The connection between art and history for julian barnes

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The connection between history and art is similar to the law of Causality in physics, otherwise known as the “ cause and effect” law. As history progressed through multiple ages, fashions, and mentalities, so did artistic styles and tendencies. Art is important to the historic field because the objects created by man show how different were the points of view of the people living back then compared to our modernized minds. This connection between art and history, which is occasionally marked by irony and incongruity, is addressed in Julian Barnes’s A History of the World in 10½ Chapters.

Salman Rushdie describes Julian Barnes’s A History of the World in 10½ Chapters as a “ fiction about what history might be,” a “ brilliant, elaborate doodle around the margins of what we know we think about what we think we know.” It is a novel composed of short stories covering the history of the world, changing the narrative mode in each chapter, thus creating in the reader’s mind different kinds of stories: a drama, a documentary, or a personal narrative. For instance, we experience the point of view of a woodworm who infiltrated Noah’s Ark, only to have the perspective changed and read a complete analysis of The Raft of Medusa, the painting by Theodore Gericault. As Steven Connor states in The English Novel in History, “ One particularly marked feature of postwar fiction, (…) which establishes an important link between history and novelistic narrative is the practice of rewriting earlier works of fiction. Such novels are a particular effect of a more generalised sense of the eternal return that seems to characterise postwar fiction.” Barnes is atomizing the history of the world, questioning the grand narratives. He is creating micro-histories that nobody thought were plausible

in order to challenge the reader to also question, divide and analyze the history of the world as seen from different perspectives, which to some may seem untruthful, unreliable, or simply absurd. As he states in “ Parenthesis,” the only chapter that does not have a numeral in front of it: “ We make up a story to cover the facts we don’t know or cannot 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.” He is retelling the history of the world in only 10 ½ chapters, and thus he is “ reworking” it or simply transforming it through “ translation, adaptation, displacement, imitation, forgery, plagiarism, parody, pastiche,” as Steven Connor describes it.

The analysis of the Medusa (Chapter 5: “ Shipwreck”) is the most relevant chapter in the book in terms of illustrating the connection between art and history. The chapter itself is an analysis of Gericault’s painting, The Raft of Medusa. The first half of the chapter explains the historical events of the shipwreck and the efforts the crew made in order to remain alive, describing all the grotesque and inhumane methods they were forced to utilize (dehydration, starvation and even cannibalism). In the second half, the narrator is examines the painting and describes why Gericault felt the need to “ soften” the harsh reality in order to make the history more reasonable, less grotesque and in order to respect the guidelines of aestheticism imposed by the Romantic movement in the French painting during that time: “ Truth to life, at the start, to be sure; yet once the process gets under way, truth to art is the greater allegiance. The incident never took place as depicted; the numbers are inaccurate; the cannibalism is reduced to literary reference…The raft has been cleaned up as if for…a queasy-stomached

monarch: the strips of human flesh have been housewifed away, and everyone's hair is as sleek as a painter's new-bought brush." This quotation explains precisely how " Catastrophe has become art": the author actively helps the reader to observe how a piece of art can be used in order to manipulate people and history.

The first chapter, " The Stowaway," is however the axis of the whole book, every chapter being related in one way or another to the Ark or Noah, the novel itself being " a post-modern, post-Christian series of variations on the theme of Noah's Ark." The chapter is written from the perspective of a woodworm, who describes Noah as a drunken, ordinary man, " who thinks of his menagerie as a ' floating cafeteria' and eats many species into extinction". He never took into account that the feathers of plovers turn white during winter and decided to bring it to extinction for the sake of the other animals. He killed the unicorns who were " strong, honest, fearless, impeccably groomed and a mariner who never knew a moment's queasiness" and consumed them (which upset the whole animal kingdom), despite the fact that the unicorn saved Ham's wife from falling into the sea. The woodworm blames God for Noah's habit because he's an " oppressive role model". Then he continues the verbal irony when talking about Noah's caretaking methods: " As soon as he saw the plovers turning white, he decided that they were sickening, and in tender consideration for the rest of the ship's health he had them boiled with a little seaweed on the side". The chapter might provoke some Christians because of Barnes's way of mocking one of the most important events written in the Bible. On this aspect I agree with Rushdie's comment: " The playful irreverence of this chapter would

make instructive and no doubt shocking reading for some of today's hardline religionists"(Salman Rushdie, 238), finding myself in the position of questioning the Bible even more than I already do. What if Noah really was a drunk who is responsible for the extinction of so many mythological creatures? We might never find out the truth. What Barnes's is trying to show us, using the motif of Noah's hero status and the Ark, is that history is highly influenced by art and guidelines imposed by people, movements. . Moreover, we forget that history is written by the victor which, of course, writes it in such way that his part is not only more glorious than it should be, but he is also omitting details (as in the 5th chapter), making us refuse other perspectives which might be indeed truthful and useful.

The woodworm perspective is still present in the third chapter, " The Wars of Religion," in which the insects, referred to as the bestioles (Latin term for bug or insect), are charged with " felonious intervention" for eating the Bishop's throne and the church of Saint-Michel until it fell down. " A church, being a ship of souls, is also a sort of ark."(Salman Rushdie, p. 241). The habitants request the excommunication of the bestioles responsible for the " devilish work". Plaidoyer des habitans, the prosecution, next described the inhabitant's victimization as " humble faith" and " unimpeachable honesty", explaining the absence of the bestioles: " too trepid of this court to let anything but the clear fountain of truth flow from their mouths". The statements used in these quotations satirize the prosecution. However, the court accuses the woodworms because they naturally eat wood by over exaggerating the incident in which the Besanson's bishop, Huge, fell through the throne: " Oh malevolent day! Oh malevolent invaders! And how the

Bishop fell … being hurled against his will into a state of imbecility”, thus parodying the Bishop’s fall. When describing the examination of the “ crime scene”, the plaidoyer says they discovered an “ unnatural infestation” in one of the legs of the chair and that they add that the criminals had “ secretly and darkly gone about their devlish work, [and] so devoured the leg that the Bishop did fall … from the heavens of light into the darkness of imbecility”. This might be an inappropriate overstatement because woodworms infest do wood naturally. In the end, “ the villager’s successful prosecution of the woodworms who end up being excommunicated … is ironically undercut by the conclusion in which the closing words … have been eaten by the woodworm” (Finney 63). Barnes satirizes documented history through the whole chapter, parodies a real event in history and tells an alternative story.

The half chapter of the total of 10 ½ is represented by “ Parenthesis,” in which Barnes talks directly to the reader about his view of love “ like El Greco staring out of his masterpiece The Burial of Count Orgaz”(Salman Rushdie, p. 239). Salman also states that this half chapter “ saves the day” because Barnes’s view of history is “ what let’s this book down” and “ it’s just too thin to support the whole fabric.” In Barnes’ vision, love is a kind of ark on which two people might just be saved and Rushdie interprets this idea as “ the opposite of history is love”, which to some might feel “ like a lifebelt, like a raft”. Barnes analyzes the “ I love you” sentence in different languages(English, German, French, Russian and finally Italian) and compares the different structure of each of them. He imagines a “ phonic conspiracy between the world’s languages. They make a conference decision that the phrase must always sound like something to be earned, to be

striven for, to be worthy of.” In German it is a “ late-night, cigarette-voiced whisper, with that happy rhyme of subject and object”, in French “ a different procedure, with the subject and object being got out of the way first, so that the long vowel of adoration can be savoured to the full,” in Russian there is an “ implication of difficulty, obstacles to be overcome,” and in Italian it: “ sounds perhaps a bit too much like an apéritif, but is full of structural conviction with subject and verb, the doer and the deed, enclosed in the same word.” He also describes why love does not mean that the couple is happy, not necessarily because they do not love each other enough, but because happiness is something that is subjective and can only be found alone and not together with love, but “ Perhaps love is essential because it’s unnecessary.” Rushdie adds, with regret, that “ even here one wishes that Barnes the essayist had stepped aside for Barnes the full-blooded novelist; instead of a disquisition on love, we could have been given the thing itself. ‘ Don’t talk of love,’ as Eliza Doolittle sang, ‘ show me.’“

The History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters is in all these ways a postmodernist carousel of the unexpected, a complex novel which speaks for those with no voice – the losers of history. Barnes employs irony and uses a wide array of narrative voices in order to form a single parody of the history restrained to only 10 ½ chapters. Using this unusual technique to write his novel, Barnes provides a criticism for the authority of history. The connection between art and history is best described by the Causality law: history being the action and art the reaction. Artists were telling history as seen by those they were working for, such as kings and the Church. In a way, because they had to paint or sculpt only one version of events, mostly the victors’, they

were censoring themselves. Moreover, they had to abide certain rules of style and morality. This is reflected in the fifth chapter, in which Gericault had to eliminate the grotesque elements of his painting. Therefore, art was an expression of history told from a singular, subjective perspective.

Without a way of cross-examining the accuracy of events as seen from other points of view, because often the truth lies somewhere in the middle, history has been told from the perspective of some people. Sovereigns used to commission paintings and sculptures in order to immortalize their accomplishments, therefore making artists accomplices to their truth (many examples come from the Antiquity to Napoleon). Barnes’s novel urges the reader to question the authenticity and the authority of history in general, calling for a lecture that questions the veracity of the information.

Works cited:

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