The Memory-Object in Julian Barnes’ *Flaubert’s Parrot*

Julian Barnes’ novels have often been studied within the field of postmodernism, with critics such as Vanessa Guignery, Merritt Moseley, and Gregory Rubinson citing his formal experimentation, and his interest in the problems of aesthetic representation as distinctly postmodernist¹. In addition, Rubinson, specifically identifies Barnes’ novels as examples of ‘historiographic metafiction’, concerned as they are with history and its representation (“History’s Genres” 161). Coined by Linda Hutcheon, the term refers to “novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (*Poetics* 5). Historiographic metafiction has often been conflated with postmodernist fiction although Hutcheon would have them separate. The two categories intersect in their challenging of the separation between the historical and the literary; as Hutcheon observes, the contemporary critical conversation is more interested in what they share in common, namely an acknowledgment of the elusiveness of objective truth, a recognition of themselves as constructs, and in their use of intertextuality (*Poetics* 105). Postmodernist fiction, however, is often drawn into larger discussions of cultural and philosophical issues. These are discussions Hutcheon seeks to liberate historiographic metafiction from, hence the “more purely descriptive” (*Narcissistic Narrative* 3) term. In historiographic metafiction, the interest is on “the text, on the literary manifestation of [cultural] change, and on the resulting implications for the reader” (3).

Yet, as Barnes has it, patterns identified quickly resolve into an oppressive “constructed grid” (*Conversations* 37). Although Hutcheon foregrounds the literary text in order to do justice

¹ For postmodern analysis of Barnes’ novels, see Vanessa Guignery’s *The Fiction of Julian Barnes*, Merritt Moseley’s *Understanding Julian Barnes*, and Gregory J. Rubinson’s *The Fiction of Rushdie, Barnes, Winterson and Carter*. 
to the “broad contemporary phenomena” (Narcissistic Narrative 2) that is metafiction, she
narrow the scope of the novels she discusses by imposing her own critical framework on them.
This is a framework developed primarily in opposition to postmodernist theorists such as
Frederic Jameson and that is concerned principally with the epistemological status of the past.
Analysis grounded in Hutcheon’s ideas, such as Rubinson’s, tends to end in the recognition of
the text’s “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs” (Hutcheon,
Poetics 5); Rubinson’s primary consideration in his study of Barnes’ novels is Barnes’
“[suspicion] of truth claims and ideological inflections of [grand] narratives” (“History Genres”
175). Barnes’ fiction however, resists such confinement. Corresponding to his belief that
“[n]ovels come out of life, not out of theories about either life or literature” (Conversations 37),
his works are often bursting at the seams, reaching beyond imposed meaning towards the
abstract. Working on Hutcheon’s basic assumption of historiographic metafiction as a genre in
which the emphasis is on the literary text, this essay hopes to do for Barnes’ novels what
Hutcheon aspired but arguably failed to do for the novels she discusses: to undertake a close
investigation of the text’s self-reflexivity without subordinating the novels’ concerns and
aesthetic qualities to a theoretical agenda.

This essay examines the particular treatment of history and its representation in
Flaubert’s Parrot. In Flaubert’s Parrot, Barnes engages with the role of memory in
reconstituting past experience and challenges the reliability of the material world to bear witness
to our lives. In place of the material artifact, the essay argues that he offers us the memory-
object, which accommodates the flux of experience and finds its ideal embodiment in the
aesthetic object. To this end, historian Pierre Nora’s distinction between memory and history in
his essay, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire”, has been particularly helpful.
For Nora, memory “remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived” (8). History, on the other hand, is “the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer” (8). Prioritizing memory over history, Nora posits that the “site of memory” (7) or the lieu de mémoire is a “material, symbolic, and functional space” (19) that escapes the fixity and banality of history. Although Nora speaks of these terms in relation to political history, his discussion on the lieu de mémoire serves as the basis for the essay’s conception of the memory-object.

*Flaubert’s Parrot: Memory and Object*

The shift from a conventional Newtonian concept of time to a flexible but more complicated Einsteinian space-time in contemporary history (Jago Morrison 26-27) has troubling implications on the way we understand and mark experience. The challenges to the assumption of stable time suggest a random disorder at the heart of experience, expose the fragmentary nature of memory, and highlight the resulting difficulty of establishing coherence in our lives. Cultural theorist Andreas Huyssens posits that as we progress historically, “our gaze turns backwards ever more frequently in an attempt to take stock and to assess where we stand in the course of time. Simultaneously, however, there is a deepening sense of crisis often articulated in the reproach that our culture is terminally ill with amnesia” (1). This concern with amnesia and with the problematic reconstruction of the past as a means of existing in the presence is a recurring theme in many contemporary works, not least of all in what William Deresiewicz has termed Barnes’ “being-old novels” (“That is So! That is So!”).

In *Flaubert's Parrot*, Geoffrey Braithwaite goes on a doomed quest to locate the parrot that
sat on Gustave Flaubert’s table as he wrote *Un coeur simple*. In writing about Flaubert, Barnes inherits the French writer’s preoccupation with the problematic representation of memory in Romantic literature. Throughout his oeuvre, Flaubert sought ways to capture the complexities of memory as he understood it. For Flaubert, memories were often involuntarily and violently evoked. In *Madame Bovary*, just before Emma takes the poison, “[a]ll the memories and thoughts in her mind [pour] out at once, like a thousand fireworks” and “[m]adness began to take hold of her” (296). Even after she recovers from this assailment, she feels like “a wounded man, as he lies dying,… his life flowing out with his blood through the gaping hole” (296). Flaubert also believed that one had little control over the memories one retained or lost. His characters, like Barnes’, often grapple unsuccessfully with the task of “integr[ing] memory into a coherent story” (Green 126); in *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, the two protagonists resort to mnemonics to remember historical dates but end up remembering only the dates while forgetting what they represent while *A Sentimental Education* concludes with Frederick and Deslauriers making a collective effort at reconstructing their past. Flaubert, however, insisted on the physicality of memory and believed that the past could ultimately be grasped as long as one made an effort to search for it (Green 120-21). Barnes, on the other hand, presents the past as that which is always elusive and, in *Flaubert’s Parrot*, challenges the authority of physical objects in bearing witness to the past.

**The Assumed Permanence of the Object**

One assumption conventionally made of the material world is that it is capable and adequate in the task of furnishing an understanding of existence. Fields like archaeology continue to work under the assumption that physical objects are not only guarantors of reality but
that the physical object-as-artifact serves as a bridge between the past and the present. In *Flaubert’s Parrot*, when Braithwaite asks, “How do we seize the past?” (100), he projects the idea of the past as an object - or the past as embodied in an object - that we can lay claim to; the past is a piglet that “squirmed between legs, evaded capture, squealed a lot” (5). It is also, of course, what Flaubert’s parrot promises for Braithwaite.

The physical object’s endurability gives it an advantage as a witness to the past; Braithwaite muses that “[a]ll around is wreckage… [but] despite the carnage some delicate things have survived” (62). This is an advantage that the object holds over the more traditional witness - people. What, or who rather, has not survived the “carnage” (62) of time is Ellen, Braithwaite’s late wife, whose story forms the second narrative thread of the novel. When Mirabeau the lunatic refuses to copulate with the corpse of a woman who had been guillotined, he gestures towards this fundamental difference between a person and an object. In “Knowing Seizures”, Matthew Goode argues that the face is the “visual surface that most immediately identifies a body” (156). Accordingly, the corpse’s lack of a face reduces it to an object that attests to the fallibility of the human body. The answer to Braithwaite’s question - “does this prove [Mirabeau] saner, or madder, this need for a face, however dead?” (*Flaubert* 102) – then, seems to be yes, because one does not, or cannot, copulate with an object.

Another aspect of the object’s endurability is its apparent graspability. Throughout the novel, Ellen remains a ghost and Braithwaite builds this idea into the structure of his telling. We are only given access to her through Braithwaite and what he will tell us of her. He briefly mentions her death at the beginning of the novel - “My wife… died” (3) - but then “side-step[s] her image” (192) as he turns instead to his obsession with Flaubert. Ellen’s missing voice is counterposed with Louise Colet’s story, missing from the annals of history but imagined into
existence here. Like Ellen, Louise Colet is long gone but in “Louise Colet’s Version”, the person is sublimated into a text, an object that Braithwaite can grasp. In this first-person narrative, Braithwaite is replaced and his authorial power usurped. “Now hear my story,” demands Louise Colet, “I insist” (162). She becomes real to the reader, a person with a voice and with a physical body. We are asked to “take [Louise’s] arm, like that, and… just walk” and to “feel [her] pulse”, and we grasp her through the dialogue she engages us in (162). Throughout the chapter, Louise Colet asserts the integrity of her existence as a woman apart from Flaubert; she proclaims that she “did not need Gustave to come into [her] life” because she was “thirty-five, [she] was beautiful, [she] was… renowned” (163). She also reveals herself to be a discriminating aesthete and apologizes neither for her poetry nor the lovers she takes. Louise Colet grows beyond the limitations of being merely “the Muse” (19) and the mistress whose primary characteristics are “immoderation and possessiveness” (24), as she is known in the earlier chapter, “Chronology”. She assumes life but only within and only through the world of the text.

Louise Colet’s story is Ellen’s story told indirectly. Contrary to John Updike’s argument that “Pure Story” comes too late (“A Pair of Parrots”), Braithwaite must tell Louise Colet’s story before he can tell Ellen’s in “Pure Story”. When he finally does so, his authorial presence returns in full force as the desire to turn Ellen into a textual object is more urgent and desperate for his grief. Just as he writes Louise Colet, Braithwaite writes Ellen but we never forget that he is doing the telling. He attempts three beginnings to this pure story (four beginnings, if we count “Louise Colet’s Version” as the first) and each varies according to the position Braithwaite chooses to adopt in relation to his wife. The first beginning is written by the historian Braithwaite - “She was born in 1920, married in 1940, gave birth in 1942 and 1946, died in 1975” (192); it is factual and impersonal, and could have been written by anyone, even a stranger to Ellen. The second
attempt prepares us for a more deliberately crafted narrative. It starts with a generic “Small people are meant to be neat, aren’t they; but Ellen wasn’t” (192) and is filled with what can be identified as obvious literary devices, such as the ominous hints of recklessness (“she was about to step out heedlessly into Piccadilly”), violence (“her arm bore the purple imprint of a robot’s pincers”), and of something amiss (“she couldn’t remember diving towards the road”, 193). Already Ellen’s death is foreshadowed. Braithwaite is certainly aware of how false, how constructed this all sounds and so starts again. In the third beginning, he writes as Ellen’s husband and gives us Ellen as a real human being, a “much-loved only child” and a “much-loved only wife” (193). However, Braithwaite is unable to sustain a narrative for Ellen as he can for Louise Colet; the actuality of her being and of his grief poses an obstacle to his attempt at reconstructing her story. He continually interrupts his telling to ask rhetorical questions and to bring up the fact of his need to “hypothesize a little” and to “fictionalize” (197). The physical text is also broken up by the inclusion of a “textual note” (195), and the use of parentheses and citations. These self-reflexive gestures are intrusions of the ‘real world’ and ironically prevent Ellen from achieving the same vividness as Louise Colet on the page. Ellen resists Braithwaite’s attempt to translate her into text and constantly slips out of Braithwaite’s text and grasp. Unlike Louise Colet, Ellen is too real and hence, paradoxically, too elusive.

The Flaubertian Grotesque

Braithwaite’s piglet, however, evades capture. Barnes only ever discusses the material object in terms of unfulfilled potential and promise. The ability of the artifact to survive time is a double-edged sword. We ascribe significance to objects according to the position they hold within a network of other objects. As the amount of material stock in an archive like a museum
increases, objects are often forced into incongruous spatial relationships with each other. This makes it increasingly difficult to define each object in relation to the other objects around it and hence, foregrounds our efforts to do so. Citing the mix of the sacred and the trivial in Loulou, the “badly-stuffed” (9) parrot in *Un coeur simple* who “stand[s] in for one third of the trinity”, Braithwaite suggests that such a combination of seemingly incompatible categories exemplifies the “Flaubertian grotesque” (9). Flaubert’s residence in Croisset has been turned into a museum of his possessions in which Braithwaite observes “the ironic conjunctions - trivial knick-knack beside solemn relic” (13). The artifacts are “carelessly laid out” (13) and “catch your heart at random”, and when Braithwaite squints into the cabinet, he assumes the posture of both the devout and the “junk-shop treasure-hunter” (13). The enforced proximity of the objects creates a grotesque mix that simultaneously blurs boundaries and prompts the individual to establish relationships and hierarchies.

The grotesque is also enacted in the structure of *Flaubert’s Parrot*, which has often been interpreted as an instance of postmodern experimentation as Barnes plays with a mix of genres, such as the biography, literary criticism, the memoir, and of course, the novel. In his interview with Patrick McGrath, Barnes acknowledges that the form of the novel is “anti-academic”; that is, the collision of genres and the resulting difficulty of categorizing the novel speak against the tendency in academia to think along tramlines (*Conversations* 14). The chapter, “Braithwaite’s Dictionary of Accepted Ideas”, posits and challenges the idea that a sequence of stereotypes can build up to a coherent understanding of a person or society and critiques formulaic thought. As in the Hotel-Dieu and the museum at Croisset, a triviality like ‘xylophone’ is juxtaposed with the great man himself, several ‘key personalities’ in Flaubert’s life, and significant geographical locations in what purports to provide a profile of Flaubert. The entry on the xylophone, much
like Juliet Herbert, is an anomaly and hence, a temptation to the uncritical thinker who is likely to try and pin down its significance, and to see it as the missing piece of the puzzle. It is this same person who overlooks Barnes’ gentle admonishment in the last entry on “Zola, Emile”, which ends with “Discuss without concluding” (Flaubert 189). The structure of the novel is the result of Barnes’ desire to find the best way, or ways as it turns out, to pay homage to Flaubert (Conversations 14).

As an enactment of the Flaubertian grotesque, Barnes asks us to consider the ways in which the seemingly disparate genres work together and illuminate each other. There is no “conclusion” or single definitive method to read this novel, which defies all categories and any one set of critical apparatus (Flaubert 189). The Flaubertian grotesque warns against the belief that objects continue to exist in comfortable and predictable relationships. Just as Braithwaite must struggle with ascribing significance to the objects in the museum and with sorting through the vast storehouse of information on Flaubert, so must we as readers struggle with drawing out meaning from these seemingly disparate chapters. In doing so, Barnes highlights the subjectivity of meaning-making processes and moves us further away from the objectivity of the material world.

The Failure of the Artifact — Artifact versus Memory-Object

In complicating the object’s place in a network of meaning, Barnes also challenges the object’s claim to historical representation, built as it is on a one-to-one relationship with reality. For Braithwaite, the stuffed parrot embodies the entirety of Flaubert and his life; it is the object to be seized, the “emblem of the writer’s voice” (12), and the symbol of absolute truth. The assumed uniqueness of the parrot is alluded to in the title of the novel and in Braithwaite’s
proclamation - “Then I saw the parrot” (7) - when he sees it at the Hotel-Dieu. Braithwaite’s quest (and Barnes’ novel) begins with the refutation of this claim in the discovery of the two stuffed parrots. When Braithwaite sees the parrot in the Croisset museum, his confidence is shaken: “Then I saw it,” (14) he says. Flaubert’s parrot splits into two, which later turn out to be the best approximates out of fifty ‘candidates’. The essential reality of the parrot is further challenged by the possibility that Flaubert allowed his imagination to color the parrot as the parrot in the Croisset museum doesn’t match Flaubert’s description despite the museum having had first and hence, one would assume, best choice (224). The parrot fails as a historical object because it is endlessly replicated much like in a fun-house mirror and reality keeps withdrawing further from sight.

Historian Pierre Nora speaks of the lieu de mémoire in terms of political history but it is a term useful in illuminating the particular complexities of the object as it is presented in Flaubert’s Parrot. In “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire”, Nora makes a distinction between “lieu de mémoire” or “sites of memory” (7), and “lieu de histoire” or historical sites (19). A similar differentiation can be made between the memory-object and the artifact or historical object. Hitherto, we have only spoken of the object-as-artifact, seemingly capable of crystallizing a particular moment of past experience. The memory-object, however, exists as lieu de mémoire. An artifact refers back to a stable external context but a memory-object is engaged with a world that denies the possibility of such (Nora 23). The stuffed parrot exists in (at least) fifty physical forms in the novel. In addition, there are also the various possible sources of inspiration and the parrots mentioned in Flaubert’s correspondence and other works. Then there is Loulou in Un coeur simple. Of course, the word ‘parrot’ itself means ‘to repeat’. Each parrot is a re-presentation and a re-inscription, colored by the individual
imagination and invested with particular significance. In Henri K—’s story, the parrot begins as an embodiment of the lost love. It grows in significance, becoming for Henri K— “a kind of holy bird” (Flaubert 59). When it dies, Henri K— himself assumes the role of the bird, resurrecting it in himself: he walks like a parrot, “perching on things, and extending his arms as if he had wings” (59). He is not, however, “an imitation of the dead bird” (59); he has effectively turned himself into a parrot through his imagination.

The parrot is a living memory-object, a lieu de mémoire. Its capacity for “metamorphosis, an endless recycling of [its] meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of [its] ramifications” (Nora 19) are the conditions of its existence. Similarly, Louise Colet’s story in the novel is Braithwaite’s “version” (Flaubert 162) of the historical personage, which is also a version of Ellen Braithwaite’s story. There is also, of course, Flaubert’s own version of the story, Madame Bovary. Just in case we miss Barnes’ hints, Ellen Braithwaite also shares the initials of Louise Colet’s double, Emma Bovary. Other multiples in the novel include the three statues of Flaubert, the three chronologies of Flaubert’s life, and “Braithwaite’s Dictionary of Accepted Ideas”, which is modeled after Flaubert’s satirical “Dictionary of Received Ideas” and echoed in “The Train-spotter’s Guide to Flaubert”.

**The Memory-Object as a Symbol for Freedom**

The bird has flown. The artifact turns out to be a “disappointed bridge” between the past and present, a mere pier (Flaubert 141). Barnes deprives us of all certainties assumed of the physical object, just as Winterton destroys all correspondence between Juliet Herbert and Gustave Flaubert, and Braithwaite’s hopes of determining their relationship. Barnes leaves us with “a conjuror’s calming gesture” (226) — this is the mystery, Barnes implies: experience is
full of gaps. It cannot be fully recuperated by means of the artifact. In light of this, Braithwaite entertains the idea that the missing object might be preferable. Pleasure, he suggests, is “found first in [the gap of] anticipation, later in [the gap of] memory”, not in “fulfillment’s desolate attic” (201). The book that is never written “is never sullied with a definite shape” (134). However, the missing object is as elusive as the ideal artifact, that perfect crystallization of time. Simply by the act of referring to an object, we give it shape; the chapter, “Flaubert’s Apocrypha” is such a “hole tied together with string” (37).

The memory-object exists in the space between the artifact and the missing object, between presence and absence. It is involved in a constant negotiation of material reality and the imagination. The fallibility of memory is a recurring theme in Barnes’ works and his characters are constantly divested of the confidence they have in their recollections. Dr. Starkie’s critique of *Madame Bovary*, for instance, assumes inconsistency on Flaubert’s part but overlooks her own faulty memory of the text. Barnes takes great pleasure in informing us that Dr. Starkie also mistook a portrait of Louis Bouilhet for one of Flaubert (87). The curse of memory (82) that he suggests afflicts the literary critic is not that of memory per se but of a wrongful assumption of its reliability. The lay reader, on the other hand, has the advantage of amnesia, a kind of memory more forgiving and authentic for its acceptance of the inevitable gaps.

Moreover, these gaps are invested with the possibility of allowing the imagination in to enrich what we do remember. Barnes goes so far as to suggest that memory and the imagination cannot be talked about separately. Amnesia, he proposes, is a necessary component of knowing and remembering someone or something in time:

If you want to know what I'm like, wait until we're in a tunnel, and then
study my reflection in the window. You wait, and look, and catch a face against a shifting background of sooty walls, cables and sudden brickwork. The transparent shape flickers and jumps, always a few feet away. You become accustomed to its existence, you move with its movements; and though you know its presence is conditional, you feel it to be permanent. Then there is a wail from ahead, a roar and a burst of light; the face is gone for ever. (108)

The memory-object embodies this moment of flickering. Unlike the artifact, amnesia is built into the memory-object and this legitimizes rather than discredits it as a witness to the past. Experience as it comes to us is chaotic and often irrational. Life is “worse than the poorest novel: devoid of narrative, peopled by bores and rogues, short on wit, long in unpleasant incidents, and [leads] to a painfully predictable denouement” (204); it is “where things aren’t [explained]” (201). Furthermore, any understanding we have of something or someone is provisional; we can only know a person or object in time and time is always slipping away.

Because our “[in]ability to construct a stable past radically compromises our ability to form a meaningful present, and equally, to conceive of a liveable future” (Jago Morrison 76), fabulation arises as a means of coping, a survival tactic of sorts. A medical term for “what you do when a lot of your brain has been destroyed” (Conversations 54), fabulation stems from the need to “convinc[e] ourselves of a coherence between things that are largely true and things that are wholly imagined” (Barnes qtd Childs 6). The fabulated memory-object speaks to our need to give a shape to experience while acknowledging the fragility of this shape and hence, remaining open to change and renewal.
Conclusion

“You tell me that I seriously loved that woman [Mme Schlesinger]. I didn’t; it isn’t true. Only when I was writing to her, with that capacity I possess for producing feelings within myself by means of the pen, did I take my subject seriously; but only when I was writing. Many things which leave me cold when I see or hear about them none the less move me to enthusiasm or irritation or pain if I talk about them myself – particularly – if I write about them. This is one of the effects of my mountebank nature.”

– Flaubert in a letter to Louise Colet (qtd in Flaubert 206)

History has conventionally been reconstructed through the material world and its artifacts. In his fiction, however, Barnes repeatedly puts history in jeopardy by divesting the material world and its artifacts of their claims to representation. Our grounds of understanding are constantly shifting as we are provided with parrot after parrot, as promises of crucial evidence are repeatedly broken. History discovers in itself a space for hesitation and error, and in these instances of hazard, new flickering forms are forged in the ‘shape’ of the memory-object. Unlike the artifact, the memory-object gives a form to experience but defies crusting over. Its concreteness comes from recognizing its roots in the abstract and from its corresponding ever-evolving nature. It demands interplay between objective reality and the imagination. It demands the particularities of the literary text.
Works Cited


