

Julian Barnes's Artistic and Textual Analysis of the Shipwreck of Medusa in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*

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ABSTRACT:

Art, through various modes of representation, has been the source of emotional and intellectual outlet for the artists. Art, whether visual, auditory or textual, serves as a proper catharsis for the artists and the connoisseurs of fine arts. Art and artists are popular not only in present social milieu but remain vibrant for future generations. The supreme art and classical artist cross the temporal and spatial peripheries and become timeless and universal. Julian Barnes's novel *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* foregrounds various world historical events and represents them in such colouring that confirms and distorts the events at the same time. The novel's fifth chapter "The Shipwreck" concerns the actual catastrophe of the Medusa by evaluating Gericault's painting which sketches the very scene of the shipwreck. Barnes's chapter successfully sketches the merits and demerits of the painting. Through the lens of his detective eyes he digs deep and critically evaluates the painting by stating what he painted and what did he not paint. By using his investigative skills Barnes tries to fill the gaps through various historical evidences and records. The present article critically evaluates the similarities and differences between two modes of art: visual through the medium of painting 'The Scene of Shipwreck' and textual through the medium of Barnes's chapter 'The Shipwreck'.

Keywords: Representation, Art, Temporal, Spatial, Timeless, Universal, Fiction, History.

The fifth chapter 'Shipwreck' in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* is divided into two parts: one is Barnes's historical account of the sinking of the Medusa and the other is Barnes's own textual analysis of Theodore Gericault's painting *The Raft of the Medusa*. The two parts of the chapter proceed to demonstrate how "the frontiers between the visual and the textual tend to blur" (*The Fiction of Julian Barnes* 65). In the *Authors' Note* Barnes mentions different sources for the two parts. The first part concerns the actual shipwreck near Senegal in 1816 based on the accounts of two survivors, Savigny and Correard which seem to draw their details from the 1818 London translation of Savigny and Correard's *Narrative of a Voyage to Senegal*. The second part takes its inspiration from Lorenz Eisele's exemplary *Gericault: His Life and Work*. The picture of the painting is inserted between the two parts and the second part discusses in detail the textual and pictorial analysis of the painting highlighting the problem of accuracy and truth in representation of art and history. Barnes tries to show the gap between an actual event and its artistic representation by interrogating to what extent the truth can be grasped. As one attempts to get closer to the truth the gap between signifier and signified grows wider. Regarding this mix up Vanessa Guignery writes:

The hybridity is thus reinforced by this representation of a representation, which testifies to a double transfer: from the actual catastrophe to the painting, and from the visual representation to the textual analysis. In both cases, the issue is hermeneutic, pertaining to interpretation (*The Fiction of Julian Barnes* 65).

The first person narrator tells the overall story of the Medusa- its sinking, the creation of the rafts, and failures and miseries of the crew. Focusing on a current event Gericault's painting shows the eventual recovery of fifteen passengers stranded on the raft for fifteen days. Barnes tells the reader that the artist gathered the information about the shipwreck from news accounts and interviews with the three of the survivors specially, the carpenter of the ship who created a scale of the ship for Gericault:

It begins with truth to life. The artist read Savigny and Correard's account; he met them, interrogated them. He compiled a dossier of the case. He sought out the carpenter from the Medusa, who had survived, and got him to build a scale model of his original machine. Recognizable portraits of Savigny, Correard and the carpenter are included in the final picture. (*A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* 126)

The second part opens with the classic line: "How do you turn catastrophe into art" (125). Which goes on to elucidate the oil painting of actual shipwreck. The scene of the painting pictures the stranded victims on their raft, hailing a tiny ship in the distance. Being a very conscious artist Julian Barnes meticulously analyses the painting which conveys the sense of one mode of art representing another mode of art. The actual event and its two ways of representation get connected. Vanessa Guignery has analysed the two modes of artistic representation in striking terms:

In both cases interpretation is presented as multiple and unstable, and this is epitomised by the coexistence of two eyes, the ignorant eye mirroring the uninitiated reader, and the informed eye reflecting the ideal reader. The schizophrenic narrator thus shares his glance between his 'two eyes, ignorant and informed' (p. 132), and constantly moves from one perspective to another (*The Fiction of Julian Barnes* 65).

Barnes's investigative skill gets sharper as he highlights those moments which the painter 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. (126-27)

After recounting the supposed artistic mistakes he cautions the reader that it should not be taken as failure as the artist's first concern was not to be "1) political; 2) symbolic; 3) theatrical; 4) shocking; 5) thrilling; 6) sentimental; 7) documentational; or 8) unambiguous" (127). It seems that while observing one can visualise only partial and limited truth about the actual event. A particular event happens and after sometime it gets turned into various modes of artistic representation and interpretation:

Nowdays the process is automatic. A nuclear plant explodes? We'll have a play on the London stage within a year. A President is assassinated? You can have the book or the film or the filmed book or the booked film. War? Send in the novelists. A series of gruesome murders? Listen for

the tramp of the poets... Why did it happen, this mad act of Nature, this crazed human moment? Well, at least it produced art. Perhaps, in the end, that's what catastrophe is for. (125)

After highlighting the artistic fissures and gaps of the painting Barnes seems to defend the painter artist one by one through his own imaginative skill. Barnes defends with logic claiming that a painting is a moment then how can it be possible to sketch an event stretching over a long period of time and specially separate actions taking place on the raft. As for the butterfly is concerned, how can it be possible to sketch a white butterfly six or eight centimetres across, alighting on a raft twenty metres long by seven metres broad? Moreover, It would not have seemed convincing.

Julian Barnes further tries to elucidate the picture from artistic point of view. There would certainly be a difference between the interpretations; one from ignorant eye and the other from the informed eye. Those who already know about the sinking incident would certainly give an interpretation which would be quite dissimilar to the other which an ignorant person would give: "The ignorant eye yields, with a certain tasty reluctance, to the informed eye. Let's check 'Scene of Shipwreck' against Savigny and Correard's narrative" (130). Barnes evaluates the scene very minutely:

There are twenty figures on board. Two are actively waving, one actively pointing, two vigorously supplicating, plus one offering muscular support to the hailing figure on the barrel: six in favour of hope and rescue. Then there are five figures (two prone, three supine) who look either dead or dying, plus an old greybeard with his back to the sighted Argus in a posture of mourning: six against. In between (we measure space as well as mood) there are eight more figures: one half-supplicating, half-supporting; three watching the hailer with non-committal expressions; one watching the hailer agonizingly; two in profile examining, plus one obscure figure in the darkest, most damaged part of the canvas, with head in hands. Six, six and eight: no overall majority. (131)

When one notices the picture the informed eye claims that there are twenty while Savigny and Correard claimed that there were only fifteen men survived out of 150 after 13 days at sea. Comparing paint with print Barnes evaluates gaps and fissures between different modes of art; visual and textual. The reader is caught in a state of indeterminacy whether to believe historical account or artistic representation; "the eye can flick from one mood, and one interpretation, to the other: is this what is intended"? (133). Vanessa Guignery further states:

The bifocalisation leads to a frustrating uncertainty as to the meaning of the ship on the horizon, either a sign of hope and rescue or one of 'hope being mocked'. Since the vessel is not coming towards the shipwrecked. Indeterminacy prevails as the narrator remarks: 'do we end up believing both versions?' (*The Fiction of Jullian Barnes* 65)

While evaluating the painting Barnes seems to be a true detective who throws a suspicious glance upon the subject. While narrating the pitiable condition of the crew he puts a question: "why do the survivors look so healthy" a question he asks again and again.

But why does everyone – even the corpses – look so muscled, so healthy? Where are the wounds, the scars, the haggardness, the disease? These are men who have drunk their own urine, gnawed the leather from their hats, consumed their own comrades. Five of the fifteen did not survive their rescue very long. So why do they look as if they have just come from a body- building class? (136)

The narrator moves from one representation to another and asks "do we end up believing both versions" (133). He concludes that the complete picture of the event cannot be projected in screen or

text. It is the willing suspension of disbelief that can act as a supreme force in the believability of art. A particular event happens, presented, represented, filmed, texted and in whatever medium the truth becomes half truth, pseudo truth and sometimes completely change in the process of various modes of representation. After the happening of event the representation seems to start from truth to life and ends with truth to art:

Truth to life, at the start, to be sure; yet once the process gets under way, truth to art is the greater allegiance. The incident never took place as depicted; the numbers are inaccurate; the cannibalism is reduced to a literary reference; the Father and Son group has the thinniest documentary justification, the barrel group none at all. The raft has been cleaned up as if for the state visit of some queasy-stomached monarch: the strips of human flesh have been housewifed away, and everyone's hair is as sleek as a painter's new bought brush. (135)

On one hand, there is the historian whose motto is 'truth to life'. Having no fictional choice the historian has to reconstruct the past to the best of his knowledge and wisdom. His duty is to tell every past event accurately and truthfully as per the document records of the material. On the other hand there is the novelist whose ultimate object is 'truth to art'. Having a great deal of fictional choice he can decide which stories are to be told and to what extent they can be fictionalised as per the suitability of the given context. He entertains liberty to make arbitrary alternations. As for the novel is concerned there appears a great difference between the Savigny & Correard's narrative and Gericault's painting. In this chapter authenticity of event has been sacrificed on the alter of art to have a greater allegiance. Painting seems to speak very candidly about history:

What has happened? The painting has slipped history's anchor. This is no longer 'Scene of Shipwreck', let alone '*The Raft of the Medusa*'. We don't just imagine the ferocious miseries on that fatal machine; we don't just become the sufferers. They become us. (137)

There may be many persons who are bothered regarding this question. Barnes not only questions but seems to answer that if the painter had painted so overtly then the painting would act directly upon the viewer. Barnes seems to convey the sense that art unlike history represents the events indirectly and leaves space for the visitors to interpret and fill the gaps as per their own creative impulse. Barnes stresses that it is art which survives over a long period of time. Future generations can get to the gist of events through artistic representation: visual or textual;

The painting which survives is the one that outlives its own story. Religion decays, the icon remains; a narrative is forgotten, yet its representation still magnetizes (the ignorant eye triumphs – how galling for the informed eye)... Time dissolves the story into form, colour, emotion. Modern and ignorant, we reimagine the story.... The eye can flick from one mood, and one interpretation, to the other: is this what was intended? (133)

The narrator is totally confused which version is to be believed and which is to be rejected. Gregory J. Rubinson articulates that "Gericault's painting, like Barnes's history, is very informative: 'though it departs from documentary realism', it offers us a kind of knowledge about its subject unavailable in strictly realist modes of representation"(Gregory 171) . The painting begins with history and ends with art into the spheres of religion and aestheticism. Painting provides meaning in its own way without any referential reading of it:

And then there we have it – the moment of supreme agony on the raft, taken up, transformed, justified by art, turned into a sprung and weighted image, then 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)

If one closely observes the painting one finds that there are three blacks on the raft to which Barnes has never indicated. The blacks appear in the position of saving the other whites. Racial prejudice seems to work at here. Albert Alhadeff has sensed the very reason of the omission of blacks by claiming that, “might it be because the blacks on board, and especially the lead black, speak of hope, the hope of emancipation, a hope that rejects differences between blacks and whites, masters and slaves, captors and captives.” (285).

Alhadeff further expresses his astonishment as; “A black is to save whites! Or, at the very least, whites are dependent on a man of drak skin. Ironically, those deprived of freedom are to save their captors” (286). He further concludes that perhaps the Raft brings the races together and denies the differences between them.

In the last part of the chapter the narrator lets the reader free to decide the value, symbol and meaning of painting rather than imposing his own interpretation. The narrator like the woodworm believes in decentralised version and interpretations. He does not try to enforce the monolithic discourse under the aura of grandnarratives but prefers to have polyphonic attitude towards the evaluation of art and history. Guignery states that “the fifth chapter, though hybrid in form and genre, thus inscribes reflections about the representation of the past, the knowledge of reality and the interpretation of signs which can apply to the whole novel” (66). The narrator’s strategy of bifocalisation proclaims: “We are all lost at sea, washed between hope and despair, hailing something that may never come to rescue us. Catastrophe has become art; but this is no reducing process. It is freeing, enlarging, explaining. Catastrophe has become art: that is, after all, what it is for” (137).

Barnes is always very conscious of craft of fiction and that’s why he seems to convey the impression that he is not only interpreting the painting of the raft but going to create a parallel story of the catastrophe. There appears a perfect equilibrium between human catastrophe and art. In the whole of the chapter Barnes remains to the central point. “How do you turn catastrophe into art”. And the catastrophe has become art first time painting through visual medium and the second time as an essay through textual medium. Gericault’s and Barnes’s different titles convey the sense of their different observations. Gericault painted it as ‘Scene of Shipwreck’ and Barnes termed it ‘The Raft of the Medusa’.

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