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ALAPSZAKOS ZÁRÓDOLGOZAT

*Történet és Történelem: A realista és posztmodern megközelítések
összehangolása Julian Barnes regényeiben*

*Story and History: The Reconciliation of Realist and Postmodern
Approaches in Julian Barnes's Fiction*

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Introduction

Story and History.

It is tempting to imagine that History is actually a large, ancient Book with a leather cover kept in a damp and clandestine vault in which *The History of the World* is recorded and all we have to do is to find it and copy its chapters of Stories with the diligence that of a medieval monk. However, believing in this picture would be self-deception. It is also tempting to believe that we are all part of a gigantic orchestra and History is like *The Song of the World* in which everyone of us plays his melody on his instrument while sitting in tail-coats and full-length evening dresses on the stage. The problem is that the conductor is on eternal sick-pay. Therefore, *The Song of the World* becomes an unbearable cacophony. Every musician plays at the same time and everyone plays his own song. Everyone wants to sing but noone wants to listen. This 'music' is totally incomprehensible; therefore, this is the death of History and the beginning of happy ahistoricism. The problem with the two approaches is that both of them lead to dead end. As Andrzej Gąsiorek put it: 'The distinction between a positivist objectivism and a radical textualism ... represent a misleading dichotomy.' (Gąsiorek 174)

In my thesis, I would like to demonstrate how Julian Barnes manages to overcome the dichotomy of these realist and postmodern approaches by harmonising them. Barnes's method, which I believe is culminated in *A History of the World in 10 ½ chapters*, is not just the joining together of these two attitudes, he does not only sew together two pieces of clothes and makes out of the two halves one whole. He is rather like a smith who by melting together two kind of metals creates a new one, an alloy.

Konrad Lorenz in his book, *Behind the mirror*, describes a phenomenon in biology which I believe is very similar to what happens to the realist and postmodern approaches in Barnes's fiction; therefore, I would like to adapt the phenomenon into a literary framework.

The phenomenon is 'fulguratio' which means 'flash of lightning'. Lorenz explains that '[t]heistic philosophers and mystics in the Middle Ages invented the term fulguratio ... to denote the act of creation.' This term implicates the 'coming into existence of something previously not there. ... If, for example, two independent systems are connected together; entirely new, unexpected system characteristics will come into existence of whose emergences there was previously no indication at all.' (72) Consequently, 'there is a system which shows not just gradual, but fundamental differences in its functional characteristics'(own translation) (75) in comparison with its original constituent systems.

Realism and Postmodernism

Defining the two terms, realism and postmodernism, is problematic. Actually, it is hard to decide which one of them is the *more* problematic. However, it is necessary to clarify what is meant under these labels, what is their relationship in the framework of this thesis. First, I discuss realism then I proceed on with postmodernism.

Unfortunately, *The Oxford Companion to Literature* is not a great aid if one desires to understand realism. Here is the beginning of the article 'realism': 'a literary term so widely used as to be more or less meaningless except when used in contradistinction to some other movement, e.g. *naturalism, *Expressionism, *Surrealism.' Hearing the word realism I think immediately about 19th century French literature and realist novels. Actually, Gyáni, a historian mentions in his book that Honoré de Balzac, one of the most prominent representatives of that period and genre, thought about himself rather as a historian than a writer. He claimed that: 'I might be able to write the history that historians tend to forget: the history of morality.'(own translation) (Gyáni 272) Balzac actually believed that historical novels are better tools for representing reality than historiography. In fact, Balzac proves his point when he highlights that events of everyday and private life has as much significance in understanding history as politics and the life of nations which are the predominant topics of

19th century historiography. Furthermore, Gyáni mentions that if we think about it, his idea that history should pay attention to everyday people and their life would re-emerge later in historiography in the form of microhistory, the so called *Alltagsgeschichte*, the 'everyday history'. (272-3) Under 'realist approach' I understand not the methods, the ways of representation in the spirit of 'as it were' rather the *effort and the faith*. The effort to attempt to represent things and the faith that it is possible to do so.

Providing the definition of postmodernism is another complicated issue. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* includes an article under this label; however, the article is not straightforward: 'As applied to literature and other art, the term is notoriously ambiguous, implying either that modernism has been superseded or that it has continued into a new phase.' ('postmodernism' 201) After reading a number of works which are predominantly classified as 'postmodern' and consulting a number of essays on historiography one feels that in postmodern historiography and postmodern art there is one key feature that prevails: indeterminacy. James E. Martin mentions in his thesis on Julian Barnes, that some literary critics, for instance Jameson, believes 'postmodern art becomes an evasion of history because of its use of pastiche which he defines as a "weakened" form of parody or satire, with very little of the critical potential of either '(qtd. in Martin 1) Postmodernism certainly represents a different kind of attitude towards the past than previous eras. However, as Umberto Eco put it: postmodern recognizes that 'the past, since it cannot really be destroyed because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently.' (227) Hence, postmodernism does the opposite of evasion of history – it attempts to embrace it and through this approach records the obstacles it encounters. Eco's brilliantly simple metaphor for this idea is the following: if a man wants to declare his love to a woman, he cannot say it simply because it have already been said, even written down by

Barbara Cartland. All he can do is say: 'As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly.' Hence, 'both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony...' (227)

Naturally, postmodern literature is and has been highly interested in the relationship of literature and historiography. World-famous novels like *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie or *Waterland* by Graham Swift are typical examples for this kind of interest and Julian Barnes's works as well. The term 'historiographic metafiction' must be mentioned in connection with postmodern literary criticism. It was coined by Linda Hutcheon and it is frequently used when discussing novels that has been mentioned previously. In a nutshell, historiographic metafiction are

...well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages. ... its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs ... is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past. (5)

In connection with history and past, historiographic metafiction 'also realizes that we are epistemologically limited in our ability to know the past, since we are both spectators of and actors in the historical process.' (122)

Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* is a typical historiographic metafiction. Hutcheon even refers to it as such in *The Poetics of Postmodernism* several times. The novel is fraught with contemplation about the relationship of past and history. Apart from that, there are a considerable number of comments about writing itself which transforms parts of the book into metafiction. Is it the same with *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*? I did not encounter printed materials which would refer to it as historiographic metafiction. The reason for this might be that critics were occupied arguing about its genre whether it is appropriate to call it a novel or not; hence, the question of its status as historiographic metafiction did not receive enough discussion. It can be easily seen that the issues – 'subjectivity, intertextuality,

reference, ideology' (Hutcheon 121) which are the concerns of historiographic metafiction can be found in *A History* as well. However, if even its status as a novel is controversial, it would be strange to apply to it the term historiographic metafiction – since it is primarily used for novels. Therefore, on the one hand, if we stick to the wide-spread usage of the word 'historiographic metafiction' then the classification of *A History* as historiographic metafiction is not appropriate. On the other hand, it is also possible that 'historiographic metafiction' can be interpreted as a genre neutral term and can be applied to works which genre is other than novel. However, this issue requires an in-depth study before further conclusions are drawn from it. All in all, the classification of *A History* as historiographic metafiction remains ambiguous.

Before starting to analyse Barnes's fiction, I include a small part of pieces of background information about my not strictly literary research; therefore, my state of mind during reading Barnes's novels will be clear.

History and Literature - Lyotard, White, Popper and Gyáni

It is natural to think that history is mainly about our past. However, if we have a closer look at the etymology of this word, it turns out that its ancient meaning is not concerned with time at all. At least, etymologically not. The word 'history' has its root in the Proto-Indo-European **wid-tor-*; 'from base **weid-* "to know," lit. "to see"'. (Online Etymology Dictionary) This indicates the problem that keeps scientists occupied: history is primarily a perceptive activity. The tricky part is that perception includes the notion of viewpoint which implicates subjectivity – not objectivity as historians tended to claim for themselves for centuries. Hayden White writes about this in his *Metahistory*:

...different historians stress different aspects of the same historical field, the same set or sequence of events, because they actually *see* different objects in that field, provisionally group them into different classes and species of historical existence,

conceive the relationship among them in different terms, ... in order to figure different meanings for them by the structure of the narratives they write about them. (274)

During the 20th century historiography was attacked from several directions and the picture of an objective, unified History (with a capital) became obsolete. However, when something is banned from existence and the hole it leaves is not filled in then it is probable that the vacuum left behind draws in everything else we did not want to ban on the first place. This led to a considerable amount of debate on the function of history and on reasons for the existence of history as such. In other words, if we do not have History what do we have instead?

Francois Lyotard's work, *The Postmodern Condition* was certainly a milestone in this respect. The work is not concerned solely with History. However, Lyotard investigated the condition of 'grand narratives' which History happens to be. Lyotard defined postmodern as 'incredulity towards metanarrative' (*The Postmodern History Reader* 36). One might argue that postmodernism is not comprised only of this 'incredulity'. Nevertheless, it is indisputable that this disbelief in 'grand narratives' is a typical characteristic of postmodernism.

Hayden White and his famous book *Metahistory*, which was already mentioned, also contributed to the emergence of postmodern historiographical disturbances. He highlighted that 'narrative accounts do not consist only of factual statements and arguments; they consist as well of poetic and rhetorical elements by which what would otherwise be a list of facts is transformed into a story.' (*The Postmodern History Reader* 393) White's work is important because it highlighted that history is itself a discourse and because it pointed to the fact that the mechanisms undergoing in historical writing and literary writing are not so different from each other as it has been previously thought. Jenkins highlights that some critics charged White with ahistoricism and denial of past, but he claims that they are incorrect: 'As far as I know (and despite accusations to the contrary) White has never argued that past events,

persons, institutions, social processes etc. (i.e. the past *per se*) did not exist, did not happen, and did not happen in exactly the way it did.' ('Why History?') 116)

White called attention to the fact that 'since the 19th century they (historians) have been taught that they must keep literary and poetic effects out of their writing.' and the problem is that they believed this is a method that can be accomplished. However, it is now widely accepted that form and content cannot be separated, they are intertwined. Historians should not be so conceited to cherish the illusion that they can evade literary effects while weaving a narrative. This does not mean that they should disregard History as such, this means that historians should develop a firm self-consciousness about narratives and about the influences to which they expose themselves while working with them. They are compelled to accept that they cannot evade them.

Karl R. Popper, an acknowledged philosopher, gave voice to his ideas on history in several of his essays. He argued that the past has no story on its own, the story of what 'really happened' does not exist; therefore, it cannot be recorded. There are only interpretations of past events and everyone has the right to interpret; in fact, is obliged to do so. These ideas are essential in postmodern historiography and in postmodern literature as well. Plurality, the equality of different viewpoints etc. Popper in his essay *Against the cynical interpretation of history* maintained that we need history (obviously not in his grand totalitarian narrative form) because it is important how we think about ourselves and our history and because it affects our decisions and our actions. Collateral to this previous statement is that 'future is not the extension of past.' (236) This means that the future does not exist in the present and it is our duty to do everything possible to make the future a better place.

Lastly, some other ideas and observations must be mentioned which belong to a Hungarian historian, Gábor Gyáni. In his book, *Relative History*, he dedicated pages, chapters to investigate the border of fiction and fact which is nowadays usually referred to as

'blurring'. Gyáni juxtaposed two typical examples of borderland piece of works. One is *The Return of Martin Guerre* by Natalie Zemon Davis and the other is *The Name Of The Rose* by Umberto Eco. Natalie Zemon Davis, a historian, reconstructed the story of the 16th century swindler, the fake-Guerre. Although the work was meant to be of scientific nature, Davis was not reluctant to assist her imagination when she bumped into unrecorded parts of the story. Seemingly, Umberto Eco's masterpiece has an unambiguous status as fiction. According to Gyáni, its status is questionable because the plot is based on historical documents and it is fraught with technical texts. (271) Since these are only two examples of nowadays 'borderline' works, it is undeniable that there is a firm interest from both sides (historical and literary) concerning differences and similarities in the applied methods.

These are just small parts from the literature on postmodern historiography and postmodernism; however, these references seemed to be the most important and relevant to the analysis of Barnes's fiction.

Discussion

I would like to discuss three novels by Julian Barnes: *Before She Met Me*; *Flaubert's Parrot* and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*. In these novels I search for ideas that are connected to the realist and postmodern dichotomy problem. I believe that *A History* is the novel in which Barnes transcends this misleading dichotomy. During my analysis I also attempt to show that *Before She Met Me* and *Flaubert's Parrot* are already steps on the road which leads to the reconciliation of the realist and postmodern approaches in *A History* since signs of those topics that will be in the centre of *A History* can be discovered in that two earlier novels. Thus, Barnes's occupation with the theme becomes conspicuous.

Before She Met Me

'How is the little Othello?' (76)

Before She Met Me is the Othello story of our time. However, there are certain changes in the cast: Othello, originally a soldier, is turned into Graham Hendrick, a historian whose participation in battles is only possible on the pages of history books. Desdemona's part is donated to Ann, a second-rate actress and second wife. Cassio's role is given to Jack Lupton who is primarily a novelist, but occasionally a self-made psychologist. The role of Yago goes to machiavellian first-wife Barbara. These modifications concerning the leading roles lead to a shift of focus in the novel. The focus shifts from jealousy to the problem of reconstructing the past. This leads to the twist in the plot that Graham murders Jack and not Ann. Graham's counterpart is Jack in the symbolism of the novel, not Ann. Historian and novelist cohere.

Martin calls this novel a 'cautionary tale' which warns us about the 'danger of completely and uncritically conflating art and history.' (28) This is definitely incorporated in the text. However, I believe the novel also draws attention to the phenomenon that in many cases our actions in the present are influenced by our *knowledge* and *beliefs* about the past, not by actual events. Unfortunately, it often happens that access to information is limited or that information goes through deliberate/unintentional distortions during mediation and the effect of lack of data or misinformation are irreversible. Ann feels obliged to conceal his affair with Jack to protect her husband, despite the fact that her relationship with Jack had ended well before she met Graham. Therefore, she decides to obliterate this short period from her and from Jack's past completely. She apologizes to Jack for erasing their affair from their personal history: 'I'm sorry to rewrite your past for you' | 'Don't bother, I'm always doing it myself.' (75) This often cited dialogue has a central significance in the book. Jack's answer to Ann's apology that he always rewrites his past indicates that as a novelist his primary source for his work is his life, his past. Furthermore, he claims that during the writing process this past is under perpetual construction. Thus, Jack, the novelist, is the counterpole of Graham,

the historian, for whom rewriting the past is sacrilege. It is ironic that while Ann is apologizing and regrets being uncandid with his husband... Graham is occupied with rewriting *her past* without any guilt in his heart by fabricating non-existent adulteries in his mind.

Jameson discusses in his thesis another issue which the novel addresses implicitly: the role of cinema and basically the whole media in people's life. Cinema plays a passive, but central role in the development of Graham's unstoppable jealousy. After all, it all starts with a visit, arranged by ex-wife intriguer Barbara, to the cinema. In the film which Graham has to watch with his daughter there is a short, innocent part which includes second-wife Ann and another man in a slightly erotic, but rather pathetic scene. Bearing in mind the tragic outcome of this visit, Graham's comic comment on the film later to Ann does not seem so amusing after all: 'Nearly caught you in flagrante'. (32) Graham becomes obsessed with films in which Ann had a role and then he turns to Jack's literary oeuvre. He unambiguously identifies every single woman character in the novels with Ann ('yes; the clincher, though, was the mole – even if he had moved it from her right shoulder to the left side of her neck.') (185) and their male partners in the books with Jack. Consequently, he comes up with an adamant conclusion that his wife and his friends are having a long term affair.

Obviously, you need a pathologic mind to be as influenced by films as Graham - to become as entangled within it; however, it is an extreme representation of the phenomenon that people's idea about the world, including its history, can be influenced by motion picture to great extent. As Jameson put it: 'it is undeniably true that film currently has a great amount of force – one might even say it has achieved hegemony – in presenting memorable representations of history to a large audience.' (27) Every time there is a new historical blockbuster in theatres, it is always accompanied by a pack of hungry historians who are eager to criticize every picture while searching for evidence for violation of 'historical accuracy'. However, the movies and the producers are not to be charged with deceit because

they do not claim to be historically accurate. Films are work of art and in art veracity is often sacrificed on the altar of aesthetics. I believe, cinema is primarily about entertainment. The problem is that people tend to forget about this and start to blur together the sphere of art and history. Cate Blanchett, world-famous actress who participated in various historical films and appeared on the screen even as Elizabeth I, the Queen of England summarized this very wittily during an interview: 'It's terrifying that we are growing up with this very illiterate bunch of children, who are somehow being taught that film is fact, when in fact it's invention. Hopefully though an historical film will inspire people to go and read about the history. But in the end it is a work of history and selection.' ("We are growing up with illiterate children")

Flaubert's Parrot

'Then I saw it.' (19)

The appearance of the second authentic parrot puts George Braithwaite into a very uncomfortable situation. It is the beginning of a long journey through history and life with a non-refundable ticket. Andrey Bitov, contemporary Russian writer, put his protagonist a similarly desperate situation in *Pushkin House*. When Pushkin's authentic and inestimable death mask accidentally smashes into several pieces, the protagonist is reassured by Albina, one of his colleagues, that there is no reason for worry: 'The death mask wasn't after all unique; there are dozens in the basement.' (qtd. in Kermode) I am sure Braithwaite would not think that 'there is no reason for worry.'

'How do we seize the past?' (7)

Flaubert's parrot brought Barnes international fame and recognition. This novel is one of his most discussed works. The most famous quotation from *Flaubert's parrot* is definitely the following question: 'How do we seize the past?' However, since Braithwaite's goal is to write a biography, another question could be put up as well: 'How do we seize a person?' The problem is hidden within the word 'person'. It originates from the Latin 'persona' which

means 'mask'. (Online Etymology Dictionary) This draws attention to the fact that one cannot know someone else 'as he is'. We construct our image of a 'person' in our mind by using the memories we have about them. One can know someone only in encounters, i.e. when one turns to another human being, but never in its independent entity. Therefore, an attempt to understand a man from the past and reconstruct a person's life who passed away more than a hundred years ago is a toilsome challenge.

A comic metaphor introduces at the very beginning the problematic issue of history: 'Some pranksters at an end-of-term dance released into the hall a piglet which had been smeared with grease. ... 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.' (7) If the piglet is the past then the 'felling over' and 'looking ridiculous' parts have to be history. This quotation is from page 7 – which suggests that the narrator is fully aware even at the start that how difficult his plan to reconstruct past events is. However, he has no other option. He is in crisis concerning his past, his private life and his wife. He cannot go on with his life still he cannot grasp his past in some way and incorporate it into his present. Braithwaite's quest for the authentic parrot reminds one that of a detective story, 'an intellectual whodunnit'. (Gašiorek 159) Jon Barnes in his article *The pig chaser's tale* claims that Barnes latest novel, *Arthur & George*, 'marks a return to one of the most resonant themes of Barnes's oeuvre, the malleability of the past, the untrustworthiness of history - what Doyle's most famous creation might have called *The Case of the Slippery Piglet*.' In the investigation of the case Braithwaite is not left without assistance. Flaubert eventually becomes Braithwaite's Dr Watson.

'Perhaps it was one of them.' (308)

The search for authenticity starts with the parrot and ends with the parrots. This storyline in the novel is a very subtle allegory for the issue which will be culminated in *A History of the World in 10 ½ chapters*, i.e. the surmounting of the realist and postmodern

dichotomy. At the beginning there is the parrot. The authentic, irreplaceable 'bright green and perky-eyed' parrot which 'had been on his (Flaubert's) desk for three weeks' (10). Braithwaite is deeply touched by this stuffed bird and feels at that moment that he 'had almost known the writer.'(10) (It is notable that this moment of intimacy is not induced by the authentic parrot but by Braithwaite's *belief* that it is the authentic parrot.) This parrot represents the objective, knowable and palpable history of the past which obviously cannot be sustained after the discovery of the second parrot, i.e. when singular becomes plural. At the end, the protagonist finds himself surrounded by '[s]helf after shelf of birds' (307) which are all eligible candidates for the post of Flaubert's borrowed parrot. The novel ends with the sentence: 'Perhaps it was one of them.' This ending is usually referred to as a disillusioning closing sentence which states that we can never know the past. However, I interpret this sentence not as a last resigned remark, but as a rightful conclusion that 'we must believe that '43 per cent objective truth is better than 41 per cent.' (*A History* 296) Maybe, what the solution to 'The Case of the Slippery Piglet' can be is a pale 'perhaps' which is still better than a devastating 'nothing'. Gyáni makes an interesting observation in his book which is connected to this: 'It is imagination and fantasy which are the starting-points of *the probable story* (of an event) that makes the large number of potential, waiting-to-be-told stories of the past tellable at all.' (own translation) (275) In Gyáni's opinion, the historians duty is to find not *the* story, but *the most probable* story out of the potential stories.

Seemingly, Braithwaite does not find the genuine parrot, but this is not entirely correct. It is possible that one of the parrots he encountered was the authentic one; however, it is beyond our ability and knowledge to prove which one of them spent three weeks together with Flaubert. Still, Braithwaite has his parrot – the writer's voice. He reconstructs it through the narration, he creates *his* probable story.

A History of the World in 10 ½ chapters

'Everything is connected, even the parts we don't like, especially the parts we don't like.'
(101)

Martin says in his chapter on *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* that it 'is a work about which one could write volumes without exhausting it.' (38) *A History* is certainly a very powerful work which demands discussion, debates and attention. One of the controversial issues concerning the work was its genre. This problem emerged in the criticism of *Flaubert's parrot* as well; however, there the narrator, Braithwaite, was strong enough to unify it into a novel and persuade the majority of critics to refer to it as such. However, there are always some doubting Thomases: John Mellors says that *Flaubert's parrot* is 'not a novel at all. It is a collection of essays about Gustave Flaubert...' (qtd. in Holmes 146) The situation with *A History* is even more complicated. One is confronted with a great number of narrators, no unified or chronological plot. As D.J. Taylor put it '*A History of the World in 10 ½ chapters* is not a novel, according to the staid definitions, it possesses no character who rises above the level of a cipher and no plot worth speaking of.' (qtd. in Holmes 149)

The problematic point is how far one can expand the boundaries of the novel as a genre. I do not know whether Barnes with *A History* crossed the boundaries of the novel or not; however, I do think that it is not a book of a collection of short stories. *A History* resists the critics' persistent attempts to be classified as a novel or as a collection of short stories because I believe these genres, these terms are not suitable for the classification of *A History*. While transcending the dichotomy of the realist and postmodern attitudes Barnes cannot stay in the framework of these two approaches. *A History* represents a new system, which shows fundamental differences and therefore cannot be defined or described with the help of the terminology of the original systems. This phenomenon is very conspicuous in connection with this genre ambiguity.

The issue of narrators is a crucial one. The lack of a narrator who would unify the text into a cohesive narrative is why critics find it difficult to discuss it as a novel. However, I believe we can analyse the work as having one narrator. This narrator is not the usual kind of narrators - it is the collective itself. Jan Assmann in his book *Cultural Memory* examines Maurice Halbwachs's, a French sociologist, work. Assmann discusses Halbwach's ideas concerning collective memory and the conclusion is that:

Although it is always the individual who actually possesses a memory, the ability to remember is the product of the collective. It means that the term 'collective memory' should not be interpreted metaphorically. Collectives do not possess memory, but they determinatively influence its members' memory. (36)

In *A History* there is a collective of story-tellers whose members form a colourful society and melt into one abstract narrator who tells the story of *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*. I am not saying that this is an argument for analysing it as a novel. In my interpretation this characteristic of 'having a unifying narrator' and 'not having a unifying narrator' at the same time is one of the 'new, unexpected system characteristics' I mentioned in my introduction.

'Since no one can be certain that his or her explanations are definitively right, everyone must listen to other voices.' (Appleby, Hunt, Jacob, *The Postmodern History Reader* 217)

The 10 and ½ chapters are all written from a different perspective which means that there is a large group of story-tellers. Because of the various narrators, the chapters are written in various registers and in various narrative forms. There is a chapter which is a legal script, *The Wars of Religion*; there is one which contains only letters by an American actor, *Upstream!*. The narrators are from different historical times, from different parts of the world, with different professions. There are males, females and a woodworm and even the author gets the opportunity to talk. The colourful society of these narrators, although I have not found any mention of it in criticism, reminded me of the colourful society of *The Canterbury*

Tales. The *Tales* consists of similarly diverse narratives and registers. Seemingly, the chief difference is that from *A History* the frame tale is missing. There is no frame tale; however, there is the title: *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* which holds together the tales. The positivist realist title of the book would have been *The Universal History of the World*, while the hard-core postmodern title would have been: *The Neverending Stories of the World*. Barnes harmonising method in the case of the title is clearly visible. He changes the definite article to an indefinite one and specifies the length of the work. In addition, the chapters are glued together with 'shared concerns (the nature of history, the dangers of binary thinking) and recurrent motifs (the ark, the deluge, the apocalypse)' (Gašiorek 159) The text is fraught with references and cross-references. These stories are actually talking to each other, they are engaged in a conversation which results in a 'dialogic collision of point of view.' (Holmes 86) This characteristic is the reason why I do not sympathize with the classification of *A History* as a collection of short stories. Short stories are usually held together by some kind of an *external* logic, while in *A History* the stories converge because of the *internal* need of the text.

'Separating the clean from the unclean.' (53)

The opposition of clean and unclean recurrently surfaces in the novel. Moseley in his book, *Understanding Julian Barnes*, includes a part in which he lists the appearance of the 'separation of the clean from the unclean' throughout the 10 and ½ chapters. Furthermore, oppositions in general are characteristic of the novel as Gašiorek highlights it: 'clean/unclean; sacred/profane; male/female; communication/excommunication; Arab/Jew; nature/civilization; believer/unbeliever.' (Gašiorek 163) We, humans, are highly inclined to think in categories and to polarize. We need a coordinate system, we need the x/y axes to be able to position ourselves in the world because without them we feel that we are lost. However, the book draws attention to the perils that binary thinking can trigger. If one thinks only in black and white then the colours of life vanish and it becomes more difficult to

perceive the beauty of the world. It does not mean that we do not need these oppositions, we cannot and should not obliterate the slash between clean/unclean or male/female. We need these distinctions because they help us to understand the world around us. However, one part of an opposition does not make sense without the other part; therefore, they belong together, they form a whole. Referring to people as 'good' or 'bad' is natural, but we should not forget that essentially every person is good *and* bad. This wholeness is what people should not forget. We can witness the search for this wholeness in the last chapter as well: 'And what percentage of people take up the option to die off?' ... 'Oh, a hundred percent, of course.' (368) Life does not make sense without death. We have to attempt to grasp the two parts of an opposition at the same time, side by side because otherwise there would be missing parts. This idea emerges in the end of Barnes's following novel, in *England, England* as well: 'What held her attention now were the children's faces, which expressed such willing yet complex trust in reality. As she saw it, they had not yet reached the age of incredulity, only of wonder, so that even when they *disbelieved*, they also *believed*.' (264) I do not mean that by putting together realist/postmodern representations one would end up having an ultimate representation of the world. I mean that this is what can be perceived in *A History*. The work can be interpreted as an experiment. Barnes attempts to grasp realist and postmodern approaches at the same time and the result of this grasping is the work itself... and it cannot be denied that it works. It is hard to imagine a more diverse society of narrators, a more diverse group of stories; nevertheless, the stories cling to each other and build up the tower of Babel itself.

'How do you turn catastrophe into art?' (149)

In *A History* the topics of history, literature and life are revisited and reconsidered. The surmounting of the realist and postmodern dichotomy creates a new framework which throws new light on these concepts. In this framework, the relationship of historians and novelists re-

emerges. Historians and novelists are brothers who have the same task: they have to tell stories. However, their responsibilities are distinct from each other.

'Truth to life', at the start, to be sure; yet once the process gets under way, truth to art is a greater allegiance.' (161)

On one hand, there is the historian whose motto is 'truth to life' and whose duty is to tell every single story he can reconstruct from the past because everyone has his story in the world and everyone of these stories are worth remembering. In Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy stories turn out to be so valuable that they can be used to bribe the horrible Harpies of Hell to let the ghosts out:

...from now on you will have the right to ask all the ghosts to tell you the stories of their lives, and they will have to tell the truth about what they've seen and touched and heard and loved and known in the world. *Every one of these ghosts has a story*; every single one that comes down in the future will have true things to tell you about the world. (284)

The historian has no choice, his guiding principle is that he always has to reconstruct our past events to the best of his knowledge. He has to listen to the stories even when they are boring, even when they are fragmented.

On the other hand, there is the novelist whose loyalty lies with art – 'truth to art' – whose duty is to tell every single story *he thinks* is worth telling. The artist can decide which stories he wants to tell, he is allowed to make arbitrary decisions, arbitrary alternations. In the fifth chapter, the *Shipwreck*, the narrator dedicates several pages to analyse 'what he (Géricault) did not paint.' The list of the not-painted scenes contains eight items. This part highlights the arbitrary nature of art, to which artists have to remain obedient. Apart from that, there is an enumeration of details about the differences between the Savigny-Corréard narrative and Géricault's painting. It is obvious that Géricault was not uninformed

concerning the particulars of the disaster of the *Medusa*, he lead a thorough investigation, he even 'sought out the carpenter from the *Medusa*, who had survived, and got him to build a scale model of his original machine.' (150) Nevertheless, he altered a large number of details. He submitted authenticity to art. Art is not interested in the momentary, he tries to grasp the eternal in life. Géricault attempted to paint *that* 'tantalizing half hour' when the *Argus* appeared at first on the horizon... and then disappeared. The painting attempted to catch *that* emotion, *that* atmosphere when it is slowly becomes evident for everyone that the rescuing ship is actually going not coming. Some bow to the inevitable without delay, some pledge oneself to perseverance till the end. The painting attempted to catch *that* universal feeling of humanity what does it feel like to hope and then to fall into hollow disappointment. 'The painting has slipped history's anchor. This is no longer 'Scene of Shipwreck', let alone 'The Raft of the Medusa'. We don't just imagine the ferocious miseries on that fatal machine, we don't just become the sufferers. They become us.' (163)

Conclusions

Julian Barnes is a typical chameleon-like writer. There are writers who write allegorically the same story in all of their books. Obviously, they use new characters, places and plot; however, they cannot deceive the skilled reader who sooner or later realizes that it is enough to read one of their books to become acquainted with that one story. Barnes is not like those writers. He is always eager to find new coasts and discover new territories. His oeuvre reveals vivid variety and magic miscellaneousness.

The mutual curiosity of literature and historiography towards the other's field did not leave Barnes untouched. It can be seen that issues connected to this had already appeared in Barnes's two novels which chronologically preceded *A History* – issues like historians and novelists; history and literature; historiography and past.

In the modern Othello story, *Before She Met Me*, the problematic relationship between historians and novelists emerges. It is not the chief concern of the story, but it certainly forms a background fabric to the linear plot. The distinction between art and history becomes a topic. This novel can be counted as one of the first signs of Barnes's interest in the field of history which initial interest would later develop into an absorption.

Flaubert's Parrot is a great advancement; here, history and historiography becomes explicitly discussed and is chosen as the focus point. In the novel the realist (one parrot) and postmodern (several parrots) approaches confront and rivalize, but they cannot regain their composure.

In my view, *A History* is the culmination of Barnes's ideas and meditation over history and literature. The reconciliation of the realist and postmodern ideas does not occur *in* the novel/collection of short story – the book itself is the result of this reconciliation. Its structure, its dynamics, its atmosphere are all balancing on the verge of the two attitudes. As the text cannot choose either of them - it chooses both of them and by this decision it transcends the old-established dichotomy. Barnes laid a siege to the fortress of this dichotomy and then he told us what he found behind its gates: 'Love and truth, yes, that's the prime connection.' (296) I see this book as a culmination point as well because I think it is in this book that Barnes actually gets over with this history issue. He thought about it, he wrote it down and he gave his answers. After this book he could move on and put out to sea, he could discover unknown regions. It is apparent that his new direction brought him to the field of identity issues, to Englishness itself. However, it must be noted that Barnes had to close his brooding over history and literature before he could write a novel like *Arthur & George*. In *Flaubert's Parrot* we can read two fragmented, obscure biographies with full of doubts. In contrast to that, there is *Arthur & George* – again a novel of two biographies; however, these biographies are written from birth to death, they are complete. I do not think that this means that Barnes

changed his mind and now believes that one can write true biographies. In my interpretation, this is an evidence that Barnes with *A History* got over with 'The Case of the Slippery Piglet'. In other words, 'The Case' might have not been solved, but the files are definitely closed.

The literature on Barnes, i. e. essays, theses, articles and books, keeps growing. I hope my thesis could join that expanding corpus and somehow contribute to it so that Mr. Barnes would have more and more readers because I believe it is simply worth reading his books. The relationship between a contemporary writer and literary critics reminds one that of the relationship of an equilibrist and the rope. Barnes have the prospect of reaching the end of the rope and enjoy the warm applaud from the audience, i.e. to be accepted as part of the „canon” of English literature. However, the rope-dance has not yet ended and in every step, in every new book there is the chance of a downfall. Obviously, what contemporary writers need for getting accepted by the public... is time. Therefore, it is a promising comment which Jasper Rees makes in his article: ' The one time I met Auberon Waugh, the founder of Literary Review, he was arguing that no one would be reading Barnes in 20 years' time. This would have been about 20 years ago.' It is certainly comforting to outlive such prophecies of oblivion.

Afterword

The limits of this thesis did not allow to include everything intended I had in mind at the beginning of the writing. In the analysis of *A History* I focused on the whole work; however, the chapters on their own would deserve more attention. Each of them has its own local issues and it would be interesting to examine the way they connect into the global discussion. A thorough paper on Julian Barnes and his wanderings on the borderline of history and literature would also be greater in breadth: it should study other novels by Barnes, especially *England, England*; *The Porcupine* and *Arthur & George*. Apart from that, it is unfortunate that I could only mention other authors like Salman Rushdie and Graham Swift

because it would be important to juxtapose these postmodern writers' attitudes and discover their similarities or differences.

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