Petites Histoires, Meta-perspective: Meaning and Narrative in Julian Barnes

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More than a one observer has called the work of Julian Barnes "odd" or "strange" (Greaney 225). Part of this surely comes from the form his books tend to take—some sort of hybrid between fiction and fact, memoir and manufacture. But part of his unsettling effect is the depth of the questions his fiction attacks. Barnes, Colm Tóibín comments, is trying to figure out "our fate on the earth, what it means to have been, or be, alive, or… What am I to believe?" Though Barnes is not a philosopher, as Tóibín mentions, it is clear that he uses his writing, fiction and non-fiction alike, to come at the same issues as those who write explicitly about ideas.

Barnes has an answer to the last of the questions Tóibín identifies: what are we to believe? And by extension, how are we to live and what things do we need in order to do so? Throughout his corpus, Barnes returns repeatedly to the subject of Tóibín's last question, that we have a need to build solid ground on which to live, but after the death of God this has become all but impossible. To put the problem in artistic terms, as Barnes often does: we need narratives and representation, but what should we do when all of them prove to be ephemeral? I contend that Barnes's answer, a meta-perspective that thrums through his work, is that we must create our own narratives and stick to them, all the while acknowledging that they, too, are liable to collapse. Barnes is surely a post-modernist writer, and the denouements of his philosophical fictions are post-modern, too. But he is a very specific kind of post-modernist. His novelistic exhortations for

us to carefully craft our own precarious stories are an example of what philosopher Jean-François Lyotard commands us to do in his own emphasis on "petites histoires."

While I uncover this meta-perspective using many works from Barnes's oeuvre, my point of entrance is *Levels of Life,* an uncommon book even by his standards. A blurb printed on the back cover calls it a record of "Barnes's attempts to find a semblance of equilibrium after the death of his wife, the literary agent Pat Kavanagh." Yet *Levels*'s first two parts initially appear to be about ballooning and photography, and only by the end of section three is it evident that the opening, too, is connected to loss. In these opening sections, we are given a strange history of ballooning, one with real historical foundations but with invented interactions and dialogue among the characters involved. Section two is simultaneously a fictional romance between the French actress Sarah Bernhardt and the ballooning pioneer Fred Burnaby. Despite these peregrinations, the blurb's assessment of the book's contents is more or less correct: the book is about love and death. Here, I roughly follow the tripartite structure of *Levels*. I also mirror Barnes's explicit foci from the book: photography, ballooning, and love.

In the section focused on the "Sin of Height," I argue that, for Barnes, we commit the sin of height when we have a mistaken conviction about the permanence of an interpretation of the world. Next, in "The Appearance of Depth," I show how Barnes suggests a predilection to commit the sin of height might be avoided. In the final part, "Layers of Levity," I claim that Barnes does not think it is enough to simply avoid the sin of height, since doing so leaves us without a place to stand. While Barnes entertains the possibility that love is the one necessity for us to live, I suggest that love is for him secondary to the need to tell stories about our lives, including stories about our loves. I conclude by briefly mining Barnes's own life to articulate how his philosophy might actually be lived.

The Sin of Height

What is the sin of height? Is it simply a prideful effort to reach elevations never intended to be seen by us heavy boned beings? This possibility is suggested by a figure in Barnes's 1989 book, *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters,* a curious work comprised of retellings of biblical tales and ruminations on art and life. In one, Barnes has "old Jessie Wade" opine to a young Spike, an enthusiast of the Wright Brothers, that the sin of height is just this, since "if God had intended us to fly, he'd have given us wings." Barnes's adolescent aviator is, however, too quick for Old Jessie. "'But God intended us to drive, didn't he?' replied young Spike, and actually pointed at the freshly shined Packard in which his elderly detractor had ridden the two hundred yards to church" (Barnes, *A History* 251). The implication here is that flight is just another form of transport, and unless one is to condemn any form of assisted travel it, too, is unobjectionable.

But things are not so simple for Barnes. In *Levels*'s opening section he returns to the sentiment earlier expressed in his work by Old Jessie. He turns first to the parable of Simon Magus from the New Testament. After impressing a crowd with his apparent ability to levitate, the magician is revealed to be a fraud, having relied on the powers of demons to defy gravity. Simon falls to the earth once St. Peter prays that God overpower these Satanic forces. "A dead magician, blood oozing from his mouth after an enforced crash landing. The sin of height is punished," Barnes writes (*Levels* 12). He reminds us of Icarus's fate as well. Barnes is not one to accept blindly the supernatural reasoning of such legends, but he also does not so glibly dismiss the sin of height as Spike does in *History.* For one, he recognizes that elevation above the ground provides a fundamentally different perspective upon the world. Horses, trains, and cars may move people faster than previously possible, but they only permit the same things to be seen at a different speed. Submarine travel allows

access to sights hitherto inaccessible, but not a new look at an old scene. Only flight fits this category.

That flight is revolutionary in this regard, Barnes notes in *Levels*, was seized by many in the nineteenth century. Once such individual was Victor Hugo, who thought that heavier-than-air flight—i.e., planes, as opposed to ballooning—heralded the spread of democracy. The photographer Felix Tournachon (Nadar) was just as enthusiastic as Hugo. Nadar found height to be a place where "man cannot be reached by any human force or by any power of evil, and where he feels himself to live as if for the first time. . . . How easily indifference, contempt, forgetfulness drop away. . . and forgiveness descends" (qtd. in Barnes, *Levels* 13). Barnes's own summation of the zeitgeist mirrors the devotion of these two men. "The aeronaut could visit God's space—without the use of magic—and colonize it. And in doing so, he discovered a peace that didn't pass understanding. Height was moral, height was spiritual" (13).

Such discussions of height make it seem like no sin at all. Indeed, in the very same chapter in *History* in which young Spike silences old Jessie, older Spike travels to the moon and speculates on the virtues of viewing the earth from such a distance. "I went 240,000 miles to the moon—and it was the earth that was really worth looking at," Spike tells his wife (257). Barnes has cribbed this line from a real astronaut, William Anders, who took the famous "earthrise" photo in 1968 in which our planet appears as a milky blue orb suspended in dark space. The symbolism of Anders's image was seized upon by others at the time of its capture. "To see the Earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats is to see ourselves as riders on the Earth together, brothers on that bright loveliness in the eternal cold," poet Archibald MacLeish wrote in 1968 (Moran). Barnes acknowledges that ballooning did not lead to democracy ("Unless budget airlines count"), all the while entertaining the possibility that aeronautics actually "purged man of the sin of height" (*Levels* 14).

Part one of *Levels* is about photography, too, and this secondary focus is necessary to purge the sin of height. "You put two things together that have not been put together before. And the world is changed," Barnes begins the book (3). In 1858, Nadar enacted such a change by combining ballooning and photography, building a darkroom in a basket and developing shots in the air. This allowed for practices loved by the French bureaucracy, land surveying and military reconnaissance chiefly among them. But Barnes suggests that cameras in the sky produced pictures that demystified the air and enlightened people of their true position:

> Once, the peasant had looked up at the heavens, where God lived, fearing thunder, hail, and God's anger, hoping for sun, a rainbow, and God's approval. Now, the modern peasant looked up at the heavens and saw instead the less daunting arrival . . . of Felix Tournachon in his airborne wicker cottage, complete with refreshment room, lavatory and photographic department. (26)

Barnes moves immediately from revelations of the modern peasant to the revelations of the earthrise photo.

In this understanding, the transformative feature of photography is its accuracy. Nadar's genius combination, Barnes says, was truth and magic. "Truth, as in photography; magic, as in ballooning" (37). This belief that Barnes articulates—that photography is truth—existed long before we began to declare "pics or it didn't happen." When Kodak produced the first mass-market camera in the late nineteenth century, the company declared that "a vacation without Kodak is a vacation wasted" (*A Vacation*). Surely this advertising campaign was at least partly propelled by the same motivations that sparked the "cartomania" of previous decades, with people as eager to display their travels as much as they were their portraits. But Kodak also suggested that photographs were to be taken for one's own use as a reminder of the facts of the past—where you had been and what you had seen. This is likely what Nadar meant when, as Barnes recounts, he called photography one of the three primary marks of modernity, along with electricity and aeronautics. Modernity,

a period ushered in by the advent of so-called enlightenment rationality, is constituted by drive to replace faith with true understanding. Modernity seeks to make peasants no longer fearful of the heavens.

Yet Barnes leaves us with the distinct impression that he does not believe this to be true—that the sin of height is not so easily dispatched by ballooning and photography. "All that has happened," he says, "is that we have brought our sinfulness to a new location" (*Levels* 23). So, too, does he depict pictorial records as inherently unstable. When explaining that his memories of his wife are gradually disappearing, he writes that "memory—the mind's photographic archive—is failing" (98). The phenomenon Barnes describes is not one of deliberate media manipulation but rather an inevitable human inadequacy. In *Levels,* aboard a balloon adrift somewhere above the Thames estuary, three travellers witness a new occurrence. "The sun was projecting on to the bank of a fleecy cloud below the image of their craft: the gasbag, the cradle and, clearly outlined, silhouettes of the three aeronauts," Barnes writes. One of the three later compared it to a colossal photograph. "And so it is with our life," continues Barnes. "So clear, so sure, until, for one reason or another—the balloon moves, the cloud disperses, the sun changes angle—the image is lost forever, available only to memory, turned into anecdote" (110). Even rising above the earth does not produce a perspective or narrative that is impervious to alteration.

Barnes covers similar issues in his 1986 novel *Staring at the Sun,* and his discussion there helps explain further what the sin of height is. Flight is a central theme of the book, with airplanes offering an opportunity at the sort of magic Barnes describes in *Levels.* One character, piloting an RAF fighter during the Battle of Britain, is flying home above the English Channel just as the sun rises. Seeing smoke from a ship below, the pilot dives down quickly. "Then something happened," Barnes writes. "The speed of his descent had driven the sun back below the horizon, and as he looked towards the east he saw it rise again: the same sun

coming up from the same place across the same sea. . . . It was an ordinary miracle he would never forget" (*Staring at the Sun* 4). In *Staring*'s first half, flight's capacity to produce such ordinary miracles makes it something worthy of esteem. When told the story of the twice-rising sun by the pilot who saw it, protagonist Jean is enraptured by airplanes. But later in the book, her son Gregory is less sure of flight's virtues than is his mother. Gregory sees the plane as a symbol of the engineers' takeover of modernity, with planes also introducing "the most infernal conditions in which to die" (96). He suggests that airplanes bring about both ignorance *and* certainty. Ignorance, in that in an airplane a calm-voiced captain will tell you that the drinks dispenser is malfunctioning when in fact a wing has fallen off, deceiving you even as you are in a death dive. And certainty, in that passengers in an airplane crash will be killed many times over by the impact and its aftermath—first dead of a heart attack, then immolated in the inferno, and then in the wreck's explosion. The magic of the "ordinary miracle" does not last.

Moreover, Barnes uses another piece of technology to articulate the sin of height. While *Staring* was written during the internet's infancy, the "General Purposes Computer" resembles today's search engines. Just as Hugo thought that flight would usher in democracy, the GPC is democratic, supposedly bringing "all things known to people," with only a few scholars objecting to a computer that can answer almost everything (147). Gregory, unsurprisingly, is skeptical of the computer's capabilities. Barnes includes access to The Absolute Truth by the novel's end. TAT goes beyond even the GPC, a mysterious realm of knowledge that supposedly lives up to its name. TAT is the ultimate sin of height, even if Barnes does not use the precise term to describe it. Believing that one has The Absolute Truth is believing that one has ascended to a sufficient height to see everything perfectly for how it is. When Gregory receives access to the TAT, however, he finds that it does not offer what it claims. "NOT REAL QUESTION," responds TAT to Gregory's questions about

God. "OUTSIDE CAPACITY," it answers to others (177-81). As the narrator, Barnes shows us what Gregory cannot see: that the GPC is not run by any fancy program but rather by people tasked with answering as if the GPC really were an artificial superintelligence. In *Staring,* as in his other books, Barnes shows us the temptation to seek the certainty of height, either by flight or other technology, all the while showing that achieving this certainty is no success at all.

In Barnes's most explicit telling of the sin of height, in *Levels,* it is the self-delusion of certainty that accompanies the combination of ballooning and photography. You think you see what is there? Just wait. The light will change and so will the image. The sin of height is the false appearance of objectivity that images—particularly aerial, distant ones—convey. The risks in these mistakes have been previously documented by Barnes. In interviews over the years, he has repeated the peculiar Russian proverb "he lies like an eyewitness," even using it as the epigraph to his novel *Talking it Over.* In *The Sense of an Ending,* narrator Tony's entire understanding of an event of his youth is revealed to have been erroneous. Tony must reconcile himself to a change in perspective, to a shifting of the sun.

The effects that images can have in this process of reconciliation is addressed by Barnes in *Before She Met Me.* Graham, the dowdy professor at the center of the plot, begins the book by divorcing his wife and marrying a younger woman, who was formerly an actress. Their relationship initially appears to be loving. Soon, though, Graham compulsively watches his new wife's old films, especially her amorous scenes with a co-star with whom she was involved romantically. These viewings drive him mad; when the book ends, he has become a murderous lunatic. In acquiring this obsession with images from his wife's past, Graham has succumbed to the sin of height. He has tethered himself to one projection on one cloud—in this case a film screen—which may have been clear and sure at the time, but which Barnes goes

to great lengths to show is no longer so. His wife loves him very much. This is the projection he ought to see.

The Appearance of Depth

How might we avoid the sin of height? This is the second part of Barnes's metanarrative on which I will focus. Barnes is not a Christian, and his worldview is thus not characterized by original sin, making the sin of height no more inevitable than any other. Tony and Graham are afflicted with it, mistakenly thinking that certain images are statically true, but this does not mean that all of us must be. A place to start looking for Barnes's prescription for avoidance is chapter five of *A History*, an essay on Théodore Géricault's 1819 painting 'The Raft of the Medusa.'"[1] In this work, Géricault depicts the aftermath of the 1816 shipwreck of a French frigate off the coast of Mauritania. Of the 157 people from the boat who boarded a rickety raft as their vessel capsized, only fifteen survived until a rescue was made. In his assessment, Barnes begins by outlining what Géricault *did not* paint when, just months after the shipwreck, he put brush to canvas. He did not paint:

> 1) The *Medusa* striking the reef;
> 2) The moment when the tow ropes were cast off and the raft abandoned;
> 3) The mutinies in the night;
> 4) The necessary cannibalism;
> 5) The self-protective mass murder;
> 6) The arrival of the butterfly;
> 7) The survivors up to their waists, or calves, or ankles in water;
> 8) The actual moment of rescue. (Barnes, *A History* 126-27)

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[1]This essay also appears in *Keeping an Eye Open,* Barnes's 2015 collection of art criticism.

With such an exhaustive enumeration of omissions, one would suspect Barnes to be accusing Géricault of incompetency. But he finds good reason for each of these to have been excised from the final painting. Géricault's resistance to overt political messaging—such as Bonapartists attacking Monarchists—meant that his work could not be reduced to pamphleteering. The mutiny honestly depicted would have looked too much like a saloon brawl. Putting the raft underwater, as it was in reality, would have rendered it invisible. Barnes observes that Géricault actually added figures to the raft, a factual change chalked up to ensuring that "structure is balanced" (132). While the actual survivors on the raft would have been shrivelled and malnourished after weeks at sea, Géricault's figures are muscled and fit in spite of their distress. This, too, Barnes suggests, is strategic. "Withered castaways in tattered rags are in [an emotional register] impelling us to an easy desolation," he writes. "What has happened? The painting has slipped history's anchor. . . . We don't just imagine the ferocious miseries on that fatal machine; we don't just become the sufferers. They become us" (136-37). Examining Géricault's painting, we are prodded into realizing that we too are "all lost at sea, lost between hope and despair, hailing something that may never come to rescue us" (137). Barnes's deconstruction of images transforms them from apparently true depictions of the world into things with a particular message and subject.

Barnes's unearthing of presences and absences in Géricault is but a tease at his broader method in *A History*. *History*'s title is no doubt an allusion to Walter Raleigh's *The History of the World in Five Books*. But where Raleigh makes a real effort at living up to the promises of his frontispiece, Barnes does not seriously try to achieve such a thing. Not only does he ignore most of history, he also spends many of his chapters returning to the same narrow stories, primarily involving Noah's ark and shipwrecks. Barnes's book is neither a novel nor an encyclopedia. Perhaps

the only way of describing his method is by comparing it to one of the book's recurring motifs: the woodworm.

The woodworm first appears at the end the book's first chapter, when it is revealed to have been the narrator re-telling the story of Noah's Ark. This loquacious insect, one of several to have sneaked aboard Noah's flotilla inside the horns of rams, literally inhabits the material of the boat itself, burrowing inside its walls and recounting the action from this perspective. The same creature appears on trial a few chapters later, in a sequence Barnes presents as pure historical court record, his only contribution being editing and translation. In these court transcriptions, woodworms have been accused of chewing apart the chair-legs on a bishop's seat, sufficiently weakening them so that they collapsed when he took his place. For this crime, the church is seeking to have woodworms everywhere excommunicated, the latest in a long line of animals to be scapegoated by humans. In chapter seven, a character remarks in passing that his childhood home had "furniture old enough to have woodworm in it" (171).

Most striking of them all is Barnes's offhanded mention of the worm at the end of his essay on Géricault. Even as he suggests that the artist's ingenuity has allowed the painting to slip "history's anchor," he shortly thereafter doubts this. Have we, in the painting, a moment of supreme agony "varnished, framed, glazed, hung in a famous art gallery to illuminate our human condition, fixed, final, always there. Is that what we have? Well, no. People die; rafts rot; and works of art are not exempt" (139). Not only will the paint's pigment slowly fade, Barnes also suspects that if the museum-keepers examined its frame "they will discover woodworm there" (139). Given his evident devotion to the work, one would think that Barnes would find the decay distressing. Not so. In its decay—its lack of permanence—the painting self-cleanses itself of the sin of height; each new stage in its descent adds depth to what it can communicate. In the field of art restoration, there are those who believe that works ought to be returned to the state they were in when the artist

added her last flourish, and there are those who seek only to keep works from turning to dust. The latter camp's most famous adherent is probably the art critic John Ruskin, who, in 1885, wrote that "the greatest glory of a building. . . is in its Age" and that restoration of the former sort constituted "the most total destruction which a building can suffer...a destruction accompanied with false description of the thing destroyed" (179).

Assessing the field in 2016, Ben Lerner explains that contemporary art conservators try to balance Ruskin's perspective with the opposite pole, occupied by those who aim at a "Disneyfication of the historical record." One approach is to try and "protect an image's over-all compositional effect while also seeking to acknowledge the newness, the falseness" of what the conservator has done (Lerner). In his novel *Talking it Over,* Barnes has one of his characters admit a devotion to the Ruskin camp: "*There is no 'real' picture waiting underneath to be revealed.* What I've always said about life itself" (122; emphasis original). Given Barnes's affinity for the woodworm, we should suspect him to be operating at least partially as a ventriloquist.

If the woodworm's gnawing has cleansing potential, quite literally adding subterranean passages to solid wood, then we can see why Barnes has chosen to use this method on biblical tales: for him, they are ones in supreme need of such a salvation. "It's not much of a story, is it?" he writes of the tale of Jonah and the whale in *History,* likening it to all other parts of the Old Testament. "There's a crippling lack of free will around—or even the illusion of free will. God holds all the cards and wins all the tricks. The only uncertainty is how the Lord is going to play it this time: start with the two of trumps and lead up to the ace, start with the ace and run down to the two, or mix them around" (176). The woodworm is Barnes's antidote to all of this divine omnipotence. It informs us that Noah actually had four arks, that the rains fell not for forty days (that would have been "no more routine than an English summer") but a year and a half, and the waters swirled upon the earth for more like four years. Far from

being a man of great virtue, Noah was, in truth, a bit of a tyrant, often drunk, more often cruel, and certainly not nice to animals, even before he had been granted consumption rights by God. Barnes also draws our attention to the subtlety of woodworms. The one that narrates the story of the flood has made it aboard the ark by hiding in a ram's horns, and its stowaway status is significant. Stowaways are present without the knowledge of the craft's captain and crew, which means they cannot move about in the open for fear of being captured. But it also means that they can do and say things that are not tolerated by the ship's rules. No wonder that Noah did not invite the woodworm on to his ark: the woodworm is the one telling the truth about him—that "he was not a nice man"—and undermining the traditional tale. In telling of the stowaway, Barnes is showing us that there are always unseen elements of stories that, if discussed, can radically alter their meanings. Similarly, the woodworms that attack the bishop's seat and Géricault's frame do so without being noticed, just like Noah's stowaway. A remarkable thing about woodworms is that they can completely destroy a piece of furniture while it remains temporarily intact, until another disturbance catalyzes its collapse. By using a stowaway as his motif, Barnes is showing us his method of combatting the sin of height in these tales. What these Biblical stories—and all sufferers of the sin of height—require for redemption is an infestation of woodworms. Crucially, these infestations often go unnoticed by those whose constructions are about to be consumed by them. In writing about these cleansings of the sin of height, Barnes suggests that even the sturdiest of stories can be disrupted by the woodworm effect, especially if those committing the sin remain unaware of the woodworms' presence.

Layers of Levity

In section one, I argued that Barnes thinks we commit the sin of height when we wed ourselves to a certain vision of the world

and history. In section two, I contended that Barnes prescribes woodworms to counteract that sin, since their burrowing makes it impossible to ignore the fact that reality has more depth than static visions of the world allow. Does this make Barnes a straightforward post-modernist? Now that we are aware of the woodworm effect, is he simply endorsing its efficacy? Are Barnes's bugs merely his version of Barthes' dictionary riffs or Foucault's genealogies? There is good reason to think so. But Joyce Carol Oates, for one, wonders otherwise, musing in her review of *History* that Barnes is a humanist of the "pre-post-modernist species" (Oates). Oates cannot mean this in a strictly chronological sense, since Barnes's career is contemporaneous to post-modernism, if not post-post-modernism. Oates's gnomic conclusion must be more meaningful than mere categorization. If Barnes were entirely committed to deconstruction it would be woodworms all the way down. But it is not. Barnes repeatedly shows us that we *must* create stories to our lives, stories that are resistant—though never entirely impervious—to woodworms.

In one of the most intriguing chapters in *History*, we follow one woman's survival of the Chernobyl disaster's fallout. Having escaped an England mired in nuclear conflict, not to mention her abusive boyfriend, Kath survives aboard a sailboat floating aimlessly in the ocean before reaching an island, growing delirious from malnourishment and a radiation-induced skin condition. Or perhaps she does not. Another half of the story, or perhaps the content of one of her delusions, suggests that her sub-conscious has invented the boat and catastrophe in response to the trauma of her relationship. Barnes leaves it ambiguous as to which story is the real one.

"How do you explain that I remember very clearly everything that's happened from the news of the war breaking out in the north to my time here on this island?" Kath asks her therapist during a session—or imagines asking him during a nightmare. "The technical term is fabulation," the therapist responds, or she imagines him to respond. "You make up a story to cover the

facts you don't know or can't accept. You keep a few true facts and spin a story around them" (Barnes, *A History* 109). Barnes's obsession with the fabulation of history and our stories began before writing *History* and has lasted long after. In *The Sense of an Ending,* he has a character describe history as "that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation" (17). This view is ascribed to the philosopher "Patrick LaGrange": Patrick is Barnes's middle name, and "la grange" is the French word for "barn." Another figure in the book cautions against concluding that history is merely the lies of the victors—claiming that it is also the self-delusions of the defeated.

Barnes's work unravels fabulations, Tony's reckoning with his remembrances in *Ending* being foremost among them. But Barnes does not condemn the creation of these stories in the first place. I think this is what Oates means when she calls him a pre-post-modernist. For all his commitment to crawling through the timber of humans'—and humanity's—edifices, he believes we have a need to fabricate certainty, or an urge to commit the sin of height. This belief appears most apparently in *History*'s final chapter, in which an unnamed man, with attributes suspiciously similar to Barnes's himself (most notably support for Leicester City Football Club), recounts his first few millennia passed in heaven. With seemingly unlimited time and resources, the narrator becomes so good at golf that he can finish a round (all his rounds!) in eighteen strokes. He goes on cruises; learns to canoe, mountaineer, and balloon; paints; explores the jungle; watches a court case; and pretends he is the last person on earth. This list, as Brian Finney has observed, bears a striking resemblance to the exploits documented in *History*'s previous nine-and-a-half chapters (62). All of this excitement, however, is eventually unable to keep the man from experiencing a profound boredom. When he confides his ennui to the mysterious women on staff in this Eden, they reveal that all others who have ever entered experienced the same symptoms.

"It seems to me that Heaven's a very good idea, it's a perfect idea you could say, but not for us. Not given the way we are," says the narrator to the staff. "So what's it all for? Why do we have Heaven? Why do we have these dreams of going to Heaven?" She provides him with a possible explanation. "Perhaps because you need them. Because you can't get by without the dream" (Barnes, *A History* 307). In this book Barnes speaks of Heaven; in *Levels* he speaks of height. But they are the same concept—a sort of objectively perfect place of truth reached by ascending above the earth with a camera while we are alive, or by climbing the golden steps after we have died.

For Barnes, this necessity most often appears as a belief in the transcendence of love. It is for love that he argues in the book's half chapter, the only one where he formally drops the façade of a narrator and writes as "Julian Barnes" (225). Here Julian opines extensively on the subject, from drowsy movements made in the dark to the word itself in its many linguistic forms. While conceding his own inability to explain much about the phenomenon, he insists that he can tell us why we should love.

> 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 is essential because it is unnecessary. Love won't change the course of history (that nonsense about Cleopatra's nose is strictly for sentimentalists), but it will do something much more important: teach us to stand up to history, to ignore its chin-out strut. . . . We make up a story to cover the facts we don't know or can't accept; we keep a few true facts and spin a story round them. Our panic and pain are only eased by soothing fabulation; we call it history. (239-40)

Gregory Salyer, having not seen or taken to Oates's classification of Barnes, is bemused by this passage: "It is unusual for a postmodernist writer like Barnes to offer his reader a way out of the problematic that he has taken pains to set up. . . . In this half chapter Barnes not only offers a way out of the problem of history and its domineering, totalizing influence; he pleads love's case" (227). Salyer comments that this commitment to love as

an absolute truth makes Barnes distinct from post-structuralists, since they have a confidence (unshared by Barnes) that people can live without "the possibility of objective truth" (228).

With his skepticism of theological truths—the true high-altitude sins—Barnes is better placed alongside thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and Frank Kermode, who hold similar non-theological commitments to the necessity of narrativity. Across her corpus, Arendt repeats Isak Dinesen's claim that all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story. Arendt argues that the sort of story Dinesen references "reveals the meaning of what would otherwise remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings" (Arendt, "Isak Dinesen" 104). Arendt writes that the most powerful elements of our private lives—the heart, the mind, and the senses—are indeterminate and shadowy until they acquire a shape fit for public appearance. "The most current of such transformations occurs," she tells us, "in storytelling" (*The Human Condition* 50). In his study *The Sense of an Ending,* its title identical to Barnes's novel, Kermode suggests that humans, like poets, "need fictive concords with origins and ends" in order to make sense of their lives (7). In his words, this stems from a "need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and an end" (53). In this book, Kermode articulates the need for action as fundamentally connected to our need to develop stories to comprehend our own lives—to find a narrative identity for ourselves. Kermode argues that in doing this we transform the events from *chronos,* which is passing time, to *kairos,* which is significant time. He writes: "In every plot there is an escape from chronicity, and so, in some measure, a deviation from this norm of 'reality'" (54). In *Sense of an Ending* Barnes has Tony become aware of his own fabulations of the past, a painful process for the aging man. Tony must recalibrate his story in response. As F.H. Holmes writes of the twist, Tony's "new perspective on his past behaviour requires a new ending" (35).

Though Oates calls him a "pre-post-modernist," Barnes's belief in the necessity of narrative is shared by the post-modernist

philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. Lyotard's distinctiveness from post-modernists committed to deconstruction—or woodworming—as something *beyond* method is well explained by Stuart Sim, who contrasts him to Jacques Derrida. "Social constructs still demand to be assessed" in Lyotard's thought, while Derrida "seems far more concerned with demonstrating how criteria can only fail us" (Sim 98). This difference turns out to mean that Lyotard explores how "little narratives" may still be possible, even as the legitimacy of grand meta-narratives is dead and gone. Little narratives make no claim to an all-encompassing explanation of the world and instead concern themselves with narrow functional accuracy.[2] Sim explains: "Metanarratives are seen to be oppressive in that they enforce conformity of belief and so keep populations in line...whereas little narratives are temporary arrangements designed to address specific social problems" (114). "It is not inconceivable that the recourse to narrative is inevitable," Lyotard writes, speaking of inadequacies in the paradigms of scientific knowledge (28). Lyotard's position on narratives takes a Nietzschean turn, noted by Fredric Jameson in his foreword to the book, when he speaks of the importance of forgetting.[3] The weight of the past becomes overwhelming; omissions of the past are essential to living. Lyotard's thinking on narrative is primarily oriented towards politics—stories that must be told for the purposes of communities. Barnes, meanwhile, is most concerned with discrete people. If we choose to classify him with postmodernists, then, he resides somewhere closer to the Lyotardians than to the Derrideans.

Seeing these similarities between Barnes and Lyotard is important because it indicates that Barnes, like Lyotard, does not

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[2]For more on the distinction between "master" and "local" narratives, see Kerwin Lee Klein's "In Search of Narrative Mastery: Postmodernism and the People without History."

[3]For Nietzsche's work on forgetting, see both *On the Genealogy of Morals* (58) and the second of his *Untimely Meditations*.

want to deconstruct endlessly the "petites histoires" by which we live. In *Levels*'s second section, Barnes writes a fictional romance between Bernhardt and the British balloonist and army captain Fred Burnaby. Much besotted with Bernhardt, Burnaby visits her every night after her performances, bringing bouquets, gifts, and hopes that Bernhardt will receive his affection and reciprocate it with the same passion. After months of this, he finally proposes marriage, a proposal Bernhardt declines. "I am not made for happiness," she tells him. "You must think of me as an incomplete person" (56). Despite this absence of affect, Bernhardt is depicted as a noble figure by Barnes. She rebuffs Burnaby's idea that she is being governed by fear. "It is not fear Capitaine Fred. It is self-knowledge," she says (57). Bernhardt knows her story. Ruminating on the affair later—Barnes imagines his pain lasting several years—Burnaby realizes that Bernhardt made no false promises. "Had she told him that she loved him? Yes, of course, many times; but it was his imagination—the prompter's voice in his ear—which had added the words 'for ever.'. . .And now he realized that if he had asked her, she would have replied, 'I shall love you for as long as I shall love you"' (61). Burnaby understands correctly that Bernhardt's declaration of loving him for as long as she loves him is the truth and that if she had said anything more absolute, it would have been false. But for as long as she *does* love him, the narrative holds, however *petite* it may be.

Following Kermode and perhaps Lyotard, Barnes's belief that individuals have a need for narrative endings *and* that still all endings are riven with woodworm is what makes him ultimately more sympathetic to the religious than many of his contemporaries.[4] In *Levels,* Barnes writes that when his wife was

[4]For a long time, Barnes was part of a London circle of writers that included Ian McEwan, Christopher Hitchens, Salman Rushdie, and Martin Amis, all of whom were or are openly hostile to faith. Hitchens's commitment to atheism is well-known, as are Rushdie's tangles with Islam. Amis once wrote that "opposition to religion occupies the high ground, intellectually and morally." McEwan is likely the least dogmatic of

sick one of his few Christian friends promised to pray for her. When she died, Barnes icily informed the friend that "his god didn't seem to have been very effective." When the friend suggested that perhaps his wife could have suffered more, Barnes is displeased. "Ah, I thought, so that's the best your pale Galilean and his dad can do" (94). And yet just pages earlier he laments the death of God:

> When we killed—or exiled—God, we also killed ourselves. Did we notice that sufficiently at the time? No God, no afterlife, no us. We were right to kill Him, of course, this long-standing imaginary friend of ours. And we weren't going to get an afterlife anyway. But we sawed off the branch we were sitting on. And the view from there, from that height—even if it was only the illusion of a view—wasn't so bad. (86)

No one unconcerned with the loss of traditional metaphysics could write such a line, just as they could not begin a book with the line "I don't believe in God, but I miss him," as Barnes does in *Nothing To Be Frightened Of* (1). He is somewhere post-Christian and somewhere pre-secular.

I have argued that storytelling—a need for endings—is Barnes's absolute rather than love, because even though he tells us that love is the supreme force in history, it never is clear that the concept of love can stand on its own without being absorbed into a more complex tale. For Barnes, love lasts *for as long as it does*. Even this world-historical force can shift slightly, change perspective, and alter the image it casts upon a passing cloud. The final section of *Levels* is his own love story, the most direct and explicit he has ever written about his own life. We know what is in this picture. He met Pat Kavanagh in 1978; she died in 2008; he has been devastated—even suicidal—ever since. Reading this account at face value gives us a classic love

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the bunch, though his consistency in centering novels on intense, secular liberal intellectuals is striking. Whatever their style of writing, this group is deeply modern—i.e., committed to Enlightenment rationality—in their mode of thought.

story. But we must use Barnes's own method against him. What does the stowaway say? What does *Barnes* not paint—and why? He does not paint:

1) Of their lack of children;
2) Of his first love;
3) Of the time his wife was unfaithful and left their marriage, abandoning him for a woman.

Notes

1) Barnes explains that his own suicide became less likely when he realized that, "insofar as she was alive at all, she was alive in my memory. . . . I could not kill myself because then I would also be killing her" (90). Barnes's belief that his wife lives on principally through him is not an uncommon one, though more common is the understanding that the dead live on through their children. But he and Kavanagh had no children. Surely this fact, even if he did not regret it or if it was a result of forces beyond their control, weighed upon his mind. Those grieving spouses typically find solace in the lives of the life they created with their departed partner. And yet Barnes does not mention this at all, does not speculate that his pain would be diminished, does not wonder what it would have been like if they were to have had children. In 2016, Barnes was asked if he regretted his and Kavanagh's childlessness. His first answer was unserious: "If children only took five years to grow from infants to voting age, then that would be clearly more attractive." He added some depth to this, however, saying that "Pat and I had one discussion, in which she said, 'I think if you really, really wanted it, I could have children with you,' and I said, 'Well, I think if I really . . . if you really, really wanted it, I could have children with you.' That was a double negative." Barnes told the interviewer that his thoughts on children certainly go back to his relations with his own parents. He recounted telling his brother that he would "like to know what it was like to be loved by them" (Daniel). In *Levels* he does not explore this (clearly complicated) subject, and its absence is striking.

2) Barnes once revealed in an interview that he was for a time in love with someone else before meeting Kavanagh. (His first book is dedicated to Laurien Wade, this woman.) He does not mention this in *Levels*—his only other experience of losing love.

3) "We were together for thirty years. I was thirty-two when we met, sixty-two when she died," Barnes says (*Levels of Life* 68). For a long while, I took this to mean that the two were together consecutively for these years; certainly, he gives no indication that they were not. But in the late 1980s, Kavanagh left Barnes for the writer Jeannette Winterson. Barnes has never spoken publicly about this period, nor about Kavanagh's eventual return to him. But at the time, as the gossip columns recount, it was a scintillating scandal, and Barnes was predictably devastated by Kavanagh's departure ("The Extraordinary Life of London's Leading Agent").

Has Barnes forgotten about all of these things? Is this why he does not paint them? Have the photographs been lost? I think not. It is not that Barnes is committing the sin of height by feigning certainty about what his life was like with Kavanaugh. His books, as I have argued, demonstrate the very woodworm effect that I have used to assess his love story. Instead, the fact that Barnes does not paint these things show that he knows, as Lyotard takes from Nietzsche, that the weight of the past can accumulate and make his current narrative impossible, an impossibility he does not want to experience. We require narratives to live, and narratives require excision. Whereas Graham Hendriks in *Before She Met Me* cannot discern the important facts about his love from the unimportant ones, the images that ought to be retained from those which should be burned, Barnes does not suffer from the same inability. His story about his relationship with Kavanaugh does not go haywire as Graham's does, but only because of his ability to prevent the woodworms from going too deep. His love story with Kavanaugh is the narrative that Barnes needs to "get by," and so it would do no good to dwell on the

fact that—given Kavanaugh's abandonment of him—their love story had sizeable cracks.

Barnes's metanarrative involves three key aspects: diagnosing grand narratives as sins of height; showing how infestations of woodworms—literal and metaphorical—can wipe away this sin; and finally, resisting both the sin and the unmooring effects of the infestation by developing our own "petite" woodworm-resistant stories. His commitment to this final suggestion is on display most prominently in his carefully crafted story of love with Pat Kavanaugh.

But, somehow, Barnes still recognizes the vulnerability of this love story, that it remains a projection upon a cloud which a sudden gust is liable to spring up and shift. He is not happy about this, but he accepts it, too, just as he has Fred Burnaby do. When explaining to Bernhardt his strategy for seeking air currents that would send him to France (a rare thing) rather than Essex (the usual landing zone), Burnaby acknowledges the risk of being cast into the channel. "But do you know how to swim?" asks Bernhardt. Burnaby responds earnestly. "Yes, but it would do me little good. There are some balloonists who wear cork overjackets in case they land in the sea. But that strikes me as unsporting. I believe a man should take his chances" (*Levels* 43). "A man should take his chances," says Barnes through Burnaby; "every love story is a potential grief story," says Barnes himself.

What of Julian? Has his love story devolved into nothing more than a grief story? Near the end of *Levels,* he alludes to a passage from Antonio Tabucchi's novel *Pereira Maintains.* The widowed Pereira is overweight, unhealthy, and talking to his wife's photograph. His doctor tells him that he has not yet done his grief-work, and only after completing this will he achieve some semblance of equilibrium. Has Julian's grief-work been done? Have his woodworms carved their way through his oaken sadness? Or is such a thing even possible? As he concludes *Levels,* "We imagine that we have battled against [grief], been purpose-

ful, overcome sorrow, scrubbed the rust from our soul, when all that has happened is that grief has moved elsewhere, shifted its interest. We did not make the clouds come in the first place and have no power to disperse them" (118).

With all his emphasis on narratives, though, we might think that part of Julian's grief-work is the storytelling itself—that his visions and excisions of his life with Kavanagh are necessary for him to live and perhaps also contribute to the clouds' dispersion. In this, he would follow Arendt. As Dana Villa explains, Arendt argues that "Although everybody started his [narrative] life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story" (184). One of the core distinctions that Arendt draws in *The Human Condition* is between labor, work, and action. Labor is comprised of the elements of life that are biologically required for existence, whereas work corresponds to acts beyond mere necessity, things that are built by humans with a lasting permanence in mind. Works can be finished; labor is interminable unto death. And action is what is done in the political realm of speech and activity. For Arendt, the action of storytelling seems almost closer to labor, something that must be continually done without hope of completion because it is necessary to have any hope at all of transforming sheer facts into a tale that is "humanly comprehensible." Her concept of continual storytelling calls to mind Penelope from Homer's *Odyssey,* endlessly weaving and unweaving a burial shroud to delay her own suitors. Or perhaps more directly we might think of Scheherazade from *One Thousand and One Nights,* who must recount a new story every night to her captor, the king, so that she may live another day. So, too, does Julian's storytelling about his marriage let him have another day.

His conclusion about the contingent nature of love is also akin to Arendt's. In a passage from *The Human Condition,* she writes that "love, although it is one of the rarest occurrences in human lives, indeed possesses an unequaled power of self-

revelation and an unequaled clarity of vision" (242). Love is the most powerful force that pushes us away from the contingency of the shared world, or, in other words, the most powerful pressure towards faith in a metanarrative. For Arendt, love is a spell, and it is utterly unpredictable how long anyone is able to inhabit its branch without it breaking. The "only possible happy ending to a love affair" is a return to the contingent shared world, a re-entry Arendt thinks possible with the bearing of children. Either the lovers will fall from one another metaphorically, or, if they wish to preserve the purity of their love, they must die, as do Romeo and Juliet. When one does return to the world, the inadequacy of love as a metanarrative is revealed. Bernhardt did not tell a lie, Burnaby acknowledges. "I shall love you for as long as I shall love you" was the truth.

Julian seems to cling to his own love-narrative as a source of meaning—this petite histoire being as good as it gets. One does not have to read *Levels* to get a sense of his uxoriousness—it is necessary only to read his books' dedications. *Before She Met Me,* from 1982, is dedicated "To Pat," as is 1984's *Flaubert's Parrot,* 1998's *England, England,* 2002's *Love, etc.*, and 2007's *The Lemon Table.* In 1989's *History* it is "To Pat Kavanagh." In *Arthur and George,* from 2005, Julian makes the work out to "P.K." *Nothing to be Frightened Of,* from 2008, is for "P." *The Sense of an Ending,* his first novel published after his wife's death, is "For Pat." *Levels* and 2011's *Pulse* are as well. And so too are 2015's *Keeping an Eye Open* and 2016's *The Noise of Time.* I thought that this would continue for ever, that his petite histoire of life with Kavanaugh would always be the "dream" he could not "get by without," resistant to all woodworm and shifts of cloud. Then, in 2019, an unexpected breeze, showing again that what is constant for Barnes, in his work and in his life, is not any one story in itself but the need to create them. *The Man in the Red Coat* was published, a new book with a new dedication to a new companion. It reads, simply: "To Rachel."

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