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An Englishman in France

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Résumé

Le sujet de cet article concerne l'aspect interculturel du roman de Julian Barnes, Flaubert's Parrot. L'auteur du roman est un romancier contemporain britannique de renommée mondiale tandis que le cadre de son roman est particulièrement situé en France. Son personnage principal est un Anglais admirateur du célèbre écrivain français Gustave Flaubert. Ce roman dépasse les antagonismes historiques entre les Français et les Britanniques et fusionne les différences entre les deux peuples grâce à la fluidité lyrique et émotionnelle des textes et des personnages romanesques. L'objectif de cet article est de montrer comment l'auteur contemporain possède la qualité d'absorber le lecteur dans un monde complexe d'aujourd'hui et d'hier, dans le monde de Flaubert et de son personnage, dans l'univers de l'esthétique française et britannique et du problème de la quête d'identité.

Mots-Clés

texte littéraire, Nouvelle, interculturalité.

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Texte intégral

Introduction

The first prominent feature about *Flaubert's Parrot* is its postmodernist concept and its unique narration. It is not uncommon for the postmodernist novels to be hermetical and hardly readable, but Barnes's novel is an exception. The novel is a real enjoyment. It is written in fluid and sensitive language which perfectly reflect the melancholic aspects of the story and opens the international theme.

> I thought of Flaubert's Parrot when I started writing it as obviously an unofficial and informal, unconventional sort of novel – an upside down novel, a novel in which there was an infrastructure of fiction and very strong elements of non-fiction, sometimes whole chapters which were nothing but arranged facts [1].

When a Leicester born author Julian Barnes (1946-) published his first big novel *Flaubert's Parrot* in 1984, famous critic and professor of literature Frank Kermode wrote a review for *The New York Review of Books*, and entitled it as « Obsessed with Obsession» (Kermode 1991: 362) [2]. The title points out the basic streak of the novel: Barnes is obsessed with writing, Flaubert was obsessed with writing, and Barnes's main character, retired MD, Geoffrey Braithwaite is obsessed with Flaubert. So, Barnes's obsession to compose a novel on obsession becomes obsessive.

The novel gained popularity immediately. The title itself became somehow provocative and there were numerous reactions to it. For example:

> In the satirical magazine *Private Eye*, a cartoon shows Barnes working on an early draft of *Flaubert's Parrot*, called *Flaubert's Dead Parrot*. The cartoonist Simon Pearsall may have intended to mock 'the parrot guy' for having become synonymous with the novel, but by putting Barnes in the *First Drafts* series he was closer to the truth about this masterpiece than he could know [3].

This «chameleon» author, as Mira Stout called him, is hard to define. He is, according to her opinion, «hard to quantify as his fiction. Even his writer-friends resort to clichés like 'the strong, silent type' and 'intensely private' to describe him. Complex, educated, ironic, he is a reconstructed suburbanite discreet to the point of caginess [4]».

Barnes is often mentioned as the one of the most representative postmodernist authors in English language, together with Martin Amis, A. S. Byatt, Angela Carter and others [5]. The form of his novel is of a postmodernist kind – it «combines literary 'detective work' [6]». The «detective» should be Geoffrey Braithwaite, who pursues the life secrets of his favourite author. And his detective quest for the «real» parrot is the frame for the «real story» which is the identity quest. Most famous authors have used the form of popular detective or similar genres to «cover» more complex novelistic tissue. The postmodernist historicism represents nothing new actually, apart from the necessarily different narrative form based on T. S. Eliot's concept of «tradition and individual talent». Barnes's novel is based on French literary tradition and *chronotope* which is shaped by his individual talent.

It is typical for a postmodernist author to manipulate narrators. Barnes does this by first-person narration of multiple narrators. In this manner he manages to achieve a greater level of intimacy and compassion between the narrators and the reader. That is why the Braithwaite's account is «colored by personal bias [7]». According to Bradford, we «find ourselves in the company of Braithwaite, who sometimes offers accounts of his life history – his participation in the Normandy landings, for example – and more frequently refers to his late, beloved wife [8]». Braithwaite's story has a deeply personal diachronic French influence. As Kermode noted, we meet him in Paris in 1968 as a student, who was preoccupied with keeping journal about his first love affair. Because of that he missed the «événements» of that spring [9]. There is a strong nostalgic line throughout this novel: it is all about missed opportunities, missed happiness and fulfilment, paradoxically about the life lived on the margins of life. This is Braithwaite, the man who has lived his life melancholically. Peter Childs believes that this:

> strain of melancholy runs through English poets such as Hardy, Housman and Larkin, elegising as much as eulogising over existence's inability to deliver wish-willed expectations, with life marked by a sense of loss and disappointment but also of continued hope underlined by stoicism and pragmatism. Love and life fail but there is much that is beautiful and amusing in the mismatch between human beings' reach and gasp [10].

Barnes's third novel, *Flaubert's Parrot* is actually his first major novel, and a sort of a breakthrough in his literary career. This unusual novel comprises several narrative methods: the most dominant are the fragmentary biographical method and versatile point

of view. Throughout the novel, the author opens different literary issues because this is actually a novel about writing. In his study on Julian Barnes Peter Childs claims that Barnes accepted Flaubert's belief in the importance of «the words» and «the purity of the aesthetic approach [11]». Mira Stout points out another similarity between these two authors: «Barnes's polished language proves Flaubert's opinion that «prose is like hair; it shines with combing [12]». Richard Bradford describes his postmodernism as unique: «While reminiscent of the post-modernism of Calvino and Nabokov, 'Parrot' is a fresh and accessible reworking of the collage-style of writing -- fiction, literary criticism, footnote and satire -- that has become Barnes's benchmark» Each chapter is different: sometimes they are more diachronic, sometimes more synchronic, sometimes in the form of chronology, and sometimes in the form examination, sometimes very personal, and sometimes distant.

The biographical method is implicated by the first person narration throughout the novel. This narration is, however, fragmentary, and fragments are completely diverse: sometimes they are told by another imaginary narrator, such as Louise Colet (1810-1876), well known 19th century French author. Louise's story is a sort of an experiment with the point of view. Here we come across a certain *rashomon* effect: the author offers three versions of the story: Braithwaite's, Flaubert's and Lisa's. Each point of view is quite different. One can only «assume» that Louise's story has been written by Braithwaite, « although we can never be quite sure of this» (Bradford 2007: 49). Braithwaite's life story resembles Louise's life story. According to Kermode, «the doctor obviously likes Louise; perhaps she resembles his dead wife who was both candid and unfaithful [13]». These two chapters are for sure the most emotional and personal, written in confessional tone.

The novel opens important poetical issues regarding authors, books, critics and readers: «Why does the writing make us chase the writer? Why can't we leave well alone? Why aren't the books enough? [14]». Every narrator thinks about writing and reading, about written and unwritten books, about the meaning and significance of books.

Flaubert's Parrot consists of fifteen chapters whereas the first one named «Flaubert's Parrot»and the final one named «And the Parrot…» encircle the story. Among these two *parrot* chapters, there are numerous fragments, memories, stylistic experiments, versatile narrative experimental chapters, stories told by reliable and less reliable narrators, more present and less present narrators, and discussions on literature and literary criticism. According to Childs «the book contains by contrast an unusual range of narrative types, including apocrypha, autobiography, bestiary, biography, chronology, criticism, dialogue, dictionary, essay, exam, guide, and manifesto [15]». These "encircled chapters" mainly refer to Gustave Flaubert, his life and works, and to reader's obsession to understand the writer and to find the answers to all that critics and biographers missed. One of these missed

segments is “the parrot”. We may ask ourselves why the parrot is important? There are numerous meanings and interpretations, sometimes it can be seen as a symbol and sometimes as a leitmotif.

1. Barnes’s «French Connection»

It is known that Barnes admired Flaubert’s writing. In 1983 he published an essay titled «Flaubert and Rouen». According to Roberts, it «recounts key events in Flaubert’s life and discusses his writing style, friendship and dislike for the bourgeois [16]». Accordingly, Vanessa Guignery emphasizes Barnes’s European spirit and she describes France as his ‘second country’, implying that his relationship to French culture is both “intimate and passionate”. She cites his words: « [France] is my other country. There is something about it – its history, its landscape – that obviously sparks my imagination [17]».

The novel shows strong French and English connections. The reason for that can be traced in the author’s autobiography: both of his parents were French teachers [18]. They family spent holidays «driving through various regions of provincial France… In 1966/67 Barnes taught English at a Catholic School in Rennes [19]». He studied Modern languages at Oxford and he worked as a lexicographer for the Oxford English Dictionary. So, his love for words origins from his profession as

well. In his book *Sometimes to Declare* Barnes describes his rediscovery of France:

> Later, in the long silent quarrel and faux existentialism of late adolescence, I took against my parents’ values and therefore against their love of France. At university I gave up languages for philosophy, found myself ill-equipped for it, and returned reluctantly to French. In my twenties, other countries appealed more. It was only in my thirties that I started seeing France again with non-filial, non-academic eyes [20].

Apart from that, in September 1981, he travelled to Normandy and visited Rouen. He stood in front of Flaubert statue and visited his museum at the Hotel Dieu [21].The «French story» of Julian Barnes opens at the very beginning of the novel in front of Flaubert’s statue in Rouen. In front of it «Six North Africans were playing boule [22]». Here Barnes ironically plays with the point of view: «the pigeons could see the full extent of the writer’s baldness [23]». This is a sort of introduction to the narrator’s Normandy. Smoothly we follow the narrator through the idyllic towns: from Graye-sur-Mer to Rouen and Croisset. In a particular *sentimental journey*, we follow the footsteps of the famous author: from his birth-house to the place of his death.

The English authors have always liked travel stories. The unfinished novel *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768) by Laurence Sterne can be defined as one of the most first literary adaptations of French and English relations. Apart from the centuries long hostility, the French and the British have mutual monarchic and cultural roots, which can be found in numerous adaptations of Arthurian legends written in French. *Flaubert's Parrot* is a contemporary expression of these mutual similarities, based on identity, language, culture, biography and geography.

These similarities are deeply rooted in the style of the novel. Firstly, the narrators come from different settings: Geoffrey Braithwaite is a late 20th century person, an Englishman with strong affinities for French author; Gustave Flaubert is a French author of the late 19th century; his fiancée, Louisa Colet is his contemporary. Their significance and presence is different, but all of them are the parts of the puzzle «narrator – author – character – reader». In this magic circle Julian Barnes knits his complex story about mutual and individual aspects of the identity quest. This magic circle opens another one, and that is «life – art – literature».

The narrator, our Englishman in France, is a retired medical doctor Geoffrey Braithwaite who is obsessed with the parrot Loulou from Flaubert's short story « Un cœur simple ». Finally, he has time to devote himself to his *mission*. Braithwaite initiates his quest in France, from place to place and town to town. He goes from Graye-sur-Mer, Courseulles-sur-Mer, Ver-sur-Mer, Asnelles, Arromanches to Rouen and Croisset. As we know, Gustave Flaubert was born in Rouen and died in Croisset. At first we know little about the main narrator in this novel. We are introduced to his quest mainly by inner monologue technique until the thirteenth chapter called «Pure story», in which he tells his personal story. It is the story of his wife Ellen, who is mentioned only several times as a sort of background character. The «Pure story» is a revealing, the most personal, and the most emotional part of the novel. It increases the significance of the narrator. We see that he is a living being, with an abundance of mixed emotions and memories. We learn that his story is a story of loneliness and introspection and that this introspection is a sort of escapism from the real world into the world of Flaubert. According to Barnes it is the story about the inability to tell the story:

> 'Pure story' tells the story that has been delayed all the way through novel – the story that Braithwaite is unable to tell you – which is his inability to tell you the tragic story of his own domestic life. Here is why he is telling you all this stuff about Flaubert, and why I insist upon the fictional element, the fictional infrastructure: without it, it wouldn't be a coherent book [24].

What is the world of Flaubert? It is a complicated mixture of biographical facts, of different voices of his contemporaries, of letters and his works, including the most renowned such as *Madame Bovary* and *L'Education sentimentale*, and many others, less renowned works such as the «key» short story «Un cœur simple». There is also, according to the poetics of postmodernism (if there is a such thing as the poetics of post-modernism) a number of fragmentary thoughts, implications, allusions and conclusions. Accordingly, there are certain, let's say «unordinary» paragraphs such as: «Emma Bovary's Eyes», «The Flaubert's Apocrypha», «The Case Against», «Braithwaite's Dictionary of Accepted Ideas», and finally, «Examination paper». So, we have here the most unusual paragraph form: an imaginary court case against Gustave Flaubert, in which, our English narrator is a sort of his advocate or one of the final chapters «Examination paper» in which imaginary students should do tests on literary criticism, economics, psychology, psycho-analysis, and so on.

Having in mind the diversity in chapter form and topics, one may differ a multiple cyclical form: the widest one would be the parrot story, the beginning and the end, the following one is Geoffrey Braithwaite's story, and the central one is Flaubert's story. These stories are intermingled with another cyclical form and that is a story within a story that is how to write a novel about a novel. Geoffrey Braithwaite is planning to write a novel or a book on Flaubert, he did not choose a genre, but throughout the novel he is seeking for a proper form, for the topics and motifs and for the narrator. Some critics claimed that the flaw of the novel is the character of Geoffrey Braithwaite since he is inconvincibly excellent connoisseur of the literary theory and history concerning the fact that he is a medical doctor. However, even in the terms of the crudest rationalism, we must admit that it is not impossible for a medical doctor to be well read in theory of literature. Additionally, in this novel we have a criticism of literary criticism and Barnes is excellent here. His narrator, Geoffrey Braithwaite, read numerous studies on Flaubert and he singled out one of the most important written in English, the study on Flaubert, written by famous critic and reader at Oxford University, professor Enid Starkie:

> This precise and disheartening indictment was drawn up by the late Dr Enid Starkie, Reader Emeritus in French Literature at the University of Oxford, and Flaubert's most exhaustive British biographer. The numbers in her text refer to footnotes in which she spears the novelist with chapter and verse [25].

This is where Barnes opens the topic of authors and critics in the original way since Dr Enid Starkie was a real person who became literary character, criticized for being meticulous regarding Flaubert's inconsistency in describing Emma Bovary's eyes. Braithwaite claims that this is the spot where the critics fail: they neglect aestheticism of the literary text in order to satisfy scholar rationalistic thought. It is truth, says Braithwaite that Emma

Bovary's eyes are sometimes blue, and sometimes black, but the medical doctor sees something what critics missed: the existence of a perfect reader. Braithwaite asks himself: Is there a perfect reader? The critics expect a perfect writer for perfect reader, but our narrator claims that there is no such thing:

> I can't prove that lay readers enjoy books more than professional critics; but I can tell you one advantage we have over them. We can forget. Dr Starkie and her kind are cursed with memory: the books they teach and write about can never fade from their brains. They become family. Perhaps this is why some critics develop a faintly patronizing tone towards their subjects. They act as if Flaubert, or Milton, or Wordsworth were some tedious old aunt in a rocking chair, who smelt of stale powder, was only interested in the past, and hadn't said anything new for years [26].

It happens often nowadays that literary criticism fulfills its own purpose. In that case *belles lettres* becomes just a material for critical or interpretative text. Barnes illustrates this by combining perspectives of literary character Geoffrey Braithwaite and real critic and professor Dr Enid Starkie:

> Eyes of brown, eyes of blue. Does it matter? Not, does it matter if the writer contradicts himself; but, does it matter what colour they are anyway? I feel sorry for novelists when they have to mention women's eyes: there's so little choice, and whatever colouring is decided upon inevitably carries banal implications. Her eyes are blue: innocence and honesty. Her eyes are black: passion and depth. Her eyes are green: wildness and jealousy. Her eyes are brown: reliability and common sense. Her eyes are violet: the novel is by Raymond Chandler. How can you escape all this without some haversack of a parenthesis about the lady's character? Her eyes are mud-coloured; her eyes changed hue according to the contact lenses she wore; he never looked her in the eye. Well, take your pick [27].

Even at this point, Barnes do not miss French and English ties: Professor Enid Starkie comes from Great Britain as Braithwaitem and both of them adore French author and French culture. Brathwaite's France is emotional and vivid. It is Barnes's France: « provincial, villagey, under-populated, a France of the regions rather than the centre [28]». Critics are not to be believed both the authors are. In an interview with Patrick McGrath Barnes emphasizes Flaubert's literary awareness:

> Obviously, he's the writer whose words I most carefully tend to weigh, who I think has spoken the most truth about writing. And it's odd to have a foreign genius for whom you feel a direct love… He's obviously a tricky bastard in some ways, but I find when I'm reading his letters I just want to go and make him a cup of hot chocolate, light his cigarette [29].

Let us go back to his Englishman in quest for the parrot of the famous author. Silvia Albertazzi believes that Braithwaite's quest, «his futile pursuit of always eluding truth» seems a variation of the so called Emma Bovary syndrome [30]. Throughout the novel the parrot appears differently, and different parrots appear at several museums. The first one for which Braithwaite thought that might be the original one was found in Hotel-Dieu, once a hospital, and now a museum. He is looking for one particular stuffed parrot described in a Flaubert's letter: «the parrot, he wrote, had been on his desk for three weeks, and the sight of it was beginning to irritate him [31]». In the mentioned story, the main character, maid Félicité, had it stuffed and in her modest life, it was her most precious possession. But, Braithwaite is torturing himself: how to find a connection: Félicité-Parrot-Flaubert? Everything and everyone was so different: «But then the aim of Un cœur simple is quite elsewhere: the parrot is a perfect and controlled example of the Flaubertian grotesque [32]». As a symbol, the parrot is perhaps "the emblem of the writer's voice", or it is a symbol of the power of language and here we come to the Barnes' obsession with words. Barnes provides historical sources for the importance of the symbol of the parrot:

> Parrots are human to begin with; etymologically, that is. Perroquet is a diminutive of Pierrot; parrot comes from Pierre; Spanish perico derives from Pedro. For the Greeks, their ability to speak was an item in the philosophical debate over the differences between man and the animals. Aelian reports that 'the Brahmins honor them above all other birds. And they add that it is only reasonable to do so; for the parrot alone can give a good imitation of the human voice.' Aristotle and Pliny note that the bird is extremely lecherous when drunk. More pertinently, Buffon observes that it is prone to epilepsy [33].

Eric Berlatsky here introduces a psychoanalytical interpretation. He believes that Barnes «slyly» constructed parallels between Bovary and Parrot, alluding that Braithwaite's obsession with Flaubert «may be itself endangered by the recognition of himself in Bovary [34]». Others, like Aleid Fokkema believe that «the biographer is quite literally no more than a writer's parrot, substituting the author's language for the unreliable hard data of unauthentic facts [35]».

2. Conclusion: «Why is there not a discovery in life? »

Finally, at the end of the novel Braithwaite finds out that there are several parrots in different museums and no one can tell for sure which is the right one or if there is the right one. His obsession is not satisfied and the end we have a sort of typical modernist recipe:

an emptiness without catharsis. At the beginning of the twentieth century Virginia Woolf asks herself: «Why is there not a discovery in life? Something one can lay hands on and say 'This is it'? What is it? And shall I die before I can find it? ». The same question tortures Braithwaite at the end of the same century.

So, the «French story» of Julian Barnes is at the same time contemporary and nineteenth century story; it is the story of Geoffrey Braithwaite and the story of Gustave Flaubert and Louise Collet; it is the story of the literary critics and their limited perspectives; it is the story of great mastery of writing and art within French culture and tradition; finally, it is both individual and general. Rarely can a writer feel and live culture of other country as Barnes can. As Vanessa Guignery points out:

> «These numerous links with a foreign culture raise questions as to the contemporary writer's relationship to the literary past and his own search for originality [36]».

One can conclude that Barnes's English originality is typically French.

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Quelques mots à propos de : Marija Letić

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Propriété intellectuelle