CHAPTER-III

THEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF POSTMODERNISM IN THE MAJOR NOVELS OF JULIAN BARNES

3.1 Introduction:

In the last thirty years or so, there has been a tremendous amount of creative energy expended in the writing of "historical fictions". One popular trend in historical writing has been a type of fiction Linda Hutcheon has called "historiographic metafiction". According to Hutcheon, historiographic metafictions combine an attention to verifiable historical events, personages or milieu with a self-reflexive awareness of their status as artifacts and the fictional narrative conventions they employ. Now with works by authors such as A.S. Byatt, Michael Ondaatje, Graham Swift, Penelope Lively, Julian Barnes and Salman Rushdie, historiographic metafiction has become a very popular literary genre, particularly for British writers.

This explosion of critical historical fictions is an outgrowth of the wide postmodern questioning of Enlightenment and positivist philosophies and traditional disciplinary authority. This re-orientatation in thinking about history and the writing of history has been brought to prominence by theorist such as Lionel Gossman and Hayden White. White, for example, urges us to see historiography as a craft rather than a science.

Postmodern historical fictions such as Barnes’s don’t necessarily set out to critique historiography or the traditional methods of historical research as much as they imagine, explore and narrative alternative understandings of
history, often in an effort to compensate for the gaps or areas of neglect in existing narratives.

3.2 Metroland

Metroland, is written according to the conventions of Bildungsroman which describes the emotional and intellectual development of young protagonists. The novel is divided into three parts: Metroland, Paris, and Metroland II. Each of them deals with the ensuing stages of development which brings new meanings to the events and situations described and even more possible interpretations. At the beginning, the two main protagonists-Christopher Lloyd and Toni Barbarowski present the same views on life, art, and society. Only in the last passages do they split. Particularly because while, in the course of time, Chris declined in his criticism for the bourgeois district communities, Toni persisted in his rebellious attitude by taking up a job as a University scientist and refusing to ever get married. Despite the simplicity of plot, Metroland introduces the personal history of the protagonist

As Matthew Pateman suggests ‘Barnes refuses the expected history…giving us instead the personal history of Christopher’s falling in love, losing his virginity, meeting his future wife…’

History is thus displaced to the margins while what may look as incidental, Chris’s personal story, is given central place. The novel thus stays true to the form of the Bildungsroman, focusing on the personal development of the main character, especially his sentimental and sexual education.
Chris and Toni appear indeed as rebellious in the first part of *Metroland*, ‘a maturely sophisticated treatment of premature sophistication in adolescence’ according to Ronald Hayman. The two clever and erudite teenagers cultivate cynicism, irony, rootlessness, affection and a fondness for all that is French. Here Barnes creates a telling, detailed and amusing picture of youth. He deftly accomplishes what must be a difficult aim: to make this picture both representative and individual, an account of both adolescence and an adolescent. Among Christopher Lloyd’s preoccupations are many that are, if not universal, still common to young men. He is obsessed with sex, though without any practical knowledge of it. He is offended by his partners, brother and sister and, in illustration of the “family romance” that Freud claimed as a common fantasy, suspects that the commonplace people represented to him as his family must be some sort of impostors:

Could it be that I was really related to all of them? And how could I bear not to point out the obvious differences?

“Mum, am I illegitimate?”

........................................................................................................

“You sure there isn’t a chance I’m illegitimate?” I waved an explicatory hand towards [siblings] Nigel and Mary

He takes genuine delight in being called “sir” and treasures the first time it happened, which was also when he was being measured for his first pair of trousers. He feels contempt for almost all his contemporaries and all the older
people he knows, especially those in positions of authority in his school, reserving his respect for older people he does not know.

All these are generic traits of adolescence, though they are captured in original ways in Barnes’s narration. The other ways in which Christopher Lloyd is made an original and individual adolescent have to do with his friend Toni. In an unsympathetic review, Paul Bailey comments: “Novels written in the first person, novels intent on establishing the peculiar quality of a single life, survive when they set that life against a vivid background of other, possible more interesting lives. There is a curious lack of people in Metroland.”

It is in creating the imaginative live of Christopher and Toni that Barnes produces the strongly individual character of the adolescent scenes. Toni shares the admiration of French culture, made up in roughly equal part of

(1) Longing for something different from their normal English milieu,

(2) attraction to the idea of the “sophisticated tough” as represented by Henry de Montherlant and Albert Camus.

(3) desire to be flaneurs- Christopher and Toni try being glaneurs but are handicapped by the lack of a boulevard and

(4) Snobbery.

In the third part, “Metroland II”, the novel comes full circle as Christopher, aged thirty, is back in suburbia where he has settled with his wife Marion into the bourgeois life he despised as a teenager, while Toni has remained faithful to his ideals of art and truth. This third part led to a
controversy as to the interpretation of Chris’s return to Metroland. Barnes intentionally devised the ironical circular structure: ‘I thought of the development of a structure, an arc’, in order to show how people can change: ‘I’m obviously saying that people develop in ways they don’t expect to.’ In an interview with Rudolf Freiburg, the writer explained that he was interested in ‘the idea of someone setting out on a journey seemingly in one direction and then ending up back where he started. It was about the compromises that people make in a way without realizing that they’re doing so’.

In the last part, Barnes introduces the themes of fidelity and cuckoldry that will recur in his later works, which leads Jay Parini to describe the novel as ‘a meditation on the meaning of fidelity within the context of marriage in an age of crushing cynicism’.

What critics mainly saluted in their reviews of Metroland was the mastery of style, the sureness of construction, the accuracy of detail, the effective wit and irony, and the apt descriptions of childhood and adolescence remembered with nostalgia and a sense of loss by the first person narrator. The ironic perspective is mainly due to the retrospective narration as, throughout the novel, the narrative voice is that of the 30 year old narrator, who, according to Mosoley, ‘is now capable of ironic correction of the ideas and postures of his adolescent self. The first person narration combines an inhabiting of the mind of the adolescent with an older man’s understanding of that mind’s shortcomings’. Moseley adds that one of the main achievements of the novel is precisely the management of tone as the wiser and distanced
view over one’s life allows for irony and sharpness: ‘the ironic verbal texture…keeps the tone astringent’

Three important things happen in the final section that put a sort of seal on Christopher’s adult relations to death, sex and art. One is that his Uncle Arthur dies; Arthur has been a comic figure, featured in the adolescent chapters. Returning from his cremation, Christopher realizes that his fear of death is gone.

The final surrender is to middle class, middle-aged suburban normality comes when Christopher attends an old-boys’ dinner for his former school. All his old scorn for the school, for the kinds of “success” his classmates have found, for the masters, tugs at him; Toni sneers at him; but he goes along anyway, overcomes his instincts and enjoys himself, and is offered a job: setting up a new publishing imprint for translations of French classics.

The question of how art mediates our experience of life and history is one that runs through all of Barnes’s novels. In his debut, the bildungsroman Metroland, it is the question that preoccupies the precocious and cynical young narrator Christopher and his school friend Toni. To address it, they take to observing people who are themselves observing art in the National Gallary. They “scientifically” note the physical responses people manifest, hoping that a twitch, squirm or puffing of the cheeks will help them to understand art’s influence on people. Many years later, they debate the utility of their experiments. Toni, who has grown into the stereotype of an embittered radical, declares that “as least we were looking, at least we believe that art was to do with something happening, that it wasn’t all a water-color want”
Chris, who has assimilated to the comfortable life of the bourgeois, is more doubtful: ‘I just don't see that it makes anything happen. Very nice for us that the Renaissance occurred and all that; but it’s all really about ego and agro, isn’t it?’

This is a novel that presents in all its potential interestingness the growth of a would be hone revolte or rebel to an home moyen sensual, an average sensual man.

3.3 Before She Met Me: In search of lost time

According to the traditional concept of realism historical narrative has an absolute value of truth. In the postmodern literature such concept assumes a different meaning and is deprived of any truth. It becomes just one of the stories of a possible incident, dictated by personal choice made by the historian, who, by manipulating the facts and choose according to their own experiences, providing its own version of the event, which is only one of many possible:

[...] One is always reading "something else", and never the supposedly "real thing".

The postmodernism wants to denaturalize some aspects of life and literature which traditionally regarded as natural. Linda Hutcheon in The Politics of Postmodernism wants to prove that those entities that we unconsciously always deemed ‘natural’ in fact are cultural products, that is created by men through the performances. Linda Hutcheon wishes to traces that we never get knowledge through the direct access of the event, but it is always filtered by the representations of the events:
The postmodern [...] is not degeneration into "hyper reality" but a questioning of what reality can mean and how we can come to know it. It is not that now dominates representation or effaces the referent, but rather that it now self-consciously acknowledges its existence as representation.²

In this sense, according to the postmodern vision, life in all its aspects is a cultural fact, precisely because it mediated the performances, which are, in fact, the deterioration of the tracks available, but without which we could not know any reality, because we do not have a direct and natural access to the past.

Linda Hutcheon emphasizes this notion by claiming that "[...] what we call" culture "is seen as the effect of representations, not their source".³

The story does not give life, but gives meanings to events. In this regard, the postmodern thought distinguishes the events of the past by historical facts that, through our interpretation, we build around those events, so the events are events that we have assigned a meaning. All episodes of the past have the potential of historical facts, but fact becomes only those that really are chosen to be told. Therefore different perspectives generate different historical facts from those events.

This same mode of postmodern interpretation of history is put in place by Graham Hendrick, professor of history protagonist of Before She Met Me.

*Before She Met Me* analyzes the confusion between history and jealousy and the consequent inability of the protagonist to distinguish the two areas: the jealous conducts his investigations through the rigorous historical method and interpretations of history that comes away from 'be objective and
rational, it completely altered and polluted by his personal involvement. What is interesting for our analysis is the confusion between history and jealousy and the consequent inability of the protagonist to distinguish the two areas.

**Jealousy and history:**

[...] The jealous lover wanders through a labyrinth whose walls are covered with Hieroglyphics, projecting over and over again in his or her mind the image of something half heard or seen half, rewriting the past [...]

Rosemary Lloyd, Closer & Closer Apart

*Before she Met Me* is the pathological case of retrospective jealousy. It also opens many other possibilities of postmodern reading and interpretation. The novel focuses on Graham Hendrick, a history teacher who divorces his first wife Barbara and marries Ann, a former actress, whom his novelist friend Jack had made in the past, no matter how bad, and becomes obsessed by the relationships she had before he met her, both on and off the screen. His obsession and retrospective jealousy gradually deepen until he becomes convinced that Ann also had an affair with his friend Jack. Deeply wounded and out of his mind, Graham eventually kills Jack and commits suicide in front of Ann.

In *Before She Met Me* the relationship between jealousy and history is analyzed starting from Graham, and the way it deals with the relationship with his second wife, and is the total coincidence between the historian and the jealous and the mechanisms that trigger this coincidence to provide key reading of the novel. We find that a full history and jealous, both represented by Graham, moving on parallel tracks completely, making a journey back in
time to know the past, through a meticulous job of investigation, collection and interpretation of material same. In both cases, the aim is to bridge the gaps of his knowledge, either from the historic taken into consideration or the life of his wife. According to the traditional concept of realism, the story has a historical value of the absolute and irrefutable truth. While in the postmodern literature, which is part of Barnes’s novel, the story loses this historic prerogative of absolute truth and becomes one of many possible stories, the result of an interpretation of the facts by the historian who analyzed.

The main theme of the novel, jealousy, ‘the green-eyed monster’ has been widely discussed by critics, who have frequently pointed out intertextual echoes, first among which was Othello (1604) by William Shakespeare (1564-1616). Graham is ironically and contemptuously nicknamed ‘little Othello’ by his friend Jack, suggesting that Graham carves out a pathetic figure compared with the larger-than-life Shakespearean hero.

Before She Met Me is written in the wake of the sexual liberation of sixties, which did not eliminate all difficulties in relationships between men and women. David Montrose delineated very aptly the theme of the novel as ‘the problem of jealousy in an age of sexual freedom’. Barnes himself pointed to the misconceived ideas dating back to that period of sexual liberation:

There seems now a major flaw in the hopeful Sixties assumption that the more people you sleep with, the more relaxed you become about the whole thing: that an increase in sexual traffic produces a decrease in the unpleasant emotions sometimes aroused by the business.
On the contrary, those emotions persist and Barnes qualified his novel as;

‘a sort of anti-‘60s book. It’s against the idea that somehow the 60s sorted sex out….suddenly everyone started sleeping with everyone else, and that cured the lot... I just wanted to say it’s not, like that; that what is constant is the human heart and human passions’.

This certainly explains why Higdon situated the novel in a deeply rooted novelistic tradition, qualifying it as a ‘twentieth-century husband’s version of the great nineteenth-century novels of estrangement, adultery and jealousy’.

Barnes, however, does not merely reproduce models of the past; he transforms tradition by making Graham’s jealousy retrospective. The novel not only describes concrete examples of this pathology but also contains metatextual pauses during which the main protagonist ponders over his own disease, trying to dissect its causes. This is an issue Barnes has struggled with and to which he attempted to provide provisional answers in an article entitled ‘Remembrance of Things Past’ (1983). After given a series of example, he explains that retrospective jealousy, or ‘retro-jealousy’ as he calls it, usually ‘broadens out into a wider obsession. That previous affair, that earlier lover turn out to be mere nominees for wider areas of baffled resentment: a kind of foolish rage against the immutability of the past and a metaphysical whinge at the fact that things can actually happen despite your absence’ This obsessional rage is precisely what Graham suffers from and what turns his jealousy into a disease of the mind.
The passage, which Barnes originally found quoted by a friend of his, the famous Hungarian writer Arthur Kostler, is taken from a medical journal whose bibliographical references are given with the utmost precision—‘Paul D. MacLean, Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases, vol. CXXXV No. 4 October 1962’ as though already announcing the meticulousness of the history lecturer. The long quotation records that man is endowed with three brains, the lower one reptilian, the second inherited form the lower mammals and the highest one late mammalian. Throughout the novel, the main protagonist reflects on the mechanisms of the human brain and Jack develops a version of that theory of the lower brains or ‘the Sawn-Offs’ the ones that control our emotions, make us kill people, fuck other people’s wives, vote Tory, kick the dog and the higher brains of ‘Four eyes’ (p-75), which are ‘socially acceptable’ (p-74). If Jack tries to reassure Graham by telling him that ‘most people don’t kill other people. Most people have got the Sawn-offs well under their thumb’ (p-75), the reader may foresee the triumph of the primitive brain when confronted with the title of the last chapter, ‘The Horse and the Crocodile’ (p-161), which actually echoes the last sentence of the epigraph—‘when the psychiatrist bids the patient to lie on the coach, he is asking him to stretch out alongside a horse and a crocodile’ (p-5) Barnes explained in an interview that he chose this quotation as an epigraph because it ‘absolutely fitted the novel….which is about a civilized man who finds that the horse and the crocodile have not gone away’. Because of this persistent reptilian mind, ‘things which begin optimistically can turn into complete tragedy’. As Moseley suggests, the first epigraph raises ‘important questions of freedom and determinism’ since one wonders whether Graham will be able
to keep his emotions under control or not. Matthew Pateman argues that the
epigraph ‘locates Hendrick within a strongly materialist conception of the self-
a conception where the self is given [by] (or atleast heavily determined by)
biological and neuro-physiological factors’. Pateman adds that the novel
keeps questioning ‘the degree to which the brain is controller or controlled’
Bill Greenwell, in his review of the novel, draws attention to this ‘battle
between our rational and irrational selves, the perennial and unfathomable
failure to reconcile our instincts, emotions and intellect’ Eventually in the
novel, the horse and the crocodile take control, and Graham is convinced that
this was his predetermined fate. Pateman concludes that Graham’s choice ‘is
for a resigned acceptance of what he sees to be the natural narrative
conclusion of his predicament’, whereas the tragic end is actually the result
of a pathological form of jealousy.

French scholar Frederic Monneyron was particularly interested in the
mechanism of Graham’s brain as beset by jealousy, and devoted a whole
chapter to Before She Met Me in his study of jealousy in literature, L’Ectiture
de la jalousie [writing Jealousy] (1997). Offering a psychoanalytical
interpretation of the novel, he applauded the way in which Barnes laid bare
the foundations of jealousy, revealed the phantasms attached to it and gave
access to the unconscious of the main protagonist. According to Monneryson,
Barnes’s main achievement in the book lies in the way he juxtaposes jealousy
and its interpretation, and offers the reader means to set him/herself free from
it. Monneyron explains that in his desire for a total fusion with Ann, Graham
cannot stand her absence and compensates for it by the phantasmatic-creation
of an imaginary rival and by erotic self-satisfactions such as masturbation. In
his sexual dreams, he fantasises about Ann with her past lovers, which is a way of imaginatively possessing the intimacy of his partner and his rivals. Graham's obsession thus becomes pathological until his retrospective jealousy towards unidentified past rivals, Jack Lupton. Monneyron differentiates between the story proper, or diegesis, in which the resolution of jealousy can only be achieved through the murder of the rival, and the narrative discourse or narration, which offers the reader elements of interpretation of Graham's pathological attitude. He concludes from several introspective passages that Graham's jealousy originates from his infancy and is based on an idealization of the mother, a forbidding of any desire for the mother by the father, and the ensuing threat of castration. The scholar adds that Graham's jealousy is also marked by specific phantasms that have been identified by Sigmund Freud (1956-1939) in his analysis of its pathological forms. These concern, on the one hand, phantasms of infidelity towards Ann that have been suppressed or projected onto his partner and on the other hand homosexual phantasms towards Jack, for example when he is about to murder him: 'In a funny way Graham was just as fond of Jack as he'd always been'. Another insightful essay on the mechanism of jealousy in Before She Met Me was written by Millington and Sinclair, who focused more particularly on the portrayal of the betrayed husband in works of literature that point to the organizing principle of patriarchal societies, in which men exert their sexual authority and social power over women. Millington and Sinclair suggest that there are two models, or paradigms, for such portrayals, which they trace back to the English writer Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343/4-1400) and the Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75): either the husband is
presented as a cuckold and is mocked for being much older than his wife and sexually impotent, or he is charactersied as a man of honor who responds powerfully to his fate, usually by killing the unfaithful wife and her lover. In *Before She Met Me*, the two paradigms are not only mixed but also sometimes subverted. Thus, Graham originally seems to fit the model of the cuckold because he is older than Ann, less experienced sexually, and feels inadequate. Echoing Monneyron’s interpretation of the novel. Millington and Sinclair suggest that Ann’s sexual experience turns her ‘into a kind of mother-figure which may create problems for Graham’s sense of control over his own identity’. On the other hand, Graham, does not fit the model of the laughable cuckold as Ann seems satisfied with her sexual relations with him, and her supposed infidelity only pertains to the time before he met her. Graham thus departs from the model is exemplified by Chaucer and Boccaccio because he never receives any public humiliation as a result of Ann’s unfaithfulness and therefore cannot be made a comic figure, to other characters at least.

Part of Graham’s suffering is more precisely due to the fact that he can no longer differentiate his own phantasms and fears from reality, an aspect that has been analysed by Matthew Pateman. Being a history lecturer, Graham should be adept at selecting and interpreting sources of information, but this proves impossible for him so that his version of history is deeply subjective. When reconstructing Ann’s past and looking for proofs of her infidelity, Graham makes no selection among the archives: he includes the films in which Ann appeared as well as those in which her supposed lovers played a role, the reviews of these films, photographs, advertisements, coins from foreign countries Ann visited, matchboxes from places where he went.
The reader may feel the irony in the following remark: “There was no point in getting jealous unless you were accurate about it’ (p-60). However Graham’s so-called accuracy and lack of discrimination as a researcher undermine the validity of his conclusions: ‘sometimes he wasn’t sure what constituted evidence’ (p-59). Pateman suggest that Graham’s ‘historical narrative is a montage of disparate forms, his self is an auto-generative self-fulfilling bricolage’14. Graham ends up with uncovering the truth, just like any historian or detective, but inevitably becomes aware of the irretrievability of the past, a typically postmodernist topic.

The flaw in his method lies in the fact that Graham, despite being a historian, confuses art and life, fiction and reality, his wife as constructed by his imagination and her real self. As John Mellors remarks, the book is the ‘illustration of an educated rational being’s disintegration when illusion takes over form reality’14. Graham’s doubts are partly provoked by his own dreams, during which Ann’s past lovers luridly describe her sexual life. Instead of vanishing in the morning, the dreams persist in the day time. Graham first attempts to convince himself of the ontological dichotomy and incompatibility between dreams and reality: ‘Dreams couldn’t be true, could they: that was why they were dreams’. But he also attributes a revelatory function to his dreams, suggesting that they can reveal truths about past reality- he calls them ‘post-monitory dreams’ (p-84). Thus, when in one of his dreams, actors tell him that Ann was keen on making love with four men at the same time, he starts wavering: ‘What if it were true? It couldn’t be true…..No, it couldn’t be true. But what if it referred to a sort of truth?’ (p-90). Graham takes such
fantasies as sources of information, pieces of evidence, if not facts, and thus invalidates the very concept of truth.

Graham’s confusion of art and life is also due to his inability to differentiate between Ann’s sexual activity on screen and off screen, both of which he considers as acts of adultery. If he first opposes two categories of films, with on the one hand fictive sexual acts and on the other hand effective, sexual acts, the two categories then tend to become indistinguishable: ‘[They] were beginning to get blurred in his head’ (p-92). The ultimate stage consists in looking in the novels of his friend, the fiction writer Jack Lupton, for clues as to his affair with Ann. This confusion of reality and fiction constitutes what Brain McHale in Postmodernist Fiction (1987) calls a ‘violation of ontological boundaries’\textsuperscript{15}. Graham no longer makes any distinction between what is fact and what is fiction so that his biography of his wife is warped. As Pateman wrote, ‘Graham’s construction is a total fabrication, an arbitrary narrative threaded between disparate states and forms that he believes to be true: he invents his own referent’. \textsuperscript{16}

We may add that Ann also creates his own referent when she willingly decides to transform the past-‘I’m sorry to rewrite your past for you’ (p-67)-and obliterate her affair with Jack: ‘I’ve decided we never had an affair’ (p66). However, Ann and Jack’s attitude cannot be confused with that of Graham as, according to Pateman, they ‘knowingly life’. They indeed still know the ontological difference between reality and their own invention, a knowledge which is not shared by Graham. Their attempt to rewrite the past will nevertheless fail as Graham will be convinced of finding evidence of their affair within Jack’s own novels. Once again, the frontiers between reality and
fiction blur: Jack’s supposedly fictional books actually reveal the truth because, he ‘lacks the imagination to make up his novels and must rely on disguised versions of his friends and altered retellings of his own life’

Even though Before She Met Me may appear to revert to traditional strategies in its narration and characterization, the debate which it triggers on the blurring of ontological frontiers between fiction and reality, as epitomized by the coexistence of a history lecturer and a fiction writer is a typically postmodernist.

As Bruce Sesto wrote, ‘The paradox implicit in having, as central character, a historian who predicates his theoretical embodies the contemporary novel’s concern with the problematical relationship between fiction and historiography [the writing of history].’ 17 This debate as to the relationships between fiction and history, art and life, already announces the main topic of Barnes’s next novel, to be published two years later, Flaubert’s Parrot.

### 3.4 Flaubert’s Parrot

Julian Barnes’s award-winning third novel, Flaubert’s Parrot, originally published in 1984, using an amazing range of techniques and a combination of genres in order to tell the story of its protagonist Geoffrey Braithwaite, a widower, retired medical doctor, and ‘amateur’ Flaubert scholar. Braithwaite’s self-appointed quest is to find the actual parrot which his favorite writer, Flaubert, used as a model for Loulou- the absurdly named, symbolically charged bird at the center of his famous short story, Un Coeur simple (i.e. “A Simple Heart”). Pursuing the search does not reduce the alternatives but
increases them. It records the problems of knowing the truth and authenticity of past.

**How do we seize the past?**

This is the question that Julian Barnes is preoccupied with in his novel *Flaubert’s Parrot*. The pervasive questioning of traditional epistemologies in this “postmodern” era has led to a general uncertainty about how to understand history and the world around us. According to Jean-Francois Lyotard, the grand systems of thought or “metanarratives” (e.g Christianity, Marxism, Reason) which used to explain events are no longer sufficient (xxiv). It is controversial as to whether they ever were really sufficient, but Lyotard is correct in that they are certainly less influential now than in previous historical eras. The existential confusion and general uncertainty of individuals deprived of such “framing certainties” is one of the more notable features of postmodern literature, and is especially foregrounded in Barnes looks to history for answers and usually only finds more questions.

Barnes draws on an extremely diverse range of writing styles to show history is recorded in a variety of genres which all make use of literary conventions. Many critics and reviewers have noted that *Flaubert’s Parrot* consist of a mix of what are usually considered “historiographic” and “literary” genres. James Scott, in particular, identifies *Flaubert’s Parrot* as a “trans-generic prose text”, and notes that Barnes deconstructs “prose genre taxonomies […] so that […] the conventional signification patterns (biography presents fact; fiction presents fancy) no longer function” ¹ This observation captures the general spirit of Barnes’s work, but a more detailed examination is needed of the specific genres that Barnes employs in his fiction and the
self-consciousness or “metafictional” ways in which he tackles the limitations, frustrations, and occasional rewards of their various conventions of representation.

Whereas A History of the World addresses the problems of historical representation in a globalized sense, Flaubert's Parrot focuses on the problem of narrating the history of an individual’s life, that is, the genre of biography. Flaubert's Parrot records the exploits and musings of Geoffrey Braithwaite, a retired British medical doctor turned amateur Flaubert biographer. Early in his quest for information about Flaubert, Braithwaite reflects upon history’s deviousness:

How do we seize the past? Can we ever do so? When I was a medical student some pranksters at an end-of-term dance released into the hall of piglet which had been smeared with grease. It squirmed between legs, evaded capture, squealed a lot. People fell over trying to grasp it, and were made to look ridiculous in the process. The past seems to behave like the piglet.

Metaphors for history abound in the work. Another, quite beautiful, one appears later in the novel and deserves quotation at length:

The past is a distant, receding coastline, and we are all in the same boat. Along the stern rail there is a line of telescopes; each brings the shore into focus at a given distance. If the boat is becalmed, one of the telescopes will be in continual use; it will seem to tell the whole, the unchanging truth. I But this is an illusion; and as the boat sets off again, we return to our normal activity: scurrying from one
telescope to another, seeing the sharpness fade in one, waiting for the blur to clear in another.³

Barnes is both fascinated and frustrated by the impossibility of getting history “right”, a puzzle which leads him to represent and reflect upon historical events and figures through a variety of “alternative” historiographic genres. Implicit throughout his work is the idea that traditional forms of historiography offer a limited means of understanding history. Barnes doesn’t assume to have the answer to this problem, but his work does suggest that it is futile to try to eschew individualist perspectives (subjectivity) and ideologies in historical narration. Thus, Braithwaite, a self-professed “hesitating narrator” who is typical of the narrators Barnes employs, tends to be self-doubting, limited and deeply subjective rather than authoritative, omniscient, and objective.

Braithwaite’s search for clues to constructing an authoritative biography of Flaubert leads him to confront the limitations of biography as a discipline and genre. The work of the biographer, just as that of the historian, becomes more and more difficult, tenuous, challenging in these post-structuralist times when the very notion of a coherent, stable subject is radically called into question, as well as the slippery, imprecise nature of language itself as a means of representing any reality or event. Braithwaite reveals this fact:

The trawling net fills, then the biographer hauls it in, sorts, throws back, stores, fillets and sells. Yet consider what he doesn’t catch: there is always far more of that. The biographer
stands, fat and worthy-burgherish on the shelf, boastful and sedate: a shilling life will give you all the facts, a ten pound one all the hypotheses as well. But think of everything that got away, that fled with the last deathbed exhalation of the biographee.

The vision of “everything that got away” drives Braithwaite to some rather absurd forms of research. At one point, his effort to ascertain how accurate our perception can be a Flaubertian metaphor comparing the sun to a “large disc of redcurrant jam” leads him to write a grocer’s company to find out if a pot of 1985 Rouennais jam would be the same color as a modern one. When assured that the color would be “almost exactly the same,” he feels vindicated: “So at least that’s all right: now we can go ahead and confidently imagine the sunset.” But how many such “problems” of referentiality can be resolved? Braithwaite’s fretfulness reflects an extreme realist attitude towards representation which Barnes is both satirizing and sympathizing with.

Throughout his search for information about Flaubert, Braithwaite is preoccupied by this concern over the reliability or referentiality of language and historical “evidence”. One of his strategies for understanding the “true” Flaubert, for example, is to seek the “true” stuffed parrot that inspired Loulou in *Un Coeur simple*; he thinks that if he finds the real parrot then he will have discovered Flaubert’s “true voice”. Having found one seemingly authentic parrot, he feels that he “had almost known the writer”:

This unexceptional green parrot, preserved in a routine yet mysterious fashion, was something which made me feel I had almost known the writer. I was both moved and cheered.
When he discovers the existence of another “authentic” parrot, he begins to discover the error and hubris of his search for a unitary emblem of Flaubert: “The writer’s voice—what makes you think it can be located that easily?” Braithwaite devotes much of his search to determining which of the two parrots is the genuine one, but at the end of the novel he discovers three more candidates—all that remains of a collection which once held fifty—at Rouen’s Museum of Natural History. “Perhaps it was one of them,” Braithwaite muses, And perhaps it wasn’t. Perhaps it was one of the lose ones or perhaps they were all frauds. This quest for the authentic parrot— and its failure—serves as a metaphor for the difficulties with reconstructing the past. Any authoritative account of the past is bound to be a fraud in some respects. Braithwaite is “obsessed” with the idea that finding the “real” parrot will somehow give him a definitive insight into Flaubert’s life and works, but over the course of his research he comes to realize that the “truth” about Flaubert is as elusive as the authentic parrot.

In addition to serving as a metaphor for the difficulties with historical research and providing a kind of skeletal plot, Braithwaite’s search for Flaubert’s parrot links the novel to the detective genre (to which Barnes has contributed four novels under the pseudonym of Dan Kavanagh). The detective novel relies on an epistemological view that postmodern fiction challenges. The genre “relies upon a perception of the world as an orderly place in which events can be explained” There are twists an turns in the plot of any good detective story, but in the end confusions are cleared rather than complicated. As such, detective fiction is a particularly inviting target for postmodern historiographic metafiction.
Flaubert’s Parrot is innovative with detective fiction conventions, albeit less obviously: Braithwaite, a backward-looking widower and ineffectual cuckold, is something of a comical antithesis to the traditional hard-boiled hypermasculine detective. Further, Barnes denies us the pleasure of the climatic resolution of the questions and mysteries which drive the plot of the traditional detective novel. Dashiel Hammett’s Sam Spade at least has the reward of finding the Maltese Falcon, even if it is a fake, but Braithwaite, and Barnes’s readers, will never know which parrot is “real” and which are fake. Similarly, many questions about Flaubert’s “true” self must go unanswered. Consistent with postmodern fictions in general, Flaubert’s Parrot unsettles us by leaving its questions unresolved: we can never “seize” the past; we can only try to do so and be “made to look ridiculous in the process”.

Braithwaite’s encounter with the multiple parrots in the museum at the end of his search confirms that there are as many views of an individual’s history as there are constructions of them, biographical or otherwise, that we create. Such constructions appear in different genres of writing—traditionally “fictional” ones and traditionally “factual” ones. Flaubert’s Parrot encourages us to question the limitations of any textual record of the past and thus to question the distinction between “fictional” and “factual” genres. One chapter, for example, is organized as a chronology of events in Flaubert’s life. Generally, we expect chronologies to be the most value-neutral genre of historical record, but even lists of dates and events can posit dramatically different views of history. Braithwaite gives us three different chronologies of Flaubert’s life: one which emphasizes Flaubert’s successes; another which
chronicles all of the death, failure, and despair in his life; and a final one which presents an autobiographical view by citing Flaubert’s personal writings.

Despite his detail-obsessed, realist approach to reconstructing Flaubert, Braithwaite continues to provide us with unconventional, often wildly contradictory, views of his subject. Several chapters offer varying portraits of Flaubert by concentrating on his observations about and interactions with, for example, the railroad, or animals, or irony. A more radically unconventional chapter conveys a view of Flaubert’s life. Another is in the form of a “Dictionary of Accepted Ideas” about Flaubert’s life which imitates the writer’s own Dictionnaire des idées recuees. This multi-genre, multi-perspective view of Flaubert does not necessarily mean that we must abandon historical inquiry to relativism: not all versions of the past are equal, but the past evades any easy attempts at encapsulation. As Alison Lee remarks, “that such multiple way of seeing exist provides an acknowledgement that there is no single true any more than there is a single parrot”.

Lee draws attention to the mediating role of language in how we acquire historical knowledge by observing that we can only know Flaubert through the written word-novels, letters, journal entries etc. Belying his ostensible naïveté, Braithwaite conveys his awareness of this poststructural epistemological orientation when he remarks:

We no longer believe that language and reality ‘match up’ so congruently—indeed, we probably think that words give birth to things as much as things give birth to words.”
Since language is pluralist (i.e. capable of offering multiple views of history) and Braithwaite can only reconstruct Flaubert through language, he can only write an uncertain biography of Flaubert. But it is more than just a question of the genres in which language recorded, for forms themselves can impose or at least encourage imitations on representation. Thus, in trying to give an account of himself, Braithwaite runs into the same kind of problem as he does with Flaubert: What form is appropriate to the task?

You know those personal advertisements in magazines like the *New Statesman*? I might do it like that

60+widowed doctor, children grown up, active, cheerful if inclined to melancholy, kindly, non smoker, amateur Flaubert scholar, likes reading, food, travel to familiar places, old films, has friends, but seeks….

You see the problem […] they aren’t lying—indeed, they’re all trying to be utterly sincere—but they aren’t telling the truth. The column distorts the way the advertisers describe themselves. No one would think of himself as an active non-smoker inclined to melancholy if that wasn’t encouraged, even demanded, by the form […] Style does arise from subject-matter. Try as they might, those advertisers are always beaten down by the form; they are forced—even at the one time they need to be candidly personal—into an unwished impersonality.

Here it proves that Braithwaite sincerely wants to render Flaubert’s life to us in some complete, authoritative fashion, but his efforts to do this are fated to failure for any such rendering. This frustration leads Braithwaite to the following exasperated formulation:
We can study files for decades, but every so often we are
tempted to throw up our hands and declare that history is
merely another literary genre: the past is autobiographical
fiction pretending to be parliamentary report”

Such passages have provided plenty of support for critics’ intent on
identifying Flaubert’s Parrot as postmodern historiographic metafiction and on
using it in turn to help define the postmodern. Hutcheon cited the novel in her
Poetics as an envoy of the postmodern consciousness ‘that there are only
truths in the plural and never on Truth’ and later credited it with furthering ‘the
now quite general reconsideration of the nature of documentary evidence’.
More recent assessments have advanced more nuanced claims but almost
without exception each has portrayed a novel that registers its postmodern
sensibility through its poststructuralist emphasis on historical knowledge’s
instability. Critics have concluded, for example, that the novel explodes the
notion of an unmediated historical reality; that it shows that ‘however
obsessively we search for “truth”, all must be fictional; that it reveals that ‘the
past can be known only obliquely’; that it portrays historical knowledge’s
‘necessary subjectivity’; that it ‘entombs’ epistemology by exploring a
postmodern ‘world of texts that cannot speak outside itself; that it records the
‘impossibility to summon up the “presence” of the past’; and that it
deconstructs the binaries of life/art, past/present and originality/imitation.
Generally critics limit their analysis to reiterating the novel’s critique of
historical knowledge and concomitant exploration of that critique’s impact on identity formation.

*Flaubert’s Parrot* also provides us the ways in which the retrieval of the past satisfies personal needs. It is not Flaubert who is led onto the stage as a speaking, thinking and acting character, but a fictional personage who attempts to piece together Flaubert’s personal history. Consequently, the novel does not only tell Flaubert’s story, but far more importantly, it also tells the story of the internal narrator, Geoffrey Braithwaite, which contains a clue to Braithwaite’s interest in Flaubert. Towards the end of the novel, we find out that Braithwaite is trying to recover from the shock of his wife’s suicide. His quest for Flaubert can therefore be regarded as a diversion from grief, an attempt to escape from the bleakness of the present. It is no coincidence that Braithwaite choose Flaubert, of all people, as a subject for a biographical search. For one thing, Braithwaite is a writer manqué, who tries to identify with a more successful writer. Braithwaite takes a great interest in Flaubert’s way of coping with grief and despair. Lastly, Braithwaite resembles Flaubert in his turning to the past out of disillusionment with the present.

Illustration of postmodern palinodes can be found in Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot*. In the single chapter dealing with his private life, the narrator repeats as if it were an obsessive conundrum, “we were happy; we were unhappy”, unable to decide between the two contrary alternatives. The narrator’s uncertainty in the most personal realm reflects his doubts in his field of research: historical knowledge. The evidence he has gathered on the subject of Flaubert leads him to construct a euphoric chronology of the French novelist, based on his achievements and successes, which is immediately
afterwards questioned and negated by a dysphoric chronology insisting on the frustrations and disasters of his life. The very existence of two contradictory biographical summaries demonstrates Barnes’s disavowal of an objective and reliable epistemology, a typically postmodern stance indeed. Again, these microstructural contradictions find echoes on a broader ideological scale.

3.5 **Staring at the sun**

In 1986 Julian Barnes followed *Flaubert’s Parrot* with *Staring at the sun*. Like *Metroland* the novel is divided into three parts, ranges from 1941 to 2021 and tells the story of Jean Serjeant’s seemingly ordinary life from childhood through adolescence to adulthood and old age. The first part related Jean’s childhood, her fascination with the Royal Air Force pilot Thomas Prosser, grounded and billeted with the Serjeants in 1941, and her unhappy marriage to a dull police man, Michael. The second part deals with the birth of her son Gregory, and her decision to leave her husband and live alone with Gregory. Having stared at the sun with Prosser, Jean is now staring at the son, a paronomasia (pun, play on words) or near homophony (‘sun’ and ‘son’ sound the same) which reflects the evolving focus of the novel. The third part, more speculative and philosophical, proposes an alternative point of view, that of Gregory, who keeps asking the General Purposes Computer questions about God, life and death.

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

You ask me what life is? It is like asking what a carrot is. A carrot is a carrot, and nothing more is known. –Chekov
This Chekhov epigraph, which opens the first part of Staring at the Sun exposes the futility of asking existential questions and thus introduces the theme that permeates the whole book: that of asking questions and searching for answers. Staring at the Sun is an account of Jean Serjeant’s journey through life, her dawning consciousness and acquisition of wisdom. It opens with her carefree childhood, during which she begins to show interest in the surrounding world and is preoccupied with a number of questions (such as: “Is there a sandwich museum?” and “Is heaven up the chimney?” 1. Since she never learns the answers to most of the questions that bothered her in childhood and in later stages of her life, she remains always on the lookout for answers that would satisfy her desire for knowledge and make sense of her life. When she marries, she thinks, “Michael was the answer, whatever might have been the question” 2 After years of marriage and gradual disappointment with her husband, Jean comes to the conclusion that if the person one is married to is not the answer, then it must be the very institution of marriage: “Getting married was an answer, not a question…. You got married, and that was you settled” 3

In the last part of the novel, set in the the 21th century, after the ultimate failure of her marriage, Jean lives with her adult son Gregory, who like her pursues answers to fundamental questions of a moral and philosophical nature. The futuristic setting allows Barnes to introduce the General Purposes Computer and the The Absolute Truth – two hi-tech computers whose aim is “to put the whole of human knowledge on to an easily accessible record”. These machines seem to promise some sort of closure of Jean’s and Gregory’s relentless pursuits of answers. However, the closure is denied. The
computers are endowed with purely scientific knowledge. The data they have accumulated may seem impressive; still they are incapable of providing answers to the questions of the utmost importance, such as the existence of God, the validity of religion or the moral permissibility of suicide. The knowledge that computers are capable of generating proves dry and breeds frustration. The final disappointment leads to the sad realisation that “[k]nowledge never really advanced, it only seemed to. The serious questions always remained unanswered” ⁴.

The novel’s dismissal of the possibility of gaining absolute knowledge and the frustration of any ultimate closure leads Matthew Pateman to concluding that Staring at the Sun “tends towards a ‘postmodern’ notion of a knowledge that prioritises heterogeneity, dissensus and openness” ⁵. The imagined triumph of the scientific over narrative knowledge feeds into Jean-Francois Lyotard’s discussion of the relationship between the two contending kinds of knowledge. The French philosopher argues that much of the postmodern sense of the loss of meaning springs from “the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative”. And narrative knowledge is what Jean and Gregory are desperately seeking. They both long for a narrative, a pattern that would make sense of their lives. Computer knowledge, the only accessible knowledge in the futuristic, post-metaphysical world refuses to provide a narrative, without which knowledge, in Gregory’s view, becomes a mere repository of random data. The novel’s ending suggests that the final confirmation is also denied in the case of Braithwaite’s search. The quest for the parrot – the emblem of Flaubert’s true voice – does not result in establishing the authentic parrot but in the multiplication of possibilities. At the
beginning of the search two parrots are taken into consideration; at its end – fifty.

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

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

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

Terry Eagleton describes the nature of postmodernity as “confidently post-metaphysical” This characteristic, however, would not hold in the case of Julian Barnes’s novels. Although far from advocating religious conviction, Staring at the Sun, address the issues of God and religion. They problematize certain aspects of religious belief, assess its validity in the contemporary world and probe into the deep needs and yearnings in human consciousness that draw people to religion despite its incompatibility with the secularism of European societies. In the first section of this chapter I am going to illustrate how the three novels dramatise the need for a metaphysical narrative and the desire for a pattern that would make sense of the chaos of the disillusioned realm of postmodernity. The second section documents the experiences of individual intellectual investigations and pursuits of theological answers on the part of the characters of Julian Barnes’s novels. Ultimately, in the final section I intend to discuss the outcomes of the characters’ pursuits and the ideas explored by the novels with regard to the validity and purposefulness (or otherwise) of religious belief. Staring at the Sun investigates the need for a religious belief in the age when belief seems no longer possible. The novel
portrays a world that has given up on metaphysics and creates the impression of being comfortable without it. Religion is seen as a thing of the past, a consolatory fable invented centuries ago by people who could not bear the definitiveness of death. People who still carry on believing are considered too weak to face the world as it is. In this post-religious reality, at the age of sixty, Gregory – the protagonist of Staring at the Sun – begins to ask himself fundamental questions about life and death. Gregory works as an insurance salesman; he is a confirmed bachelor and has lived with his mother all his life. Suddenly he is overcome by a sense of purposelessness of his life and comes to the point when he realises that he has been paying too little attention to some of life’s fundamental issues. Although in the past years Gregory was not particularly interested in any religion, now – in the light of his slowly impending death – the questions of God’s existence and the immortality of the soul assume paramount importance. He is astonished to discover how desperately he suddenly needs religion. What Gregory seeks is “a pattern” a coherent narrative that would account for his existence and for the reality of pain and that would impose an unquestionable meaning on life, which otherwise frightens him with its insufficiency and chaos. Religion answers to Gregory’s need and provides him with an illusion of order and harmony: “The old story, the first story: Gregory eased himself into it. A comfortable jacket, an armchair fitted to your shape by long use, the wooden handle of an old saw, a jazz tune with all its parts, a footprint in the sand which fits your shoe” 7 Gregory needs religion for the comfort and safety it brings. He seems to accept religion because of the consolation it offers rather than the answers it gives. It is suggested in the novel that Gregory’s need for
a religious belief springs also from his growing fear of death. The novel owes its title to the following maxim by La Rochefoucauld, “Neither the sun nor death can be stared at steadily” 8 To stare at death directly and without blinking is what Gregory finds himself incapable of doing. He needs religion because he cannot face the thought that his and his mother’s lives will come to a definitive end. “God,” as Merrit Moseley points out, “is a defence men turn to because they are afraid” 10. Vanessa Guignery, likewise, argues that the novel as a whole “acknowledges man’s need for God, who keeps fear at bay” 9 The conclusion that emerges from the analysis of Gregory’s religious longing is that it stems predominantly from a deep discontent with life, the desire for an organising pattern and the paralysing fear of the finality of death. Staring at the Sun and England, England illustrate different reasons for the awakening of the longing for religious belief. In both novels, however, the need for a spiritual dimension stems from a sense of disappointment with the world in which the grand narratives of the past no longer hold. The two novels dramatise the nostalgia for the soothing sense of order and moral certitude that religion used to guarantee. This sense of nostalgia bears witness to the fact that the world depicted by Staring at the Sun is not free of metaphysical longings, even though the influence of religion as an institution seems almost marginal. In this seemingly post-metaphysical reality the intangible and irrational need for a divine presence and order keeps resurfacing. In an attempt to account for this curious phenomenon one may quote Jacques Derrida, who thus characterises the post-religious spirituality of postmodernity, Barnes’s novels portray the reality in which the grand narratives of religion have long been discarded but the need for
otherworldliness and transcendence persists. Postmodernity, argues Philippa Berry, is “imprinted with traces of other, more ambiguous and elusive, modes of spirituality or of … post-religious, post-sceptical … consciousness” and yearnings beyond the domain of rationality. Staring at the Sun and England, investigate very closely these traces of post-religious and post-sceptical consciousness, which in both novels take the form of an awakening of religious longing in people who appear rational and down-to-earth in their disposition and stripped of metaphysical illusions.

**Screaming at the sky**

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

- Staring at the Sun

*Staring at the Sun* explores the issue of religion. The figure of Gregory epitomizes not only the intangible longing for religious reassurance but also the dramatic intellectual pursuit of the answers to the questions about the existence of God, the validity of religion and the finality of death. Tired of life’s monotony and increasingly anxious about death, Gregory comes to the point when he begins to see the fundamental existential questions as very pressing. Although he never showed much interest in religious matters, suddenly the question about whether there is truth in religion becomes of crucial importance to him. Gregory approaches religion intellectually and is dissatisfied with the crude choice between subscribing either to the belief in the existence or non-existence of God and comes up with his own set of fifteen possible permutations about God. The long list – composed of both serious and facetious entries – includes the hypotheses that God once existed but does not any longer, that God “exists only as long as belief in him exists,”
that he has abandoned his creation or is simply “taking a divine sabbatical.” In his questioning of the simple dualism between belief and non-belief and of drawing any absolute distinctions, Gregory seems to adopt a postmodern theological stance. Exasperated by the inconclusiveness of his intellectual pursuit, Gregory turns to The Absolute Truth computer (ironically referred to as TAT) and asks it questions about the current state of world religions and the number of their followers. What he gets are uselessly dry statistics. Gregory is irritated by the irrelevance of the information he receives to his thirst for certitude and asks TAT a straightforward question, “Do you believe in God?,” to which the computer replies, “NOT REAL QUESTION” 12. The session with TAT frustrates Gregory and leaves him in a very reflective mood. The reflections that the session inspires in him suggest that Gregory’s preoccupation with religion may predominantly spring from his increasingly overt fear of death. The question of God’s existence assumes central importance for him because it entails the question of eternal life, the answer to which is, as Gregory realises, the one he really pursues. “Eternal life – that was always the great bargaining counter, wasn’t it?,” suggests the narrating voice later in the novel 13. When Gregory considers whether it is braver to believe or not to believe in God, he thus perceives the implications of rejecting the belief, “You are declaring the certainty of your own non-existence. I end. I do not go on…. You are complacent in the face of extinction…. You stretch out confidently on your deathbed confident that you have understood the question of life; you boldly declare for the void. Imagine that moment. Imagine the fear” 14. Gregory, however, is far from complacent in the face of his death and lacks the courage to admit to himself his doubts and, ultimately, gives up
on his search. Instead, he is trying to persuade himself that he believes in eternal life (and in God – as a consequence rather than a source of his belief in the afterlife) simply because “he [knows] it [is] true” 15 Gregory realises that what he pursues may not be the genuine answer to the question about whether God exists but the certainty that he does exist. When faced with pessimistic findings, he refuses to continue his search and stops at a point that gives him neither reassurance nor consolation. Unlike Gregory, his mother, Jean Serjeant, emerges from the novel as an embodiment of courage. Her courage marks most of the crucial decisions of her life, including the dramatic decision to leave her husband and begin a new life away from home, with Gregory to provide for. She never studied much in her life but was always very curious about the world. From the earliest years she you used to ask herself questions, the question about God’s existence being one of them. When she is already retired her desire to understand more makes her want to travel the world. During one of such travels, she visits the Grand Canyon and expects a wonder that may shake her religious indifference and amaze her with its majesty. Jean’s reaction, however, is the opposite: “the Canyon stunned her into uncertainty” .The mystical experience of seeing the Grand Canyon helps her realise that she is devoid of any religious sense. Towards the end of the novel, when asked by Gregory about God, she cryptically remarks, “God’s on a motor-bike off the west coast of Ireland” 16. To Jean, God is an abstraction and religion – a system invented by people to deceive themselves that death is not final and that there is a pattern and meaning beyond the here and now. The playful image of God riding a motor-bike suggests the futility of a religious pursuit: God, if He exists, is beyond human
reach. Jean’s image of an indifferent God can be interpreted in terms of the postmodern spirituality; in postmodernity, argues Jean-Luc Nancy, “our experience of the divine is our experience of desertion … God has deserted all encounter” Jean’s life has been a relentless pursuit of answers to questions seemingly trivial and childish and the fundamental, existential questions; “religiously,” argues Merrit Moseley, “her getting of wisdom … is a loss” 17

In the last part of Staring at the Sun, Jean – old, disillusioned but serene – witnesses Gregory’s struggle with eschatological questions and tries to allay his fears. In an attempt to save him the pain and disappointment of the – in her view – inevitable failure of the search for religious reassurance, she declares that religion is “nonsense” and that death is “absolute” 18 She can see that Gregory is turning to religion for peace and consolation; although she does not believe that religion can grant Gregory anything that he is searching for, she does not disapprove of his pursuit. She calls it “screaming at the sky” and perceives his search as a desperate and, in a sense, heroic attempt to divine a meaning beyond himself, which, although deemed to ultimate failure, is a necessary stage in a journey to a higher consciousness and a deeper understanding of the condition of human existence:

Putting your head back and roaring at the empty heavens, knowing that however much noise you made, nobody up there would hear you. And then you flopped down on your back, exhausted, self-conscious and a little pleased: even if no one was listening, you had somehow made your point. That was what Gregory was doing. He was making his point. 19
According to Jane’s viewpoint, the purposefulness of the search is not undermined by its ultimate frustration. Seeking God and failing to find him is seen in the novel as inscribed in the experience of a searching human individual. Even though, as Jean describes it, the outcome of the pursuit entails painful disappointment and “exhaustion,” it also makes one “a little pleased” that one has made their point. The search may not reach its hopeful end, believes Jean, but reaches a different one, which, although disillusioning, is at the same time liberating: the negative outcome of the pursuit of religion frees one from illusions and allows one to stare directly at the sun, of which more in the next section

**Staring at the sun:**

A belief in God emerges from the text as one of such master narratives which provide people with an illusion of a pattern and order. And since all totalising accounts of ultimate reality, argue the theoreticians of postmodernism, are doomed to failure, so is religion. Religion answers to people’s need for reassurance that there is a meaning beyond the here and now, whereas postmodernity breaks with the notion of ultimate meaning altogether. Religion is thus an attempt to hide the dazzling truth about the empty and indifferent universe: “God is the hand we put before our eyes because we cannot stare directly at the sun,” argues Merrit Moseley. Although the ability to metaphorically stare at the sun is admirable and testifies to one’s courage and wisdom, its status in the novel is not unequivocal. Sun-Up Prosser, a fighter pilot whose story is referred to in the novel several times, describes the experience of looking steadily at the sun from his plane in the following manner, “You stare through your fingers at the sun, and you notice that the
nearer you get to it, the colder you feel. You ought to worry about it but you
don’t. You don’t because you’re happy” (29). However, the feeling of
happiness, as Prosser explains when he goes on with his gently comedic
description, is a result of “a small oxygen leak.” The fear of the approaching
burst leaks away with the oxygen; one carries on climbing higher and higher
and then comes the inevitable end. In the latter part of the novel, Jean learns
that it is exactly the kind of death that Prosser chose for himself many years
later. Staring at the sun can therefore be lethal; the sheltering hand may be an
illusion but it does protect from the dazzling truth. The scene related by
Prosser has its counterpart in the last scene of the novel, in which Jean and
Gregory are flying together on the plane and see the sun set twice. Gregory
finds himself unable to look at the sun and covers his face with his hands and
cries. Jean, the novel’s paradigm of courage, does look at it yet without “any
sign of greeting” or smile and she “trie[s] very hard not to blink”. Looking
steadily at the truth is painful even for the courageous, shows the final
passage of the novel. One can conclude that Staring at the Sun
acknowledges the longing for God, which, as they demonstrate, can often be
at variance with one’s rational mindset. It appears that their protagonists
would gladly subscribe to Barnes’s much-quoted phrase: “I don’t believe in
God but I miss Him” 22 The metaphysical yearning experienced by Jean,
Gregory and Martha is not presented as a weakness but as a testament to
their sense of disappointment with the absence of stable meanings and “the
thinness of life.” Even the search for religious reassurance and certitude
undertaken by Gregory does not emerge as an act of weakness on his part
but as proof of his desire for knowledge and final meaning. Where he goes
wrong, however, is his refusal to accept the pessimistic conclusions of his pursuit. Gregory is unable to confront the disillusioning truth, which prevents him from staring at the sun and makes him burst into tears and shrink away from it in the last scene of the novel. Despite its questioning of the foundations on which religions are based, the novel does not undermine the purposefulness of religious pursuit seen as a stage in a journey to a deeper understanding of human condition. What the final section of Staring at the Sun illustrates is the danger of arresting the search for fear of coming to disappointing conclusions. An honest pursuit, Barnes’s novel suggests, never culminates in a failure, even if achieving its aim is precluded from the start. Despite – or rather, thanks to – its ultimate frustration, the religious pursuit allows one to see through the illusory and look steadily at the real.

3.6 History of the world in 10 ½ chapters:

A History of the world in 10 ½ chapters is an ambitious tragicomic novel composed of various stories randomly ranging over centuries and involving different characters in each chapter. It is usually considered as Julian Barnes’s second postmodernist masterpiece after Flaubert’s Parrot.

How do we seize the past?

This is the question that Julian Barnes is engaged with in his novel A History of the world in 10 ½ chapters. Barnes is fascinated and frustrated by the impossibility of getting history “right”, a puzzle which leads him to represent historical events and figures through a variety of narrative genres. Implicit throughout his work is the idea that traditional models for narrating history are inadequate. Barnes doesn’t presume to have the answer to this problem, but his work does suggest that it is futile to attempt to eschew
individual perspective and ideology in historical narration. Thus Braithwaite, a self-professed “hesitating narrator” who is typical of the narrators Barnes employs, tends to be self-doubting, limited and deeply subjective rather than authoritative, omniscient, and objective.

Barnes utilizes an extremely diverse spectrum of writing forms to demonstrate that history is recorded in a variety of genres, all of which necessarily make use of literary conventions. Many critics and reviewers have noted that *A History of the World* consists of a mix of what are usually considered “historiographic” and “literary” genres. This is an interesting observation that captures the general spirit of Barnes’s work, but more detailed attention is needed to the specific genres that Barnes employs in his fiction and the self-consciousness or “metafictional” ways in which he confronts the limitations, frustrations, and occasional rewards of their various conventions of representation. *A History of the World in 10 ½ chapters* offers interesting mixtures of genres of historical writing.

**A Multi-Media Collage:**

To call *A History of the World in 10 ½ chapters* a “novel” as I have just done is already a way of glossing over its radical use of genre. Even on the level of primary formal categories, this work offers us a challenge: is it a “novel” or a collection of short stories? In titling the work “A History”, Barnes further complicates efforts at generic classification. The “chapters” are not held together by a single narrative progression but by a series of themes, events, objects and personae which recur in different historical contexts (e.g. sea voyages, apocalypse, irreverent woodworms, and the separation of clean from unclean). Barnes’s “novel” does not give an impressionistic portrait of
that history is the sum of our attempts to make sense of our past through numerous narrative genres, whether they are traditionally considered historical or not.

It begins with a revised view of Old Testament historiography. In the first chapter “The Stowaway”, Barnes rewrites the Judeo-Christian myth of
Noah and the Ark by inhabiting the perspective of a stowaway woodworm. The woodworm narrator “disabuses” us of the idealized view of Noah as the pious, wise, and sober father of humanity and protector of the world’s species. Barnes’s narrator assures us that

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” (p-3).

Instead, Noah was a bigoted, tyrannical, ignorant, misguided, aggressive, and even murderous drunkard. Whatever happened to the basilisk, the griffin, the sphinx, the hippogriff? All were tossed overboard, the victims of discrimination:

They were all crossbreeds. We think it was Shem—though it could well have been Noah himself—who had this thing about the purity of the species” (p-16).

This introduces a theme that runs throughout the novel: separating the “clean” from the “unclean”, the “pure” form the “impure”. Here Barnes criticizes ancient religious scripture. The woodworm tells that although “accounts differ” he’s going to give it to us straight, correcting the “misleading” portrait presented in the Old Testament: "My account you can trust" p-(4). But can we? The woodworm enjoins us to believe his tale but in doing so calls attention to its fictionality. Of course, in this case we’re unlikely to find a woodworm’s account of the deluge believable. But then, the point is that it is no less naive, and perhaps a good deal more so, than the Biblical version:
It rained for forty days and forty nights? Well, naturally it didn’t- that would have been no more than a routine English summer. No, it rained for about a year and a half, by my reckoning. And the waters were upon the earth for a hundred and fifty days? Bump that up to about four years. And so on (p-4)

Barnes calls our attention to some of the more fanciful elements of the Bible to highlights its dependence on fictional conventions, suggesting that religious texts need to be stripped of the privilege and authority which many believers invest in them.

Among the other roles, the Bible is the most widely accepted Western narrative of the ancient history of the world, and, as Barnes makes clear, it is an overtly ideological history. In addition to creating categories for discrimination, the Bible is essentially an early law book and demonstrates the harsh consequences of disobedience: God casts humanity out of Paradise, purges the Earth of life in a storm that lasts forty days and nights, unleashes plagues on Egypt, and kills first born sons. One of the Bible’s ideological functions, then is, to ensure obedience, presumably to God but in reality to the various secular and religious authorities who assume the privilege of interpreting it. The willingness with which people default that interpretation to others is the principle danger of such texts.

In chapter three, “The Wars of Religion”, the woodworm returns as the central figure in a dispute over Biblical law and divine intention. In sixteen-century France, the woodworms are put on trial in absentia for the blasphemy of having eaten away the leg of a Bishop’s throne, causing it to break and “Hugo, Bishop of Besancon” to “fall like mighty Daedalus from the heavens of
light into the darkness of imbecility” (64). Reproducing the overwrought legal discourse of the era, Barnes presents the chapter in the form of a series of trial transcripts. Whereas the prosecution argues that the woodworms are never mentioned in the Bible as having been onboard Noah’s ark and must therefore be representatives of “The Devil” (p-72), the defense maintains there is no mention in the Bible of them not having been on the ark. Similarly, against the prosecution’s attempt:

“to maintain that the bestioles are not granted by Holy scripture the right to inhabit cut wood, “the defense argues” firstly that the scripture does not in any patent form forbid them from so doing, secondly that if God had not intended them to eat the cut wood. He would not have given them the instinct to do so” (p-75).

Thus, the Bible is used to both defend and condemn the woodworms. The entire trial is absurd though it is, as Barnes informs us in an after note, based on actual legal precedents. The absurdity is critical, however, for it mirrors the extremes to which interpretations of theological and legal texts can vary. Such texts, Barnes implies, are often invoked to legitimate institutional acts of control, as when the judges who decides in favor of the prosecution then declares that, to upload the decision, the villagers of Mamirolle must “pay heedful attention to the duty of charity…yield up their tithes as commanded by the Holy Church, [and] …refrain from any frivolity in the House of the Lord’ (p-79).

The kind of polarized dispute between interpretive camps exemplified in the trial of woodworm is an organizing narrative convention which recurs in each of the novel’s chapters. Sometimes this convention results in critical
comedy, as with the woodworm’s “correction” of the traditional account of Flood, or, in the final chapter, with the narrator’s experience of a grossly materialist Heaven instead of the traditionally spiritual one. At other times, the polarization of interpretive points of view is more overtly serious. Chapter two, for example, deals with an Arab hijacking of a cruise ship. Seeking to justify or at least explain to the hostages the necessity for their execution, the Arab leader forces the self-impressed anthropologist and tour guide, Franklin Hughes, to relate to them the Arab’s anti-Zionist view of history. Hughes complies, delivering a lecture on the Israeli persecution of the Arabs, suggesting that the lesson the Jews learned from history was that “the only way to survive was to be like the Nazis” (55). The Zionist position, of course, would hold that they are defending themselves against Arab aggression.

The dispute is over who will survive, who, in fact, has the right to survive—the Israelis or the Arabs? The result of this dispute is that everyone is caught in a vast historical cycle of killing: the Arab leader explains that

“There are no civilians any more….The Zionists, at least, understand this. All there are fighting. To kill a Zionist civilian is to kill a soldier” (p-51),

and Hughes relays this narrative to the hostages. Grounding this view is a philosophy of history as a destructive force:

“the world is only advanced…by killing people” (p-50-51).

The hostages, like the victims of the Flood, are “mixed up in [this] history (p-51),

that is to say they are its victims. As a scholar, Hughes is an authority figure for the passengers. They look to him to explain their plight and in order to
save his own life he betrays his values by using his authority to attempt to pass on a very slanted view of history as true. He asks innocent people to see their imminent deaths as “justified” by historical “logic”. Historiographic metafiction is often mistakenly interpreted as suggesting that all versions of history are equal, but in Hughes’s collaboration Barnes presents us with an allegory of the dangers of historical relativism.

We are all at the mercy of the whims of a violent history. Some survive through ingenuity and resourcefulness, like the woodworms who smuggle themselves onto the ark in a ram’s horn. Less nobly, some survive by collaborating in the destruction of others, as does Franklin Hughes, Barnes gives another portrait of survival in Chapter Four, “The Survivor”. Like most of the novel’s chapters, it is organized around a conflict between two alternative perceptions of reality or history. It tells the story of Kath Ferris who, in one “reality”, anticipates nuclear war, and like Noah operating without God’s instructions, sets off to sea with two cats to find a new land and rebuild the world. In the alternative reality, which she ascribes to nightmares brought on by radiation poisoning, she is a psychiatric patient suffering from delusions after a break-up with her chauvinist boyfriend, Greg. Moving of these two world, Kath provides us some interesting reflections on history. On the boat with her cats she formulates a feminist critique of male-scripted and sculpted history:

This happened, they say, and as a consequence that happened. There was a battle here, a war there, a king was deposed, famous men-always famous me, I’m sick of famous men-made events happen... I look at the history of the world, which they
don’t seem to realize is coming to an end, and I don’t see what they see.” (p-97)

In the other reality, she is humiliated by a male doctor who tells her she has a self-victimizing pattern of behavior which he calls “persistent victim of syndrome” (p-108) Wryly, Kath observes that “The whole bloody world’s a persistent victim” (p-109), but he doesn’t really listen her, lending credence to her critique of androcentrism.

The doctor explains that she has been engaging in “fabulation”: “You make up a story to cover the facts you don’t know or can’t accept. You kept a few true facts and spin a new story round them” (p-109). In other words, her “delusions” of radiation sickness and having settled on an island are the product of her attempt to imaginatively make sense of the world. She decides, however, that she has been fabulating her experiencing with the doctor, trying to account for the horrifying symptoms of radiation sickness:

It was all about her mind being afraid of its own death, that’s what she finally decided. When her skin got bad and her hair started falling out, her mind tried to think up an alternative explanation. She even knew the technical term for it now: fabulation. Where had she picked that up from? She must have read it in a magazine somewhere. (p-111)

Though there is no definitive way for a reader to decide which reality is “true”, in either case she is fabulating-making sense of what has happened by mixing fact with fancy.

“Fabulation” is also a generic description of how Barnes narrates the writing of history and how his own stories are scripted. His explanation of
fabulation suggests the soothing functions of such fictions, implying a need to come to terms with the forces of a destructive, even harsh history. Barnes’s *History of the world in 10 ½ chapters* often seem like catalogue of human disasters: the Flood, terrorism, nuclear war, shipwreck, earthquake, murder, the Holocaust. As Calida Kotte observes, it is a view of history which contrasts with Hegel’s assumption that history unfolds rationally. It is also a view which parodies the whole notion that history can be understood and recorded in a purely rational manner.

One of the ways we deal with history’s destruction side, Barnes implies, is through artistic representations:

We have to understand it, of course, this catastrophe; to understand it, we have to imagine it, so we need the imaginative arts. But we also need to justify and forgive it...Why did it happen, this mad act of Nature, and this crazed human moment? Well, at least it produced art. Perhaps, in the end, that’s what catastrophe is for? (p-125)

In Barnes’s view, art helps us to interpret and understand history’s horrors if not conquer them. This view is conveyed through “Shipwreck”, one of the more compelling chapters in the novel. It is split into two sections divided by a foldout reproduction of Theodore Gericalut’s 1819 painting “The Raft of the Medusa”. The first part of the chapter re-tells Jean Baptiste Henri Savigny and Alexandre Correard’s account of the shipwreck of the Medusa off the African coast in 1816, while the second is an excursion into the genre of art criticism which also serves as a metafictional commentary on Barnes’s project in this novel. The first section of the chapter records the events in a
documentary prose, it is a second-hand account and therefore necessarily speculative in its reconstruction of events. The account is unavoidably tinted by Barnes’s attempt to find patterns in the historical events he is narrating. Thus, when the healthy survivors on the raft decide to cast the wounded into the ocean in order to preserve their provisions, Barnes comments: “The healthy were separated from the unhealthy like the clean from the unclean” (p-121). Later, when a butterfly appears fluttering over their heads, Barnes contemplates that to some “this simple butterfly was a sign, a messenger from Heaven as white as Noah’s dove” (p-121). Much historiography is similarly contemplative.

The second section is an attempt to reconstruct the process of the painting’s compositions. Barnes gives a fair amount of attention to what Gericualt didn’t paint:

- The various mutinies.
- The healthy casting the wounded into the sea,
- The arrival of the butterfly, and
- The moment of rescue (p-126-130).

“A painting is a moment” (p-128), Barnes declares; the challenge for that moment is to tell an entire story of shipwreck. Gericualt, Barnes notes, was at the start faithful to the details of the shipwreck, so much so that he went to the trouble of having the ship’s surviving carpenter build him a scale model of the raft. Despite this attention to realist detail, he made a number of glaring departures form documentary reality:

The incident never took place as depicted; the numbers are inaccurate; the cannibalism is reduced to a literary reference; the
Father and Son group has the thinnest documentary justification, the barrel group none at all". (p-135).

It is in these alterations that Barnes discerns the most telling lessons of the work. Contemplating the pyramid of bodies attempting to hail the tiny Argus on the horizon, Barnes asserts that the image has a visual advantage over the real event in which one of the survivors waved a handkerchief attached to straightened-out barrel-hoops: “reality offered [Gericault] a monkey-up-a-stick image; art suggested a solder focus and an extra vertical” (p-131); in other words, “Truth to life, at the start, to be sure; yet once the process gets under way, truth to art is the greater allegiance” (p-135). One might add that “truth to art” is inevitable, for all representational genres necessarily mediate reality.

The most glaring departure from mimetic reality is the shining, muscular health of the bodies depicted: “Where are the wounds, the scars, the haggardness, the disease?...Why do they look as if they have just come from a body building class? (p-136) asks Barnes.

A painting is a moment, but this painting gestures to a despairing past and a redeeming future, not only hinting at the full narrative of the wrecked Medusa but functioning as a metaphor for human history:

The painting has slipped history’s anchor... There is no formal response to the painting’s main surge, just as there is to no response to most human feelings... How hopelessly we signal; how dark the sky; how big the waves. We are all lost at sea, washed between hope and despair, hailing something that may never come to rescue us. (p-137)
Art helps us make sense of the hopelessness of history: “Catastrophe has become art; but this is no reducing process. It is freeing, enlarging, explaining. Catastrophe has become art: that is, after all, what it is for (p-137)

Gericault’s painting attempts to capture the twin poles of hope and despair experienced by those on the raft. To that end, balanced against the figure frantically summoning the Argus on the horizon is an old man in a pose of “resignation, sorrow, despairs” (p-132). The painting suggests two principle paths for interpretation: those in the raft are about to be saved, or they are within sight of salvation only to have it denied them. It is an interpretative dilemma which again foregrounds a conflict between two opposed senses of reality.

Barnes’s discussion of the painting is a comparison of the methods of artistic and historical representation. As with Hayden White’s explanation of historiography, Gericault has selected among the recorded historical facts to faithfully reproduce some while suppressing or modifying others. Clearly, Gericault has not attempted to offer a strictly realist portrait of the events. The painting, like Barnes’s novel, is a mix of genres: a combination of gritty realism and heroic fantasy. Whether aesthetic or historical, Barnes implies that realist genres have no particular claim to representational authority; they do not necessarily tell us more or more accurately about a particular historical event than forms of representation which blatantly take liberties with documented historical reality.

In A History of the world in 10 ½ chapters, Barnes does at one crucial point in the “Shipwreck” chapter propose that art is “freeing, enlarging,
explaining.” In “Parenthesis,” however, the meditative “half chapter” of A History, he hedges his praise of the educative and freeing value of art:

“Art, picking up confidence from the decline of religion, announces its transcendence of the world (and it lasts, it lasts! art beats death!), but this announcement isn’t’ accessible to all, or where accessible isn’t always inspiring or welcome” (p-244-245)

“Parenthesis” is more or less the keystone to this novel. A self-conscious or metaficitonal essay, the chapter poses love as the antidote to history’s horrors:

“Love won’t change the history of the world…but it will do something much more important: teach us to stand up to history, to ignore its chin-out strut. I don’t accept your terms, love says; sorry, you don’t impress, and by the way what a silly uniform you’re wearing. (p-240)

Barnes can get a bit smarmy about the idea, as when he declares a page later that “How you cuddle in the dark governs how you see the history of the world” (p-241). He admits the difficulty of discussing love seriously in prose, asserting that while poets “write this stuff called love poetry,” “there is no genre that answers to the name of love prose” (p-227-8). Strictly speaking, this isn’t true. Love letters, for example, could be considered a genre of “love prose”, but Barnes’s frustration is with the fact that poetry is generally considered to be the genre of love.
Underlying Barnes’s appeal to the redeeming features of love, then, is a fear of history as degenerative, destructive, and inexplicable. We want to think of history as a continuum that makes sense; our most basis concept of history—as a series of sequential dates on which important events occurred—encourages this view. But “Dates don’t tell the truth,” Barnes asserts. “They want to make us think we’re always progressing, always going forward” (p-241). Barnes disabuses us of such myths:

History isn’t what happened. History is just what historian tell historians tell us. There was a pattern, a plan, a movement, expansion, the march of democracy; it is a tapestry, a flow of events, a complex narrative, connected, explicable.

One good story leads to another…

[All the time it’s connections, progress, meaning, this led to this, this happened because of this. And we, the readers of history, the sufferers form history, we scan the pattern for hopeful conclusions, for the way ahead. (p-242)

The myth of history as rational progression underlies all of the major Western philosophies of history. As Claudia Kotte demonstrates, various discourses—Judeo-Christian, Marxist, Hegelian, Darwinian—have been used or adapted to help find patterns in, explain, and predict historical events (p-115-120).

Barnes’s novel, Kotte concludes, demonstrates the failure of such explanatory models to account for the chaos and destructiveness of history (p-127-128). They are all “fabulations”—soothing attempts to understand it in rational terms. Beyond that, Barnes attributes a kind of willful deviousness to
history, as if it was somehow consciously trying to trick us: “The history of the world? Just voices echoing in the dark; images that burn for a few centuries and then fade: stories, strange links, and impertinent conclusions” (p-242). Strangely enough, however, Barnes insists on the pursuit of objective knowledge:

We all know objective truth is not obtainable, that when some event occurs we shall have a multiplicity of subjective truths which we assess and then fabulate into history, into some God-eyed version of what “really” happened. This God-eyed version is a fake...But while we know this, we must still believe that objective truth is obtainable; or at least 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, we value one liar’s version as much as another liar’s, we throw up our hands at the puzzle of it all, we admit that the victor has the right not just to the spoils but also to the truth.(p-245-246)

This appeal to believe in an objective truth seems extremely odd, considering the great lengths Barnes has gone to in order to convince us of the impossibility of knowing. With its “half chapter” and episodic structure held together by themes rather than traditional narrative logic, A History of the world in 10 ½ chapters, denies symmetry, teleology, totality, and hierarchy—all the expected conventions of realist historiography. According to Andrezej Gadiorek, Barnes teaches us that history is “narrative not event, the imposition of order where there is none, and the illusion of teleology where
there is absence of meaning” (p-164). Barnes suggests that a great deal of historical texts misrepresent our profound ignorance of what really occurred in the past. Even the title of Barnes’s novel periodically mocks the notion that an inclusive, “total” history can be narrated. Which is not to say that we don’t or can’t have any knowledge at all; it means that all historical narratives are inherently partial, that each contributes to our understanding of the past, and that that understanding is always being revised. It also means that we need to question all such narratives so that we can recognize and challenge ideologically dangerous revisionary histories. In demonstrating the inevitable element of fabulation in historical and religious forms of writing, Barnes is implicitly urging us to be suspicious of the truth claims and ideological inflections of such narratives.

**The Search for Answers:**

Barnes’s fictional works are replete with individuals facing epistemological crises. Miss Ferguson, the Christian zealot who seeks the remains of Noah’s ark on Mt. Ararat in Chapter Six of *A History of the world in 10 ½ chapters*, believes has found what she wants despite the lack of physical evidence and then dies on the mountain.

The characters in Barnes’s novels search for answers to deeply troublesome questions about human experience in the contemporary era. Sometimes they confront very serious questions of human purpose, the politics of race, gender and nationality, or how technology is going to affect our lives. Other times, they seem trivial but mask more profound human concerns. The final chapter “The Dream” portrays heaven as a place where every individual gets exactly what he or she wants heaven to be. The
narrator’s vision of heaven is corporeal and sybaritic: he spends his time playing golf, eating, shopping, having sex, and meeting famous people. This too is a transformation in genre: Barnes depicts Heaven not, as is conventional in art, as an ethereal realm of peace, serenity and spiritual grace, but one that offers activities that represent the dominant values of selfish, narcissistic, and materialistic twentieth-century society.

But once the novelty of this wears off, he decides that he also needs to be judged: “It’s what we all want, isn’t it? I wanted, oh, some kind of summing up, I wanted my life looked at” (p-293). He gets what he wants and a “nice old gent” reviews his history and concludes, simply: “You’re OK.” When the narrator expects a little more, the old gents says, “No, really, you’re OK,” a summation which leaves him feeling a “bit disappointed” (p-294).

Even this extremely shallow narrator conceives of heaven as a place where questions are answered, lives are validated, and the world is made sense of, but this fiction is revealed to be hollow. Not unlooked at” (p-293). He gets what he wants and a “nice old gent” reviews his history and concludes, simply: “You’re OK.” When the narrator expects a little more, the old gents says, “No, really, you’re OK,” a summation which leaves him feeling a “bit disappointed” (p-294).

Even this extremely shallow narrator conceives of heaven as a place where questions are answered, lives are validated, and the world is made sense of, but this fiction is revealed to be hollow. Not only does he learn that “getting what you want all the time is very close to not getting what you want all the time” (p-309), but pressing existential questions go unanswered. He’s prompted to ask:
Margaret, his guide to the afterlife, speculates: “Perhaps because you need them... Because you can’t get by without the dream” (p-309). Our religious narratives, like our historical narratives, Barnes irreverently implies, are fabulations designed to comfort people by making sense of their suffering. In an interview, he admitted that he is making an “argument... against the existence of a man-created God, an approvable God or a just God... There is either a God and a plan and it’s all comprehensible, or it’s all hazard and chaos, with occasional small pieces of progress. Which is what I think” (Saunders G9). For Barnes, dreams of heaven and a “just God” may help some endure history’s violence, universal entropy, and death, but they are ultimately a kind of self-delusive wishful thinking.

3.7 Talking it over and Love etc: The polyphony of Love and Truth

It is impossible to write any history without some standpoint—and that means some philosophical or ideological standpoint. The only questions are whether or not we acknowledge that standpoint, and whether or not our choices have been consciously made.

(Southgate History: What and Why)

Talking It Over presents a fairly conventional triangular relationship but applies an original narrative technique. It was well received by reviewers. The novel contrasts two friends: dull Stuart, an investment banker, and brilliant Oliver, a teacher of English to foreigners, Stuart meets Gillian, a picture restorer, and marries her, but soon afterwards, Oliver falls in love with Gillian,
who gets a divorce from Stuart and marries Oliver. Stuart is desperate and leaves for the United States while Gillian and Oliver move to the South of France and have a daughter. Ten years later, in *Love etc*, Gillian and Oliver have moved back to London and have two daughters, but Oliver has had a nervous breakdown and is jobless. Stuart comes back from America where he has made a fortune, remarried and divorced again, and he decides to help Gillian and Oliver financially by having them go back to the house where he and Gillian lived when they were married, and getting a job for Oliver. It appears, however, that Stuart is also here to win Gillian back. The first novel is funny and witty, especially thanks to Oliver's virtuous interventions, while the sequel is much more bitter, cruel and dark.

*Talking It Over* and *Love etc* using multiple first-person point-of-view, dramatizes the difficulty of memory, the most basic and personal form of historical recollection. It reminds us that "knowledge of the past, however small, begins with memory." Each of the labeled narrators addresses the reader, more or less, as a confidante, as if the reader were interviewing the narrators or talking depositions from them. The characters narrate the details of their lives, and in each narrative we encounter a different personality constructing the events of his or her life. For the most part, each character strives for fidelity to the truth, but these narratives, as one might expect, present many different events as well as conflicting interpretations of the same events. The reader is left to establish some idea of what the true story of the characters' past really was, while being constantly reminded that his or her conclusion is yet another interpretation based on stories mediated through the characters. By the time the reader hears them, the stories are already
contextualized and come with the attendant biases of the characters who relate them.

The principle characters in the novels are Stuart Hughes, Oliver Russell, and Gillian Hughes. The action of the novel is based on a love triangle. Stuart and Gillian are married early in the novel, and this event awakens Oliver’s passion for Gillian, whom he eventually wins away from his long-time best friend Stuart.

The characters occasionally make observation about the nature of history and memory. Gillian makes a wise observation about how form shapes content while amusing over her lack of ability to locate a moment when she and her husband Stuart fell in love. She says” You don’t know exactly when you fall in love with someone, do you?.....I suppose you look back and select one particular moment out of several then stick to it” She maintains that the only reason anyone would feel compelled to pick a particular moment is that other people require it:

And everyone has to have an answer, don’t they? I feel in love with him then, I fell in love with him because. It’s a sort of social necessity. You can’t very well say, Oh, I forget. Or, it wasn’t obvious. You can’t say that, can you? ²

Our conversations with others follow, or sometimes subvert, existing protocols, just as any instance of writing will follow or subvert the protocols of its genre. Thus Gillian’s statement reminds us of Braithwaite’s observation on personals advertisements.

Barnes’ narration of events through multiple, subjective, perspectives hints at a problem of philosophy which dates back at least to Plato’s dialogs.
In his *Theatetus* we find Socrates, Theatetus and Theodorus in a debate about knowledge and perception. Their task is to discern what can be perceived truly, apart from obvious limits of subjectivity. In the end, Socrates concludes that the soul perceives certain things (truth, beauty) directly, while other, lesser things perceived through the senses, which may introduce error. Socrates’ reply is an interesting piece of rhetorical footwork. The determining of important things like what is true and what is beautiful removed from the realm of human confusion and opinion. But such an argument is more than a bit idealistic for most contemporary readers. Without a soul which perceives directly, we are left with the limitations of our sense and thus must find other ways to determine the truth and the beautiful.

*Talking It Over* presents a fairly conventional triangular relationship but applies an original narrative technique. It was well received by reviewers. The novel contrasts two friends: dull Stuart, an investment banker, and brilliant Oliver, a teacher of English to foreigners, Stuart meets Gillian, a picture restorer, and marries her, but soon afterwards, Oliver falls in love with Gillian, who gets a divorce from Stuart and marries Oliver. Stuart is desperate and leaves for the United States while Gillian and Oliver move to the South of France and have a daughter. Ten years later, in *Love etc*, Gillian and Oliver have moved back to London and have two daughters, but Oliver has had a nervous breakdown and is jobless. Stuart comes back from America where he has made a fortune, remarried and divorced again, and he decides to help Gillian and Oliver financially by having them go back to the house where he and Gillian lived when they were married, and getting a job for Oliver. It appears, however, that Stuart is also here to win Gillian back. The first novel
is funny and witty, especially thanks to Oliver’s virtuous interventions, while the sequel is much more bitter, cruel and dark. The narrative technique of monologue is an efficient device of characterization as the protagonists are revealed through the way they speak, their idiosyncrasies, their cultural references, their centre of interest. Drawing attention to Barnes’s knack for ventriloquy, Mick Imah remarks that ‘Barnes’s selection and balance of three dissimilar styles of discourse is shrewdly done’

This plurality of voices and styles corresponds to what Mikhail Bakhtin called ‘polyphony’. Each voice becomes readily recognizable thanks to a specific vocabulary, syntax and rhythm, as may be perceived by analyzing the introductory words of each protagonist. Stuart starts *Talking It Over* with ‘My name is Stuart, and I remember everything’ and ends his first monologue with the same sentence: ‘I remember everything’. In *Love etc.*, he addresses the reader with insistence: ‘I remember you, I remember you’ The repetition marks Stuart’s self-proclaimed reliability, but also his doggedness. Gillian, reticent and quite, proves reluctant to engage in a conversation at first and is the least talkative character until she opens up later on. In *Talking It Over*, she starts with ‘I haven’t got anything to say’ ‘What I remember is my business’ and in *Love etc.* she adopts the same defensive and wary tone: ‘You may or may not remember me’ Finally, Oliver’s tone is much more relaxed in *Talking It Over* – ‘Hi, I’m Oliver, Russell. Cigarette?’ - and he wittily insist on differentiating himself from Stuart from the start: ‘I remember all the important things’ In *Love etc.*, Oliver once again chooses to differ from Stuart by inverting the original order of the personal pronouns: ‘I could tell you remembered me’ We will later understand that memory works differently for
each character, each of them providing complementary and contradictory versions of the past, an issue Barnes had already examined in some of his previous novels.

Oliver’s voice, though seemingly unreliable, is certainly the most memorable and entertaining, as he is characterized by his erudition, flamboyance, wit and a tendency to ‘scatter bons mots like sunflower seeds’ as he says in Talking It Over. Mick Imlah called him ‘the literary life of the novel’ 10 because he very often makes literary but also musical allusions, combined with the use of French, Latin, Italian or German words, all highlights his pedantry and pretentiousness as well as his wit and cleverness. He enjoys repeating sophisticated or unusual words such as ‘steatopygous’ or ‘crepuscular’ and uttering polyglot sentence, such as ‘hie me to the vomitorium pronto). In the sequel, Oliver sarcastically makes fun of literary conventions when describing a fable as it might be related in various literary genres, among them Realism, Sentimental Romanticism, Surrealism and Postmodernism

The epigraph to Talking It Over, which is also appropriate to Love etc, is ‘He lies like an eye-witness’. As Oliver later explains, this is a Russian saying quoted by Dimitri Shostakovich in his memoirs, and it warns the reader that what follows will not necessarily be the truth and that he/she should question the reliability of each speaker. As Linda Hutcheon remarks: ‘Even an eye-witness account can only offer one limited interpretation of what happened; another could be different’. 11 This will be confirmed in the novel itself as each protagonist gives his or her own different version of the same events, and each comptes for the reader’s sympathy and interest: ‘we had this
argument. Oliver and Gillian and me. We each had a different opinion. Let me
try and set down the opposing point of view’ (p.3). According to Tim Adams,
the three protagonists are ‘defense counsels for their own versions of the
events that forced them together and apart, slick-talking, misty-eyed life style
attorneys appealing to our emotions and plea-bargaining for sympathy and
special dispensations’ 20

Gillian’s job as a painting restorer seems to offer a metaphor of the
reader’s constant efforts at uncovering the truth lying beneath layers of
subjective versions. When in Talking It Over she explains what her work
consists in – ‘you take off overpaint and discover something underneath’ (pp-
58-9)-she actually seems to be telling the reader what he/she should do with
the texts at hand. However, Gillian adds that the original picture-or truth-can
never be completely deciphered: ‘You’re bound to go a little bit too far or not
quite far enough’ (p -120). Oliver rejoices in this relativity of truth: ‘Oh
effulgent relativity! There’s no “real” picture under their waiting to be revealed.
What I’ve always said about life itself…It’s just my word against everybody
else’s!’ (p.120).

This exchange between Gillian and Oliver harks back to Flaubert’s
Parrot and to all of Barnes’ works concerned with recording or rediscovering
history. Some aspects of the past, due to the passage of time, are beyond
historical recovery, at least in the exact sense. What we are left with, in the
cases where we can know things at all, are rough estimate of what life in
another time must have been like. The historian, like the restorer of paintings
waiting underneath the dirt and overpaint. Like the restorer’s rendition of a
painting, a work of history is a hypothesis-a way in which things might have
happened, not the thing itself. History, understood in this fashion, becomes an artistic rather than an empirical endeavor. Certainties give way to relative certainties. Dreams of total knowledge are humbled. But knowledge itself does not thereby become a useless category. It simply becomes a more complex and provisional one.

In spite of it, some passages remain unclear, such as, in both books, the endings which John Bayley categorises as ‘aporia’, an ancient Greek term which means ‘in rhetoric, the expression of doubt, and which has been revived by deconstructionist critics to mean a final, irresolvable impasses in a text. In *Talking It Over*, Gillian stages a quarrel with her husband in the middle of the street to get rid of Stuart, who is spying on them from a hotel room across the street. This fake quarrel, however, arouses fear in Gillian—‘the fear is this: that what I’m showing Stuart turns out to be real’ (*p. 269*)—and incredulity in Oliver—‘surely this isn’t real, is it? (*p. 271*)’—but the novel ends abruptly before the reader is able to decide what will ensue. In an interview, Barnes said: ‘I like the kind of novel or work of art or film which implies that it’s going on after it ends, which leaves some things unresolved’ 14 The open ending of *Talking It Over* and its unknown consequences are actually what enabled Barnes to write a sequel. In *Love etc*, Stuart remarks: ‘In life, every ending is just the start of another story’ (*p.93*) who proves tru also for Barnes’s novel.

The absence of any authorial or authoritative voice forces reader to make their own judgment on the events described. After having made his presence blatant in ‘Parenthesis’ in *a History of the world in 10 ½ chapters*, Barnes enjoyed hiding in the wings again: ‘I found the novel’s technique
alluring, with this notion of reducing the authorial presence to the smallest it could possibly be and having no intervention between characters and reader. The constant breaking of the frame of fiction by a polyphony of voices which address the reader, and the insistence on the elusiveness and fragility of truth, force the reader into an active role.

3.8 The Porcupine

In *The Porcupine* (1992) Julian Barnes overtly questions the foundations of traditional historiography, a process that could be analyzed from three main viewpoints: ontological, epistemological and political. The problematizing of historical discourse in Julian Barnes’ fiction leads the author to foreground the intimate links that connect historical accounts and political power.

After addressing the question of the elusiveness of truth through a polyphony of voices entangled in the web of love in *Talking It Over*, Julian Barnes approached the issues of truth again a year later in *The Porcupine* but from a completely different perspective, that of politics and ideology.

This brief novel or novella, takes place in an unnamed country of Eastern Europe in January and February 1991, and deals with the trial of Stoyo Petkanov, a former Communist Party leader, who is opposed to Prosecutor –General Peter Solinsky, a proponent of democracy and capitalism. The trial is relayed on television and a group of students react to the proceedings. Petkanov is eventually convicted but retains his arrogance and honor, while Solinsky is portrayed as inept, and mocked for his shameless ambition and spitefulness.
Matthew Pateman’s *Thesis on Barnes’s Fiction*, and Vanesa Guignery’s *Postmodernisme*, give information on the political and legal events on which Barnes based his novels, and on the similarities between fiction and reality, which can be useful to situate the historical context of *The Procupine*

A few examples of the similarities and differences between the authentic Zhivkov and the fictional Petkanov can help the reader distinguish fiction from reality.

- While Zhivkov was the Communist Party leader in Bulgaria for 35 years, Petkanov was ‘party leader and head of state for 33 years’. ¹
- The charges against Petkanov are slightly different from those against Zhivkov: ‘deception involving documents…abuse of authority in your official capacity….mismanagement’ ²
- Zhivkov’s 39-year-old-daughter Ludmilla Zhivkova, a Politburo member in charge of culture but suspected of being a political opponent, mysteriously died in 1981 from a brain haemorrhage; Petkanov’s 35-year old daughter Anna Petkanova, Minister of Culture, died of a heart attack on 23 April 1972 despite her previous excellent health³

Despite his protestations to the contrary, Scammel seems to look in the novel for a faithful reflection of historical reality. He concedes at first that ‘Barnes, of course, cannot be held to account for not portraying the historical Zhivkov,’ but then adds: ‘But he can be held accountable for historical plausibility, since he intends *The Porcupine* to be a serious comment non contemporary Eastern Europe.’ ⁴

Such comments suggest that readers may have found it difficult to draw a demarcation line between fiction and reality, a recurrent ambiguity in
Barnes’s literary production since *Flaubert’s Parrot* and *A History of the world in 10 ½ chapters*. The blurring of the frontiers between two heterogeneous worlds is one of the key issues of *The Porcupine* and also of its reception. In September 1992, Barnes travelled back to Sofia in Bulgaria in order to promote his new novel, and the next month, he published a long article in *The Times*, ‘How Much is that in Porcupine?’, in which he addresses the issue of the ‘recurrent problems with the demarcation line between history and fiction’.

He first claims that *The Procupine* is mainly a work of the imagination: ‘it is true I had used the rough outline of Todor Zhivkov’s trial, borrowed bits of the local topography, listened to Bulgarian friends; but then I had gone off on my own, inventing the characters, making a plot of a process and so on’. However Barnes remembers his anxiety when he was about to meet his Bulgarian readers, who, he surmised, might prefer ‘to read the book as history a clef rather than a novel. He wondered at that time: ‘would they think I had imaginatively transformed their recent history, or merely pillaged and perverted it? It shows ontological confusion.

Barnes’s 1992 article clearly reveals the porosity of the frontiers between fiction and reality, and the difficulty in maintaining a clear distinction between the two in a novel obviously based on recent historical facts. The confusion is heightened by the fact that many real political figures are alluded to in the novel, thus authenticating the historical and geographical context and establishing a continuity between reality and fiction. An effect of verisimilitude is therefore attained when Perkanov compares his reaction to the fall of Communism with that of his colleagues in the real world: Erich running away to Moscow’; Janos Kadar (1912-89) in Hungary: ‘Kadar dead after the betrayal
of opening his frontier. Such allusions grant a degree of realism to the novel. According to Linda Hutcheon, ‘In many historical novels, the real figures of the past are deployed to validate or authenticate the fictional world by their presence, as if to hide the joins between fiction and history in a formal and ontological sleight of hand.’ ⁶ Fiction and reality belong to two incompatible world, i.e. worlds of a different ontology or mode of being, and yet such strategies tend to erase the differences.

While acknowledging the effect of verisimilitude, Bruce Sesto suggests that Barnes’s insertion of real-world figures also ‘foregrounds the ontological boundaries between fiction and reality’, ⁷ in that the author brings together characters that belong to disparate worlds. Brain McHale explains that ‘There is an ontological scandal when a real-world figure is inserted in a fictional situation, where he interacts with purely fictional characters.’ ⁸

The violation of boundaries between world is reinforced when Petkanov enumerates the titles and medals he received from countries around the world (pp-116-20), and reads excerpts from statements by historical heads of state who praised his achievements as a political leader (pp. 122-5). These statements supposedly uttered by real world figures about an imaginary dictator tend to highlight the transgression of the boundaries between fiction and reality, but also to deprive the historical figures of their authenticity, turning them into puppets which have been manipulated by a fictional protagonist. Such manipulations alert the reader to the fragility of truth in the novel, an issue which is recurrent in Barnes’s fiction.

In The Porcupine, the elusiveness of truth is foregrounded in many ways, first of all ironically through the name of the newspaper ‘Truth’ (Pravda),
‘the mouthpiece of the Socialist (formerly Communist) Part’ (p-40). Having been subjected to a constant evasion or distortion of truth under the Communist leadership of Petkanov, the students have great hopes of a new era: ‘It was the end of lies and illusions; now the time had arrived when truth was possible, when maturity began’ (p-20)

The day before the trial begins, the four students, Vera, Stefan, Dimiter and Atanas, share their expectations about the proceedings. Dimiter’s and Stefan’s forceful statements are marked by the anaphora (repetition at the beginning of sentences) of ‘I want to know’ (p-24), while Vera is both more cautious and more ambitious: ‘I hope we learn the truth’ (p-23). The students belong to these people who, according to Solinsky, ‘preferred facts to ideology’ and ‘wanted to establish small truths before proceeding to the larger ones’ (p-27). Solinsky himself offers the media a daring comparison when referring to his ‘plan of easing truth like a dandelion leaf from between teeth of lies’ (pp.37, 107)

Cynical Petkanov is, for his part, suspicious of the retrievability of truth and views the trial in dramatic terms: ‘They would stage the trial their way, how it suited them, lying and cheating and fixing evidence, but maybe he’d have a few tricks for them too. He wasn’t going to play the part allotted him. He had a different script in mind’ (p-17). The trial is relayed on television and Petkanov is determined to play the part he has chosen himself. Thus, before making his first statement, he asks: ‘Which camera am I on?’ (p-33). Later on, the ex-leader will qualify the trial as a ‘show’ (p. 126) and ‘a farce of a trial’ (p. 136). Petkanov is in fact right in pinpointing the theatrical dimension of the trial. For instance, Solinski arranges for a female prison officer to be standing
behind the former President and ‘therefore always in shot when Petkanov was on camera’ (p. 31). Reviewers emphasized the theatrical aspect of the novel, for example Robert Stone, who argued that The Porcupine ‘might work better as a play’, or Maureen Howard, who remarked: What should play as grand inquisition, or at least as pure melodrama, becomes serious farce.’

In order to prove that Petkanov ordered the elimination of political opponents when he was head of state, Solinski produces a memorandum supposedly signed by Petkanov, authorizing ‘the use of all necessary means against slanders, saboteurs and anti-state criminals’ (p-94). The authenticity of the document is however questionable, as Lieutenant-General Ganin discloses it to Solinski only when the trial seems to have come to a dead end after the public humiliation of the Prosecutor-General: Petkanov has just ruthlessly revealed to the public that Solinski, when going to Turin as part of a trade delegation in the 1970s, spent the money given him by the Communist Party on a shiny Italian suit and a prostitute. Moreover, the statement ends not with a signature but with initials, as Petkanov remarks: “I do not call that a signature. I call it a set of initials, quite probably forged’ (p. 109). Solinski’s wife bluntly accuses her inept husband of ‘inventing fake evidence’ (p.112)

Solinski’s own arguments do not sound convincing: ‘If Petkanov hadn’t signed that memorandum, he must have signed something like it. We are only putting into concrete from an order he must have given over the telephone’ (p-113) His conclusion discredits his earlier accusation: ‘the document is true, even if it is a forgery. Even if it isn’t true, it is necessary’ (p-113). Solinski has failed in that he has resorted to the very strategy which constitutes his first charge against Petkanov: ‘deception involving documents’ (p-39).

As Moseley
remarks, ‘The end justifies the means’, and the need for a conviction of Petkanov is more important than the truth or forgery of a document. Petman concludes: ‘In order for justice to be done, documents are forged and are given the status of truths: fakes, forgeries and lies are the platforms for a justice that is supposed to be condemning fakes, forgeries and lies. 10 Politics triumphs over justice, and both sides evade the truth. In that respect, as Richard Brown suggests, *The Porcupine* develops a theme which was already central to Barnes’s previous novels: an ‘attempt to evaluate competing claims to the truth in a postmodern cultural environment where all unitary claims are to be questioned’. 11

The distortion of truth is presented in the novel as an inheritance of the closed Communist system of thought, especially in the way language is used. As British novelist Nick Hornby suggests, ‘*The Porcupine*’ is as much about the inadequacy of language as it is about political turmoil. 12 Solinski identifies the clichéd and ideological characteristics of the former dictator’s language: the ‘cheap analogies……the parables, the exhortations, the made-to-measure moralities, the scraps of peasant wisdom’ (p.68), ‘bureaucratic distortions of the language’ (p.91)The totalitarian and imprisoning ideology is thus reflected in a sterilized, stilted and uniform language which still prevails.

Like other novels by Barnes, *The Porcupine* is characterized by an open ending, emblematic of the uncertainty of the political and economic future of Eastern countries at the end of the twentieth century.
3.9 *England England*

Reviewers criticized that *England, England* was just another novel dealing with what have by now become well-known themes and outworn clichés like authenticity and "one of [Barnes'] favorite themes - the elusive nature of memory, which is all tied up with confusions about individual and national identity." And critics observed that the exploration of "the philosophical distinction between the real and the replica or, in this case, its representation in memory or history" was the major aim of this novel.

Even though no reviewer or critic has yet pointed out that Barnes' latest novel could be included under the wide umbrella term of historiographic metafiction. Barnes' novel displays all of the typical features which, according to Hutcheon and other critics, are the hallmark of this particular kind of postmodernist fiction: Yes, like other historiographic metafictions, *England, England* is both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay[s] claim to historical events and personages. Barnes's *England England* reflects that feature which has been the major focus of attention in most of the critical work on postmodernism, a self-conscious assessment of the status and function of narrative in literature, history, and theory: "its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past". ¹ It also uses history as both a reference to the 'real' past world and as a discursive construct. *England, England*, just like historiographic metafiction in general, "differs substantially from the use of history in the traditional historical novel where history, as a group of facts which exists extra-textually and which can be represented as it 'really was,' is never in question". ²
The remarkable achievement of Barnes' latest and arguably most ambitious novel to date, lies neither in perpetuating a number of clichés about the English nor in defining the characteristic 'Englishness' of English culture or history, nor in providing yet another fictional illustration of the curiously reductive postmodern thesis that history is nothing but a 'verbal fiction', to use Hayden White's (in)famous, but hardly very felicitous phrase. Rather, it can be located in the ways that England, England explores, constructs, parodies, and deconstructs those 'invented traditions' known as 'Englishness'. As Barnes put it in an interview, the novel is concerned with what "you might call the invention of tradition". The novel incorporates a host of diverse traces of the English cultural past, including many myths and legends, juxtaposes competing versions of and discourses about Englishness, and explores the complexity of any account of a nation's organically grown cultural memory and identity. Barnes' novel, therefore, not only expresses a wide range of versions of Englishness, but it also provides highly self-conscious reflections upon both the invention of cultural traditions and the questionable notion of historical authenticity. The two epigraphs thus reflect some of the issues that are of crucial importance for anyone trying to come to terms with the intricate structure of Barnes' novel and the significance of the host of references to Englishness.

The present chapter seeks to examine the ways in which England, England thematizes and explores the invention of cultural traditions, by constructing and deconstructing both 'Englishness' and the notion of authenticity.
Construction and deconstruction of Englishness:

Although Julian Barnes' novels display a major concern with history and historiographic issues. What these novels have in common with a great number of other contemporary British novels is a preoccupation with history and the problems involved in the reconstruction of the past. Critics agree that they represent a "new type of historical novel": A number of thematic and formal parallels between Barnes' previous novels and *England, England* despite, his latest novel represents a significant new departure in a number of ways.

(1) First and foremost, *England, England* exemplifies the great current interest in the fictional exploration of Englishness, something that was only a marginal concern in his earlier novels.

(2) Second, it is revisionist in at least two ways: it questions and revises conventional notions of Englishness, and it also expresses revisionist notions of historical authenticity.

(3) Third, the novel provides ample support for the view recently put forward by Nicole Fugmann that "postmodern genres expand rather than just problematize our historical understanding". ³

A brief glance at the plot of *England, England* shows, the notion of Englishness is of central importance to the novel, which is set in the early years of the third millenium. The first part, entitled "England", describes memories of the female protagonist Martha Cochrane, who tries to remember significant events of her childhood, while being highly skeptical about the 'truth' of these recollections. Later on, the mature Martha is employed by the billionaire Sir Jack Pitman, an egomaniacal and megalomaniacal mogul who
bears more than just a passing resemblance to Robert Maxwell and Rupert Murdoch. Pitman's great idea is to make a fortune by preparing England theme park on the Isle of Wight. The realization and success of this scheme are depicted in great detail; though the description abounds with satire and wit, the whole plan appears less and less absurd as the story commences. Although Martha has a love affair with Paul Harrison, the personal "Ideas Catcher" of 'Sir' Pitman, and manages to chair the enterprise for a short period of time, she is forced to leave the island in the end. She is not unduly dismayed about the turn of events, however, since she had never believed in the project, anyway, and had grown increasingly dissatisfied with her relationship with Paul, which in spite of her efforts had gradually degenerated into as much of a fake as the project itself. The last part of the novel delineates the experiences of an aged and lonely Martha, who settles down in a de-industrialised England, still searching for truth and meaning.

The structure of the novel highlights the concern with the state of England, whose fictionalized development is represented in three different stages. Martha's earliest memories consist of her repeatedly assembling her beloved jigsaw-puzzle 'Countries of England'. A day at a fair organized by an Agricultural Society and her subsequent efforts to grow beans and win a prize also loom large in Martha's remembrance, depicting an image of a rural setting in which goats, cows and flowers evoke a pastoral atmosphere. In this section of the novel, two central themes are introduced: the analogy between the memory of an individual and a country, and patriotism. As Martha realizes, her difficulties in trying to recover a true memory of her childhood are similar to those of "a country remembering its history". Throughout the novel, Martha
seeks "for truths about origins, her own and England's." In an interview, Barnes emphasizes the analogies that exist between the ways people constantly reorder their personal memory and what has been called the invention of national traditions: "Getting its history wrong is part of becoming a nation. And we do the same thing with our own lives. We invent, ransack and reorder our childhood."

The second theme which runs through the novel involves the glorification of national history. The patriotic view of history satirized in Barnes' novel is highlighted by the strange way history is taught at Martha's school, viz. by "chants of history" (p-11) i.e. by rhyming rote in a simplified, albeit highly memorable way. The teacher - who manages to present history in a manner which inspires more reverence and awe than religion - tells the children "tales of chivalry and glory, plague and famine, tyranny and democracy" (p-12) that grip the imagination. At the beginning of the novel, Martha's childhood thus corresponds to the 'infant' state of rural England.

An altogether different stage of Englishness is presented in Part II, entitled "England, England". Having taken a poll to determine which things potential visitors primarily associate with England, Sir Jack Pitman and his committee - which also includes Dr. Max, a celebrated historian especially hired for the project - set about exploiting the only thing England has that is still thought to be valuable: "You - we - England - my client - is - are - a nation of great age, great history, great accumulated wisdom." (p-41) The Pitman company therefore reconstructs all that England was renowned for, celebrating English culture of yesteryear on the Isle of Wight, which is renamed 'England, England'. Sir Jack thus tries to capitalize on the late-
twentieth-century British obsession with national heritage that is manifested, for instance, by 'living history'-ventures and theme parks like Wigan Pier or the Black Country Museum by building something that is both similar and yet unrivalled and on an altogether more gigantic scale: an 'original reproduction' (oxymoron intended) of England’s genuine cultural heritage. All the historical sites - including the major battlegrounds, Big Ben, Buckingham Palace, Anne Hathaway's cottage, and the grave of Princess Di - are to be situated within easy visiting distance, with Harrods being conveniently placed within the Tower of London. In 'England, England', a replica of Old England which reproduces the original metonomically, tourists can meet icons like the King and Queen of England, chat with historical celebrities like Samuel Johnson or Nell Gwyn, share pastoral idylls with shepherds, and even encounter myths, Robin Hood’s Band of Merry Men being especially popular with the visitors. Being turned into a miniature version of England, the island project is so successful that it gradually begins to replace Old England; tailored to tourists’ tastes, who prefer the carefully designed simulacrum embodying all the standard clichés to the real thing, the island also prospers economically, while Old England, bereft of tourists, gradually falls into decay, slowly reversing the process of industrialization.

Part III, "Anglia", the action of which is situated in 'Old England' (i.e. the 'real British Isles), illustrates the result of this economical regression: In contrast to the prospering island, 'Old England' has finally degenerated into a hybrid and de-familiarized version of 'rural England', in which farming has become dependent on the weather again, pony carriages are the major form of transport, foreign trade is virtually non-existent, and one has to dial O for
Operator. The final short section - like the first part roughly twenty-five pages in length - describes a return to a preindustrial world, in which Martha spends her old age. Despite the fact that the narrator describes the setting as "neither idyllic nor dystopic" (p-265), it is a curious amalgam of dystopian fiction and a regression to an idyllic, rural England.

Far from being merely a transparent reflection of certain 'essential' facets of Englishness, Barnes' novel is self-consciously concerned with exploring both the nature and origin of national identity and the question of how established versions of Englishness have come to be invented and upheld. The tourist scheme provides a realistic framework both for a thorough examination of the many aspects of Englishness and for the way in which versions of Englishness are constructed in order to serve the needs of the present. Planning to build a perfect replica of people's conceptions of England and Englishness, Sir Jack asks his Concept Developer to take an opinion poll on the "Top fifty characteristics associated with the word England among prospective purchasers of Quality Leisure. Serious targeting. I don't want to hear about kids and their favorite bands." (p-60) The polling takes place world-wide, because the idea is to attract as many visitors from as many countries as possible. Since the heterogeneous list of fifty quintessences of Englishness is of central significance for both the novel and the widespread current concern with the notion of Englishness, it deserves to be quoted in full.

1. Royal Family
2. Big ben/ houses of parliament
3. Manchester united football club
4. Class system
5. Pubs
6. A Robin in the snow
7. Robinhood and his merrie man
8. Cricket
9. White Cliffs of Dover
10. Imperialism
11. Union Jack
12. Snobbery
13. God Save the Kind/Queen
14. BBC
15. West End
16. Times Newspaper
17. Shakespeare
18. Thatched Cottages
19. Cup of Tea/Deconshire Cream Tea
20. Stonehenge
21. Phlegm/Stiff Upper Lip
22. Shopping
23. Marmalade
24. Beefeaters/Tower of London
25. London Taxis
26. Bowler Hat
27. TV Classic Serials
29. Harrods
30. Double-Decker buses/Red buses
31. Hypocrisy
32. Gardening
33. Perfidy/Untrustworthiness
34. Half-Timbering
35. Homosexuality
36. Alice in Wonderland
37. Winston Churchill
38. Marks & Spencer
39. Battle of Britain
40. France Drake
41. Tropping the Color
42. Whingeing
43. Queen Victoria
44. Breakfast
45. Beer/Warm beer
46. Emotional Frigidity
47. Wembley Stadium
48. Flagellation/Public Schools
49. Not Washing/Bad Under wear
50. Mgana Carta

(p-86-88)
As this eccentric list already indicates, the construction of Englishness and its associated deconstruction are intricately intertwined in the novel. Although it would be tempting to go through the whole list and comment on each feature of Englishness in turn, limitations of space preclude the possibility of offering a comprehensive analysis of the way the fifty quintessences are explored in the novel. The following interpretation will therefore focus on an examination of those items that are shown to be of central importance in England, England.

The myth of Robin Hood - "a primal English myth" (p-150) - is given particular attention by the Pitman committee. The managers realize that it has great potential; after all, it embodies ideals like freedom, (justified) rebellion, and the brotherhood of man, and provides an attractive rural setting. Moreover, the project managers initially assume that everyone knows what the legendary Robin and his 'Merrie Men' actually did in Sherwood Forest. The fact that popular beliefs generally do not correspond to historical reality is unimportant, as John Fowles stresses in his essay "On Being English but Not British": "What Robin Hood was, or who he was, in the dim underwoods of history, is unimportant. It is what folk history has made him that matters."\textsuperscript{151}

But even such a seemingly straightforward feature of Englishness as Robin Hood and his Merrie Men turns out to be full of pitfalls. Although Concept Developer Jeff stubbornly insists that everyone knows exactly what the merrie band stands for, he is at a loss to provide any clear account of them. Were there any women present - after all, there is a long tradition of female outlawry, and Robin is a sexually ambiguous name - and were there any homosexuals among them? Since feminist visitors as well as gays might
object to a gang of heterosexual outlaws with just one woman among them, Dr Max, whose favourite phrase is 'That's not my period', is asked to clarify the issue. But the historian's knowledge about medieval manners and his interpretation of old myths about Hood only complicate the issue; Dr Max comes up with a number of unresolved problems, and the committee even toys with the idea of having two gangs, each embodying the expectations of different groups of visitors. The "repositioning of myths for modern times" turns out to be a very complex issue in this case.

Barnes' deconstruction of the Hood myth as a quintessential item of Englishness is not limited to exposing the ambiguity and the 'politically incorrect' aspects of that myth, but also illustrates what may happen if the nostalgic embodiment of Robin Hood's Band really begins to act like the original. Barnes' treatment of the Robin Hood myth thus suggests that even a popular myth may contain unfavourable connotations which, if they were specifically English, would not project a very flattering image of the nation.

The development of some of the characters who represents famous Englishmen further underlines the discrepancy between the contemporary image of allegedly representative English traits and historical reality. The island is crowded with actors representing well-known personalities who display specifically 'English' qualities. Visitors are offered the attraction of spending an evening in the company of a typically English personification of wit, and dine with Dr Johnson at the local alehouse, the Cheshire Cheese. Although - or rather because - the committee manages to find an actor who has internalized Johnson's characteristics to an astonishing degree, visitors' complaints against him soon fill a huge file, stating:
That he was badly dressed and had a rank smell to him; that he ate his dinner like a wild beast [...]; that he was either bullyingly dominant or sunk in silence [...]; that he was depressing company; that he made racist remarks about many of the Visitors' countries of origin; that he was irritable when closely questioned; that however brilliant his conversation might be, clients were distracted by the asthmatic gasping that accompanied it (p-213f.)

What they complain about is, in short, that the talented actor behaved exactly like Dr Johnson. If Joseph Addison was right in identifying "that gloominess and melancholy of temper, which is so frequent in our nation" as one of the hallmarks of a distinctly English mentality, tourists are evidently less than delighted when they are actually confronted with it.

Another problem the project managers are faced with results from attractive features which Englishmen are supposed to lack. Besides the difficulty of coming up with a sound, harmless wit who might substitute for Dr Johnson at the Cheshire Cheese, they find it hard to select a historical person who might personify the typically English sex appeal, something which, given the current preferences of tourists, is held to be a necessary addition to the list of English characteristics. Dismissing candidates like Oscar Wilde and Lord Byron, Sir Jack hits upon Nell Gwynn, the most popular of Charles II's mistresses: "Won the hearts of the nation. And a very democratic story, one for our times. Perhaps a little massaging, to bring her into line with third millenium family values." (p-97) However, more than just a little massaging of historical facts is required, for Gwynn referred to herself as "the Protestant
"whore", had various lovers at the same time, and gave birth to at least two illegitimate children. Moreover, by today's standards, she was still a child when she began her affair with Charles. The committee, however, decides to forget about the children, her lower class origin, her morals, and the unfortunate pederastic implications. Instead, visitors get what they "expected her to have been. Raven hair, sparkling eyes, a white flounced blouse cut in a certain way, lipstick, gold jewellery, and vivacity: an English Carmen." (p-190)

In addition to English myths and famous personalities, many of the best known geographical sites as well as specialties of the English cuisine are reproduced in 'England, England'. The project features such sites as the White cliffs of Dover, Stonehenge, and Shakespeare's grave and such indispensable items of food as Devonshire Cream tea and Yorkshire pudding, thus highlighting the fact that any notion of 'Englishness' is likely to impose a highly artificial unitary image of the country's real homogeneity. The listing of typically English food fills more than a page, including items like plum duff, game chips, and "Poor Knights of Windsor" (p-94), while non-English specialties like Irish Stew are not even discussed, and even porridge is banned for its Scottish associations.

The project's selection of items that are accepted as representative of Englishness favors attributes associated with nostalgic views of Old England. This tendency is also inherent in the list of the fifty quintessence, whose items overwhelmingly refer to bygone days. Bent on exploiting popular preferences and the great esteem in which the countryside is held in England, Pitman's committee completely neglects modern features of England, concentrating on shepherds tending their flock, bobbies, beefeaters, bowler hats. The novel
implicitly criticizes Sir Jack's method of poll taking, which deliberately keeps clear from kids' tastes and pop-bands. One important icon of Englishness, the Beatles, makes its way into the novel despite Sir Jack's preferences. When questioned whether the English weren't a proud race, having defeated Napoleon, the Kaiser, and Hitler, Martha answers by quoting a title from a song, "'With a little help from our friends.'" (p-47) The name of her lover and colleague, Paul Harrison, provides an allusion to the names of Paul McCartney and George Harrison; when the inhabitants of Anglia are unable to identify the 'Land of Hope and Glory', some villagers think it is "a hymn in deference to the vicar, and others an old Beatles song" (p-272).

Barnes also deconstructs the notion that educated citizens' knowledge of history provides any reliable basis for the retrieval of specifically English traits. Despite the history-worship that Martha experienced at school, the knowledgeable Englishman does not know anything much about the nation's past, as Dr Max has to learn when he conducts a survey:

The Subject was asked what happened at the Battle of Hastings.

Subject replied: '1066.'

Question was repeated.

Subject laughed. 'Battle of Hastings. 1066.' Pause. 'King Harold. Got an arrow in his eye.'

Subject behaved as if he had answered the question. (p-83)

Further questioning reveals that the average university-educated middle-class subject is not even able to identify the participants in the battle. He doesn't remeber the famous Battle of Hastings, which gave rise to the myth of the Norman Yoke and thus takes pride of place in any patriotic
version of English history is no part of the 'cultural memory' that plays such a
great role in the construction of national identity. This is not to say, however,
that lack of historical knowledge would reduce the level of patriotism. On the
contrary, musing about the evanescent nature of memory, the project's
historian realizes that "patriotism's most eager bedfellow was ignorance, not
knowledge." (p-85)

Instead of emphasizing that the English past lingers on in the present,
*England, England* exposes the assumption that people share a common
knowledge about the past as mistaken. Thus the 'echo-chamber' supposedly
ringing with voices and traces of the past is shown to be curiously hollow,
consisting at best of names, dates or meaningless catch-phrases. Any
attempt at forging a national identity therefore has to reckon with elusive
memories, lack of knowledge, and highly distorted patriotic views of history;
instead of retrieving 'echoes' of shared experiences, the attempt to trace
Englishness always involves the invention of something new under the guise
of a time-honored tradition.

The share that literature may have in the construction of Englishness is
consequently relegated to minor importance. In *England, England* intertextual
references, a typical feature of many of Barnes' other works, are very few.
Barnes' novel greatly reduces the number and importance of intertextual
references. The project's committee does not take literary texts into serious
consideration. What is represented on the island is rather a watered-down
version of literature, which is made palatable to the tastes of the general
public: The grave of Shakespeare, the conversation of Dr Johnson, the
presence of well-known literary characters like Connie Chatterley and Alice.
Rather than staging the plays of Oscar Wilde, the Project reenacts his trials. *England, England* thus suggests that the collective memory of literature amounts to no more than superficial knowledge of the names of a few famous authors and fictional characters, and even they are stripped of their less attractive attitudes to meet the needs of the audience.

The activities of the Pitman Company also highlight another issue that is of central concern in postmodern English literature, the problem of authenticity.

**The Problem of authenticity:**

The blurring of boundaries between the authentic and imitations is one of the major thematic leitmotifs of Barnes' novel. As Barnes put it in an interview, there are "opposing extremes running through the book between the public and the private, between the fake and the authentic, between the complete lie and invention and the inner truth." In this respect, there a number of obvious parallels of concern between *England, England* and novels like Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* (1987) or Tibor Fischer's *The Collector* (1997), works which also deconstruct the notions of authenticity and originality by obscuring the boundary between copies and originals.

The whole project of rebuilding a replica of Old England is based on the premise that the authentic has lost its value and postmodern subjects prefer the well-made simulacrum to the real thing. Sir Jack even goes to a French intellectual in order to get his project on a sound intellectual footing. This satirically portrayed academic elaborates on well-known postmodern doctrines, claiming that

we prefer the replica to the original. [...] it is our intellectual duty
to submit to that modernity, and to dismiss as sentimental and inherently fraudulent all yearnings for what is dubiously termed the 'original.' We must demand the replica, since the reality, the truth, the authenticity of the replica is the one we can possess, colonize, reorder (p-55, 57).

The success of the venture confirms these predictions, in that the island prospers because it offers the convenient replica, which proves to be far more attractive to tourists than viewing the authentic sites in England: "given the option between an inconvenient 'original' or a convenient replica" (p-185), a high percentage of tourists would opt for the latter. After all, the 'real' thing is not as well-preserved, readily accessible and pleasing as the copy, and the actors impersonating taxi-drivers or peasants are much more friendly and 'in character' than their real counterparts. As Sir Jack shrewdly foresaw, behaviour which is learned paradoxically is "the more authentic" (p-110). As the project goes into operation, and actors increasingly take over the characteristics and habits of their historical models, the lines between the replica and the real thing begin to blur, and it becomes ever more difficult to distinguish the copy from the real.

This deconstruction of the conventional distinction between originals and copies is officially sanctioned by the Project's historian, who dislikes the venture for any number of reasons, but not because it is 'bogus'. As he explains to Martha, the "very notion of the authentic [is] somehow [...] bogus" (p-134). Since it is impossible to determine any "authentic moment of beginning, of purity", any so-called 'original', be it Athenian democracy or Palladian architecture, can always be traced back to an earlier object which it
imitates in some way. Therefore everything is a copy.

Dr Max' prediction that postmodern subjects wouldn't know what to do when they encountered anything "real" or "natural" is amply borne out by the behaviour of the tourists who insist on being presented with a polished and improved copy of the past. When faced with a close resemblance of real manifestations of Englishness like Dr. Johnson's unpolished eighteenth-century manners, they demand their money back. It thus comes as a surprise that at least in one instance Sir Jack determinedly rejects the notion that the replica is to be preferred to the original.

Barnes' presentation of King Thingy, as he is called by his wife, pushes the blurring of the boundaries between the authentic and the simulacrum to its mind-boggling limits. The king, a worthy descendant of King George I, who is characterized as "dull as ditchwater" (p-223), relies on script writers to provide his punch lines, carefully rehearses his behavior, and spends his life representing royalty. Having been hired to play himself, the King imitates the behavior of his ancestors. This 'real' King of England, England, who has been promised that "very good replicas will shoulder most of the burden" (p-171) of tiresome daily rituals for him, soon starts to copy the habits of his illustrious predecessor King Charles II, as Nell Gwynn, the unfortunate object of King-Thingy's unflagging sexual attentions, complains. It becomes more and more difficult to distinguish the 'genuine' King from an actor playing an English monarch, the more so since King Thingy imitates royal manners by giving in to his own sexual urges. As Queen Denise knows, there is only one cure for this manifestation of 'personality slipping', and this is to question the authenticity of the bodily allurements of Nell. Denise's words "Are they real, do
you think?” (p-169) prove to be the only way of checking the King's extra-marital ardour. There is one feature of royalty, however, that the 'real' king does not intend to emulate: Martha's worry "What if the King decided he really wanted to reign"? (p-231) proves to be unjustified, thus implicitly raising the question of whether reigning had ever been an activity characteristic of the Windsors.

The problems of historical truth:

By calling into question the existence of anything that might be called 'authentic', England, England also undermines the notion of historical truth. The difficulties the committee has in finding out what really happened amply demonstrate the truth of the poignant comment in Flaubert's Parrot that "What happened to the truth is not recorded." In contrast to many other contemporary novels, however, there are no narratorial comments which reflect on the nature of historical truth. The concern with epistemology and history is rather illustrated by the activities of the committee and Martha's difficulty in trying to recall her childhood. Only the project's historian sometimes informs the rather naive members of the committee about the pitfalls of his profession. As Dr Max is ready to admit, historiography does not fabricate copies of historical reality:

What, my dear Jeff, do you think History is? Some lucid, polyocular transcript of reality? Tut, tut, tut. The historical record of the mid-to-late thirteenth century is no clear stream into which we might thrillingly plunge. As for the myth-kitty, it remains formidably male-dominated. History, to put it bluntly, is a hunk.

(p-152)
Since authentic records are lacking and past accounts are always influenced by the preferences of the present, neither the committee nor the residents of Anglia are able to reconstruct the 'true' past. That the same holds true for individuals trying to recall their childhood or even recent events is demonstrated by Martha’s experiences, for even the unflinchingly honest protagonist comes to realize that she is unable to reconstruct what she had thought and hoped for when she began her affair with Paul (p-219). Barnes thus alerts the reader to the idea that our models of national or individual history are as much an intellectual construction as the fictional world projected in the novel.

With regard to the construction of Englishness, there are even more serious problems involved than the by now familiar insights into the elusiveness of the past suggest. As Dr Max explains, "the greatest and grossest" and at the same time the most common misconception of people trying to recover a specifically English tradition lies in the assumption that the past is really just the present in fancy dress. Strip away those bustles and crinolines [...] and what do you discover? People remarkably like us, whose sweet essential hearts beat just like Mama's. Peer inside their slightly under-illuminated brains and you discover a range of half-formed notions, which, when fully formed, become the underpinnings of our proud modern democratic states. (p-199)

The point that he is making is that people thought and felt differently in the past, and that their characteristics cannot possibly bear any resemblance to present-day Englishmen and women.
Barnes’ novel also suggests that one of the major functions of a nation's collective memory lies in its importance for forging its national identity. Although it is impossible to retrieve 'authentic' past manifestations of Englishness, their exploration still helps to construct and stabilise a sense of identity. When Martha ruminates about her early childhood, she realises the central importance of memory: "It was like a country remembering its history: the past was never just the past, it was what made the present able to live with itself." (p-6) The construction of a continuous history gives coherence to fragmentary experiences, makes it possible to establish patterns, and to provide explanations for what happened, both with regard to the history of a nation and the life of a person. The invention of a tradition is thus shown to be of essential importance for individuals and countries. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering what Barnes satirically illustrates over and over again, viz. that there is no 'essence' of Englishness, let alone a 'quintessence'. Just like any other construction of past events, the invention of 'Englishness' is primarily a means of coming to terms with the present. community, "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members [...] yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” Imagining a common history provides one of the major bonds between members of such communities, and the 'cultural memory' of groups thus plays a major part in forging and maintaing national identities. The rituals and images held to be representative of a nation since times immemorial are quite often of surprisingly recent origin, and more often than not they are invented to begin with, thus reflecting the present-day needs and concerns of a community trying to establish continuity with a suitable historical past.
groundbreaking work Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Granger coined the phrase *The Invention of Tradition* to describe such processes. From the point of view of the cultural historian trying to explore national identities, "the use of ancient materials to construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite novel purposes" can indeed be most revealing, but so can investigations of novels that are engaged with Englishness and the invention of traditions. Presenting a "'scandalous analysis of our nation's glorious past'" (95), *England, England* forcefully illustrates that "Getting its history wrong is part of becoming a nation."
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