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Chapter Three

‘A preference for things Gallic’: Julian Barnes and the French Connection

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Summary: This chapter explores Julian Barnes’s relationship with French culture and literature in his fiction and non-fiction, and seeks to delineate the contours of the traditions within which he situates himself and explore the ways in which he revisits and assesses the French legacy from a British viewpoint. Although frequently labelled ‘postmodernist’, Julian Barnes is nevertheless often drawn back to the literature of the nineteenth century and to French masters of realism and modernism. His admiration for the French literary canon leads him to engage a fertile exchange with the past while at the same time creating his own original voice.

In *Flaubert’s Parrot*, the narrator, driving off the boat at Newhaven, imagines answering the customs officer’s ‘Have you anything to declare?’, with ‘Yes, I’d like to declare a small case of French flu, a dangerous fondness for Flaubert, a childish delight in French road-signs, and a love of the light as you look north’ (Barnes 1985: 115-116). If Julian Barnes claims to be a European, his relationship with France which he calls his ‘second country’ (Barnes 2002a: xiii), and to French culture more specifically, is both intimate and passionate. Barnes presents himself as ‘an English Francophile’ (Barnes 1995: 320) and willingly admits: ‘[France] is my other country. There is something about it – its history, its landscape – that obviously sparks my imagination’ (Swanson 1996). His work – more particularly *Metroland* (1980), *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), *Talking It Over* (1991), *Cross Channel* (1996), *Love, etc.* (2001), *Something to Declare* (2002) and *Nothing to be Frightened of* (2008), but also his various essays, reviews and notebooks which form part of his archives held by the Harry Ransom Humanities Centre at the University of Texas in Austin – is teeming with references or allusions to French culture, their presence justified by the topics and contexts of these books, as well as by the personality of their fictional characters. Beyond the

thematic level, a more literary approach to the various connections between Julian Barnes and France can help to delineate the contours of the traditions within which the writer situates himself and explore the ways in which he revisits and assesses the French legacy from a British viewpoint. These numerous links with a foreign culture raise questions as to the contemporary writer's relationship to the literary past and his own search for originality. How does Barnes address his fascination and admiration for Flaubert and other French nineteenth-century writers? Are his works so full of respect and devotion that they are bound to retell, repeat so as to celebrate? Are his books a homage, a eulogy, a commemoration and an imitation, or does he use the postmodernist strategies of irony, subversion and deconstruction? Can a writer be both respectful towards the past and original in his own creation? Do the extensive French references in his work suggest that the literary space is saturated, exhausted, condemned to parrotry, or does the British writer manage to break free from the French literature of the past to give vent to an original voice? Finally, is Barnes's fascination for French nineteenth-century literature the sign of a dissatisfaction with the present state of British contemporary fiction and could it be related to the nostalgic mode that some critics have associated with postmodernism and more particularly with the retro-Victorian novel (Gutleben 2001: 199)? In order to probe these issues, I will first provide a rapid overview of the French cultural and literary traditions which attract Julian Barnes and I will then examine how the writer deals with this legacy of a foreign past.

A Fondness for Provincial France

Julian Barnes's interest in France was undoubtedly sparked by the fact that both his parents were French teachers and that from 1959, the family spent their summer holidays driving through various regions of provincial France, holidays which, however, were 'filled with anxiety' for the teenager (Barnes 2002a: xii). In 1966-67, Barnes taught English at a Catholic school in Rennes, and was initiated into francophone popular culture through singers such as Jacques Brel and Georges Brassens whom he valued for their individualism and non-conformity (Barnes 2002a: 19-33). Barnes then studied modern languages (French and Russian) at Magdalen College, Oxford but as he remarks in the introduction to *Something to Declare*, his fondness for France really started when he was in his thirties:

[...] in the long silent quarrel and *faux* existentialism of late adolescence, I took against my parents' values and therefore against their love of France. At university I gave up languages for philosophy, found myself ill-equipped for it, and returned reluctantly to French. [...]

It was only in my mid-thirties that I started seeing France again with non-filial, non-academic eyes. (Barnes 2002a: xii)

It is thus only at this period that the author developed a passion for France, which he shares with his older brother, Jonathan Barnes, who owns a house in the Creuse, a step the younger brother has always declined to take and which encouraged him to travel regularly through different regions of France on holiday, exploring the Ardèche, the Drôme, the Cantal, enjoying long walks in the countryside or the mountains, savouring local food and wine of which Barnes is a distinguished connoisseur. The France Julian Barnes likes is the one his parents preferred: ‘provincial, villagey, under-populated’, ‘a France of the regions rather than the centre’. He is not drawn to ‘Paris or the larger cities or some yelping exhibitionist beach, but to quiet working villages with rusting café tables, lunchtime torpor, pollarded plane-trees, the dusty thud of boules and an all-purpose *épicerie*’ (Barnes 2002a: xiii, xiv, xiii). Because Barnes’s fiction and essays are very often marked by an affectionate tenderness towards French items and people, some critics have accused him of sentimental idealism and nostalgia in his portrayal of France. However the author acknowledges his partiality: ‘My view of France has been acquired from literature, from holidays, from living amongst you for only one year; it is necessarily partial’ (Barnes 2006b: 5.1). Moreover, Barnes argues that you choose a second country to find antitheses to your own and your judgment is ‘seldom fair or precise’ (Barnes 1996: 207) because you ‘project, perhaps, your romanticism and idealism’ (Swanson 1996) onto this other country, and also, one may add, onto its culture and literature.

The Combativeness of French Literature

Together with the lifestyle, French culture and literature are decisive factors in explaining Barnes’s francophilia. In 1996, the writer euphemistically told an interviewer: ‘it’s a literature I know well’, adding: ‘A lot of my intellectual points of reference are French rather than English’ (Swanson 1996). This web of references is apparent in Barnes’s fiction and non-fiction alike, and points to the French tradition that attracts his characters and himself. In *Metroland*, whose first part is, as Barnes conceded, autobiographical in ‘spirit’ and ‘topography’ if not in its ‘incidents’ (Hayman 2009: 3), the literary erudition and affected rebellion of the two teenagers, Christopher and Toni, impel them to idealize French poets from the second half of the nineteenth century, including Gérard de Nerval, Théophile Gautier, Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud. The narrator remarks early in the book that

what particularly appealed to him and his friend as teenagers was the rebelliousness of French authors:

[...] we cared for its literature largely for its combativeness. French writers were always fighting one another – defending and purifying the language, ousting slang words, writing prescriptive dictionaries, getting arrested, being prosecuted for obscenity, being aggressively Parnassian, scrabbling for seats in the Académie, intriguing for literary prizes, getting exiled. The idea of the sophisticated tough attracted us greatly. (Barnes 1990: 16)

The two adolescents are thus drawn to a subversive and combative literature, a literature of opposition, resistance, and dissidence, which quarrels with tradition in order to try and create something new. Julian Barnes admits for his part that, contrary to his heroes, he didn't want to be a rebel: 'Perhaps I *wasn't* rebellious enough. Or maybe I was saving it all for the novel' (Stout 1992: 29). However, in the introduction to *Something to Declare*, he confesses that the France he values is 'contrarian in spirit' (Barnes 2002a: xiv), and just as for his characters, he admits that 'there was an element of cultural snobbery in [his] initial preference for things Gallic'. He explains that snobbery in terms that echo those of *Metroland's* narrator: 'their Romantics seemed more romantic than ours, their Decadents more decadent, their Moderns more modern' (Barnes 2002a: xii-xiii).

This 'preference for things Gallic' also applies to cinema. In *Something to Declare*, Julian Barnes celebrates the *nouvelle vague* film director François Truffaut whose film *Jules et Jim* (1962) is revisited with postmodernist irony both in *Metroland* (Barnes 1990: 112) and in *Talking It Over* (Barnes 1992: 22-24). If Barnes's homage to Truffaut is oblique and whimsical in his fiction, maybe in the vein of postmodernist ironical practices, in his review of the director's correspondence, the writer is much more open about his admiration for Truffaut which he contrasts with his impatience with Jean-Luc Godard. What he values in particular in Truffaut is his revolt against *le cinéma de papa*, traditional cinema, and the term 'revolt' which Barnes uses deliberately reminds the reader of the rebelliousness of French literature valued by *Metroland's* teenagers.

In this very 'literary novel' (Hayman 2009: 3), Christopher and Toni's admiration for French culture goes beyond literature and cinema to include language as well. The narrator remarks: 'We were, you may have guessed, mostly doing French. We cared for its language because its sounds were plosive and precise' (Barnes 1990: 16), characteristics which could be related to the combativeness of French literature that fascinates the two teenagers. Moreover, the use of French words or expressions and the bilingual puns enable Christopher and Toni to cultivate their marginality while further exposing their pedantry. They thus sometimes mix French words with literary references as in their mottoes: '*écraser*

l'infâme' and '*épater la bourgeoisie*' (Barnes 1990: 15), two expressions which are never translated throughout the novel and are respectively borrowed from Voltaire and Charles Baudelaire. The teenagers then create their own idiolect or language when they anglicize the French verbs in sentences such as 'How about écrasing someone?' (Barnes 1990: 17) or 'Think I épated him much?' (Barnes 1990: 18). They also deliberately ostracize their fellow pupils when making monolingual puns in French which only they understand. These forays into French can certainly be seen as playful, amusing and clever but they also epitomize the teenagers' premature sophistication, cynicism and self-absorbed snobbery. Moreover, Christopher's attachment to all that is French may be the sign of his impatience with Britain and his need to create an identity for himself that would not be strictly English. The adolescents' appropriation of French specificities partly finds an echo in Barnes's own approach to his francophilia which he attempts to define in *Something to Declare*: 'Knowing a second country means choosing what you want from it, finding antitheses to your normal, English, urban life' (Barnes 2002a: xiii). In *Metroland*, Christopher cultivates a form of rootlessness and can only look up to Toni whose parents are Polish Jews. Thus, the boy's adoption of French culture, literature and language is a way for him to approach the assumed class of rootless people. According to Merritt Moseley, in *Metroland*, 'France is an idea, as well as a style, a language, a pose, an image of the right sort of life, and a rebuke to Metroland' (Moseley 1997: 30).

The French Essayistic Tradition

The two boys in *Metroland* will later find an heir in *Talking It Over* and *Love, etc* in the character of Oliver who is most memorable and entertaining for his erudition, flamboyance, wit and his tendency to 'scatter *bons mots* like sunflower seeds' (Barnes 1992: 239). However, Oliver's literary quotes, allusions and references are more often British than French, whereas Gillian's mother, a Frenchwoman, regularly quotes French eighteenth-century moralist Chamfort, and especially his maxims and reflections on love. In 2003, in his review of a new translation of Chamfort's reflections, Barnes pointed to the fondness of French people for such 'little books of wisdom' while the British viewed them with some suspicion, judging them 'lordly, snobbish' or 'merely flash' (Barnes 2003b: 34). The author's own essayistic inclination, both in his fiction and non-fiction, may partly find its source in a French moralist such as Chamfort whom he finds 'engaging, human, modern', 'various, contradictory, but always stimulating' (Barnes 2003b: 34). Barnes may also have drawn inspiration from the methods of the sixteenth-century essayist Montaigne whom he greatly admires and whose learned pages on

death he respectfully quotes or refers to in *Nothing to be Frightened of*, describing them as ‘stoical, bookish, anecdotal, epigrammatic and consoling’ (Barnes 2008: 39).

Barnes has repeatedly demonstrated his great talent as an essayist in his reflections about art, history, memory and death throughout his novels, in his disquisition on love in the ‘Parenthesis’ of *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, but also in his three volumes of essays, the many uncollected pieces published in newspapers and magazines, his introductions and prefaces, and of course, in *Nothing to be Frightened of*. In that respect, the British writer situates himself within a rather ancient French (but also, more broadly, European) tradition of the essay as a type of writing which is – somehow paradoxically – simultaneously personal and abstract, intimate and metaphysical. But Barnes also manages to be very modern in that his meditations engage with the contemporary world and his images belong to the late twentieth century. This is the case for instance in *Nothing to be Frightened of* when he ponders modern death in hospitals, surrounded by the latest but also most impersonal technology. In this book, Julian Barnes seems to find his own place within that hybrid essayistic tradition by including anecdotes drawn from his private life – some of them jaunty and even hilarious, others melancholy and poignant – which he mixes with serious philosophical reflections, delightful epigrams and quotes from great novelists, musicians and thinkers. The result is partly a personal though cagey family memoir and partly an intimate conversation with Barnes’s literary predecessors whom he considers his second family, affectionately calling them ‘non-blood relatives’ (Barnes 2008: 46, 195): ‘Such artists – such dead artists – are my daily companions, but also my ancestors. They are my true bloodline [...]. The descent may not be direct, or provable [...] but I claim it nonetheless’ (Barnes 2008: 38). Through this original form of beyond-the-grave conversation, Julian Barnes proves that the literature of the past is very much alive to him: ‘I think of the writers who speak to me as my coevals. Or not as my coevals, but as my elders and betters. I don’t think of them as being as dead as other people’ (Herbert 2008).

A Portrait of the Artist as a Reader

If one compares the writers favoured by Julian Barnes’s fictional characters and those the author himself admires, the overlap quickly becomes obvious. Some fifteen years after *Metroland*, in the short story ‘Gnossienne’ from *Cross Channel*, the writer Clements, an alter ego for Julian Barnes, makes a list of the French authors he is loyal to, and the names are familiar to the Barnes reader: Montaigne, Voltaire, Flaubert, Mauriac, Camus (Barnes 1996: 127). These names recur in the memoir *Nothing to be Frightened of* where the writer offers quotations from and stories about Montaigne, Flaubert, Renard, Zola, Daudet, the Goncourts,

Stendhal, Camus. One may perceive an evolution in the characters' references, which mirrors the writer's own progress. In an interview in 1986, Julian Barnes said that while he was at university he liked Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Gide, Camus, Sartre, i.e. the rather rebellious writers praised by *Metroland's* teenagers. He added that in his forties, he preferred Voltaire, Montaigne, Mauriac, Tournier (Salgas 1986: 13), i.e. the ones favoured by his more mature and sedate characters, thus suggesting some degree of change in the author's preferences and confirming the fact that intertextuality can be an efficient tool of characterisation. Moreover, from *Metroland* to *Nothing to be Frightened of*, one may discern an evolution from a fondness for rebellion associated with the impetuosity of the young, to a keenness on insolence which may be a more mature attitude. In an essay about Michel Houellebecq whom Barnes refers to as 'the most potentially weighty French novelist to emerge since Tournier', Barnes explains that what strikes him about Houellebecq is his literary insolence which he traces back to Voltaire and La Rochefoucauld, and defines as a tendency to 'systematically affront all our current habits of living, and treat our presumptions of mind as the delusions of the cretinous' (Barnes 2003a). Part of Barnes's own work could be qualified as insolent, the best example being the first chapter of *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, where the narrator – a woodworm – satirizes certain assumptions which turn out to match what Barnes sees as the targets of literary insolence, i.e. 'a purposeful God, a benevolent and orderly universe, human altruism, the existence of free will' (Barnes 2003a).

It is needless to say that the French connection asserts itself fully in Barnes's masterpiece, *Flaubert's Parrot*, which celebrates the French master and exposes Barnes's fondness for the work of this distinguished writer. This deep attachment to Flaubert is also confirmed by numerous essays and reviews on the hermit of Croisset, some of which are collected in *Something to Declare*, and by his latest book, *Nothing to be Frightened of*, in which Flaubert is regularly evoked and quoted. To Kingsley Amis's provocative and exasperated remark, 'I wish he'd shut up about Flaubert', Barnes jokingly replied: 'Not Shutting Up About Flaubert [...] remains a necessary pleasure' (Barnes 2002a: xiv). Thus, even in his most recent essay on Guy de Maupassant, he cannot help starting by reminding the reader of the connection between the two writers and by quoting one of Flaubert's letters at long length (Barnes 2009: 25).

In 2001, Barnes undertook to translate into English Alphonse Daudet's *La Doulou (In the Land of Pain)*, a notebook Daudet kept of his bouts of pain in the terminal stages of syphilis from which he suffered most from the early 1880s until his death in 1897. This decision to make Daudet's notebook known to the British public and to do the translation himself certainly confirms Barnes' interest in and intimate relationship with

French literature and language. Barnes first read the book when he was researching *Flaubert's Parrot*, and was struck by its 'honesty and its directness and its lack of either sentimentality or self-dramatisation' (Wild 2009: 96). In a letter to Professor Peter Bayley, he described the book as 'a work of great truth, precision and bravery' (Barnes 2006b: 4.3), and a few years later, he praised it for 'the exact glance, the exact word, the refusal either to aggrandize or to trivialize death' (Barnes 2008: 97). These characteristics may also be found in Barnes's own work and more particularly *Nothing to be Frightened of* whose main subject is also death and dying. What is interesting about Daudet is that Barnes was attracted to this rather obscure and almost forgotten set of dying notes, rather than the lighter and comic part of Daudet's work, such as *Letters From My Windmill* and *Tartarin de Tarascon*, which are set in a sunny and agreeable if partial Provence. Barnes's archives in Austin reveal that he devoted himself very seriously to the task of translation and edition. In particular, he wrote several letters to try and trace the original and unedited manuscript, and had in mind to publish the first complete French edition of the book. In terms of language proper, while working on the translation, Barnes sent very precise queries to friends and scholars to make sure he perfectly understood all the nuances of the French hypotext in which some sentences are extremely cryptic, even to the French reader. While translating the book, the writer felt 'a strong sense of service': 'I felt that it was my duty to represent this man as closely as possible in tone and weight of words to what he wrote' (Wilde 2009: 97).

Barnes's choice of a nineteenth-century French writer and of Daudet's book in particular makes even more sense after the publication of *Nothing to be Frightened of* where Barnes proposes an answer to the question he asked in the introduction to *In the Land of Pain*: 'How is it best to write about illness, and dying, and death?' (Barnes 2002b: v). In this latest memoir, Julian Barnes's cool and dispassionate tone recalls Daudet's own detachment, lack of self-pity and calm and steady gaze on acute suffering. To flesh out his arguments, Barnes draws again from nineteenth-century French literature, quoting from Flaubert's correspondence, but also from Jules Renard's *Journal* which he kept from 1887 until his death in 1910. The British writer draws particular attention to Renard's talent at 'compression, annotation, pointillism' (Barnes 2008: 48), his 'intense precision' in his description of the natural and human world, and his deep understanding of 'the nature and function of irony' (Barnes 2008: 49), all traits that could equally be applied to Barnes's own work. There thus seems to be a genuine kinship between the twentieth-century writer and the melancholy Renard who share the same first name (Jules, Julian) and whose parents bear similarities: Barnes presents Renard's parents as 'an extreme, theatrical version' of his own (Barnes 2008: 159). As was the case for Daudet, Barnes chooses the less obvious and less known work by

Renard, the *Journal*, rather than his famous and more expected novel, *Poil de Carotte* (1894), a bitterly ironical account of his own childhood. Barnes thereby confirms his fondness for French writers' diaries and letters, those of Flaubert, Renard but also Sand, Baudelaire, Mallarmé and the Goncourts which Barnes reviewed for various newspapers, valuing for example the Goncourts' journal for being 'an intimate, gossipy, catty, candid panorama of French social and artistic life from 1852 [...] to 1896' (Barnes 2006b: 5.1). This inclination towards journals and correspondences may be partly explained by the fact that they are fascinating documents not only about the life and work of its authors, but also about the literary and cultural context of the time.

There is thus a coherent circulation of writers and texts in Julian Barnes's work, the cultural period he is constantly drawn back to being 'roughly 1850-1925, from the culmination of Realism to the fission of Modernism' (Barnes 2002a: xiv). This is also the period Barnes covers when he devotes essays to French painters such as Gustave Courbet, Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Odilon Redon, Pierre Bonnard, Édouard Vuillard and Henri Matisse. Such an attachment to this particular French tradition may seem unexpected for a writer who is frequently labelled 'postmodernist' and whose metafictional strategies are often interpreted in the light of former eighteenth-century experiments, such as Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* – which Barnes confesses he has never read (Barnes 2000: 114) – or the novels by Henry Fielding and René Diderot. This should certainly draw the reader's attention to the sometimes misleading aspect of labels and to the fact that writers cannot be placed in neat little boxes for the convenience of critics. Like most writers, Julian Barnes is reluctant to be reduced to a specific school, and the variety of his production proves that his work is profoundly dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense, mixing several traditions and voices while aiming for originality. One may wonder however whether the weight of the French literary tradition is not sometimes too onerous for the contemporary British writer, and the palimpsestic dimension of many of Barnes's works raises questions as to the originality of any work of art and the way in which a twenty-first century author can deal with the legacy of the past.

Negotiating the Literary Past

Julian Barnes has often been labelled a postmodernist writer, especially because of the extensive formal experimentation of *Flaubert's Parrot*. The prefix 'post' in its historicized meaning demands to be probed in relation to the literary past as Barnes comes not only after modernism but also after realism, and more generally after canonical literature. This leads one to wonder what an erudite and francophile author *can* write in the wake of such great novelists as Flaubert or such great essayists as Montaigne, and how he can situate himself in the present when the past

tradition he calls upon is so overwhelming. Barnes is aware of the risk that the literary legacy may prove too much to handle: ‘There’s bound to be a certain burden of the past, a certain oppressiveness of great writing’ (Freiburg 2009: 38). This is more true when one is imbued with massive admiration or enthusiasm for a great artist whose work strikes one as perfect and who could therefore condemn all future writers to silence. Barnes’s position in relation to Flaubert is daring and ambitious as, instead of sidestepping the master or using the common postmodernist devices of irony or subversion, he takes up the challenge to deal with the Flaubertian inheritance directly, by making Flaubert the central figure of his most accomplished novel and his literary essays, systematically eulogizing his work.

As T.S. Eliot remarked in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, any writer needs to take the literary past into account: ‘the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence’ (Eliot 1920: 49). The whole of literature can of course be considered as a huge palimpsest with layer upon layer of intertexts, but the way intertextuality is used and perceived has evolved in recent times. In the second half of the twentieth century, in the context of postmodernism and the death of the author, the romantic concept of originality and the exaltation of the autonomous creative imagination have become obsolete. As Frederic Jameson sternly explains, the demise of the subject as viewed by modernity as a single individual generating his own vision of the world, means the end of individual style, ‘in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brushstroke’ (Jameson 1984: 64). This is replaced by a nostalgic polyphony of voices and styles from the past which Jameson deplors: ‘with the collapse of the high-modernist ideology of style – what is as unique and unmistakable as your own fingerprints [...] – the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture’ (Jameson 1984: 65).

It is certainly true that in contemporary fiction, ‘telling has become compulsorily belated, inextricably bound up with retelling, in all its idioms: reworking, translation, adaptation, displacement, imitation, forgery, plagiarism, parody, pastiche’ (Connor 1996: 166). One needs only think of the great success in recent years of the retro-Victorian novel, but also of biographical novels based on the lives of famous writers. In Barnes’s *Metroland*, the narrator dryly refers to ‘trading on resonances’ as ‘that most twentieth-century of techniques’ (Barnes 1990: 126). In *England, England*, the French twenty-first-century intellectual continuously refers to Guy Debord for his concept of a society of

spectacle, and to Jean Baudrillard for the notion of simulacrum, and he remarks: ‘in our intertextual world [...] there is no such thing as a reference-free zone’ (Barnes 1998: 53).

If one takes the example of *Flaubert’s Parrot*, the book reads like a vibrant and original homage to the French writer, in which Flaubertian intertextuality is so extensive and Braithwaite has so fully incarnated and impersonated Flaubert’s voice that sometimes the narrator’s own voice seems to disappear beneath or behind that of Flaubert. Chapters such as ‘The Flaubert Bestiary’ and ‘Examination Paper’ almost take the form of a collage of quotations from Flaubert’s correspondence so that Braithwaite’s role seems limited to that of a compiler or a parrot, Flaubert’s parrot. The third chronology of Flaubert’s life is a great achievement in confusion as some readers believed it was a pastiche of Flaubert’s style (Bouillaguet 1996: 54), while it is entirely composed of quotations from Flaubert’s correspondence in the form of metaphors and comparisons, thus forming an original autobiography. This strategy of collage might be a nod of homage to the end of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* by Flaubert, where the two copyists attain serenity by simply copying. But Braithwaite’s activity is not restricted to copy as he is also imitating Flaubert. ‘Braithwaite’s Dictionary of Accepted Ideas’ in particular reveals the scope of the narrator’s ventriloquism as the chapter consists of a parody and a stylistic pastiche of Flaubert’s *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*. The deliberate confusion of voices throughout the novel seems to suggest that the notion of paternity or author-ity has been seriously shaken and that the words themselves are more important than the identity of the writer.

A pessimistic view on this issue may consist in thinking that works of the past exert such a huge influence on the present that all innovation is impossible, that the literary space is now saturated and that all writers are condemned to repetition, stammering, retelling. They can only imitate what has been done before, and thus the notion of originality is truly exhausted. Is this then what contemporary novelists are condemned to? Is there no way out other than that of repetition and replication? Tristram Shandy was already pondering that subject in the eighteenth century: ‘Shall we for ever make new books, as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring only out of one vessel into another? Are we for ever to be twisting, and untwisting the same rope? For ever in the same track – for ever at the same pace?’ (Sterne 1985: 339).

One could certainly take a more positive view on the subject and suggest that it is possible to take the past into account and appropriate it in a dialogic way which would not be mere parrotry or submission. Barnes certainly does not consider himself as a victim of the famous ‘anxiety of influence’ developed by Harold Bloom (Bloom 1973). In an essay in 2000, he confidently asserted: ‘I am uninfluenced by anybody’ (Barnes

2000: 114). Talking about Flaubert more specifically, he says that ‘[i]t’s not a question of direct influence, or tempted emulation [...] it’s a question of feeling that someone sympathetic has been there before you, has seen it all, and is squinting down at you – benevolently, you hope’ (Barnes 1983: 14). In 2001, he asserted:

I always deny any influence on me whenever it is proposed. It’s obvious when reading *Flaubert’s Parrot* and other things that I’ve written that I regard Flaubert [...] as an iconic figure, as the writers’ writer, the saint and martyr of literature as Tournier refers to him. But when it comes down to actual stylistic influence – I’m a British writer in the twenty-first century, Flaubert is a nineteenth century Frenchman – I simply don’t see it on a word to word level. I agree with many of his positions on writing, on art [...] But I don’t think I’ve ever been praised as a Flaubertian stylist (Guignery 2001: 123).

Julian Barnes’s relation to Flaubert is indeed one of admiration, respect and fascination but he is certainly not trying to imitate the master, since this would be anachronistic. So *Flaubert’s Parrot* does not read as a submissive and repetitive text, but is an act of genuine and original creation in which Barnes respectfully celebrates Flaubert but also evinces his great talents as novelist and stylist. He tactfully handles grief and emotion, culminating in the highly moving chapter called ‘Pure Story’. He creates a convincing Louise Colet and his great achievement consists in rendering an unheard and unsung voice palpable. The metaphors are finely developed and well related to twentieth-century reality, while the style is precise, elegant and has a specific Barnesian touch to it. A reviewer praised the book for performing ‘a couple of literary marriages straight out of critics’ dreams: he’s written a modernist text with a nineteenth-century heart, a French novel with English lucidity and tact’ (Rafferty 1985: 22). Indeed, Barnes parodies the story of *Madame Bovary* through the fictive couple of the Braithwaites, but he brings a new light to it by transferring it to England and to the late twentieth century. The linguistic shift from French to English is also meaningful in that it suggests a different conception of the world. In 2006, for the 150th anniversary of *Madame Bovary*, Julian Barnes wrote a different ending to Flaubert’s novel called ‘The Rebuke’ in which Emma, the first person narrator, doesn’t kill herself and, looking back, gives her own version of her story (Barnes 2006a). The voice Barnes conjures up in this text is extremely original, modern, intimate, drawing the reader into an affectionate complicity which is quite different from the type of narration developed by Flaubert in his novel. Barnes explained in an interview that he had to take a diverging path: ‘it was more of a tribute to Flaubert that I didn’t try and modify an existing episode from the book, but that I did something subversive. If I had tried to fill in a little gap in the book or something and try to narrate it Flaubertianly, I expect I would have failed’ (Guignery and Roberts 2009: 172). In his translation of Daudet’s *In the Land of Pain*, Barnes also seems to set up a dialogic exchange across

centuries, across countries and across languages, as he is intent on being very faithful to Daudet in the translation but he also asserts his presence in the illuminating introduction and footnotes. Barnes remarks: ‘I want the reader to hear Daudet’s voice as clearly as possible in the text, and then hear my voice, helping to explain what his voice is saying, in the notes’ (Wilde 2009: 97). This intertwining of voices is furthered by the fact that, as Hermione Lee suggested in one of her letters to the writer, for all the faithfulness of Julian Barnes’s translation, one may imperceptibly feel the writer’s own personal style: his translation ‘sounds uncannily like [him]. It’s very eloquent & elegant without being mannered’ (Barnes 2006b: 4.3).

Barnes’s work in general thus seems to oscillate between repetition and difference, between the awareness of past literature and a desire to go beyond and make something new and hybrid. The writer is in no way constrained by the heritage of French literature or by past conventions, but manages on the contrary to create a voice of his own and a form of his own. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon remarks that ‘[intertextuality] can both thematically and formally reinforce the text’s message *or* it can ironically undercut any pretensions to borrowed authority or legitimacy’ (Hutcheon 1988: 138). Barnes can be scathing towards a few French writers such as, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre, whose biography of Flaubert, *The Family Idiot*, he disparagingly refers to in *Flaubert’s Parrot*, and about which he wrote a ferocious review, describing the book as ‘a puzzling and frustrating book, needlessly difficult to read, shuffling between dogma and perceptiveness’, a passage which was deleted in the later version published in *Something to Declare* (Barnes 1982; Barnes 2002a: 158-170). But apart from a few examples such as this one, Barnes’s intertextual approach is on the whole benign. Unlike some of his postmodernist or post-colonial contemporaries, Barnes’s acknowledgement of a literary debt is neither brutal nor subversive, but rather smooth, cathartic and celebratory, even if his celebration does not exclude irony, nor lead to an excess of crepuscular nostalgia or morbid melancholy. As far as Flaubert is concerned, Barnes does not contest or subvert the master’s works but he conjures them up, commemorates them and liberates some space to let his own voice resonate.

Conclusion: ‘Knit Your Own Stuff’

This survey of Julian Barnes’s connections with the French literary past sought to delineate the contours of a continuous, fertile and amiable dialogue with nineteenth-century literature, which may be related to the polyphonic dimension of postmodernism but not with its more subversive stance nor with the nostalgic tendency with which this aesthetic movement has sometimes been associated. Through his appropriation of certain specific texts, Barnes manages to ‘replenish’ the literature of the

past (Barth 1980), to give it a second life. This is more particularly true for Alphonse Daudet and Jules Renard, two writers who are no longer frequently read in France, or only for a limited part of their work. In the introduction to *In the Land of Pain*, Barnes presents Daudet as ‘a substantially forgotten writer nowadays’ (Barnes 2002b: vi), and his translation of Daudet’s notes on dying has certainly helped to put him under the spotlight again, if only temporarily. In 2007, a new edition of *La Doulou* was published in France with Barnes’s own preface, notes and postscript. Despite his admiration for his distinguished ancestors, Barnes is far from being trapped in the French literary past, far from being reduced to silence by overwhelming ancestry. His choice of writers such as Flaubert, Daudet and Renard with whom one feels his kinship, might actually be a way to express his fascination for them, to claim a cultural identity which is linked to the French literary canon, but also to suggest his own obsession for originality. The motto ‘everything has been said’ does not condemn any literary project but may actually incite one to write in order to silence or challenge this certainty that all is said, and find new ways of saying what has already been said. Staring at the literary past as Julian Barnes but also Peter Ackroyd and A.S. Byatt do is a way of accepting its weight so as to appropriate it and also free oneself from it. As Barnes said in an interview, ‘[o]ne part of your brain knows that you are writing in a literary and social continuum and that what you write is dependent on the fiction that has gone before. But in order to inhabit the novel that you’re writing and make it live, you have to think of it as something completely special’ (Porter 1995: 6). You may identify your literary parents and grandparents, but, in order to create something new, it is necessary to put them behind in a process which simultaneously entails acknowledgement and challenge. Barnes thus views ‘the exemplary and companionable novelists of the past’ as ‘both your masters and your fellow-students; sometimes they daunt, sometimes they encourage. But their true influence is to say, simply and repeatedly, across the years: Go thou and do otherwise’ (Barnes 2000, 115), or, as the narrator of *Flaubert’s Parrot* more prosaically suggests: ‘Knit Your Own Stuff’ (Barnes 1985: 99), which is what Barnes has repeatedly and so skilfully achieved.

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