

JULIAN BARNES IN CONVERSATION

[n.d.l.r.: En retranscrivant ces débats enregistrés sur le vif, nous avons cherché à conserver, dans la mesure du possible, le naturel et la spontanéité des débats oraux improvisés, sans essayer de les reformuler dans le langage académique exigé d'une communication écrite. En tentant de gommer les défauts de ces échanges impromptus, le risque était trop grand de gommer les qualités que le lecteur voudra bien leur reconnaître.]

Nicole Terrien : I do not really know how to introduce Mr Barnes to all his readers: I guess the questions will be enough to provide a kind of quest for self-definition of Julian Barnes as a writer. Perhaps you could introduce yourself ?

Julian Barnes : If you like: I am Julian Barnes, I wrote this book [*Montrant Flaubert's Parrot*], which is the proof—it's got my photograph somewhere ! [*Rires dans l'assistance*] I'd just like to thank Professor Capet for organising this Conference with such amiability and efficiency. I would say as a preliminary remark that it makes me feel slightly awkward in two respects.

The first is that it makes me think of one of those Polycarp dinners that Flaubert was given towards the end of his life on the feast day of Polycarp, his chosen patron saint, when they would serve him dishes named after his work: so it would be *Potage Bovary*, followed by *Poulet Homais*, *Salade au Cœur Simple* and *Glace Salammbô*—there are about three or four other dishes on that particular menu, and I must say I half-expected Professor Capet to have ordered roast parrot when we had dinner last night. At one of these banquets, there was a moment when Flaubert's friends decided to crown him; they had a laurel crown ready, and someone came forward, placed it on his head, but it had been made too big, so it slipped down around his neck. And he said: 'I feel like a tombstone'—Well, I feel like half a tombstone today [*Rires dans l'assistance*]: that's the first ground for awkwardness.

The second is a more practical ground: which is that *Flaubert's Parrot* is a novel, which it's very appropriate to talk about here, evidently, because it was here that the novel began—but it began here exactly twenty years and two months ago, and was finished seventeen and a half or eighteen years ago,

and therefore *you*, in asking any questions of me, will have the advantage on me that I will have forgotten quite a lot of it. This is, I'm afraid, one of the necessary happenings when you are a novelist—that writing a new novel necessitates the almost total forgetting of the previous one. And since *Flaubert's Parrot*, I have written half a dozen novels or so. So, some of my answers may be more 'creative' than truthful! [*Rires dans l'assistance*]

Vanessa Guignery : Thank you, Julian. First, I'd like to thank Julian Barnes very warmly for being here today, because he very rarely attends academic meetings, so we should really be grateful to him for accepting to be here today. One of the reasons why he accepted to come has certainly to do with place: this symposium takes place in Rouen, the Flaubertian city, the city which Geoffrey Braithwaite visits in the first and last chapters of *Flaubert's Parrot*, the city where he sees the first stuffed parrot at the Hôtel-Dieu before discovering the second one in Croisset. So, that's my first question, which has to do with the genesis of the book: could you tell us how the idea for the book came up to you ?

Julian Barnes : Yes, I can !—I can answer this one !!! [*Rires dans l'assistance*] I think it's true that most of my books have two starting-points, or two different sorts of genesis. There is a long-standing, long-delayed and usually unrecognised beginning, an obsession with a particular subject or theme, which usually I am conscious of, but I am not aware that it is necessarily going to turn into the subject for a novel; and then, at a certain point, usually there is a moment of ignition at which the notion that this interest—this mere human interest—might turn into a literary endeavour comes in focus. So, to begin with, I read French at school and University; I was given *Madame Bovary* to read by the English master—not a French master—when I was about fifteen: I read it expecting that it was going to be a hot book [*Rires dans l'assistance*] because it was about a married Frenchwoman—so, obviously an erotic novel. I think that when I read it on that front at fifteen, I was very disappointed, but the older I get, the more it seems like an erotic novel to me. And then I did a special paper on Flaubert when I was at University, and continued to read him. I published one novel, two novels—I had always wanted to do something about Flaubert, but I knew I did not want to write any sort of biography or any sort of work of criticism.

Then at a certain point which I had forgotten until I consulted my travel notebook [*Montrant le carnet*—I keep one, as Flaubert kept them—for September 1981, for a trip to Normandy and the Loire—I had forgotten that the incident which sparked off *Flaubert's Parrot* came out of a commission I

had, which was to write a book about French writers' houses—it was going to be a guide to every French writer or artist whose house was publicly available for visit and I think I even signed a contract for this book. And on this particular trip—it was theoretically a holiday but it included visiting in the following order: Michelet's château at Vascoëuil, Monet's garden, Voltaire's patron's château at Sully, Alain-Fournier's birthplace, Balzac's château at Saché, and Anatole France's house at Tours (where I remember being taken round by Anatole France's grandson, who introduced his wife by saying 'This is my third wife'. I did not make any comment, but he said 'No, no, I must explain: my first wife decided that she preferred other company to mine; my second wife died; and so, this is my third wife, but I am not a man who runs after women.' That was going to go in the book that was never written). From there Corneille's house, Flaubert's birthplace, Flaubert's *pavillon* and Maupassant's birthplace. So I was researching hard, as you can see.

This was September 1981, twenty years and two months ago, and I had not looked at this notebook since. These are the three relevant entries which I then wrote. After a sort of rather dismissive account of how Corneille's house consisted of almost nothing that had anything to do with Corneille (I hope that's not offensive to anyone), it goes on: 'Flaubert's statue, place des Carmes, looking rather loftily upwards with a sticking out moustache disdaining the game of *boules* being played beneath him' (end of entry). Next entry: 'Avenue Gustave-Flaubert, containing an *Imprimerie Flaubert* and a snack-bar/restaurant called *Le Flaubert*. Round the corner to the musée Flaubert: mixed surgical instruments, medical texts and Flaubertiana. A copy of the magazine containing his first published item, pictures of his family, the room he was actually born in (Louis Quinze fireplace), and most memorably, the bright-green perky-eyed parrot which was lent to him when he was writing *Un cœur simple*, and which irritated him at the same time, as giving him an inner sense of parrothood'. Line space, next entry:

'Croisset, the high point of pilgrimage. In Flaubert's day, a village outside Rouen. His broad house as seen in an amateur picture above the Seine, backdropped by green. Now Croisset is part of the docks area. Huge gantries loom alongside, and rails for cranes to run along. The Seine looks commercial, and there is a bar, *Le Flaubert*.' Then there is various stuff about the house, and an inventory of the museum, which I shall spare you—it ends with 'The handkerchief with which he mopped his brow before he died, and a very ordinary tumbler, from which he took a drink a few instants before he died. Then, crouched on top of one of the display cabinets—what did we see, but Another Parrot (capital letters and underlined as in the notebook). Also bright green, also according to the *gardienne*, and also a label hung on its perch, the

authentic parrot borrowed by Gustave Flaubert when he wrote *Un cœur simple*!! I ask the *gardienne* if I can take it down to photograph it. She concurs, even suggests I take off the glass case. I do, and it strikes me as slightly less authentic than the other one, mainly because it seems benign—and Flaubert wrote of how irritating the other one was to have on his desk. As I am looking for somewhere to photograph it, the sun comes out—this is on a cloudy, grouchy, rainy morning—and slants across the display cabinet. I put it there and take two sun-lit photos, then, as I pick the parrot up to replace it, the sun goes in. It felt like a benign intervention by Gustave Flaubert, signalling thanks for my presence, or indicating that this was indeed the true parrot.'

So you can see, I think, the start of the novel very clearly in those passages. I did not know of course then, when I took these notes, or for a while afterwards that this was the beginning of a novel. I thought that this was an interesting coincidence, a provocative ambiguity. I thought briefly: should I write an article in a scholarly magazine about this? Then I thought: that's not the sort of thing I do, or am any good at. I put it aside for months, I suppose—I simply don't know the chronology—until it came to me that there could be a story made from this, and as soon as I had the sort of person who, in my stead, would be able to write passionately about these two parrots—so, someone rather pedantic, rather obsessed, ready to draw the fullest meanings out of the smallest coincidence or ambiguity—I began to have Geoffrey Braithwaite with me and then I wrote a version—quite a close version, I think, of the first chapter—as a story, as a separate story. But it was clearly a fiction, a piece of fiction. It had Braithwaite, it bounced his life off Flaubert's life and work, and it ended with the second parrot, and had one wondering which was which, or whether one was the true one. And, I guess, shortly after I had finished that, I realised this was not just a short story: this was the start of a project, in which I could play off the real against the fictional and the contemporary against the nineteenth century in a productive way—and I went on to write it.

When I re-read that passage, I thought it was quite a good example of what you can and can't do and use as a writer, what is true in life but does not work as fiction—because it really happened that I was there in the second museum, took the cover off the parrot, put it down somewhere, and all of a sudden on a typical grey Normandy day a great shaft of sunlight comes into the *pavillon* and it lights up this second parrot. Now, you can't do that in fiction [*Rires dans l'assistance*], because it's just too obvious, it's just pointing the finger, saying: 'Look, this is an answer, this is a symbol.' But I also remember that I had a debate with myself about whether I could use this at all, and in fact I reduced it finally to a single line. I misremembered my own novel at this

point: I thought that I had completely eliminated this obviously banal and sentimental piece of sunlight that suddenly arrived, but in fact I had left in 'a shaft of sunlight came in.' But I was deliberately keeping it as little more than weather, rather than as an authorial thumb on the scales.

Vanessa Guignery : Thank you very much, Julian. I find that there are many similarities between Braithwaite's method in *Flaubert's Parrot* and Bouvard and Pécuchet's method in Flaubert's book, in particular I am thinking about when Bouvard and Pécuchet try to write the life of the duc d'Angoulême: there are many common points with Flaubert's approach—that is, in both cases the structure is rather fragmented, it's a juxtaposition of disconnected fragments, and none of the biographers manages to reach an all-encompassing vision. So, did you intend this parallel between Braithwaite's method and Bouvard and Pécuchet's method ?

Julian Barnes : No. [*Rires dans l'assistance*] That I can say for certain: I didn't. I mean I may possibly have, at some very very unconscious level remembered this, but I certainly wouldn't admit it to any conscious or pre-conscious level. I thought of *Flaubert's Parrot* when I started writing it as obviously an unofficial and informal, non-conventional sort of novel—an upside down novel, a novel in which there was an infrastructure of fiction and very strong elements of non-fiction, sometimes whole chapters which were nothing but arranged facts. It was a challenge as to how strong and authentic you can make a narrative when you aren't having anything invented in it, it was partly a challenge to myself to see what I could do as narrative with various stuff. I guess that if I was looking for a comparison within Flaubert, the one that I would choose would be perhaps Félicité's room in *Un cœur simple* which, you recall, Flaubert describes as a cross between a chapel and a bazaar. And so you could say my novel is half homage and half junk shop. If *The History of the World* is a similar sort of upside down, informal piece of novel-history, this is an upside down, informal piece of novel-biography.

I had one image when I was writing it, which I did not use at all in the book, but it was the idea that a great novelist lies in a sort of unofficial burial mound—something Anglo-Saxon or Egyptian—and there is always an entrance to it, through which he was taken in, and then he was buried and the entrance was sealed up. What biography tends to do, understandably, is to unseal the entrance: it goes in, it finds the body, it finds all the artefacts that the great writer has been buried with, and it is re-creating him backwards from that moment of burial. And I thought—my semi-image in my head for what I was doing was: what happens if you sink in tunnels at lots of different

unexpected angles into the burial chamber? Perhaps this will result in some insights that you don't get by using the official entrance—hence a chapter which has just been so ably commented on about railways. What if you just assemble everything that you can find that Flaubert wrote about railways? Perhaps this will tell us something about him and his work that something sequential and conventional won't?

It's like my second chapter—the three biographies of Flaubert. I thought, it is your duty as a writer (any sort of writer) to establish facts for your readers, so it was my duty to give some sort of account of Flaubert's life early on so that people knew exactly who he was, what he'd done, and so forth. But it seemed to me that the conventional account of his life should be undermined in two ways: you can read almost anyone's life as a triumph—I am talking about the sort of people who get biographies written about them (*ipso facto*, their biographers usually see their lives as triumphs), or you can equally read most of these lives as failures, which is what they often appear to the subject of the biography him- or herself (and that's 'Chronology II'). And then 'Chronology III' says: 'But maybe seeing someone's life either as triumph or as disaster does not actually tell us half as much as just seeing their lives in terms of metaphors.' There are many, many, many metaphors and similes that Flaubert used that I did not put into 'Chronology III;' as he said at some point—I can't remember the French quote, but the English quote is roughly that similes and comparisons were crawling over him like bugs and that he was always having to squash them. In fact, I think that maybe, of the three chronologies, the one that evokes Flaubert the best is the third, the one which consists of him saying things like 'I feel like an old camembert slowly liquefying'.

While on the subject of railways, I meant to add a satirical P.S. to Tony Williams's remarks. I hadn't realised that I had written so admiringly about the Eurostar. But that explains why shortly after the story appeared I got a letter from Eurostar, asking me if, in exchange for free travel for the rest of my life, I would allow my name and my picture to be used to advertise their services. I left that to M. Éric Cantona, I think [*Rires dans l'assistance*—though had I had the wit, I would have written back and said: 'No, but I know a famous Frenchman called M. Flaubert who might be willing to do it'. [*Rires dans l'assistance*]

Vanessa Guignery: In an interview for *Book Club* on Radio Four in 1999, you said that mystification is too easy for a novelist, and you also said confusing the reader is too easy. When you were saying that, in fact, you said that you devised a strict line dividing factual and reliable information about

Flaubert in *Flaubert's Parrot* on the one hand and more doubtful and fictional components on the other hand. And yet I feel that sometimes you do confuse the reader in *Flaubert's Parrot*, for example when you propose contradictory versions: you have just alluded to the three Chronologies, and we can refer to the different versions of Flaubert and Louise Colet's affair. You also confuse the reader when you give references without giving the sources: I am thinking about the series of maxims, when at the end you say 'All these maxims are by Flaubert, except for the one by Bouilhet,' but without saying which one it is.

Julian Barnes : I think I only confuse the *academic reader*. [*Rires dans l'assistance*]

Vanessa Guignery : O.K: let's talk about the academic reader, then.

Julian Barnes : My brother, who unlike me lives in France, is a philosopher and has a very logical mind. When he read *Flaubert's Parrot*, he wrote me a letter saying 'I enjoyed your novel very much, except of course I did not know what was true and was not...etc., etc.'. As I said, mystification is easy, confusing the reader is easy: I intended the rules of the game to be as clear as I could make them. It seemed to me that all the information that Geoffrey Braithwaite gives you about Flaubert is true, or as true as he and I together could make it—I mean I'm sure there are one or two mistakes in it, which perhaps today someone will point out. So everything that he tells you is true, is the rule. He is an imaginary character, therefore all the people he meets are also fictional—except I thought that at the end of the book I was allowed to make the factual and fictional shake hands, when I bring on M. Lucien Andrieu, who indeed really existed, and was secretary of the Société des amis de Flaubert, and who solved the problem of the parrots as far as it is soluble, for me and for Braithwaite.

I would not agree with you that giving three chronologies is confusing: I would say that it is actually illuminating. I don't think that, if you read the three chronologies, all the facts, all the statements there are incompatible with one another in terms of human life and human psychology. I think it's like giving an extra dimension or extra depth of focus. I can see that there would be points where the reader might want footnotes, or a question would be raised in the reader's mind to which he or she would only obtain the answer by going off and looking up in a book about Flaubert: for example in Chapter 3 about Juliet Herbert's letters the reader might want to know more exactly the nature of Flaubert's relationship or to what extent these letters were likely to have existed. Incidentally, when I talked to Jean Bruneau, the extremely

distinguished editor of the *Pléiade Correspondance*, he said that he still thought that the letters would turn up—which was very interesting, because that was some years after I had written this chapter.

To revert to the beginning: I thought I was making the rules of the game fair, and if my novel sends people off to either read Flaubert or read a biography of him, or check up some facts for themselves, then I don't think that's a failure.

Vanessa Guignery : In an interview in 1999, you insisted on the importance of the fictional infrastructure in *Flaubert's Parrot*, and you said that the whole impetus of the novel was aiming towards the chapter called 'Pure Story': so can we perhaps say that 'Pure Story' is in a way the real conclusion of the novel, and that everything that comes afterwards is an anticlimax ? It's true that the last chapter has to come last, because it solves—or does not solve—the enigma of the parrots. For example, why did you decide to put the examination paper as the last chapter but one ?—If you remember !

Julian Barnes : I do remember ! No, no, it has more than one ending, perhaps ! 'Pure Story' tells you the story that has been delayed all the way through the novel—the story that Braithwaite is unable to tell you—which is his inability to tell you the tragic story of his own domestic life. Here is why he is telling you all this stuff about Flaubert, and why I insist upon the fictional element, the fictional infrastructure: without it, it wouldn't be a coherent book. I think it's a book... (I hate these sentences which start with 'It's a book about...', but I occasionally find myself drawn into them) ...obviously, it's a book about the shiftingness of the past, and the uncertainty and unverifiability of fact, and so on and so forth, and it's a book, and it's a novel about Flaubert, and so on, and it's a novel about love: how the love of art compares with love of a human being—and I think perhaps beyond all that it's a novel about grief, it's a novel about a man whose inability to express his grief and his love is shifted (I'm sure there's a psychiatric term for it—displacement activity might be the one), is transposed into an obsessive desire to recount to you the reader everything he knows and has found out about Gustave Flaubert, love for whom is a more reliable constant in his life than has been love for Ellen.

Vanessa Guignery : You were talking just a few minutes ago about Chapter 3, 'Finders Keepers,' which focuses on Juliet Herbert, a fictional chapter involving two fictional characters, Geoffrey Braithwaite and Ed Winterton: did you choose to deal with Juliet Herbert in a fictional chapter precisely

because there is no evidence for her affair with Gustave Flaubert? In other words, do you agree with Virginia Woolf when she writes: 'The biographer is inventing when the evidence runs out' ?

Julian Barnes : Yes, I guess I do agree with that.

Vanessa Guignery : I know that you are not a biographer.

Julian Barnes : No, I'm not a biographer in *Flaubert's Parrot*. Juliet Herbert is a case which reminds me of the time when I worked as a lexicographer for the *Oxford English Dictionary*—I worked on the *Supplement to the Dictionary* for three years. It was at times fascinating, at times tedious work, and part of the tedium was relieved by things like finding that other lexicographers in the past had found the work tedious and had therefore inserted jokes into their dictionaries. I can no longer remember which dictionaries they are, but there's one dictionary whose definition of a *currant bun* is 'bun with very few currants in it.' [*Rires dans l'assistance*] And there's another dictionary whose definition of a *net* is 'a collection of holes tied together with string,' which actually is a very—I think—elegant and intellectual definition of a net. And I use this to say: 'You know, this is what a biography is: it's a net. Things below a certain width or diameter go through it automatically, and are lost—all the plankton, and the anchovies perhaps (unless you have an anchovy net).' Some biographers have anchovy nets and boy ! their biographies are long !

So, getting vaguely back to your topic, Juliet Herbert is an anchovy who has slipped through the herring net cast by biographers. Flaubert's letters to her have disappeared, none of hers to him if there were any exist (or have been found), there is no photograph of her. There is a wonderful book by an Englishwoman called Hermia Oliver, entitled I think *Flaubert and an English Governess*¹ which assembles all the known information, and even so she remains someone of whom one can only speculate. So there did not seem to be any other way to go than by Braithwaite meeting some imaginary person who had perhaps found the letters and then done something beastly with them. I think this was one of the earliest chapters I wrote, maybe the second or the third, and I think I was still searching, finding my way with the book when I did; and perhaps, I thought, it had better have a chapter in which there was a bit of narrative excitement: how about one with some lost letters ? I remember Kingsley Amis telling someone he gave up *Flaubert's Parrot* at about Chapter 3 because no-one had come through a door with a gun in his hand by that

1. *Flaubert and an English Governess: The Quest for Juliet Herbert*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980 [n.d.l.r.]

point. [*Rires dans l'assistance*] His taste in literature somewhat declined as he grew older, alas ! Have I answered your question, or not ?

Vanessa Guignery : Yes, yes !—you have ! In 1999, you published an article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 'Letter from Genoa,' in which you explained how you tried to trace *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, the painting by Bruegel, by going back to Genoa. First, could you explain why you wanted to find that painting in the first place, and is this related to the quest for the parrots ? And my second question is...

Julian Barnes : No, no ! Let's have the first—that's enough ! When Flaubert was travelling with his sister and his parents on his sister's honeymoon, they went to Genoa, and it is there that he saw the Bruegel, which has subsequently been re-classified, I think, as painted by Jan Mandyn, *The Temptation of St. Anthony*. He makes two entries in his travel journal about this: a short entry at first, and then a few days later a considerably longer entry, in the course of which he says this might be the subject for a play. This is rare evidence of the exact beginning of a literary work, and a literary obsession. We actually see it on this day he saw this painting in this place, in the *Palazzo Balbi*, in Genoa—and after all, it was a theme which obsessed him all his life, for some thirty years, until he finally published *The Temptation of St. Anthony*. So, not surprisingly, I wanted to be there to witness this painting *in situ* if it was still there, and I found myself going to Genoa with some friends, one of whom was a painter. We were looking for it, and had various contacts with the art world, but it just wasn't there. It was not clear what the *Palazzo Balbi* had turned into, what had happened to their collection, and so on and so forth. There is a reference to it in I think the *Pléiade Letters*—a footnote which says it's still in Genoa, belonging to someone, and this footnote is repeated, I note, in the *Œuvres de jeunesse*, first volume, in the *Pléiade* edition, which I bought here this morning, appropriately enough. I looked up the editor's note, which said that it had been proved in 1946 that this was still in Genoa. But I know that it is *not* there ! Because I know an English picture dealer who has established that it's actually in Rome, it's in a private collection in Rome. But I haven't yet been to Rome to write a letter from Rome about it. Is that the answer ?

Vanessa Guignery : Yes, you even answered my second question ! I knew that you had not found the painting in Genoa, so I was wondering whether you had been to Rome to find it.

Julian Barnes : I'm going to Rome in May, so I shall try and find it then.

Vanessa Guignery : Tomorrow afternoon, a visit is planned to the two museums, in Rouen and in Croisset. You visited these two museums, as you just said, twenty years ago. You also said that you visited French writers' houses for this book which you were supposed to write: are you interested in museums devoted to writers, or are you sometimes disappointed by what you find there ?

Julian Barnes : I visit whenever I can, wherever I am, any house belonging to any artist of any sort. I like them the more messy they are, the more dusty they are, the more incoherent they are, and I think this is one of the reasons why I found the *Pavillon* at Croisset so engaging when I first visited it twenty years ago: it was, as Braithwaite says, like Félicité's room, half-chapel, half-bazaar. In that sort of museum, you often find more objects which speak to you directly, which draw you into contact with the writer, artist, composer—whoever it is—than you do in the ones where lots of State money has been poured in and which have been perfectly decorated, with a Study Centre downstairs and you feel it's sort of antiseptic and everything is kept behind glass and in a perfect state of preservation—which in many ways is admirable. But at the same time, the moment when you have to get down on your knees to look into a little display cabinet, and there you see in handwriting from about 1905, when I think the *Pavillon* museum was set up, '*mouchoir* with which Flaubert mopped his brow just before he died,' and when next to it there is this very ordinary glass which says 'glass with which he took his last sip of water,' that has an immediacy which no amount of video presentation and trying to make older art 'relevant' to twenty-first century visitors will achieve, it seems to me. So, I am all on the side of mess, because if you go into any writer's study, that's how they should look like.

If you go to *my* study—this must be edited out²—the last thing I did before leaving my house on Thursday morning, because I knew that the cleaner was coming, was to leave her a note (I do not normally allow the cleaner into my study at all, but made an exception since I was going abroad) saying: 'Please clean the floor (and only the floor) of my study,' because you can't see anything but the floor, anyway. And this is what writers' studies look like.

Actually, one artist's studio that I would love to see is that of the great British artist Francis Bacon, who died a couple of years ago: I have only seen photographs of it, but it looked like something between an extremely grubby

2. Nous remercions Julian Barnes d'avoir cédé à nos amicales pressions et d'avoir accepté de laisser malgré tout ce passage [n.d.l.r.].

automobile repair workshop and a place where many deranged children had been let loose with tubes of coloured paint [*Rires dans l'assistance*]. It has been faithfully bought and transported, in all its amazing squalor and disarray, to I think Dublin—certainly to Ireland, where he came from originally—and is being re-erected. I just hope that they let people go in, and feel it, rather than put it in a sort of glass wall, as you get in a squash court, so you can just see through to it. That seems to me the authentic chaos from which any work of art tends to be created.

Vanessa Guignery : Participants will be able to form an impression tomorrow, during the visit to the two museums. It is now time for the audience to ask questions.

Julian Barnes : I am quite happy to answer questions on football, politics...anything, really ! [*Rires dans l'assistance*]

Nicole Terrien : You've just said that you obviously did not write your chapters in chronological order, and we were wondering earlier on about the organisation of chapters in *Flaubert's Parrot*: as the narrative is not linear, it is hard for us to pinpoint the logic. What dictated the order ?

Julian Barnes : Well, it's the same with *The History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*, which also follows no obvious chronology, and actually seems on the surface even more inchoate than *Flaubert's Parrot*. But, if you think about it, *Flaubert's Parrot* begins with Chapter 1—the problem, the quest; Chapter 2—the facts in the case; working backwards: the answer to the problem—the last chapter. To answer an earlier question on the last chapter but one, I thought it would be a nice joke to give the reader an examination paper at the end of the book, you know: 'you've done your work—I hope it was pleasant work: here's some questions for you to consider' (whose answers are not contained in the book). [*Rires dans l'assistance*] Again, it's a sort of upside down examination: it's not an examination paper on the book you've just read—it's telling you a lot of stuff you didn't know from the book at all. So it is a subversive examination paper: just before that, you get 'Pure Story,' which is the answer to the *second* quest, problem or query. At the beginning Braithwaite drops a remark about his wife, which you have to then follow through the book. Then there is in the middle a kind of hinge of reality, with the chapter 'Cross Channel,' which both does the formal Anglo-French link by being a cross-Channel journey in one direction and a cross-Channel journey in the other, and also brings Braithwaite in focus: that's the first time when he speaks to you—apart

from the first chapter—fairly directly and tries to explain himself and breaks down at some point and fails, and gets rather cross with you.

So, it's like the way dentists build up bridges in your mouth: they have certain pins which they put in certain teeth in certain places, and then, on that, once they've got those in place, they know that they can build a solid structure. Those are five or six of the posts on which the rest of the structure can rest. Obviously, what you're balancing is narrative drive, narrative continuation, against the pleasures of going off the tangent, and writing separate discrete chapters which don't follow the straightforward narrative through, but exist there, in some sort of parallel relationship to it, or explain it indirectly.

Trying to re-imagine myself back into the time when I was writing it: you get the key chapters in place—that does not necessarily mean you write those ones first—but you know there are going to be those ones holding it together, and then you think about what the other chapters might be, and some ideas come to nothing, some ideas you turn into a chapter. And at that point, it's more a question of setting them against one another in terms of 'tonality,' than moving the story forward. There comes a point, though, when most novelists run out of the ability to explain, and you say at this point, i.e. now: 'I did it because it feels right, I did it because I thought that chapter would work better—I can't explain more than the words 'work better' say—by putting it there rather than here'.

Tony Williams : There's one broad issue, I think, that is relevant to what you were saying about the quest to find Flaubert. At one stage, Flaubert jokingly said he'd like to be buried with all his manuscripts in this tomb you were talking about, penetratingly. Did you ever consider making Geoffrey Braithwaite go off to the *Bibliothèque nationale* in Paris, and look at the manuscripts of *Un cœur simple*, in an attempt to solve the riddle of which was the right parrot? I mean, would the *avant-texte* of *Un cœur simple* have provided a different set of indicators—or was that something you deliberately closed down as an avenue of enquiry?

Julian Barnes : There are three answers. I think that Braithwaite is the sort of cranky amateur scholar who would have a slight fear of manuscripts, of libraries: it's an obsession which is in some way private, and to do with his own life—as I was trying to explain when I referred to displacement activity. On the grounds of character, he probably would not go the *Bibliothèque nationale*: his solution is of course the more practical one, which is to go to the Museum of Natural History in Rouen, from which Flaubert borrowed the parrot, and to try and work out from that which is the true parrot. You see, as M. An-

drieu explains at the end of the book, very lucidly, and correctly—which seemed obvious when he told me since it had not been something that I had thought—just because Flaubert borrows a parrot from a museum, it does not mean that the parrot that he then describes in *Un cœur simple* will resemble this parrot: because after all, the one thing that we do, as novelists, is we make it up! And so the colours that it might have might change because of the sonority of the sentence.

Funnily enough, further on in this notebook, there is an entry on that problem. I came back to Rouen about a year or so later, and I went to Museum of Natural History, and I tried to solve it. There's a booking-out system, from which it's clear that Flaubert has booked out a parrot and has returned one. There's a system of numbers, which are attached to the base, I think, of the parrots: it's clear that both parrots came from the museum—but whether or not one of them was actually borrowed by Flaubert is uncertain. And there is a problem because one of the parrots has a big screw through the place where the number is. It's quite clear from my notebook, from these notes which I made nineteen years ago, that I thought that I had solved it: but re-reading my notes, I can't understand what they're saying! [*Rires dans l'assistance*]—Which seems to me completely appropriate, since just as there is no solution in the book, there is not even a solution in my notebook that is lucid any more.

I think in any case this is appropriate to the book, and also to the sort of novels I write: there isn't a solution. I like the kind of novel or work of art or film which implies that it's going on after it ends, which leaves some things unresolved. If you set up a novel in which there is a sort of symbolic chase for the writer's voice, which is emblematised in one of two parrots, I think it's only fair that the writer's voice, that the feeling of getting finally in touch with the great writer, fails in the end: let him have a little bit of privacy, and let him keep his secrets, I say.

Matthew Pateman : You seemed to encourage this one by asking us to ask you about football. One of the things you did manage to avoid yourself doing, which I am sure must have been a strong desire, is to make the obvious football joke about being 'sick as a parrot'—and Braithwaite, I don't think, doesn't make that joke, does he, during the course of the book. But given that you wrote *Putting the Boot In* and the usually improbable idea of Leicester City winning the F.A. Cup at the end of *The History of the World*—and there's obviously a footballing delight there—how is it, do you think, that you managed to avoid being part of that whole crew of 'New Lads' when football became suddenly rather popular in the mid-1990s with intellectuals and academics? You seem to always be, to my mind, rather pleased to be excluded from the

whole 'New Lad' catalogue, despite the fact that you are pretty one the first major novelist to have included it seriously in a novel.

Julian Barnes : I'm too old to be a 'New Lad' ! [*Rires dans l'assistance*] Yes I did put football in *The History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*. I am very interested in football, and indeed many, many, many other sports—but I tend to speak only to the Leicester City fanzine, which is full of other nutters writing. Did I say nutters ? Let's say we have lots of distinguished supporters of the great game writing there.

'Sick as a parrot' was naturally used in the cartoon when the book was short-listed for the Booker Prize; there was a picture of two footballers, with a ball between them, and one was saying to the other: 'I suppose he will be over the moon if he wins, and sick as a parrot if he loses.' I actually wasn't tempted to use the phrase—'sick as a parrot' was a sort of young football lad's joke twenty years ago, wasn't it ? It was not the Geoffrey Braithwaite type of joke: so I think that would be my answer—it would be out of character for him.

Vanessa Guignery : He's too old.

Julian Barnes : He's too old, yes. And he doesn't actually say he likes football. I don't think he mentions sport at all, as far as I can remember.

Vanessa Guignery : As there do not seem to be other questions, I would like to thank again Julian Barnes for answering these questions: this was interesting, illuminating and stimulating. We should also thank him for reading from his notebook, which was something really new and of great interest. [*Applaudissements de l'assistance*].