



The Puppeteer as a Puppet: The Cynical Gaze in Julian Barnes's Flaubert's Parrot

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ABSTRACT

When the subject fractures itself into fragments, then dissolved by the irruption of the postmodernist Real, the postmodern Oedipal subject finds itself cursed with enlightenment transforming it into an anti-Oedipal insurgent. Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* stages this moment of transformation in a distinctly dialectical mode. Yet, this is not the entire story. Within the postmodern impulse to question paternal narratives and then subvert them, a third mode of existence emerges: the cynical one. Standing in opposition to the anti-Oedipal stance and paradoxically produced from it, this mode reconstitutes the Other after annihilating it. This cynical mode/gaze unfolds itself through Braithwaite's cynical quest to track down the French novelist, Gustave Flaubert's stuffed parrot. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the three overlapping gazes; the pre-postmodernist, the postmodernist and the cynical on which *Flaubert's Parrot* is woven. The text will be approached from a psychoanalytic/Žižekian lens, employing Slavoj Žižek's key concepts such as "cynicism" and "false enlightened consciousness". In this light, *Flaubert's Parrot* may be read as dramatizing a Žižekian Oedipal dialectic, one that begins with traditional Oedipalism, moves through anti-Oedipalism, and culminates in a cynical reconstruction.

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عندما يكون محرك الدمي هو الدمية: النظرة الساخرة في رواية جوليان بارنز "ببغاء فلوبير"نور عيسى عبد اللطيف مهدي¹، ا.إسراء هاشم طاهر²

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المُستخلص

حين تتكسر الأنا إلى حطام بفعل ظهور "الواقع" في فترة ما بعد الحداثة، يجد الأنا الأدبي ما بعد الحداثي نفسه معرضاً للعبة الإدراك، فيتحوّل إلى متمرد مضاد للأدبية. تجسد رواية ببغاء فلوبير لجوليان بانز هذه اللحظة التحولية في شكل جدلي واضح. ومع ذلك، ان الموضوع اعرق مما يبدو؛ في صميم الثورة ما بعد حداثية التي تتمثل في التشكيك في السرديات الأبوية ثم تقويضها، يظهر نمط ثالث للوجود وهو النمط الساخر. هذا الشكل يمثل النقيض من نمط المضاد للأدبية، لكنه وبشكل متناقض يولد منه في ان واحد، ليعيد إنتاج "الأخر" الكبير بعد ما تم إلغائه. يتمثل هذا هذا المنظور او النمط الساخر في الرحلة التي يقوم بها برايثويت بحثاً عن الببغاء المحنط للروائي الفرنسي غوستاف فلوبير.

تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل الأنماط الثلاثة المتداخلة التي تكون رواية ببغاء فلوبير: نمط قبل ما بعد الحداثة، نمط بعد الحداثة، ونمط السخرية. سيتم استكشاف النص من خلال عدسة تحليلية نفسية/جيجكية، اعتماداً على مفاهيم سلافوي جيجك الأساسية مثل "السخرية" و"الوعي المستتير الزائف". بالتالي، اعتبار رواية ببغاء فلوبير على أنه يجسد جدلاً أدبيًا جيجكياً يبدأ بالأدبية التقليدية، ثم يمر عبر المضادة للأدبية، وينتهي بإعادة تشكيل الأنا بطريقة السخرية

الكلمات المفتاحية: الآخر الكبير، السخرية، الدمية

1. Introduction: Theoretical Underpinnings

Being replete with critiques of "grand narratives" on which the credibility of things is measured, postmodern epoch is typically depicted as an age of enlightenment. These cultural narratives are no longer perceived as a trustworthy means in determining the subject's identity or answering the enigmatic questions about its existence. The philosophical currency of this epoch has the propensity for deconstructing any absolute ideology rather than constructing it, this is evident in the dominant thought of the era that can be summed up in Jurgan Habermas's concept of "the crisis of legitimation," Jean Lyotard's idea of the disintegration of "the metanarratives," Fredric Jameson's lamentation over the decline of historicity, and Jacque Derrida's deconstructive theory (Heise, 2011, p.965). Yet, among these philosophical voices calling for annihilating the absolute narratives, Slavoj Žižek, the Slavonian philosopher, Lacanian psychoanalyst and political critic, adopts a different trajectory as he remarks "anti- Oedipus is the ultimate Oedipal myth" (1999, p.72). This Zizekian gesture seems highly paradoxical, nevertheless, it describes the antithetical nature of both the postmodernist intellectual thought in particular and the subject's psyche in general. Zizek's main theoretical argument is concisely represented in his repudiation for the annihilation of the Other ("metanarratives"), in revolting against these paternal narratives, Zizek argues, the subject tends (un/consciously) to establish a new paternal system (social, cultural, political ideologies...etc.) controlling its desire without the possibility of grasping the absolute freedom (105).

This postmodernist anti-Oedipalism -being a new Oedipal myth in essence- defines the concept

of cynicism. This term has its roots in Žižek's version of Oedipus complex, especially in his theory of postmodernist enlightenment. His premise is based on his reading of Hegel and Lacan. Hegel's philosophy of negation, on one hand, is premised upon the paradoxical conjunction of the being (world, humans, culture...etc.), this is exemplified in the dictum "thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis" (Taher and Abd, 2023, p.3117). While the postmodernist thought questions then dismantle the universal standards, Hegel's philosophy valorizes the tenet that both the universal and the particular can be reconciled in an irreconcilable way, the point that is asserted by Manfred Frank in his *What is neo-structuralism*, "Hegel believed he could drive unity and difference from a single conceptual structure...the universal as well as that of the particular" (1989, p.264). On the other hand, Lacan psychoanalysis is driven from this Hegelian vintage point, the social subject is hysterical, constituted through an endless displacement, whenever an ideology ceases to function, the subject adopts a new one. The subject, in Lacan's Oedipus complex, constructs itself through an Oedipal dialectic operating within the symbolic (social) world, in which the father or the universal "Other" weaves its desires through illusions (the whole social reality is perceived as an illusion, a fictional construction in postmodernism) (p.29). In other words, the subject is split between this Hegelian particular and universal, in Lacanian terminologies, the particular stands for the Real (the void), and the universal, is the measure/the gaze that establishes the subject's ontic identity. Whenever the subject experiences the lack of desire, anxiety, nothingness being exposed to the irruption of the Real/void, it anchors itself to an ideology to fill this void. By stitching itself to a paternal system (symbolic world), it transforms itself to a desiring subject, judged and dominated by the gaze of the Other (ideologies that direct the subject's actions), thus, the Other's virtual words would be: "You believe you are taking action when I am the one making you stir at the bidding of the bonds with which I weave your desires" (p.29), in other words, the subject's freedom is a mere illusion, in all cases, its desire is woven by an Other (a Paternal order).

Inasmuch as the postmodernist voices opt for deconstructing the fictionality of the universal standards, Žižek critiques this postmodernist enlightenment by emphasizing the fact that even in an age in which the subject becomes fully conscious of the fictionality of its identity and the outer world, illusion/fantasy persists. Despite being anti- Oedipal, the postmodernist subject is Oedipal in its core, the more it breaks with the father's/Other's mastery, the more it invokes its own new Other. Hence, Žižek's cynical formula: "I know very well but still..." describes the postmodernist subject's paradoxical psyche. to elucidate the latter phrase, being enlightened, the postmodernist subject is aware that behind the mask of ideology, lies nothingness, mere void, rather than giving itself up to the chaotic Real behind the mask of reality, the subject submits to the Other's gaze willingly. In this

case, ideologies resist the postmodernist enlightenment through the cynical gaze that serves as the Freudian's Eros/drive to life, protecting the subject from symbolic/social self-annihilation (1989, p.13). This cynical formula, Žižek maintains, produces a 'cynical subject', that is fully conscious of the fact that ideology functions as a representation of reality rather than a distortion of it and aware of the mechanisms through which the Other exerts control, yet this subject persists in its adherence to the ideology: "one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it" (1989, p. 26): "Cynical distance is just one way-one of many ways-to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy... even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them (p.30). One may posit the question, how is the Žižekian concept of cynicism intersect with the thematic core of Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*, as a novel contemplating upon postmodernist philosophical perplexities and norms such as self-reflexivity, uncertainties, and skeptical tendencies towards the universal narratives.

Consequently, the subject formation in the postmodern epoch, as it is premised by Žižek, unfolds through a paradoxical and cynical logic. In attempting to annihilate the Other and embrace a truly subjective mode of thought, the postmodern subject paradoxically reinstates the Other, being self-perceived enlightened. For Žižek, the father/Other functions as a mere fictional agency, and the mother is ultimately absent; yet the subject is compelled to regulate its chaotic drives by constructing and maintaining a symbolic order. The allegory of being both puppet and puppeteer captures this dynamic: the subject invokes its own Other, fully aware that the Other cannot yield absolute truth. Nevertheless, this constructed Other – being an intentional "fiction – remains indispensable, functioning as the sustaining lie upon which the subject's symbolic existence depends.

2. Julian Barnes' Cynicism

The French-British novelist, short story writer and journalist, Julian Barnes (1946-) is known for his idiosyncratic postmodern writings. Peter Childs remarks: "Barnes is sometimes considered a postmodernist writer because his fiction rarely ... conforms to the model of the realist novel" (2005, p.88). All in all, Barnes's literary works are typically examined from a postmodernist lens since their thematic and structural core is highly centered on the postmodernist tenet of questioning, then deconstructing the transcendental center. A thoughtful examination of critical studies addressing Julian Barnes' writings reveal that most scholars perceive his work as a parallel to the dominant postmodernist thought. For instance, he is considered as "an innovator in the form of the novel" by the literary critic, Vanessa Guignery, she contends that his fictional universe is a conjunction of hybrid "genres, texts, arts and languages" (2006, p.1) being a "hybrid intertext/tale" (Mahdi, 2015, p.6041). Dóra Vecsernyés, a literary scholar and critic, remarks that his characters are "self-reflexive" and the

plot in his major works based on their “passive contemplations of the concepts of memory, history, life and death, and the nature of time” (2014, p.29).

The majority of critical studies which concern themselves with Barnes’ fiction do not focus on the aspect of cynicism in a Zizekian context in his works. It is true that his fiction mirrors the anti-Oedipal postmodernist philosophy, and this is well reflected in the subversive nature of his novels such as Flaubert’s *Parrot* (1984) *England England* (1986), *A History of the World in 10½* (1989), yet, aligning this deconstructive tendency in his fiction with Zizek’s concept of cynicism, the call for deconstruction is embedded with a reversal call for construction, that is, a call for embracing the Other’s fantasy. This is a connotation of a cynical return to a fictional solid ground. In the aforementioned novels, the characters are typical enlightened subjects who are fully aware of the fact that the cultural, historical as well as the aesthetic universes are entirely fictional and that behind this fictional appearance lies the void of their subjectivity. Above all, Barnes’ characters such as Braithwaite and Martha submit themselves to the cynical gaze, in other words, despite being enlightened, they assimilate themselves with the postmodernist paternal narratives, that is, (solipsism in *Flaubert’s Parrot* and England as a fictional version in *England England*, history as a fictional narration in *A History of the World*). Therefore, Barnes’ writings must be examined from Zizek’s “cynical reason”:

Cynical reason is no longer naive, but is a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still, one does not renounce it ... This cynicism is therefore a kind of perverted 'negation of the negation' of the official ideology (1989, p.26)

Subsequently, one can extrapolate, being cynical, Barnes’ enlightened characters are unreliable. This unreliability, one may contend, is rooted in their cynical submission to the Other’s gaze. His works and characters are a fictionalization of all paradoxes humans’ psyche bears, on one level, his novels and characters repudiate the paternal norms (the Oedipal father), on the other, they establish these norms in a new guise. His character’s attempt of embracing the subjective/particular stance leads them to invoke a new universal schema (a new fictional order/a new cultural system). This cynical attitude is to be examined in third novel: *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984).

widely controversial Barnes’ *Flaubert’s Parrot* in so far as its structural and thematic dimensions are based on contradiction. Perplexing, it brings about a considerable critical debate. Accordingly, it is conceived as a reflection of the postmodernist track by literary scholars such as Neil Brooks: “*Flaubert’s Parrot* seems to put itself very self-consciously within the field of postmodern explorations” and James Scott who regards it a highly postmodernist work (qtd. in Guignery 43). It

is a mild postmodern text. This moderation with which *Flaubert Parrot* is diagnosed stimulates some critics to affiliate it with modernist fiction such as Erica Hateley, another Literary scholar, who states: “I believe we can read Flaubert Parrot as a modernist text which includes within itself a strong sense of the postmodern condition” (p.177). These controversies among the scholarly perspectives on the accurate categorization of the novel spring from the fact that this novel is an embodiment of the postmodernist cynical gaze in its Zizekian sense. Braithwaite, the protagonist, epitomizes the psychical paradoxes the postmodernist human undergoes. He becomes an entity that combines two antithetical psychical polarities; enlightenment and false-consciousness, illusion and disillusionment, particularity and universality.

3. Braithwaite’s Cynical Quest

Braithwaite says:

The final object in Felicite’s ever-diminishing chain of attachments is Loulou, the parrot. When, in due course, he dies, Felicite has him stuffed. She keeps the adored relic beside her, and even takes to saying her prayers while kneeling before him. A doctrinal confusion develops in her simple mind. (Barnes, 1984, p.17)

Before examining the protagonist’s quest and psychological motivations through the Zizekian lens, Felicite, the main character in Gustav Flaubert’s novella *Un coeur simple (a Simple Heart)* and a peripheral character in *Flaubert’s Parrot*, who is referred to by Braithwaite worths exploration due to its being a pivotal allegory of Braithwaite’s cynicism. as far as Felicite is concerned, one may posit the question, how far does the simple-minded Felicite’s act of worshipping a dead Parrot relate to the enlightened Braithwaite’s act of searching for Flaubert’s stuffed parrot? At the first glance, one may set a distinction between Felicite and Braithwaite when it comes to knowledge and enlightenment, while Flaubert’s Felicite seems an ignorant woman whose “doctrinal confusion” by no means renders her an enlightened subject, Braithwaite’s contemplations upon and skepticism towards language, history, biography or any Other tending to exert authority render him a typical postmodernist subject being plagued with the curse of enlightenment and disillusionment. Braithwaite, thus, in a cynical gesture ridicules Felicite’s act, this can be perceived as a sign of his awareness of the parrot’s truth that it is nothing than a dead stuffed parrot: “Imagine the difficulty of writing a story in which a badly stuffed bird with a ridiculous name ends up standing in for one third of the Trinity...” (p.17). Braithwaite’s words capture the postmodernist cynical gaze, that is, a critical gaze dismantling the Other and strips of it its authority and devoid it of its position as a universal measure. Yet, there is much more to the antithetical relation between Felicite and Braithwaite.

Felicite’s tale, once can extrapolate, is an allegory of the pre-postmodernist subject’s tenet, thus,

behind the literal story, lurks a symbolic one. Her act of establishing an Other (the stuffed parrot as a god) for herself is nothing than an attempt to survive the void of her subjectivity. Before losing this “chain of attachment”, she has been “attached ...to a rough fiancé, to her mistress’s children, to her nephew” yet, Braithwaite proceeds “all of them are casually taken from her: they die, or depart, or simply forget her” (Barnes, 1984, p.17), she clings to the dead parrot as the only means through which she survives. Elevating the dead Parrot to the status of an Other is the first step in the process of symbolization, that is, the creation of a symbolic (social) world. This calls to mind the Nietzschean lie or the “peace treaty”, that is, any cultural and social system is built on shared fake norms and an invented supreme authority taken as both a measure of truth and a sustainer to the symbolic social system (1887, p.3). Without this lie, there would be no culture but chaos. In psychoanalysis, this social system/symbolic order is the means through which the subject escapes the chaotic Real, such is the case with Felicite’s act, as a representative to the pre-postmodernist psyche, her loneliness and anxiety stimulate her to activate this lie to function as a sustainer to her fabricated symbolic “chain of attachment”. The subject, in Zizek’s psychoanalysis, is constituted through injecting itself with “surplus X”, a tautology filling the void in order to materialize it. In Felicite’s case –emblemizing the pre-postmodernist subject – the stuffed parrot has to be instilled with “something... in it more than it” (Zizek, 1989, p.134). Hence, this fictional tautology enables her to register in a fictional symbolic world of her creation despite the fact that the parrot as a god or “Other does not exist” (Zizek, 1991, 14).

At first sight, Felicite’s naïve practices of worshipping a relic - to the extent of seeing it welcoming her in heaven while she is dying - renders her an unenlightened subject, especially that she takes what she has created as gospel truth and mistakes her creation for external reality. The latter situation is precisely what the postmodernist subject repudiates as it strives to reveal how the whole cultural world is fictionally constructed and that the Other as a measure of all things does not exist in the first place. This postmodernist tenet is gradually disclosed through Braithwaite’s cynical quest whose beginning can be described as totally Felicitean in a sense that Braithwaite begins it in a manner analogous to Felicite. As Felicite positions Loulou as an Other, so does Braithwaite, his whole quest aims at finding the true stuffed parrot Flaubert borrowed to write *Un coeur simple*. Thus, it seems ironical that Braithwaite, who ridicules Felicite’s act of worshipping a stuffed parrot, follows the same path, yet, rather than worshiping Flaubert’s Parrot, he positions it as the ultimate aim of his quest injecting it with a fictional surplus meaning/significance despite being a mere stuffed parrot.

Braithwaite’s cynical quest splits itself into three episodes which also echo his psychological development throughout the novel. Seemingly, in the beginning of his quest, he appears plagued with

a “naïve consciousness” as Zizek puts it (1989, p. 24). Positioning Flaubert’s stuffed parrot as the crucial aim of his quest renders him a pre-postmodernist rather than a postmodernist. Homologous to Felicite’ Parrot-Other, is Flaubert, he is perceived by Braithwaite as a “Pure Word...un symbol de logos” (Barnes, 1984, p.18). His obsession in Flaubert’s writings, biography, and even the relic he had borrowed established this novelist an Other that sustains Braithwaite’s symbolic quest:

I begin with the statue, because that’s where I began the whole project. Why does the writing make us chase the writer? Why can’t we leave well alone? Why aren’t the books enough? Flaubert wanted them to be: few writers believe more in the objectivity of the written text and the insignificance of the writer’s personality; yet, still we disobediently pursue. The image, the face, the signature: the 93 per cent copper statue and ... photograph. The scrap of clothing and the lock of hair. What makes us randy for relics? (Barnes, 1984, p.12)

Despite that Braithwaite is reflecting on the influence of the writers, yet the matter has a deeper level. Braithwaite’s obsession in detecting the smallest details about Flaubert’s life is nothing than an attempt of symbolization. In this context, he becomes the new version of Felicite, he has experienced the same traumatic condition that has threatened his symbolic/social “chain of attachment”: “My wife...died. My children are scattered now...they have their own lives” (p.13). As Felicite who has lost all loved ones, so does Braithwaite. Therefore, the dead novelist, Flaubert, obtains a surplus significance to Braithwaite. To put it differently, this dead novelist as an Other procures something in him more than him, using Zizekian expression (1989, p.134).

Braithwaite’s process of an unenlightened symbolization (the first episode in his cynical quest), goes as such: his symbolic/intersubjective world is menaced- after losing all his family members and sensing loneliness- by the irruption of anxiety and the void of subjectivity. Accordingly, the instinct to fill this void is activated urging him to compensate his lack. To restore a psychic homeostasis, Braithwaite becomes obsessed with a dead novelist’s writings, relics, interests, and most importantly, the Amazonian parrot the French writer had to write *Un coeur simple*. Why does Braithwaite begin the quest with a “naïve consciousness”? the reason lies not only in his obsession with Flaubert, but in his pre-postmodernist conviction that there is a singular parrot/Other:

Then I saw the parrot. It sat in a small alcove... borrowed by G. Flaubert from Museum of Rouen and placed on his work-table during the writing of *Un coeur simple*, where it is called Loulou, the parrot of Felicite...I gazed at the bird, and to my surprise felt ardently in touch with this writer.

(Barnes, 1984, p.16)

The crucial question that might be posited in this regard, why is Braithwaite obsessed with Flaubert, his books, and parrot? What is Braithwaite’s real desire? Flaubert, his belongings, art and

remnants, more especially the parrot he borrowed seem fictional/illusory compensation for an essential loss or an answer to an enigmatic question stuck in his mind. These questions can be answered through relating the matter to what Braithwaite calls “the Pure story (Barnes, 1984, p.160), that is, his wife’s. Ellen’s death has been a traumatic event, representing the break in Braithwaite’s last symbolic “chain of attachment”: “She dies... afterwards comes the madness.... just loneliness” (p.160). In addition to her death, her recurrent betrayals during her lifetime compels him to have recourse to Flaubert’s books searching for satisfactory answers such as *Madam Bovary* in which the main female character resembles Ellen in the matter of betrayal. Ellen, thus, becomes an embodiment of the Zizekian/Lacanian negative traumatic kernel (the Real as a void), standing for the death drive or Braithwaite’s void of subjectivity that presses him to fill it with this cynical quest. The Other, in Zizekian psychoanalysis, represents a “subject which presumes to know”, that is. A supreme entity has the knowledge and qualification to answer the subject’s hysterical questions, yet, these answers are nothing than illusory fabricated ones (1999, p.183,184). It is because of Ellen’s betrayal, then death; Braithwaite invokes the French writer as an Other (a subject presumed to know). Through contemplating upon *Madam Bovary*’s adulterous affair, Braithwaite attempts to resolve his dilemma concerning Ellen’s adultery. Her unfaithfulness, despair, and ultimately suicide have led Braithwaite to this hysterical situation, (searching for answers from Flaubert): “She was a much-loved only child. She was a much-loved only wife. She was loved if that’s the word” (Barnes, 1984, p.162).

As Braithwaite’s quest gradually progresses, his psyche evolves from being naïve to enlightened, transforming itself into postmodernist. Ellen’s death, then, his obsession in the French writer, serves as the primary catalyst for this transformation. This evolvment unfolds with the emergence of a second parrot, which may in fact be the original one, metaphorically marking the beginning of Braithwaite’s postmodernist awakening:

Then I saw it. Crouched on top of a high cupboard was another parrot. Also, bright green. Also, according to both the gardienne and the label on its perch, the very parrot which Flaubert had borrowed from Museum of Rouen for the writing of *Un coeur simple*... I mentioned the question of authenticity to the gardienne. She was, understandably, on the side of her own parrot, and confidently discounted the claims of Hotel-Dieu. (Barnes, 1984, p.21)

The above incident captures the moment in which the pre-postmodernist absolute narrative collapses, it is the turning point that will shape the protagonist’s postmodernist psyche transforming it from naïve to enlightened. The sudden appearance of a second parrot that has the possibility to be Flaubert’s stuffed one serves as a crucial juncture marking the beginning of the postmodernist doubt and uncertainties. The conflict between the two parrot narratives is symptomatic of the triumph of

plurality over singularity, in a psychoanalytic context, the absence of the authentic real parrot is indicative of the absence of the Other as a universal measure.

The emergence of the second parrot narrative that destabilizes the coherence and negates the authenticity of the first, inaugurates a chain of uncertainties and doubts as far as Flaubert's biography, art and belongings are concerned. Flaubert/ the Other -being the illusion that has to fill Braithwaite's lack- is turned out to be a subject that is plagued with lack himself. Such is the case in "The Flaubert Apocrypha", a section dedicated for Flaubert's uncompleted works and absent documentaries: "there is the life, then there is the not-life" (Barnes, 1984, p.121). The more Braithwaite immerses himself in Flaubert's history, art, documentaries, the more imperfect Flaubert appears. It is Flaubert who has been always stained with a traumatic gap searching an Other to bridge it. Flaubert says: "deep within me there is a radical, intimate, bitter and incessant boredom which prevents me from enjoying anything" (1984, p.33), this psychotic stasis of desire is cured through art as a symbolic system, this is the reason why: "he ...never endures a writer's block" (1984, p.26).

"The Flaubert Bestiary" is intended to reveal such a lack in the Other-Novelist, and consequently, in biography and history as authentic trustworthy discourses. Postmodernist signs with which Braithwaite concludes his documentation to Flaubert's random incidents from his life such as "what happened to dog is not recorded" (1984, p.63), "what happened to the dragoman is not recorded" (1984, p.64), and "what happened to truth is not recorded" (1984, p.65) are nothing than a connotation of both Flaubert's lack and the postmodernist deconstruction of biography and history. By that, Braithwaite -being enlightened- tends to de-throne the Other and reveal its inconsistency. Likewise, and in a normative postmodernist manner, any archetypal narrative used by any Other (let it be language, criticism, author, ideal reader) is constantly deconstructed: "the right words don't exist...you talk, and you find the language of bereavement foolishly inadequate" (1984, p.161).", "Omniscience is impossible" (1984, p.88), "is there a perfect reader? A total reader?" (1984, p.75).

Rather than finding satisfactory answers through Flaubert's art and biography, Braithwaite's dilemma increases awakening him to the postmodernist truth that the social, literary and linguistic realities are subjective, and that, the Other is nothing than the subject's own creation. In the first episode of the cynical quest, Braithwaite's epistemic ignorance ("false consciousness") has led him to construct an "Other" as a purveyor of answers, that is, Flaubert, the dead French novelist, Yet the gaps pervading Flaubert's art and biography, and Flaubert himself, who never attained definitive solution to his own perplexities, propel Braithwaite toward embracing the postmodernist tenet. At this point, the subjective disposition of this tenet that inclines to deconstruct the Other's narrative, prompts Braithwaite to de-alienate himself, in a Zizekian/Lacanian sense. "Lack in the Other", Zizek

thus posits:

enables the subject to achieve a kind of 'dealienation' called by Lacan separation: not in the sense that the subject experiences that now he is separated for ever from the object by the barrier of language, but that the object is separated from the Other itself, that the Other itself 'hasn't got it', hasn't got the final answer - that is to say, is in itself blocked, desiring; that there is also a desire of the Other. (1989, p.137)

As a text engaging itself with the postmodernist philosophy, it ostensibly elicits doubt and calls for the liberation from the paternal authority of the Other. This is exemplified in Braithwaite's gradual release from Flaubert's authority following his recognition of the gaps penetrating the writer's biography and books. The postmodernist episode flashes here as an anti-thesis to the pre-postmodernist thesis in the beginning. Being antipode to the first, it has a deconstructive nature embodied in the array of diverse voices, each undermines the other in a subversive anti-Oedipal process. This subversive episode is supposed to be taken as the last moment at which the particular triumphs over the transcendental paternal Oedipal mastery. Being precisely against the Oedipal narrative, as the nature of the structure reveals, the text lucidly departs itself from the normative literary conventions and adopt a "nomadic" (Jawad and Hassan, 2025, p.1201) restraint-transgressing approach. It resists taxonomy: is it fiction or non-fiction? As it is condensed with a hybrid structural combination, one may posit the question; is it an essayistic work, a critical discourse, or even "examination paper" (Barnes, 1984, p.171)? The novel does not conform to a central formal paradigm; rather, it establishes itself as a hybrid piece.

This hybridity and structural transgression are nothing than a reflection to Braithwaite's psychical transformation -being an enlightened subject-. He no longer confirms to Flaubert's narrative, instead, he has his own subjective one. This is exemplified in his subjective version of Louise Colet's story, Flaubert's friend (p.137). Rather than being marginalized, and this is the case in Flaubert's original story, in Braithwaite's version, Louise has a central role and a voice through which she expresses herself and her relation with Flaubert from her own perspective: What is negated first is Flaubert as an analyst, a subject that is supposed to inject Braithwaite with what he has missed. Braithwaite's "I" transforms itself:

From "I cannot tell the truth about myself directly; this most intimate truth is so painful that I can only articulate it through another, talking through the mask, of another entity," to "truth itself is talking through me"? This reversal involves the dialectical shift "what I am saying is true" to "truth is talking through me." (Zizek, 2012, chapter 8)

Furthermore, Braithwaite's failure in finding the real parrot as he discovers there are at least three

Amazonian parrots, each one is possibly be Flaubert's stuffed one, may allude to the supremacy of the postmodernist plurality and the annihilation of the Other's mastery: "There, standing in a line, were the Amazonian parrots. Of the original fifty only three remained...perhaps it was one of them" (Barnes, 1984, p.190). Yet, does Braithwaite renounce the Other?

Braithwaite is a cynical subject. His quest is built on paradoxes mirroring his paradoxical psychic formation. In fact, through his quest, he seems plagued with a cynical gaze that is defined by Žižek as "a false enlightened consciousness". Why does he proceed in searching for the authentic parrot despite being illuminated about the fact that a singular narrative is impossible? Does his quest fail after he misses real Flaubert's parrot? On the surface, Flaubert's parrot bears within itself a symbolic signification - that is the Other's dominance singular narrative - and that by failing to grasp it, this narrative proves to be an illusion. The multitude of the parrots assumes that the Other's narrative is annihilated, plurality indicates the death of the Oedipal-center. Yet, since that "anti-Oedipus is the ultimate Oedipal myth" (*The Ticklish Subject*, 1999, p.72), to put it in Žižek's words, Braithwaite, - being enlightened yet with an intentional false consciousness- becomes a cynical puppet and a puppeteer, he transforms himself to a puppet by invoking the Other/puppeteer, despite being aware that the Other does not exist, it is a mere fictional entity created by the subject itself and taken as a sustainer of its own symbolic social life. Flaubert as Other who is supposed to provide Braithwaite with answers does not exist only in the latter's psyche.

Braithwaite's cynical psyche is accentuated as both naïve and enlightened, paradoxically, it combines, yet, deters the previous aspects in a Žižekian-Hegelian paradoxical logic. As Felicité creates her means to survive in a symbolic world of her own invention so does Braithwaite as an enlighten subject who is "aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less still insists upon the mask" (*The Sublime Object*, 1989, p.25), in other words, he "knows the falsehood very well...but still, ...does not renounce it (p.26). The key evidence to Braithwaite's cynical gaze is in "Pure Story": "Ellen's is a true story; perhaps it is even the reason why I am telling you Flaubert's story instead" (Barnes, 1984, p.86). Ellen dies because of the absence of an Other, in Lacanian-Žižekian psychoanalysis, the annihilation of the symbolic Other leads the subject to a deadly vertex of surplus enjoyment. Such is the case with Ellen, Braithwaite says: "she had had husband, children, lovers, a job... friends, and what are called interests... she didn't have *unfulfilled ambitions*" (*Italicized mine* p.166). She has committed suicide because she has already enjoyed everything, this surplus enjoyment, from a psychoanalytic lens, is dangerous, thus, the postmodernist subject's annihilation to the prohibitive symbolic Other renders it vulnerable to a deadly surplus enjoyment. Such is the case with Ellen, who has fulfilled all her ambitions without

hindrance.

Ellen “didn’t have some rash devotion to a dead foreigner to sustain her” (p.166), Braithwaite remarks. This gesture is denotative of the distinction between Ellen and Braithwaite, while the absence of a regulatory Other leads Ellen to death, Braithwaite incarcerates himself in a quest through which he invokes an Other/ Flaubert leading it. Despite being enlightened, Braithwaite knows that he cannot symbolically survive without an Other regulating his own desire, although it is a fictional entity. This “synecdochal journey from the part to the whole” Vanessa Guignery maintains, “proves impossible” (p. 47). One partially agrees with Guignery’s contention, yet there is much more to the matter. Due to that, his quest becomes both cynical, it is true that his goal is to gratify his need (finding answers about his personal crisis), his true aim is not to accomplish the quest and find the true parrot as much as to establish a symbolic order to constitute himself as a desiring subject: “Isn’t the most reliable form of pleasure, Flaubert implies, the pleasure of anticipation? Who needs to burst into fulfilment’s desolate attic?” (Barnes, 1984, p.13). This is precisely the difference between the aim and goal in psychoanalysis: “One should bear in mind here Lacan’s well - known distinction between the aim and the goal of the drive: while the goal is the object around which the drive circulates, its (True) aim is the endless continuation of this circulation as such” (Zizek, 2008, p. 327). Braithwaite, with his cynical gaze, positions the Other-Flaubert as a puppeteer despite being aware of the fact that this very puppeteer doesn’t have the answer, yet still he pretends that it is “pulling the strings” (Zizek, 1989, p. 2) to domineer his symbolic reality.

4. Concluding Synthesis

Flaubert’s Parrot, like any postmodern novel aiming to refute the pre-modernist narrative, initially presents itself as a modernist-oriented text, exemplified in Braithwaite’s “naïve consciousness.” As the narrative begins with Braithwaite searching for Flaubert’s real parrot, his pre-postmodernist beliefs are gradually disrupted by postmodern plurality and uncertainty. Braithwaite’s quest ultimately culminates in a pluralistic postmodernist perspective that challenges the absolute authority of the “Other.” Yet, this is not the whole story. Penetrating the aforementioned antipodal narratives is a third narrative that simultaneously unites and undermines them: the cynical perspective embodied in Braithwaite’s “false enlightened consciousness.” While mocking Felicity’s actions as he considers himself enlightened, Braithwaite ultimately replicates her practice by positioning Flaubert as an “Other,” despite being fully aware that Flaubert is incapable of providing him with answers. In this way, he becomes both puppet and puppeteer, dominated by Flaubert while simultaneously dominating him, as Flaubert’s position as an Other is entirely determined by Braithwaite himself.

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