

## Character Narration and Fictionality in Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*

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### Abstract

Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* is a hybrid book resisting any attempt at genre classification. It also serves as the embodiment of Barnes's concern and experiment with the interplay of life and fiction. Enlightened by James Phelan's rhetorical theory of character narration and his rhetorical approach to fictionality, this article examines the form and function of fictionality in *Flaubert's Parrot*, to investigate how Barnes fashions a novel that resonates with greater truth than the factual material. It argues that an important aspect of the function of fictionality in *Flaubert's Parrot* is that it invites and, indeed encourages, intense readerly involvement and vicarious experience by the use of character narration. Barnes's pursuit of greater truth in fiction lies in the readers' search for the emotional authenticity and ethical situation in writing one's or their own lives during the process of reading, which makes the act of reading rewarding in itself.

**Keywords:** *Julian Barnes, Flaubert's Parrot, character narration, fictionality*

In the year 2005, the English writer Julian Barnes wrote an article in honour of the twentieth anniversary of his novel *Flaubert's Parrot* called 'When Flaubert Took Wing' for *The Guardian*, in which he describes how the idea for this novel came to his mind. After finishing two comparatively conventional novels, Barnes has succumbed to the temptation to make Gustave Flaubert the principle subject of his probably most experimental and controversial novel – *Flaubert's Parrot*. It is not a secret that Flaubert is both the central figure in Barnes's work and his most admired writer, too. His admiration of Flaubert can be traced back to his first novel *Metroland*. Thus, this temptation was too difficult for Barnes to withstand, though defining the approach to writing about Flaubert was baffling. In this regard, Barnes himself claims that:

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.<sup>1</sup>

Before finally deciding what to write, Barnes was sure that he didn't want to write 'any kind of biography, for instance, or something in that charmingly illustrated Thames & Hudson series about writers and their worlds (not that I'd been asked)'.<sup>2</sup> He was still unsure about the work's jumping-off point when he argued that the information he collected 'had clearly made an impression...but of what sort – and with what

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<sup>1</sup> Vanessa Guignery, 'Julian Barnes in Conversation', in *Conversations with Julian Barnes*, ed. Vanessa Guignery and Ryan Roberts (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 105.

<sup>2</sup> Julian Barnes, 'When Flaubert Took Wing', *The Guardian* (5 March 2005): 30.

consequences, if any? Was this just a Curious Fact? Half of an anecdote? A small article for an academic journal?'<sup>3</sup>

As an indicator of its categorical belonging, Barnes's phrase 'an upside-down, informal piece of novel-biography' already suggests the difficulty of classifying this work within one generic category. The juxtaposition of genres, including fiction, biography, bestiary, chronology, criticism, manifesto, dictionary and even an examination paper, creates a more complex interpenetration of genre conventions, enabling Barnes to illustrate his famous 'chameleon-like' quality of genres. His game-playing with genres, narrative impostures, hesitation and uncertainty pose the question of what constitutes *Flaubert's Parrot* and challenge its generic identity. Interestingly, *Flaubert's Parrot* is Barnes's first novel that was translated into many languages, with varying descriptions in different editions. The Picador paperback edition refers to it as novel, but with biographical notes, while the American edition calls it as 'a novel (in disguise)'. At the same time, the French edition directly defines it a 'novel' and the Chinese one refers to it as both a unique biography and a brilliant novel.

As it can be seen, there has hardly been any consensus on the genre of *Flaubert's Parrot*. Nonetheless, generally speaking, there are three competing views on the genre of *Flaubert's Parrot*. First, the work appears as the ungraspable and indeterminate one, as far as genre taxonomy is concerned. Instead of defining its genre, scholars tend to emphasize its ambiguity. Hence, it is described as a 'text' or in other vague terms (Ramón Suárez, James Fenton).<sup>4</sup> The second view goes to the work's biographical enterprise. Traditional categories, such as biography, autobiography, biographical novel, and fictional novel, seem to be quite unhelpful in labelling *Flaubert's Parrot*. When examining the approach to experimenting with the biographical genre in the context of Barnes's fiction, scholars like Cornelia Stott, examine Barnes's unique treatment of the relationship between the narrator and the writer to present a procedure that belongs to the field of metabiography.<sup>5</sup> What most critics puzzle over, but also salute in *Flaubert's Parrot*, is the creative blending of biography and novel. Rather than getting lost in its hybridity and multiplicity, however, most critics suggest that calling the work a novel, on the whole, may be most appropriate among other options, though its status as such has been questioned repeatedly. Barnes himself also affirms the term of 'novel': 'I can't think of *Flaubert's Parrot* as anything except a novel. I think if you withdrew the fictional infrastructure, it would just sort of collapse. It wouldn't be worth reading'.<sup>6</sup> It is understandable that Barnes was not an essayist in writing of *Flaubert's Parrot*, but a novelist who used his imagination as an instrument of writing. This work garners critical attention as an example of the type of postmodernism that Linda Hutcheon labels 'historiographic metafiction',<sup>7</sup> namely, 'novels which are both intensely self-reflexive

<sup>3</sup> Barnes, 'When Flaubert Took Wing', 30.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Vanessa Guignery, *The Fiction of Julian Barnes: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 39.

<sup>5</sup> Cornelia Stott, *The Sound of Truth: Constructed and Reconstructed Lives in English Novels since Julian Barnes's Flaubert's Parrot* (Marburg: Tectum-Verlag, 2011), 97.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Rudolf Freiburg, "'Novels Come out of Life, not out of Theory": An Interview with Julian Barnes', in *'Do You Consider Yourself a Postmodern Author?'* *Interviews with Contemporary English Writers*, ed. Rudolf Freiburg and Jan Schnitker (Münster: Lit Verlag, 1999), 44.

<sup>7</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), xiv.

and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages'.<sup>8</sup> In hindsight, Barnes's playful use of metafictional elements makes the label of 'historiographic metafiction' gain acceptance from many critics like Ansgar Nünning,<sup>9</sup> Bruce Sesto<sup>10</sup> and Zhang Helong,<sup>11</sup> though these scholars perceive the label in a more nuanced way.

Compared with *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* that addresses the problems of representation of history in a global sense, *Flaubert's Parrot* concentrates on the problems and limitations of accessing and presenting an individual's life and, consequently, of writing about it. The definition of *Flaubert's Parrot* as metabiography, metafiction biography, historiographic metafiction, or biographic metafiction somehow leaves loose ends. It is debatable as to whether one single label can define *Flaubert's Parrot's* particular characteristics. It has to be noted that I do not mean to deny the existence of postmodern features in the text. However, subjecting this work to rigid confinements of one genre may lead to the loss of attention to Barnes's distinctive treatment of narrative techniques and genres. Just as James Scott notes, Barnes deconstructs 'prose genre taxonomies [...] so that [...] the conventional signification patterns (biography presents fact; fiction presents fancy) no longer function'.<sup>12</sup> Realizing these insufficiencies in previous studies on *Flaubert's Parrot*, this article argues that a fruitful path for the critical study of Barnes's work is to examine the tensions and overlaps between fictionality and factuality within the text. However, very few scholars have paid particular attention to fictionality in *Flaubert's Parrot*.

Ostensibly, this novel is Geoffrey Braithwaite's account of his research on Gustave Flaubert. In fact, it tells three main stories at the same time: the story of Flaubert, the story of the character Braithwaite and the story of the narrator Braithwaite. These three interwoven storylines make this novel a multi-generic novel which blurs the line between fictionality and nonfictionality while employing different conventions of fictional writing. As far as *Flaubert's Parrot* is concerned, there are three points that deserve our attention. First, instead of writing the conventional fiction or biography, Barnes is interested in how far he can push the constraints of traditional narrative, and how far he can distort and fragment the narrative line while keeping a continuous and growing expectation in the audience. He seeks to stress the conventions of genres, which results in an analysis of this rhetorical aim as the key to understanding fiction. Second, to present the intertwinement of the character narrator's and Flaubert's stories, Barnes uses a range of narrative techniques, especially character narration. His unique design of tracks of communication makes the discourse as the story, which helps readers and character narrator himself to better explore the narrator's and the implied author's purposes in the novel. Third, the choices of narrative techniques convey Barnes's inquiry into the relationship between nonfiction and fiction in terms of the discussion between factuality and fictionality in the process of self-expression. One should not aim at determining whether the genre of

<sup>8</sup> Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ansgar Nünning, 'Fictional Metabiographies and Metaautobiographies: Towards a Definition, Typology and Analysis of Self-Reflexive Hybrid Metagenres', in *Self-Reflexivity in Literature*, ed. Werner Huber, Martin Middeke and Hubert Zapf (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005), 199.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Sesto, *Language, History, and Metanarrative in the Fiction of Julian Barnes* (Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 125.

<sup>11</sup> Helong Zhang, 'The Intergenre and Interart Aspects in the Fiction of Julian Barnes', *Foreign Literature* 4 (2009): 6.

<sup>12</sup> James B. Scott, 'Parrot as Paradigms: Infinite Deferral of Meaning in *Flaubert's Parrot*', *ARIEL* 21.3 (1990): 65.

*Flaubert's Parrot* is fictional or factual: it can be either and, moreover, it constantly oscillates between these two poles. Therefore, it is more fruitful to investigate the form and function of fictionality in *Flaubert's Parrot*. Given these overarching points, this article will elaborate how fictionality interacts with factuality through the technique of character narration in *Flaubert's Parrot*, and how the use of fictionality results from the author's contemplation of life and fiction.

Since David Herman's coinage of the term *postclassical narratology* to reflect the then-current picture of narratology in 1997,<sup>13</sup> the last two decades have witnessed a great revival of interest in the study of narratives across various disciplines and different media. Burgeoned by hybridization of feminist narratology, cognitive narratology, rhetorical narratology, cultural-historical narratology, etc., postclassical narratologies are characterized by diversity and pluralism. Among these well-developed approaches to narrative, rhetorical narratology, particularly with regard to James Phelan's comprehensive approach, as formulated by Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik, 'can be regarded as an important contextualising venture that opens the text to the real-world interaction of author and reader, and hence provides a perfect model for discussing the ethics of reading and the treatment of ethical problems in narrative fiction'.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, in my analysis, I adopt Phelan's rhetorical approach to fictionality and character narration to explore how particular techniques and strategies connected to the above-mentioned matters are employed in the novel in order to discuss Barnes's purpose of fictional writing.

## The Rhetoric of Character Narration in *Flaubert's Parrot*

In *Flaubert's Parrot*, Braithwaite plays the dual role of a character participating in the storyworld and a narrator in the discourse. Phelan refers to this type of narration from inside of the storyworld as character narration, which is

an art of indirection: an author communicates to her audience by means of the character narrator's communication to a narratee. The art consists in the author's ability to make a single text function effectively for its two audiences (the narrator's and the author's, or to use the technical terms, the narratee and the authorial audience) and its two purposes (author's and character narrator's) while combining in one figure (the 'I') the roles of both character and narrator.<sup>15</sup>

Phelan provides an account of two tracks of narrative communication: the narrator-narratee track and the implied author-authorial audience track. The narrator directly addresses a narratee, while the implied author indirectly communicates with the authorial audience. Along the first track, the narrator unknowingly communicates to his or her authorial audience. However, without the implied author, this special communicative situation would not be possible. Accordingly, these two tracks convey two purposes: the author's purpose and the narrator's purpose. The art of character narration involves making these two tracks of communication progress seamlessly. In *Flaubert's Parrot*,

<sup>13</sup> David Herman, 'Scripts, Sequences, and Stories: Elements of a Postclassical Narratology', *PMLA* 112.5 (1997): 1046.

<sup>14</sup> Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik, 'Introduction', in *Postclassical Narratology: Approaches and Analyses*, ed. Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2010), 11.

<sup>15</sup> James Phelan, *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 1.

Barnes employs these tracks of communication in a more flexible and capacious way, and creates synergy among them.

Compared with other character narrators who mostly tell their own stories in Barnes's fiction, Braithwaite seldom talks about himself. Barnes has remarked about his narrator, claiming that Braithwaite is about to tell readers many things about Flaubert because 'he is unable to tell readers the real story he is loaded down by. It will be a novel about emotional blockage, about grief'.<sup>16</sup> At first glance, Braithwaite indulges himself in his project on Flaubert; however, he also reveals the degree of importance of other concerns in the work:

Three stories contend within me. One about Flaubert, one about Ellen, one about myself. My own is the simplest of the three – it hardly amounts to more than a convincing proof of my existence – and yet I find it the hardest to begin. My wife's more complicated, and more urgent; yet I resist that too. Keeping the best for the last, as I was saying earlier? I don't think so; rather the opposite, if anything. But by the time I tell you her story I want you to be prepared: that's to say, I want you to have had enough of books, and parrots, and lost letters, and bears, and the opinions of (critics), and even the opinions of Dr Geoffrey Braithwaite. Books are not life, however much we prefer it if they were. Ellen's is a true story; perhaps it is even the reason why I am telling you Flaubert's story instead.<sup>17</sup>

In regard to the passage, the narrator reveals both his role as a character in the work and his authorial purpose. According to Braithwaite, the central topic of his narration is the story of him and his wife, instead of Flaubert's. However, this proves to be the most difficult passage for him to directly reveal to the audience. Thus, the impression created herein is that Braithwaite will be frank while also 'hesitating' with his narration, as he later admits. Braithwaite is fully aware of his audiences and his role of the storyteller, since he indulges in a rhetorical commentary on other characters and events to induce appropriate or expected responses from the audience. In this way, Braithwaite shares an 'authorial position' with Humbert in *Lolita*, who also possesses an awareness of himself as a storyteller. Furthermore, he can also be identified as a 'self-conscious narrator', or an 'intrusive narrator', who has the awareness of his agency in crafting the effects of the narration.<sup>18</sup> Barnes offers us several signals early in the narrative that point to Braithwaite's self-consciousness and the implied author's purpose.

In the last sentences, the voice of 'I' comes from the implied author Barnes. As an 'intrusive narrator', Barnes breaks the narrative boundary into the storyworld, robs the narrator Braithwaite of words, and reveals the process as well as his purpose of writing to his audience. In fact, there are two different narrative processes: on the one hand, the process by which the narrator Barnes describes the passage and, on the other hand, the process and purpose of his fiction writing that Barnes describes. The second process has become part of the story and part of the first process. This embedded narration indirectly realizes the dissolving margin of story and discourse, reflecting the author's self-reflexive consciousness in the writing process. It also provides suggestions and directions for readers, that is, finding the true purpose of the character narrator's and the author's telling of Flaubert's story, which also increases the difficulty for readers to distinguish the 'truth' in *Flaubert's Parrot*.

<sup>16</sup> Barnes, 'When Flaubert Took Wing', 30.

<sup>17</sup> Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (London: Vintage Books, [1984]2009), 86. Hereafter cited as *FP*, with page numbers in the text.

<sup>18</sup> Phelan, *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*, 103.

In this 'truth-pursuing-journey', we have encountered many signals directed to the narratee, in which Braithwaite directly addresses the narratee in second-person like: '[p]erhaps you know the story. It's about a poor, uneducated servant-woman called...' (*FP*, 16), '[t]he point at which you suspect too much is being read into a story is when you feel most vulnerable, isolated, and perhaps stupid' (*FP*, 19), and '[h]ow do you compare two parrots, one already idealized by memory and metaphor. The other a squawking intruder?' (*FP*, 21). In addition to these signals, Braithwaite also refers to the narratee by using the general collective pronoun 'we': '[h]ow do we seize the past? Can we ever do so?' (*FP*, 14). When referring to the narratee directly or indirectly, herein, Braithwaite also provides information concerning the narratee's background, knowledge and perception, and they are constantly obliged to readjust their point of view. Braithwaite gives the direct indication in saying that '[y]ou can define a net in one of two ways, depending on your point of view' (*FP*, 38). The narrator seems to challenge the narratee in reminding of their power to make one's own judgement, by remarking that 'you must make your judgement on me as well as on Flaubert' (*FP*, 41). These signals not only call for insights into Braithwaite and the narratee's perception, but also for a closer collaboration between the two parties. Throughout this work, the narratee is constantly changing: from a well-learned Flaubertian scholar to an acquaintance of Braithwaite the narrator on the ferry to France, a public prosecutor, and a chaperone of Colet, and to Braithwaite the narrator himself. Their visibility and engagement make the individuality of Braithwaite the narrator unsettled and questionable, which is also of great help in characterizing Braithwaite the narrator. In analysing each portrait of Braithwaite's narratee and their communication, we find that as a narrator or storyteller, Braithwaite's identity is constantly substituted by others.

In Chapter seven, 'Cross Channel', Braithwaite refers to his narratee in a specific context. The narrator invites the narratee to join his conversation in a ferry: '[t]he fat lorry-driver on the banquette is snoring like a pasha. I've fetched myself another whisky; I hope you don't mind' (*FP*, 85). This important group of signals to the narratee indicates that Braithwaite is talking to one in a certain place. The narratee becomes almost a character in the storyworld. In such a conversation, Braithwaite reveals the content of his three stories, and he uses questions, exclamations, or other interrupting words to make the conversation casual and humane. Braithwaite maintains close contact with his narratee, and even regards them as a part of his story. The narratee and Braithwaite's dialogue are embedded within Braithwaite's narration, and this technique allows Braithwaite to transmit the information about his and Ellen's story as well.

The key point, then, is to understand the reasons and effects of Braithwaite's wish to create a more direct relationship at this particular moment. By establishing that intimacy, Braithwaite feels more comfortable and summons up the courage to tell his story. He gives many indicators of his self-awareness: 'You expect something from me, don't you?' (*FP*, 86), and '[a]s for a hesitating narrator-look, I'm afraid you've run into one. You'd guessed that, at least – that I'm English? I... I...' (*FP*, 89-90). Braithwaite tries to reveal his embarrassment in the process of storytelling and later realizes that he fails to express it in the way he had intended. It is worth noting that Braithwaite does not know whether his narratee will believe the statements he makes or not. However, the fact that he continues to try and prove his determination indicates the narratee's lack of belief. He emphasizes that:

I'm honest. I'm reliable. When I was a doctor I never killed a single patient, which is more of a boast than you might imagine. People trusted me; they kept coming back, at any rate... No,

I didn't kill my wife. I might have known you'd think that. First you find out she's dead; then, a while later, I say that I never killed a single patient. Aha, who did you kill, then? The question no doubt appears logical. How easy it is to set off speculation. (*FP*, 97)

Braithwaite opens his account with such a defensive explanation, showing that he expects readers to trust in his narration despite his hesitancy and evasiveness. He mentions Ellen's death and he explains that he has not killed anyone, including his wife. Braithwaite the narrator is very interested in the narratee's judgements of himself, as he evidently feels the need to find and cultivate similarities between himself and his narratee, so that he can reap a deeper understanding from this relationship. By providing the defence of his wife's death, Braithwaite assures an expected evaluation of his actions and words. His anticipation of response demonstrates that he tries to gain an indirect command over the narratee. The point is that, although the intimate narrator-narratee relationship takes on a discourse function, it is also inseparable from the story. Both Braithwaite the narrator and his narratee, whose views bear effect on the story, can enter the storyworld. In addition to this, the narrative shifts between the past tense and the present tense, which are important in this context, since they both convey Braithwaite the character's reaction to the narratee or other people as characters and Braithwaite the narrator's present view on and explanation of the situation. The former belongs to the level of story, and the latter to that of discourse. Thus, the merging of the two blurs the clear distinction. The present Braithwaite is the older protagonist facing the trauma of Ellen's death, while also functioning as the narrator writing his fear and grief.

Another typical case in point is Chapter eleven, 'Louise Colet's Version'. Braithwaite abandons his voice as the narrator and ventriloquizes the role of Flaubert's lover Louise Colet. This is the only chapter where Braithwaite partially gives up his voice as the narrator and imaginatively talks about the story of Flaubert's mistress Louise Colet in the first person. Similarly to the case in Chapter seven, the narratee is involved in an ordinary conversation with Colet:

Now hear my story. I insist. Look, take my arm, like that, and let's just walk. I have tales to tell; you will like them. We'll follow the quay, and cross that bridge – no, the second one – and perhaps we could take a cognac somewhere, and wait until the gas-lamps dim, and then walk back. Come, you're surely not frightened of me? So why that look? You think I am a dangerous woman? Well that's a form of flattery – I accept the compliment. Or perhaps...perhaps it's what I might have to say that you are frightened of? Aha...well, it's too late now. You have taken my arm; you cannot drop it. After all, I am older than you. It is your job to protect me. (*FP*, 137)

In this case, the narratee is more like a chaperone to the narrator, who has no choice but to accompany Colet. They are asked to engage in the dialogue. With the imagined voice, Braithwaite offers a plausible and sympathetic account of Colet's relationship with Flaubert. Colet describes her relationship with Flaubert in terms suggesting that one should notice not Colet's actual voice, but that of Braithwaite's imagination of it. Though Braithwaite believes that in telling Colet's version, another biographical enterprise, he can take himself and the narratee away from his own life; the narratee is also encouraged to find Braithwaite in the fictional voice of another, which is challenging albeit implicit. Their appreciation of Colet and Flaubert's personal life helps them to understand Braithwaite's and Ellen's lives. In addition to the complex discourse between Braithwaite and Ellen, we can also see such themes as death, grief, and sexual betrayal. It is easy for us to imagine Ellen's description of her husband Braithwaite: '[h]e was a difficult man to

love, that is certain. The heart was distant and withdrawn; he was ashamed of it, wary of it' (*FP*, 147). Like Colet who is in a difficult relationship, Ellen also suffers from the lack of emotional intimacy with her husband Braithwaite.

At this moment, we may transform the character chain into Braithwaite = Flaubert and Ellen = Colet. Meanwhile it is Braithwaite who speaks from Colet's perspective. In this respect, Braithwaite chooses to deal with his unresolved pain or grief about Ellen in an indirect way. He re-enacts Ellen's experience of their relationship through Colet. Barnes deploys the Barnes (author)-Colet (Ellen) (Braithwaite) (narrator) -Braithwaite (narratee) -audience track to give the description of Colet's experience with Flaubert, and to make Ellen express her feelings and relay experience in marriage to Braithwaite in Braithwaite's imagination. Braithwaite struggles to accept the fact that he had escaped from taking part in Ellen's life and marriage, and that it subsequently led to Ellen's infidelity and death. Imagining the position of Colet and Ellen in a difficult relationship is actually Braithwaite's attempt to have a dialogue with both of them, so that he can come to some understanding in this area. It seems that he is better able to enter into the mind of Colet than the mind of Ellen. The synergy among these communications and Braithwaite the narrator's narration prompt the audience's inference and understanding of Braithwaite's unresolved grief. By making Colet's unsung voice palpable, the audience is able to sense the struggles in Braithwaite's mind. The dialogue captures the power dynamic between Braithwaite's and Flaubert's stories, and in so doing further underlines what *Flaubert's Parrot* narrates.

By the time we reach Chapter thirteen, 'Pure Story', Braithwaite tackles the most important but difficult story. He finds himself in a position where he needs to talk directly about the above-mentioned pains and his past. However, in the process of self-writing, Braithwaite the narrator repeatedly takes circuitous paths in his attempt to tell the narratee the story. He fails to give a direct explanation, but tries to establish a close collaboration with the narratee. Despite the attempt at explaining the story, it remains difficult to enter into the narrator's world where little information is elucidated directly to the narratee. Braithwaite is aware of his own reluctance for disclosing these matters. He tries to mask it with a quotation from his French mentor: '[g]iving the public details about oneself is a bourgeois temptation that I have always resisted' (*FP*, 94). Thus, Braithwaite addresses his narratee in a more private context to tell of his personal life. The narratee is given this glimpse into Braithwaite's perspective:

Other people think you want to talk. 'Do you want to talk about Ellen?' they ask, hinting that they won't be embarrassed if you break down. Sometimes you talk, sometimes you don't; it makes little difference. The words aren't the right ones; or rather, the right words don't exist. (*FP*, 161)

In this regard, Braithwaite the narrator discloses his psychological battle about what can and cannot be revealed to his narratee. Demonstrating his personal struggle with himself, Braithwaite is also forcing them to enter into his painful experience of Ellen's suicide, that makes it difficult for him to write about the situation. In an attempt to understand his own feelings, Braithwaite makes the narratee become the narrator, and enter his world just as he enters the Flaubertian world. In this way, although this chapter is devoted to Ellen, Flaubertian references are unavoidable. Accordingly, the narratee is also expected to understand the narrator's pressure to abstain from telling or to hide his life, and to adopt the same way to interpret Braithwaite's biography. The implied author Barnes makes Braithwaite's struggles or problems in capturing Ellen a parallel to

Flaubert's problems with Colet. Moreover, Flaubert similarly uses this technique to express what he feels through Emma Bovary in his novel, with the statement that 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi'.<sup>19</sup> By immersing themselves in the personalities of others, both Flaubert and Braithwaite try to forget their own; however, they suffer from it at the same time. By adopting parallels and alternative versions, and depicting relationships of three couples: Flaubert and Louise Colet, Charles and Emma Bovary, Ellen and himself, Braithwaite changes the role of the narratee and himself so that he can successfully disclose and conceal information. These strategic transformations melt away the distinction between discourse and story, which allows Braithwaite to protect himself as a character while also maintaining his responsibility as a narrator.

Barnes's ability to achieve the effects he seeks mainly lies in the treatment of two tracks of communication in character narration, when the identity of each end could somehow alter. Barnes has Braithwaite describe his feelings and actions largely from perspectives of others including Flaubert, Colet, Ellen, and his narratee. When Braithwaite 'abstain[s] and observe[s], fearing both disappointment and fulfillment' (*FP*, 201), Barnes not only invites but actually commands us to interpret traumas in Braithwaite's own personal life through alternate means. This invitation or command means that we, according to the narrator's implications, read him in the same way as he reads Flaubert. In other words, to trace his version of Flaubert's biography is to trace Braithwaite's biography in a Flaubertian way. By comparing these parallels, we witness Braithwaite's internal psychological battle. The implied author Barnes gives Braithwaite rhetorical power and skills so that he can use a variety of literary genres and Flaubertian style as well. Meanwhile, we face frequent challenges in this type of discourse, and frequent changes in the role of the narrator. In this process, fictionality is the rhetorical act in which Barnes in this communicative context intentionally signals his use of character narration to his audience to achieve his purpose.

### **The Function of Fictionality in *Flaubert's Parrot***

From the very beginning of scholarly inquiry into *Flaubert's Parrot*, claims of truth have been difficult to pin down. Are we talking about the true story of Flaubert? Or is it about narrators or writers who trumpet their use of source material for narratives about this well-known figure from history? In the conversation with Freiburg, Barnes mentions a constant source of confusion, as well as an inspiration for himself:

Of course fiction is untrue, but it's untrue in a way that ends up telling a greater truth than any other information system – if that's what we like to call it – that exists. That always seems to me very straightforward, that you write fiction in order to tell the truth. People find this paradoxical, but it isn't.<sup>20</sup>

Barnes's exploration of truth can be seen in *Flaubert's Parrot*, in which reality and fiction, truth and representation, are at the crux of the matter. By questioning Braithwaite's biographical project, we are engaging with a series of doubts: how can a writer portray truth via a form that is inherently fictional? What kind of greater truth will we get from this novel? To tackle these doubts, the first thing we need to do is to think about what

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Stephen Heath, *Flaubert: Madame Bovary (Landmarks of World Literature)* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 34.

<sup>20</sup> Freiburg, "Novels Come out of Life, not out of Theory", 54.

truth is. The term 'truth' itself obfuscates. Generally speaking, nowadays it often signifies conformity to facts or accordance with reality. According to Phelan, referential truth and subjective truth are two different kinds of the concept, furthermore, there are also two kinds of subjective truth, one rooted in non-fictionality and the other in fictionality.<sup>21</sup> In this regard, a rhetorical approach to fictionality can shed light on Barnes's project of writing and his idea of 'greater truth'.

From a rhetorical perspective, fictionality can not only refer to the 'ultimate status of life writing but rather to any rhetorical act in which somebody on some occasion intentionally signals his or her use of a discursive invention to someone else for some purpose[s]'.<sup>22</sup> The inquiry into fictionality, especially in the literary field, has such significant purposes, as Nielsen, Phelan and Walsh observe, as 'it opens our eyes not only to its widespread presence outside of generic fiction but also to its multiple functions'; it is not ultimately a means for 'constructing scenarios that are cut off from the actual world but rather a means for negotiating an engagement with that world'. Nielson, Phelan and Walsh propose to treat 'the use of fictionality' as 'not a turning away from the actual world but a specific communicative strategy within some context in that world, a context which also informs an audience's response to the fictive act'.<sup>23</sup>

Concerning the factors of the communicative act, Braithwaite the narrator and his wife are fictional inventions of the real author Barnes. However, it is noted that Braithwaite deals with real figures, like Flaubert, Colet, Starkie, Sartre, Ricks, and Ledoux. Accordingly, the mediated stories of fictional figures and their elements are invented and exist only when mentioned, while the real figures are authentic and can act independently from representation. Throughout the novel, we have encountered many documented facts about these factual characters. In this respect, there are cross-references: the fictional narrator refers to factual characters and factual state of affairs, while the supposed factual account of characters includes a fictive state of affairs. Then, if we assume that the work is non-fictional, *Flaubert's Parrot* offers the audience a representation of actual people and events that is responsible to their existence outside the textual world. Given that the tacit assumptions imply the reading of the text as nonfiction, the ethical imperative to be accurate to extratextual reality drives Braithwaite to embark on his Flaubert project. In this process, Braithwaite observes the constraints of the extratextual reality. This way to interpret the changing context shows that authenticity is not inherent in Braithwaite's biography. On the contrary, it invites a level of storytelling that highlights its fictionality. More than that, he uses the constraint of nonfiction and the audience's conventional attitude to nonfiction to address fictionality for a nonfictional purpose. Attending to factuality and fictionality in life writing, Braithwaite the narrator and his audiences indulge themselves in reports, interpretations, and evaluations of the non-factual. The audiences' understanding of the biography's status as nonfiction enhances the pervasiveness of fictionality. More specifically, Braithwaite himself admits that sometimes he has to hypothesize and fictionalize in the course of narration. Taking his wife Ellen as an example, Braithwaite confesses that 'we never talked about her secret life. So I have to invent my way to truth' (*FP*, 165). To support his version of events, Braithwaite adds fictional elements so as to evoke an impression of authenticity. In the

<sup>21</sup> James Phelan, 'Fictionality', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 32.2 (2017): 236.

<sup>22</sup> Phelan, 'Fictionality', 235.

<sup>23</sup> Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan and Richard Walsh, 'Ten Theses about Fictionality', *Narrative* 23.1 (2015): 62-3.

rhetorical concept of fictionality, 'invention typically arises from an interaction between the actual and the imaginative'.<sup>24</sup> In the case of *Flaubert's Parrot*, its emphasis on biographical inventions highlights the mutual dependence of fictionality and factuality. The extratextual 'reality' is never directly accessible, requiring evidence from other texts. However, the evidence might be questionable because some pieces of information, such as literary works, are fictionalized.

To capture the complex truth of Flaubert and his life, Braithwaite combines factual and fictional statements. On the one hand, he still respects the nature of biographical documentation by providing sufficient evidence from other texts, and representing Flaubert's life through an organized interpretive context. On the other hand, he feels able and obliged to admit the contradictory nature that he presents in the fictional pieces. Braithwaite still admits the criterion of fidelity to the facts that no longer applies to the narrative as a whole. The outer world of biographical facts is seen in reference to an inner world of the narration. While organizing these multi-layered stories, Braithwaite is primarily concerned about how to cohesively relate them as a whole. In this respect, historical facts that Braithwaite uses as representations are thereby transferred to symbolic and metonymic accounts, which can serve as indications of his inner reality. Rather than recapturing Flaubert's life and his own life, Braithwaite's management of the materials determines the unconventional shape of biographical accounts. He creates lives from the facts by working with fictional techniques, intricately combining the two. This can be seen in the Flaubertian exercise with Colet, which allows him to present the dynamics of the different aspects of his life as perceived through the imaginative sympathy to Flaubert. In this instance, fictionality here is not an avoidance but an invitation to evaluate the relevance of the story to his understanding of and engagement with his version of reality. It is basically factual at some level, because Braithwaite takes the represented emotions, attitudes, and experiences as 'real'. In this sense, is that subjective truth rendered via fictionality or non-fictionality? To regard it as nonfictionality is to interpret Braithwaite's account of Flaubert as the recording of the historical figure's life. To regard it as fictionality is to interpret it as the narrator Braithwaite's retrospective invention of his own life. The fictionality hypothesis is superior, since its emphasis on retrospective invention highlights the narrator Braithwaite's courage and effort of writing the pain he is experiencing, the courage that the character Braithwaite didn't have.

By depicting the fictional narrator Braithwaite with a story of his own, Barnes provides a search for the greater truth in an indirect way of character narration, which becomes more significant than the search for the historical truth about Flaubert's life. Compared with the real parrot, the audience wants to know the true story of Braithwaite. Barnes attempts to find the truth about the relationship between the writer and his audience by relating to the audience in writing a biography of the writer and of himself. In this way, Barnes not only writes a biography for the audience, but also a biography of the audience. What is noteworthy is that the greater truth that Barnes tries to pursue is not the historical truth about Flaubert or even Braithwaite; instead, it is a subjective truth via fictionality, the inward-looking face of emotion and its ethical value in relation to the 'real' and the 'fictional'. Braithwaite conveys both kinds of subjective truth so as to have the freedom to embrace creativity and literariness, and at the same time he still conforms to

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<sup>24</sup> Phelan, 'Fictionality', 237.

the ethical obligation for truth telling. If we consider the constitution of subjective truth, then we need to consider the subject's way of being related to the object. In the sense of making it his own, Braithwaite's particular way of experiencing life is quite indirect.

In *Flaubert's Parrot*, the search for the 'true' parrot and the audiences' journey to that truth ultimately fail, as we never discover the historical truth about the parrots, Braithwaite and Ellen. Compared with Braithwaite's goal to find some larger truth that is not recorded, Barnes's goal to find the greater truth lies in the reader's search for the emotional authenticity and ethical situation in writing one's or their own lives. There are ethical dimensions of the told and the telling. The ethics of the told involve Braithwaite's treatment of Flaubert and Ellen. Braithwaite's immersion in Flaubert's life is largely driven by his difficulties of confronting Ellen's adultery and death. Drawing from his limited and conflicted personal information, we have learnt that Braithwaite might be an incompetent husband who is less concerned about his wife than he ideally should be. He wishes to achieve a sense of objectivity of his feeling so that he is able to stay detached. This dispassion can be seen as his own acknowledgement of pain and guilt. He realizes the problems in his marriage and recognizes that he should be responsible for Ellen's death. Nevertheless, Braithwaite's emotional approach to the account of Flaubert's story makes him almost blend in with Flaubert. In turn, the ethics of the telling rise from the difference between Braithwaite's and Barnes's communication. Braithwaite is a hesitant and reluctant narrator, primarily focusing on his interest in Flaubert. He is unable to deal with or escape his personal life and traumas. His oscillation between Flaubert and himself, which creates his constantly substituted identity, has an appealing complex that is resolved by the communication from Barnes. Barnes makes the text appealing as it reveals multiple layers of truth that lies in the communicative acts.

In his Flaubertian world, Braithwaite still suffers from a profound sense of guilt in his marriage and Ellen's death. Thus, truth in *Flaubert's Parrot* is also a function of the author's purpose and the readers' reading. By simultaneously entering the authorial audience, readers also recognize that 'the characters are inventions in the service of authorial purposes related to life in the actual world'.<sup>25</sup> Overwhelming the narrator with information, Barnes creates Braithwaite, whose emotional blockage leaves him paralyzed in his fictional world. Braithwaite believes that he can face emotional pain in his Flaubertian world, and invites his audience to interpret it precisely in this way; while Barnes invites audiences to 'chase' Flaubert or themselves through Braithwaite's indirect way of truth-telling.

The postclassical narratological reading of *Flaubert's Parrot* sheds light not only on the complexities of individual narratives and the larger project of life writing, but also demonstrates the sophisticated diversity of narrative and uncovers the corresponding ethical implications in Barnes's fiction. Facilitated by Phelan's rhetorical approach to character narration and fictionality, this article has examined Barnes's ability to motivate the telling through the communicative frame of character narrator Braithwaite's telling to his narratee. By using character narration, Barnes interweaves the nonfictive discourse and the fictive one, making readers view three stories and the given materials interchangeably. This double communicative rhetorical situation of both fictional narration and nonfictional narration provides an effective perspective to explore the interactions among characters, the narrator, the author, and audiences. Barnes employs

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<sup>25</sup> James Phelan, 'Fictionality, Audiences, and Character: A Rhetorical Alternative to Catherine Gallagher's "Rise of Fictionality"', *Poetics Today* 39.1 (2018): 128.

two tracks of communication in a more flexible and capacious way, in which the identity of each end in the narrator-narratee track undergoes changes, and he sets up synergy among those tracks. In doing so, Barnes directs readers' attention to the difficulties of Braithwaite's self-expression by revealing his story through fictional techniques, and thus readers' access to Braithwaite's internal psychological battle by tracing his life in a Flaubertian way generates affective responses to and ethical judgments about his story and situation. Readers' affective investment in Braithwaite has major effects on their recognition of the response to Barnes's conception of fiction and truth, which is in the service of Barnes's authorial purpose. To put it in another way, Barnes has created readers' interests in Braithwaite and engagement in decoding his story and inner world through affective and ethical experiences that makes readers chase their own lives in the fictional world.

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## **Narațiunea și ficționalitatea personajului în *Papagalul lui Flaubert* de Julian Barnes**

### **Rezumat**

*Papagalul lui Flaubert* de Julian Barnes este un volum hibrid care rezistă oricărei încercări de a-l încadra într-un gen literar. Volumul servește de asemenea ca o porta-voce a preocupării și experimentului propus de Barnes în ceea ce privește interacțiunea dintre viață și ficțiune. Pornind de la James Phelan cu a sa teorie retorică despre narațiunea personajului și cu a sa abordare retorică a ficționalității, acest articol examinează forma și funcția ficționalității în *Papagalul lui Flaubert*, pentru a investiga cum Barnes scrie un roman care rezonază cu un adevăr mai important decât cel oferit de materialul factual. Articolul arată că un aspect important al funcției ficționalității în *Papagalul lui Flaubert* este că invită și, într-adevăr, încurajează, implicarea intensă a cititorului și experiența produsă prin împuternicirea pe care autorul i-o atribuie folosind narațiunea personajului. Căutarea adevărului suprem pentru Barnes constă în căutarea pe care cititorul o face pentru a afla autenticitatea emoțională și situația etică de a scrie viața unui personaj sau viața proprie în timpul actului de lectură, ceea ce face acest act să fie profitabil.