Beyond Veracity: The Pursuit of Postmodern Truth in Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*

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Abstract

Truth used to be a monolithic monad which was single and absolute. Postmodern truth is contrarily multiple and ambiguous. It is no longer the divine Form held by Plato, nor does it solely depend on the verifiability as suggested by Ayer. It is also viewed as a cultural phenomenon and constructed by power which according to Foucault is productive rather than depressive. Postmodern truth is closely related to Nietzsche's view that there is no truth, only interpretations. Barnes presents it as perspectival and various with the bootless tracing of the two parrots that claim to be the specimen used by Flaubert.

Keywords: truth, perspectival, multiple, postmodern

When he was asked about the purpose of fiction in an interview, Julian Barnes said: "It's to tell the truth. It's to tell beautiful, exact, and well-constructed lies which enclose hard and shimmering truths" (Guignery & Roberts, 2009, p. 30). In Barnes's view, fiction is an elaborate army of lies which does reveal some indisputable facts about life. The binary opposition of truth and lie brings to the forefront the consequential question—what is truth?

1. The Conception of Truth

From Plato onwards, the ontological quest for truth has been a dominant *topos* of Western thought. As lovers of the "spectacle of truth" (Plato, 475e), philosophers have been struggling to ascertain its implications. They are definitely not the insubstantial shadows cast on the cave wall, which are the reflections of the objects illuminated behind the chained prisoners. The objects themselves are representations of the Forms (Ideas) which according to Plato are divine and transcendental. Truth as a Form is far more superior to what is experienced and recognized to be true as the world of appearances is of mere opinions of the sensible particulars, whereas the world of reality is of true knowledge of the transcendental universals. The Form of the Good is the one that dominates all the other Forms, and Plato proposes: "Because the idea of the good is the very cause of knowledge and of truth, it is also the chief objective in the pursuit of knowledge" (Plato, 508e). Plato's privileging of truth as an eternal and unchanging Form over truth as the sensible perceptions is somewhat self-contradictory since "[w]hat is timeless must be uncreated" (Russell, 2004, p. 130).

As Plato's most renowned disciple, Aristotle does not further intensify or mystify the metaphysical doctrines of his mentor. On the contrary, his exhaustive study brings Plato's heavenly Forms down to the earth. Aristotle argues that Plato's theory of immutable Forms, segregated from the sensible world, fails to provide knowledge of how things change as they "cause neither movement nor any change in them [sensible things]" (Aristotle, 991^a 10-11). Moreover, the allegedly transcendental Forms are virtually "patterns not only of sensible things, but of Forms themselves also" (Aristotle, 991^a 29-30). It is impossible for the Forms to stand aloof from their partaking particulars which are modeled on them. The mutual likeness obscures the nature of participation and Plato's failure to specify it may drag the Forms into an infinite regress. Aristotle attenuates the empirical world and the senses which "apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves" (Aristotle, 980^a 23-24). If truthness isn't the decisive factor in Truth, what will be?

Nietzsche, the founding figure of modern philosophy, is averse to the traditional metaphysics that not only maintains the distinction between reality and appearance but also privileges the true world over the apparent world. Nietzsche enumerates the former's three "seductions"—it is an *unknown* world, *another* world, and a *true* world (Nietzsche, 1968, pp. 319-20). The three attributes make the true world ontologically superior to this world, the one actually being experienced. Nevertheless, for Nietzsche, the true world, as a metaphysical being, is elusive and intangible; there are not any substantial claims about it except that it is a "being-other, an inaccessible, incomprehensible being-other; it would be a thing with negative qualities" (Nietzsche, 2003, p.55). Additionally, one does not have the right to "posit, as it were, degrees of reality" (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 321) and assume that one world is more real than the other. What Nietzsche objects to is the objective or external world whose value is presumed to be independent of human perception, conceptions, and interpretations. The world we are concerned with, in Nietzsche's view, is "in a state of becoming, as a falsehood always changing but never getting near the truth: for—there is no 'truth'" (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 330). Nietzsche's insistence on the world of appearances rather than the ethereal world of Forms or thing-in-itself is in tune with the Aristotelian metaphysics which "investigates being as being and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature" (Aristotle, 1003^a 21-22). As a profound skeptic, Nietzsche does not believe in the transcendent truth or "that God is truth, that truth is *divine*" (Nietzsche, 1989, p. 152) For him, truth is not a monolithic entity; instead, it is multiple, unstable, and ambiguous, which should not to be "posited as being, as God, as the highest court of appeal" (Nietzsche, 1989, p. 152). As a result, there will be various interpretations of one and the same phenomenon. Truth itself is constructed since "something must be held to be true—*not* that something *is* true" (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 276).

A. J. Ayer, the prominent English logical positivist, proposes that the veracity of a statement can be paraphrased as "(the proposition) p is true" (Ayer, 2001, p. 85). He argues that within a sentence the phrase "is true" is actually redundant because the proposition itself is capable of establishing its veracity or falsehood. The expressions of "is true" and "is false" function simply as "marks of assertion and denial" (Ayer, 2001, p. 86) rather than the decisive factor of the validity of the statement. Ayer sticks to Hume's dichotomy of propositions, namely relations of ideas and matters of fact. The former category is, in Kant's view, the analytic a priori knowledge since the predicate is contained in the subject and thus tautological. It is certain and necessary but has no factual content as the predicate furnishes no additional knowledge which is not already encompassed in the subject. Ayer points out that the logical and mathematical propositions are analytic and not contingent on the realm of experience; consequently, we cannot confute them with empirical observations. All in all, they are linguistic conventions and reveal "our determination to use words in a certain fashion" (Ayer, 2001, p. 80). The validity of an analytic proposition is self-evident: if the predicate conforms to the subject, true; otherwise, false. He propounds that Hume's epistemological categories are the only bearers of truth due to the principle that every cognitively meaningful statement should be literally true or false. Metaphysical statements, Ayer contends, are "neither true nor false but literally senseless" (Ayer, 2001, p. 9) because no empirical observations available can substantiate them. By virtue of nullifying them, Ayer eliminates the synthetic a priori knowledge promoted by Kant and manifests that some supposedly synthetic knowledge is actually analytical propositions and thus tautologies.

Drawing on the Nietzschean tradition, Foucault puts forward that truth, as a cultural construction, is contingent on power. He underlines this-worldliness of truth: it is not an ethereal or transcendent Form as proposed by Plato but the upshot of various competing forces. The regime of truth stipulates what discourses are allowed and what are banned; what are granted truthfulness and what falsity. As the product of power, truth serves those who are in power and buttresses their reign. For Foucault, power is not a negative force aiming at suppression and oppression. Rather, it should be "considered as a productive network that runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression" (Foucault, 2002, p. 120). With the development of modern and postmodern thoughts, truth is no longer a monolithic monad. It is not absolute or single, but multiple and perspectival.

2. The Pursuit of Postmodern Truth in *Flaubert's Parrot*

Figuratively speaking, *Flaubert's Parrot* is a liberated, vivacious schizophrenic. Without a dominant and thus repressive plot, the fifteen chapters constitute a non-hierarchical structure which is of "deterritorialized lines that connect with other lines in random, unregulated relationships" (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 99). Brian Nicol holds that the novel "could easily be arranged in a different order without disrupting any necessary coherence" (Nicol, 2009, p. 116). The seemingly incoherent and disoriented chapters are imbricated or parallel since none of the three narrative threads—the identity of the two parrots, Braithwaite and Ellen's marriage, and Flaubert's biography—takes up the central stage and radiates the other two as secondary and ancillary. They are of the same

valorization, and none is privileged over the other two.

Chapter one introduces the first-person narrator, Geoffrey Braithwaite, a widowed, retired English doctor who is an amateur Flaubertian scholar. During his visits to Rouen and Croisset, the fortuitous encounters with the two stuffed parrots arouse his curiosity and prompt him into further investigation. Both of the parrots claim to be the specimen borrowed from the Museum of Rouen and thus the prototype of Loulou, the sole solace to Félicité who has been deprived of all her beloveds in Flaubert's short story "A Simple Heart". The multiple and perspectival truth is, in fact, highlighted in the very first chapter. The *gardienne* of the Croisset Museum asserts that their parrot is the true one, so does the *gardien* of the *Hôtel-Dieu*. Their assertions are echoed in the final chapter which aggravates the mystery and evinces that truth is related to how it is perceived and interpreted. The first chapter is presented as a typical fictional beginning, though the narrator is hesitant about his marital life, only mumbling: "My wife…died" (Barnes, 2012, p. 9). Braithwaite's visit to Rouen might be a therapeutic journey to help him recover from the traumatic loss of his wife. What is expected to follow is either the identification of the specimens or the narration of Braithwaite's conjugal life or a combination of the two. However, the identity of the two competing parrots is dealt with again after an incredibly long interval of thirteen chapters until the very end of the novel, which terminates with the elusive line—"Perhaps it was one of them" (Barnes, 2012, p. 167). The end fails to unravel the mystery after the lengthy build-up of suspense and the readers are still bewildered as to which parrot is the real archetype of Loulou. The lack of a definitive denouement leaves the novel open and the indeterminacy is in accordance with Linda Hutcheon's view that "postmodernism remains fundamentally contradictory, offering only questions, never final answers" (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 42). The absence of the reassuring truth does not necessarily mean that the novel is an unintelligible bricolage of irrelevant, digressive narratives; instead, it effects a deep insight into the nature of the postmodern truth which is perspectival and multiple. James B. Scott argues that the "novel's lack of closure is symptomatic of our rhizome reality's lack of final meaning" (Scott, 1990, p. 68). The "final meaning" can be interpreted as the absolute truth which has been replaced by its multiple postmodern counterparts.

The second chapter is composed of three distinctive chronologies which display a more or less panoramic view of Flaubert's life. All of them revolve around Flaubert's experiences, but each chooses a different perspective. The firs chronology presents Flaubert's life in a positive way. The second covers the same period, from 1817 to1880, yet it focuses on the ordeals that Flaubert undergoes in his life. The third chronology is a compilation of Flaubert's ideas. Chapter two complicates the genre of the novel and the readers cannot help asking for the criteria of truth after reading it. Tania Shepherd proposes that the insertion of Flaubert's biography in the second chapter "functions as a paradigmatic axis which is recycled in various non-narrative forms in the next twelve chapters with the sequence apparently based on mere juxtaposition" (Qtd.in Guignery, 2006, p. 41). Her structuralist analysis levels the first and last chapters as the syntagmatic axis; in other words, the pursuit of the true parrot conducted by Braithwaite is the plane of combination of "this-*and*-this-*and*-this" (Chandler, 2009, p. 84) whereas Flaubert's biography, probably along with Braithwaite's marital life, is the plane of selection of "this-*or*-this-*or*-this" (Chandler, 2009, p. 84). Although Shepherd's argument highlights the "discontinuity and atypical organisation" (Guignery, 2006, p. 41) of the novel, it still admits a dominant plotline, with the parrot at the center flanked by the other two subplots, which could be put on the syntagmatic plane without fundamentally transforming the novel. The dualistic reduction of the novel to syntagms and paradigms may eradicate its heterogeneity and hybridity and restore the metaphysical oneness which will undoubtedly undermine its theme, namely the multiplicity of the postmodern truth.

The chapter "Braithwaite's Dictionary of Accepted Ideas" assumes the lexical form and lists the terms alphabetically. A parody of Flaubert's "*Dictionnaire des idées reçues*", it is nonetheless concerned with Flaubert, his friends, his views, and other correlated elements, his epilepsy, the Orient and so on. Thus, it establishes a remote kinship with the other fourteen chapters, all of which more or less revolve around Flaubert. Undoubtedly, the listed terms not only intensify the deconstruction of the traditional biography but also highlights the multiplicity of truth as it presents Flaubert's life from various angles.

Braithwaite resumes being the first-person narrator in chapter five "Snap!" Being the mouthpiece of Julian Barnes, he states unmistakably the author's aversion of coincidences in fiction—"the sudden but convenient Dickensian benefactors" (Barnes, 2012, p. 56) and "I'd ban coincidences, if I were a dictator of fiction" (Barnes, 2012, p. 57). Braithwaite then disappears from the rest of the chapter and the omniscient narrator proceeds with the biographical data of Flaubert. There are several coincidences in Flaubert's life, especially the parallels between Emma Bovary and Flaubert himself. Flaubert uses a closed cab to avoid meeting Louise Colet when he visits Paris, and he puts his heroine in the curtained cab for her adulterous affairs. The mingling of Flaubert's biography with literary criticism makes the novel more heterogeneous and in the meantime, the truth concerning

the two parrots is still shrouded in mystery. Braithwaite mentions his wife again in chapter six, but he stops abruptly, saying: "I will keep that for another time" (Barnes, 2012, p. 65). With an irresolute and faltering voice, the narrator intentionally defers disclosing his marital life. The curiosity that has been accumulating reaches the climax in chapter seven when Braithwaite says: "No, I didn't kill my wife. I might have known you'd think that" (Barnes, 2012, p. 83). The suspicion is further enhanced when Braithwaite delays again exposing what has happened to his wife, saying: "My wife . . . Not now, not now" (Barnes, 2012, p. 91). The secret of his marriage is finally revealed in chapter thirteen of "Pure Story," but the previous equivocations have aroused the reader's suspicion and turned him into an unreliable narrator. The polysemy of the word "pure" makes the chapter susceptible to various interpretations as indicated by the very first line—"THIS A PURE STORY, whatever you may think" (Barnes, 2012, p. 140). Is "pure" commensurate with "true"? Or is this story a sheer figment of Braithwaite's imagination? Deducing from what Braithwaite has revealed, the readers figure out that his wife also commits suicide just as Emma Bovary does. Ellen, like Emma, has a series of extramarital affairs too. Nonetheless, Braithwaite narrates everything about Ellen and Ellen's friends and children are denied voice. Braithwaite's narration must be biased and partial, as he would definitely recount what is advantageous to him. Has Ellen really cuckolded him or is she suffering from depression or other diseases which lead to her suicide? If Ellen is alive, her version might be entirely different from Braithwaite's. Braithwaite might have cheated on and deserted her and Ellen ends her life out of despair. As there are no other sources to confirm or refute Braithwaite's assertions, the readers may never figure out what has actually happened between the couple, as they will not know which parrot is the real archetype of Loulou and what has happened in Flaubert and Du Camp's trip in Egypt.

3. Conclusion

The end of the novel does not supply any definitive answers to either the identity of parrots or the Braithwaites's story. The lack of a conclusive ending highlights the nature of postmodern truth which is no longer absolute but perspectival and multiple. In postmodernity it is impossible to have access to the monolithic, absolute truth, as indicated by Barnes that "100 percent truth is unreclaimable and unknowable, but that we must maintain the superiority of a 67 percent over a 64 percent of truth" (Guignery & Roberts, 2009, p. 44).

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