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1

Julian Barnes

In 1983, after having published two fairly conventional novels, Julian Barnes (born in 1946) was selected by the Book Marketing Council as one of the 20 'Best of Young British Novelists' in a list which included Martin Amis, William Boyd, Kazuo Ishiguro, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie and Graham Swift. The next year, the outstanding *Flaubert's Parrot* met with huge success, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and went on to win the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Award and the Prix Médicis in the non-fiction category in France. To this date, the novel remains Barnes's most celebrated book worldwide and, together with his fifth novel, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989), the book has been hailed as an exemplary postmodernist text for its generic instability, its self-reflexive features, its epistemological concerns over the irretrievability of the past and its blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction. More than 15 years after its publication, the following interview focuses on this hybrid book which has become part of the contemporary literary canon, traces its genesis and addresses some of its most important issues which can be related to other works by Barnes but also to specific trends in twentieth-century literature.

Flaubert's Parrot is one of those books that challenge any attempt at categorisation, classification and genre taxonomy. In the interview, Barnes gives insight into the writing process as he explains how the idea for the book came about and how the notes he had taken while travelling in Normandy found their way into a short story and eventually into an upside-down novel made of an array of genres. *Flaubert's Parrot* is indeed an ungraspable book in that it includes such various genres as biography, literary criticism, the epistolary mode, essays, a manifesto, examination papers, a charge, a train-spotter's guide, a dictionary, a recipe, a bestiary and chronicles. This generic compendium enables the narrator to approach Gustave Flaubert by means of original and varied ways and to avoid the pitfalls of each individual genre, which is why Barnes decided against writing an academic article or a conventional biography. Within the book, the mixing of biography with fiction

undermines the so-called objectivity of biographical procedures of which Barnes is highly suspicious, and suggests that it is no longer possible to follow the old patterns but necessary to take unexplored paths in order to create something new. As a consequence, *Flaubert's Parrot* thwarts the expectations of the reader by simultaneously using and abusing biographical conventions, asserting and crossing boundaries, a paradoxical process which is specific to postmodernist works of fiction. In Barnes's book, the biographical genre is thus both included and subverted: on the one hand, the narrator Geoffrey Braithwaite accumulates extensive data and sometimes provides extremely precise references as any biographer would, but on the other hand, he realises that his obsessive quest for exhaustiveness down to the tiniest detail cannot give him access to a complete knowledge of Flaubert or of the past.

At the end of the twentieth century, many contemporary British writers took a keen interest in historical events and figures, but novelists such as Julian Barnes, Jeanette Winterson, Salman Rushdie, D. M. Thomas or Graham Swift did not abide by the rules of traditional historical or biographical novels. Instead of propagating historical facts with confidence, they questioned the means and modes of acquiring any knowledge about the past and threw doubt on the possibility of ever representing past events objectively and faithfully, a process which is particularly visible in Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*. The fragmented form of both novels and their emphasis on the elusiveness of truth and the indeterminacy of meaning testify to the writer's wariness of the certainties of biography and historiography.

In the following interview, Barnes also discusses the basic components of a novel – such as narrative, plot, character, narrator or style – and suggests that writers should try and experiment with new ways of handling these features instead of relying on conventional practices. Thus, in *Flaubert's Parrot* (but also in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*), the writer tries his hand at an original form of narrative that is neither continuous nor stable, but diverging, chaotic and disorderly. The chapters of the book resemble the pieces of a jigsaw that narrator and readers try to assemble without ever managing to complete the motif – a process inscribed within the postmodernist aesthetics which favours fragmentation, multiplicity and the refusal of any form of totalisation. Barnes is rightly wary of labels and reacts sarcastically when the term 'postmodernist' is applied to him or his work, all the more as some of his novels, such as *Metroland* (1980), *Before She Met Me* (1982), *Staring at the Sun* (1986) and *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) display rather conventional features. However, he insists that in each novel he aims to explore a new area of experience and to experiment with form and narrative modes. He thus argues against the easy and comfortable choice of an authoritative third-person narrative when other options are available. In his

novels *Talking It Over* (1991) and *Love, etc* (2000), he chose the form of the dramatic monologue whereby the various characters address the implied reader directly and engage him/her in an intimate relationship. The absence of any authorial or authoritative voice forces the reader to make his/her own judgement on the events described, of which contradictory versions are sometimes presented. This polyphony of voices points to the elusiveness and fragility of truth and memory, a recurrent concern in Barnes's fiction (including in his Booker Prize-winning novel *The Sense of an Ending*) and contemporary literature.

In *Flaubert's Parrot*, even though the original incident was autobiographical, Barnes's aim was to create a first-person narrator who differed from himself, shared common traits with Charles Bovary and had a secret in his life that could be progressively revealed during the course of the novel. It is deliberately ironic that Barnes should have chosen an intrusive narrator in a book devoted to Gustave Flaubert who precisely claimed the necessity for an impersonal type of narration. The novel thus differs from traditional realist fiction in which the narrator is often presented as a stable, reliable, unproblematic omniscient figure. In *Flaubert's Parrot* and in much postmodernist fiction, the narrator may be reliable but he is generally hesitant and reluctant to tell the whole story. In Barnes's book, Braithwaite's hesitations and frequent digressions reflect how painful it is for him to confront his wife's adultery and suicide, and his literary investigation into Flaubert's life and works is a way of postponing telling the story of his marital life. To a certain extent, Braithwaite bears similarities to John Dowell, the narrator in Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1915), a book Barnes views as one of the greatest – though underrated – twentieth-century novels. In both cases, the self-deluded melancholy narrators defer telling their private stories but they do so for differing reasons. In the interview, Barnes delineates the similarities and differences between the two narrators, one modernist, the other postmodernist, and addresses the issue of reliability.

Even if the narrator's story, told by fragments, gives its structure to the book, the main subject of *Flaubert's Parrot* remains Gustave Flaubert. Consequently the book reads like a vibrant and original homage to the French 'homme-plume', 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. Barnes's deep attachment to the hermit of Croisset and, more generally, to French culture and literature, is confirmed by his numerous essays and reviews on Flaubert, some of which are collected in *Something to Declare* (2002), and by his memoir *Nothing to be Frightened of* (2008), in which Flaubert is regularly evoked and quoted, along with other French writers such as Montaigne, Jules Renard or Alphonse Daudet whose stunning collection of notes about his syphilis, his symptoms, excruciating

pain and various treatments Barnes translated in 2002 (*In the Land of Pain*). Barnes's intertextual practices and relation to the literary legacy may be considered in the context of postmodernism and the death of the author, where the Romantic concept of originality and the exaltation of the autonomous creative imagination have become obsolete. It has been argued that contemporary writers engage in a dialogue with the literary past through pastiche, parody or rewriting, rather than creating an autonomous and individual style. 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. 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 does not consider himself as a victim of the famous 'anxiety of influence' developed by Harold Bloom: his relationship with Flaubert is one of admiration, respect and fascination but he is not trying to imitate the master, since this would be anachronistic. As a consequence, *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, an achievement which is only made possible through a lot of rewriting, as Barnes explains in the interview.

In Britain, Barnes is presented as a Francophile and known for his fondness for anything that is related to France, as demonstrated by the essays collected in *Something to Declare*. In France, however, the writer is praised for being quintessentially British, a perspective that still amuses and intrigues him, and raises questions as to what constitutes national identity and binds a country together. Barnes tackled these issues both in *Letters from London* (1995), a collection of witty and insightful reports on late- and post-Thatcherite England, and in *England, England* (1998), a novel about the invention of tradition and the construction of national history. In Barnes's work in general and in *Flaubert's Parrot* in particular – but also in his short story collection *Cross Channel* (1996) – French and British culture, history and literature meet and play against each other. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, Barnes not only celebrates a dead foreign artist and the related French culture and lifestyle, he also tactfully handles the private tragedy of his British narrator, offers reflections into the vagaries of love and explores ways of coping with death and mourning. More than 20 years later, in the short story collections *The Lemon Table* (2004) and *Pulse* (2011) and in his memoir *Nothing to be Frightened of*, Barnes addresses these issues in greater depth, his vision of illness, ageing, grief, loss and fear of death being fundamentally unsentimental and unsparring, while at the same time deeply humane.

Julian Barnes's Key Works

Novels

- Metroland*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1980.
Before She Met Me. London: Jonathan Cape, 1982.
Flaubert's Parrot. London: Jonathan Cape, 1984.
Staring at the Sun. London: Jonathan Cape, 1986.
A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters. London: Jonathan Cape, 1989.
Talking It Over. London: Jonathan Cape, 1991.
The Porcupine. London: Jonathan Cape, 1992.
England, England. London: Jonathan Cape, 1998.
Love, etc. London: Jonathan Cape, 2000.
Arthur & George. London: Jonathan Cape, 2005.
The Sense of an Ending. London: Jonathan Cape, 2011.

Short story collections

- Cross Channel*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1996.
The Lemon Table. London: Jonathan Cape, 2004.
Pulse. London: Jonathan Cape, 2011.

Non-fiction

- Letters from London 1990–1995*. London: Picador, 1995.
Something to Declare. London: Picador, 2002.
Nothing to be Frightened of. London: Jonathan Cape, 2008.

Detective fiction under the pseudonym of Dan Kavanagh

- Duffy*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1980.
Fiddle City. London: Jonathan Cape, 1981.
Putting the Boot in. London: Jonathan Cape, 1985.
Going to the Dogs. London: Viking, 1987.

Translation

- In the Land of Pain*. By Alphonse Daudet. London: Jonathan Cape, 2002.

Interview

[The interview was conducted at the Sorbonne on 14 November 2001 by François Gallix and Vanessa Guignery.]

- Q Could you tell us about the germ for *Flaubert's Parrot*? How did the idea of the book come to you?

A I can actually date the beginning of *Flaubert's Parrot* very precisely. Normally, I find that books have a long-term beginning, a long-term interest or obsession, and then a moment of ignition, a moment of beginning, a moment when all that you have known, or experienced, or thought about in the past, suddenly comes to a point where a small explosion takes place. You may not know it at the time but it's happened. And this small explosion took place in September, 1981. I was in Rouen, not surprisingly; I had been commissioned by a publisher to write a book that I finally never wrote and barely even began, which was a guide to the houses of French writers and artists. I have brought along the travel notebook that I kept on that journey, which begins with 'Normandy, Loire, September 1981'. Then, there is a list of the places that I visited. It started at Michelet's *château* in Vascoeuil, Monet's garden, Voltaire's patron's *château* at Sully, Alain-Fournier's birthplace, Balzac's *château* at Saché, Anatole France's house in Tours, Corneille's house in Rouen, Flaubert's birthplace in Rouen, Flaubert's *pavillon* at Croisset and ended at Maupassant's birthplace, which I think is Miromesnil.

There are three notes in succession on my visit to Rouen. The first is very brief, but you will see exactly how it fits with the book. It goes: 'Flaubert's statue, place des Carmes. Looking rather loftily upwards with a sticking out moustache, disdaining the game of boules being played beneath him.' The second note concerns the museum at the Hôtel-Dieu: 'Avenue Gustave Flaubert, containing an Imprimerie Gustave Flaubert, and a snack-bar-restaurant called Le Flaubert. Round the corner to the Musée Flaubert. Mixed surgical instruments, medical texts, and flaubertiana: copy of the magazine containing his first published item at (?) age fifteen, pictures of his family, the room he was actually born in, Louis XV fireplace, and most memorably, the bright green perky-eyed parrot which was lent to him when he was writing *Un Cœur simple* and which irritated him at the same time as giving him an inner sense of parrothood.' Third note, immediately succeeding: 'Croisset, the high point of pilgrimage. In Flaubert's day, a village outside Rouen. His broad house as seen in an amateur picture, above the Seine, backdropped by green. Now Croisset is part of the docks area. Huge gantries loom alongside and rails for cranes to run along. The Seine looks commercial and there is a Bar Le Flaubert.' Then there is a description of the history of the house and an inventory of everything that is in the *pavillon*, which goes on for a page and a half, ending with 'a crumpled mound of a white handkerchief with which he mopped his brow a few instants before dying'. And then, 'a very ordinary tumbler from which he took a drink a few instants before he died'. It goes on: 'Then, crouched on top of one of the display cabinets, what did we see, but Another Parrot, also bright green, also according to the gardienne and also according to a label hung on

his perch, the authentic parrot borrowed by GF when he wrote *UCS* [*Un Cœur simple*]. I ask the gardienne if I can take it down and photograph it; she concurs, even suggests I take off the glass-case. I do, and it strikes me as slightly less authentic than the other one, mainly because it seems benign, and Flaubert wrote of how irritating the other one was to have on his desk. As I am looking for some way to photograph it, the sun comes out – this is on a cloudy, grouchy, rainy morning – and slants across the display cabinet. I put it there and take two sun-lit photographs. Then, as I pick the parrot up to replace it, the sun goes in. It felt like a benign intervention by GF, signalling thanks for my presence or indicating that this was indeed, the true parrot.’

It is strange reading, that, because it seems so innocent; indeed, it was innocent. That was not the start for a book; those were notes taken while travelling. I had absolutely no notion when I wrote those notes that there was anything there at all. Indeed, looking at the other notes I took, there’s an incident about the time when I visited Anatole France’s house in Tours which is perhaps more obvious fictional material and I’ll give it to you to show when things can be transformed from life into fiction and when they can’t. ‘Anatole France’s house in Tours. After much ringing of the doorbell we rouse and are finally shown round by France’s grandson and his third wife. He says to us: “I’m not a Don Juan, I must say. My first wife, well, she desired a friend. My second wife, she died in Spain while on holiday. And well, this is my third wife.”’ When I reread that, which I had not done for 20 years, I thought: ‘Why is not that a story? Why are the two parrots a story, and why is that not a story? Why is there not a story in the man who is not Don Juan?’ I think perhaps one of the answers is that the man who is not Don Juan is a complete story. It is a little anecdote which you tell, which has a brief beginning and a brief end, whereas the story of meeting two different parrots, apart from being slightly bizarre, is also open-ended, it asks a question.

I think a lot of books begin with a question of one sort or another. Very often, the question is: ‘What if ...?’, ‘What if this rather than that?’, ‘What if what actually happened in life did not happen, but something else happened instead?’ That is one way in which fiction often starts. In this case, I suppose the question was: ‘Which? Which parrot?’ To continue, I then remember, as far as I can, going home and, a month or two later, finding that these two parrots were still perched in my head, grooming their feathers with their beaks, and I thought: ‘I ought to do something about this.’ I didn’t know what to do. I thought: ‘Perhaps I could write an academic article’, but academic articles are not what I have ever been any good at. I eventually started writing a short story – or what I thought was a short story – which in the end turned into

the first chapter of *Flaubert's Parrot*. I published it separately, but by the time I published it, I realised that there was a lot more where this came from: it had Geoffrey Braithwaite, this melancholy English doctor with a secret in his life; it had the bouncing off of fact and fiction; it had the sense that sometimes love for art can be more satisfying than love for someone in real life. And those elements, which are some of the key elements in the book, were there in this – as I saw it then – short story. Then, it just grew and grew, I suppose.

- Q Do you sometimes reread these notebooks to refresh your memory?
- A I must have reread my Rouen and Croisset notes when writing *Flaubert's Parrot*. But I never reread my notebooks looking to see if there's a story there for me. Either there is or there isn't. You note down a whole range of things and there are some things which lodge in your memory in a different way from others. For example, I had absolutely no memory of the Anatole France-Don Juan character at all, which, I guess, is one way of saying that it was not a story that appealed to me as a writer particularly.
- Q The epigraph to *Flaubert's Parrot* is a quote by Flaubert: 'When you write the biography of a friend, you must do it as if you were taking revenge for him.' Is this what you were doing by writing *Flaubert's Parrot*? Do you think you need to love a writer, to empathise with him/her in order to write his/her biography?
- A First of all, I regard biography with some suspicion as a genre. I am frequently made uncomfortable and even disapproving of the certainties with which biographers describe lives. I was reading on the Eurostar coming over this afternoon the last posthumous collection of various journalism and interviews by and with Philip Larkin. At one point, he is talking about biography, and he says he always begins biography in the middle, because he is not interested until the character is grown-up, because no one does anything interesting until they are grown-up. I have a certain sympathy with this attitude, and I think there is no first sentence of a book which makes the heart sink more than the one that goes: 'his great-great-grandfather, as far as we know, married his great... and so on.'

I think the other reason I feel suspicious of biography is because, too frequently, it is reductive and fails to account for the active imagination that makes a work of fiction. A biography, whether it is the biography of a painter, a musician or a writer, often likes to reduce art to the life which was present when the art was produced, and somehow minimise and diminish it. I think also that I am suspicious of biography because it sometimes tends to be read instead of the books themselves: it can be

read as a substitute. As I understand it, you in France are much more suspicious of biography and tend to think of it as more of a debased genre than we do in Britain. In Britain, it is held to be an entirely respectable literary genre; in fact, in some cases it is held to be superior to things like poetry and fiction. And it is enormously popular, maybe that is why I don't like it: jealousy!

I think also that in the old days, when religion was widely believed, people wrote hagiography, that is, the lives of the saints. The lives of the saints were instructive, told people how to behave, and gave them something to live up to in their own lives. Few of us nowadays read the lives of the saints but we do read, increasingly, lives of artists and writers. Of course, these lives are always much less saintly than the lives of saints, and therefore, in some ways, they are bound to disappoint us. There is also a certain school of biography which is intended to make the reader feel superior to the subject. Just to continue the charge sheet, there is another aspect of biography which I find curious and which is related to the notion of empathy: you need empathy not just with the subject of a biography, you also need empathy with the times in which he or she lived. But very often you read biographies of nineteenth-century characters which are seen entirely through the prism of the twentieth or now the twenty-first century; and you see people who are being judged for their sexual behaviour or their literary careerism in an entirely contemporary way, which indicates a lack of a wider empathy. I remember an extraordinary phrase in one biography of Flaubert – I will spare the biographer the shame of being named – in which, talking about Flaubert and his male friends, the biographer remarked at one point that they showed 'a lack of respect for condoms', which struck me as a bizarre remark to make at *any* time, but curiously sort of rebuking and cloth-eared when aimed at France in the nineteenth century.

- Q You wrote four detective novels under the pseudonym of Dan Kavanagh between 1980 and 1987. We might suggest that *Flaubert's Parrot* is some kind of detective fiction as Braithwaite is looking for the authentic parrot and trying to reach a truthful knowledge of the past, while the reader is trying to understand what Braithwaite is hiding about his private life. One critic even suggested *Flaubert's Parrot* could be viewed as an 'intellectual whodunit'. Would you agree with this phrase?
- A I would accept it because I accept all phrases that are nice. It is a book that has been described as many, many different things. I remember that a French reviewer called it a cubist biography. Naturally, it was called a postmodern text, which I wasn't so sure about. In an American review in the *New York Times*, it was called 'a subtle riposte to Derrida', which is one of the most peculiar descriptions of a novel that I've ever had to

endure. You can see the logic of it, I suppose, but you can also see the illogic of it. Imagine a novelist, and in my case one who has written and published two novels and two thrillers under another name at the time, coming back from Rouen, six months later going into his study, and one day, sitting down, cracking his knuckles and saying: 'Well, what shall it be today? Subtle riposte to Derrida? What about a slap across the nose for Roland Barthes?' and so on. No, it doesn't start like that; it doesn't ever start like that. It always starts with a moment or a thought or a character, or with two dead parrots.

So, a thriller? Yes, I take your analysis: there is a mystery about the narrator, there is a mystery about the parrots; in the end, the narrator's mystery is solved and the parrots' mystery is not solved. I don't think this is probably quite enough to hold and keep the attention of the average reader of *Série Noire*, on the whole. I was reading a wonderful letter that Philip Larkin, whose name I have invoked already and will invoke again – to my mind the best English poet of the last 50 years – wrote to me about *Flaubert's Parrot*. He said various things, but the nice thing was he said he read two-thirds straight off into the night and then woke up the next morning and finished it off. But I think I'd be deceiving myself if I thought that that was because the novel is most of all characterised by a thrilling narrative drive. I think it is more characterised by quirkiness and divagation and diversion. There are lots of ways of making a narrative which keeps people up till three or four in the morning. I think the novel continues to tend towards conservatism, and critics of the novel tend to be very conservative. The assumption of what is a narrative, or an exciting narrative, or something that drives a book along, perhaps needs a bit of updating. Philip Larkin was a wonderfully complex character. I never met him, but he wrote to me about three of my books, and the first time you read the letter, you'd think: 'This is absolutely wonderful, this is nothing but praise.' Then you read it again and you notice that it was not quite like that. There is a sentence in this letter he wrote to me about *Flaubert's Parrot* which says: '[you]'ve written a most extraordinary and haunting book I dread trying to reread for fear it won't work a second time'!

- Q Writers tend to have varying views on characters: some say characters have lives of their own, others maintain strict control over them. Did you feel that Geoffrey Braithwaite was sometimes getting more freedom than you had expected or were you in complete control of this character?
- A I think I sit somewhere in the middle of the two extremes of writers. At one extreme is the Nabokov attitude to his characters. Nabokov once said: 'They are there to be whipped like galley-slaves.' And at the other

end are the writers, usually of popular fiction, who tell you with a gasp that the characters just 'took over', and they decided what happened in the novel. I think that if characters take over and decide what happens in the novel, it is probably going to be a very bad novel! I know what they are there for. When I start with my characters, I know roughly what their function in the book is, what their moral weight is, and I know their moral function; then I know a bit of what they are like, and probably last of all, I know what they look like. Writers vary enormously in what order their characters come to be fully formed in their heads. I met a German novelist once, who was a former sculptor, and he would always make life-size heads of the principal characters of his novels before he started writing; and when he had finished the novel, he would take them down to the bottom of the garden and throw them into a heap, so he has dozens and dozens of heads there. It must work for him, is all I can say. As for my book, I knew what Geoffrey was there for and by the time I was into the novel, I knew pretty much his story. Obviously his story has parallels with the story of *Madame Bovary*, though he is different. What happens to him has parallels with what happened to Charles Bovary, though he is in no way similar, I think, to Charles Bovary; I don't think Charles Bovary would have ended his life writing a novel called *Dickens's Marmoset* or something like that!

- Q Was Geoffrey Braithwaite in your notebook?
- A No, he wasn't at all. I don't really know where he came from. This is partly the trouble with asking writers about the process of creation: the best time is when they are actually doing it, and then they will *not* speak to you. Then afterwards, various theories are put forward. I remember someone explaining to me that, of course, Geoffrey Braithwaite was called Geoffrey Braithwaite because his initials were GB and therefore he stood for Britain; that is what you see on the back of every British car! Obvious, isn't it? Never crossed my mind! Never ever crossed my mind! You choose names because they have a certain resonance, and a certain weight. Geoffrey Braithwaite is a solid name, the name of a certain age; it is probably provincial, it is middle-class, professional class. You decide things like that rather than looking at the back of a car as it passes you!
- Q In the book, Geoffrey Braithwaite has an almost physical contact with his readers whom he constantly addresses with a very puzzling 'you'. In your later novels *Talking It Over* and *Love, etc*, on the other hand, it seems that you have decided to do away with the narrator as much as possible and to let the characters speak directly to the

reader – a technique that has often been compared to the epistolary novel. In a seminal essay, Roland Barthes wrote that the death of the author announced the birth of the reader who gives meaning to the text. Would you say that the contemporary novel tries to narrow the distance between the author and the reader, whose part would then increase as Barthes predicted?

- A I'm against being dead, that's my general position on life. It's also my general position on being a writer. Barthes's thesis also strikes me as inherently self-contradictory: he was saying something specific, which he wanted his readers to understand precisely; he wouldn't, I imagine, want them to have too much freedom to misunderstand his intention. I also find Barthes's line unfair to the history of reading; it seems to me that readers have always made of books what they will and reinterpreted them and taken sides and understood them partially or over-understood them or understood them with different emphases. To take it out of the private reading sphere into the sphere of public literature, it is like the way in which Shakespeare was reinterpreted over the several hundred years after his death: there were different readings of Shakespeare by the various directors and actors, some radically against what we think of Shakespeare, what we now, in our later wisdom and authority which will be overthrown in another century, think Shakespeare was really like and what he really meant.

I think the question of narration is one that arises afresh with every book and it is something that I particularly look at. I think all novelists ought to. Some don't, some fall all too easily into an authoritative third-person form of narration, which begs a lot of questions. One of the things you have to decide when you start a novel is 'Where is this coming from?', 'Where is this novel coming from?', 'Who is telling us this?', 'Why are they telling us this?', 'What authority do they have in telling us this?' An easy way out is always a third-person narrative, because it slips down easily and every one takes it on trust. As for the two novels that you mentioned, *Talking It Over* and *Love, etc*, I suppose it is a version of the epistolary novel, except that they are not writing letters and it is less formal and also less cumbersome. I think the reason people don't write epistolary novels any more is that they were a very cumbersome and leisurely form. The equivalent would probably be an e-mail novel, which has probably been done – I don't know ... I would have thought it had by now – and *that* would work. In these two novels, one of which is indeed the sequel to the other, I was trying to tell an intimate story with an intimate method. I was trying to eliminate that person who, however discreet he or she is, is the author telling you that on such and such a day, and such and such a climate, such and such a person wearing these

clothes did such and such, that voice of authority which, however gently and modestly it is introduced at the start of the book, is nonetheless a voice of authority. I wanted to set the characters free in some sort of play zone with the reader, and absent myself totally or at least give the illusion of absenting myself totally. I invented the game, I invented the play zone in which they were let loose. I think I did successfully absent myself from those books. The only way I can judge it is that various people suggest that various opinions that the characters put forward in the course of the books are obviously mine, and that such-and-such a character is obviously the voice of the author! This is another understandable error that tends to be made – that there is a character who tends to speak for the author in a novel.

As for Geoffrey Braithwaite in *Flaubert's Parrot*, he was about 25 to 30 years older than me when I wrote him, and obviously that helped. Obviously, if this is a novel about a character who is obsessed by Flaubert and who is avoiding telling you the true story of his domestic life by instead transferring all his thoughts and obsessions onto a dead French writer, he is going to have some points of overlap with me, because I am also extremely keen on Flaubert. But you try and separate him as much as possible. Obviously, he is going to know some of the things that *you* know, but in the account of his life as it is, and also in the account of his tastes, I deliberately made him be offensive about some writers that I admire. For example, I am a great admirer of Auden, but he thought that the Auden–Isherwood–Spender group was contemptible. It is certainly not something that I particularly at all agree with.

- Q Talking about the writers you admire, I find that there are many similarities between *Flaubert's Parrot* and Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, not only in terms of plot (both narrators try to come to terms with their wives' adultery and suicide), but also in terms of narrative technique and progression (both narrators find it difficult to tell their story and frequently digress; both are self-deluded; irony is a major tool in both books). I know that you particularly value *The Good Soldier* and place it among your most favourite books. Were this book and the figure of John Dowell, the narrator of *The Good Soldier*, present in your mind when you wrote *Flaubert's Parrot* and created the character of Geoffrey Braithwaite?
- A I've never been asked that question before, and it's actually a very interesting comparison. It's true that I deeply admire Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*. I think it's one of the great English novels of the twentieth century and it's still undervalued. I think Ford generally is very undervalued as a writer; *Parade's End* and *The Good Soldier* are two great novels. I've probably read *The Good Soldier* half a dozen times now. It's one of

those books that grip you more and more as you pass in to your thirties and forties and I think I had only read it once by the time I wrote *Flaubert's Parrot*. I can swear on such memory as I have that Dowell had no conscious contact with or influence on Braithwaite. I absolutely take your analysis, though it seems to me that the main difference is that Dowell, who is the narrator of *The Good Soldier*, is unable to tell his story or defers telling his story because he doesn't really understand it. He is the classic example of what people call the unreliable narrator; this is the *locus classicus* of the unreliable narrator in British fiction. It's a superbly accomplished novel which is all the more remarkable when you learn that it was dictated by Ford, though the fact that he dictated it perhaps helped give it the conversational talky and diversionary tone that it does have. Dowell is unreliable from the very first sentence of *The Good Soldier*, which is: 'This is the saddest story I have ever heard' ... 'heard'. But he didn't hear it: as you carry on reading the book you realise that he is deeply implicated and that he is one of the four main players in the story. That's the other thing that you don't get about the book when you read it first: you don't get all the uncertainties and all the unreliabilities. The second time you read the novel you read that sentence: 'This is the saddest story I have ever heard', and as you read the word 'heard', it's like a creak of the floorboard; you know that beneath the surface, that underneath your foot, things are not stable.

The difference with Braithwaite is that Braithwaite quite deliberately at one point tells you he is a reliable narrator and that everything he tells you about Flaubert is true. He is unable to tell you the story of his wife, which eventually emerges in 'Pure story', because of emotional blockage. I think it's not because he doesn't understand it. I think it's a different technique. *The Good Soldier* is grand opera narrated by a bumbler, that's why it's such a wonderful novel. There's such a contrast between the high operatic emotions and passion and death that goes on in it and this very matter-of-fact chap who seems to be trying to do his best to tell you what happens but all the time isn't quite doing that. The set-up of *my* novel is rather different: it's Braithwaite telling you all this stuff because he is emotionally, almost physically, incapable of telling you the tragedy of his life.

- Q How far do you feel that you have been influenced not just by the whole atmosphere of Flaubert but by his writing, his style, and by other novelists writing in French?
- A It's not easy for me to answer. The question of influence is usually hard for the writer himself or herself to answer. I think you've got a particularly hard case in front of you because 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 do other writers in other languages, from Milan Kundera to Mario Vargas Llosa to Philip Roth, 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, and obviously I agree with him that, as he famously said, 'Prose is like hair, it shines with combing.' Obviously I rewrite and rewrite and rewrite, and I think that writing is usually in the rewriting. Writing the first draft is usually a great illusion. The first draft makes you think that the telling of this story, whatever it is, is a fairly blithe and easy business. Then you realise you've fooled yourself yet again. Then the work, the real writing starts, and in my case I rewrite until I get to the point where I know that actually I'm making it worse rather than better, and then I give it up. But I don't think I've ever been praised as a Flaubertian stylist. I have to say this is something which may or may not be the case but it's really only visible from your position and not mine. Just as is whether or not I or my generation have any influence on anyone else. I obviously read the younger generation but I don't spot it. Occasionally I wish we had more influence on them but that's another matter!

- Q You've mentioned the name of Philip Larkin a couple of times. It could be argued that Larkin is a quintessentially British and even peculiarly English writer, and Braithwaite quotes him a few times or paraphrases him once or twice. I was wondering whether you enjoyed playing off a quintessential Englishness against something that might be regarded as a quintessential Frenchness with Flaubert or if it was purely accidental that you just happened to like Larkin and threw in some of his lines. Was there a specific structural reason for making Braithwaite so Larkinesque in some ways – his pessimism and his gloominess in many respects?
- A Add the humour, please! Larkin was frequently asked the question: 'Why are you such a gloomy old sod?', and he would always reply: 'Actually I think I'm quite funny.' *Further Requirements*, this posthumous collection I mentioned earlier, contains several interviews with different interviewers, and one interviewer asks a question about 'The Whitsun Weddings', which is the title poem of his collection called *The Whitsun Weddings*. It is a poem about coming down England on a train on a Saturday afternoon and at each station there are wedding parties. They all get on the train and they have this frail travelling moment as they all head towards London and then they disperse. It's partly because Larkin

has this reputation that the interviewer says: 'This is a pretty grim and gloomy poem, isn't it?' and Larkin says: 'I'm sorry, you don't understand, that was one of the most deeply moving train journeys I've ever had. I got on at Hull or wherever, and we came down the eastern side of England, and then I noted these wedding parties getting on and it filled my heart with joy.' So I think Larkin is a more lyrical poet than he's often been given credit for, and certain of his poems have predominated but the full picture isn't there.

It's certainly true that Braithwaite is a Larkiny character and I suppose I made Braithwaite more typically British and of his generation than I am: he's fought in the war, he's a doctor, he's very localised except for this foreign passion. Though at the same time whenever I attempt to be less than British when I'm abroad, it fails dismally. In Britain I am sometimes regarded as a suspiciously continental type of writer. But I remember, when I came to France on a book tour a few years after *Flaubert's Parrot* had been published, tentatively mentioning to an interviewer that I was perhaps just a little bit continental – but with a frown of disapproval, he said: 'No, no, we like you because you're British. I'm sorry, you're nothing but British, will you please understand?' So, I'm nothing but British.

- Q *Flaubert's Parrot* has very often been referred to as being postmodernist. Do you agree with that or are you reluctant to accept such a label?
- A I find it a fairly neutral label and I don't mind. When I was first called a postmodernist, which was 15 or so years ago, it sounded like something which was pretty up to date but it seems to me that most of the labels have become almost meaningless. After all, I don't think I can be a postmodernist because if we think of the modernists in the English writing world as Joyce, Eliot and so on, and then you think of the postmodernist generation, it must be people like Borges, Nabokov, Calvino, and they're all dead, so does that make me a post-postmodernist? There's a certain point where you come out the other side. Joyce Carol Oates once reviewed one of my books and said he's a pre-postmodernist. Still trying to work it out, Joyce! I can see that *Flaubert's Parrot* and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* have an approach to narrative which attempts to fracture traditional narrative, to bend it and stretch it and redefine it. Some of my novels are more conventional. My view of form is that it has to be decided afresh with each book. There's no form without an idea, and no idea without a form, as Flaubert said. So the notion that because I write *Flaubert's Parrot* I must be put in that box all the time is something that I refuse to accept. But then maybe that's postmodernist to refuse to be a postmodernist!

Q Do you have an ideal reader in mind?

A No, I don't have an ideal reader. Who is your ideal reader? Your ideal reader is the person who gets the book, who gets every nuance of the book, but that's just a circular description. I don't write for any targeted person of any sort. You think it would be wonderful if someone just completely locked themselves away in a room and took a sandwich from under the door from time to time till they finished your book and experienced it as an absolutely whole entity as it's meant to be. You realise that the reality of reading is different. A friend said to me a couple of years ago: 'I took your book on the airplane because it was a long flight and I nearly finished it by the time I got there.' I was already looking deeply sympathetic because of the tremendous distractions of air travel, being given food and safety videos and all that stuff. But in fact, it was meant as a compliment: a long flight was the nearest to any sort of solitude and being alone with a book that this friend could find. So I don't have any sense of a particular reader or a particular place or how my books are going to be read. I know they're read differently by different people at different times and places – not according to Barthesian theory, but according to the awkward, incoherent, messy way in which real life is inevitably lived.

Q Could you say a few words about two of your later books which, to a certain extent, can be related to *Flaubert's Parrot* because of their subject matter: your collection of essays *Something to Declare* and *In the Land of Pain*, your translation into English of *La Doulou* by Alphonse Daudet?

A In a way, they both come out of Flaubert. *Something to Declare* is a collection of essays, all about France and French subjects. Not surprisingly, after I published *Flaubert's Parrot*, a lot of English and American journals and magazines asked me to write on French topics. Once the *Times Literary Supplement* asked me to review the fourth volume of the Pléiade correspondence of Flaubert and when the book arrived, it had tucked into it one of those comp slips – that is, a little note that the editor sends you – and the editor had written 'A million words please' by a certain date, so I was known for writing quite a lot about France. *Something to Declare* is 17 essays, half of which are about Flaubert: the second half are about Flaubert, the first half are on various topics from the Tour de France in the year 2000 to a chapter called 'Tour de France 1907', which is actually about Edith Wharton and Henry James going around France in a motor car, and there are chapters on Truffaut, Elizabeth David, Richard Cobb, Georges Brassens and so on.

The other book, *In the Land of Pain*, also, in a slow, indirect way, came out of *Flaubert's Parrot*. When I was researching my novel – I no longer remember precisely the trail that led to it – I came across a book that Alphonse Daudet wrote called *La Douleur*, 'la douleur' being the Provençal for 'la douleur'. It's an astonishing text: it's about 60 pages long and it's a notebook that Daudet started keeping when the syphilis that he contracted when he was about 17 or 18 reached its tertiary stage and so, for the last 12 of the 15 years of his life, he kept notes on his pain and on his suffering and on the treatments that he underwent, all of which were hopeless and some of which were bizarre. The last 20 pages of it are accounts of spa life where all his talent as a novelist is made manifest. I read this and in fact quoted from it a couple of times in *Flaubert's Parrot*. For some reason the book has never been translated into English. Daudet died in 1897. The book was authorised by his widow to be published as part of the collected works in 1930, and then there was a slightly fuller edition in 1931. His widow, Madame Daudet, didn't die until 1940, which is actually a hundred years to the year after Daudet's birth – that's 70 years ago. The book never went away from me. I always thought it was the most extraordinary book about illness. It's very difficult to write about illness, especially terminal illness, especially your own. As you can imagine, it's easy to be melodramatic or self-pitying, and Daudet is never that: he is always extremely exact, unself-pitying, funny, and he doesn't treat the illness that killed him as in any way a devilish or heroic opponent. It's an everyday exchange, and he knows what the outcome is going to be. It obviously has resonances today in the time of AIDS but that's understood.

So the book lodged at the back of my brain for 15 years and more, and then I read it again about a year ago and thought I must write one of those articles that sometimes appear in the *Times Literary Supplement* called 'Why does no one translate this book?' And then I thought: 'Well, go on then, mate, on you go.' So that's what I have done. I've done lots of notes because it is in a very compacted form and so it needs annotation. I think I can say that the English edition will be fuller than the French edition! I did a bit turn into Geoffrey Braithwaite and I've gone down all sorts of alleyways I didn't expect to go: the history of nineteenth-century syphilis and things like that.

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