

THE UNIVERSITY OF BELGRADE  
FACULTY OF PHILOLOGY

Ivana M. Zečević

IRONY AS A FEATURE OF POSTMODERNISM  
IN THE PROSE OF JULIAN BARNES

Doctoral Dissertation

Belgrade, 2024

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У БЕОГРАДУ  
ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

Ивана М. Зечевић

ИРОНИЈА КАО ПОСТМОДЕРНИСТИЧКИ  
ПОСТУПАК У ПРОЗИ ЏУЛИЈАНА БАРНСА

Докторска дисертација

Београд, 2024.

УНИВЕРСИТЕТ В БЕЛГРАДЕ  
ФИЛОЛОГИЧЕСКИЙ ФАКУЛЬТЕТ

Ивана М. Зечевич

ИРОНИЯ КАК ОСОБЕННОСТЬ  
ПОСТМОДЕРНИЗМА В ПРОЗЕ ДЖУЛИАНА  
БАРНСА

Докторская диссертация

Белград, 2024.

## ПОДАЦИ О МЕНТОРУ И ЧЛАНОВИМА КОМИСИЈЕ

Ментор:

**Проф. др Зоран Пауновић, редовни професор**

Филолошки факултет, Универзитет у Београду

Чланови комисије:

Датум одбране:

## Acknowledgements

A doctoral dissertation is not merely an individual endeavor but rather the culmination of collective efforts, support, and guidance. Consequently, these contributions warrant recognition and acknowledgment.

I wish to express my deepest appreciation to my esteemed mentor, Professor Zoran Paunović, who supported me throughout my Master's and Doctoral studies. Without his insight, guidance, persistent help, and patience, this dissertation would not have been possible.

Reflecting on my formative years, I am profoundly grateful to Professor Dragoslava Tanasijević, who epitomized professorial integrity, dignity, commitment, and knowledge, and to Professor Radomir Baturan, who introduced me to the beauty of literature and sparked my lifelong love for it. Their influence has been invaluable, instilling in me a deep sense of intellectual integrity and originality.

I am also indebted to Dr. Dejan Janković and Dr. Snežana Svetozarević for their extensive support and guidance. Their encouragement and steadfast belief in my work have been instrumental in my academic journey. I greatly appreciate their indispensable suggestions and the faith they had in me.

I owe my deepest gratitude to my colleagues, friends, and family for their endless support, particularly my late parents, Danka and Momčilo, who always believed in me.

Finally, this dissertation is a testament to the brotherly support I received. It is written in the loving memory of my late brother, Marko, to whom I wholeheartedly dedicate this work. His memory continues to inspire and guide me.

Ivana Zečević

# **Irony as a Feature of Postmodernism in the Prose of Julian Barnes**

## **Abstract**

This dissertation aims to examine the works of Julian Barnes through the lens of postmodernism, with a particular focus on irony as a salient feature of this literary movement. Specifically, the research addresses the question of postmodernist irony, investigating whether Julian Barnes employs irony and, if so, to what extent. Ultimately, the dissertation seeks to determine whether Barnes is ironically serious or seriously ironic.

This research presents Barnes' works in the context of postmodernist irony, a perspective that has not been thoroughly explored so far. The study aims to recognize and affirm the key tenets of postmodernism and to delineate Barnes's distinctive use of irony within the same.

The introductory chapter establishes a theoretical framework for this investigation, drawing on contemporary theoretical critiques of postmodernism and irony, and situating irony within its contemporary contexts. This foundation supports a comprehensive analysis of selected works by Julian Barnes, including *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, *England, England*, *The Noise of Time*, *Elizabeth Finch*, and the story collection *Pulse*. These works were selected based on their showcasing the ironic authorial approach.

The methodology primarily employs a comparative approach, considering intertextuality in postmodernism, as well as phenomenological and formal analysis of the literary corpus. The research offers a critical overview of the aforementioned works, with references to Barnes' other notable writings, highlighting the postmodern and ironic elements to define what may be termed "Barnesian irony".

By situating Julian Barnes within the postmodernist tradition and analysing his unique application of irony, this dissertation contributes to a deeper understanding of his literary oeuvre and its significance within the broader context of contemporary literature.

**Keywords:** Literature, Contemporary Novel, Julian Barnes, Irony, Postmodernism

**Scientific field:** Literature, Literary Theory, Postmodernism, British Contemporary Novel, Anglistics

**Scientific Subfield:** Literature and Postmodernism

**UDC Number:**

# Иронија као постмодернистички поступак у прози Џулијана Барнса

## Сажетак

Циљ ове дисертације је да испита дела Џулијана Барнса кроз призму постмодернизма, а са посебним освртом на иронију као истакнуту карактеристику поменутог књижевног правца. Конкретно, истраживање се бави питањем постмодернистичке ироније и утврђује да ли Џулијан Барнс користи иронију и у којој мери. Њен коначни циљ је да утврди да ли је Барнс иронично озбиљан или озбиљно ироничан.

Сам рад нам приближава Барнсова дела кроз контекст постмодернистичке ироније, и у перспективи у којој до сада нису детаљно истраживана. Студија има за циљ да препозна и потврди кључне принципе постмодернизма, као и да дефинише специфичну употребу ироније код Џулијана Барнса у оквиру истих.

Уводно поглавље представља теоријски оквир за ово истраживање, ослањајући се на савремене теоријске критике постмодернизма и ироније. Такође, позиционира иронију у њеном савременом контексту. Овај теоријски контекст примењен је у свеобухватној анализи одабраних дела Џулијана Барнса, а то су: *Историја света у 10 ½ поглавља*, *Енглеска*, *Енглеска*, *Шум времена*, *Елизабет Финч*, као и збирка прича *Пулс*. Наведена дела су препозната као репрезентативна у погледу пишчевог ироничног приступа стваралаштву и сагледавању живота.

Методологија се примарно ослања на компаративни приступ, узимајући у обзир интертекстуалност у постмодернизму, као и феноменолошку и формалну анализу књижевног корпуса. Истраживање нуди критички преглед поменутих дела, уз референце осталих значајних дела Џулијана Барнса. Истиче постмодернистичке и ироничне елементе како би се дефинисало оно што се може назвати „Барнсовом иронијом“.

Позиционирањем Џулијана Барнса унутар постмодернистичке традиције, као и анализом његове јединствене примене ироније, ова дисертација доприноси дубљем разумевању пишчевог књижевног опуса и значаја истог у ширем контексту савремене књижевности.

**Кључне речи:** Књижевност, савремени роман, Џулијан Барнс, иронија, постмодернизам

**Научна област:** Књижевност, књижевне теорије, постмодернизам, британски савремени роман, англистика

**Ужа научна област:** Књижевност и постмодернизам

**УДК број:**

## Table of Contents

|        |                                                                                              |    |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 1.     | <b>Introduction .....</b>                                                                    | 1  |
| 1.1.   | Justification for the Study: Why is Irony of Relevance Nowadays? .....                       | 1  |
| 1.2.   | Brief Evolution of Irony: From Historical to Contemporary Interpretations.....               | 3  |
| 1.3.   | Contemporary Theories on Irony and Postmodernism.....                                        | 5  |
| 1.3.1. | Irony and Postmodernism According to Hutcheon .....                                          | 6  |
| 1.3.2. | <i>Irony's Edge</i> .....                                                                    | 6  |
| 1.3.3. | <i>A Poetics of Postmodernism</i> .....                                                      | 7  |
| 1.4.   | Irony in a Postmodern Environment – According to McHale .....                                | 10 |
| 1.5.   | Irony According to Colebrook .....                                                           | 11 |
| 1.6.   | Irony According to Muecke .....                                                              | 12 |
| 1.7.   | Intersection of Irony and Postmodernism with References to Barnes' Oeuvre                    | 14 |
| 1.8.   | Julian Barnes: A Brief Insight .....                                                         | 15 |
| 1.9.   | A Touch of <i>Flaubert's Parrot</i> .....                                                    | 16 |
| 2.     | <b><i>A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters and its (Hi)storicity .....</i></b>            | 21 |
| 2.1.   | <i>You Keep a Few Chapters and Spin a Novel around them</i> – is it a Novel at all? .....    | 24 |
| 2.2.   | Intertextuality, Echoes and Irony across Chapters .....                                      | 26 |
| 2.3.   | The Role of Irony in Thematic Development .....                                              | 29 |
| 2.4.   | A History that did not Happen or What Géricault did not Paint .....                          | 45 |
| 3.     | <b><i>England, England: Yet Another English Novel or Ironic Subversion Thereof?.....</i></b> | 48 |
| 3.1.   | Instances of Irony Throughout the Novel .....                                                | 50 |
| 3.1.1. | <i>England, England</i> - an Authentic Replica as a Reply to Authenticity .....              | 54 |
| 3.1.2. | Martha's Pursuit of Filling the Void .....                                                   | 57 |
| 3.1.3. | <i>Anglia</i> : What Kind of <i>Topia</i> is it? .....                                       | 59 |
| 3.2.   | <i>England, England</i> as a Heterotopia .....                                               | 63 |
| 3.3.   | <i>England, England</i> as a Simulacrum .....                                                | 66 |
| 4.     | <b><i>The Noise of Time: Commentaries and Context.....</i></b>                               | 69 |
| 4.1.   | The Genre of the Novel, References to <i>Flaubert's Parrot</i> and Intertextualities         | 70 |

|          |                                                                                                     |     |
|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 4.1.1.   | Circularity of the Novel, Chekhov's Gun and Narrative Mode.....                                     | 73  |
| 4.1.2.   | Three Vodka Glasses, Two and a Half Men and Some Music.....                                         | 74  |
| 4.2.     | Irony in the Novel.....                                                                             | 75  |
| 4.2.1.   | Irony as a Dominant Narrative Technique and Existential Approach.....                               | 78  |
| 4.2.2.   | Examples of Irony in Shostakovich's Interactions with Power.....                                    | 79  |
| 4.2.3.   | The Irony of Living a Life Which is not Yours.....                                                  | 86  |
| 4.2.4.   | The Irony of Living a Life Which is not Yours... Anymore. Integrity <i>and</i> Corruption.....      | 88  |
| 4.3.     | Whose Voice is this? And Why Shostakovich Never Laughs? .....                                       | 92  |
| 5.       | <b><i>Elizabeth Finch</i> - Current reception of the novel</b> .....                                | 94  |
| 5.1.     | Neil as a Narrator .....                                                                            | 95  |
| 5.2.     | Irony and Legacy: EF's Influence and Shaping of Neil's Perspective .....                            | 96  |
| 5.3.     | Celebrating Irony: Instances Thereof in the Novel .....                                             | 102 |
| 5.3.1.   | Irony, Wit, and Affection: The Complex Characterization of EF .....                                 | 105 |
| 5.4.     | Introducing Julian the Apostate .....                                                               | 108 |
| 5.4.1.   | Religious Dynamics in Julian's Biography: Barnes' Interpretation of Christianity and Paganism ..... | 110 |
| 5.4.2.   | Echoes of Martyrdom: EF's Public Shaming and Parallels to Julian the Apostate.....                  | 112 |
| 5.4.3.   | Whose Biography is This? .....                                                                      | 114 |
| 5.5.     | "Getting History Wrong" - According to Barnes .....                                                 | 114 |
| 5.6.     | The Ironic Laughter of Understanding .....                                                          | 115 |
| 6.       | <b><i>Pulse</i> - Collection of Stories</b> .....                                                   | 118 |
| 6.1.     | Stories unravelled: Part One .....                                                                  | 120 |
| 6.1.1.   | <i>East Wind</i> .....                                                                              | 120 |
| 6.1.2.   | <i>At Phil &amp; Joanna's 1 - 4:</i> .....                                                          | 123 |
| 6.1.2.1. | <i>At Phil &amp; Joanna's 1: 60/40</i> .....                                                        | 124 |
| 6.1.2.2. | <i>At Phil &amp; Joanna's 2: Marmalade</i> .....                                                    | 125 |
| 6.1.2.3. | <i>At Phil &amp; Joanna's 3: Look, No Hands</i> .....                                               | 127 |

|          |                                                                                                          |     |
|----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 6.1.2.4. | <i>At Phil &amp; Joanna's 4: One in Five</i> .....                                                       | 129 |
| 6.1.3.   | <i>Sleeping with John Updike</i> .....                                                                   | 131 |
| 6.1.4.   | <i>Gardeners' World</i> .....                                                                            | 136 |
| 6.1.5.   | <i>Trespass</i> .....                                                                                    | 138 |
| 6.1.6.   | <i>Marriage Lines</i> .....                                                                              | 140 |
| 6.2.     | Stories unravelled: Part Two .....                                                                       | 142 |
| 6.2.1.   | <i>The Limner</i> .....                                                                                  | 142 |
| 6.2.2.   | <i>Complicity</i> .....                                                                                  | 146 |
| 6.2.3.   | <i>Harmony</i> .....                                                                                     | 148 |
| 6.2.4.   | <i>Carcassonne</i> .....                                                                                 | 151 |
| 6.2.5.   | <i>Pulse - "One's Perfect. Two's Too Many. And Three's not Enough". But what about Six Pulses?</i> ..... | 155 |
| 7.       | <b>Conclusion</b> .....                                                                                  | 161 |
| 8.       | <b>Bibliography</b> .....                                                                                | 167 |
| 9.       | <b>Биографија аутора</b> .....                                                                           | 173 |

## 1. Introduction

The objective of the Introduction chapter is to situate the study within the broader domain of literary criticism and to articulate the research question in contemporary cultural context.

We are living in an era where traditional boundaries are not only under scrutiny but have already been dismantled. It is imperative, whether willingly or unwillingly, to continuously interrogate the reality we inhabit, confronting phenomena previously unimagined: sensory reality, virtual reality, and augmented reality. Ignorance is no longer an excuse; it is mandatory to continually update and enhance our knowledge.

In this quest for understanding, we explore, learn, and research from all available sources, one of which is literature. People turn to literature for comfort, entertainment, and a broader perspective. Perspectivism is a central feature of postmodernism, more so than ever before. It is my strong conviction that this particular phenomenon and aspect of postmodernism will be crucial in the future, as each individual will be enabled and held responsible for the reality they create.

Literature fosters mindfulness in the reader, a state that is highly sought after in contemporary times. More importantly, literature invites us to form and express our opinions on various topics. In today's world, nothing is impossible; anything imaginable has likely been achieved by someone else, and we are encouraged to share those experiences. Who could have imagined a project like *England, England*?

However, this invites further questions: what do we think of it, both individually and collectively? How do we feel about it? How well can we foresee the consequences, assuming we wish to see them at all?

Our attitudes and values shape our beliefs, and our beliefs govern our behaviour, thus influencing our achievements. What we believe about ourselves, our relationships, and the world around us determines how we live. Therefore, it is our utmost responsibility to understand ourselves first and foremost. This is why literature still matters and will continue to be significant in the future.

### 1.1. Justification for the Study: Why is Irony of Relevance Nowadays?

“Imagine understatement expanded into the principle of a whole life and you have grasped, in the large, a notion of the most famous and noble of all the ironies - the irony of Socrates.”  
(Sedgewick, 9)

This study emanates from the observation that irony has ascended to a predominant and highly regarded mode of communication, esteemed by a select few as conferring a sense of exclusivity or hierarchical distinction (see Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge* pp. 17-18). Irony serves as a ubiquitous perspective, functioning as both a trope and a figure, and manifests as an unavoidable form of discourse, regardless of its efficacy. The very essence of irony, along with its various subcategories such as sarcasm, teasing, persiflage, understatement, litotes, and antiphrasis, is discursive in nature, requiring social *rapprochement* (Muecke, 2). Whether consciously or subconsciously, we are predisposed to search for ironic undertones within any form of discourse. The adoption of an ironic viewpoint towards texts, politics, popular culture, and other facets of life has become an indispensable strategy for navigating the fluid and ever-changing landscape of contemporary society. Colebrook delves on this when tackling problems of postmodernity: she says that “our very historical context is ironic because today nothing really means what it says. We live in a world of quotations, pastiche, simulation and cynicism: a general and all-encompassing irony” (1).

Considering the focus on human relations, it is unsurprising that irony has attracted significant psychological research, having in mind the reasons for its use and the benefits it provides. In a study published in 1995 (see Dews et al.), researchers investigated the social payoffs of speaking ironically. In a set of three experiments, the effects of using irony in communication were investigated. The first experiment found that participants deemed ironic remarks (both criticisms and compliments) to be funnier than straightforward ones, though they didn't impact perceived social status. The second experiment showed that while ironic compliments were considered more offensive than sincere ones, ironic criticisms were seen as less insulting than direct criticisms. In the third experiment, participants rated ironic criticisms as more humorous than direct criticisms. Notably, irony aimed at poor performance tended to soften the criticism, thereby saving the recipient's face. When irony targeted offensive behaviour, it helped the speaker appear more composed and less angry, thus protecting their own image.

In addition, the study shows that the use of irony was found to be less detrimental to the speaker-recipient relationship compared to direct criticism. The experiments conducted suggest that irony is frequently employed for humour, to mitigate the severity of an insult, to exhibit emotional control, and to maintain interpersonal relationships. Consequently, irony functions as a critical social communication tool and a skill that individuals must develop to enhance their public persona. This is particularly pertinent in contemporary society, which is heavily imbued with irony.

Moreover, these findings underscore the nuanced role of irony in social interactions. By providing a buffer against the potential negative impact of direct criticism, irony allows speakers to navigate sensitive topics with greater ease. This strategic use of irony not only fosters a more amiable social environment but also highlights the speaker's ability to manage and regulate emotions effectively. The pervasive presence of irony in modern discourse further emphasizes its importance as a communicative strategy. As individuals strive to project a favourable public image, mastering the art of irony becomes essential in navigating the complexities of social interactions in an irony-laden age.

Throughout my investigation, I have examined irony as a perspective on life, acknowledging its manifestations in both literature and philosophy. The literary and philosophical dimensions of irony are not mutually exclusive; instead, they complement and enhance each other, enriching the broader understanding of irony as a cultural and intellectual expression. Philosophical paradigms find their practical applications and reflections within literature, and conversely, literary techniques and narratives often serve as vehicles for philosophical discourse. The philosophical aspect of irony is explained henceforth:

“Philosophy is the real homeland of irony, which one would like to define as a logical beauty: for wherever philosophy appears in oral or written dialogues - and is not simply confined into rigid systems - there irony should be asked for and provided.” (Millán-Zaibert, 168)

Building on the previously discussed perspective on life, a third dimension of irony - ironic disengagement - is explored. This aspect serves psychologically as an ““escape” from the world of paramount reality” (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 38). This concept has been analysed in several of Barnes' works covered in this study.

In addition to its psychological and philosophical implications, irony has been examined within a broad cultural and educational framework. This encompasses the early adoption of ironic communication by children (referenced in Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 56), the prevalence of irony within Western cultural contexts (cited in Muecke, 1), and the current inability of artificial intelligence to

recognize irony, suggesting that irony may be a distinctively human evolutionary trait. However, this dissertation will not delve into the psychological and cultural implications of adopting an ironic stance. Rather, it will concentrate on Barnesian irony as a specific literary phenomenon, exploring its relevance and accessibility from both philosophical and humanistic perspectives.

## **1.2. Brief Evolution of Irony: From Historical to Contemporary Interpretations**

This chapter will not undertake a detailed exploration of irony's historical development throughout the ages. Instead, it will leverage the comprehensive historical overview by Stojanović and other scholars as a foundational reference. Presented herein is a concise overview of irony's evolution, intended merely for contextual understanding. While delving into the depths of irony's historical evolution is beyond this chapter's scope, it is pertinent to note how its definitions, functions, and uses have shifted over centuries, illustrating that irony's meaning is not static but open to various interpretations. This fluidity in the concept's understanding could itself be viewed as a postmodern trait.

Aristotle viewed irony primarily from an ethical standpoint, focusing on its social and psychological aspects, and aligning with the Greek perception of irony as negative and associated with deceit. In Greek comedy, ironic characters were seen as cunning deceivers. This perspective shifted with Plato's *Dialogues*, where Socratic irony emerged as a method of stimulating critical thought through feigned ignorance, embodying a spirit of inquiry rather than deceit. Additionally, the rhetorical definition of irony, significant in its tradition, depicts it as stating the opposite of what is meant, often in a sarcastic manner for critique. This evolution highlights irony's transition from an ethical tool for deception to a rhetorical and philosophical instrument for exploration and critique (see Stojanović, pp. 7-62).

Socrates utilized irony as a methodological tool in his dialectical approach, maintaining impartiality while engaging with his interlocutors. His method encouraged independent thought and critical analysis through dialogic contradictions, using irony to challenge sophistry and search for transcendental truths. This approach aligns with the epistemological functions of irony in seeking universal and eternal truths, a pursuit that may seem utopian in the modern context. Additionally, Socrates' method resonates with contemporary postmodern thought, which similarly does not seek definitive answers but rather focuses on posing pertinent questions within and about the system.

Further, Quintilian notably defines irony as a subclass of allegory, introducing terms such as illusion, manner of speaking, the character of the locutor, and the subject itself. He emphasizes their overall congruence as a criterion for identifying irony. According to Quintilian, the alignment of these elements is essential for irony to be effectively recognized and understood:

“[...] that class of allegory in which the meaning is contrary to that suggested by the words, involve an element of irony, or, as our rhetoricians call it, illusion. This is made evident to the understanding either by the delivery, the character of the speaker or the nature of the subject. For if any of these three is out of keeping with the words, it at once becomes clear that the intention of the speaker is other than what he actually says.” (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 8, 6, 54)

It is of particular interest here that Quintilian refers to irony as “illusion”, thereby emphasizing its elusive nature. Indeed, irony does not exist without context and mutual consent. Furthermore, irony is not stable; it can occur or not, depending on various factors.

Three key elements Quintilian refers to when discussing the occurrence of this “illusion” - namely, “tone, gesture, and the known circumstances” (as in Sedgewick, 5) - shall be further explored.

At this point, it is only fair to acknowledge the foresightedness of this definition, as it resonates with one of the core postulates of contemporary neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), a method of applied psychology, wherein this “out of keeping” is termed incongruency. The alignment with NLP principles also provides a modern perspective on Quintilian’s insights, demonstrating the enduring relevance of his rhetorical theories.

It is quite right to recognize that the Hellenic interpretation of irony extends to a way of life, specifically referring to Socrates, the ultimate eiron (notably, neither eirōneia nor eiron had positive connotations in ancient times). Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, referred to irony as a “pervasive mode of behaviour” (Sedgewick, 7), characterized by pretentious behaviour gravitating toward understatement, as opposed to exaggeration.

For Cicero, irony was described as “urbane pretence” (Sedgewick, 12). According to Stojanović, Cicero analyzes the “urbane aspect of irony”, asserting that “*dissimulatio* and *simulatio* involve a certain type of personality and pertaining values” (italics in original text, 27). This urbane aspect of irony was of great importance to Hegel in his writings about Socrates. Hegel saw irony as the essence of the Socratic method and perceived it in terms of freedom of expression in the pursuit of truth (Stojanović, 30), with freedom and truth being quintessential philosophical categories.

Thus, the third, philosophical aspect of irony is constituted, in addition to the linguistic and discursive aspects. This philosophical dimension underscores the role of irony in fostering intellectual freedom and the quest for truth, highlighting its significance beyond mere rhetorical or communicative functions.

Friedrich Schlegel eloquently and wittily described the intrinsic relationship between irony and philosophy. In *Lyceumfragment 42*, Schlegel writes: “Philosophy is the true home of irony, which might be defined as logical beauty”<sup>1</sup>. This statement summarises the profound connection between the two, suggesting that irony, in its highest form, embodies a harmonious blend of logic and aesthetic sensibility.

For Sedgewick, irony belongs to the realm of two-edged language (22). In a similar vein, in *Irony’s Edge*, Hutcheon focuses on irony as “a discursive strategy” (10). She not only addresses irony in terms of syntax and semantics but also in terms of pragmatics, thereby concentrating on all three key elements identified by Quintilian. Hutcheon examines the dynamics between the said and the unsaid, where the latter inevitably leads to the realm of speculation. She distinguishes between the ironist (whose intention and attitude shape the irony) and the interpreter (whose inference of meaning and attitude determine the understanding of the irony).

Irony has undergone a significant metamorphosis from its archaic origins, from eirōneia to the irony. This evolution started with irony as a “sleight of mouth” together with disrespect toward the interlocutor. In its contemporary form it often aligns with prevailing wisdom and societal viewpoints.

---

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Schlegel further suggests that irony, emerging in philosophical dialogues, exposes a perspective while simultaneously opening the door to infinite other viewpoints, embodying a deep consciousness of the universe’s eternal dynamism and complexity (plato.stanford.edu/entries/schlegel).

Yet, it persists as an exceptionally captivating and intellectually stimulating phenomenon. Throughout my research, an inquiry has been occupying my cognitive landscape: Why does irony manifest as such a naturalized form of communication nowadays, surpassing other communicative modalities? While postmodern literature offers invaluable insights into this inquiry, I am convinced that a more profound essence underlies this phenomenon - an essence that serves as a form of self-exegesis.

### **1.3. Contemporary Theories on Irony and Postmodernism**

The theoretical framework guiding the argumentation of this dissertation is grounded in the considerations and studies of seminal theorists on postmodernism and irony, including but not limited to Linda Hutcheon, Brian McHale, Claire Colebrook, and Douglas Colin Muecke. These scholars provide a rich foundation for understanding the multifaceted nature of irony within postmodern contexts.

Despite the extensive array of definitions of irony, they converge on a fundamental concept: antiphrasis, which involves saying one thing while meaning another. This simple but core principle encapsulates the essence of irony and serves as a critical lens through which the intricate layers of ironic discourse can be examined and interpreted.

In terms of definition, both Hutcheon and Stojanović elucidate irony in its dual roles - as a trope and as a figure. Stojanović provides the precise definition and distinction between the two; therein, he refers to Quintilian:

“If a word is substituted by another, of an opposite meaning, and the immediate context enables the intended meaning to be understood, then we’re talking about a trope. If the irony is extended across a whole thought in a sentence or even a whole text, then we’re talking about the figure<sup>2</sup>.” (qtd. in Stojanović, 23)

By delineating irony in this manner, Hutcheon and Stojanović provide a nuanced understanding of its application. The trope, confined to a specific word or phrase, relies on contextual cues for its ironic meaning. In contrast, the figure extends irony across broader textual or discursive elements, allowing for a more complex and layered interpretation.

Colebrook echoes this distinction, further differentiating the figure of speech from figure of thought (9). This distinction is analogous to the distinction between metaphor and allegory (as Stojanović further points out), or, on a larger scale, between language and discourse. This definition shall be operational in my further research.

Muecke provides a concise, albeit circular, definition of *eirôneia* as a rhetorical figure, adhering strictly to a Quintilianesque manner; he posits that irony means “to blame by ironical praise or praise by ironical blame” (14).

The theoretical frameworks of the aforementioned scholars will be summarized and referenced below to establish the guidelines for analysing the works of Julian Barnes.

#### **1.3.1. Irony and Postmodernism According to Hutcheon**

In analysing Hutcheon’s theory of postmodernism and irony, I have relied on two seminal works: *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) and *Irony’s Edge* (1994). The latter examines irony within a postmodern context, considering its application not only in literature but also across various art forms

---

<sup>2</sup> Terms bolded and translation provided by the author of the dissertation.

as a predominant mode of communication with art enthusiasts and audiences. Consequently, I will begin by highlighting the key points from this book.

### 1.3.2. *Irony's Edge*

Hutcheon points out that irony challenges our interpretation and internal debate by subverting Saussurean straightforward principles of signification. According to her, irony operates within “discursive communities” (*Irony's Edge*, 18), highlighting its consensual, conventional, and contextual nature. This suggests that irony is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a social and communicative one, dependent on the shared understanding and conventions of specific communities. Thus, the reader or interpreter in general is foregrounded, and his role is critical to the reception of a text regardless of the author’s intentions, known or unknown. The interpretation is subjectivised, it is fluid and not fixed (so Hutcheon argues), and therefore in line with the postmodern hermeneutics. Hence, Hutcheon formulates the syntagma “the unbearable slipperiness of irony” (Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 111). Such slipperiness directly correlates with the Colebrook’s argument about the context: Colebrook claims that the “contexts are not passive backgrounds to the texts we read: contexts are created by texts, with each text also presenting the instabilities and insecurities of the context” (4).

In terms of reception, Hutcheon argues that irony has carried negative connotations ever since “its derivation from the Greek *ieron* figure” (*Irony's Edge*, 29). However, this work shall not dwell on perceived evaluative opinions regarding irony’s reception. Instead, the focus will remain on the structural and functional aspects of irony as a discursive strategy.

Interestingly, Hutcheon has found a perfect expression of her views on irony in Julian Barnes’ work, paying homage to him in her discussion of the opposing receptions of irony. She borrows terms from Barnes’ *Flaubert’s Parrot*, specifically the chapter titled *Braithwaite’s Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*, to title her section on irony “‘The ‘Devil’s mark’ or the ‘Snorkel of sanity’?” (Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 44). Barnes himself comments on irony in his definition:

“The modern mode: either the devil’s mark or the snorkel of sanity. Flaubert’s fiction poses the question: Does irony preclude sympathy? There is no entry for *ironie* in his Dictionary. This is perhaps intended to be ironic.” (*Flaubert’s Parrot*, 155)

In this dichotomy capturing the polarized views on irony, which qualifies Barnes as an ironist himself, Barnes introduces another trait or quality - sympathy - prompting us to perceive irony on a continuum rather than as a strict dichotomy.

By incorporating sympathy into the discussion of irony, Barnes challenges the conventional binary understanding of irony as either wholly negative or positive. Instead, he suggests that irony can coexist with and even enhance sympathetic engagement. This perspective aligns with postmodern theories that favour a more fluid and nuanced understanding of concepts, rejecting absolute dichotomies in favour of continuums. This continuum-based approach aligns with contemporary discourses that value the interplay of diverse perspectives and the rejection of simplistic categorizations.

On the semantic and pragmatic levels, irony is characterized as **relational**, **inclusive**, and **differential**. Yet, the author acknowledges the existence of “stable” ironies - those that are both intentional and overt, as well as those interpreted as such, regardless of the author’s intent (Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 111). The argument on intentional or unintentional irony inevitably leads to the theory of authorial intentionalism, which has been strongly opposed by the predominant and postmodern opinion that the interpretation should not be restrained and that the author does not hold the hegemony

over the text. Hutcheon resolves the issue by stating that “all irony happens intentionally” (Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge* 113), be it by the encoder or decoder.

Eventually, what is the function of irony?

Hutcheon summarizes all intentionalism theories into three categories: psycho-aesthetic (the term coined by Hutcheon), semantic and ethical. Hutcheon once again refers to *Flaubert's Parrot* and quotes in order to summarize the ongoing debate on the presence of author in irony: “That is the attraction, and the danger, of irony: the way it permits a writer to be seemingly absent from his work, yet in fact hintingly present. You *can* have your cake and eat it; the only trouble is, you get fat” (Barnes qtd. in *Irony's Edge* 120). Barnes underscores the concepts of intentionality, its allure, and inherent risks, highlighting the accountability it demands. Irony enables authors to maintain an apparent detachment from their work while subtly asserting their presence, offering them the dual advantages of engagement and disengagement. However, this literary mechanism also presents a paradox similar to the idiom of having one's cake and eating it too - pleasurable yet fraught with responsibility. The question of who bears the ultimate responsibility for irony - whether the ironist or the interpreter - remains open for debate.

The theoretical debate on irony encompasses a spectrum of divergent viewpoints regarding its nature and interpretation. Central to this debate is the question of whether irony is an inherent quality of the text itself or it emerges solely during the act of interpretation. Additionally, there is contention over the role of the author in conveying ironic intent and the various functions that irony may serve within a literary context. These discussions delve into the complexities of understanding and defining irony, examining its multifaceted manifestations in literature and the diverse implications of its usage.

Hutcheon resolves this debate by stating that “Irony is always [...] a modality of perception - or, better, of attribution - of both meaning and evaluative attitude” (*Irony's Edge*, 122). This perspective is going to be the guiding principle for the research at hand, which aligns with the conviction in the autonomy of the reader. This approach underscores the reader's pivotal role in the act of reading, emphasizing their responsibility in crafting an informed interpretation, or personal exegesis. This stance acknowledges the interactive nature of literary engagement, where meaning and value are not solely inscribed by the author but are dynamically co-constructed by the reader's interpretive participation within a given textual context. On that note, Hutcheon defines context as a “more specific **circumstantial**, **textual**, and **intertextual** environment [...]” (bold in original text, *ibid*, 143).

### 1.3.3. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*

Linda Hutcheon's exploration of postmodernism in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* is an attempt to conceptualise postmodernism as a “poetics”, highlighting its flexibility and resistance to fixed definitions. This poetics underscores postmodernism's self-reflective and parodic nature, distinguishing it from its historical and political contexts, which it neither merges with nor reconciles.

Postmodernism, as Hutcheon articulates, is characterized by its engagement with and subversion of historical and cultural contexts, employing irony and parody to question traditional narratives and ideologies. This approach reflects a complex engagement with culture, where postmodernism neither fully merges with nor entirely rejects its antecedents, but instead interrogates the assumptions underlying cultural and historical narratives.

Hutcheon identifies postmodernism's significant feature as its contradictory nature - being both historical and anti-historical, part of and apart from its cultural and philosophical lineage. This duality

is evident in postmodernism's approach to art and literature, where it employs strategies like parody not simply to ridicule but to critically engage with the texts and contexts it references. Postmodern works thus often blur the boundaries between high and low culture and challenge the distinctions between genres and media.

In her discussion, Hutcheon contends that postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, historical, and political. Postmodernism does not nostalgically return to past aesthetics but rather rethinks and critiques them, reflecting a broader cultural shift rather than a complete break from liberal humanism.

Furthermore, Hutcheon's analysis points out that postmodernism often critiques and subverts the very foundations of its existence, including the institutions that propagate cultural narratives, such as the media, universities, and museums. By doing so, postmodernism not only challenges the content of these narratives but also the forms and structures through which they are communicated. This is manifest in postmodernism's tendency to relocate performances from traditional venues to unconventional spaces, or its blending of fiction with non-fiction, which challenges the viewer's or reader's expectations and perceptions.

In postmodern literature and art, issues such as sexuality, social inequality, science, religion, and the relationship of art to the world are examined with a nuanced approach that engages both contemporary and historical conventions. Postmodern discourses maintain both autonomy and engagement with the world, integrating theory with praxis to provide a context for individual actions within a collective framework. Rather than seeking resolution, postmodernism thrives on productive and ironic tension. It parodically inscribes criticism of its past within its very name, exploring the fascination with the different, the provisional, and the paradoxical.

Postmodernism is marked by a process of continual questioning rather than striving for a totalizing vision. It engages in a "both/and" logic rather than an "either/or" approach, incorporating elements of modernism while simultaneously critiquing and destabilizing their authority. The radical break theory posits a stark opposition between modernism and postmodernism, contrasting modernist depth with postmodern surface and seriousness with irony. Postmodernism's theoretical and aesthetic practices intersect with various contemporary theories, including psychoanalytic, linguistic, poststructuralist, and feminist approaches. These theories emphasize interpretative strategies and the situational context of verbal utterances.

She identifies two types of postmodernism: one that is non-mimetic and anti-referential, and another that is historically engaged and referential.

Hutcheon introduces several critical terms related to postmodernism, which will be explored in the following sections:

- *The Ex-centric Perspective*

The postmodern perspective also reconsiders the relationship between center and periphery, challenging traditional narratives of unity and essentialism. It values the local and non-totalizing aspects, recognizing the center as a constructed fiction rather than an absolute. This shift fosters a critique of dominant cultures and embraces multiple, provisional alternatives to fixed concepts.

- *A Postmodern Reader*

Hutcheon examines the complex interaction inherent in the act of reading, arguing that the traditional dichotomy between a reader and a text is insufficient. She emphasizes that understanding a text also necessitates considering its production and the contextual influences that shape it. This perspective is particularly relevant in postmodern ironic texts, where the reader's role extends to discerning intended ironies, significantly enriching the interpretative process.

Hutcheon elaborates on Foucault's theory, which asserts that discursive practices are governed by unseen, historical rules. These rules determine the functionality of texts within their specific socio-historical contexts, highlighting how meaning is shaped by underlying structural influences. Postmodern texts thus highlight the significance of discourse "in use", contrasting with structuralist emphasis on stable signifier-signified relationships. This shift is towards pragmatics - understanding discourse in its operational context.

- *Postmodernism and (A)Historicity*

Postmodernism often faces criticism for being ahistorical, a viewpoint common among both Marxists and traditionalists. This critique stems from its rejection of modernist formalism, which tends to use the past to underscore the present or seek universal truths. In contrast, postmodernism acknowledges the provisional and indeterminate nature of historical knowledge, emphasizing that our understanding of the past is shaped by contemporary contexts and ideologies. This scepticism does not imply a radical relativism but rather an acknowledgment of how the present shapes our understanding of the past. Postmodernism recognizes that historical knowledge is contingent on current ideological and institutional frameworks, thereby embracing provisionality and irony. Hutcheon points out that postmodernism's focus extends beyond merely critiquing past methodologies; it actively interrogates our current understanding and interpretation of history. Echoing this sentiment, Umberto Eco emphasizes that postmodernism revisits historical narratives with a sense of irony rather than innocence, highlighting the recognition that historical meanings are not static but evolve through contemporary interpretations. This perspective allows postmodernism to critique traditional narratives without resorting to nostalgia, focusing instead on how historical understanding is inherently contingent and constructed.

- *Historiographic Metafiction*

Historiographic metafiction disrupts the clear distinction between historical fact and fiction, arguing that both are narrative constructs rather than reflections of objective truth. This genre questions the epistemological underpinnings of traditional historiography, asserting that historical and fictional narratives alike are shaped by narrative processes and the interpretative acts of their creators.

This approach challenges traditional views by:

- Blurring the boundaries between historical and fictional narratives, emphasizing that both construct reality through narrative techniques.
- Asserting that writing history is akin to crafting a narrative, focusing on interpretation rather than mere recounting.
- Critiquing positivist history, which claims to present an unproblematic past, by highlighting how historical narratives are shaped by contemporary perspectives.
- Through the use of intertextuality and irony, questioning the stability and truth claims of both historical and fictional narratives.

On the whole, the postmodern stance is inherently paradoxical, questioning the nature of historical knowledge, subjectivity, and representation. It does not deny the existence of the past but interrogates how we understand and represent it. This approach is seen as a response to, rather than a complete rejection of, modernist and historical ideals. It suggests that while totalizing or simplistic views are problematic, postmodernism's critical stance remains entangled with the very conventions it seeks to challenge.

#### **1.4. Irony in a Postmodern Environment, According to McHale**

The second theorist I have addressed is Brian McHale, renowned for his insightful examination of postmodern literature, particularly through his seminal work, *Postmodernist Fiction*. He discusses the postmodernism from the perspective of its discursive constructs: namely, among the variety of constructs, we can choose the preferred one based on "the criterion of self-consistency and internal coherence" (*Postmodernist Fiction*, 4). In addition, he proposes more criteria, such as scope of writing, productiveness and interest. Such proposal for guidance among the plethora of theories on postmodern production seems consolatory as we discuss the phenomenon in its real time and may serve its purpose as a beacon as we're trying to find our way through the maze of references. Still, it puts the accountability and reliability on the consumer of postmodernism, in this case - the reader, to elicit the system.

McHale defines postmodernism as a continuation or response to early twentieth-century modernism, rather than as a futuristic form of writing. He clarifies that the term "post" in postmodernism relates more to historical sequence than to a radical departure from previous styles.

A key aspect of McHale's theory is the distinction between ontological and epistemological dominants in postmodernist texts. He explains that while modernism focused on epistemological questions of "how" we know the world, postmodernism shifts to ontological inquiries of "what" constitutes reality. McHale further explores postmodernism in terms of what he calls "classic epistemological issues - appearance vs. reality, multiplicity of perspectives, the distortions of desire and memory [...]" (*Postmodernist Fiction*, 43).

Furthermore, in exploring the space as a construct of a fictional world, McHale delves into the concept of heterocosm which shares the common denominator with Foucault's heterotopia, and that is - otherness. He also directly refers to the term heterotopia, or the zone, as some postmodernists call it (ibid, pp. 43-59). In postmodern texts, the representation of reality is not just a direct reflection or imitation of the 'real world' as we understand it. Instead, it suggests a blending or fusion of the real and the constructed, where the boundaries between them are fluid and permeable.

In his work, McHale often addresses the theme of how different worlds within a narrative can confront each other, creating a tension that questions the nature of reality itself. Postmodernist texts often challenge the boundaries between fiction and reality, creating narrative spaces where multiple realities coexist, overlap, or are in constant flux. Modern science, particularly quantum physics, is already pushing the limits of our understanding, by questioning the certainty and stability of previously accepted Pascalian paradigm. As for the latter, McHale summarizes that the real logical world functions within three modalities: necessity, possibility, and impossibility, which are subverted in postmodernism.

McHale's analysis extends into how postmodern texts manipulate the conventional boundaries between fiction and reality, challenging the reader's perception of both. By employing strategies like intertextuality and irony, postmodern works encourage readers to question the narratives' ontological bases.

According to this interpretation, irony operates within two distinct yet interrelated frames or planes. The first frame is the literal one, the overt, the said, or heard verbal level of the text. The second frame, however, belongs to the realm of interpretation and this is where the ironic stance is located. It is this second, interpretative frame that imbues the literal words with an additional layer of meaning, often contrasting with or even contradicting the surface level. Irony occurs when these two frames interact, creating a tension or dissonance between what is said and what is meant. The ‘ironic charge’ - the strength or impact of the irony - is contingent upon this tension. Irony thus resides in a liminal space, oscillating between the explicit verbal expression and the implicit, often unspoken, interpretive understanding.

In conclusion, McHale’s contributions to understanding postmodernism highlight the complexities of navigating its theoretical landscapes, urging a re-evaluation of how narratives construct and convey realities. His emphasis on ontological over epistemological concerns marks a significant shift in how literature can be perceived and analysed in the postmodern context.

### **1.5. Irony According to Colebrook**

In her book titled *Irony*, Claire Colebrook contributes to the discussion of irony by positioning it within a cultural and intellectual context, emphasizing its elitist nature. She notes that irony, historically seen as a straightforward form of lying in Aristophanes’ time, evolved during the era of Socrates into a more complex form of dissimulation designed to be recognized and provoke thought. Irony, according to Colebrook, moved away from mere deception to become a critical tool in philosophical dialogues, particularly in the Socratic method, which used irony to challenge conventional wisdom and provoke deeper thinking.

Colebrook traces the progression of irony through history, noting its significant theorization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries where it came to characterize life more broadly, reflecting a transition from closed societies to more open, dialogic polities filled with competing viewpoints. This shift made irony a valuable tool in times of cultural insecurity, serving as a kind of release valve during tumultuous periods.

She draws parallels between Socratic irony and postmodern irony, noting that both rely on a distinction between sincere statements and those that are repeated or quoted to expose their inherent emptiness. This reflects a postmodern awareness that what might appear as new or original is often a recontextualization of existing ideas, pointing to a loss of belief in the genuine or original.

Colebrook also discusses the role of irony in challenging historical narratives and the notion of objective truth. She ties irony to historicism, suggesting that irony allows for the re-evaluation of contexts as constructs influenced by texts themselves, rather than as static backgrounds. This idea aligns with the new historicist approach which views contexts as dynamic and narrative-driven.

Colebrook explores the pragmatic dimension of irony, questioning whether it is an intrinsic property of texts or a result of reader interpretation. This perspective opens up the possibility that any text might be interpreted as ironic, dependent on the reader’s perspective and their interpretative community. Such a view resonates with a postmodern ethos which suggests that no texts are “sacred” and immune to ironic interpretation. Colebrook also notes historical precedents for this approach, mentioning that early scholars like The Venerable Bede and Erasmus of Rotterdam identified irony even in canonical texts like the Bible (5).

Colebrook further agrees with Hutcheon about contextual function of irony, stating that irony is “always diagnostic and political: to read the irony you do not just have to know the context: you also have to be committed to specific beliefs and positions *within* that context” (12).

She distinguishes between two broad types of irony: cosmic irony, which relates to fate and has little to do with language play, and linguistic irony, which involves a double sense of meaning and is more aligned with traditional notions of irony involving figural speech.

Politically, Colebrook views irony as liberating, suggesting that in a world devoid of fixed ideologies, ironic detachment allows individuals to remain open and undecided, thus fostering a political environment where no single ideology dominates. This perspective underscores irony's role in maintaining a critical distance from accepted norms, enabling a continuous questioning of those norms as a form of political engagement.

She also underscores the same exclusivity in irony as Hutcheon, explaining that "irony is essentially, avowedly and positively elitist: it works against common sense, the unrefined intellect and the social *use* of language (rather than its reflection, complexity and tension)" (19), which relates irony to the pragmatics. According to Colebrook, irony relies on "shared recognition" (36), or precisely "[...] we do not exchange signs; we recognise a *meaning* that is other than sign, or what the sign intends", which requires "shared conventions and presupposed values" (36). Colebrook also agrees with Hutcheon in terms of political function of irony: she recognizes politics a battleground leading to 'higher', universal values. "It is not just exertion of authority, but authority based on legitimate values that transcend any specific opinion: values that 'we' share and recognise behind different uses of a word" (36).

### 1.6. Irony According to Muecke

D. C. Muecke's examination of irony in his book *Irony* is meticulous and practical, focusing on defining and illustrating the constituent elements of irony through varied examples. He considers irony primarily a literary phenomenon, more challenging to manifest in non-literary arts due to its inherent referential nature. Muecke outlines that irony must refer to something specific, which non-representational arts like abstract painting might not do directly. This perspective contrasts with Hutcheon's broader recognition of irony across various art forms, including architecture - where postmodernism initially gained prominence - along with painting, photography, dance, and film, highlighting a more expansive view of irony's applicability in artistic expression.

His book is instrumental in distinguishing between different forms of irony, such as verbal irony, where the speaker is aware and intentional in their use of irony, versus situational irony, which involves a discrepancy observed by an outsider rather than the participant. Muecke's framework classifies irony into various subtypes, including sarcasm, understatement, and dramatic irony, each serving different rhetorical or expressive purposes.

In his discourse, Muecke identifies key elements common to all forms of irony: the element of innocence or unawareness, a contrast between appearance and reality, a comic effect stemming from this contrast, the detachment, and the aesthetic element (see Muecke, pp. 24-40). He suggests that irony, by its nature, involves a superior, detached stance from the observer, often leading to a complex interplay between the creator's intent and the audience's reception. Muecke intriguingly suggests that the ultimate, archetypal ironist is God, while the archetypal victim of irony is man. He cites Flaubert's letter to Louise Colet:

"Quand est-ce qu'on écrira les faits au point de vue d'une blague supérieure, c'est-à-dire comme le bon Dieu les voit, d'en haut?"<sup>3</sup> (qtd. in Muecke, 39).

---

<sup>3</sup> The quotation translates as follows: "When will people begin to write down the facts as if it were all a divine joke, that is to say, as the Lord sees them, from above?" (Muecke, 39).

Muecke's insights into irony extend to its function and detection, while he distinguishes the following sub-forms of irony:

- Verbal Irony: Tends to be satiric due to its linguistic nature.
- Situational Irony: Tends to be more purely comic, tragic, or philosophical (51).
- Sarcasm: Muecke questions whether sarcasm can be viewed as part of irony, due to its unequivocal tone that leaves little room for pretended unawareness (ibid).
- Impersonal Irony: Characterized by dryness or gravity of manner, often found in understatement (52).
- Covert Irony: Irony meant to be detected rather than overtly expressed.
- Self-disparaging Irony: The ironist understates themselves as part of their strategy, exemplified by Socrates and Chaucer (pp. 56-57).
- Ingénu Irony: The ironist uses a simpleton or ingénu to convey irony (pp. 57-58).
- Irony of Self-betrayal: Characters unknowingly ironize themselves, related to dramatic irony and the irony of events, common in drama (59).

Muecke identifies two elements pertinent to irony: the comic (arising from contradiction) and sympathy (arising from the feeling we have for the victim). He corroborates Barnes' view from *Flaubert's Parrot* regarding the inclusion of sympathy in the definition of irony. He concludes that the ultimate purpose of irony might be to enable individuals to transcend their predicaments, even if it does not make them any less a victim of these predicaments (77). Furthermore, Muecke acknowledges that General Irony is often compared to the absurd, acknowledging the certainty of death, the unpredictability of life, and the unbreakable chain of cause and effect (72). He also highlights an epistemological irony, which deals with the fundamental contradiction between the desire to know everything and the impossibility of knowing everything (76).

Overall, Muecke's work provides a comprehensive guide to understanding and identifying irony, especially in literary texts, by categorizing its various forms and elucidating the mechanisms through which it operates. Muecke's work, characterized by its conciseness, does not sacrifice depth or value. It serves as an essential textbook on the ever-elusive concept of irony, offering clarity and insight into its various forms and applications. By leveraging Muecke's classifications, this dissertation aims to elucidate the multifaceted nature of Barnesian irony and provide a robust analytical toolkit for exploring its presence and function in literary works.

\*

In addition to the structured definitions and classifications provided by Muecke, it is apposite to consider the broader philosophical view on irony offered by Edmond Reiss. In his article on Medieval irony - a somewhat controversial subject, as irony is often not associated with pre-modern times - Reiss examines the concept through a diachronically-oriented lens, providing a comprehensive perspective on its evolution and maturation.

Reiss addresses the aforementioned scepticism by asserting that irony possessed "a reality of its own" (209) long before it was formally distinguished as a figure of speech by Cicero and Quintilian, long before Aristotle and Aristophanes considered its ethical implications, and long before Plato and Theophrastus depicted their ironists. He emphasizes that the term itself is a "relative newcomer to modern languages" (209), noting that it does not appear in extant French writings before 1370 or in extant English writings before 1502, and did not come into general use until the eighteenth century (see Reiss, 209).

Reiss makes a profound conclusion, stating that: “Irony is millennia older than the consciousness of irony” (210). This assertion underscores the deep-rooted and intrinsic nature of irony, suggesting that it has been an integral part of human expression and understanding long before it was explicitly recognized and articulated.

There is a profound, and perhaps inherently ironic, aspect to Reiss’ conclusion. The idea that irony existed and was practiced long before it was consciously acknowledged highlights the subtle and pervasive presence of irony in human history. This observation invites further reflection on the ways in which irony operates not just as a rhetorical device but as a fundamental aspect of human cognition and communication.

### **1.7. Intersection of Postmodernism and Irony with References to Barnes’ Oeuvre**

Irony and postmodernism intersect in a complex and multifaceted relationship, where irony serves as a fundamental mode of expression and critique within postmodernist discourse. Postmodernism inherently embraces irony as a tool for deconstructing and challenging established norms and conventions. The contemporary renaissance of irony has found a great expression in the works of Julian Barnes, among the others, and therefore shall be referred to in the following key points of intersection between irony and postmodernism:

- *Subversion of Grand Narratives*: Postmodernism is characterized by its scepticism toward overarching narratives that purport to universally explain historical, cultural, and personal identities. Through its intrinsic capacity to project multiple, often conflicting meanings, irony serves to dismantle these grand narratives. It exposes their contradictions and insufficiencies, fostering a perspective that embraces a fragmented and diverse reality. Julian Barnes frequently employs this ironic approach to manipulate narratives, ranging from biblical tales to modern accounts.
- *Deconstruction of Language and Meaning*: Irony is indispensable to the deconstruction of narratives, utilizing tools like ambiguity, paradox, and double entendre. Without its verbal articulation, neither dramatic nor cosmic irony could effectively challenge or subvert established meanings. The ironic elements expose the gaps between a signifier and a signified, emphasizing the contingent and constructed nature of meaning. This aligns with the postmodernist view that meaning is not fixed but is always in flux, shaped by context and interpretation. In this sense, we can witness the writing of one of the greatest ironists of postmodern era - Julian Barnes.
- *Critique of Authority and Authenticity*: Irony in postmodernism frequently targets the concepts of authority and authenticity. By adopting an ironic tone, postmodernist works question the legitimacy of authoritative voices and the authenticity of cultural and social institutions. This ironic critique undermines traditional sources of power and knowledge, suggesting that what is often presented as ‘authentic’ is itself a construct subject to manipulation and reinterpretation. Relevant examples of this are present in Julian Barnes’ novels, including *Flaubert’s Parrot* and *England, England*, among others.
- *Intertextuality*: Postmodernism is known for its intertextual and self-reflexive approach to art, literature, and culture. Intertextual references permeate artistic works, which cannot be fully understood without their social context, as elaborated by scholars such as Hutcheon and Umberto Eco. Irony enhances this playfulness, allowing creators to engage with and distance themselves from their subjects simultaneously. This reflexivity invites audiences to become aware of the constructed nature of the work and to question the boundaries between fiction and reality. Consequently, irony becomes a means of exploring the fluid interaction between creation and critique, reality and representation. Barnes’ body of work is characterized by its

intertextuality and self-referential nature, which will be explored in subsequent chapters. He consistently carries the same ideas across various works, despite their differences in space, form, and theme, demonstrating his willingness to play with, subvert, and deconstruct concepts, underscoring a distinctive consistency in his writing approach.

- *Perspective and Unreliable Narration*: Barnes is recognized for employing unreliable narrators, a technique that aligns with his rejection of the omniscient narrator. The inherent gap he creates between the narrative setting and his characters is ripe with ironic potential, which frequently manifests in his works. This setup consistently sparks an ironic affective charge, whether through instances of verbal irony or dramatic irony, serving as a pivotal element.

In conclusion, the intersection between irony and postmodernism is marked by a shared commitment to questioning and destabilizing established norms, meanings, and authorities. Irony, with its capacity for nuanced critique and playful deconstruction, is an essential feature of postmodernist expression, enabling a deeper exploration of the complexities and contradictions inherent in contemporary culture and thought.

### **1.8. Julian Barnes: A Brief Insight**

This research endeavours to identify markers of irony within Barnes' prose, operating under the premises aforementioned. The focus on irony, a complex and multifaceted literary device, within Barnes' work offers a rich field for exploration, considering the author's reputation for nuanced and layered writing. The examination of irony in his prose is not merely an exercise in literary analysis but also a deeper inquiry into the interplay between authorial intent, textual construction, and reader's interpretation. This research thus aims to uncover and analyze the instances and functions of irony in Barnes' narratives, contributing to a greater understanding of his literary artistry and the broader implications of irony in literature.

Julian Barnes is renowned for his innovative prose, with experimentation being a recurrent attribute of his literary output. Vanessa Guignery aptly notes that Barnes' works simultaneously confound and enchant readers and critics alike (Guignery, *The Fiction of Julian Barnes*, 1). This complexity can be attributed to his diverse educational background, encompassing lexicography, philosophy, literature, and even law. Indeed, the world lost a good lawyer, but gained an extraordinary writer.

Barnes' journalistic inclination is evident today, as he frequently comments on social developments ranging from the Booker Prize and politics to football. He is also a keen admirer of art, painting, and music, having written numerous commentaries and several monographs on these subjects. All of these interests are intricately woven into his versatile oeuvre, enriching his narratives with depth and breadth.

Furthermore, Barnes imbues each new work with a fresh perspective, venturing into uncharted thematic territory and employing narrative strategies that diverge markedly from his previous works. This approach results in a rich hybridity of literary forms, subjects, genres, voices, tones, and characters - a veritable elephantiasis and mélange that enriches the literary landscape. His oeuvre is characterized by both self-referential and inter-referential elements, with motifs, symbols, and characters resonating throughout his body of work, underscoring a cohesive consistency. This interconnectivity affirms that neither novels nor stories exist in isolation, as a bubble, much like the interconnectedness of individuals, scientific and literary theories. Each of Barnes' projects is a venture into new challenges and pathways. Barnes himself succinctly captures this ethos, stating: "In order to write, you have to convince yourself that it's a new departure for you and not only a new departure

for you but for the entire history of the novel” (Billen qtd. in Guignery, *The Fiction of Julian Barnes*, 1).

Such endeavours and consistency in writing and exploring various themes have not gone unnoticed by the critical minds, so he has been awarded with numerous awards, both in his homeland and abroad, to name the few: the Man Booker Prize (awarded for *The Sense of an Ending* in 2011, the Somerset Maugham Award (*Metroland* 1981), Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize (*Flaubert's Parrot* 1985); Prix Médicis (*Flaubert's Parrot* 1986); E. M. Forster Award (American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, 1986); Gutenberg Prize (1987); Grinzane Cavour Prize (Italy, 1988); and the Prix Femina (*Talking It Over* 1992). Barnes was made a *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* in 1988, *Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* in 1995 and *Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* in 2004<sup>4</sup>.

Indeed, Julian Barnes is a unique British writer who bridges English and foreign literature, particularly French, for which he has received significant recognition. His profound appreciation for French literature is rooted in his upbringing by parents who were French teachers. Barnes has translated many French authors, and his admiration for Gustave Flaubert is proverbial. He has often commented on this cross-Channel connection; in an interview, it was noted that Barnes is uniquely the only foreigner to “have scooped the Médicis and the Femina, two of the top literary prizes: and presumably this interest had something to do with the French strand in his books” (Martin).

Regarding his most popular works across the Channel, in addition to well-known titles like *Flaubert's Parrot* and *Cross Channel*, several other works draw inspiration from French literature and society. “Certainly, in England he's well known, sometimes to the point of suspicion, as a ‘European’ writer. But [...] here in France, we like [Barnes'] stuff because it's so English” (Martin). Moreover, his interest and positive reception extend to Eastern Europe and Russia, making Barnes a distinctive figure in the contemporary literary scene.

In 2017, the Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to Kazuo Ishiguro, a fellow countryman of Julian Barnes. This sparked discussions about whether Barnes might be the next to bring the award home<sup>5</sup>. This remains to be seen, while I sincerely hope that we will witness the award going to a deserving writer, renowned for his elegance, wit, and irony, and, not least, with minimal controversy in today's turbulent literary world.

### 1.9. A Touch of *Flaubert's Parrot*

The decision to exclude *Flaubert's Parrot* from direct analysis was made consciously, acknowledging that it stands as Julian Barnes' most extensively examined work to date. Therefore, including it in this study seemed superfluous. My objective was to broaden the analysis of Julian Barnes' literary output, exploring the ironic and postmodern characteristics in lesser-studied works to offer fresh insights into his overall body of work.

Nonetheless, numerous references to *Flaubert's Parrot* are woven throughout this dissertation, reflecting its inescapable significance in any discussion of Barnes, irony, and postmodernism. This

---

<sup>4</sup> The complete and updated list of Julian Barnes' awards can be found on his official website, [julianbarnes.com](http://julianbarnes.com).

<sup>5</sup> Alex Shephard comments on the Nobel Prize in his article in *The New Republic*: “Julian Barnes should win, because he's a fine novelist and critic, but he won't, because it feels like everyone has forgotten about Julian Barnes” (October 3, 2022, *The New Republic*, <https://newrepublic.com/article/167921/will-win-2022-nobel-prize-literature>).

seminal novel remains a pivotal reference point, underscoring its foundational role in understanding Barnes' engagement with literary techniques and thematic explorations.

Moreover, I would argue that *Flaubert's Parrot* could be regarded as a kind of a "postmodernist manifesto" of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, or at the very least, its flagship work. Written in 1984, the novel has had a forty-year period of maturation in the eyes of audiences and critics alike, and it continues to mature and intrigue. There is a prevailing impression that Barnes was awarded the Booker Prize for the wrong novel, with many considering the award for *The Sense of an Ending* to be a belated recognition of *Flaubert's Parrot*.

The enduring appeal of *Flaubert's Parrot* can be linked to its status as a foundational text for discussions on postmodernism, addressing numerous pivotal themes, which is why I am inclined to label it as the "manifesto of postmodernism". The reasons for this designation are detailed below, supplemented by relevant quotations from the novel:

1. First and foremost, it poses the typical and essentially postmodern questions, which have been quoted extensively, such as:
  - "How do we seize the past? Can we ever do so?" (*Flaubert's Parrot*, p. 14);
  - "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 a parliamentary report" (ibid, p. 90);
  - "Is the writer much more than a sophisticated parrot?" (ibid, p. 18);
  - "[...] think of everything that got away, that fled with the last deathbed exhalation of the biographee" (ibid, p. 38). Barnes is famous for his exploration of the oeuvre that was never created, such as not-paintings, not-books, and eventually the not-life, the life that was never lived, and could have been. These are neatly listed in the whole chapter titled "The Flaubert Apocrypha";
  - "One way of legitimising coincidences [...] is to call them ironies. That's what smart people do" (ibid, p. 67); and further to this: "And yet sometimes I wonder if the wittiest, most resonant irony isn't just a well-brushed, well-educated coincidence" (ibid);
  - The principle of the "irony in the eye of the beholder," which Hutcheon has discussed extensively (see Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 110); Flaubert finding a business card at the Egyptian pyramid, that bears meaning for him. Braithwaite comments: "What a moment of perfectly targeted irony [...] Other visitors might have seen the business card as merely a piece of litter [...] but Flaubert gave it function" (ibid, p. 69);
  - As Braithwaite contemplates writing a Dictionary of Accepted Ideas about Flaubert himself, he imagines it to be "straight-faced yet misleading", which is highly postmodern (ibid, p. 87).
  - "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" (ibid, p. 88).
2. The parrot, which serves as a mere portal into the dissection of a writer's life, ultimately demonstrates that it was not the actual parrot after all, and moreover, that the real parrot cannot be identified. This is indicative of our limited capacity to know reality, with certain implications of constructivism. Furthermore, the parrot itself is an ironic motif, as Flaubert explicitly did not want to be touched. The narrator states: "I gazed at the bird, and to my surprise felt ardently in touch with this writer who disdainfully forbade posterity to take any personal interest in him" (*Flaubert's Parrot*, p. 16). Thus, the parrot also represents

an endeavour highly ironic in its purpose and meaning, as the narrator engages in precisely what the object of his exploration wished to avoid. This is notably similar to the exploration of Elizabeth Finch's life in the eponymous novel written some years later. Therefore, the parrot serves as a gateway to critiques and observations on the futility of the positivist method;

3. The exploration of an admired writer's life serves both as an homage and a deconstruction of his life and oeuvre, which embodies a distinctly postmodern approach;
4. The narrator is highly unreliable and subjective, while presenting an appearance of objectivity and factuality. Moreover, he acknowledges his meta-position by declaring his lack of professionalism and by suggesting that the reading audience must have certain expectations from him, communicating directly to them as if speaking to a camera. Geoffrey Braithwaite asks: "You expect something from me too, don't you? It's like that nowadays" (*Flaubert's Parrot*, p. 86). Eventually, he admits his own unreliability by stating, ironically: "As for the hesitating narrator - look, I'm afraid you've run into one right now. It might be because I'm English" (ibid, p. 89).
5. Simultaneously, the narrator is aware of the power in his hands, as he deliberately and consciously manipulates the narrative pace, postponing the mention of his wife until the end of his story;
6. "*Literature includes politics, and not vice versa*" (original italics, ibid, 129). Hutcheon would undoubtedly concur;
7. By examining the intersection of fiction and reality through a comparative analysis of Flaubert's *Un cœur simple* and Flaubert's personal life, as well as reflecting this principle in the narrator's life, one can identify ironic connections and attempts to establish causal relationships. Thus, the boundaries between fiction and reality are blurred, as they complement and challenge each other, ultimately leading to mutual irony. Notably, Flaubert, described as an "arch anti-bourgeois and virile hater of governments" (ibid, p. 68) and a "bourgeois bourgeoisophobe" (ibid, p. 154), accepted the title of *chevalier* of the *Legion d'honneur*. This acceptance is reflected in the final line of his work, where soldiers fire a volley over his coffin, symbolically bidding farewell to "one of its most improbable and sardonic chevaliers" (ibid, p. 68).);
8. Expanding upon the previous discussion, the boundaries between the writer, Gustave Flaubert, and the narrator, Geoffrey Braithwaite, are further obscured. For instance, the narrator undergoes a similar experience related to death as he contemplates what Flaubert's encounter with death might have been like. The complexity increases when the narrator is considered in relation to Julian Barnes, the author. The narrator's relationship with his subject, Flaubert, evolves: Flaubert transitions from being an idol and a profound influence on the narrator's life to being referred to as a "client";  
The novel adopts a form that integrates, or more precisely, "inscribes and then subverts" (in Hutcheon's terms) various literary genres, including narration, biography, metafiction, dictionary entries, lists, epistolary prose, diaristic prose, critique, and even the format of an examination paper;
9. "The writer must be universal in sympathy and an outcast by nature: only then can he see clearly. Flaubert always sides with minorities [...]" (ibid, 131);
10. Regarding the formal characteristics of genre, Flaubert demonstrated considerable foresight. As Braithwaite observes: "[...] Flaubert teaches you to gaze upon the truth and not blink from its consequences; [...] he teaches you to dissect out the constituent parts of reality, and to observe that Nature is always a mixture of genres" (ibid, pp. 133-134). Braithwaite further elaborates on this by incorporating the form of art into the discussion,

asserting that form is inseparable from the idea itself: “You can no more imagine an Idea without a Form than a Form without an Idea. Everything in art depends on execution” (ibid, p. 136);

11. Perspectivism, by presenting multiple, and even contradictory, versions of the same events, underscores the variability of interpretation and the subjective nature of reality; and all of these are imbued with masterful verbal irony, showcasing supreme wit, intelligence, and perceptiveness.

Irony has been a central concept in both Flaubert’s and Braithwaite’s lives. An entry in a biography from 1852 reflects one aspect of Flaubert’s approach to irony, which could be extended to describe the contemporary era:

“I laugh at everything, even at that which I love the most. There is no fact, thing, feeling, or person over which I have not blithely run my clownishness, like an iron roller imparting sheen to cloth” (*Flaubert’s Parrot*, p. 34).

Substituting “laugh” with “ironize” provides a fitting definition of a mode of living characterized by irony today, with the additional reference to the “iron roller” enhancing the pun, characteristic of Barnes’ style.

For those who might suspect that *Flaubert’s Parrot* lacks a voice or cannot defend itself, Barnes has addressed this concern by incorporating literary criticism into the narrative. The issue with literary criticism is that it fails to capture the intrinsic beauty of words. While it aids in understanding the text, offers new perspectives, and provides enlightening insights into intertextuality, it ultimately does not convey the inherent beauty of the language. The aesthetic qualities of the words remain embedded within the text itself.

Criticism entails the dissection of a work of art, providing a distinct form of pleasure that allows a critic to engage intimately with the art they admire, thus enhancing their sense of ownership, insofar as art can be possessed. The closest one can come to possessing the work is through its critical analysis.

This precise delight has served as the driving motivation for this dissertation. Although the process of reading and exploration might seem “arid and solitary” (as described in Flaubert’s final years, *Flaubert’s Parrot*, p. 31) to the casual observer, it is profoundly appreciated by the discerning reader. This dissertation represents the “private pleasure” (ibid, p. 36) derived from such engagement, offered here as my own “parrot on its perch” for public examination.

\*

This dissertation will undertake an examination of four novels and one collection of stories, selected for their particularly compelling use of irony - a characteristic that could be attributed to Julian Barnes’ complete body of work. The corpus for this study includes the following novels:

- *England, England*,
- *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*,
- *The Noise of Time*,
- *Elizabeth Finch*, and
- *Pulse*, a collection of stories.

This research is uniquely advantaged by Julian Barnes’ active status as an author, which continually revitalizes interest in his oeuvre through fresh publications. This ongoing activity not only

enriches the contemporary literary discourse but also allows for real-time commentary from Barnes himself - a privilege that enhances the depth of scholarly engagement. Throughout this study, I have extensively leveraged this unique opportunity, incorporating Barnes' current reflections and explanations to enrich the analysis of his work. This approach allows for a dynamic and up-to-date understanding of his literary contributions, providing insights that are as current as his latest publication.

## 2. *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* and its (Hi)storicity

“The poetry of history lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once, on this earth, once, on this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women, as actual as we are today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, one generation vanishing after another, gone as utterly as we ourselves shall shortly be gone like ghost at cock-crow. This is the most familiar and certain fact about life, but it is also the most poetical. [...] The motive of history is at bottom poetic.” (Trevelyan, qtd. in Rees, 3)

The novel published in 1989 bearing the ambitious title *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*<sup>6</sup> might aptly have been named “A History of the World with a Parenthesis” with the parenthetical element highlighting the author’s perspective on recounting history and his selection of subject incidents. Such a title immediately captures the reader’s curiosity, inviting an exploration of a global narrative from a distinctly postmodern vantage point. Guignery has observed that Barnes announced the blend of history and fiction in his title: precisely, “[...] right from the first paratext - the title – [the book] pretends to be both historical – *A History of the World* – and fictional (*in 10 ½ Chapters*)” (67). The innovative approach adopted in *A History* solidified Barnes’ reputation and garnered him “the second major critical and commercial success” following “Flaubert’s Parrot” (Guignery, *The Fiction of Julian Barnes*, 3). Rushdie wittily remarks that in this novel “Barnes is in his *Flaubert’s Parrot* mode, only more so” (241). Buxton observes that “Barnes’s fifth novel [*A History*] announces a shift from literary to global historiography and, it would appear, a move from biographical failure to historical success” (56). Buxton further interprets the chapters as Barnes’ theses, making a comparison to Walter Benjamin’s philosophical theses.

Despite the seemingly incoherent structure and timeline of the novel, and its fictional exploration of historical episodes, the author has invested significantly in factual exploration, as clarified in the Author’s Note; this fact that has been widely acknowledged by scholars and critics alike (see Guignery 62, Kotte 108).

How did he do it? And why? In the “Parenthesis” half-chapter, Barnes insightfully elucidates both the method and the motivation behind our engagement with history, articulating a compelling perspective:

“[W]e, the readers of history, the sufferers from history, we scan the pattern for hopeful conclusions, for the way ahead. And we cling to history as a series of salon pictures, conversation pieces whose participants we can easily reimagine back into life, when all the time it’s more like a multi-media collage, with paint applied by decorator’s roller rather than camel-hair brush.” (*A History*, 242)

This passage reveals several profound insights deeply instilled into the novel before us: first, we do suffer from history, which pain drives us to comprehend, assimilate, and claim ownership of it. We seek not just to comprehend but to find a pattern, meaning and a semblance of a grand design within its expanse. Furthermore, we turn to history in hopes of deciphering what the future might hold. The concept of diachrony in history implies that historical analysis can extend in both temporal directions: backward into the past and forward into the future. Finally, according to Barnes, the history appears to us as a multi-media amalgam, with less precision and sophistication than we tend to attribute to this complex mosaic of memories.

---

<sup>6</sup> Henceforth the novel shall be referred to as *A History*.

As mentioned in the chapter regarding *England, England* theme park (see subchapter 3.1. herein), Barnes is a very accommodating author; he often explains his method. In *A History* he claims: “*You keep a few true facts and spin a new story around them*” (original italics, 110). Such postmodern blend of factual history and fabulation is based on the following principles, that Barnes profusely employs: selective use of historical facts, innovation in narrative thus emphasizing interpretation, engagement with the counterfactual conditional and metafiction. Such engagement with history through narration and its subsequent interpretation, reconstruction, and deconstruction is what aligns him with postmodernism, even though he himself is hesitant to embrace such a label, declaring that he was “deliberately unaware of literary theory” (Freiburg, 37).

The discussion around the hybrid nature of Julian Barnes’ novel, as identified by many critics, including Guignery, who notes Barnes’ crossing of ontological (epistemological, I’d argue) boundaries between history and fiction, indeed highlights a quintessential postmodern literary technique. Official wisdom has it that history is inherently tied to narration. Barnes elaborates on their mutual relationship, as follows: “Either you only write the history for which there is evidence, or, if you try to write more than that, if you try to write a more complete history, then you have to fictionalise or imagine” (Guignery and Roberts, *Conversations with Julian Barnes*, 53). The “imperfect ‘historicality’” (White, 9) of the novel is not problematic as most of the critics agree on basic principles of connectedness of historiography and narrativity, as a metacode. Hayden White claims that “[h]istoriography is an especially good ground on which to consider the nature of narration and narrativity because it is here that our desire for the imaginary, the possible, must contest with the imperatives of the real, the actual” (8). Further, he argues that narration and narrativity function as crucial instruments within a discourse, mediating, arbitrating, or resolving the often-conflicting claims of the imaginary and the real.

Eventually, we can observe narrative aspect of historiography as a middle ground which reconciles history and philosophy, two disciplines that have been disparate from their inception, as “philosophy has not considered history a proper object of philosophical reflection” (Doran, 3).

In the Introduction to his book, *The English Novel in History 1950-1995*, Professor Connor discusses the connection between novel and history recognizing the value novels hold for historians. He claims that novels are valuable tools for historians because they offer detailed snapshots of life and events that history might overlook. They can feel as real as eyewitness accounts, giving historians vivid reenactments, specific details, and personal stories. This is important because novels can capture the complexity of the world in a way that’s both rich and straightforward, mixing real-life situations with elements of fantasy or imagination, thus helping to balance what is true with what we dream about. Novels also help connect personal experiences with larger societal themes, making big, abstract ideas more personal and understandable by showing how they affect individual lives. Moreover, he advocates a new perspective on (postwar) novels, an active one - “one that sees the novel not just as passively marked with the imprint of history, but also as one of the ways in which history is made, and remade” (Connor, 1). He points out that this doesn’t mean that history should be oversimplified as textuality, in terms of reductionism; rather: “the processes we associate with the making and substantiation of fictional worlds are to be seen at work within the making of the real, historical world” (Connor, 2). This view is pivotal in examination of Barnes’ discourse.

So, what is the nature of Barnes’ discourse?

Guignery’s observation that he failed to lend verisimilitude to the fictional world prompts a deeper inquiry into Barnes’ intentions (67). Was Barnes aiming to create an alternate version of history that mirrors reality closely? Or was his goal to provoke a re-evaluation and expansion of our perceptions

and understanding of history? For instance, José Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*<sup>7</sup> offers a humanized portrayal of Christ, not necessarily to engender re-examination of factual biography, but to invite reflection and a broader contemplation of historical and religious narratives.

The core of our engagement with reinterpretations hinges on how we, as readers and interpreters, handle them. The narrator in the "Parenthesis" half-chapter articulates a critical viewpoint: "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" (*A History*, pp. 245). Before this, he delves into the topic of love, proposing a principle that might encapsulate the essence of all our pursuits: "[Love's] our only hope even if it fails us, although it fails us, because it fails us" (*ibid*). The concept of 'love' herein could be interchangeably used with other concepts, including 'history'. This succinct statement, charged with irony (including tragic, comic, philosophical, practical, dramatic, verbal, rhetorical, and self-irony, as categorized by Reiss and Muecke), resonates profoundly with us. So, what's our recourse? Barnes suggests a path forward: "[...] while we know this, we must still believe that objective truth is obtainable [...] because if we don't, we're lost, we fall into beguiling relativity [...]" (*A History*, 245-246). Thus, we find ourselves in paradox: despite knowing that truth, love, history and the like are elusive, we must cling to the notion that they are obtainable to us, where belief itself becomes our salvation from this ironic and absurd predicament. It's uncertain if Barnes intended this, but ironic distance and faith emerge as our sole 'snorkel of sanity'<sup>8</sup> in these turbulent waters.

Approaching these narratives with irony allows us to achieve a cognitive and epistemological distance, affording a retrospective and alternative perspective on events. This process underscores the value of re-examining our viewpoints and the narratives we accept, as an act of a reader involvement.

Having recognized historical facts, historicity, objectivity, or belief in them ultimately elusive, it is unlikely that Barnes seeks to challenge the veracity thereof. The complete truth about the past remains beyond our grasp, leading to the inevitable question of how we navigate the uncertainty of knowledge. By selecting specific facts, reimagining them, and embracing the resultant irony, Barnes illustrates a method of engaging with history that acknowledges its complexities and uncertainties. This approach does not undermine the importance of historical facts but highlights the interpretive nature of historical understanding and the creative possibilities inherent in exploring the spaces between known facts.

In her book *The Contemporary British Historical Novel* Boccardi attributes the increased production of historical novels in the latter half of the twentieth century and the initial decade of the twenty-first to "millennial conditions which initially invited a reflection on the past" (1). Connor also identifies the post-Cold War era as a pivotal time when the world began to acknowledge the possibility of its own demise, result of which is that "one form of the novel of history is concerned with

---

<sup>7</sup> The novel, released in 1991, offers a fresh and humanized, yet ironic, interpretation of the life of Jesus Christ, sparking widespread reaction and critique. This unconventional biography was criticized by the Roman Catholic Church, leading to pressure on the Portuguese government to prevent the book from being considered for a literary award in 1992. Saramago, viewing this as censorship, chose to spend the rest of his life in self-imposed exile (Saramago). This incident highlights how engaging with historiography can still significantly impact the lives of authors and remains a relevant issue nowadays.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase, a direct reference to *Flaubert's Parrot*, gained further recognition and popularity through Linda Hutcheon's reference in *Irony's Edge*.

investigating the new relations to the past required by the dramatic changes of the late twentieth century” (199).

At the outset of her analysis, Boccardi recognizes the imaginative leap required to transition from fragmented evidence to a cohesive representation of the period or events that constitute the narrative’s setting and subject. This process underscores the creative endeavour inherent in the historical novel genre, where authors must bridge the gaps in historical record with their narrative construction. Simultaneously, and perhaps ironically, the temporal distance between the past events depicted and the present moment of their inscription endows the author with a position of “privileged knowledge” (Boccardi, 6). This arises from the author’s awareness of the eventual outcomes of historical events and their subsequent impacts, which have unfolded by the writer’s present time. Such a vantage point allows the author to infuse the narrative with insights and interpretations that are unavailable to the characters within the story or to contemporaries of the historical period being portrayed.

This dual aspect of historical novel writing - combining imaginative reconstruction with the advantage of hindsight - highlights the complex interplay between past and present in the genre. It allows authors to explore historical events not just for their intrinsic interest, but also for their implications and resonances with contemporary issues, thereby enriching the narrative with layers of meaning that extend beyond the mere recounting of historical facts.

Incorporating postmodernism into her analysis, Boccardi further posits that:

“[T]he historical novel [is] inherently metafictional and as such not only ideally receptive to postmodernism’s positions on narrative, representation, and knowledge but also supremely equipped to probe their validity. Indeed, it is my contention that the historical novel is, at once, the genre where postmodernism manifests itself most clearly and that where it proves theoretically inadequate.” (6)

This assertion underscores the intrinsic nature of the historical novel as a site of metafictional exploration, making it a fertile ground for engaging with postmodernist critiques of narrative techniques, the nature of representation, and the epistemology of historical knowledge. Hayden White solidifies this stating that: “Narrative becomes a problem only when we wish to give to real events the form of story. It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult” (8). Kotte claims that “patterns and plots are never found, but always imposed upon history” (128). It’s within this intricate tension between the fluidity of history and ironical storytelling that *A History* finds its rich potential.

### **2.1. *You Keep a Few Chapters and Spin a Novel around them* – is it a Novel at all?**

The novel’s form has sparked debate regarding its literary genre, with opinions varying and no consensus reached. This ambiguity might well be the author’s deliberate choice, aiming to create a “sort-of novel” (Cook, 20) that provokes thought without allowing it to be easily categorized or dismissed as a novel.

Seemingly not connected chapters do form a novel “thanks to the recurrence of motifs, sea voyages, catastrophes, woodworms, analogies between characters, echoes, plot links, verbal repetitions and thematic coherence” (Guignery, *The Fiction of Julian Barnes*, 63). Kotte goes a step further, methodically cataloguing the novel’s recurring motifs, which will be explored in the subsequent subchapter in terms of intertextuality.

The chronological organization of events in *A History* is indeed disparate, reflecting a non-linear approach to historical narrative. Barnes utilizes the wisdom of hindsight as discussed in previous

subchapter. If one were to represent this non-chronological narrative structure on a graphic chart, it would manifest as a zig-zag timeline, thus making the novel a kind of zig-zag through history. This is not to be confused with Hayden White's concept of "flow", a wavelike motion of historical time (25). It reflects the postmodern temporal distortion, i.e. scepticism towards grand narratives and linear histories, emphasizing the idea of history as a construct thus inviting and enabling author and reader to draw connections between disparate events.

*A History* unfolds over ten and a half chapters, each marked by its distinct narrative voice, form, and genre. These chapters feature a variety of themes that disrupt the narrative continuum - a fundamental characteristic traditionally associated with novels. This unconventional structure raises the question: what categorizes this work as a novel? Julian Barnes directly responds to this question, stating that it was conceived and executed as a whole, though "not as one-idea book" (Cook, 21). He goes on: "Things in it thicken and deepen. [...] there are recurrent voyages in it. Woodworms reappear. And, there are recurrent patterns of human aspirations and failings" (ibid). Yet, from an academic standpoint, to avoid merely accepting his designation without scrutiny, one must identify what distinguishes this work as a novel rather than a mere collection of stories.

The coherence of the novel emerges through its echoes or instances of self-referentialities (be it chapters of this novel or other works of Barnes, both previous and later), recurring motifs, and symbols that interlink the chapters into a cohesive narrative entity.

Moreover, the inclusion of 'history' in the title invites readers to reconsider their expectations of what constitutes a historical narrative within a novelistic framework. It suggests that this work is not a straightforward novelization of world history but rather represents "a history among many possible histories of the world" (Finney). The 'history' we are invited to testify is presented as divided into smaller "chunks" of (hi)story, much like the paintings on the wall Barnes referred to: however, they are intertwined by the themes, characters and motifs. This notion implies a multiplicity of narratives and interpretations, further reinforcing the work's status as a novel by challenging and expanding the boundaries of the genre through its thematic complexity and narrative structure. Barnes does exactly that: he acknowledges pushing the novelistic boundaries and conventions "to the point at which you hope the chewing gum doesn't snap" (Stuart), highlighting his "radical use of genre" (Robinson, 159). Barnes' investigation and experimentation with the boundaries, reflects the innate investigation of this genre Connor refers to when he claims: "The novel of history [...] is in part the investigation of its own possibility, the possibility of conferring sequence, direction and narratability upon the past and on the present in relation to that past" (Connor, 199).

Finney draws a parallel between Barnes and Sir Walter Raleigh's *The History of the World*, both in the title and in the fact that "[i]nterestingly both writers see history as necessarily fragmented" (Finney). He goes on, stating that "[c]learly in this book, as in 'Flaubert's Parrot' (1984), Barnes is adopting an ironic approach to history as a genre" (Finney).

Finally, concerning the structural integrity of the novel, Kotte observes that "the ten chapters are thematically linked to the first" (111). For greater accuracy, I propose that all following chapters actually originate from the first, each unfolding its themes and motifs in varied manifestations. The initial chapter is pivotal to the novel, providing the structural, logical, and cohesive foundation. Remove this chapter, and the novel effectively disappears.

In terms of thematic cohesion, this novel does form a thematic arc as "the book charts a journey from Genesis to salvation" (Buxton, 57). Additionally, Candel speaks of "history-love-religion triad" as the overarching theme of the novel (28). This assertion will be elucidated in the subsequent chapter.

## 2.2. Intertextuality, Echoes and Irony across Chapters

“[...] one reading turns into a wanderer. And in that haze that transforms space and time, myths are born, and characters travel from text to text, settling in our memory as if they had always existed in the memory of our fathers, young like Methuselah and centenarians like Peter Pan, so that we often feel we stumble upon them even where they have not been told, even - at least children have that gift - in life.” (Eco, 102, translated by the author of this dissertation)

Eco's anagraphic and anthropomorphic definition of the text and its relationality emphasizes the notion of texts as inherently “contaminated” by other texts, suggesting that no text exists in isolation but is rather a mosaic of references, styles, and influences from previous works. This concept emphasizes how postmodernism challenges the conventional divisions between reality and fiction, suggesting that through their intertextual nature, texts blur these distinctions and adopt a mythical quality.

I have based my intertextuality research on the findings of Graham Allen, who observes intertextuality as unquestionable authority and a term which “continually refers to the impossibility of singularity and unity” (Allen, 209). Literature is constructed upon the frameworks, codes, and traditions of previous works, according to modern theorists. In this view, texts do not possess inherent meanings but are interpreted through the lens of intertextual relationships they share with earlier literature. “Texts [...] are viewed by modern theorists as lacking in any kind of independent meaning. The text becomes the intertext” (Allen, 1).

Allen's commentary on Eco's work highlights Eco's insight that in texts oriented towards historical themes, the core challenge lies in their intertextual nature. This complexity leads to what Eco describes as a “loss of innocence”, implying that the engagement with and reference to pre-existing texts introduce a layer of complexity and self-awareness that fundamentally alters the nature of historical narrative. Therefore, “[t]he Postmodern cultural climate [...] requires that we distance or ironize our representations and utterances if they are to be taken seriously” (Allen, 194).

This is substantiated by Eco's argument that the past is an inescapable aspect of narrative construction, yet it can only be revisited and depicted through lenses that are inherently non-innocent, employing irony or parody (see Allen, 195). In the context of historical fiction, the author navigates a complex intertextual landscape, where the past has been repeatedly explored through various narratives. This saturation of historical discourse necessitates a nuanced approach to storytelling. When authors attempt to represent historical events or dialogues, they must do so with an awareness of the pre-existing body of work. This often leads to a deliberate distancing, where the narrative acknowledges its own constructedness, thereby introducing a layer of irony. This strategy not only challenges the authenticity of the historical representation but also reflects on the act of writing about history itself, creating a space where the narrative both engages with and critiques its historical foundations.

The novel begins with the inception of the world, choosing the story of Noah's Ark as the starting point for the historical narrative, as determined by the author. This is in direct correspondence with Pekić (see *Novi Jerusalem*, 1988), who supports the same idea when writing about genetic memory of a species: he explains that the genetic memory of species holds traces of nature's ferocities - earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, droughts, plagues, and floods that have devastated populations. Thus, the “true history of each nation does not start from its creation but always from the first mythical flood that destroyed it” (Pekić, 169). The similarities between the two authors do not stop here: Pekić goes further in explaining that in the face of environmental threats, microfauna sought refuge

underground, with only the most elusive and hardy species re-emerging; these are: “chameleons, magicians of mimicry, and fleas, companions of eternity” (ibid). The woodworm would definitely fall into these categories, axiomatically embodying adaptability and resilience as survival modes.

This tale is conveyed from a first-person singular perspective, deeply resonant with postmodern voices that prioritize the marginalized, obscured, and minority figures. Specifically, it is a woodworm and stowaway that narrates the construction of the Ark, its voyage, and survival, thereby offering a more intimate narrative standpoint that engages and persuades the reader. In alignment with the narrator’s identity, the story naturally adopts a subversive tone. Moreover, and adversely to the expected, it ironically embraces a more humane tone. This is achieved at the outset by attributing the following words to the narrator: “[...] I was specifically not chosen [...] When I recall the Voyage, I feel no sense of obligation [...] My account you can trust” (*A History*, 4). The narrator’s claim to trustworthiness, based on the assertion of not being chosen, presents a striking irony. This stance, paradoxically, uses a lack of entitlement as a foundation for reliability.

Through this lens, the conventional narrative, as we know it, is thoroughly subverted: precipitation of the Deluge endured not for forty days but for a year and a half; Noah is depicted not as a venerable patriarch but as a mere drunkard and coward, overwhelmed by fear of the Old Testament God; even Darwin’s theory of natural selection is reinterpreted as mere “professional incompetence” (*A History*, 7), for it was not the fittest who survived, but rather the most cunning. A woodworm “decodes the euphemisms” (*A History*, 17) we’ve learnt throughout the history, underscoring that our species is “hopelessly dogmatic” due to the fact that we all have Noah’s genes (*A History*, 25).

From the outset, the novel employs a principle of division that permeates its entirety. The animals were divided between two classes - the clean and the unclean. Yet, this distinction of cleanliness is imbued with irony, for to be deemed clean also meant to be considered edible. This is echoed in the chapter about the Jews on *St Louis* liner, only to announce the more ominous historical predicament in the first half of the twentieth century.

In the story of legal proceedings wherein inhabitants file the lawsuit against the woodworms, the whole proceedings and the outcome is ironical. We can draw upon the insights of the author himself, referencing his commentary on the narrative detail where woodworms are put on trial for damaging Bishop’s chair. This, he suggests, indicates that animals held a higher status in the Middle Ages compared to today; it was a way of “putting [them] into the order of God’s creation, it was giving [them] a conscience, whereas now the horizon has lowered” (Freiburg, 42). Thus, the act of putting them on trial serves as an ironic form of respect towards them.

In the Chapter Six through eyes of Miss Fergusson, we observe the dualistic or dichotomic essence of art, religion. She discusses the Medusa painting with her father, who claims that the moving pictures are better, as they provide better experience. Contrarily, she opines that the moving pictures and the painting do not match in (e)motion: she finds the painting, even though immovable, finite and depicting only a moment, more touching, while the moving pictures (the predecessor of a movie) is of no effect for her.

This contrast is echoed in the experience of two women viewing the same spectacle at the peak of Great Ararat: Miss Fergusson observes the clouds encircling the peak, interpreting this as a sort of halo, and thus sacred, reflective of the mountain’s sanctity. Conversely, her companion, Miss Logan, perceives this phenomenon merely as magical. Miss Fergusson then elaborates: “There always appear to be two explanations of everything. That is why we have been given free will, in order that we may choose the correct one” (*A History*, 154). Her father also believed, even though he believed in nothing. To her, faith is immanent to people, whether you declare yourself as a believer or not. It is open to

discussion whether Miss Fergusson was a victim of her faith, as shall be discussed in subsequent chapter.

In his critique of *A History*, Rushdie observes the connection between the chapters six and nine: in the former Miss Amanda Fergusson, a fervent believer, meets her end on Mount Ararat in the year 1839, driven by her religious convictions. Moving forward to the ninth chapter and the twentieth century, the narrative introduces an astronaut who, convinced of having received a divine message during a lunar mission, ventures to Mount Ararat with the aim of uncovering Noah's Ark. Having stumbled upon the remains of Amanda Fergusson, he mistakenly identifies them as those of Noah. Further, Rushdie critiques the cogency of these two stories, arguing: "You get the point, but not the message" (Rushdie, 242).

This reflection initiated a discourse that I summarized as follows: Miss Fergusson arguably encountered her Ark within the cave where her life ended, leaving us to conjecture about her final moments - whether she passed away content, feeling she had achieved her life's quest. This contemplation equally applies to the astronaut, her counterpart in spiritual fervour. Furthermore, this prompts us to consider the true aim of a religious endeavour: Is it the attainment of a specific outcome or the significance found in the journey itself? Eventually, Miss Fergusson did make a part of history, *post mortem*, having been found and mistaken for Noah's remains. Revisiting Rushdie's observation reveals that the point of chapter six intentionally left open was to find its closure in chapter nine. Yet, regarding the message, the narrative delves deeper, suggesting that people we encounter, whether alive or dead, carry with them distinct histories and messages for the future. For the astronaut, her unmistakable message was a call to perseverance: "Don't give up."

Intertextuality is prominently displayed through the rephrasing of another text. In Chapter Seven, Barnes echoes the epitaph of John Gay, written just below the poet's portrait bust at Westminster Abbey; Barnes substituted the original word 'jest' with 'cheat', to say: "Life's a cheat and all thing show it, I thought so once and now I know it" (*A History*, pp. 173-174).

Intertextuality in art refers to how artworks engage with, reference, or communicate with other artistic works, as well as authors and philosophers. In *A History*, Mr Beesley, a survivor of the Titanic, finds himself reliving his experience, this time on a movie set as an extra, echoing the tragedies of the Deluge and the raft of the Medusa. The protagonist sees this as an embodiment of Marx's interpretation of Hegel: history repeating itself, first as tragedy and then as farce.<sup>9</sup> By directly experiencing this principle, Mr Beesley not only reflects on the famous maxim but also embodies it in his own life. Additionally, much like Mr Beesley revisits his memories, Barnes also draws upon and references his own experiences. He confirmed that this short story was based on reality, as he had personally met Mr Beesley (see Guignery and Roberts, *Conversations with Julian Barnes*, 56).

In essence, Barnes' novel serves as a profound reference to the Bible. The initial chapter deconstructs the biblical tale of the flood and Noah's survival, setting the tone for subsequent stories which frequently echo and reinforce motifs such as the flood, woodworm, voyages, divisions, messengers, and the ark. Each subsequent story acts as an echo, or more precisely, an echo of an echo, reflecting the primal myth in a secondary, thus ironic, manner. Indeed, the titles of the chapters reflect a pilgrimage, an odyssey that mirrors the journey of every individual. From "The Stowaway", through

---

<sup>9</sup> Marx's famous maxim builds upon Hegel's statement, with Marx not providing a specific attribution to Hegel's words but offering a general acknowledgment of the idea. He further expands upon this concept as follows: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce" (Marx, opening lines of Chapter I).

“The Wars of Religion”, “The Survivor”, “The Shipwreck” and “Upstream” to “The Dream”, each title represents a significant episode in the human experience, as each of these chapters’ title is an episode in the life in each of us.

Within the broader exploration of the human condition, themes of God and religion manifest both overtly and subtly throughout the narrative. These themes are sometimes explicitly addressed through direct references and discussions about faith. Additionally, they are subtly woven into the background scenes and motifs, such as the indigenous tribe’s experience of faith and religion, or human’s formal and superficial relationship with God as depicted in the court proceedings against the woodworms. This multifaceted approach to exploring the spiritual dimensions of human existence adds depth and complexity to the novel’s thematic tapestry. I would argue that the depiction of God undergoes an evolution throughout the narrative, transitioning from the authoritarian figure associated with the Old Testament to a more democratic and humane representation, as evident in the final chapter on Heaven. In simpler terms, the narrative suggests a shift from a wrathful and intimidating God, whom people strive not to anger, towards a more indifferent figure, who, if we’re willing to undergo earthly life’s trials, might just confirm that we’ve done alright.

In the half-chapter titles “Parenthesis”, Barnes delves into the concept of love, intertwining it with reflections on the history of the world and other themes. Here, he directly invokes intertextuality, offering a poetic portrayal of its essence:

“The history of the world? Just voices echoing in the dark, images that burn for a few centuries and then fade; stories, old stories that sometimes seem to overlap; strange links, impertinent connections.” (*A History*, 240)

### **2.3. The Role of Irony in Thematic Development**

The subject thematic development and use of irony shall focus on the following subjects: analysis of how irony is employed to critique historical narratives and human nature, the interaction between irony, division, and thematic exploration in the novel, irony and self-reflexivity in Barnes’ narrative, detailed examination of the use of irony and subversion of realistic strategies.

In Barnes’ postmodernist reimagining and reinterpretation of the past, the use of irony has been one of focal point of critical discussion. A.S. Byatt articulates this aspect with precision, noting that Barnes “both resorts to and subverts realistic strategies; his writing is essentially self-reflexive; and he celebrates the literary past but also considers it with irony” (qtd. in Guignery, *The Fiction of Julian Barnes*, 1).

The aforementioned subjects shall be presented in the following analysis of the chapters.

The book’s opening chapter (*The Stowaway*) reveals the Judeo-Christian narrative of Noah’s Ark told through the eyes of a woodworm, a stowaway on the Ark.

Right from the beginning, the narrator distinguishes himself as “specifically not chosen” compared to other species (*A History*, 4), thereby casting himself as an outsider but, from a postmodern perspective, as a preferred voice, speaking from the margin.

He references Varadi, Noah’s favoured but ultimately lost son, who is depicted “strutting the quarterdeck with a parrot on each shoulder” (*A History*, 6), thereby openly resonating with *Flaubert’s Parrot*. The suggestion is that, had Varadi survived the Deluge, our species would have been significantly improved by his genetic contribution.

The narrator is “decoding euphemisms” (17) from history: The serpent was just Adam’s black propaganda (6), it could not have rained for 40 days, but for about a year and a half, while the waters were upon the earth for up to about four years (4). The selection process for species boarding the Ark resembled a beauty contest or a massive wedding, focusing on appearance and presentation rather than the principle of survival of the fittest (6-7). Noah is portrayed as a man who revered God, above all; considering God’s depicted nature, “that was probably the safest line to take” (*A History*, 11).<sup>10</sup>

The irony reaches its peak when the woodworm narrator suggests that humans are an “unevolved species compared to the animals” (*A History*, 28). This claim ties the stages of evolution to the concept of authenticity, one of central themes in Barnes’ entire body of work. Comparing men to animals, the woodworm says: “We, for instance, are always ourselves: that is what it means to be evolved” (ibid). This resonates with the “disavowal of anthropocentrism” (Erdal, 69), another distinctive characteristic of the novel, underscored in this chapter. The narrative perspective of the woodworm challenges the conventional human-centered view of history by positioning humans as merely one among many protagonists in the vast tableau of existence. This repositioning is further emphasized by the woodworm narrator’s ironic assertion that “man is a very unevolved species compared to the animals” (*A History*, 28). The criterion for evolutionary advancement, according to the narrator, hinges on the principle of authenticity - the simple capacity to always be oneself - whereby humans allegedly score low on the scale thereof.

The narrator also delves into another pivotal theme, the one of memory and human engagement with it, adopting a critical perspective. Addressing humanity directly, as though speaking into a camera, he says: “You keep forgetting things, or you pretend to. [...] [I]gnoring the bad things makes you end up believing the bad things never happen” (*A History*, 29). He directly refers to the manipulation with memory, and history in the last instance, typical for mankind. In manipulating the memories, we blame someone else, as that is our first instinct. “And if you can’t blame someone else, then start claiming the problem isn’t a problem anyway. Rewrite the rules, shift the goalposts” (*A History*, 29). This raises the question: Isn’t this process emblematic of how history is frequently constructed? Or, to put it more straightforwardly, is history essentially about moving the goalposts to make our memories and historical narratives fit into our worldview?

Chapter Two, titled *The Visitors* portrays the hijacking of a pleasure boat by contemporary Arab terrorists. The use of the euphemism ‘the visitors’ to refer to the terrorists in the Chapter’s title signifies a shift from the literal meaning and reflects a change in the perception of crisis and life onboard the ship. This shift in perception underscores the ship’s role as a heterotopia, a concept elaborated in subchapter 3.2. of this dissertation.

Regarding authenticity, the identity of Franklin Hughes, the story’s protagonist, remains elusive: his exact area of expertise is unclear to everyone, for “he roved freely in the worlds of archaeology, history and comparative culture” (*A History*, 34). Similarly, his emotional status is ambiguous, as he maintains only superficial relationships with the women who accompany him on the cruise. He also flirts with nationality, both his (Irish) and that of his “wife”. The passengers are divided based on nationality, or “genealogical fluke” (*A History*, 49), echoing division and separation from Chapter One. Similar to how species were selected for the Ark based on their presentation abilities, the passengers are now segregated for execution, where “[t]he order of execution has been decided

---

<sup>10</sup> It is important to mention that the God referred to in this chapter is the Old Testament God, characterized as vengeful, stringent, and intimidating. The depiction of God in the New Testament shifts significantly towards positioning man as God’s collaborator, based on his free will. Barnes refers to the former in Chapter Seven, stating: “[...] in most of the Old Testament, there’s a crippling lack of free will around. [...] God holds all the cards and wins all the tricks” (*A History*, 176).

according to the guilt of the Western nations for the situation in the Middle East” (*A History*, 57). Hughes resorts to using irony as a literal means of self-preservation, hoping that the passengers will discern what is lacking in his lecture and thus get the irony of the situation. Yet, he abandons this approach upon realizing the absence of a shared understanding among the passengers. This corresponds directly to Hutcheon’s views on irony, where it fails to function because, although it involves the crucial ironic element of implying something is missing, it falls short without the listeners’ comprehension and agreement (see Hutcheon in Introduction herein).

Barnes elevates the irony of history to a new level when he discusses “European guilt over the Holocaust being paid by the Arabs. The Jews having learned from their persecution by the Nazis that the only way to survive was to be like Nazis. Their militarism, expansionism, racism” (*A History*, 55). Thus, he is suggesting an ironic reversal of roles influenced by past trauma, as we witness how historical injustices inform current actions. Furthermore, Barnes provocatively suggests that the Jews, as victims of persecution, have ironically internalized the tactics of their oppressors in order to ensure their survival. This notion challenges conventional narratives of victimhood and resilience, raising questions about the ethical implications of adopting oppressive strategies in response to oppression.

Chapter three (*The Wars of Religion*) details sixteenth-century court proceedings from the diocese of Besançon, France. In the context of this chapter, Barnes’ brief experience in the legal field, from his earlier career pursuits, proves to be beneficial.

The *procureur pour les insects* is the distinguished jurist Bartholomé Chassenée who had previously defended rats accused of feloniously consuming and recklessly destroying the barley crop.<sup>11</sup> The *plaidoyers* and *répliques* of the proceedings and reasoning are imbued with irony, as the woodworms stand trial for causing damage to the leg of the Bishop’s throne and the church’s roof. The woodworms are ordered, “under pain of malediction, anathema and excommunication” (*A History*, 79), to quit the church in matter and relocate to the pasture provided by the *habitants* of the village, never to infest the church again.

The peak of irony is reached when the parchment containing the final judgment is itself consumed by the same termites that damaged the wooden structures. This twist, concluding Chapter Three, could be seen as an irony of fate, circular irony, or self-referential irony.

Julian Barnes noted in an interview that, contrary to contemporary prevailing *doxa* about the Middle Ages, animals were treated more humanely in the Middle Ages than they are today (see Freiburg, pp. 41-42). Thus, his use of anthropomorphism should come as no surprise. Barnes’ portrayal of woodworms, treating them on par with humans and even reproaching them for their failure to attend court or receive summonses, is drawn from real life, then twisted, infused with irony, and brought to life within his narrative. The absurdity of the situation lends itself to various forms of irony, such as comic irony, situational irony, dramatic irony, and cosmic irony. In this context, the woodworms could be viewed as *ingénus*, subject to ingénu irony, as they remain entirely unaware of the irony surrounding them.

The fourth chapter (*The Survivor*) unfolds a possibly delusional voyage of an Australian woman fleeing across the sea from a nuclear-devastated West in her Noah’s Ark, accompanied by two cats.

---

<sup>11</sup> The ‘barley crop’ legal proceeding was recorded and discussed in *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals*, 1906, by E. P. Evans, Chapter One titled “Bugs and beasts before the law” ([gutenberg.org/files/43286/43286-h/43286-h.htm](http://gutenberg.org/files/43286/43286-h/43286-h.htm)). The wording of the opening paragraph of *A History*’s Chapter Three suggests that Barnes was familiar with this particular source.

In this chapter, Barnes navigates the borders between reality, illusion and dream, adopting a subtly futuristic tone where the impossible becomes plausible, so reindeer can fly. Connor discusses this story in terms of “confrontation between two competing stories” (232). These two stories are both juxtaposed and intertwined. In the other version, Kath never makes it to any island but is found circling adrift in her boat, on the brink of death. She is taken to a psychiatric hospital, where she understands that a nuclear war has actually been narrowly avoided.

Kath has been discussed in terms of unreliable narrator; to that effect the findings of Ansgar Nünning are particularly useful. Contrary to the *communis opinio doctorum* that an unreliable narrator should be defined in relation to postulated implied author, or is dependent “solely or even primarily on the critic’s intuition”, Nünning argues that the “structure of unreliable narration can be explained in terms of dramatic irony or discrepant awareness” (87). The irony he refers to is reflected in “textual inconsistencies, the verbal habits of the narrator, and discrepancies between the fictional world presented by a text and the reader’s world-knowledge and standards of normality” (85).

Unreliable narration through the lens of dramatic irony appears where there is a gap between the narrator’s perception of events and the reality that the reader discerns. This discrepancy invites readers to engage with the narrative on two levels: taking the narrator’s account at face value and interpreting the underlying truths based on contextual cues. Thus, “[t]he reader interprets what the narrator and/or the text says in two quite different contexts” (Nünning, 87).

Further, Nünning suggests a nuanced view on the concept of unreliable narrators, highlighting the characters in novels such as Julian Barnes’ *Talking It Over* (1991), Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and others, might not be considered unreliable in a traditional sense. Although these narrators may not provide an objective account of events, they authentically represent their personal illusions and self-deceptions, offering a different dimension of reliability related to their introspective truths. Nünning posits that the surge of unreliable narrators has notably increased since the late eighteenth century, suggesting a significant link between this narrative technique’s evolution and the shifting perceptions of subjectivity (see Nünning, 95).

How to identify an unreliable narrator and “not depend solely or even primarily on the reader’s intuition or ability of ‘reading between the lines’”? (Nünning, 95). Nünning offers several clues: spotting internal inconsistencies, noting the narrator’s unique speech patterns, observing discrepancies between the text’s world and real-world knowledge, contrasting story elements with discourse, and recognizing narrative tactics aimed at manipulating reader perception, such as “speaker-oriented and addressee-oriented expressions”<sup>12</sup>, along with stories told from multiple perspectives that question narrator’s reliability (97). Clearly, the shift in reality planes is mirrored by a shift in narrative perspective, from third-person to first-person in this chapter. The protagonist’s intention to flee disaster by returning to the sea reflects the notion that “[w]e all crawled out of the sea once, didn’t we?” (*A History*, 94). This echoes God’s decision to wipe the slate clean depicted in Chapter One. In her escape from the island, she feels no sadness, much like Noah did not feel nostalgic about departing from the old world. She envisions herself in the role of Columbus, reciting the rhyme about his voyage. Furthermore, she intends to revive the old ways of doing things, believing that “the future

---

<sup>12</sup> Nünning highlights how in Julian Barnes’ *Talking It Over* the narrators exhibit traits of compulsive monologuing and egotism, while the protagonist-narrator in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* attempts to justify his actions and beliefs by addressing the reader directly. Such characters’ behaviour serves as a clue to their unreliability, offering insight into their psyche and motivations, and showcasing different narrative techniques to signal to the reader the presence of the unreliable narrators.

lay in the past” (*A History*, 96). This concept mirrors the sentiment found in “Anglia” the concluding chapter of the novel *England, England* (see subchapter 3.1.3. herein) suggesting a cyclical return to traditional values and methods. Kath reflects: “Start making things simple again. Begin at the beginning. People said that you couldn’t turn the clock back, but you could” (*A History*, 104).

The protagonist’s status as an unreliable narrator is underscored by the fact that those around her fail to recognize that they are witnessing the end of the history of the world. This situation lends itself to a sense of cosmic irony, particularly highlighted by her observation that God appears to be merely an observer of events rather than an active participant in their unfolding.

In her endeavour, Kath seems to be undergoing a profound existential crisis, feeling isolated in her perception of apocalyptic change. Her scepticism towards God shifts slightly as “[s]he did not believe in God, but now she was tempted” (*A History*, 103). She contemplates the possibility of a God, not as a participant in worldly events, but as a detached observer. This shift underscores a moment of vulnerability and a grappling with the need for meaning in the face of perceived cataclysmic change.

Ultimately, she attributed her escape to her fear of death, as her mind, predisposed to seek explanations and closures, resorted to fabrication. What her mind accomplished was to “keep a few true facts and spin a new story around them” (*A History*, 111). This strategy, emblematic of a postmodernist approach, suggests an innovative reworking of historical events, where factual accuracy is intertwined with creative interpretation, allowing for a multiplicity of perspectives and narratives. This reflects a broader postmodernist tendency to question objective truth and highlight the subjective nature of history and narration.

Connor recognizes that in this story Barnes does not simplify the complex temporalities of survival in order to achieve its continuation into a linear historical narrative. While readers are entitled to interpret the story taking a step back from the survival mode, entailing psychological or pathological lenses, and make sense out of the story, Connor finds it a “weakness of Barnes’s story that it gives us so much warrant to read it as a particular kind of psychopathological exception or instance” (Connor, 235). The narrative’s deliberate avoidance of clear perspectives places the reader within a hermeneutic circle, echoing the paradox of Epimenides (in this case the paradoxical statement would be “I am not crazy”, claimed by the woman in a psychiatric wards). Be that as it may, the narrative intentionally refrains from providing explicit explanations, leaving the reader in a state of interpretive ambiguity.

The narrative culminates with a touch of optimism, paralleling the ending of “Anglia”, where the arrival of new kittens signifies the continuation and renewal of life. This moment symbolizes hope and the cyclical nature of existence, suggesting new beginnings and the resilience of life, much like the inauguration of a new Fête in “Anglia” heralds upcoming life phases.

This chapter can be examined through the lens of hysterical realism, particularly in relation to James Wood’s definition of the genre, and Zadie Smith’s response to Wood’s commentary of her novel *White Teeth*; she acknowledged the term as “a painfully accurate term for the sort of overblown, manic prose” (Staiger, 638). Wood’s characterization of hysterical realism includes traits such as “zany overexcitement, a fear of silence and of stillness, a tendency toward self-conscious riffs, easy ironies, puerility” (Staiger, 641). The elements pertaining to the genre, as described by Wood, align with the characteristics of the narrative mode, tone, and atmosphere depicted in this chapter. While the term “hysterical realism” may initially suggest an exaggerated and manic narrative style, the “realism” aspect should be understood in a subversive manner. Wood clarifies that hysterical realism doesn’t present events that could never occur, as seen in thrillers, but rather depicts genuine individuals

grappling with experiences they could hardly endure. These narratives challenge the boundaries of believability rather than defying the laws of physics, as often found in magical realism (see Wood).

In the realm of hysterical realism, Kath's narrative can be interpreted as a hysterical and possibly manic or delusional portrayal of reality. It oscillates between moments of child-like innocence, as evidenced by her recitation of Columbus rhymes, and instances of self-imposed delusions of omniscience, where she believes herself to be the only one capable of recognizing imminent danger. Ironically, her attempt to overcome this "overexcitement" ultimately falls short.

The fifth chapter (*The Shipwreck*) is split into two parts: one narrating the story of the raft of Medusa, that followed the shipwreck of the French frigate in 1816, and another examining the process of painting "The Raft of the Medusa" by Géricault three years later.

The narrative establishes a connection between the ordeal on the raft and the biblical Noah's Ark; beside the obvious echo of the ark, it reiterates the thematic motif of division, with the sick separated from the healthy. As the raft's dire circumstances lead to cannibalism, it still echoes the Ark's tale of survival. A white butterfly, symbolizing hope and salvation, serves as an equivalent to Noah's dove, reinforcing hope and salvation.

The echoes within the narrative serve as essential elements, imbuing the storytelling with layers of meaning. Barnes adopts a direct approach to storytelling, evident from the outset: "The voyage of the frigate had begun with a portent, and it ended with an echo" (*A History*, 123), the ominous signal being the incident where a young boy fell from the ship, leading to the launch of a raft for his salvation. The motif of a raft recurs, with the most robust survivors on the frigate constructing a second raft to attempt landfall. A further repetition of this theme occurs when a sailor who stayed on the frigate after the second raft's departure made his own attempt to reach the shore using a makeshift raft - a chicken coop - but likewise did not succeed. Thus, history unfolded in three recurring cycles, with the initial two iterations embodying tragedy and the final one descending into farce, exemplified by the chicken coop sinking into the sea.

The second part of the chapter centers on the painting depicting the disaster, included in the book as a paratext to aid the reader's understanding. Barnes delves into the painting, interpreting its creation and existence as an echo of the actual event, and as a representation of the core of art. Intriguingly, Barnes enumerates the moments in the story that Géricault could have painted but chose not to, leaving them only as sketches. This represents an unconventional approach to understanding art, particularly painting, and shall be discussed in the subchapter 2.4. herein.

The sixth chapter (*The Mountain*) tells the tale of Miss Amanda Fergusson, an Irish woman's fictional pilgrimage to Mount Ararat in 1840, where she meets her end.

The chapter opens with her father on his deathbed, pondering how his most cherished daughter evolved into a fervent believer, whereas he remained indifferent to God. The pamphlet she peruses by his bedside was authored by Parson Noah, mirroring the *pater* from Chapter One. Chapter Six extends the narrative from Chapter Five as it refers to the same painting. Rather than escorting Amanda to view Géricault's painting, her father brings her to witness the Peristrepthic Panorama of the Wreck of the Medusa, an early form of cinema. Choosing between the painting, described as "stationary pigment" (*A History*, 145), and a series of pictures was an unequivocal decision for him.

However, Amanda did return to see the painting she wanted. Her experience was much deeper than her father's: "though static [the painting] contained for her much motion and lighting and, in its own way, music. [...] [I]t contained more of these things than did the vulgar Panorama" (*A History*, 145-146).

Her father interpreted a garish display of lights and music as an accurate representation of a maritime disaster, while she believed the essence of the tragedy was best captured by a simple painting. This difference in perception underscores the division, a recurring motif, in their approach to understanding and interpreting reality, rooted primarily in their differing levels of faith (see *A History*, 148). This divergence in perspective is highlighted during their debate over the Bible: she trusted in the reality of the Holy Scriptures, revered for thousands of years, whereas her father placed his belief in the reality of what he read in newspapers.

The concept of perspectivism is vividly illustrated through contrasting perceptions of the world held by Amanda and her father: “Where Amanda discovered in the world divine intent, benevolent order and rigorous justice, her father had seen only chaos, hazard and malice. Yet they were both examining the same world” (*A History*, 148).

Following her father’s death, Amanda contemplates the age-old questions regarding the differences between believers and non-believers, and the fate of the latter in the afterlife. Those familiar with the Ten Commandments were to be judged according to these exact standards, but she ponders the fate of those “savages” who had never encountered such doctrines. Will they be treated with “gentleness and given a second chance”? (*A History*, 147). This dilemma will be revisited in Chapter Seven, where the religious experience and its interpretation by the tribe will be explored, highlighting the thematic echoes present throughout the entire novel. It can be argued that God judges each individual based on what they have been given; those who have received more talents will face stricter judgment, while those with fewer talents will be judged more leniently. Consequently, a person who is aware of God’s existence and adheres to divine laws will bear greater responsibility than someone who, ignorant of any commandments, worships primitive gods and lives in harmony with nature. Miss Fergusson holds a firm belief in God’s plan, the harmony between humans and nature, and the idea that God placed “Man into that Nature as a hand is placed into a glove” (*A History*, 147).

Seemingly divergent views on faith eventually merge, suggesting that all beliefs, even those sceptical of traditional faith, are underpinned by a form of belief in themselves. Non-believers do not fail to believe; rather they fail to apply self-ironical stance on their seeming lack of faith, and understand that everyone is a believer, bar none. Accordingly, Miss Fergusson comments on faith:

“There always appear to be two explanations of everything. That is why we have been given free will, in order that we may choose the correct one. My father failed to comprehend that his explanations were based as much upon faith as mine. Faith in nothing.” (*A History*, 154)

Miss Fergusson undertakes to intercede for the soul of her non-believing father, and embarks on the expedition to the village Arghuri, Mount Ararat, where Noah supposedly planted the vines after the Deluge. In Constantinople she hears about Dr Friedrich Parrot<sup>13</sup>, who had previously managed to reach the top of the mountain. Here, Barnes makes a self-ironical and autoreferential remark, commenting that it was “appropriate and just [...] that the first traveller to ascend the mountain upon which the Ark rested should bear the name of an animal” (*A History*, 151).

---

<sup>13</sup> Dr Parrot was a historical figure; Yulu details how his expedition led to the publication of his book *Reise zum Ararat*, published in Germany in 1834 (see Yulu, Abstract to the research article “Friedrich Parrot’s Mount Ararat Research Expedition”). Barnes must have been familiar with Dr Parrot’s expedition, and one can speculate that it was the coincidence of the scientist/s surname that offered a convenient form of self-referentiality.

Yet another echo hints at a thematic precursor for the novel to come later. Miss Fergusson shows little interest in the ancient ruins she encounters on her journey to the summit as she remains indifferent to temples, or columns believed to have been constructed in honour of Emperor Julian the Apostate. Barnes would later revisit and deepen this interest in his novel *Elizabeth Finch*, published approximately twenty years after.

Miss Fergusson's faith faced a challenge at the Monastery of Saint James when the Archimandrite presented wine made from grapes planted by Noah. She bluntly declined, deeming it blasphemous. Her refusal not only displayed disobedience and disrespect towards a church official but also illustrated her self-imposed duty to atone for sin. She justified her actions by stating, "[t]he sin of the world was purged by the waters of the flood" (*A History*, 160), suggesting that a purification, which previously came through the Deluge, was now being sought through her pilgrimage up the mountain.

Miss Fergusson interprets a devastating earthquake that destroys a monastery and village as a punishment for sin, echoing biblical narratives of divine retribution. Her journey, along with Miss Logan and a Kurdish guide, is seen as an allegorical salvation, paralleling Noah's survival of the flood. Interestingly, Miss Logan discovers that only Noah's vines survived the earthquake, further entwining their experience with biblical themes of preservation and renewal amidst destruction.

Upon her fall, Miss Fergusson remained unexpectedly serene, demonstrating her faith and resignation. Their journey appeared to be ironical: officially, the purpose of her journey was to intercede for her father's soul, yet no prayers were uttered. When offered to taste the holy wine, they refused, even though the wine must have been used for religious service. Instead, Miss Logan observed Miss Fergusson seemingly continuing a mental debate with her father. Miss Fergusson's journey evolves beyond mere physical ascent, symbolizing her quest for reconciliation with her father, reaffirmation of her faith, and coming to terms with her own mortality. This expedition becomes her personal Ararat - a place of renewal and resolution - where she confronts unresolved elements of her past, beliefs, and the inevitability of her end.

Miss Logan is left contemplating the nature of Miss Fergusson's demise, pondering if it was a consequence of her own impulsiveness or a deliberate choice. She reflects on whether Miss Fergusson achieved her personal objectives. This chapter leaves readers with questions only partially resolved in Chapter Nine.

The seventh chapter (*Three Simple Stories*) includes narratives about a Titanic survivor, Jonah and a sailor from 1891 who were both swallowed by a whale, and Jewish passengers on the *St Louis* liner fleeing Nazi Germany in 1939.

In the first short story the narrator is an eighteen-year-old boy serving as a resident prep-school master. The school's founder, Lawrence Beesley, is a survivor of the Titanic disaster. Once more, themes of voyage, catastrophe, and survival are revisited.

In describing the house, he emphasizes the authenticity of the oil paintings with irony, noting that he "had a genuine oil painting too, but not as genuine as that" (*A History*, 171), as though the authenticity of artwork could be measured. Naturally, the recurring motif of the woodworm appears, as he speculates that the furniture likely harbours woodworms.

Beesley's survival of the Titanic disaster presents an ironic deviation from Darwin's principle of survival, echoing the theme of survival discussed in Chapter One. The blanket Beesley retained from the rescue boat was probably a fake, and there were suspicions that he had escaped the Titanic disguised in women's clothing. This leads the narrator to question the principle echoing from the Chapter One: "[D]id not the Beesley hypothesis prove that the 'fittest' were merely the most

cunning?” (*A History*, 174). Consequently, he wonders whether this was not a “deft proof of how the human gene-pool was constantly deteriorating [?]” (*A History*, 174).

Like the survivors of the Medusa, Beesley authored a book titled *The Loss of the Titanic*, leading to his frequent involvement as a consultant in maritime history, film research, and other areas. His alleged expertise ultimately culminated in his role as a consultant for the film “A Night to Remember”. Moreover, he ended up as an extra on the ship leaving it just before it sank down. The parallel between Medusa survivors reliving their experience while posing for Mr Géricault’s painting is obvious.

\*

In the second short story, Barnes revisits Biblical stories, this time tackling the one of Jonah and the whale. He retells it speaking directly to the reader, from a postmodern perspective, acquiring an ironical and condescending tone: for him, the story is just a “street theatre”, God is a “paranoid schizophrenic” acting as “*deus ex machina*”, the whale is a “floating prison”, while, in terms of narratology, God would be “marked down” for “plot, motivation, suspense and characterisation” in this story (*A History*, pp. 176-177).

Barnes deconstructs the story, particularly concentrating on the episode with the whale, pondering what about it continues to captivate us. Themes of life and death, memory, and fear resurface: Jonah is entombed alive within the whale for three days and three nights, only to be expelled - symbolically reborn - from the whale’s mouth. The narrator addresses the allegory:

“Like Jonah, we are all storm-tossed by the seas of life, undergo apparent death and certain burial, but then attain a blinding resurrection as the car-ferry doors swing open and we are delivered back into the light and into a recognition of God’s love. Is this why the myth swims through our memory?” (*A History*, 178)

Barnes embraces a postmodern perspective, adopting a universal voice that represents the views of the contemporary reader. He acknowledges the implausibility of the story, stating, “[w]e are sophisticated people, and we can tell the difference between reality and myth” (*A History*, 179), only to reiterate this assertion as if to reassure himself and affirm the statement’s validity. However, what the contemporary reader often overlooks are the layers of allegory and the role of faith in interpreting such stories. Miss Fergusson would undoubtedly have insights to contribute on this matter.

One might question the precise meaning of “sophistication” in this context. Are we considered sophisticated in comparison to Jonah and the people of Nineveh? Does such sophistication stem from our knowledge, intellect, and experience? It’s conceivable that the people of the Old Testament era were just as cognizant of the implausibility of surviving in a whale’s stomach. Eventually, could it then be that the term “sophisticated” is used ironically, implying a lack of faith where “sophisticated” could be synonymous with “faithless” or “Godless”?

To illustrate the point about intellectual sophistication, Barnes recounts the tale of a sailor who was swallowed by a whale in 1891 and survived for about half a day before being rescued by his crewmates. This modern-day Jonah narrative, Barnes notes, was accepted just as readily as the original Jonah myth. Similar to the story of Jonah, the sailor’s tale “has been retold, adjusted, updated; it has shuffled nearer” (*A History*, 180). The Jonah myth held as much validity and closeness in the past as the sailor’s story does for us today.

Barnes concludes his discussion by emphasizing the prophetic aspect of myths:

“For the point is this: not that myth refers us back to some original event which has been fancifully transcribed as it passed through collective memory; but that it refers us forward to something that will happen, that must happen. Myth will become reality, however sceptical we might be.” (*A History*, 181),

thus pointing to the timeless, enduring nature of myths, representing universal truths, “primal metaphor” or “archetypal dream” (*A History*, 178), that inevitably unfold, materialize, and occur across all eras and situations.

\*

In the third story Jewish refugees escape Germany aboard the *St Louis* liner in 1939, comprising the majority of the 937 passengers on a cruise ship that served as a heterotopia of normality. This ship, sailing under a flag with a swastika, housed a handful of Gestapo agents and featured portraits of Hitler, embodying a paradoxical normality. Ironically, the sole aspect of this “normality” that deviated from expectation was the kindness with which the German crew treated the passengers.

The global reaction to the dire situation of the *St Louis* boatload was marked by irony: prior to embarkation, the passengers had to buy round-trip tickets, the Cuban immigration head assuring them of a safe arrival and designating them as “tourists, traveling for pleasure” (*A History*, 182). Life and entertainment on the ship continued as normal, evoking memories of the Titanic. Barnes notes some analogies: their departure from Germany parallels Jonah’s release from the whale, while the security measures surrounding the ship bear a resemblance to concentration camps. Ironically, the narrator refers to Germany as “the Fatherland”, where father, in this case, devours his children. Despite all hopes and endless cables, intervention and negotiations, the ship had to sail back to Europe.

Ultimately, the disembarkation of the Jewish passengers was distributed among Holland, Belgium, Great Britain, and France. Many of them found themselves in concentration camps, transported by trains with doors locked “for their own protection” (*A History*, 188). Those who arrived in Southampton discovered that their voyage had lasted exactly forty days and forty nights.

Barnes’ narrative explores the idea that ancient myths and stories, such as Noah’s Ark, are not just remnants of our collective past or archetypal manifestations, but active blueprints for our contemporary experiences. In this light, the experiences of the Jews parallel the biblical narrative of survival and resilience, suggesting that we all navigate through life’s tumultuous waters on our own arks.

The eighth chapter (*Upstream*) narrates a contemporary film actor’s experience in the Venezuelan jungle.

In this epistolary anti-romance narrative, the actor’s only connection to civilization is via a mailman, who diligently preserves love letters in a plastic bag to shield them from woodworms, symbolically safeguarding the love from decay. The narrative’s ironic twist unfolds as we reach its conclusion, revealing that the protagonist’s love is already tainted and deteriorated. The love story turns out to be fake; the narrator was deceptive as he withheld the full truth from his loved one and positioned himself as unreliable narrator. Their communication concludes disastrously, leading him to request that she leave the apartment. This revelation serves as a counter-dramatic irony for the reader, as we remain unaware of the true history of this relationship until the very end.

The protagonist becomes acquainted with a primitive tribe and, as a consequence, contemplates the irony of civilization:

“All the crew here think the Indians are fantastically primitive just because they don’t have radios. I think they’re fantastically advanced and mature because they don’t have radios. They’re teaching me something without knowing they’re doing it. I’m beginning to see things a lot more in perspective.” (*A History*, 200)

The tribe doesn’t distinguish between actors and the characters they portray, leading the narrator to question whether this lack of distinction is actually a sign of maturity, in contrast to the crew’s perception of them as naive. Instead of dismissing them as primitive, he speculates that this tribe could represent the world’s first post-acting civilization.

When one of the tribesmen falls off a raft and drowns, his community remains peaceful, whereas the “civilized” men are notably, and ironically, disturbed. The narrator surmises that the tribe might also not differentiate between life and death, as they are not familiar with the art of lying:

“These Indians never lie, same as they don’t know how to act. No pretence. Now I don’t think that’s primitive at all, I think it’s bloody mature. [...] They spend all their time surrounded by nature and the one thing nature doesn’t do is lie. It just goes ahead and does its thing.” (*A History*, 205)

The actors discuss whether the Indians can be baptised and thus have their souls saved. Further, he observes that “Christianity starts off as the religion of peace but ends up violent like any other religions” (*A History*, 208). He further remarks: “[y]ou could say the same about Communism or anything else, any big idea” (ibid).

Indicative is that two actors are filming the scene of capsizing the raft while rowing upstream, where one was supposed to be drowning and the other to save him. The two priests held conflicting views on the baptism of the indigenous people. By chance, it was the other actor who died while filming this scene. The Indian people appeared to anticipate the accident, suggesting they had foreknowledge of such an event. This led the narrator to speculate, in line with the “myth becoming reality” theme established in the previous story, that a similar fate had befallen two Jesuits in the past, which is why the Indians were not shocked but rather seemed to expect it. Once the event occurred, aligning with their expectations, they simply moved on and left the area. Once again, an idea established in one chapter of the novel spills over or materializes in another. Indeed, this recurrence underscores the narrative cohesion present throughout the novel, reinforcing its thematic and structural unity.

Furthermore, it became apparent that the actors and film crew were inadvertently serving the Indians, as if the actors “have come back to re-enact the ceremony for some reason that’s tremendously important to their tribe” (*A History*, 218). This scenario presents yet another reenactment of a historical disaster, echoing the Medusa survivors who posed for the painter, and the elderly Titanic survivor who participated as an extra in the reenactment of the ship’s sinking. Candel argues that “Chapter Eight muses about the relationship between nature and society as it asks “whether “primitive people” can have a history” (28). This story suggests that such societies experience history and myths in an immediate, undifferentiated manner, integrating these narratives seamlessly into their lives without the filters of culture or civilization. Their historical consciousness is presented as direct and unmediated, where past and future are intertwined, allowing them to observe recurring events with acceptance rather than surprise. This relationship with history is characterized as pure and integral, free from irony or a sense of alienation from the natural world. By integrating the notion of living without an ironic detachment, these societies indeed exemplify a “post-acting civilization”, suggesting a postmodern critique of contemporary life, given we embrace the ironic stance where we are all mere actors in the performances of our lives.

The next half-chapter (*Parenthesis*) is a much-discussed essay on love. The narrator adopts a first-person singular narrative voice, offering both a confession and a reflection on the nature of love, in a tone mirroring the memoirs *Nothing to be Frightened Of* (2008). By employing a first-person narrative voice, this meditation personalizes the discourse on love, making it both specific to the narrator's life and relatable to a reader. Finney observes that the "Parenthesis" is "the only section of the book to use a didactic, mildly professorial voice, with no apparent hint of irony or humor" (Finney). However, I will argue that there is an underlying irony in his observation of love and resultant happiness; similarly, love's relationship to history carries an inherent irony.

In addressing the notion of love author relates it to the history of the world; the narrator situates love not merely as a personal or ephemeral emotion but as a force, which is less about shaping human history and more about being attributed to it. The narrator's approach to love is analytical yet deeply reflective. The allure of love as a theme is undeniable. It stems from the authenticity and openness that author brings to the subject. Yet, this exposure carries a paradoxical nature - it not only exposes author's vulnerability, but draws readers closer, fostering a sense of trust and respect, as it delves into the core of human aspirations and anxieties. To put it briefly, writings on love establish the most intimate communication with readers. Consequently, addressing love stands as the most captivating and profound topic for exploration.

Barnes refers to the half chapter as he recounts his visit to America; he visited the address 2041 ½ Yonge Street, and noticed that "half-numbered, half-acknowledged house was put up. And yet people can live in it quite comfortably, people call it home" (*A History*, 236). Here, we are compelled to draw the parallel to this half-numbered history chapter as well. The inclusion of the theme of love within this half-chapter suggests Barnes' assertion of love's role throughout history, prompting the conclusion that history could potentially have unfolded without its influence. He claims love is not "strictly necessary" (*A History*, 234), which is an argument hardly to be denied. "If we look at the history of the world, it seems surprising that love is included. It's an excrescence, a monstrosity, some tardy addition to the agenda" (*A History*, 236). He supports this by repeating the fact that heart is not heart-shaped, thus confirming that love is not essential.

Barnes advances an even more striking analogy, likening love's essence to a notion articulated by Tertullian regarding Christian belief: "Tertullian said of Christian belief that it was true because it was impossible. Perhaps love is essential because it's unnecessary" (*A History*, 236). This passage highlights the *contradictio in adjecto* in the perception of love. It suggests that while love, particularly in its mature form, may not seem essential for physical survival, it is, paradoxically, indispensable for a fulfilling life. This necessity arises from the soul's deep-seated quests that only love can satisfy. Therefore, the text draws a parallel between love and faith, positing that at the core of genuine faith is love.

When discussing the portrayal of love, Barnes finds prose writers at a slight disadvantage compared to poets. "Poets seem to write more easily about love than prose writers" (*A History*, 227). Barnes explains that the poets seem able to turn bad love into good poetry, while prose writers can only turn bad love into prose about bad love. He points out that there is no literary genre known as "love prose". He refers to Mavis Gallant, a Canadian author, who suggested that once we truly understand the essence of a couple, neither love nor literature would be necessary. The reference to Mavis Gallant underscores an intriguing paradox: the notion that a complete understanding of the essence of human relationships could potentially obviate the necessity for love and literature. This concept is quintessentially subversive; the irony of this predicament lies in the fact that as we progressively demystify these relationships, we might simultaneously diminish the allure and necessity of love and literature - two realms deeply entrenched in exploring and celebrating the

unknown and the ineffable aspects of human connections. As such, it embodies the irony of fate, as argued by Muecke and Reiss.

Barnes emphasizes that expressions of love should be reserved and used with caution, likening them to precious items stored “in their box behind glass” (*A History*, 230). He advocates for using such expressions not as a means to achieve personal gain, but in moments devoid of self-interest or ulterior motives.

Further, Barnes tackles the eternal questions of the purpose of love and happiness. Rather than providing a definitive answer to the purpose of love, Barnes aims to explore and expand upon the question itself. Candel claims that this is “the only chapter that, instead of denouncing or asking questions, tries to find solutions” (28).

The author highlights the lack of formal education on the subject, noting that individuals are left to navigate their own paths in understanding and experiencing love, often guided solely by instinct and the natural course of life. Barnes offers a more practical purpose: love’s “primary effect is to energize” (*A History*, 233). Therefore, love is posited not merely as an abstract or romantic ideal but as serving a pragmatic function in our lives: it acts as a catalyst, energizing and animating individuals; Barnes further elaborate on this, integrating the concepts of happiness and truth to offer a more nuanced understanding.

Does love entail happiness?

The author posits that love does not guarantee happiness for those involved, suggesting a distinction between the experience of love and the attainment of happiness. From personal experience, he points out that it was through the trials of unhappy love that he learned the most, rather than from joyous love. Love is about sacrifice and not happiness, as seen in the following quote:

“Didn’t I love her enough? I knew I did - and put off half of my future for her. Didn’t she love me enough? I knew she did - and gave up half of her past for me. We lived side by side for many years, fretting at what was wrong with the equation we had invented. Mutual love did not add up to happiness.” (*A History*, 232)

Barnes emphasizes the intricate link between love and truth, suggesting that being in love pushes us towards a deeper engagement with honesty, positing that the state of being in love, as in altered state of mind, compels us to be open to both embrace and express truth more fully than at any other time. He wonders: “Have you ever told so much truth as when you were first in love? [...] Love makes us see the truth, makes it our duty to tell the truth” (*A History*, 240).

The relation between history and love is charged with irony. This juxtaposition entails contrasting two vastly different entities: the deeply personal and enigmatic nature of love against the overwhelming force of history, which carries us forward in search of meaning and order. This contrast illuminates the idea that the grand narratives of history are built from the collective impact of individual, intimate experiences. It suggests that the seemingly fragile force of love plays a crucial role in shaping the course of history, highlighting the importance of personal connections in the broader historical context. While history may not overtly recognize the influence of love, reducing it to anecdotal records, love possesses a profound power to influence the trajectory of historical events, either by driving them forward or subverting its course.

Therefore, the history without love is ridiculous. Barnes admits that he cannot teach us how to love, but can tell us why to love:

“Because the history of the world, which only stops at the half-house of love to bulldoze it into rubble, is ridiculous without it. The history of the world becomes brutally self-important without love. Our random mutation [love] is essential because it is unnecessary. 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.” (*A History*, 240)

Love necessitates imaginative sympathy and the ability to see the world from another’s perspective. This empathetic capacity is essential not only in personal relationships but also in art and politics. Barnes humorously challenges the notion of empathy and love in positions of power, suggesting that power and the capacity for love are mutually exclusive: “Show me the tyrants who have been great lovers” (*A History*, 243).

Barnes closes the discussion with not only ironical nature of love, but also our ironical belief in love:

“If anything, I tend to believe that [love] will make you unhappy: either immediately unhappy [...] or unhappy later, when the woodworm has quietly been gnawing away for years and the bishop’s throne collapses. But you can believe this and still insist that love is our only hope. It is our only hope even if it fails us, although it fails us, because it fails us.” (*A History*, 245)

Barnes advocates for love, free will, and truth as essential to our search for meaning, suggesting that without these beliefs, we risk losing our individuality to predetermined historical narratives and the beliefs of others. The interplay between personal agency and genetic history is best described by the following words: “If we don’t [believe in love], then we merely surrender to the history of the world and to someone else’s truth. [...] Still we must believe in love, just as we must believe in free will and objective truth. And when love fails, we should blame the history of the world” (*A History*, 246). This perspective underscores the importance of love as a fundamental belief that sustains us, suggesting that its failures are not due to its inherent flaws but rather to external circumstances shaped by historical events and societal constructs. This is Barnes’ caveat for those who have capitulated in matters of love.

The ninth chapter (*Project Ararat*) imagines another expedition to Mount Ararat in 1977 by an astronaut looking for Noah’s Ark.

The opening of the chapter depicts the small town featuring the church shaped as an ark, conveniently and democratically called the “worship center” instead of “church” (*A History*, 249). This setting introduces Spike Tiggler, an astronaut famed for throwing the football on the Moon. However, his lunar voyage turned out to be a mystical one: during his Moon mission, he received a mysterious directive to locate Noah’s Ark on Mount Ararat, Turkey. Upon his return to Earth, it was the Ark from the opening paragraph that guided him towards his divine mission.

Upon returning to Earth, Spike Tiggler humorously reflects on his lunar journey, observing that traveling 240,000 miles to the Moon only highlighted the value of Earth itself. “You come back to where you started from. I went 240,000 miles to see the moon - and it was the earth that was really worth looking at” (*A History*, 259). This ironic realization sparks a deeper quest for origins, symbolized by the search for Noah’s Ark, thus propelling a journey of discovery not just into outer space but into the essence of human heritage and the planet that cradles it. Thus, we witness protagonist’s shift from the lunar to the sublunary realm.

The team embarking on the quest for Noah's Ark is uniquely composed of an astronaut and a geologist, symbolizing a confluence of skyward exploration and terrestrial science. This pairing underscores the holistic nature of their mission, bridging the vastness of the cosmos with the geological specificity of Earth, as they seek out an artifact that resides at the nexus of myth and reality.

As Spike and his companion progress on their mission, they witness the extraordinary phenomenon of water defying gravity by flowing uphill. This observation leads Spike to the same awe-inspiring realization Miss Fergusson had made 150 years prior: the mountain itself is a miraculous entity. The village she visited in her expedition is now revisited by Spike and his companion, as yet another echo from previous stories.

Furthermore, Spike's faith mirrored that of Miss Fergusson; he was convinced that their divine guidance to the mountain was purposeful, not meant to lead them on a fruitless quest. This unwavering belief fuelled his certainty in discovering the Ark, showcasing his profound trust in a higher power. Their expedition led to the discovery of a human skeleton in a cave, which Spike believed to be Noah's remains. Yet, it was ultimately ascertained that the skeleton discovered in the cave was, in all probability, that of Miss Fergusson. Undeterred by the initial setback, Spike holds a bottle filled with the miraculous water that defied gravity, a symbol of his unwavering resolve. With this token of the extraordinary in hand, he commits to embarking on a second endeavour, Project Ararat, fuelled by determination and a belief in the possibility of uncovering wonders anew.

The parallels between Miss Fergusson and Spike Tiggler bring forth an ironic dimension to their separate journeys, intertwining their stories with elements of cosmic and situational irony. This contrast places the characters in an ironic stance relative to the reader, who, in contrast to the protagonists, can recognize the irony of fate that escapes the characters' understanding. Such a configuration introduces a level of dramatic irony, adding a layer of complexity to the story that the characters are intrinsically unable to perceive.

The final tenth chapter (*The Dream*) depicts a contemporary vision of Heaven.

The final chapter starts with an antithetical statement: "I dreamt that I woke up" (*A History*, 283). This statement also closes the chapter, and the book, and is referred to as "the oldest dream of all" (*A History*, 309). It encapsulates the essence of human yearning for understanding and enlightenment, bridging the gap between the tangible and the ethereal, and leaving the reader to ponder the depths of perception and the mysteries of existence.

The oldest dream is a depiction of Heaven, a "grossly materialistic Heaven instead of the traditionally spiritual one" (Rubinson 167). In this vision, the protagonist engages endlessly in the pleasures he once enjoyed on Earth. Finney astutely notes that the dreamer revisits activities outlined in the preceding nine and a half chapters (see Finney, *A Worm's Eye View of History*): the final chapter is positioned as both a summary and re-evaluation of the narrative's entirety, encompassing both personal and collective dimensions. Yet, Finney articulates a quintessentially postmodern conclusion: "There is no master discourse" (ibid). However, he further elaborates that "the repetitions and intertextual allusions also assert in narrative form that certain patterns of human interaction reappear over the expanse of history" (ibid). Just as the initial chapter serves as a foundation for all those that follow, the concluding chapter acts as a culmination, encapsulating all preceding chapters and thereby completing the narrative arc.

The protagonist is devoid of all limitations he had in earthly life, even including so-called "negative" emotions - he is not envious anymore and did not feel bad once. He did not dream anymore, because he was in a dream. Freed from earthly limitations and negative emotions, the protagonist experiences a dreamlike existence where everything aligns with his desires: all news is to

his liking, the world is a better place to live, diseases are cured, his party won the elections and even Leicester won the Football Association Cup (which it did, actually, in 2021, thirty-two years after the publication of this novel). Ironically, the protagonist recognizes his existence in a sort of seventh heaven, thereby juxtaposing his mortal awareness with a newfound, unearthly consciousness. This realization represents a form of self-irony, denoting an awareness of one's own consciousness, or in other words, the recognition of dreaming about being awake. Within this utopia, the narrator observes the absence of woodworms, signifying the elimination of death and the embrace of eternal life and bliss. Here, woodworms, previously symbols of mortality and decay, underscore the transition from a world marred by impermanence to one of everlasting existence.

Having enjoyed all amenities in the paradise, he reveals their banality over time. The protagonist comes to understand that endless pleasure paradoxically mirrors its absence: "After a while, getting what you want all the time is very close to not getting what you want all the time" (*A History*, 309). As the next step, the protagonist desires a review of his life. A kindly figure, "a nice old gent" (*A History*, 294), confirms his satisfactory life. Yet, ironically, this assurance leads him to worry, and then to worry about his worrying. He finds himself missing the sensation of being tired, indicating a longing for the very human experiences absent in his utopian existence.

The final chapter finally abandons the notions of division and separation, including the binary classification of individuals as either good or bad. There is no retribution; the protagonist finds himself in a Heaven vastly different from traditional conceptions. This shift reflects a collective realization that the old paradigms of Heaven are no longer necessary, leading to its closure. The closure is also attributed to dissatisfaction with the treatment of those considered bad. This insistence on earthly justice in Heaven demonstrates ironic inability to self-reflect on potential punishment. This new Heaven is customized for each individual, reflecting a desire for the continuation and improvement of earthly experiences. Within this realm, individuals even have the option to cease existing, typically chosen once they feel content with their heavenly experience and decide to end their existence voluntarily.

The narrator ultimately contemplates the ineffectiveness of such a conceptualized Heaven, identifying an intrinsic irony within human nature: our relentless quest for an ideal existence, only to discover a fundamental discord between this aspiration and our inherent attributes. This insight highlights the paradox between human desires and our essential qualities, encapsulating the sentiment: "It seems to me [...] that Heaven's a very good idea [...] but not for us. Not given the way we are" (*A History*, 309). This reflection suggests a deep-seated misalignment between the human condition and the pursuit of a flawless utopia, underscoring the complexities and contradictions that are embodied in the irony of character.

Concluding on a note of optimism, the chapter's narrative suggests that the apparent futility of certain dreams, such as the concept of Heaven, should not deter us from harbouring them. These dreams are depicted as essential, acting as crucial mechanisms for coping with the realities of life. This view points to the irony of our reliance on seemingly unreliable ideals for sustenance, hope, and resilience. Barnes encapsulates this sentiment by stating: "Why do we have these dreams of Heaven? [...] Because you can't get by without the dream" (*A History*, 309). This aligns with his earlier thoughts on love and faith, emphasizing that dreams are vital precisely because they are impossible.

Barnes injects humor into the depiction of scholars and writers in Heaven through a lens of metafiction, self-reflexivity and self-irony. Scholars, engaged in endless discussions, seem immortal, and have no intention of dying, as their debates can span millennia. Writers, along with painters and composers, contrastingly, possess a keen awareness of when they've achieved their pinnacle, allowing them to gracefully "fade away" (*A History*, 306).

In the final chapter, Barnes deliberately chooses not to provide a conclusive ending, preferring instead to “suspend a final meaning or resolution”, as observed by Kotte (109). This approach encourages readers to actively participate in the process that Barnes himself undertakes throughout the narrative: selecting specific facts presented within the text and constructing new interpretations from them. This intentional act plays on our natural inclination towards finding coherence and closure, urging us to piece together facts and fill in the narrative voids. This mirrors our inherent desire to comprehend and find meaning in the stories that engage us, showcasing Barnes’ skill in involving readers in the ongoing dialogue between author and reader.

#### **2.4. A History of the World that did not Happen or What Géricault did not Paint**

The latter part of Chapter Five acts as a treatise on art, with an emphasis on painting. Barnes has since professed his love for paintings: *A History* chapter on Géricault is the opening chapter in the collection of critical writings titled *Keeping an eye open: Essays on Art* (2015), where Barnes elaborates on paintings predominantly by French artists. In this collection, he offers a narrative journey from Romanticism to Realism, culminating in Modernism, showcasing the evolution of art through these significant periods. As professed by him personally, the author expresses a hope that readers, especially those new to art or fans of his novels, will approach paintings with a fresh perspective, focusing on personal responses rather than preconceived notions of what constitutes “the best” art. He explained that he wrote about painting as if the reader was standing next to him, and they were chatting (Balzer).

Such a fresh perspectives is employed in this chapter, where Barnes examines Géricault’s painting, originally titled “Scene of Shipwreck”. Barolsky finds that “[n]owhere does the ongoing mockery of the idea of the “masterpiece” appear in more pithy form than in Julian Barnes’s novel” (402). Guignery found chapter five particularly interesting, in terms of its ekphrastic and hermeneutic nature, emphasizing “double transfer”, or precisely, the “representation of the representation”: Géricault painted the painting and interpreted the historical event, whereas the author interpreted Géricault’s interpretation (painting) by virtue of two views: “the ignorant” reader as opposed to “informed” one (Guignery, *The Fiction of Julian Barnes*, 65). He acquires dual perspective, where informed spectator is familiar with historiography of the work of art, while the uninformed one is a plain observer. “Thus Barnes enjoins us to look dispassionately at the *Raft*”, Alhadeff explains (281). This approach aligns with Barnes’ practical advice for the ignorant consumer of visual art, when at exhibitions: “I think you should [...] go in information-blind, decide what you like and why you like it, and then seek the information afterwards” (Balzer).

The narrator initiates this exploration with a provoking inquiry: “How do you turn catastrophe into art?” (*A History*, 125), a query that resonates with the compelling and succinct question from *Flaubert’s Parrot*: “How do we seize the past?”.

So, how did Géricault do it?

Barnes says: “It begins with truth to life” (*A History*, 126). Before embarking on the painting, Géricault shaved his head, which, as noted in *A History* (ibid), could be seen as a “Do Not Disturb” sign or, as I tend to believe, as a form of sacrifice or homage. Following this, he proceeded to compiling the dossier on the case, meeting the two survivors, having them recount their experiences. He even had them pose for the painting, thereby reenacting the “reprise of their sufferings” (ibid).

Barnes observes the creation of the painting as a process of contrasting the scenes Géricault did not paint to the one he did; this directly resonates with the statement offered by the painter Phillip Lopate, who claimed that “ninety nine percent of all art-making attempts are failures” (Lopate, qtd. in Barolsky, 395). Barnes is concerned with the ideas that were set aside and the near misses. The

compilation of discarded ideas was informed by the sketches that remained after the completion of the artwork, as “for him [the painter] the discarded ideas began as excitements, and he saw only at the very end what we take for granted at the beginning” (*A History*, pp. 134-135). Géricault chose not to depict several dramatic scenes in his artwork, as crucial as the one he painted. The omitted scenes include the raft hitting the reef, instances of cannibalism, murders for self-defense, the arrival of a white butterfly, and the moment of rescue, each rich with narrative potential and emotional depth, yet absent from the final work. Barnes crafts an imaginative retelling of the genesis of a masterpiece, presenting an alternate history that delves into the what-ifs of artistic creation. This approach, akin to a form of *uchronia*, explores the potential narratives and artistic decisions that could have shaped the final work, essentially framing it as one possibility among many.

Barnes takes into consideration the painter’s intention in his deciding what not to paint; applying his characteristic approach to list the concerns Géricault wanted to avoid, which include political, symbolic, theatrical, shocking, thrilling, sentimental, documentational and unambiguous.

The political ramifications of the artwork are not common yet unsurprising for this case, considering the political upheaval triggered by the painting. This outcome could have been anticipated, especially since some survivors were still living and certain individuals in positions of authority were held accountable. Encyclopædia Britannica notes that “Géricault astonished viewers by painting, in harrowing detail, not an antique and noble subject but a recent gruesome incident” (The Raft of the Medusa). On the other hand, King Louis XVIII’s wittily remarked, according to Barnes, in a statement phrased as a *litotes*: “Monsieur Géricault, your shipwreck is certainly no disaster” (*A History*, 126). This remark certainly carries irony, especially in its reference to the actual shipwreck and disaster.

Further concerning creation process, once the painting process is underway, the painter diverges from real-life events; at this stage, for him, “truth to art is the greatest allegiance” (*A History*, 135). Barnes reinforces this point by stating: “The incident never took place as depicted” (*ibid*).

In his analysis of the painting and its genesis, Barnes employs notes, commentaries, and factual insights. Expectedly, these do not serve as a support for the main argument - these constitute the main argument. Thus, Barnes’ foundational premise is that “[a] painting is a moment” (*A History*, 128). This correlates to his earlier observation that we hold onto history as if it were a collection of salon pictures, while the history is akin to a multi-media collage, created with broad strokes from a decorator’s roller rather than the meticulous touch of a camel-hair brush. In other words, while the painter focuses on a frozen snapshot in time, the author herein aims to delve into the complexity and richness of the background, the multi-media collage, attempting to capture the broader context and the dynamic interplay of elements that constitute the scene.

The narrator recognizes that the analysis of the painting occurs in reverse order, defying the natural and chronological sequence of the artwork’s creation. We are presented with the completed work without any insight into the developmental journey. Conversely, for the artist, the creative journey “begins with truth to life”, as previously stated. Nonetheless, this journey is not a simple act of imitation but rather a deconstruction of the event.

Similarly to how Barnes explores Géricault’s artistic omissions, Alhadeff notes the aspects Barnes himself decided to leave unaddressed, in other words, his failure to acknowledge the presence of three Black individuals on the raft. This oversight is notable, considering Barnes’ renowned meticulousness to detail. So, what conclusion can be drawn from this omission? Alhadeff elucidates Barnes’ viewpoint with the statement: “*The Raft of the Medusa* is not about *the Medusa*” (285). This perspective is derived from Géricault’s choice to title his work for the Salon of 1819 “Scene of a

Shipwreck”, a designation that detaches the incident from the Medusa raft specifically and situates it within a broader, universal framework. Clearly, Barnes chose to sidestep the political implications entangled with the painting’s controversy, instead recognizing and emphasizing the artistic and universal significance embedded within the work.

Moreover, this is in alignment with his explanation of painter’s presentation of “*douce terreur*”, referring to the depiction of the survivors’ “muscular bodies à la Michelangelo” (Alhadeff, 289). Barnes suggests that Géricault struck a balance between eliciting viewers’ compassion through the realistic portrayal of tormented bodies and avoiding outright despair. He achieved a harmonious blend in terms of tone and muscularity, thereby paralleling the strength of the ocean waves with the resilience of those aboard the raft, and extending this sense of strength to the audience. Thus, the painting effectively communicates the ocean’s power while fostering a sense of identification with the raft amidst the sea, an experience that could have been overwhelmed by the direct representation of the catastrophe. Géricault’s intention was not to depict the disaster in a purely realistic manner but to transform the catastrophe into a work of art. The impact of such art is profound, as evidenced by the reaction of Delacroix, who was so profoundly moved by the painting, that he hastily exited the artist’s studio and ran back to his own residence, seemingly overwhelmed by the intensity of his emotions.

Finally, Barnes employs irony to challenge the conventional notion of a “masterpiece”. He does so by referencing Géricault’s supposed belittlement of his renowned piece, describing it, on his deathbed, as “Bah, une vignette!” (*A History*, 139). Whether or not Géricault actually uttered these words remains uncertain, yet Barnes leverages it with intent. He encourages the readers to challenge the pedestal on which the notion of a “masterpiece” is placed, inviting readers to experience the artwork firsthand. Additionally, he prompts us to adopt an ironic viewpoint, enabling a deeper, more critical examination of the work that enhances our appreciation and enjoyment. This approach is not limited to the discussion of Géricault’s painting but extends to Barnes’ novel itself.

### 3. *England, England*: Yet Another English Novel or Ironic Subversion Thereof?

The novel *England, England*<sup>14</sup> was published in 1998, to be shortlisted for The Man Booker Prize the same year; that year the prize was awarded to McEwan's *Amsterdam*. The official novel's precis states the following received wisdom: "[...] you can fit the whole of England on the Isle of Wight". Julian Barnes begins with this concept and elevates it to an entirely new dimension.: "The grotesque, visionary tycoon Sir Jack Pitman takes the saying literally and does exactly that" (thebookerprize). Along with a narrative about the compressed version of England and pertaining values, as *pars pro toto* kind of a project, the novel also attends to the personality of Martha Cochrane, her intimate and emotional development, as a kind of *Bildungsroman* of a woman<sup>15</sup>. Alongside, both new and old England develop in unexpected ways. Thus, the novel has also been referred to as "the national coming-of-age novel" (Bradford, 99). Therefore, it can be safely said that the novel has two protagonists: Martha Cochrane and England itself. Hence the witty remarks that there are, also, two novels in Barnes' book *England, England* (see Kakutani).

In a broader context, the social climate of the last decades of the twentieth century was such that a novel like this can be seen as a product of the prevailing paradigm. Bradbury, in explaining the agenda of the Eighties, observes that the dominant cultural discourse was built upon "myths of money" (396). He goes on to explain that new economic realities, which were as fictional as any other interpretative realities, became dominant. Fiscal interpretation was applied to various aspects of culture and art, including tradition, as we can see in this case.

Starting with the notable title of the novel, one might question the reason behind its palillogy. The repetition of the proper noun conveys the reflection of *England, My England* poem by W.E. Hanley (1900), or the story *England My England* by D.H. Lawrence (1922).<sup>16</sup> However, these works, one venerating England through Victorian ideals and the other portraying a nation in turmoil through an Englishman's perspective, do not foreshadow the narrative written by Barnes. Contrarily, the portrayal of England as the "Chosen daughter of the Lord" (Hanley, *ibid*) dissolves at the very beginning of the narrative, precisely its second chapter; as it progresses, the developments of the project, Olde Englande and protagonist's life go in unexpected way, where our horizon of expectation is failed, in terms of Jauss' reception-aesthetics (Bužinjska, 108-111).

The choice of the title herein holds significance considering that the repetition serves as a literary device to convey deeper meanings and nuances related to the novel's themes and narrative. Nünning labels the title "ironic" concluding from it that the novel "undercuts the pretensions to objectivity, continuity and totality that are generally associated with positivist historiography" (7). At first glance, the repetition in the title seems to "grant a doubled value to the fake country" (Guignery, *The Fiction of Julian Barnes*, 106). However, in my view, it is more than a repetition of a word for emphasis or rhetorical effect. Herein, its replication gets a new meaning: the novel revolves around the creation of a theme park as a replicated version of England. The repeated use of "England" in the title may emphasize this replication, drawing attention to the theme park's attempt to be a microcosm of the larger nation.

There is an added satirical element to it: the novel employs satire to critique various aspects of English society and identity. Bradford contends that: "Routinely, and lazily, *England, England* is

---

<sup>14</sup> For easier reference and avoidance of repetition, the novel *England, England* shall hereinafter be referred to as *England*.

<sup>15</sup> *Bildung* is used and understood in Romantic terms of culture and creation. *Bildung* as a term is inherently related to irony; Colebrook observes that "[h]uman life, as capable of *Bildung*, is essentially capable of being other than any fixed *essence*. This is why human life is ironic" (48).

<sup>16</sup> The connection between the two authors was mentioned in Harrison, Andrew. *D.H. Lawrence Selected Short Stories*, Tirril, Penrith, 2008, and by Guignery in her essay, referring to it as "intertextual echoes".

treated as a work of satire, its targets abidingly self-selecting and open for ridicule” (102). On that note, using “England, England” in the title could be a satirical commentary on the notion of simplifying and commercializing a complex and diverse nation like England into a marketable product. It underscores the artificiality and commodification of culture and tradition. It could be also perceived as a play on identity: the repetition of “England” in the title might reflect the theme of identity in the novel. The characters, especially Martha, struggle with their personal identities in the context of a replicated England. The title suggests a search for identity within a context where the idea of England itself is duplicated.

And finally, it bears an ironic and ambiguous meaning, despite the replication. It signals the author’s ironic treatment of the concept of England, both as a physical place and as an abstract idea. Guignery argues that “[t]he name of the venture sounds both patriotic and ironic as the doubling of ‘England’ seems to grant a doubled value to the fake country while the original England has been erased from the history of the world” (*The Fiction of Julian Barnes*, pp. 106-107). Moreover, it is the mutual relation between these two entities that is complex and ironic, as well as the way it evolves through time. This is going to be the subject of the subchapters to follow.

Julian Barnes, as a contemporary British writer, is renowned for his adroit employment of postmodern literary techniques, which serve to challenge and expand the boundaries of traditional narrative and form. His engagement with postmodernism is particularly evident in the ways he approaches the structure, modes, and genres within his literary oeuvre. Postmodernism, characterized by its scepticism towards grand narratives and its inclination towards fragmentation, pastiche, and metafiction, offers Barnes a vast palette from which he draws to craft his narratives. However, in this work, the structure exhibits a firm foundation.

Barnes employs a three-chapter structure in the novel, arranged chronologically. This structural approach bears resemblance to his earlier works; Guignery observes this similarity, noting that “the novel echoes *Metroland* and *Staring at the Sun*” (104), published in 1980 and 1986, respectively. All novels share a tripartite structure, creating a literary arc that parallels the protagonists’ growth and, in *England’s* case, the Project’s development. Furthermore, I contend that *Metroland* and *England* exhibit circular structures, as both protagonists return to their initial starting point but with a more mature perspective, allowing them to perceive and embrace their circumstances differently.

Focusing back to *England*, the novel’s narrative arc reflects a cyclical pattern. Both central characters (as referred to in the first paragraph of this chapter) go through the transformation and ultimate return to rural England. Martha’s personal journey and the fate of England mirror a cycle of rise and fall, transformation, and replication. Martha has been replaced by other people doing her job, or replicating her achievements, just like England has been literally replaced by its replica. Martha’s life development mirrors the novel’s larger theme of England’s historical changes and the creation of a replica in the form of the theme park. Closures and their circularities add value to the novel’s exploration of identity, satire, and irony, as they underscore the idea that history, development and identity are often cyclical and subject to repetition. Eventually, neither Martha nor England are the same at the end of the process: Olde Englande, once a formidable imperial world leader, has regressed to a remote state. Martha is a spinster, finding solace in what remains of her homeland.

Such novel’s structure accentuates the novel’s themes and the interplay of reality and parody throughout the narrative. This circularity enriches the novel’s ironic tone and narrative complexity.

Within the framework of a well-structured novel, Barnes demonstrates a mastery of narrative twists and turns. Thus, reader’s expectation is failed in every way: the project becomes a remarkable success, while Olde Englande regresses to an industrial state, illustratively embodying Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the precedence of models over reality, contrary to what the reader might anticipate. Concurrently, in a parallel narrative thread, Martha’s lifelong endeavour to complete her jigsaw puzzle of British counties, specifically her quest for the elusive Nottinghamshire piece, culminates not in the discovery of the missing jigsaw piece, but in an ironic revelation that it was not

the small piece of a jigsaw that was missing, after all. Interestingly enough, Nottinghamshire is famous for the biggest antique fair in Europe is held near market town Newark six times a year (Newark). It is the form of fair that Martha will dedicate her life to, having had her father leave with a Nottinghamshire piece in his pocket.

The novel also tackles the issue of Englishness, which comprises one of the central topics in complete Barnes' oeuvre. It is not unexpected whatsoever, considering the fact that Julian Barnes constitutes the establishment and icons of contemporary British fiction, along with Ishiguro, Amis, Rushdie, McEwan, and others. Both Englishness and postmodernism are still predominant subject in his interviews, as these are inseparable from the writings of authors in late twentieth-century British fiction. However, some scholars find it curious that Barnes should have written an English novel; Bradford argues that the reasons are "firstly because he was invoking a non-existent tradition and secondly because Barnes himself has gained a considerable reputation as a writer with Continental, especially Francophile, affiliations." (93). On the other side of the Channel, the perception is somewhat different: as Groes and Childs argue, "while in England Barnes is often viewed as a Francophile, in France he is valued as for being a quintessentially English writer" (6). Bradbury also introduces Barnes to his overview of the modern British novel in the context of his bilingualism and modern French ideas and theories (pp. 436-437).

Here I am compelled to mention as well that, the English novel, as a literary category, has been widely discussed, defined and scrutinized. Consequently, the question arises: What defines an English novel, and who qualifies as an English novelist in contemporary times?

Apart from obvious categories such as language and the author's nationality (whether the author was born, raised, or resided in English society), Patrick Parrinder offered his interpretation, introducing an additional criterion. He contends that "a novel wholly or partly set within a fictionalized version of English society would qualify as an English novel" (4). In a hindsight, Parrinder traces "apocalyptic fantasies portraying England's future collapse" back to the last decades of the nineteenth century (pp. 292-293). Furthermore, he asserts that a trajectory can be traced from Orwell to Barnes, claiming that "the moral seriousness of Orwellian satire" has been followed by a "much lighter vein of futuristic farce", epitomized in *England* (320).

And, finally, how many novels have qualified as English novels? According to some - not much. On that note, Bradford claims: "In the vast majority of novels set principally in England and comprised mainly of English characters issues of nationality or shared collective identity are of negligible significance" (96). A.S. Byatt, a peer of Julian Barnes and also a recipient of the Booker Prize, during her 1999 interview observed that there were not really any English novelists of her generation (see Byatt, 155).

However, this study will not primarily concentrate on the examination of national identity or subversiveness thereof; rather, its focal point lies in the examination of the ironic aspects associated with it. Specifically, this chapter undertakes the task of identifying the instances of irony throughout the novel, as they relate both to the concept of the theme park and female protagonist's personal life. The objective is to elucidate the distinctiveness of Barnes' irony, within the theoretical framework as provided in the Introduction of this dissertation. Furthermore, in the subsequent subchapters, this work will establish connections between the novel and inherently ironic notions of heterotopia, as delineated by Michel Foucault, and simulacrum, in accordance with the theory of Jean Baudrillard. Both of these concepts assume a significant role when considering the unconventional concept of the theme park in matter.

### **3.1. Instances of Irony Throughout the Novel**

The most effective approach to illustrate a specific feature within a novel is by providing concrete examples throughout the narrative. In line with this method, it is opportune at this point to introduce the plot in order to clearly expose the intended purpose in this chapter.

In the opening chapter, titled “England”, we delve into the childhood reminiscences of Martha, deeply rooted in her bucolic English upbringing. A jigsaw puzzle of England’s counties, a treasured item from her youth, emerges as a poignant symbol of her profound attachment to her personal and national identity. This idyllic connection is disrupted when her father departs abruptly, taking in his pocket a piece of her beloved puzzle, leaving a void in both the puzzle and her life.

The narrative then transitions to the more voluminous chapter, titled “England, England”, set against the backdrop of a futuristic Britain. Martha, now in her forties, finds herself employed by Sir Jack Pitman, an overbearing tycoon with grandiose visions of establishing a theme park on the Isle of Wight, thus commodifying England’s heritage. In this venture, Martha is designated the ‘Appointed Cynic’, a role that sees her embroiled in an affair with a colleague, Paul. Together, they stumble upon a clandestine detail about Sir Jack, which they exploit to cement Martha’s position as the CEO of the burgeoning attraction, now a new residence for the Royal Family. Concurrently, the original England, now dubbed “Anglia”, witnesses a regression to a pastoral economy amidst its decline.

Under Martha’s management, the theme park descends into turmoil, with historical reenactors overstepping their roles, culminating in a catastrophic clash involving Robin Hood’s gang and the island’s security forces. This upheaval leads to Martha’s ousting, paving the way for Sir Jack’s return to power.

The narrative culminates in the “Anglia” chapter, portraying an elderly Martha in a quaint village within the antiquated realm of old England, a stark contrast to her previous life. This segment paints a picture of a society that has forsaken technology in favour of a return to a more rudimentary existence, encapsulating Martha’s journey full circle from a childhood innocence through complex adult entanglements back to simplicity.

Indeed, there exist notable reflections within the novel, which can be discerned through the lens of both small-scale and large-scale paradigms, as well as in the mirroring of the past and the future, and vice versa. One such instance is exemplified by the jigsaw puzzle that young Martha endeavours to assemble, a precursor to the jigsaw-like structure of the theme park. Her childhood project seems to echo her career project. The question arises: did she encounter failure in both endeavours?

All three chapters of the novel are different in terms of literary style, genre and conventions; Böhme summarized the critical analyses arguing that the novel on the overall is “hybrid” (175). This hybridity is not merely a stylistic choice but a narrative strategy that explores different philosophical and aesthetic paradigms - namely, realism, modernity, and postmodernity - each predominating in the respective chapters.

The opening chapter revolves around Martha’s Counties of England jigsaw puzzle and her memory of father having left with a missing piece in his pocket. At the age of twenty-five, Martha reunites with her father, only to discover that he has no recollection of the incident. This experience leaves a lasting emotional scar, and she becomes determined to hold him responsible for it throughout her life. It appears as though her father’s neglect played a pivotal role in fuelling her cynicism, which would later define her personal and professional life. Given this perspective, it is hardly surprising that she was appointed as a Cynic for the Project.

Martha’s employer, Sir Jack Pitman, undertakes to make his swansong, a theme park of “[...] something called the United Kingdom which, to be honest and facing facts, didn’t live up to its adjective” (*England*, 38), all under patriotic pretence. Sir Jack Pitman’s conceptualization and enactment of patriotism presents a confluence of traditional patriotic sentiment and contemporary, market-driven imperatives. “He did not believe in mindless ancestor-worship; for him, patriotism should be pro-active” (*England*, 37). His proactiveness reflects in his pragmatic stance towards the potential independence of Ireland, Scotland, or Wales, thus framing his vision of patriotism within a distinctly utilitarian and rather opportunistic framework.

This approach is further elucidated by his intention to leverage “an accumulation of time” (*England*, 39) as a unique asset, transforming the historical and cultural capital of England into a tangible, commercial enterprise. This strategy underscores an ironic form of patriotism that transcends mere reverence for the past, aiming instead to repackage and sell an idealized version of national identity and heritage. The question raised is whether this is *real* patriotism, or ironic subversion thereof.

The irony in Pitman’s methodology lies in the inherent contradiction between the commodification of national heritage and the intrinsic values that patriotism traditionally involves, such as loyalty, sacrifice, sense of belonging and an inherent respect and love for one’s country and its history. By monetizing patriotism, Pitman arguably dilutes its essence, reducing profound cultural and historical narratives to mere attractions within a theme park, putting the price tags on them. This commodification can be seen as a reflection of postmodern capitalism, where even the most sacred aspects of society are subject to market forces and consumerism.

However, as Guignery suggests, Pitman’s endeavours can be interpreted as a form of (post)modern patriotism where the goal is to sell the idea of his country, thereby “reestablishing the conquering dynamism of the British Empire” (*The Fiction of Julian Barnes*, 107) seeking to reclaim and reassert the global stature of the British Empire. This perspective may posit that Pitman’s commercial strategies are not devoid of patriotic intent; I’d rather argue that the patriotic intent in matter is distorted, thus representing a contemporary adaptation of nationalistic fervour, which is at odds with conventional paradigms.

In all his peculiarity, Martha matches Sir Jack in cynicism which results in her employment as an Appointed Cynic, instead of the intended position of a Special Consultant.

The key person to conceptualize and rationally justify the Project is, ironically, a French intellectual, who introduces the notion of replica and reproduction: “We prefer the reproduction of the work of art to the work of art itself [...]” (*England*, 53). His attitude is based on a highly practical reasoning: simple math shows that the time visitors spend in front of the replica beats the time spent in front of the original. This is due to the fact, he elaborates, that in facing a replica, we experience *frisson* and *jouissance*, which reaction stands in contrast to the conventional reverence typically accorded to the original.

In order to comprehend this astonishing attitude Barnes refers us to our own vulnerabilities, the hesitation rooted in our existence, and the primordial fear that arises when confronted directly with something authentic or original. When faced with an alternative version of reality that seems more formidable, we are left exposed, in front of a more powerful reality, which inevitably leads to fear. Therefore, the French intellectual concludes:

“[...] it is our intellectual duty 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, find *jouissance* in, and, finally, if and when we decide, it is the reality which, since it is our destiny, we may meet, confront and destroy.” (*England*, 55)

Indeed, the attitude is rather provocative. It appears that he is alluding to the concept of power and, more specifically, a person’s power over their perception of reality. However, a crucial question arises: what kind of reality is being sought after? It seems to be a reality that can be harnessed, taken pleasure in, or even abolished. Be that as it may, one must ponder its authenticity. The irony lies in the pursuit of controlling reality, as it may ultimately lead to individuals being controlled by the very reality they seek to manipulate.

Moreover, he takes this concept to its utmost extreme, ironically stating his idea which is a *contradictio in adjecto*: “Project must be very Olde, because then it will be truly novel and it will be modern!” (*England*, 56).

From a hermeneutical perspective, Barnes proves to be a rather accommodating author as he provides his direct opinions and interpretations within his work. For instance, when examining Sir Jack’s manner of communication with his employees, Barnes labels it a “bullying version of Socratic dialogue” (*England*, 60). Here, it is worth noting that a fundamental principle of a Socratic dialogue involves feigning ignorance to draw out and expose the interlocutor’s true ignorance, thereby gaining the upper hand in the argument. This characterization implies that Sir Jack has perfected this skill. Furthermore, dealing with a bully necessitates a certain level of courage, which is precisely why Martha, with her cynical and intelligent approach, becomes an ideal choice to contend with a pompous businessman like Sir Jack.

Dr Max, the Official Historian, emerges as the slowest member of the Coordinating Committee to grasp the concepts of Concept Development. He was ironically employed due to his lack of scholarly spirit, despite his impressive title. He is a historian employed *not* to teach history. Instead, his employment is based on the paradoxical goal of making visitors “*feel* less ignorant” (original italics, *England*, 70), implying that the Project’s aim is not to educate people, as that might insult them. Instead, Dr Max and the Project are intended to cater to visitors’ existing knowledge, allowing them to indulge in what they already know while offering a mere taste of novelty.

This approach mirrors the prevailing ethos of many cultural and historical institutions in the contemporary world. In the third millennium, more than ever, there has been a condescending attitude toward money, fostering a sense of entitlement under the guise of human rights. This has led to a decline in education, culture, ethics, and self-responsibility, all in pursuit of financial gain. History, tradition, and culture have been commodified. Sir Jack’s Project embodies this commodification, deliberately pampering visitors to make them feel grandiose for merely paying a visit, despite having done nothing to earn such esteem apart from parting with their money.

In order to get the idea of the limits of the knowledge of a common visitor Dr Max interviews a man. He concluded that “most people remembered history in the same conceited and evanescent fashion as they recalled their own childhood” (*England*, 82). Or, more in the same vein, he laid out the paradox: that “patriotism’s most eager bedfellow was ignorance, not knowledge” (*England*, 82). These reflections from Dr Max emphasize a critical view of how individuals and societies engage with their history and national identity. It points to the possibility that patriotism can be driven more by emotion and idealization than by an informed appreciation of historical realities. This brings us to a more ironic stance that our patriotism and affection for childhood is driven by the things we *do not* know, rather than critical view and objectiveness. The Project, in this context, does not serve as a vehicle for enlightenment; rather, it caters to and amplifies these idealized and romanticized notions.

Martha becomes embroiled in a sexual liaison with her colleague, Paul, who holds the role of the Ideas Catcher. In this intimate context, her authenticity is put to the test. Preceding this, Barnes acquaints us with her “Brief History of Sexuality”, a meticulously numbered and sub-numbered list, offering a taxonomic overview of one’s intimate experiences. This list commences with “Innocent Discovery” or the sensation of “Getting a feeling”, and concludes with the “Current Situation”. It’s noteworthy that Barnes frequently employs taxonomic lists as a literary device throughout his body of work. This serves as a tool to bring clarity, particularly in domains of life that may appear hazy, by introducing a sense of order. This inclination is what led Martha to recall Agricultural and Horticultural Society’s Schedule of Rules she learnt at the fair she attended as a child with her parents. In her own words, “there was something about the lists – their calm organizations and their completeness - which satisfied her” (*England*, 9). It reflects her effort to capture the elusive, bring structure to the ambiguous, and find security in the uncertain. Martha’s list is to be followed by a briefer list of Paul’s sexuality.

The compilation of the “Fifty Quintessences of Englishness” in the novel, as orchestrated by Sir Jack and executed by Jeff, stands as a pivotal moment that encapsulates and critiques notions of national identity and cultural essence. Böhme’s observation that, seven years after the novel’s release, a strikingly similar initiative was undertaken by the British Government under Tony Blair’s administration - an online campaign to elect a hundred ‘Icons of England’ (1) - serves as an example of fiction preceding reality. Literary constructs echo in real-world developments, but also influence societal discourse and perception. The discussion and popularity garnered by Barnes’ list among critics mirror the popularity achieved by iconic literary symbols, such as Flaubert’s parrot.

More to the point, the portrayal of “Anglia” in the third part of the novel, as an Old England that has separated itself from the European Union, indeed presents an interesting presage to the actual Brexit event in 2020.

### **3.1.1. *England, England* – an Authentic Replica as a Reply to Authenticity**

Throughout the novel, the idea of authenticity is continually examined and re-examined, revealing its multifaceted nature. For Barnes, authenticity is not a static or absolute concept but is instead subject to interpretation, context, and perspective. On both personal and national planes, the novel deals with the ongoing tension between reality and representation, between the inherent and the constructed, in our understanding of what is truly authentic.

When Martha proposes to incorporate the local inhabitants of the Isle of Wight in order to showcase the traditional warmth and hospitality. Sir Jack unexpectedly replies: “That too can be learned, [...] And by being learned, it will be the more authentic” (*England*, 108). Such a view encapsulates a contradictory and paradoxical stance on the nature of authenticity. His assertion that authentic hospitality can be ‘learned’ and thereby enhanced, subverts authenticity, boiling it down to performance and presentation.

This inevitably prompts us to question of whether Sir Jack’s own grandiose persona and visionary ambitions are themselves a form of learned authenticity. If we consider Sir Jack’s grandiosity as a learned behaviour, it raises the issue: does the effectiveness and impact of this persona render it authentic in its own right? This notion that authenticity might reside not in the original but in the presentation (or replica for that matter) introduces a paradox where the line between the genuine and the constructed becomes blurred. Thus, Sir Jack’s personality appears as a *chiaroscuro* of his innate personality, unbeknown to the reader, and the assumed, therefore learned, persona he presents to the world.

His treatment of employees sustains this construct. In his role as an employer, Sir Jack employs tactics that can be described as intimidating or overbearing. Barnes ironically refers to these tactics as a form of Socratic dialogue. Yet, unlike the classical Socratic method aimed at uncovering ignorance and discovering universal truths, this approach is merely a display of power dynamics. Paradoxically, his severe and resolute efforts to harm or reprimand an employee are to be interpreted as a peculiar manifestation of affection. This is predicated on the idea that these behaviours indicate a certain degree of involvement and interest; if he were indifferent, he wouldn’t have bothered to intervene. Ironically, as a result, the employees are expected to be grateful for this bullying.

As the Project progresses, the Committee devises a logo that humorously recalls a nineteenth-century incident relayed by Dr Max. It involves a woman with a basket full of eggs who, when blown off a cliff by the wind, miraculously lands safely on the ground thanks to her umbrella. Sir Jack finds the story appealing and incorporates it into the Project’s logo. The Committee even playfully names the woman “Betsy”, drawing from the phrase ‘Heavens to Betsy’.

The irony doesn’t stop there. Sir Jack decides to transform this tale into the “Heavens To Betsy Bunjee Experience” for tourists. This is followed by the “Island Breakfast Experience”, where, as one

might expect, visitors are served the eggs they have safely descended with in a basket. As a bonus, they receive a “Certificate of Descent”, personally signed and stamped by Sir Jack.

The manner in which Sir Jack conducts his business ventures mirrors the operating principles of the contemporary world, no matter how absurd they may appear. In this particular case, it means declaring the crisis on the island, because “no legislator [...] could be seen denying that there was a crisis if someone said there was one. It looked like idleness or incompetence.” (*England*, pp. 126-127). This is in accordance with Sir Jack’s dictum: “success bred its own legitimacy” (*England*, 129). It is not unexpected though that such a strategy ends up in the Island’s independence, after the alleged “seven centuries of subjugation” (*England*, 170). Sir Jack was titled Island Governor.

During a conversation with Dr Max, Martha challenges his view on the authenticity of the Project, questioning whether he fabricated the entire story about the woman and the eggs, implying that the story is as bogus as the Project itself. Dr Max’s response is telling: “Is not the very notion of the authentic somehow, in its own way, bogus?” (*England*, 131). What he alludes to here is the concept of interference and intertextuality in literary and broader terms, all of which are the product of human manipulation. He goes on to assert: “[...] intention and purpose are merely being supplied by men, rather than by nature” (*England*, 132). Regarding the Project, Dr Max counterposes “intentionality” with “reliance on the brute hazard of nature” (*ibid*), asserting that the transformed landscape, shaped by human intention, is not bogus but rather superior. The same analogy applies to the Project, which is a product of human intervention and manipulation. He concludes with the following statement: “What we are looking at is almost always a replica [...] of something earlier. There is no prime moment” (*ibid*).

Dr Max also touches upon the concept of constructivism, acknowledging that both he and Martha are constructs, albeit with varying degrees of artfulness. He elaborates on how individuals inevitably adopt gestures, and ideas, suggesting that “Larceny is not ruled out. Most people [...] steal much of what they are. If they didn’t, what poor items they would be” (*England*, pp. 133-134). This perspective can be subjected to various interpretations. It is undeniable that as we grow, we mimic and borrow from our surroundings, influenced by our family, upbringing, and social environment. It is a natural part of maturation. However, each person contributes a unique and unprecedented value, be that *je ne sais quoi*, an indefinable quality that distinguishes them. Without this individuality, human progress would stagnate, art would become mere repetition of primal ideas, scientific advancement would halt, and the human race would not evolve. While all ideas are accessible in retrospect, it is our responsibility and freedom to construct our unique and unrepeatable version of ourselves. We do replicate the other(s), but the combination thereof is unreplicable.

As observed thus far, nothing is authentic in the theme park. Barnes amplifies this theme of inauthenticity by deconstructing various mythical metanarratives. As a result, the entire team engages in reevaluating and challenging the commonly accepted English myths, in order to accommodate to the market.

Martha challenges the traditional myth of Robin Hood and questions whether all Merrie Men must be men, introducing the idea of a “repositioning of myths for modern times” (*England*, 148). On that note, Dr Max deconstructs the myth from a sexual orientation perspective. He suggests that the name Robin is sexually ambiguous, while the name “Hood” carries an ambisexual connotation. He further reinterprets the idea of revision of the Robin Hood Band myth in an ironic tone: Friar Tuck becomes “a rebel priest with an eating disorder”, Little John - “a person suffering from either restricted growth or gigantism”, Will Scarlet - “a possible case of *Pityriasis rosea*” rash, while Maid Marian was possibly male. Their endeavour is characterized as “liberationist actions and redistributive economic policy” (*England*, pp. 149-150). Even Sir Jack found this historical revisionism and reframing “provocative” and sometimes “bordering on the offensive” (*England*, 152).

Martha finds herself in an ironic position as compared to where she began. Firstly, she manages, defends and justifies the project she herself doubted in at the beginning. She is so into the new reality, especially the one on the cameras, that she cannot remember if she had ever seen the spots in reality. Sir Jack is a caricatural and therefore pathetic version of himself - “a mere figurehead with no real power” depending on Martha’s empathy for allowance amount. Sir Jack was a victim of his own grandiosity, now allowed only his uniform, title and ritual appearances. Everything else is in Martha’s hands, as she has inherited Sir Jack in his role and office.

The depiction of the Royal Family in the narrative serves as a self-caricature, the mockery of a prevalent royal image and tradition, that once “presided over a third of the globe” (*England*, 160). Their Buckingham Palace is a replica at half-size of the original place, their guardsmen are just actors, and needless to say that gun salute is electronically generated. The King is portrayed as a parody of a monarch, existing “by contract and by permission” (*England*, 189). As Nünning observes, this scenario, where the King is essentially “hired to play himself”, represents an epitome of irony. The tendency to draw parallels between characters in the novel and real-life figures, such as the likening of Sir Jack to Rupert Murdoch and the “Kingy-Thingy” monarch to Prince Charles, while intriguing, exhibits a positivist approach that is pivotal in case the novel is interpreted as satire *pur et simple*. Thus, such direct correlations, though compelling, narrow the scope of the novel’s broader thematics and symbolism.

Julian Barnes’ work transcends mere societal critique; the significance lies not just in whether specific real-world figures inspired his characters, but rather in the thematic and allegorical implications these characters embody. The crucial question is not solely about the real-life counterparts these characters may represent, but what Barnes aims to convey and evoke in the reader through them. Thus, the focus shifts from identifying direct analogies to exploring the larger ideas and societal reflections these characters offer.

In this narrative, we encounter a unique portrayal of a King who no longer embodies the traditional essence of monarchy. Instead, he is presented as an ironized, exaggerated version of a monarch, a caricature that stretches beyond mere mimicry. This King even has look-alikes to stand in for him, further diluting the authenticity and singularity traditionally associated with a monarch. He is not just a straightforward literary imitation of a known monarch; rather, he represents the irony of a monarch whose role, image and reputation are taken to their utmost extremes.

Similar transformative process goes among the employees who have adopted their historical roles to such an extent that these personas become their new identities. A striking example is the actor portraying Dr Johnson, who not only assumes the character’s behaviours and mannerisms but goes as far as changing his name to Dr Johnson. This change is not merely performative; he deeply assimilates Dr Johnson’s character into his real life. Similarly, the members of the Robin Hood gang undergo a comparable metamorphosis, fully embodying their characters to the point where the distinction between their real selves and their roles perishes.

This aspect of the narrative can indeed be seen as a potent expression of irony in the novel. The irony lies in the way these characters, initially employed to play historical figures in a simulated environment, gradually become indistinguishable from the personas they represent, internalizing the roles they play and are paid for.

This observation leads to an inquiry I find pivotal in Barnes’ novel: How would we interact with historical figures if they were present in our contemporary world? The novel provocatively questions whether the reverence and pride we express in hindsight for these figures would translate into genuine respect and admiration if they were living among us today. Would our veneration persist in the face of their human flaws and idiosyncrasies, or would these historical icons become subjects of annoyance or even commodification? The possibility that our admiration might wane when confronted with their everyday habits and personalities presents a compelling contrast to the idealized versions of these figures that we uphold in memory and historical narrative.

Once again, Barnes' exploration of this theme challenges us to reflect on the nature of our relationship with history. And memory, for that matter, having in mind that both history and memory are some of central topics in his oeuvre. The dilemma is whether our respect for historical personages is contingent upon their distance in time and the resultant idealization, or whether it would withstand the realities of their tangible presence and human complexities. The novel, through its ironic treatment of historical figures, prompts a re-evaluation of our perceptions of and interactions with the past, highlighting the fine line between reverence, reality, and commodification.

### 3.1.2. Martha's Pursuit of Filling the Void

Martha's journey is initiated in her early years, an odyssey that unfolds not by her own choosing but through circumstances that compel her to seek a metaphorical missing piece. This path, determined for her rather than by her, casts a shadow of doubt on the reliability of her childhood recollections. Given the inherent corruption and unreliability of these early memories, and the emotions tied to them, Martha's recounting of her past, despite its apparent detail and precision, must be approached with caution. Martha is the common denominator for all three parts, but "although Martha figures in all three, she is different in each" (cf. Eder).

Guignery's observation about the "malleability of history and the unreliability of collective and individual memory" (*The Fiction of Julian Barnes*, 106) underscores this point, particularly in the context of the Isle of Wight's theme park, where history is reshaped, simplified, and caricatured for entertainment. This manipulation of history and memory mirrors Martha's personal quest to piece together her own fragmented past. Just as the theme park's portrayal of history is subject to reinterpretation and distortion, so too are Martha's memories and emotions, shaped by subjective experiences and the passage of time.

Therefore, Martha's narrative is deeply entangled with the broader narrative of England, both seeking coherence in a landscape where history and memory are fluid and often unreliable. Her quest for understanding and identity is paralleled by the construction of the theme park, where historical narratives are crafted and altered. This parallel suggests that Martha's personal history, like the national history presented in the theme park, is constructed from memories that are as malleable and open to reinterpretation as the stories that populate the Project's landscape.

Martha's love life is a great foreground for analysis of the authentic and fake. Despite her involvement with Paul, Martha remains unyielding in her attitude towards men. She adheres to principles instilled in her by her mother and guidance she accumulated as she matured. Furthermore, she consciously avoids pursuing true love, the love of her life, or the ideal romantic relationship. She would tell Paul "her mother's opinion than men are either wicked or weak" (*England*, 88). To her, love seems to come with a "subversive edge of boredom attached, tenderness with irritation" (*England*, 95). Her relationship with Paul does not get deeper, as she is "making sensible adjustments and sensible excuses" (*England*, 97). Nünning rightly observes that her relationship with Paul, the only one that we are familiar with and witness, "had gradually degenerated into as much of a fake as the project itself" (8).

In contrast, Paul holds a different perspective on love. Initially, he didn't believe that justice played a role in matters of sex and matters of the heart because there was no established system for assessing one's qualities, hence no merit to consider. He humorously notes: "You couldn't very well protest, try handing over a list of your hidden selling points" (*England*, 101). Ironically, this is precisely what he is doing for Sir Jack and the Project: meticulously marketing a country's history, tradition, and values, point by point.

Paul further perceives that absence of a structured system and merit lead individuals to rely on luck, chance or serendipity, for that matter. Paul, a "tenacious believer in luck" (*England*, 101) offers an example of this in his own life, highlighting the fact that he obtained his position through a chance encounter with Sir Jack in the restroom. He is well aware that there are no merits in Sir Jack's hire-

and-fire policy, as well. Eventually, in terms of authenticity, for Paul “falling in love with Martha made things *real*” (my italics, *England*, 103).

Martha has one last conversation with Dr Max, a historian she was reluctant to fire, even though he had deserved so. Their conversation could as well be interpreted as Marta’s conversation with herself. They discuss her attitude, and he says:

“You may not be religious, but you’re certainly pious. [...] Brittle cynicism is a truer response to the modern world than this... sentimental yearning.” (*England*, 237)

Martha establishes a comparison between her personal experience and the fate of Old England, pondering: “An individual’s loss of faith and a nation’s loss of faith, aren’t they much the same?” (*England*, 237). She then makes a foreboding remark: “Look what happened to England. Old England. It stopped believing in things” (ibid). Additionally, she asserts that Old England has lost its sense of seriousness. Contrasting her viewpoint, Dr Max finds it ironic, especially considering Martha’s recent removal from the Project, which was serious in its endeavours, but questions the purpose of such seriousness. “You think the nation does better if it has some serious beliefs, even if they’re arbitrary and cruel? Bring back the Inquisition, wheel on the Great Dictators [...]” (ibid).

At the moment of leaving the Island, Martha sees the image of a

“woman swept and hanging, a woman half of this world, terrified and awestruck, yet in the end safely delivered. A sense of falling, falling, falling, which we have every day of our lives, and then an awareness that the fall was being made gentler, was being arrested, by an unseen current whose existence no-one suspected.” (*England*, 238)

Martha sees herself, or God (for latter reference see Bradford, 95) mirrored in Betsy, the symbol of the Project she once managed and now emblematic of her rise and fall. She attempted to grasp the essence of her life, to capture her memories, and even contemplated making a list of them. However, she ultimately felt like a woman caught in the wind, falling off a cliff. Nevertheless, there is a glimmer of hope. What remains after the fall are some broken eggs and “the richness of all subsequent life after the moment” (*England*, 238).

In the final chapter, she returns to the inquiry into the nature of her memory, revisiting the dilemma that initiated the novel. Ironically, the sentence at the beginning of the novel could just as easily serve as its closing line: “Martha Cochrane was to live a long time, and in all her years she was never to come across a first memory which was not in her opinion a lie” (*England*, 4). What then of her dotage in Anglia?

She finds herself in the country where the history is invented: Jez Harris invents myths and stories, despite being reprimanded by Mr Mullin, the schoolmaster. He is the one who wants to revive, or rather, institute the village Fête from scratch. Marta is consulted on the matter being one of the few inhabitants who actually grew up in the mainland. This is the moment when she takes out her old book from Agricultural Fair, but it does not bring back memories as she expected. She thinks to herself: “She had failed her younger self by losing the priorities of the youth. Unless it was that her younger self had failed by not predicting the priorities of age” (*England*, 247).

Martha found herself wandering for decades, before deciding to settle in Old England. This is the country that eventually gave up its progress. International forces and neighbouring countries have welcomed its decline, even propelling its downfall. It is a place of “yokeldom and wilful antiquarianism” as the media have it (*England*, 254).

Eventually, “she became accustomed to the quiet and necessary repetitiveness, the caution, the incessant espionage, the helpfulness, the mental incest, the long evenings” (*England*, 257). She was not sure she had done right, and neither could she tell the same for her country. She could not decide whether Old England’s course was “mere willed antiquarianism” or “brave new venture” (irresistibly

reminiscent of Huxleyan *Brave New World*), nor was it discussed anymore. She ironically echoes the verse “for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory” with the following: “[...] for thine is the wigwam, the flowers and the story” (*England*, 258).

As for nostalgia, Martha says that perhaps she is feeling a nostalgia, but “of a truer kind: not for what you knew, or thought you had known, as a child, but for what you could never have known” (*England*, 260). The novel closes with Martha watching the Fête being established. Bradford has regarded the birth of new Fête as “disdainful pathos” claiming that Barnes should not be understood here as sympathetic for the country (97). However, Barnes himself claims: “[...] memory is identity [...]” (*England*, 251); therefore, the country is trying to remember in order to regain, or reinvent its identity. I see it as Hope.

### 3.1.3. *Anglia*: What Kind of *Topia* is it?

I found the third part of the novel most compelling for definition in terms of literary conventions. Even though it is the shortest one, it bears significance in terms of a possible outcome of a country’s devolution. I was not alone in such an inquiry; many critics have debated the nature of the topos as depicted in *Anglia*. This chapter shall delve into labels, such as: utopia, dystopia, retrotopia, pastoral anti-pastoral, post-pastoral, pastoral elegy, exploring how the novel engages with and possibly subverts these traditional literary conventions.

Some critics have referred to it as ‘Arcadia’ (Bradford, 95), thus indicating the pastoral nature of the closing chapter. Barnes gives us the straightforward cue: its title, “*Anglia*”, is self-explanatory. The term “*Anglia*”, being the Latin name for England (*Anglia*), signifies the backward direction in which Old England is inevitably heading. By using “*Anglia*”, Barnes seems to be deliberately invoking the historical and cultural connotations associated with the ancient name of England. This choice could be seen as a literary device to underscore the theme of regression or a return to earlier times. In addition, by naming the final chapter “*Anglia*”, Barnes might be setting up a direct contrast between the past (*Anglia*) and the present (*England*), inviting readers to consider the differences, similarities, and the trajectory of change over time. Thus, the title “*Anglia*” serves not just as a geographic indicator but as a thematic compass. Therefore, I found this chapter particularly intriguing in the context of literary genres.

Many scholars have easily categorized it as a pastoral or pastoral elegy. However, such categorization should be done with caution, or at least in broad sense, due to the reason best described by Alpers as one of the irritants that led him to write the book titled *What Is Pastoral?*; as he explains in his footnote: “‘Pastoral’ is used in an extended sense [...] to refer not to the specific set of obsolescent conventions of the eclogue tradition, but to all literature-poetry or prose, fiction or nonfiction - that celebrates the ethos of nature/rurality over against the ethos of the town or city” (ix). Or, as Gifford put it in simpler terms when commenting on English literature after Renaissance in Europe: “pastoral came to refer to any literature that described the countryside in contrast to the court or the city” (19).

Pastoral can be defined in various dichotomies, two of which I would like to emphasize: the contrast between the old and the new, and the distinction between the literal and metaphorical meanings.

Gifford delineates the multifaceted nature of pastoral literature. Pastoral texts, originally set in idyllic rural landscapes, are noted for their “idealization, nostalgia, and escapism” (18), particularly as they were crafted for an audience accustomed to the intricacies of court life. This genre often serves as a contrast to the complexities and corruptions of urban or courtly existence, depicting the countryside as a symbol of purity and simplicity. Furthermore, Gifford emphasizes the “pastoral momentum of retreat and return” (ibid.). Thus, characters often retreat into the pastoral world as a form of escape or search for truth, only to return to their original settings with newfound insights or resolutions. The portrayal of shepherds as universal representatives of humanity extends the relevance

of pastoral themes beyond their immediate rural context. By drawing on the root word ‘pastor’, pastoral literature imbues these characters with a didactic purpose, using their interactions with nature and simple living as allegories for broader human experiences and truths. As Gifford explains, “pastoral concern might be for human life or the life of the environment of retreat, or both” (ibid).

On the other hand, the anti-pastoral incorporates an undermining counterforce or corrective function (cf. Gifford, 25-26) serving to challenge or subvert the idealized notions of rural life and simplicity typically found in pastoral literature.

Barnes’ “Anglia” is presented as an impasse and is set in juxtaposition or opposition to England. It is conceptualized as a distinct entity, separate from England rather than engaged in a dialectical relationship with it; therefore, the anti-pastoral’s characteristic of serving as a counterforce or corrective to the pastoral might not be directly applicable. Anglia functions more as a parallel or alternative reality without direct interaction or reconciliation. This suggests a different literary dynamic at play.

Speaking of alternative reality, it is worth noting the similarity with uchronia. This genre is also referred to as alternative history, counterfactual history, what-if history, or history with ifs and buts. In this sense, Barnes deploys this genre in the novel *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, as examined in Chapter 2 of this analysis. When considering “Anglia”, the application of uchronia-like elements presents a similar ‘what-if’ scenario. Anglia represents an alternative reality, arising from a specific historical divergence and constructed as a hypothetical or speculative reality. This characteristic aligns it with aspects of dystopian literature, where ‘what-if’ scenarios are often used to explore the consequences of societal, political, or technological developments gone awry. Thus, Anglia might be aptly described as a diatopic counter-uchronia, focusing not on the possibilities of an alternate past, but rather on those of an alternate future.

Referring to the classical interpretation of pastoral elegy, we find it encompasses elements such as a dirge, mourning for the deceased, or the grief over a profound loss. It includes the motif of ‘All Nature Mourns’, symbolizing collective sorrow, alongside feelings of resentment towards unyielding destiny. The melancholic tone, stemming from the grief of loss, is often juxtaposed with the perpetual cycle of nature and the transient nature of human life. Additionally, there is a comforting aspect, offering solace in the belief that the departed continues to exist in an alternate realm (see Norlin, pp. 294-312 for reference).

However, Martha does not mourn. Thus, it indicates a significant departure from the conventional role of a grieving individual in a pastoral elegy. Instead of embodying sorrow or loss, Martha is described as seamlessly integrating into the village life, suggesting a sense of acceptance and belonging. She “herself fitted into the village, because she herself no longer itched with her own private questions” (*England*, 257). Her lack of mourning can be seen as a reflection of her internal resolution, moving beyond the traditional elegiac expressions of grief and melancholy.

In the context of the pastoral elegy, where nature often symbolizes continuity and a cycle of life that contrasts with human mortality, Martha’s acceptance might symbolize a reconciliation with the natural order of things.

Nonetheless, it is my contention that the pastoral element in literature accentuates the connection to nature and provides a contrast to urban settings at its core. In contrast, the depiction of Anglia, representing the future of Olde Englande, takes on a dystopian character, serving as a warning. Moreover, on initial observation, Anglia may appear pastoral, but we must view it in the context of preceding chapters. It intertwines with earlier parts of the novel, as outlined by Hutcheon (cf. Hutcheon in the Introduction here). Consequently, it is inadequate to categorize it as inherently bucolic; rather, it assumes a dystopian nature when examined within the broader narrative.

Whenever we encounter the vision of a degraded society, that is the antithesis of an ideal or utopian society, we are compelled to shout: dystopia. But, what does the concept of dystopia actually entail?

*The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* explains two prevailing ideas in dystopian literature in the second half of the twentieth century, marked by post-war and cold-war atmosphere and rise of science and technology: “on the one hand, the idea of totalitarianism; on the other hand, the idea of scientific and technological progress which, instead of impelling humanity to prosper, has sometimes been instrumental in the establishment of dictatorships” (Gifford, 18). In Anglia, we do not speak of dictatorship, on the contrary, the country has abandoned any political ambition, and is not even subject of interest of any prospective dictator. The country is also devoid of technological progress, and prosperity *en general*.

If we turn to a more detailed explanation of dystopia, the Companion defines the dystopic model of *if this goes on* as “a future in which some aspect of the present had continued and worsened” (151).<sup>17</sup> In this line, it can be asserted that “Anglia” does have the dystopian trait, as seen from the passage:

“Old England had cut its own throat and was lying in the gutter beneath a spectral gas-light, its only function as a dissuasive example to others. [. . .] Old England had lost its history, and therefore - since memory is identity - had lost all sense of itself.” (*England*, 251)

Finally, in my quest to find a fitting term for the final chapter of the novel, I discovered that retrotopia most effectively encapsulates the intended meaning.

The concept of retrotopia, as articulated by Zygmunt Bauman, presents a definition reasoned within the realm of sociological and philosophical discourse. Bauman explores retrotopia through both synchronic and diachronic lenses, positing it as a concept born from the double negation of the utopian ideal, initially conceptualized by Thomas More in 1516. In his seminal work “Utopia”, More envisages human happiness inextricably linked to a specific topos, defined as a “fixed place, a polis, a city, a sovereign state - each under a wise and benevolent ruler” (Bauman, 9). Bauman observes that this notion has undergone a transformation: the utopian vision was first ‘unfixed’, dissociated from any particular topos and transformed into an individualized, privatized, and personalized pursuit. This evolution, according to Bauman, sets the stage for a secondary negation, wherein these modern interpretations of utopia confront their own negation, culminating in the emergence of ‘retrotopia’. This concept, thus, represents a dialectical synthesis arising from the historical interplay of utopian and anti-utopian ideas.

While Zygmunt Bauman’s conception of retrotopia marks a distinct departure from traditional notions of utopia, it retains certain foundational elements of its predecessor. According to Bauman, retrotopia preserves the essential aspect of a territorially sovereign topos, a firm ground that offers a semblance of stability and self-assurance, much in line with Thomas More’s original utopian vision (cf. Bauman, 11). However, retrotopia diverges significantly in its rejection of the pursuit of “ultimate perfection” (ibid). Instead, it embraces the notion of non-finality and endemic dynamism, suggesting a constant state of change and evolution. This approach inherently allows for the continuous possibility - and indeed, desirability - of ongoing changes, a concept that traditional utopias, with their fixed ideals of perfection, inherently preclude.

---

<sup>17</sup> It is important to distinguish dystopia from anti-utopia, the latter being “an equally dismal future, but one which is intended as a criticism of utopianism or of some particular eutopia” (*Companion*, 151). Having established that “Anglia” does not maintain a relation with England, but instead exists as a parallel or contrasting entity, it becomes irrelevant to analyze “Anglia” in the context of anti-utopia.

Bauman's analysis aligns with the utopian spirit in order to reconcile security with freedom, yet it does so through a lens that acknowledges and even valorises continuous change. This perspective resonates with the principles of non-finality, which I am inclined to interpret as hope, and endemic dynamism, correlating with the concept of heterotopia, as discussed in Chapter 3.2. herein. Bauman's retrotopia is not rigid or finished: it emerges as an adaptable model, a contemporary reinterpretation of utopian thought that acknowledges the complexities and uncertainties of the modern world.

Such a diachronic presentation of retrotopia is followed by its synchronic delineation. Bauman further describes it as

“conscious attempts at iteration, rather than reiteration, of the *status quo ante*, existing or imagined to have been existing before the second negation - its image having been by now significantly recycled and modified anyway, in the process of selective memorizing, intertwined with selective forgetting” (12).

The dichotomy Bauman presents between “iteration” and “reiteration” bears significance. In Anglia, this concept is manifested through Martha's and the society's endeavours not merely to replicate a past way of life, but to create a new, pre-Project one that is informed by the past. They are establishing new mode of life based on the “contributions/corrections supplied by its immediate predecessor” (Bauman, 11). New Fête is being established as a collateral for new future: “It had been Mr Mullin's idea to revive – or perhaps, since records were inexact, to institute – the village Fête” (*England*, 246). Martha lives with the new found calmness, “a patience discovered late in life” (*England*, 258), having come to terms with her own issues.

The mutual relation between Matha and Anglia is described as follows:

“Was it a brave new venture, one of spiritual renewal and moral self-sufficiency, as political leaders maintained? Or was it simply inevitable, a forced response to economic collapse, depopulation and European revenge? These questions were not debated in the village: a sign perhaps that the country's fretful, psoriatic self-consciousness had finally come to an end. [...] She no longer debated whether or not life was a triviality, and what the consequences might be if it were. Nor did she know whether the stillness she had attained was proof of maturity or weariness.” (*England*, 257)

As *Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* explains, one of the most important characteristics of utopias<sup>18</sup> is that they are human-centered, “not relying on chance or on the intervention of external, divine forces in order to impose order on society” (Claeys, 7). In the context of a retrotopian Anglia, perfectly matched Martha is ending up as a non-believer. As a child, her lack of faith was ironically justified by her intelligence: “Martha was a clever girl, therefore not a believer” (*England*, 12). Over time, her faith dwindled, giving way to an increasing sense of cynicism. A self-fulfilling prophecy that cynicism is a “very lonely virtue” (*England*, 13) accurately predicted her solitude. Ultimately, Martha ended up alone, as forewarned in her youth. Despite this, she occasionally visited the church, seeking solace and insight.

Her visits to the church, despite her disbelief, indicate a search for solitude and meaning. This action reveals an acknowledgment of the church as a place of reflection and introspection, irrespective of her personal beliefs. It underscores a universal human inclination towards seeking meaning and understanding, even in the absence of religious faith. This behaviour is particularly significant in the retrotopian context of Anglia, where societal order is not predicated on divine intervention. Martha's

---

<sup>18</sup> Utopia is understood here as a comprehensive term encompassing all its variations, including anti-utopia and dystopia.

actions suggest a longing for a connection or experience beyond the rational and the empirical, even in a society that prioritizes human-centered order and profit-oriented business.

Vera Nünning analyzes “Anglia” in the context of deconstruction on two levels: authenticity and rural idealization. She notes that this representation of England is neither genuinely authentic nor an idyllic rural utopia (pp/ 21-22). A key illustration of the lack of authenticity in “Anglia” is the character Jez Harris, an immigrant, likely of Eastern European origin, with his real name being Jack Oshinsky.

Harris, assuming a new identity, tells made-up myths and stories to the visitors of Anglia. These tales are not based on actual historical facts. Rather, they are crafted performances tailored to meet the visitors’ expectations and stir their imaginations. This method mirrors the treatment of myths as depicted in the theme park. Harris is being scorned and reprimanded for his fabricated tales, in a xenophobic, or Old English, manner: “Others in the village put things more plainly: for them, Harris’s fabulation and cupidity were proof of the farrier’s unAnglian origins” (*England*, 244).

Similarly, Vera Nünning draws a parallel between the Project and “Anglia”, suggesting that both entities, in their distinct manners, strive to recreate idealized versions of the same country. This observation points to a thematic convergence within the narrative: both the Project’s theme park and the rural Anglia are attempts at reconstructing an England that aligns more with nostalgic or romanticized visions than with historical or contemporary reality. She opines that: “Adjusting the past to their own specific needs, both ventures result in the invention of new, rather than old traditions” (22).

### **3.2. *England, England* as a Heterotopia**

“Le jardin, c'est la plus petite parcelle du monde et puis c'est la totalité du monde.”<sup>19</sup>

Foucault, M., *Des espaces autres* (1967)

Heterotopia was not a new term in discourse, when Foucault introduced it in his lectures. *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* explains: “[...] it was created as a medical term to refer to a misplacement of organs in the human body” (Claeys, 18). The concept of heterotopia has evolved from its origins as a medical and architectural term to acquire broader philosophical significance. Initially used to describe physical spaces of otherness, heterotopia has come to encompass a wider array of meanings in philosophical discourse, often representing spaces that are simultaneously real and imagined, and that challenge traditional notions of place and order.

In the text that served as a basis for his lecture given in March 1967, *Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias* (published in 1984)<sup>20</sup>, Michel Foucault introduces his concept of heterotopia, whose meaning originates from two Greek morphemes: *héteros* (other) and *tópos* (place).

In discussing the concept of sites and their unique spatial relations, Foucault says that he is “interested in certain ones that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (3). Foucault identifies these unique spaces as ‘utopias’ and ‘heterotopias’ (as different spaces, those other spaces). Moreover, Foucault’s framework could be extended to encompass ‘dystopias’ or ‘anti-utopias’, which represent spaces of negative or distorted ideals.

---

<sup>19</sup> This holographic nature of *jardin* corresponds to Baudrillard’s notion of holographic reality, as discussed in the subchapter 3.3. herein.

<sup>20</sup> Hereinafter the text shall be referred to as *Heterotopias*. The source, referred to herein, includes the following disclaimer: “Although not reviewed for publication by the author and thus not part of the official corpus of his work, the manuscript was released into the public domain for an exhibition in Berlin shortly before Michel Foucault’s death. Translated from the French by Jay Miskowiec”.

Indeed, Foucault's exploration of heterotopias is elucidated through six principles, each shedding light on different facets of these unique spaces. In the context of Pitman's conceptualization of a perfect England, the latter four principles of Foucault's theory are particularly relevant.

Foucault's third principle states that: "heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (6). Such spaces defy conventional geographic and logical boundaries, allowing for an amalgamation of diverse elements in a way that is typically impossible in ordinary locations. A helicopter tour of the Island, "a sort of fast-forward version of England" (*England*, 164) mirrors Foucault's third principle remarkably. The tour presents a rapid succession of iconic English landmarks - Big Ben, Anne Hathaway's Cottage, the White Cliffs of Dover, Wembley Stadium, Stonehenge, a royal palace, and Sherwood Forest. Each of these sites is geographically dispersed across England. However, in the context of the helicopter tour, they are experienced in immediate sequence, effectively compressing space and time. This juxtaposition creates a unique, heterotopic experience where the breadth of English heritage and identity is synthesized into a condensed, yet comprehensive, visual narrative. It aligns with Foucault's concept by creating a space where multiple, normally incompatible sites coexist, providing a concentrated essence of English identity and history.

The fourth principle introduces the temporal aspect in the way that "heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time" (Foucault, 6). This moment is referred to by Foucault as heterochrony. In terms of heterochrony, heterotopias can be linked to indefinite accumulation of time, such as museums and libraries; on the other hand, there are those oriented to time in "the mode of the festival" (*ibid*, 7). Such are fairgrounds.

In the context of this temporal dynamics, Barnes subverts the expected temporal narrative. Typically, one might anticipate that a project like Sir Jack's, which can be likened to a fairground, would represent a transient, ephemeral space - a temporary showcase of England, contrasting with Old England that is presumed to be stable and enduring. However, Barnes inverts this expectation. The 'new' England, embodied by Sir Jack's Project, is not transient but continues to evolve and grow, suggesting a dynamic and enduring quality. In contrast, Old England, which one might expect to be eternal (in Foucauldian terms) is depicted as regressing or deteriorating. This reversal challenges the conventional perception of historical and cultural constructs as static or immutable.

Foucault's fifth principle focuses on the dual nature of heterotopias in terms of accessibility and exclusion. This principle underscores that heterotopias are neither freely accessible nor completely closed off; instead, their entry and exit are governed by certain conditions or rituals. Namely, "heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. [...] To get in one must have certain permission and make certain gestures" (Foucault, 7).

In the context of the Project, this principle manifests in the form of exclusivity and controlled access. The theme-park, representing a heterotopic space, is not a freely accessible public domain. Instead, it operates under a set of specific rules and prerequisites for entry. Visitors to this reconstructed England must not only prove their solvency, but also agree to abide by the regulations of the Project. This includes accepting a unique currency system exclusive to the Project, among others.

This system of controlled access aligns with Foucault's idea of heterotopias as spaces that are in essence contradictory, being both isolated and penetrable at the same time, but under certain conditions. The theme-park, in this case, becomes a microcosm, a controlled environment that replicates aspects of England, but under a specific set of rules and norms that differ from those in the outside world.

The application of Foucault's sixth principle to Sir Jack's Project in Barnes' *England* is a profound illustration of the concept of heterotopias as spaces of illusion and/or compensation. This principle elucidates how heterotopias function in relation to the rest of the space, oscillating between creating a space of illusion or a space of compensation. It directly resonates with both Sir Jack's Project and Old England, as heterotopia can be either a "space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory [...]" (Foucault, 8). Or else, heterotopia can be "a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (ibid.).

Sir Jack's Project can be seen as a heterotopia of illusion. It offers certain 'Alice-in-Wonderland' experience, a passage "through a mirror"<sup>21</sup> into a new world that is both different and familiar, "as if in a rare dream" (*England*, 120). Such a heterotopia of illusion creates a space presenting distorted, though recognizable, version of reality. The visitors are not just entering a replica of England; they are stepping into a dream-like version, an illusion that reflects and distorts the reality they know.

Simultaneously, Sir Jack's Project functions as a heterotopia of compensation. It's described as "everything you imagined England to be, but more convenient, cleaner, friendlier, and more efficient" (*England*, 184). This characterization aligns with the notion of a compensatory heterotopia, where the created space serves as an improved version of reality. It compensates for the messiness, inefficiencies, and imperfections of the 'real' England. In this sense, the Project doesn't just mirror reality; it seeks to rectify it, offering a meticulously curated and enhanced experience.

Interestingly enough, Foucault recognizes colonies as great examples of such heterotopias, stating as example the Puritan societies that the English had founded in America and Jesuit colonies that were founded in South America: marvellous, absolutely regulated colonies in which human perfection was effectively achieved.

Indeed, Foucault's recognition of colonies as exemplary forms of heterotopias, particularly those of the Puritans in America and Jesuit colonies in South America, underscores the broader application of his concept. In these contexts, colonies represent heterotopias of both illusion and compensation, as they were envisioned and constructed as spaces of idealized order and perfection, having compensated the imperfections of the societies from which they originated.

Foucault's idea that heterotopias can either expose the illusory nature of real spaces or create a perfected counter-site is vividly embodied in Sir Jack's Project. It serves as a critical commentary on the human desire to idealize and perfect reality, as well as a reflection on the nature of cultural and national identities. The Project exposes the fluid boundary between reality and illusion and challenges the notion of what is considered 'real' or 'ideal' in a societal context. This duality of Sir Jack's Project - as both a space of illusion and compensation - makes it a quintessential example of Foucault's concept of heterotopia, encapsulating the complex interplay between reality, perception, and idealization.

On another level, the Project embodies the heterotopia of compensation, with an added temporal category. Namely, Martha explains that: "[t]he West always treated the East as a brothel, upmarket or downmarket. Now the position's reversed. We're chasing Pacific Rim dollars, so we have to offer a historical quid pro quo" (*England*, 92). Needless to say, Foucault also mentions brothels along with colonies, as an example of heterotopia in terms of the sixth principle. The Project, in this context, represents a heterotopia that compensates for historical imbalances. The historical taking from the East is now being compensated in the present, with the West adapting to cater to the economic and cultural demands of Eastern societies. Brothels, as heterotopias, are spaces of alternate social order and norms, existing within but apart from the mainstream society. They represent a world inverted, where conventional social structures and moral codes are suspended or reversed. In the context of Sir Jack's Project, this notion of inversion is mirrored in the shifting economic and cultural power

---

<sup>21</sup> Passing 'through a mirror' is a recurrent trope, inherently implying a heterotopia behind the mirror.

dynamics between the West and the East. What was once a dynamic of exploitation and dominance is now being reconfigured into one of economic dependence and cultural mimicry. Thus, the Project becomes a heterotopia not just in its distinct 'otherness' but also as a space of compensation, rebalancing historical dynamics.

Similarly, the transformation of Old England can be observed as becoming a heterotopia of compensation. Once a central force in global affairs, Old England's devolution into a heterotopia reflects a shift in its cultural and geopolitical significance. It becomes a space that is trying to compensate for its lost prominence and influence, by instituting its identity and traditions in a world where it no longer sets the rules. This shift is emblematic of Foucault's notion of heterotopias as reflective of societal changes and historical transitions.

### 3.3. *England, England* as a Simulacrum

"I observe, I accept, I assume, I analyze the second revolution, that of the twentieth century, that of postmodernity, which is the immense process of the destruction of meaning, equal to the earlier destruction of appearances. He who strikes with meaning is killed by meaning." (Baudrillard, 105)

References to Baudrillard and his critiques are indispensable in discussions of postmodern culture and its representations. Baudrillard, in his introductory quotation, returns to the Hebrew Bible, specifically Ecclesiastes, to support his claim that "the simulacrum is true" (1). This statement underpins his philosophy of simulacrum and simulation, a process that is fully realized in the age of postmodernism - a period where Cartesian certainties no longer prevail. Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum - a copy that no longer possesses an original - dominates his analysis of postmodernity. As Allen articulates: "For Baudrillard, Postmodern culture is dominated by the simulacrum, a word taken from the work of Plato and referring to a copy which does not possess an original. Hence our experience of modern art [...] increasingly comes to us in forms of reproduction" (Allen, 182). Allen further notes that the simulacrum (the copy) has replaced the real (see Allen, 183).

This subchapter explores how these ideas are reflected in Julian Barnes' *England*, examining the function of Barnesian irony within the framework of Hutcheon's theoretical perspectives on irony. Several points of interest from Baudrillard's seminal work and the parallels between this work and Barnes' novel will be drawn:

- The Nature of Simulacra

Baudrillard asserts the fractal or holographic nature of reproduction, stating that "the real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control - and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these" (1). This reproduction no longer needs to be rational, as it is no longer measured against an ideal or negative instance; it is purely operational, and this has become its most valuable merit. Baudrillard further claims, in an ironic manner, that reality is no longer real, as there is no imaginary to contrast and challenge its absolute value. According to him, "it is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere" (ibid).

Baudrillard's philosophy progresses from representation to simulation, culminating in the concept of simulacrum. While representation entails "the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real (even if this equivalence is Utopian, it is a fundamental axiom)" (Baudrillard, 4), simulation subverts this equivalence, negating the sign as a value. Baudrillard elaborates on the intricate mutual relation between representation and simulation: "Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum" (ibid).

In this trajectory, Baudrillard distinguishes five successive phases of the image, or reality: the reflection of a profound reality; masking and denaturing a profound reality; masking the absence of a profound reality; no relation to any reality whatsoever; and the image's own pure simulacrum.

In line with this concept of simulacra, Sir Jack presents his project with an illocutionary statement that aligns with Baudrillard's simulacrum:

“We are not talking theme park. [...] We are not talking heritage centre. We are not talking Disneyland, World's Fair, Festival of Britain, Legoland or Parc Asterix. [...] We are offering *the thing itself*” (original italics, *England*, p. 59).

This statement serves as an introduction to the next point, irresistibly connecting Sir Jack's project to Baudrillard's example of Disneyland:

- Baudrillard's Disneyland and Barnes' *England*

Baudrillard describes Disneyland as a quintessential hyperreal space, claiming that it exists to mask the fact that “real” America itself has become Disneyland. Disneyland is presented as imaginary to make us believe that the rest of America is real. However, places like Los Angeles and the surrounding areas are actually part of the hyperreal order of simulation. This phenomenon is not about false representation but about concealing the fact that the real no longer exists, thereby preserving the illusion of reality: “It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle” (Baudrillard, 8).

This concept finds a direct parallel in Sir Jack's ambitious project in *England*. In both cases, the simulated experience aims to convince visitors of its authenticity. However, in reality, it underscores the absence of the real. Visitors flock to these places seeking genuine contact with imaginary characters or expedited experiences of history and tradition. These experiences differ from simple representation by embodying the principles of simulation and hyperreality.

The pretentious nature of such projects, driven by commercial interests and the inflated egos of their creators, mirrors Baudrillard's critique of hyperreality. The simulation of traditional values and historical sites, governed by profitability, creates an effect where “the imaginary conceals that reality no more exists outside than inside the limits of the artificial perimeter” (Baudrillard, 9). The dystopian involution of England following the death of the Queen Mother in *England* illustrates Baudrillard's idea that the real cedes to the hyperreal, further emphasizing the precession of the model over the original.

Baudrillard's reflections on the hierarchy of these concepts lead us to explore the next point: the intricate dynamics between representation, simulation, and simulacrum:

- The Precession of the Model

Baudrillard's keystone idea is that in the logic of simulation, the model precedes reality. He writes:

“[...] we are in a logic of simulation, which no longer has anything to do with a logic of facts and an order of reason. Simulation is characterized by a precession of the model, of all the models based on the merest fact - the models come first, their circulation, orbital like that of the bomb, constitutes the genuine magnetic field of the event.” (Baudrillard, 11)

In *England*, the model continues to evolve while the original country degenerates, illustrating how the model's development purposefully leads to the country's involution.

Barnes articulates this principle through the voice of the French intellectual character, who describes the project's modernity as follows:

“Once there was only the world, directly lived. Now there is representation - let me fracture that word, the re-presentation - of the world. It is not a substitute for that plain and primitive world, but an enhancement and enrichment, an ironization and summation of the world. This is where we live today.” (*England*, 55)

The project, driven by the owner's inflated ego and the simulated behaviour of the employees, is an ironic attempt to compress the entire country's traditional values and historical sites, governed by the ultimate principle of profitability. When compared with the reality of England, we encounter the precise phenomenon Baudrillard described as the imaginary veiling the fact that reality ceases to exist both outside and within the confines of the artificial boundary. Following the death of the Queen Mother, England experiences a dystopic involution - reality as we know it perishes, ceding to an Industrial Era lifestyle and mentality.

The precession of the model is evident here - the model continues to develop, while the original country degenerates. The model's evolution purposely leads to England's involution, assuming the role of an authority in creating the reality of the country of origin by deploying all available resources, predominantly the media. The irony of this process lies in Baudrillard's postulate: “Everything is metamorphosed into its opposite to perpetuate itself in its expurgated form” (13).

Barnes' work, particularly *England*, provides a new perspective and revisit on authenticity that points towards the future rather than the past. As Delnieppe points out: “Barnes provides a redefinition of authenticity as something which implies not so much a movement backwards to the past as one pointing to the future” (Delnieppe). This modern approach aligns with Baudrillard's view that in the modern world, we prefer replicas to originals because they offer greater excitement and engagement.

Ultimately, Barnes' portrayal of Sir Jack's project embodies Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and hyperreality, along with McHale's theory of multiple planes of reality. By creating a simulated environment that visitors perceive as authentic, Barnes illustrates the ironization and summation of the world, highlighting the complex interplay between reality and representation in postmodern culture. This perspective allows us to understand irony not merely as a rhetorical device but as a profound commentary on the nature of reality and authenticity in the contemporary world.

Hutcheon's theory is particularly relevant here: irony achieves its full potential within the project's concept as it subverts its model, further acquiring a life of its own with the consensus of both its creators and visitors. This dynamic aligns with Hutcheon's discussions on art, where she examines how irony functions within and beyond its initial context.

Barnes describes the project experience in terms reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland*, framing it in ironic terms of opposition. The reference to passing through a mirror into a new world suggests the disorienting and transformative power of simulation. This mirrors the postmodern condition where familiar structures and meanings are constantly questioned and redefined. The irony of this experience gains an epistemological dimension as Sir Jack asserts:

“We want our Visitors to feel that they have passed through a mirror, that they have left their own worlds and entered a new one, different yet strangely familiar, where things are not done as in other parts of the inhabited planet, but as if in a rare dream.”  
(*England*, 120)

#### 4. *The Noise of Time*: Commentaries and Context

“My hero was a coward. Or rather, often considered himself a coward. Or rather, was placed in a position in which it was impossible not to be a coward.” (Barnes in “The Guardian”)

*The Noise of Time*<sup>22</sup> is Barnes’ long-awaited novel published in 2016, the first since the 2011 Booker-winning *The Sense of an Ending*. Duncan White commented that “[w]hile his peers burned out with self-consciously big books, Barnes wrote more modestly and his talent aged well”<sup>23</sup> (D. White). Indeed, it can be observed that in *The Noise* he has demonstrated a maturation as a novelist. McAlpin has wittily described the novel in musical terms as “elegantly structured as a concerto in three movements bookended by a resonant overture and coda” (McAlpin). Denk continues the same musical analogy, claiming that given the widespread familiarity and frequent retelling of Shostakovich’s story, “Barnes’s role here is less that of a novelist than of a musician” (Denk), in the sense that his endeavour is to breathe new life into a seminal narrative, engaging with an Important Story, rather than seeking to reframe it, through his interpretation, as an expression of reverence to the composer. Barnes is admittedly a life-long fan of Shostakovich, having mentioned on several occasions that the composer has been in his life for more than half a century (see Barnes in “The Guardian”).

Finney rightly observes that Shostakovich has been present in Barnes’ many pieces, forming a thread of intertextuality and recurring motif: “More Shostakovich references can be found in *Letters from London* (1995), *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), and *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (2008)” (Finney, *Irony: Truth’s Disguise*). Barnes’ aspiration to venture beyond purely literary works aligns with his endeavours in writing about paintings and music, as seen in this instance. His writings, while inspired by his personal interests, sports and politics included, transcend mere personal taste. He delves into discussions about art that extend beyond any specific artwork to address broader questions about the nature and objectives of art itself.

Rentzenbrink highlights that Barnes has been particularly gratified by initial reactions to the book for enlightening readers about the severity of Shostakovich’s circumstances. These readers, who previously perceived Shostakovich as merely colluding with the Soviet authorities, now recognize the intricate dilemmas he faced. Barnes comments on the ease with which we pass judgment, especially notable regarding the Cold War, suggesting we often too swiftly assess the situations in other nations. “We do judge - especially [so] during the Cold War - we judge other countries too easily” (Barnes in Rentzenbrink).

Engaging with this fictional biography, readers may feel compelled to scrutinize the historical references, individuals, and events depicted, potentially uncovering certain inaccuracies or discrepancies. Yet, Barnes pre-empts this impulse in the *Author’s note* at the novel’s conclusion. He cites the extensive bibliography on Shostakovich and particularly credits Elizabeth Wilson for her biographical contributions. Furthermore, he issues a disclaimer, albeit placed at the end of the book, which arguably might have been more conveniently positioned at the beginning: “[...] this is my book not hers; and if you haven’t liked mine, then read hers” (*The Noise*, 184). This metafictional and witty

---

<sup>22</sup> Hereinafter referred to as *The Noise*.

<sup>23</sup> Duncan White refers to a group of aspiring writers known for their habit of gathering at a kebab house on the outskirts of Bloomsbury for spirited Friday lunches in the late 1970s. This group comprised Julian Barnes along with his contemporaries: Martin Amis, James Fenton, Christopher Hitchens, Clive James, Ian McEwan, and, subsequently, Salman Rushdie (D. White).

remark absolves him of the obligation to accuracy in a work that was never intended to be a strict biography, shifting the narrative's focus from factual precision to interpretive exploration.

Ulfried Reichardt is one of the critics who has discussed the novel focusing on irony, and, moreover, has placed the novel in a wider context. In his paper *Shostakovich, Totalitarianism, and Anglo-American Fiction: Powers, Barnes and Vollmann* he delves into the resurgence of interest in the twenty-first century for the Soviet composer within Anglo-American literature. He opines that it is not coincidental. Reichardt ascribes the recent interest into the composer's life to two motivations: the current historical and political landscape, and consequent intellectual changes. While Shostakovich's music remains unchanged, the context around it has transformed dramatically. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the initial optimism in the West about the spread of democracy and liberalism have faced setbacks. In recent years, there's been a growing disillusionment with the promise of liberal democracy, which has not only failed to assert its dominance but is also being eroded from within by populist and authoritarian movements. These developments challenge previously sacrosanct liberties, signalling that the threat of totalitarianism, thought to be a relic of the early twentieth century, might once again be on the horizon. This changing backdrop has sparked a renewed examination of Shostakovich's life, offering insights into how his music was crafted under the shadow of political pressures similar to those re-emerging today (Reichardt, 50).

The other reason for the revitalized interest in Shostakovich stems from intellectual shifts alongside the geopolitical changes. The prominence of poststructuralism, social constructionism, and postmodernism within the humanities, literature, and arts has ebbed and flowed. Broadly speaking, these schools of thought have scrutinized the capacity of language to accurately convey reality or factual truths, proposing instead that language functions in terms of intertextuality, as a series of signs pointing to other signs, not directly to tangible reality. This is where irony steps into light. Within the postmodern framework, irony transitioned from being merely a narrative device to embodying a broader philosophical stance that favoured disengagement and neutrality. This is exactly what Linda Hutcheon referred to when she discussed intentionalism theories related to the functions of irony (see Hutcheon in subchapter 1.3.2. herein). This elevation of detachment to an aesthetic virtue fostered an environment where expressing definitive opinions or adopting clear positions was seen as limiting or even doctrinaire (Reichardt, 50).

Reichardt also recognizes irony as a driving force in the context that surrounds these pieces on Shostakovich. Precisely, while the postmodern assertion that reality is, to some extent, a construct, that our understanding and evidence of knowledge are bound by their historical context, and that irony serves as a tool against dogmatic truths holds weight and should not be hastily dismissed, these arguments presume the existence of certain democratic safeguards like legal security and freedom of expression. In a totalitarian regime, the notion that reality and its narratives are shaped by those wielding power becomes not just a theoretical critique but a perilously evident truth. Irony, while functioning as a valuable tool for coping or subtly challenging oppressive regimes, has its limitations as a catalyst for significant social or political transformation. Its ability to provoke direct action or meaningful resistance is inherently restricted. This is a reality that Barnes' Shostakovich comes to personally experience and contend with.

#### **4.1. The Genre of the Novel, References to *Flaubert's Parrot* and Intertextualities**

Genre plays a pivotal role in Barnes' literary approach, aptly reflected in his designation as "a trans-genre writer" (as cited in Finney, *Irony: Truth's Disguise*). This focus on genre permeates his oeuvre, making it a central theme that recurs throughout his work. Each of his novels contributes to an expansive dialogue regarding literary norms and the essence of what defines a novel. This thematic

exploration not only showcases Barnes' versatility as an author, but also his interest in pushing the boundaries of conventional narrative to explore the multifaceted nature of narrative construction.

The Barnesian exploration of great composer's life unfolds in a cohesive, novelistic form. Leveraging the opportunity of interviews with the author currently active in his career, we are fortunate to receive direct commentary from the author on his novel. Barnes himself has shared insights on the genre of his novel. The author regards it as a novel, embracing a definition of the genre characterized by its immense generosity (see Rentzenbrink). This perspective highlights the novel's capacity to encompass a wide range of subjects, styles, and themes, a trait particularly pronounced in the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition. The author concludes: "I don't really think of it as a fictional biography. It's a fiction about a real life. But then fiction has often been about real lives" (ibid).

Regardless of the designation, be it fictional biography, biographical fiction, historical fiction, (semi)biographical novel or even - "bio-fiction' *cum* meditation" (Adams) - the core value and significance of the novel rest upon the reader's belief in and engagement with its narrative. The critical measure of Barnes' success as a novelist lies in whether readers can empathize with the composer, as Barnes evidently does. It questions whether we can internalize the composer's experiences and turmoil, and whether we are able to connect with and feel the depth of pain, doubt, self-loathing and irony. Barnes challenges our judgment, undertaking a profound responsibility to not only narrate but also evoke understanding and compassion within us. He strategically employs historical facts and provides sufficient context to eliminate ignorance as a defence. Post-reading, one cannot claim unawareness of the realities of living under tyranny.

What unfolds beyond the factual layer is a dialogue between the author and the reader through the text, a call from the author to extend our sympathy towards the composer. In essence, Barnes positions himself as an advocate for Shostakovich, facilitating a deeper connection and understanding between the reader and the historical figure through the medium of his novel.

References to *Flaubert's Parrot* confirm the pivotal role of this experimental oeuvre in the complete Barnes' oeuvre - he seems to nod to *Flaubert's Parrot* with all of the subsequent pieces as they recurrently echo themes or techniques explored in this seminal work. This referentiality is naturally unavoidable in discussions pertaining to Barnes' novel in matter, having in mind that *Flaubert's Parrot* has set a benchmark by which all his subsequent novels are, whether intentionally or inadvertently, compared. Intertextuality, along with paratextuality and metatextuality, is a hallmark of Barnes' novels, weaving connections between different texts, authors, and literary traditions, situating his novels within the broader context of postmodern literature, albeit cautiously employing such categorization.

In this vein, Lasdun observes the similarity stating that "[i]n part, *The Noise of Time* offers itself as a cubist biography in the manner of *Flaubert's Parrot*, cycling and recycling choice vignettes through memory and reflection as well as real time, to create an intimately illuminating montage of Shostakovich's life" (Lasdun). The clear parallel between the two lies in the thematic exploration: while *Flaubert's Parrot* sees Barnes delving into the life of a writer he admires, *The Noise* embarks on a journey to cultivate empathy and acquaint us with the world of a composer he regards highly. Nonetheless, a notable difference emerges in the method through which Barnes allows his protagonists and characters to speak, marking a distinct evolution in his narrative technique and character development.

Clark acknowledges a clear distinction and a trajectory of development in Barnes' literary career, differentiating between the seminal work *Flaubert's Parrot* and his later writings. Initially, in *Flaubert's Parrot* Barnes navigated the life of Flaubert through the intermediary of a biographer,

Geoffrey Braithwaite. However, in his subsequent novels, Barnes evolved his approach as he “had found a way to write from *within* the history, instead of around it” (Clark, 848). Clark observes that this narrative technique was further refined in *Arthur & George* and extended into *The Sense of an Ending* and *Levels of Life*, and to a certain degree in his nonfiction work *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (ibid). Clark concludes that “*The Noise of Time* employs the technique of inner debate better than anything else he’s written. Ian Hamilton noted that *Flaubert’s Parrot* “provided an almost perfect vehicle” for Barnes’s talents: I believe that *The Noise of Time* can now claim that distinction” (ibid).

In discussing further references and the theme of intertextuality, it’s noted that the novel’s title is an echo of the nineteenth-century poet Alexander Blok, who utilized the phrase to articulate his perception of history (see Saval). On the other hand, some critics have pointed out allusions to Osip Mandelstam (see Alexis, Preston), the esteemed poet who was executed by Stalin’s regime. Alexis elucidates the connection between the two, stating: “While Shostakovich is the subject of the novel, there is to it a silent witness: Osip Mandelshtam” (Alexis), as the title of Barnes’ novel shares its name with the memoirs of Osip Mandelstam.<sup>24</sup>

Mandelstam’s memoirs offer insights and reflections from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the lens of a Jewish poet born in Russia. Both the memoirs and Barnes’ novel share more than just a title: Mandelstam’s memoirs adopt an ironic stance towards his recollections, aiming to encapsulate the “noise of his time”. This irony emerges from his intentional distancing from his memories, acknowledging the adversarial nature of his own memory:

“My desire is not to speak about myself but to track down the age, the noise and the germination of time. My memory is inimical to all that is personal. [...] I repeat - my memory is not loving but inimical, and it labors not to reproduce but to distance the past” (Mandelstam, pp. 109-110).

The question of whether Barnes consciously intended to honour Mandelstam remains open; nevertheless, the principle quoted above aligns with Barnes’ progressively mature and explicit employment of irony. This evolving relationship with irony, and its more frequent acknowledgment, will be scrutinized in the following subchapters.

Generally speaking, Barnes’ literary trajectory suggests that with advancing age and authorial experience, his engagement with irony becomes more pronounced. This could indicate either an increased inclination towards irony with age or perhaps a deeper comprehension of its nuances. The correlation between aging and a greater propensity or understanding of irony raises an intriguing consideration: Is the development of irony inherently linked to the accumulation of age and experience?

This question remains open to individual interpretation, not due to a quest for a definitive answer, because it serves less as a concrete inquiry and more as a prompt for observation and self-reflection. This holds true for Shostakovich, Barnes, and each one of us.

---

<sup>24</sup> Alexis’ thesis might be considered ambitious or speculative in his further observation that “Mandelshtam is an abiding presence in Barnes’s novel, all the more moving for being unnamed, for being just offstage, a constant desolating memory”. The question of whether Barnes consciously channelled the spirit of the poet (akin to a metaphorical parrot at his desk), does not affect the readers who may be completely unacquainted with Mandelstam’s oeuvre. Literature is fundamentally intertextual, making it challenging to pinpoint all direct influences and references. Mandelstam’s work is brought into the conversation here primarily for its resonance with Barnes’ narrative in terms of manipulation with the past, particularly the nuanced, ironic detachment from one’s memories.

#### 4.1.1. Circularity of the Novel, Chekhov's Gun and Narrative Mode

The novel's intentional use of a circular structure is a key feature, highlighted by the recurring mention of leap years, which Shostakovich superstitiously believes to forecast misfortune. This motif serves to frame his life and creative path within cycles aligned with these quadrennial intervals, with each of the three chapters illuminating a critical moment in his dealings with the Soviet government:

The first chapter is titled "On the Landing": The narrative begins in 1936, amidst Stalin's Great Purge, a period characterized by severe political repression. This era is marked by Shostakovich's initial "Conversation with Power", setting the stage for the complex dynamics between the individual and authority that will pervade the novel.

The second chapter is titled "On the Plane": Fast forward twelve years to 1948, and Shostakovich faces his second significant "Conversation with Power". The crisis here involves his reluctant participation in a Peace Conference in New York, sponsored by the Soviet regime, reflecting another episode of negotiation and duress with the state apparatus.

The third chapter is titled "In the Car": Advancing another twelve years to 1960, the third crisis emerges when Shostakovich is mandated to join the Communist Party. This requirement aims to extract his explicit support for the Soviet Union's direction, symbolizing a peak in the demands placed upon him by the governing powers.

From the outset, Barnes establishes a distinctive narrative mode. We are privy to the internal dialogue of the protagonist, depicted through a blend of third-person singular narration and seemingly internal, yet unassigned voice, reflections and observations. Denk astutely notes Barnes' employment of a "third-person 'Shostakovich'", but often switching into an unlocatable narrative voice, like a "biographer behind a literary veil", further explaining that "[m]uch of it [the narrative] is written in a Joycean interior monologue" (Denk). Finney recognizes the similarity between Barnes and his favourite novelist in employing narrative voice: "To add to the indeterminacy of his narrative Barnes employs Flaubert's style of free indirect discourse, that is, third-person narration that slips in and out of various characters' consciousnesses" (Finney, *Irony: Truth's Disguise*). Barnes skilfully employs the internal monologue as a narrative technique, thereby cultivating a sense of closeness, while avoiding the direct use of first-person singular. He achieves what Preston describes as an "intimately close third person", maintaining a delicate balance between proximity and distance (Preston). D. White elaborates on this method, emphasizing how Barnes navigates this narrative approach: "He avoids inserting great chunks of exposition into Shostakovich's thinking by telling the story in free indirect speech, giving himself the narratorial freedom to enter the workings of the composer's mind while also offering outside context for the reader. You expect nothing less from a writer soaked in Flaubert" (D. White).

The novel meticulously explores Shostakovich's complex interactions with political authority, his pursuit of artistic integrity, and his fight for individual freedom amidst oppressive forces, utilizing a narrative framework that advances linearly, loops in cycles, and oscillates between past and present as specific scenes and themes are re-examined or modified. The narration strikes a balance between intimacy and distance, employing a third-person perspective that centers closely on the first-person experiences of the protagonist. This approach is characterized by episodes rich in reflection, exposition and internal monologue, with minimal action and sparse dialogue. D. White comments on this distinctive storytelling approach, noting: "*The Noise of Time* is a narrative in which nothing much happens: a man waits for a lift; a man sits on a plane; a man sits in a car" highlighting the focus on internal experiences over external events (D. White). Lasdun refers to these narrative segments as "vignettes", which act as portals to the protagonist's deep-seated conflicts and contemplations. This

narrative technique, relying on memory, introspection and vignettes across different timelines, mirrors the narrative style of *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, specifically the 'Parenthesis' chapter, showcasing Barnes' penchant for weaving intricate internal landscapes.

The real narrative unfolds within Shostakovich's mind as "in each of these three sections we find him at a moment of reflection amid a larger crisis, the "skittering" of his mind" (D. White). This approach underscores the internal rather than external action, highlighting the introspective journey of the protagonist amidst his broader life challenges.

The novel's use of a circular structure is exemplified not only through its thematic focus on leap years and pivotal events but also through the narrative device of mirroring the introductory and closing stories, whereby the author skilfully adheres to the principle of Chekhov's Gun, ensuring that each element introduced comes full circle and achieves resolution. This strategy not only closes the narrative loop but also weaves a thread of thematic unity throughout the work.

Similarly, the nuanced repetition of phrases at the beginning of each chapter enriches the narrative, in the following manner: these phrases, while echoing previous sentiments, are subtly altered to reflect the escalating intensity of the protagonist's life challenges. Finney has observed this technique in musical terms - as a composer's variation of an initial theme; moreover, it echoes *Levels of Life*, published in 2013 (see Finney, *Irony: Truth's Disguise*). Specifically, the protagonist's evolving perspective is captured through a recurring reflection that shifts from initially considering the current moment as "the worst time" in his life (*The Noise*, 7), only to disclaim it at the beginning of subsequent chapter, declaring that "*this* was the worst time" (*The Noise*, 61). Saval points out that this phrase also evokes Edgar's words from Shakespeare's *King Lear*: "The worst is not / So long as we can say, 'This is the worst'" (see Saval). The progressive repetition not only highlights the intensification of the protagonist's experiences but also enhances the reader's anticipation and suspense. Thus, the author exhibits his skill and craftsmanship in the narrative technique, which will be further exemplified in the upcoming subchapter.

#### **4.1.2. Three Vodka Glasses, Two and a Half Men and Some Music**

The novel begins and ends with narratives of three men, framed by the ongoing war, highlighting the perpetual nature of conflict as a war that seemingly has no end. This recurring motif could be interpreted as a metaphor for the internal conflicts faced by the characters, with the train serving as a symbol for their journey. The characters' lack of awareness of their precise location, coupled with their reluctance to inquire for fear of being labelled saboteurs, further accentuates the theme of navigating through an uncertain landscape. This scenario crafts an ambiance of travel through unfamiliar territory, elevating their personal journey to an allegory, reflecting the broader human experience of moving through life's uncertainties and challenges.

The opening story features a beggar in a wheelchair; alongside him were two men in their thirties: the one who heard, ultimately identified as Shostakovich, adorned with garlic amulets for protection, and the second man, his companion, unknown to history - he was the one to remember. At the end of the opening story, the one who heard "had almost forgotten what he had said. But the one who remembered was only at the start of his remembering" (*The Noise*, 3). They drink and toast.

In the final story, it is disclosed that the original beggar has died, yet another beggar takes his place on the station platform. The composer "had almost immediately forgotten what he had said. But the one whose name is lost to history remembered. He was the one who made sense of it, who understood" (*The Noise*, 179). Shostakovich remains attuned to the sounds around him. A "perfect triad" - this is what Shostakovich utters, and "what the one who remembered had remembered". The notion of a perfect triad endures even after the departure of all three men.

The concept of a “perfect triad” is a deeply symbolic and multifaceted metaphor, intricately weaving together elements of survival, music, and understanding within the throes of adversity, particularly within a repressive regime. This triad can indeed be interpreted as representing the multifaceted nature of Shostakovich himself.

Thus, the Crippled Beggar can be seen as a manifestation of Shostakovich’s vulnerability and the constraints imposed upon him by the tyrannical regime. The depiction of the beggar as a “half-man” and a “technique for survival”, “impervious to insult” (*The Noise*, pp. 1-2), reflects the dehumanizing effect of the regime on individuals, reducing them to mere mechanisms for enduring their reality. This aspect of the triad underscores the struggle for existential survival while navigating the oppressive landscape.

The One Who Hears is bearing garlic amulets, explicitly identified as Shostakovich in the latter narrative, symbolizes the composer’s cautious navigation through life under a regime that demanded conformity and silence. He holds onto the garlic amulets, traditionally symbols of protection against evil, metaphorically representing his pillow of safety and appropriate gap between him and the intruders, in his attempts to safeguard his integrity and artistic voice against the pervasive threats of censorship and persecution. This figure embodies Shostakovich’s lived experience, caught between vulnerability and resilience, seeking ways to endure and protect himself amidst the cacophony of societal and political pressures by switching between the crippled beggar as a human shell to the transcendent self, trying to balance out the surrounding wartime.

Interestingly, this character is of the same age as the third man, The One Who Remembers, the enigmatic figure, whose identity is “lost to history”. He could not have been known as he never was a historical figure. He represents the transcendent aspect of Shostakovich’s legacy - the essence of his being that rises above the immediate realities of his life to achieve a deeper understanding and interpretation of existence. This character’s journey from the inception of memory (in the opening story) to the culmination of understanding (in the closing story) symbolizes the process of artistic and intellectual maturation, reflecting Shostakovich’s evolution as an artist who not only navigated but also transcended the “noise of time”.

The triad, therefore, encapsulates the existential journey of Shostakovich as an individual and artist: from survival to awareness, and ultimately to a profound understanding that outlives the immediacy of his circumstances. The triad, that may be summarized as survival, music and memory, is a poetic allegory of his life, articulating the struggle, resilience, and eventual transcendence of an artist living under tyranny. The sound of the vodka glasses clinking was a crescendo, “a sound that rang clear of the noise of time, and would outlive everyone and everything” (*The Noise*, 180). It was a toast to life.

#### **4.2. Irony in the Novel**

In this novel, Barnes delves into irony with unprecedented openness compared to his other works. The narrative charts a developmental journey of irony, evolving progressively with the unfolding story, to reach its zenith in the portrayal of the aged Shostakovich. We could safely say that *The Noise* swims in irony “like a shrimp in shrimp-cocktail sauce”, to borrow a phrase fitting the Barnesian lexicon. This chapter will examine the progression of irony within the context of the theoretical foundations laid out in the Introduction.

In the opening scene, Shostakovich is depicted enduring nightly vigils (a kind of “Shostakovich’s wake”) by the elevator, aiming to spare his wife and daughter the trauma of witnessing his potential arrest. Adding to the peculiarity of this situation, he dismisses the notion of

bringing a chair to sit on while he waits, rationalizing with ironic observation that *that* would appear eccentric.

A fine illustration of authorial narrative mastery is evident at the beginning of the narration, where protagonist's mind ponders of what he assumes to be the onset of his ordeal:

“It had all begun, very precisely, he told his mind, on the morning of the 28th of January 1936, at Arkhangelsk railway station. No, his mind responded, nothing begins just like that, on a certain date at a certain place. It all began in many places, and at many times, some even before you were born, in foreign countries, and in the minds of others.”  
(*The Noise*, 9)

This passage is revealing not just of Barnes' narrative skill but also signifies an intertextual connection to his broader body of work, especially regarding one of his recurring motifs: memory and its manipulation. Within this context, he elaborates on a concept that Dr Max from the novel *England, England* would passionately declare: “There is no prime moment!” This assertion underscores Barnes' exploration of the fluidity and subjectivity of memory, a theme that permeates his literary oeuvre. The use of exposition as a narrative mode, alongside the manipulation of memory, inherently incorporates an ironic thread. This element of irony, resulting from the juxtaposition between the narrative presentation and the underlying reality of memory, will be examined in greater detail in the subsequent analysis.

Shostakovich, as portrayed in the narrative, emerges as an individual grappling with a profound dissonance within his own life or destiny. While others saw him as embodying “the typical buttoned-up formality of a Leningrader” (*The Noise*, 12), he internally identified as shy and anxious. This contrast, highlighting the discord between his external persona and inner experiences, is best described in his perception of self: “It was as if he was always on the wrong metronome setting” (ibid). Such an observation immediately signals to the reader an anticipation of irony.

The composer finds himself in disfavour with Stalin following his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, adapted from Leskov's novella. Stalin dismisses the opera as “muddle instead of music” in a critique published in *Pravda*, effectively serving as a public condemnation. In response, Shostakovich wryly contemplates whether the blame should fall on Shakespeare for penning “Macbeth” or on Leskov for “Russifying” it (*The Noise*, 18). This layer of irony injects humor into the narrative, lightening the tension of the situation with a wry reflection on the chain of creative influence that led to his precarious standing.

The irony in the narrative lies in the fact that this opera, acclaimed globally, is abruptly condemned as a mess, solely due to Stalin's attendance at a performance, and his dubious taste of music. This wasn't a matter of happenstance or mere misfortune that Stalin's attention was drawn to this specific work. Rather, the composer's entire life trajectory seemed to have been a preparation for such a pivotal moment, as well as for the acclaim that accompanied his proficiency. With great talent and recognition come substantial responsibilities. The novel delves into the struggles of a man attempting to navigate these waters, where fame and skill can oscillate between blessing and burden.

Certainly, the notion that Shostakovich's destiny was inescapable, within his own limitations, or that any deviation from his chosen path would lead to a compromise of his identity or harm to those he loved, imbues his life story with a sense of tragedy. The impasse encountered by Shostakovich evokes the depiction of the Sultan in Ivo Andrić's novel *Devil's Yard*. In this work, the Nobel Prize-winning author explores the concept of entrapment, applying it to the figure of the Sultan. This analogy enriches the comprehension of Shostakovich's situation, placing it within a wider

literary and existential framework. The parallel drawn between Shostakovich and the Sultan underscores a universal theme of individuals caught in the web of circumstances beyond their control:

“[...] Djem is condemned to be Sultan, whether here in captivity or in his rightful place in Istanbul, or dead and in his tomb. A Sultan and only a Sultan can he be, and only as a Sultan can he find salvation; a Sultan and nothing less, since for him that would be the same as ceasing to exist as himself and nothing more, since there can be nothing greater. It is a slavery from which there is no escape, even after death.” (*Devil's Yard* by Ivo Andric, translated by Kenneth Johnstone, Grove Press, Inc, 1962)

Barnes' Shostakovich goes beyond the bounds of straightforward tragedy. His demeanour and decisions are imbued with an ironic detachment, emblematic of individual volition within the context of pervasive systemic influences. This portrayal aligns with a postmodern viewpoint that moves away from traditional notions of tragedy, suggesting that mere tragedy no longer suffices to capture the complexities of modern existence. Irony becomes a critical tool for navigating and expressing the intricacies of life under authoritarianism. Therefore, Shostakovich's life trajectory may be seen as a manifestation of tragic, cosmic, or dramatic irony, depicting a scenario where he is entangled in a destiny he attempts to transcend through his deliberate choices or absence thereof, for that matter.

The allusion to *Devil's Yard* reaches its apex as an aged Shostakovich reflects on his existence from a standpoint of ironic detachment, recognizing his life as a form of inescapable bondage, persisting even beyond death. His life embodies absurdity; contemplating suicide, yet recognizing it as no real exit. “He felt, in the moment, genuinely suicidal, if it were possible to feel genuinely suicidal without passing to the act itself” (*The Noise*, 96). However, suicide was dismissed as a viable option “because they would steal his story and rewrite it. He needed, if only in his own hopeless, hysterical way, to have some charge of his life, of his story” (*The Noise*, 97).

Furthermore, questioning the rationale behind these circumstances proves to be futile, prompting a reflection that leads to both irony of manner and irony of character. This underscores the inherent contradiction between the artist's intentions and the interpretations or manipulations by those in power. Shostakovich wonders:

“Why [...] had the Power now turned its attention to music, and to him? Power had always been more interested in the word than the note: writers, not composers, had been proclaimed the engineers of human soul. [...] And yet ... what was the artist's business with, if not the human soul?” (*The Noise*, 40)

This passage captures the introspection of an artist who refuses to be “merely decorative” or “merely a lapdog of the rich and powerful” (*The Noise*, 40). The regime elevates artists, particularly writers, to the status of “engineers of the human soul”, reducing the complex and intangible essence of the soul to something mechanical and manipulable. This perspective reveals the regime's view of its citizens as entities requiring control and reshaping. Shostakovich recognizes the core issue: individuals do not desire their souls to be engineered. The irony emerges from the realization that people living under such an oppressive system were largely oblivious to the manipulation they were subjected to, thus they could not consent to, or even question, the engineering of their souls. Further deepening the narrative is Shostakovich's existential pondering: “who engineers the engineer?” (*The Noise*, 41). This question highlights the paradox of control and the circular dilemma of authority within such a regime, pointing to a higher level of philosophical and moral inquiry regarding the nature of influence and autonomy.

This elegantly concise use of polyptoton not only subverts the concept of power and its hierarchical structure but also seeks to deconstruct the foundations of the power pyramid by a higher,

possibly divine, superordination. The phrase highlights the transient and elusive nature of power, no matter how oppressive it may appear in moments of suffocation, adding a nuanced, almost religious dimension to the critique of power.

#### 4.2.1. Irony as a Dominant Narrative Technique and Existential Approach

Within the unfolding drama of his current circumstances, Shostakovich delves into the irony of art's role in the oppressive society he inhabits. He muses that in an ideal society, all forms of art "would form a dynamic partnership, not just reflecting society or criticizing it or satirizing it, but *making* it. [...] It was the artist's oldest dream. Or, as he now thought, the artist's oldest fantasy" (*The Noise*, 40). The ironic position of the arts becomes clear as they end up serving the very society they aim to critique. Instead of acting as agents of inspiration, reflection, criticism, and satire with the potential to transform society, in a tyrannical regime, the purpose and significance of art are perverted, turning it into a tool of those it seeks to influence or reshape. In this context, art becomes a puppet, manipulated by the very forces it aspires to transcend or reform, in a situation that might aptly be described as the "irony of agency" in art.

Barnes echoes a sentiment from *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* regarding the cyclical nature of history, connecting it to an event at an open-air concert in Kharkov where the performance of his First Symphony was interrupted by the barking of dogs. The increasing volume of the orchestra in response to the barking, which amused the audience, is likened to his present struggles: "Now, his music had set bigger dogs barking. History was repeating itself: the first time as farce, the second time as tragedy" (*The Noise*, 41). This self-referential approach by the author introduces a layer of subversion, challenging previously accepted truths. Further, D. White highlights Barnes' incorporation of humor, observing: "[t]his inversion of Marx's formula is typical of the black humour Barnes lends to Shostakovich" (D. White). This comment is telling of Barnes' humorous self-subversion as he reevaluates previously established truths.

The narrative's third-person voice achieves a level of intimacy typically reserved for first-person accounts, further exemplified by the text's rich use of irony. This irony manifests in several forms: dramatic irony, where the audience is aware of outcomes unknown to the characters; situational irony, illustrated by the composer's ignorance, in anticipation of execution, of his executor's fate, who is eliminated by an ironic swipe, not mere coincidence; and philosophical irony, reflecting on the absurdity and unpredictability of life's events.

"He did not want to make himself into a dramatic character. But sometimes, as his mind skittered in the small hours, he thought: so this is what history has come to. All that striving and idealism and hope and progress and science and art and conscience, and it all ends like this, with a man standing by a lift, at his feet a small case containing cigarettes, underwear and tooth powder; standing there and waiting to be taken away." (*The Noise*, 41)

In Barnes' portrayal, Shostakovich emerges not as a traditional hero but as an antihero, navigating the treacherous waters between the dictates of Power and the integrity of his art. He employs irony to critique his own errors, thereby achieving a crucial distance from himself and his fate. Irony serves as a refuge from his own identity. Despite his initial insistence that he would never join the Party, he eventually finds this vow steeped in irony when faced with the reality of his actions. He creates music that is politically *engagée*, including a symphony dedicated to the memory of Lenin. In a compromise that could be likened to a Faustian bargain, he, as a self-described "non-Party Bolshevik" (*The Noise*, 52) consents to create works that align with the prevailing ideology, thus allowing himself to "be portrayed as fully supportive of the Party" (*ibid*). The irony lies in the fact

that his “non-Partyism” amounts to mere wishful thinking, a dance of compromise and self-preservation where his beliefs contradict his works.

So, as a *Homo Politicus* he is obedient; as a *Homo Sovieticus*<sup>25</sup> he loathes himself. From a political standpoint, and somewhat reassuringly, he perceives himself as “not a fool, nor altogether naive” (*The Noise*, 54). Yet, this self-recognition opens the door to deeper ethical conflicts, resonating with the biblical theme of “render unto Caesar”, further symbolized by Shostakovich’s reference to Titian’s painting “The Tribute Money”. The presence of this painting’s reproduction in his study acts as a continual reminder of his duties and transgressions alike. He is certain that he “render[s] unto Caesar that which was Caesar’s”; he wrote quickly and was productive in composing “tuneful music which pleased him for a month and the public for a decade” (ibid). However, he soon realizes that Caesar is also no fool - he sets the price but the currency as well. It becomes insufficient to compose music to his own liking; now, he must craft music that appeases Caesar. This realization highlights his naivety regarding the true demands of his Caesar, indicating that he has been “working from an outdated model” (ibid), a phrase he ironically uses, reflecting his disdain for the engineering terms applied to artistic creativity. He comes to understand that the tribute demanded by the powers is calculated at “the full 100% of your worth. Or, if possible, more” (*The Noise*, 55).

Shostakovich’s means of navigating through this dilemma came with the composition and premiere of his Fifth Symphony, which, as anticipated, garnered significant acclaim. A journalist described it as “A Soviet Artist’s Creative Reply to Just Criticism”, a label that Shostakovich never openly contested. Consequently, many assumed these words were his own, inscribed at the forefront of the score. Ironically, this statement became the most renowned one that he authored, despite never having penned or even conceived it. He permitted this description and the interpretation of his work to persist, as they shielded his music. Yet, what Caesar and his minions overlooked was the “screeching irony of the final movement, that mockery of a triumph” (*The Noise*, 58). In this subtle defiance, encoded in the symphony’s concluding notes, Shostakovich claimed a personal victory over the “asses’ ears”, outmanoeuvring the regime. It is hardly surprising that the Fifth Symphony was called “an optimistic tragedy” (ibid). The irony this time rests with the regime, due to its obliviousness to the deeper significance and intent behind the symphony’s finale, as this was Shostakovich’s nuanced way of navigating the *ratio decidendi* to “render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s, and unto God that which is God’s”.

#### 4.2.2. Examples of Irony in Shostakovich’s Interactions with Power

While the first chapter closes on a positive note, we find Shostakovich devastated at the beginning of the second one, on a plane on his way back to Russia from Cultural and Scientific Congress for World Peace in New York. Though the congress represented a public victory, it was simultaneously the source of profound personal disgrace for Shostakovich. “It had been public success - and also the greatest humiliation of his life. It had been the perfect trap, the more so because the two parts of it were not connected” (*The Noise*, 67). Caught in a dichotomy, Shostakovich found himself at the intersection of communist and capitalist forces; he was in the middle, lacking full awareness or control over his engagements, movements, and schedule.

---

<sup>25</sup> *Homo Sovieticus* is the title of a book by Aleksandr Zinovyev, published in 1981. It offers a literary analysis of an individual stripped of personal identity, whose sense of purpose and meaning is entirely derived from the collective. This trope, that emerged during the Cold War, has seen a resurgence in public discourse recently, particularly following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. This term has also been employed to interpret contemporary Russian perspectives on the conflict with Ukraine ([ieres.elliott.gwu.edu/project/the-afterlife-of-the-soviet-man-rethinking-homo-sovieticus/](http://ieres.elliott.gwu.edu/project/the-afterlife-of-the-soviet-man-rethinking-homo-sovieticus/)).

The “two parts” he refers to could also symbolize the dual aspects of his identity - the composer and the politician - that together constituted the perfect snare, a scenario from which he found no escape, nor resist any of the roles. Initially desiring to blend in among the many participants, Shostakovich was instead spotlighted as the figurehead of the Soviet delegation, a position that thrust him unwillingly into the limelight and exemplified the internal conflict between his artistic integrity and political obligations.

The root of this renewed cycle of distress was yet another of Stalin’s attendances at the opera, an event that Shostakovich couldn’t help but find bitterly ironic. History repeated itself, first as a farce and then as a tragedy: yet another opera was fatal for Shostakovich. This time it was not even his opera. In January 1948, twelve years after Stalin had seen *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, Stalin attended a showing of *The Great Friendship*, an opera composed by Muradeli, a fellow Georgian, to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the October Revolution. Unfortunately, the opera did not curry favour with Stalin, perhaps due to Muradeli’s inclusion of a dance in the style of Stalin’s favoured lezhinka rather than an original tune. This led to Muradeli being accused of formalism. In his defence, he asserted that he had been misled by Shostakovich and his opera *Macbeth*, suggesting that he had been led astray (*The Noise*, 77).

The first time when his own opera was denounced by Stalin, and he was proclaimed “the enemy of people”, Shostakovich was instructed to make a public recantation, so he read the speech that was written for him, and managed, in a helpless voice and speaking from the heart, to say at the end that when he writes sincerely his music cannot be against the people, as he was a representative of the people. This was a desperate attempt of a man not dead formally but inside to save his soul. It goes without saying that he promised to conform to the Party’s directives in the future. Consequently, he revisits his thought on personal and artistic honesty: “He found himself reflecting on questions of honesty. Personal honesty, artistic honesty. How they were connected, if indeed they were. And how much of this virtue anyone had, and how long that store would last” (*The Noise*, 33). In this context, Shostakovich emerges as a figure reminiscent of a Shakespearean protagonist, characterized by a rich complexity and a profound introspection of his own psyche. His internal conflict serves as both the source of his suffering and a reservoir of ironic consolation, and narrative tension, as well.

This time round, Shostakovich finds himself reciting speeches penned by others, yet transcends mere irony by coming full circle, recognizing that, in a world set aright, these speeches might indeed reflect his own sentiments. This scenario, where “[h]e made political speeches written for him by others, but - so upside down had the world become - they were speeches whose sentiments, if not whose language, he could actually endorse” (*The Noise*, 68), illustrates what could be termed the irony of political manipulation and self-representation, or even qualify for double irony. Here, Shostakovich’s predicament illuminates the convoluted dynamics of power, wherein he must articulate thoughts imposed upon him that strangely echo his genuine convictions, blurring the lines between genuine self-expression and enforced rhetoric. This situation tempts a simplistic condemnation of Shostakovich as a mere puppet, without considering the complexity of his situation.

Barnes, in his portrayal, strikes an ideal balance, presenting Shostakovich from a historical remove. He courageously avoids being swayed by the prevalent image of Shostakovich as a collaborator, instead identifying and emphasizing a deeply human aspect of the composer’s life.

Though Shostakovich appeared to be in the regime’s good graces, this situation offered little comfort.

“[...] those who understood how religion - and therefore Power - operated would have known better. The sinner might have been rehabilitated, but this did not mean that the

sin itself had been expunged from the face of the earth; far from it. [...] the sin must be named, and reiterated, and its consequences eternally warned against. In other words, ‘Muddle Instead of Music’ had become a school text, and formed a part of conservatoire courses in the history of music.” (*The Noise*, pp. 74-75)

Here he draws a parallel between religion and political power, tragically overlooking a crucial distinction: religion offers a path to redemption and forgiveness, a grace not extended by political power. This reality is something he experiences firsthand: in the realm of power, once labelled a sinner, that label is indelible. Furthermore, he doesn’t grasp that underlying the power’s unforgiving stance is fear, for the power is hesitant to offer forgiveness and trust, fearing both its allies and adversaries. His favour with the authorities did not erase the past nor alleviate his anxiety. Shostakovich remained a man haunted by fear, contemplating that “[f]ear normally drives out all other emotions as well; but not shame” (*The Noise*, 61).

The exploration of shame as a deep and resonant emotion by Barnes strikes a chord of universal truth, drawing readers in with its relatability. This emotion’s endurance, even amidst fear, speaks to a collective human experience, marking a particularly perceptive aspect of Barnes’ portrayal. The profound humanity of the protagonist, a facet often overlooked by critics focused more on factual accuracy and occasional irony, stands out as a pivotal element in Barnes’ narrative. This depth is where Barnes most viscerally connects with the reader, presenting a vulnerable Shostakovich who lays bare his innermost fears and insecurities. We, as readers, are moved to empathy, encouraged to feel compassion for the man behind the music. Shostakovich himself introspects on his identity, caught between the demands of Power and the weight of his own shame.

He invites a deeper reflection on the human condition: the question of (in)compatibility of Genius and Evil, a topic of significant resonance within artistic discourse. Shostakovich, reflecting on Pushkin’s “Mozart and Salieri”, prompts an exploration into the ethical dimensions that encompass artistic brilliance and the moral obligations borne by creators. This reflection raises the critical inquiry of whether true genius can exist alongside moral depravity. He ponders:

“Genius and evil

Are two things incompatible. You agree?” (*The Noise*, 69).

Shostakovich’s personal stance is clear as he considers the example of Wagner, whose talents are overshadowed by his reprehensible views: “For himself, he agreed. Wagner had a mean soul, and it showed. He was evil in his anti-Semitism and his other racial attitudes. Therefore, he could not be a genius, for all the burnish and glitter of his music” (ibid). This sheds light on Shostakovich’s intimate feelings of humiliation: it signifies a deep rejection of his musical heritage - if he conceded to being malevolent, he would have to forsake his music and, by extension, his authentic self. Thus, by the narrative’s end, he wishes for his musical works to rise above the earthly and time-bound confines associated with his persona:

“What he hoped was that death would liberate his music: liberate it from his life. [...] And then, if it still had value - if there were still ears to hear - his music would be ... just music. [...] Because music, in the end, belonged to music. That was all you could say, or wish for.” (*The Noise*, 179)

\*

A year into his period of disgrace, Shostakovich had his second interaction with the authorities, this time through a phone conversation, concerning his attendance at the Cultural and Scientific

Congress for World Peace in New York. During this exchange, he unsuccessfully attempted to convince Stalin to excuse him from participation. He also brought up his blacklisting, the reluctance of concert managers to feature his works, and the musicians' fear of playing his compositions. Surprisingly, Stalin seemed unaware of any directive against Shostakovich and assured him that the oversight would be rectified. Consequently, Shostakovich found himself compelled to attend the congress in New York, despite his reservations and the complex backdrop of political and personal challenges he faced.

Following his phone conversation with Iosif Vissarionovich and his subsequent agreement to travel to New York, Shostakovich pens a letter expressing his gratitude, acknowledging the support received. The language used is ostentatious and patronizing; the tone is sycophantic; he writes:

“[...] please accept my heartfelt gratitude for the conversation that took place yesterday. [...] I cannot but be proud of the confidence that has been placed in me; I will fulfil my duty. To speak on behalf of our great Soviet people in defence of peace is a great honour for me.” (*The Noise*, 85)

Above all, this letter was unsolicited: therefore, it invites a reading rich in irony. The ostensibly respectful tone of Shostakovich's letter to the dictator necessitates such an interpretation; Shostakovich could not have been honest, as his potential honesty would undermine the whole narrative. Thus, we become collaborators with the protagonist. He hopes this letter serves as an enduring symbol of ironic resistance against tyranny, discernible to future generations attuned to its nuances.

In his thoughts, Shostakovich conjures up an allegorical exchange between Power and a Citizen, symbolically represented through the figures of a Conductor and Citizen Second Oboe. This imaginative dialogue reflects Shostakovich's conviction in the orchestra's role as a miniature society: “[...] who would still deny that an orchestra was a microcosm of society?” (*The Noise*, 83). This conversation serves as a projection of his inner musings, laden with irony. In this constructed scenario, Power proudly claims credit for the Revolution, to which the Citizen, adopting a tone that appears condescending yet is steeped in irony, responds:

“Yes, it's a wonderful revolution, of course. [...] But I just wonder, from time to time ... I might be completely wrong, of course, but was it absolutely necessary to shoot all those engineers, generals, scientists, musicologists? To send millions to the camps, to use slave labour and work it to death [...]” (ibid)

henceforward questioning the necessity of the regime's brutal actions. Power's response to these accusations is dismissive: “Yes, yes, I see your point. [...] But let's leave it for now. We'll make that change next time round” (ibid).

The use of epistemic and evasive hedges by the Citizen with the purpose of subjectivisation, in terms of pragmatics, acts to subtly introduce a layer of verbal irony. The intentional softening of claims not only protects the speaker from direct confrontation with Power but also expose the absurdity and horror of the regime's policies through understated critique. This imagined dialogue between the Citizen Second Oboe and the Power could also represent a conversation Shostakovich yearned to have with the Power but never mustered the courage. The fictional exchange allows him to articulate the critiques and questions he harboured privately, providing a safe medium through which to confront the oppressive regime's actions and ideology indirectly.

The inability of a tyrant to grasp the nuances of irony is a pivotal aspect that ties directly into Colebrook and Hutcheon's exploration of irony's political function. Far exceeding merely being an

example of “attributed or inferred operative motivation” as outlined by Hutcheon (see Hutcheon in the subchapter 1.3.2. herein), the letter and dialogue above exemplify the strategic use of irony for political ends. Both Colebrook and Hutcheon delve into how irony, politically wielded, can illuminate higher values we recognize behind different uses of a word (see Colebrook in Introduction herein), thereby imbuing it with a broader, universal significance.

Accordingly, Shostakovich further contemplates on sarcasm and irony, concluding:

“Sarcasm was dangerous to its user, identifiable as the language of the wrecker and the saboteur. But irony - perhaps, sometimes, so he hoped – might enable you to preserve what you valued, even as the noise of time became loud enough to knock out window-panes” (*The Noise*, 85).

\*

The observation that “Of course, Russia had known tyrants before; that was why irony was so well developed here” (*The Noise*, 84) points to irony serving as a “snorkel of sanity” within a repressive context. Humour becomes a form of bravery for those not ruled by fear; in places where laughter is present, fear finds no refuge. Barnes further clarifies: “When truth-speaking became impossible - because it led to immediate death - it had to be disguised. [...] And so, the truth’s disguise was irony. Because the tyrant’s ear is rarely tuned to hear it” (*The Noise*, 85). Addressing the interplay of irony and music, Finney directs our focus to the musical metaphor employed in this instance (Finney, *Irony: Truth’s Disguise*). In oppressive regimes or situations where open dissent can result in dire consequences, irony as truth’s disguise serves not just as a literary or rhetorical device but as a means of survival and subversion, allowing the flow of truth in a manner that is coded yet profound.

This insight directly connects to the prior discussion on the protective layer irony offers to higher values. When irony encourages us to look beyond the obvious and literal to seek meaning, it begs the question: what lies beneath? Barnes suggests that the essence captured by irony represents something profoundly valued, necessitating concealment to ensure its survival amid political chaos. Thus, irony becomes not just a stylistic device but a strategy of survival of core beliefs and truths in an environment where direct expression could be perilous. On the same note, Reichardt observes that “[w]hile irony is a central category of postmodernist literature, where it is used as a trope for staying aloof and not engaging with conflicts, in times of persecution, saying something and meaning something else is a political and artistic strategy of survival” (60).

Such strategy of survival is most vivid and best employed in artistic endeavours. Barnes explores the relation between art and tyranny, and wonders if music is as powerful and controversial to the tyrants as other artistic forms. This approach to survival, particularly poignant and effective in the realm of art, is thoroughly examined by Barnes as he delves into the dynamic between art and despotism, questioning the impact and contentious nature of music in the eyes of tyrants:

“[...] tyrants hated music, however strenuously they pretended to love it. Although they hated poetry more. [...] But, even more than poetry, tyrants hated and feared the theatre. Shakespeare held a mirror up to nature, and who could bear to see their own reflection? So *Hamlet* was banned for a long time; Stalin loathed the play almost as much as he loathed *Macbeth*.” (*The Noise*, 88)

This insight suggests that while music poses its own threats to authoritarian figures, poetry and theatre, especially the reflective and confrontational works of Shakespeare, incite even greater disdain and fear among them, highlighting the potent subversive power of artistic expression. The fact that

Stalin harboured a particular dislike for *Macbeth* casts the fate of Shostakovich's opera in a light of tragic irony, marking it as an inescapable path to which he had to resign himself.

Reflecting on Shakespeare, Shostakovich initially critiques the playwright for ascribing too much sentimentality to his tyrannical characters by endowing them with guilt and awareness.

“Shakespeare was a little naive. Because his monsters had doubts, bad dreams, pangs of conscience, guilt. They saw the spirits of those they had killed rising in front of them. But in real life, under real terror, what guilty conscience? What bad dreams? That was all sentimentality, false optimism, a hope that the world would be as we wanted it to be, rather than as it was.” (*The Noise*, pp. 88-89)

However, as he grows older, Shostakovich begins to appreciate Shakespeare's perspective, acknowledging that it was fitting, but for its era - this could be interpreted as a manifestation of the principle *Il faut être de son temps*. He muses that, in the modern world, the notion that monstrous rulers could possess a conscience seems implausible: “The world had moved on, become more scientific, more practical, less under the sway of old superstitions. And tyrants had moved on as well. Perhaps conscience no longer had an evolutionary function, and so had been bred out” (*The Noise*, 164). In this instance, Shostakovich exhibits cynicism toward the concept of a moral conscience, leading readers to surmise that his reflections may be an effort at rationalizing his own decisions.

Shostakovich reflects on the relationship between age and the propensity for irony, suggesting that irony is more commonly an attribute of those who are older and wiser. He considers the ironic young person to be more of an anomaly than the norm. “In an ideal world, a young man should not be an ironical person. At that age, irony prevents growth, stunts the imagination” (*The Noise*, 85). It's preferable to begin life with a sense of joy and openness, with trust in others, an optimistic outlook, and straightforwardness in all interactions. Then, as one gains a deeper understanding of the world and its inhabitants, a sense of irony can develop. “The natural progression of human life is from optimism to pessimism; and a sense of irony helps temper pessimism, helps produce balance, harmony” (*The Noise*, 86). Yet, in the far-from-ideal reality, irony sprouted abruptly and in unexpected forms, much like a mushroom emerging overnight.

\*

Shostakovich, serving as a figurehead for the Soviet delegation in America, secretly loathed the assignment and felt relief at the cancellation of certain events. However, fate dealt an ironic hand; little did he know that New York “would turn out to be a place of the purest humiliation, and of moral shame” (*The Noise*, 96).

The catalyst for Shostakovich's moral shame was Nabokov, a Russian émigré living in the United States. Nabokov led them to their meeting venue in the Waldorf Astoria, called the Perroquet Room, with a smirk implying an irony he believed would be obvious to everyone present. This prompted speculation about the target of Nabokov's irony: Was he suggesting that Shostakovich was simply regurgitating the Soviet government's propaganda, much like a parrot? Was their meeting essentially a *tête-à-tête avec le perroquet* - a discussion with a metaphorical parrot, playing on the room's name and Shostakovich's perceived function?

The composer's reliance on his audience's ability to detect the discrepancy between the speeches he delivers and his actual beliefs, through an understanding of the embedded irony, indeed embodies irony itself. “This has absolutely nothing to do with me, his manner insisted” (*The Noise*, 97), and “[a]nyone with an ounce of political understanding would know that he hadn't written the speeches he gave” (*The Noise*, 98). He aspires for the audience to essentially become his allies in a

nuanced act of defiance that could be described as “how to iron(y) out the regime”. This situation echoes a narrative from the second story in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, wherein the protagonist attempts to subtly convey the reality of a hostage crisis to fellow passengers through an ironic speech, only to relinquish this approach, sceptical of their capacity for such sophisticated interpretation.

Feeling a touch of bravery, the composer elevates his strategy; as his pre-scripted speech is being translated, he opts to read merely the opening page before sitting down, leaving the remainder for the translator, a move that earns him a solid round of applause. This act was naively intended as a display of moral neutrality through apparent disinterest in his own speech. He momentarily believes in his victory, only to find that this was merely a prelude to further conflict. The irony of fate asserts itself once more.

Nabokov, adopting the guise of a well-meaning inquirer, seeks to question Shostakovich not in his capacity as a delegate but as one composer to another. He persistently asks whether Shostakovich personally supports the Soviet ban on Western music, including works by Stravinsky, whom Shostakovich deeply admires. Shostakovich confesses that he does, yielding to the demands of Power, thereby betraying the artist he holds in high regard. “Yes, I personally subscribe to the views expressed by Chairman Zhdanov” (*The Noise*, 103) - these words distil the very nature of betrayal and humiliation. This admission marks Shostakovich’s moment of moral defeat and the crumbling of his integrity before an international audience. Nabokov elevates the interrogation, but for Shostakovich, it no longer holds significance. In a climactic moment, Nabokov queries Shostakovich’s endorsement of General Zhdanov’s harsh criticism of his music, previously denounced as comparable to “a road drill” and a “mobile gas chamber” (*The Noise*, 102). Shostakovich concedes once more, indicating a profound sense of resignation and apathy towards his own artistic identity and principles. “He had betrayed Stravinsky, and in doing so, he had betrayed music. Later, he told Mravinsky that it had been the worst moment of his life” (*The Noise*, 110).

What were the reactions to his slump? Did he receive the support he had fervently hoped for? He comes to a stark realization that once you’ve betrayed your own principles, the understanding and support from others lose their significance. Solace cannot be found in external validation. In this, he resembles a Shakespearean antagonist, characterized by their conscience and burden of guilt that follow the outright malevolence.

Indeed, there was a glimmer of the understanding he sought, as evidenced by a picketer outside the Waldorf Astoria holding a sign that proclaimed “Shostakovich - we understand! How little they understood...” (*The Noise*, 105). This moment, while seemingly offering a semblance of empathy, also underscores a profound misunderstanding of the depth of his internal conflict and the complexities surrounding his actions and decisions.

Shostakovich discerns a clear distinction between individuals who genuinely endorsed the oppressive regime or overlooked its cruelties, and those who exhibited a semblance of understanding. He harboured particular disdain for celebrated Western humanitarians who visited Russia, proclaiming its citizens lived in utopia, notably including figures like Romain Rolland and Bernard Shaw. His contempt for these Nobel Prize for Literature laureates stemmed from their paradoxical stance of lauding his music while turning a blind eye to the regime’s treatment of him and his fellow artists. Regarding Shaw, Shostakovich mused on the playwright’s indifference to dictatorial power, speculating: “Though why indeed should he be afraid of a dictator? They hadn’t had one in England since the days of Cromwell” (*The Noise*, 107), highlighting the disconnect and naivety of foreign observers in comprehending the true nature of artistic suppression under the Soviet regime. Thus, it seems peculiar to assert that “Barnes’s protagonist may be Russian, but his theme is reassuringly

English” (Lasdun). This statement suggests an intriguing crossover of cultural and thematic elements, proposing that the deeply Russian narrative and character arc explored through Shostakovich also resonate with quintessentially English themes, possibly alluding to universal questions of morality, artistic and personal integrity, and individual versus state dynamics that transcend specific national contexts.

Shostakovich recognized a group that seemed to comprehend the situation slightly better, yet concurrently harboured disappointment towards him. This group failed to acknowledge a critical reality about the Soviet Union: “that it was impossible to tell the truth here and live” (*The Noise*, 107). These individuals believed they understood the mechanisms of Power and expected Shostakovich to resist in the manner they deemed appropriate, essentially desiring his sacrifice. “They wanted the artist to be a gladiator, publicly fighting wild beasts, his blood staining the sand” (ibid). These are mere spectators finding the same pleasure as they would in yet another whodunit. To these individuals, the spectacle held the same allure as a captivating mystery novel, viewing the artist’s struggle as entertainment rather than a perilous reality.

Moreover, according to Shostakovich, these “self-nominated friends” (*The Noise*, 107) did not grasp their resemblance to the very Power they critiqued: no matter the concessions made, they perpetually demanded more, mirroring the insatiable nature of the regime.

The tragic and dramatic irony is comprised in the following words, explaining in essence the inevitable position of the antihero:

“If you saved yourself, you might also save those around you, those you loved. And since you would do anything in the world to save those you loved, you did anything in the world to save yourself. And because there was no choice, equally there was no possibility of avoiding moral corruption.” (*The Noise*, 110)

Seeking comfort, he revisits the memory of the train, echoing the narrative from both the introduction and conclusion where he adorned himself with garlic amulets around his wrist and neck. This time, however, the amulets serve not as a safeguard against typhus, but as a symbolic armour against Power, enemies, hypocrites, and “well-meaning friends” (*The Noise*, 110).

#### **4.2.3. The Irony of Living a Life Which is Not Yours**

In the third chapter, a mature Shostakovich comes to a profound realization, reflecting that the present moment *was* the worst of all times for him, distinguished by an understanding that “[t]he worst time was not the same as the most dangerous time. Because the most dangerous time was not the time when you were most in danger” (*The Noise*, 115). This insight reveals that current threats are less overt than those of previous regimes but are more insidious and widespread. While his life may no longer be directly endangered, his existence - his way of living and creating - is under siege. This final chapter serves as both a reflection on his past and a testament to his growth, encapsulating his journey through and beyond the vicissitudes of time and tyranny. “And tragedies in hindsight look like farces” (ibid) - in this reflection, he revisits and further elaborates on the theme of circularity and the interchangeability of tragedies and farces.

As Shostakovich ages, his irony intensifies, mirroring the evolution and maturation of the novel’s motifs. What he once deemed the worst of times is later reconsidered; his views on the interplay between tragedy and farce shift, leaving him questioning convictions he once held with fervour in his youth.

One significant aspect of this introspection is his distrust in his own memory, casting doubt on what is factual. An illustrative moment of this uncertainty is his recollection of being a ten-year-old boy at Finland Station to see Lenin - he now questions whether he was ever there. This scepticism is encapsulated in the phrase “he lies like an eyewitness” (*The Noise*, 116) highlighting the unreliability of memory and the personal revision of history that comes with time and reflection. Notably, this saying is also the epigraph to Barnes’ novel *Talking It Over* (1991).

\*

Shostakovich ironically portrays Stalin with grandiose titles: “the Leader and Teacher, the Friend of Children, the Great Helmsman, the Great Father of the Nation, the Great Railway Engineer, and now also the Great Gardener” (*The Noise*, 117). This hyperbolic depiction serves to mock the cult of personality surrounding Stalin, emphasizing the absurdity of attributing supernatural capabilities to the dictator. For instance, an oratorio glorifies Stalin’s era as a time when “even apple trees grew more courageously, fighting off the frosts just as the Red Army had fought off the Nazis” (ibid). The piece’s overwhelming triteness secured its popularity, furthering the irony of the regime’s taste. This artistic compliance awarded Shostakovich his fourth Stalin Prize: 100,000 roubles and a dacha, illustrating the transactional nature of his relationship with the regime. “He had paid Caesar, and Caesar had not been ungrateful in return” (ibid) reflects on the rewards of conforming to the state’s expectations, highlighting the complex interplay of compromise, survival, and recognition within the oppressive system.

Shostakovich found himself immersed in accolades “like a shrimp in shrimp-cocktail sauce” (*The Noise*, 118); opposed to this was his desire not to live until next leap year (1976) comes around. His tragedy and misery lie in the fact that, despite the outward appearance of basking in his numerous honours, he aspired to be more than a mere shrimp in sauce; he wished to stir and churn the sauce as well. This metaphor not only captures his complex relationship with the Soviet regime’s rewards but also hints at his internal struggle and desire for agency amidst his celebrated yet constrained position.

In the oppressive atmosphere of Soviet society, Stalin’s presence loomed as a *deus ex machina*, with the power to alter any situation with mere words. Conversations and fates could hinge on just two phrases. The first, a query - “Does Stalin know?” - could halt any discussion in its tracks, introducing a sense of foreboding. The second, a more ominous assertion - “Stalin knows” (*The Noise*, 122) - signified that the wheels of power were already turning, often with dire consequences. Life itself seemed to oscillate between these pronouncements. Yet, there existed a third utterance capable of saving lives: “Stalin says he is not to be touched” (ibid). This statement, whether based on fact or mere speculation, was understood by Shostakovich to have been crucial in sparing his life at times.

The scale of Stalin’s influence was paralleled by the degree of his glorification, to the point where one might describe him as an ironic figure, given that his existence starkly contrasted with what could be deemed typical or humane. “[...] Stalin was accorded supernatural powers - he never made a mistake, he commanded everything and was everywhere [...]” (*The Noise*, 122). It seemed inevitable that a figure so exalted would one day be toppled; yet, in an ironic twist, the essence of his governance persisted, morphing into new shapes and ideologies.

In times of turmoil and confusion, what comfort can a composer seek? Barnes offers an insight: “When all else failed, when there seemed to be nothing but nonsense in the world, he held to this: that good music would always be good music, and great music was impregnable” (*The Noise*, 124). For example, Bach’s preludes and fugues stand resilient even to the clumsiest of performances. Similarly, the inherent nobility of this music renders it immune to cynical interpretation, preserving its purity and magnificence regardless of the approach taken by the performer. Shostakovich may

seem naive here to believe in music, but he is definitely not ironic. Nor cynical, for that matter. This reflection suggests that, amidst chaos, the enduring quality and integrity of great music provide a sanctuary, a steadfast truth that remains unassailable, untainted by cynicism or the misapplication of talent. An upcoming incident will testify to his naivety.

Shostakovich completed his fourth string quartet in 1949. It was performed for the Ministry of Culture's Directorate of Musical Institutions by the Borodin Quartet, as approval from this body was requisite for the work's public performance and the composer's compensation. The performance was deemed successful, leading to whispers about the Borodin Quartet's unique approach to the piece. They had mastered two renditions: one that was true to Shostakovich's vision and another that was tactically altered to navigate the expectations of the musical bureaucracy. The latter approach, crafted to ensure the quartet's acceptance by the authorities, was celebrated as a quintessential demonstration of using irony as a shield against the oppressive mechanisms of Power. "This was held to be a perfect example of the use of irony as a defence against Power" (*The Noise*, 125). This would have been a major triumph for the artist against the backdrop of oppression. Except it wasn't.

Shostakovich himself refutes the tale of the Borodin Quartet's dual interpretations, asserting that such a story could not hold true on the grounds that one "cannot lie in music" (*The Noise*, 125). He believed the Borodins could only perform the fourth quartet as he, the composer, had envisioned. For Shostakovich, music - particularly when it is of high quality and depth - possessed an uncompromising purity. Even when imbued with sentiments of bitterness, despair, or pessimism, music remains incapable of conveying cynicism. To be cynical implies a fundamental scepticism towards human sincerity and moral integrity, a sentiment incompatible with the essence of music. For a great composer, the act of creating music is akin to an act of faith, elevating composition to a form of spiritual devotion. This equivalence between composing and believing transforms music into his religion, affirming his commitment to it. His relationship with music displays a level of conviction as deep as a religious believer's faith in an unchanging truth, suggesting that while his unwavering dedication to music might seem naive, such a perception could be reconsidered with the benefit of historical hindsight.

In a pinnacle of his contemplation, Shostakovich further examines the role of music against the backdrop of life's tumult, wondering: "What could be put up against the noise of time? Only that music which is inside ourselves - the music of our being - which is transformed by some into real music" (*The Noise*, 125). With the passage of time, if this intrinsic music is "strong and true and pure enough to drown out the noise of time, it is transformed into the whisper of history" (ibid). This insight highlights the transcendent nature of music, its capacity to outlive the immediate and resonate across epochs as an echo of the human spirit and its enduring values. In this short passage, Barnes has reached the pinnacle of his contemplation; once we tone down the surrounding and distracting noise of contemporary time, we can hope to touch eternity. The music that reverberates within us, whether it's a composer's opus or a simple melody of the soul, remains when temporalities fade. Music transcends time; it is, in its purest form, a slice of eternity.

#### **4.2.4. The Irony of Living a Life Which is Not Yours... Anymore. Integrity and Corruption**

"Being a hero was much easier than being a coward. To be a hero, you only had to be brave for a moment - when you took out the gun, threw the bomb, pressed the detonator, did away with the tyrant, and with yourself as well. But to be a coward was to embark on a career that lasted for a lifetime. You couldn't ever relax. You had to anticipate the next occasion when you would have to make excuses for yourself..." (*The Noise*, 158).

The widely cited passage is illuminating on multiple levels, making use of irony to its fullest extent. It acts subversively by uncovering the reality behind the concepts of bravery and cowardice: both the coward and the hero experience fear, yet cowardice is framed as a lifelong “career”. This fear can propel us in one direction or the other; Shostakovich exemplifies the route that is more frequently taken. Through this lens, the text not only critiques but also deeply humanizes the experience of navigating fear and moral choices in a repressive environment, showcasing the nuanced survival mechanisms that individuals like Shostakovich might adopt.

In the third chapter, as Shostakovich enters his later years, he arrives at a juncture where the fear of death has ceased to plague him as intensely as before; the terror of being executed feels like a relic of the past. Echoing Mandelstam’s words: “At the end of an historic era abstract concepts always stink like rotten fish” (114), a similar sentiment can be drawn towards the personal experience of fear - prolonged and excessive exposure can lead to its diminishment. Shostakovich discovers that death itself was not his greatest fear.

This realization became particularly poignant following the murder of his friend, Solomon Mikhoels, director of the Moscow Jewish Theatre, under Stalin’s directives. At Mikhoels’ memorial, Shostakovich’s declaration of envy towards his deceased friend was sincere: “I envy him.’ He meant it: death was preferable to endless terror” (*The Noise*, 129). In his view, death was a more merciful fate compared to the relentless agony of living under constant terror.

The current situation is highly ironical: as the regime evolves, so too does its methods of governance. Initially, under Lenin and Stalin, the threat of death and the absolute power of commands were clear and brutal. The fear was tangible, manifesting in physical reactions and an unambiguous understanding of one’s place under power. Now, the Power sought to claim his soul, and for the composer, it became a question of when, not if, he would be compelled to join the Party. Shostakovich explains:

“Before, there was death; now, there was life. Before, men shat in their pants; now, they were allowed to disagree. Before, there were orders; now there were suggestions. So his Conversations with Power became, without him at first recognising it, more dangerous to the soul.” (*The Noise*, 131)

The Power has transited from explicit terror to a subtler, potentially more pernicious form of psychological manipulation. The allowance for suggestions might superficially appear as freedom but, in reality, it shifts the battleground from physical survival to a deeper, moral struggle.

Shostakovich continues:

“Before, they had tested the extent of his courage; now, they tested the extent of his cowardice. And they worked with diligence and know-how, with an intense but essentially disinterested professionalism, like priests working for the soul of a dying man.” (*The Noise*, 131)

In reflecting upon a past dialogue with Stravinsky concerning the art of conducting, Shostakovich confessed: “I do not know how not to be afraid” (*The Noise*, 135). This moment of candour encapsulates a profound acknowledgment of his persistent fear, not just in the face of mortal danger but within the everyday challenges of his artistic life. We are inevitably drawn to empathize with the individual who laid his soul bare.

The core of Shostakovich’s experience is encapsulated in what might be termed the irony of life, as he articulates:

“He was no longer afraid of being killed - that was true, and should have been an advantage. He knew he would be allowed to live, and receive the best medical attention. But, in a way, that was worse. Because it is always possible to bring the living to a lower point. You cannot say that of the dead.” (*The Noise*, 135)

The cessation of fear for his life ironically does not grant him peace; instead, it exposes him to a more insidious form of vulnerability - the vulnerability of his soul and integrity. The acknowledgment that the living can always be degraded further, in ways the dead cannot, speaks to a deeper existential dread. It highlights the inescapable reality of human fragility and the power dynamics that exploit it. Living without the fear of death does not equate to liberation but rather, and ironically, opens up a spectrum of subtler, more tormenting fears associated with survival, dignity, and autonomy.

Self-admittedly, he should have died years ago.

This description of life under Nikita Khrushchev, nicknamed “the Corncob”, employs irony to draw a nuanced comparison between the relative ‘improvements’ of his regime and the slight easements in the conditions of a solitary prisoner. The analogy here is both stark and revealing. It suggests that while there were undeniable ameliorations in the societal and political climate - akin to the prisoner being given a cellmate, the opportunity to breathe fresh air - these changes, at their core, did little to alter the fundamental nature of the imprisonment. The improvements are real, yet they are so basic, so rooted in the deprivation of fundamental human dignities, that their celebration becomes an irony in itself.

A Party official, persuading Shostakovich to accept the position of a Chairman of the Russian Federation Union of Composers, thus join the Party, admits that the Party essentially operates as a camp - albeit one masquerading under the more palatable label of a “camp of progress”, as opposed to the overt repressiveness associated with the Cult of Personality era - reveals a critical, if unsettling, insight into the nature of power and control within the Soviet system. This admission does more than just shed light on the inherent repressiveness of the Party; it also serves as a metaphorical gesture by which the Party attempts to rebrand itself, to distance its current operations from the darker periods of its past, suggesting a superficial or cosmetic change rather than a fundamental transformation of the devil in disguise.

And so, he submitted to the Party “as a dying man submits to a priest” (*The Noise*, 156). This moment marked one of the only instances his son witnessed him in tears, the other being upon the death of his wife.

\*

Shostakovich’s subsequent journey reflects an internal struggle for self-consolation amidst profound moral conflict. Contemplating suicide, he dismisses it, not for a lack of courage, but because he perceives himself as already engaging in a form of moral suicide: “since he was already committing moral suicide, what would be the point of physical suicide? It wasn’t even a question of lacking the courage [...] he lacked even the self-respect that suicide required” (*The Noise*, 156). In this raw introspection, he confronts his own cowardice, acknowledging it as a recurring theme throughout his life - from the personal realm of his marriage to Nina Vasilievna, where he feared informing his mother in advance, to the political domain of joining the Party without forewarning his children.

He ponders how his younger self would react to the person he has become, suggesting that one of life’s cruel ironies is the transformation into the very figure one would have scorned in youth:

“Perhaps this was one of the tragedies life plots for us: it is our destiny to become in old age what in youth we would have most despised” (*The Noise*, 162).

In a moment of profound introspection, Shostakovich ponders the creation of an opera that would serve as a *uchronia* of his own life. He regrets not having composed more operas, feeling that the oppressive regime had stifled this aspect of his creative expression. He imagines an opera titled *The Portrait*, centered on a Faustian bargain. The narrative would follow Chartkov, a talented young painter who achieves fame and wealth through a pact, in contrast to his peer who, having studied in Italy, returns with a single painting that eclipses Chartkov’s entire body of work. The moral is verging on the biblical: “He who has talent in him must be purer in soul than anyone else” (*The Noise*, 163).

This fictional opera serves as a reflection of the internal turmoil Shostakovich grapples with; opera’s fictionality is similar to his fictional *Conversation with Power*. He speculates on the trajectory his life and career might have taken had he eschewed the Faustian bargains presented to him. In envisioning *The Portrait* as a form of self-therapy, Shostakovich confronts a binary choice between integrity and corruption, yet he introduces a third possibility: “integrity *and* corruption. You could be both Chartkov and his morally shaming alter ego” (*The Noise*, 163).

This assertion strikes at the heart of both the novel’s central inquiry and a universal dilemma: Is such a duality genuinely feasible?

Had Shostakovich been sincerely convinced of this compromise, he would have written the opera. However, the lack of such an opera suggests an inner conflict; the composer appears unconvinced by the viability of balancing integrity with corruption in his own life.

\*

Shostakovich’s participation in Party meetings is marked by a profound detachment; he attends yet chooses not to engage with the proceedings. In a particularly ironic episode, he finds himself applauding a speech that was, in fact, critical of him, pushing the boundaries of irony as a Party member to their utmost limit. This act can be seen as his final endeavour to signal his alienation from the Party, adopting the role of an *enfant terrible* as a means of expressing his dissent.

The episode in America, where Shostakovich seemingly betrays Igor Stravinsky, serves merely as a prelude to further acts of self-betrayal. In a subsequent and deeply compromising act, he signs a public letter denouncing Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a writer for whom he harboured private admiration and whose works he read in secret. Shostakovich clung to the hope that people would see through the facade and understand that he did not truly support the sentiments of the letter. Contrary to his wishes, however, many did take the letter at face value, including friends who began to distance themselves from him. This experience leads him to a sombre realization about the limitations of irony as a tool for dissent:

“There were limits to irony: you cannot sign letters while holding your nose or crossing your fingers behind your back, trusting others will guess you do not mean it. [...] He had betrayed himself, and he had betrayed the good opinion others still held of him. He had lived too long.” (*The Noise*, 166)

Shostakovich’s long life is deeply entwined with irony, a theme that resonates through to the twilight of his life. He articulates a reflection on irony, not merely as a literary device, but as a profound survival mechanism, a means of defence, and a source of consolation. His introspection reveals irony as emerging from the discrepancy between expectation and reality, a universal human experience, as explained by Muecke (see Muecke, 10). Shostakovich posits:

“All his life he had relied on irony. He imagined that the trait had been born in the usual place: in the gap between how we imagine, or suppose, or hope life will turn out, and the way it actually does. So irony becomes a defence of the self and the soul; it lets you breathe on a day-to-day basis. [...] And part of you believed that as long as you could rely on irony, you would be able to survive.” (*The Noise*, pp. 173-174)

The ultimate irony in Shostakovich’s life, as dictated by the regime, was the very fact of his continued existence. This existence became an extension of the regime’s power, rendering his life no longer his own. Reflecting on his life, he increasingly considered himself a mediocre composer, a stark contrast to the youthful self-doubt that pales in comparison to the profound insecurities that haunt one’s later years. This self-perception signifies the regime’s ultimate victory over him.

The decision not to kill him but to let him live became an ironical form of execution. By sparing his life, they effectively extinguished the essence of who he was:

“Instead of killing him, they had allowed him to live, and by allowing him to live, they had killed him. This was the final, unanswerable irony to his life: that by allowing him to live, they had killed him.” (*The Noise*, 177)

This sentiment is soaked in deep and bitter irony, where survival becomes a curse rather than a blessing.

#### **4.3. Whose Voice is This? And Why Shostakovich Never Laughs?**

Finney astutely points out: “[...] the real problem of the novel is one of voice - trying to decide who is speaking - Shostakovich or Barnes. The answer is both” (Finney, *Irony: Truth’s Disguise*). This perspective resonates deeply with me.

The narrative crafts a fictional portrayal of a historical figure, where strict adherence to factual accuracy is secondary to the dialogue it initiates with the reader. As Finney observes, “he [Barnes] welcomes factual uncertainties because they liberate him as a novelist to reconstruct the central concern in this book, which is the moral price Shostakovich pays to continue composing music” (Finney, *Irony: Truth’s Disguise*). The crux of the matter lies in the engagement between Barnes’ rendition of Shostakovich and the audience, and the insights gleaned from this interaction.

Echoing Umberto Eco’s concept of “The Open Work”, the novel serves as a conduit for dialogue, a premise Eco elegantly, and conveniently herein, parallels with musical composition as he introduces his theory:

“A number of recent pieces of instrumental music are linked by a common feature: the considerable autonomy left to the individual performer in the way he chooses to play the work. Thus, he is not merely free to interpret the composer’s instructions following his own discretion (which in fact happens in traditional music), but he must impose his judgment on the form of the piece, as when he decides how long to hold a note or in what order to group the sounds: all this amounts to an act of improvised creation.” (Eco, *The Open Work*, 1)

Guided by Eco’s tenets of *intentio operis* and *intentio lectoris*, we are invited to become autonomous interpreters of Shostakovich’s personal symphony. Barnes offers his rendition of how Shostakovich’s internal melodies might sound, leaving us with the contemplative task of determining how we would express our own rendition of these melodies within his circumstances. Hoping to transcend mere ‘muddle instead of music’.

The novel's relevance is profoundly anchored in its contemporary resonance, given that the shadows of totalitarianism and dictatorship are as prevalent and significant in today's world as they have ever been throughout history. This work urges us to engage with and contemplate these issues, not merely as historical footnotes but as pressing realities that continue to influence the fabric of human society. The shadow of tyranny looms large, compelling us to ascertain our stance toward it, which is a *conditio sine qua non*, unless we aspire to the existence of a *poète maudit*; the experiences of Shostakovich are neither too distant in the past nor too remote in possibility to disconnect from our own realities. If there's any irony to be found, it lies with us, in our engagement or indifference.

Barnes takes a measured approach to detailing Shostakovich's music: the narrative does not present the composer in moments of deep immersion in his music, an aspect that some might anticipate. He sparingly uses musical terminology, perhaps diverging from some readers' expectations. His focus is directed more towards exploring the 'inner music' of the composer, the personal and internal struggles faced amidst an oppressive regime. This narrative offers a factional and fragmented glimpse into the life of a renowned composer navigating the challenges of dictatorship, prioritizing the emotional and psychological landscape over the technical aspects of his musical compositions.

A striking feature of Barnes' depiction of Shostakovich is the notable lack of laughter, as well as moments of *jouissance* or ecstasy, despite brief interludes of genuine love he recalls. In this portrayal, Shostakovich does not embody the archetype of a *Homo Ridens*.

Such absences might be viewed as potential limitation of the narrative, leaving a dimension of Shostakovich's character and experience unexplored. This critique might align with Denk's observation, where he expresses a desire for Barnes to "explain a little less, and show a bit more" (Denk). Introducing elements of humor and laughter into Shostakovich's portrayal could have offered a more layered understanding of his character, perhaps making him more relatable or trustworthy to readers. Laughter, as a universal sign of resilience, humanity, and complexity, might have deepened the portrayal, suggesting that amidst the gravity of his situation, Shostakovich retained a semblance of lightness - a facet that could engender a deeper connection and trust from the audience.

Be that as it may, unlike the oppressive dialogues with authority figures that marked much of his life, Barnes' Shostakovich embarks on an enduring dialogue with readers, transcending temporal and spatial constraints. The readers become the new interlocutors in a dialogue that extends beyond the confines of the Soviet regime, reaching into the very essence of human experience. It is a conversation that, while grounded in historical specificity, reaches out to address the universal concerns of art, power, and the enduring quest for meaning amidst the vicissitudes of existence.

## 5. *Elizabeth Finch* - Current Reception of the Novel

Julian Barnes has firmly established himself as a “national treasure” (see Arthanayake), consistently sparking considerable interest in literary circles with each of his publications. This acclaim was clearly demonstrated by the reception of his 2022 novel, *Elizabeth Finch*. The receptions of the novel to date have been noteworthy, reflecting the literary community’s ongoing engagement and interest in Julian Barnes’ work.

Julian Barnes ventures into uncharted territory with *Elizabeth Finch*, the novel which appears to revolve around the teacher, diverging from a genre he once vowed to avoid. Early in his career, the novel of academe was popular, prompting him to promise never to write one (see Orhanen). True to his word, *Elizabeth Finch* does not fit the traditional mould of a campus novel, despite its academic settings and themes.

Critics have approached *Elizabeth Finch* from diverse perspectives, resulting in so varied interpretations that one might suggest they are discussing different novels altogether. Some focus on the narrator’s reliability (Cummins, Charles), others delve into the intricacies of teacher’s character, while some examine her attitude towards mono-agendas reading into Barnes’ authorial voice the current Barnes’ stand on political situation (Harrison). Additionally, there are analyses concerning the reliability of the narrator, historical accuracy, and memory (McAlpin). Certainly, the novel’s ability to spark such diverse discourses contributes to its contemplative depth and value.

Cummins refers to it as “a Julian-centred narrative likewise shaped by a woman’s enigmatic magnetism, albeit cerebral, not carnal, in a roman à clef that keeps the clef tucked firmly under a plant pot by the back door [...]” (Cummins). For Charles, “[i]t isn’t so much a story as a late-night hagiography drunk on distilled irony” (Charles). McAlpin refers to it as a “dual-pronged exploration of both personal and ancient history” (McAlpin). Barnes articulated his motivation for delving into the theme of teaching within his novel as follows: “I think part of it is the mixture of intimacy and formality in teaching (though it’s probably much more informal nowadays), and the question of what sticks in a student’s mind and what doesn’t, and how long-lasting that ‘sticking’ is” (Barnes in Orhanen).

John Self places *Elizabeth Finch* within the broader context of Julian Barnes’ oeuvre, emphasizing the author’s consistent exploration of familiar themes such as memory, perspective and the perception of history. Self notes Barnes’ distinctive style, highlighting his intelligence, originality, and humor, traits that set him apart from his contemporaries. According to Self, Barnes has a longstanding interest in examining personal and collective histories, as seen in works like *The Sense of an Ending* and *Arthur & George*. His method of blending fact with fiction, particularly exemplified in *Flaubert’s Parrot*, showcases his unique approach to narrative, often presenting a “novel-as-encyclopaedia” that challenges conventional storytelling. Furthermore, in *Talking It Over* and its sequel *Love, etc.*, Barnes explores the complexities of truth through multiple perspectives, underscoring the subjective nature of human relationships. *Elizabeth Finch* is described by Self as a culmination of these themes as it “blends these concerns, buffs them up and brings them into the open. It’s Barnes squared” (Self).

It is intriguing to consider whether this novel represents a continuation of the author’s diaristic prose, particularly concerning the significant women in his life. Having that in mind, the parallels

with *The Only Story* are telling. In that novel, as his university friend noted, Barnes portrays a love affair with an older woman during his student days<sup>26</sup>.

Now, in *Elizabeth Finch*, he shifts focus to a teacher, further exploring the theme of influential women in his life and extending this personal narrative thread.

It has been widely noted that the character of Elizabeth Finch bears similarities to Anita Brookner. The depiction of Neil's lunches with Elizabeth Finch mirrors the routine Julian Barnes himself maintained with Brookner. In an interview, Barnes acknowledged this connection, stating: "[...] she was certainly at the starting point [of the novel]" (Arthanayake, 00:18:10). Kemp notes that sections of a 2016 obituary tribute by Barnes to his friend, the "witty, glitteringly intelligent, reserved" art historian and novelist Anita Brookner, resurface in Neil's descriptions of his interactions with EF, at times verbatim<sup>27</sup> (Kemp).

The novel is "deceptively slim" (Messer), yet within its roughly 180 pages, it explores a vast territory of memories and emotions. It also includes a narrative about a Roman emperor, serving as an homage to and acknowledgment of a debt to the protagonist's late teacher - a task that remained incomplete during her lifetime. Structurally, the novel is organized as a triptych: initially, it appears to consist of two-thirds fiction and one-third non-fiction. The non-fiction segment, however, will be examined for its fictional elements in the upcoming subchapter.

Chapters One and Three of the novel bookend the narrative, with the first introducing the narrator, Neil, and his late, eponymous teacher, Elizabeth Finch, as well as the contours of their relationship. As EF unpredictably bequeaths her complete notes and library to Neil, the chapter also sets the stage for the central story of Julian the Apostate.

Chapter Two shifts the narrative pace and explores a fictional biography of Julian the Apostate. True to Finchian analytical style, this chapter also discusses juxtaposition of the Christian God and pagan gods, embodying a thematic exploration that Neil wishes he could have discussed with Elizabeth Finch. Moreover, this chapter introduces a speculative dimension, contemplating a uchronia where Julian the Apostate lives long enough to fulfil his vision, thus pondering how the world might have looked under his prolonged influence.

The final chapter serves as a graceful narrative decrescendo: Neil brings his examination of EF's and Julian's lives to a close, reaching a conclusion and finding resolution with his endeavour, memories of EF, and reflections on life.

### 5.1. Neil as a Narrator

In *Elizabeth Finch*, Barnes employs a range of narrative techniques, including dialogue, description, action, interior monologue, and exposition. The narrative primarily focuses on EF, with less emphasis on the narrator himself, although we do learn some details about his life, such

---

<sup>26</sup> The specifics of the affair were disclosed by a university friend of Barnes in an article published in *The Times* ([thetimes.co.uk/article/a-very-grown-up-affair-the-truth-behind-julian-barnes-fiction-9bpw0bpfg](http://thetimes.co.uk/article/a-very-grown-up-affair-the-truth-behind-julian-barnes-fiction-9bpw0bpfg)). While details from the author's personal life generally hold limited significance, their inclusion becomes notable as Barnes opts to weave fiction around these real-life elements, similar to his fictionalization of Flaubert's life. Thus, these personal facts can be viewed merely as a Barnes' parrot, akin to his use of Flaubert's parrot in his narrative, serving primarily as creative catalysts rather than focal points of genuine biographical interest.

<sup>27</sup> The character of Elizabeth Finch will henceforth be abbreviated as EF, following the nomenclature used by Neil, the narrator. To maintain conciseness, I will continue using this designation throughout.

as his career changes, two failed marriages, two unnamed children, and an affair with Anna, his classmate from the Netherlands. Barnes also employs a diaristic prose style reminiscent of *Flaubert's Parrot*, particularly in the inclusion of entries from EF's notebook. These entries serve as points of exposition, with the narrator reflecting on them and building the narrative accordingly.

Neil employs a first-person singular narrative, akin to a monologue delivered on stage. Such a narrative perspective inherently raises concerns regarding the reliability of the narrator. EF's words are conveyed through Neil's recollections, with his impressions and details about her filtered through his memory. This intimate voice invites the attentive reader to trust the protagonist as he confides in them. However, it simultaneously urges a measure of caution, prompting readers to approach his account with a degree of scepticism.

Neil's impressions of EF are both reliable and biased, as evidenced by his recounting of his conversation with Geoff at the novel's conclusion. Geoff had a markedly different impression of EF and did not share Neil's fascination with her. In fact, Geoff undermined Neil's entire portrayal, thereby calling into question everything Neil claimed about EF and reinforcing suspicions regarding his reliability. Although Neil insists that "this is not my story" (*Elizabeth Finch*, 62), it is clear that the narrative is entirely under his control, shaped by his memory and judgment.

This distancing gesture alleviates any expectations of extensive personal disclosure, redirecting the focus toward his teacher's life. He shares just enough details about himself to support the main narrative, recognizing that a complete absence of personal information would undermine his credibility as a narrator. Instead, he discloses information relevant to his interactions with EF, thereby justifying his role within the narrative framework.

Harrison delves into the portrayal of Neil as a narrator in Barnes' works diachronically, tracing his evolution from *Metroland* (1980) to his pinnacle in *The Sense of an Ending* (2011). The Barnesian narrator, according to Harrison, is "this recurrent Barnesian man, whose averageness *is* his excellence" (italics in original). There is an ironical twist in this comment: narrator's averageness ironically results in his excellence. However, despite offering minimal personal details and presenting himself as a reliable narrator, Neil harbours doubt about his own credibility. Harrison suggests that Neil's apparent reliability is deceptive, as he eventually reveals himself to be a liar driven by obsession. Neil's fixation on a memory, object, or person leads him to linger on each reflection or artifact until the obsession reaches its anticlimactic conclusion. "And somewhere along the way, he is going to tell you a lie" (Harrison).

Neil, as the narrator, exhibits a remarkable degree of self-subversion, a characteristic not uncommon in Barnes' narrators. When describing EF, he initially presents her as "high-minded, self-sufficient, European" (*Elizabeth Finch*, 10), only to be abruptly interrupted by a recollection of EF's own advice: "whenever you see a character in a novel, let alone a biography or history book, reduced and neatened into three adjectives, always distrust that description" (ibid). This moment exemplifies Neil's consistent tendency to subvert his own narrative, highlighting what could be described as the irony of the narrator.

## **5.2. Irony and Legacy: EF's Influence, Embedded Essay and Shaping of Neil's Perspective**

EF's notable success lay in her ability to "draw out" her students, encouraging them to "theorise without fear of scorn" (*Elizabeth Finch*, 28). EF was notable for her "epigrammatic

generalisation” (ibid), which reflects her ability to distil complex ideas into concise, memorable expressions. Rather than oversimplification of complex issues, this can be seen as a distinctive feature of her teaching style, providing memorable hooks that encouraged further thought, while still leaving room for deeper intellectual exploration.

She was, of course, ironic. Her ironic observations, such as her commentary on Carpaccio’s painting of St. George and the Dragon, where she humorously points out the saint’s lance and armour, remarking: “You might agree that this is more a demonstration of superior weaponry than of superior piety” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 29). Carpaccio’s work, she argued, serves as both “a freeze-frame from an action movie and a compelling work of propaganda”, noting that “one secret of the Christian religion’s success was always to employ the best moviemakers” (*Elizabeth Finch*, pp. 29-30).

Her ironic critique of the dogmatic iconic representation of one of the key events in Christianity is characteristic of Barnes’ signature style, reflecting a typical postmodern stance that questions prevailing truths while risking misinterpretation or even condemnation. In this instance, irony reaches its full potential in a postmodern discourse.

The political discussions between the teacher and the student were even more productive in terms of irony. During their conversation about elections and government, EF stated:

“‘A politician’s main function is to disappoint.’

‘And that sounds incredibly cynical, you know.’

‘I disagree. I am not a cynic.’

‘What are you then?’

‘I am not vain enough to attach a label to myself.’” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 40)

Neil and EF maintained a ritual of meeting twice or thrice annually at a small Italian restaurant in West London. The rules were clear: EF would arrive first, they would order the same meals and drinks, and she would always pay. Neil was always eager to impress her, confessing that “I was cleverer in her presence. I knew more, I was more cogent; and I was desperate to please her” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 38). Their tradition of lunches continued for nearly twenty years, with Neil describing them as “still and radiant points” in his life (*Elizabeth Finch*, 43). He was preparing for their lunches as if he were sitting for an exam.

When Neil asked EF why she had chosen to teach adults, she responded in a *via negativa* manner, explaining that she was not thrilled by the incuriosity of the young. Instead, she found adult learners more inspiring, as “most come because they feel a lack in their lives, a sense that they might have missed something, and that they now have a chance - perhaps even a final chance - to put things right” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 39). EF ultimately provided Neil with just that - a center in his life, both during her lifetime and posthumously. It is curious that a teacher would be more inspired by adults who feel they are missing something in their lives than by the young in their formative years. It is arguable whether EF’s desire to assist adult students in finding their center and addressing their perceived voids reflects her own sense of emptiness and lack of meaning.

Their lunch tradition continued for nearly twenty years, but Neil failed to notice that she was dying when she cancelled their meetings twice consecutively. Barnes has EF die relatively early in the novel, roughly midway through the first chapter. Neil received an invitation to her

funeral from her brother, Christopher Finch, and discovered that EF had bequeathed to him “all [her] papers and [her] library, to do with as he wishes” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 45).

After EF’s death, Neil took on the task of sorting out her legacy through her notes and books. He initially considered compiling *The Wit and Wisdom of EF* but abandoned the idea, realizing he was “anthologizing her against her will” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 49). As he sifted through her notes, one entry caught his attention: “-J, dead at thirty-one” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 50).

From her lawyer, he learned that she had made her will eighteen years prior, just a couple of years into their lunch tradition. This indicated that EF had long intended to leave her belongings to Neil and could have provided instructions if she had wanted to. Ironically, all this was entrusted to the one student who failed to submit the essay and was nicknamed by his child “the King of Unfinished Projects” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 52).

Neil learned of a potential lover of EF from her brother, who described a scene in which he saw EF parting ways with a tall man in a double-breasted overcoat at a public concourse. When asked about the man, she dismissed the question, saying: “That was nobody” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 57). This scene introduced narrative tension, further heightened by Neil’s attempts throughout the novel to uncover the identity of the mysterious lover. However, Barnes left the man’s identity unresolved, which could be seen as one of the novel’s shortcomings, given that he chose not to capitalize on this narrative intrigue. Nonetheless, it is arguable whether revealing EF’s lover’s identity and exploring a potential love story would have diluted the narrative focus on her intellectual life and impact.

In her notes, EF pondered various themes she taught, including fully composed arguments, quotations, private jottings, memories, and scribbles. One note, in particular, addressed her own death: when she asked her GP whether he would be willing to euthanize her when the time came, he refused, as it wasn’t permitted. She replied: “[...] either way, I was hardly to sue him, am I?” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 57), showing her ironic detachment even in the face of mortality. This remark encapsulates her unique blend of wit, realism, and irony, which she used to navigate the uncertainties and discomforts of life.

EF also tackled the issue of posthumous memory, contemplating the moment “when the last living person to remember you has their very last thought about you. There ought to be a name for that final event, which marks your final extinction” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 58). Continuing to offer insightful observations, Barnes, through EF, posits that the final moment is not the instant of physical death but rather the point at which one ceases to exist in the memory of others. Thus, her reflections become a poignant commentary on the impermanence of human life and the futility of clinging to notions of eternal remembrance.

After reading EF’s note on Julian the Apostate, Neil realized what he should do: “Instead of looking at Hitler and Stalin, I suggest we look at Constantine and Theodosius. And if you want someone to admire, try Julian. What the newspapers would call ‘a hold-out hero’” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 68). This revelation immediately solved the mystery of “-J, dead at thirty-one”. Accordingly, Neil decided to embark on writing a belated essay on Julian, not to honour EF - because, as he ironically opined, honouring would make the dead even more dead - but to please her as a way of bringing her back to life. Moreover, he decided to do it for himself, as “[t]his was one task the King of Unfinished Projects was determined to complete” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 68).

In Chapter Two, Barnes makes a narrative pause and, in his own words (see Barnes in Arthanayake), shifts to a non-fiction section of the book as Neil presents his essay on Julian the Apostate, offering the reader a comprehensive treatise on the last pagan emperor of Rome. Neil

provides the caveat at the very beginning: “The emperor’s full name was Flavius Claudius Julianus, but since the victor acquires the spoils, and these spoils include not just the narrative and the history but also the nomenclature, he will be known thereafter as Julian the Apostate” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 73). However, he immediately undermines himself, noting that “only some of this is true” and that “versions differ” (*ibid*). Thus, if he proved himself to be an unreliable narrator in the first chapter, he thoroughly subverts his own reliability in the second one.

The essay served as a deconstruction of the historical myth. Regarding Julian’s famous last words, “Thou hast conquered, O Galilean” (as they appear in Theodoret’s *History of the Church*), Neil argues that they are a brilliant invention, noting that “historians can also be excellent novelists” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 74). Neil analyzes why the poet added an extra word, “pale,” and from this single word draws hypotheses. The poet may have referred to the paleness of Jesus in contrast to Julian, or he may have been alluding to Jesus’s otherworldly nature, or simply to the fact that Jesus was dead. Neil concludes that “[p]oets can also be excellent novelists” (*ibid*).

Here, Barnes subtly connects history, biography, prose, and poetry, emphasizing that these genres are not fundamentally different but rather share a common core. All three require a degree of imagination. In *The Man in the Red Coat* (2019), Barnes’s non-fiction book about a Belle Époque gynaecologist whose portrait was painted by John Singer Sargent, he aptly states: “Biography is a collection of holes tied together with string” (as cited by McAlpin). What Barnes referred to in this quote is the emplotment process, as defined by Hayden White, and as employed by Neil in his essay.

\*

From a narratological perspective, one might inquire why Barnes obligates us to engage with an essay that should have been submitted long ago. What elicits our interest in Neil’s detailed examination of Julian the Apostate? Neil could have succinctly notified the reader of his delayed completion of the assignment; however, he - or more accurately, Barnes - opts to display the essay in full.

The embedded story in the form of an essay possesses clear motivation, logical justification, and coherent sequencing, adhering to the principle of causality. Moreover, this embedded story appears to halt the “narrative clock”, yet not without a previously set alarm (as presented in Lowe, 39), and takes on a new temporal and narrative pace of its own. In this case, the alarm is unmistakable: “It was right that I wanted to please EF, and right that I would keep my promise. And so I did. And this is what I wrote” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 69).

Julian Barnes is too astute a writer to simply insert a story to fill pages. The narrative surrounding Julian is not just an homage to his revered teacher but also contains parallels with her own life, which Neil aims to convey to readers. In a recent interview, Julian Barnes revealed that Julian the Apostate *was* the true focal point of the novel (Messer, 00:06:40). The embedded narrative, framed by the outer story, carries a certain tension as it serves a purpose open to interpretation by discerning readers. Julian’s struggle against Christian orthodoxy mirrors EF’s own challenge to academic norms, reinforcing the theme of questioning historical narratives and myths. Furthermore, Barnes elaborates that the parallel between Julian the Apostate and EF lies in “the spirit of contrariness towards your own times” (*ibid*).

By incorporating this narrative into his novel, Barnes creates a loop that invites questions and speculation as readers naturally seek to close it. As Ryan states: “[e]mbedded narratives originate in two main types of mental acts: retrospective interpretations of the past and projections of the future” (323). In this case, we gain insight into EF’s initial interest in Julian, reflecting

retrospective interpretations of the past, while also considering the narrative's future implications on Neil and EF's relationship as the plot unfolds.

As a rule of thumb, the embedded story mirrors the external one, often conveying a universal or cosmic message that can also be applied to the external narrative. In this instance, the external story concerns how the embedded story about Julian was written and what happened after its completion. Julian's story is neither a juxtaposed nor an extraneous diversion from the plot, nor is it disembodied from it.

The embedded story's narrator is Neil, and his narrative position is both intradiegetic (as it is his essay on Julian, thus providing his own opinion) and extradiegetic (this position is enhanced by his use of EF's notes to discuss and challenge the emperor's biography). Such a narrative focalization can be viewed as ironic, as it provides him with the distance needed for critical observation and enables him to challenge educated opinion. Neil exploits the benefits of this irony profusely. Neil's dual focalization (intradiegetic and extradiegetic) introduces a layer of irony. While he positions himself as a scholar on Julian the Apostate, he frequently undermines his own authority through self-critique, highlighting the subjective nature of historical interpretation. By adopting EF's perspective and utilizing her notes, he effectively shifts the focus from Julian's story to EF's own intellectual legacy, presenting his essay as a homage to her teachings. This narrative strategy allows Neil to critically engage with the traditional biography of Julian while simultaneously crafting a narrative that celebrates EF's influence.

\*

During one of their lunches, Neil was surprised to learn that EF volunteered at a hospital during Christmas. He remarked that it was very Christian of her, to which she replied, in a Finchian manner: "[c]harity is hardly confined to the Christian religion" (*Elizabeth Finch*, 130).

This reveals another parallel between EF and Julian: both displayed virtues traditionally regarded as Christian while distancing themselves from the religion - EF ironically and Julian directly.

Furthermore, this parallel becomes evident to Neil himself: he recognizes that the same dilemma he faces in writing about EF and interpreting episodes and actions from her life mirrors Julian the Apostate's efforts to interpret signs from his diviners. Neil reflects on the challenges biographers encounter in piecing together a coherent narrative from circumstantial, contradictory, and missing evidence. He compares this to Julian on campaign with his team of diviners, who receive conflicting interpretations. The Etruscans would tell him one thing, while the philosophers would say another; the gods spoke, but the oracles were silent or obscure; dreams were alarming, visions were propelling in different directions, the animals' entrails were ambiguous, and the sky and dust storms suggested conflicting meanings. In the midst of all these signs and symbols, Julian struggled to discern the truth and the way forward. Similarly, Neil finds himself overwhelmed by the complexities of trying to reconstruct EF's life and legacy. His cry encapsulates his struggle: "Where is the truth, where is the way forward?" (*Elizabeth Finch*, 132).

Thus, Neil aligns biographers, and narrators more broadly, with the figure of Julian as depicted in above paragraph: a man striving to decipher the narrative and its implications, seeking to provide a conclusive note to his life or specific circumstances, akin to Julian's efforts to interpret the omens before him. Neil identifies with the challenge of discerning a coherent thread within the narrative universe, mirroring Julian's quest to latch onto a semblance of truth.

He further delves into the issue of biography, questioning whether “consistent narrative is a delusion, as is trying to reconcile conflicting judgements” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 132). He then simplifies the matter with a solution akin to Occam’s razor: “Maybe you could equally account for someone by a mere list of snagging, indicative facts” (*ibid*), followed by a list (Barnes’ favourite technique) of incidents from Julian’s life that had not been previously revealed.

\*

Barnes employs an intriguing literary technique known as *mise en abyme*, where a story is nested within the main narrative, creating layers that reflect and echo each other. The episode of Neil reading Michel Butor’s novel *La Modification* represents a novelistic fractal approach, wherein Neil reads about a character who reads about Julian the Apostate. This embedded story reflects the embedded narrative about Julian. *La Modification* is written in an irritating second-person singular narrative voice, which might mirror Neil’s own irritation with the subject of Julian, which has grown into an obsession to a certain degree. However, as the novel fails to clarify the connection between the protagonist and the Roman emperor, Neil becomes increasingly annoyed.

Cummins also recognizes that Neil’s emotional state is reflected in his irritation with the novel, which fails to establish a clear connection between its protagonist and Julian. Furthermore, Cummins addresses the question of purpose: “Barnes couldn’t make it any clearer that he knows exactly what he’s doing; the question is, why is he doing it?” (Cummins). The answer follows immediately after the *mise en abyme* culminates - we learn that the novel the protagonist intended to write about his emotional dilemma is the very novel Neil has just read.

Following this culmination, Neil reflects: “It seemed appropriate that my time with Julian’s afterlife should end on such a diminuendo” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 159). This resolution provides insight into “why” Barnes permits Julian’s narrative to gradually diminish rather than abruptly cease. As Julian’s presence fades, so does EF’s. For Neil, this moment marks a significant turning point, signalling that it was indeed time to move on.

\*

The novel concludes with Neil engaging in reflective discussions about EF with two of his former classmates. These conversations introduce a subversive perspective, highlighting Neil’s bias towards EF. His credibility as a narrator is ultimately undermined by Anna and Geoff. Anna, in particular, contests the image of EF as an inspirational teacher, proposing that this might be more of a comforting myth suitable for younger audiences rather than adults in their thirties. She also suggests that Neil gravitates towards women who are assertive and direct. Thus, Anna questions Neil’s role as the narrator, while Geoff further challenges Neil’s tendency to mythologize EF.

Geoff’s response to Neil is more forthright than Anna’s; he indirectly acknowledges his part in the public shaming of EF, a situation that became clear once *Hitler’s Table Talk* was brought into public discussions about EF during the “Shaming” episode. In his evaluation of EF, Geoff presents a divergent view: “She obviously thought of herself as ‘original’; I believe a more fitting term would be ‘amateur’” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 174). He further discloses that he used EF as a counter-example when he assumed the role of a teacher. Ironically, despite their disagreements, he was the student who continued in her professional path. Geoff effectively concludes the debate initiated by Anna regarding EF as a myth. In a postscript to Neil, Geoff observes:

“With the passage of time, I’m sure you won’t object to my observation that not only were you quite infatuated with her, but you elevated her to the status of a legend. Not that it’s harmful, really. After all, we all rely on our own personal myths to navigate life, don’t we?” (ibid)

What Neil expresses about EF’s legacy aligns with the broader implications of Barnes’ own literary legacy. Neil recognizes that beyond EF’s profound influence on him, she has imparted specific legacies: “of words and phrases, of ideas which I couldn’t necessarily understand or reconcile, but which would follow me down the years” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 175). A similar assertion could be made regarding Barnes.

### **5.3. Celebrating Irony: Instances Thereof in the Novel**

Kemp highlights the affinity between Julian the Ironist (referring to the author) and Julian the Apostate, noting Barnes’ admiration for both: “With Julian the Apostate and his latter-day admirer, Julian the Ironist finds himself in congenial company”. He further underscores Barnes’ appreciation for irony: “It [the novel] also celebrates the cast of mind Barnes most prizes. A connoisseur and master of irony himself, he fills this book with instances of its exhilarating power - from EF’s “fine, ironic wit” to the invigorating scepticism of her 4th-century hero” (Kemp).

The novel’s intricate use of irony weaves a rich tapestry of narrative technique and thematic depth. Herein, I endeavour to catalogue these ironic elements in a manner reminiscent of EF’s meticulous notes:

- **EF’s character**

The characterization of the eponymous teacher will be examined in detail in subchapter 5.3.1.

- **The significance of bequeathing notes: A pivotal plot twist in narrative progression**

The deliberate EF’s action of bequeathing her notes to the one student who failed to fulfil his task serves as a pivotal plot twist that propels the narrative forward. Neil’s failure to submit his final essay to EF becomes the catalyst for significant developments in the story, his life, and his relationship with EF. This incident carries an ironic dimension, as his apology to EF for letting her down due to his post-divorce crisis leads to unexpected consequences. When Neil expressed his remorse to EF, she responded with the reassuring remark: “I’m sure it is only temporary” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 36). Initially interpreting her words as referring to his emotional turmoil, Neil later realizes that EF meant that his failure was temporary. He comes to understand that she believed “[t]hat somehow, in the future, I would justify her belief in me” (ibid). The irony lies in the fact that instead of facing repercussions for his failure, Neil’s relationship with EF deepens and evolves based on this very failure. This pivotal moment marks the beginning of a new chapter in Neil’s life.

The situation carries a trait of cosmic irony, as the initially misunderstood words ultimately lead to a life dedicated to exploring someone else’s. The narrator’s initial inability to grasp EF’s comments fully becomes ironically significant, as he only comes to understand their true meaning in hindsight. Ironically, his past failures were never addressed in their regular meetings, during which EF decided to entrust him with all her intellectual property. The cosmic irony of the situation is profound: a pivotal moment, initially laden with misinterpretation, directs the narrator on a deep exploration into EF’s life, the life of Julian the Apostate, and culminates in the completion of a long-overdue essay. This series of events underscores the irony of understanding and insight often arriving post factum, shaping life paths in unexpected ways.

- **Biographical irony**

The endeavour to craft a biography that deviates from conventional norms embodies a profound irony. This metafictional technique challenges the traditional boundaries of biography, merging factual recounting with fictional elements and even speculative, counterfactual history. By highlighting the biographer's capacity to manipulate and interpret historical facts, this approach subverts established conceptions of biography. It blurs the distinctions between fact and fiction, effectively redefining biography as a form of narrative fiction that both reflects and constructs reality. This inevitably brings us to the following item:

- **Fictionalization and memory**

As mentioned previously, irony arises from the novel's manipulation of memory and history. Julian Barnes has commented on the national propensity to misremember history; similarly, the novel plays with the accuracy and interpretation of EF's life story, reflecting on how personal histories are constructed or misconstrued.

Furthermore, Barnes raises a poignant question regarding the fallibility of collective memory, equating it to personal memory: "[...] why should we expect our collective memory - which we call history - to be any less fallible than our personal memory?" (*Elizabeth Finch*, 22). This inquiry echoes his recurring concerns about memory manipulation, as depicted in various works such and characters as Martha Cochrane, Shostakovich, characters in *A History*'s stories, and Barnes' non-fiction disquisition *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*. Once again, Barnes scrutinizes and challenges the reliability of memory, opting not to provide a definitive answer. This approach mirrors Finchian mode of inquiry. Barnes adopts a similar approach to his treatise on Géricault's painting, delving into scenes the painter did not paint and assigning them equal significance. This method is Barnes' signature approach:

"We must always bear in mind what might have happened but didn't, as well as what did. Why, you might enquire - what happened, happened, and that's what we have to deal with. Perhaps not. And this is not just a jolly game of counterfactuals - what if Stauffenberg's bomb had killed Hitler? - it is also a serious enquiry. We are too apt, I would propose, to see history as a kind of Darwinism. The survival of the fittest, by which, of course, Darwin didn't mean the strongest or even the cleverest, merely those best equipped to adapt to changing circumstances." (*Elizabeth Finch*, 22)

In this passage, Barnes draws parallels to themes explored in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, particularly through the woodworm's subversion of Darwinian principles. EF echoes this theme, asserting that human history is often influenced by factors such as organization and military strength rather than mere adaptation to changing circumstances. Barnes continues and expands upon this notion in the current novel, emphasizing the sobering reality that peaceful nations are rarely triumphant, as ideas alone seldom prevail without the support of force. EF concludes:

"It is lamentable, we would all agree, but it would be indolent not to recognise it. Because otherwise we merely have to sit on our hands - sit on our brains as well, and admit, To the victor the spoils, which also means, To the victor the truth." (ibid)

- **Unwilling subject**

The irony inherent in composing an extensive biography about an individual who valued privacy and avoided public scrutiny, particularly one who lived remotely in the past and whose

life is pieced together from the biographical accounts and notes of others, raises ethical questions about the nature of biography. This subjective portrayal of someone who abstained from public commentary on their reputation, yet endured public scrutiny and shaming in accordance with their stoic principles, highlights a stark contrast. Now, the subject becomes the object of commentary. This stark disparity presents a rich source of irony, one that Barnes adeptly exploits throughout the narrative.

- **Navigating the incomprehensible**

The theme of the incomprehensibility of the subject emerges as a consequence of previous item. The task of fully understanding EF is depicted as inherently futile, as she remains elusive despite efforts to define her through narrative. This ironic twist parallels the portrayal of Julian the Apostate, further complicating the process of unravelling their characters within the narrative.

- **Neil's essay remains unpublished**

Neil's decision to withhold the publication of the completed essay can be interpreted as an expression of self-irony, as he ultimately chooses not to disseminate the only essay, and consequently project, he accomplished during his lifetime. Despite finally completing a significant project - a rarity in his life characterized by unfinished endeavours - he opts not to share it publicly, which is an echo of the same action, or lack thereof, of the protagonist in *La Modification* (as referred to in chapter 5.2).

- **Exploring irony and interconnection: EF and Julian the Apostate in historical and narrative context**

The juxtaposition of EF and Julian the Apostate, despite their vast temporal and contextual differences, introduces irony by suggesting a search for connection where direct lines are tenuous. This raises questions about the mutual positions of EF and the historical figure Julian, imbuing the narrative with additional ironic depth as their narratives intertwine. Neil's role as narrator further complicates these positions, as his inherent distance and biographical details contribute to the complexity of the historical and narrative arc.

- **Speculating on Julian's legacy: Irony in historical what-ifs**

The speculative exploration of potential outcomes if Julian the Apostate had lived longer serves as an ironic engagement with historical "what-ifs". This inquiry highlights the inherent uncertainties and complexities within historical narratives, emphasizing thematic and philosophical reflections over strict factual adherence.

Julian Barnes consistently weaves the theme of history throughout his works, and in *Elizabeth Finch*, the lesson Neil derives from EF underscores this focus: "history is for the long haul; further, that it is not something inert and comatose, lying there and waiting for us to apply a spyglass or telescope to it; instead, it is active, effervescent, at times volcanic" (*Elizabeth Finch*, 30). While the novel portrays a teacher whose influence profoundly impacts her students, it simultaneously acts as a discourse on history and its hypotheticals. This narrative invites a re-evaluation of both national and personal histories, advocating for a proactive engagement with history's dynamism. EF elucidates further:

"I would like to suggest that failure can tell us more than success, and a bad loser more than a good loser. Further, that apostates are always more interesting than true believers,

than holy martyrs. Apostates are the representatives of doubt, and doubt - vivid doubt - is the sign of an active intelligence.” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 30)

### 5.3.1. Irony, Wit, and Affection: The Complex Characterization of EF

EF’s embodiment of irony adds depth to her character, allowing her to maintain a reserved yet impactful presence. Describing her character in detail goes beyond a mere biographical approach because EF embodies contemporary wit that fearlessly embraces irony, not just as a rhetorical device, but as a way of life (see Hutcheon and Colebrook in Introduction herein). By conveniently allocating such a broad subject as “Culture and Civilisation” to EF, Barnes enables her, and consequently Neil, to contemplate life in its entirety and complexity. EF holds opinions on a wide range of subjects and stands firmly behind them, reflecting her profound engagement with the world around her.

EF introduces her course by remarkable words: “The best form of education, as the Greeks knew, is collaborative. But I am no Socrates and you are not a classroom of Platos [...]” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 3). EF’s introduction to her course begins with pompous words that are immediately subverted by her acknowledgment of her own limitations and her students’ differences from Plato’s classroom. This introduces an ironic trait in her character. Furthermore, she utilizes oxymoron to enhance the irony, describing the course as “rigorous fun” and asserting that these terms are not incompatible (*ibid*).

Barnes expands the contemplative scope to include the themes of artifice and authenticity, which are recurring motifs in his body of work. Regarding EF, she expressed a belief in artifice, noting, paradoxically, that it was not incompatible with truth. Additionally, when Neil mentioned his background in acting, EF remarked on the paradoxical relationship between artificiality and authenticity: “‘Ah, acting,’ she said, ‘the perfect example of artificiality producing authenticity’” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 14). In this quote, EF remarks on the paradox of acting, considering it as a prime example of artificiality generating authenticity. Her comment touches on Baudrillard’s concept of reproduction taking on a life of its own, existing independently from the original, which has become backgrounded. Additionally, EF revisits the theme of reality and simulacra, contemplating the significance of a painter depicting cut flowers:

“By cutting them, we make them die sooner; by painting them we preserve them long after they have been thrown out. At which point the art becomes the reality, and the original flowers merely brief, forgotten simulacra” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 19).

In this perspective, EF unexpectedly flips the roles and meanings of the original flowers and their painting, asserting that the original flowers fade into obscurity as a forgotten simulacrum, while their representation persists and assumes the role of reality. This viewpoint is emblematic of Julian Barnes’ recurring exploration of authenticity and simulacra in his literary works. Barnes extensively explores the themes of authenticity and simulacra in *England, England*, he particularly focused on the *Raft of the Medusa* painting in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, and discussed artistic authenticity under repression in *The Noise of Time*.

Prompted by EF’s statement, the group of students engages in a discussion on the meaning of art, debating whether it serves as a depiction of reality, a concentrated form of reality, a superior substitute for reality, or simply a beguiling irrelevance. However, Neil observes that many students merely parrot received opinions or repeat quoted phrases, which contradicts EF’s intention of shaking up conventional thinking. Ironically, EF did not prioritize reaching a conclusive outcome or final answer; instead, her focus was on something else entirely:

“[...] in many cases, ‘thinking for yourself’ resulted less in truer, deeper thought than in the replacement of one *idée reçue* by another - even so, the process was to be valued for its own sake.” (*Elizabeth Finch*, pp. 19-20)

The novel is soaked in ironic character of EF, as evidenced by above instances and *passim*. For instance, her interpretation of *The Golden Legend*’s narrative concerning St. Ursula is described as “suicide by Cop” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 8). Additionally, the absence of lecture notes during her teaching sessions suggests a thorough internalization and meticulous preparation of material, thus fostering a closer connection between EF and her students. Moreover, her use of language, which seamlessly intertwines between formal discourse and casual conversation is in its essence ironic, as it imparts a sense of vitality rather than antiquity to her communication style: “Her vocabulary was drawn from the same word-box she used for both writing and general conversation. And yet the effect wasn’t archaic in any way, it was intensely alive” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 6).

EF assumes the role of an educator, tasked with guiding her adult students, whose ages range from twenty to thirty years, toward independent thinking. She accomplishes this through the deliberate use of ironic rhetoric. An illustrative instance of this occurs during a discussion initiated by EF’s student, Linda, on the topic of monogamy. EF’s response to Linda’s inquiry showcases her approach as an educator:

“‘But do you agree with that, or are you just avoiding the question?’

‘No, I am merely offering you the alternatives.’

[...]

‘That’s not much help,’ said Linda, with a kind of whiney fierceness.

‘I am not employed to help you,’ replied Elizabeth Finch, firmly and yet not rebukingly. ‘I am here to assist you to think and argue and develop minds of your own.’”

(*Elizabeth Finch*, 12)

EF’s renown for her memorable quotes permeates this novel, wherein Barnes skilfully crafts a plethora of quotable phrases uttered by EF, characterized by their ironic undertones. Some illustrative examples include:

“‘Life is both necessary, and unavoidable” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 20).

“[T]he so-called Mozart dilemma. Is life sad but beautiful, or beautiful but sad?” (ibid).

“‘OK, then, well, are you a feminist?’ [...] ‘Naturally - I am a woman.’” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 41)

“[...] do not make the mistake of thinking me a lonely woman. I am solitary, and that is quite a different matter. To be solitary is a strength; to be lonely a weakness.” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 72)

EF demonstrated a mastery of her craft by strategically leaving quotes unattributed, thereby preventing bias among her students and encouraging independent thought. This tactic aimed to prevent the influence of the authors’ reputations on the students’ interpretation of the quotes. However, when she did reveal the author, as in the case of Goethe’s alleged quote: “Be

approximately satisfied with approximate happiness. The only thing in life which is clear and beyond doubt is unhappiness” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 14), EF subtly prompted the class to consider deeper questions, as she “didn’t raise a physical eyebrow at us - it was not one of her gestures - but she raised a metaphorical, or even moral one” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 15). This is how she prompted the class to discuss whether being an intellectual inevitably meant that one is doomed to unhappiness.

EF’s personal credo, as conveyed by Neil early in the novel, assumes a pivotal role in shaping the narrative trajectory. Presented as a recurring motif, this credo influences the characters’ actions and decisions, propelling the plot forward. Neil’s meticulous presentation of EF’s ideologeme underscores its significance, establishing it as a guiding principle that resonates throughout the story. Ultimately, this creed leaves a lasting impression on Neil, prompting him to adopt it as a guiding philosophy in his own life. EF’s credo is based on a clear dichotomy of control, articulated as: “Some things are up to us and some are not up to us” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 21), the former encompassing our opinions, impulses, desires and aversions. The latter include our bodies, possessions, reputations, public offices, in general whatever is not our doing.

What adds a layer of irony to this creed is the tendency of individuals to conflate their identity with elements beyond their control, thereby inviting frustration and suffering. This could be attributed to the irony of character, or even co(s)mic irony. She further opines that the things up to us are “by nature free, unhindered, and unimpeded”, whereas the latter ones are “weak, enslaved, hindered, not our own” (*ibid*). Failure to recognize this distinction, as EF suggests, leads to a state of perpetual discontent and blame-shifting, as individuals erroneously attribute their unhappiness to external circumstances:

“[...] if you think that only what is yours is yours, and that what is not your own is, just as it is, not your own, then no one will ever coerce you, no one will hinder you, you will blame no one, you will not accuse anyone, you will not do a single thing unwillingly, you will have no enemies, and no one will harm you, because you will not be harmed at all.” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 21)

Indeed, Neil’s portrayal of EF as “the most grown-up person” he has encountered, is contrasted with his characterization of her attitude as that of a “Romantic pessimist” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 21), which challenges conventional expectation. Typically, we associate romanticism with optimism, yet Neil’s perspective of EF diverges from this norm. This contrast emphasizes the complexity of her character and introduces certain ironic potential into Neil’s depiction of his beloved teacher. The contrast becomes even more pronounced when Neil later refers to her as a “Romantic Stoic” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 41), prompting speculation about the compatibility of these two seemingly disparate labels. It is noteworthy that Julian Barnes employs the contradiction as a valuable approach, serving as a strategic means to push beyond conventional boundaries and challenge received wisdom. In his narrative, contradictions seamlessly intertwine with line of thought, creating an atmosphere where we, as readers, find comfort in their presence.

EF’s characteristics of wit, subversion, irony, and steadfastness vividly contrast with Neil’s more subdued demeanour. These distinctions are precisely what draw Neil to her, as he seeks to find stability and direction through her influence. In turn, EF allows Neil into her intellectual sphere not merely to display her own sharp wit but also to forge a lasting impact through their interactions. This dynamic between them underscores a profound mentor-mentee relationship, where the exchange transcends typical learning and becomes a transformative journey for both parties, allowing EF to impart a unique legacy.

#### 5.4. Introducing Julian the Apostate

EF's interest in Julian the Apostate, and subsequently Neil's and Barnes', should come as no surprise given the historical figure's enduring impact on intellectual discourse. As articulated in the introduction of *Brill's Companion to Julian the Apostate*: "His figure still arouses emotions to this day, with reactions ranging from fervent admiration to strong disapproval. Whoever deals with Julian necessarily takes sides" (Rebenich, 1). Such a polarizing character naturally presents a challenge that EF, with her intellectual curiosity and critical approach, would find irresistible.

Julian the Apostate's historical persona is steeped in irony, as highlighted by Neil: "[w]hen, on becoming emperor, Julian announced himself a pagan, and never again set foot in a Christian church, he was not disestablishing Christianity because it had never been established" (*Elizabeth Finch*, 76). Furthermore, Julian himself is a figure of historical irony, having never set foot in Rome, despite being a Roman emperor. Neil, or better EF through his interpretation, characterizes him as "an accidental emperor" (*Elizabeth Finch*, 75) - an emperor who defied the odds. Appointed to succeed his brother, also a Caesar, Julian anticipated his own execution. Instead, he was placed at the helm of the empire's western army in Gaul, where he was expected to falter. Contrary to these expectations, his protectress, Empress Eusebia, furnished him with a trove of books on philosophy, history, and poetry to enrich his mind during his military campaigns against the Germanic tribes.

The irony surrounding Julian's destiny extends to his religion and character. Neil observes: "he was efficient, incorruptible, hard-working and fair-minded; he improved the judicial system, the tax system, and made the empire safer from invaders. But ... but ... but he was, and ever more would be so, an apostate" (*Elizabeth Finch*, 76-77). Neil opines that almost all religions despise apostates more than the ignorant or misguided, yet simultaneously require them to serve as cautionary examples. This paradox could itself be considered ironic. In this context, Julian's reputation remains unstable and subject to interpretation based on the changing perspectives of history. Neil describes this fluidity by noting: "A figure to be interpreted according to the shifting light of history: for some, as EF ironically put it, a 'hold-out hero'; for others, pretty much a younger brother of Satan" (*Elizabeth Finch*, 78).

Neil elaborates on the irony inherent in Julian's religious stance: "He was born and baptised a Christian, and grew up in the Church's observances, while still being permitted to philosophise Hellenistically" (*Elizabeth Finch*, 77). Julian exemplified many virtues traditionally associated with Christianity and publicly conducted himself in ways that aligned with Christian values. Neil contemplates whether this was a result of hypocrisy, his polytheistic beliefs, or simply pragmatic caution.

The irony of his characters, as Neil recognises it, is in his virtues, typically Christian, he demonstrated against the Christians. He never persecuted or killed them as this would make them martyrs - something that they hysterically wanted, as he puts it. "Julian fell upon the Galileans with 'gentleness', with mildness, with clemency, with a refusal to butcher" (*Elizabeth Finch*, 83). His most cunning act was his attempt to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, leveraging the Christian prophecy that the Temple would not be rebuilt until the second coming of Jesus. In this way, Julian aimed to challenge Christianity using its own prophetic narrative, through both creation and destruction. This strategy gets doubly ironic considering Julian's own upbringing as a baptized Christian.

Julian's apostasy was also manifest in his appearance; he deliberately eschewed the typical imperial garb. Moreover, he despised it, as is evident in his addressing Antiocheans: "'all of you are handsome and tall and smooth-skinned and beardless; for old and young alike ... rather than

righteousness you prefer “changes of raiment and warm baths and beds” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 87). However, Julian recognized the limitations of his ironic “literary axe” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 86), a notion mirrored in Shostakovich’s experiences as described in *The Noise of Time*. Julian’s nuanced defence, although intellectually robust, failed to sway his critics, much like Shostakovich’s ironic intentions in his symphony were overlooked by those in power. The irony proved ineffective because Julian was perceived as an outsider in his own cultural context. This situation aligns with the theories outlined in the Introduction herein regarding the pragmatic aspects of irony, which suggest that certain shared understandings must be in place for irony to effectively engage and provoke a response.

\*

Neil delves into the realm of uchronia, speculating on the possible outcomes had Julian, whom his supporters dubbed the Lost Leader, not perished “on the 26th of June 363 AD, only 20 months after the beginning of his sole reign” (Rebenich, 1). EF placed considerable importance on Julian’s untimely demise, referring to it as “the moment history went wrong” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 162). She was convinced that he was the last individual capable of halting the spread of Christianity, thereby altering the course of world history. Neil’s alternate historical narrative stretches into the realms of utopia, imbued with inherent irony due to its stark divergence from established historical trajectories and its improbable vision. Neil imagines a world where the Renaissance and Enlightenment might have been unnecessary, as the ancient Graeco-Roman traditions and their extensive libraries persist. He conjures an alternate reality free from the distortions of a dominant state religion, where diverse belief systems coexist harmoniously under the aegis of European Hellenism. In this envisioned history, the last fifteen centuries are devoid of religious conflicts and intolerance, facilitating an uninhibited flourishing of science and the preservation of indigenous cultures from missionary and military exploitation. In this scenario, intellectualism triumphs, emphasizing the enjoyment of earthly life over the pursuit of an afterlife.

Neil acknowledges that such alternative historical narratives are as much a construct of fantasy as the Christian conception of heaven (*Elizabeth Finch*, 96). He engages in an imaginary dialogue with his teacher: it is EF who would have grounded his flights of imagination, likely reminding him that daily life necessitates grappling with “the crooked timber of humanity” (*ibid*). Her pragmatic philosophy encourages recognizing the inherent flaws of human nature, such as irrationality, greed, self-interest, and fear. She would argue that even virtues imposed upon society might not truly be virtues at all. Neil laments that he no longer has the opportunity to discuss these ideas with EF; he believes she would have assisted him in refining his “crude thoughts” and smoothing out his narrative (*ibid*).

\*

In his essay, Neil turns his attention to the sources documenting Julian’s life, highlighting the irony that many of Julian’s biographers were Christians. He examines the work of Theodoret of Cyrus, who portrayed Julian not as the brilliant general he was known to be but rather as a poor strategist prone to elementary errors. Theodoret also critiqued the nature of pagan gods, suggesting they lacked the omnipotence of the monotheistic Christian God, whether viewed singularly or as a Trinity.

Expanding his scholarly inquiry, Neil reviews a spectrum of historical and literary figures who have written about Julian the Apostate. These include de Montaigne, Milton, and Samuel Johnson (distinct from the later Doctor), who collectively characterized Julian as a “vivid

bogeyman” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 104), a portrayal that underscores their bias, given that Julian refrained from initiating physical persecutions against Christians.

Julian’s posthumous reputation reached its zenith in the eighteenth century. Two facets of his life and philosophy garnered particular appeal during this period: his renowned, albeit sometimes controversial, “mildness”, which aligned with the Enlightenment concept of “toleration”; and his portrayal as a philosopher-prince, serving as a prototype for the enlightened monarchs of subsequent generations. This is the period when the discourse on Julian gains a more favourable tone, as Montesquieu’s praise as “the finest of rulers” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 107). Voltaire continues along the same line and reveals Julian as “a dazzling precursor to the Enlightenment” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 108). Edward Gibbon was a little more cautious: he referred to Julian as an Emperor who seamlessly integrated his responsibilities with his pleasures, and worked to alleviate suffering and uplift spirits. The essay continues with Julian-related references by Byron, Henrik Ibsen, Anatole France, Swinburne, to close with Hitler.

Neil’s closing passage is from *Hitler’s Table Talk*, wherein Hitler discusses Christianity and praises Julian’s perspective on the religion. Neil recognises a “thundering irony” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 121) in Hitler’s defence of tolerance. Hitler asserts that “[t]he heaviest blow that ever struck humanity was the coming of Christianity” (*ibid*), contrasting it with the ancient world, which he views as epitomizing tolerance.

Despite Hitler’s admiration for Julian’s perspective on religion, he fundamentally misunderstood its core principles. Julian the Apostate championed persuasion and intellectual engagement over force and persecution, a stark contrast to Hitler’s brutal methodologies. Ironically, while Hitler lauded Julian for his criticisms of Christianity, his own tactics mirrored the oppressive measures he sought to critique, marked by extreme persecution and intolerance. This represents a profound irony - Hitler extolled Julian for qualities that he himself completely failed to practice, such as tolerance and reasoned debate. Furthermore, the circular irony in this scenario deepens as Hitler, in his misguided praise of Julian, advocated for a return to values that were, in essence, aligned with the Christian virtues of compassion and forbearance that Julian, in his own way, managed to demonstrate even towards those he ideologically opposed.

The ultimate irony of Julian the Apostate’s life is manifest in his steadfast belief in prophecy juxtaposed with his inability to foresee the signs predicting his own untimely demise. Despite his deep engagement with divination and prophecy, Julian failed to interpret the omens that foreshadowed his early death. This oversight adds a tragic and ironic dimension to the life of this complex and controversial emperor. Such irony not only deepens the historical perception of Julian but also underscores the limitations of human foresight, even in those most devoted to understanding the future.

#### **5.4.1. Religious Dynamics in Julian’s Biography: Barnes’ Interpretation of Christianity and Paganism**

Julian earned his reputation by virtue of his writings; one of his texts is titled “Against the Galileans” - therein he lays objections to the Christian religion. Julian intentionally uses the terms “Galileans” for Christians and “the Nazarene” for Christ in order to depict their origins and beliefs as localized and provincial. He perceives Christianity not as an evolution of Judaism but as a distortion of it - a distortion so significant that Judaism and Hellenism are depicted as closer to each other than either is to Christianity.

Julian’s unwavering commitment to paganism and his deep reliance on prophecies prompt Neil to engage in a comparative analysis of the Christian God and pagan gods. In this section of

the essay, Julian Barnes' authorial voice emerges distinctly, echoing the observations made by Harrison who notes: "there is the larger issue of Neil, whose voice is almost entirely erased by Barnes's for the duration of the essay" (Harrison). While Harrison frames this overtaking of Neil's voice by Barnes as problematic, it can alternatively be viewed not as a flaw but as a deliberate narrative strategy. Indeed, the direct engagement of Barnes' voice enriches the discourse, offering insights directly to the reader and fulfilling the purpose for which the character of Neil was crafted - to serve as a conduit for Barnes own historical and philosophical explorations.

The comparison between Christianity and Paganism is articulated in Barnes' characteristic encyclopaedic exposition style., as follows<sup>28</sup>:

**Table 1:**

| Categories:                   | A. Christian God                                                                                         | B. The (pagan) gods                                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Subjectivity to divine power: | We are all subject to the will of God, and to His power.                                                 | We are all subject to the will of the gods, and to their powers.                                                                                                 |
| Obedience:                    | God must be worshipped dutifully and often.                                                              | The gods must be worshipped dutifully and often.                                                                                                                 |
| Divine communication:         | God gives us signs and warnings, which we need to understand and interpret.                              | The gods give us signs and warnings, which we need to understand and interpret.                                                                                  |
| Earthly life vs. afterlife:   | <b>This life is only the preparation for a further life, when the spirit is separated from the body.</b> | <b>The soul's bliss is of a higher order than the body's, so the separation of the better from the worse should cause us to rejoice rather than grieve.</b>      |
| If you are impatient:         | A man might find a way of hastening this separation.                                                     | A man might find a way of hastening this separation.                                                                                                             |
| Bonus:                        |                                                                                                          | <b>He might also know the place where he is destined to die, and the place where he will be buried, so that he may proceed towards them with calm assurance.</b> |

Neil, or rather Barnes', analysis as presented here, recognizes human subjectivity to divine power and underscores the necessity of devout worship and obedience to their respective god(s), emphasizing the duty of adherents to faithfully follow religious practices. Both belief systems acknowledge divine communication through signs and warnings, placing the responsibility of interpretation on believers and highlighting the perceived infallibility of the god(s). The fundamental distinction resides in their differing perspectives on earthly existence: Christianity perceives it as a preparatory stage for the afterlife, whereas pagan beliefs embrace a *carpe diem* approach, emphasizing the celebration of life on Earth. Both belief systems allow individuals to hasten their death if they so desire, which is a humorous touch in a Barnesian manner.

This analysis suggests that the conflict between paganism and Christianity can be attributed to minor differences, echoing the concept of the "narcissism of small differences" and paranoia

---

<sup>28</sup> Table 1 herein presents claims as extracted from the novel (p. 98), formatted to facilitate comparison and understanding of Barnes' argument. By adopting a tabular format, I have continued Barnes' analytical style, aiding readers in grasping the contrasts in beliefs. Differences in beliefs are visually emphasized in red, thus enhancing clarity and comprehension. The categorization of beliefs (the first column on the left) is the dissertation author's contribution to the analysis.

(*Elizabeth Finch*, 98). The minor difference is the “bossy nature of monotheism” (ibid), or Christian God who “has all the answers, gives all the advice, requires all the worship. He does not subcontract” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 98-99). On the other hand, the pagan and Hellenistic gods are “multiple and multifarious. You have your favourite gods, each of whom is in charge of separate activities, and they have their favoured human beings” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 99). It remains debatable which set of deities imposes greater vigilance upon their followers.

Indeed, Barnes employs a highly ironic tone in this comparison, likening God to the main contractor, while characterizing the Hellenistic pantheon as reminiscent of spoiled children. He seems conscious of the provocative nature of his commentary on religious beliefs, as evidenced by his self-admission in a recent interview: “This book is probably offensive to most Christians in the world. Or a large number of Christians, perhaps” (Julian Barnes in Lewis).

The climax of the treatise on Christianity and paganism reaches its peak in the argument concerning the afterlife: both systems concur that after death, the soul transcends and ascends - “vertically being the preferred metaphor” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 99). For Christians, this marks the beginning of the real drama, as the soul awaits entry into the “Big Mansion” (ibid). Additionally, Barnes asserts that the most remarkable innovation of the Christians, as referred to in Julian’s vocabulary, is the resurrection of the body, a concept that repulsed Platonists who abhorred the idea of eternal entrapment in a mortal body. Conversely, Julian, in a manner aligned with Hellenistic and pagan beliefs, reassured those around him not to mourn his passing, as he “would be united with heaven, and with the stars” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 100). In this pagan perspective, the soul’s unity with heaven and the stars implies a departure from individual consciousness and a merging with the ethereal, rather than a continuation of personal identity beyond death.

#### **5.4.2. Echoes of Martyrdom: EF’s Public Shaming and Parallels to Julian the Apostate**

In delving into EF’s biography and reflecting on episodes of her life, Barnes employs the same “vignette” technique as seen in *The Noise of Time*, utilizing flashbacks to explore her past and seek answers about her decisions. One such instance occurs when he contemplates her decision to request euthanasia from her doctor if necessary. Initially, this decision appears contradictory to her stoic philosophy as Neil understands it. He suggests that a stoic should endure whatever life presents, yet he recalls EF’s philosophy, emphasizing that a stoic possesses agency. In EF’s view, there are things within our control and things beyond it. Her stoicism applies specifically to the latter category; she is stoic where she cannot effect change. Thus, it can be argued that EF, as portrayed by Neil, is a selective stoic, basing her philosophy on a clear distinction between influenceable and non-influenceable matters. She accepts reality while asserting her agency simultaneously, a theme further explored in the episode titled “The Shaming”.

The seed of “The Shaming” was planted long before the incident itself unfolded. Barnes constructs and sustains a compelling narrative arc around the fact that, ironically, EF’s downfall is rooted in her reference to *Hitler’s Table Talk*, where the dictator notes that there were one hundred and seventy significant religions in the world, each claiming to be the sole repository of truth. He, or EF, concludes that one hundred and sixty-nine must be mistaken. Geoff interprets this literally and confronts EF, questioning whether she is recommending students read Hitler. This episode with Geoff serves as a premonition of the ordeal to come.

The narrative arc reaches closure when Neil reconnects with Geoff after some time to explore his recollections of EF. Geoff essentially admits to being one of the contributors to EF’s shaming and expresses no remorse.

Again, “The Shaming” incident was partly her fault. As a contributor to the *London Review of Books*, she was invited to deliver a public lecture, which naturally focused on Julian. Although she initially wanted to title it “Thou Hast Conquered, O Pale Galilean”, the magazine edited it to a provoking “Where Do Our Morals Come From?” In her lecture, she argued that the dominance and corruption of Christianity led to the “closing of the European mind” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 140), that Julian was morally superior to successive popes, and that joy had drained from Europe, except for a few pagan survivals like Carnival. Neil attended the lecture discreetly, ensuring she wouldn’t see him, positioning himself as a silent witness.

The tabloid press wasted no time in launching an attack on EF. Sensationalist headlines adorned newsstands, twisting her words and dredging up details from her personal life. Reports surfaced of her grandstanding about the tragic loss of her relatives in concentration camps and recommending readings from *Hitler’s Table Talk*. One newspaper went as far as to demand her dismissal from London University. Neil attributed this public shaming to what he deemed the “historic English delight of publicly indulging in fits of morality” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 140).

EF maintained her composure throughout the ordeal, even advising the *London Review of Books* not to issue any response. This decision could be interpreted as a demonstration of tolerance and patience, ironically aligning with Christian virtues, despite EF’s likely disdain for such labels. In this respect, she mirrors Julian the Apostate’s refusal to capitulate to public opinion, both exhibiting a perseverance that, paradoxically, echoes Christian virtues they would reject.

Neil, in a gesture of support, penned a letter to her, which prompted her unexpected phone call in return. During their conversation, she expressed gratitude for his concern but dismissed it as unnecessary, remarking: “They choose to understand nothing” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 142). Once again, she adhered to her personal philosophy that some things were up to us and some things were not, categorizing reputation as belonging to the latter group. EF’s assertion that her attackers chose not to understand subtly mirrors Christ’s lament on the cross: “they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Unlike Christ, however, EF does not pursue understanding or forgiveness, nor does she display the Christian virtues of compassion and patience explicitly. She faces her ordeal in stoic silence, choosing not to respond and instead letting time facilitate her healing. It remains ambiguous whether EF’s approach was influenced by Julian the Apostate, though certain similarities can be inferred. Paradoxically, EF’s manner of enduring public ridicule aligns with Christian virtues - particularly the virtue of forbearance - similar to how Julian’s policy of non-persecution of Christians inadvertently reflected Christian forbearance.

Accordingly, Neil perceives the incident of public shaming as EF’s martyrdom, a characterization she would likely dismiss as rhetorical exaggeration. Despite withdrawing from public life after “The Shaming”, Neil reflects that “she was *not shamed*” (original italics, *Elizabeth Finch*, 143). This was a kind of victory for EF, as this recognition implies a shared responsibility in instances of public shaming, a form of compliance in which EF refused to participate.

In recounting the incident to Neil, EF’s brother Chris shared that he had sent a brief letter to EF, to which she replied by apologizing for any disgrace she might have caused the family. Intriguingly, she concluded her letter with the words: “Your sinning but unrepentant sister, Elizabeth” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 144). This sign-off reflects her recognition of her role in the events, hinting at a perceived guilt, yet it simultaneously declares her lack of repentance. The pairing of “sinning” with “unrepentant” in her signature not only underscores her acceptance of the paradox but also injects a measure of self-irony into her acknowledgment.

### 5.4.3. Whose Biography is This?

The narrative structure of the novel presents itself as a biography that meticulously explores the intellectual and philosophical paths of EF, alongside Julian the Apostate, a historical figure she deeply admired. This narrative intricately intertwines their lives and teachings, effectively blending biographical and fictional elements to create a complex dual biography. Through the reflective mirroring of EF's character and Julian's historical impact, the novel enhances its narrative depth, presenting a rich tapestry of interconnected lives and ideologies.

Neil, the narrator, embarks on an explorative journey to better understand EF through the study of Julian's life, using it as a conduit to sustain his posthumous connection with her. This exploration, deeply rooted in the intellectual remnants EF left behind, serves as both a continuation of her scholarly legacy and a personal odyssey to decipher her philosophical impact on his life.

Moreover, the novel unfolds as Neil's *Bildungsroman*, chronicling his intellectual and emotional development catalysed by his complex relationship with EF. This progression is portrayed through his engagement with Julian's teachings, guided by EF's enduring influence. As Neil ventures deeper into the intellectual realm of his late mentor, he transitions from an eternal student to an individual who integrates his learned philosophies into his own existential framework.

The culmination of Neil's journey is marked by the completion of his essay on Julian, which not only signifies the resolution of an academic obligation but also symbolizes his intellectual maturation, liberation and detachment from EF's overshadowing presence. This act of finality represents Neil's transformation, signifying a pivotal moment of self-actualization and closure.

Ironically, despite the unreliability of Neil's narrative and the limited personal details disclosed about him, he attains a level of closure that seems more conclusive than that experienced by the other two central figures, EF and Julian. This conclusion is particularly striking given his final act of letting go, embodying EF's philosophy by discerning which aspects of life he can control and which he cannot. This subtle irony underscores the fact that Neil, among the triad of principal characters, benefits most significantly from the unfolding events, despite his relative obscurity within the narrative. It can be aptly stated that the student has ultimately risen to meet his master's level.

### 5.5. "Getting History Wrong" - According to Barnes

EF references Ernest Renan's quote, "Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation" (*Elizabeth Finch*, 33) to emphasize the notion that nations often perpetuate myths and falsehoods about their history as a means of solidifying their identity. She subtly points out that Renan did not say "getting its history wrong is part of becoming a nation" (*ibid*) implying that historical inaccuracies are not just a temporary phase, but an ongoing aspect of national identity. EF elaborates on this idea by suggesting that belief in national ideals requires a continual process of self-deception, as individuals uphold comforting narratives about racial and cultural superiority, benevolent rulers, and righteous governance. She highlights the pervasive nature of these myths and assumptions, which shape individuals' perceptions of themselves and their place in the world: "Assumptions that the religion into which you are born, or have chosen to adopt, just happens to be the one sect which is true among hundreds of heathen creeds and apostasies out there" (*ibid*).

Barnes employs EF's voice to articulate a recurrent theme in his oeuvre - the dubious authenticity of national narratives and the myth-making that underpins national identity. This

theme finds echoes in his other works, such as the explicit critique of constructed national identity in *England, England*, the exploration of biblical myths in *A History*, and the interrogation of personal and national history under oppressive regimes in *The Noise*. EF's commentary on the distortion of history as an intrinsic aspect of nationhood reflects Barnes' ongoing scepticism toward received knowledge and prevailing opinions. Her observations encourage readers to scrutinize the myths and narratives that shape their understanding of nationhood and history. Barnes' remark in an interview: "We all self-mythologize while being confident that we're not unreliable narrators" (Julian Barnes in Messer), underscores this theme, highlighting the inherent unreliability of personal and collective narratives.

EF posits that the gap between our actual selves and our perceived identities inherently results in hypocrisy, a condition she suggests is particularly notable among the British. She critiques this not to single out the British uniquely but to highlight a universal human trait, observing that those who label the British as hypocrites are themselves not exempt from similar discrepancies in their own national narratives. This commentary on hypocrisy serves as a broader critique of how national identities are often constructed on idealized and often falsified versions of history and self-perception, implicating all societies in this shared human imprudence.

Barnes extends his contemplation of historical inaccuracies from national to personal scales, encapsulating the dynamics within families. Neil identifies a third category beyond Tolstoy's famous dichotomy of happy and unhappy families: those that pretend to be happy or falsely recall past happiness. By adapting Renan's concept to the realm of family, Neil's observation: "getting our history wrong is part of being a family!" (*Elizabeth Finch*, 138), underscores the idea that both nations and families construct comforting yet often misleading narratives about their pasts. Barnes suggests that such distortions are not mere anomalies but integral to the fabric of human associations, whether they bind a nation or a family. He pushes this analysis further:

Neil concludes his reflections on Julian with an analogy depicting the emperor moving across a stage, bathed in variously coloured spotlights, symbolizing the changing interpretations of his character across centuries: "I thought of Julian, and how the centuries had interpreted and reinterpreted him, like a man walking across a stage pursued by different-coloured spotlights" (*Elizabeth Finch*, 176). This vivid imagery extends to illustrate how individuals undergo constant reinterpretation, not only by historical forces but also by those immediately around them - parents, friends, lovers, enemies, children, and even casual passersby "who suddenly notice a truth about them, or by long-term friends who hardly understand them at all" (ibid). This reciprocal observation is highlighted by Neil's realization: "And then they look at us, in a manner different from how we look at ourselves. Well, getting our history wrong is part of being a person" (ibid).

This observation, which begins with Julian and extends to the concept of personal history, underscores a recurring leitmotif. "Getting history wrong" is depicted as a phenomenon that transitions from broader societal constructs like nation, religion, and family down to the individual level, emphasizing a central motif reiterated in a cadenced progression from the general to the specific.

## **5.6. The Ironic Laughter of Understanding**

Neil's final reflection on EF is both peculiar and deeply emotional. He acknowledges that some students failed to appreciate her, while others sought something different from her teaching. Many may have forgotten her entirely or relegated their memories of her to mere comic anecdotes. This realistic evaluation of EF's influence, mirroring her own philosophical stance on the dichotomy between what can and cannot be controlled, stands in sharp contrast to Neil's somewhat egocentric nostalgia: "But I didn't care at all. Because, you see, it made her more *mine*"

(original italics, *Elizabeth Finch*, 176). In this sentiment, Neil relishes the exclusive possession of EF within his memories, holding her dear as a personal treasure.

Neil openly acknowledges the significant personal and intellectual connection he had with EF, affirming that she was not only his friend but also someone he deeply loved. He reflects on the profound impact she had on his intellectual growth, stating: “[h]er presence and example had made my brain change gear, had provoked a quantum leap in my understanding of the world” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 177). Neil acknowledges the malleability of memory and the role of imagination, openly recognizing:

“But perhaps all these meetings and exchanges, and my memory of them - memory being after all a function of the imagination - are and were like rhetorical tropes. Living ones, not literary ones, but tropes nonetheless.” (ibid)

Neil expands his reflections beyond simple memory and imagination, venturing into the realm of rhetorical devices, with irony being especially poignant. Despite his commitment to preserving EF’s memory and exploring her life, Neil encounters an impasse: his understanding of EF remains elusive, akin to his grasp of Julian the Apostate. This epiphany signifies a turning point, leading him to the decision to cease his efforts - this is the moment when he decided to finally let go.

Neil ultimately perceives the irony in EF’s decision to leave her notes and library to him, a student notorious for leaving projects incomplete. He believes that EF would have appreciated this irony, viewing the act as leaving much to chance, dependent on whether Neil would take the initiative to reconstruct her “book”.

Embracing this unpredictability, Neil decides to follow in EF’s footsteps, leaving the publication of his legacy to chance as a final tribute to her. This choice reflects a Stoic acceptance of what is within his control and what is not, echoing EF’s teachings: “This would be just. Some things are up to us, and some things are not up to us. This thing is not now up to me, and so will not hinder me from attaining freedom and happiness” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 179). Neil’s journey concludes with a personal epiphany, expressed to a certain degree dramatically: “And any ironic laughter you hear will be mine” (ibid).

The ironic laughter at the end of Neil’s journey symbolizes a profound understanding and acceptance of life’s uncertainties and the recognition that some things are beyond our control. It reflects a sense of wisdom gained through experience, akin to the ironic laughter that EF and Julian the emperor might have had, at the end of their journey. This is not yet another act of giving up of a professional defeatist; such a scenario would be far too predictable - this is exactly what EF did when she left everything to him - hence the ironic laughter. Indeed, Neil’s ironic laughter mirrors that of his beloved EF, as it signifies his embrace of irony as a lens through which to view life, echoing EF’s own perspective. At long last, the apprentice has mastered the art of irony.

In concluding the discussion on *Elizabeth Finch*, it is apt to revisit her fundamental approach to teaching. EF approached classes not as discrete time slots for conveying and settling upon information, but rather as ongoing processes of idea exploration and contemplation. “She liked us to continue processing the ideas she had laid before us” (*Elizabeth Finch*, 25).

Similarly, Barnes’ novel leaves ideas lingering in the minds of attentive readers for further contemplation. Like Finch, readers appreciate the journey of exploration over the pursuit of finite conclusions. The process of reading and learning involves both active contemplation during reading and subsequent reflection. This ongoing engagement with ideas and self-exploration is

what gives life its richness and enjoyment. Rather than rigid goals set in stone, finite conclusions are merely temporary outcomes of the mental pathways our minds navigate. It is within this apperception that irony resides.

## 6. *Pulse* - Collection of Stories

*Pulse* is Julian Barnes' second collection of stories, published in 2011, often compared to his earlier work, *The Lemon Table* (2004). Reflecting recurring themes in Barnes' oeuvre, this collection both continues established topics and introduces new ones. The central character in nearly all stories, and the narrator in first-person narratives, is typically an inadequate male, a figure Barnes has consistently explored. In this regard, Cusk notes Barnes' focus on middle-class concerns and modes of existence, suggesting that "he expects to be called an apologist for them" (Cusk). These stories reveal Barnes' vulnerability as he delves into memoir and autobiography, where his thematic interests take on a concrete form. Ultimately, Cusk acknowledges that Barnes' talent is "essentially parochial and home-loving" (ibid). Adams also notes the inadequacy of Barnes' protagonists within the context of their relationships, asserting that "Barnes is a wicked observer of the fastidiousness and pedantry of the suburban male. Even unbuttoned, though, his characters most often flail and fail at connection" (Adams).

Cusk provides a comprehensive summary of Barnes' oeuvre, highlighting his meticulous approach to recurrent themes within his interest. She elaborates on Barnes' interests stating that they are characterized by their depth rather than breadth, as he persistently explores the same themes across various literary forms. Notable Barnesian themes include the essential elusiveness and mystery of women, the factualism of (English) men - which simultaneously acts as an impediment and a virtue - and the dynamics that either unite or separate these individuals. Cusk aptly notes that "Barnes draws the same pattern again and again, translating the same phrases into memoir, historical fiction, personal recollection, and scenes of contemporary life" (Cusk). To that, *Pulse* is no exception.

In his article on the history and current reputation of the Booker Prize, along with an analysis of the 2011 candidates and winner, Moseley discusses *Pulse*, relating it to *The Sense of an Ending* and *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, noting their similarities in form and themes. He states: "*The Sense of an Ending* is witty, as Barnes always is, but not as funny as some of his early novels; the more somber mood accords with his most recent nonfiction book, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (about death), and his 2011 collection of short stories, *Pulse* (also largely about decline and mortality)" (346). Additionally, Moseley concludes that the Booker judges made the right decision in 2011, awarding the prize to "one of Britain's great novelists, recognizing him while he is still alive and at the peak of his powers" (347). In that context, Cusk also observes that Barnes and his fiction are not shy when it comes to public attention and praise: "[Barnes'] fiction is used to the light, and thrives in it" (Cusk).

Adams draws a connection between *Pulse* and Raymond Carver's collection of stories, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*<sup>29</sup>. He states: "the point was that [Carver's] characters talked about anything but. In some ways, *Pulse* is Julian Barnes's very English improvisation of that idea" (Adams). However, I would contend that Barnes' collection is more than just an English improvisation; it is a manifestation of a pulse both in structure and thematic coherence. Furthermore, Barnes is notable for his intertextuality within his own oeuvre, with *Pulse* referenced in his other works. For instance, in *The Sense of an Ending* he mentions:

"We live in time - it holds us and molds us - but I never felt I understood it very well, (but) I know this much: that there is objective time, but also subjective time, the kind

---

<sup>29</sup> This collection of stories, set in the Midwest among the lonely men and women who drink, fish, and play cards to ease the passing of time, was the first by Raymond Carver to be published in the UK. The collection became one of the most influential literary works of the 1980s ([shop.penguin.co.uk/products/what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-love-by-raymond-carver](http://shop.penguin.co.uk/products/what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-love-by-raymond-carver)).

you wear on the inside of your wrist, next to *where Pulse lies*. And this personal time, which is the true time, is measured in your relationship to memory.”

(italics are mine, *The Sense of an Ending*, Jonathan Cape, 2011, p. 132)

The same thematic elements are reiterated in both this passage and *Pulse*: the perception of time, the manipulation of memory, and the need to affirm our existence by feeling pulse, thereby confirming our wholeness. This interconnectedness underscores Barnes’ intentional construction of thematic continuity across his oeuvre.

In this context, Adams further observes that “[t]his perfectly weighted collection feels like a companion volume to his erudite and profound meditation on death, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*.” I would concur with this assessment, adding that *Pulse* serves as a fictional continuation of the themes explored in the earlier non-fictional work.

The stories within *Pulse* exhibit a remarkable diversity in style, atmosphere, narrative voices, epochs, and characters, reminiscent of the varied chapters in *A History*. As Kemp aptly observes: “The first impression is of virtuoso variety, something that has always hallmarked Barnes’s pages” (Kemp). Despite this vast variety, Barnes succeeds in maintaining a coherent thematic whole, particularly in the second part of the collection, alongside a consistent narrative rhythm. Cusk comments on the significance of Barnes’ choice of form, noting that the exploration of long-term relationships is a predominant theme, a view with which I concur. She further posits that “[t]his is a volume that works hard to overcome its own fragmented condition, as though in fear that variety might become disarray. At this point Barnes is certainly the master of his own style: what preoccupies him here are the novelistic qualities of endurance, unity, cohesiveness, qualities for which the short story is made to act as an anti-metaphor” (Cusk).

*Pulse* is organized into two distinct parts: Part One comprises nine stories, interspersed with four recounts of dinner parties titled *At Phil & Joanna’s*. These four intermissions are strategically placed at regular intervals, functioning like rhythmic interludes that sustain the book’s pulse. This regular repetition evokes the recurring and varied Promenade theme in Mussorgsky’s “Pictures at an Exhibition”, underscoring Barnes’ meticulous structuring. Consequently, Barnes maintains a steady rhythm in Part One, ensuring a cohesive and rhythmic structure. As Martin observes: “Interleaved with the prose playlets are denser pieces” (Martin), highlighting the intricate balance between lighter narratives in the form of conversations and more substantial ones.

In addition, the five stories in Part Two maintain a solid and coherent structure, albeit in a different manner. Each story deals with the loss of a particular sense - touch, sight, smell, hearing, and taste - which, as Adams notes, “represent all we have to get close to another person” (Adams). Part Two, and indeed the entire collection, culminate in an emotional crescendo related to the decrescendo of a life, exemplified in the eponymous story where the narrator’s father loses his sense of smell. This thematic choice for the last story is deliberate, as it is revealed that the senses of hearing and smell are the last to fade as one approaches death. The poignant scene where the father brings various herbs to the hospital for his dying wife to smell, offering her the last earthly scents, is profoundly moving. While the structural approach of the second part differs from the first, the thematic connection remains intact, creating a unified narrative rhythm across the collection.

In the context of thematic exploration, Sanai observes the relationship and similarity between *Pulse* and Barnes’ previous works, *The Lemon Table* and *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*. She notes a striking difference: in *The Lemon Table* and *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, the characters’ struggles against old age and death are portrayed as inevitably doomed to failure, reflecting a tone of helpless rage and metaphysical contemplation. In contrast, *Pulse* depicts characters who are mostly middle-

aged and still possess the potential to change their lives and start anew. This distinction imparts a certain optimism to *Pulse* that is absent in the other two “bittersweet” books, as noted by Sanai (Sanai).

Sanai further observes that “Barnes’s erudition is in full display. There are forays into history: Garibaldi in ‘Carcassonne’ and an early case of hysteria in ‘Harmony’” (Sanai). While metafictional historiography is not a stranger to him, Barnes employs a versatile stylistic approach in this collection, mirroring the stylistic diversity showcased in *A History*. Therein, one of the stories is set in 16th-century France, representing the minutes from a court case wherein people sued woodworms. In this story, Barnes adeptly adopts an archaic legal language and style. He demonstrates the same skill in *Harmony* within *Pulse*, effectively blending historical context with a pertaining narrative style.

In a postmodern fashion, Barnes engages with themes by contemplating various perspectives, weighing both advantages and disadvantages, and reflecting on the subject matter without providing definitive conclusions. Barnes is at his best when he articulates memorable and quotable statements that convey an opinion, characteristic of his style - witty aperçus that provide his signature humorous or ironic insights.

Martin elucidates this approach by noting: “Consider the endings, some of which are delivered in a downbeat tone that borders on the vicious” (Martin). He references the endings in the stories *East Wind* and *Sleeping with John Updike*, where the former concludes with the protagonist opting for payment by direct debit, and the latter ends with one of the female protagonists changing the TV channel. Martin continues: “The use of such ironic anticlimaxes is a technique borrowed from Flaubert, the writer who once asserted that ‘stupidity lies in wanting to draw conclusions’” (Martin).

Good prose is seldom devoid of love in some form. As “the master explorer of the intricacies of human relations” (Adams), Barnes inevitably addresses love or its absence in various ways. Shilling examines the themes of love and death in this collection, particularly focusing on the misunderstandings between men and women, a recurring motif in Barnes’ work. She argues that the ways in which we misinterpret each other are “infinite in their variety”. She further asserts: “Love is, along with death, the great incomprehensible, and most of these stories are about one or the other. Or both” (Shilling).

## **6.1. Stories Unravelled: Part One**

### **6.1.1. *East Wind***

The opening story, as observed by Kemp, starts in a “lightly humorous” atmosphere; however, “it darkens into something more comfortless: a portrait of sterility as embodied by an emotionally stunted man and a physiologically damaged woman” (Kemp).

At the outset, the protagonist, Vernon, observes the destruction of a row of wooden beach huts by fire, while situated at the Right Plaice (a paronomasia, both on verbal level and level of meaning wherein it obtains an ironic meaning). Having recently relocated from London following a divorce and now working as a realtor who sees his children every other weekend, Vernon is emotionally detached. This detachment is encapsulated in his goal for the relocation: “he’d moved here to have no weather in his life” (*Pulse*, 10). Furthermore, Vernon exhibits signs of indecision and possible depression, as evidenced by his frequent resignation: “Vernon didn’t mind one way or the other. That’s what he found more often than not these days: he didn’t mind one way or the other” (*Pulse*, 11).

Vernon meets a waitress and impulsively asks if she would like to go for a swim, a proposal that she finds off-putting. This exchange transcends mere dialogue between two strangers; it serves

as a narratively ironic hook, foreshadowing future events. Barnes strategically plants this seed of irony, which will fully reveal its significance at the story's conclusion. In an instance of what might be termed unconscious irony, Vernon later suggests to the waitress, upon receiving the bill, that they should run away together and live in a beach hut. Unbeknownst to him, she will indeed eventually leave, but without him. For now, Vernon attributes her reaction to a misunderstanding of British humor: "'I do not think,' she replied, shaking her head, as if she assumed he meant it. Oh well, the old English sense of humor, takes a while for people to get used to it" (*Pulse*, 12).

Having concluded that neither he nor the waitress, Andrea, possessed the ability to flirt effectively, Vernon initially resolved not to ask her out. However, he quickly reconsidered this decision. The text illustrates this internal conflict: "He wasn't going to ask her out" (*Pulse*, 13). The subsequent paragraph reveals his change of heart: "He asked her out" (*ibid*).

Vernon's initial attraction to Andrea stemmed from what she was not, in a Barnesian *via negativa* manner. She was neither flirtatious nor overly talkative, and she did not impose herself upon him. This appealed to Vernon, who believed that women tended to be more attracted to men who were still in a marriage, regardless of how troubled it might be, rather than to those who were attempting to rebuild their lives after a divorce.

Their interactions continued to unfold in an uneven manner, as the disbalance and disagreements got more and more evident. However, ironically, contrary to possible expectations, it will not turn out to be the disbalance on the side of the woman.

Andrea asked Vernon to help her improve her English. Though he complied, he did so reluctantly, thinking: "Maybe he didn't want her talking like an Englishwoman in case she started behaving like an Englishwoman - well, like one in particular. And anyway, he didn't want to play the teacher" (*Pulse*, 15). This reluctance underscores his attraction to Andrea, which is based, ironically, on everything she was not.

As their relationship developed, Vernon discovered that Andrea could not have children and that she was reticent about her age. This prompted him to inquire further, as tactfully as possible. However, he reflected on his own limitations, recognizing the painful truth that: "tact was like flirting: either you had it, or you didn't. No, that wasn't right. It was just easier to be tactful if you didn't care if you knew things or not; harder when you cared" (*Pulse*, 19).

When Vernon and Andrea first began their relationship, he appreciated the mystery surrounding her; the lack of knowledge about her past made their interactions feel novel and invigorating. Over time, Andrea had learned much about Vernon, while he remained largely ignorant about her. He considered maintaining this dynamic but was haunted by his ex-wife's whispered admonition that he always ruined things. Vernon rejected this notion, reasoning that falling in love necessitates a desire to know everything about the other person:

"If you fall in love, you want to know. Good, bad, indifferent. Not that you're looking for bad things. That's just what falling in love means, Vernon said to himself" (*Pulse*, 19).

Driven by this conviction, Vernon made the ethically dubious decision to steal and copy Andrea's keys without her knowledge. He clandestinely entered her apartment on three occasions. During these invasions, he discovered several personal items: a medal, a photograph framed in metal, and a passport. The photograph depicted four girls in a swimming pool. From these items, Vernon deduced that Andrea was German, born in Halle in 1967, making her forty years old at the time.

This intrusive behaviour is indicative of Vernon's internal conflict, as he chooses to invade his girlfriend's privacy directly rather than addressing it through conversation. It reveals his struggle with trust and boundaries, highlighting the extent to which he is willing to navigate the complex interplay between love, curiosity, and ethical considerations in intimate relationships.

Despite his invasive actions, Vernon found it easy to be with Andrea. This was due to the fact that she was opposite of his past experiences which had taught him that relationships could quickly become perplexing. He recalled moments with previous partners when he felt completely bewildered. For example, with Karen, everything had been going smoothly and without pressure until she abruptly asked the question feared by men: "So where's all this leading, then?" (*Pulse*, 21). She presented the situation as if there were only two options: a commitment leading to marriage or a dead-end relationship. Similarly, with other women, an innocuous comment could unexpectedly lead to significant misunderstandings.

One evening, during an intimate moment, Vernon inadvertently commented on Andrea's strong swimmer's legs, a remark that seemingly went unnoticed by her that night. The remark may have appeared to pass as unnoticed by Andrea, but the reader knows for sure that this is the moment when the plot gains acceleration.

The resolution arrives swiftly. The next day, Andrea called in sick at work and ceased all contact. Concerned, Vernon decided to enter her apartment, only to discover that she had left. This prompted him to finally Google her, uncovering her full story.

One might question why he did not immediately investigate once he had her full name and origin. Why did he wait until her disappearance to seek out the truth? This delay is a testament to Barnes' narratorial mastery. By postponing the revelation of Andrea's background until the very end, Barnes skilfully maintains the suspense throughout the narrative. Barnes' strategic delay in revealing Andrea's history not only heightens the suspense but also deepens the reader's engagement with the characters' complexities and the unfolding mystery.

Vernon finally discovers the whole story about Andrea: she had been recruited as a swimmer in East Germany, where she was subjected to doping, resulting in severe health consequences. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, her involvement in the doping scandal became public, prompting her to flee and hide. Her failure to make the national team ultimately, and ironically, benefited her, as it allowed her to resettle in England unnoticed. However, "Andrea had come out with nothing more than a relay medal at some forgotten championship in a country that no longer existed" (*Pulse*, 23). In this context, his initial humorous question about going for a swim with her acquires a highly ironic dimension, as it was the least appropriate opening line he could have chosen, given her background, which he was unaware of at the time. Consequently, the introductory scene exemplifies dramatic irony.

The story concludes with Vernon sitting once again at the same café, his gaze unchanged. The narration remarks: "Except that there used to be a row of beach huts blocking the view. Then someone had burnt them down" (*Pulse*, 24). This imagery symbolizes a burnt bridge between Vernon and Andrea, suggesting the irreversible end of their relationship. It also reflects the recurring theme that Vernon's ex-wife had articulated - that he inevitably sabotages his relationships. This final image brings the story full circle, leaving Vernon ironically at the Right Place to reflect on his actions and their consequences, reinforcing the notion that his ex-wife's critique of him may indeed hold true. Should that be the case, the story adds to Vernon's unreliability as a narrator.

### 6.1.2. *At Phil & Joanna's 1-4*

Four stories, each titled to reflect the setting of the conversations and interspersed at regular intervals, create a steady pulse throughout Part One of the book. These narratives depict a series of dinner parties attended by several married couples in their fifties and sixties, originating from diverse backgrounds. The friends gather at Phil and Joanna's, with the stories serving as transcripts of their discussions on a wide range of topics, from politics to health. The conversations are infused with wit, humor, and irony, showcasing the dynamic and multifaceted nature of their interactions. This series of recurring four stories is among the most frequently commented upon in this collection.

Martin observes that the setting of the stories is contemporary and notes that the tone, typical of Barnes' work, is a mix of lampoon and sincerity. Furthermore, he discerns Barnes' dramatic talent, noting that "these excellently turned conversations, dense with non sequiturs, interruptions and concealed humour, give a glimpse of the playwright he might have been" (Martin).

Adams sees these stories as an extension of the discursive tone Barnes established in his novels *Talking It Over* and *Love, etc.*, or precisely "sharp interrogations of the way we chat and miss each other in the dark" (Adams), adding that certain "practised wit" can be discerned in their exchanges (ibid).

Kemp continues along the same line, stating that "they share their strengths (deft jokes and shrewd perceptions) but also their weaknesses (cerebralised waggishness and rather self-admiring smartness)" (Kemp).

McAlpin describes the quartet of dinner party conversations as witty and clever, presented with minimal exposition. She highlights how the group of aging boomers maintains their high spirits even while discussing serious subjects.

Sanai, on the other hand, critiques the stories for their superficial treatment of intellectual content, arguing that the guests lack the depth of wisdom or eloquence that Barnes himself possesses: "The smatterings of intellectual minutiae in these stories aren't expanded upon, and it would be different if the guests showed the considered wisdom or eloquence of Barnes himself, but they don't" (Sanai).

Shilling comments on Barnes critical perspective, noting his forensic dissection of the complacency and superficiality of these social occasions: "Barnes anatomises with forensic distaste the jittery complacency of these grim social occasions, with their vinous melancholy and conversation drawn from a 21st-century lexicon of received ideas" (Shilling).

Finally, Cusk provides a comprehensive critique, suggesting that Barnes' portrayal of middle-class values borders on aggressive glorification: "The Barnes of these stories is neither objective nor remotely apologetic; indeed, in their glorification of middle-class values they are close to an act of aggression" (Cusk). She further argues that the happiness depicted in these stories is the happiness "of well-off, well-fed, well-educated people in late middle age whose good fortune and good character have earned them stability, success, and the security of love and friendship" (ibid).

According to Cusk, the interlocutors, rooted in this stability, are not confronted with any particular threats, which renders their exchanges "even faintly satirical" (ibid). Instead, she contends, readers are forced to recognize the depicted happiness as their own, providing their own counterpoint of loss. Consequently, this narrative approach makes readers participants in the conversations, rendering the "writing so open to criticism that criticism becomes pointless" (ibid).

### 6.1.2.1. *At Phil & Joanna's 1: 60/40*

The first of the four stories is titled *At Phil & Joanna's 1: 60/40*, referring to the attitude of one of the speakers towards several issues discussed. The conversation seamlessly transitions from topics such as food to politics, employing a smooth and ironic tone. This discourse ultimately leads to the conclusion that we are living in a world of approximations that we no longer notice:

"These chocolates, to change the subject. Why do the drawings never match what's in the box?"

"Or is it the other way round?"

"The other way round's the same way round. They still don't match."

"The pictures are only an approximation. Like a communist menu. What would exist in an ideal world. Think of them as a metaphor." (*Pulse*, 26)

Based on their references and topics, it can be concluded that they are late boomers. As McAlpin observes, these are "aging boomers who gather every few months manage to preserve their high spirits even as they banter about serious subjects" (McAlpin).

In a playful exchange about smoking and joints, the participants reference contemporary politicians, culminating in an ironically biblical tone at the end of their conversation:

"McCain must have smoked when he was a POW."

"Obama must have had a joint or two."

"I bet Hillary never inhaled."

"By their smoking shall ye know them." (*Pulse*, 27)

This dialogue exemplifies the group's tendency to interweave humor and irony into their discussions of serious topics. By invoking well-known political figures and their alleged smoking habits, the conversation critiques and satirizes the public scrutiny and moral judgments directed at personal behaviours. The concluding reference adds a layer of irony, suggesting a mock-sermonizing tone that both elevates and trivializes the subject. Similarly, they attribute Bush's presidency to "the absolutism of the recovering addict" (*Pulse*, 28).

They discuss the problem of smoking, with none of them being strongly opposed to the habit. While referring to the official governmental report, they highlight the hypocrisy of the government:

"Life expectancy for a smoker: seventy-three years. Life expectancy for a nonsmoker: seventy-four."

"Is that true?"

"That's what it said. So Macmillan wrote on the report: 'Treasury think revenue interest outweighs this.'"

"It's the hypocrisy I can't stand." (*Pulse*, 29)

Furthermore, Barnes anticipates the global restriction and prohibition of smoking, including its depiction in films: "They'll probably find a way of cutting the smoking out of films. Like colourising black-and-white movies" (*Pulse*, 30). It is noteworthy that this prediction aligns closely with contemporary realities.

The second part of the story's title refers to the attitude of one of the speakers towards the issues discussed; his stance of 60% pro and 40% con on any subject is highly ironic and indicative of contemporary men. Barnes precisely observes and documents the indecisiveness, unawareness, and lack of concern characteristic of modern men. This trait is depicted as follows:

"How can you be sixty/forty on something like Iraq? It's like being sixty/forty on flat-earth theory."

"I'm sixty/forty on that too." (*Pulse*, 33)

This attitude culminates in a form of auto-irony, as his 60/40 stance is eventually examined and critiqued by the same principle, ultimately collapsing into itself:

"You're a liberal - you're sixty/forty on everything."

"I'm not sure I'd agree."

"See, he's even sixty/forty on whether or not he's sixty/forty." (*Pulse*, 34)

The discussion concludes in a humorous and ironic manner by highlighting the economic savings smokers purportedly provide to national health budgets. The argument suggests that smokers, rather than being stigmatized, should be appreciated for their cost-effectiveness. As the dialogue unfolds, in regard to "the cost in health care to the nation" it is noted that "[s]mokers were the cheapest. Next came obese people. And all those healthy, nonobese, nonsmokers ended up being the biggest drain of all on the country" (*Pulse*, 35).

This ironical viewpoint that it is the most expensive to be a nonsmoker is further emphasized with the remark: "Stigmatising smokers, taxing the [...] out of them, making them stand on street corners in the rain, instead of thanking them for being the nation's cheap dates" (ibid). This comment provides the ironical argument that smokers, despite being heavily taxed and marginalized, should be appreciated for their lower overall healthcare costs.

Eventually, as the group prepares to go home, they conclude on a cheerful note:

"Sixty/forty is a metaphor."

"Is it?"

"Everything's a metaphor at this time of night." (*Pulse*, 36)

#### **6.1.2.2. At Phil & Joanna's 2: Marmalade**

In the second story of this sequence, we learn that some participants are from the United States, some from a former British colony, and one is Croatian. This diverse background propels the narrative, which is predominantly concerned with the theme of Britishness. The conversations are saturated with British self-referencing irony, a trait that is highlighted as one of their predominant characteristics. Barnes does not shy away from critiquing his own nation. This characteristic is exemplified in the following exchange:

"You've got the same colour passports. Why not cut to the chase and say you're all Europeans?"

"Because then we wouldn't be allowed to make jokes about foreigners."

"Which is after all a central British tradition." (*Pulse*, 53)

In the same vein, they comment on British evasiveness of reality:

“So why not admit the reality?”

“But that’s another British trait we cling to. Not accepting reality.” (ibid)

This exchange illustrates the ironic self-awareness present in their discussions. By acknowledging the British tendency to avoid confronting reality, the characters engage in a form of meta-commentary that critiques their own cultural behaviours.

As a politically engaged writer, Barnes follows the same line of thought, commenting on the UK’s orientation towards money and reducing the state to a public limited company due to its interests. His character asserts:

“UK plc’s just honest. We’re a trading nation, always were. Thatcher just reconnected us to the real England that is forever England - money worshipping, self-interested, xenophobic, culture hating. It’s our default setting.” (*Pulse*, 57)

The title of this story refers to the origin of the word “marmalade”. Barnes playfully leverages his French connections and knowledge of the French language to draw a parallel to Queen Mary Stuart. One of the participants asserts that it is a French word and “comes from ‘Marie malade’. That queen of Scotland who had French connections” (*Pulse*, 56). This witty etymological concoction by Barnes - that the French made marmalade for the Queen of Scotland and named it after her - adds to the humorous tone of the dialogue.

The next topic the group tackles is Valentine’s Day, which coincides with National Impotence Day on February the fourteenth. Barnes highlights the irony of celebrating love and romance alongside impotence on the same date, addressing the group’s disbelief with the remark: “But it’s true. And if anyone asks me about national characteristics, or irony, for that matter, that’s what I tell them: February the fourteenth” (*Pulse*, 57). The irony inherent in this coincidence is so comic that one might suspect it is not a coincidence at all.

Barnes further maintains referencing this humorous coincidence as the group continues their discussion. With the irony of February, the fourteenth still lingering in the air, they turn to the idea of joining the European Union on this particular date. One participant suggests: “Why not Friday the thirteenth?” Another counters: “No, it has to be the fourteenth. The celebration of both love and impotence. That’s the day we become fully paid-up members of Europe” (*Pulse*, 62).

References to British history continue as the participants mention King Charles I and the day he was beheaded. They comment on the extreme cold of that day, noting that Charles I wore two shirts to prevent shivering and thus avoid giving the impression of fear to his people. The group acknowledges this characteristic as quintessentially British, stating: “That’s pretty British” (*Pulse*, 57).

The discussion on British society culminates in the recounting of a story about an aristocratic lady on a transatlantic liner who had a romantic encounter with one of the stewards. “And the next morning he ran into her in the fo’c’sle or whatever and said hello in a friendly way [...] And she replied, ‘Intromission is not introduction’” (*Pulse*, 60).

This anecdote is rich in irony, as it underscores the rigid social hierarchy and the incongruity between private actions and public decorum. The steward’s assumption of familiarity, based on their intimate encounter, is starkly contrasted with the lady’s dismissive response, which clearly stated that she was not properly introduced to him and rejected any possibility of such an introduction. The sharpness of her remark that intercourse is insufficient for a proper introduction lingers in the mind long after the conversation ends and the friends part ways.

### 6.1.2.3. *At Phil & Joanna's 3: Look, No Hands*

The third story in this series predominantly explores themes of love, relationships, and sex. From the outset, the group exhibits a cynical attitude, as confirmed by one comment: "A friend of mine once said he didn't think it was possible to be happy for longer than two weeks at any one stretch" (*Pulse*, 81).

This scepticism is further compounded by observations that highlight hypocrisy and irony within their interactions:

"You know, when I first came over here, the things I noticed most were how you were always making jokes, and how often you use the C-word."

"Don't you use the C-word in America?"

"I guess we certainly avoid it in the presence of women."

"How very peculiar. And richly ironic, if you don't mind my saying." (*Pulse*, 82)

These stories and their narrative modes of dialogue and exposition provide a perfect ground for Barnes' wit, humour, and irony. The stories are replete with quotable and memorable utterances that are ideally suited to the dialogue-driven format. Here are a few notable examples related to love, sex, and relationships:

"[...] We make jokes instead of being serious, and we talk about sex instead of talking about love."

"I think jokes are a good way of being serious. Often the best way." (*Pulse*, 83)

\*

"Last time - or the time before - someone was asking if there was cancer of the heart. Of course there is. And it's called love." (*Pulse*, 84)

\*

"What did we say before we said 'passive-aggressive'?"

"How about 'well mannered'?"

"'Passive-aggressive' indicates a psychological condition."

"So does 'well mannered'. And a very healthy one too." (*Pulse*, 89)

\*

The dialogue further reflects the complexities and ambiguities surrounding love and intimacy in contemporary society. It becomes evident that these concepts are no longer interconnected or understood in the same way as they once were. These discrepancies and perspectives presented by the group are characteristic of postmodern views, marked by wit and irony.

A friend of one of the participants, a lawyer, moved to New York in her fifties, where she was surrounded by individuals thirty years younger. She observed that "they didn't think twice about going to bed with someone, but they were really, really scared of getting close, or of anyone getting close to them" (*Pulse*, 84). This observation underscores the irony of contemporary relationships, where physical intimacy is readily pursued, yet emotional intimacy is feared. This theme resonates

with the earlier anecdote about the posh lady, which tackles disconnection between physical and emotional closeness.

The conversation continues with reflections on, or better, deconstruction of pain and suffering:

“No gain without pain, as they say.”

“I’ve known pain where there’s no gain. In most cases, actually. ‘Suffering ennobles’ - I’ve always known that was a moralistic lie. Suffering diminishes the individual. Pain degrades.” (*Pulse*, 85)

This dialogue suggests that, contrary to the conventional belief, pain does not elevate the individual but rather diminishes and degrades them.

Another participant comments on emotional resilience and avoidance:

“I’m just thinking of a few people - men, yes, they are all men, actually - who’ve never been hurt by love. Who are, in fact, incapable of being hurt by love. Who set up a system of evasion and control that guarantees they’ll never get hurt.”

“Is that so unreasonable? It sounds like the emotional equivalent of a prenup.”

(*Pulse*, 86)

The participants further note that some men can engage in the entirety of relational experiences - sex, marriage, fatherhood, companionship - without feeling any real pain. What they do feel are manifestations of underlying pain: frustration, embarrassment, boredom, and anger. This exchange explores the theme of emotional detachment, highlighting how some individuals, particularly men, create mechanisms to avoid emotional vulnerability. By comparing this behaviour to an “emotional equivalent of a prenup”, the dialogue ironizes the concept of marriage by reducing it to calculated efforts to prevent emotional pain.

Barnes’ views, as exposed in this dialogue, delve deeply into human suffering without providing concrete answers. He abstains from judgment, merely bringing to the surface the sufferings of contemporary men from the perspective of a discerning “erudite fly on the wall” (“erudite fly”). This approach allows Barnes to illuminate the complexities of modern emotional experiences without imposing a singular moral interpretation.

The discussion then turns to the nature of love, jealousy, and pain, culminating in a thought-provoking observation:

“[...] Love can’t exist without the possibility of jealousy. If you’re lucky, you may never feel it, but if the possibility, the capacity to feel it, isn’t there, then you aren’t in love. And it’s the same with pain.” (*Pulse*, 86)

This observation posits that love inherently involves the potential for pain and jealousy. The capacity to experience these emotions is seen as integral to truly being in love. The fear of emotional intimacy contrasts with the inevitability of pain and jealousy as components of love. Ultimately, it is impossible to feel one emotion without contrasting it with its opposite counterpart. Human nature is complex and cannot be reduced to a singular mode of experience; rather, it must be lived in its extremes. And these extremes provide the playground where irony thrives.

#### 6.1.2.4. *At Phil & Joanna's 4: One in Five*

The conversation in this story is characterized by repartees, filled with the group's aperçus and banter. The opening lines exemplify this dynamic: As Joanna discusses oiling her new maplewood work surface, she explains:

"There's a formula: once a day for a week, once a week for a month, once a month for a year, and thereafter whenever you feel like it."

Another participant humorously responds:

"Sounds like the formula for married sex." (*Pulse*, 104)

This exchange not only sets the tone for the group's witty interactions but also highlights the ironic and humorous perspectives they bring to everyday topics.

Another remark explains the irony inherent in the public's perception of media credibility, highlighting the selective trust placed in familiar sources while dismissing others as unreliable:

"Here's a paradox. We all of us read a newspaper, and most of us believe most of what our newspaper tells us. But at the same time every survey says that journalists are generally regarded as untrustworthy. Down there at the bottom with estate agents."

"It's other people's newspapers that are untrustworthy. Ours are reliable."

(*Pulse*, 106)

The group tackles their education, and by the use of Latin proverbs we can conclude on their age. Their exchange reflects a lament for the diminishing presence of classical and literary references in contemporary culture. It highlights the participants' awareness of their own erudition and the irony in questioning whether the loss of such knowledge is significant:

"And in case you think we're showing off our education, we aren't. It's more despair. We're probably the last generation to have these phrases at our disposal. They don't have classical references in the Times crossword anymore. Or Shakespeare quotations. When we're dead, no one will say things like '*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*' anymore."

"And that'll be a loss, will it?"

"I can't tell if you're being ironic or not."

"Neither can I." (*Pulse*, 107)

The title of the story is referenced to in their discussion on global agreement, which delineates the group's scepticism about achieving global consensus, highlighting the tension between self-interest and long-term thinking:

"But if we think we are at the tipping point, what chance do we believe we have of the world agreeing?"

"Perhaps as much as one chance in five?"

"Self-interest. That's what makes things tick. People will recognise it's in their own interest. And that of subsequent generations."

"Subsequent generations don't vote for today's politicians."

“What has posterity ever done for me, as someone asked.” (*Pulse*, 109-110)

Furthermore, at the end of the book, we come to realize that “one in five” may also refer to the five senses, suggesting that this exchange serves as an introduction to Part Two of the book, where five stories explore each of the senses, or rather the loss thereof.

The tipping point mood referred to in the above exchange is amplified by the recognition that they might be part of the last generation, with an added sense of glamour arising from this realization. The apocalyptic tone is evident in the following utterance:

“... and just as, in the past, people looked ahead and posited the rise of civilisation, the discovery of new continents, the understanding of the universe’s secrets, now we are looking at a vista of grand reversal and inevitable, spectacular decline, when *homo* will become a *lupus* to *homini* again. As in the beginning, so it was in the end.”

(*Pulse*, 111)

The cyclical view of history is a recurring theme for Barnes, with traces evident in *England, England*, where Olde England reinvents itself, as well as in *The Noise of Time*, which depicts seemingly disparate regimes repeating in new forms, and in *Elizabeth Finch*, wherein the history of the last Roman emperor is reflected in the life and perspective of an English teacher.

They conclude that from now on, it is all about “managed decline” (ibid), a concept signifying a controlled deterioration of society. The phrase is indicative of an apocalyptic mood, shifting from striving for progress to merely mitigating the descent, reflecting a resigned acceptance of gradual societal decay.

The group further humorously references a famous quote concerning the nature of knowledge and opinions held, encapsulating the irony of fervently advocating for opinion that may not be deeply rooted in conviction.:

“Isn’t it amazing how much we don’t know?”

“Or how much we know but how little we believe.”

“Who was it said they had strong opinions weakly held?<sup>30</sup>” (*Pulse*, 112)

Another exchange is illustrative of Barnes’ wit and ironic approach to aging. He encapsulates this in a conversation about classical music, one of his favourite interests, displaying a deconstructive, (auto)subversive, and ironic approach to the complex process of aging. This dialogue highlights the changing perspectives that come with age, with Barnes using humor and irony to explore how preferences evolve over time. The exchange about the “blood slowing down” serves as a metaphor for the natural deceleration and we are not concerned with whether or not this is literally true, as long as it holds metaphorical truth:

---

<sup>30</sup> The reference is to A. J. P. Taylor, the British historian (1906 - 1690). According to the Oxford Reference ([oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00007995](https://oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00007995)), Taylor, in a letter to Eva Haraszti Taylor dated 16 July 1970, recounted a notable exchange during his interview at Oxford. The historian wrote: “Once, when I applied for an appointment at Oxford which I did not get, the president of the College concerned said to me sternly: ‘I hear you have strong political views.’ I said: ‘Oh no, President. Extreme views weakly held.’” (source: [statmodeling.stat.columbia.edu/2005/09/02/extreme\\_views\\_w/](https://statmodeling.stat.columbia.edu/2005/09/02/extreme_views_w/)).

“When I was young and started listening to classical music, I used to prefer the fast movements and was bored by the slow movements. I just wanted them to be over. Now it’s the opposite. I prefer slow movements.”

“That’s probably connected to the blood slowing down.”

“Does the blood slow down? Just out of interest.”

“If it doesn’t, it ought to.”

“Another thing we don’t know.”

“If it doesn’t, it’s still a metaphor and, as such, true.” (*Pulse*, 113)

Aging is also reflected in the evolution of our emotions, as the group posits: “We had our strongest emotions when we were young - falling in love, getting married, having children” (*Pulse*, 114). With age, emotions change in terms of their longevity, as we might now experience “longer emotions” (ibid). Alternatively, our strongest emotions may be “of a different kind now - loss, regret, a sense of things ending” (ibid). This latter reflection is a direct reference to *The Sense of an Ending*.

Finally, they exchange an ironic definition of a nuclear family:

“I’ve just realised why it’s called the nuclear family.”

“Because it’s fissile and always likely to explode and irradiate people.”

(*Pulse*, 115)

This critical perspective on modern family dynamics, comparing them to a nuclear reaction, serves as a humorous yet pointed commentary on the inherent tensions and conflicts within family structures. By framing the nuclear family - a supposed source of security - in terms of its instability and potential for destructive outcomes, Barnes underscores the fragility of the central unit in all of our lives. Irony might be the anchor that saves us from its potential explosions.

As the conversation quiets down, one of the participants poses a final question: “Which of our five senses could we most easily do without?” (*Pulse*, 115). This question, left unanswered by the group, serves primarily to introduce the second part of the book, which explores the theme of the five senses through a series of stories.

### **6.1.3. *Sleeping with John Updike***

Sanai comments on this story by drawing a parallel with *The Things You Know* from *The Lemon Table*, which also features two female protagonists and employs a similar narrative form. She highlights the deeper similarity between the two stories, emphasizing the “competitiveness, passive aggression, and suppressed rage” (Sanai) that characterize the relationships between the protagonists in both narratives.

In both narratives, the female protagonists display a complex interplay of rivalry and concealed hostility beneath the superficial appearance of friendship. Sanai’s observation highlights the intricate emotional landscapes that Barnes navigates in his storytelling, where the ostensibly amicable surface of friendship is frequently disrupted by underlying currents of envy and conflict. Indeed, *Sleeping with John Updike* can be interpreted as a continuation and deepening of its counterpart story, distinguished by its compelling title.

Jane and Alice, long-time friends and fellow writers, sat together in a train compartment. Their friendship was so enduring that they had even forgotten how and when they had first met.

Their initial conversation serves as a preview of the revelations Barnes uncovers throughout the story, including the notable incident of sleeping with a celebrity author. When Alice enquires about the story involving Graham Greene, she asks: “I’ve always meant to ask you, is it true?” (*Pulse*, 38). Jane admits candidly and ironically: “You know, I never worry about that anymore. It fills a slot” (*ibid*).

Alice finds solace in the fact that neither she nor Jane achieved fame. She acknowledges that fame would have brought a constant stream of readers seeking new anecdotes, a demand neither of them could fulfil: “They’d expect some new anecdotes. I don’t think either of us has told a new story in years” (*Pulse*, 38). This utterance is ironic given that both protagonists are writers, making their living through writing, yet they admit to having been unable to produce any new work.

Reflecting on the early days of their friendship, both women were newly married and newly published authors. Despite privately thinking less of each other’s work than they publicly admitted, this discrepancy was consistent with their general opinions of others’ work, thus seemingly avoiding hypocrisy: “Each privately liked the other’s work a little less than they said, but then, they also liked everyone else’s work a little less than they said, so hypocrisy didn’t come into it” (*ibid*).

It is obvious to the reader that lack of hypocrisy is a consolatory thought only in their minds, as the general application of the rule does not make you sincere; rather, it signals to the reader that all their utterances should be interpreted with an ironic lens.

Both Jane and Alice experienced “a little more success than they had anticipated, but less, looking back, than they thought they deserved” (*Pulse*, 39). Here, they demonstrate shared lack of sincerity and introspection. This nuanced reflection on their careers and friendship highlights the complexities of their relationship and the realities of their literary achievements.

Their conversations are marked by wit and irony, further illustrating the peculiarity of their bond:

“Are you saying it’s Buddhist to forget who you slept with?”

“It could be.”

“I thought Buddhism was about things coming round again in different lives?”

“Well, that would explain why we slept with so many pigs.” (*Pulse*, 40)

In a light-hearted conversation about religion, Jane admits to having become religious in recent years. Her friend Alice, curious about Jane’s newfound faith, questions her with playful support, remarking: “As long as your god allows drinking and smoking and fornication” (*Pulse*, 42). Jane responds with humour, assuring her: “Oh, he’s very keen on all of those” (*ibid*). She proceeds:

“I don’t think I’d want a god who disapproved. Get enough of that in life anyway. Mercy and forgiveness and understanding, that’s what we need. Plus the notion of some overall plan.” (*ibid*)

When discussing her newfound religious beliefs, Jane’s thoughts quickly drift to the harsh realities of life: plane crashes, mass slaughter, cancer, the strangling of elderly women living alone, and the probable absence of immortality. She acknowledges that the benevolent, comfy God she envisions is powerless against such grim visions. The portrayal of God as envisioned by the protagonist is highly ironic. She contrasts His comforting presence with the disastrous events He permits, ultimately reconciling this contradiction by stating that “The God Who Approved of Things was powerless against such visions” (*Pulse*, 45). Barnes leaves this assertion unexamined, refraining

from further exploring the theme of religion as he has done in other works. Alice notably concludes that life is predominantly about the gradual loss of pleasure.

Their conversation also touches on contemporary literature. When Alice asks Jane if she reads the young male authors everyone talks about, Jane responds that she does not, as they already have plenty of readers. When asked about the young female authors, Jane admits she pretends to have read them more often than the male authors. She further responds, adding to the shared sense of hypocrisy:

“What about the young women everyone’s going on about?”

“I suppose I pretend a little more to have read them than with the boys.”

“So do I. Is that bad?”

“No, I think it’s sisterly.” (*Pulse*, 44)

This dialogue highlights their ironic wit and mutual understanding, emphasizing their bond and the complexities of their perspectives on life and literature. At this moment, it becomes apparent that Jane and Alice might actually represent two facets of the same person, engaging in an internal dialogue. Barnes masterfully uses their exchanges to explore and contradict different viewpoints, effectively speaking through both characters.

Their mutual relationship becomes further complicated as they become more candid with the reader, revealing details from their past. This deepening transparency begins with an acknowledgment from one of them:

“Actually, I was wondering if you’d ever been jealous of me.”

[...]

“... I don’t know if ‘jealous’ is the right word. But I was envious as hell about the Mike Nichols thing - until it went away. And I was pretty furious when you slept with my husband, but that was anger not jealousy, I think.” (*Pulse*, 45)

This moment reveals the extent of their hypocrisy, as they continue to act as friends despite having shared the same man, pretending it was not a significant issue. They conclude the subject with a seemingly casual dismissal: “But he was your ex-husband by then. And back in those days everyone slept with everyone, didn’t they?” (ibid). However, the inner turmoil within both the once-cheated wife and her friend remains unresolved. Jane did write a novel about their shared experience, but the issue remained smouldering beneath the surface. In her novel, she claimed that “David” was on the verge of returning to “Jill” when “Angela” intervened. However, the novel omitted crucial details: it was two years, not two months later, and by that time, “David” was involved with numerous women in west London in addition to “Angela”. The unresolved tension and the gap between their public personas and private realities persist. For the woman who was cheated on, the main issue lies in her friend’s honesty, as she replies: “It was tactless of you to *tell me*” (italics in original text, *Pulse*, 46). This remark reveals that dishonesty serves as the foundation of their friendship, suggesting that the fragile balance of their relationship depends on concealing painful truths rather than confronting them openly.

When the conversation turns to the subject of memoirs and their age, Alice explains her perspective on counting years. She humorously states that she considers herself to be fifty because she only starts counting from the age of sixteen. She adds: “Before that I wasn’t sentient, let alone responsible for what I was” (*Pulse*, 46).

In their discussion, one of them recalls a story involving John Updike and contemplates whether it would make a good addition to a memoir. Thus, we finally learn what supposedly happened with John Updike, an episode that, in fact, did not occur. The author ironically employed a typical female excuse to explain the non-event:

“I mean he said he had an early start the next day. Paris, Copenhagen, wherever. Book tour. You know.”

“The headache excuse.”

“Precisely.”

“Well,” said Jane, trying to hide a sudden surge of jauntiness, “I’ve always believed that writers get more out of things going wrong than things going right. It’s the only profession in which failure can be put to good use.” (*Pulse*, 47)

This verbal exchange deconstructs the title of the story, rendering it ironic. The story is named after an intimate incident that never happened, a fact the protagonist was aware of all along. Thus, “sleeping with John Updike” becomes a catchall phrase for wishful thinking and the deliberate embellishment of one’s biography while being fully conscious of its falseness.

Barnes delves into profound existential issues, which become evident upon closer examination of Alice’s reflections. Alice contemplates whether it is better to approach life with seriousness or levity, questioning if this dichotomy is genuine or merely a means of feeling superior: “[...] was that a false antithesis, merely a way of feeling superior?” (*Pulse*, 48). She perceives Jane as someone who takes life lightly until faced with adversity, at which point Jane seeks serious solutions, such as turning to God. Conversely, Alice believes it is preferable to take life seriously while seeking light solutions, such as satire or, more darkly, suicide.

Alice further ponders why people cling so fiercely to life, a gift received without consent. From her perspective, all lives are failures. Jane’s notion of transforming failure into art appears to Alice as a naive fantasy. She contends that true understanding of art reveals its inherent inability to fulfil the creator’s dreams: “Art always fell short, and the artist, far from rescuing something from the disaster of life, was thereby condemned to be a double failure” (*Pulse*, 49). This reflection underscores Alice’s cynicism and profound existential questioning, contrasting with Jane’s seemingly more hopeful outlook and revealing deeper philosophical differences between them.

Several instances of irony permeate Alice’s observations.

Firstly, her contemplation of whether to take life seriously or lightly reveals an ironic tension. By questioning if this distinction serves merely to feel superior, Alice ironically exposes her own critical stance as potentially self-serving. Her intellectualizing of the issue may itself be an attempt to elevate her viewpoint above Jane’s, thereby falling into the very trap she critiques.

Furthermore, Alice perceives Jane’s turn to God as a serious solution to life’s problems. Yet, there is irony in Alice’s own proposed “light” solutions. Satire, although seemingly lighter, is a serious form of critique stemming from deep engagement with life’s absurdities and injustices. Similarly, suicide, mentioned in a seemingly flippant manner, is a profoundly serious and tragic response to life’s difficulties, starkly contrasting with the notion of a “light” solution.

The greatest irony lies in Alice’s dismissal of Jane’s belief in transforming failure into art as a “fluffy fantasy” (*Pulse*, 49). By rejecting the potential of art to transcend failure, Alice undermines

the very purpose and hope that art embodies, thereby reinforcing her own sense of futility. The climax of the irony is that Alice herself is an artist - of the written word.

Moreover, Alice's belief that clinging to life is irrational, as it is a gift given without consent, further deepens the irony. While she criticizes this attachment to life, she is herself deeply engaged in the existential struggle to find meaning, revealing an inherent contradiction. Her intellectual disdain for life's inherent value contrasts with her active contemplation of its worth, highlighting a profound internal conflict.

The closing of the story underscores once again the ironic nature of Alice and Jane's friendship - a friendship that was never truly genuine. Alice maintains this relationship primarily to elevate her own sense of self-worth by comparing herself to Jane. As Alice reflects: "[...] that was the constant advantage of appearing with Jane. It made her, Alice, look better: lucid, sober, well-read, slim" (*Pulse*, 49).

Alice's thoughts further reveal her underlying disdain and ironic honesty towards Jane. She wonders when Jane will write a novel about an overweight writer with a drinking problem who finds solace in religion, suggesting that this would be an honest, albeit offensive, portrayal. This moment marks the first time Alice labels Jane with such honesty, and it occurs at the end of the story, emphasizing the depth of Alice's hidden contempt and the mastery of Barnes' narrative suspension.

Alice concludes her reflections with a biting observation to herself: "You really could do with the scourge of one of those old, punitive religions. Stoical atheism is too morally neutral for you" (*ibid*). This final thought serves as an intertextual reference to Elizabeth Finch, where the eponymous teacher would likely disagree with Alice's sentiment, as the exploration of stoicism and its moral implications is one of central themes in that novel.

Alice's sense of superiority and her critical view of Jane's reliance on religion and her personal flaws reveal that their friendship is built on a foundation of comparison and concealed judgment rather than genuine camaraderie. Alice's inner critique exposes her lack of empathy and understanding towards Jane, further emphasizing the ironic nature of their relationship. While Alice views herself as morally and intellectually superior, her reflections betray a deep-seated insecurity and need for validation through the perceived failings of her friend.

In contrast, the story's final scene depicts Jane alone in her apartment, contemplating what would happen if she were to die on a train. She wonders whether Alice would leave her dead body or stay with her, thus seeking assurance that she would not be alone in her final moments. This introspection highlights Jane's fear of loneliness and desire for companionship at the end of her life.

The story concludes with a muted tone, paralleling Jane's solemn thoughts with the act of switching television channels with her remote control. This imagery subtly mirrors the story's end, reflecting the unresolved and muted complexities of life, death, and relationships. The reference to death not only closes the story but also fades away into a quiet, uncertain conclusion, much like the television channels she flips through:

"It suddenly seemed very important to be reassured that Alice wouldn't abandon her. She looked across at the telephone, wondering what Alice was doing at that moment. But then she imagined the small, disapproving silence before Alice answered her question, a silence which would somehow imply that her friend was needy, self-dramatising and overweight. Jane sighed, reached for the remote, and changed the channel." (*Pulse*, 50-51)

#### 6.1.4. *Gardeners' World*

Ken and Martha are a married couple, eight years into their relationship. They have reached a stage where they give each other practical, useful presents rather than gifts that directly express their feelings. This shift symbolizes their commitment to their “joint project in life rather than express[ing] their feelings” (*Pulse*, 63), suggesting a mature, pragmatic approach to their partnership. Moreover, this is the very first sign or red flag that might signify certain underlying conflict or irony.

Ken’s wedding anniversary card reads: “I have cleaned all your shoes” exemplifying this. His meticulous care for her footwear - spraying suede against rain, whitening tennis pumps, shining boots, and polishing shoes with devotion - becomes an unconventional but profound expression of his love. Instead of traditional romantic gestures, Ken’s actions convey his affection through acts of service “treating the rest of her footwear with polish, brush, rag, cloth, elbow grease, devotion, love” (*ibid*).

It is evident that household chores have become the mutually accepted medium through which Ken and Martha express their love and respect for each other. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the garden becomes a metaphorical battlefield for their interactions.

In line with this dynamic, Ken receives a soil-testing kit for his birthday. Feigning enthusiasm for a gift that would typically fail to excite, he ironically exclaims: “A soil-testing kit! Just what I needed” (*Pulse*, 64).

He, or rather Barnes, further ponders on the appeal of such a present to “that small area of masculinity which modern society’s erosion of difference between the sexes had not yet eliminated” (*ibid*). Thus, the soil-testing kit symbolizes Ken as a “boffin” (a nerdy enthusiast), “prospective hunter-gatherer” (connected to nature and self-sufficiency), and “Boy Scout” (resourceful and prepared).

Husband’s definition of marriage is telling:

“Marriage was a democracy of two, he liked to say. He had somehow assumed that the garden would be decided upon much as the house had been, by a process of reasoned yet enthusiastic consultation in which requirements were enunciated, mutual tastes considered, finances estimated. As a consequence, there was almost nothing he actively hated in the house, and much he approved of.” (*Pulse*, 66)

This passage employs irony to highlight the discrepancies between the idealized notion of marital decision-making and its practical realities. The concept of marriage as a “democracy of two” suggests an equitable partnership where decisions are made collaboratively through mutual agreement. However, the irony lies in the disparity between this ideal and the actual dynamics of the relationship.

The husband’s belief that decisions about the garden would follow the same “reasoned yet enthusiastic consultation” as those about the house reflects his expectation of a democratic process. This expectation is built on the premise that both partners’ preferences and opinions are equally valued and considered, leading to outcomes that neither partner actively dislikes. The irony becomes apparent when this ideal is contrasted with the specific instance of the garden decision, implying that this harmonious process is more theoretical than practical.

Ken further expands this: when they argue about her having dug up “his” blackberry he concludes: “Marriage was a democracy of two, except when there’s a tied vote, in which case it descends into autocracy” (*Pulse*, 68). This observation deepens the irony by addressing the inherent flaw in the “democracy of two” concept. When a disagreement occurs, as illustrated by the conflict

over the blackberry bush, the equal partnership breaks down. The husband's conclusion that a tied vote results in "autocracy" reveals the inherent contradiction: in situations where consensus cannot be reached, one partner ultimately assumes control, undermining the democratic ideal.

The wife's choice of gift is imbued with irony: she selects a soil testing kit for a man who has never exhibited a penchant for precision or meticulous care, as evidenced by his remark: "Why not just get a bag of bonemeal and a sack of compost and dig them in?" (*Pulse*, 66). Furthermore, her husband remains entirely unperturbed by this characteristic of his, fully aware of his tendency to accept approximations. This trait, once referred to by an irate girlfriend as "just being incredibly lazy" (*ibid*) is a description he has always regarded with a sense of cherished self-deprecation.

Their intimate relationship is characterized by a pervasive sense of depressed irritation and resentment, as evidenced by the following exchange before sleeping:

"More bookwork?" he asked mildly, as he got into bed.

She was reading Ursula Buchan's *Wall Plants and Climbers*.

"There's nothing wrong with bookwork, Ken."

"As I know to my cost," he replied, turning out his bedside light.

This wasn't an argument, not anymore; just an admitted difference." (*Pulse*, 69)

The "admitted difference" in their characters and the resulting quarrels are clearly evident in their contrasting approaches to everyday activities. "Martha, for instance, believed it was only sensible to follow recipes when cooking" (*Pulse*, 69). This adherence to structure and precision highlights her methodical nature. In contrast, her husband's more relaxed approach is illustrated by his comment: "Can't make an omelette without breaking the spine of a cookbook?" (*ibid*) - a remark that underscores his disdain for strict guidelines and preference for spontaneity.

Similarly, Martha's reliance on "guidebooks and maps even when navigating through town" reflects her need for certainty and direction, whereas her husband's preference for "an internal compass, serendipity, the joy of getting creatively lost" (*ibid*) reveals his inclination towards exploration and improvisation. In an attempt to reconcile the two extremes of their differing approaches, he eventually proposes a consolatory synthesis: "Perhaps they had what was needed in any partnership: one bookworm and one instinctivist" (*Pulse*, 70).

The garden serves as both a metaphor and a battlefield for their marriage. The repeated acts of theft of plants and the oak tub draw attention to this space, both in literal and symbolic manner. Within this battlefield, the husband is subjected to his wife's directives and finds little enjoyment in the process. Their visits to the garden center epitomize his sense of subjugation, even though he labels the experience "the perfect deal: he drove her there, sat in the car, met her at the desk and paid, then drove them home and paid again by risking a hernia lifting all the stuff out of the car and lugging it through the house to the garden" (*Pulse*, 72).

Moreover, his efforts in the garden highlight the dynamics of their relationship. "Also that spring he improved the soil as and where indicated. He dug where Martha asked him to dig. He began what promised to be a long campaign against ground elder" (*Pulse*, 74). These actions reflect his compliance. On the contrary, his internal reflection further reveals the complexities of his emotions: "He wondered if he loved Martha just as much as ever, or if he was merely performing a husbandly routine from which others were invited to deduce how much he loved her" (*ibid*). His actions are driven more by a sense of duty than genuine love, while the garden becomes a symbol of their marital

strife, where they invest time and energy in their shared, yet contested, space, as they would have invested in their child, had they managed to have one.

However, Ken finds a means of escape from the constraints of their marital dynamics; without informing his wife, he applies for an allotment. He relishes the secretive nature of this act, as “[...] it had pleased him to detect vice hidden in the seemingly innocuous, not to say beneficial, occupation of gardening” (*Pulse*, 73). This clandestine endeavour provides him with a sense of autonomy and rebellion within the bounds of their relationship.

Ken decides to reveal the acquisition of the new allotment in a cowardly manner, during a dinner party in the garden, in front of their friends. Contrary to his expectations, Martha is not taken aback; it becomes evident that she had been aware of his actions all along, having noticed the new plants he ordered for his allotment.

The garden, initially a metaphor for their marital strife, now transforms into a symbol of separation, as Ken acquires a new garden for himself while Martha retains the existing one. This division reflects his vain attempt to alleviate the monotony of their marriage and his suppressed anger toward his wife. This becomes evident in his final remark in the story:

As they slept late into Sunday morning, Ken drew the curtain to check the weather and noticed the terra-cotta oven overturned, and its lid broken into pieces. He quietly remarked: “Bloody foxes”, unsure if Martha was awake, adding: “Or bloody cats. Or bloody squirrels. Bloody nature anyway” (*Pulse*, 78). This comment, ironically directed at the forces of nature, reflects his underlying frustration with his domestic life. This frustration and consequent irony are heightened by the fact that it comes from a man who has just invested in the garden of his own.

In her analysis of the story, Sanai commends Barnes for his exceptional ability to observe and articulate details that are often overlooked yet profoundly revealing. She acknowledges “Barnes’ mercilessly forensic gaze [which] lands upon the fractures in a marriage. His many talents include perceiving how it’s often the pettiest irritations that undermine foundations, and conveying nuances of mood” (Sanai).

Indeed, in this story Barnes focuses on the seemingly trivial annoyances that gradually erode the foundations of a marriage, with the garden mirroring this gradual decay.

#### **6.1.5. *Trespass***

Adams observes the similarity between the two stories, *Gardener’s World* and *Trespass*, noting that both explore how English hobbyists, such as ramblers and cultivators of raised borders, find substitutes for their childlessness and lack of passion in the routines of garden centers or the reliability of Gore-Tex and gaiters (Adams). In these narratives, Barnes demonstrates his perceptiveness in depicting and understanding middle-aged men and their inner turmoil. This turmoil is intimate and not visible on the outside; it is revealed through interior monologue, supplemented by expository passages. Barnes employs a third-person narrative voice that remains intimate, akin to the characterization of Shostakovich in *The Noise*.

Kemp continues this analysis, referring to the protagonists as “inadequate”. He observes the protagonist of this story as a control freak obsessed with hiking, who inadvertently reveals his overbearing nature as he meticulously records distances covered, maintains speeds, and offers unsolicited advice, thereby trampling on his girlfriend’s independence (Kemp).

The protagonist, Geoff, has recently broken up with Cath and is considering joining the Ramblers to continue their joint activity, albeit alone. This situation mirrors the protagonist’s

experience in the subsequent story, *Marriage Lines*. The difference is that Geoff engages in this activity in spite of his previous memories, whereas the protagonist in the other story does it in loving memory of his deceased wife. Geoff is ambivalent about this decision, envisioning a somewhat depressing scenario. His ambivalence is evident in his approach to the activity, as he embarks

“with (despite all his warnings to himself) a hopeful heart. A hopeful heart waiting to be bruised. And then it would be a case of getting through the walk, saying cheery farewells, and going home to eat the leftover sandwich and tangerine for his supper. Now that would be sad.” (*Pulse*, 92)

Nevertheless, he eventually contradicts his pessimistic prediction: “Of course, he carried on walking” (*ibid*).

As a newly single man, Geoff realizes that he has more free time, but he quickly discerns that this is not necessarily a positive development. He describes it, ironically, as “extra time in which to be lonely” (*Pulse*, 93). In an attempt to combat this loneliness, he engages in self-encouragement, admonishing himself: “Stop that, he said to himself. You aren’t allowed to be a sad person; you’re only allowed to be sad” (*ibid*). This inner dialogue reveals Geoff’s struggle to maintain emotional resilience and his effort to navigate the newfound solitude, as he attempts to separate his identity from his temporary feelings of sadness.

Unexpectedly, Geoff meets Lynn, and they begin to climb, trek, and hike together. During one of their outings, Geoff recounts the story of how national parks were created, an event that ironically began with an act of trespassing. He tells her about the Kinder Scout trespass in the 1930s, where hundreds of walkers and hikers from Manchester protested against the lack of access to the countryside by converging on the Duke of Devonshire’s grouse moors. This protest eventually led to the establishment of national parks and the registration of public rights of way.

This historical anecdote serves as an ironic foreboding of their relationship. Geoff’s act of trespass into Lynn’s private life parallels the historical trespass, yet unlike the successful outcome of the Kinder Scout protest, Geoff’s efforts will not lead to the goal he desires. This parallel sets up an expectation that is ultimately subverted, a realization that only comes at the end of the story.

As their intimacy grows, Geoff’s meticulousness with details becomes increasingly apparent. In contrast, Lynn remains mysterious throughout the story, and the more she remains elusive, the more Geoff pushes. After they begin sleeping together, Geoff buys her a complete set of hiking equipment, despite her not expecting it and being surprised. While this act might be seen as overstepping boundaries, therefore a trespass, he draws a line at the compass: he does not buy her one. He already has a compass and ascribes symbolic meaning to it, stating: “No, one compass between two, that was right, somehow. Symbolic, you could say” (*Pulse*, 97).

This act symbolizes Geoff’s reluctance to relinquish control in their relationship. By not providing Lynn with her own compass, he symbolically denies her the autonomy to navigate and steer herself freely, revealing his desire to maintain control over their shared direction.

During one of their walks, Geoff asks Lynn to schedule a walk after Christmas, but she responds using trespass terminology. Unlike Geoff, she is open yet firm in maintaining her boundaries, protecting her space:

“Geoff”, she said. “You’re on my space”.

“I just - “

“You’re on my space.” (*Pulse*, 98)

Back home, Lynn tries to explain to Geoff that she cannot commit to Christmas plans because she does not know where she will be at that time. She does not reveal her situation, nor does he inquire further. Instead, Geoff goes silent, and he compares his discomfort to the sudden disorientation experienced during a hike: “One minute you were steaming along a track, the weight on your shoulders barely noticeable, and then suddenly you were in a pathless scrubland with no waymarks, the mist descending and the ground boggy beneath your feet” (*Pulse*, 98). This metaphor illustrates his sudden sense of uncertainty and confusion, mirroring his emotional state as he grapples with Lynn’s elusive nature and the ambiguity of their relationship.

While Adams draws a similarity between *Trespass* and *Gardener’s World*, I perceive a parallel between *Trespass* and *East Wind*. Both stories feature protagonists experiencing discomfort in their relationships with their girlfriends. However, their approaches to dealing with discomfort differ markedly. In *East Wind*, the protagonist aggressively invades his girlfriend’s apartment to learn more about her, demonstrating a direct and intrusive method of dealing with his uncertainties. Conversely, in *Trespass*, Geoff retreats into himself, reflecting a more introspective and passive approach to his discomfort.

The story culminates in an episode during their last hike. They encounter a field of bracken, and despite Geoff’s warnings about the potential dangers of inhaling spores and encountering ticks, Lynn boldly proceeds into the field after protecting herself. In contrast, Geoff remains on the sidelines, highlighting the difference between her adventurous spirit and his cautious rigidity. Following this, Lynn spontaneously screams, a stark contrast to Geoff’s lack of spontaneity. He immediately interprets her scream as something alarming, wondering if it was directed at him. She denies this.

Their final exchange reveals the fundamental incompatibility between them. Geoff, fixated on understanding and controlling the situation, asks her what it would feel like if she felt the need to scream again. Her response encapsulates the essence of their differing approaches to life and relationships:

““Geoff, it would feel like wanting to scream again, now.”

“And when do you think you’ll do it again?”

She didn’t answer that, and neither of them was surprised.” (*Pulse*, 102-103)

Eventually, Geoff decides to end his relationship with Lynn and joins the Ramblers, opting for the familiar structure and predictability of the hiking group over the uncertainty and spontaneity of his relationship with Lynn. In his case, the trespass he committed has not led to breaking new boundaries or embarking on a new life adventure. Instead, he remains within the same confines, making no real progress.

#### **6.1.6. *Marriage Lines***

This story is one of the most emotional and poignant in Barnes’s oeuvre, not just within this collection. Sanai comments: “The most wrenching tale of loss in this collection is the haunting, elegiac “Marriage Lines”” (Sanai).

The protagonist, a widower, visits the Scottish island after his wife passed away. He is attempting to adjust to his loss and find a way to continue his life. One of the adjustments he faces is adapting to a new grammar: “They, their: he knew he must start getting used to the singular pronoun instead. This was going to be the grammar of his life from now on” (*Pulse*, 117).

Calum, from Calum and Flora's B & B, has been their host for more than 20 years. When Calum collects him at the airport, the protagonist recounts the events of his wife's passing. The manner in which he retells what happened mirrors the single-track road they are driving along: "As the van dawdled along the single-track road, and waited politely in the passing bays, he told Calum the story he was already weary with repeating. The sudden tiredness, the dizzy spells, the blood tests, the scans, hospital, more hospital, the hospice. The speed of it all, the process, the merciless tramp of events" (*Pulse*, 118). His manner of recounting suggests that he has not yet internalized this traumatic experience: "He told it without tears, in a neutral voice, as if it might have happened to someone else. It was the only way, so far, that he knew how" (*ibid*).

Calum shared a story about his grandparents, who began their marriage in humility. This experience mirrored the protagonist and his late wife's own experience when they first came to the island, knowing no one and unable to share their happiness with others. "Perhaps this had been good for them - to be silly with happiness and obliged into silence. Perhaps it had been their own way of beginning marriage in a state of humility" (*Pulse*, 119).

Flora, Calum's wife, reveals an old sweater that belonged to her grandfather and explains its significance. She places the sweater on the kitchen table and explains that, in the past, the women of these islands would weave stories into their knitting. The pattern of the jersey indicated which island its owner came from, while the buttons at the neck specified the family to which they belonged. The protagonist humorously observes that it was akin to "walking around dressed in your own postcode" (*Pulse*, 120). This particular sweater showed that Flora's grandfather was from Eriskay, while its details and decorations depicted elements of fishing, faith, the sea, and the sand.

She points out a series of zigzags across the shoulder, explaining that these represent the ups and downs of marriage: "They were, quite literally, marriage lines" (*Pulse*, 119).

Barnes introduces the symbol of the eponymous knitting pattern early in the story. The newly married couple did not anticipate the zigzags of their own marriage; their initial happiness was characteristic of all new couples, who often believe that their union will be free of difficulties. They hoped, naively, to be the first couple in history to avoid the common struggles of married life. This optimistic view of marriage is ultimately ironic, as they would later encounter one of the most difficult challenges. This belief becomes a poignant example of cosmic or dramatic irony when they face a profound tragedy:

"Zigzags. Like any newly married couple, they had exchanged a glance of sly confidence, sure that for them there would be no downs - or at least, not like those of their parents, or of friends already making the usual stupid, predictable mistakes. They would be different; they would be different from anyone who had ever got married before." (*Pulse*, 120)

The protagonist reflects on his stay on the island, noting: "There were moments when he felt this was the most distant place he had ever come to. The islanders happened to speak the same language as him, but that was just some strange, geographical coincidence" (*Pulse*, 120). Barnes poignantly articulates that this journey is both the farthest and the furthest the protagonist has ever travelled, symbolizing his transformation into a new person, now devoid of his second half. This marks the beginning of a new path and distance he must traverse.

The story addresses, in a touching manner, the commencement of such a journey. As he ventures into the unknown, he returns to a familiar place, yet his dissociation from his experience and grief is evident in his inability to connect even with his own language. His life, at this moment, is characterized by differences rather than similarities. He is endeavouring to find a new pattern for his

life as he recovers from grief, highlighting the profound disconnection and the search for meaning and identity in the aftermath of loss.

As he reflected on marriage lines and the memories created on the island, the tears eventually and inevitably came. Both the protagonist and Calum had known, albeit unspoken, that he would not be returning. However, the tears were not for this fact, nor for himself, nor even for her or their shared memories. They were tears for his own foolishness and presumption. He had believed that he could manage and control his grief. He came to realize that grief is something bigger than life itself. He had thought that by returning to a place where they had been happy, grief might be assuaged, or at least hastened. However, he learned that this is not how grief operates; instead, it works in the opposite manner: “[...] he was not in charge of grief. Grief was in charge of him. And in the months and years ahead, he expected grief to teach him many other things as well. This was just the first of them” (*Pulse*, 123).

This realization of the newly established role of grief can be viewed ironically, as it undermines his expectations and reveals that he was never in control. The tragic irony deepens as he ultimately comes to see grief not as an adversary, but as a lifelong companion.

He eventually submits to his grief, ceasing to resist or attempt to control it. Instead, he begins to learn from it and coexist with it. In doing so, he perhaps starts to draw new “marriage lines”, this time with grief as his companion.

## **6.2. Stories Unravelled: Part Two**

### **6.2.1. *The Limner***

*The Limner* is the first of five stories to address the theme of the loss of senses. This particular story deals with deafness, exploring its nature and the misconceptions surrounding it. Martin describes it as a “teasing, amusing piece with a twist in the tail, almost a model short story” (Martin). His observation is accurate, as the story is paced with an excellent narrative rhythm, revealing each piece of the mosaic gradually. The narrative culminates in a final scene where the painter leaves before daybreak with his mare, depicted in an attenuated, muffled tone, with emotions bursting inside - a scene that would itself make a great painting.

The story addresses two primary themes: the loss of hearing and the approach to art.

James Wadsworth is a limner currently commissioned by Mr. Tuttle, a collector of customs, to create his portrait. As anticipated, the client complained about the price, the size, and the view through the window. This experience aligns with Wadsworth’s broader experience with clients, who typically prioritized being depicted as sober, God-fearing individuals over achieving a true likeness. The painter accommodated their preferences with a sense of indifference.

Barnes employs narratorial suspense to gradually unveil that the painter is deaf, and unable to speak, having lost his speech due to a childhood illness. This gradual revelation is marked by initial confusion, as Wadsworth communicates with his clients by pointing to his notebook rather than speaking. Barnes’ narrative technique of revealing the protagonist’s condition piece by piece maintains a steady tension and suspense, engaging the reader and prompting them to closely follow the narrative line unfolding. By focusing on the protagonist’s deafness, the story delves into the challenges and adaptations associated with sensory loss, exploring how it shapes one’s interaction with the world.

Wadsworth’s reliance on written communication arises from his failed attempts to vocalize, as his utterances did not convey his needs or humanity effectively: “the sounds he was able to utter

failed to establish either his requirements or his shared nature as a human being, part of the Almighty's work, if differently made" (*Pulse*, 129). Consequently, Wadsworth ultimately "retreated into the muteness they expected, and perhaps preferred" (ibid). This retreat is a result of the painter's acceptance of societal expectations and his adaptation to a silent existence.

However, he develops a profound understanding of human nature not from the words of his clients but from his keen observations. Barnes writes:

"But his understanding of men, such as it had developed, came less from what they wrote down, more from his mute observation. Men - and women too - imagined that they could alter their voice and meaning without it showing in their face. In this they were much deceived. His own face, as he observed the human carnival, was as inexpressive as his tongue; but his eye told him more than they could guess."

(*Pulse*, 129)

To manage condescending clients, Wadsworth even carried a special card that read: "Sir, the understanding does not cease to function when the portals of the mind are blocked" (ibid). Wadsworth recognizes that, despite his clients' social advantages, their verbosity often conceals rather than reveals their true character. Consequently, he discerns more about them precisely because they underestimate his perceptiveness.

The limner's observation of ordinary people, for whom hearing and speaking are assumed abilities, is critically examined as he observes: "Those in the world of tongue held all the advantages: they were his paymasters, they wielded authority, they entered society, they exchanged thoughts and opinions naturally. Though, for all this, Wadsworth did not see that speaking was in itself a promoter of virtue" (*Pulse*, 129). This observation underscores the irony of the hearing/speaking ability, as Barnes suggests that mere ability to speak does not equate to virtue.

On the contrary, Wadsworth's own silence offers him two significant advantages: he can portray those who speak on canvas while silently observing their true meanings. He adds: "It would be foolish to give away this second advantage" (*Pulse*, 130). The irony here lies in the fact that Wadsworth, despite being mute, possesses a deeper understanding of his subjects than they do of themselves or are willing to admit. This ability and the irony therein are further pronounced by the fact that his subjects often treat him as someone incapable of such an endeavour.

Clients often misjudged Wadsworth's affinity with children as a sign of his own lack of understanding, whereas he saw their rapport with him as evidence of their clarity of vision. This connection aligns him with the naivety and purity of a child, resonating with Christian virtues, as children are considered the most innocent and purest beings in the world.

As regards treatment by people, Wadsworth experienced varied treatment based on the households he entered. Whether placed in the stable, quartered with the help, or occasionally treated as a guest in the most Christian of homes, he found a temporary sense of function and recognition:

"This did not mean he was treated with any less condescension than other artisans; but at least he was being judged a normal human being, that is to say, one who merited condescension. He was happy, perhaps for the first time in his life." (*Pulse*, 131)

This parallels the ironic humanization seen in Barnes' *A History*, where woodworms were subject to a lawsuit, revealing the absurdity of human condescension.

\*

The notebook serves as a record of human interaction and character, though it is imbued with irony: Wadsworth gleans more from his observations than from the written words of his clients, who remain not only unaware of this circumstance but indifferent to it as well. Barnes encapsulates this notion succinctly; as far as the clients are concerned, “[...] Wadsworth was paid to represent waistcoats rather than opinions” (*Pulse*, 125). Moreover, he humorously adds:

“The waistcoat and breeches showed the body beneath, as the wig and hat showed the brain beneath; though in some cases it was a pictorial exaggeration to suggest that any brains lay beneath.” (*Pulse*, 125)

The simplified assertion of a painter’s task deepens as we gain a better understanding of the artist. Specifically, “to represent the waistcoat, and the wig, and the breeches, was to represent an opinion, indeed a whole corpus of them” (*Pulse*, 129). This highlights the symbolic function of portraiture in Wadsworth’s era. During this period, clothing and appearance were crucial for conveying social and intellectual status. However, this observation also underscores the superficiality inherent in such representations, as outward appearances could be manipulated or, as was often the case in Wadsworth’s experience, customarily required to convey certain virtues or qualities that may not genuinely exist. Consequently, Wadsworth’s work becomes an exploration of the tension between external appearance and internal reality, subject to ironic interpretations as his works may turn into visual overstatements.

The artist’s ultimate plan is to paint his only loyal companion, his mare. The details of the proposed painting are particularly poignant: “His plan had been this: to paint her, on the same size of canvas used for Mr. Tuttle, though turned to make an oblong; and afterwards, to cast a blanket over the picture and uncover it only on the mare’s death” (*Pulse*, 127). This approach is already unusual, especially for an artist, as it involves creating a painting and then concealing it until the subject has passed away. He rationalizes this decision by stating: “It was presumptuous to compare the daily reality of God’s living creation with a human simulacrum by an inadequate hand - even if this was the very purpose for which his clients employed him” (*Pulse*, 128).

This rationalization, framed in terms of humility, represents one of the highest forms of reverence: respecting God’s living creation as long as it exists and finding solace in the portrait upon its death. Moreover, this approach provides yet another answer to Barnes’ recurrent question, present in many of his works: “How do we seize past/reality/art?” The limner’s option introduces a new perspective compared to Barnes’ treatises on art and the past in works such as *A History* and *Flaubert’s Parrot*, among others.

Barnes further presents the human attempt to capture life in a brief exposition, explaining how the limner “[...] had painted infants, children, men and women, and even corpses. Three times he had urged his mare to a deathbed where he was asked to perform resuscitation - to represent as living someone he had just met as dead” (*Pulse*, 128).

This passage is an extreme example of role of the artist in attempting to immortalize life through art. Limner’s task of portraying the recently deceased as though they were still alive illustrates the tension between reality and artistic representation. This endeavour to “resuscitate” the dead through portraiture positions the artist as a mediator between life and death, tasked with creating an illusion of life that comforts the living. It also reflects on the broader theme of art as a means of grappling with the transient nature of existence, revealing the delicate balance between honouring reality and indulging in hopeful fictions.

\*

The client he is portraying at the moment desired to be depicted with more dignity, but in limner's opinion this concession was an un-Christian demand as "[i]t would do the man no service in God's eyes if the limner allowed him to appear puffed up with all the dignity he demanded" (*Pulse*, 128).

Wadsworth exhibited more Christian virtue and dignity compared to the client, who superficially demanded these qualities be portrayed. The irony lies in the client's lack of inherent dignity, yet his insistence on having it artificially added to his portrait, as if it were a commodity that could be measured or purchased. Wadsworth recognizes the futility and moral irony in this request, understanding that one cannot deceive God with false appearances.

Slowly, Wadsworth realized the power dynamics inherent in his craft: "that the client was the master, except when he, James Wadsworth, was the client's master. For a start, he was the client's master when his eye discerned what the client would prefer him not to know" (*Pulse*, 131). His ability to read hidden traits and thoughts, even those his clients wished to conceal, gave him an ironic advantage born of his disability.

His clients did not truly understand what they were paying for. Those who sat for him and paid him did not fully grasp what their money would buy. Until then, they had only seen their reflections in looking glasses and hand mirrors, in the backs of spoons, and, faintly, in clear still water.

Consequently, the clients' reactions to their portraits were also emotional and revealing: some experienced a profound moment of introspection, contemplating their true selves and how they might be perceived by God. Occasionally, when the portrait was unveiled, the limner would notice a chill in them, as if they were thinking: so this is how I truly am? This was a serious moment for them, as they realized this image would be how they were to be remembered after death. There was an even deeper gravity to this realization, as Wadsworth often sensed the subject's next thought: and is this perhaps how the Almighty sees me too?

Such questioning requires a certain degree of modesty, rather than challenging the limner's skills. Those who lacked this virtue would not hesitate to ask the painter to adjust their portraits, attributing any perceived flaws to his artistic abilities. However, the limner does not subscribe to this line of thinking and instead wonders: "Would they have the vanity to complain to God in His turn?" (*Pulse*, 132).

\*

An incident in the kitchen further illustrated the dynamics at play. When Wadsworth drew a sketch of a garden boy as a gift, the master abruptly entered the kitchen, saw the drawing, and, angered by the painter's generosity to a servant, tore the paper and burned it. This act underscored the master's view of art as a commodity to be paid for rather than a gift to be freely given.

As Wadsworth neared the completion of Mr. Tuttle's portrait, he requested payment but received only half the agreed fee. Nevertheless, he finished the portrait, adding the requested traits of dignity. He then packed his belongings and left before dawn. As he departed on his mare, it was revealed that this was his penultimate work - the last would be a portrait of his mare. Reflecting on his future, Wadsworth hoped that there would be painting in Heaven, but more so, he hoped for deafness in Heaven. The final scene depicts him and his mare finding their way through the forest: "After a while, with Mr. Tuttle's house now far behind them, Wadsworth shouted into the silence of the forest" (*Pulse*, 136).

In conclusion, Wadsworth's journey and experiences as a limner highlight the ironic complexities of human nature and perception. His disability, rather than being a hindrance, endowed him with a profound ability to see beyond superficial appearances and grasp the deeper truths of his clients. Moreover, what was a disability in earthly terms becomes something he hopes to retain in the afterlife and eternity. And this is the ultimate irony.

### 6.2.2. *Complicity*

The second story in Part Two primarily explores the sense of touch. This story recounts the protagonist's experiences meeting his girlfriend, interspersed with reminiscences and reflections on love and relationships through references to touch. This narrative style bears similarities to the half-chapter in *A History* and *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*. Adams observes that the "story of touch, "Complicity", essays proximity, trying to get the measure of nerve endings and finger-tips" (Adams). Kemp comments that this story "juxtaposes talk of blindfold guessing-games [...] with an intensely tactile account of the narrator's involvement with a woman doctor who has numbed fingertips" (Kemp). Sanai adds that in this story, "the surge of protectiveness a man feels for a woman with Raynaud's (a condition that results in a limiting of blood flow in the cold) builds a bridge between them" (Sanai).

The protagonist begins his story by recalling past experiences related to touch. He remembers that as a boy, his mother would put a key down his back to stop his hiccups. As he grew older, his skin seemed to communicate with him: falling in love with a married woman led to a skin condition that caused his skin to peel entirely, likening him to a "transmuting reptile" (*Pulse*, 137). After his divorce, his doctor friend noted from his hands that he was drinking excessively and advised him to "look out for unattached female medics who might not find me too repugnant" (*Pulse*, 138). This is exactly what his patient friend is going to do.

These past reflections flow into an episode at his doctor friend's party, where he meets a woman doctor who smokes - a sign he interprets positively. They become immediate accomplices, sharing a cigarette, which he sees as significant: "The point was those three moments when an object had passed from one set of fingertips to another" (*Pulse*, 139). This simple act emphasizes the importance of touch in their budding relationship.

He recalls playing a blindfold guessing game where touching squishy mozzarella or peeled lychees provoked queasy thoughts of breast implants and eyeballs. He remembers the fearsome peeled lychee used in the game, leading to a memory of a production of *King Lear* where Gloucester's eyes, represented by peeled lychees, were tossed onstage.

When reflecting on relationships and their beginnings, he introduces the concept of "complicity". He employs this term to describe the initial attraction, which he summarizes as follows:

"The first hint that you may be suited, before the nervous drudgery of finding out whether you 'share the same interests,' or have the same metabolism, or are sexually compatible, or both want children, or however it is that we argue consciously about our unconscious decisions." (*Pulse*, 142)

Herein lies the irony: our emotional and relational decisions are often driven by unconscious forces of which we are completely unaware. This irony is cosmic, as the universe seems to purposefully create situations and decisions that we believe are made rationally. He further reflects that we later celebrate and idealize the first date, the first kiss, and other significant experiences together, yet we overlook the initial moment when it all truly began. This moment is more visceral - hence the reference to "pulse" - than cognitive:

“[...] what really counts is what happened before this public story: that moment, more of pulse than of thought, which goes, Yes, perhaps her, and, Yes, perhaps him.” (ibid)

His doctor friend Ben turns out to be a sort of accomplice in this complicity by advising him to find a woman and hosting the party where they met. It becomes clear that a fortunate complicity often requires the help of a friend or, more broadly, the universe. Ben, being a pedant, declares the definition of “complicity”, stating that it “means a shared involvement in a crime or sin or nefarious act. It means planning to do something bad” (*Pulse*, 142).

However, the protagonist is reluctant to accept this negative connotation. He prefers to retain his interpretation of the word as referring to something positive. He reasons: “She and I were both free adults, capable of making our own decisions. And nobody plans to do anything bad at that moment, do they?” (ibid).

The next scene depicts their date, where they go to a film together. While nothing particularly eventful occurs, the protagonist’s interior monologue prevails, with the point and drama emerging from details, reflections, interpretations, and, of course, touch. When contemplating her character, he adopts a tolerant mindset, recognizing that “understanding another human being is hardly a matter of box-ticking in which the answers stay the answers. It’s perfectly possible to be cheerful *and* depressive, easy-going *and* quick-tempered” (italics in original text, *Pulse*, 142). In acknowledging this, he acknowledges the inherent irony in recognizing that individuals can be characterized by seemingly contradictory traits, thereby illustrating the complexity of human nature.

In the cinema, he finds himself thinking about the layers of clothes that separate his body from hers. Barnes thus explores both presence and absence of touch, highlighting how we rarely bring to awareness all the things that separate us from others.

Upon leaving the cinema, she shows him her hands, which have turned a pale yellowish colour. She explains that she must not leave the house without gloves due to a condition that causes numbness in her fingers from the cold. In that moment of shared intimacy, he feels an intense emotion that he “would describe as tenderness, were it not so ferocious” (*Pulse*, 144), as well as, ironically, sexual arousal. This moment of her vulnerability provokes both passionate and protective response.

This also prompts him to further ponder what it feels like when you can see both your hands and the other person’s hand but can’t feel anything. This disability bothers him not only on a sensory level but also in “a wider, more alarming sense” (ibid), a concern that is evident to the astute reader.

It is at this moment that he decides to supply her with various types of gloves, thus becoming her accomplice in her condition. He confirms this by stating: “I had a sudden, acute desire that nothing bad ever happen to her” (*Pulse*, 146), which is an act of deepening emotional involvement and desire to protect her.

He further reflects on the complicity between two people by considering the complicity of their senses:

“Our fingers must work together; our senses too. They act for themselves, but also as pre-senses for the others. We feel a fruit for ripeness; we press our fingers into a joint of meat to test for doneness. Our senses work together for the greater good: they are complicit, as I like to say.” (*Pulse*, 146)

She participates in yet another kind of complicity, although she is entirely unaware of it. During their dinner date at a Chinese restaurant, she orders lychees, thus making herself his accomplice, not consciously but in his memories and reflections. Sharing the same taste in music,

they humorously agree that if they hear “Lara’s Theme”, they should “make a run for it and plead duress in court” (*Pulse*, 147), thus acting as accomplices. When the song plays, they remain seated together, acting as real accomplices rather than in an imagined, humorous scenario.

This serendipity prompts him to finally touch her, and thus the story concludes.

### 6.2.3. *Harmony*

In this story, Barnes addresses the theme of losing eyesight, despite the title’s reference to acoustics. Many critics have recognized the historical basis of the narrative. In this context, McAlpin notes that Barnes builds his story on “an actual case - Franz Mesmer’s treatment of Maria Theresia von Paradis<sup>31</sup>” (McAlpin). However, Barnes goes beyond merely exploring historical facts; McAlpin continues: “Barnes makes the curious decision to uphold ‘a routine literary mannerism’ of the era, suppressing so many details that the opening of his story reads like *Mad Libs*” (ibid).

Fictionalization of historical persons and events is a familiar terrain for Julian Barnes. He has undertaken such endeavours multiple times, clearly unafraid that his fictionalization might distort or mischaracterize historical figures. Kemp acknowledges this approach, commenting: “A blind pianist celebrated as a musical prodigy in imperial Vienna has her vision briefly restored by Franz Mesmer, in one of those accomplished fictionalisings of historical actuality Barnes has elsewhere achieved with figures such as Delius, Sibelius and Turgenev” (Kemp).

The story opens in Mesmer’s music room, where he entertains his guests with music from an unusual instrument. One of his guests, upon listening, comments that the music Mesmer played was the music of the spheres. Mesmer then clarifies: “Music seeks harmony,” he replied, “just as the human body seeks harmony” (*Pulse*, 150). He continues to elaborate, explaining that the music of the spheres is heard when all the planets move through the heavens in harmony. Similarly, the music of the earth is produced when all the instruments of an orchestra play together in unison, and the music of the human body is heard when it is in a state of harmony, with the organs at peace, the blood flowing freely, and the nerves aligned along their true and intended paths. This early statement in the story serves as a foreshadowing of future developments, establishing an expectation for the reader. The reader further anticipates that this principle will be embodied throughout the narrative, guiding the unfolding of events and the selective revelation of details.

Following this introduction to the harmony of spheres reflecting harmony in humans, the story delves into its specifics: “The encounter between M— and Maria Theresia von P— took place in the imperial city of V— between the winter of 177— and the summer of the following year” (*Pulse*, 151). Barnes immediately addresses the omission of details, explaining his narrative style and principle: “Such minor suppressions of detail would have been a routine literary mannerism at the time; but they also tactfully admit the partiality of our knowledge” (ibid). Barnes conscientiously withholds certain details to avoid biasing the reader, a technique akin to the teaching method of Elizabeth Finch.

The doctor began treating her after 14 years of unremitting blindness and disappointed hope. His method included the use of magnets, which were a novelty in medicine at the time. However, his work encompassed a holistic approach to the patient, recognizing the existence of underlying causes behind physical symptoms and disabilities. This approach, which acknowledged the

---

<sup>31</sup> Maria Theresia von Paradis was a historical figure, renowned as a pianist, composer, and performer who toured Europe during the second half of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century. Born in Vienna in 1759, she was the daughter of the imperial secretary at the court of Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, also her godmother (source: [encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/paradis-maria-theresia-von-1759-1824](https://www.encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/paradis-maria-theresia-von-1759-1824)).

interconnectedness of mind and body, anticipated practices that would later become fundamental in the field of psychology.

He repeated his procedure each day at the same time, thus maintaining the steady pulse of their treatment and relationship. Each day, a slight improvement was noticeable, and by the fourth day, her eyes had realigned. The girl patient also responded to his treatment; however, facing a new situation for the first time left her at the peak of her vulnerability. The doctor observed: "A crisis was never a neutral occurrence: it might be benign or malign - not in its nature, but in its consequences, leading either to progress or regress" (*Pulse*, 158).

He decided to accommodate the girl patient in his house to separate her from her overbearing father and her mother, whom he judged likely to be hysterical, which he ironically attributed to her Italian heritage. He did not believe that the optic nerve was atrophied, given her reactions during treatment, but was convinced that her nervous system had suffered a significant shock. He noted that "it was the effect he was treating, not the cause" (*Pulse*, 160). His method takes an ironic turn as he claims that "it might be fortunate that the Fräulein could not recall the precise nature of the precipitating event" (*ibid*).

The exchange between the doctor and the girl is tinged with irony, given her significant intelligence. When she complains about the pain, he explains that pain is a sign of recovery and a beneficial response to the treatment. She then reflects:

"Other doctors have told me that the pain they were inflicting was necessary and beneficial. You are a doctor of philosophy as well?"

"I am."

"Philosophers can explain anything away." (*Pulse*, 160)

The doctor was also ambivalent about his method and its effect on the patient. Within himself, he was torn between two lines of thought and two facets of his intellectual formation. On one hand, the doctor of philosophy in him argued that the universal element underlying everything had been revealed through magnetism. On the other hand, the doctor of medicine contended that the patient's progress was more about the power of touch. Barnes here makes a direct reference to the previous story, continuing the theme: the doctor believed that even the laying on of hands, as well as the use of magnets and the wand in testing her eyesight, were merely symbolic. The doctor concluded that what was actually happening was "some collaboration or complicity between physician and patient, so that his presence and authority were permitting the patient to cure herself" (*Pulse*, pp. 164-165). Thus, the doctor becomes a subject of his treatment alongside his patient. What is being examined is not only the patient's condition but also the dual aspects of his identity: him as a philosopher and him as a doctor.

The girl's progress came with significant consequences. When she attempted to play a familiar music piece in front of her parents with her eyes open, it ended disastrously. Yet, when she replayed the piece with her eyes closed, she performed as skilfully as before. She reflected: "In my darkness, music was my entire consolation. To be brought into the light and then lose the ability to play would be cruel justice" (*Pulse*, 167).

Her progress was laced with irony. While regaining sight seemed to promise a fuller experience of the world, it paradoxically impaired her musical performance, which had been a source of solace and identity. The irony lies in the fact that the very ability to see, which was supposed to enhance her life, instead disrupted a core aspect of it, thus bringing doubt to the purpose of her

healing. This situation raises the question of whether every healing we desire is truly for our greater good.

The doctor's healing method naturally attracted public attention and scepticism. The reaction of both the medical community and the Church was predictable: fellow doctors and the Church were upset. The rumours of the doctor's miraculous cures raised suspicion among some members of the Faculty of Medicine, while the Church deemed the alleged healing through the laying on of hands to be a miracle reserved solely for Jesus Christ, thus considering it blasphemous. Barnes humorously comments: "The conservative, the slow-witted and the envious existed in every profession" (*Pulse*, 165).

The doctor displayed a level of naivety similar to that of Shostakovich in his expectations from the regime. Certain members of the Faculty of Medicine proposed to endorse his treatment method "if M— could reproduce his effects with a new patient, under full lighting and in the presence of six Faculty examiners - conditions which would, M— knew, destroy its effectiveness" (*Pulse*, 167). This placed the doctor in an ironic predicament - he was required to demonstrate his method under conditions that would inevitably nullify its efficacy.

The situation had both satirical and moral implications. Satirists speculated whether all doctors in the future would need to carry magic wands, while moralists questioned the propriety of a physician taking young women into his household, secluding them, and then laying hands on them amidst jars of magnetized water and the caterwauling of a glass armonica.

The parents reacted with an outburst when the father barged into the house, followed by a screaming mother, which resulted in their daughter crying. As the father insisted on immediately taking his daughter away, Barnes humorously notes that the doctor "remained dispassionate enough to reflect that the young Mozart would have happily set this operatic quartet to music" (*Pulse*, 169).

This incident had a profound impact on the doctor in two significant ways. Firstly, it confirmed his suspicion that the girl's blindness was closely linked to her parents' hysterical and aggressive behaviour. He interpreted the girl's blindness as a protective mechanism against the trauma imposed by her parents, as it spared her from witnessing their outbursts. He arrived at a conclusion that would become a widely accepted understanding centuries later: "That a sensitive, artistic child, in the face of such an emotional assault, might instinctively close herself off from the world seemed reasonable, even inevitable" (*Pulse*, 169).

Secondly, the doctor demonstrated a remarkable capacity for perspectivism by considering the situation from the parents' point of view for the first time. This act of shifting perspectives exemplifies a postmodern approach to understanding multiple viewpoints. He realized that "[b]efore, [the parents] had been in charge of a blind virtuoso; now, sight had rendered her mediocre" (*Pulse*, 170). He understood that if she continued to play poorly, which they associated with her healing, her career would be over. Moreover, he recognized an ironic aspect of their perspective: "even assuming that she rediscovered all her former skill, she would lack the originality of being blind" (*ibid*), which would mean the loss of her pension from the empress as well as a reduction in financial support.

After five weeks the girl spent at the doctor's the final agreement was reached with her parents: to continue treating her as and when it might be necessary. Of course, he never saw her again.

Expectedly, she relapsed into blindness never to heal from it.

The final paragraph of the story recapitulates the lives of both protagonists. Barnes, in discussing Maria Theresia, does not delve into detailed accounts of her life but instead offers a

perspective on her possible development within her familiar world of darkness, using modal verbs as epistemic hedges to convey uncertainty: “We may presume that she gave up all hope of cure, and also of escape from her parents; we may know that she took up her career again, first as pianist and singer, then as composer, and eventually as teacher” (*Pulse*, 171). She adapted to her circumstances, utilizing devices for correspondence invented for her and gaining fame across Europe.

As for the doctor, he was expelled from Vienna by the Faculty of Medicine and the Committee to Sustain Morality, “a combination which ensured that he was remembered there as half charlatan, half seducer” (*Pulse*, 172). He first withdrew to Switzerland and then established himself in Paris. Despite having the opportunity to meet again when Maria Theresia performed in Paris, they never did.

Barnes provides a dual perspective on the doctor’s death. As he lay dying, he requested his young friend to play for him on the glass armonica that had accompanied him through all his travels since leaving Vienna: “According to one account, the pangs of his dying were soothed by listening a final time to the music of the spheres” (*ibid*). However, Barnes also presents a less optimistic scenario: according to this account, the young man was delayed, so the doctor never got to hear the music one last time.

Such closing of the story can be interpreted as an attempt to read the harmony of the spheres into the doctor’s life, thereby imbuing it with meaning. This meaning was necessary for the protagonists, as the healing ironically turned out to be regression. This ending raises questions about the philosophical and cosmic irony of healing in which we place all our hopes, despite being completely in the dark, therefore blind, about whether it will benefit us or serve a higher purpose at all.

#### **6.2.4. *Carcassonne***

The story dealing with taste is intriguing in terms of its form, as Barnes experiments by combining fictional history with an essayistic narrative style. Martin acknowledges this by stating that “*Carcassonne* [...] uses an episode from the life of Garibaldi as a springboard for some essayistic reflection on the moment that love takes hold” (Martin). Kemp further recognizes this mixture, typical of Barnes, noting that the story is “a narrative that circles around Garibaldi’s life, intermittently curving off into autobiographical memories” (Kemp).

The concept of taste that Barnes explores in this story is multifaceted, encompassing both the sensory experience of taste and broader notions of aesthetic and emotional preferences.

The story begins in the summer of 1839, with a man aboard the ship using a telescope to inspect the Brazilian coastal town of Laguna. He is a foreign guerrilla leader whose recent success has led to the surrender of the imperial fleet. This liberator spots a young woman and brings her to him. He is Garibaldi, and she is Anita.

Although their encounter may appear romantic, and despite Barnes acknowledging Garibaldi as “one of the last romantic heroes of European history” (*Pulse*, 174), Barnes deconstructs this notion ironically, suggesting that we should not “quibble over circumstantial detail” (*ibid*). These circumstantial details include the fact that Anita, despite her youth, was a woman already married for several years to a local cobbler. Furthermore, Barnes suggests that we overlook questions about the husband’s feelings, the family’s honour, and whether violence occurred or money was exchanged when Garibaldi came ashore a few nights later and carried Anita off.

Instead, Barnes invites us to focus on the romantic or idealized side of the story, suggesting that truth is a matter of agreement. He posits: “let’s just agree that it was what both parties deeply and instantly desired, and that in places and times where justice is approximate, possession is usually nine points of the law” (*Pulse*, 174). The success of their marriage justifies this request: Anita was Garibaldi’s companion both in bravery and horse-riding skill, fighting and fleeing with her husband throughout their time together. Trevelyan even reports with “a tremendous romantic flourish: ‘Dying on the breast of Garibaldi, she needed no priest’” (ibid).

After concluding the story of Garibaldi and Anita, with Anita’s premature death, the narrative shifts to a contemporary scene. Here, the narrator listens to two women discussing the taste of men’s sperm, humorously noting that one could discern exactly who was a meat eater. One of the women even quips that she conducted a blind tasting to determine this.

The narrator delves into the nature of tasting, suggesting that “[t]he expectation of an experience governs and distorts the experience itself. I may not know anything about sperm tasting, but I know about wine tasting” (*Pulse*, 175). He illustrates that approaching a glass of wine is laden with preconceptions, which inevitably shape the experience. Factors such as the wine’s colour, aroma, the type of glass, its cost, the context, and the taster’s mood all play a role before the wine is even tasted. These preconceptions are inescapable, making it impossible to approach the experience purely.

The narrator further argues that the only way to eliminate such biases is through extreme measures:

“If you are blindfolded, and someone puts a clothes-peg on your nose, and hands you a glass of wine, then, even if you are the greatest expert in the world, you will be unable to tell the most basic things about it. Not even whether it is red or white” (ibid).

Barnes uses this example to emphasize the complicity of our senses, illustrating how intertwined sensory experiences are and how they affect our understanding and enjoyment of various stimuli. The analogy of wine tasting serves as a broader commentary on how preconceptions and context shape all forms of taste, whether it be for food, wine, or even more intimate experiences.

The narrator further elaborates on the importance of taste in life, emphasizing its wide-ranging influence. He states: “Of all our senses, it is the one with the broadest application, from a brief impression on the tongue to a learned aesthetic response to a painting. It is also the one that most describes us” (*Pulse*, 176). This highlights how taste spans from the immediate sensory experience to complex aesthetic appreciation, making it a defining aspect of our identity.

He continues by discussing how taste represents a domain where we experience true freedom, unaffected by our character, emotional state, or success:

“We may be better or worse people, happy or miserable, successful or failing, but what we are, within these wider categories, how we define ourselves, as opposed to how we are genetically defined, is what we call ‘taste’. Yet the word - perhaps because of its broad catchment area - easily misleads.” (*Pulse*, 176)

Here, the narrator posits that taste, more than any other sense, defines us beyond genetic predispositions, encompassing our preferences, judgments, and values, and shaping how we perceive and interact with the world.

However, the passage also warns that the term “taste” can be misleading due to its extensive scope. It encompasses both immediate sensory experiences and complex aesthetic judgments, which

can lead to confusion. For instance, “good taste” in fashion or art refers to acquired, subjective discernment, whereas “taste” in food pertains to immediate sensory pleasure.

The narrator then contrasts learned and inherent taste, suggesting that “[t]rue taste, essential taste, is much more instinctual and unreflecting” (*Pulse*, 176).

Barnes further elevates this idea by linking it to love, citing Dowell, the narrator of Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier*, who says of Nancy Rufford: “I just wanted to marry her as some people want to go to Carcassonne” (ibid). This particular sentence has inspired many analyses of Ford’s work, with one inquiry pondering how people desire such things: faintly or passionately, casually or with intense longing<sup>32</sup>. Consequently, Barnes concludes: “Falling in love is the most violent expression of taste known to us” (ibid). This comparison underscores the profound and instinctual nature of true taste, paralleling the intensity and immediacy of falling in love, which transcends rationality and conscious reflection.

The narrator reflects on the limitations of the English language in capturing the intensity of a sudden, passionate love. Unlike the French phrase “coup de foudre”, which vividly conveys the idea of love striking like lightning, English expressions such as “love at first sight” or “their eyes met across a crowded room” lack the same immediacy and intensity. Barnes ironically comments: “We talk of “love at first sight,” and indeed it happens, even in England [...]” (*Pulse*, 176). These phrases tend to sound polite or social rather than capturing the raw, thunderous impact of sudden love. This linguistic deficiency raises the question of how to trust the authenticity of that passionate moment. The narrator admits that we cannot fully trust it, even though we often feel compelled to do so, acknowledging the uncertainty inherent in love and the subjective nature of taste.

He further wonders what happens in case when one partner has a bad taste, and the other no taste at all. He recounts visiting a young married couple whose house was notably devoid of furniture. The wife explained that the lack of decor stemmed from her husband having no taste and herself having bad taste. This anecdote suggests that self-awareness of one’s bad taste might imply an understanding or aspiration for good taste, but in matters of love, we often lack certainty about the choices we make. The metaphor of an empty house without furniture serves as a symbol of the potential voids and mismatches in relationships formed on uncertain or misguided tastes, as “[...] in our love choices, few of us know whether or not we are going to end up in that house without furniture” (*Pulse*, 177).

The narrator reflects on the longevity of relationships, observing that the only enduring relationships he encounters are homosexual. He contemplates whether the inherent danger and illegality of such bonds in many countries might contribute to their resilience. This contemplation leads him to speculate that the external pressures and societal challenges faced by homosexual couples could potentially strengthen their commitment and perseverance in maintaining the relationship. The same can be said in art where the oppressive circumstances ironically contribute to valuing the piece of art:

“A bond made in such circumstances may well run deeper: I am committing my safety into your hands, every day of our lives together. Perhaps there is a literary comparison: books written under oppressive regimes are often more highly valued than books

---

<sup>32</sup> The source referenced herein is an article by Skinner, P., titled “Speak up, Fordie!": How some people want to go to Carcassonne”, published in *International Ford Madox Ford Studies*, vol. 4, 2005, pp. 197–210. (*JSTOR*, [jstor.org/stable/44871260](https://www.jstor.org/stable/44871260)).

written in societies where everything is permitted. Not that a writer should therefore pray for oppression, or a lover for illegality.” (*Pulse*, 178)

The narrator muses on whether a meaningful relationship is merely a matter of luck, quoting a friend who vehemently rejects this notion: “I don’t want it to be luck. If it’s luck, there’s nothing I can do about it” (*Pulse*, 180). This sentiment underscores a desire for agency and the ability to influence one’s destiny rather than attributing success or failure to chance. He further reflects on the adage: “People say that in the end you get what you deserve” (*ibid*), noting its dual nature: it suggests a sense of justice or fairness, but also acknowledges the randomness and unfairness that can determine outcomes.

He extends this observation to modern urban life, remarking that “in modern cities there are too many terrific women and too many terrible men” (*ibid*). This comment carries an ironic undertone, suggesting that being “terrific” can be a disadvantage, as it implies a mismatch in the perceived quality and availability of potential partners.

The narrator then turns to the city of Carcassonne, admired for its solidity and endurance, but points out the irony that “what we admire is mostly nineteenth-century reconstruction” (*ibid*). This serves as a metaphor for relationships, implying that what appears enduring and solid may actually be the result of reconstruction or adaptation over time. Consequently, he advises against focusing on the “hazard of whether it will last”, and questions whether longevity is inherently a virtue, a reward, an accommodation, or simply another stroke of luck.

The ultimate question he poses: “How much do we act, and how much are we acted upon, in that moment of passionate taste?” (*ibid*), explores the tension between human agency and external influences in determining our choices and experiences, particularly in the context of love and taste. This reflection invites readers to consider the balance between their own actions and the uncontrollable elements that shape their lives.

The story concludes with Barnes returning to Garibaldi’s life, completing a narrative circle that exemplifies Barnes’ storytelling prowess. He focuses on Garibaldi’s second marriage following Anita’s untimely death. This marriage was remarkably brief, as Garibaldi quickly uncovered his new wife’s past. She was pregnant with her previous lover’s child when Garibaldi proposed, prompting her to consummate the marriage before the actual wedding. Garibaldi attempted to annul the marriage, arguing it had been consummated before the wedding, but he was unsuccessful. Barnes ironically observes: “The liberator found himself shackled to Giuseppina for the next twenty years” (*Pulse*, 181). The liberator, renowned for emancipating others, ironically found himself incapable of achieving his own liberation.

The resolution of this situation is presented with further irony: “In the end, the law is only ever defeated by lawyers; in place of the romantic telescope, the legal microscope” (*Pulse*, 182).

This reference to the telescope from the story’s opening paragraph, which Garibaldi used to observe his first wife Anita, underscores the transition from romantic idealism to legal pragmatism. The lawyers exploited the fact that the marriage was solemnized in a territory under nominal Austrian control, whose legislation permitted annulment. Barnes wryly notes: “So the hero-lover was saved by the very nation against whose rule he had been fighting at the time” (*ibid*). The irony deepens with the revelation that the lawyer who proposed this solution had, in 1860, prepared the legislative unification of Italy. “Now, he achieved the marital disunification of the nation’s unifier” (*ibid*). This double irony, skilfully crafted by Barnes, highlights his narrative expertise and masterful use of irony ending the story in an ironic crescendo.

### 6.2.5. *Pulse* - “One’s Perfect. Two’s Too Many. And Three’s Not Enough”<sup>33</sup>. But What About Six Pulses?

This story captures both the pulsation of life and its eventual fading. It is narrated by the son of a long-married couple, who reflects on his own life and the lives of his parents. The narrative is touching, subtle, and poignant. Martin astutely notes: “Anyone still under the illusion that Barnes is a chilly and cerebral writer should read this story” (Martin).

The eponymous story serves as the culmination of the collection, particularly its second part, where *Pulse* is a recurrent theme in many of the narratives. Consequently, this story has garnered significant attention from critics. It acts as the crescendo of the entire collection, as well as the decrescendo of one’s life. Kemp aptly notes that “[w]ith its graceful stoicism, it is a fitting ending to this emotionally sombre, intellectually keen and sensuously celebratory book” (Kemp).

The opening scene is presented by the narrator observing his parents during their visit to Umbria, where they explore a local vineyard and its *vino novello* sign. The chalk-written label for the young wine becomes a metaphor for their ever-young love. The family resides in what was once a market town, located about thirty miles northwest of London. The mother works in hospital administration, while the father has spent his entire career as a solicitor in a local practice. He faces an inevitable decline in business as people increasingly turn to agony aunts for advice instead of a solicitor, or prefer the Internet to both. Nonetheless, the father takes this philosophically, often remarking: “the man who represents himself in court has a fool for a client” (*Pulse*, 184).

The plot starts to unravel as the father loses his sense of smell. It is at this trip to Italy that his father noticed losing his ability to smell the things. He decides not to do anything until they return home. Both parents exhibit a familiar reluctance to consult a doctor unless the situation is deemed serious. The narrator notes: “But each thought something that happened to the other was more serious than if it was happening to them” (*Pulse*, 186). This mutual concern underscores the depth of their bond and their enduring love for one another.

The son inquires when his father decided to address his loss of smell. The father replies: “Well, if you want to know, son, it was when I realized I couldn’t smell your mum” (*Pulse*, 186). When the son asks if he means her perfume, the father clarifies: “No, not her perfume. Her skin. Her ... self” (ibid).

The narrator finds this deeply touching, recognizing the profound bond between his parents, who felt no need to display their affection overtly, yet it remained evident. He acknowledges this intimacy when contemplating whether his parents are still sexually active. He dismisses the need to ponder this question “[b]ecause I’d seen the look in my father’s eye when he talked about not being able to smell his wife. It didn’t matter one way or the other if they were actually having sex. Because their intimacy was still alive” (*Pulse*, 189). This passage stands out as one of the most precise and poignant explanations of intimacy and love, with Barnes astutely highlighting that true love and marital life are deeply rooted in a connection that transcends physicality. Perhaps ironically, Barnes underlines that intimacy does not necessarily involve sex.

Accordingly, his father is deeply troubled by his inability to smell his mother. This leads the son to contemplate whether smell plays a central role in sexual arousal. He reflects on the role of

---

<sup>33</sup> In *Pulse*, on page 186, the narrator’s friend Jake comments on the adequate number of martinis with the saying: “One’s perfect. Two’s too many. And three’s not enough.” This enumeration serves as a prelude to the revelation of six pulses in Chinese medicine, or at least six locations on the human body where *Pulse* is measured.

pheromones, which influence our behaviour precisely when we ironically believe we are in control. Having long surpassed that phase, the father's complaint about not being able to smell the mother suggests he might have always implied something more profound. This issue might be unknown to him, but it suggests that smell represents a deep, if not the deepest, form of connection and intimacy with another person.

The son also reflects on how he met his wife, Janice. They met through a running group after she had moved from London. Their relationship began in a lukewarm manner, foreshadowing the eventual state of their marriage. Adhering to the group's rule of sticking to light topics during runs, their conversation was casual:

““Only a couple more k.”

“So be it.”

“Fancy a drink afterwards?”

She looked across and up at me. “So be it,” she repeated with a grin.” (*Pulse*, 187)

This interaction encapsulates the understated and somewhat indifferent start to their relationship, which ultimately mirrors the emotional trajectory of their marriage.

Janice used to appreciate his smell after running, particularly enjoying the scent of his sweat and preferring that he not shower immediately. This preference hints at the primal aspect of their relationship, which also manifested in their communication dynamics. Their interactions often reflected this raw, unrefined nature, suggesting a relationship that was fundamentally grounded in physical attraction rather than deeper emotional connection.

The GP examined the father's nostrils and suggested that such issues often resolve on their own over time. Interestingly, the father did not lose his sense of taste, which suggests that his loss of smell might be psychological and thus not treatable with standard medication. The doctor's opinion that the sense of smell would naturally return proves to be ironic, as it foreshadows the impending loss of his wife. This irony underlines the deeper, emotional undercurrents affecting the father's condition, hinting at a connection between his sensory loss and the forthcoming emotional trauma.

As expected from a skilled narrator like Barnes, the son further reflects on all the implications of the nose and smell in his life. Humorously, one of narrator's friend, Jake, remarks that the narrator has a “nose for trouble”, referring to his repeated failures with women. Jake, who enjoys success with women without seeking serious relationships, has a contrasting approach to intimacy. The narrator describes Jake's attitude:

“It's as if he's saying, Look, I'm here, I'm fun, I'm not long-term, but you'll probably enjoy me and afterwards we can still be friends. Quite how he manages to convey such a complicated message with little more than a grin and a lifted eyebrow is beyond me. Perhaps it's those pheromones.” (*Pulse*, 192)

The narrator admits that part of him admires Jake's carefree approach, but most of him “doesn't want it or envy it” (*ibid*). This internal conflict highlights his deeper longing for a meaningful connection, contrasting with Jake's more superficial interactions.

When his father decided to try acupuncture, he admitted that Western medicine did not have a monopoly on knowledge, acknowledging that other countries also possess valuable medical insights. The son agreed but immediately felt a resistance to this change in approach, recognizing the deep-seated need for parental constancy. This need, a cry for security, does not diminish over time;

rather, it intensifies as we grow older. The desire for parents to remain consistent anchors our sense of stability.

This sentiment is evident in the exchange between father and son, where the son's scepticism towards Chinese medicine reflects his deeper need for familiarity and constancy. He initially attributes his scepticism to cost-saving measures, but his father challenges this view:

"You see, you said *if it worked*."

"I didn't mean it."

"You're too cynical, son."

"You're not cynical enough, Dad." (*Pulse*, 194)

According to his father's account, the acupuncturist demonstrated professionalism, beginning with the assessment of his pulse. Here, Barnes delves into the concept of pulse, explaining that in Chinese medicine, there is not just one but six pulses - three on each wrist. However, pulses on the left wrist are deemed more significant because they correspond to major organs: the heart, liver, and kidneys.

Despite this detailed explanation, the son remains unconvinced by this alternative approach to treatment, cynically referring to his father's arm as a place where "mysterious new pulses lay hidden" (*Pulse*, 195). He refrains from further confrontation, recognizing that his parents have already discussed and decided upon this new approach. He understands that any further remarks would be futile, as his parents have made their decision together, reflecting their mutual agreement and commitment to trying this new method despite his scepticism.

Barnes' narration further delves into the concept of parenthood and the limits of our understanding of our parents. Early in the story, he suggests that comprehending one's mother is an impossible task for a child, drawing a parallel to how members of the royal family might struggle to describe what it's like to be royal: "It's like when interviewers ask one of the royals what it's like to be royal, and they laugh and say they don't know what it's like not to be royal" (*Pulse*, 184).

This idea is provocatively echoed by his wife Janice, who represents a challenging perspective in the story. Janice raises the issue of truly knowing one's parents, questioning the depth of our understanding of who they were before they met and had children. She argues that by the time one can comprehend their parents' lives, most crucial events have already occurred. She asks the narrator how often he thought of his father as a reformed alcoholic. He honestly replies never, as that is not how he thinks of him, humorously adding that he is his son, not a social worker. This response proves Janice's point, emphasizing that children desire their parents to be just parents, which is never the case. This perspective deconstructs the received opinion that we know our parents best because we have spent our whole lives with them. The irony lies in the fact that we did not spend *their* whole lives with them. She challenges the narrator's idealized perception of his parents: "So you want him to be just a dad. No one's just a dad, just a mum. It doesn't work like that. There's probably some secret in your mother's life you've never suspected" (*Pulse*, 196).

Her assertion that parents present a façade that children cannot penetrate challenges the narrator's understanding and introduces the ironic notion that the closest familial bonds may be built on mutual deception:

“I think that what happens with most couples over time is that they find a way of being with one another that is basically untruthful. It’s like the relationship depends on mutually assured self-deception. That’s its default setting.” (ibid)

The father continues with acupuncture, though his son grows increasingly impatient with the procedure. When the father comments on the discomfort caused by the acupuncturist’s repeated attempts to find the right spot for the needle, he also mentions that the practitioner regularly checks his pulses to monitor his energy levels. This prompts the son to exclaim in frustration: “Oh, for Christ’s sake, Dad. There’s only one pulse, you know that. By definition. It’s pulse of the heart, pulse of the blood” (*Pulse*, 197). The son’s impatience and intolerance towards this alternative medical treatment can be seen as reflecting an underlying fear, though this fear is ironically misdirected within the family.

At this juncture, they begin to notice something amiss with the mother, who attributes her condition to hormonal changes. The son cynically remarks: “‘Hormones’ is a catchall word for when women don’t want to tell you something. I always think: hang on, haven’t men got hormones as well? Why don’t we use them as an excuse?” (*Pulse*, pp. 198-199).

Reflecting on his marriage to Janice, the narrator recalls their arguments and her accusation of his lack of straightforwardness, which she does not articulate clearly herself. He further comments on their marriage in terms of smell, noting that “she could always smell a lie on me. She actually put it like that” (*Pulse*, 199). Janice, who accuses him of manipulation, ironically exhibits manipulative tendencies herself - a common trait of manipulators. Their marriage, strained by mutual infidelities, seems beyond repair:

“And then she explained the falseness of my apparent candour, and the difference between our infidelities - hers born of despair, mine of revenge - and how it was symptomatic that I thought the affairs were the significant thing, rather than the circumstances which gave rise to them. And so we came full circle to the original charges.” (*Pulse*, 200)

His marital situation leads him to contemplate what individuals truly seek in a partner: similarities or differences? He delves into this query through a postmodern lens of opposites forming a unity: “Someone like us but different, different but like us? Someone to complete us?” (*Pulse*, 200). Acknowledging the danger of generalization - an approach antithetical to postmodernism - the narrator poses these questions without offering definitive answers: “The point is: if we’re looking for someone who matches us, we only ever think of their good matching bits. What about their bad matching bits? Do you think we’re sometimes driven towards people with the same faults as we have?” (ibid).

This inquiry carries an inherent irony, supported by psychological theories of attraction that suggest individuals are often drawn to the familiar, even if it means repeating negative experiences from their past. This paradox implies that we might be attracted to certain traits we perceive as negative but familiar, leading us to love aspects of a person that we simultaneously hate or are ashamed of. Consequently, this duality in attraction highlights the complex nature of human relationships and the unconscious, ironic forces that shape them.

Throughout his reflections on his parents, attraction, and marriage, the narrator continually debates with Janice. She serves as the provoking force behind his thinking, indicating that he has not emotionally resolved his relationship with her despite their separation. Their quarrels persist in his mind, revealing his ongoing internal conflict. In contrast to Janice, he looks up to his parents and their marriage, although he admits this admiration may be influenced by his own failed marriage. When

his father mentions having to chase off rivals who courted his mother in their youth, which his mother denies, he contemplates the nature of truth in relationships. He considers whether a good marriage involves a consensus on truth, a concept resonant with postmodernist thought: “Or perhaps that’s the definition of a happy marriage: both parties are telling the truth, even when their accounts are incompatible” (*Pulse*, 202).

His failed marriage with Janice also prompts him to reflect on whether a successful marriage requires a certain talent or is merely a matter of luck: “Do you think there are people who have a talent for marriage, or is it just a question of luck? Though I suppose you could say that it’s luck to have such a talent” (ibid).

When the narrator mentions to his mother that he and his wife are going through a rough patch and trying to work on their marriage, her response reveals that marriage has never felt like work to her and his father. She explains: “If you love your marriage, it doesn’t feel like work. I suppose you may be working at it, underneath. Just doesn’t feel like it” (*Pulse*, 202). This ironic turn of having to work at something while not perceiving it as work is further explored by the narrator. He reflects on the expectation that he should have a happy marriage, given that he comes from one. However, he observes that “some genetic inheritance” or learning by example does not necessarily apply to marriage. He concludes:

“So perhaps you need the opposite example - to see mistakes in order not to make them yourself. Except this would mean that the best way for parents to ensure their children have happy marriages would be to have unhappy ones themselves” (ibid).

This reflection underscores the irony and complexity inherent in familial and marital relationships. The idea that a happy marriage should naturally beget another happy marriage is challenged by the narrator’s own experience, suggesting that observing and learning from mistakes might be a more effective, albeit paradoxical, way to achieve marital success. This nuanced understanding of marriage challenges conventional wisdom, a hallmark of Julian Barnes’ literary approach.

Both parents underwent their medical scans in the same week: the father was diagnosed with a chronic sinus condition, while the mother, unexpectedly, was diagnosed with Motor Neuron Disease (MND). This marks the beginning of their decline. The first thing the mother says to her son is to ask him to take care of his father. The son realizes that his mother is dying, but it is his father who is losing her. Both father and son focus on the mother’s well-being and strive to make the rest of her life as good as possible. In this context, the father’s condition “felt like an irrelevant joke” (*Pulse*, 206), given the severity of his wife’s situation.

As the mother’s condition deteriorates, they both experience the “remorselessness of hope” (*Pulse*, 205). Hope signifies uncertainty, and it persists even when faced with the single, certain, and unacceptable answer: death. In this context, hope occupies an ironic position, embodying uncertainty in contrast to the certainty of death. In such borderline situations, we unexpectedly, and ironically, pray and wish for something uncertain because we find it impossible to accept and live with the certain outcome.

The son coped with his mother’s illness not by seeking out activities with clear rules and solutions, such as crosswords or jigsaws, which many people find comforting. Instead, he immersed himself in running, approaching it with newfound seriousness. He ran at the front of the pack with the heavy runners who didn’t engage in much conversation. Constantly checking his pulse became his way of confirming his own vitality, a method of staying connected with himself and finding solace amid the turmoil. This physical activity provided him with a sense of purpose and control over the

aspects of his life he could manage - his health and common sense. He reflects: "I ended up fitter than I'd been at any time in my life. And sometimes - crazy as it may sound - that felt like solving something" (*Pulse*, 206).

The closing part of the story, and the collection as a whole, is a poignant recount of a brave woman's decline and her family's struggle to cope with it. Barnes poignantly captures the insufficiency of words in the face of overwhelming experiences: "The bigger the matter, the less there is to say. Not to *feel*, but to say" (original italics, *Pulse*, 207). This reflects a profound truth: when circumstances become overwhelming, verbal expression often falls short, and we are left primarily with our emotions, which are sometimes inexpressible. Barnes emphasizes this sentiment by noting, "Mum's illness was in a category [...] beyond rationality; it was something enormous, mute and muting" (*ibid*).

In these moments, our senses often take precedence. The narrator recalls being told that hearing and smell are usually the last senses to remain functional as a person is dying. This sets the stage for a deeply touching scene involving the father, which can be seen as one of Barnes' metaphorical "parrots", along with Flaubert's parrot and Shostakovich waiting in front of the elevator every night.

In an intimate and tender gesture, the father brings various packets of fresh herbs to the hospice. He closes the curtains around the bed to maintain privacy, even from his son, creating a secluded space for their final moments together. The father talks to his wife, uncertain if she can hear him, while crushing the herbs between his fingers and holding them under her nose, hoping she can still perceive their fragrance. The narrator imagines his father's hope that these smells would not become a cruel mockery, a painful reminder of the vibrant life she could no longer experience: "I imagine him hoping that the smells wouldn't come as a terrible mockery, reminding her of the sun she could no longer see, gardens she could no longer walk in, aromatic food she could no longer enjoy" (*Pulse*, 210).

This scene epitomizes anti-irony, as the father's actions aim to provide comfort and connection, eschewing ironic detachment or cynicism in the face of the desperate situation he is experiencing. In this poignant moment, Barnes masterfully completes his exploration of irony, bringing the collection of stories to a purposeful close with an anticlimactic resolution. Through anti-irony, Barnes conveys the depths of pure love, care, and the human desire to alleviate suffering, stripped of the agendas or consensual interpretations typically associated with irony. This scene is a powerful depiction of a man saying goodbye to the love of his life, fully immersed in the moment, devoid of any ironic distance.

This represents the culmination of irony, having come full circle.

## 7. Conclusion

This dissertation delves into the nuanced interplay between irony and postmodernism, using Julian Barnes' literary works as representative for research of irony, as he has been acknowledged as one of the most prominent ironists in contemporary literature. The aim of this dissertation was to explore his oeuvre in detail to ascertain instances of irony and their character, i.e. the nature of a "Barnesian irony".

The key tenet this study lies on is positioning irony not merely as a rhetorical device but as a profound mode of engagement that challenges readers to question the apparent realities presented in literary works.

The dissertation commences with positioning the subject of research, irony, in the contemporary postmodern context. A brief overview was provided with the purpose of providing perspective on historical evolution of this concept to showcase how its meaning changed over the centuries. Moreover, it concluded that certain tenets from the Hellenic and Roman period could be applied nowadays, thus testifying to their continued relevance.

The study is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of noted scholars, such as: Linda Hutcheon, Brian McHale, D.C. Muecke, and Claire Colebrook, each of whom provides essential insights into the evolving nature of irony within the postmodern literary landscape.

Linda Hutcheon's theories on irony and its implications for postmodern narrative form a cornerstone of this analysis. Hutcheon articulates how irony operates within "discursive communities", shaping and being shaped by the cultural and historical milieus from which it arises. Her insights into the ironic dimensions of postmodernism highlight how texts can simultaneously critique and adhere to the conventions they ostensibly undermine.

Brian McHale's contributions further enrich the discussion by emphasizing the shift from epistemological to ontological dominants in postmodern literature. His analysis underscores how postmodern works frequently blur the boundaries between different worlds or realities, illustrating complex interplays of being and perception that challenge traditional narrative forms.

D.C. Muecke's focus on the subtleties of ironic expression complements McHale's ontological concerns, offering a detailed taxonomy of irony's manifestations across literary texts. Muecke's distinction between types of irony - ranging from verbal irony to more complex forms like dramatic irony - provides a nuanced understanding of how irony operates across different narrative levels.

Claire Colebrook's examination of irony addresses its philosophical underpinnings, particularly its role in challenging and redefining notions of truth and interpretation. Her perspective is crucial in understanding how irony can be both a destabilizing force and a means of constructing new forms of understanding and engagement within postmodernism.

In my analysis of Julian Barnes' works through the lens of the aforementioned theoretical principles, the selection of the corpus was deliberately unconventional. Notably, *Flaubert's Parrot* was excluded, given the extensive body of scholarship already dedicated to it. Instead, my objective was to focus on Barnes' lesser-studied works, aiming to highlight the traits these texts share with *Flaubert's Parrot* - particularly in their use of irony and postmodernist themes - thus underscoring the author's artistic consistency and philosophical engagement with the world. Inevitably, however, references to *Flaubert's Parrot* could not be entirely avoided, and indeed, they were necessary to corroborate this notion of consistency. Consequently, a subchapter concluding the Introduction was devoted to this seminal work.

Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* exemplifies above mentioned theoretical concerns by weaving a narrative that is rich in ironic reflection and metafictional commentary. The novel not only interrogates the nature of historical truth and artistic representation but also serves as a meta-commentary on the act of writing and interpretation itself. In a brief subchapter, *Flaubert's Parrot* is discussed as a seminal influence not only on Julian Barnes' oeuvre but also on broader postmodernist literature. The dissertation author characterizes the work as a "manifesto of postmodernism", citing its incisive inquiries and principles that resonate with the core themes of postmodernism. Many examples and instances quoted herein from the novel testify to this.

The scope of the research was narrowed to four novels: *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, *England, England*, *The Noise of Time*, *Elizabeth Finch* and the collection of stories titled *Pulse*. The relatively limited exploration of this corpus - though an exception in some cases - presented both advantages and challenges. On the one hand, it marks a step forward in the systematic examination of Julian Barnes' complete oeuvre. On the other hand, the scarcity of critical references, particularly for Barnes' more recent works, posed difficulties in engaging with existing scholarship. I endeavoured to make the most of all available sources, both online and in print, and benefited greatly from the fact that Julian Barnes is still an active writer at the time of this dissertation's composition. His interviews, in particular, proved invaluable and were a source of intellectual pleasure. It is my hope that this dissertation will serve as a useful resource for future research on Barnes' work.

The critical study of Julian Barnes' representative novels has been undertaken with the aim of examining and interpreting his literary technique as a play with the boundaries of form, both presented and possible. Special attention has been paid to intertextuality, fictionality, and (auto)referentiality in the novels, approached with an ironic distance.

The work has been divided into chapters, with each chapter focusing on a specific representative novel by Julian Barnes and referencing relevant literary theories.

The research has primarily utilized a comparative method, considering intertextuality in postmodernism, as well as an internal (phenomenological) and, to a certain extent, external (formal) approach to the literary corpus.

In the chapter tackling *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, Julian Barnes intertwines irony and postmodernist techniques to challenge traditional narratives of history. The novel bears an ambitious title; through its inventive structure and content, it juxtaposes historical fact with fictional elements, effectively blurring the lines between reality and fabrication. Barnes' approach is emblematic of postmodernism, as it emphasizes the subjective nature of history and the inevitable biases in historical narration. Barnes explores the subjective interpretation of history, suggesting history as a collage of perspectives rather than a singular, objective narrative.

By presenting history through a series of disjointed, seemingly unrelated chapters - ranging from a fictional account of Noah's Ark to the legal proceedings against woodworms - Barnes highlights the constructedness of historical truths and the arbitrary nature of what is often deemed significant in historical recounting. This method not only reflects the postmodern scepticism towards metanarratives but also employs irony to question the authenticity and reliability of historical records.

Furthermore, the chapter demonstrates that this seemingly disparate collection of stories, each engaging with a distinct epoch or narrative style - thereby showcasing Barnes' narratorial prowess and erudition - should, in fact, be regarded as a novel. This classification is justified by the inherent cohesion found within the text, particularly through the recurrence of motifs, thematic unity, and a narrative arc that extends across its ten and a half chapters, with the final half-chapter focusing on the

theme of love. Thus, this dissertation highlights from the outset Julian Barnes' masterful playfulness with narrative form - or, perhaps more accurately, his deliberate subversion of it.

The novel *England, England* serves as an incisive postmodern critique of the commercialization of culture through its portrayal of a theme park that replicates England's cultural and historical landmarks. The novel's title, *England, England*, underscores a thematic doubling: it reflects the replication of an entire nation within a commodified, bounded space, as well as the repeated construction and deconstruction of national and personal identity. Through this layered narrative, Barnes employs irony to scrutinize the transformation of rich cultural heritage into marketable kitsch, challenging the authenticity of such an endeavour. The theme park, conceptualized by the ambitious tycoon Sir Jack Pitman, becomes a symbol of this irony, selling an oversimplified and sanitized "Englishness" that caters more to consumer expectations than to genuine heritage. In doing so, *England, England* provocatively questions whether authenticity can survive in a world where cultural experiences are packaged and sold, making it a profound commentary on the state of contemporary cultural identity in the guise of a satirical novel. The issue of authenticity has been thoroughly examined in relation to the theories of Baudrillard and Foucault.

The character of Martha Cochrane enhances the novel's ironic tone, as her journey from an eager participant in the theme park's creation to a disillusioned critic mirrors the park's superficial success and ultimate moral hollowness. Her personal disillusionment parallels the novel's broader critique of nostalgia and identity, both commodified to suit commercial and ideological agendas. Barnes thus uses irony not just as a narrative technique but as a lens through which to view the entire project of cultural commodification: the park is both a literal and figurative mirror that reflects the absurdities of reducing complex national identities to simplistic caricatures.

The novel also adopts an intimate tone, as it traces the personal journey of Martha Cochrane, beginning with her childhood. Here, Barnes introduces one of his recurring themes: the act of seizing the past, probing how we remember and manipulate our memories. The narrative follows Martha into her later years, set against the backdrop of "Olde England". Her life unfolds as a multilayered story, rich in irony, yet significant in that it mirrors the trajectory of England itself. Thus, it can be argued that *England, England* features two protagonists: Martha Cochrane and England itself.

*The Noise of Time* intricately weaves commentary on the life of Dmitri Shostakovich, a renowned composer living under the repressive Soviet regime, showcasing Barnes' matured narrative prowess and thematic depth. The novel is praised for its concise yet profound structure, likened to a musical concerto with distinct movements that echo the ups and downs of Shostakovich's life and career. Critics like McAlpin describe the novel's structure as elegantly crafted, mirroring the emotional and historical phases of the composer's life, while Denk highlights Barnes' role in this narrative as akin to a musician rather than just a novelist, emphasizing his interpretative finesse in retelling a well-known biography. This metaphorical comparison underscores Barnes' nuanced approach to blending historical facts with literary fiction, aiming to breathe new life into the familiar story of Shostakovich, driven by a deep reverence for his subject.

Barnes' exploration of Shostakovich's life through *The Noise of Time* also delves into broader themes of art, identity, and the oppressive mechanics of the Soviet state, drawing readers into a reflective discourse on the nature of artistic expression under tyranny. The novel extends beyond mere historical recounting, engaging with the existential dilemmas and moral complexities faced by Shostakovich, particularly highlighting the composer's struggles with his own perceived cowardice and the compromises he made with his artistic integrity. This thematic depth is encapsulated in Barnes' portrayal of Shostakovich's ironic self-reflection and the profound ambivalence he feels towards his actions and choices. Through this introspective journey, Barnes not only reconstructs a

pivotal figure's life but also invites a contemplation of the timeless conflict between individual agency and authoritarian constraint, resonating with contemporary issues of freedom and control.

The novel embodies a series of contrasts, a hallmark of postmodernism. Barnes' portrayal of Shostakovich presents him as both a self-confessed coward and a genius. His interactions with Power are marked by a duality: openly ironic remarks and forms of communication serve as a subtle means of resistance against oppression, while his decision to join the Party reflects a pragmatic attempt to regain control over his life and work - ironically, neither of which truly belong to him anymore. The period that appears to be the most glorious in his career is the period of his deepest fears. Barnes does not focus solely on Shostakovich as a composer; rather, he explores the man under oppression, navigating his circumstances as many would, finding refuge in his ironic stance toward both Power and life - except in one domain: music. Here, Shostakovich allows no room for irony. This just might be the reason why Barnes' Shostakovich never laughs.

*Elizabeth Finch*, Julian Barnes' 2022 novel, has been met with a diverse critical reception that illustrates the author's ongoing appeal in literary circles. The novel deviates from Barnes' initial reluctance to engage with academic settings in his fiction, presenting a narrative that explores intellectual and philosophical themes through its protagonist, Elizabeth Finch. Critics have varied in their focus, with some examining the reliability of the narrator and others delving into the novel's intricate discussion of history and personal influence. This range of interpretations highlights the book's capacity to prompt significant reflection on memory, history, and the impact of educators.

*Elizabeth Finch* is structured as a "story-within-a-story", raising questions about the interconnectedness of the two narratives from the very outset. This complexity is further heightened by the central story's highly ironic premise: a teacher leaves her entire intellectual legacy to a student notorious for leaving his projects unfinished. The irony deepens when we consider that the student remained unaware of her intentions throughout their decades-long tradition of lunches, and even failed to perceive the signs of her impending death.

Additional layers of irony emerge in the parallels between the lives of Elizabeth Finch and Julian the Apostate, the historical figure she deeply admired and credited with significant influence. The relationship between the two narratives is subject to manipulation and interpretation, further intensifying the novel's ironic tone. Ultimately, this study raises the provocative question: whose biography is this? The novel, particularly the story of Julian, could be interpreted as a biography of an alternative world - one in which Julian lived long enough to prevent the ascendancy of Christianity. The irony reaches its climax in the portrayal of Julian as Emperor, where he embodies virtues and attitudes typically considered Christian, despite his active opposition to Christianity itself. This culmination of irony invites deeper reflection on the connections between the two figures, while also engaging with broader themes of knowledge, legacy, and the complexities of historical interpretation.

The reception of *Elizabeth Finch* underscores Julian Barnes' ability to craft narratives that resonate on multiple levels and stimulate thoughtful discourse among readers and critics alike. Figures such as Cummins, Charles, and McAlpin have highlighted aspects of the novel from its narrative structure to its thematic depth, reflecting its capacity to engage with complex dialogues. This critical engagement maintains Barnes' reputation as a significant contemporary author, whose work continues to challenge and enrich readers' understanding of narrative, history, and personal relationships within the literary world.

The final and most extensive chapter of this dissertation delves into *Pulse*, a collection of stories by Julian Barnes that has yet to be extensively analysed. Each story within the collection stands as a complete entity, both narratively and in terms of genre, warranting the detailed discussion presented in this chapter. The collection showcases a diversity in narrative style, mode, epoch, and

theme, epitomizing Barnes' adeptness at weaving versatile narratives that span centuries and blend fiction with factual elements. This characteristic not only underscores the postmodern qualities of the collection but also sets the stage for the pervasive use of irony found within each story. This chapter provides a thorough examination of the ironic elements in these stories, affirming Barnes' consistent employment of irony.

Many scholars and critics have identified a quintessential Barnesian protagonist within the stories of *Pulse* - a disoriented, middle-aged man with a history of failures, who is deeply introspective, questioning his life, relationships, and future. Unsurprisingly, this protagonist is also an unreliable narrator. His irony operates on multiple levels, ranging from verbal irony - evident in the banter and *aperçus* that Barnes so skilfully crafts in the four stories depicting transcripts of social gatherings among a group of middle-aged friends discussing a wide array of topics - to a broader ironic worldview. The latter is exemplified by the widower who revisits a location he and his late wife frequented, intending to honour her memory and their marriage, only to come to the realization that he is now "married" to grief, thus forming new "marriage lines" with sorrow itself.

The second part of the collection comprises five stories that, despite their differences in theme, style, and historical period, form a unified whole through the recurring motif of the loss of one of the senses. Barnes approaches these losses with a sense of irony. For example, the loss of speech becomes an advantage for the limner as he observes his clients; numbness in the hands is not viewed as a medical condition but evokes a protective feeling in the protagonist, leading to the beginning of a relationship; the question arises of whether blindness in a prodigious girl is a blessing or a curse, given that her parents do not wish for her to be healed; and taste is explored both as a physical sensation and as an attitude toward life, examined through its absence in a highly ironic and postmodern manner.

The crowning and eponymous story, perhaps the most touching in the collection, centres on the loss of smell - but not merely the simple sense of smell. Barnes portrays it as a man's inability to "sense" his wife anymore, which poignantly serves as a prelude to her death. In the final scene, the man brings herbs for his dying wife to smell, wishing these aromas to be the last she experiences in this world. This is one of the most moving scenes in Barnes' entire oeuvre, cementing his reputation as more than just a cerebral writer.

Addressing the initial inquiry posed in the Abstract - whether Julian Barnes is ironically serious or seriously ironic - the answer is decidedly both. Postmodernism thrives on embracing a spectrum rather than excluding extreme viewpoints, allowing Barnes to embody both qualities simultaneously. This dual nature is indicative of postmodernism's broader invitation to challenge and subvert extreme positions and prevailing opinions. Furthermore, Barnes' work persistently subverts established dogmas, whether they concern biblical narratives or conventional understandings of love and relationships.

A persistent question that has haunted me throughout this entire research is whether there is hope after irony. When narratives are deconstructed, myths are dethroned, and dogmas are scrutinized, what remains?

I contend that what endures is the "curse and blessing" of writing our own stories. Can irony aid us in this pursuit? Without a doubt.

If one wonders why this endeavour is necessary, we are reminded of a profound statement made by Julian Barnes in response to literary criticism - a statement that may well apply to life in its entirety:

“[...] if all your responses to a book have already been duplicated and expanded upon by a professional critic, then what point is there to your reading? Only that it's yours. Similarly, why live your life? Because it's yours.” (*Flaubert's Parrot*, 166)

## 8. Bibliography

### a) Reference List of Analysed Novels:

- Barnes, Julian. *Flaubert's Parrot*. Vintage Books. 1990.
- Barnes, Julian. *A History of the World in 10 ½ chapters*. Vintage Books. 2009.
- Barnes, Julian. *England, England*. Vintage Books. 2012.
- Barnes, Julian. *The Noise of Time*. Jonathan Cape. 2016.
- Barnes, Julian. *Elizabeth Finch*. Jonathan Cape. 2022.
- Barnes, Julian. *Pulse*. Vintage. 2011.

### b) Sources:

1. Adams, James. *In new novel, Julian Barnes tests the noise of time through art and biography*. The Globe and Mail. Jun 3, 2016. [theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/in-new-novel-julian-barnes-tests-the-noise-of-time-through-art-and-biography/article30260780/](http://theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/in-new-novel-julian-barnes-tests-the-noise-of-time-through-art-and-biography/article30260780/).
2. Adams, Tim. *Pulse by Julian Barnes — review*. The Guardian. Sun 2 Jan 2011. [theguardian.com/books/2011/jan/02/julian-barnes-pulse-review](http://theguardian.com/books/2011/jan/02/julian-barnes-pulse-review).
3. Alexis, André. *Review: Julian Barnes's The Noise of Time is a thoughtful, humane and compassionate novel*. The Globe & Mail, 20 May 2016. [theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/book-reviews/review-julian-barness-the-noise-of-time-is-a-thoughtful-humane-and-compassionate-novel/article30105601/](http://theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/book-reviews/review-julian-barness-the-noise-of-time-is-a-thoughtful-humane-and-compassionate-novel/article30105601/).
4. Allen, Graham. *Intertextuality*. Routledge. 2000.
5. Alhadeff, Albert. *Julian Barnes and the 'Raft of the Medusa'*. The French Review, vol. 82, no. 2, 2008, pp. 276–91. *JSTOR*, [jstor.org/stable/25481546](http://jstor.org/stable/25481546).
6. Alpers, Paul. *What Is Pastoral?* The University of Chicago Press. 1996.
7. "Anglia." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. [britannica.com/dictionary/Anglia](http://britannica.com/dictionary/Anglia).
8. Arthanayake, Nihal. *Julian Barnes with Nihal Arthanayake*. The Penguin Podcast. Society & Culture. February 22, 2023. [shows.acast.com/thepenguinpodcast/episodes/julian-barnes-with-nihal-arthanayake](https://shows.acast.com/thepenguinpodcast/episodes/julian-barnes-with-nihal-arthanayake).
9. Balzer, David. *Julian Barnes: There's No Right Response to a Painting*. May 10, 2016. [canadianart.ca/interviews/julian-barnes-theres-no-right-response-painting/](http://canadianart.ca/interviews/julian-barnes-theres-no-right-response-painting/).
10. Barnes, Julian. *My hero: Dmitri Shostakovich by Julian Barnes*. The Guardian. Sat 30 Jan 2016 14.00 CET. [theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/30/my-hero-dmitri-shostakovich-by-julian-barnes](http://theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/30/my-hero-dmitri-shostakovich-by-julian-barnes).
11. Barolsky, Paul. *The fable of failure of modern art*. The Virginia Quarterly Review, vol. 73, no. 3, 1997, pp. 395–404. *JSTOR*, [jstor.org/stable/26439055](http://jstor.org/stable/26439055).

12. Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation (The Body, In Theory: Histories of Cultural Materialism)*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. The University of Michigan Press. 1994.
13. Bauman, Zygmunt. *Retrotopia*. Polity Press. 2017.
14. Billen, Andrew. *Two Aspects of a Writer*. Observer Magazine. p. 27. 07 July 1991.
15. Böhme, Anna Katharina. *Challenging Englishness: Rebranding and Rewriting National Identity in Contemporary English Fiction*. Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung des Doktorgrades der Philosophie des Fachbereiches 05 der Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen. University of Bergamo. 2012.
16. Boccardi, Mariadele. *The Contemporary British Historical Novel*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2009.
17. "thebookerprize". thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/books/england-england.
18. Bradbury, Malcolm. *The Modern British Novel*. The Penguin Group. 1994.
19. Bradford, Richard. Julian Barnes's *England, England* and *Englishness*. *Julian Barnes. Contemporary Critical Perspective*, edited by Sebastian Groes and Peter Childs, Continuum, 2011, pp. 92-102.
20. Bužinjska, Ana i Markovski, Mihal Pavel. *Književne teorije XX veka*. Službeni glasnik. 2009.
21. Buxton, Jackie. *Julian Barnes's Theses on History (In 10½ Chapters)*. Contemporary Literature, vol. 41, no. 1, 2000, pp. 56–86. JSTOR, doi.org/10.2307/1208964.
22. Byatt, A.S. *Contemporary British Novelists*. Edited by Alfer, Alexa and Edward de Campos, Amy J. Manchester UP. 2010.
23. Candel, Daniel. *Nature feminised in Julian Barnes's 'A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters'*. Atlantis, vol. 21, no. 1/2, 1999, pp. 27–41. JSTOR, jstor.org/stable/41055539.
24. Claeyes, Gregory, editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*. Cambridge UP. 2010.
25. Clark, Jonathan Russell. *The Georgia Review*, vol. 70, no. 4, 2016, pp. 847–51. JSTOR, jstor.org/stable/44077776.
26. Colebrook, Claire. *Irony. The new critical idiom*. Routledge. 2004.
27. Connor, Steven. *The English Novel in History 1950-1995*. Routledge. 1996.
28. Cook, Bruce. *The World's History and Then Some in 10 ½ Chapters. Conversations with Julian Barnes*. Guignery, Vanessa and Roberts, Ryan, editors. UP of Mississippi. 2009.
29. Cummins, Anthony. *Elizabeth Finch by Julian Barnes review - a roman à clef with a key that's hard to find*. The Guardian. Apr 11 2022, theguardian.com/books/2022/apr/11/elizabeth-finch-by-julian-barnes-review-a-roman-a-clef-with-a-key-thats-hard-to-find.
30. Cusk, Rachel. *Pulse by Julian Barnes – review*. The Guardian. Sat 8 Jan 2011 01.05 CET. theguardian.com/books/2011/jan/08/julian-barnes-pulse-rachel-cusk-review.

31. Delnietpe, Fanny. *A Past Perfect Rather Than a Perfect Past: Julian Barnes's Reflective Nostalgia in England, England*. doi.org/10.4000/ebc.2620. journals.openedition.org/ebc/2620.
32. Denk, Jeremy. 'The Noise of Time,' by Julian Barnes. May 9, 2016. nytimes.com/2016/05/15/books/review/the-noise-of-time-by-julian-barnes.html.
33. Dews, Shelly, et al. *Why not say it directly? The social functions of irony*, Discourse Processes, 19:3, 347-367, 1995. Tandfonline.com. doi:10.1080/01638539509544922.
34. Doran, Robert, editor. *Philosophy of History After Hayden White*. Bloomsbury Academic. 2013.
35. Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work*. Harvard UP. 1989.
36. Eder, Richard. *Tomorrowland. The New York Times on the web*. archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/05/09/reviews/990509.09ederlt.html.
37. Eko, Umberto. *Između laži i ironije*. Paideia. 2000.
38. Erdal, Baturay. *Deciphering Radical Ecology in Contemporary British Fiction. Julian Barnes, David Mitchell and John Fowles*. Peter Lang. 2020.
39. "erudite fly". Pulse: Stories. *Publishers Weekly*. publishersweekly.com/978-0-307-59526-3.
40. Finney, Brian. *A Worm's Eye View of History: Julian Barnes' A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*. home.csulb.edu/~bhfinney/barnes.html.
41. --- *Irony: Truth's Disguise*. June 20, 2016. Los Angeles Review of Books. lareviewofbooks.org/article/irony-truths-disguise/.
42. Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias", *Architecture /Mouvement/Continuité*, October 1984, web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf.
43. Gifford, Terry. "Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral, and Post-Pastoral." *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*, edited by Louise Westling. Cambridge UP. 2014. pp. 17-44.
44. Groes, Sebastian and Childs, Peter, and contributors. *Julian Barnes Contemporary Critical Perspective*. Continuum International Publishing Group. 2011.
45. Guignery, Vanessa. *The Fiction of Julian Barnes*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2006.
46. --- and Roberts, Ryan, editors. *Conversations with Julian Barnes*. UP of Mississippi. 2009.
47. Harrison, Connor. *An Enigmatic Woman: On Julian Barnes's "Elizabeth Finch"*. Los Angeles Review of Books. October 13, 2022. lareviewofbooks.org/article/an-enigmatic-woman-on-julian-barness-elizabeth-finch/.
48. Hutcheon, Linda. *Irony's edge. The theory and politics of irony*. Routledge. 1994.
49. ---. *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History. Theory. Fiction*. Routledge. 2004.
50. Jaus, H.R. *Estetika recepcije, Izbor studija*. Nolit. 1978.

51. Kakutani, Michiko. *'England, England': England as Theme Park*. *The New York Times* on the web. [archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/05/09/daily/051199barnes-book-review.html](https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/05/09/daily/051199barnes-book-review.html).
52. Kemp, Peter. *Julian Barnes's new novel Elizabeth Finch — and the formidable friend who inspired it*. *The Times*. April 10 2022. [thetimes.co.uk/article/julian-barnes-new-novel-elizabeth-finch-and-the-formidable-friend-who-inspired-it-wx029gqmt](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/julian-barnes-new-novel-elizabeth-finch-and-the-formidable-friend-who-inspired-it-wx029gqmt).
53. Kemp, Peter. *Pulse by Julian Barnes*. *The Times*. Sunday January 02 2011. [thetimes.co.uk/article/pulse-by-julian-barnes-kcf08q86q60](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/pulse-by-julian-barnes-kcf08q86q60).
54. Kotte, Claudia. *Random Patterns? Orderly Disorder in Julian Barnes's 'A History of the World in 10 and 1/2 Chapters'*. AAA: Arbeiten Aus Anglistik Und Amerikanistik, vol. 22, no. 1, 1997, pp. 107–28. *JSTOR*, [jstor.org/stable/43025524](https://www.jstor.org/stable/43025524).
55. Lasdun, James. *How Shostakovich Survived Stalin*. *The Guardian*, 22 January 2016. [theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/22/the-noise-of-time-by-julian-barnes-shostakovich-stalin-review](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/22/the-noise-of-time-by-julian-barnes-shostakovich-stalin-review).
56. Lewis, Helen. *Julian Barnes - my book is 'probably offensive to most Christians in the world'*. *The Times*. April 02 2022. [thetimes.co.uk/article/julian-barnes-my-book-is-probably-offensive-to-most-christians-in-the-world-2z66h6p85](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/julian-barnes-my-book-is-probably-offensive-to-most-christians-in-the-world-2z66h6p85).
57. Lowe, N. J. *The Classical Plot and the Invention of Western Narrative*. Cambridge UP. 2003.
58. Mandelstam, Osip. *The Noise of Time. The Prose of Osip Mandelstam*. North Point Press. 1986.
59. Martin, Tim. *Pulse by Julian Barnes: review*. *The Telegraph*. 02 January 2011. [telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8230189/Pulse-by-Julian-Barnes-review.html](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8230189/Pulse-by-Julian-Barnes-review.html).
60. Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Progress Publishers Moscow. 1934.
61. Messer, Miwa. *Poured Over: Julian Barnes on Elizabeth Finch*. August 16, 2022. [barnesandnoble.com/blog/poured-over-julian-barnes-on-elizabeth-finch/](https://barnesandnoble.com/blog/poured-over-julian-barnes-on-elizabeth-finch/).
62. McAlpin, Heller. *'The Noise Of Time' Can't Drown Out Shostakovich*. May 10, 2016, [npr.org/2016/05/10/476486103/the-noise-of-time-cant-drown-out-shostakovich](https://www.npr.org/2016/05/10/476486103/the-noise-of-time-cant-drown-out-shostakovich).
63. McAlpin, Helen. *Julian Barnes Finds The 'Pulse' Of Heartache*. npr.org. MAY 5, 2011. 7:00 AM ET. [npr.org/2011/07/14/135812941/julian-barnes-finds-the-pulse-of-heartache](https://www.npr.org/2011/07/14/135812941/julian-barnes-finds-the-pulse-of-heartache).
64. McHale, Brian. *Constructing postmodernism*. London. 1992.
65. ---. *Postmodernist fiction*. London. 2001.
66. Millán-Zaibert, Elizabeth. *Friedrich Schlegel and the Emergence of Romantic Philosophy*. State University of New York Press. 2007.
67. Moseley, Merritt. *"THE MAN BOOKER PRIZE FOR 2011."* *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 120, no. 2, 2012, pp. 341–47. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41495408>. Accessed 20 May 2024.

68. Muecke, Douglas Colin. *Irony*. Methuen & Co Ltd. 1970.
69. "Newark". [iacf.co.uk/newark/](http://iacf.co.uk/newark/).
70. Newmark, Kevin. *Irony on Occasion. From Schlegel and Kierkegaard to Derrida and de Man*. Fordham UP. 2012.
71. Norlin, George. *The Convention of the Pastoral Elegy*. The American Journal of Philology, Vol. 32, No. 3, 1911, pp. 294-312. [doi.org/10.2307/288618](https://doi.org/10.2307/288618). [jstor.org/stable/288618](https://www.jstor.org/stable/288618).
72. Nünning, Ansgar. 'But Why Will You Say That I Am Mad?' *On the Theory, History, and Signals of Unreliable Narration in British Fiction*. AAA: Arbeiten Aus Anglistik Und Amerikanistik, vol. 22, no. 1, 1997, pp. 83–105. *JSTOR*, [jstor.org/stable/43025523](https://www.jstor.org/stable/43025523).
73. Nünning, Vera. *The Invention of Cultural Traditions: The Construction and Deconstruction of Englishness and Authenticity in Julian Barnes' England*, England. *Anglia* (119) pp. 58-76. [julianbarnes.com/books/england.html](http://julianbarnes.com/books/england.html).
74. Orhanen, Anna. "A UK Exclusive Q&A with Julian Barnes on Elizabeth Finch". Posted on March 24, 2022. [waterstones.com/blog/a-uk-exclusive-qanda-with-julian-barnes-on-elizabeth-finch](https://www.waterstones.com/blog/a-uk-exclusive-qanda-with-julian-barnes-on-elizabeth-finch).
75. Parrinder, Patrick. *The English Novel from its Origins to the Present Day*. Oxford UP. 2006.
76. "The Raft of the Medusa". [britannica.com/topic/The-Raft-of-the-Medusa](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Raft-of-the-Medusa).
77. Rebenich, Stefan and Wiemer, Hans-Ulrich, eds. *A Companion to Julian the Apostate*. Brill. 2020.
78. Rees, A. W. G. M. *TREVELYAN, O.M.: A Tribute*. *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 3, 1950, pp. 1–9. *JSTOR*, [jstor.org/stable/41802594](https://www.jstor.org/stable/41802594).
79. Reichardt, Ulfried. *Shostakovich, Totalitarianism, and Anglo-American Fiction: Powers, Barnes, and Vollmann*. In *The Public Mind and the Politics of Postmillennial U.S.-American Writing*. Edited by Mathieson, Jolene, Henderson, Marius, and Lange, Julia. pp. 49-70. De Gruyter. 2022.
80. Reiss, Edmond. Medieval Irony. *Journal of the History of Ideas*. Vol. 42, No. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1981), University of Pennsylvania Press pp. 209-226. [jstor.org/stable/2709317](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2709317). [doi.org/10.2307/2709317](https://doi.org/10.2307/2709317).
81. Rentzenbrink, Cathy. *A good cover shouldn't be an answer, it should be a provoker*. Nov 6, 2015. [thebookseller.com/author-interviews/julian-barnes-interview-320358](https://thebookseller.com/author-interviews/julian-barnes-interview-320358).
82. Ron, Charles. *Julian Barnes is back. But where's the magic?* The Washington Post. August 9, 2022. [washingtonpost.com/books/2022/08/09/julian-barnes-elizabeth-finch-book-review/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/books/2022/08/09/julian-barnes-elizabeth-finch-book-review/).
83. Robinson, Gregory J. *History's Genres: Julian Barnes's 'A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters'*. *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2000, pp. 159–79. *JSTOR*, [doi.org/10.2307/3195384](https://doi.org/10.2307/3195384).

84. Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands*. Granta Books. 1991.
85. Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Embedded Narratives and Tellability*. *Style*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1986, pp. 319–40. *Style*: Volume 20, No. 3, Fall 1986. Pp. 319-340. *JSTOR*, [jstor.org/stable/42945611](https://www.jstor.org/stable/42945611).
86. Sanai, Leyla. *Pulse*, by Julian Barnes. Sunday 09 January 2011. The Independent. [independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/pulse-by-julian-barnes-2176835.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/pulse-by-julian-barnes-2176835.html).
87. Saval, Nikil. *Julian Barnes and the Shostakovich Wars*. The New Yorker. May 26, 2016. [newyorker.com/books/page-turner/julian-barnes-and-the-shostakovich-wars](https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/julian-barnes-and-the-shostakovich-wars).
88. “Saramago”. [britannica.com/biography/Jose-Saramago#ref890161](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jose-Saramago#ref890161).
89. Sedgewick, G.G. *Of Irony Especially in Drama*. University of Toronto Press. 1935.
90. Self, John. *Elizabeth Finch by Julian Barnes review - an old-fashioned novel full of big ideas to chew on*. The Times. March 29 2022. [thetimes.co.uk/article/elizabeth-finch-by-julian-barnes-review-an-old-fashioned-novel-full-of-big-ideas-to-chew-on-hnqr558fw](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/elizabeth-finch-by-julian-barnes-review-an-old-fashioned-novel-full-of-big-ideas-to-chew-on-hnqr558fw).
91. Shilling, Jane. *Pulse By Julian Barnes: review*. The Telegraph. 09 January 2011. [telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/8241433/Pulse-By-Julian-Barnes-review.html](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/8241433/Pulse-By-Julian-Barnes-review.html).
92. Staiger, Jeffrey. *James Wood’s Case against ‘Hysterical Realism’ and Thomas Pynchon*. The Antioch Review, vol. 66, no. 4, 2008, pp. 634–54. *JSTOR*, [jstor.org/stable/25475640](https://www.jstor.org/stable/25475640).
93. Stojanović, Dragan. *Ironija i značenje*. Zavod za udžbenike. 2003.
94. Stuart, Alexander. *A Talk with Julian Barnes*. Los Angeles Times. October 15, 1989 12 AM PT. [latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-10-15-bk-163-story.html](https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-10-15-bk-163-story.html).
95. White, Duncan. *The Noise of Time by Julian Barnes, review: 'black humour'*. 16 January 2016, 8:00am. [telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/the-noise-of-time-by-julian-barnes-review-black-humour/](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/the-noise-of-time-by-julian-barnes-review-black-humour/).
96. White, Hayden. *The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality*. *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1980, pp. 5–27. *JSTOR*, [jstor.org/stable/1343174](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343174).
97. Wood, James. *Human, All Too Inhuman*. The New Republic. July 24, 2000. [newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-inhuman](https://www.newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-inhuman).
98. Yulu, Adem. Abstract to research article *Friedrich Parrot’s Mount Ararat Research Expedition*. *Journal of Geography*, vol. 38, 2019, pp. 49-58. Istanbul UP. [doi.org/10.26650/JGEOG2019-0003](https://doi.org/10.26650/JGEOG2019-0003).

## 9. Биографија аутора

Ивана М. Зечевић рођена је 1977. године у Крушевцу, где је завршила и основну школу и Реалну гимназију. Основне студије је уписала и одслушала на Филолошком факултету у Београду, на катедри за англистику, као и на факултету за стране језике, универзитета БК Алфа у истом граду, где је и дипломирала. Године 2011. уписује мастер студије и успешно их завршава на Филолошком факултету у Београду 2013. године. Мастер рад под називом *Mr. Stevens, please take a stand* бива објављен у *Аналима Филолошког факултета* за 2013. годину.

Одмах након мастер студија, наставља са докторским академским студијама на истом факултету, на студијском програму Језик, књижевност, култура. Докторска дисертација је резултат њеног дугогодишњег читалачког стажа и критичког промишљања књижевности.

*Прилог 1.*

### **Изјава о ауторству**

Име и презиме аутора \_\_\_\_\_ Ивана М. Зечевић \_\_\_\_\_

Број досијеа 13023/Д \_\_\_\_\_

### **Изјављујем**

да је докторска дисертација под насловом

\_\_\_\_\_ ”Irony as a Feature of Postmodernism in the Prose of Julian Barnes” \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- резултат сопственог истраживачког рада;
- да дисертација ни у целини ни у деловима није била предложена за стицање дипломе студијских програма других високошколских установа;
- да су резултати коректно наведени и
- да нисам кршио/ла ауторска права и користио/ла интелектуалну својину других лица.

**Потпис аутора**

У Београду, \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Прилог 2.*

**Изјава о истоветности штампане и електронске верзије докторског рада**

Име и презиме аутора Ивана М. Зечевић

Број досијеа 13023/Д

Студијски програм Језик, књижевност, култура

Наслов рада "Irony as a Feature of Postmodernism in the Prose of Julian Barnes"

Ментор Проф. др Зоран Пауновић, редовни професор

Изјављујем да је штампана верзија мог докторског рада истоветна електронској верзији коју сам предала ради похрањивања у Дигитални репозиторијум Универзитета у Београду.

Дозвољавам да се објаве моји лични подаци за добијање академског назива доктора наука, као што су име и презиме, година и место рођења и датум одбране рада.

Ови лични подаци могу се објавити на мрежним страницама дигиталне библиотеке, у електронском каталогу и у публикацијама Универзитета у Београду.

Потпис аутора

У Београду, \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### Изјава о коришћењу

Овлашћујем Универзитетску библиотеку „Светозар Марковић“ да у Дигитални репозиторијум Универзитета у Београду унесе моју докторску дисертацију под насловом:

”Irony as a Feature of Postmodernism in the Prose of Julian Barnes”

---

која је моје ауторско дело.

Дисертацију са свим прилозима предао/ла сам у електронском формату погодном за трајно архивирање.

Моју докторску дисертацију похрањену у Дигиталном репозиторијуму Универзитета у Београду, и доступну у отвореном приступу, могу да користе сви који поштују одредбе садржане у одабраном типу лиценце Креативне заједнице (Creative Commons) за коју сам се одлучила:

1. Ауторство (CC BY)
2. Ауторство – некомерцијално (CC BY-NC)
3. Ауторство – некомерцијално – без прерада (CC BY-NC-ND)
4. Ауторство – некомерцијално – делити под истим условима (CC BY-NC-SA)
5. Ауторство – без прерада (CC BY-ND)
6. Ауторство – делити под истим условима (CC BY-SA)

(Молимо да заокружите само једну од шест понуђених лиценци.

Кратак опис лиценци је саставни део ове изјаве).

Потпис аутора

У Београду, \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_