The Postmodern Writer and His Alter Ego:
Julian Barnes versus Dan Kavanagh

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an examination of the postmodern writer's dilemma: Should a writer be *good* by serving a higher literary purpose or by playing to the book market? Unlike those who have been writing merely two centuries ago, the literary reputation of writers today rest fundamentally on financial success. The career and the works of British writer Julian Barnes closely reflect his struggle with this dilemma. On the one hand, Barnes writes "serious" works in the sense that they are crafted with a "literary" purpose in mind. On the other hand, his pseudonymous alter-ego, Kavanagh writes "popular" works that are aimed at making some quick cash. Although Barnes' growing oeuvre evidences an egotistical conciliation between the "serious" writer and the "popular" writer, they are never far from suggesting that the struggle is near the surface and the differences are more insurmountable than can be seen at first glance.

KEY WORDS: postmodernism, literature, "popular" fiction, "serious" fiction, aesthetics, novel

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> The difference between acceptance and approval is subtle, but distinct. Acceptance means having your work counted as the real thing; approval means having people *like it*.[1]

Julian Barnes is a prolific contemporary writer. Mainstream bookshops in England stock his books, and reviewers and critics allude frequently to his most famous novel—*Flaubert's Parrot* (1984). However, for a writer who has written some highly acclaimed works, it may come as a surprise that he is not as "popular" as he ought to be. In fact, a lot of people do not even know who he is. This is because Julian Barnes is a writer of "serious" literature, and it is his alter-ego, Dan Kavanagh, who is the writer of "popular" literature. What is the difference between the two and why does the writer have two names? Although Barnes is more well-known for his "serious" postmodernistic works such as *Flaubert's Parrot*, *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* and *England, England*, it is important to note that he also attempted to write a more "popular" *Duffy* series. His steadily growing oeuvre reveals a unique writer's experimentation and struggle with individual preference and popular acceptance, creative novelty and formulaic reproduction, story-telling with a higher moral purpose and story-telling for pure entertainment. This paper will attempt to explain the postmodern writer's dilemma: Should a writer be *good* by serving a higher literary purpose or by playing to the book market? For many writers today, literary reputation is closely tied to financial gain, and there is no writer who has considered this issue more seriously than Julian Barnes, aka Dan Kavanagh.

It is an agreed fact that novel-writing—suggesting the production of fiction in prose form—did not have a very respectable beginning. Pseudonymous

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[1] David Bayles and Ted Orland, *Art and Fear* (Santa Cruz: Image Continuum Press, 1993) 47.

authorship was in fact the norm for early novelists because: "For aristocratic and upper middle-class authors in the nineteenth century, fiction-writing was little less than trade and little more than diversion with a possible hint of immoral earnings to boot," and later on, when writers of the lower class cottoned on to this genre, pseudonyms provided a second twist suggesting both a lower class of writers as well as writers from the lower class.[2] Pseudonyms were used to create glamour for the lower class writers who did not own a saleable name or background, and conversely, they were also used by upper class writers who wanted to remain anonymous when writing for such an un-glamourous genre. This combination maligned the novel-writing practice and haunted its practitioners. Even though the appearance of Jane Austen and George Eliot went a long way to redeem the novelist's reputation, the sense of shame linked to fiction production as a whole has remained and is now arguably more palpable in the genre's polarised division into "serious" *literature* and "popular" *fiction*.[3]

Novels, or prose-writing, was popularised by the industrial, capitalist society. It was the growth of the population, the improvement of financial circumstances and the spreading of literacy in the eighteenth to the nineteenth century that helped popularise the novel. However, there are three main problems associated with producing "literature" for the masses. First, how was a writer to begin gauging and consolidating the tastes and demands of his audience? Second, how was it possible to "elevate" a form in the literary

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[2] Clive Bloom, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction Since 1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002) 11.

[3] Bookshops often place "serious" writing under the heading "literature" and mix them in with writers of "classics", whereas the more "popular" writing, sometimes also called bestsellers and belonging to the horror, sci-fi, fantasy, pulp "subgenres", are lumped under a separate heading such as "fantasy" or "fiction". This paper will use the terms writer and novelist interchangeably to refer to producers of fictional stories of any real length because the argument does not require and does not seek to define the novel. Instead, it is prepared to concede to the fact that many writers today produce novel-like works that specifically disregard literary niceties.

sense when it was trying to cater to a newly-educated readership? Thus, what exactly was the writer's purpose: To win his readers and sell his books or to elevate his readers and attempt to improve their tastes?

These questions probably led to Q. D. Leavis' publication of *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932).[4] Like her father, who tried to mould a tradition and dictate a taste in *The Great Tradition*, Leavis attempted the task but approached it from the opposite angle by analysing and criticising the questionable tastes of the reading public. Leavis referred condescendingly to bestsellers as popular fiction that catered for the majority who were low-brow, uncultured and even uneducated. Although she considered the novel a good medium for *educating* the public, she felt that the quest for popularity had led to a peculiar form of writing that was produced and consumed by parties that were equally disinterested in their own social and cultural development. As evidence, she gave several examples of writers who refused to be named but were sincerely apologetic for degrading the novel by catering to the public. Her arguments against "popular" writers included blandness and conformity, what she viewed as "Giving the Public what it wants." As she observed,

> [I]t is more profitable to make use of man's suggestability as a herd animal than to approach the reader as if he were what used to be called "the thinking man"; fear of the herd, approval of the herd, the peace of mind that comes from conforming with the herd, are the strings they play upon and the ideals that inform their work.[5]

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[4] Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (New York: Russell, 1965).

[5] Leavis 156.

The goal such writers aimed for was "in soothing and not disturbing sentiments, yet with sufficient surface stimulus to be pleasing . . . . [Thus the] readers are left with the agreeable sensation of having improved themselves without incurring any fatigue."[6] In other words, giving the public what it wanted involved pleasing them as well as deceiving them. Not only did they want an entertaining, easy read, but they also wanted to feel a sense of achievement after having read the book. If any form of improvement or expanding of knowledge was sought, it had to entail minimum mental effort so as not to "fatigue" the reader. In fact, as Leavis pointed out, the Anglo-American Manuscript Service's advice to writers was: "Remember that *serious* thought is not looked for in the majority of American magazines" so "write so a *blind* man can read it."[7] In short, the public wanted the ready-made, the easy, the unchallenging, which signified mental laxity and an aversion to mental exertion or improvement, which was the reason behind the film industry's instant success. According to Leavis, reading was quickly dropped for the American "talkie," which gushed ready-made dialogues and delivered picture-perfect situations. The distinguished man of letters was quickly replaced by the film star, an even better symbol of popularity, mass taste and *brainlessness*.

The causes and issues behind the development of the "popular" branch of writing are further examined by Clive Bloom, who is more sympathetic to the masses and regards the writer as a spokesman for their needs. For Bloom, "popular" writing conforms to its own aesthetic principles and these, even when they are capital-oriented, are not less valuable to the world or less deserving of praise.

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[6] Leavis 42-43.

[7] Leavis 37, italics mine.

It is organised into aesthetic categories that often correspond to sociological, political and economic categories. . . . Popular fiction is always commercially oriented and its production and marketing is essentially corporate and industrial, aimed at the maximum distribution and sales of units (books) . . . . Popular fiction releases a desire in language to become the very life that is being portrayed by it. Here language looks beyond itself and into the world, but a world already distributed and arranged to the geometry of its own trajectory.[8]

The "trajectory" would be that of the audience who is tied to the flow of the capital, thus creating a loop which is as reprehensible as it is true. Mass taste is to a large degree dictated by capitalism and popular fiction carries certain characteristics: it is repetitive, it is formulaic, it is sentimental, it appeals alternately to familiarity and exoticism, it is often sensational and it does not shy away from the erotic. That is to say, anything that sells works. Nobody has observed this tendency and worded it better than Frederic Jameson: "aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production [where it is an economic necessity to] . . . find recognition in the varied kinds of institutional support available . . . [which is] grounded in the patronage of multinational business, whose expansion and development is strictly contemporaneous with it."[9] Publishers fund writers with good track records or whom they believe will sell well, writers aim to garner a large audience and attract big publishers which will ensure their works receive maximum funding and publicity, and readers purchase books they believe are good because it is

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[8] Bloom 17, 21.

[9] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) 32-38.

readable enough and has been guaranteed by the name of the publisher endorsing the writer.

If popularity corrupted writing, what was good writing? To write well, as Leavis suggested, is to excel, to exceed, to generate new ideas and explore beyond the boundaries—to forge a culture "such as no modern writer is born to but must struggle for as best he can, unaided, or else accept the materials the age offers."[10] To interpret this idealistically vague idea more carefully, it would probably mean that a good writer is capable of producing writing that is exemplary in its innovative difference and its cultural contribution. In other words, a good work must lead the way, be individualistic and yet also applicable for the good of the society.

Walter Nash is more specific about the definitions and role of good writing. "Serious" writing entails "serious lessons"—it has to be thought-provoking writing that continues to inspire its readers with passing time. Nash believes that nobody could leave a Conrad or a Henry James in a hotel room "because they have served their turn and have nothing left to offer," rather "the lessons of 'serious' art are not quickly learned," and in dealing with significant works we need to remember that "judgements on matters . . . are so far from straightforward that they may appear in different lights at repeated readings."[11] Thus, "good" authors are those who produce works from which we can repeatedly draw important lessons at different times in our lives. As our relationships and understanding of life evolve, so does our appreciation of the good book, which provides materials so profound as to be able to sustain new interpretations in a new light. Popular fiction, by contrast, has nothing of this kind to offer. After the first reading, it is disposable because its content

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[10] Leavis 62.

[11] Nash 2,3,15.

becomes predictable. Although it is equally the product of someone's imagination, Nash believes that the lack of meaning and complexity and the following of convention without much diversity or originality indicate that reading and rereading of such works cannot bring new forms of enlightenment. Hence with "serious" writing we would want to read the books again and again, with "popular" writing we would only want to read more of the same kind of books but never the same one again.

On another level, definitions of good literature are often tied to questions of scholarship. Why are certain writers canonised and why are certain books classics? As Bloom has pointed out, a classic may not have been a popular work in the writer's lifetime but it remains popular afterwards because there is no threat of diminishment, especially when it is sold to schools in large quantities as compulsory reading material. Classics *become* popular and in that sense they are also bestsellers because of the unit of their sales. Alternatively, infamy can also be the root of fame, popularity and, finally, canonisation. As Leavis argued, James Joyce's *Ulysses* made it to the literary reading list "probably owing to the factitious fame censorship has conferred upon it."[12] This leads to the next question: Should certain works be studied and others dismissed? This question, difficult to answer as it was, has become even harder to answer because of the global breakdown of language barriers and the skyrocketing of title sales. Not only are sales-figures confusingly ambiguous, but the sheer amount of works being printed makes the sifting of good/bad or necessary/unnecessary reading an impossible task. Hence in certain aspects, the argument about what is literature is very much like the argument about what is art. In a postmodern age, theoretically anything can be literature just as anything can be art.

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[12] Leavis

As I. Q. Hunter and Heidi Kaye argue in their introduction to *Trash Aesthetics: Popular Culture and Its Audience*, who should be in the position to decide whether one text is a classic whilst another trash? "We are urged . . . not to take aesthetic judgments for granted. We should understand them instead as forms of 'cultural capital,' both exertions of social power and exercises in self-description." Furthermore, "The obvious drawback of the post-structuralist/postmodern emphasis on audience is that, with aesthetic judgements put on hold and audiences boldly reinvented as active generators of meaning and pleasure, few positive reasons are left to prefer one text over another."[13] Although it is easy to say let capital, the reading public and the publications dictate the aesthetic trends, the advice only leads to the loop that Jameson mentions. Hunter and Kaye have noticed that critics are reluctant to take this advice seriously and often seek to *legitimise* popular taste through literary criticism. This is a very interesting method for gauging serious/good/valuable writing since criticism involves "thinking" in both senses. The critic has to apply his thoughts to the work and the work itself has to supply ideas that hold up to deeper analysis. They have discovered that while not all popular works contain junk, under scholarly scrutiny it is possible to separate the more meaningful ones from the less ambitious ones. To prove this beyond doubt, they looked at the analyses of films like *Showgirls* or *Independence Day*. They discovered that attempts at analysing these films often led to over-interpretation where critics would put ideas into the film, even when the examples carried little food for deeper thought.[14] Therefore, they concluded that a division between "serious" writing that is "good" literature and "popular" writing that is so-to-speak "bad" existed to

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[13] I. Q. Hunter and Heidi Kaye, "Introduction" to *Trash Aesthetics: Popular Culture and Its Audience* (London: Pluto Press, 1997) 3, 5.

[14] See Hunter and Kaye 4.

some degree.

Dan Kavanagh, Julian Barnes's pseudonymous alter ego, is a good example of an aspirant 'popular' writer. Kavanagh's novels were aimed at monetary success and popularity, as he admits in an interview: "Had they been more successful [but] . . . They were perfectly reasonably successful in their own right."[15] In other words, it was not a success in any respect other than fulfilling the requirements of the genre. Barnes is painfully aware of his deviant alter-ego. Interviewers enjoy asking Barnes about Kavanagh, but he prefers to dissociate himself, claiming: "He comes from a different part of my brain"; "Some nasty road accident in north London may be necessary to get rid of Kavanagh. Traditionally the author kills off his characters, but I don't see why an author shouldn't get killed off as well. Crushed by a beer barrel falling off a truck as he leaves a pub, or something."[16] When asked to elaborate on the writing process of the books, he simply replies that they were "a way of burning off excess energy," "a sort of relaxation after two or three years spent writing novels under my own name. I enjoy them very much but don't re-read them."[17] When asked whether he signs copies of the books, he explains that he is "perfectly happy" to sign them, but in a different signature, "a barely *literate* signature."[18]

Barnes is clearly not too proud of Kavanagh and there are many reasons why a "serious" writer prefers not to be associated too often with a degenerate "popular" writer, even when that writer is his alter ego. A closer look at the

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[15] Robert Birnbaum, "Robert Birnbaum Interviews Julian Barnes"(1999) http://www.julianbarnes.com/resources/birnbaum-ee.html.

[16] Phillip Marchand, "English Novelist Re-creates God in His Own Image" *The Toronto Star* (17 October 1989) E1.

[17] David Streitfeld, "Barnes's Albatross" *The Washington Post Book World* (22 October 1989) X15. Marchand.

[18] Birnbaum.

Duffy series explains why.[19] It is "successful in its own right" because it displays all the features of its genre: it portrays a shallow character, it is sensational in content and setting, it has a catchy but simple plot, it is formulaic, it uses repetitive diction, it does not treat any significant issues. The protagonist, Duffy, is frequently described as "a faggot," a 'queer, bent cop' who wears a gold stud in his left ear and "plugs in both ways." In descriptive language that is more formal, he is a corrupt bisexual policeman. The gold stud is his characteristic trademark, but more eccentric features that differentiate him the score of "popular" protagonists like himself are: an intense dislike for clocks and wrist watches (which he keeps hanging outside his window or in Tupperware boxes), a need to store his food in layers of plastic bags (because he hates crumbs on his floor) and a habit of never saying "Yes" but "All right." The story is that he has been fired from the police force because he was set up to have sex with an under-aged, black boy. As a result, he cannot sleep with the only woman he loves, a colleague called Carol, and ends up only having sex with random men and prostitutes. In order to get revenge, he refuses to leave "his patch" and sets himself up as a private security adviser so that he is constantly rubbing shoulders with his old colleagues. Downtown London—Duffy's patch—is described as a "fetid knot" of cinemas, street markets and brothels. In fact, he lives next to escort agencies, sex shops, massage parlours, strip clubs, "porno cinemas" and dirty bookshops. Although he is conscientious in his work, he makes a point of earning extra cash when the customer is rich, or when he dislikes the customer. His moral standing is "like most coppers, had a slightly flexible approach to the truth. . . . Most of the time you stuck to the truth as closely as you could, but were prepared to bend with the breeze if necessary" (48). As Barnes

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[19] Dan Kavanagh, *The Duffy Omnibus* (London: Penguin, 1991).

himself laconically commented, "The AIDS crisis . . . made it a tad more difficult to have a hero who was a carefree bisexual."[20]

In the first novel, *Duffy*, the story begins: "The day they cut Mrs. McKechnie, not much else happened in West Byfleet" (3). In the second novel, *Fiddle City*, the story begins: "The day they crashed McKay, not much else happened on the M4" (181). The almost identical start is a telling sign of Barnes's literary attitude towards his popular endeavours. The plots of all the stories are simple, for example, in the first one Mrs. McKechnie is wounded by two gangsters because her husband's rival in the porn industry (which she knows nothing about) wants to take over the neighbourhood business. Duffy is hired because the police are ineffective. Slowly he discovers that Big Eddy, the villain, is blackmailing all his victims with destructive information and photos. Not only is McKechnie, who is cheating on his wife with his *secretaries*, a victim, but even the chief superintendent of police, Duffy's old boss and sworn enemy, is also a victim. Big Eddy's character is built on the reiteration of his most profound mantra: "Knowledge is power." At the end of the story, Duffy destroys him by breaking into his office and burning the building down. He then also gets his revenge by sending photocopies of Big Eddy's file on his old boss to all the police departments. It is safe to say that all the other stories follow this simple mould.

Duffy does not pretend to teach any lessons, an important element that more than likely contributed to its "success." All the morals are questionable: a policeman who believes that "fiddling" is a necessary part of police work, a security man who installs security systems despite having no faith in them and is burgled twice himself, a bisexual who compares sleeping with men or women as "choosing between bacon and egg and bacon and tomato.

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[20] Streitfeld.

Whichever you decided on you had a good time" (81). In fact, on one occasion the protagonist actually breaks into a house, albeit the villain's, and sets fire to it. Taking the law into his own hands turned out to be the most effective solution, but it certainly is not justifiable or laudable. What is probably reprimandable in the novel is the use of ethnic stereotypes and political incorrectness. Duffy frequently refers to Paddies, Chinks and Malties in a very offhanded manner. One recognises a "Paddy" when he says things like "focking caht", or a "Malty" when he says, "Mr Salvatore no speaka da English, only speaka da Eyetalian. Tutto his life" (27). Since this novel has no lessons to teach, political correctness is ignored when Duffy refers to all foreigners as "these immigrants", or compares killing cats and microwaving them to "Islamic methods of punishment", or accuses the Chinese for having a frustratingly impenetrable community. To him a Malaysian is a Chink with slit eyes and Asian women are small creatures who walk gracefully in and out of the toilets they clean. Abroad is a "hot country where the grub is spiced and the natives unfriendly", therefore, "he'd rather take a long lease in an English cell than paddle in the wildest foreign luxury" (339). We cannot, indeed should not, analyse these statements further because, first, there is nothing to analyse in seemingly offhand remarks like these, and second, to do so would be to take something that surely cannot be taken serious too seriously. Similarly, to analyse Duffy's sexual orientation or gender politics would be futile because his coarseness evades serious treatment. Such a novelistic stance, if the associations were made, would undermine Barnes the "serious" writer, hence his need to create an alter ego. But, can a different identity really help him escape writing like this: "she played with tits and pubes while she danced, as the other girl had done. But she also leaned right over, stuck her bum in the air, and pulled her cheeks apart so that you could see her cunt and bum-hole. Then she would bounce over towards a letterbox and put her leg

right up in the air, resting her foot against the wall of the booth while she dabbled at her cunt with her fingers" (64)?

In writing *Duffy*, Barnes clarified two branches of popular fiction. The first is the "bestseller." Bestselling fiction can be like the work of J. K. Rowling, which everybody knows something about now, but may with time, like the work of Marie Corelli, turn into something that most people will know nothing about. As Bloom points out, Thomas Hall Caine and Marie Corelli were giants in their own time, commanding great title, fame and wealth, but their fame rested on the foundations of "exoticism, eroticism, spiritualism and anti-materialism beloved of ordinary [people at the time]."[21] It is understandable that sales based on sensationalism wanes quickly; hence it is easy for such fame to disappear following the death of the writer because it is a reputation gained from the simplistic appeasement of a shallow appetite. The inference is that the average, ordinary reader is mainly interested in works that provide short-term amusement and familiar philosophies. The second is "pulp" fiction. Pulp writing epitomises all the suspect qualities that the success of a popular work may be cross-examined for. In fact, if an attempt at "popular" fiction fails to reap financial rewards, it is often because it falls into the "pulp" category. Although this problematic, pseudonymous authorship can be intentional too, its trademark characteristics include vanishing without a trace, a limited readership, explicit contents that challenge censorship and, sometimes, such disinterest in its own worth as a piece of writing that it borders on illiteracy. Sold to court obscurity, these are books also best forgotten as an embarrassment. As a matter of fact, pulp fiction is often termed ideologically and morally unsound, created for and usually by a

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[21]　Bloom 2.

literary underclass.[22]

A blasé disregard for others and a visible contempt for social rules is one of the main reasons why the pulp genre is looked upon so unfavourably. It is true that popular fiction has often been categorised as low-brow, and in this day and age it is only correct to argue that the class orientation of such writing should be left out of the equation, but it cannot be wrong to argue that the nature of genre contents can go some way to define its audience. If writers are not obliged to teach moral lessons or aim to do "good" with their writing, should their blatant defiance of social codes or carelessness about harming others be accepted as suitable contributions to "serious" writing? However, it goes to prove that even if taboo subjects and shocking descriptions may not be the norm in most writing, there is a point in the treatment or implicit enjoyment of such subjects that could justify the label "low-brow." In clarifying this point, a certain validity is given to the existence of what might be termed "high-brow" writing and the engagement of "serious" topics that pertain to "good" literature.

Flaubert's Parrot is, on the literary scale, at the opposite end to *Duffy*. This book represents Barnes as a "serious" writer in two main ways: it is categorically *different* and it is *usefully* postmodern. In the first place, Barnes explained: "It takes me 2-3 years to write a novel; it used to take me 2-3 weeks to write a thriller. That's about the relative level of importance I accord them."[23] When a writer spends more time on his work is he putting more effort into it because it is a more important work? As an experienced writer of two very different types of books, it makes sense to take Barnes' at his word. If a book is harder to write, it may also be harder to read. This is probably

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[22] Bloom 8.

[23] Lidia Vianu, "Interview with Julian Barnes" *Romania Literara* (December 2000) 13-19.

because the writer hopes to achieve different results. It was a calculated move on Barnes' part to choose Flaubert to parrot in *Flaubert's Parrot*. Flaubert is famous for his painful cogitations and studied appropriation of the art of novel writing. Many English writers like Joseph Conrad, Henry James and James Joyce looked to French *experimental* writers like him to produce works of art that were time-consuming to write, revise and read. As Leavis approvingly remarked, these so-called high-brow artists "set out to develop the possibilities of [the] medium for ends outside the understanding of the ordinary reader."[24] Thus the gulf was created between those who wrote like Marie Corelli and those who wrote like Henry James. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, Barnes follows the more serious tradition of experimenting with writing techniques, revising with stylistic scrupulosity and engaging in subjects with a literary attempt.

The story of *Flaubert's Parrot* is a pastiche of stories with many levels. There is Flaubert's life-story, the life of Geoffrey Braithwaite the narrator, situations lifted from *Madame Bovary*, Barnes's implied authorial experience and the reader's semi-guided involvement.

Although the novel is seemingly based on historical facts about Flaubert, as can be seen by the biographical chronology of his life at the start, the question is whether the facts of this history exist. Hence Braithwaite's search for Flaubert's parrot as evidence, but his discovery that there were two contending parrots plus a convincing parrot's perch; and, finally his reluctant concession that "The bird has flown" (63). Like Flaubert's life, which was filled with contradictions—he was a literary genius but socially and financially inept, he had a desire for adventure and new experiences but was addicted to the solitude of his home, he was addicted to one woman but

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[24] Leavis 139.

couldn't remain devoted and faithful to her—Braithwaite's life is hung-up on similar discrepancies. He describes Croisset as having "the air of a chapel and a bazaar," where trivial knick-knacks laid beside solemn relics, and he was the devout pilgrim who could turn junk-shop treasure hunter (13). Rather than satisfying answers, his quest takes him down split roads: he finds both Flaubert the genius and Flaubert the lunatic and he finds both the past and also the present. As if this level of complication is not enough, Braithwaite's personal, albeit fictional, history plays a part too. He is a retired doctor whose wife, Ellen, committed adultery before committing suicide. Braithwaite's emotionless passivity and Ellen's consolation in adultery is directly lifted from *Madame Bovary*. Braithwaite proudly makes this comparison and in other ways tries to prove his devotion to Flaubert. Not only does he boast about knowing "a dead foreigner" better than his wife and children, but secretly he yearns to be like *that* foreigner. He fancies himself a writer who, like Flaubert when writing *Madame Bovary*, was on a "heroic quest for style." He writes: "How many times have I fallen flat on my face, just when I thought I had it within my grasp. Still, I feel that I mustn't die without making sure that the style I can hear inside my head comes roaring out and drowns the cries of parrots and cicadas" (61).

Whilst Braithwaite carries out painstaking research yet fails in his great plan to write a story worthy of Flaubert, Barnes is successful. What Barnes has done so successfully is to re-master Flaubert's style in a postmodern format. *Flaubert's Parrot* embodies what critics hail as one of the most recent literary developments.

> Barnes conducts his revision of traditional modes of historical knowledge through a novelistic technique known as historiographic metafiction, a form which combines fictional

reflexivity and historical narrative in order to expose the intrinsic discursiveness (and thus the concomitant ethical and epistemological limitations) of both genres.[25]

According to Patricia Waugh, "for metafictional writers the most fundamental assumption is that composing a novel is basically no different from composing or constructing one's reality. Writing itself rather than consciousness becomes the main object of attention."[26] *Flaubert's Parrot* magnifies Flaubert's early practice of making style the mirror of the author's control over his fiction, a moment when the writer's reality intrudes into his writing and blurs the line between fact and fiction. Clearly, *Flaubert's Parrot* has taken this even further by integrating the subject's, the narrator's and the writer's worlds in such a way that is it difficult to tell which is which.

In fact, Barnes has gone so far as to offer the reader a novel that is incomplete and requires the reader to step in to fill the missing links. Are the facts on Flaubert's life truth or fiction? Is Braithwaite's presence useful or frustrating? Consider his contributions to the story and as a narrator. He is "huddled into the interstices of a fictional structure" and protected by a distance that the author set and the reader cannot breach.[27] Ultimately, why does Julian Barnes appear and always seem to make an appearance in his stories? As Jean Baudrillard has noted, postmodern viewers are no longer happy to remain mere spectators, but have to be actors in the performances

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[25] Bruce Sesto, *Language, History, and Metanarrative in the Fiction of Julian Barnes* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001) 10.

[26] Patricia Waugh, "Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction" *A Companion to the British and Irish Novel: 1945-2000* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 2005) 24.

[27] David Leon Higdon, "'Unconfessed Confessions': The Narrators of Graham Swift and Julian Barnes" *The British & Irish Novel since 1960* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991) 180.

going on around them. [28] Reality has been replaced by virtuality and postmodernist writers are not content with simply writing a story, especially if it is about someone else's life, without taking part in it too. Hence Bruce Sesto's deduction that "postmodernist authors frequently insert themselves into their texts in order to expose ontological 'seams' and thereby reveal the inherent 'constructedness' of fictional works."[29] It is not enough that "fiction" is not "real" anyway, but writers have to throw in a little "reality" to make it more complicated. Ultimately, not only is the writer's life included in the text but the readers too have to vigorously question the roles they play within the text. Thus postmodernism may be about variety and freedom of choice, but on the other hand it is undeniably about purpose and the search for it through some very serious thinking.

In many ways *Flaubert's Parrot* epitomises the postmodern quest for innovation and answers. It embraces Jean-Francois Lyotard's argument for heteromorphity, experimentation and the idea that evasion of authority and conformity is necessary despite the knowledge that nothing can ever be completely independent or completely new. According to Lyotard, heterogeneity is a form of speculation and its need for difference is good because it brings tensions that force systems, even the most ossified, to adjust and therefore learn a new set of skills. This adjustment can only be interpreted positively as an improvement in performativity, and the best example of this performativity is language as game. The process of sentence formation is like moves in chess where playing the game is not necessarily about winning but about the sheer pleasure of inventing new moves, or rather new turns of phrases, words and meaning. It is reasonable to argue that *goodness* in writing means educating

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[28] Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime* (London: Verso, 1996) 27.

[29] Sesto 4.

learners in such a way as make the knowledge being passed on *purposeful* if not necessarily *useful*. Since language games are *heteromorphous*, "subject to heterogenous sets of pragmatic rules," progress can be defined in two ways: the first corresponds to a new move within the established rules, the second involves the invention of new rules and changes that will bring forth a new game. Thus paradoxically, the stronger the "move" the more likely it is to be denied consensus, because it is precisely upon these rules that the game originated and may have relied on for its existence.[30] In other words, the benefits of heterogeneity is twofold: it encourages experimentation and it defies authority. Experimentation gives us the opportunity to play with possibilities and resistance to authority allows us to break away from conformity.

Lyotard upheld the state of heterogeneity but also proposed moments of temporary consensus as signs of futuristic reconciliation. "Consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value. But justice as a value is neither outmoded nor suspect. We must thus arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus."[31] The postmodern condition is precisely one of disintegration and fragmentation, but it does not necessarily have to be one of aesthetic dissolution, although that has increasingly become a hot ground for contention. Can justice be practised if it is not preached? Lyotard proposes a little "severity" in the formation of the fragile postmodern collective framework, for despite philosophy being *delegitimated*, i.e. lost its power to legitimise and unify life because most people have lost the desire for a unified narrative, "[i]t in no way follows that [people] are reduced to barbarity"; it is rather a realisation or acceptance that through continued linguistic practice and communication maybe one day some form of

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[30] Lyotard 43, 63.

[31] Lyotard 66.

knowledge and legitimation will be regained.[32] If we are to continue hoping for answers we need to create new games and believe that playing them will eventually help us find the answers.

This spirit for novelty is one of the main reasons why Barnes is categorised as a serious writer; for not only does he focus on difficult social issues such as racism or nationalism, but he spends a great deal of time doing researching and then creating elaborate "games" with his subjects, styles and techniques. And, not only is this true in *Flaubert's Parrot*, but it is true of what Barnes is trying to do with his entire writing career.

> I'm the sort of writer who tends to write about different subjects in different modes from book to book. . . . I like to try new things with each book.[33]

Writing and researching seriously yet throwing in the irreverent and ironic is another experimental characteristic in Barnes. In Alex Webb's words, he has "a style which combines a conversational matter-of-factness with the ability to undertake complex explorations of art, philosophy and emotion."[34] And in her review of *Flaubert's Parrot*, Nadine O'Regan also notes: "As the narrator attempts to track down the stuffed parrot that once sat on Flaubert's desk, he relays snippets of information about the author and analyses his prose. In this way, the book combines fiction with literary criticism."[35] Barnes's decision to focus on the parrot instead of the famous French writer is very playful, but he

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[32] Lyotard 62, 41.

[33] Birnbaum.

[34] Alex Webb, "Barnes and France: Love Requited" *BBC News Online* (18 January 2002).

[35] Nadine O'Regan, "Cool, Clean Man of Letters" *The Sunday Business Post Online* (29 June 2003).

also incorporates some serious researched details. For example, he inserts a factual chronology in his second chapter, uses a dictionary format for the twelfth chapter and ends the novel with an appendix and a section on literary criticism. This curious mixture of playfulness and seriousness makes Barnes's voice and style unique, what his admirers like to describe as satirical or ironical but his more cautious critics label as ambitious and notorious.[36]

There are many times in the novel when Flaubert, Braithwaite, Barnes and even the reader feels torn by dualities and confused by infinite possibilities. Under such circumstances it would seem futile and even wrong to try and define Barnes or *Flaubert's Parrot* as "serious". It would amount to putting limits and boundaries where none are desired. Returning to Bloom's observation,

> Serious literature . . . [sets] itself an arbitrary genealogy and in believing its own myth of moral ascendancy and aristocratic (aesthetic) *hauteur*, can decline, for it *alone* can fall into popular idiom, be tainted by what it attempts to refuse or to ignore and thus become *illegitimate*, become popular—a bestseller. Only a serious artist can become a literary prostitute, too closely associated with disguise, convention, titillation and commercial reward.[37]

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[36] Daniel Candel, "Julian Barnes's A History of Science in 10 1/2 Chapters" *English Studies* (3:2001) 253-261. Candel writes, 'it is open to question whether with *A History* [*of the World In 10 1/2 Chapters*] Julian Barnes is ultimately able to present issues which are at present satisfying from an intellectual point of view. It may be that the predominance of certain themes over others, and thus the unavoidable caricaturisation of marginal themes, threatens the balance of the novel' (253). These queries are not only true of *A History of the World In 10 1/2 Chapters*, but they strike at a precarious balance in all of Barnes's works.

[37] Bloom 19.

In other words, any sense of superiority in serious writing is a construction. The genealogy it upholds belongs to scholars whose academic existence depends on its maintenance. Definitions of seriousness are thus arbitrary, not only because it is in the hands of a certain group, but also because paradoxically it may take countless forms and be influenced in countless ways. On the one hand, it is restricted, but on the other, it is also limitless. The attempt to differentiate common English once it enters print in order to create something superior is, in Bloom's view, doomed to reproduce what are ultimately indeterminable differences of convention, mode and intention. We may accept this view and agree that writing cannot be categorised in terms of superiority for all writing may be tainted by capitalist goals, go popular and be vulgarised. The differentiation of "serious" writing does not have to rest on superiority, it can be about the goals. Serious writers can be commendable because they search for, experiment with and explore new avenues. Even if the results should become popularised and turn conventional, in the initial discovery there may have been an opportunity to elevate the human condition, and who is to say it hasn't after the idea has been disseminated?

The line that divides literacy competence and literary competence is very fine, but it is not all about class and gender hierarchies. It would be dangerous to follow Leavis in stating that the best works are produced by the "higher" class because it is traditionally *about* the "higher" class. It is impossible to argue that the "lower" class cannot be trusted to think, that the "cultivated" write literature because only they were brought up with the necessary background and good taste. It would be wrong to continue in the belief that the Romantic writers had debased literature by elevating the "common" man and bringing down the level of literature to facilitate their understanding.[38] Indeed,

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[38] Leavis 184.

illiteracy may be *merely* a "technical" question, possibly determined by "moral-medical ethics" that include mental laziness, to biological dysfunction (dyslexia) or simple incompetence. However, it must actively avoid being "a metaphor for cultural degeneracy" where "the very subject matter of [all] popular reading was denigrated as trivia for the half-educated," especially women.[39] In the present day and age, the ability to work on an "intelligent" or "challenging" piece of writing should no longer be a class issue.

Barnes's forage into "pulp" fiction may be regarded as a diversification, an enrichment to his search for originality, new forms and new techniques. *Flaubert's Parrot* is very postmodern, but it could yield to a modernist or an as yet undiscovered interpretation, and it certainly does not make Barnes specifically a postmodern writer. There is no point in trying to force Barnes into a category.[40] To some degree, Barnes experiments with extremes to evade categorisation.

> This is one of Barnes's intellectual habits. Two opposing ideas are selected; but as they collide, each exposes the absurdity and vulnerability of its opposing extremity. This is neat enough to watch, but seems easy, for what is difficult is not the vulnerability of extremity, but the troublesome solidity of what is in the middle, of what is not extreme.[41]

However, if Barnes relishes complicating the simple in order to simplify the

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[39] Bloom 9-10.

[40] Merritt Moseley, "Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*" *A Companion to the British and Irish Novel: 1945-2000*, 490.

[41] James Wood, "Julian Barnes and the Problem of Knowing Too Much" *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (New York: Random House, 1999) 242.

complicated and if he enjoys playing with extremes, it is because he never forgets to question the purpose of his game and what lies between the extremes. This has been the case with his serious and his popular writing throughout his career.

In his first novel, *Metroland*, two boys from the suburbs try to escape their bourgeois upbringing and promise to rebel against all their parents' values. Near the end of the novel, the friends meet up again and one has kept his promise but the other is married and living with his children in the very same suburb. Toni, the writer who is still battling the herd instinct, complains to Chris, his friend and the narrator of the story.

> "But why doesn't anyone take books seriously any more? I mean, apart from academics, and what the fuck good are they—they're only reviewers delivering their copy a hundred years late. Why does everyone sneer when a writer makes a political statement? Why does anything left-wing have to be trendy before it's read, and by the time it's trendy it's already a force for conservatism? And why the *fuck*' (he seemed to be drawing breath at long last) 'why the *fuck* don't people buy my fucking books?"
>
> "Too dirty?" I suggested.[42]

Toni clearly expresses a writer's frustrated struggles for acceptance *and* approval. On the one hand, he notices that academics are responsible for deciding whether a work counts as "the real thing" and yet they are not in control of the market. On the other hand, he is annoyed that the public

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[42]   Julian Barnes, *Metroland* (London: Picador, 1990) 176.

constitute the market but do not like "political statements" or anything "left-wing". To work for acceptance would mean writing for the academics, who want left-wing political statements, but to do so would mean giving up the public's approval, for they only want "trendy" things that have been tried and tested. This is where an alter-ego comes in handy: the writer can please one audience and the alter-ego can please another. Having such a split personality allows you to write things you normally cannot and, at the same time, the personalities can keep each other in check by reminding themselves of their limitations. Toni is the voice of this concern. But, it is Chris' remark that concludes the argument. In the book *Trash Aesthetics*, which is seriously dedicated to the examination of "trash", it is telling that the writers believe that "postmodern hedonism needs to be tempered by the recognition that while political correctness may be anathema, political apathy is far worse, in criticism as elsewhere."[43] Indeed, the blessing of postmodernity is choice, but that does not mean anything goes.

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後現代作家中的第二個我：
朱利安‧拔恩斯對抗丹‧卡瓦納

黃寶儀*

摘　　要

　　本文審視後現代主義作家面臨的困境—作家究竟應該因能實踐更高的文學理念而出類拔萃？還是應該因能迎合出版市場而揚名立萬？有別於僅僅兩個世紀前的作家，現今作家的文名主要植基於作品的銷售成績。英國作家朱利安‧拔恩斯的作品和寫作生涯，貼切地反映出他在此困境中的掙扎。拔恩斯一方面以追求文學境界為念而創作了一些「嚴肅」作品；另一方面，拔恩斯的第二自我以卡瓦那為筆名寫了一些意在快速求現的「通俗」文學。雖然拔恩斯持續增加的作品證明了他對於調和純文學作家和通俗作家這兩種身分的自信，但純文學和通俗文學間的拉鋸在他的作品中一直隱然若現，二者間的差異比乍看之下更難以化解。

關鍵詞：後現代主義、文學、「通俗」文學、「嚴肅」作品、
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