

The Quest for History and Truth in *England, England*

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Abstract

Contemporary British novelist Julian Barnes pays great attention to the historical and truth issues in most of his novels. This paper introduces his *England, England* as well as analyzes his concern of construction of national history, tradition and self-identity in personal history. Barnes's historical view is similar to that of Walter Benjamin. The paper focus on the intertextual relation between Barnes's *England, England* and Benjamin's philosophy of history from the perspective of "victors' history", tortuous national and personal history as well as historical quotation. Barnes demonstrates unreliable personal memory and modified national history in order to express his doubts about traditional history and his criticism of historical progress. One way to resist historical progress is quotation, by which Barnes proffers a farcical demonstration of historical quotation. At the same time, the writer claims the redemption potential of such quotation: future development of Britain: to be "England, England" or "Anglia" or other modes. It is found that Barnes criticizes traditional historical view and tries to find authentic history, memory and truth in the world of uncertainty.

Keywords

England, England; Historical Process; Memory; Truth; Self-identity.

1. Introduction

Julian Barnes is a native British novelist who represents the middle-class community. His intellectually fictional experimentation and culturally insightful viewpoints have earned him fame at home and abroad. His novels blur boundaries between the text and the history, and put well-known historical figures and events into novels. *England, England* is one of his famous works, published and nominated for the Man Book Prize in 1998. As Barnes states that, the book is about "the idea of England, authenticity, the search for truth, the invention of tradition, and the way in which we forget our own history" (Guignery, "The Fiction of Julian Barnes" 105). This novel involves an attempt to create a miniature version of England in the form of a theme park on the Isle of Wight. *England, England* includes three parts, "England", "England, England" and "Anglia", which "respectively correspond with time-scale: 1980, 2010, 2040" (Childs, "Julian Barnes" 120), depicting female protagonist — Martha's childhood memory, the establishment of the theme park and Martha's idyllic life in Anglia.

This novel is related to the memory and history. In current research, researchers mainly analyze national identity and history from the perspectives of postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard's concepts of simulacrum and hyper-reality, narratology and new historicism. As Salman Rushdie comments that, Barnes' novels are as footnote of history, as subversion of the tradition, as complex scrawl around the margins of what we think we know (1991). Andrzej Gasiorek insightfully points out that Barnes' ideas and Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history have obvious similarities. Regrettably, he does not study this further. "It is Benjamin's and Barnes's idiosyncratic approaches to history that reveal the deep interconnections between their work" (Buxton 57). Inspired by this standpoint, the author

uses Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* as the framework to explore how the writer uses his fictional narrative to respond to Benjamin's philosophy of history.

2. Inauthentic Memory and Modified History

Benjamin expresses opposition to the classical historicism. While traditional historians see the march of events as a linear succession of triumphant human advances, Benjamin sees only a trail of violence and destruction. He suggests that traditional historical writing is not only fictional narrative, but also subjected to the historical victors. As he claims in *Illuminations*:

And all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers... Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate... There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism... A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain. (256-257)

Benjamin knows that human history is written by victors, who are arrogant and boastful, while the losers are enslaved and suppressed. Conventional historians, in his opinion, are nothing more than a group of followers. They worship victory blindly, follow conquerors and invariably privilege the perspectives and interests of victors, but disdain those conquered who fell in front of the "monument of civilization". Benjamin realizes that this violent writing mode of traditional historians inevitably cover the real history. Therefore, genuine historical materialists should brush history against the grain to restore the historical truth as much as possible, and expose real history from domination.

Barnes also expresses his distrust of official history. It is worth noting that he not only challenges the national history, but also doubts about individual history or individual memory. At the beginning of the novel, female protagonist Martha is asked about her first memory, but she doesn't remember it because she insists that there is no pure, no "true", no "unprocessed" memory (Barnes 5), and the original memory tends to accumulate and then transform. When she recollects her favorite English jigsaw puzzle in the childhood, she considers that the reason of her father's departure is that he goes to find the missing piece of the jigsaws for her. However, it is until her meeting with her father in twenty-five years old that she gets the truth: she is abandoned by her father. As a result, it proves that her memory is inauthentic. Memory has a dangerous function, and it will give things meaning that they don't have. It must be effaced by an artificial memory. Fraudulent childhood memory has a major impact on her whole life. It hinders her construction of complete self-identity and her sense of reality. She yearns for reality, pursue the reality, but cannot confirm what is reality. When she falls in love with Paul in her forties, she only regards Paul as "a growth hormone to the heart" (Barnes 205), and it is not true love. In the end, she comes back to the old England as an elderly lady, she gains the insight of life — the person is no more than what others saw he or she as, which indicates that she fails to find the real self in her whole life. Martha's realization of the impure memory leads her to equate it with national history: "It was like a country remembering its history: the past was never just the past, it was what made the present able to live with itself" (Barnes 6).

The jigsaw is a metaphor for the essence of collective and individual memory, whose wholeness is a mere illusion. English jigsaw puzzle is a mini version of England. It exactly duplicates the shapes and geographical locations of counties in England, and incompleteness of the jigsaw is an emblematic expression of the loss of Martha's memory and fragmented national history. The fragmentation of history and the unreliability of national and personal memory give a chance to the project members of the theme park on the Isle of Wight to modify, simply and piece together national history so as to be adopted to contemporary consumers. The history of "England, England"— the theme park which condensed copy of England— is rewritten by "victors": landmark buildings— Big Ben, Stonehenge and so on— and historical and mythical figures including Robin Hood, Dr Johnson and Nell Gwynn, played by actors, all perform their authorized, expected and simplified functions. The essential aspects of Englishness are reduced to inoffensive performance, all negative characteristics of

Englishness are discarded, and all the major historical figures and episodes are modified to meet the needs of worldwide tourists, which is Martha called “the repositioning of myths for modern time” (Barnes 148). The survey conducted by the creators of the theme park project lists fifty quintessences of Englishness that people all over the world associate with the word “England”, involving both positive and negative items. However, Sir Jack Pitman crosses off items he judges false so as to only preserve glorifying items of the past. Nunning suggests that Barnes exposes one side of contemporary Englishness, which overwhelmingly locate “true” Englishness in the past (2001). From the behavior of Sir Jack, Barnes makes readers realize that the history of “England, England” is nothing but one made up by “victors” Pitman and his team, whose fictional nature is exposed. In the process of exposing unreliable history, the writer allows readers to hear the voices that were previously oppressed, and hear their doubts, interrogations and challenges to hegemonic discourse.

In addition to caricaturing history, the creators of the theme park also control and manipulate ordinary people’s mind through the medium of newspaper— *The Times of London*. When the King and his royal pilots fire a small plane guided by a journalist who exposes royal filthy secrets, the newspaper covers the truth and holds the power of voice. According to *The Times of London*, “Old England had lost its history, and therefore— since memory is identity— had lost all sense of itself” (Barnes 251). In other words, invented history replaces the original and erases the original England from the history of the world and the memory of people. In an interview, Julian Barnes states:

After I had written it, I came across a wonderful quotation from Ernest Renan: “Getting its history wrong is a part of being a nation.” It would have made a perfect epigraph for the book. Getting its history wrong is also a part of creating a nation. You have to build up those myths of liberation, myths of fighting the oppressor, myths of bravery. Often, they have a certain percentage of truth in them, so they’re easy myths to build up. But then being a nation as well as becoming a nation also depends on the continuation of these myths (Guignery, “History in Question” 69).

The victors rewrite myths to apply for the modern society, delete worthless fragments of history to show ideal model of the nation. Nevertheless, everything in the past presents a different appearance, which is incompatible with the real history, Barnes reveals the fabulation of the victors’ history. By picking up fragments that rejected by traditional historians, Barnes deconstructs the discourse authority in the writing of single history, subverts its hidden ideological mechanism, and practices incompatible historical writing method advocated by Benjamin, representing heterogeneous factors and liberating suppressed history from the restrictions of victors to a certain extent.

3. Backward Simulacra Worlds and Tortuous Personal History

Benjamin believes that the reason why history is called “victors’ history” is that it is a progressive epic constructed by the blood-stained conquerors, and it is a myth created by traditional historians who submit to the conquerors. Therefore, Benjamin’s criticism of the concept of historical progress is another important part of his historical philosophy. In his view, real history is not linear or progressive, but repetitive and tortuous. “The angle of history” is the most memorable image of Benjamin’s powerful critique of the theory of historical progress. He compares himself to the angle of history, facing the backward history alone. In his view, real progress is happiness and fully emancipation of human beings, not just advances in men’s ability and knowledge.

Like Benjamin’s critical attitude towards historical progress, Barnes views history as a capricious and backward process. In *England, England*, there are two replicas of the original England: one is a commercialized society “England, England”, the other is a preindustrial society “Anglia”. The former represents a simulacrum world for commercial purpose in which British cultural heritages are replicated and transformed. The latter reflects declining England society and people’s nostalgia for the real past. By portraying two different worlds of simulacra, the author implies that future path of England may be backward.

On the one hand, the design group plans to build a theme park as a replica of England to sell British historical heritages to accumulate wealth, which deconstructs rich contents of national essence.

British heritages are replicated and modified for the tourism and business, though they achieve commercial progress, these national symbols become signifiers without referential meaning. The theme park project carries out a range of surveys to obtain public's approval and appreciation, one of which is testing a middle-class intellectual who is British but has no historical education background. The result of the survey shows that history is uncertain for him, and history is just a vague memory in his mind. This man represents most people in contemporary British community, and national history becomes an abstract existence in their minds, what history represents is not the originally real existence, but mere signifiers of England. For most tourists who pursue for Quality Leisure, the theme park provides them with real consumer experience and history that they already know. They don't doubt about the truth of history and heritages, only enjoy high quality service. High quality consumption also presents social identity and status, "research indicated that the majority of vacationers enjoy the act of spending, and, just as importantly, that of being seen to spend" (Barnes 182). Behind superficial success of entrepreneurs and consumers, British culture is relegated to the commercial sign. The fundamental purpose of creators is to create capital value, and they have no intention of showing cultural significance of Britain. The hyperreal landscape inflates desire for consumption and paralyzes consumers' self-consciousness, resulting in mixing up the boundaries between reality and illusion and no longer pursuing cultural connotation behind the consumption. As Jean-Francois Lyotard says, "capitalism inherently possesses the power to derealize familiar objects, social roles, and institutions to such a degree that the so-called realistic representations can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia or mockery, as an occasion for suffering rather than for satisfaction" (Lyotard 74). As a result, English culture and history have lost seriousness and authenticity. In other words, English history does not move forward to further enrich and develop national cultural and history, but retrogresses to historical nihilism.

On the other hand, different from the former commercialized society, Anglia is a pre-industrial, pre-technological and rural society that symbolizes collapsing Old England in 2040. It represents people's desire to return to the past and nostalgia for the tradition and real past. Inhabitants in Anglia keep away from the rapid development of modern society and come back to the former agricultural society: "road traffic and power-lines, street-lights and billboards, the vital ductwork of nation" disappear, and "dead, bulldozed suburbs, and four-lane highways petering out into woodland, with a gypsy caravan titupping over the lurched, volcanic tarmac" (Barnes 254), seasons return to this place over the years and they are respected by people again. Some critics and readers misread it as being what Barnes personally approves of, but the author disavows it. It seems that Barnes depicts a nostalgic recreation of a preindustrial world, indeed, he regards this world as a completely fake village and a bogus village reinventing itself. At the same time, people in this world only pay attention to the forms and entertainment functions of the tradition, and mistakenly regard traditional rural society as an emblem of authenticity. Most parishioners still go to church on Sunday, but it is more from secular needs for social contact and enjoying music than in order to receive religious and soul redemption. The vicar does not even make a ritual remark about the God at the annual village fete, because he knows "better than to use his position to propose any coercive theological system; while he had soon learnt that moralizing sermons were paid for on the silver plate with a trouser button and a valuable euro" (Barnes 262). It is clear that people's demands for spiritual life have been seriously weakened and what they focus on is the external representation of traditional religion and national culture. On top of that, in this idyllic village, festivals related to the history are artificially established. For example, the fete is a successful invented festival and becomes a part of the village's custom: "The Fete was established; already it seemed to have its history. Twelve months from now a new May Queen would be proclaimed" (Barnes 266). The establishment of new festivals means the construction of invented traditions, but these new traditions obviously lack historical foundation. In this simulacrum world, inhabitants lost faith both in religion and convention, and they just live by eyes rather than minds.

In fact, except for the history of society, Barnes also suggests that individual history has many ups and downs, hills and valleys instead of linear progress. The main characters in England, England

experience a series of frustrations, and the road of life is not progressive, but cyclic. The female protagonist Martha Cochran suffers a lot in her life. Before she reached her teens, she was abandoned by her father because he fell in love with another woman. Her illusion of the childhood is broken by this truth and her inner wholeness is shattered as a piece of jigsaw puzzle missing. When she works for Sir Jack and then becomes the CEO of the theme park, she continues to quest for the truth and her personal identity, seeking happiness as much as possible. Martha actively participates in the establishment of the theme park and effectively promotes the implementation of the project. In spite of that, “The main difference between the previous and current CEOs was that Sir Jack Pitman vociferously believed in his project whereas Martha Cochran’s privately did not” (Barnes 191). She only regards it as a plausible and well-planned way of making money. That is to say, she cannot find her value and the reality in her work. For Martha, her happiness is to be true to herself, her nature and her heart. “But the main problem, life’s central predicament, was, how did you know your own heart? How did you know what your nature was?” (226) Then she leaves the Isle of Wight with these questions and returns to the Old England as a villager, but the Old England is just another simulacrum as the theme park, there exists no reality. As a result, Martha fails to find self-identity and authentic memory. Her failure life journey illustrates that both national and personal history are filled with relentless disasters. For Barnes, history of the world includes a continuing series of ironic coincidences and unlucky accidents; personal history is nothing more than a confluence of contingencies driven by personal self-interest, like a motor wheel spinning toward the grave. History does not always go forward, but goes through one difficulty after another.

4. Historical Quotation and National Redemption

For Benjamin, the theory of historical progress is the culprit in the disastrous reality. “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now” (Benjamin 261). Obviously, Benjamin views history as essential, eternal present, rather than the traveling time. History is “now-time”, the sudden adjacency of a past moment with the present in an illuminating constellation, and the clash of present and past produces shock effect that breaks historical continuity to redeem the oppressed. Benjamin states that in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: “A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop... He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history” (262). In conclusion, he considers that revolution lies not in historical progress, but in historical arrest.

One of the ways in which historical arrest can be realized is what Benjamin calls quotation. Quotation interrupts the continuum of history “to redeem lost revolutionary opportunities, disruptive proto revolutionary moments palimpsestically rewritten as original triumphs by those who conquered” (Buxton 68). There is a famous metaphor in Benjamin’s work: he refers to quotations as armed robbers on the highway who block travelers, disrupt their journey and relieve them of their convictions. Robbers in Benjamin’s book aren’t the evil images in the general understanding. It can be seen that quotation arrests forward movement, while simultaneously jolting travelers out of their illusion and complacency. Quotation is not a slavish parroting of the past “the way it really was”, rather, it fosters an illuminating recognition of both the past and the present by way of their defamiliarizing conjunction. It offers liberations to the dead by giving them the power of discourse and then the dead may speak to the present moment. In Benjamin’s discussion of the French Revolution’s conscious quotation of ancient Rome, he suggests that “ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history” (261), the oppressed past is granted with voice to have an impact on present.

Benjamin considers the quotation as the way of historical revolution. However, Barnes using ironic repetitions and quotations satirizes history. In *England, England*, figures in British history and myth including Robin Hood, Dr Johnson, the King and Queen, are quoted and rewritten to adapt to the anticipation of the audience and to the spirit of the new century. The members of the theme park project deem the myth of Robin Hood is politically incorrect because of its male-dominated feature.

As a result, the Official historian Dr Max reminds his colleagues that “one of them—Maid Marian is clearly a certified woman” (Barnes 148), who married Hood according to a survived incomplete narrative. He also mentions that the name “Robin” is a “sexually ambiguous” and that “Hood” indicates “a garment which is ambisexual” (Barnes 148), so they can reposition the Hood myth with the consideration of the sexual orientation of the Band and add gays, women and ethnic minorities into the community. “It was a primal myth, repositioned after considerable debate. Band personnel had been realigned with great sensitivity; offensive elements in the scenario— old-fashioned attitudes to wildlife, over-consumption of red meat— had been expunged or attenuated” (Barnes 222). The essential aspects of characteristics are reduced to depoliticizing and inoffensive performance to adapt to the consumer society. However, actors who play roles of the Band gradually begin to exchange representation for dangerous actuality. They hunt their own food in the parks and steal vegetables from the back gardens. The reason of their atavistic behavior is that the role players not only involve themselves in their fictional work environment, but also gradually obsess with their inauthentic role identities. They mistakenly parallel unreal role identity with real self-identity and mix up the difference between reality and illusion. Barnes uses citation and representation of historical and mythical figures to satirize uncertainty of the past and commercial parody of the history.

The Backdrop members are never known by their own names but by those of their roles, thus they prefer their role models to their real selves and confuse their real and fictional identities. The actor who plays Samuel Johnson identifies himself as the real lexicographer, poet and critic. At the beginning, Dr Johnson is ordered to have dinner with visitors at the Cheshire Cheese. Whatever the actor’s original name is, he had identified as Dr Johnson long ago. The longer he plays this role, the less he remembers his real task. He becomes a scruffy, an angry depressive, a man making racist marks and no longer willing to please bored guests. After dealing with visitors’ complaints against him, Martha feels strangeness, “Dr Johnson was not just two centuries older than her, but two centuries wiser” (Barnes 211), and “he had behaved as if she were less real than he was” (Barnes 212). Thus, it can be seen that the role player becomes a replica of Dr Johnson, not only in appearance, but also in mind. He pursues his character model of simulation, finally finds his real self identity sidestepped.

There is a typical narrative of the King and Queen Denise who are different from other role player. Their identities and social status are real and now they are obliged to supplement their diminished grandeur by performing in the theme park as they sign contract with the theme park. On the one hand, it is clear that Their Majesties regard their duties with disdain: “There’d been a script meeting at the Palace that morning and he’d practiced his lines with Denise as they were waiting to take off. She’d nearly peed herself. She was a real best mate, Denise. But what was the point in paying good money if the audience didn’t get it?” (Barnes 160). The Royal Family are concerned about secular interests rather than subjects’ expectations. They appear to weave and simile to tourists because they “appreciate the cash fee that accompanies each balcony appearance” (Barnes 179). On the other hand, the Royal Family do not distinguish myth from reality. When Martha warns the King to obey executive instructions on the Isle of Wight, he shouts that he is always the king anyway, anywhere and everywhere. Ironically, he is the King by contract and by permission on this island. Therefore, if he disobeys an executive order, he will be decrowned by the CEO of the theme park. It is a vivid reflection of the Royal Family’s manner: contempt of their subjects and dissatisfied acceptance of their belittled status. After presenting inauthentic role of the Royal Family, Barnes lampoons the declined British grandeur that is symbolized by the Royal Family in modern Britain.

Barnes uses historical quotations not only to express parody, but also to contemplate the revolutionary potential of citation. “England, England” and “Anglia” are two replicas of the present England, and they are invented in order to meet the nostalgic desire to the past and recuperate past glories of England. As Mark says in the novel, people “can approach the real thing only by means of the replica” (Barnes 60). In the former commercialized society, historical heritages are represented in the form of replicas, and historical episodes of England are played by actors and intentionally pieced together. All of them become symbolic commodities driven by economic interests. The successful construction

of “England, England” reveals that people in contemporary society are not only easy to satisfy the superficial aesthetic pleasure, but also ignore distinctions between the authentic and the copy. Furthermore, in the latter primitive agriculture society, all inhabitants regress to preindustrial society by rejecting industrial technology, isolating from the rest of the world and having xenophobia. However, it is impossible for the village’s return to its original, and the reconstructed, preindustrial “Anglia” is a similarly artificial alternative to “England, England”. In “Anglia”, the celebration of English traditional festivals is simplified and loses the meaning of custom, which exactly indicates the loss of value judgment of British people. According to Barnes, this work is a letter to Britain at the turn of the millennium. By the depiction of two simulacra worlds, Barnes attempts to arouse readers’ reflection of the future way of Britain and of the way to distinguish truth and fiction.

Through quotations of the historical figures and episodes, Barnes connects the past with the present to interrupt the continuous historical flow and arrest the history at the present. Human beings gain the chance to deliberate the history and the future. The “now-time” of Barnes resembles Benjamin’s “time filled by the presence of the now” (Benjamin 261), which highlights actively putting the past moment into the present. The quotation of the history and convention presents modified history and spiritual emptiness of individuals in England, which arouse introspection of people and the world around them.

5. Conclusion

Julian Barnes’s views on history are ubiquitous in his novels, and his attention to history has become one of the main themes of his works. “*England, England* addresses some key issues developed in his previous novels, in particular the evasiveness of the truth, the construction of history and the elusive nature of memory” (Guignery 105). In this novel, we can see a distrust of traditional historical texts, an acute insight into the violence contained in traditional historical writing, and a stinging satire on the linear narrative of classical historiography. Barnes consciously responds to Benjamin’s philosophy of history in his fiction with his understanding of history’s kinship with literature. Therefore, this paper uses Benjamin’s historical philosophy to analyze Barnes’s conception of history in *England, England*, and explores his doubts about the truth of history and personal recognition of self identity. First of all, by narrating the inauthenticity of national history and personal memory, the writer exposes that traditional history is written by victors, so historical materialists should “brush history against the grain”. The novelist examines victors’ history from both national and individual levels, revealing the unreliability of memory and artificial construction of history. Secondly, by depicting people’s life and behaviors in two simulacra worlds, it shows the refutation of a improving historical trajectory, and claims that history is filled with disasters. These duplicated societies regress to the past: people’s historical recognition and memory gradually fade away, only focusing on material progress and ignoring spiritual development. Personal history also comprises the relentless piling up of disasters. Most of the characters in the novel have experienced ups and downs in life, they have succeeded and failed. Finally, the way to break linear historical progress is to arrest history to the time filled by the presence of now. Through quotation from history, Barnes ironically criticizes personal blurred identities and takes it as a power of redemption arouses people’s reflection on the future, historical reality and the direction of national development.

Barnes interprets history from a literary perspective, and his novel has a significant impact on the literature and history circles. His combination of history and literature not only breaks boundaries between different research fields, but also facilitates mutual development of disciplines. Barnes’s understanding of history provides readers with a new perspective of studying the obscure Benjamin’s philosophy. Simultaneously, using Benjamin’s philosophy of history to explain Barnes’s novel, readers will find the author’s special views and understanding about history. In a new millennium with accelerated process of globalization, Barnes follows the trend of the times to emphasize uncertainty and unpredictability of the history, while trying to make people contemplate history, truth and the construction of national identity.

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