Skirmishes of self in the light of socio cultural veracities of postmodern world in the books of Julian Barnes

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Abstract

Flaubert's Parrot , Julian Barnes's most acclaimed novel worldwide, poses and playfully elaborates on questions about traditional(ist) understandings of history and conventional concepts of truth, which are also frequently asked by postmodern theorists and philosophers. How can we know the past? Can we ever do so on objective grounds? Are we not bound to (socio-culturally determined) modes of representation that prevent us from thinking or writing about anything but representation? Does the past even exist outside of our systems of signification or is it merely the product of these systems? Is it possible to really understand history in any way? And if it was, would it not always be subjective, partial, even relative, and constantly shifting? In postmodern thought these kinds of questions are raised in the context of an increasing scepticism towards realist or modernist ontology and epistemology as coined by the Enlightenment, among them the "denial of the Cartesian autonomous […] subject, of the transparency of language, of the accessibility of the real, [and] of the possibility of universal foundation" (Bertens & Natoli 2002: xii). While proclaiming "a pervasive loss of faith in the progressivist and speculative discourses of modernity" (Waugh 1992: 3) philosophers and writers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, François Lyotard and later Hayden White and Keith Jenkins testify to the assumption that "history [as well as any concept that aims at 'totalizing' human existence] now appears to be just one more foundationless, positioned expression in a world of foundationless, positioned expressions" (Jenkins 1997: 6), stressing that there is an inescapable relativity in every representation (or rather re- interpretation) of historical entities (cf. White 1997: 392).

The age of postmodernism with its undermining irony, hopelessness, pessimism and the sense of the looming end could not but leave the world in a state of despair, characterized by a propagated rule of the simulacra and the subaltern, hybridism, uncertainty, absence and inconclusiveness. As a result, the world witnessed the appearance of various calls for the re-institution of metanarratives as the only cure to rescue mankind from continuous deferral of signification, which tends to feel secure only with a score of guiding narratives. The same holds true of Julian Barnes's fiction. While many consider the writer's works to be typically postmodern, it is far from being so, as alongside the propagation of multiplicity and flexibility of meaning, it emphasizes the existence of the Truth and the necessity to fabulae metanarratives, which are the only guiding poles in human progress through life in post-postmodernism.

Key words: sociological, cultural , realities , postmodern society , novels of Julian Barnes, Struggles

Introduction

Julian Barnes is an ironist, a post-modern fiction writer and literary critic who occasionally moonlights in the crime and mystery genre. Julian Barnes is a contemporary English writer of Postmodernism in literature. He was more famous for his prosaic style, who was born in Leister on 19 January 1946 and was educated at the city of London school and magladen college Oxford.He has written crime fiction under the pseudonym Dan Kavanagh. His brother, Jonathan Barnes, is a philosopher specialized in ancient philosophy. After working as a lexicographer on the oxford English dictionary, he began a career as a journalist, reviewing for the Times Literary supplement and became a contributory editor for the New Reviewin 1977.He was assistant literary editor and television critic for the New statesman Magazine (1977-81) and deputy literary editor for the Sunday Times.Barnes prose is elegant, witty and playful, and he often employs techniques associated with postmodern writing unreliable narrators, a self-conscious linguistic style, an inter-textual blending of different narrative forms-which serve to foreground the process of literary creation, The gap between experience and language and subjectivity of 'truth' and 'reality'. However, despite this playful experimentation with language, style and fiction and Form Barnes fiction is also foregrounded in psychological realism and his themes are serious poignant and we can say that Heart-felt. He frequently addresses the nature of love, particularly its dark side, exploring humankind's capacity for jealousy, obsession and infidelity.

However, in this paper I will hope to show that, despite it being "a very hard [and indeterminate] act to follow" (Barth 1980: 66), history is not dead in Barnes's novel and neither is the pursuit of (its) meaning. In fact, both remain subjects of a longing for truth and authenticity that is repeatedly re-invented, played with, undermined and reinstalled, rather than deconstructed, in the course of FP 's narrative. As Barnes puts it himself, "[i]t's no good just lying back and saying 'Well, we'll never work it out' and it's no good saying 'Of course, we understand history, all we have to do is apply the following theories or the following scientific principles or Marxist ideology, whatever'" (Barnes quoted in Guignery 2009: 56). Words come as easily to Barnes as they did to Flaubert but to the former the words (and therefore the books) are not enough. FP 's narrator, Geoffrey Braithwaite, truly admires Flaubert and genuinely desires to engage with his pre-postmodernist notions of an 'objective' style and his belief in the possibility of pure words and stories which are able to provide a stable framework for both history and 'his-story'. Living in a postmodern age, however, Braithwaite frequently and self- consciously undercuts his own desires and presuppositions embracing postmodern literary tropes (such as parody and double-coding) and philosophical concepts. Even though he is well aware that objective truth (and with that objective historical research) is fanciful rather than factual, he still desires it and it is precisely this seemingly irreconcilable opposition that inspires and drives his narrative. Braithwaite is devoted to recovering Flaubert as a person and obsessed with 'revitalizing' his written oeuvre with as much accuracy to 'the facts' as possible. Yet, throughout the whole novel he remains an unreliable narrator who's "agenda [...] is a paradoxical one in [its] simultaneous presentation and subversion of Realist conventions" (Lee 1990: 70). On one hand, he embraces a variety of historical facts and figures, but on the other, he repeatedly points to their indeterminacy and apparent incredibility.

But does this lead him to abandon any belief in our ability to attain some sort of truth or knowledge about the past? The answer is a cautious 'no'. In fact, it appears that he never stops searching and longing for post-postmodern meaning(s) (in history) and answers to questions such as: "Why does the writing make us chase the writer? Why can't we leave well alone? […] What makes us randy for relics?"   Disagreeing with certain deconstructionist readings   will argue that it is this (personal) pursuit of and struggle with history and truth that lies at the heart of the novel and represents a source of or refuge for meaning. Braithwaite is never unaware of the artifice involved and the probability of failure. Yet, his quest for the past is actually shown to be of value in itself since it keeps him moving, keeps him alive and helps him to make sense of his own life.

Objective:

This paper intends to study struggles and tribulation of the individual self-depicted in in the novels of Julian Barnes within the larger setting of socio cultural realities of postmodern society

Postmodernism turmoil of the Self

As a matter of fact, postmodernism has caused "a massive shake-up in the subject of History" (Brown 2005: 3) and the activity of the historian, that is (professional) historiography, by asking questions not only about the craft of traditional(ist) historical research that seeks to reconstruct the past in an objective manner but also about the very nature of knowledge and the attainability of objective truth. In the following section of this paper I will aim at depicting this shake-up's reasons and backgrounds and later substantiate (and perhaps complicate) the matter in relating it to contemporary criticism as performed by traditional(ist) historians who argue against (radical) postmodern 'deconstructions' of their profession.

Postmodern Theories of History - (De)Constructing Representation, Knowledge and Truth

Historians are by definition preoccupied with the (linguistic) representation of past times through the analysis of past relics and evidences. This alone offers a wide surface of attack for postmodern theories claiming "that language constitutes rather than represents reality; […] that meaning is a social construct; that knowledge only counts as such within a given discursive formation and is therefore if not merely an effect of power than in any case bound up with it; that knowledge therefore is inevitably institutional; that in the absence of representation representation must necessarily be political and so forth and so on."

So again, what is at stake with postmodernism is a severe scepticism of the attainability of truth (as a 'metaphysical totality') and with that "the idea and ideal of 'objectivity'" which lies at the very centre of "professional historical venture" (Novick quoted in Jenkins 1997: 11). In this context, one cannot avoid referring to the French philosopher and

social theorist Michel Foucault who, in a lecture given at the University of California at Berkeley in 1983, confronted his audience with the following questions:

Who is able to tell the truth? What are the moral, the ethical, and the spiritual conditions which entitle someone to present himself as, and to be considered as, a truth-teller?" About what topics is it important to tell the truth? (About the world? About nature? About the city? About behavior? About man?) What are the consequences of telling the truth? […]And finally: what is the relation between the activity of truth-telling and the exercise of power, or should these activities be completely independent and kept separate? What Foucault does here is to problematize not truth itself but the process of its installation by and through our conceptualization of it. To him, truth and knowledge are 'home-made' since conceptualized in relation to the historical, social and political circumstances that prevail in the moment of their articulation. Whenever someone claims to be a truth-teller, he or she does so while being part of fixed socio-cultural and political entities which 'institutionalize' his or her ways of perceiving and attaining knowledge, "for we always act and use language in the context of politico-discursive conditions" (Hutcheon 1991: 105).

Effects on literary output & social realities

Consequently, postmodern theories of knowledge do not only deal with how we "order, configure, assemble and display knowledge (in verbal written or image form)" (Brown 2005: 9). They also call attention to how we subjectively experience knowledge and in how far our perceptions are governed by those societal entities (people and institutions) with power, which exclude and include, forbid and allow what is to be known and what is not. Applied to the concept of history, this means that there can never be only one history or one truth. On the contrary, there must be a huge variety of histories of 'the other', of the outcasts, of those marginalized by the prevailing societal power structures since historians, too, are subjective interpreters rather than objectifying researchers. With this in mind, Foucault demands that historians should not pursue an absolute (scientific) truth shining through the evidence of primary sources but rather aim at analysing how and why these sources come into being in the first place. They "should examine the linguistic basis (i.e. narrative statements) that constitute s history, rather than correspond to, or unproblematically represent, the real world of things, that is, to abandon the search for original meaning".

In making a case against all kinds of totalizing concepts of knowledge and meaning Foucault argues in line with other postmodern thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard who, in the context of his thesis of the "postmodern condition" (Lyotard in Jenkins 1997: 36) of knowledge, defines "postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarrative" (ibid.) - metanarrative understood "in terms of the production and transmission of meaning, that is [in terms of] a conceptual instrument of representation" (Readings 1991: 48). To Lyotard, metanarratives are "a form of ideology which function violently to suppress and control the individual subject by imposing a false sense of 'totality' and 'universality' [of meaning] on a set of disparate things, actions and events" (Nicol 2009: 11), among them of course history. In other

words, metanarratives aspire to unite the disparate and subjective discourses of a culture into totalizing concepts which claim to account for absolutes of (past) human life and experience. In the tradition of the Enlightenment narrative, "in which the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico- political end - universal peace" (Lyotard in Jenkins 1997: 36), metanarratives thereby aim at legitimating (social) knowledge and the governing institutions behind it, while creating objectifying prerequisites for a societal consensus which foreshadows "the end of freedom and of thought" (Bertens 1995: 127). According to Lyotard, postmodernism rejects these metanarratives and claims "that the stakes have changed once we recognize that politics, art, history and knowledge don't fit together anymore within the patterns of […] rational discourse established by the Enlightenment" (Readings 1991: 48/49). Like Foucault, he calls for a greater awareness of the instability and relativity of all kinds of representation and demands to engage with 'the other' excluded by metanarratives, namely the 'little narratives' which do not intend to unlock absolute (cultural) meanings but rather work to install a dissensus, one allowing "us to experience freedom and to think, that is, to extent our possibilities" (Bertens 1995: 127).

Ideological moorings of Barnes

However, history 'as we know it' and as it is taught at schools and universities rather works into the direction of consensus and can easily be presented as an if not the prime example of western metanarrative since it still incorporates the "dream of a 'total history'" born from the "mastery of a documentary repertoire [aimed at] furnishing the reader with a vicarious sense of […] control in a world out of joint" (LaCapra 1985: 25). Yet, even traditional(ist) historians such as Arthur Marwick (1995) have to admit that "history can no more form one unified body of knowledge than can the natural sciences" (12) or any science at all. History theory has actually undergone a number of changes and transformations since the time of the Enlightenment and if one investigates in the archives, numerous attempts can be found which entertain the thought that "no enterprise as laborious and long-drawn-out as historical research can be pursued without deeply held convictions as to its purpose and significance" (Tosh 2000: 1) and that "our response to a particular work of history will inevitably be influenced by its writer's stance" (ibid.). Postmodernism here asks: But if historiography is such a subjective and self-reflective craft, is it not practically fiction? And if so, "if one treated the historian's text as what it manifestly was, namely a rhetorical composition" (White 1995: 240), would this not mean "that historians effectively constructed the subject of their discourse in and by writing?".

This postmodern problematization of the fictive character of history writing and of language as a tool of representation has to be put in the context of the so-called 'linguistic turn' at the beginning of the 20th century which, on the basis of Saussurian linguistics, came to be one of the most influential paradigm shifts in the history of science (cf. Schäfer 2009: 29). Saussure, whose oeuvre can be seen as the origin of structuralist linguistics, basically argues that language is a closed system independent of outer substances, which is based upon a functional sign-structure. This structure is composed of signifiers (words, visual images, etc.) and signifieds (the 'things' or concepts called to mind by the signifier) that are arbitrarily put together and, therefore, make sense only in the context of their linguistic 'code-system'. So when someone talks about a certain 'real world'- referent, say a book, he or she can only be understood by means

of the linguistic code determining the relation between the word 'book' (the signifier) and the (culturally generated) concept (the signified) it evokes in us - even without the actual referent at hand (cf. Nicol 2009: 7). In any discourse - be it ideological, literary or artistic -any word's meaning, then, does not derive from the word itself but from its structural context since it "only exists within its meaning system as a product of the interaction of semantic elements" (Russel 1993: 295/296). Consequently, meaning becomes the "Ergebnis von Differenzen innerhalb eines Spiels [der Wörter], das sich nach Außen abgrenzt […], um in sich ein geschlossenes System von Sinn bilden zu können" (Schäfer 2009: 31).

Intellectual influences on Barnes

Post-structuralists go even further in complicating the matter by criticizing and re - inscribing Saussure's theories. Within his assumption of the sign's separation into concept and sound image, for example, they claim to have detected a kind of metaphysical 'logocentrism' (cf. Newton 1988: 147) that, according to Jacques Derrida, is typical of the Western thinking tradition which promulgates "that meaning is conceived as existing independently of the language in which it is communicated and is thus not subject to the [free]play of language" (ibid.). Following Derrida's criticism of Saussure, this distinction implies (within the existence of the signified) the existence of an original or transcendental concept that stands for itself and, therefore, operates outside of discourse. Derrida is highly sceptical of the possibility of such a "point of presence, [such] a fixed origin" (Derrida 1988: 149) because it supports the metaphysical presupposition of "a truth shining through from behind the signs" (Voss and Schütze 1989: 137) and the possibility of an "extralingual, intelligible logos" (ibid.) which, in post-structuralist thinking, simply does not exist. Derrida states that there are no certainties, no fixed meanings; there are only discourses and/or 'texts' which are all "implicated in an endless intertextuality" (Waugh 1992: 6), drawing from "innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes 1977:146). Every signified is built upon and constructed through a signifier and there is "not a signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language" (Derrida 1976: 7). Judging from this, the freeplay of signs and 'texts' is potentially limitless: "The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification ad infinitum." (Derrida 1988: 151) Thus, the possibility of transcendental meanings and the desire to "pass beyond man and humanism" (ibid.: 153) are shown to be based on false presuppositions about the nature of representation which, in post-structuralist terms, becomes multi-dimensional and discursive, "a network of agonistic language games where the criterion for success is performance not truth" (Waugh 1992: 6).

Of course, all these considerations did not simply pass 20th century history science without being exposed to criticism from professional historians themselves. As a matter of fact, many of the latter were soon beset by "pomophobia" (Southgate 2003: 3), the fear of postmodern ideas leading to "cynism and even despair, rather than wisdom or spiritual growth" (John Clarke quoted in ibid.: 4), and the suspicion that "the uncertainties, ambiguities and doubts that postmodernism reveals and provokes" (ibid.) might result in stasis and scientific regression. However, this does not mean that there are no examples of a 'sophisticated' discussion of the clash between postmodern theories and (the writing of) history, which actually took the shape of a proper 'battle of words' in the pages of some contemporary

history journals. Two of these examples - Arthur Marwick (1995) vs. Hayden White (1995) and Perez Zagorin (1999) vs. Keith Jenkins (2000) - will be presented in the following.

Flaubert's Parrot

Julian Barnes's award-winning third novel, Flaubert's Parrot, originally published in 1984, using an amazing range of techniques and a combination of genres in order to tell the story of its protagonist Geoffrey Braithwaite, a widower, retired medical doctor, and 'amateur' Flaubert scholar. Braithwaite's self-appointed quest is to find the actual parrot which his favorite writer, Flaubert, used as a model for Loulou- the absurdly named, symbolically charged bird at the center of his famous short story, Un Coeur simple (i.e. "A Simple Heart"). Pursuing the search does not reduce the alternatives but increases them. It records the problems of knowing the truth and authenticity of past.Barnes is both fascinated and frustrated by the impossibility of getting history "right", a puzzle which leads him to represent and reflect upon historical events and figures through a variety of "alternative" historiographic genres. Implicit throughout his work is the idea that traditional forms of historiography offer a limited means of understanding history. Barnes doesn't assume to have the answer to this problem, but his work does suggest that it is futile to try to eschew individualist perspectives (subjectivity) and ideologies in historical narration. Thus, Braithwaite, a self-professed "hesitating narrator" who is typical of the narrators Barnes employs, tends to be self-doubting, limited and deeply subjective rather than authoritative, omniscient, and objective. Braithwaite's search for clues to constructing an authoritative biography of Flaubert leads him to confront the limitations of biography as a discipline and genre. The work of the biographer, just as that of the historian, becomes more and more difficult, tenuous, challenging in these post-structuralist times when the very notion of a coherent, stable subject is radically called into question, as well as the slippery, imprecise nature of language itself as a means of representing any reality or event. The vision of "everything that got away" drives Braithwaite to some rather absurd forms of research. At one point, his effort to ascertain how accurate our perception can be a Flaubertian metaphor comparing the sun to a "large disc of redcurrant jam" leads him to write a grocer's company to find out if a pot of 1985 Rouennais jam would be the same color as a modern one. When assured that the color would be "almost exactly the same," he feels vindicated: "So at least that's all right: now we can go ahead and confidently imagine the sunset" 5 But how many such "problems" of referentiality can be resolved? Braithwaite's fretfulness reflects an extreme realist attitude towards representation which Barnes is both satirizing and sympathizing with.

Throughout his search for information about Flaubert, Braithwaite is preoccupied by this concern over the reliability or referentiality of language and historical "evidence". One of his strategies for understanding the "true" Flaubert, for example, is to seek the "true" stuffed parrot that inspired Loulou in Un Coeur simple; he thinks that if he finds the real parrot then he will have discovered Flaubert's "true voice". In addition to serving as a metaphor for the difficulties with historical research and providing a kind of skeletal plot, Braithwaite's search for Flaubert's parrot links the novel to the detective genre (to which Barnes has contributed four novels under the pseudonym of Dan Kavanagh). The detective novel relies on an epistemological view that postmodern fiction challenges.

Postmodernism in Barnes' characters

The genre "relies upon a perception of the world as an orderly place in which events can be explained" 9 There are twists an turns in the plot of any good detective story, but in the end confusions are cleared rather than complicated. As such, detective fiction is a particularly inviting target for postmodern historiographic metafiction.Despite his detail-obsessed, realist approach to reconstructing Flaubert, Braithwaite continues to provide us with unconventional, often wildly contradictory, views of his subject. Several chapters offer varying portraits of Flaubert by concentrating on his observations about and interactions with, for example, the railroad, or animals, or irony. A more radically unconventional chapter conveys a view of Flaubert's life. Another is in the form of a "Dictionary of Accepted Ideas" about Flaubert's life which imitates the writer's own Dictionnaire des ideas recues. This multi-genre, multi-perspective view of Flaubert does not necessarily mean that we must abandon historical inquiry to relativism: not all versions of the past are equal, but the past evades any easy attempts at encapsulation.

As Alison Lee remarks , "that such multiple way of seeing exist provides an acknowledgement that there is no single true any more than there is a single parrot".Flaubert's Parrot also provides us the ways in which the retrieval of the past satisfies personal needs. It is not Flaubert who is led onto the stage as a speaking, thinking and acting character, but a fictional personage who attempts to piece together Flaubert's personal history. Consequently, the novel does not only tell Flaubert's story, but far more importantly, it also tells the story of the internal narrator, Geoffrey Braithwaite, which contains a clue to Braithwaite's interest in Flaubert. Towards the end of the novel, we find out that Braithwaite is trying to recover from the shock of his wife's suicide. His quest for Flaubert can therefore be regarded as a diversion from grief, an attempt to escape from the bleakness of the present. It is no coincidence that Braithwaite choose Flaubert, of all people, as a subject for a biographical search. For one thing, Braithwaite is a writer manqué, who tries to identify with a more successful writer. Braithwaite takes a great interest in Flaubert's way of coping with grief and despair. Lastly, Braithwaite resembles Flaubert in his turning to the past out of disillusionment with the present.

Conclusion

Barnes introduces the themes of fidelity and cuckoldry that will recur in his later works, which leads Jay Parini to describe the novel as 'a meditation on the meaning of fidelity within the context of marriage in an age of crushing cynicism'. What critics mainly saluted in their reviews of Metroland was the mastery of style, the sureness of construction, the accuracy of detail, the effective wit and irony, and the apt descriptions of childhood and adolescence remembered with nostalgia and a sense of loss by the first person narrator. The ironic perspective is mainly due to the retrospective narration as, throughout the novel, the narrative voice is that of the 30 year old narrator, who, according to Mosoley, 'is now capable of ironic correction of the ideas and postures of his adolescent self.

The first person narration combines an inhabiting of the mind of the adolescent with an older man's understanding of that mind's shortcomings'. Moseley adds that one of the main achievements of the novel is precisely the management of tone as the wiser and distanced view over one's life allows for irony and sharpness: 'the ironic verbal texture…keeps

the tone astringent'. Three important things happen in the final section that put a sort of seal on Christopher's adult relations to death, sex and art.

One is that his Uncle Arthur dies; Arthur has been a comic figure, featured in the adolescent chapters. Returning from his cremation, Christopher realizes that his fear of death is gone. The final surrender is to middle class, middle-aged suburban normality comes when Christopher attends an old-boys' dinner for his former school. All his old scorn for the school, for the kinds of "success" his classmates have found, for the masters, tugs at him; Toni sneers at him; but he goes along anyway, overcomes his instincts and enjoys himself, and is offered a job: setting up a new publishing imprint for translations of French classics. The question of how art mediates our experience of life and history is one that runs through all of Barnes's novels. In his debut, the bildungsroman Metroland, it is the question that preoccupies the precocious and cynical young narrator Christorpher land his school friend Toni. To address it, they take to observing people who are themselves observing art in the National Gallary. They "scientifically" note the physical responses people manifest, hoping that a twitch, squirm or puffing of the cheeks will help them to understand art's influence on people. Many years later, they debate the utility of their experiments. Toni, who has grown into the stereotype of an embittered radical, declares that "as least we were looking, at least we believe that art was to do with something happening, that it wasn't all a water-color want".

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