

WHAT WOULD HISTORY BE WITHOUT IMAGINATION?

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Abstract: *Many times memory assumes fictitious developments. In this way, reality becomes imagination or, better said, hypothesis. As we never get to know reality in all its aspects, we are forced to make suppositions. In Peter Ackroyd's novel The Fall of Troy, history is recreated in order to support the myth. Because the myth has energy and charisma, it incentivises the soul of a nation. In Julian Barnes's The History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters and Flaubert's Parrot imagination is used to reconsider mentalities, religions and characters. In both novels, imagination works as a deconstructionist factor. By creating a simulacrum of reality, we can better understand the nature of our beliefs and attitudes. The conclusion would be that the only useful reality resides in the realm of imagination.*

Keywords: *deconstruction; Julian Barnes; Peter Ackroyd; history; truth; imagination*

1. The great expectations of memory

Even after crossing the postmodernism so many citizens persist in their stubborn conviction to give credit to the history taught in schools, as if history were an innocent discipline. All great historians highlight the danger of manipulated historiography, but in vain, most of us keep absorbing victors' version of events. It was Jean Baudrillard who endorsed the rumour of Walt Disney's body waiting to be de-criogenised in a more technically developed world. As we know, Disney's health decayed severely soon before his death, the doctors having even to remove one of his lungs. Baudrillard needed this invented memory as he wanted to demonstrate that even death had been absorbed into the range of simulacra. The fake news was supported by the fact that Disney's tomb isn't known to the large public. Such a stratagem is not uncommon when it comes to the graves of those celebrities who don't want their resting place to be vandalised. Of course, we would like the idea of having Disney back and saving our kids from the catastrophic cartoons of the 3rd millennium...

Memory could offer great expectations when infused with imagination. Such an "ideology of the return" (Foucault in Simon During 1999: 138) engenders illusions or disillusion. On the one hand, who studies history is protected from historicism (ibidem), as history is seldom a nuptial feast, on the other hand, who superficially or fallaciously selects deeds from the past, or distorts them, is tempted to herald the miracle.

In other words, it is very important the way in which we decode historical messages. Signs can acquire unexpected ideological meanings, getting in this way articulated with biased openings. As Stuart Hall remarks, it is at the level of association that connotation intervenes and favours "situational ideologies" (Hall in

Simon During 1999: 512). As we know very well, ideologies emerge from polysemy, but they cannot stand pluralism. They institutionalise “the dominant or preferred meanings” (ibidem: 513) with the purpose of imposing a hierarchical vision. The human species has the obsession of structure. Now, an obsession nurtures compulsory drives: it matters to win, irrespective of the fact that it is not an honest victory. Encoding and decoding meanings are incongruent activities (ibidem: 515). Wherefrom then comes the pleasure of fake victories?

2. The uncontrollable impulse to win

This is the question to which Peter Ackroyd tries to answer in the novel *The Fall of Troy*. The autodidact Heinrich Obermann (impersonating the renowned Heinrich Schliemann), dedicates the second part of his life – the first one having been invested in making a fortune for himself – to the identifying and revealing of the site of legendary Troy. He already boasts the discovery of Odysseus and Penelope’s palace on the island of Ithaca. His enthusiasm derives from the tales told by his father when Heinrich was a child. Tales about trolls, fairies, ghosts, demons, and hidden treasures. His father also extensively lectured him in Homer’s works, read in original. If the realm of fairies and that of the trolls are not necessarily pure fantasy, the mind of the young Lutheran kept fantasizing all his life. He indulges, too, in a process of de-Christianisation which coincides with the worshipping of shrewdness and victory obtained at no matter what price. We know that for the Old Greeks fame was everything. Achilles finally preferred to die in the battle than to reach the age of wisdom. Even Nestor’s fame of a wise old man originated in his ability to compromise antagonistic forces and not in his desire to contribute to a happier world for everybody. The pagan wisdom was and is specific to old age, because only at this stage in life can be arranged “the complicity between regimes of memory and dominant power relations” (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003: 18). Obermann is in his 50s and is fully aware of how to practise the “politics of memory discourses” (ibidem: 2).

Preserving childhood memories and fantasies doesn’t annihilate the matter-of-fact thinking. Exalted and fond of culture as Obermann may seem, he is ready to resort to unorthodox archaeological methods in order to create chaos. The samples shouldn’t be accurately dated so that nobody could hold him accountable for the discoveries he made. In this way, the jewellerys and precious objects are stolen away with the help of an ingenious network. Heinrich motivates his stratagem in front of his much younger Greek wife by saying that what he robs from Turkey he gives to Greece. Of course, personal interest prevails. In this way, the imaginary is bound to support mercantilism. For instance, because on the site could be found no swords or shields – strange enough for an ancient would-be battlefield – Obermann shamelessly produces some swords out of the blue. Additionally, he advertises his magic gift of discovering famous lost historical places in the press worldwide. His belief that people lived “in an iron age” and that “they needed history” (Ackroyd 2007: 12) proves to be very profitable in terms of present day currency. His gift of “sniffing” potentially significant archaeological locations is indisputable. But he is

not a vulgar tomb-pilferer because he deludes himself together with the rest of the world. He really believes that he gets closer and closer to the *mysterium tremendum* of Troy and repudiates cultural selfishness: "Troy is not for Turkey. Troy is for the world" (ibidem: 35). By postulating the primacy of imagination over science: "That is archaeology. Instinct! [...] It is not a science [...] It is an art [...] My imagination is correct" (ibidem: 41), he is able to attribute himself supernatural powers. A genius deserves more than the common lot. Because only he can make visible the invisible, he infers that he has the right to repeat the game the other way round.

3. Faking identity – structure begotten by chaos

Later in the novel we learn that Obermann's past is full of onerous businesses. Capitalism gets on well with enthusiasm and culture is his suitcase. When Consul Cyrus Redding assesses him as a genius but not as a great man (ibidem: 66), the problem is reset in ethical coordinates. As Jeremy Gibson and Julian Wolfreys put: "playing with identity is the most serious game in the world for Ackroyd" (Gibson and Wolfreys 2000: 18). In the process of constructing a new identity, even if a fake one, memory is ascribed a leading role. The best way to discourage inquiries into the past is to mythologize that past. We are used to the cliché that postmodernism demythologizes the past. But the reverse way functions smoothly as long as it relies on a biased mythology. The myth can have the paradoxical effect of freezing the past. Memory and oblivion are inextricably intertwined. We forget things in order to memorize other things. Actually, our minds shift sets of memories and our past becomes a battlefield of reminiscences (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003: 241).

Paradoxically, although Obermann is a fake, the fact that he sacralises his own past in connection with the grandeur of the Homeric legends sanctifies almost everything around him. It seems that if behind a simulacrum there is a saintly kern, the imitation assumes the holiness of the lost original. When Turkish peasants discover an ancient skeleton, they don't agree to its museumification. In order to accelerate the burial proceedings, Obermann is forced to baptize the foundling. The same when the sceptical professor William Brand, from Harvard, unexpectedly dies after visiting a cursed cave, the cave of Selene. Obermann will perform the rites of exorcism in a blasphemous way, reciting Latin verses from Vergil while making signs with a cross. His excuse is a cultural one: "was he not called the divine Virgil by the early Church fathers?" (Ackroyd 2007: 95). More than this, in order to get rid of any evidence, he burns the corpse with the help of a Homeric pyre.

Ackroyd does not condemn his hero. The message is another one: the manipulator cannot escape unaffected by his manipulative stratagems. Who wants to pre-arrange the victory is seized by a continuous fear. And who is fearful misses the spectacle of the game, which is the real beauty of life. Obermann is too intelligent to confine his life to a series of dull victories. This is the second conclusion of the novel: mischievous deeds in the realm of beauty and glory get contaminated by that beauty and glory. Obermann is halloed by grandeur in spite of his materialistic drives: "I am here to recreate Troy, not to reduce it to a pile of dust

and bones” (ibidem: 84). Imagination abuses science, but the result is amazing. Without supposition and genius, hidden treasures would never come to light. Accuracy and objectivity should come after imagination released the revelation. The lack of necessary correspondence between encoding and decoding (Hall in During 1999: 515) could make logical decodings sterile enterprises. From such a stance, the imaginary offers the chance of a preview which shouldn’t be despised as it is fuelled by strenuous former documentation. The imaginary is really useful when science exhausted its means. In many cases, what once belonged to the imaginary has been scientifically certified in the meantime. The history of science is full of examples of realisable imagination. When the road from premises to conclusion was not a smooth one, scientists preferred perverted syllogisms more often than not. It is exactly what Obermann tries to do, with the excuse that his schemes improve the spiritual condition of humanity. The recovered Troy is a symbol of courage and love conjoined with treachery and recklessness. The exemplary city lays bare good and bad examples together. It is a parable of humanity. The purpose of such a discovery is education, not profitability.

From such a perspective, there is a benign imaginary and a toxic one. “We must fight for the criminal imperfection of the world. Against this artificial paradise of technicity and virtuality, against the attempt to build a world of completely positive, rational and true, we must save the traces of the illusory world’s definitive opacity and mystery” (Baudrillard 2000: 74). Actually, the real opposition is not between science and imaginary, but between science and technical applications that encourage anti-metaphysical approaches and short-sighted utilitarianism. Obermann is not guilty of inventing historical artefacts, but of disfiguring the beauty of Troy through stealing. Misery and grandeur rotate in a vicious circle: on the one hand, he makes visible what belongs to the invisible, on the other hand he makes disappear the jewelleries that came out from imaginary into reality.

4. The grandeur and misery of the imaginary

The small, and, anyway, varying distance between reality and imaginary is reflected in Julian Barnes’s novels *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* and *Flaubert’s Parrot*. If “fable and fabulation are cathartic as they attenuate the horror, brutality and arbitrariness of the history of the world” (Guignery 2006: 67), then part of his novels’ substance correspond to such a compensatory function of the imaginary. But the imaginary, as I have already mentioned, contributes to reconsidering the doctrinal truth through conjecture or hypothesis. As a matter of fact, the doctrinal truth is not something repulsive. It is only an ideologised truth whose interpretation stalled in order to be convenient to a certain epoch. The stalled interpretation becomes anachronistic in time, consequently not totally understood, so it will be approached with awestricken respect. Even the ironies poked at the indisputable truths are manifestations of hesitance and incomprehensibility. What we do not understand anymore gets reintegrated into the realm of imaginary.

But there is the reverse way: the cynical and demythisizing approach realised with postmodernist techniques. The literary historian comes with the minimalist perspective and this suggests familiarity with immemorial times. If the discourse respects the principles of verisimilitude, literature wins over history. It is quite plausible that the Deluge was sailed over by a flotilla, not by a single Ark, as Barnes “enlightens” us in the chapter-story *The Stowaway* from *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*. The reconsideration, then, becomes violent towards the consecrated tradition. Noah is “a hysterical rogue with a drink problem” (Barnes 2010: 8). The dismantling of the Holy Scripture is justified by the fate of animals accompanying humans on the flotilla. The narrator being a tiny woodworm camouflaged into the horn of a ram – but the narrative source is disclosed only at the end of the chapter –, the perspective belongs not to the maximized winner, but to the minimized refugee. The woodworms are not allowed on the Ark as they are considered not irrelevant to the chart of species, but even extremely dangerous to the safety of the ships. Gnawing at wood is the same with gnawing at mentalities and prejudices. Why should humans feed on the other animals: “we were just floating cafeteria” (ibidem: 14)? Why should humans apply oversimplified structures to reality by destroying the cross-breeds: the behemoth, the fire-living salamander, the basilisk, the griffon, the sphinx, and the unicorn? Those primitive desires of domination and simplification would be, thus, specific to a “very unevolved species compared to the animals” (ibidem: 28). Barnes here implicitly accuses the protagonists of human history of lack of imagination. And where we have a deficit of imagination, the respect for others’ rights will suffer or regress to the level of toleration. We may have either a “permission concept of toleration” or a “respect conception” (Forst 2007: 305). The latter implies “equal rights for identities” (ibidem: 307), irrespective of the differences between them. The accent in the genuine multiculturalism is put on *identities*, not on minorities or majorities. What matters is the quality, not the quantity. Toleration, with its three components: *objection*, *acceptance* and *rejection* (ibidem: 292), is acceptable and not insulting when the parties involved tolerate each other. Toleration being “a normatively dependent concept”, which needs “other, independent normative resources in order to gain a certain content and substance” (ibidem: 293) can swiftly evolve to perverse implementations if it is based on the permission conception. The one-sided toleration is reflected in Barnes’s novel with the help of aberrant juridical context. When it is advantageous, the maximal becomes democratic, overestimating the minimal. A strategy of this sort is effective when somebody wants to transfer responsibilities to an innocent, uninitiated category. The process of overestimation is mirrored in the third chapter of the novel: *The wars of religion*. The woodworm is accused of having devoured on purpose the leg of the throne in the church of Saint Michel. The incident provoked the fall of a bishop who hit his head on the pavement. The fall is mythologized: he fell “like the mighty Daedalus, from the heavens of light into the darkness of imbecility” (Barnes 2010: 64). Besides the ironical rhetoric, the inaccuracy of taking Daedalus for his son, Icarus, induces mistrust towards the sophisticated scholasticism of the religious court of

law. The *bestioles* (ibidem: 75) should be anathemized and excommunicated. From now on, the theological conflict enters the domain of multiculturalism. Can the woodworm be placed under the dominion of man's jurisdiction if it was not upon Noah's Ark? Can the vermin be acquitted if it didn't turn up at the tribunal after repeated summoning? This is the utopian, or the hypocritical side of multiculturalism – imagining that the borders between different cultures will not be trespassed. Trespassing involves violence exerted by one of the parties. Reciprocal opening of some intervals of borderlines creates the opportunity to the transcultural communication, whose success we shall never be able to anticipate. The permission conception is the pre-condition of advancing multiculturalism towards transculturalism. This is realisable in a context of complete amnesia or of comprehensive mutual understanding. As much memory or as much amnesia possible! I have to admit to approximation as “historiography and memory are not the same” (Schwarz 2007: 141).

5. Twisted decodings

Maybe Obermann stretches his imagination in order to obtain imaginings. He forces out historical evidence, and this is not what we could name historical truth. Imagination is useful to his business, but also to the local people's businesses. Somebody could argue that truth in such conditions is irrelevant, not to say useless. We could agree with this line of interpretation if producing such fake truths didn't disturb others' life and beliefs. Obermann tricks Sophia's – his young Greek wife – high expectations. She had sincerely believed in her future husband's enthusiasm and genius. Then, there is a tacit fight between the greedy improvised archaeologist and the Turkish peasants working for him: the fight for gold and precious stones found on the site. Lastly, the whole world is fooled about the veracity of the tremendous discovery. The figment of Obermann's imagination is sheer mercantilism. He is able to mimic rituals and the antique heroes' behaviour. His enlightened conceptions hide subterranean mean purposes. Wherefrom the title of the novel: *The Fall of Troy*. When the inventor of the falsified Troy is crushed under the hoofs of a scared horse, the whole invention breaks into pieces. Troy's legendary name is dragged through the mire. Obermann's magnificent imaginary, which is the result of his imagination, is compromised because he “detotalises the message in the preferred code in order to retotalise the message within some alternative framework of reference”. In cold, scientific formulation, this is a “struggle in discourse” (Hall in During 1999: 517).

6. Amnesia or hyper-memory?

But imagination can be dangerous in more subtle ways. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, Julian Barnes “stages” the irony played at the expense of Flaubert's principle that between writers and their work there should be no transfer of personal information. Writers shouldn't imbue their works with autobiographical substance and the literary productions will live an independent life from their authors'. The irony is that in France there are plenty of Flaubert's statues. Right at the beginning of the

novel, Barnes provides three biographies of the French writer: an official one and two intimate other. The first one of the second type records successes and happy events, the second failures and sorrows. Exactly what Flaubert feared: that his life could influence the reception of his books, degrading in this way their intrinsic aesthetic quality. In the novel we have a character who burns Flaubert's personal correspondence in order to respect his cultural will. But this only enhances the danger: we have insufficient information regarding Flaubert's existence, but we do have something, though. Out of this incompleteness emerges the insatiable imagination. So, imaginary is the result of a force that can never be *as sober as a judge*. Homer's and Shakespeare's lives cannot be exploited in terms of plastic-surgery-imagination. The imaginary shaped around their physical presence is sheer fiction. This is the pure condition of imaginary. Semi-fictitious or semi-historical imaginings are double-edged: they can commercially and shamelessly speculate about the scarce evidence left, or they can advance visionary hypotheses, contributing to authentic revelations. Cast in such an equation, imagination is the communication channel between memory and future. As Luisa Passerini put it: "Memory is the past tense of desire, anticipation its future tense, and both are obstacles to the present-oriented attitude which is the only one which allows the unknown to emerge in any session" (in Hodgkin and Radstone 2003: 251)

Without memory, humanity gets morphed into a subspecies. But with forged memory that subspecies could boast the status of the dominant species, while being inferior to the despised condition of animals.

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