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NATURE FEMINISED IN JULIAN BARNES'S *A HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN 10 1/2 CHAPTERS*[1]

Daniel Candel

Universidad de Alcalá de Henares

Up to now, the importance of the thematic workings of Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* has not found much reflection in academia, which is a pity, since *A History* thrives on its themes. This article intends to close this gap by focusing on two marginal themes -femininity and nature- to see how they interact with each other and to what extent they constrain the articulation of the main themes of the novel. This article argues that the interaction between femininity and nature in chapter 4 of the novel is flawed, and that it is necessary to look into "Parenthesis" to ascertain whether such a situation can ultimately be revoked. This article argues that the redeeming moment of "Parenthesis" involves a change of tactics rather than content, which saves the novel from the threat of reductionism.

There can be little doubt that Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* (henceforth to be referred to as *A History*) has all the trappings of an ambitious work. Despite its humble and/or mocking title, "a" history, the novel also yearns for completeness in its attempt to articulate in different ways abstract, all-embracing themes (see Saunders 1989: 9; Locke 1989: 42; Oates 1989: 12), and in this sense, gains much from the intellectual challenges it poses.[2] According to

[1] The work that went into this article was financed by the "Vicerrectorado de investigación" of the "Universidad de Alcalá" (Project no. H001/98).

[2] In a sense, it has to, since "it possesses no character who rises

critics, the thematic pillars of *A History* is made up of history, love, and religion (See Sexton 1989, Salyer 1991, Raucq Hoorix 1991 and Moseley 1997). However, at times other more intermittent themes appear which are part and parcel of the novel's overall meaning; what's more, these themes also define, and are in turn defined by, the history-love-religion triad. A proper understanding of the workings of *A History* thus depends on an analysis of these more marginal themes.

One such marginal element is nature, which is present in virtually all the chapters of *A History*. However, most of the times its appearance comes framed as a question or a denunciation. Thus chapter 1, for example, uses the character of Noah to condemn humanity for exploiting nature by using systems of knowledge like science and religion; chapter 2 asks itself whether "the difference between a monkey and a human being" is that only the latter is capable of "altruism" (53); while chapter 8 muses about the relationship between nature and society as it asks whether "primitive people" can have a history (216-17).

"Parenthesis", the most authoritative chapter of the novel (see Moseley 1997: 121-24 and Rushdie 1991: 242), is the only chapter that, instead of denouncing or asking questions, tries to find solutions. In "Parenthesis", nature also has an important function, for it is vital for defining love, which in turn "teach[es] us to stand up to history, to ignore its chin-out-strut" (238,[3] see also Coe 1989: 27, Locke 1989: 42, Moseley 1997: 119-20). But nature can only define love in an uneasy alliance with femininity, and this is the reason why this article chooses not to study nature on its own, but prefers to focus on the joint appearance of nature and femininity. This double theme is articulated in different ways in chapter 4 and "Parenthesis", and it is

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above the level of a cipher and no plot worth speaking of" (Taylor 1989: 40). For Joyce Carol Oates, too, "the more polished voice of the essayist dominates over the less certain voice of the fiction writer" (Oates 1989: 13); while Coe (1989) "can't remember reading a novel which showed so little interest in the politics of everyday relationships -or one, at any rate, which isolated them so ruthlessly from the realm of speculative ideas" (27).

[3] All page references devoid of indications as to author or year refer to Barnes (1989) *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*. New York: Vintage.

therefore that these two chapters will form the object of analysis of this article.

It is a commonplace to say that one of the main elements in the interaction between nature and femininity is holism or organicism.[4] In recent times, holism in nature has appeared as part of an attempt to articulate a non-anthropocentric ethics towards nature. Anthropocentric thinking has always seen nature in terms of its significance to human beings, whether this significance be material, aesthetic or religious. But for environmentalists nature exists as an *other*, radically different from human beings: "Nature's independence *is* its meaning; without it there is nothing but us" (McKibben 1990: 54). This is not just an ethical imperative, but also part of our current episteme, for which "There is something Newtonian, not yet Einsteinian, besides something morally naïve, about living in a frame where one species takes itself as absolute and values everything else relative to its utility" (Rolston 1995: 75).

Nature's radical otherness comes through in its having a "good of its own", identified on the one hand in the "telos" or final goal of every organism and which is encoded in the organism's DNA (Rolston 1991: 79-80, Taylor 1986: 67). On the other hand, not only organisms, but also species and ecosystems have a good of their own, ecosystems because "any level is real if it shapes behavior on the level below it" (Rolston 1991: 89), and species implicitly because ecosystems depend on them. Thus, nature is an interconnected whole made up of organisms, species and ecosystems, in which one cannot exist without the other.

The awareness of such an interrelationship in nature has prompted environmentalists to turn anthropocentrism upside down: according to them, ecosystems and species are ultimately more important than individuals, because they make it possible for individuals to exist (Rolston 1995: 72). Such an attitude runs counter to all ethical behaviour between human beings, which is anthropocentric

[4] This organicist theory usually operates through the detour of maternity (see for example Kaplan 1985, which draws on the controversy between Mary Wollstonecraft and Rousseau to argue this point, and Friedman 1989).

and individualistic, and thus seeks to satisfy the claims of the individual prior to those of the community (v.d. Pfordten 1996: 292).

This has a number of consequences which for anthropocentric thinking might be strange. Thus, for instance, environmental ethicists in a wildlife reserve may kill a whole herd of hundreds of animals if it threatens just a single individual from an endangered species; similarly, a herd that develops a disease will be allowed to die, so that natural selection may make the species as a whole stronger. On the other hand, environmental ethicists will allow wild ecosystems to burn down if that is due to natural sources, for it means that the ecosystem will have breathing space to develop. Ecosystems and species thus take pride of place if compared with individual organisms (v.d. Pfordten 1996: 169; see also Elliot 1995b: 227).

Initially, chapter 4 of *A History* seems to hold great promises for an analysis of nature and environmental issues: this chapter deals with the story of Kath Ferries, a woman who, unable to accept that nature is victimised by male dominated society and her boyfriend Greg, and with the world on the brink of a global nuclear disaster, leaves civilisation on a boat and in the company of two cats. Having landed on an island and apparently due to the nuclear catastrophe, she falls prey to a skin disease which leaves her delirious and fighting down nightmares in which it is not clear whether the nuclear war has really happened or just been a figment of her imagination, a projection of her problems with Greg.[5]

But it is not just the presence of nature which makes this chapter a treat for any ecocritic; more important is that chapter 4 is virtually littered with holistic references. Kath tries to think in holistic terms. Her insistence on "Everything [being] connected" bears out her readiness to accept unpleasant particulars in the face of the whole within which they function; the whole is more important than the individual. Thus, for example, she accepts that reindeer fight each other and that

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[5] The reader is left in doubt as to whether her nightmares are real or not; see Connor (1996: 232-38) for a discussion of this point.

> [T]hey bled. The skin was torn off and underneath was blood as well as bone. The antlers turned scarlet and white.... It was horrible, she thought, yet we ought to face it. Everything *is* connected, even the parts we don't like, especially the parts we don't like. (84)

In addition, when a nuclear disaster takes place in Russia -probably an allusion to Chernobyl- Kath is very much aware that the whole ecosystem in Norway, the country where she lives, may suffer from the effects of the nuclear catastrophe:

> The [radioactive] cloud had gone over where the reindeer grazed, poison had come down in the rain, the lichen became radioactive, the reindeer had eaten the lichen and got radioactive themselves. What did I tell you, she thought, everything is connected. (85)

In this Kath is quite different from the Norwegian government and the people around her: the former because after the Russian nuclear disaster they raise the becquerel level permitted in reindeer meat to insure that Norwegian butchers do good business (86); the latter because "For a while people stopped buying milk, and asked the butcher where the meat came from. But soon they stopped worrying, and forgot about it all" (85). Besides, it is not just that people around do not perceive that "everything is connected"; they do not even seem aware, as Kath is, of the necessity of a non-anthropocentric ethics: "People couldn't understand why she got so upset. They said ... if she had some spare sympathy going shouldn't she save it for human beings?" (85).

Kath's behaviour does not only point towards a holistic attitude towards nature, but also makes possible a connection between the concepts of holism and duty: thus, when she leaves a nuke-threatened society by sailing away on a boat, she does not expect to land on any holiday brochure island, and insists that "It was your duty" (92) to try it anyway. In addition, she is happy that, on arriving at the island, it does not turn out to have a "perfect sweep of sand ready for the tourist's footprint.... It was better that the sand was

rock, the lush jungle a scrub, the fertile soil a dustheap. *Too much beauty, too much verdure might make her forget the rest of the planet*" (99, my italics).

This connection between duty and holism is important in an environmental understanding of nature. Unlike anthropocentric ethics, which is individualistic, environmental ethics is oriented towards collectives: one effect of an environmentally oriented ethics is that it has to rely much more on a sense of duty than on affective behaviour, since a constant affective arousal towards collectivities is difficult to maintain; in the words of the environmental philosopher Taylor,

> The end of the action must be thought of as an ethically obligatory end and consequently as an end that is to be pursued disinterestedly, whether or not one is so inclined. If one seeks that end solely or primarily from inclination, the attitude being expressed is not moral respect but personal affection or love. (1986: 90)

As we can see from all these examples, chapter 4 articulates a strong defence of holism in *A History*. However, this same chapter also provides evidence which partially contradicts its holism, and it does so because of the close association between nature and femininity: holism in chapter 4 does not just apply to nature, but also feminist tenets.

There is no justifiable biological reason why woman should be closer to nature than man (Dickens 1992: 140). On the other hand, woman is like nature in that it is one of the great others (see Eagleton 1990: 13), and thus a potential enemy of male dominated ideology, which, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, is positivistic. It is a well known fact that even though otherness represents a threat to positivism (see Adorno and Horkheimer 1969: 22), at times it is also used by positivism for the latter's own ends. It is in the nature of positivism to stigmatise otherness as a troublesome remnant of the all-embracing scientific discourse (Kaplan 1985: 150),[6] and one of the great

[6] For Kaplan, it is the French Revolution which brings about the birth of "feminism and Romantic cultural theory" (1985: 150) and creates "new categories of independent subjectivity ... marked from

strategies of positivism consists in fusing different others, such as woman and nature, and to create one single and unanalysable whole:

> Man as Lord denies woman the honour of individualising her. In social terms, the female individual is an example of the species, a representative of her gender; completely surrounded by male logic, she therefore stands for nature, the substratum of neverending subordination in the idea, of neverending vassalage in reality. (Adorno and Horkheimer 1969: 119)[7]

As Adorno and Horkheimer make clear, the fusion of two such distinct and incommensurable others effectively precludes a rational defence of otherness. On the one hand, this strategy can be the direct product of positivistic ideology. On the other hand, it can also be espoused by the very same others as a defensive attitude, in the feeling that by uniting they are somehow more powerful and able to thwart their common enemy. However, in so doing, they may just be reproducing positivistic patterns of thought, thus defeating their own ends. It is thus arguable that to the extent that chapter 4 presents its others, nature and woman, as elements of one and the same otherness, the very concept of nature as presented in this chapter falls prey to positivistic thinking.

In feminist thinking, there seem to be three main links created by male dominated, scientific discourse, in the name of which women and nature are conflated. First of all, man is frequently equated with thought or culture and woman with the body or nature (Friedman 1989: 76, Eisenstein 1984: 22). Such an argument finds easy analogies with man's domination of nature through

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the beginning by exclusions of gender, race and class" (150). However, if we enquire further, the French Revolution itself can be understood as the outcome of positivist thinking (Hobsbawm 1977: 286).

[7] My translation: "Der Mann als Herrscher versagt der Frau die Ehre, sie zu individuieren. Die Einzelne is gesellschaftlich Beispiel der Gattung, Vertreterin ihres Geschlechts und darum, als von der männlichen Logik ganz Erfasste, steht sie für Natur, das Substratum nie endender Subsumtion in der Idee, nie endender Unterwerfung in der Wirklichkeit". See also Dickens (1992: 140) and Elliot (1995a: 5).

thought or science, and again, seems to have its inception in Descartes' division of "the world into matter and mind" (Brown 1986: 12).[8] Secondly, woman tends to be associated with a passive role, while man is seen as an active being (Eisenstein 1984: 8), which also establishes parallels with man's domination of nature. So here, too, man's domination of nature offers parallels to his domination of woman. Finally, women are more holistic or organic than men, due to "their role as socializers of the young" (Eisenstein 1984: 25). Here we can draw parallels with romantic thinking on nature and art; according to Schelling, for example, art is "a closed organic and necessary whole in all its parts, like nature" (quoted in Todorov 1982: 168).

In *A History*, it is possible to find these three attitudes in chapter 4. As regards instances of the split between thought or culture on the one hand, and body and nature on the other, one can be found when Kath lands on the island and begins to have nightmares in which men try to argue her out of her opinions:

> The mind was producing its own arguments against reality, against itself, what it knew. There was obviously something chemical behind it all, like antibodies or whatever. The mind, being in a state of shock because of what had happened, was creating its own reasons for denying what had happened. (100)

The nightmares peopled with men and the fact that Kath associates the mind with accepted modes of thinking or culture in the expressions "its own arguments" and "its own reasons" firmly links masculinity with thought and culture, while it leaves femininity with the dregs, the body. Moreover, in chapter 4 male culture -"those other impregnators up in the north [who] would sort something out" (89)- is responsible for the domination of nature, just as Greg sometimes slaps Kath around (87). The very word "impregnators" also supports deeply ingrained associations of masculinity with activity and

[8] For Friedman (1989), the difference between man and woman is born with Christianity, which appropriated "the power of the Word for a masculine deity and his son" (76). However, the parallel between woman and nature could only be established when nature itself was emasculated, i.e. with positivism.

femininity with passivity, the second characteristic which nature and woman share.

As regards the identification of nature and women with the organic, evidence is overabundant, the best being possibly the following:

> [M]aybe women are more in touch with the world ... everything's connected, isn't it, and women are more closely connected to all the cycles of nature and birth and rebirth on the planet than men, who are only impregnators after all when it comes down to it, and if women are in tune with the planet, then maybe if terrible things are going on up in the north, things which threaten the whole existence of the planet, then maybe women get to feel these things, like the way some people know earthquakes are coming, and perhaps that sets off PMT. (89)

Apart from reminding us of the holism which pervades nature in Kath's "everything's connected", such a passage creates an organic pattern which nature and woman share: first of all in the link between the "cycles of birth and rebirth" in woman and nature; then in the condescending role of man as "only" an impregnator; and finally in the fact that women can feel if the planet is threatened (this by the way links the reindeer episodes in chapter 1 and 4) which in turn further strengthens the ties between woman and nature.

Thus we can say that on the whole, the holism which appears in chapter 4 is ambiguous. On the one hand, it is close to a current articulation of the concept of nature. On the other hand, and since it seems that all three positivist characteristics which woman and nature share are present in chapter 4, it can be said that despite its contribution to the understanding of nature, this chapter has also regressive elements which look back in time to positivism.

If we compare "Parenthesis" with chapter 4, "Parenthesis" does not seem to have much spare time to devote to nature, and, when it does so, it becomes positively aggressive. If for this chapter, and thus in a sense for *A History*, love is its redeeming and most

important statement (Moseley 1997: 120), this love is posited at the opposite pole of nature:

> They teach kids how to cook and mend cars and fuck one another without getting pregnant ... but what use is any of that to them if they don't know about love? They're expected to muddle through by themselves. Nature is supposed to take over, like the automatic pilot in an aeroplane. Yet Nature, on to whom we pitch responsibility for all we cannot understand, isn't very good when set on automatic. Trusting virgins drafted into marriage never found Nature had all the answers when they turned out the light. (229)

In this passage, love is at the opposite pole of nature, here equated with "fuck[ing] one another".

In his endeavour to separate love and nature, the narrator of "Parenthesis" does not see love as a "useful mutation that helps the race survive" (233); rather, it is a "random mutation [which is] essential because it is unnecessary" (238). The argument seems to imply that love is not subject to the laws of evolution as nature is. This argument is flawed, for mutations are not always useful and can even be detrimental to the species as a whole (see Lorenz 1974: 47), but it furthers Barnes's point. Thus, for the narrator of "Parenthesis", "If we look at nature, do we see where love comes in? Not really" (232). In a most thorough inversion of chapter 4, nature is enquired into and found wanting.

For "Parenthesis", there are two interpretations of nature; one is feminist and nature friendly: "The feminist looks for examples of disinterested behaviour in the animal kingdom" (232). The other is chauvinist and antagonistic to nature; it tries to find in nature "the exercise of power, dominance and sexual convenience" (232). The narrator seems to agree with this latter view (232), and in the process discredits the sometimes too easy presentation in chapter 4 of a benevolent nature which is close to some kind of feminine principle. The narrator of "Parenthesis" thus breaks the link established in chapter 4 between nature and femininity.

If this were the final judgement on the treatment of nature in "Parenthesis", it would indeed be a weak one. But the imagery that Julian Barnes creates in this chapter seems to belie this rejection of nature. It has been argued that for "Parenthesis", love is a plus in man and a lack in animals. The imagery of "Parenthesis" suggests something different: for the narrator, "love has roots below the gums of consciousness" (224); it is also equated with the heart, which is opposed to the brain (242). This suggests not only that love is a specifically human essence, but also that it escapes rational control and thus comes near to instincts and nature. Love seems to be quintessentially human precisely because it is part of human nature, and does not only exist at the conscious level.

Let us remain with images of rationality: at one point, to refer to love, Julian Barnes uses a metaphor in which he compares the heart with the brain. At one pole of the comparison stands the brain, which is the opposite of love, and which "has its secrets, though when different cryptanalysts, maze-builders and surgeons unite, it will surely be possible to solve those mysteries" (242). The reference to "cryptanalysts, maze-builders and surgeons" places the brain near the domain of positivism as an object of scientific analysis which can be exhausted in the findings it admits.

However, opposed to the brain is the heart, which refers to love, and it is the use of the heart metaphor which shows that positivistic attitudes such as those that appeared in chapter 4 do not necessarily run through "Parenthesis" as a whole:

> I sliced it [an ox heart] up with a radiologist friend.... We frequently lost our way in this compacted meat. The two halves of the heart did not ease apart as I'd fancifully imagined, but clung desperately round one another like drowning lovers. We cut into the same ventricle twice, believing we'd found the other one. (235-36)

Unlike the brain, the heart cannot be exhausted as an object of analysis. But it is even more interesting to note that, on the one hand, the ox heart itself invokes the presence of the material, and, the heart being from

an ox, of nature; on the other hand, the love the heart symbolises moves away from the material. This creates a wholesome tension in "Parenthesis" between a love which "is anti-mechanical, anti-materialist" (242) and non-existent in nature (232); and on the other hand, a love which is linked with matter by having "roots below the gum of consciousness" (224), by not being "heart-shaped" (234), or unlike the brain, by looking "a fucking mess" (242). It also creates a curious dichotomy, for, while nature is explicitly separated from love, that element which escapes deterministic reason (242), it is let in by the backdoor through the use of metaphors which are grounded in nature, and in which nature itself escapes the rational.

It remains to be seen how in "Parenthesis" femininity is linked to nature. At the very beginning of this half-chapter, the first picture we are presented with is that of the narrator and his wife asleep in bed.[9] In this image,

> She falls asleep like someone *yielding* to the *gentle* tug of a *warm* tide, and floats *with confidence* till morning. I fall asleep more *grudgingly*, *thrashing* at the waves, either *reluctant* to let a good day depart or still *bitching* about a bad one. (223, my italics)

The words in italics and the simple fact that she submits to nature's lead, while he resists it, clearly links the female/male with the nature/non-nature opposition, and more important, with the good/bad or positive/negative dichotomies. The result of this image combines femininity with nature and goodness, a value which is very much associated with love, the essence of humanity "Parenthesis" advocates. Thus, what is human can be said to be close to nature through the detour of femininity. Furthermore, the same image is enacted in a setting in which the narrator thinks about and observes his wife, while she is sleeping. Observing, thinking and sensing create associations of rationality and activity,

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[9] I hope that, in what follows, Coe's complaint about "how we are to interpret the behavioural tics of the author's (sleeping) wife" (1989: 27), will receive a satisfactory answer, as I also hope his reference to "the overworked symbolism about the shape of the heart" (1989: 27) has.

while the sleeping wife who is looked at suggests the body, so that the female element is nearer to nature and also passivity than its male counterpart.

Is then "Parenthesis" able to find a way out of the positivistic straits it entered in chapter 4? A look at the imagery of "Parenthesis" shows that chapter 4 and "Parenthesis" bear some similarities in their opposition of nature and femininity on the one hand, and man or positivistic rationality on the other hand: most of the quotes discussed link love and nature against the brain and rationality; and the last quote suggests that women are closer to nature, while men are identified as having more rational attributes; women are also shown to be passive, while males are active. There is thus a sense in which the problems of chapter 4 are not resolved.

But this is not the whole story. It is also possible to see one technical difference which may help "Parenthesis" to go beyond the shortcomings of chapter 4: whereas in chapter 4 the union between femininity and nature appears as an overt one, in "Parenthesis" it is hidden, presented in ambiguous terms. It may be that its overt statement is that nature and love are different, indeed that nature and femininity are at opposite poles. However, the imagery of "Parenthesis" revokes the overt judgement even if it once again sails close to the positivistic harbour.

Thus, Julian Barnes may not be able to imagine nature and femininity in terms other than those he has inherited; possibly only a few writers can do so anyway. But in "Parenthesis" he proves dexterous at evading final, reductive meanings. Unlike chapter 4, "Parenthesis" does not let itself be pinned down in its task of assigning meaning to nature and femininity. Instead, in a never-ending motion, it oscillates between different variations on these themes. I dare say that this is a great plus, and probably one hidden reason for Rushdie's admiration of the treatment of love in "Parenthesis": if, as he says, "love almost saves the day" (1991: 242), this may well have to do with the fact that in *A History* nature and femininity are very much alive and kicking.

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