

**Sailing Into the Void :
“Notness” in Julian Barnes’ *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters***

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Alison Lee first introduced the term “notness” in order to characterise post-modern fiction’s tendency to revisit previously-existing works or genres; the result, by dint of borrowing from, copying and frequently parodying the original, both resembles yet differs from the work or genre in question. Peter Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor*, to take Lee’s example, relies on a pre-existent model - the detective novel – but totally transforms it, to such an extent that the term is no longer valid to define what Ackroyd has actually written. His novel is, therefore, not a detective novel in the accepted sense of the word since it “doesn’t subscribe unquestioningly to the wiles of the genre.” At the same time, however, it is “*not not* a detective novel” because, owing to the numerous devices it adapts, it “inscribes a superficial layer of recognizable conventions.” (83) Hence Lee’s apt term of “notness” to describe this borderline, in-between or what she calls “threshold” aspect of many postmodern novels, in which the original or parent genre is simultaneously exploited and undermined in a series of often-ironic echoes. The resulting hybridity frequently leads to a fragmentation of form; it also destabilises hitherto-unquestioned assumptions about the nature of reality and casts doubt upon the ability of the written word to reflect any truth whatsoever – all concerns which the original had taken for granted.

Julian Barnes’ *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*¹ similarly plays upon familiar models, as indeed its title, with its characteristic mingling of the playful and the serious, the lighthearted and the learned, clearly announces. This “History” is reminiscent of a myriad of previous “Histories of...” which purport to present, within the limited confines of the text, the definitive account of a vast and ever-fluctuating subject. Here, such an enterprise is of course instantly called into question by the mention of the “half-chapter”. Authorial authority and textual reliability are thus simultaneously invalidated, whilst two supposedly stable and universal concepts, namely history and the world, are undermined. Barnes’ title alone well illustrates Lee’s “notness”, suggesting as it does that what is to follow will be a history - and yet not - about the world - and yet not. And this is more than borne out by the work itself, which borrows from different genres – historical novel, travel book, learned treatise (Guignery, 43-4) - yet defies any single definition. Furthermore, its apparently random collection of miscellaneous accounts and its lack of conventional novelistic devices raises the question of whether it may even qualify as a novel at all. The book resembles more a collage of disconnected chapters, which flit haphazardly from French court-room to Turkish mountain to American small town. This spatial fragmentation is mirrored by the time-shifts, since the narration alights on particular moments in various individual lives in different centuries. Thus, no single plot or group of characters unifies *A History of the World’s* ten and a half chapters, the only connecting thread being the themes of voyage, selection and survival. Barnes takes the journey of the Ark as his departure point and then presents his “history of the

¹ The title will henceforth be abbreviated to *A History of the World*; all page references are to the 1990 Picador edition.

world” as a multiform re-enactment of this journey.

Such hybridity is of course the stuff of a great deal of postmodern fiction; indeed, the novel itself has become so protean a form over the last half-century that any attempt to define precisely what it *is* has been abandoned. Most literary dictionaries now offer a definition which allows for endless plurality, for example: “a wide variety of writings whose only common attribute is that they are extended pieces of prose fiction.” (Cuddon 599) *Flaubert's Parrot*, which Barnes wrote five years before *A History of the World*, similarly experiments with form, and was hailed on its publication as “a splendid hybrid of a novel, part biography, part fiction, part literary criticism.” (Brooks, 7,9) Both works cast doubt on the realist assumption that truth and reality are absolutes, and on the ultimate inadequacy of language to reflect any external reality, let alone truth, about the world. In *A History of the World* this doubt is expressed, notably, by juxtaposing diverse accounts – written, painted, filmed - in which myths are rewritten, historical records revisited and textual reliability questioned. Again, such concerns have been to the fore of postmodern writing ever since John Fowles allowed his omniscient narrator to intervene and shatter the reader’s “willed suspension of disbelief” in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. In all these respects, then, Barnes’ *History of the World* may indeed be called a “perfect example of [...] postmodern fiction.” (Kelley, 10) The present article aims to show, however, that the notion of “notness” is central to the novel and as such reflects a greater sense of unease than its teasing playfulness would at first suggest. For a friction arises between humanity’s – and the novelist’s - need, ever-renewed, to set out on a quest for truth, and the knowledge, constantly reiterated, that such a quest is from the outset doomed to failure. In the face of this impossible reconciliation, the quest becomes increasingly erratic and the conflicting accounts multiply, jostle and clash. Since the reliability of any single account or interpretation is always questioned, defining things by what they are *not* becomes as valid as attempting to define them by what they *are* – or rather, by what they are reported to be, are recorded as being.

A History of the World accordingly begins with an account, precisely, of what the Ark voyage most definitely was not, its aggressive stowaway narrator (a woodworm) constantly rectifying the biblical story in a series of dogmatic statements. The following one, with its emphatic negatives, is characteristic:

It wasn't like those nursery versions in painted wood which you might have played with as a child – all happy couples peering merrily over the rail from the comfort of their well-scrubbed stalls. Don't imagine some Mediterranean cruise on which we played languorous roulette and everyone dressed for dinner; on the Ark only the penguins wore tailcoats.” (3)

Throughout the first chapter, this process of demystification ironically urges the reader to reconsider any illusions concerning God’s design in constructing the Ark. The entire structure of Barnes’ history may indeed be guided by the underlying imperative of “Thou shalt not” (Kelley, 3), but the woodworm in fact breaks this code twofold. The third commandment is disobeyed, since the Lord’s name is repeatedly taken in vain through the cynical parody of the biblical commands, whilst the series of “Don’ts” which run through the woodworm’s account destroys any illusions whatsoever about the human race. The intertextual reference behind the

woodworm's commandments, far from constituting a standard for humanity to base its future conduct upon, suggests rather Dantë's injunction to the dead to abandon all hope on entering hell. For the stowaway's version of the Ark story sets the tone for the entire history of the world - a tale of tyranny and persecution carried out by Noah and his sons, in which the selection of the Chosen and the separation of the clean and the unclean recall the grimmest moments of 20th century world history. The notion of "notness" is once again at work behind this apparently deliberate choice, since the animal kingdom is created by the elimination of those species "Not Wanted on Voyage"(7), and is thus defined as much by what was *not* chosen as by what was. And even this so-called choice is made to depend on random factors, both before and during the journey, such as over-hasty selection or the voracious appetite of the ruling class on board ("What the hell do you think Noah and his family ate in the Ark? They ate *us*, of course." 13) Barnes thus points out, albeit comically, that so-called knowledge may be based on data which is not only arbitrary but incomplete; selection is again at work, not only in deciding who will survive human history, but which parts of that history will be recorded.

At the same time, selection and choice by definition imply loss, and the losses to the animal kingdom are neatly incorporated by transforming them into myth: "You can't imagine what richness of wildlife Noah deprived you of. Or rather you can, because that's precisely what you do: you imagine it. All those mythical beasts your poets dreamed up in former centuries." (14) What is pinpointed here is the metafictional aspect of the selection process; all art implies choice and deletion, and the final product is as much about what was not retained, as about what eventually remains - the "not-books", as Barnes previously dubbed these lost elements. (*Flaubert's Parrot* 137)² Here, in the chapter entitled "Shipwreck", he applies a similar approach to painting, first presenting an account of the fated 1816 voyage of the French brig the *Medusa*, then a reproduction of Géricault's painting of some of the survivors, *The Raft of Medusa*. In an attempt to understand the artist's portrayal of the catastrophe, much of the following part is then given over to what in fact he chose *not* to paint, or to what he "most nearly painted" or "very nearly painted", and to the consequences of his successive rejections and choices. The narrator is forced to conclude that the final painting cannot be considered a "true" representation of the event: "The incident never took place as depicted; the numbers are inaccurate." (135) And, although "truth to art" is acknowledged to be more important than truth to life, the painting itself will not in fact remain "fixed, final, always there" for the public gaze, since the canvas is subject to "a slow, irreparable decay of the paint surface." (139) Similarly, in chapter 3, where the woodworm's descendants are on trial in a 16th century court-case concerning the rotting-away of a church-seat, the parchment recounting the case has been eaten away by a species of termite, thus preventing the closing words from being read.(80) This disintegration confirms what is stated in the "half" chapter, namely that the "current model for the universe is entropy"(246); the quest for origins and the retelling of the original Ark story in an "almost obsessive pattern of repetition" (Bernard, 148, my translation) may be seen as attempts at resisting this process of dissolution. But they both suggest closure and confinement, the whittling-away of human endeavour and of language itself through worn repetition rather than their

² The chapter considering these "Apocrypha" has as its epigraph the following lines from "A German Requiem": *It is not what they built. It is what they knocked down./It is not the houses. It is the spaces between the houses./It is not the streets that exist. It is the streets that no longer exist.* (133)

renewal.

In *A History of the World*, then, the Ark story is repeatedly re-enacted, the necessity of finding the allegedly original or “true” version stressed throughout. Whether on the *Titanic*, on a raft in the jungle, or in a spaceship, the Ark voyage is retold and replayed, as are its accompanying themes of selection and survival. At the beginning of chapter 2, for example, a Mediterranean cruise-tour operator quotes “The animals came in two by two” as he watches the tourists mounting the gangway in obedient couples (33), and later passengers on the ship are shot at random, two by two every hour, until the terrorists’ demands are met (53); in chapter 7, the *St Louis* liner, with its Jewish refugees fleeing Germany, explicitly recalls the process of selection carried out on the Ark.(184). This need to return to and repeat the past is matched by the accumulation of differing accounts of a single event. Juxtaposition and repetition constitute an attempt to seize and record the supposed original for posterity - an attempt which is constantly thwarted. The woodworm’s account of the Voyage, for example, is subsequently invalidated in the chapter recounting the trial, for the prosecution’s premise is that no woodworm was never on the Ark at all, since “Holy writ makes no mention” of any such presence.(72) Furthermore, doubt is cast on the authenticity of the entire account, as it is stated that the minutes of the case are the work of a third party and may be a “copy of someone else’s version.”(61-2) The entire woodworm trial is in any case of so preposterous a nature that the reader tends to dismiss it all as pure playfulness. Yet this certainty is itself called into question when, on the very last page of the book, an “Author’s Note” specifies that the chapter is “based on legal procedures and actual cases described in *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals* by E.P.Evans (1906).” Each supposedly authentic version is thus cancelled out as new data comes to light, creating a series of palimpsests in which the original constantly escapes the reader’s grasp.

One is reminded of Roland Barthes’ comment that realism can never represent an original version of reality, but must first establish a frame around it, and then copy what is within the frame; thus the so-called depiction of reality is not even a copy, but the “copy of a copy.”(61) Here, copies repeat themselves in a seemingly-endless deferral; the doomed voyage of the *Medusa*, to take another example, is recounted by an omniscient narrator who, again according to the “Author’s Note”, has drawn “the facts and language from the 1818 London translation” of an account published by the two French survivors, whilst the account of the painting’s genesis relies on a 1982 biography of the artist. Finally, when *The Raft of Medusa* resurfaces in Dublin in the 19th century, it is not the painting of the shipwreck which attracts the public most, but yet another copy: a mobile show complete with music and light-effects which again transforms the original event.(145) Just as the survivors on the raft are compared to humanity at large, lost at sea and straining towards the horizon to no avail, the “true” version of any event recedes on an ever-distant horizon. This kind of embedding, constantly casting doubt on the authenticity of a source and referring either back to a previous one or forward to a future one, which in turn will also be invalidated, results in a sense of disorientation and unease for the reader.

Thus *A History of the World* may be considered as expressing that form of “narrative anxiety” which characterises much postmodern writing, namely:

“a pervasive cultural concern [...] that things are not only not what they seem:

what they seem is what they are, not a unity of word or image and thing, but words and images without things or as things themselves, effects of narrative form and nothing else.” (Botting, 171)

This lack of connection between signifier and signified is what Barnes' versions point to again and again; the very stress on sources highlights all the more the lack of any single and reliable one. What remain are indeed simply words and images, copies of copies ultimately drained of their substance and existing in a void: “unstable, unfixed and ungrounded in any reality, truth or identity other than those that narratives provide.” (*idem*) In this respect, the retelling of the Voyage appears as an attempt to resist what Botting calls “a threat of sublime excess, of a new darkness of multiple and labyrinthine narratives, in which human myths again dissolve, confronted by an uncanny force beyond its control.” (*idem*) Hence not only the revisiting of the Ark story, but also the accounts of various quests to find the original Ark on Mount Ararat, where it supposedly came to rest, and thus fend off the threat that one of humanity's founding myths vanish once and for all into “notness.” Ironically, as though better to fight the “new darkness”, the two quests presented are undertaken by religious fanatics, one a fervent 19th century Protestant spinster and the other a modern-day astronaut who is converted to the faith when on the moon, where he hears God commanding him to find the Ark. The stories follow the spiral movement of the whole novel, for the astronaut's quest is sparked off by seeing a replica of the Ark at Kitty Hawk: “You had driven to the place where Man first took to the air, and you are reminded instead of an earlier, more vital occasion, when Man first took to the sea.” (249-50) And later on Mount Ararat he discovers, not Noah's remains, but the skeleton of his own 19th century predecessor, which creates anew the need to set off on another quest; the chapter closes with his launching a second project to recover the Ark. With such latter-day explorers as these, Barnes ironically rewrites the heroic voyages of the past, creating a multiplicity of voyages with no central anchorage or ultimate destination.³ This surfeit of retellings and renewals sets up a circular motion which disturbingly resembles that “new darkness of multiple and labyrinthine narratives” mentioned above.

If one of postmodernism's dilemmas is to “overcome the conflict between truth and lies”, then *A History of the World* indeed tries to resolve this dilemma by treating both as “versions of what can no longer be recovered.” (Fokkema, 42) And the novelist, whether he attempts to present history as truth or fiction as lies – or vice versa - will always sense that both endeavours remain forever out of reach. Hence the urge to retell, to recover the original. Yet the very emphasis on what versions are *not* reveals all the more the impossibility of ever knowing what they really are - worse, the suspicion that the versions themselves are “effects of narrative form and nothing else”, mere reflections, that is, of “notness.” In the face of this void, the revisiting of old models and pre-existing genres may be seen as a yearning for the past on the one hand; their recycling a straining towards the future on the other. It is this threshold status, to return to another of Lee's terms, that, beneath *A History of the World's* sometimes ostentatious display of postmodernist prowess, pervades the novel with a certain unease. For the mingling of the familiar and the unfamiliar, which

³ The only anchorage that he provides is in the “Parenthesis”, the “½ chapter” in which the narrator, in a surprisingly sentimental interlude, reflects on love as an “ark on which two might escape the Flood”.(231)

is the very hallmark of “notness”, also corresponds to Freud’s definition of the uncanny, and as such perhaps reveals the continuing fear that some “uncanny force beyond [narrative’s] control” may lurk beneath the sophisticated surface of the text.

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