

Tomasz Dobrogoszcz

GETTING TO THE TRUTH THE NARRATOR
OF JULIAN BARNES'S *FLAUBERT'S PARROT*

We make up a story to cover the facts we
don't know or can't accept.

Julian Barnes

A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters

It is an undeniable fact that a story cannot exist without a teller. Any narrative structure must introduce the voice of a narrator, though the levels of his perceptibility may vary, and in some cases the reader may be hardly aware of his presence. There are narratives in which the pattern of narration is relevant only to the way of presenting the story; in other words, it models *the discourse* of the narrative structure. In some cases, however, the manner of narration is a crucial element of the narrative, meaning that an analysis of the narrator cannot be neglected in the search for the real meaning of the piece of writing.

Flaubert's Parrot, a novel by Julian Barnes, certainly belongs to the latter category of narratives. This paper focuses on the manner of narration employed by the author, aiming to demonstrate that the narrator of *Flaubert's Parrot* – seemingly a figure of minor importance for the narrative – bears crucial relevance to it. I try here to investigate the reasons for the multiplicity of narrative models present in Julian Barnes's novel. One of the topics at issue is the balance between the digressions of the narrator and the main body of the story narrated.

The theoretical assumptions of the paper are derived from various American structuralist critics. The apparatus employed here is based mainly on two works. One of them is *The Rhetoric of Fiction* by Wayne C. Booth,¹ which is probably the first thorough and systematic presentation of narrator

¹ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968).

typology. The other is a meticulous and exhaustive work by Seymour Chatman – *Story and Discourse*.² The concepts devised by the two critics have proved remarkably helpful in the analysis of Julian Barnes's novel.

The narrator of *Flaubert's Parrot* is an elderly widower, Geoffrey Braithwaite. A doctor by profession, he is a zealous enthusiast and an amateur biographer of Gustave Flaubert. At first the novel reads as a witty and engrossing, though unprofessional, study of the life and work of the French novelist. Several hints imply that this biography is not being written by a professional scholar. For instance, the narrator, instead of keeping strictly to the topic, involves himself in a series of digressions concerning his own life. Rare in the beginning chapters, the strayings of the narrative appear more and more frequently, until the reader begins to feel that Flaubert's biography is not the central topic at hand. That is to say, the story of Geoffrey Braithwaite and his wife Ellen, although possibly mistaken for a set of digressions, constitutes the core of the narrative. At some point, the narrator actually delivers a list of his concerns, and the degree of importance he attaches to each of them:

Three stories contend within me. One about Flaubert, one about Ellen, one about myself. My own is the simplest of the three – it hardly amounts to more than a convincing proof of my existence – and yet I find it the hardest to begin. My wife's more complicated, and more urgent; yet I resist that too. Keeping the best for the last, as I was saying earlier? I don't think so; rather the opposite, if anything. But by the time I tell you her story I want you to be prepared: that's to say, I want you to have had enough of books, and parrots, and lost letters, and bears, and the opinions of [critics], and even the opinions of Dr Geoffrey Braithwaite. Books are not life, however much we prefer it if they were. Ellen's is a true story; perhaps it is even the reason why I am telling you Flaubert's story instead.³

Indeed, the bulk of the novel seems to be devoted to Gustave Flaubert. The narrator is in no way enthusiastic about dealing with his story and the story of his wife. The first sparse digressions referring to this topic are inserted in the narrative almost involuntarily. The impression created is that they are but obsessive thoughts persistently haunting the narrator. He does not seem to be eager to share them with the reader and therefore the information is not conveyed in a straightforward way.

Even the basic and apparently non-embarrassing facts are reported by the narrator reluctantly. We do not know his name until it is revealed, forty pages into the story, in a quite inventive digression. When the narrator mentions the article he might write and publish, he provides the

² Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

³ Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985), p. 86. All subsequent references are to this edition.

reader with its title and the name of its author – that is, his own name (41). The narrator keenly (which does not mean frequently) uses different sorts of digressions to inform the reader about himself. Although he mentions that he is a doctor, not a critic, at the very beginning of the novel (13), he does not return to that point for a long time, almost as if he would like the reader to forget it. If he reminds us about his profession, he does so only marginally – it does not seem to be his real purpose. When he refers to some ethical issue, he adds, in parentheses, that his views can be explained by his being a doctor (75). Finally, he provides us with the full self-characterisation – using the form of a “personal advertisement” he would write if he were to put one in a magazine (95). The narrator is aware of his own reluctance about disclosing certain matters; he puts forth an effort to mask it, making use of a quotation from his French mentor: “Giving the public details about oneself is a bourgeois temptation that I have always resisted” (94).

However, Braithwaite displays this kind of hesitancy not only when he speaks of himself. A similar situation arises when he goes into the story of his wife, Ellen. Judging from the frequency of the remarks concerned with her, we can see that she is very important for him long before he says so directly. At the beginning of the novel, Braithwaite openly states that his wife is dead, but he bothers neither to explain any details concerning her death, nor to speak of their life together. He does not return to this death for a long time, although any careful reader must perceive several allusions to it (e.g., “I never asked my wife [that question]; and it’s too late now” – p. 40). In the course of the narrative we can gradually construct, or rather approximate, the picture of Braithwaite’s late wife. Throughout this part of the novel, the narrator is constantly wavering – to tell or not to tell. The reader, coming across the remarks: “I remember . . . But I’ll keep that for another time” (76) or “My wife . . . Not now, not now” (105), sees Braithwaite stricken by deep inhibitions.

The narrative continues in this mode until the third to last chapter, when Geoffrey Braithwaite announces that he is going to reveal the whole truth and directly discusses his wife’s story which undoubtedly constitutes his real perplexity. Indeed, even though the narrator is immensely reticent about his unfaithful (as we finally learn) wife, it can be easily spotted that he is almost obsessed with adultery. The matter is clearly explained in the above-mentioned chapter, but until the reader reaches this stage of the novel, he must suspect something when reading several persistently reappearing remarks connected with betrayed marriages. *Adultery* is for Braithwaite one of the words that are replaced by euphemisms nowadays, together with *madness* and *death* (91). Talking about the invention of rail-travel in the nineteenth century, he stresses the effect it had on fornication (109). He

also finds infidelity among the worst things one can discover about a wife or lover, next to “lack of love, madness [and] the suicidal spark” (127). Such passages instil the reader with a notion that the narrator may be a betrayed husband who finds difficulty in accepting it. This notion is supported in the chapter dealing with Ellen’s actual infidelity.

Thus in *Flaubert’s Parrot* we meet a narrator who is so inhibited and reserved that he finds it impossible to speak in a straightforward way and tackle the issue with which he is most concerned. Instead, he takes to weaving a new story. The narrative is dominated by this secondary digressive story, whereas the core matter is removed to the background and only marginally dealt with, almost as if *this* were a kind of digression. The narrator responsible for this kind of discourse is, for David Leon Higdon, “the *reluctant narrator*, who is reliable in strict terms, . . . but who has seen, experienced or caused something so traumatic that he must approach the telling of it through indirections, masks and substitutions.”⁴ Indeed, even in the course of his narration, Braithwaite himself admits that he is a “hesitating narrator” (89). He creates a discourse which, as a matter of fact, leads him far from his genuine interest; actually the whole narrative may be perceived as “a fictional structure the narrator has erected to protect him.”⁵ Higdon claims that the narrator “blames his hesitation on his typically reticent English nature, on his own embarrassment, and finally on his fear of unmasking himself as a cuckold.”⁶ The list might be extended to include a very simple, yet very important point – a point which shows Braithwaite as a human being: he does not feel at ease discussing the suicidal death of his wife and the consequent, pervading suffering.

Geoffrey Braithwaite would much rather discourse upon Flaubert, which in fact he does. Writing about his favourite author is much easier for him and, accordingly, much more appealing. He does not find enough strength to resist the temptation immediately; therefore, the narrative for its main part, although quite rich in personal digressions, is basically devoted to Flaubert. The reader finds out that, ironically, as a doctor, Braithwaite suggests “a new interest” to his newly widowed patient (160); he similarly prescribes for himself the writing of Flaubert’s biography. He claims to have “some rash devotion to a dead foreigner to sustain [him]” (166), a devotion which, he hopes, will not only provide a pastime, but also keep his obsessive thoughts far from his mind. In this case, however, the process of writing does not seem to act as a potent remedy: it does not bring the

⁴ David Leon Higdon, “‘Unconfessed Confessions’: the Narrators of Graham Swift and Julian Barnes,” in: James Acheson, ed., *The British and Irish Novel Since 1960* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1991), p. 174.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

sufferer much ease. As Higdon puts it, "Geoffrey . . . creates a literary investigation to escape his own fears."⁷ Yet the fears cannot be thwarted entirely, and the narrator finally decides to share the "pure story" of his wife with the reader. However, even the eventual confession does not bring Braithwaite final consolation, and he resumes a discussion of Flaubert. He finds it impossible to come to terms with the matter concerning his wife, who, although the only love of his life, was in some respects a perfect stranger to him. Braithwaite admits that very often he found himself ignorant of her motivations, as well as of the system of values she accepted. Being aware of it all, Geoffrey summarises his conviction in a sentence: "My wife: someone I feel I understand less well than a foreign writer dead for a hundred years" (168).

Yet another possible reason for the narrator's concern with Gustave Flaubert is suggested by James B. Scott. The critic stresses personality differences between Braithwaite and his wife, pointing out his strong, perhaps even unhealthy need to understand her. As the feeling is not reciprocated, Geoffrey is bound to seek his way to her heart (and/or mind), which proves unachievable. But for him "the search is all, and if . . . the search is thwarted by an immovable barrier, then the only alternative to life-wasting inertia is a refocusing of the quest . . . towards Flaubert."⁸ However, such an interpretation, reasonable as it may seem, does not fit the narrator's evident shyness, which this paper has already noted. It is true that Braithwaite perceives a special kind of unity between himself and Flaubert, but the obvious proofs of his reluctance present in the story show his real reasons for discussing the French writer.

Braithwaite, who, according to Higdon, escapes his fears by means of going into Flaubert, feels awkward largely because, ironically, "his married life has but parroted that of Flaubert's Charles and Emma Bovary."⁹ Examining this matter in more detail, we find several striking similarities. Geoffrey Braithwaite mirrors Charles Bovary not only in that he is a betrayed husband. In both cases, it is only the wife who is unfaithful. Geoffrey and Charles share the same profession, being doctors. It may very well be coincidental, but their wives have the same initials. Finally, both Mrs Braithwaite and Mme Bovary die in a similar way – by committing suicide. All these details, unintentional as they may seem, have most probably been carefully planned by Barnes, which is to some extent corroborated by his statement in an interview: ". . . why a doctor? . . . Geoffrey Braithwaite is a doctor like Charles Bovary, and his wife

⁷ Ibid., p. 180.

⁸ James B. Scott, "Parrot as Paradigms: Infinite Deferral of Meaning in *Flaubert's Parrot*," in: *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 3 (1990): 61.

⁹ Higdon, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

resembles Mme Bovary.”¹⁰ Even Braithwaite is allowed to discover the similarity between Emma and his wife, speaking of her: “Did she, like Emma Bovary, ‘rediscover in adultery all the platitudes of marriage?’” (164). Nevertheless, the narrator seems to deny any resemblance between himself and Emma’s husband. For such a devoted Flaubert enthusiast and expert, it would not be possible not to notice the foregoing similarities, and yet he does not provide a single reference to this matter. Following in the footsteps of Flaubert’s character, and in that way becoming “Flaubert’s parrot,” is not a great honour for him. Again, this reluctance prevails over openness and sincerity, hindering him from dealing with his heartfelt anxiety. Because of this, none of the similarities mentioned above are pointed out in the discourse, and may elude a careless reader – which very much seems Braithwaite’s intention, although it is clearly not Barnes’s.

Certainly the story of Ellen does not mirror Emma’s life *fully*; it is to a large extent original. Its depiction, however, is only fragmentary and seen through the filter of the narrator’s discourse. Thus her story becomes rather a very subjective *version* of her story, the reader knowing only what the narrator wants him to know. Still, the narrator, judging from the part of his discourse that deals with Flaubert, might be considered largely reliable. He is very precise and meticulous in presenting the life story of the French novelist, and it has to be noted that for the most part the facts he describes, the dates, and the opinions of the critics are based on the truth. There are, obviously, passages of unalloyed fiction which are only thematically related to Flaubert’s biography, but they can be easily spotted and separated from purely biographical material. As for the description of Flaubert’s life, the narrative is corroborated not only by the actual historical events (after all, the dates and facts can be checked, and confirmed, with the help of any professional biography). To prove even more authenticity, the novel abounds in numerous references to Flaubert’s letters, diaries, and quotations from his fiction. Consequently, the reader, positive about the details from Flaubert’s life, tends to believe the narrator also as far as his own personal matters are concerned. Braithwaite is presumably hiding something; but withholding the whole truth is not the same as lying. In other words, a reluctant narrator does not necessarily have to be an unreliable one.¹¹

¹⁰ Interview with Julian Barnes: Jean-Pierre Salgas, “Julian Barnes n’en a pas fini avec Flaubert,” in: *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, Paris, 16–31 May 1986: 13: “Alors pourquoi un médecin? . . . Geoffrey Braithwaite est médecin comme Charles Bovary, et sa femme ressemble à Madame Bovary.”

¹¹ A definition of an *unreliable* narrator has been provided by Booth: “. . . I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), *unreliable* when he does not.” Booth, *op. cit.*, pp. 158–159.

Providing incomplete information in the form of brief digressions, or even only interruptions of the narrative, impels the reader to actively seek a picture of Ellen, given the insufficient assistance of her husband. What do we learn about her from the narrator? That by the time of this narration she has died (13), that she was not a perfect wife (76), that her eyes were greeny-blue (78), that she once visited France with her husband and developed a blister on her foot (84) . . . The narrator is not very explicit; his reluctance serves as a stimulus for our active reading and creation of pictures and meanings from his, ostensibly, involuntary hints. Our hypotheses are either confirmed or rejected in the chapter "Pure Story", the one which is directly concerned with the narrator's wife. Thus, for example, the narrator at this point verbalises his previous allusions to Ellen's infidelity ("She was loved . . . by what I suppose I must agree to call her lovers" – p. 162).

It has to be noted that the narrator of *Flaubert's Parrot* is well aware of his function. Geoffrey Braithwaite is conscious that he is writing a story, although at the beginning he admits only that his "project" is concerned with Flaubert (12). Later on he confesses, as it has been already demonstrated, that in fact the narrative is meant to deal as much with himself and his wife as with the French novelist. Moreover, several passages from the novel suggest that the narrator is also concerned with the process of writing itself, which seems to give the narrative a metafictional character. In the course of narration, he seems to show the reader that the writing has not been completed and tries to share with us his ideas about the possible shape of the parts of the novel still to be written. He foreshadows one of his last chapters, saying: "It tempts me to write a Dictionary of Accepted Ideas about Gustave" (87), which sounds as if he were not sure what he will finally write about.¹² Later on, in one of his digressions, the narrator returns to this idea saying: "It's coming along well, by the way, Braithwaite's Dictionary of Accepted Ideas" (118). In this way, the narrative focuses on its own structuring: the narrator creates the impression that he is writing the said dictionary parallel to the novel and is going to introduce it at a later stage. A reference of a similar kind is made about the chapter "Louise Colet's Version" (135). In Booth's terms, Geoffrey Braithwaite is a *self-conscious narrator*,¹³ and the comments he provides the reader with could be described by Chatman as an example of *commentary on the discourse*.¹⁴ Thus *Flaubert's Parrot* exhibits the features of the workshop novel, although it has to be admitted that this aspect is rather understated

¹² This as well testifies to the hypothesis that the digressions about Ellen and about himself are also presented as unplanned.

¹³ Cf. Booth, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

¹⁴ Cf. Chatman, *op. cit.*, pp. 248–253.

and only very subtly present. In fact, the book is neither Flaubert's biography nor a text on writing a biography as such, but a study of the narrator's concerns, worries, and fears.

Braithwaite, who is not a professional writer, and for whom it is probably the first text he has written, shows at some points that he is obsessed with writing. The novel on Flaubert seems to be the realisation of his old hopes and dreams: "I thought of writing books myself once. I had the ideas; I even made notes. But I was a doctor, married with children" (13). Now, as he states, being old and widowed, he is able to devote himself to writing. However, the fact that he has lost his wife has not only created the opportunity to write; as it has been shown, it has provided most of all the *topic* to write about. Still, the narrator's preoccupation with writing is undeniable. It is best seen probably in the chapter "Finders Keepers," where Braithwaite hunts for Flaubert's secret letters mainly because he craves to publish them, together with his commentary, of course.

Braithwaite is so much dedicated to Flaubert, and so strongly fascinated with the idea of writing, that at one point the two intense feelings come very close to each other. Andrzej Gąsiorek goes even further, concluding that "Braithwaite is modelling himself on Flaubert. He adopts Flaubert's ironic tone, mimics his disingenuousness, and adjures the reader to make sense of him just as he makes sense of Flaubert."¹⁵ The critic ignores the reluctance of the narrator, pointing out that the structure of Braithwaite's unenthusiastic confession is to reflect his search for autobiographical data connected with the French novelist. As Geoffrey Braithwaite has to construct Flaubert's biography bit by bit, he wants the reader to share in his difficulties. There is a similar lack of information concerning, and difficulty in reconstructing, Braithwaite's biography. Consequently, the novel seems to make use of two entwined narratives, so that „Braithwaite's autobiographical story, which leaves the truth largely hidden, mirrors his biographical account of Flaubert, who remains as elusive as his never to be discovered parrot."¹⁶ However, the reluctance of the narrator is so strongly corroborated by the text that it cannot be fully rejected, as Gąsiorek seems to do making Braithwaite's account of Flaubert's life the main theme of the novel.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that Braithwaite is altogether hesitant and faint-hearted. In some aspects which concern leading the narration, he exhibits extensive power and effectiveness. He is a very intelligent and skilful writer, displaying sophisticated wit, and using irony ingeniously. The

¹⁵ Andrzej Gąsiorek, *Post-war British Fiction. Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), p. 160.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

narrative is compact and coherent, disregarding the fact that each successive chapter of the novel is constructed differently. As Gąsiorek puts it, "Braithwaite functions as the novel's controlling consciousness" and "[his] questing and absurd figure . . . presides over proceedings, ensuring the novel's forward momentum."¹⁷ In other words, Braithwaite is a powerful and effectual narrator, binding all the varying sections of his narrative together.

The narrator of *Flaubert's Parrot* guides the reader through the text as if leading him through a labyrinth of actual and possible meanings. The reader is totally dependent on the narrator, having to rely on his digressive method of telling the stories. Moreover, the narrator is keen on frequently returning to the ideas he has already presented. The reader experiences the circular structure of the narrative also on a large scale, as the whole novel is framed by the search for Flaubert's parrot, which is the starting point of the biographic exploration and also the final episode of the book. Braithwaite takes good care that the reader's curiosity should not be easily satisfied, neither as far as Flaubert's story is concerned nor in the case of his personal confession. Gąsiorek notices that "the narrative is constantly retarded . . . by numerous disruptions,"¹⁸ it takes a long time for the narrator to come to the point. Yet the digressions from the drift of the narrative directed towards Flaubert usually have accessory significance – they serve as components of the other story related by Braithwaite.

The narrator of *Flaubert's Parrot*, although conscious of his indecision, his inability to deal with certain matters directly, and the consequent tendency to beat about the bush, still realises his power as the creator of the novel. He is perfectly aware of the fact that the reader has no other option but to rely on him, and quite often makes use of this advantage. However, Braithwaite also sometimes aspires after the reader's trust in spite of all circumstances:

. . . what knowledge is useful, what knowledge is true? Either I have to give you so much information about myself that you are forced to admit that I could no more have killed my wife than Flaubert could have committed suicide; or else I merely say, That's all, that's enough. No more. (97)

Thus it becomes transparent that the narrator, at least seemingly, cares for the reader's confidence, and is afraid of losing his liking and respect. It is true that he tells us no more than he wants us to know. But facing the possibility of inventing the story for the reader, Braithwaite chooses to be evasive, assuming that avoiding the whole truth is better than telling

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

lies instead. In other words, deciding not to tell too much, he wants to be *reliable* in what he does actually tell.

At the same time the narrator realises that certain matters he discusses inevitably evoke doubts in the reader. The chapter "Pure Story," devoted almost entirely to the relationship between Braithwaite and his wife, is announced with the sentence: "This is a pure story, whatever you may think" (160). It is obvious that the narrator is not sure of the reader's trust; he worries that the reader may very well disbelieve him.

However, it is also true that in order to make us read the novel in the manner he has intended, the narrator resorts to manipulation. As Gąsiorek puts it, the narrative is structured "in such a way that the reader's approach to it is effectively forestalled because it is directed down certain paths."¹⁹ Braithwaite carefully selects the clues he provides for the reader, making sure not to authorise any personal interpretation. In fact, he often does so openly, telling the reader that the information given to him may be elusory or misleading: "Do you know the colour of Flaubert's eyes? No, you don't: for the simple reason that I suppressed it a few pages ago" (95). He wants his narrative to be understood in a given way, so that he can arouse a planned reaction and be always positive about the reader's approach to his story. Therefore, withholding certain facts often replaces inventing their substitutes, while all the time the text is under Braithwaite's control. The aim of the narrator seems to be "to produce the terms in which the text is to be read."²⁰

Ironically, the manipulation is deepened by the narrator's consciousness of the fact that the reader may well realise that he is manipulated and misled. Despite his awareness that the reader requires freedom of choice, the narrator often seems to jeopardise it. "See how carefully I look after you. You don't like it? I *know* you don't like it" (95). However, in view of the fact that Braithwaite would rather not lose the reader's confidence, it has to be admitted that many of his efforts are put into reviving the strained trust. Indeed, having acknowledged that the reader may not like the colour of Flaubert's eyes to be "suppressed", Braithwaite soon decides to reveal this information. When, in the course of relating his wife's story, he confesses "I have to hypothesise a little. I have to fictionalise," he hastens to add "though that's not what I meant when I called this a pure story;" and to explain himself: "I have to invent my way to the truth" (165). Thus the narrator is shown as an ambiguous figure – a strong creator having strict control over the narrative, and at the same time a reluctant vacillator, hesitant and hankering after the reader's trust.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Although the whole novel is dominated by the personality of its narrator, Geoffrey Braithwaite, it has to be noted that *Flaubert's Parrot* is not written in an immutable first-person, overt narration.²¹ The division of the text into chapters is followed by shifts in the manner of narration. For James B. Scott *Flaubert's Parrot* is not so much a novel as a "trans-generic prose text"²² or "a medley of prose genres."²³ He contends that the "chapters are devised . . . in such forms as dictionary entries, examination questions, metafictional chat with the reader, narratorial reminiscence or introspection, . . . speculative autobiography [and] chronological summaries."²⁴ Indeed, the labyrinth of meanings Braithwaite confronts his reader with is accompanied by a maze of form.

The novel begins in a fairly "conventional" way, with the first chapter narrated overtly in the first person, almost as a kind of a narrator's diary concentrating on his search for biographical data. It could well serve as a starting point for what *Flaubert's Parrot* at that point appears to be – a biography, or, at least, a book on writing a biography. The following chapters may possibly confirm the apparent concern of the novel, yet the form seems no more conventional for this kind of writing. The life and work of Flaubert are shown from many different, and it has to be admitted, unusual perspectives. Braithwaite presents us his French mentor, considering many contrasting aspects: the animals associated with him or appearing in his life and writings ("The Flaubert Bestiary"), his attitude towards various aspects of the railways ("The Train-spotter's Guide to Flaubert"), his unrealised artistic plans ("The Flaubert Apocrypha"), the presence of coincidence and irony in his life ("Snap!"), or the charges brought against the writer and his work ("The Case Against").

Such a structure not only allows for a new and lively presentation of Flaubert's biography from a variety of original angles. It also provides a good opportunity for Braithwaite to exercise his absurd sense of humour, making use of the ironical and the bizarre. The weirdness of this "biography" is taken to extremes in the chapters "Examination Paper" and "Braithwaite's Dictionary of Accepted Ideas." The former chapter provides us with several "examination" topics concerned with Flaubert, at first putting forward serious issues of the relationship between art and life, and Flaubert's attitude to criticism, then investigating the French novelist from such absurd perspectives as philately, phonetics, geography, theatrical history, economics, and astrology. In the latter chapter Braithwaite attempts to

²¹ By "overt narration" Chatman understands the manner of narrating which enables the reader to recognise the voice of the teller clearly. Cf. Chatman, *op. cit.*, pp. 197–198.

²² Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65.

present Flaubert "alphabetically", taking pains to provide one entry for each letter. It is child's play with such letters as F (Flaubert, certainly) or E (epilepsy), but X seems to cause a problem. Braithwaite, however, does not hesitate to make use of "xylophone", stating that "[t]here is no record of Flaubert ever having heard the xylophone. . . . Perhaps he heard the glockenspiel in Switzerland" (58).

The technique of looking at one concept from several different perspectives becomes applicable in a special way in the chapter "Chronology", where the reader is provided with three parallel chronological summaries of Flaubert's life. One of them concentrates on the highlights of his artistic career, the second one on the misfortunes that befell him, while the third consists of excerpts taken from the writer's books and diaries (focusing especially on the comparisons that he used writing about himself and his life). Thus the biography of the French novelist is shown through different frames of reference, which at some points manifests itself in presenting some particular events in his life from varied points of view. The contrast of the opposing perspectives is most striking in the case of two events: the publishing of his first novel and his death. The former occurrence is shown both as a success and a failure:

1851-7 The writing, publication, trial and triumphant acquittal of *Madame Bovary*. A *succès de scandale*, praised by authors as diverse as Lamartine, Sainte-Beuve and Baudelaire. (25)

1851-7 *Madame Bovary*. The composition is painful . . . and the prosecution frightening. . . . [Flaubert] tells Du Camp that . . . he would buy up . . . all copies of *Madame Bovary* in circulation: 'I should throw them into the fire, and never hear of them again.' (29-30).

The latter contrast is even more conspicuous:

1880 Full of honour, widely loved, and still working hard to the end, Gustave Flaubert dies at Croisset. (27)

1880 Impoverished, lonely and exhausted, Gustave Flaubert dies. (31)

Such diversified versions of the biography of the French writer are separated by no more than a few pages in the text. No reader will fail to spot the disparity.

The discourse in the foregoing chapters seems to be entirely under Braithwaite's control. Yet the chapters contain passages in which the narrator has remarkably reduced his presence ("The Flaubert Bestiary," "The Train-spotter's Guide to Flaubert"), or from which he has even withdrawn ("Chronology", "Examination Paper"). In such *nonnarrated* extracts the reader is left with bare information.²⁵

²⁵ The term "nonnarrated story" has been used by Chatman in reference to the narratives in which the presence of the narrator's voice is drastically limited. Cf. Chatman, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

The biographical data concerning Flaubert are conveyed in the novel in a variety of forms. The chapter "Finders Keepers," speculating about the possible relationship between the French novelist and the governess Juliet Herbert, seems to be a pure example of fiction writing, even though it is based on events from Flaubert's life. It could well be published separately as a short story, having an independent closed composition. The chapter "Emma Bovary's Eyes," in its turn, is written in a form of an argumentative essay, as if a polemic directed to a specified critic with whom Braithwaite disagrees.

All those chapters fit, to a greater or lesser extent, the traditional pattern of biography. It has been demonstrated, however, that the main concern for the narrator of *Flaubert's Parrot* is not the French novelist. If in the chapters mentioned above the real purpose of the narrative can be guessed only from rare allusions, there are two chapters dealing with it more extensively. The already discussed chapter, "Pure Story," may be treated either as one large digression discussing the narrator's personal matters, or, as seems more probable in my view, as the long-awaited core of the narrative. The chapter "Cross Channel" also deals, in its main part, with topics for which Flaubert is only a pretext. The narrator returns to the form of reminiscence used in the first chapter, but here the narrative is constantly interrupted by loose comments which, in fact, constitute the bulk of it. As Braithwaite feels it is too early to disclose the most awkward details concerning his wife, the digressions are mainly devoted to certain social and philosophical issues, to the process of artistic writing as such — writing about the past in particular, and to the contemporary notion of language.²⁶ The chapter is also original in its form, since the narrator runs the discourse as if directing it to a particular person, creating the impression that he is rather *speaking* than *writing*. The technique used comes at some points close to a record of speech in the form of *dramatic monologue*.²⁷

Listen, I hope you won't think this rude, but I really must take a turn on deck; it's becoming quite stuffy in the bar here. Why don't we meet on the boat back instead? The two o'clock ferry, Thursday? I'm sure I'll feel more like it then. All right? What? No, you can't come on deck with me. For God's sake. Besides, I'm going to the lavatory first. I can't have you following me there, peering round from the next stall. (90)

In this way Braithwaite introduces another person between himself and the reader, who is in no way inclined to feel identified with the silent interlocutor accompanying the French doctor on the ferry. Braithwaite,

²⁶ Those comments constitute in fact a very important part of the book, but their further analysis would go beyond the scope of this paper.

²⁷ Cf. Chatman, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

however, even in this very chapter calls himself a narrator (89), which may seem somehow inconsistent.

Eventually, the novel contains a chapter which is *not* narrated by Geoffrey Braithwaite – “Louise Colet’s Version.” Using the first-person overt self-conscious narration, the chapter in question presents certain facts from the life of Gustave Flaubert from yet another perspective – it shows them as they might have been seen by the novelist’s mistress. Still, such a perspective, captivating as it may seem, is to a large extent artificial. The snag lies in the fact that Braithwaite announces in advance that he is going to write such a chapter in his book. Therefore this passage of the narrative seems to be yet another measure to assuage the narrator’s pangs of conscience. Braithwaite proves that he is well aware of the psychological differences between men and women. However, he cannot let his wife speak for herself and explain her point of view, it is too late since she is already dead. Instead, Braithwaite tries to give Flaubert’s lover an opportunity to speak her mind.

For Gąsiorek, “*Flaubert’s Parrot* focuses its attention on its multiple narrative models and invites the reader to see that their different ways of mapping a subject – the biography of Flaubert, the historical past – constitute it.”²⁸ This view is supported by the narrator himself, who compares a biography to a net, stating that it could be defined in two ways – either as “a meshed instrument designed to catch fish,” or “a collection of holes tied together with string” (38). Thus, providing the information about the subject of a biography from different perspectives may serve as an instrument allowing to get closer to *the objective truth* (if, indeed, there is any). The method which takes advantage of the “net” must also consider its drawbacks – any mesh structure involves losing all the substance which slips away through the holes.

However, devising *Flaubert’s Parrot* in such a way that it deconstructs conventional narrative structures may serve still another purpose. As the narrative makes use of a variety of literary genres, the reader faces frequent changes in the type of discourse, and hence frequent changes in the role of the narrator. As James B. Scott states:

The ostensible writer of the text, Geoffrey Braithwaite, plays a diversity of literary roles – biographer, scholarly essayist, omniscient narrator, existential philosopher – and as such he underscores Barnes’s central premise that identity is a mercurial consequence of discourse.²⁹

Indeed, as Braithwaite alters through the shifts of discourse, his selfhood becomes unsettled and questionable. His identity depends on the kind of

²⁸ Gąsiorek, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

²⁹ Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

narrative at hand, and is subject to frequent changes. Consequently, the novel provides the reader with a single narrator, but a narrator whose personality is never fully acknowledged, since one of Braithwaite's identities is constantly substituted by another, as in the Derridean process of supplementation. Paradoxically, it is Braithwaite himself who causes the changes, as he is responsible for the shifts in the manner of writing. The reader's search for the real narrator's identity may be said to mirror Braithwaite's quest for Flaubert's parrot. It is impossible to determine which one is authentic, or even if the real one can be at all traced. The true narrator's identity, if he has got any, becomes lost in the labyrinth of discourse masks.

Flaubert's Parrot consists of many disconnected narratives which, although linked together in the person of the narrator, belong to a variety of prose genres. Such a structure presents the life of Gustave Flaubert from different perspectives, showing various aspects of his biography. The reader is presented not only with different ways of looking at the French writer, but also with different truths about him. Thus *Flaubert's Parrot*, similarly to another of Barnes's novels – *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*, demonstrates that there is no objective history. The novel shows that it is impossible to produce homogenous biography of the French writer – or any homogenous biography for that matter. Barnes uses the idea of a net to describe the search for biographical data, in the case of this novel, and the search for the truth in general. He points out that what we find is always fragmentary and incomplete, and that the search is inseparable from the feeling of losing something.

However, the life of Flaubert is only the surface concern of this novel. The core of the narrative lies in the narrator's digressions which, apart from reflections concerning art and the process of writing in general, deal with his own story, his fears and obsessions. The narrator feels compelled to tackle his own personal story, to embark on his hopeless and somehow involuntary quest for the truth about Madame Bovary, about Flaubert, about Ellen, or about himself. The absolute truth, in any case, is certainly never to be found.

Tomasz Dobrogoszcz

**W DRODZE DO PRAWDY
NARRATOR W *PAPUDZE FLAUBERTA* JULIANA BARNESA**

Opierając się na badaniach narratologicznych amerykańskich strukturalistów autor artykułu zajmuje się narracją w powieści Juliana Barnesa *Papuga Flauberta*. Zademonstrowano to, że w powieści, będącej na pierwszy rzut oka zbiorem szkiców i danych biograficznych na temat Flauberta, centralną postacią nie jest wcale francuski pisarz, lecz piszący o nim biograf-amator. Co więcej, Flaubert stanowi temat zastępczy, bowiem tak naprawdę narratora nurtuje coś zupełnie innego, a mianowicie fakt, że był zdradzany przez niedawno zmarłą żonę. Artykuł pokazuje powolne, lecz uporczywe zmierzanie narratora do prawdy, którą stopniowo odkrywa czytelnikowi, czyniąc to niechętnie, gdyż nie jest mu łatwo zwierzać się z bardzo osobistych problemów. Tytułową papugą okazuje się nie tylko wypchany ptak dający niegdyś natchnienie Flaubertowi, lecz także sam narrator, którego życie powiela stare schematy. Jego dążenie do osiągnięcia prawdy – czy to o Flaubercie, czy też o sobie samym – jest niemożliwe do zrealizowania. Badając formę i strukturę powieści, autor artykułu udowadnia znaczenie dygresji narratora dla wymowy całości tekstu.