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THE TRUTH OF THE CHARACTERS OF THE POLYPHONIC NOVEL BY JULIAN BARNES

Abstract: The aim of the article is to show the “multiple” truth that readers are exposed to in a polyphonic novel according to Julian Barnes' famous novel *Talking It Over* (1991). As expected for a polyphonic novel, the main protagonists, Gillian, Stuart and Oliver are completely different characters. "Pluralism" of the novel of this genre, or "Democracy" if you will, allows the autonomous narratives of three narrators: there are as many people, as many points of view, as many truths. Rare is the case when the main characters see eye to eye when accounting for one and the same crucial events in their lives. The article shows how the diverse personalities being juxtaposed with one another are bound to deliver their truth, self-justifying in most cases, to their listeners, that is to us, the readers.

Key words: Barnes, polyphonic novel, truth, plurality of voices, diversity.

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Introduction

Julian Barnes (b.1947) is one of the major British contemporary novelists. When *Talking It Over* was published in 1991, Barnes had already earned a remarkable reputation through his previous 5 novels, with one of them *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) having been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. The author's scope of interests is quite large and he has touched many existential issues in his works. Eventually, he was awarded the Man Booker prize for *The Sense of an Ending* (2011).

Review of the Literature

Author Michael David Lucas writes about the polyphonic novel: "Just as polyphonic music combines melodies to create texture and tension, the polyphonic novel collects a multiplicity of distinct, often conflicting voices around a single place, family, object, or idea. Polyphony widens the novel's geographic, psychological, chronological, and stylistic range, while simultaneously focusing its gaze. Drawing inspiration from classics like *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and John Dos Passos's *USA Trilogy*, contemporary

polyphonic novels make music from the messy cacophony that is life in the 21st century.

Bypassing traditional notions of character and plot, polyphonic novels create meaning at the intersection of seemingly random plot lines. Harmonies are found in the artful assemblage of disparate voices. As the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin described the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky: "A plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event." Eschewing objectivity and uniformity, polyphonic novels rely instead on simultaneity, contradiction, and the empty space between voices" (<https://themillions.com/2013/02/a-multiplicity-of-voices-on-the-polyphonic-novel.html>). In the novel in question, there are three main and several episodic characters exposed with their own versions of the story to the reader. The versions differ and who is a reader to trust? "Postmodern writing triumphantly affirms its own capacity to escape the limiting oppositions which once promised to deliver the truth. Indeed, the nature of truth itself becomes the stake pillar in the textual games that characterise novels invoking history,

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fiction representing fact, and presenting it as a fiction" (Belsey, 1994:687). When you listen to the protagonists, you will undoubtedly get the feeling that "they tell their stories in a series of spoken—rather than internal—monologues, as if to an invisible interviewer. They give verbal performances, then, meant for public consumption, and so of course laden with rationalization, self-justification and half-truth. Barnes's neat epigraph is a Russian saying: "He lies like an eyewitness" (Flower, 1992:337).

Analysis of the Data

Julian Barnes' novel *Talking It Over* was released in 1991 and it became so popular that the writer offered its sequel to the readers. In a few years, a movie adaptation was made, *Love, etc.* What made the book so popular and what is the main charm of this polyphonic novel? *Talking It Over* is not a collection of interconnected stories that unfold chronologically, one after the other. It belongs to the sub-category of the genre, which is tied around one story and all the characters tell us their versions, that is, the voices of the narrators are synchronized.

As for the plot of the novel, it is ancient and represents one of the tritest of the dramatic situations—a love triangle. What weapon is a writer left with facing this mega-archetypal plot? This is his writing genius alone, to create original, memorable characters, which, thanks to their credibility, will remain in the reader's mind for some time. "Credibility" is a necessary word here, because the main characters presented to the reader try to tell their own versions, their own truths.

Stuart is a more or less traditional type of a Brit and seems to fit the widespread stereotype of a young civil servant: balanced, stable, reliable. He does not mind his "unromantic" name "Stuart" and is not at all worried that he does not know any foreign language. He certainly realizes that his firework of a best friend, Oliver outshines him a little. However, he is cleverer and brighter than it might seem at first glance. In conversation with Oliver, he sometimes makes a fool of himself and asks stupid questions to his friend. Stuart says: "A wotsit?" I asked, playing Dumb Stu. He smiled his smile, playing Sophisticated Ollie" (Barnes, 1992:22). Stuart secretly applies to a dating agency and is exceptionally lucky: he meets Gillian on the very first day. Gillian is pleased by what she saw in the shy Stuart; polite, decent, serious, orderly Stuart exudes reliability, stability, a secure future.

Oliver has been Stuart's best friend since high school and they are complete opposites. He teaches the English language to overseas students. Oliver is a gifted, artistic nature, extremely expressive, emotional, romantic, exceptionally verbose, adventure seeker, financially unstable and moody. He knows French and many phrases in different languages. Being content with casual romances, he doesn't seriously consider starting a family of his own

until he falls for Gillian, Stuart's wife, on her wedding day.

Stuart and Oliver complement each other; They are like two sides of a coin. Their different personalities are better seen juxtaposed to each other, especially when seen through the eyes of one woman. They both often say about each other that they are the closest of friends. Stuart on Oliver: "He is my oldest friend" (Barnes, 1992:4, 8, 141). Oliver on Stuart: "I think Stuart was the person who understood me best" (Barnes, 1992:252).

We think Gillian is the most complex of the three. Gillian is the woman whom both friends fall in love with. The writer created a character that would be largely unfathomable and unpredictable. Naturally, we know less of her than of the men. Gillian has her distinctive heritage—her mother is French. Mme Wyatt brings a French flavor, a tradition of *Maximes* and *Pensées* to the novel. The sophisticated middle-aged French lady enriches the novel with wise sayings and in a way popularizes Nicolas Chamfort introducing us to some of his maxims, like: "Marriage comes after love as smoke comes after fire" (Barnes, 1992:146). Contrary to her mom, Gillian doesn't like to talk a lot, she's more of an introvert than an extrovert: "That's the trouble with talking it over like this. It never seems quite right to the person being talked about. I met Stuart. I fell in love. I married. What's the story?" (Barnes, 1992:41). Many readers will surely think that she has an ideal profession for her nature. She is a restorer of paintings. In our opinion, this is a symbolic profession. For hours, weeks, often months, she works on each painting to reveal the original work under the layers of soot, dust or another painting. The author often emphasizes that Gillian is quite realistic and practical person. She regards love practically too. After several failed relationships, she also turned to a dating agency, where she met Stuart on her first visit. Once, Gillian starts her story like this, "Now listen to me. *Me*" (Barnes, 1992:243). As if she seems afraid that others' incorrect versions of the whole thing will overshadow *her* truth. On the other hand, she is ready to delve into herself and not be afraid of what she sees in the depths: "If two such different people as Stuart and Oliver can both fall in love with me, what sort of *me* is it? And what sort of *me* falls in love first with Stuart and then with Oliver? The same one, a different one?" (Barnes, 1992:176).

The scholar Vanessa Guignery, who thoroughly studied Barnes' archives, where he had made notes on every detail of the novel, writes that Gillian was conceived from the beginning as a practical and pragmatic young woman who fights for happiness (Guignery, 2020:146). Gillian says: "You can't just 'be happy'; you have to manage happiness" (Barnes, 1992:255). After her divorce from Stuart, Gillian tries to face the future calmly and practically. Her attitude is seen from the following: "I didn't choose what happened. I didn't manipulate things, suddenly decide

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that Oliver was a "better deal" or something than Stuart. It happened to me. I married Stuart, then I fell in love with Oliver. I don't think complacent about that. Some of it I don't even like. It just happened" (Barnes, 1992:179).

Although first Stuart and then Oliver are happy with Gillian, they both look back with a kind of regret at the time when they were really best and loyal friends. Of course, the opposing characters of Stuart and Oliver reveal more different qualities next to each other. And when the crisis comes, Oliver finds himself explaining the situation to Stuart in marketing terms. As if Gillian is becoming a commodity. As if the emphasis is on her passivity. Indeed, Gillian seems relatively without a distinct color and passive at first: "Look, I just don't particularly think it's anyone's business. I really don't. I am an ordinary, private person. I have not got anything to say" (Barnes, 1992:9-10). But this line develops in a completely different way at the end of the novel; Gillian gathers strength and becomes powerful. At the end of the novel, we see that the center of gravity shifts onto her and she becomes the main agent. It is Gillian who makes a very risky decision to sort out the situation once and for all. In addition to her own peace, she is also driven by her remorse of conscience. She often says: "It is something I owe to Stuart."

The writer equipped his protagonists with different characters and gave each of them their own idiosyncratic voice. The fact that in the very first chapter all three of them have different points of view on a specific grammar point, already makes it clear that this linguistic difference of opinions is only a prelude to a larger conflict. Which of them is a stronger and more convincing protagonist? Perhaps the one whom we believe and trust the most. When we listen to them, we realize that even the "truth" of all three of them is not always enough to understand the whole picture. Sometimes only after having listened to a "secondary" character, the light of truth is cast on some details. For example, the only cameo of Gillian's father towards the end of the novel convinces us of the misconceptions his ex-wife and daughter had been living with. Like in real life, only when we bother ourselves and listen patiently and carefully to others, we might find that there are other "truths" as well.

All three protagonists, like everyone else, want to be happy. They fight for it by different means. And at one point, when everything is messed, when Gillian

decides she's fallen in love with Oliver and has to leave Stuart, there's a moment when all three are thinking the same thing—only about their own pain. This is the rarest case where all three say the same thing. Stuart says: "Whatever happens...whatever happens, I'm the one that's going to get hurt" (Barnes, 1992:129). Gillian says: "I am the one in the middle of this story, the one that's being squeezed every day. I'm the one that's going to get hurt" (Barnes, 1992:130). And finally, let's listen to Oliver: "Bash, bash, bash. I'm the one that's going to get hurt" (Barnes, 1992:130).

Critic Catherine Belsey describes this situation as follows: "Oliver's love is intimately involved with power and possession. ... Gillian, who has no style, acknowledges her seduction, her surrender in the simplest terms: "I feel lost". ... and Stuart, who works in a bank and has no imagination, laments his lost love by quoting Patsy Cline lyrics" (Belsey, 1994:691).

The truth of the protagonists may not coincide with the truth gathered and perceived by the reader. As we have seen, they all have their own truth. Maybe it sounds paradoxical, but if we come back to the epigraph chosen by the writer, the reader may think that the one who lies most convincingly is the right one. In one of the interviews, Barnes says: "Part of a novelist's job obviously is to understand as wide variety of people as possible. And you put them in situations where there isn't necessarily an easy answer, and things aren't necessarily resolved. But this does not mean you don't have strong personal views about how life should be lived, and what's good and bad behaviour, as I certainly do". (McGrath, 1987).

Conclusion

To summarize, by applying Julian Barnes's novel as a sample, we can say that a polyphonic novel actually resonates with our modern world as it too offers plurality of voices. This kind of text gives more food to think about, and we also realize that no matter how convincing one character seems, another character may also have their own truth. Typically, such texts are characterized by more psychologism than other novels; by means of a polyphonic novel, not only the understanding of what the author has to say, but also the reading process itself becomes more diverse.

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