

## THE INTERPLAY OF FICTION AND NONFICTION IN JULIAN BARNES'S *ELIZABETH FINCH*

Naghmeh Varghaiyan  
Ağrı İbrahim Çeçen University, Türkiye

**Abstract:** *The duality of fiction and nonfiction runs through the contemporary British writer Julian Barnes's narrative fiction. Storytelling and history writing (historiography) equally make up a crucial force in the structure of narrative in Barnes's most recent novel Elizabeth Finch (2022). By using a combination of personal memories, imaginary/invented possibilities, and the written personal notes he has inherited, the historian/narrator of Elizabeth Finch tries to disclose his deceased history teacher's and the Roman emperor Julian the Apostate's true characters. Elizabeth Finch is, thus, a work of fiction in the shape of biography and history writing. The narrator digs into the past people and events to find out the truth about them. In the absence of any reliable evidence, the possibilities raised by imagination become the only medium through which the diligent narrator tries to find out the truth. Thus, as it is mainly argued in this paper, written from certain points of view, nonfiction (history) in Barnes's narrative is only a form of fiction in which the delivered/claimed truth is relative, uncertain, and multiple as it is filtered through diverse points of interests, ideologies, and views. The plot in Elizabeth Finch is based on blurring the border between fictionality and nonfictionality. Accordingly, this paper aims to show how history and story share the basic elements of fictionality and how narrative as a structured construction is everywhere in Elizabeth Finch.*

**Keywords:** Storytelling; history writing (historiography); fictionality/nonfictionality; Elizabeth Finch; Julian Barnes.

### Introduction

Fact and fiction are masterfully intertwined in the contemporary British writer Julian Barnes's works. While facts pertain to actual events, characters, and settings, fiction involves those that are invented or imagined. Barnes (b. 1946) usually blurs the lines between fact and fiction to the point where distinguishing one from the other becomes a challenge. His stories, however, reveal how storytelling can illuminate historical truths obscured by the passage of time and the influence of those in power. Barnes's novels, such as *Arthur & George* (2005) and *The Noise of Time* (2016), exemplify how historical facts are often tainted by the biases and intentions of those who construct them. Fact in Barnes's representation is not an objective truth but a discourse-based phenomenon. Through fiction, Barnes exposes the transformed or fictionalized nature of these so-called facts by exploring them from different, often suppressed, perspectives. In this context, the role of the storyteller in *Elizabeth Finch* parallels that of a detective, who, by sifting through various and conflicting pieces of evidence, seeks to uncover the truth. Barnes's

approach underscores the idea that history is not a fixed narrative but a collection of stories shaped by those who hold the power to tell them. By doing so, he invites readers to question the authenticity of historical narratives and consider the ways in which power dynamics influence our understanding of the past. His work highlights the transformative power of fictional words and fictionality in general in challenging and reimagining historical discourse, ultimately offering a more nuanced and multifaceted view of truth. Through his intricate blending of fact and fiction, Barnes not only tells compelling stories but also engages in a profound exploration of the nature of truth and the ways in which it is constructed and perceived.

In Barnes's latest novel *Elizabeth Finch* (2023), the lines between historical fact and fictional representation dissolve, raising questions about their very distinction. Beverley Southgate's assertion that fiction serves as a valuable form of historical evidence (7) finds resonance within the interplay of fiction and history present in Barnes's narrative. Yet, Barnes simultaneously employs “the construction of meaning through narrative” as a unifying thread across both historical and fictional realms (Southgate 19). This latter aspect imbues Barnes's most recent narrative *Elizabeth Finch* with a patina of plausibility, blurring the boundaries between truth and invention. Thus, Barnes's narrative resonates with Southgate's broader argument regarding “history's close and enduring relationship with fiction” (19). As Southgate observes, “the boundaries between the two [history and fiction] are obviously fluid, with two-way traffic and meetings, whether intentional or inadvertent, not infrequent” (19 and 9). This paper delves into this very fluidity, exploring how *Elizabeth Finch* challenges our rigid perceptions of historical truth and fictional invention.

The persistent theme in Barnes's works is the interplay between fiction and truth, and the crucial role of the writer's imagination in weaving them together within any artistic creation. As Barnes argues, both imagination and truth contribute equally to the construction of fictional narratives. In his memoir, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (2008), Barnes emphasizes the writer's ability to employ fiction and nonfiction interchangeably, highlighting the power of imagination. According to Barnes, fiction emerges from a fascinating paradox: it thrives on both “total freedom and utter control,” meticulously balancing “precise observation” with the “free play of the imagination.” Thus, fiction employs both “lies to tell the truth” and “truth to tell lies,” seeking a deeper understanding through this seeming contradiction. A piece of fiction, as Barnes continues his argument, yearns to explore every narrative, embracing all their “contrariness, contradiction and irresolvability,” while simultaneously pursuing the “one true story” that encapsulates them all. The novelist, therefore, embodies a duality: a “bloody back-row cynic” grounded in reality yet also a “lyric poet” with a free-flowing imagination. This duality,

according to Barnes, draws inspiration from both Wittgenstein’s call to “speak only of that which you can truly know” and Stendhal’s “larky shamelessness” (*Nothing* 240).

The contrasting qualities of invention/imagination and truth/factuality are respectively termed fictionality and factuality, concepts grappling with the essence of invention versus veracity. This distinction hinges on the potential for referentiality, or the narrative’s connection to the real world. Factual narratives, as defined by Fludernik and Ryan, aim to “convey true, reliable information” (1) by mirroring “true information” through factual elements (82). They serve as windows to documented events, seeking to inform and illuminate.

However, fictionality occupies a distinct terrain, attracting renewed interest in both novel studies and narratology (Gjerlevsen 176). Unlike factual narratives, fictionality thrives on invention, deliberately weaving elements that lack direct external referents. Simona Zetterberg Gjerlevsen emphasizes this constructed nature, defining fictionality as “intentionally signaled invention in communication,” highlighting the author’s conscious creation of nonreferential elements (176). This aligns with Richard Walsh’s view of fictionality mainly as a textual property, residing within the narrative itself rather than mirroring an external reality. He argues that fictionality functions “rhetorical[ly],” influencing the reader’s engagement and interpretation through carefully crafted strategies (413). It is not defined by external referents, but by its internal construction and the rhetorical effects it generates (Walsh 398).

Therefore, examining a narrative’s rhetorical strategies becomes crucial in understanding its constructed nature and how it establishes a storyworld. In Julian Barnes’s latest narrative *Elizabeth Finch*, the question of fictionality assumes particular significance. Does the narrative present itself as factual, mimicking historical records? Or does it embrace its inventiveness, inviting the reader to engage with a constructed reality? By delving into the novel’s narrative techniques, its use of language, and its construction of character and events, we can unlock the secrets of its fictionality, revealing the unique dance between invention and interpretation that lies at the heart of Barnes’s storytelling.

The line between the imagined/invented and the true or factual qualities in a given fictional narrative is sometimes blurred in a way that their distinction disappears. The existence of nonfictional elements within a fictional world, however, not only does not threaten the level or scale of its fictionality, but rather they can enhance its fictional qualities. For example, as argued by Florian Barth et al.: “Non-fictional passages within a fictional text are of special interest in literary studies because they often contain central messages of a work or correspond with specific statements or intentions of the

author” (27). Thus, “By examining a textual feature that is common to both fictional and nonfictional texts,” as Catherine Gallagher and Simona Zetterberg-Nielsen argue, “we can observe how it becomes an intensifier of fictionality—an amplification of the work’s invented status—when used inside the fictional genre” (216). The frequency of theoretical and speculative sentences, as Gallagher and Zetterberg-Nielsen state, is a common feature between nonfictional and fictional narratives. They focus on a specific sentence structure called the “conjectural sentence,” which can be found in both factual and fictional narratives. Despite their presence in various genres, these sentences share a connection with “fictionality.” They represent a shift from established facts to exploring possibilities, considering “what *might* have happened or what *might* yet happen.” This often occurs when the narrative pauses to consider alternatives to the accepted sequence of events, potentially “suspending the facts momentarily” and hinting at elements of fiction. Even outside fictional genres, these sentences can sometimes suggest an inclination towards exploring “alternative sequences” akin to fictionalization (Gallagher and Zetterberg-Nielsen 216, emphasis original).

Speculating on alternative scenarios while discussing factual information has always been a central concern in the contemporary British writer Julian Barnes’s works. Barnes is a writer whose works are notable for their use of history as a central element in the construction of narrative plots. In other words, historiography and historical issues are recurring themes in Barnes’s works. In his examination of *Elizabeth Finch* through a hermeneutical lens, Ian Tan posits that Barnes fundamentally challenges the prevailing notion of history as an absolute and monopolistic construct, one that prioritizes resolution over acknowledgment of inherent contradictions (4). Barnes’s novel, according to Tan, attempts to “reevaluate the cultural importance of monotheism” by examining it through the “shifting light of history” (14). Therefore, as this paper argues, reconstruction of history or historiography in Barnes’s novel offers a new understanding or interpretation of a historical figure or event. In this sense, in Barnes’s narratives, history writing is not distinct from story writing since fiction and nonfictional elements are intertwined.

## FICTIONALITY AND FACTUALITY IN *ELIZABETH FINCH*

The narratorial stance in *Elizabeth Finch* adopts a notably sceptical perspective when engaging with the representation and/or documentation of the past. Within Barnes’s narrative framework, history is portrayed as an ongoing, incomplete endeavour. This echoes Michael Greaney’s observation on Barnes’s seventh novel, *The Sense of an Ending*, “where history and reality are characterized as an archival collection of texts—diaries, wills, letters,

suicide notes, emails—that beckon examination but consistently remain tantalizingly incomplete in their revelations about the past” (238).

This paper contends that while diverse historical texts form the primary constituents of the narrative archive in *Elizabeth Finch*, they fall short of delivering a coherent, comprehensive, or self-contained account of the past concerning both historical and fictional characters. Instead, *Elizabeth Finch* emerges as a composite of disparate historical and fictional narratives. In essence, Barne’s narration underscores the intricate interplay between historical and fictional constructs by exploring the complexities inherent in recounting and comprehending the past.

The narrative focal points within *Elizabeth Finch* encompass the multifaceted challenges of referentiality, credibility, and retrievability pertinent to both fictitious scenarios and historical occurrences. Neil, the narrator, conscientiously directs our attention to the inherently contrived nature of Elizabeth Finch within the confines of his literary creation. Concurrently, his essay undertakes to underscore the absence of unanimity concerning the characterization and deeds of Julian the Apostate in the works of other scholars. Consequently, *Elizabeth Finch* becomes a repository of numerous conjectural assertions.

Within the fabric of his research, the narrator grapples with a palpable uncertainty, as historical accounts germane to the subject matter exhibit inherent contradictions and distortions. The intertwining of fiction with historical veracity permeates both the research and the narrative, wherein the narrator candidly articulates his uncertainties, engaging in a process of fictionalization acts to address gaps in knowledge. Notably, the hypotheses presented are derivative conjectures, as the narrator extrapolates insights based on the speculative propositions of other commentators regarding Elizabeth Finch and Julian the Apostate. This intricate interplay between historical ambiguity and narrative invention invites readers to navigate the nebulous terrain where fact and fiction converge.

*Elizabeth Finch* represents both the culmination of the narrator’s scholarly efforts, including metafictional elements, and a reflection of the intricate creative process involved in its construction. Through meticulous exploration in both his research and autobiographical reflections, the narrator crafts Elizabeth Finch as a derisive critique of historians and biographers. These purveyors of historical narratives, as scrutinized by the narrator, grapple with pervasive uncertainty and inconsistency in their representations. The narrator strategically exposes the perpetual cycle of invention and reinvention within historical accounts, thereby casting doubt upon the reliability of the historian’s corpus. This scepticism is epitomized in the narrator’s assertion that “historians can also be excellent novelists” (Barnes 188).

Similarly, the narrator impugns the credibility of (auto)biographical works, expressing incredulity at the daunting task faced by biographers in fashioning a coherent and vibrant life narrative from the amalgamation of circumstantial, contradictory, and absent evidentiary fragments. The narrator's explicit discrediting of biographers is summed up in the emotional question: "I sometimes wonder how biographers do it: make a life, a living life, a glowing life, a coherent life out of all that circumstantial, contradictory and missing evidence" (Barnes 105). In these insightful critiques, the narrator not only delineates the challenges inherent in historical and biographical enterprises but also underscores the broader epistemological implications of narrative construction within the scholarly domain. The historical and biographical enterprises both involve constructing narratives about the past. The narrator in *Elizabeth Finch* critiques the challenges in both fields, emphasizing how these challenges affect the accuracy of historical and biographical accounts and raise broader questions about how knowledge is constructed in scholarship.

Permeated with a tapestry of possibilities and contradictions, *Elizabeth Finch* serves as an artistic exploration into the omnipotence and universality of narrative. The narrator's emphasis on the inevitability of narratives as structured accounts of a series of events and experiences reminds us of Roland Barthes's proclamation that "narrative is universal" (Barthes 238). Narratives, according to Barthes, are not merely a component of human communication but rather constitute the very fabric of our understanding of the world. Barthes's definition of narrative challenges the notion of objective reality by emphasizing that what we consider to be reality is constructed through the stories we tell and the meanings we derive from them. The ubiquitous nature of narrative is also a common point in narratology. For example, "narrative," according to Fludernik, "is all around us, not just in the novel or in historical writing. Narrative is associated above all with the act of narration and is to be found wherever someone tells us about something" (1). The narratives depicted within *Elizabeth Finch*, whether pertaining to historical events or fictional characters, unfold as disjointed and distorted constructions of the past events and experiences. This fragmentation arises from the inherent limitations of retrieving the narrative of the past which relies on incomplete documents and memories characterized by subjectivity and unreliability.

The narrative reconstruction process engenders conflicting and competing viewpoints, culminating in the emergence of myriad smaller narratives that collectively challenge the authoritative stance of any overarching metanarrative. *Elizabeth Finch*, thus, subverts the conventional demarcation between history and biography by skilfully obfuscating the boundaries between factual accounts and fictional embellishments. By navigating this intricate interplay of fact and fiction, the work dismantles the

traditional dichotomy, offering a nuanced perspective on the intricate nature of narrative construction and its profound implications for the understanding of the past.

In seamlessly interweaving the realms of fiction and nonfiction, *Elizabeth Finch* epitomizes the quintessential Barnesian novel, wherein the two principal characters transgress their own ontological confines to traverse each other's narrative territories. The tripartite narrative structure intricately blends factual historical events with imaginative inventions, presenting a tapestry where reality and fiction coalesce. Described by the narrator as a “short memoir” and a “tribute,” *Elizabeth Finch* assumes a dual identity, embodying both historical authenticity and fictional embellishment (Barnes 106 and 127).

Barnes's narrative unfolds a parallel exploration of the lives and actions of the fictional character Elizabeth Finch and the historical persona Julian the Apostate. The first-person fictional narrator, motivated by a desire to gratify his teacher Elizabeth, engages in an elaborate scholarly endeavour—a lengthy essay on Julian. This scholarly pursuit is motivated by a sense of duty and commitment to Elizabeth: “It was right that I wanted to please EF [Elizabeth Finch], and right that I would keep my promise. And so I did. And this is what I wrote” (Barnes 59). This intricate narrative structure not only underscores the novel's unique aesthetic but also presents a nuanced exploration of the complex dynamics between reality and invention within the literary domain.

## JULIAN THE APOSTATE'S SHATTERED IMAGE

The second segment of the tripartite narrative within *Elizabeth Finch* is dedicated to a comprehensive research attempts focused on the historical figure Flavius Claudius Julianus, renowned as Julian the Apostate—an emperor who held the final pagan rule over the Roman Empire from 361 to 363 AD. Acting as the extension of the authorial self, the fictional character-narrator Neil divulges the contents of a research article concerning this historical persona. His scholarly pursuit is motivated by a desire to fulfil the expectations of his esteemed mentor, Elizabeth Finch, drawing inspiration primarily from the notes she bequeathed.

Within the contours of his research, Neil accentuates the inherent contradictions present in both historical and nonhistorical accounts of Julian the Apostate, exemplified by his assertion: “There is a lofty incredulity to Julian's attitude” (Barnes 66). He adeptly navigates the dissonant narratives surrounding Julian, encapsulating the essence of conquest in his observation that “the victor acquires the spoils, and these spoils include not just the narrative and the history but also the nomenclature” (Barnes 61). Unveiling

the imposed epithet “the Apostate” as a product of the victors, Neil underscores the malleability of historical narratives and nomenclature influenced by the prevailing power dynamics.

Intriguingly, Neil’s research reveals a recursive pattern, as he acknowledges that his own scholarly contribution is not devoid of derivative elements. Rather than being grounded in unequivocal sources, Neil’s work relies heavily on a tapestry of “may or may not[s]” (Barnes 61), encapsulating possibilities, probabilities, conjectures, and educated guesses. This self-awareness within the narrative emphasizes the perpetual uncertainty and subjectivity inherent in historical inquiry, transcending the dichotomy between fact and speculation. In essence, the second part of *Elizabeth Finch* serves as a scholarly lens, scrutinizing the complex interplay between historical accounts, the influence of victors, and the nuanced nature of Neil’s own research methodology.

Neil’s exploration unveils the pervasive fictionalization within historical accounts of the emperor, as they abound with imaginative constructs and continuous reinventions. His pivotal realization crystallizes in the assertion that: “historians can also be excellent novelists” and extends to poets and theologians, positing their aptitude for narrative craftsmanship (Barnes 61 and 121). This conclusion emerges from Neil’s meticulous historical scrutiny, laying bare how writers across genres seamlessly incorporate narrative elements into their compositions. Consequently, the scrutiny of a singular historical figure, as elucidated by Elizabeth Finch, yields contradictory reflections in subsequent historical and nonhistorical narratives. In essence, Neil’s revelations underscore the co-constitutive nature of history and story, wherein both draw upon a composite fabric of factual and mythical elements to shape their narrative tapestry.

To elucidate the variances in the documentation, reporting, and interpretation of a singular historical event and figure, the narrator embarks on a chronological exploration, commencing with the foundational thesis that discrepancies in portrayals of Julian the Apostate manifest early on: “Versions differ, almost from the beginning” (Barnes 61). The subsequent effort involves tracing the evolution of historical narratives pertaining to Julian, commencing with the narrator’s own contributions. The exploration then extends to diverse and sometimes contradictory depictions in the works of various writers, spanning from Swinburne, evidenced in his poems “Hymn to Prosperine” and “The Last Oracle,” to the nuanced perspectives of Montaigne, Milton, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Edward Gibbon, Schiller, Goethe, Byron, Ibsen, Anatole France, and even the infamous Hitler, characterized as an “unexpected and unwelcome admirer of the Apostate” (Barnes 98).

This comprehensive review delineates the spectrum of interpretations and alterations in the narrative trajectory of Julian the Apostate across

centuries and diverse literary contexts. By scrutinizing the evolving discourse surrounding this historical figure, the narrator adeptly showcases the dynamic nature of historical representation and the enduring impact of varying perspectives on shaping the collective understanding of a pivotal historical event and its central figure.

The scholarly essay initiates with an examination of the purported last words attributed to Julian, wherein, purportedly, he addressed Christ with the phrase: “Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean” (Barnes 32). The narrator critically characterizes this attribution as a “brilliant invention,” emphasizing its diverse iterations across historical accounts (Barnes 61). Subsequently, the narrator delves into an interrogation of the reliability of recorded and reported materials, drawing attention to the insufficiency of extant documents directly traceable to Julian himself. This scrutiny underscores the inherent challenges in ascertaining the veracity of historical narratives, particularly when reliant on attributions that bear the hallmarks of inventive reinterpretations over time:

Julian was a prolific writer, who dictated so fast that his tachygraphers were often unable to keep up. What has survived fills three volumes in the Loeb edition: Letters, Orations, Panegyrics, Satires, Epigrams and Fragments. A central text is ‘Against the Galileans’, in which he lays out his objections to the Christian religion. It is a three-part work, whose second and third books have been lost. Even the first exists only in fragmentary form, often assembled from later Christian writers who quote Julian in order to refute him. But they hardly soften his opinions or his tone. (Barnes 64)

Neil strives to highlight the inherent dependence of historical narratives on lost or nonextant documents. Despite Julian’s prolific literary output, only fragments of his works have survived, primarily preserved by those with adversarial views towards him. Neil’s portrayal of Julian emphasizes his remarkable energy and dedication as a writer, whose strong opinions and extensive writings have left a significant, though incomplete, legacy. By examining these surviving fragments, Neil discovers that Julian’s ability to produce such a vast body of work, despite the limitations of his tachygraphers, underscores his intellectual vigor and relentless drive. Julian’s central work, *Against the Galileans*, not only reveals his fierce critique of Christianity but also illustrates his deep engagement in the religious and philosophical debates of his time. The fact that later Christian writers felt compelled to quote and refute Julian highlights the potency and perceived threat of his ideas. As Neil interprets the existing excerpts, Julian emerges as a formidable intellectual force, unafraid to challenge prevailing religious doctrines and determined to leave a lasting impact through his writings. His determined and vigorous nature is reflected in the volume and intensity of his surviving works, which continue to provoke thought and debate long after their creation.

Consequently, Neil concludes that all forms of historical writing are inherently problematic and susceptible to misdirection.

Rather than embodying a universally applicable truth, historical writings are invariably constrained by the temporal context in which they emerge and the subjective inclinations of their authors. As articulated by the narrator, theologians and historians engage in adaptive rewriting of Julian's life and ideology to align with contemporary agendas and shifting eternal verities. A notable instance of such imaginative and personal reinterpretation is found in Henrik Ibsen's *Emperor and Galilean* (1873) (Barnes 92). In the narrative's culmination, Neil discerns a parallel between the historical interpretations of Julian and the broader human tendency to interpret one another:

I thought of Julian, and how the centuries had interpreted and reinterpreted him, like a man walking across a stage pursued by different coloured spotlights. Oh, he was red, no, more like orange, no, he was indigo verging on black, no, he was all black. It seems to me, if in a less dramatic and extreme way, that this is what happens when we look at anyone's life: how they are seen by their parents, friends, lovers, enemies, children; by passing strangers who suddenly notice a truth about them, or by long-term friends who hardly understand them at all. And then they look at us, in a manner different from how we look at ourselves. Well, getting our history wrong is part of being a person. (Barnes 136-137)

This statement underscores the complexity of Julian's character. The narrator suggests that while many may attempt to define Julian, any single interpretation is inevitably incomplete and influenced by the observer's own biases and context. The narrator portrays Julian as a multifaceted individual whose true essence remains elusive and perpetually open to reinterpretation. The narrator characterizes Julian as a figure whose identity and legacy have been subject to constant reinterpretation and shifting perspectives over the centuries. This dynamic portrayal is likened to a man moving across a stage under spotlights of various colors, each representing a different interpretation. The changing colors symbolize the evolving perceptions of Julian, illustrating how his character has been seen differently by various observers over time. The narrator suggests that this phenomenon of reinterpretation is not unique to Julian but is a universal aspect of how people's lives are viewed. Just as Julian's identity has been reframed by historians and commentators, anyone's life is seen differently depending on the observer's relationship to them—parents, friends, lovers, enemies, children, and even passing strangers who might catch a fleeting yet profound glimpse of their truth. The narrator implies that these diverse perspectives can sometimes be more revealing or, conversely, more obscuring than one's self-perception or the understanding of long-term acquaintances. The final reflection, “getting our history wrong is

part of being a person,” emphasizes the inherent subjectivity and fallibility in human interpretation. It acknowledges that misinterpretations and varying perspectives are an intrinsic part of the human experience.

Neil employs examples from everyday life to fortify his assertion that the proclivity for “getting our history wrong” is a pervasive tendency among individuals. He underscores that the nature of a person’s interpretation is contingent upon the interpreter, resulting in the revelation of a person’s “different coloured spotlights” at various stages of interpretation. Essentially, each interpretation constitutes an inherently incomplete act, unveiling merely a fragment of an elusive whole. Consequently, Neil arrives at a pivotal conclusion, emblematic of his overarching research findings, asserting that every historical narrative is inherently infused with “wrong” or inaccurate details. This assertion extends to encompass a deliberate self-discrediting, as Neil acknowledges the potential fallibility inherent in his own comprehension and interpretation of Elizabeth Finch. In elucidating these dynamics, Neil underscores the intricate and multifaceted nature of historical interpretation, urging a critical reassessment of historical narratives and their inherent complexities.

## THE MYTH CALLED ELIZABETH FINCH

Similar to Julian the Apostate, the eponymous character Elizabeth Finch in Barnes’s novella possesses an enigmatic and nebulous character. The narrator endeavours to delineate her persona, articulating, “Elizabeth Finch was not in any way a public figure. You will google her with little result. If asked to characterize her professionally, I would say that she was an independent scholar” (Barnes 16). The narrator’s exposition of Elizabeth Finch and her pursuit of comprehension and description concerning certain historical figures and events emanates from his incomplete and fragmented portrayal and interpretation of Elizabeth’s character and cogitations. Furthermore, the narrator’s cognition owes its foundation to her character and musings: “Her presence and example had made my brain change gear, had provoked a quantum leap in my understanding of the world” (Barnes 137). In his narrative depiction of her character and thoughts, Neil also relies on his recollections, interpretations, and her public persona. The more he reflects on Elizabeth Finch to convey her essence and elucidate the intricacies of her personality, the more he discerns parallels between his portrayal of her character and the historical accounts and interpretations of Julian’s character, thoughts, and actions:

perhaps all these meetings and exchanges, and my memory of them – memory being after all a function of the imagination – are and were like rhetorical tropes. Living

ones, not literary ones, but tropes nonetheless. Perhaps the fact is that I ‘know’ and ‘understand’ Elizabeth Finch no better – if in a different way – than I ‘know’ and ‘understand’ the emperor Julian. So, realising this, it was time to stop. (Barnes 137)

The narrator draws a parallel between the understanding of Elizabeth Finch and Julian as two different entities. He suggests that both types of understanding are ultimately limited and shaped by personal perception and imagination. The narrator highlights the subjective nature of personal experiences and understanding. By likening memories and exchanges to rhetorical tropes, the narrator implies that just as rhetorical tropes are devices used to convey meaning in literature, the interactions and memories related to Elizabeth Finch are constructed and interpreted through his own imagination. Through equating his personal acquaintance with Elizabeth Finch to historical understanding of Emperor Julian, the narrator highlights the limitations and subjectivity inherent in both personal and historical knowledge. Accordingly, after exhaustive endeavours to delineate and elucidate her persona, the narrator concludes his narrative by acknowledging the elusiveness and unattainability of a definitive resolution regarding Elizabeth Finch’s character and thoughts.

Thus, the narrator Neil’s portrayal of Elizabeth Finch undergoes a perceptible shift from assuredness to ambiguity. Initially, his stance towards Elizabeth Finch’s historical narrative is characterized by unwavering positivity and a perception of absolute veracity: “She dealt in truths not from previous generations but from previous eras, truths she kept alive but which others had abandoned” (Barnes 17). Likewise, Elizabeth Finch herself initially assumes the role of a grand narrative in Neil’s eyes: “She was outside of her age in many ways” (Barnes 17). For a significant portion of his narrative, she remains inextricably linked with truth for the narrator: “I prefer to believe EF. After all, she always told the truth. Except when she didn’t” (Barnes 109). However, profoundly impacted by his scholarly engagement with Julian, Neil’s depiction of Elizabeth’s character, thoughts, and behaviour gradually becomes infused with uncertainties, conjectures, and doubts: “I can’t promise that those were exactly EF’s words. But I have a good ear for voice, and in reconstructing how she spoke, I hope that I do not caricature her” (Barnes 21). By acknowledging that the words attributed to her may not be exact, Neil reveals an awareness of the inevitable subjectivity that accompanies any attempt to reconstruct someone else’s voice. This recognition not only introduces a layer of ambiguity into the narrative but also subtly invites the reader to question the reliability of the portrayal. As Neil grapples with the fear of caricaturing Elizabeth, the line between accurate representation and interpretive embellishment begins to blur. The depiction of Elizabeth thus becomes a complex interplay of memory and imagination, where the

boundaries of truth are constantly shifting, and the essence of her character is shaped as much by what is remembered as by what is forgotten or reimagined.

Neil tries to “reconstruct her life” (Barnes 139) with the aim of comprehending the reasons behind Elizabeth Finch’s noncompletion of the project on Julian the Apostate. Confronted with an absence of verifiable truths and lacking direct access to the primary source, Neil initiates the process of conjecture and creation. In his attempts, he not only engages in the act of speculation but also derives pleasure from the exploration of potentialities:

How about this: she plans to write a book about the emperor and his historical consequences, but can’t make it work. Either because she doesn’t have the skill. Or because the historical and theological complications defeat her. Or because Julian turns out not to be the man she first thought him. Or because her initial, grand audacity was not rewarded. (Barnes 138)

In his analytical pursuit of Elizabeth’s words and actions, Neil tries to discern her intentions and genuine thoughts concerning Julian. Essentially, his written discourse operates as a tool for mind-reading. Nevertheless, as Neil probes deeper, he becomes increasingly cognizant of the inherent inconsistencies and lack of coherence within his assessments of Elizabeth. Ultimately dissatisfied with his own scholarly output, Neil, upon envisioning his work through the lens of his progeny, deems it contradictory and inconsistent. His anticipation of his children’s disappointment hinges on the plethora of conclusions at the expense of a cohesive narrative (Barnes 139).

This dissatisfaction prompts Neil to reflect on the narrative structure of his work, revealing an acknowledgment of the deficiency in unity and cohesion. Rather than embodying a singular, overarching narrative with a unifying theme, Neil’s work manifests as a mosaic of smaller narratives. In essence, his historical account is governed by a constellation of micro-narratives, deviating from the conventional grand narrative. Neil’s critical stance toward grand narratives, whether in fictional or nonfictional historical writing, is underscored by his assertion that a consistent narrative may be illusory, akin to the futile endeavour of reconciling conflicting judgments (Barnes 105). Regrettably, Neil’s own narrative is permeated with elements of “personal deduction” and “guess[es]” (Barnes 13), detracting from the scholarly rigor and objectivity he aspires to maintain.

Despite being entrusted with the imperative task of uncovering truth within his research, Neil, the narrator in *Elizabeth Finch*, ultimately concedes his inability to fully achieve this objective. The conclusive rendition of his work emerges as but one narrative amid a multitude, a subjective interpretation derived from Neil’s own perspective: “Perhaps the fact is that I ‘know’ and ‘understand’ Elizabeth Finch no better – if in a different way – than I ‘know’ and ‘understand’ the emperor Julian. So, realizing this, it was time to stop”

(Barnes 138). The inherent self-directed focus of the historian character-narrator, Neil, introduces an element of unreliability into his account. Motivated by a deep-seated “romantic-stoic love” for Elizabeth (Barnes 115), Neil’s narrative is susceptible to bias as he endeavours to defend her.

Complicating the matter further, Neil’s memoir of Elizabeth Finch intertwines personal recollections and reflections on her thoughts and character. Moreover, it incorporates interpretations, narrations, and comments sourced from other writers. This amalgamation of diverse voices and perspectives contributes to the multifaceted nature of Neil’s work, but simultaneously raises questions about the objective veracity and coherence of the historical account. Neil’s acknowledgment of his limited understanding of Elizabeth and the decision to cease further exploration underscores the complexity inherent in historical research, particularly when personal sentiments are interwoven with the analytical process.

## CONCLUSION

In Julian Barnes’s latest novel *Elizabeth Finch*, history and story are portrayed as structured constructions or narrative practices. Barnes’s narrative serves as a satirical embodiment of both historiography and historical fiction. By intertwining history and fiction, Barnes skilfully exposes the intricate and interpretation-laden nature of retrieving past events and experiences. This essay has elucidated how *Elizabeth Finch* exemplifies the universality of narrative by weaving together two distinct parallel plots. The first plot, centred on Elizabeth Finch, unfolds as an imaginative and constructed narrative. The first-person historian character-narrator, in both the first and third parts of his work, endeavours to encapsulate Elizabeth’s thoughts, behaviour, and life within the pages of his memoir. In parallel, the plot involving the Roman emperor Julian the Apostate is a composite built upon recorded and reconstructed historical documents. Despite their disparate origins, these plots share common threads in their construction. Elizabeth Finch, as an autonomous scholar and lecturer in Culture and Civilization, exerts an enduring influence on the narrator, akin to the impact Julian has left on subsequent historians and writers. The shared quality between these two figures becomes apparent in the conflicting interpretations of their characters and deeds by their respective followers. Certainty and credulity are elusive; interpretations remain highly perspectival, driven by political, cultural, ideological, and theological motivations at different junctures in history. The narrator, both in his essay on Julian and in his memoir of Elizabeth, arrives at the same conclusion. He acknowledges that any narrative, whether historical or fictional, is rooted in temporally and geographically restricted points of view, shaped by interests and ideologies. The narrative comes to a halt when

the narrator recognizes the contested nature of the concept of universal or ultimate truth, realizing its dependence on both time and individual perspectives. The complex process of understanding truth unfolds as fact and fiction become intertwined, revealing that all histories, whether factual or fictional, are constructed narratives assembled from fragmented parts that hold truth only for specific individuals at particular moments in time.

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