

*Parrot as Paradigms:  
Infinite Deferral of Meaning  
in "Flaubert's Parrot"*

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WHEN OSCAR WILDE wrote in 1891 that "life imitates art" and that "lying, the telling of beautiful, untrue things, is the proper aim of art," he hardly could have foreseen the extent to which much of postmodern literary theory would be predicated on that very principle: reality and truth are the illusions produced when systems of discourse (especially artistic discourse) impinge on human consciousness. In practice, this has led postmodern novelists to strive to undermine hermeneutic responses to art by foregrounding the discourse that informs their artifact, thereby implying that not only is the final "meaning" of a work of art forever unknowable, but also *any* orthodox truth is actually a discourse-generated fluke. Indeed, to a postmodernist, truth is a term that has meaning only for those who have an unshakeable faith in some form of divinity, or for those who have (primarily through fear of incertitude) restricted the scope of their vision to such an extent that they let their cultural norms stand as the Laws, the immovable cornerstones upon which existence grounds itself. But there are many who, as Woody Allen describes himself, lack the comforts derived from either a faith in God or a good denial system; they see that the cornerstones are, as though by a collective act of levitation, suspended over an abyss, and that all which is regarded as certain or solid is really a delusion that hides the evanescence of meaning.

This indeterminacy of meaning arose, in part, from semioticians' contentions that the so-called conscious mind does not bestow meaning on what it perceives to be reality, but rather that the self

is a product of the systems of signs that operate independent of the self's control; Jonathan Culler summarizes this ontological view as one in which "the self is dissolved as its various functions are ascribed to impersonal systems which operate through it" (*Pursuit* 33). In other words, not only is each self just a matrix of intersecting sign systems, but also the five billion or so discrete selves on this planet collectively constitute an organic medium through which sign systems can exist and perpetuate themselves. This post-modern view, then, is that consciousness is a consequence of (not a producer or perceiver of) a conjunction of systems — a conjunction which is both arbitrary and protean. There can therefore be no such thing as an absolute truth or a Meaning of Life, and yet any solipsistic sense of the self as *the* repository of meaning and value is equally a delusion.

If a novelist were to accept this unsettling premise as valid (and if he were not, in consequence, to commit suicide), then he would feel that, in the legacy of Wilde, the proper aim of his art is not so much lying as registering the non-existence of truth and the indeterminacy of signs. Such a novelist is Julian Barnes "qui pense plutôt, lui, pour l'impossibilité de 'totaliser'" and for whom the central question is "sartrienne: 'Que peut-on savoir d'un homme aujourd'hui?'" (Salgas 13). Particularly in his 1984 novel (or rather, his trans-generic prose text) *Flaubert's Parrot*, he evinces this conviction that words are empty signifiers never touching a final signified and that the self is a creature of discursive forces. At its simplest, the novel could be said to be a response to the question, "Which is the real stuffed parrot that sat on Flaubert's desk?" (for two different museums boast their ownership of this parrot); but in answering the question Barnes deconstructs conventional narrative structures, not only through the presentation of contradictory-but-equally-valid "answers," but also through the foregrounding of the discursive forces that are at work in his characters and in his reader. 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.

Barnes repeatedly stresses the arbitrariness and subjectivity and transience of signs. For example, in the chapter "narrated" by Flaubert's paramour Louise Colet, she discusses the structure of floral discourse (that is, white, pink, and blue convolvuli "signify" different "messages" [144]), yet she also concedes that to Flaubert such signifiers carried a totally dissimilar signification. And the flower sent to her from Chateaubriand's tomb initially speaks of Flaubert's depth of feeling, until her suspicion that he did not pick the flower at the tomb produces different "reverberations" (142) from the flower. Similarly, in recapping the conventional discourse of eye-colour (such as, blue is innocence, black is passion [78]), Braithwaite recognizes the imprecision of such language, for eye-colour is protean, just as the eyes of the model for Emma Bovary were "green, grey, or blue, according to the light" (81); that is, her eyes as signifiers carried no unique and final signification. Of more central concern to Braithwaite, however, is the imprecision of verbal language itself, the uncertainty one has in never knowing if any one word produces the same impression in the mind of the word's receiver as existed in the mind of the transmitter. For instance, he infers that the words "giant" and "fat" pertained to different quantitative conditions in the nineteenth century than they do today, and therefore he loses any basis on which to believe that the term "redcurrant jam" corresponds to the same retinal encoding in him as it did in Flaubert. Therefore, if words are signifiers that, over time, can dance with a plurality of signifieds, then history becomes a fictional discourse whose signification perpetually reshapes itself like a cloud in the wind: "the past is autobiographical fiction pretending to be a parliamentary report" (90). Braithwaite's search through the relics and mementoes of Flaubert's life leads to a sense of purposelessness in the face of signifiers that no longer point towards invariable signifieds: "It isn't so different, the way we wander through the past. Lost, disordered, fearful, we follow what signs there remain; we read the street names, but cannot be confident where we are" (60).

But it is not only because of the indeterminacy of meaning in formerly used words that "we must look at the past through coloured glass" (94), for the meaning that we attribute to the past constantly shifts in accord with the data at our disposal. Just as

the discovery that Emma Bovary's seduction coach was actually very small means that "our view [of the seduction scene] suddenly lurches" (92), so too does any view of past events change as the configuration of signs changes — not that any one of these changes could be said to be the truth:

The past is a distant, receding coastline, and we are all in the same boat. Along the stern there is a line of telescopes; each brings the shore into focus at a given distance. If the boat is becalmed, one of the telescopes will be in continual use; it will seem to tell the whole, the unchanging truth. But this is an illusion; and as the boat sets off again, we return to our normal activity; scurrying from one telescope to another, seeing the sharpness fade in one, waiting for the blur to clear in another. (101)

The past is like an infinitely nested set of Ukrainian wooden eggs, such that the appearance of a new datum causes the opening of one egg (or past truth), thereby disclosing another egg (or new truth); the opening of the eggs, then, only creates a sequence of truths, all of which are equally illusive and therefore equally true.

Part of what Barnes addresses in the novel is the human compulsion to grasp at artifacts and to use these as signifying ends in themselves, because of a reluctance or fear to see the artifact as merely one component in an endless chain of meaning. Hence the museums with their Flaubertian enema-pumps and assorted bric-a-brac — a memento-mania perhaps best shown by "the believers, the seekers, the pursuers who bought enough of it [alleged locks of R. L. Stevenson's hair] to stuff a sofa" (12). Braithwaite both recognizes the emptiness of this and is guilty of it himself, seeing the statues merely as stainable, erodable, and mass-produced icons that had been created in the self-deceptive endeavour to preserve the reality of Flaubert himself, and yet his enthusiasm over the apparent discovery of letters from Flaubert to Juliet Herbert "thrilled" him for they "might help me imagine more exactly what Flaubert was like" (41). Braithwaite's ambition — despite his realization that the holes in his data-gathering net preclude total success (38) — is to re-create Flaubert, as though he were working with a jigsaw puzzle composed of innumerable pieces.

But the motivation underlying the ambition — "Why does the writing make us chase the writer? . . . Why aren't the books

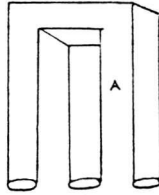
enough?" (12) — is only indirectly disclosed in the novel, and is perhaps best illustrated through the contrasting epistemological stances taken by Braithwaite and his wife. Braithwaite contends that people can be dichotomized into those who want to know everything and those who don't, the search undertaken by the former being "a sign of love" (127). His dead wife Ellen "didn't ever search for that sliding panel which opens the secret chamber of the heart" (127) and, correspondingly, she kept the "same inner chamber of her heart inaccessible to me" (166). She presumably realized the futility of ever knowing anyone in totality, for the large-holed net of the biographer is little different from the net with which one scoops 'meaning' out of another person's consciousness. At best, this latter net can seine in words, but the incapacity of words (with their infinitely deferred meanings) to define the final truth of another's existence impels Ellen into a life of casual relationships and suicidal despair. Braithwaite, on the other hand, committed himself to the search despite his realization that, even if he did discover the secret panel to the heart, it might not open or, if it did open, it might reveal "nothing but a mouse skeleton" (127). Like a Grail-questing knight, the search is all, and if (as in the case of Braithwaite's search for the secret chamber inside Ellen) the search is thwarted by an immovable barrier, then the only alternative to life-wasting inertia is a refocusing of the quest (in this case, towards Flaubert).

Braithwaite's reference to searches through chambers with hidden sliding panels suggests the analogy drawn by Umberto Eco between labyrinths and models of conjecturality. The post-modern "space of conjecture" Eco likens to a rhizome pattern which "is so constructed that every path can be connected with every other one. It has no centre, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite" (*Reflections* 57). The Braithwaites find themselves in such a rhizome space (that is, one from which there can be no unique exit into full and final certitude), and whereas Ellen abandons the movement from chamber to chamber, Geoffrey realizes that motion is meaning (albeit evanescent meaning) and that only through the process of searching can one experience the delight of love. But Braithwaite also realizes that "love for a writer is the purest, the steadiest form of love" because "if you want to pursue

and find him [the writer] — despite edicts to the contrary — then it's impossible to know too much" (127). That is, whereas the discovery of, say, a wife's infidelity could lead to a "final confirmation that . . . life was indeed just a gaudy nightmare in the head of an imbecile" (126), the "impossible" pursuit of an author precludes any "final confirmation" and thus ensures the joy of indeterminacy. Braithwaite even contends that he prefers "to feel that things are chaotic, free-wheeling, permanently as well as temporarily crazy — to feel the certainty of human ignorance" (66), and to feel that the apparent stability of a boat in a calm sea is a transitory state alterable by the next wind or tide (82). Appropriately, the books that Braithwaite finds most "tantalizing" are the unfinished works, the ones where the attempts to "enclose and subdue the whole world" (13) remain without closure. Thus, to answer the question, "Why does writing make us chase the writer" (and, one could add, love the writer), the example of Braithwaite would suggest that the indeterminacy of words and the endless suggestiveness of relics create a quest free from the emptiness of final confirmation: "perhaps, like Frédéric and Deslauriers [in *L'Education Sentimentale*], we should prefer the consolation of non-fulfillment: the planned [but never actualized] visit to the brothel, the pleasure of anticipation" (22).

The consolation of non-fulfilment and the impossibility of closure are, paradoxically, the figure in this novel's carpet. One manifestation of this pattern is the occurrence of conditions which are contradictory, mutually exclusive, and yet equally viable. At its simplest level, this is seen in the dual definitions of net (a meshed instrument, and an assemblage of holes [38]), the conflicting perspectives on the light over the English Channel (83), the oxymoronic summary of the Braithwaites' marriage ("We were happy; we were unhappy" [165]), and the opposing statements by Flaubert and Sartre on Flaubert's homosexual activity (actual sodomy versus wishful thinking [100]). The reader is left with no capacity to discern the "true" perspective and thus is forced into an acceptance of irreconcilable contraries that, in effect, simulate the condition of rhizome space. The epigram to Chapter 9 (which states, in part: "It is not the houses. It is the spaces between the houses" [115]) refers to the resonant interplay between presence

and absence, such as that in the well-known "trompe l'oeil" which deconstructs Cartesian space:



Whereas the bottom part of the diagram suggests cylinders and the top part a rectangular arch, the space at point A can be seen as both a presence (that is, part of the arch) and an absence (that is, a gap between the cylinders). There is no "answer" to the diagram and a carver would be hard pressed to create such a structure in wood, just as any attempt to determine finality in any process of signification is alluring but futile. Accordingly, Braithwaite is intrigued by the power of irony for "it permits a writer to be seemingly absent from his work, yet [he is] in fact hintingly present" (87); irony effectively deconstructs authorial presence by allowing the author to be both there and not there. Moreover, ironic moments can be multi-dimensional; Flaubert atop the Pyramid of Cheops spying the Rouen business card endows the situation for us with irony, but "our response shifts" (64) twice as we discover that his travelling companion Du Camp set up this discovery by Flaubert and that Flaubert set up Du Camp's discovery of the card in the first place: "as ironies breed, realities recede" (70). Irony, that is, discloses layers of putative truth and thus mirrors the nature of human understanding.

The subjectivity of "fact" and the pointlessness of precision is further underscored by Braithwaite's emphasis on the writer's exemption from the exigencies of verisimilitude. In his denunciation of the Enid Starkies of the world, with their detection of mistakes in fiction, Braithwaite evinces his conviction that literary reality is not important. He does concede that "if the factual side of literature becomes unreliable, then ploys such as irony and fantasy become much harder to use" (77), but he also asks, in reference to Flaubert's inconsistent colouring of Emma Bovary's eyes, "does

it matter what colour they are anyway?" (78). After all, if the registering of empirical reality in an individual's consciousness is subject to arbitrariness (both through the nature of words as signifiers and through the variance of ambient conditions, such as eye-colour changing in light), then does it matter if fiction as well lacks internal consistency? Braithwaite feels, however, that the converse approach — an attempt to simulate in fiction the indeterminacy and uncertainty of human existence, such as through the provision of two endings to a novel — is only a ploy that can never register the vast rhizomic "delta of life's possibilities [so] let's not deceive ourselves about the artifice involved" in such ploys (89). Fiction, then, can only mirror conventional reality if it records the endless and rather random ramifying by which "we make a decision — or a decision makes us — and we go one way" (89) without ever arriving at a meaningful end or closure. Moreover, even the non-fictional presentation of data, such as that in a biography, is necessarily an intertextual construct, a mere "hypothesis . . . spun directly from the temperament of the biographer" (40), such as Sartre's assertion that Flaubert never engaged in homosexuality and Ledoux's statement that Flaubert committed suicide (181). Braithwaite himself concedes that in his biographical details about his wife, "I have to invent my way to the truth" (165). In short, the eight-word paragraph which closes Chapter 4 (following the two conflicting accounts of Flaubert and Du Camp's visit to Thermopylae) could perhaps be considered a Braithwaitian maxim on literary as well as empirical reality: "What happened to the truth is not recorded" (65).

This fusion in indeterminacy of literary and empirical reality is neatly underscored by the text's structure, in which a medley of prose genres (which one reviewer labelled "un marmite bouillonnante" [Génies 7]) deconstructs the conventional distinctions between fiction and non-fiction. The "Finder's Keepers" chapter, for instance, is the most purely fictional of all the chapters (and could almost stand as a short story about biographers' obsessions), whereas others, such as "Flaubert's Bestiary," offer a careful cataloguing of biographical detail. Other chapters are devised (at least in part) in such forms as dictionary entries, examination questions, metafictional chat with the reader, narratorial reminiscence or



introspection, and speculative autobiography. The "Chronology" chapter consists of three chronological summaries which neither wholly support nor contradict each other (just as the "definitions" of Louise Colet [154] provide two different options for a reader to choose from). What Barnes achieves by all this is a deconstruction of prose genre taxonomies as a means of signification; the reader is at all times caught between the poles of true and not true, so that even the conventional signification patterns (biography presents fact; fiction presents fancy) no longer function. This trans-generic structure, then, leaves the reader in the same rhyzome space as Braithwaite, free from the delusions of fixed meaning.

This absence of fixed meaning is also suggested by the novel's emphasis on discourse as the shaper of human self-definition. That is, the manner in which one thinks is determined by whatever discourse (or system of signification) underlies the cerebration. This is perhaps best illustrated in the text by Braithwaite's spurning of "lonely-hearts" personal advertisements because the writers of the advertisements, by adopting the discourse of such advertisements, "aren't telling the truth":

The column distorts the way the advertisers describe themselves. No one would think of himself as an active non-smoker inclined to melancholy if that wasn't encouraged, even demanded, by the form. . . . Try as they might, those advertisers are always beaten down by the form; they are forced — even at the one time they need to be candidly personal — into an unwished impersonality.

(95)

By adopting the discourse of advertisements, then, a writer of advertisements in effect is a medium by which the discursive system manifests itself — in other words, what you read you are. Similarly, the "language of bereavement" which is so "foolishly inadequate" (161) a means of expressing the depth of one's grief, is just a discursive system bereft of an authentically human intent. (One could even postulate that there are no such things as authentically human intents, but only responses to discursive forces.) Moreover, the "Dictionary of Accepted Ideas" (both Flaubert's and Braithwaite's) depicts how patterns of discourse establish metonymic associations that become labelled truths. Even Mauriac's definition

of himself in his *Memoirs* is shown to be just a configuration of various artistic discourses: “he finds himself by looking in the works of others” who shaped him (96). Braithwaite likens Mauriac’s self-disclosure to the reflection of a face on the window of a train as it passes through a tunnel, the face being seen “against a shifting background of sooty walls, cables, and sudden brickwork . . . and though you know [the image’s] presence is conditional, you feel it to be permanent” (96). That is, to Braithwaite, human existence consists of a temporary physiological presence animated by background patterns (or patterns of discourse) — patterns whose meaning or purpose is forever beyond the reach of organic intelligence.

Perhaps the best example of the way that discourse can be said to impel people into engaging in a specific activity is implicit, not explicit, in this text. The discussion of the death of Ellen (and here her “death” shall refer to the process by which she came to be in a not-to-be-resuscitated state in a hospital, not to the switching off of her life-support system) parallels the disclosure of Oedipus’ guilt in Sophocles’ play. In *The Pursuit of Signs*, Culler points out that, in a legal sense, no evidence is given (to the reader) that Oedipus did kill his father, but rather the “demands of signification” — also referred to as “the force of meaning” and “discursive forces” (175) — *produced* the event of patricide. In *Flaubert’s Parrot*, the same discursive demands for a “significant” death of Ellen also could be said to create the suicide, even though at no point is it explicitly stated that she committed suicide. Braithwaite acknowledges the conventional expectation that his discomfort in discussing the death creates the discursive demand for either a murder or a suicide (“No, I didn’t kill my wife. I might have known you’d think that. First you find out she’s dead; then, a while later, I say that I never killed a single patient. Aha, who *did* you kill, then?”[97]), and thus the subsequent hints about despair and drug overdoses create the forces that, in all readers’ minds, produce the suicide. Accordingly, when Braithwaite says that “hers is a pure story” (168), he accords with Culler’s distinction between story/*fabula* and discourse/*sjuzhet* (170-71), for Ellen’s fictional life (her story) presumably traced out a sequence of causally related occurrences ending in her death, but at the same time it could

be said that the discourse (created by the demands or expectations that inhere in a text) produced the suicide. This is not to say that the reader's inference of the suicide is important in itself, but rather it serves, along with the mentions of other discursive forces, to foreground discourse — that is, to draw the reader's attention away from a focus on story to a focus on discourse. This deconstructive condition of having two producers of death (the story's tale of progressive despair, and the discourse's demand of signification) is effectively summarized by Braithwaite's "point: What knowledge is useful, what knowledge is true?" (97).

The limits of knowledge and the bondage of humankind to discourse are succinctly demonstrated through the parrot — or, more precisely, through the answer to the opening chapter's question as to which museum owns the real stuffed parrot that sat on Flaubert's desk. In arriving at an answer, Braithwaite first has to consider the implications of "parrot-ness"; he initially speculates that "the parrot . . . was Pure Word" and thus by association the writer is little more than "a sophisticated parrot" (18) capable only of "repeating at second hand the phrases [discourse] he hears." Again, because such discourses are tied to systems that are "received, imitative, and inert" (19), they cannot ascribe meaning to anything outside their system. The thrice-cited excerpt from *Madame Bovary* illustrates the "sub-stellar" bounds of discourse: "Language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, while all the time we long to move the stars to pity" (19). Because of this, Flaubert posited his "religion of despair" based on a calm acceptance of the abyss in which indifferent, amoral systems function, irrespective of human needs or so-called volition. Ellen could not "outgaze the black pit" (181) and lapsed into despair. But Braithwaite can, like Flaubert, persevere in life above the pit, despite his dream, "like a loop of film endlessly running," that he is at a dark, train-less train station whose timetable is a blur of signs and which foments in him "desolation, darkness, . . . no hope" (183). This sense of being trapped in an array of signs from which no escape to full certitude is possible is emphasized by the immediately subsequent discovery that the two parrots in the two museums were, in fact, arbitrarily chosen from fifty possible parrots, just as words have been arbi-

trarily derived from a system of differences and endowed, through convention, with meaning. And just as a stuffed parrot is only a facsimile of "parrot-ness," so too is a word only a facsimile of meaning. Thus, each museum's parrot (that the curator claims to be "the real one") is actually an arbitrarily selected facsimile that signifies only the conventions attributed to it — functioning, in short, as words do. The answer to the question about which is the real parrot, then, is that it does not matter, for stuffed parrots, like words, are indicators of the rhizome structure in which human consciousness finds itself, and the novel's lack of closure is symptomatic of our rhizome reality's lack of final meaning.

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