

**The Search is All?:**

**The Pursuit of Meaning in Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*,  
*Staring at the Sun* and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters***

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## Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to examine the notion of the pursuit of meaning in the three early novels by Julian Barnes – *Flaubert's Parrot*, *Staring at the Sun* and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*. Throughout the dissertation I attempt to situate the texts and the ideas explored by them in relation to the discourses of postmodernism. I argue that the novels' dramatisation of the notion of the search for final or ultimate meaning positions the texts in dialogue with the postmodernist concept of a lack of absolute meaning.

The dissertation is divided into four chapters. The first chapter functions as an extended introduction, for its purpose is to provide a general outline of the realities portrayed by the novels under discussion and point out certain similarities with what is referred to as the postmodern condition. Next chapters examine the quests for meaning embarked on by the characters of the three novels. The focus of chapter two is the search for the consolations and reassurances of religion, which is the subject of *Staring at the Sun*. The argument investigates the validity of religious belief in a seemingly post-metaphysical world and attempts to account for religion's failure to act as a source of stable meaning. Chapter three explores the pursuit of meaning through art as problematised in *Flaubert's Parrot* and flags the contending approaches to art that are in play in the text. It also raises questions about the notion of the search itself and suggests that often in Barnes's novels "the search is all" – or, in other words, the pursuit of meaning is shown as a value in itself and its final failure to reach its end does not undermine its purposefulness. Ultimately, the last chapter is devoted to "Parenthesis," the half-chapter of *A History of the World*, and considers love's capacity to transcend the entropy and relativity of the disillusioned world of postmodernity. I conclude my dissertation with a brief examination of the pursuits of religion, art and love dramatised by the novels and a discussion of the postmodern playfulness and indeterminacy of the analysed texts.

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## Introduction

“For Oliver, who found the whole idea deeply embarrassing.” With this playful dedication Terry Eagleton opens his recent book entitled *The Meaning of Life* (2007). What is more, in the preface he notes that writing about such a suspect concept as “the meaning of life” seems “fit for the crazed and the comic” (ix). Why is the notion of “meaning” embarrassing to explore? Why are we so wary of it? Possible answers are many. One of them is that we have come to live in an age that distrusts “big words” and concepts which purport to account for the totality of human existence, which disregard variety and difference. The postmodern thought, which highlights the contingency of human life and announces the lack of any solid foundation to it, calls into question the notion of absolute meaning and regards it as redolent of “an old-fashioned metaphysics” and as, philosophically, “passé” (*The Meaning* 28).

In my dissertation, however, I wish to demonstrate that, despite its apparent invalidity, the notion of absolute or final meaning is not dead in the novels of Julian Barnes, but keeps being questioned and longed for, deconstructed and re-inscribed, dramatised and played with. The term “absolute meaning” may sound rather nebulous and abstract; therefore the question arises: what do I understand by it? I shall be using the term in a variety of its aspects. In my analysis the notion of the pursuit meaning will be in many respects equivalent to the notion of seeking a metanarrative, an explanatory pattern that orders the whole of one’s experience into a meaningful and coherent narrative. The search for absolute meaning, I will argue, can also find its expression in a desire to establish a stable context of interpretation (such as religion or art) – a framework through which one can understand one’s own experience and make sense of it. It may also take the form of a longing for truth and authenticity, which would stand firm

and intact in confrontation with the relativity, scepticism and moral chaos that appear implicit in the postmodern age marked by the demise of grand narratives.

How is then absolute meaning pursued in the texts under discussion and what exactly do I mean by the search, quest or pursuit of meaning? In my dissertation the notion of the search for meaning will denote a set of intellectual investigations whose aim is to explore the potential of a particular narrative or domain of human existence – such as religion, art and love – to act as a firm foundation and a stable point of reference. The search entails constantly asking questions and assessing the validity of the explored ideas in the contemporary reality. The question posed in the title of my dissertation – “the search is all?” – is adapted from James Scott’s essay on *Flaubert’s Parrot*, which I discuss in chapter three. I shall be looking at the pursuits dramatised in Barnes’s texts through the prism of this question, thus foregrounding the effects of the search, its ultimate success or failure. I will also attempt to explore the idea of the purposefulness or otherwise of pursuits which fail to reach their end and the Grail-like concept of the search as an end in itself.

I intend to divide my dissertation into four chapters, each of them further divided into several shorter sections. Chapter One will flag the major context of my discussion of Barnes’s novels – the discourses of postmodernism – and introduce the concept of the postmodern crisis of meaning, which the further explored pursuits attempt to transcend. The next three chapters will be devoted to the pursuits of religion, art, and love, respectively, and will examine their capacity to function as solid foundations and repositories of meaning. In my analysis I shall be making particular reference to the three early novels by Julian Barnes: *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), *Staring at the Sun* (1986) and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989). I will also, although less frequently, quote one of Barnes’s later novels entitled *England, England* (1998). Among the critical texts that I am most indebted to in my discussions of the above-listed novels are three monographs on the fiction of Julian Barnes

written by Merrit Moseley (1997), Matthew Pateman (2002) and Vanessa Guignery (2006), and several works by Terry Eagleton, exploring postmodern philosophy and investigating the notion of meaning.

## Chapter One

### BARNES AND THE POSTMODERN CRISIS OF MEANING

The aim of this chapter is to examine the curiously ambiguous relationship between the novels of Julian Barnes and the discourses of postmodernism. The reasons why the author of *Flaubert's Parrot* is often labelled a postmodernist writer are at least threefold. First of all, his novels fit in the time span associated with postmodernism, which leads some of the critics to confuse the notions of the postmodern with the contemporary (“Julian Barnes and the Popularity of Ethics,” 179). Secondly and more importantly, most of his novels – *Flaubert's Parrot* and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* being the most notable examples – are highly experimental in terms of their form. The publication of the two above-mentioned novels was accompanied by an animated critical debate about whether they live up to the formal standards of the novel. Many critics argued that the former book should rather be classified as “a thing” (James Fenton) or “a text” (Ramon Suarez qtd. in Guignery 39). When *A History of the World* came out five years later, critics suggested that it should be treated as a collection of short stories since each chapter has a different narrator and a different setting (Guignery 61). Barnes, however, strongly insists that all his books should be classified as novels and dismisses the arguments that no definition of the novel can accommodate his experimental texts by quoting his favourite definition, which characterises the novel as “a long piece of writing with something wrong in it” (an interview with Melvyn Bragg, *The South Bank Show*). The third reason why Julian Barnes's novels are seen as deeply rooted in postmodernism is their, albeit often ambiguous and debatable, indebtedness to certain philosophical notions (such as the concept of history as fiction, the impossibility of absolute knowledge, the unattainability of truth) which are recognised as being in the thick of the discourses of postmodernism.

It is on the level of ideas and philosophical implications that I am going to focus attention in this chapter and throughout the dissertation. Although I will attempt to demonstrate that postmodernism does indeed provide an extremely productive framework for the discussion of a number of ideas dramatised by the novels in question, I will argue that the way *Flaubert's Parrot*, *Staring at the Sun* and *A History of the World* play with postmodernist ideas is more ambivalent than many critics may want to see it. The aim of my discussion of Barnes's concepts of knowledge, truth, history, language and the unreal – examined against the backdrop of the ideas of such philosophers and practitioners of the postmodernism as Jean-Francois Lyotard, Richard Rorty, Zygmunt Bauman and Linda Hutcheon – will be to illustrate the crisis of meaning dramatised by the novels in a variety of ways.

#### **No exit from uncertainty – knowledge and ignorance**

*You ask me what life is? It is like asking what a carrot is. A carrot is a carrot, and nothing more is known.*

Chekhov

This Chekhov epigraph, which opens the first part of *Staring at the Sun* (Barnes's fourth novel) exposes the futility of asking existential questions and thus introduces the theme that permeates the whole book: that of asking questions and searching for answers. *Staring at the Sun* is an account of Jean Serjeant's journey through life, her dawning consciousness and acquisition of wisdom. It opens with her carefree childhood, during which she begins to show interest in the surrounding world and is preoccupied with a number of questions (such as: "Is there a sandwich museum?" and "Is heaven up the chimney?" (148)). Since she never learns the answers to most of the questions that bothered her in childhood and in later stages of her life, she remains always on the lookout for answers that would satisfy her desire for knowledge and make sense of her life. When she marries, she thinks, "Michael was the answer, whatever might have been the question" (36). After years of marriage and gradual

disappointment with her husband, Jean comes to the conclusion that if the person one is married to is not the answer, then it must be the very institution of marriage: “Getting married was an answer, not a question.... You got married, and that was you settled” (62).

In the last part of the novel, set in the 20s of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, after the ultimate failure of her marriage, Jean lives with her adult son Gregory, who like her pursues answers to fundamental questions of a moral and philosophical nature. The futuristic setting allows Barnes to introduce the General Purposes Computer and the The Absolute Truth – two hi-tech computers whose aim is “to put the whole of human knowledge on to an easily accessible record” (144). These machines seem to promise some sort of closure of Jean’s and Gregory’s relentless pursuits of answers. However, the closure is denied. The computers are endowed with purely scientific knowledge. The data they have accumulated may seem impressive; still they are incapable of providing answers to the questions of the utmost importance, such as the existence of God, the validity of religion or the moral permissibility of suicide. The knowledge that computers are capable of generating proves dry and breeds frustration. The final disappointment leads to the sad realisation that “[k]nowledge never really advanced, it only seemed to. The serious questions always remained unanswered” (151).

The novel’s dismissal of the possibility of gaining absolute knowledge and the frustration of any ultimate closure leads Matthew Pateman to concluding that *Staring at the Sun* “tends towards a ‘postmodern’ notion of a knowledge that prioritises heterogeneity, dissensus and openness” (Julian Barnes 39). The imagined triumph of the scientific over narrative knowledge feeds into Jean-Francois Lyotard’s discussion of the relationship between the two contending kinds of knowledge. The French philosopher argues that much of the postmodern sense of the loss of meaning springs from “the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative” (26). And narrative knowledge is what Jean and Gregory are desperately seeking. They both long for a narrative, a pattern that would make sense of their

lives. Computer knowledge, the only accessible knowledge in the futuristic, post-metaphysical world refuses to provide a narrative, without which knowledge, in Gregory's view, becomes a mere repository of random data.

The epistemological implications suggested by the novel create a pervasive tone of disappointment and pessimism. The impossibility of absolute knowledge is not a discovery that Jean and Gregory revel in – any coherent pattern is denied and the thirst for the ultimate answers is unquenched, or rather, proves unquenchable by its nature. Such implications seem at odds with the celebration of indeterminacy which is often associated with the postmodernist views on knowledge.

However, echoes of a more optimistic attitude to the limitations of knowledge can be traced in *Flaubert's Parrot*. Geoffrey Braithwaite, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, embarks on a quest whose aim is to gain a deeper insight into the life and art of Gustave Flaubert. Yet, unlike Jean and Gregory, from the beginning of his search he seems prepared for the possibility of failure. He does not display a strong yearning for certainty and unquestionable truth; on the contrary, he admits he “prefer[s] to feel that things are chaotic, free-wheeling, permanently as well as temporarily crazy – to feel the certainty of human ignorance...” (70). Elsewhere Braithwaite reflects on his preference for the months of transition from one season to another rather than “the vulgar months, the fullness of seasons.” He interprets it as “a way of admitting that things can't ever bear the same certainty again” (90). These reflections do not cause sadness but bring a curious “joy of indeterminacy” guaranteed by the “freedom of the emptiness of final confirmation” (Scott 62).

The novel's ending suggests that the final confirmation is also denied in the case of Braithwaite's search. The quest for the parrot – the emblem of Flaubert's true voice – does not result in establishing the authentic parrot but in the multiplication of possibilities. At the beginning of the search two parrots are taken into consideration; at its end – fifty. Vanessa

Guignery argues that the novel culminates in “the triumph of indeterminacy” (39). Barnes’s novel seems to lean here towards the notion of knowledge which Zygmunt Bauman defines as “the postmodern awareness of no certain exit from uncertainty” (15). The epistemological idea that the novel plays with can be interpreted as an illustration of the idea that “the growth of knowledge expands the field of ignorance” (23). Such a view, as Bauman argues, does not necessitate giving up on knowledge entirely and nor does Barnes’s novel. The impossibility of closure does not undermine the purposefulness of the quest for knowledge. Even if the pursuit of knowledge falls short of achieving its original aim, it allows Jean, Gregory and Geoffrey Braithwaite to rid themselves of illusions, the illusion of the totality of knowledge being one of them.

### **Unrecoverable truth, relative perspectives, historical fabrications**

*What happened to the truth is not recorded.*

*Flaubert’s Parrot*

One of the key issues raised by *Flaubert’s Parrot* and *A History of the World* is the possibility or otherwise of discovering the truth about the past. The former novel repeatedly poses the question: “How do we seize the past?” (5, 100, 113). At an early stage of his quest, Geoffrey Braithwaite compares the pursuit of the past to a game of chasing a piglet 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” (5). But why is the past beyond our grasp? Is it because there is no such thing as truth about the past? Does that mean that the past did not take place? Barnes’s novel does not seem to go that far. What precludes the ultimate success of the search for truth is the lack of a reliable means to conduct it. There is no objective access to the past – memory is fallible;

what remains are texts and various discourses, which are contingent, unreliable and partial. Braithwaite realises this and declares that “all that remains of Flaubert is paper” (2).

The impossibility of fathoming the truth on the basis of existing discourses is very effectively encapsulated in the chapter entitled “Chronology.” The reader is presented here with three alternative accounts of the life of Gustave Flaubert. The first one is composed of entries which add up to a very optimistic overall picture of his biography and describe a life abounding in numerous successes and culminating in artistic fulfilment and social recognition. The second account is quite the opposite. It creates an image of a life of growing bitterness, disillusionment and deteriorating health, a life in the shadow of deaths of beloved friends, pervaded by the painful misunderstanding and underestimation of his work. The last version, in turn, provides the reader with a set of chronologically ordered quotations by Flaubert about himself. The point that the novel makes here is that many different stories can be woven around the same facts. The power of the argument lies in the fact that none of the three biographical notes has recourse to manipulation – the facts are all true yet the way of linking them into a coherent structure and the totalising narrative that is imposed on them account for the striking differences in the overall tone. The answer to the question about which of the three versions is the closest to the truth is beyond our grasp.

Another issue which is closely entwined with the notion of the possibility of knowing the truth, and one which is explored at great length in Barnes’s novels, is the relativity of perspective. This concept is introduced in *Flaubert’s Parrot* by a witty definition of the net:

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. (35)

The point of view may, as Braithwaite attempts to demonstrate, entirely determine one's view of things. The same scepticism about the possibility of attaining objective truth is shared by the narrating voice of "Parenthesis" (the half-chapter of *A History of the World*), who observes that "[w]e all know that objective truth is not obtainable, that when some event occurs we shall have a multiplicity of subjective truths which we assess and then fabulate into ... a God-eyed version of what 'really' happened" (243). This "God-eyed version," the Absolute Truth, is a merely utopian concept; each version of events available to us is flawed by the inevitable subjectivity of the eye of the viewer.

*A History of the World* makes a similar point by presenting a woodworm's iconoclastic account of the Deluge, in which the irreverent narrator challenges the veracity and accuracy of the Biblical story and subverts many accepted notions, such as the superiority of human species over animals or the justice of God's punishment. The story told by the woodworm exposes the unreliability of all historical accounts, since, as it suggests, they are written by "the winners" and therefore inevitably partial. By giving voice to the unnoticed woodworm, the novel advocates "resistance to the monological and totalitarian aspect of canonised history" and aims to "undermine the discourse of authority" (Guignery 69, 70). Linda Hutcheon argues that such an attempt to rewrite history from the perspective of the losers, the silenced and the left out is a very common practice in postmodernist literature (*Politics* 51).

Another reason why *A History of the World* can be interpreted as being deeply sceptical about the possibility of attaining truth about the past is its suggested implication that history, by definition, imposes a coherent narrative on the chaos and randomness of events. The narrator of "Parenthesis" perceives the grand historical narrative of constant progress as fake and remarks that "[h]istory just burps, and we taste again that raw-onion sandwich it swallowed centuries ago" (239). There is no pattern or meaning inherent in the events; they

are imposed by those who make history: “history is just what historians tell us” (240). What we call history is therefore “more like a multi-media collage, with paint applied by the decorator’s roller rather than camel-hair brush” (240). This notion of history as an illusory narrative is one of the major characteristics of the postmodern concept of history, as conceived of by Hayden White and Linda Hutcheon. The latter asserts that postmodernism sees all the order and meaning in a historical account of events as constructed by its author (*Politics* 58). The meaning is not a property that is inherent in an event but, as White argues, along with the illusion of coherence it is imposed on the chaos of events (*Poetics* 121). The narrator of “Parenthesis” sees history as fabulation, “We make up a story to cover the facts we don’t know or can’t accept; we keep a few true facts and spin a new story round them. Our panic and our pain are only eased by soothing fabulation; we call it history” (240). History emerges therefore as the opposite of the repository of truth – it is a story written to conceal the fact that the truth about the past can never be attained.

Barnes’s apparent adherence to the ideas discussed above led several critics to the conclusion that his novels endorse and celebrate the postmodernist notions of truth as an illusion, a discourse-generated fiction (“Popularity of Ethics” 185-6). These views however do not seem to do justice to the complexity and ambiguity that can be traced in the novels’ treatment of the issue of truth. An example of such a reading of *Flaubert’s Parrot* is an otherwise very illuminating essay by James Scott entitled “Parrots as Paradigms: Infinite Deferral of Meaning in *Flaubert’s Parrot*.” The critic interprets the novel as speaking in favour of the postmodernist idea that “reality and truth are illusions produced when systems of discourse ... impinge on human consciousness” (57). He argues that *Flaubert’s Parrot* calls into question the very concept of truth and that its author strives for “registering the non-existence of truth” (58). Scott thus incorporates Barnes’s fiction into the realm of the postmodern, whose key practitioner Richard Rorty perceives truth as a mere “property of

linguistic entities” and subscribes to the notion of truth as “made rather than found” (Rorty 7, 3).

It can be argued, however, that *Flaubert’s Parrot* does not go that far in its questioning of the status of truth. Merrit Moseley points out that “Geoffrey Braithwaite and Julian Barnes stop well short of radical scepticism about the past – not to mention the wider scepticism about reality and truth reported by James Scott” (Moseley 88). Moseley argues that Braithwaite does indeed entertain doubts as to the possibility of ever discovering the real parrot that served Flaubert as inspiration but is far from questioning the fact that such a parrot ever existed. Braithwaite likewise realises the impossibility of comprehending his wife’s life but does not deny the reality of it (88). The critic concludes that “Barnes’s position is more tentative or more ambiguous than the postmodern scepticism about referentiality and knowledge” (87).

As regards the notion of history as problematised in *A History of the World*, the rejection of the utopian concept of total objective History, the acknowledgement of the relativity of perspective and the questioning of the possibility of discerning any patterns, narratives and meanings in events themselves suggest the novel’s endorsement of the postmodernist concept of history. However, as Matthew Pateman argues, what places Barnes’s text in opposition to the postmodern notion of history is its wariness of relativism seen as the logical consequence of it. The novel is not interested in celebrating the fact that history is fiction but tries “to construct a theory of history which can accommodate the ethical” (“Popularity of Ethics” 185).

On closer analysis, one may come to the conclusion that the ideas about the accessibility of truth that *Flaubert’s Parrot* and *A History of the World* play with do not add up to a coherent epistemological theory. The concept of truth is by turns called into question and re-inscribed. Arguably the most notable example of such re-inscription in a novel

otherwise highly sceptical about the notions of truth and history is the already quoted “Parenthesis,” whose narrator very emphatically calls for clinging to the belief in truth despite the well-grounded scepticism about the very concept of truth. The narratorial voice, which introduces himself as “Julian Barnes,” warns that abandoning the belief in truth inevitably leads to “beguiling relativity” (244). The plurality and incompatibility of ideas dramatised in Barnes’s novels testifies to their dialogic character. These texts display their awareness of the postmodern concept of truth and play with it, more often seemingly endorsing it than not.

### **A cracked kettle and dancing bears: the inadequacy of language**

*The words aren't the right ones; or rather, the right words don't exist.*

*Flaubert's Parrot*

As we have seen so far, the degree to which Barnes’s novels draw on postmodernist concepts of knowledge, truth and history is ambiguous and open to discussion. In the case of language, however, the novels’ indebtedness to postmodernist/ poststructuralist theories questioning the referential capacity of language appears evident. A number of theoreticians of postmodernism drop the traditional idea that language represents the world and reflects its complexities. In her analysis of the poststructuralist concept of language, Catherine Belsey argues that language is not referential, but differential. In other words: “we owe our ideas of things to differences which are the effect of language in the first instance” (*Post-Structuralism* 70). Whereas structuralists believed that words, or signifiers, pointed to their stable meanings called signifieds, poststructuralists see language as a free play of signifiers, which does not generate ultimate meanings. James Scott reads *Flaubert's Parrot* as an illustration (or even celebration) of that poststructuralist scepticism about the referential ability of language; he argues that the novel “evinces the conviction that words are empty signifiers never touching a final signified” (Scott 58).

This scepticism is articulated by the novel's pervasive sense of the shiftiness and slipperiness of language. Geoffrey Braithwaite is confused about the stark discrepancy between all the accounts reporting that Flaubert was a "giant" and that he "towered over everybody like a strapping Gallic chieftain" and the fact that he was only six feet tall (100). Braithwaite understands that this divergence results from the simple fact that in the nineteenth century people were on the whole shorter than nowadays. The realisation of it, however, produces in him a strange anxiety that if words cannot be relied on, then history, literature and all the knowledge accumulated over the centuries are susceptible to misunderstanding.

The notion of the tragic insufficiency and inadequacy of language that underlies the whole novel is brilliantly encapsulated by Flaubert's thrice-quoted sad definition of language as "a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, while all the time we long to move the stars to pity" (11). Towards the end of *Flaubert's Parrot* Braithwaite complains about the "foolish inadequacy" of the language of bereavement. The choice of expressions is limited and unsatisfying ("I loved her; we were happy; I miss her. She didn't love me; we were unhappy; I miss her"). Worse still, they all sound untrue and artificial – as descriptions of other people's grief. Braithwaite sadly concludes, "the right words don't exist" (191).

Elsewhere the narrator also voices his scepticism about language's ability to represent the world, "In our pragmatic and knowing century ... 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" (98). The view that words create rather than reflect reality has its origins in poststructuralist/ postmodernist theories of language, which suggest that "the distinctions we make are not necessarily given by the world around us, but are instead produced by the symbolising systems we learn" (*Post-Structuralism* 7).

The postmodern awareness of language's incapability of guaranteeing stable meanings creates a sense of confusion and the feeling of being lost in the daunting chaos of empty signifiers. "Lost, disordered, fearful, we follow what signs there remain; we read the street names, but cannot be confident where we are," reflects the narrator of *Flaubert's Parrot* (62). The image conjured up by Braithwaite illustrates "the sense of being trapped in an array of signs" (Scott 67) and what Lyotard calls the subject's dissolution in the "dissemination of language games" (Lyotard 40). The image of the city is redolent of Wittgenstein's much-quoted simile: "Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses ... and this is surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses" (Lyotard 40).

James Scott argues that the novel implies that there is no way out of the linguistic maze into certitude; it is illustrated by its culmination with the discovery that "the two parrots in the museums were, in fact, arbitrarily chosen from fifty possible parrots, just as words have been arbitrarily derived from a system of differences and endowed, through convention, with meaning" (68). Here again *Flaubert's Parrot* finds itself in the thick of postmodern thought; it problematises the unreliability and insufficiency of language, questioning its referential capacity and its ability to generate stable meanings.

### **A sense of the unreal**

*All that was once directly lived has become a representation.*

Guy Debord

*England, England*, a novel written by Julian Barnes in 1998, is an extended reflection on the blurring of the distinction between the real and the inauthentic, artificial or hyperreal. Although *England, England* is not going to be the main focus of my dissertation, I would still like to refer to it in this section, since it elaborates on some of the notions merely hinted at in

the novels I am to discuss in more detail and also because it seems indispensable in a discussion of the relationship between Barnes's fiction and postmodernism.

The novel refers overtly to the theories of the French postmodernist philosopher Jean Baudrillard, who famously announced the advent of "an age of simulacra and simulation," in which the true and the false, the real and the artificial become alike and there is no longer any criterion to tell one from the other (Baudrillard 347). Baudrillard distinguishes between the four successive phases marking the transition from the real world to the hyperreal. In the first phase the image reflects a reality; in the second it "masks and perverts" it; the third phase is marked by the image beginning to "mask the absence" of a reality and in the fourth and final phase it "bears no relation to any reality whatever" and becomes a simulacrum (347). The French philosopher's theory of the dominance of the hyperreal is illustrated in Barnes's novel by the idea of creating a small island called England, England on which the replicas of all the landmarks of England are erected. As the story unfolds, the experiment proves more and more successful and the popularity of the simulacrum ultimately surpasses the popularity of the original. Tourists much prefer to visit England, England, where everything is professionally organised and the distance between, say, Big Ben and Hadrian's Wall is incomparably shorter. As in Baudrillard's theory, the hyperreal prevails over reality.

The fact that *England, England* draws heavily on postmodernist theories of hyperreality is indisputable, yet what remains problematic is whether it endorses or ridicules them – or both at the same time. Vanessa Guignery argues that the novel can be read "as both a reflection on and a parody of" Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality (110). Although the ultimate triumph of the hyperreal in an, on the whole, realist novel seems to suggest the rightness or at least credibility of the theories in question, the attitude of *England, England* towards them is rendered ambiguous by the lecture delivered at the beginning of the novel by a caricatured, pretentious French intellectual. The lecture glorifies the project of the island of

simulacra in such an exaggerated and overintellectualised way that the passage appears to be “a reasonable pastiche of a sort of postmodern theory” (*Julian Barnes* 79). It announces and celebrates the triumph of the replica over the original and does not see it as a loss of the real but as an “enhancement,” a superior form of it, a “victory” (*England, England* 53). The over-the-top tone of the lecture leaves no doubt as to the novel’s mocking attitude towards it. Does Barnes’s novel then ridicule Baudrillard’s theory and is the whole novel a mere parody of the idea that the real is fragile and in danger? It does not seem so. What is parodied here is not the idea of the hyperreal itself but the celebratory tone and the excessive intellectual sophistication, which are often associated with postmodernism.

The fact that the novel is indeed concerned about the danger of the loss of the real becomes evident when one reads the personal plot that runs parallel to the story of the developing England, England project. It tells the story of the life of Martha Cochrane, which is pervaded by the sense of emptiness and the intangible yearning for authenticity in the increasingly inauthentic reality. Her relationship with Paul seems to be the only space where they can resist the dominance of unreality; Paul feels that their love “made things real” (103). The novel implies however that hyperreality penetrates even that most intimate level of existence. James Miracky argues that Martha and Paul’s love is also an illusion, for they have been “constructing their sexuality out of replicas and imitations”(Guignery 113): Paul by always finding it easier “to be alone with magazine girls” (*England, England* 99) than have sex with real women, and Martha by her detachment from the partner she was making love to in order to pursue the dream of an ideal man (Guignery 113).

The novel as a whole dramatises Baudrillard’s mourning of the loss of the real. It demonstrates the relevance of his theory and the effects of the triumph of the hyperreal thought of as more of a future danger rather than as already taking place (*pace* Baudrillard). *England, England* is the first novel in which Barnes explicitly deals with the notion of

unreality, although it can be argued that it may also be traced in Barnes's earlier novels but only on a personal rather than sociological or political level. In her old age Jean Serjeant, the protagonist of *Staring at the Sun*, comes up with her own private list of the seven wonders of life (which includes: being born, being loved, disillusioned, getting married, giving birth, getting wisdom, and dying). She realises that she was either unconscious or unaware or under anaesthetic when most of these events were happening. This, in turn, leads her to the sad realisation that one has very little control over one's life; life unfolds and most people only submit to it, still harbouring the illusion of their agency. "You do things, and only later do you see why you did them, if ever you do. Most of life is passive, the present a pinprick between an invented past and an imagined future," Jean concludes. Her reflection mirrors the words of Geoffrey Braithwaite, "we make a decision – or a decision makes us – and we go one way" (*Flaubert's Parrot* 99). The protagonists of the two novels have an unsettling sense of being deprived of any real, active part to play in their lives. They seem suspended in a kind of limbo of unreality – between the past that is "invented" and the future which is "imagined." These observations may be interpreted as illustrating a different – existential – dimension of the notion of the unreal.

The aim of this chapter has been to outline the philosophical aspects of the reality inhabited by the characters of Barnes's novels. This reality, as I have attempted to demonstrate, seems to share many important characteristics (scepticisms, doubts, discontents) with what is referred to as the postmodern condition. Barnes's novels display their awareness of the postmodernist concepts of knowledge, truth, history and the unreal. They self-consciously play with these ideas, usually refusing to straightforwardly endorse or reject them. It can be argued, however, that their presence and the way they are introduced suggest that Barnes's novels are on the whole deeply rooted in postmodernist thought. What emerges from the discussion of the ideas problematised in *Flaubert's Parrot*, *Staring at the Sun* and *A*

*History of the World* is the sense of chaos, confusion and a crisis of meaning, which is the result of the collapse of the old reassuring narratives which made sense of the world.

There is however one fundamental difference between Barnes's novels and postmodernism. The latter does not mourn the loss of meaning it announces; on the contrary, its tone is often seen as celebratory (*Post-Structuralism* 102-3). Postmodernism is more concerned with assessing the human condition and documenting the demise of grand narratives than with seeking foundations on which to build new systems of thought that would accommodate ethics and values universally shared by humans and restore lost meaning. Barnes's novels, however, are pervaded with a longing for the no longer available stable meaning. The lack of any firm foundations breeds disappointment, anxiety and frustration. Most importantly, it creates the need to embark on some sort of pursuit that would make sense of one's place in the universe, help to understand one's personal tragedy or defy the increasingly relativist and ethically hollow world. In his article entitled "Julian Barnes and the Popularity of Ethics," Matthew Pateman places the author of *Flaubert's Parrot* in opposition to postmodernism, insofar as he attempts to "re-invent legitimating formulae in an effort to arrest our fall into beguiling relativity" (189). The critic argues that the main concern of Barnes's fiction is to examine "the potential for an ethical formulation in the light of the breakdown of legitimating narratives" (180).

There is a subtle sense of defiance against the disillusioned and cynical reality to be traced in Julian Barnes's novels. The way in which the characters articulate their disappointment and discontent is by pursuing on their own these very truths which their self-important age boasts of having undermined and deconstructed. A detailed discussion of these pursuits can be found in the ensuing chapters.

## Chapter Two

### BETWEEN YEARNING AND BELIEF: THE PURSUIT OF RELIGION

Terry Eagleton describes the nature of postmodernity as “confidently post-metaphysical” (“Beginning...” 260). This characteristic, however, would not hold in the case of Julian Barnes’s novels. Although far from advocating religious conviction, *Staring at the Sun*, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* and *England, England* address the issues of God and religion. They problematise certain aspects of religious belief, assess its validity in the contemporary world and probe into the deep needs and yearnings in human consciousness that draw people to religion despite its incompatibility with the secularism of European societies. In the first section of this chapter I am going to illustrate how the three novels dramatise the need for a metaphysical narrative and the desire for a pattern that would make sense of the chaos of the disillusioned realm of postmodernity. The second section will document the experiences of individual intellectual investigations and pursuits of theological answers on the part of the characters of Julian Barnes’s novels. Ultimately, in the final section I intend to discuss the outcomes of the characters’ pursuits and the ideas explored by the novels with regard to the validity and purposefulness (or otherwise) of religious belief.

#### **Yearning for a larger context**

*I don’t believe in God, but I miss Him.*

Julian Barnes

*Staring at the Sun* and *England, England* both investigate the need for a religious belief in the age when belief seems no longer possible. The two novels portray a world that has given up on metaphysics and creates the impression of being comfortable without it. Religion is seen as a thing of the past, a consolatory fable invented centuries ago by people who could not bear the definitiveness of death. People who still carry on believing are

considered too weak to face the world as it is. In this post-religious reality, at the age of sixty, Gregory – the protagonist of *Staring at the Sun* – begins to ask himself fundamental questions about life and death. Gregory works as an insurance salesman; he is a confirmed bachelor and has lived with his mother all his life. Suddenly he is overcome by a sense of purposelessness of his life and comes to the point when he realises that he has been paying too little attention to some of life's fundamental issues. Although in the past years Gregory was not particularly interested in any religion, now – in the light of his slowly impending death – the questions of God's existence and the immortality of the soul assume paramount importance. He is astonished to discover how desperately he suddenly needs religion. What Gregory seeks is “a pattern”(Julian Barnes 39), a coherent narrative that would account for his existence and for the reality of pain and that would impose an unquestionable meaning on life, which otherwise frightens him with its insufficiency and chaos. Religion answers to Gregory's need and provides him with an illusion of order and harmony: “The old story, the first story: Gregory eased himself into it. A comfortable jacket, an armchair fitted to your shape by long use, the wooden handle of an old saw, a jazz tune with all its parts, a footprint in the sand which fits your shoe” (*Staring* 165). Gregory needs religion for the comfort and safety it brings. He seems to accept religion because of the consolation it offers rather than the answers it gives.

It is suggested in the novel that Gregory's need for a religious belief springs also from his growing fear of death. The novel owes its title to the following maxim by La Rochefoucauld, “Neither the sun nor death can be stared at steadily” (Guignery 59). To stare at death directly and without blinking is what Gregory finds himself incapable of doing. He needs religion because he cannot face the thought that his and his mother's lives will come to a definitive end. “God,” as Merrit Moseley points out, “is a defence men turn to because they are afraid” (98). Vanessa Guignery, likewise, argues that the novel as a whole “acknowledges man's need for God, who keeps fear at bay” (59). The conclusion that emerges from the

analysis of Gregory's religious longing is that it stems predominantly from a deep discontent with life, the desire for an organising pattern and the paralysing fear of the finality of death.

*England, England* – a novel written twelve years after *Staring at the Sun* – also documents a dawning of a peculiar religious yearning. Its protagonist, Martha Cochrane, is a successful businesswoman in charge of a major “England, England” project. Martha's professional success, however, does not go hand in hand with her personal well-being. She grows more and more distant from her boyfriend Paul and even loses her enthusiasm for the job that was once her passion. Her life begins to appear to her strangely unreal and incomplete. She feels she lacks something important that she cannot pinpoint. One day Martha finds herself drawn to an abandoned church. When she enters the temple, she does not know what has brought her there. At first she can only think of the negative answers: “disappointment, age, a discontent with the thinness of life” (220). She realises the apparent absurdity of her position: she is firm in her lack of faith in God; she perceives religion as a system made up to “make [people] feel better about death” (220). And yet she cannot deny that she does feel attracted to this old place of worship. Before going to sleep later that day, she articulates her longing as being drawn to God who does not exist. Her next visit to the abandoned church brings the same question, “What am I after?” (236). She finally identifies the curious longing that makes her keep coming back to the little church as religion's “capacity for seriousness,” which the modern life sorely lacks (236). As well as Gregory, Martha seeks a stable narrative, a cohering pattern that would grant another dimension to the world which is in need of an order ensured by a power beyond itself. “I suppose,” she reflects, “life must be more serious if it has a structure, if there is something larger out there than yourself” (236).

Unlike Gregory, the reason why Martha pursues the religious impulse is not because she believes or even hopes that religion is true, but because religion sees life as serious and, in

a sense, more real. The desire for the return to the real is one of the major ideas explored by the novel. “England, England,” the project that Martha is in charge of is a celebration of the idea of a replica, or simulacrum. Her day-to-day preoccupation with the fake and unreal awakens in Martha a yearning for the real and serious. That is why she becomes curious about religion. Religion, in Martha’s view, generates a seriousness without which life can become unendurable. For her the question about whether there is any truth in religion appears to be of secondary importance – what matters is that religion provides another dimension, which, according to Martha, is necessary to go on living:

I’m not in a church because of God. One of the problems is that words, the serious words, have been used up over the centuries by people like those rectors and vicars listed on the wall. The words don’t seem to fit the thoughts nowadays. But I think there was something enviable about that otherwise unenviable world. Life is more serious, and therefore better, and therefore bearable, if there is some larger context.  
(237)

*Staring at the Sun* and *England, England* illustrate different reasons for the awakening of the longing for religious belief. In both novels, however, the need for a spiritual dimension stems from a sense of disappointment with the world in which the grand narratives of the past no longer hold. The two novels dramatise the nostalgia for the soothing sense of order and moral certitude that religion used to guarantee. This sense of nostalgia bears witness to the fact that the world depicted by *Staring at the Sun* and *England, England* is not free of metaphysical longings, even though the influence of religion as an institution seems almost marginal. In this seemingly post-metaphysical reality the intangible and irrational need for a divine presence and order keeps resurfacing. In an attempt to account for this curious phenomenon one may quote Jacques Derrida, who thus characterises the post-religious spirituality of postmodernity, “There is then *some spirit*. Spirits. And *one must* reckon with

them” (Berry 169). Barnes’s novels portray the reality in which the grand narratives of religion have long been discarded but the need for otherworldliness and transcendence persists. Postmodernity, argues Philippa Berry, is “imprinted with traces of other, more ambiguous and elusive, modes of spirituality or of ... post-religious, post-sceptical ... consciousness” and yearnings beyond the domain of rationality (171). *Staring at the Sun* and *England, England* investigate very closely these traces of post-religious and post-sceptical consciousness, which in both novels take the form of an awakening of religious longing in people who appear rational and down-to-earth in their disposition and stripped of metaphysical illusions.

### **Screaming at the sky**

*God’s on a motor-bike off the west coast of Ireland.*

*Staring at the Sun*

Whereas, in terms of its interest in religion, *England, England* only acknowledges the relevance of a spiritual yearning for God in a seemingly post-metaphysical world, *Staring at the Sun* further explores the issue of religion. The figure of Gregory epitomises not only the intangible longing for religious reassurance but also the dramatic intellectual pursuit of the answers to the questions about the existence of God, the validity of religion and the finality of death. Tired of life’s monotony and increasingly anxious about death, Gregory comes to the point when he begins to see the fundamental existential questions as very pressing. Although he never showed much interest in religious matters, suddenly the question about whether there is truth in religion becomes of crucial importance to him.

Gregory approaches religion intellectually and is dissatisfied with the crude choice between subscribing either to the belief in the existence or non-existence of God and comes up with his own set of fifteen possible permutations about God (*Staring* 162-6). The long list

– composed of both serious and facetious entries – includes the hypotheses that God once existed but does not any longer, that God “exists only as long as belief in him exists,” that he has abandoned his creation or is simply “taking a divine sabbatical.” In his questioning of the simple dualism between belief and non-belief and of drawing any absolute distinctions, Gregory seems to adopt a postmodern theological stance. Exasperated by the inconclusiveness of his intellectual pursuit, Gregory turns to The Absolute Truth computer (ironically referred to as TAT) and asks it questions about the current state of world religions and the number of their followers. What he gets are uselessly dry statistics. Gregory is irritated by the irrelevance of the information he receives to his thirst for certitude and asks TAT a straightforward question, “Do you believe in God?,” to which the computer replies, “NOT REAL QUESTION” (175-6). The session with TAT frustrates Gregory and leaves him in a very reflective mood. The reflections that the session inspires in him suggest that Gregory’s preoccupation with religion may predominantly spring from his increasingly overt fear of death.

The question of God’s existence assumes central importance for him because it entails the question of eternal life, the answer to which is, as Gregory realises, the one he really pursues. “Eternal life – that was always the great bargaining counter, wasn’t it?,” suggests the narrating voice later in the novel (188). When Gregory considers whether it is braver to believe or not to believe in God, he thus perceives the implications of rejecting the belief, “You are declaring the certainty of your own non-existence. I end. I do not go on.... You are complacent in the face of extinction.... You stretch out confidently on your deathbed confident that you have understood the question of life; you boldly declare for the void. Imagine that moment. Imagine the fear” (166). Gregory, however, is far from complacent in the face of his death and lacks the courage to admit to himself his doubts and, ultimately, gives up on his search. Instead, he is trying to persuade himself that he believes in eternal life

(and in God – as a consequence rather than a source of his belief in the afterlife) simply because “he [knows] it [is] true” (188). Gregory realises that what he pursues may not be the genuine answer to the question about whether God exists but the certainty that he does exist. When faced with pessimistic findings, he refuses to continue his search and stops at a point that gives him neither reassurance nor consolation.

Unlike Gregory, his mother, Jean Serjeant, emerges from the novel as an embodiment of courage. Her courage marks most of the crucial decisions of her life, including the dramatic decision to leave her husband and begin a new life away from home, with Gregory to provide for. She never studied much in her life but was always very curious about the world. From the earliest years she used to ask herself questions, the question about God’s existence being one of them. When she is already retired her desire to understand more makes her want to travel the world. During one of such travels, she visits the Grand Canyon and expects a wonder that may shake her religious indifference and amaze her with its majesty. Jean’s reaction, however, is the opposite: “the Canyon stunned her into uncertainty” (98). The mystical experience of seeing the Grand Canyon helps her realise that she is devoid of any religious sense. Towards the end of the novel, when asked by Gregory about God, she cryptically remarks, “God’s on a motor-bike off the west coast of Ireland” (183). To Jean, God is an abstraction and religion – a system invented by people to deceive themselves that death is not final and that there is a pattern and meaning beyond the here and now. The playful image of God riding a motor-bike suggests the futility of a religious pursuit: God, if He exists, is beyond human reach. Jean’s image of an indifferent God can be interpreted in terms of the postmodern spirituality; in postmodernity, argues Jean-Luc Nancy, “our experience of the divine is our experience of desertion ... God has deserted all encounter” (Berry 176). Jean’s life has been a relentless pursuit of answers to questions seemingly trivial

and childish and the fundamental, existential questions; “religiously,” argues Merrit Moseley, “her getting of wisdom ... is a loss” (102).

In the last part of *Staring at the Sun*, Jean – old, disillusioned but serene – witnesses Gregory’s struggle with eschatological questions and tries to allay his fears. In an attempt to save him the pain and disappointment of the – in her view – inevitable failure of the search for religious reassurance, she declares that religion is “nonsense” and that death is “absolute” (185). She can see that Gregory is turning to religion for peace and consolation; although she does not believe that religion can grant Gregory anything that he is searching for, she does not disapprove of his pursuit. She calls it “screaming at the sky” (157) and perceives his search as a desperate and, in a sense, heroic attempt to divine a meaning beyond himself, which, although deemed to ultimate failure, is a necessary stage in a journey to a higher consciousness and a deeper understanding of the condition of human existence:

Putting your head back and roaring at the empty heavens, knowing that however much noise you made, nobody up there would hear you. And then you flopped down on your back, exhausted, self-conscious and a little pleased: even if no one was listening, you had somehow made your point. That was what Gregory was doing. He was making his point. (157)

According to Jane’s viewpoint, the purposefulness of the search is not undermined by its ultimate frustration. Seeking God and failing to find him is seen in the novel as inscribed in the experience of a searching human individual. Even though, as Jean describes it, the outcome of the pursuit entails painful disappointment and “exhaustion,” it also makes one “a little pleased” that one has made their point. The search may not reach its hopeful end, believes Jean, but reaches a different one, which, although disillusioning, is at the same time liberating: the negative outcome of the pursuit of religion frees one from illusions and allows one to stare directly at the sun, of which more in the next section.

## **Staring at the sun**

*The fingers of cloud no longer lay between her and the sun. They were face to face. She did not, however, give it any sign of greeting. She did not smile, and she tried very hard not to blink.*

*Staring at the Sun* (last page)

The failure of the religious pursuit dramatised in *Staring at the Sun* brings the reader back to the title of the novel and hints at its significance. To stare at the sun is to have the courage to discard consolatory narratives or, as Nietzsche puts it in *The Birth of a Tragedy*, “the horizon ringed around with myths” (Rayment-Pickard 135). A belief in God emerges from the text as one of such master narratives which provide people with an illusion of a pattern and order. And since all totalising accounts of ultimate reality, argue the theoreticians of postmodernism, are doomed to failure, so is religion. Religion answers to people’s need for reassurance that there is a meaning beyond the here and now, whereas postmodernity breaks with the notion of ultimate meaning altogether. Religion is thus an attempt to hide the dazzling truth about the empty and indifferent universe: “God is the hand we put before our eyes because we cannot stare directly at the sun,” argues Merrit Moseley (98).

Although the ability to metaphorically stare at the sun is admirable and testifies to one’s courage and wisdom, its status in the novel is not unequivocal. Sun-Up Prosser, a fighter pilot whose story is referred to in the novel several times, describes the experience of looking steadily at the sun from his plane in the following manner, “You stare through your fingers at the sun, and you notice that the nearer you get to it, the colder you feel. You ought to worry about it but you don’t. You don’t because you’re happy” (29). However, the feeling of happiness, as Prosser explains when he goes on with his gently comedic description, is a result of “a small oxygen leak.” The fear of the approaching burst leaks away with the

oxygen; one carries on climbing higher and higher and then comes the inevitable end. In the latter part of the novel, Jean learns that it is exactly the kind of death that Prosser chose for himself many years later. Staring at the sun can therefore be lethal; the sheltering hand may be an illusion but it does protect from the dazzling truth. The scene related by Prosser has its counterpart in the last scene of the novel, in which Jean and Gregory are flying together on the plane and see the sun set twice. Gregory finds himself unable to look at the sun and covers his face with his hands and cries. Jean, the novel's paradigm of courage, does look at it yet without "any sign of greeting" or smile and she "trie[s] very hard not to blink" (194). Looking steadily at the truth is painful even for the courageous, shows the final passage of the novel.

The concept of staring at the sun is not new to Barnes's fiction. It has its analogue in *Flaubert's Parrot*, in the Flaubertian idea of "gazing into the black pit." In the last chapter of the novel, Geoffrey Braithwaite dismisses the theory that Flaubert committed suicide and quotes the words of the French master as proof of the preposterousness of such an idea, "People like us must have the religion of despair. By dint of saying "That is so! That is so!" and of gazing into the black pit at one's feet, one remains calm" (217). Flaubert's existentialist position is similar to the one adopted by Jean Serjeant: only by means of a painful act of divesting oneself of illusions, can one attain peace and calmness. Elsewhere in the novel, Braithwaite remarks that the lesson taught by Flaubert is to "gaze upon the truth and not blink from its consequences" (157), which appears to be an obvious analogue to the concept of staring at the sun.

In the conclusion of his analysis of *Staring at the Sun*, Merrit Moseley argues that the novel presents the reality which is "mundane, untouched with divine presence, and closed by death" (106). It is hard to disagree with the last two characteristics – the sky is seen as empty and death as definitive – but whether the world portrayed by *Staring at the Sun* is mundane can be disputed. The novel abounds in descriptions of little epiphanies and moments of

enchantment, such as the opening image of the pilot soaring in the sky and witnessing an “ordinary miracle he would never forget” (*Staring* 2) – the sun rising twice. Alice Hennegan considers this scene to be crucial to understanding the poetics of the novel, which she regards as a testimony to “the ordinary nature of the miraculous and the miraculous nature of the ordinary” (Guignery 53). Moseley points out that *Staring at the Sun* is about “the extraordinary that lies beneath or beyond the ordinary” (101). It is far from affirming the view that a world without God is a world in which there is no capacity for wonder and enchantment. While rejecting the glorious miracles of religion, the novel re-inscribes the notion of a miracle – earthly rather than divine, and all the more amazing for that, since eluding explanation by any master-narrative.

One can conclude that both *Staring at the Sun* and *England, England* acknowledge the longing for God, which, as they demonstrate, can often be at variance with one’s rational mindset. It appears that their protagonists would gladly subscribe to Barnes’s much-quoted phrase: “I don’t believe in God but I miss Him” (Guignery 59). The metaphysical yearning experienced by Jean, Gregory and Martha is not presented as a weakness but as a testament to their sense of disappointment with the absence of stable meanings and “the thinness of life.” Even the search for religious reassurance and certitude undertaken by Gregory does not emerge as an act of weakness on his part but as proof of his desire for knowledge and final meaning. Where he goes wrong, however, is his refusal to accept the pessimistic conclusions of his pursuit. Gregory is unable to confront the disillusioning truth, which prevents him from staring at the sun and makes him burst into tears and shrink away from it in the last scene of the novel. Despite its questioning of the foundations on which religions are based, the novel does not undermine the purposefulness of religious pursuit seen as a stage in a journey to a deeper understanding of human condition. What the final section of *Staring at the Sun* illustrates is the danger of arresting the search for fear of coming to disappointing

conclusions. An honest pursuit, Barnes's novel suggests, never culminates in a failure, even if achieving its aim is precluded from the start. Despite – or rather, thanks to – its ultimate frustration, the religious pursuit allows one to see through the illusory and look steadily at the real.

## Chapter Three

### ART AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

The following chapter will examine the concept of art as a source of meaning on the basis of *Flaubert's Parrot*. The aim of this chapter is to discuss the ideas about art that are played with by the text. Among the ideas that will be of particular importance for this analysis will be the questions about art's capacity to generate meaning and provide stable contexts of understanding and interpretation. In the three consecutive sections I will attempt to explore the contending approaches to art that are dramatised by the text and draw attention to certain ambiguities and contradictions in which the novel consciously abounds. I will argue that the text is a site of confrontation of modernist and postmodernist approaches to art. In order to be able to point to certain references to both approaches, I wish to begin with a brief outline of the major differences between modernist and postmodernist theories of art.

Arguably, one of the most notable aspects of the postmodern concept of art is calling into question the distinction between high and low culture (Jameson 63). Modernist art was expected to serve an important purpose, social or individual. In the face of a significant decline of religion, art seemed to take its place. Art in the age of modernism, notes Terry Eagleton, "represented the last fragile dwelling-place of human value in human civilisation" (*Meaning* 40). It was believed to contain multiple depths, which could be unravelled by means of a detailed interpretation. Postmodern art, for its part, breaks with the notion of depth altogether and replaces it with a multiplicity of surfaces, discourses and "textual play" (70). Fredric Jameson argues that the two literary concepts – parody and pastiche – encapsulate the major difference between modernist and postmodernist art. Parody, associated with modernism, "deviates from a norm which then reasserts itself." Pastiche, a typically postmodernist mode of artistic expression, celebrates heterogeneity, dissensus and

fragmentation to such an extent that “the norm itself is eclipsed” and becomes merely one of many idiolects (73). What is more, postmodernism is distrustful of such modernist notions as individual style, authenticity or originality of art and openly imitates other styles, draws attention to its heavy reliance on other texts and conceives of art as a site of mimicry and intertextuality (74). In terms of tone, modernist art is often seen as an expression of mourning of the loss of unity, order and belief in an intelligible and meaningful universe. Postmodernism, in turn, instead of lamenting the loss, takes the utter incomprehensibility and decentredness of the world for granted and appears to celebrate this fact rather than mourn. The idea of decentredness finds its expression in the form of much of postmodernist literature, whose characteristic features are the fragmentation of structure, overt self-referentiality and the denial of a linear narrative and closure (Snipp-Walmsley 410). All of these formal characteristics are prominent in *Flaubert’s Parrot*.

### **Art as master-narrative?**

*Superior to everything is – Art. A book of poetry is preferable to a railway.*

Gustave Flaubert

Geoffrey Braithwaite, the protagonist of Barnes’s most highly acclaimed novel to date, is an elderly doctor who introduces himself as a devoted admirer of Gustave Flaubert. Throughout the text he collects facts about the life and works of the French master, tells stories and anecdotes about him, quotes his novels, letters and diaries and defends him against the accusations that have been levelled at him by literary critics and historians. However, Braithwaite finds himself unsatisfied with the essential dryness of his knowledge about Flaubert. At the very beginning of the novel he complains that “all that remains of [Flaubert] is paper[:] ideas, phrases, metaphors, structured prose which turns into sound” (2). He desires to know him intimately, to gain a more profound insight into his genius. What serves as this

intimate link between Braithwaite and Flaubert is a stuffed parrot, which he discovers one day at the Hotel-Dieu in Rouen. The parrot, named Loulou, is reputedly the one which Flaubert once borrowed from the museum to serve him as inspiration when he was working on his novella *Un coeur simple*. Braithwaite admits that at the sight of Loulou he feels “ardently in touch” with Flaubert and from then on imagines it to be “the emblem of the writer’s voice” (7,12). The importance of the epiphany he experiences makes him want to establish whether the exhibit at the Hotel-Dieu is indeed the parrot that Flaubert had in front of him when writing *Un coeur simple* or whether the parrot on display in the near-by Croisset is the authentic one.

The novel, then, takes the form of a very loosely structured account of the quest for the genuine parrot intertwined with numerous digressions about Gustave Flaubert. As the novel unfolds, however, it becomes increasingly clear that Braithwaite’s story about Flaubert and the parrot is to a large extent a mere pretext for telling (or withholding?) the tragic story of the protagonist’s late wife Ellen. The text is peppered with aposiopeses, moments of sudden breaking off in speech, which take place whenever Braithwaite attempts to overcome his embarrassment and shyness and begin his own painful story: “I remember... But I’ll keep that for another time” (82), “My wife... Not now, not now” (120). At one point, in the midst of his discussion of *Madame Bovary*, he suddenly confesses, “Three stories contend within me. One about Flaubert, one about Ellen, one about myself. My own is the simplest of three ... and yet I find it the hardest to begin. My wife’s is more complicated and more urgent; yet I resist that too.... Ellen’s is a true story; perhaps it is even the reason I am telling you Flaubert’s story instead” (94-5).

Flaubert’s story becomes thus a story that is being told instead of a different, personal one, which the narrator feels unable to begin. Several questions seem to arise at this point. If the story about Gustave Flaubert is not being told for its own sake, what purpose does it

serve? Why tell a story at all? Does writing about Flaubert prepare Braithwaite for telling his own story? And ultimately: Why does he choose to write about Flaubert and not somebody else? As is usually the case with Barnes's novels, there is no one answer to any of the questions; there are only answers in plural, often contradictory ones. The reasons why Geoffrey Braithwaite chooses to tell Flaubert's story rather than his own are complex and equivocal. On the one hand, Braithwaite is afraid of confronting the pain of his personal tragic story and therefore defers it until he can work up the courage to share it with the reader. On the other hand, however, he writes about Flaubert because he hopes to find consolation in telling his story. But what sort of consolation is he seeking? And how can Flaubert and his art provide it? These are the questions that I want to consider in the remaining part of this section.

In order to examine these questions, one needs to be familiar with one of the last chapters of *Flaubert's Parrot* entitled "Pure Story," in which Geoffrey Braithwaite finally confronts the tragic events of his past. He talks about his long-time marriage with Ellen, which he describes as "happy... unhappy... happy enough" (197). What he also confides to the reader is the painful and embarrassing fact that Ellen used to have numerous affairs with other men, a thing he never mentioned to her and pretended not to notice. Eventually, Braithwaite confesses that his wife in all probability committed suicide and that he was the one to switch off her respirator. The reason for Ellen's decision to take her life was never clear to Braithwaite and the ignorance of it has haunted him ever since. He does realise, however, that despite the fact that she seemed to have everything she needed: "a husband, children, lovers, job... friends, and what are called interests"(197), she suffered from depression and a pervading sense of emptiness. She was not religious, he suggests, and at some point she simply could no longer think of a good reason to go on. Despite the years that

have passed, Ellen's suicide still remains an event that Braithwaite cannot reconcile himself to. The critic Georgia Johnston refers to his wife's tragic death as "the crux of his life" (65).

In default of any consolatory narrative to account for Ellen's suicide, enable him to understand her decision or make sense of it (Braithwaite is not religious either), he turns to art. The reasons why he chooses Gustave Flaubert are manifold and some of them will be discussed further in this section. One of the crucial ones, however, and the one that explains why Braithwaite intertwines Flaubert's story with the highly confessional story about Ellen is the French writer's masterpiece, *Madame Bovary*. The eponymous character of Flaubert's most famous novel is a middle-aged woman who (simplifying to the extreme) repeatedly betrays her husband and in the end commits suicide, thus becoming a counterpart to Ellen. The plot of *Madame Bovary* becomes for Geoffrey Braithwaite a context of interpretation, which enables him to identify with Charles Bovary, the betrayed and abandoned widower, and to understand Ellen better through the figure of Emma Bovary. Georgia Johnston captures the reasons for Braithwaite's interest in Flaubert very succinctly:

The autobiographical 'I' cannot understand his wife's suicide; that inability to understand provides the impetus of Braithwaite's current life. The quest to find Flaubert's parrot, while unable to give direct information about Ellen's suicide, can and does present information about Flaubert and about Madame Bovary. By presenting information about the real Flaubert, the fictional Braithwaite invokes Emma Bovary's suicide, and her suicide provides a textual parallel to Ellen's suicide. (66)

The parallels that the narrator finds between his sad story and the life and works of Gustave Flaubert, argues Johnston, "become sources of meaning for Braithwaite's life, an ideological structure through which he understands himself" (69). The idea that what the protagonist of *Flaubert's Parrot* desperately seeks in art is the ability to understand his personal tragedy is shared by several critics. Matthew Pateman suggests that Braithwaite's

“desire to be able to understand his relationship with Ellen and his relationship with himself” is what “necessitates the construction of [the] contexts” of Flaubert and *Emma Bovary* (*Julian Barnes* 29). He argues that the reason why Braithwaite pursues the parrot also results from the same desire: “In trying to understand his loss, [he] needs to understand Flaubert; in order to understand Flaubert, he feels he needs to understand the parrot” (28). If one adopts this hypothesis, then the whole quest on which Braithwaite embarks becomes a means to a different end – to comprehend a personal tragedy. Whether the quest achieves this aim is problematic and will be discussed in the next sections of this chapter. What remains to be considered are other expectations that Geoffrey Braithwaite has of art and different reasons why he turns to Flaubert and his writings.

It becomes apparent in “Pure Story” that Braithwaite needs Flaubert in order to define himself and articulate his own thoughts. It is significant that even in the most personal part of his narrative – in which he promises to leave Flaubert aside for a while and finally tell his own story – Braithwaite cannot express his thoughts and feelings without having recourse to his literary master. When talking about the insufficiency of the language of bereavement that he experienced after Ellen’s death, he feels compelled to quote Flaubert’s definition of language as “a cracked kettle” (discussed in Chapter One). While pondering Ellen’s unhappiness, he follows Flaubert in concluding that stupidity and selfishness are necessary requirements for achieving happiness (198). What these observations testify to is the fact that Flaubert has become for Braithwaite such an important (arguably indispensable) context of identification and interpretation that the latter cannot define himself without recourse to his beloved writer. One of the ways to account for this phenomenon is the postmodern theory of the death of the autonomous subject. The self is no longer construed as a unified whole but rather as a decentred and free-floating construct of multiple texts and discourses. The figure of Flaubert can therefore be seen as one of the forces that constitute Braithwaite’s identity.

The protagonist of the novel looks up to Flaubert as a teacher and as an aesthetic as well as moral authority. In “The Case Against” he lists the qualities and attitudes that Flaubert “teaches” in his life and in his writings, among which are the following: “courage, stoicism, friendship”, “to gaze upon the truth and not blink from its consequences”, “to sleep on the pillow of doubt” (157). Elsewhere, he mentions Flaubert’s “lesson” that one should not participate in life, for “happiness lies in the imagination, not the act” (201) and subscribes to his argument that “one must have the religion of despair” (217). A few critics have also suggested that Braithwaite models himself on Flaubert and strives to adopt some of his characteristics. David Higdon argues that the manner in which Braithwaite tells his own story bears witness to the fact that he tries to imitate “Flaubertian detachment, objectivity and impersonality” (Guignery 47). Similarly, Andrzej Gasiorek points out that Braithwaite wishes to adopt his characteristically “ironic tone” and “disingenuousness” (Guignery 49).

The purpose of my discussion of Geoffrey Braithwaite’s attitude towards Gustave Flaubert is to flag some of the most significant ideas about art and its capacity to generate meaning that are in play in the text. As can be seen above, among the questions that are addressed by *Flaubert’s Parrot* are the following: Can art help people live their lives? Is art capable of accounting for or explaining events or situations that people cannot reconcile themselves to? Does art shape people’s identities? Is it possible for art to teach certain values or attitudes? Is art capable of setting an example to follow? For the most part of the novel, Geoffrey Braithwaite seems to lean towards answering most of these questions in the affirmative. By clinging to the belief that art has the capacity to teach, explain and guarantee meaning, Braithwaite endorses the concept of art as a kind of metanarrative. His pursuit of the consolations of art is seen by the critic Neil Brooks as a result of his “modernist approach” to art, which consists in his desire to discover in art “stable hierarchies and master-narratives” that would restore “order and intelligibility to his life” (Guignery 45). This concept of art,

which the novel embodies in the figure of Braithwaite, is espoused by Robert Williams in his *Art and Thought*. The critic claims that art answers to our need for meaning “in the most fundamental and all-inclusive sense.” He conceives of art as a repository of meaning and a source of identity and argues that any sense of coherence, order and “significant agency” that we experience is the effect of art (Williams 3-4). Although Barnes’s novel seems to draw on this concept of art and suggest that art can indeed generate stable meanings, it also repeatedly calls the concept into question, which I will attempt to explore in the following section.

### **Art as no life-jacket? Sites of indeterminacy**

*Books are not life, however much we might prefer it if they were.*

*Flaubert’s Parrot*

If we assume that the real aim of Geoffrey Braithwaite’s pursuit is not the authentic Flaubert’s parrot but the understanding and acceptance of his personal tragedy through art, then the outcome of his quest can be interpreted as revealing in terms of the ongoing discussion about art’s capacity to provide guidance and consolation. The outcome of the quest for the parrot, however, is far from conclusive. In the last chapter of the novel Braithwaite visits yet again the two museums that boast of owning the genuine Loulou and closely examines the two exhibits. Afterwards, he arranges to meet Monsieur Andrieu, an elderly expert on Flaubert, and asks to be told the story of the two parrots. He gets to know that it is a possibility that neither parrot is authentic, since they were, to a degree, arbitrarily selected from about fifty parrots that were stored in the reserve collection of the Museum of Natural History in Rouen. “Pleased and disappointed at the same time” (227), Braithwaite decides to visit the Museum and examine the leftovers of the collection of stuffed parrots. In the last paragraph of the novel he describes the sight of the three last Amazonian parrots that have

survived over the years. After a moment of investigating them carefully, he remarks pensively, “Perhaps it was one of them” (229).

These last words are a testimony to the ultimate inconclusiveness of the novel. The authentic parrot, the only living link between Flaubert and Braithwaite, is not (and probably cannot ever be) identified. Does then the ending of the novel suggest that art’s consolations are, likewise, inaccessible to us? Erica Hateley argues that despite the failure of Braithwaite’s project, he has learnt to cope with Ellen’s death and is now ready to “move forward” (Guignery 47). Most critics, however, read the ending of the novel as an illustration of the ultimate frustration of Braithwaite’s quest. James Scott concludes that the protagonist’s search through Flaubert’s life and literature culminates in “a sense of purposelessness” (59). Likewise, Vanessa Guignery argues that Braithwaite’s “synecdochal journey from the part to the whole” proves “impossible” (41). The narrator of *Flaubert’s Parrot* himself comes to realise towards the end of the novel that his attempts to understand life through literature are doomed to failure. In a much-quoted passage from “Pure Story,” Braithwaite admits that he understands Gustave Flaubert better than his late wife and goes on to reflect, “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” (201). In the long run, implies Braithwaite, literature, or more generally – art, is incapable of imposing meaning on life or helping to understand it.

Critics have argued that the sceptical attitude towards art that Braithwaite seems to adopt by the end of the text can be seen in terms of postmodernist concepts of art, as opposed to the modernist belief that art is capable of restoring order and acting as a master-narrative. The two contending approaches to art, to which *Flaubert’s Parrot* is much indebted, have been discussed by Neil Brooks in his stimulating reading of Barnes’s novel against the

backdrop of one of its crucial intertexts, Ford Maddox Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1915). The critic notes that the plot of Ford's classical modernist text is essentially the same as *Flaubert's Parrot's*. Both novels tell a story of a widower who hopes to learn to cope with his grief over the death of his unfaithful wife by means of telling a story about his loss. Brooks points out that despite numerous similarities between the two texts there is one fundamental difference: Dowell (the protagonist of *The Good Soldier*) "lives in an age and a novel where Modernist assertions of order can be upheld" (46). Telling his sad story enables him to "bring an order to the events of his life, an order through which the individual can reassert the importance of tradition and still maintain the 'purity' of self" (49). Braithwaite, on the contrary, realises that the codes of proper behaviour that Dowell can rely on are no longer accessible and "discovers in postmodern society that even stories cannot tell tales that provide a secure foundation" (49). The "totalising narrative" of modernism that allows Dowell to accept knowledge as truth and find coherence and order in telling his story does not hold in the realm of postmodernist scepticism and is denied Braithwaite (50). The dialogue between modernism and postmodernism that is enacted in Barnes's novel has also been the subject of Erica Hateley's article, in which she notes that *Flaubert's Parrot* "maintains a strong modernist aesthetics despite its seeming postmodern sensibilities" (Guignery 46). She interprets the novel's ending as a confrontation of "Braithwaite's modernist project" with "the plurality and contradiction" that are inherent in postmodernist aesthetics (46).

One of the most notable examples of postmodern aesthetics in *Flaubert's Parrot* is the eponymous figure of the parrot itself. The fact that the success or failure of Braithwaite's quest hinges on his ability to establish the authentic parrot is in itself highly ironic. However, there appear to be more levels of irony in play. The parrot, a symbol of imitation and mimicry, is playfully associated in the text with the authenticity of art. A stuffed parrot is referred to by Geoffrey Braithwaite as "the emblem of the writer's voice" (12). This suggests

the novel's indebtedness to, or at least dialogue with, the postmodern concept of art as essentially imitative and infinitely drawing on other texts. In the face of the collapse of the modernist belief in style and originality, argues Fredric Jameson, postmodernist art has "nowhere to turn to but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of ... culture" (74).

The sceptical attitude towards art's ability to guarantee authenticity and re-inscribe meaning deserves more attention and will be discussed in the remaining part of this section. This attitude is implicit in Braithwaite's defence of Flaubert against the charge that "he didn't believe Art had a social purpose" (160-1). The narrator concedes that Flaubert does not treat art as a moral or social pill, or as a means to provide any kind of consolation. His literature, if anything, is closer to providing desolation. Braithwaite then goes on to compare a work of art to "a pyramid which stands in the desert, uselessly" and is "pissed at" by jackals (160). He remarks that "the Ambulance Flaubert" cannot serve as a healer but rather as a teller of the truth, which can "run over your leg" (161). Comparing Flaubert to an ambulance sounds rather ironic and therefore it may seem ambiguous whether Braithwaite really believes that art can tell "the truth." If so, why would Braithwaite state a couple of sentences earlier that art "stands in the desert, uselessly"? Further in the passage, the protagonist of *Flaubert's Parrot* denies literature's capacity to effect a (social or moral) change, by quoting Auden's maxim that "poetry makes nothing happen" (161). Braithwaite ends the chapter by declaring that art is not a "brassiere" (French for "life-jacket") and is not meant to bring "uplift or self-confidence" (161). The sudden firmness of his stance on art's essential distinctness from life is rendered ambiguous by other passages in the novel (discussed in the previous sections) in which his yearning for the consolations of art is explicitly expressed. Nevertheless, the scepticism about art's capacity to serve as a moral guide or healer is evidently flagged and played with in the novel.

This position, argues Noel Carroll in his “Art, Narrative and Moral Understanding,” can be referred to as an “autonomist” concept of art. It defines art as essentially separate from the realm of morals and therefore beyond the notions of “goodness” or “badness” (126). According to this theory, art cannot serve as an instrument of moral education or guidance. This idea, although hinted at by Braithwaite himself, is at odds with the attitude to literature that is implicit in the narrator’s referring to Flaubert’s “lesson” (201) and listing the qualities that his works “teach” (157). Such contradictions and ambiguities, however, should come as no surprise, for they only testify to the dialogic character of *Flaubert’s Parrot*.

### **The search is meaning?**

*[Ellen] didn’t ever search for that sliding panel which opens the secret chamber of her heart, the chamber where memory and corpses are kept. Sometimes you find the panel, but it doesn’t open; sometimes it opens, and your gaze meets nothing but a mouse skeleton. But at least you’ve looked.*

*Flaubert’s Parrot*

The last, very brief, section of this chapter will focus not so much on the relationship between art and meaning as on the notion of the search for meaning as illustrated in *Flaubert’s Parrot*. Following James Scott’s analysis of the novel, I want to present the possibility of a different way of interpreting the purpose and the outcome of the protagonist’s pursuit.

It is usually argued that Barnes’s novel dramatises Braithwaite’s quest whose aim is either to find the eponymous parrot or to understand and reconcile himself to his wife’s suicide. Consequently, Braithwaite is perceived as a character who strives to achieve his, rather utopian, aim and masks his disappointment as his search proves impossible. The frustrated pursuit brings no consolation and is, in the end, futile. James Scott, however, advances a radically different interpretation (61-2). He maintains that from the very beginning

Braithwaite is aware that his search will probably never reach its end, but commits himself to it nonetheless. This, argues Scott, turns Braithwaite into a latter-day “Grail-questing knight,” for whom the failure to find the object of his quest does not preclude, or even undermine, the purposefulness of the pursuit. Since “the search is all,” the ultimate success or failure is of little (if any) importance.

The critic then compares the realm inhabited by the characters of the novel to a rhizome pattern, which “is so constructed that every path can be connected with every other one” and “has no centre, no periphery, no exit” (Eco qtd. in Scott 61). The rhizome space precludes the possibility of there being any “unique exit into full meaning or certitude.” In default of an ultimate meaning, the only accessible, although “evanescent,” meaning(s) is (are) guaranteed by motion – “the movement from chamber to chamber.” According to Scott, Braithwaite realises that and continues his quest, as opposed to Ellen, who gives up and takes her life when she discovers that there is no exit from the rhizome space. What turns the reality of *Flaubert’s Parrot* into a rhizome space is the recurrent experience of indeterminacy and the inherent lack of closure. The final denial of certitude is the effect of all Braithwaite’s investigations. He fails to establish Flaubert’s exact height or find out whether he really had sex with an Egyptian boy; he cannot solve the mystery of the secret correspondence between Flaubert and Juliet Herbert. And, ultimately, his quest for the authentic parrot is also deprived of closure. Braithwaite, however, does not rebel against the inaccessibility of certitude. On the contrary, at one point he confesses that he even “prefer[s] to feel that things are chaotic [and] free-wheeling” (70). James Scott argues that the reason why Braithwaite pursues Flaubert is because the search for the consolations of art “ensures him the joy of indeterminacy.” The elusiveness of meaning in literature and the undecidability of interpretation preclude at the very start the closure of Braithwaite’s quest and thus make it “free from the emptiness of final confirmation.”

Scott's interpretation presents art as merely one of the objects of the search for meaning, which does not, however, generate meaning by itself but only keeps the search in motion. The search, the movement – to whatever end – is what ensures meaning, or rather a plurality of partial meanings. This is a very illuminating insight, which casts a new light on the subject of this study – the notion of the pursuit of meaning – and therefore it will be referred to in the remaining part of my dissertation.

## Chapter Four

### LOVE IS THE ANSWER?

“Love is the answer, and you know that for sure” sings John Lennon in one of his later songs. Love and its capacity to be the Answer and the only lasting hope is one of the major issues addressed in several of Julian Barnes’s texts. That is why the following chapter will investigate the pursuit of love as the last instance of the quest for meaning to be discussed in my dissertation. In my analysis of the concept of love as dramatised in the novels of Julian Barnes, I will be making frequent reference to “Parenthesis,” the half-chapter of *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* and, to a lesser extent, to the other sections of the novel. I wish to examine the issue of love and its capacity to generate meaning against the backdrop of the postmodern theories of love and desire, which were very eloquently explored by Catherine Belsey in her seminal work *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (1994). As was the case with the previous chapters of my dissertation, I will be trying to foreground some of the ambiguities and ambivalences of the texts under discussion. One of the major issues that I intend to address in this chapter will be the question about whether love can be put up as the definitive answer to the metaphysical pursuits embarked on by the characters of Barnes’s novels or whether it is merely one of a plurality ways to meaning, as prone to failure as any other.

#### **“Parenthesis” and the postmodern ambivalence about love**

*They were children of a time and culture which mistrusted love, “in love,” romantic love, romance in toto, and which nevertheless in revenge proliferated sexual language, linguistic sexuality, analysis, dissection, deconstruction, exposure. They were theoretically knowing: they knew about phallocracy and penisneid, punctuation, puncturing and penetration, about polymorphous and polysemous perversity, orality, good and bad breasts, clitoral tumescence, vesicle*

*persecution, the fluids, the solids, the metaphors for these...They took to silence. They touched each other without comment...Neither was quite sure how much, or what, all this meant to the other. Neither dared ask.*

*A. S. Byatt, Possession (423-4)*

The above-quoted passage from A. S. Byatt's Booker-winning novel illustrates the awakening love between two literary scholars, Maud and Roland. They are both familiar with the post-metaphysical theories about desire and sexuality; they both seem disillusioned with the romantic idea of true love, sceptical about the very concept of love. And yet when sitting side by side on a deserted beach they feel something they fail to find words for – the Freudian jargon they are so fluent in does not prove any helpful. Careful not to spoil the magic of what has just awakened between them, they choose reverent silence. Maud and Roland are drawn to each other despite their theoretical wariness of love. The protagonists' curiously ambivalent attitude towards the concept of love is, as I wish to demonstrate, implicit in the culture of postmodernity.

Postmodernism, famously referred to by Fredric Jameson as “the cultural logic of late capitalism,” is often viewed as a celebration of consumerism and a realm of instant gratification in which money can buy almost everything. This “almost,” argues Catherine Belsey, is love. Following the title of the famous The Beatles song “Can't Buy Me Love,” love remains a value that is “beyond market” (*Desire* 72). Its pricelessness emphasises its, in a sense, otherworldly and metaphysical character. Belsey notes that – to a greater extent than ever before – love “has come to represent presence, transcendence, immortality ... certainty, everything, in short, that the market is unable to provide” (72). At the same time, however, postmodernism calls into question the very concepts of metaphysics, presence, transcendence and immortality, which makes it incredulous and sceptical about love. What the postmodern scepticism also stems from is the fact that the metaphysical idea of true love appears to be

today a kind of fundamentalism which is responsible for many social wrongs. Over the centuries the idea of true love has been used as an instrument of control over the society. It has established the confines of sexual desire (the negative effects of which have been one of the major concerns of Michel Foucault's work); it has promoted the intolerance of sexual minorities and "legalised prohibitions, coercions, narrow proprieties, expropriations and the transformation of people into property" (*Desire* 74). Traditionally regarded as the quintessential expression of one's individuality, desire and love have increasingly been viewed in terms of their "im-personality" and "citationality" (82-3). The poststructuralist theories which conceive of language as an instrument that constructs rather than reflects our reality root desire in other texts and not in the individual self. What follows is the view that love cannot offer transcendence since its origin is not anywhere beyond or outside the world it is meant to transcend, but in this very world, in its discourses and texts. Desire and love are thus seen as contingent – products of a particular time, place and culture. Postmodern love, Catherine Belsey concludes her argument, is "at once endlessly pursued and ceaselessly suspected" (74).

Some of the postmodern ambivalence about the status of love comes through in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*. Although in "Parenthesis" the voice of the implied author announces love's transcendence of the chaos and entropy of the contemporary world (of which in the next sections), love's overall status in the novel is rendered ambiguous by the unique structure of the text. The novel as a whole is a collection of ten short stories told by ten different narrators and set in ten different locations; it also comprises an essay on love, which figures as the half-chapter and is situated between chapters eight and nine. The reason why, despite its unusual structure, Barnes's text tends to be classified as a novel are numerous links and motifs that are common to all the stories. Contrary to what the title might suggest, Barnes's novel is far from presenting a coherent outline of the history of the world. Instead,

the novel is a celebration of discursive heterogeneity – it mixes genres, epochs and tones without any apparent order. The randomness of subjects of the stories told in the novel illustrates the idea that history is a mere fabulation, every bit as random as the selection of stories in Barnes’s text. The question that is of central importance for my discussion is whether “Parenthesis,” the half-chapter that hails love as the antidote to history and as a redeeming force, is just another story – another voice among a plurality of voices or if it is an authoritative, concluding voice that speaks from a different, higher perspective than the voices telling the other stories of the novel.

“Parenthesis” comes after chapter eight, which positions it in the midst of other texts, neither at the beginning of the novel nor at its end. On the other hand, however, its title singles it out, suggesting that it is not an integral part of the rest of the text but, in a sense, stands on the side, remains outside of it. What emphasises the unique status of “Parenthesis” and what accounts for it often being treated by critics as “the summary and conclusion” of the novel is the voice of the narrator, which hints that it is identical with the voice of the implied author. At the very beginning of “Parenthesis” the narrator describes the famous El Greco painting “Burial of the Count of Orgaz,” in which, as the tradition has it, the painter looks directly at the viewer. Then the narrator goes on to suggest that now he is the El Greco from the picture. Vanessa Guignery argues that at this moment Julian Barnes chooses to discard “the mask of pseudonyms or narrators” and “assumes responsibility for his reflections about love and history” (64). The idea that literature is a mask behind which hides the omnipresent author may appear obsolete, but Guignery’s argument is still interesting insofar as it illustrates the forcefulness and the peculiar status of “Parenthesis” in relation to the other sections of the novel. Similarly, Merrit Moseley argues that in the half-chapter “Barnes comes as close as possible, for a novelist, to *speaking as himself*” but he does concede that this identification of the narrator with the author may be interpreted as a mere literary device – that “the ‘Julian

Barnes' speaking here is a mask behind which the 'real' Julian Barnes is smirking at the sentimentality of these ideas" (121-3).

This is by no means to say that the ideas expressed in "Parenthesis" are indeed sentimental or that its celebration of love is invalid but it seems important to bear in mind that the half-chapter is part of the novel which foregrounds its fictionality and heterogeneity. Therefore it should be analysed with critical vigilance and in relation to the novel as a whole. What follows is a discussion of one of the most powerful pieces of prose in the fiction of Julian Barnes and the ideas about love dramatised very eloquently and forcefully in the text.

### **Can love save us?**

*Trusting virgins were told that love was the promised land, an ark on which two might escape the Flood. It may be an ark, but one on which anthropophagy is rife; an ark skippered by some crazy greybeard who beats you round the head with his gopher-wood stave, and might pitch you overboard at any moment.*

“Parenthesis”

One of the recurrent motifs of *A History of the World* is the notion of survival. The first chapter tells the story of the ark of Noah; chapter two describes a historian who survives a terrorist attack; "Shipwreck" depicts the tragic story of the castaways from the raft of the Medusa and, finally, one of the chapters is straightforwardly entitled "The Survivor." The motif of survival runs through "Parenthesis" as well and is explored in relation to love. In the opening part of the chapter, the narrator quotes the last line of Philip Larkin's "An Arundel Tomb", "What will survive of us is love" (226). He then asks if this famous line is true or if it should only be read as a pretty "poetic flourish." He wonders if love "glows after our deaths" for a while like outdated television sets after being switched off. This image of love, however appealing, is discarded by the narrator. The death of lovers puts an end to their love too – love cannot survive outside of them. "If anything survives of us it will probably be something

else,” remarks the narrator. In the case of Philip Larkin it will not be his love but his poetry. What will remain of William Huskisson, a politician who was the first person to be killed by a train, will be “his moment of final carelessness” rather than his love (226-7).

The link between love and survival, although called into question at the very beginning, keeps recurring further in the text. During his polyglot analysis of the words “I love you” the narrator asks, “Are there tribes whose lexicon lacks [these] words? Or have they all died out?” He then argues that love should be spoken about with restraint, honesty and precision. “If it is to save us,” he points out, “we must look at it as clearly as we should look at death.” What does the narrator mean here by the word “save”? What kind of salvation can love offer, if it is unable to outlive us, to guarantee our survival? The narrator clarifies that he does not mean “happiness”, “Let’s start at the beginning. Love makes you happy? No.... Love makes everything all right? Indeed no. I used to believe all this, of course” (229). The conviction that true love ensures happiness is a myth, which proliferates in our culture and lies deep down our psyche. The narrator invokes his own love experience and declares, “Mutual love did not add up to happiness. Stubbornly, we insisted that it did” (230). He then disputes the idea that love is capable of *making* somebody happy – love cannot *make* anything. Much as we would want it to, love does not work as a “transforming wand.” If so, the question remains – how can love save us?

“We must love one another or die,” wrote W. H. Auden in “September 1, 1939” and later changed it into “We must love one another *and* die” – notes the narrator of “Parenthesis” and praises Auden’s correction: “If a line sounds ringingly good but isn’t true, out with it” (230-1). The change of “or” into “and” is crucial and declares that love cannot guarantee any sort of immortality, however metaphorically understood. A couple of lines below, however, the narrator pauses once again on the first version of the quote and suggests an alternative way of reading it, “We must love one another because if we don’t, if love doesn’t fuel our

lives, then we might as well be dead.” This seems to be the survival that love can offer and that is how it can save us – by giving us a purpose, something to hold on to when everything else proves futile. It may not be a lasting survival, the narrator seems to suggest, and no grand salvation, but it is the only one there is. Love cannot work miracles but what it can do is give you “spine-stretching confidence” and “clarity of vision” (232). The notion of love as survival recurs once more and is questioned when the narrator announces, “Our love doesn’t help us survive ... Yet it gives us our individuality, our purpose” (234). Love, then, is capable of imposing a purpose, generating meaning, which, although not absolute and closed by death, is worth striving for. Several pages later the narrator declares love’s ultimate superiority over religion and art:

Religion has become either wimpishly workaday or terminally crazy, or merely businesslike ... Art, picking up confidence from the decline of religion, announces its transcendence of the world (and it lasts, it lasts! art beats death!), but this announcement isn’t accessible to all, or where accessible isn’t always inspiring or welcome. So religion and art must yield to love. It gives us our humanity, and also our mysticism. There is more to us than us. (242-3)

Love emerges from “Parenthesis” as the only stable source of transcendence, as the quintessence of our humanity. It allows us to see the truth and to tell the truth – “Love and truth, that’s the vital connection, love and truth” (238). The narrator, however, is far from affirming that, once discovered, love makes everything right once and for all. He even suggests that failure is inscribed in the experience of loving. Still, it does not undermine the necessity for love, “It’s our only hope even if it fails us, although it fails us, because it fails us” (243). The illustration of love’s failure is the subject of two other chapters of the novel. “The Visitors” tells the story of Franklin Hughes, a distinguished Irish historian who becomes one of the passengers of a hijacked ship. The terrorists promise to release Hughes’s girlfriend,

Tricia Maitland, if he agrees to deliver a lecture addressed to the other passengers in which he explains the motives of their attack. Hughes realises that by accepting the terrorists' terms he would betray his fellow passengers and his own profession. In the end, he chooses to save his girlfriend's life and delivers the lecture, which, as he expects, antagonises the crowd, including Tricia. After the terrorists are killed and the ship recovered from their hands, there are no witnesses to the bargain that Hughes made with the Arabs. He himself fails to convince Tricia that he agreed to give the lecture only in order to save her, and as a result she "never [speaks] to him again" (58). Matthew Pateman argues that "The Visitors" dramatises a failure of an act of selflessness to "transcend the historical moment" and interprets the story as an illustration of the view of love affirmed by the narrator of "Parenthesis" – that of "an amorphous concept that will fail but that still offers salvation" (50-1).

"Upstream!", the chapter preceding "Parenthesis," takes the form of a series of letters written by Charlie, an actor working on his new film in the wilderness of South-American jungle, to his wife Pippa. Charlie's encounter with the native people and his experiences away from civilisation turn him into "a changed man" (218). He learns to truly value Pippa's love and in one of the later letters confesses, "God I do love you, Pippa, I just hold on to that" (211). His wife, however, does not reply to any of his letters because, as we learn at the end of the story, she discovers that Charlie's ex-lover is a member of the crew – a fact he has been hiding from her. She refuses to forgive Charlie for his lie and breaks up with him. Again, argues Pateman, "love fails drastically" (52). Love enables Charlie to feel the "spine-stretching confidence" and regain "clarity of vision," yet fails to save the relationship.

Although "The Visitors" and "Upstream!" can indeed be read as, rather pessimistic, illustrations of some of the ideas about love expressed in "Parenthesis," the half-chapter itself does not end on such a gloomy note. The following section of this chapter will examine a different aspect of the novel's concept of love.

## Love as defiance

*In the night the world can be defied. Yes, that's right, it can be done, we can face history down.*

“Parenthesis”

*A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* is, as the title suggests, a novel about history. The ten chapters tell ten different stories, some of them entirely fictional, some remotely based on actual events. The randomness of their selection illustrates the unreliability and fictionality of history itself. In the latter part of “Parenthesis” the issue of history resurfaces. History is referred to by the narrator as “fabulation,” an illusory narrative that pretends to tell the truth about humanity’s past and bullies people with dates and illusions of constant progress. It dismisses the individual and makes them feel daunted and insignificant. The only way to resist history and defy its dictatorship, announces the narrator of “Parenthesis,” is to love. Without love history becomes “ridiculous” and “brutally self-important” (238). Love, however, one has to remember, is not a “transforming wand.” It “won’t change the history of the world,” points out the narrator, “but it will do something much more important: teach us to stand up to history, to ignore its chin-out strut. I don’t accept your terms, love says; sorry, you don’t impress” (238). It is only the “spine-stretching confidence,” which is the effect of love, that can enable one, if only for a moment, to look at history without awe and see all its ridiculousness and absurdity. A similar point about the relationship between love and defiance is made by Catherine Belsey. She argues that desire, and love for that matter, is “the location of a resistance to convention,” for it signals that “people want something more” (*Desire* 7). Desire, Belsey notes, can bring about a “change in an area which seems most personal, most private, most independent of history” (8). According to the narrator of “Parenthesis,”

however, a change in the most private area, although seemingly independent of history, is crucial and teaches one to stand up to its flow.

Another reason why love should have the capacity to resist the terror of history is its connection with truth. Whereas history emerges from “Parenthesis” as a fabrication, love is the closest one can get to truth. “Love and truth,” states the narrator, “yes, that’s the prime connection” (243). This declaration sounds surprising in a novel that has been deconstructing the notion of objective truth, with the consecutive chapters (“The Stowaway” in particular) illustrating the mechanisms of transforming stories into the “truths” of history. The narrator, however, is not naïve about 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. This God-eyed version is a fake – a charming, impossible fake” (243). Still, if we want love to defy history, we have to put aside our scepticism about truth. The narrator goes on, “But while we know all this, we must still believe that objective truth is obtainable; or we must believe that it is 99 per cent obtainable; or if we can’t believe this we must believe that 43 per cent objective truth is better than 41 per cent” (243-4). This unexpected endorsement of the concept of truth is seen by Vanessa Guignery as “the postmodernist strategy of inscribing and subverting, installing and deconstructing.” The unusual thing about it is the fact that the novel does it “in the reverse way” – first deconstructs the notion of objective truth and then re-inscribes it (68). Gregory Salyer also perceives this strategy as indebted to the postmodern, “With this paradox of subverting objective truth and then reinstalling it, Barnes is right back in the thick of postmodernist thought” (Guignery 68).

The re-establishing of the notion of truth and the belief in love’s transcendence of history, claims the narrator of “Parenthesis,” is the only way to avert our “fall into beguiling relativity” (244). Merrit Moseley sees the endorsement of truth as subversive in relation to the

rest of the novel, “It works to undermine the postmodernist relativism to which the arguments about history tend” (123-4). According to Matthew Pateman, the indictment of postmodern relativity is one of the major concerns of Julian Barnes as a writer. He argues that his novels, including *A History of the World*, ask questions about the possibility of “creating a system of ethics within a society which appears to have lost the legislative authority to tell us how to act and which apparently leaves the individual as the sole arbiter of ethics” (“Popularity of Ethics” 179-80). Pateman points out that one of the reasons why love is referred to in “Parenthesis” as the only hope in the struggle against history is its capacity to function as “the potential basis of an ethics” (181).

The belief in love as truth, however firm, does not guarantee love’s ultimate victory. The narrator repeats that love is by definition prone to failure, “It will go wrong, this love; it probably will.... But when love fails us, we must still go on believing in it. Is it encoded in every molecule that things fuck up, that love will fail? Perhaps it is. Still we must believe in love, just as we must believe in free will and objective truth” (244). The belief in love is then an act of defiance against the world in which we have come to live, the world which calls into question such fundamental concepts as truth and free will. To love, and be ethical, suggests the narrator, is to resist the order of our world, to act against its logic. This notion of defiance against relativity positions the text in opposition to postmodernism. Terry Eagleton’s argument about what he calls postmodernism’s fallacy of “leaping from description to prescription” seems to illustrate the stance adopted by the narrator of “Parenthesis”:

[Postmodernist] ontology then offers to ground your ethics or politics by suggesting that we should live as the world does.... Why should the fact that there are supposedly no unities or identities in reality have any implications whatsoever on our conduct? Why should fact – more precisely, the fact that there aren’t any unimpeachable facts – become value? There are, after all, plenty of moralists who

have believed that we should act against the grain of the way they take the world to be. (*The Illusions of Postmodernism* 32)

To act against the grain of the world, in which love's failure may be encoded in every molecule, is the only chance to survive – the narrator seems to be saying. If our efforts fail, the history of the world is to blame. “But that's still to come. Perhaps it will never come. In the night the world can be defied” (244). After all, the narrator wonders, love's failure may not be inevitable. He is lying next to his love and feels like waking her up to tell her this “grand truth,” but eventually decides against it – “in the morning it may not seem worth disturbing her for” (244). On that playful and inconclusive note “Parenthesis” ends and leaves open the question about love's capacity to stand up to history.

## Conclusion

Throughout my dissertation I have been examining the notion of the search for ultimate meaning in Julian Barnes's novels and this is the place to attempt to draw more general conclusions about the ways in which they are problematised in the texts.

The pursuit of religious belief dramatised in *Staring at the Sun* fails to reach its desired end. Gregory does not find consolation in religion, which is exposed as an illusory narrative hiding the truth about the finitude of human existence. Although frustrated, the search does not appear to be futile. It enables Jean Serjeant to see through the illusory reassurances offered by religion and work up the courage to "stare at the sun." In *Flaubert's Parrot* the notion of the pursuit and its purposefulness is more problematic. On the surface level, the object of the quest – the authentic parrot – is not found. But the real aim of Geoffrey Braithwaite's search is, as I have argued, not so much establishing the authentic parrot as understanding, and learning to cope with, his wife's suicide. Whether the protagonist achieves that is debatable. What makes the search worthwhile is not its closure (which is denied in the novel) but the very fact that, as James Scott points out, it keeps the protagonist in motion. That is to say that in the world in which ultimate meaning is not (no longer?) accessible, what guarantees survival is movement; Ellen's refusal to pursue leads to her suicide. This existential stance is thus encapsulated by Terry Eagleton, "The meaning of life consists in the search for the meaning of life. A good many liberals tend to prefer questions to answers, since they regard questions as unduly restrictive. Questions are free-floating whereas answers are not. The point is to have an inquiring mind, not to snap it shut with some drearily determinate solution" (*Meaning* 50). In default of answers to Braithwaite's dramatic questions, the fact that he asks them allows him to survive. The search is all.

In comparison to religion and art, love, which is the subject of "Parenthesis," emerges from my discussion as the most solid foundation for a meaningful existence. It is said in the

text to be the only accessible source of transcendence and the quintessence of our humanity. Where religion fails because of its mundane practicality and art because of its essentially elitist character, love transcends the everyday, offers us mysticism and announces that “there is more to us than us,” declares the narrator of the half-chapter. The search for love, however, is also prone (if not bound) to failure. “But when love fails us, we must still go on believing in it” (244). The search becomes an act of defiance, a refusal to submit to the entropy of the world of “beguiling relativity,” in which there are no unimpeachable foundations. The narrator insists that one has to heroically believe in love even if the ultimate failure of any human endeavour is “encoded in every molecule.”

The implications of all the pursuits problematised in my dissertation, of love in particular, may suggest that absolute meaning is impossible to attain. The longing for it, however, is shown as natural and, arguably, inscribed in the experience of being human. Barnes’s novels portray a reality in which meaning is not out there to be discovered; it is not inherent in religion, art, nor love. Final meaning cannot be found in the world, whose every molecule may even be marked by defeat. It can only be generated by the individual – thus the necessity to pursue. Meaning is not to be discovered but created, for it is a human performance. “Parenthesis” suggests that if our love manages to transcend the chaos, it does not mean that there is an ultimate order in the world or that this success is inherent in the concept of love, but that it is our own individual merit.

These implications, however, are merely one of a variety of ways to conclude the discussion of the novels’ exploration of the notion of the pursuit of meaning. The desire to draw a final, overall conclusion seems to run counter to the poetics of Barnes’s novels, which seem to follow the guideline given by Geoffrey Braithwaite in *Flaubert’s Parrot*, “Discuss without concluding” (189). The three novels do not provide answers to the question they raise – at most they merely hint at them. One of the reasons why Barnes’s texts refuse to yield

straightforward conclusions is their, more or less overt, postmodern playfulness. Although they raise serious existential questions, they tackle them with a degree of ironic detachment. Here are some examples of this strategy. In the climactic part of *Staring at the Sun*, the novel interrogating the validity of religious belief, Jean Serjeant, when asked by her son about God, replies that “God’s on a motor-bike off the west coast of Ireland” (183). In *Flaubert’s Parrot* the entire dramatic discussion about art’s capacity to impose ultimate meaning and function as a stable point of reference hinges on the success or failure of a quest for a grotesque stuffed parrot. And, ultimately, in the already quoted passage of “Parenthesis,” after an emphatic and hopeful declaration of love’s transcendence of history comes the narrators remark that “it seems a grand truth now,” but in the morning it may not even seem worth waking his beloved for.

The discussions of fundamental questions and ideas about religion, art and love are marked with gentle comedy, which adds an element of playfulness to them and, if only for a moment, undermines their seriousness. Therefore it can be argued that serious modernist questions are explored in Barnes’s novels with a postmodern degree of scepticism, facetiousness and levity.

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