figuratively, instead, George cannot entirely “see” (in the sense of “understand”) what happens around him because ‘he lacks imagination’ (Barnes, 2005: 4). He cannot understand the figurative meaning of language, and this leads him to interpret anything that is said in its literal meaning. Emblematic is George’s interaction with Mr Wood during Conan Doyle’s wedding with Jean:

‘A happy day,’ George observes.
‘And the end of a very long road,’ replies Mr Wood.
George does not know what to make of this remark, so contents himself with a nod of agreement. ‘Have you worked for Sir Arthur for many years?’
‘Southsea, Norwood, Hindhead. Next stop Timbuctoo I shouldn’t wonder.’
‘Really?’ says George. ‘Is that the honeymoon destination?’
Mr Wood frowns at this, as if unable to follow the question (Barnes, 2005: 448).

These misunderstandings are due to the fact that communication is mostly based on implicit assumptions which, in this case, make people believe that George ‘is the sort of fellow who generally understands things in the way they also generally understand things’ (Barnes, 2005: 447). Indeed, despite the opposite interpretations of events, Captain Anson and Conan Doyle at least seem to agree on one element: race is somehow related to the crime. Ultimately, the first and greatest mistake was, in their shared opinion, committed by George’s family:

[Captain Anson] ‘The family’s. That’s where it all went wrong. The wife’s family. What took it into their heads? Whatever took it into their heads? Doyle, really: your niece insists upon marrying a Parsee – can’t be persuaded out of it – and what do you do? You give the fellow a living... here. In Great Wyrley. You might as well appoint a Fenian to be Chief Constable and have done with it.’

'I'm inclined to agree with you,' replied Doyle. 'No doubt his patron sought to demonstrate the universality of the Anglican Church. The Vicar is, in my judgement, both an amiable and a devoted man, who has served the parish to the best of his ability. But the introduction of a coloured clergyman into such a rude and unrefined parish was bound to cause a regrettable situation. It is certainly an experiment that should not be repeated' (Barnes, 2005: 372-73).

The problem seems to lay in George's 'half-caste' status, in his mixed blood which tears the soul 'between the impulse to civilization and the pull of barbarism' (385). This is the abhorrence of miscegenation, of the corruption of the race, which is feared most by this illustrious and emblematic representatives of Edwardian society. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the champion of justice, shares this fear and disgust for the half-caste, and reported his opinion also in *Memories and Adventures*, his autobiography, which constitute Julian Barnes's main source of information about Doyle's life:

Perhaps some Catholic-minded patron wished to demonstrate the universality of the Anglican Church. The experiment will not, I hope, be repeated, for though the Vicar was an amiable and devoted man, the appearance of a coloured clergyman with a half-caste son in a rude, unrefined parish was bound to cause some regrettable situation (Conan Doyle, in Barnes, 2005: 470).

The comparison between the two extracts, the first written by Barnes and the second by Conan Doyle, is emblematic of the use that Barnes decided to make of his sources. The original is almost entirely copied and embedded in the fictional framework, approximatively as Barnes did with Flaubert's citations in *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984). Indeed, it is the 'licence which an author takes in filling in the resulting gaps [that] establishes one of the crucial differences between fiction and non-fiction, or between a novel and a biography' (Lycett, 2011: 132). While Barnes had an abundance of material to dig from to reconstruct Conan Doyle's life, opinion, and viewpoint, George's personal life was much more a matter of fabulation. Basing his reconstruction on the little evidence available, Barnes had to guess and imagine which would be George's most likely reactions, feeling, and thought to the events he has to face.

George's "peculiar" interpretation of the world is sometimes at odds with Conan Doyle's clear-cut explanations of the crime. For instance, while Conan Doyle considers racial prejudice as the prime motive for the persecutions, hoaxes, trial and eventual imprisonment, George does not believe that racism is the reason of his ordeal:

'I am aware that you consider race prejudice to be a factor in the case, Sir Arthur. But as I have already said, I cannot agree. Sharp and I do not know one another. To dislike someone you have to know them. And then you find a reason for disliking them. And then, perhaps, if you cannot find a satisfactory reason, you blame your dislike on some oddity of theirs, such as the colour of their skin. But as I said, Sharp does not know me. I have been trying to think of some action of mine that he might have taken as a slight or an injury. Perhaps he is related to someone to whom I gave professional advice...' Arthur does not comment; he thinks that you can only point out the obvious so many times (Barnes, 2005: 420-21).

George has never regarded race as a discriminatory element, neither even when he was a child at school and his classmates kept telling him 'You are not a right sort' (Barnes, 2005: 16), nor could he understand why his family did not take part in local society. Like in the title, also throughout the novel the two protagonists are referred to with their first name, so that a reader who has not been informed by any element of the para-text does not know that Arthur is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and that George's surname is Edalji. It is only when Sergeant Upton interrogates George about the Walsall school key that his surname is revealed to the reader. Although the narrator is a third-person one, he is not omniscient, objective, or neutral. This piece of information is wilfully omitted in the first 36 pages of the novel, even though it could have helped explaining and making sense of many past events, for instance the bullying at school. However, the narrator decides to retain this information in order to maintain a close focalization on George, who, in fact, could not understand how his "half-caste status" could affect other people's behaviour in his regards. George feels he is entirely English, because he was born and raised in England, while he knew nothing whatsoever about India. As a second-generation migrant, he finds himself in a limbo

position, belonging to both England and India, but also to neither, and never *completely*. Sir Arthur loves to define himself and George as ‘unofficial Englishmen’ (Barnes, 2005: 303): ‘Irish by ancestry, Scottish by birth, instructed in the faith of Rome by Dutch Jesuits, Arthur became English. English history inspired him; English freedoms made him proud; English cricket made him patriotic’ (Barnes, 2005: 31). Identity is the result of a choice. It is therefore not natural or essentialist, but artificially constructed. Interestingly enough, ‘[o]ne of the early titles of the book was *The Skin of Things*, because it was about the surface of the world and what was immediately underneath it and the skin of George and the skin of Arthur’ (Barnes, in Fraga, 2006: 140).

As in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, also in *Arthur & George* there are at least always two perspectives which provides different, if not opposite, interpretations of reality. On the one hand, there is Captain Anson and the Staffordshire Constabulary’s narration, in which George is guilty; on the other hand, there is the narration supported by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s pamphlet, Mr Yelverton’s petition, and the Edalji family, which instead advocates George’s innocence. Like in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, the world seems to be divided into guilty and innocent; however, reality proves so complex and ambiguous that such a neat division is impossible:

[Captain Anson:] ‘You want [George Edalji] to be completely innocent, don’t you? Not just innocent, but completely innocent? In my experience, Doyle, no one is completely innocent. They may be found not guilty, but that’s different from being innocent. Almost no one’s completely innocent’ (Barnes, 2005: 381).

Reality proves very different from fiction, where ‘Holmes performed his brilliant acts of deduction and then handed villains over to the authorities with their unambiguous guilt written all over them’ (Barnes, 2005: 426). There are multiple sides of every person, as Barnes has shown with the characterization of Gustave Flaubert, Louise Colet, and Maxime du Camp in *Flaubert’s Parrot*. The distinction between guilt and innocence is further blurred by the Report of the Gladstone Committee which re-examined the Edalji Case. Indeed, George is found *both innocent and guilty*: ‘Innocent

yet undeserving of compensation. Innocent yet undeserving of an apology. Innocent yet fully deserving of three years' penal servitude' (Barnes, 2005: 442).

The same ambiguity in the conception of guilt can be found also in Sir Arthur's relationship with Jean Leckie, which lasted over ten years, when Lady Conan Doyle was still alive. Arthur was risen with tales of chivalry and ancient heroism, and subsequently honour became the fundamental principle which ruled his life. When he met Jean, his wife Touie had been diagnosed consumption, and her life expectancy was short. However, she managed to live for ten years more, during which Arthur had an entirely platonic relationship with Jean (or at least, this is the official version of the story, recorded in *Memories and Adventures*). Their relation is gradually acknowledged by the respective families, only Touie could not know the truth. It was indeed a matter of honour for Arthur that Touie had to be left unaware of, so that to live her last years in peace, loved and respected. Even though their love is not consummated, and therefore Jean is not his mistress, Arthur condition is ambiguous. Is his behaviour really honourable? Is he guilty or innocent? Once again, there are two opposite alignments: on the one hand, the Mam and Jean's family approve of their "mystical" union and consider Arthur's behaviour honourable and innocent; on the other hand, his sister Connie and her husband Willie Hornung thought that their behaviour was compromising, and therefore Arthur was guilty both towards his legitimate wife and towards his 'mystical wife' (Barnes, 2005: 237) Jean. Although Jean is not literally Arthur's mistress, she seems to be, and this is enough to lead to gossip which would ruin Jean's reputation and dishonour the Conan Doyle family.

'It seems to me,' [Willie Hornung] replies, 'that you attach too much importance to whether these relations are platonic or not. I can't see that it makes much difference. What is the difference?'

Arthur stands up. 'What is the difference?' he bellows. [...] 'It's all the difference in the world! It's the difference between innocence and guilt, that's what it is.'

'I disagree, Arthur. There is what you think and what the world thinks. There is what you believe and what the world believes. There is what you know and what the world knows. Honour is not just a matter of internal good feeling, but also of external behaviour' (Barnes, 2005: 247-48).

The border line between guilt and innocence is blurred. Is it more important what the truth really is, or rather what the world believe the truth to be? The world, namely society, seems to operate like a jury in a trial, whose task is to assess, evaluate, and decide which the sentence is, and the decision, more often than not, seems to be arbitrary. Before dying, Touie told her daughter Mary that she should not be surprised if her father re-married. Did Touie know about Jean? If so, which version of the facts did she know? Would the mere fact that she knows change Arthur's status from innocent to guilty? This is another unsolvable mystery.

Like *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, *Arthur & George* too is characterized by a polyphony of voices which shatter any monolithic certainty provided by an authoritarian, monological, unquestioned and unquestionable Truth. The alternation of parts devoted to George to those about Arthur shows the development and evolution of two personalities and their visions of the world, which are strongly influenced by their own life experience. Arthur's interpretation sometimes differs from George's, and certainly it does contrast with Captain Anson's reconstruction of the events. However, there are not just two dichotomous alternatives: as Dr Butter explained to Sir Arthur, 'you offer only two possible explanations - that of the prosecution, and your own. There is a wide expanse between them' (Barnes, 2005: 354). In *Flaubert's Parrot*, the choice of the authentic parrot initially seemed to be between *either* the parrot exhibited at Hôtel-Dieu *or* at Croisset. Eventually, Geoffrey Braithwaite discovers that there are more than fifty candidates which had the same probability of having been the model for Loulou. Who maimed the livestock and who wrote the anonymous letters? At first, the choice seems limited to *either* George Edalji *or* Royden Sharp. Actually, there were much many possible candidates who could have committed the crimes, and, indeed, four years after Sir Arthur's death, Enoch Knowles pleaded guilty for the writing of the letters signed 'G.H. Darby'. The mystery of the mutilations and of the rest of the letters, however, remains unsolved, like the 'Case of the Stuffed Parrot'.

However, in his campaign, Sir Arthur has written many articles in newspapers and even two pamphlets, one "proving" George's innocence, and the other "proving"

Royden Sharp's guilt. While reading Sir Arthur's articles to the *Daily Telegraph*, George thought that

It was most disconcerting to see oneself described not by some provincial penny-a-liner but by the most famous writer of the day. It made him feel like several overlapping people at the same time: a victim seeking redress; a solicitor facing the highest tribunal in the country; and a character in a novel [...]. Here was Sir Arthur explaining why he, George, could not possibly have been involved with the supposed band of Wyrley ruffians: 'In the first place, he is a total abstainer, which in itself hardly seems to commend him to such a gang. He does not smoke. He is very shy and nervous. He is a most distinguished student.' This was all true, and yet untrue; flattering, yet unflattering; believable, yet unbelievable (Barnes, 2005: 416).

The limits of language in describing a person have already been analysed in *Flaubert's Parrot*, when Geoffrey Braithwaite attempts a succinct description of himself for an advertisement for lonely hearts:

60+ widowed doctor, children grown up, active, cheerful if inclined to melancholy, kindly, non-smoker, amateur Flaubert scholar, likes reading, food, travel to familiar places, old films, has friends, but seeks... (Barnes, 1984: 106)

Although this is all true, it is also untrue. That description is fixed, stiff, and unavoidably limited. A person, instead, is much less defined, more complex, ambiguous, and mutable. Depriving a person of this intrinsic plurality is like de-naturalizing its essence, reducing a person to a mask, or to a character in a novel. Indeed, Sir Arthur is often confusing reality with fiction, and interpreting reality as if it were fiction. The creator assumes the role of his creature: Conan Doyle plays the role of his famous detective Sherlock Holmes and therefore expects also the solution of the crime to happen as in his novels. Instead, he finds out the culprit little by little, simply by asking the right question to the right person:

'It's not meant to happen like this,' said Sir Arthur. 'I should know. I've written it enough times. It's not meant to happen by following simple steps. It's meant to seem utterly insoluble right up until the end. And then you unravel the knot with

one glorious piece of deduction, something entirely logical yet quite astounding, and then you feel a great sense of triumph.’
‘Which you don’t?’
‘Now? No, I feel almost disappointed. Indeed, I do feel disappointed’ (Barnes, 2005: 410).

When Sir Arthur writes a Sherlock Holmes story, he always starts from the solution of the crime, because ‘[h]ow can you make sense of the beginning unless you know the ending?’ (Barnes, 2005: 75); ‘[b]eginning with an ending. You cannot know which path to travel unless you first know the destination’ (373). *Arthur & George* itself is a novel entirely composed of beginnings and endings: the first part is entitled ‘Beginnings’, the second part ‘Beginning with an Ending’, the third is ‘Ending with a Beginning’, and the fourth and last part is entitled ‘Endings’. This division of the novel shows the arbitrariness of such labels like “beginning” and “ending”, because the very same event might be both a “beginning” and an “ending”, according to the kind of narrative it is inserted in. Consequently, the event’s meaning is not intrinsic in the event itself, but it is imposed upon the event in accordance to the ultimate goal of the narrative. It has been shown how the same piece of evidence can be interpreted differently by the attorney for the defence and by the attorney for the prosecution, who would therefore produce two opposite explanations of the same event, depending whether their ultimate goal is to demonstrate the innocence or the guilt of the accused. Arthur Conan Doyle chooses the “ending” of his narrative about George: he is innocent. Then, all the evidence collected will be interpreted to fit this conclusion. From the “ending”, Sir Arthur fictionalizes his “beginning”. Even in the mental construction of their life-story, both Arthur and George know where they are starting from and what they want to become. The “beginning” and the “ending” are clear in their mind: the mystery is the road in-between, the ‘yet unrevealed process’ (Barnes, 2005: 91).

This process of making sense of the beginning by knowing its end is not limited to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s detective fiction, since it seems to characterize historiography as well. Indeed, ‘detective stories – including *Arthur & George* – have a theological dimension: they embody what Frank Kermode has named “end-determined fictions”, narratives that are defined by their conclusions and that look

towards a meaningful resolution' (Tate, 2011: 65) and, similarly, also historiography makes sense of the past, finding "logical" connection between unconnected events in order to explain why and how the present is what it is.

The past is re-constructed in order to understand and solve the mystery of the present.

9.2 CONCLUSION:

A BELIEF IN OBJECTIVE TRUTH AS A WAY OUT OF NIHILISM

The quest for truth and for knowledge is the central issue of *Arthur & George*. Tribunals and trials are privileged places where truth is expected to be revealed. However, as the Edalji Case clearly demonstrates, justice is not always just, laws are not objective but are instead interpreted and manipulated, innocent people might be found guilty and guilty people might be found innocent. Justice is not always, as George believed before his ordeal, 'a journey from confusion to clarity' (Barnes, 2005: 90), and the laws of England are no longer 'a place of safety' (148) for him, because they can also imprison, and not only free. Indeed, 'life is not a detective story. In life you don't necessarily find out who did it, you don't necessarily get justice - you get three quarters of justice, half justice. And you don't know who the bad guy was in the end' (Barnes, in Fraga, 2006: 146). What triumphs in George's trial is neither truth nor justice, but mere rhetoric which produces persuasive narrations. George's idealization of justice is proved wrong by reality:

[George:] '[...] A barrister, however competent, cannot make bricks without straw.'

Litchfield Meek gave George a worldly smile. 'In my years in the courts, Mr Edalji, I've seen bricks made from all sorts of materials. Some you didn't even know existed. Lack of straw will be no hardship to Mr Disturnal' (Barnes, 2005: 164).

During a trial, two opposite narratives, based upon the very same facts are constructed and offered to the jury who has to evaluate them, according to their credibility, in order to establish whether a person is innocent or guilty. During one of George's mock trials regarding railway laws, Maud supported Monsieur Payelle's innocence, while Horace considered him guilty. Although the Court found Monsieur Payelle guilty, George observed that neither of his siblings was wrong, because '[t]he case could have gone either way' (Barnes, 2005: 72). Theoretically, Payelle – as well as George during his own trial – could have been *both* guilty *and* innocent. This speculation is later transformed in a fact according to the decision made by the jury. Justice therefore seems to be a matter of persuasion, where even scientific evidence is manipulated in order to influence the jury's opinion, as Dr Butter sadly observes:

[...] I have worked with the Staffordshire Constabulary for twenty years and more. Twenty years of going to court and having to answer sly questions based on assumptions I know to be false. Twenty years of seeing a jury's ignorance being played to. Twenty years of presenting evidence which is as clear and unambiguous as I can make it, which is based on rigorous scientific analysis, and then being treated, if not as a fraud, then as someone who is merely giving an opinion, that opinion being no more valuable than the next man's. [...] I state what I have observed – what I know – and find myself being told disdainfully that this is merely what I happen to think (Barnes, 2005: 356).

In addition to the scientific evidence, an important role is also played by the witnesses' testimonies. Carofiglio (2007) distinguished the "unaware perjurer" (*falso testimone inconsapevole*) from an actual perjurer, who deliberately lied to the court. Not even testimonies are therefore entirely reliable, also because the witness's knowledge is always fragmented, partial, and unavoidably biased. On the one hand, Sergeant Parsons maintained that the Vicar started wiping the blade of one of his razors with his thumb, as to tamper with the evidence; on the other hand, George's father denied it. Another example is Mr Markew's '[p]erfectly sure' (175) statement that George smiled when he was told about a maiming, which completely contrasts with George's version of the events: not only did he not smile, but also no one came near them

talking about horse mutilations. Mr Hodson's evidence confirms that George was wearing his blue overcoat during his evening stroll, while Mr Hands asserted that George was *not* wearing such garment (173). There are two contrasting testimonies of the same event. How is it possible to find out which one is true? Is it possible to *know* the truth, or can we only choose to *believe* in one version? The jury has to choose which version of the story they believe to be the true one, and therefore the best witnesses are not the honest and sincere ones, but those whose narrative is more persuasive:

It is rather the case that the best people are not necessarily the best witnesses. The more scrupulous they are, the more honest, the more they dwell on each word of the question and doubt themselves out of modesty [...]. It's a question of belief. What we believe, why we believe it. From a purely legal point of view, the best witnesses are those whom the jury believes most (Barnes, 2005: 193).

Testimonies are narratives, linguistic constructs which attempt to describe "what really happened". It has already emerged in the analysis of both *Flaubert's Parrot* and of *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* that language is the only way in which it is possible to access the past, another consciousness, or reality itself. However, language is not a transparent medium, because it can manipulate and distort reality. Such is the case with the description of George's blue serge coat, which feels 'damp' to Sergeant Parsons and Inspector Campbell, while it is 'dry' for the Vicar and his family (Barnes, 2005: 135). During his testimony, Inspector Campbell defined such coat as 'wet' when they found it (170). The attention to this linguistic alterations is far from being a mere linguistic pedantry: on the one hand, describing the garment as dry would prove George's innocence, or at least that he was not wearing it the previous night; on the other hand, were the coat damp or wet, it would prove that George were on the field during the rainy night of the maiming. The same adjustment of language happens when the attorney for the prosecution describes the hair found on the coat as 'identical' to those of the pony's belly, while Dr Butter only said 'similar' in his evidence (186).

This linguistic issue does not emerge only in the witnesses' accounts, but also in the representation of the trial offered by newspapers. Many articles were written about the Edalji Case and the Great Wyrley Outrages, and Barnes inserted extracts in his own narrative, portraying George while reading about his own ordeal in newspapers:

The next morning, as a favour, he was brought a newspaper, so that he might see, one final time, his life turned into headlines, his story no longer divergent but now consolidated into legal fact, his character no longer of his own authorship but delineated by others (Barnes, 2005: 204).

George's attitude, which he regarded as self-possessed and dignified, was perceived by journalist as 'stolid' (189) and, after the verdict, 'unmoved' (205). Even in this case, the same event is interpreted differently, therefore gaining disparate meanings. By reading the articles devoted to his case, George becomes aware of the unreliability of the information reported by journalists, even the most objective facts: George is said to be twenty-eight, while he is actually twenty-seven, his father becomes a Hindoo instead than a Parsee, his mother is said to be English, while she is Scottish (157), and the tiny spots of mammalian blood found on the coat sleeve were reported as 'a quantity of bloodstained apparel' (153). Journalism proves not more reliable than fiction, as both are fabulatory constructions: a few true fact are kept and inserted in a narrative, where the blanks are filled in by imagination. Julian Barnes has also worked as a journalist, and has often compared the writing of fiction with the writing of journalism:

I think I tell less truth when I write journalism than when I write fiction. I practice both those media, and I enjoy both, but, to put it crudely, when you are writing journalism your task is to simplify the world and render it comprehensible in one reading; whereas when you are writing fiction your task is to reflect the fullest complications of the world, to say things that are not as straightforward as might be understood from reading my journalism and to produce something that you hope will reveal further layers of truth on a second reading (Barnes, in Guppy, 2000: 65).

The role of newspapers is crucial, because it is such written documents that constitute most of the factual evidence on which historians base their writing of history. However, newspapers do not report the absolute Truth, but are inevitably partial, over-simplified, approximate, and often imprecise. The kind of history which can be written from such unstable “evidence” cannot but be equally partial and imprecise. Newspapers are also important because they influence ‘the last tribunal of all, a tribunal which never errs’ (Conan Doyle, in Barnes, 2005: 396), that is to say the public opinion. Indeed, there was a public outcry at George’s verdict, especially after the Committee Report which defined George ‘[i]nnocent yet guilty’ (442). The official verdict of the Court first and of the Committee were questioned and challenged by many other “unofficial” verdicts: the Press, the public, the legal profession, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle supported George and his innocence. ‘Would these verdicts in time come to outweigh the official one?’ (Barnes, 2005: 442). As in the case of Sir Arthur ambiguously honourable behaviour, what a person has actually done does not seem to be as relevant as what most of the people think/believe/know that he has done. Ultimately, Truth seems to be what most of the people hold to be true.

It is impossible to know all the truth, because ‘knowledge never stay[s] still, and today’s certainties might become tomorrow’s superstitions’ (Barnes, 2005: 53). Indeed, *Arthur & George* is set in a historical period in which rationalism and scientific materialism were questioned and new “sciences” started gaining relevance: it is the case of telekinesis, telepathy, mesmerism, phrenology, and spiritualism. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle himself underwent an epistemological transformation which lead him from empiricism, in which the only reality is what can be seen with one’s physical eyes, to spiritualism, which instead requires the use of the ‘eyes of faith’ (Barnes, 2005: 499):

Man is on the verge of elaborating the truths of physical law as he has for centuries been elaborating the truths of physical law. When these truths come to be accepted, our whole way of living – and dying – will have to be rethought from first principles. We shall believe in more, not less. We shall

understand more deeply the processes of life (Barnes, 2005: 299).

Many were sceptic about séances, telekinesis, and telepathy, and considered spiritualism as a fraud, a hoax, or charlatanry. However, Sir Arthur, one of the most illustrious men of his time, who was kept in high esteem for his intelligence and rationalism, came to believe in this extra-sensorial world, in an attempt to conciliate the visible world of the body with the invisible world of the spirit. The whole reality includes also what is invisible to the physical eyes and can be seen only with the eyes of faith. Sir Arthur belong to the group of intellectual and scientists who, at the turn of the century, perceived materialism and empiricism as unbearably reductive. Their goal was to discover a new world, and get to know it, by applying the same methodology based on empirical evidence which characterized the positivist sciences they tried to overcome. However, despite Sir Arthur's strong belief that just one true case was enough to prove their theories about the survival of the spirit after the death, the evidence they provide is always subjected to doubt, scepticism, and disbelief. As physical and factual elements are interpreted, misinterpreted, an manipulated in multiple ways in order to make them fit into a certain narrative, so are the proofs in support of the existence of an invisible world and of life after death. Sir Arthur *really* appeared in his spiritual form during the Spiritualist Meeting held at the Albert Hall to celebrate his "promotion", because many people could see him. However, George - despite his binoculars - could see only an empty chair. Maybe the woodworm in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* was right:

If you think I am being contentious, it is because your species - I hope you don't mind my saying this - is so hopelessly dogmatic. You believe what you want to believe, and you go on believing it. But then, of course, you all have Noah's genes. No doubt this also accounts for the fact that you are often strangely incurious (Barnes, 1989: 25).

Knowledge and therefore truth seem to be ultimately just a matter of belief: you decide to believe in a certain interpretation of reality, and your belief is turned

into knowledge and the interpretation becomes the Truth. Sir Arthur deeply *believed* that Spiritism could offer the evidence of the survival of the spirit, and consequently interpreted the past in the light of his knowledge: Jesus was nothing less than an excellent medium, and his meeting with the Apostles were séances. What is for Sir Arthur evidence of the truthfulness of his theories is for his sister Connie just ‘a wonderful story’:

It seemed to Connie that he has just told her a revised version of Jonah and the Whale – though one in which the victims were less fortunate – but that to base any beliefs upon such a story would be as much an act of faith as it was for those who first heard the story of Jonah (Barnes, 2005: 273).

Every form of knowledge requires this leap, this ‘act of faith’, which is necessary to escape scepticism and nihilism. Whether we decide to believe in Louise Colet’s version rather than in Du Camp’s, or in the woodworm’s rather than in the Bible, it is always a matter of choice, and therefore of opinion, because ‘perhaps proof is impossible anyway. Perhaps the best we can manage is thinking and believing’ (Barnes, 2005: 264). Since absolute, indisputable, and universal knowledge is not possible, what is left is the need to believe in the possibility of objective truth:

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 [...]. 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. We must do so, because if we don’t we are lost, we fall into beguiling relativity, we value one liar’s version as much as another liar’s, we throw up our hands at the puzzle of it all, we admit that the victor has the right not just to the spoils but also to the truth (Barnes, 1989: 245-246).

Postmodernism shows how there is a plurality of interpretations, of versions, and, ultimately, of “truths” among which it is possible to choose, while in the past there was only one possible choice: the official Truth produced by power and authority. The certainties of the past were the result of a lack of choices converging into a master-narrative which gave sense and order to the world. Instead,

what [postmodernism] does say is that there are all kinds of orders and systems in our world - *and* that we create them all. That is their justification and their limitation. They do not exist “out there”, fixed, given, universal, eternal; they are human constructions in history. This does not make them any the less necessary or desirable. It does, however, [...] condition their “truth” value. The local, the limited, the provisional are what define postmodern “truth” [...]. The point is not exactly that the world is meaningless (A. Wilde 1981, 148), but that any meaning that exists is of our own creation (Hutcheon, 1988:43).

Such a master-narrative is no longer believable, as it is replaced by a fragmentation of subjectivities, of histories, and of truths. Knowing that there are many truths, it is possible to choose in what to *believe* to be the “truer” version, or interpretation, of reality. This awareness of the polyphony and plurality that characterizes postmodernity implies a recognition that any form of knowledge is ultimately the product of a subjective choice in what to believe. Absolute knowledge of a subjectivity, of history, or of truth is unobtainable, but this does not lead to nihilism. On the contrary, nihilism means that we do not know anything, while postmodern plurality means that we know more: we know that there are many possible and equally viable explanations to give sense to the world, and therefore this implies recognition and respect for other points of views. Instead of the totalitarian imposition of one absolute truth, postmodernism invites to a dialogue between a plurality of truths.

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