

# Parrot, Parrotry and Truth in *Flaubert's Parrot*

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## ***Abstract***

In the studies on contemporary British writer Julian Barnes's novel *Flaubert's Parrot*, the early dominating postmodern trend is increasingly challenged by the explorations of the humanistic concerns. To continue this dialogue, this paper examines parrotry—a special kind of intertextual relationship Barnes engages in the novel so as to probe his views on the relationship between language, representation and truth. I argue that Barnes creates an “in-between” area between Flaubert's modernist exploration of the possibility of language as a representation of truth and the poststructuralist conviction that language mediates all value constructions and constitutes their essence. The argument is developed by elaborating on the two dimensions of parrotry—the direct quotations of words, phrases or passages of Flaubert and other critics as well as the protagonist Geoffrey Braithwaite's interpretation of his life in light of Flaubert and his works. In this analysis, Barnes's resonance with Flaubert is revealed through the double connotation of parrotry: on one hand, it shows Barnes's celebration of the evocative power of Flaubert's words; on the other hand, it echoes Flaubert's criticism of clichés and stupidity as a result of his sense of the inadequacy of words to express human feelings. By cross-examining the dynamic interaction between life and art, Barnes presents a more complicated picture of this relationship and the third dimension of truth: the experiential truth realized in the inter-illumination between art and life.

**Keywords** parrotry; representation; truth; art and life

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## ***Introduction***

Contemporary British writer Julian Barnes (1946- ) started his literary career with the publication of his first novel *Metroland* in 1980, but it is his third novel *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) that won him broad recognition both at home and abroad.<sup>1</sup> The novel marks a clear departure from the traditional way of writing displayed in his first two novels (The second is

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*Before She Met Me* [1982]). It is the homage Barnes pays to his life-long literary idol, Gustave Flaubert. By creating the fictional character Geoffrey Braithwaite's quest for the parrot Flaubert used as a model while creating *Un coeur simple* (1877), Barnes interweaves two levels of narration about both Flaubert and Braithwaite as well as a metafictional reflection on writing. Peter Childs calls it "a novel at one remove: partly a novel about a novelist, partly a novel about a man obsessed with a novelist, and partly a novel about the business of novel-writing" (46). Its juxtaposition of different genres, self-reflectivity and exploration of historical truth make it a model text of postmodernism in its early studies.<sup>2</sup>

This dominating interpretation, however, is increasingly challenged by another trend that highlights Barnes's humanistic concerns in the novel<sup>3</sup>. To continue this dialogue between postmodernism and humanism, I approach the novel from the aspect of the intricate intertextual relationship Barnes established with Flaubert, which I define as parrotry with a purpose to distinguish it from parody and pastiche.

Jonathan Culler has observed that "to pay homage to Flaubert is one way of expressing solidarity with the writer in his battle with language and obsessive exploration of its possibilities" (13). Flaubert's engagement with language emerges in two ways: one is his torturous pursuit of "*le mot juste*" (the exact word), which, H. M. Block thinks, "points to the artist's faith in the ideal of an absolute formal perfection as the crown and goal of his endeavor" (199); the other is his exploration of what Barnes calls "the inadequacy of the Word" (*FP* 11), which results in his paradoxical attitude of both fascination and terror towards clichés. These two aspects of Flaubert's engagement with language correspond to two positions critics put him into: realist on one end and modernist or even postmodernist on the other. While the former believes in the evocative power of words to represent reality, the

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<sup>2</sup> The early studies mainly explore its deconstruction of the concept of identity and truth (Scott) and its features as postmodern historiographic fiction (Sasto, Bedggood and Nicol). For more information of the postmodern reading of the novel, see Guignery *Fiction* 44-46; Goode 151-52; Gitzen 45-49.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Brooks interprets the novel's intertextual relationship with Ford Madox Ford's modernist novel *The Good Soldier* and Erica Hartley analyzes it as a modernist quest narrative. Ecaterina Pătrascu makes the first effort to bring together "the postmodern interpretation of history with the necessity of establishing a saving system, which characterizes the British 'new humanism'" (208), but she mainly focuses on the relationship between art and life—the function of the biography of Flaubert and his work *Madame Bovary* as an "interpretation frame" for the evolution of Braithwaite's character—without touching on the deep resonance between Barnes and Flaubert on the issue of language.

latter predicts the postmodern awareness of the separation between language and its referent. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, Braithwaite interprets Flaubert “as a pertinacious and finished stylist; or as one who considered language tragically insufficient” (11).

I, therefore, argue that parrotry can be identified as the tool Barnes adopts to continue Flaubert's exploration of language. The word parrotry bears an obvious connection with the bird in the novel's title, which functions as the central clue in Braithwaite's performative reconstructions of Flaubert's identity. As the target of Braithwaite's quest, the parrot is a metonymy for his pursuit of Flaubert (Childs 48). The discovery of two parrots of equal validity at the beginning of his quest breaks the realistic correspondence between the word and its referent and raises the issue of historical truth. The discovery of a roomful of model parrots in the end renders the realistic resolution impossible and symbolically pertains to the postmodern world of simulation. In this aspect, Barnes evokes the postmodern crisis of representation, the correspondence between language and reality.

I also contend that another symbolic meaning of the parrot can be located in Barnes's recalling of Flaubert's description of the parrot perch in *L'Education sentimentale* (1869). Braithwaite interprets Frédéric's wandering in Paris as a symbol of seeking history and the bare wooden perch in a window left by the flown parrot suggests the historical past which can never be fully present. In this way, Barnes expresses symbolically his own fundamental conception of historical truth. As he further elaborates, “It isn't so different, the way we wander through the past. Lost, disoriented, fearful, we follow what signs there remain; we read the street names, but cannot be confident where they are. All around is wreckage” (*FP* 62). This sense of the past as wreckage is preceded by Braithwaite's awareness of the constraint the textuality of Flaubert's materials exerts on his pursuit. At the beginning of his quest, he complains, “Nothing much else to do with Flaubert has ever lasted. He died little more than a hundred years ago, and all that remains of him is paper. Paper, ideas, phrases, metaphors, structured prose which turns into sound” (*FP* 2). Braithwaite's awareness of historical truth as a reconstruction of the traces left behind reflects the postmodern sense of the textuality of history.

Barnes's way of raising the issue of historical truth through resonating with Flaubert exactly

caricatures the construction of meaning in the novel. I define this as the essence of parrotry, which is both repetition and mimicry. I use parrotry first to indicate the direct quotation of words, phrases or passages of Flaubert and other critics. It then is extended to include Braithwaite's mimicry of Flaubert and interpretation of his own life in terms of Flaubert and his works. The two types of usage work to establish a double resonance with Flaubert: first, to show Barnes's celebration of the evocative power of Flaubert's words; second, to find a backward nod to Flaubert's criticism of clichés. As a kind of intertextuality, parrotry represents both Barnes's reaction to the textuality of history in postmodern age and his unique way of arriving at truth.

### *Parrotry as a Way of Quoting*

Parrotry is firstly defined as a way of quoting. Barnes uses it mainly to celebrate the evocative power of Flaubert's words, but at the same time makes a parody of Flaubertian scholars. I classify it as a type of intertextuality in its broad sense as designated by Julia Kristeva. In the essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1966), Kristeva uses it to refer to Bakhtin's concept of text as "a mosaic of quotations" and "absorption and transformation" between texts (66).<sup>4</sup> In *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1982), Gérard Genette gives it a more restrictive definition: "a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts" (1). It belongs to one of his five types of transtextuality— "the textual transcendence of the text" (1). Genette's transtextuality is close to Kristeva's concept of intertextuality. He classifies quoting, together with plagiarism and allusion, as one type of intertextuality.

In the essay "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" (1940), Mikhail Bakhtin states that quoting was popular in the Hellenistic period and the Middle Ages as a way of literary continuation. He translates Paul Lehmann's saying that the history of medieval literature and its Latin literature, in particular, is "the history of the appropriation, reworking, and imitation

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<sup>4</sup>The essay was first published in French titled "Le mot, le dialogue et le roman" in *Séméiotiké* in 1966. It was later translated as "Word, Dialogue and Novel" and collected in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1969).

of someone else's property" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 69). He identifies the spectrum of quotations ranging from "the pious and inert quotation that is isolated and set off like an icon" to the "most ambiguous, disrespectful, parodic-travesty use" (69). What Bakhtin focuses on is the function of quoting, especially the parodic-travesty type, in the inter-animation of languages during both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, exploring its contribution to the formation of the novelistic discourse of modern times.

The way Barnes quotes Flaubert and other scholars covers the two ends of the relationship Bakhtin identifies in quotations. Quotations of Flaubert's words in most cases belong to the former type, where words are quoted because of their authority and unique evocative power. It is a celebration of the power and originality of Flaubert's words. In contrast, quotations of Flaubertian scholarship tend to assume the parodic-travesty feature, indicating an intertextual relationship of subversion.

Parrotry is used as a significant way to recreate Flaubert's life and personality. Flaubert insisted on the impersonality of his works and once said, "I believe...a writer should leave behind him nothing but works" (qtd. in *SD*: 253). For such a writer, the best words to describe him should be his own. Therefore, instead of fictionalizing Flaubert or burying him deeper in paper, Barnes recreates his life and personality mostly through his literary comparisons. The character Oliver in *Talking It Over* describes himself as someone who: "scatter[s] *bons mots* like sunflower seeds among the waiting pupils" (239). This comparison can be used to describe Braithwaite's quotation of Flaubert's words.

Barnes uses Flaubert's own literary comparisons to evoke a more profound image of the writer, which reverses the biographical practice of giving descriptions of the biographee's life. The most typical one is the following: "I'm devoured by comparisons as one is by lice, and I spend my time doing nothing but squashing them" (*FP* 11). This comparison is a vivid caricature of Flaubert's life as a writer devoted to pursuing the exact word. In Flaubert's sense, the comparison is more like simile or metaphor. Chapters like "Chronology" and "The Flaubert Bestiary" are mostly composed of Flaubert's literary comparisons. As literary rhetoric, it indicates literary words are more powerful evocations of life.

In the chapter “Chronology”, by paralleling three different chronologies of the same person (Flaubert), Barnes challenges the objectivity implicated in the traditional form of chronology. The selection of information implicated in the first two chronologies shows the influence of the perspective of the selector: the first one is optimistic and the second is pessimistic. In contrast to this, the third chronology is highlighted, for it is made up of Flaubert’s literary comparisons about himself. For example, the first sentence describes the year 1842: “Me and my book in the same apartment: like a gherkin in its vinegar” (*FP* 28). Barnes takes the third one as a better way to tell the truth about Flaubert. As he stresses in the same interview with Guignery, “But maybe seeing someone’s life either as triumph or as disaster does not actually tell us half as much as just seeing their lives in terms of metaphor” (“Julian Barnes in Conversation” 106). This demonstrates Barnes’s preference for the psychological truth conveyed by literary words rather than the subjectively interpreted historical truth.

This is the case with the chapter “The Flaubert Bestiary”. Flaubert’s diverse personality is embodied by his animal comparisons. For instance, under the item “The Bear”, Flaubert’s own comparisons to different bears are quoted: “He is the bear: a stubborn bear (1852), a bear thrust deeper into bearishness by the stupidity of his age (1853), a mangy bear (1854), even a stuffed bear (1869) and so on down to the very last year of his life, when he is still ‘roaring as loudly as any bear in its cave’ (1880) (*FP* 46). Like the comparisons in the third chronology, these rhetorical comparisons are more interesting and more revealing of Flaubert’s personality than factual descriptions. Barnes recreates Flaubert’s biocentric worldview through his intimate contact with animals, which permeates both his art and life.

In addition to the literary comparisons, Braithwaite quotes passages from Flaubert’s works in his defence of Flaubert against all kinds of accusations. In Genette’s sense, this commentary relationship between two texts forms another kind of transtextual relationship—metatextuality. Quotations of the original texts are inseparable from any commentary. As Genette observes, “The critical metatext can be conceived of, but is hardly ever practiced, without the often considerable use of a quotational intertext as support” (8). In the chapter “Emma Bovary’s Eyes”, to refute Dr Enid Starkie’s criticism of Flaubert’s inconsistency in his description of Emma’s eyes, Braithwaite quotes six passages from *Madame Bovary* where Flaubert

describes Emma's eye color together with Du Camp's delineation of the woman on whom Emma is based. This type of quoting is different from that of Flaubertian scholarship (to be analyzed next), for it is still a celebration of Flaubert's words. In this sense, parrotry is different from parody, which Hutcheon regards as the principal form of postmodern intertextuality and the best expression of the double codedness of postmodernism—its use and subversion of the past. In contrast to parody's challenges to the humanist discourse of authenticity and originality, parrotry here paradoxically celebrates them through repetition.

Different from this celebration of words, Braithwaite's quotations of Flaubertian scholarship veer towards the other end of the spectrum mentioned above. In congruence with his "simple-minded" reading of Flaubert (*FP* 12), Braithwaite is hostile towards scholarly criticism, as he declares, "I hate critics" (*FP* 80). His quotations of the scholarly criticism are often parodic, which is revealed by the sarcastic comment or description that follows. It continues a long tradition of disdaining critics in the novel, which has been around since Henry Fielding. Besides Dr Starkie, the other scholar Braithwaite responds to is Professor Christopher Ricks. Both of them are real scholars: the former is "Reader Emeritus in French Literature at the University of Oxford, and Flaubert's most exhaustive British biographer" (*FP* 80); the latter is "a professor from Cambridge" (*FP* 82). Their studies are characterized by attention to literary details. They both draw attention to Professor Ricks's argument that "if the factual side of literature becomes unreliable, then ploys such as irony and fantasy become much harder to use" (*FP* 84).

Along with this thematic focus, Braithwaite quotes these scholars to disclose their hair-splitting pedantry. For example, he quotes a passage from Dr Starkie's book on Flaubert: "Flaubert does not build up his characters, as did Balzac, by objective, external description; in fact, so careless is he of their outward appearance that on one occasion he gives Emma brown eyes (14); on another deep black eyes (15); and on another blue eyes (16)" (*FP* 80). After quoting, Braithwaite gives a sarcastic description of Dr Starkie's lecture: "I'm glad to report that she had an atrocious French accent; one of those deliveries full of dame-school confidence and absolutely no ear, swerving between workday correctness and farcical error, often within the same word" (*FP* 80-81). This description discloses as much of Dr Starkie as

of Braithwaite himself. It exhibits the unforgiving aspect of his personality. As he admits, it amounts to “a cheap revenge on a dead lady critic” (*FP* 81). The same tone is applied to the description of Professor Ricks’s lecture, which he calls “a very shiny performance” due to his “shiny” bald head, “shiny” shoes and “shiny” views (*FP* 83) .

By quoting Flaubert and Flaubertian scholarship, Barnes weaves the net of both Flaubert’s life and work. While quoting Flaubert’s literary comparisons as a better way of presenting Flaubert’s psychological world, Barnes quotes the real scholars’ studies as a supplement to literary characterization. This subversion of the traditional use of language constitutes one facet of his innovation in the novel. The presence of a large number of quotations endows the novel with an essayistic quality and challenges the very nature of fiction. In this respect, *Flaubert’s Parrot* is different from Vladimir Nabokov’s postmodern novel *Pale Fire* (1962), which is similarly characterized by the presence of lengthy commentary. Unlike the latter, it mixes the real and the fictional but does not take one for the other, so it does not blur the ontological distinction between the real and the fictional.

### ***Parrotry and Representation***

As a kind of repetition, parrotry raises the issue of representation, that is, the relationship between language and its referent. I analyze this issue in its resonance with Flaubert’s criticism of clichés and stupidity. As a rhetorical device, the comparison evokes the meaning of one thing by finding its similarity with another rather than by giving a direct description. Leo Bersani’s view on metaphor and simile offers a revealing reference for its essence. In the introduction to the English translation of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, Bersani comments on Flaubert’s paradoxical feeling towards metaphors and similes in the novel. On the one hand, Flaubert is attracted by “the very ‘inaccuracy’, by the gap between their own suggestiveness and the experience they are meant to translate” (xxi); on the other hand, he is impatient with “the epistemologically approximative nature of metaphor”, which “was meant to cover and absorb its hypothetically real subject with literal precision” (xxi-xxii). Quotations of Flaubert’s comparisons are susceptible to the same paradox. They may evoke among readers a better understanding of Flaubert’s feelings and personality but provide no idea of his real

life. More optimistically speaking, they enable us to come closer to his psychological world, but not to his practical life.

Braithwaite frequently feels this frustration in his quest for the parrot and the real life of Flaubert. Ironically, he can only express it through new comparisons, especially numerous self-reflective comparisons with history. The frequently quoted one is that “History is merely another literary genre: the past is autobiographical fiction pretending to be a parliamentary report” (*FP* 101). His comparisons have the same problem as those of Flaubert. They evoke the intangibility of history but not what history is. The language here only leads to itself and parrotry becomes a barrier to the real presence of Flaubert. In this sense, it is close to the poststructuralist conviction that language mediates all value constructions and constitutes their essence.

The symbolic meaning the ending of Braithwaite’s quest implies also seems to affirm this conviction. As an image of the postmodern world of simulation, it brings about two different interpretations marking the distinction between postmodern skepticism of the ontological existence of truth and modernist questioning of the epistemological knowability of truth. The former is represented by James B. Scott, who interprets it as “registering the non-existence of truth and the indeterminacy of signs” (58). I agree with Moseley’s critique of this radical postmodern skepticism. As he notes, “Braithwaite doubts the possibility of finding out which was the ‘real’ Flaubert’s parrot, but this does not lead him to conclude that there was no real parrot; he disclaims the ability to explain his wife’s life but never the reality of it” (88). Brian Nicol regards the novel as a model of Linda Hutcheon’s postmodern historiographic fiction, but he stresses its link to realism and “the return of ‘plot and questions of reference’” in this special form of the postmodern novel (99). Based on this, he rightly interprets Braithwaite’s dilemma as “a metaphor for the problem at the heart of historiographic metafiction: the limits to our attempt to know the past” (117). Based on these analyses, I contend that the issue of the parrot is epistemological, not ontological. What Barnes highlights is the difficulty of finding out the historical truth rather than its impossibility.

Moreover, what Barnes shares with Flaubert is the sense of language’s inadequacy to express human feelings, which distinguishes parrotry from the poststructuralist view on language.

When giving an etymological introduction to the word “parrot” in the chapter “Flaubert’s Bestiary”, Barnes emphasizes the bird’s unique connection with human beings: its ability to imitate human voice and its sharing of some human maladies, especially epilepsy. In the chapter “Braithwaite’s Dictionary of Flaubert”, Braithwaite introduces epilepsy as a stereotyped stratagem Flaubert adopts to sidestep a conventional career and life. Barnes underlines the unique human-parrot relationship in Flaubert’s *Un cœur simple* by tracing its origin to the story of Henri K and his parrot, which Flaubert clips from the newspaper *L’Opinion nationale*. In both stories, the bird’s ability to imitate human voice enables it to offer the sympathetic feelings the characters are desperate for. Because of this, it is elevated to holiness. Braithwaite’s pursuit of the parrot as “an emblem of the author”, to a certain degree, expresses the same emotional longing for a kind of identification, which he takes as a cure for the trauma brought about by his wife’s betrayal.

The repetitive nature of parrotry in Flaubert’s works, however, connects more with the autonomous use of language, which imparts no authentic feeling and is thus ironic. Bruno Penteadó gives an insightful analysis of the relationship between the philosophy of stupidity, the animal and religion in Flaubert’s *Un coeur simple*. He uses the phrase “epistemology of parrotry” to “account for what can be known and claimed about the idea of language devoid of reference, or language only referencing itself, contained in the figure of the parrot” (148). He mainly focuses on the irony in the equation God=parrot=parrotry. God becomes the repetition of empty words, which forms the irony of the story. Penteadó makes great sense in revealing the essence of parrotry and the irony implied in it, but what I highlight in parrotry is the pathetic state of human life it implies, for the parrot is the only company the character Félicité can rely on, and there is no other kind of comforting language available for her except its parroting.

Flaubert’s sense of the inadequacy of words to express human feelings is further embodied in his paradoxical attitude towards cliché. He believes that a cliché is “the purest art of intelligibility; it tempts us with the possibility of enclosing life within beautifully inalterable formulas, of obscuring the arbitrary nature of imagination with an appearance of necessity” (Bersani xviii). In this sense, Clichés have been the exact words the author pursues. Because

of this, he is fascinated or even obsessed with them. However, Flaubert hates the mechanical repetitions of these words, which diminish their beauty and reduce them to clichés. His works are a full attack on clichés and platitudes at all levels of life. He is especially preoccupied with the inexpressible feelings caged in clichés. In *Madame Bovary*, Emma can only repeat the romantic clichés to utter her love. Stratton Buck notes that “a part of Emma’s tragedy stems from her inability to find words adequate to her feelings and her needs, and that the problem of communication is central for the heroine as for the author” (552). Flaubert voices his criticism of these romantic clichés from the perspective of her first lover Rodolphe:

He had heard such things said to him so many times before that they no longer held any interest for him. Emma was like any other mistress; and the charm of novelty gradually fell away like a garment, revealing in all its nakedness the eternal monotony of passion, which always has the same form and speaks the same language...and human speech is like a cracked pot on which we beat out rhythms for bears to dance to, when we are striving to make music that will wring tears from the stars. (165)

The fact that Barnes quotes Flaubert’s simile three times (11, 51, 191, in his own translation) attests to his sharing of Flaubert’s sense of the inadequacy of words. Throughout the novel, Braithwaite displays a similar lack of the exact words to express his emotional world. His brief introduction to his family life betrays no feeling of closeness: “My children are scattered now; they write whenever guilt impels. They have their own lives, naturally” (*FP* 3). Like Emma Bovary, “he lacks an adequate emotional vocabulary” (Dyer 173). This is more concretized in his narration of Ellen’s story. When he finally comes to her in the chapter “Pure Story”, he quotes Flaubert’s simile for the third time and describes his frustration at not being able to find a clear expression of their feelings:

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.... You talk, and you find the language of bereavement foolishly inadequate . . . I loved her; we were happy; I miss her. She didn’t love me; we were unhappy; I miss her. (*FP* 191)

The ellipsis and the parallel structure at the end implicate the ups and downs of feelings in

their relationship that are beyond concrete expression.

The resonance further shows in Barnes's criticism of social clichés. As a doctor, Braithwaite mimics the clichés he has given to his patients who suffer from the pain of losing their loved ones:

What do we doctors say? I'm deeply sorry, Mrs Blank; there will of course be a period of mourning but rest assured you will come out of it; two of these each evening, I would suggest; perhaps a new interest, Mrs Blank; car maintenance, formation dancing?; don't worry, six months will see you back on the roundabout; come and see me again any time; oh nurse, when she calls, just give her this repeat will you, no I don't need to see her, well it's not her that's dead is it, look on the bright side. What did she say her name was?  
(*FP* 190)

The professional clichés transmits more indifference than the authentic sympathies they are supposed to convey. The mimicry reflects the mechanism of social language, which, as Culler observes, “is not the instrument or vehicle of a spontaneous response to the world” and “is not something lived but something given, a set of codified responses” (165). Its stupidity is caused by the separation between language and sincere feelings, or more broadly, between language and its referent. It is “a self-enclosed system” of language: “a set of objects with which man plays but which do not speak to him” (Culler 165). Therefore, it is impossible for them to be functional to Braithwaite when he loses his wife<sup>5</sup>.

Clichés are connected with another interpretation of Flaubert's view of language—the sense of being spoken. As Braithwaite mentions, this is Sartre's interpretation: “The parrot / writer feebly accepts language as something received, imitative and inert. Sartre himself rebuked Flaubert for passivity, for belief (or collusion in the belief) that *on est parlé*—one is spoken” (*FP* 11). This view is repeated by Culler in his poststructuralist reading of Flaubert's attitude towards language: “one does not speak, one does not construct sentences to express one's

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<sup>5</sup> Barnes's criticism of social clichés is better expressed in the chapter “Braithwaite's Dictionary of Accepted Ideas”, which I interpret as pastiche instead of parrotry. Barnes/Braithwaite applauds Flaubert's great insight into the stupidity of human beings by identifying its presence in the contemporary life. What Barnes ridicules is the stereotyped understanding of Flaubert, so it should be a pastiche in homage. The irony of “Braithwaite's Dictionary” lies in the fact that Flaubert—the person who criticizes clichés so fiercely—ends up as the subject of clichés. For detailed introduction to pastiche, see Jameson and Rose.

relation to the world and to others; one is spoken” (165). The way Braithwaite interprets his life or expresses his own feelings by quoting Flaubert’s words acknowledges this sense of being spoken. Braithwaite mentions how Mauriac writes his *Mémoires intérieurs*: “[h]e finds himself by looking in the works of others” (FP 108). This is the way Braithwaite tells his story. Flaubert’s life and works, especially the storyline of *Emma Bovary*, function as major references when Braithwaite interprets his life. However, the dynamic interaction between the two levels of narration about Braithwaite and Flaubert’s art and life is a testament to the truth Flaubert has expressed rather than Sartre’s passive understanding of the nature of language. Braithwaite concludes that, in most cases, “Flaubert was right” (FP 94). It is an affirmation of Flaubert’s art as a better representation of universal truth.

However, Barnes’s reflection on the relationship between art and life goes far beyond this simplified correspondence. The contrast between Braithwaite and Flaubert highlights their differences. For example, after a brief introduction to his own life, Braithwaite quotes Flaubert’s saying: “Life! Life! To have erections!” (FP 3). The passion in Flaubert’s sexually inflected metonymy only sets off his own pale life, as he admits, “It made me feel like a stone statue with a patched upper thigh” (FP 3). This is more typically presented in Braithwaite’s reflection on differences between his wife Ellen and Flaubert’s Emma:

Did the wife, made lustrous by adultery, seem even more desirable to the husband? No: not more, not less. That’s part of what I mean by saying that she was not corrupted. Did she display the cowardly docility which Flaubert describes as characteristic of the adulterous woman? No. Did she, like Emma Bovary, ‘rediscover in adultery all the platitudes of marriage’? We didn’t talk about it. (FP 195)

Braithwaite’s awareness of the comparison’s fruitlessness speaks more of his psychology in making this identification.

In this regard, Braithwaite is similar to Emma, who finds an ideal life in the romantic clichés and tries to realize it in real life. Braithwaite may not take Flaubert’s life as perfect, but he needs a reference to make meaning out of his life, and this underscores the interaction between the two levels of narration of Flaubert’s and his own life. As Emma Cox observes,

Braithwaite's lack of "a sense of his own self-worth" may partly explain this identification (53). I maintain that it is more related to a psychological aspect, which French philosopher Jules de Gautier defines as *bovarysme*, that is, the "tendency to see oneself as other than one is, and to bend one's vision of other persons and things to suit this willed metamorphosis" (qtd. in Jenson: 167). Braithwaite needs Flaubert and his works to finish this transformation.

Additionally, Barnes demonstrates the unexpected transformation and the mutual illumination between art and life. Braithwaite gives *Madame Bovary* as an example: while the curtained cab in the book originates from Flaubert's own practice of putting the curtains on so as to avoid being recognized by Louise Colet, the end of the novel, with Homais winning the highest decoration in France, sheds ironic light on Flaubert's own transformation from "arch anti-bourgeois and virile hater of governments" to "a chevalier of the *Légion d'honneur*" (FP 73). It indicates that the relationship between art and life goes far beyond simple correspondence or transformation.

### **Conclusion**

Parrotry turns the normal biographical representation of Flaubert's life and art into a dynamic interaction between Braithwaite and Flaubert as well as between Barnes and Flaubert. It generates a metafictional reflection on the essence of language, representation and truth. Barnes starts with the postmodern sense of the crisis of representation, but reverts to Flaubert's awareness of the dualistic nature of language and reinterprets it in his own way. Barnes expresses his dislike of the word "palimpsest" as a descriptor applied either to *Talking it Over* or *Flaubert's Parrot*. As he stresses, "...when I do use previous sources or reference points, I want them to be in the same focus as what I'm writing about; I want the world of Flaubert's novels to be as clear as the text that it appears" (Freiburg 45). In this sense, parrotry is different from both parody and pastiche. Barnes kills multiple birds with one stone by using parrotry: while expressing the difficulty of finding the historical truth through Braithwaite's pursuit, he recreates Flaubert's spiritual world through his own words, which is the ideal state Flaubert wants to be remembered; moreover, it has an ironic take on Flaubert's disdain for clichés.

Through cross-examining the relationship between art and life, as well as between language and its referent, Barnes underscores the ethical commitment towards truth; that is, in spite of the references offered by art, the truth in life can only be realized by experiencing / living. The author compares life to the process of reading: “if all your responses to a book have already been duplicated and expanded upon by a professional critic, then what point is there to your reading? Only that it’s *yours*. Similarly, why live your life? Because it’s yours” (*FP* 198, italics in original). There is a reflection on the truths in life and truths in writing in the novel: “Truths about writing can be framed before you’ve published a word; truths about life can be framed only when it’s too late to make any difference” (*FP* 202). This truth about truth can be termed meta-truth. By cross-examining the dynamic interaction between Braithwaite and Flaubert, Barnes presents a more complicated picture of the relationship between art and life and unfolds the third dimension of truth: the experiential truth realized in the inter-illumination between art and life, which is, to some extent, beyond language representation.

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