

Reflection Statement

The intention of my Major Work was to use the fictocritical form to open up a dialogue that comments on the process and conclusions of biography, thereby furthering the academic understandings of biography and single truths. Aware of the differing views of post-structuralism and postmodernism, I present two sides of the debate around whether the reader can triangulate a sufficient biography and therefore truth within Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot*. The purpose of my Major Work was to construct a critical analysis of Barnes' novel that could therefore be the subject of scrutiny of my fictional parrot. My critical analysis specifically engaged with three areas already established within the analysis of Barnes; the deconstruction, contamination, and search for truth within the novel. Using a fictional academic to further satirise the "academic discourse that has focused on the critique of the biography," I present a new understanding of how the three areas work to subvert the notion of biography. My fictional layer, in the form of a narratorial parrot, subverts Barnes' subversion of the biography, offering the conclusion that a sufficient truth can be found or constructed. I hope to engage the academic audience of *Social Text*, as the postmodern nature of my work possesses relevance to the audience and editorship of the journal, and as such may further their understanding of Barnes and biography.

I was first introduced to the fictocrit form through Vladimir Nabokov's postmodern piece *Pale Fire*, in which critical commentary on creative writing provided an opportunity for greater meaning. I therefore decided to invert this, constructing a work that used the fictional to comment on the critical, and one that would reflect the metafictional self-reflexivity of Barnes' novel. "I thought of writing books myself once" (13) is reflected in the parrot's response to the essay, "every time I make it through a few sentences of this text I get distracted and flip back to this book by this Barnes fellow". I further incorporated the fragmented form of fictocritical works such as Jill Farrar's 'The Glossary', in which narratives

are continued in the foot notes, mirroring the form of *Pale Fire*. This was accomplished through the alternating texts of the fictional academic, 'William Johnson Howells III' and that of the fictional parrot. In 'The Glossary' the reader is drawn out of the immediate work of the glossary in "2. See jill farrar".¹ In much the same way my parrot asserts, "I've been perched at this high standing desk for a few weeks now, and I honestly cannot tell what I am meant to understand here." I hoped that such self-reflexivity and fragmentation would draw attention, whilst demonstrating to my intended audience the postmodern pastiche of my piece.

In maintaining the intention of my Major Work, it was important that I develop a strong understanding of the academic field surrounding *Flaubert's Parrot*. Much of my understanding of the structure of Barnes' novel, and therefore its purpose, was influenced by Ecaterina Patrascu's analysis that "the novel itself unfolds as multiple narrative models,"² reflected in my academic's analysis that "the quest of Braithwaite and the narratorial intrusion" create dissonance that aids in Barnes' subversion. The content of the contamination by Braithwaite was influenced by my readings of Emma Cox's 'Abstain, Hide your Life: The hidden narrator of Flaubert's Parrot', as I unpacked the need for Braithwaite to "identify with Flaubert,"³ and therefore "Barnes' character comes to contaminate the deconstructed biography to subvert the notion of the biographer." The final part of my critical work centred around the symbolic meaning attached to the search for Flaubert's parrot. Interpreting Lixia Liu's conclusion "that the issue of the parrot is epistemological, not

¹ Jill Farrar, "THE GLOSSARY as Fictocriticism," (University of Western Sydney, 2008), accessed August 22, 2019, <https://researchdirect.westernsydney.edu.au/islandora/object/uws:6367/datastream/PDF/view>.

² Patrascu, Ecaterina, 2011. 'Flaubert's Parrot and the Masks of Identity: Between Postmodernism and the "New Humanism"'. *Acta Iassyensia Comparationis*, vol. 2, 2011.

³ Cox, Emma, 2004. "'Abstain, and Hide Your Life': The Hidden Narrator of Flaubert's Parrot", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 2004.

ontological,”⁴ I developed my Major Work to reflect this conclusion, therefore centring the contention of my narratorial parrot around the witty response “*anyone who honestly believes that you are completely unable to gain any concrete understanding of a person through some straightforward facts is out of their mind.*” In this way, I tied together the creative and critical, whilst demonstrating and commenting on the idea that a single truth does exist, but according to Barnes is impossible to find. Much like Barnes’ novel, my hybrid structure represents a critical choice rather than a purely aesthetic one. As such, the purpose of the fragmented structure within my work can be seen to be subversive.

Additionally, the purpose of my fictional narratorial parrot was to parody the use of narrators within postmodern works through the use of witty characterisation thus providing a relevant yet amusing commentary on the critical evaluation of my essay. Having read books such as *A Pleasury of Witticisms and Wordplay* by Antony B. Lake, I decided to have my narrator reflect “this show had to be seen to be depreciated”⁵ with comments such as “*if I am cursed for the time being to sit and watch as the wind plays with the edge of ink stained paper, then the best I can do is have a swoop at it.*” This also came to reflect the motifs of birds, inspired by George Orwell’s animalistic motifs in ‘Shooting an Elephant’, seen in “stripped the skin from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit.”⁶ This can be seen as “I’ve resorted to shuffling aimlessly around the garret that I’ve come to occupy,” wherein the garret first obscures the interpretation of the bird, as a garret is both housing for a bird, or the name for a French apartment attic.

⁴ Liu, Lixia, 2006. ‘Parrot, Parrotry and Truth in Flaubert’s Parrot’, Newcastle Online Journal, vol.6 (4): 36-55.

⁵ Lake, Antony, 1998, *A Pleasury of Witticisms and Wordplay* (Bramhall House: New York).

⁶ Orwell, George, 1936, *Shooting an Elephant*.

Structurally, the narrator I developed ultimately responds to the critical text in multiple layers. The first can be seen in response to the academic, which demonstrates the discourse surrounding Barnes' novel. This was borne out of the idea presented in 'Structure and Strategies, an introduction to Academic Writing', that "in varying details and viewpoints authors produce different types of narratives."⁷ I therefore took this idea and provided different viewpoints within my Major Work to produce differing forms of discourse seen across the hybrid form. The second layer of commentary is offered by the parrot who critiques the work itself. This gave me the scope to present a counter-argument to Barnes' conclusion that you cannot find an adequate truth through biography. This was initially inspired by the statement from Antony Lake in *A Pleasury of Witticisms and Wordplay*, that "through this profile of one modern cowboy, Kramer provides insights into the lives of many cowboys,"⁸ which I believe demonstrates the value of life stories that may not be all knowing yet possess the ability to provide meaningful considerations. The final layer was that of responding to the character of Braithwaite himself, as the narratorial parrot responds, "it matched the description perfectly," providing a post-narrative completion of Braithwaite's quest, thereby subverting the inconclusiveness that Barnes presents and fulfilling my purpose.

In Senior English, I became intensely interested in the meta-fictional texts of Pacino's *Looking for Richard*, as well as Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. Pacino's work, studied in Advanced English, was of specific relevance due to the way in which he deconstructed the form to reinterpret Shakespearean power. The self-aware, satirical, yet

⁷ Davis, Lloyd, McKay, Susan, 1996, *Structures Strategies, An introduction to Academic Writing* (McMillan Education Australia: Melbourne) 29 pp.

⁸ Cheney, Theodore, 2001, *Writing Creative Nonfiction* (Ten Speed Press: Berkeley) 83 pp.

refined method of the subversion of Shakespearean academia came to embody my use of a narratorial parrot that satirised academic discourse. Furthermore, Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* introduced me to the hybrid, fragmented and metafictional structure of the incipits, and the use of alternating voice which my work came to microcosmically represent. Finally, the prevalent use of second person by Calvino constructed an interaction with the reader that spoke to the reading process, something that came to underpin the narrative of the parrot.

As I constructed the narrative for the parrot, I came to realise the importance of the drafting process and the mocking nature of my narrator, if anything a meta-commentary on my own Major Work. The final weeks, whilst a tumultuous time, returned me a final product that filled me with pride and a fictocrit that reflected not only my own views on the concepts for which it engaged, but the long hours of research that filled my head with Barnes, Foucault, Flaubert and more. For every moment of reading, there was an equivalent hour tapping away at a keyboard, leading me to the intention to explore Barnes' subversion of biography. However, the ideas within *Flaubert's Parrot* provided the basis for me to construct my own ontological journey, eventuating with a postmodern work that would be well placed within journals like the *Social Text*.