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Commingling of History and Fiction in Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*

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ABSTRACT. This paper intends to explore the relationship between history and fiction in the novel *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989) by the British writer Julian Barnes in order to indicate how these two notions have been commingled in different periods. In this regard, the focus of the current study is to investigate the above-mentioned novel, and to demonstrate the invalidity of historical records, their subjectivity, and how throughout history myths have become realities, with an eye on *New Historicism*. By the end of this study, its reader's attitude towards history and what s/he is presented with as fact and truth is hoped to change, not to readily accept historical records and stories as absolute truths, rather to consider them one possible history among many others that might have been marginalized and suppressed by a dominant ideology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Most of us tend to think of history in the traditional way, regarding it as an accurate account of what actually occurred in the past. Traditional historians have indoctrinated us to accept the objectivity of what we have been told of history, not to question their validity, instead to consider them as truth, that history serves as a reliable source of delving into the past, and that by reading and scrutinizing the past, we can ascertain the truth about a given history.

Some features characterize historicism. Among them, the most significant is the belief that all systems and institutions, literary texts, and all modes of thought have to be scrutinized within their historical contexts. They cannot be examined independently of their historical and cultural milieu. The second one holds that history operates in accordance with "certain identifiable laws, yielding a certain predictability and explanatory power." According to the third notion, every society holds its own set of beliefs and worldviews that are of a different kind compared to those of other cultures. How do historians, therefore, know the past? How do they succeed in overcoming their assumptions to present a disinterested account of the past? Thinkers have offered various answers. Hirsch, for example, wishes to be "objectivist," proposing the denial of "the historical and context-bound nature of knowledge," a distinction between what the author meant by his use of language, and "significance, which comprehends the subjective evaluation of the text" in accordance with the critic's perspective. Another one suggested by Gadamer holds the notion of "horizonfusion" whereby the text is thought of as "a product of a tradition of interpretation," and that our own impressions are made by the past we intend to look into. With keeping these two limitations in mind, we are capable of effecting an "empathetic fusion of our own cultural horizon with that of the past" (Habib 760-1)

The claim that the information handed down the centuries of past phenomena is a true representation of them was refuted by a new approach to history called *New Historicism*, a term coined by Stephen Greenblatt in 1982 that rose to prominence in the late 1970s and early 1980s, maintaining the subjectivity of history. "Historians can never provide us with the truth," as Bressler puts it, "or give us a totally accurate picture of past events or the worldview of a people. Similar to language, history is but one of the many discourses or ways of viewing the world" (352). History, hold new historicists, cannot be considered a reliable background for analyzing a text, and for the same reason, scholars are not able to provide us with an objective account of the past phenomena. As opposed to old historicists' assumptions, literature, say new historicists, should be studied in

relation to “culture, history, society, and other factors that help determine a text’s meaning.” Art and society, Greenblatt maintains, are “interrelated.” No scholar is able to employ only one approach to comprehend these complex interrelationships. New historicism, according to Greenblatt, is to be considered a “reading practice,” not a school of criticism,” because when examining the relation between a text and society we come across “conflicting social and literary patterns” that provide proof of how “art affects society and how society affects art” (Bressler 215-16).

As New historicists declare, history is written by historians who like other people live in a particular time and place, and their evaluation of past is heavily affected by their own culture and milieu, and only the basic facts of history are accessible to us (Tyson 83). New historicists admit the subjectivity of themselves, the fact that they are affected by their social and cultural milieu. “To mitigate the risk that they will unquestioningly appropriate texts that were written in the past,” writes Abrams, “they stress that the course of the history between the past and present is not coherent, but exhibits discontinuities, breaks, and ruptures” (222).

Michael Warner speaks of new historicism’s motto as, “the text is historical, and history is textual” (qtd. in Guerin, Wilfred L., et al 283). *New historicists* search for opposing and contradictory versions of a phenomenon, sometimes those of the marginalized so that a thorough examination of the past would be plausible. For Foucault who exerted a pervasive influence on such approaches as *New historicism* and *cultural studies*, history is not “the working out of universal ideas,” due to the fact that we are not aware of and familiar with the ruling ideas of either the past or the present. History is but a “form of social oppression, told in a series of ruptures with previous ages” (Guerin, Wilfred L., et al 284).

When examining a past occurrence, traditional historians are opting to ascertain: “what happened, and what does a given event tell us about history?” In contrast to this mode of approaching to history, *New historicists* ask: “how has the event been interpreted? And what do the interpretations tell us about the interpreters?” (Tyson 282).

2. DISCUSSION

Julian Barnes in the aforementioned novel has provided us with stories, which are in part based on facts, and partly combined with fiction. *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* is composed of diverse stories involving various characters in different periods. The book, therefore, does not follow a chronological order since it does not contain a single story. It is heterogeneous in style, employing different points of view with different subjects. The novel is considered one of the most acclaimed works by Barnes, and is illustrative of his great intelligence and mastery over historical events. It contains 10 chapters each with a story with the exception of chapter seven in which we are presented with three short stories. The number ½ in the title refers to a chapter inserted between eighth and ninth chapters called *parenthesis*, which is much more like an essay than a story.

To begin with, a concise summary of the whole book would be helpful. Chapter one called STOWAWAY, is the history of Noah’s Ark narrated by a woodworm different from the one presented in the Bible. Chapter two VISITORS, is the story of the hijacking of a cruise ship by Arab tourists. Chapter 3 THE WARS OF RELIGEON tells the trial of a group of woodworms in a church accused of damaging a bishop’s throne. In the next one (4) SURVIVOR, there is a story of a woman leaving Chernobyl to avoid an incipient nuclear war. The following chapter (5) SHIPWRECK, narrates the true story of the wreck of Medusa and the survival of its crew along with an analysis of Gericault’s painting, The Raft of Medusa. The succeeding one (6) MOUNTAIN centers the journey of a very religious girl to Mt. Ararat to intercede for the soul of her late father. Chapter seven Three Simple Stories narrates an old man surviving the wreck of Titanic, the biblical history of Jonah, and the story of refugees from Nazi state being prevented from landing to Cuba, the US and other countries. In chapter 8 UPSTREAM, we read letters from an actor while being in Venezuela to her wife. In the half-chapter (*parenthesis*), an essay on love is incorporated. The following one (9)

PROJECT ARARAT, is about an astronaut's attempt at Mt. Ararat. The last chapter (10) THE DREAM, depicts heaven, which is not the same as the one we have imagined and told.

The first chapter concerning Noah's Ark, we encounter a history different from the one we are familiar with. The woodworm introduces Noah not the same as we used to think of as sage, righteous, God fearing, but as an ignorant man, no flexibility of mind, and the one blindly obeying God. The reader is informed of animals' dissatisfaction with Noah's actions such as separating "clean from the unclean" (Barnes 54). The God is even perceived as "an oppressive role model" (Barnes 30). We think Noah got the animals together, being afraid of their deaths; however, it is not the case. He did so out of self-interest, to consume them when the flood had abated. He was a drunkard not a nice man, but some scholars claimed that the Noah was not the same one in the Bible: "how could a drunkard be chosen by God?" the woodworm, nonetheless believes: "blame someone else is your first instinct. And if you can't blame someone else, then start claiming the problem isn't the problem anyway. He wasn't that *Noah*. "Simple case of mistaken identity. The problem disappears" (Barnes 38). When something is not adapted to the tastes of us, we try to justify it in some way to make it more palatable. So, which of these histories (the one in the Bible, and that of the woodworm) do we tend to believe in?

Regarding the story of Kathleen Ferris, she is actually trying to concoct an excuse to evade her problems and responsibilities. Since she is not realistic, she struggles to deny many things in her personal life. Her mind during a conversation in a dream, informs her of her inability to tackle her problems: "the technical term is fabrication. You make up a story to cover the facts you don't know or can't accept. You keep a few true facts and pin a new story round them. Particularly in cases of double stress" (Barnes 116). Is thus, her account of the past reliable?

The succeeding chapter concerns the true history of the wreck of Medusa and makes a comparison between this incident and the painting by Gericault: *The Raft of Medusa*, to indicate how a catastrophe was turned into art. The chapter is made up of the historical part that recounts the actual wreck of Medusa near Senegal in 1816 based on the account of Savigny and Correlad (the two survivors of the shipwreck) who published the account of their voyage in 1817. It is followed by an examination of Gericault's painting of this incident, and ends with an analysis and interpretation of the origin of an artwork. Gericault's painting "began with truth to life" (Barnes 130). The artist read the two survivors' book, met them, and interviewed them. He found the carpenter from the medusa who had survived, and "got him to build a scale model of his original machine" (Barnes 130), and worked assiduously on his painting. Barnes then accentuates what the artist did not paint, among them: "the Medusa striking the reef...the necessary cannibalism...the actual moment of rescue" (Barnes 130). "Truth to life" at the beginning, but once it progressed; "truth to art" (Barnes 139) became the principal obsession. The incident, however, is not the same as the one actually occurred. The numbers are not accurate; "the cannibalism is reduced to a literary reference...the raft has been cleaned up as if for the state visit of some queasy-stomached monarch..." (Barnes 130). A catastrophe has changed to art, "catastrophe has become art: that is, after all, what it is for" (Barnes 142). The chapter, "though hybrid in form and genre," says Guignery, "thus inscribes reflections about the representation of the past, the knowledge of reality and the interpretation of signs which can apply to the whole novel" (The Fiction of Julian Barnes 66).

Concerning the history of Jonah, Barnes believes it has no basis in fact. It is even scientifically refuted. Incorporating a similar story of a man devoured by a whale and managing to survive, the writer asks: why have we accepted it as an event that truly took place? The answer is, as Barnes himself puts it: "for the point is this: not that myth refers us back to some original event which has been fancifully transcribed as it passed through the collective memory; but that it refers us to something that will happen, that must happen. Myth will become reality, however skeptical we might be" (Barnes 183).

The next chapter being a reflection on love, Barnes maintains that love is not capable of making you feel happy, nor does the mutual love. Though we are cognizant of this, we yet believe in it, otherwise we are lost, "if we don't, we merely surrender to the history of the world and to

someone else's truth" (Barnes 245). This is the case with history. People are conscious of the subjectivity of history, still they believe in its objectivity. However, "history", according to Barnes, "isn't what happened. History is just what historians tell us" (Barnes 241).

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 fabricate into history, into some God-eyed version of what 'really' happened. This God-eyed version is a fake- a charming, impossible fake, like those medieval paintings which show all the stages of Christ's Passion happening simultaneously in different parts of the picture. But while we know this, we must believe that objective truth is obtainable; or we believe that it is 99 percent obtainable; or if we can't believe this we must believe that 43 percent objective truth is better than 41 percent. We must do so, because if we don't we're lost, we fall into beguiling relativity... (Barnes 245)

In the last chapter of the book, a new version of Heaven is depicted, where there is hell, in which people have the option to die off if they want to. In this Heaven, people are weary of eternity, trying to find a way out. There is no separation of the "saved from the damned (Hitler is in Heaven)" which seems unpalatable to man since he is inclined to see the clean from the unclean be separated. It may be true, as Moseley says, "perhaps the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is akin to the separation of clean from the unclean, and perhaps it is just as difficult to ascertain" (Understanding Julian Barnes 129).

Barnes, therefore, explores the relation of history and fiction without giving one primacy over the other. Instead he casts doubt on the "validity of historical facts and raises the question of whether we can ever know the past". The whole book thus does not claim to be the "monologic history of the world," rather a subjective and "partial" one in which no single voice obtain "outright authority" (Guignery 67-8). The title itself is worth considering. The book is *a history* not *the history* of the world. The reader is made conscious of the fact that it is not the only history to be contemplated. "There is no the history", as Moseley discusses, "there are only histories"(Understanding Julian Barnes 120).

3. CONCLUSION

Throughout history, we have been told thousands of stories, which we have accepted them as history, or to be more precisely as facts. Histories that most of which are neither scientifically nor logically plausible. People tend to think of history in the traditional way. However, if they are made cognizant of, and acquainted with, the subjectivity of it, that history does not accurately reflect the events occurred in the past, that the stories passed down the generations as histories have heavily been influenced by historians' viewpoints of the world, ideology, and environment, then they will no longer be staunch believers in history. All we are capable of doing, is the interpretation of past occurrences, of making them palatable to our tastes. It is thus highly partisan and biased. As is the case with the above-examined work, history as "what happened is attenuated to disappearance; history as what somebody told about what happened makes up the whole book" (Moseley 120). What Barnes indeed suggest, is that history is a construct which reflects not that which truly occurred in a given period, but historians' interpretations and impressions of a past occurrence.

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