
Navigating Impossibility: Possible Worlds Theory and Epistemological Crisis in Julian Barnes's "*Flaubert's Parrot*"

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Abstract

This paper examines possible worlds theory in Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), arguing that the novel constructs a single but epistemologically unstable textual actual world surrounded by multiple competing epistemic, interpretive, counterfactual, and apocryphal possible worlds. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Marie-Laure Ryan, Lubomír Doležel, and Ruth Ronen concerning possible world theory and fiction, it demonstrates how Barnes exploits the ontological instability between actual and possible worlds to interrogate the epistemological foundations of biography, literary criticism, and historical knowledge. The novel's central quest—to identify the authentic stuffed parrot that Gustave Flaubert borrowed while writing *Un Cœur Simple*—becomes an allegory for the impossibility of accessing any singular actual world of the past. Through close analysis of the novel's competing chronologies, contradictory character versions, and proliferating parrots, this study argues that Barnes constructs a heterogeneous possible world in which authentication procedures fail and ontological boundaries collapse. It further examines how the narrator Geoffrey Braithwaite's obsessive reconstruction of Flaubert's life generates counterfactual and apocryphal worlds that compete with the historical record, ultimately revealing that all biographical narrative is a form of world-making rather than world-discovering. Finally, it explores how the deferred revelation of Ellen Braithwaite's story creates a narrative structure in which the actual world of the narrator's present remains inaccessible until the novel's climactic chapter. The paper concludes that *Flaubert's Parrot* demonstrates that if all worlds accessed through language are ontologically equivalent, then the distinction between historical fact and fictional invention collapses.

Keywords: possible worlds theory, biography, history, ontological instability, epistemology, textual world

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Introduction

Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) presents readers with an apparently simple question: which of two stuffed parrots housed in French museums is the authentic bird that Gustave Flaubert borrowed from the Museum of Natural History in Rouen while composing his story *Un Cœur Simple* (1877)? The narrator, Geoffrey Braithwaite, a retired English doctor and amateur Flaubert scholar, pursues this question with obsessive intensity across the novel's fifteen chapters, only to discover in the final chapter that neither parrot may be authentic, or rather, that both might be, since the museum's reserve collection once contained approximately fifty Amazonian parrots from which curators selected specimens on two separate occasions, each time choosing the bird that best matched Flaubert's textual description of the parrot Loulou (Barnes 185).

What has received less sustained theoretical attention, however, is how Barnes's novel might be understood through the lens of possible worlds theory, a framework derived from modal logic and semantics that has been productively applied to narrative fiction by theorists including Marie-Laure Ryan, Lubomír Doležal, Ruth Ronen, and Thomas Pavel. Possible worlds theory offers a rigorous vocabulary for analyzing the ontological structure of fictional universes, the relationships between actual and non-actual states of affairs, and the authentication procedures by which readers determine what counts as true within a given

narrative world. Possible worlds theory regards texts as autonomous semantic domains, each constructing its own textual actual world that may or may not correspond to the actual world of historical reference. Applied to *Flaubert's Parrot*, possible worlds theory reveals that Barnes has constructed not one but multiple incompatible storyworlds that resist integration into a single coherent narrative universe. The novel systematically violates what Ryan calls the "principle of minimal departure," the assumption that fictional worlds resemble our actual world except where explicitly contradicted, by presenting competing versions of Flaubert's life, contradictory chronologies, and ontologically unstable objects (the parrots) that exist simultaneously in multiple, mutually exclusive states (51). The novel does not necessarily ontologically actualize fifty parrots within the same fictional present; rather, it renders the identity of the authentic parrot epistemologically undecidable. What proliferates is not the parrot's being but the range of mutually incompatible reconstructions through which Braithwaite and the reader attempt to access a single past state of affairs. Moreover, Braithwaite's narration generates numerous counterfactual and apocryphal worlds—what might have been, what Flaubert imagined, what others claimed, what has been lost—that compete with the historical record for narrative authority.

This paper argues that *Flaubert's Parrot* uses possible worlds theory to dramatize an epistemological crisis in biographical and historical knowledge. The novel does not present several mutually incompatible textual actual worlds. Rather, it presents a single but underauthenticated TAW surrounded by competing epistemic, counterfactual, apocryphal, and interpretive possible worlds. The uncertainty surrounding Flaubert's parrot, the competing versions of Louise Colet, the alternative chronologies of Flaubert's life, and the delayed disclosure of Ellen Braithwaite's story do not make contradiction ontologically actual. Instead, they reveal the difficulty of knowing which state of affairs belongs to the actual past and how narrative, archival survival, and interpretation shape that knowledge.

The paper proceeds in five sections. The first section provides theoretical foundations, outlining key concepts from possible worlds theory and their application to narrative fiction. The second section analyzes the novel's construction of multiple, incompatible worlds through its competing chronologies, contradictory versions of characters (particularly Louise Colet), and the ontological instability of the parrots themselves. The third section examines Braithwaite's generation of counterfactual and apocryphal worlds, including Flaubert's un-lived lives and unwritten books. The fourth section explores how the novel's narrative structure

creates a situation in which the narrator's own actual world remains inaccessible, known only through retrospective reconstruction. The conclusion considers the broader implications of Barnes's possible worlds poetics for our understanding of biography, history, and the relationship between fiction and fact.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology:

Possible worlds theory originates in modal logic and philosophy, especially in the work of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, David Lewis, and Saul Kripke, where it is used to conceptualize necessity, possibility, and counterfactuality. Lewis defines a possible world as a way things "could have been different in countless ways" (84). Literary theorists have adapted this model to describe fictional texts as autonomous semantic domains: worlds populated by entities, events, histories, and laws that may resemble or diverge from the actual world (Pavel; Ryan; Doležel, *Heterocosmica*). In this sense, reading fiction involves imaginatively constructing a storyworld, or what Ryan calls a "collection of concatenated or embedded possible worlds" (4). Such worlds are not merely imitations of reality; they possess their own internal criteria for truth and existence.

Marie-Laure Ryan's work provides the central vocabulary for this study. Ryan distinguishes between the Actual World (AW), the world of historical reference inhabited by the reader; the Textual Actual World (TAW), the

world presented as actual by the text; and Alternative Possible Worlds (APWs), which include characters' beliefs, desires, dreams, hypotheses, counterfactuals, and imagined alternatives. Readers enter fictional worlds through "recentering," temporarily adopting the TAW as their point of reference and evaluating truth claims from within it rather than from the AW's perspective (Ryan 21–23). This process is guided by the "principle of minimal departure," according to which readers assume that the fictional world resembles the actual world unless the text indicates otherwise (Ryan 51). In *Flaubert's Parrot*, however, this principle is repeatedly strained: historical figures, museum objects, documentary records, and biographical claims are presented in ways that generate competing and often incompatible worlds.

Ryan's model is particularly useful because it treats narrative not as a single stable world but as a modal universe composed of multiple embedded worlds. The TAW contains what the narrative presents as factual, while APWs include what characters imagine, desire, misremember, fear, or speculate. Plot can therefore be understood as the shifting relation between these domains: some possible worlds are confirmed, others are rejected, while others remain undecidable. This framework allows us to analyze Barnes's novel not simply as an unreliable biography of Flaubert, but as a text that dramatizes

the failure to determine which world counts as actual.

Lubomír Doležel's theory of fictional worlds further clarifies this instability. In *Heterocosmica*, Doležel distinguishes between homogeneous fictional worlds, which are governed by consistent laws and stable identities, and heterogeneous fictional worlds, which contain contradictions, gaps, or mutually exclusive states of affairs. Such worlds are especially common in modernist and postmodernist fiction, where ontological uncertainty becomes a central aesthetic and philosophical strategy (Doležel, *Heterocosmica* 169–71). Doležel's concept of authentication is crucial here. In conventional narrative, textual signals such as authoritative narration, documents, testimony, or perception establish what is true in the TAW. In heterogeneous worlds, however, these authentication procedures break down. Contradictory reports, unreliable documents, and incomplete evidence prevent the reader from integrating all claims into one coherent world (Doležel, *Heterocosmica* 143–49).

Doležel also distinguishes between historical and fictional gaps. Historical gaps are epistemic: they arise from the limits of available knowledge and may, in principle, be filled by new evidence. Fictional gaps, by contrast, are ontic: they are created by the act of world-making and cannot be resolved through legitimate inference (Doležel, "Possible Worlds" 38). This distinction is especially important for *Flaubert's Parrot*, a

novel that imitates the procedures of biography and historical inquiry while repeatedly exposing their limits. Barnes transforms what appear to be historical gaps—missing documents, uncertain objects, conflicting testimonies—into ontological problems within the narrative world itself. The question is not only what Braithwaite fails to know, but whether the text permits any final world to be authenticated.

Ruth Ronen's account of modality supplements Ryan and Doležel by emphasizing that fictional worlds include not only actualized events but also unrealized possibilities. Ronen argues that narrative worlds contain a "horizon of actuality" composed of hypothetical, epistemic, wish, intention, and obligation worlds (12, 171). This concept is useful for analyzing the apocryphal dimension of Barnes's novel: Flaubert's unlived lives, unwritten books, imagined alternatives, and lost possibilities are not marginal to the narrative but form part of its modal structure. Biography, in this sense, is haunted by what did not happen as much as by what did.

This study therefore uses possible worlds theory methodologically in three ways: first, to distinguish between the novel's actual, textual actual, and alternative possible worlds; second, to analyze moments where authentication fails and multiple incompatible worlds remain open; and third, to examine how counterfactual, apocryphal, and speculative worlds challenge the authority of biography and historical knowledge. In this

respect, Barnes's novel participates in a broader postmodern concern with the instability of historical reference, where the boundary between documented fact and fictional world-making becomes increasingly difficult to secure.

Analysis and Discussion

The novel's central ontological puzzle concerns the authentication of Flaubert's parrot. Braithwaite encounters the first parrot in chapter one, during a visit to the Flaubert museum at Croisset. The museum's institutional authority guarantees that this is indeed the parrot Flaubert borrowed. In possible worlds terms, the parrot's identity seems secure within the TAW: there exists a parrot that Flaubert borrowed, and this is it. However, this ontological certainty collapses when Braithwaite visits the Hôtel-Dieu museum in Rouen and encounters a second parrot. In possible worlds terms, the reader now faces three competing epistemic scenarios concerning which state of affairs belongs to the textual actual world: World W1: The Croisset parrot is authentic; the Hôtel-Dieu parrot is an impostor.

World W2: The Hôtel-Dieu parrot is authentic; the Croisset parrot is an impostor.

World W3: Both parrots are impostors; the authentic parrot has been lost.

Braithwaite attempts to resolve this ontological crisis through empirical investigation. He compares the parrots to Flaubert's textual description in *Un Cœur Simple*: "His body was

green, the ends of his wings pink, his forehead blue, and his throat golden” (Barnes 185). The Hôtel-Dieu parrot matches this description; the Croisset parrot has the colors reversed (golden forehead, blue throat). This appears to authenticate the Hôtel-Dieu bird.

However, the final chapter reveals that this authentication procedure is fundamentally unreliable. Lucien Andrieu, secretary of the Société des Amis de Flaubert, explains that the Museum of Natural History once housed approximately fifty Amazonian parrots in its reserve collection. When the Croisset museum was established in 1905, curators selected the parrot that best matched Flaubert’s description. Forty years later, the Hôtel-Dieu museum repeated this process, again choosing the bird that most resembled the textual description. This revelation generates an exponential multiplication of hypotheses about the parrot’s identity. Now:

World W1–W50: Fifty possible worlds, each containing a different “authentic” parrot.

World W51: The authentic parrot was never returned to the museum.

World W52: Flaubert borrowed multiple parrots at different times.

World W53: Flaubert altered the parrot’s colors in his description “for the sake of a cadence” (Barnes 188).

World W54: The parrots have changed color over time due to decay and restoration.

World W55: Most of the fifty parrots were sold off in the 1920s and 1930s; the authentic one may no longer exist.

Andrieu’s explanation introduces radical ontological instability: “So you mean either of them could be the real one? Or, quite possibly, neither?” Braithwaite asks. Andrieu’s response is a gesture of epistemological surrender: “I don’t know” (Barnes 188).

The novel has constructed a heterogeneous world in which authentication procedures fail. The normal devices by which readers (and Braithwaite) determine truth within the fictional universe—institutional authority, empirical observation, comparison to textual evidence—prove inadequate. The reader is left with multiple possible worlds that cannot be integrated into a single coherent TAW. The parrot does not exist simultaneously in fifty mutually exclusive states; rather, the evidence produces numerous possible hypotheses about which parrot, if any, was the one actually borrowed by Flaubert. This ontological structure has profound implications for the novel’s representation of historical knowledge. If even a simple material object—a stuffed parrot, sitting in a museum and supported by institutional records—cannot be authenticated with certainty, then the novel suggests how fragile our epistemological access to more complex historical truths must be.

The novel’s second major ontological instability concerns temporal structure. Chapter

two, titled “Chronology,” presents what appears to be a straightforward biographical timeline of Flaubert’s life, beginning with his birth in 1821 and concluding with his death in 1880 (Barnes 23–38). This chronology establishes the historical framework within which the novel operates—the documentary record of Flaubert’s actual life. However, later in the novel, another type of chronology presents a radically different temporal structure. This second chronology is organized not by calendar years but by emotional and psychological phases. Where the first chronology emphasizes public events (publications, travels, deaths), the second emphasizes private suffering (illness, disappointment, loss). The two chronologies are not incompatible textual actual worlds; rather, they are different interpretive frameworks that organize the same life according to different principles of relevance. In World W1 (the first chronology), Flaubert’s life follows a conventional narrative arc of artistic development and public recognition. In World W2 (the second chronology), Flaubert’s life is a series of devastating losses and accumulating sorrows. The chapter “The Train-spotter’s Guide to Flaubert” organizes Flaubert’s life around his relationship to railway travel—a relationship characterized by hatred, resistance, and eventual capitulation (Barnes 107–114). This chronology constructs yet another possible world (W3) in which Flaubert’s life is shaped primarily by technological modernity and its discontents.

Ryan argues that readers typically resolve such contradictions through a hierarchy of reliability: they privilege certain narrative levels or sources over others. But Barnes’s novel resists this hierarchical ordering. Each chronology is presented with equal narrative authority; none is marked as truer than the others. The effect is to suggest that any life can be organized according to multiple, equally valid principles. In possible worlds terms, the three chronologies construct three incompatible TAWs that cannot be reconciled. They violate logical compatibility; all three cannot be true simultaneously if one understands truth to mean correspondence to a single actual historical world. Yet the novel presents them as coexisting alternatives, none with ontological priority. As Tang observes, Barnes creates “three interwoven storylines”—“the story of Flaubert, the story of the character Braithwaite and the story of the narrator Braithwaite” (178)—that operate simultaneously at different ontological levels. Braithwaite himself acknowledges this multiplicity: “Three stories contend within me. One about Flaubert, one about Ellen, one about myself” (Barnes 86). This structure has important implications for biographical epistemology. Biography claims to represent the actual world of the subject’s life to tell what really happened. But Barnes demonstrates that biographical narrative always involves selection, organization, and interpretation, acts of world-construction rather

than world-discovery. The biographer does not access the actual world of the past; rather, the biographer constructs a possible world that may or may not correspond to actuality. And since multiple, incompatible possible worlds can be constructed from the same documentary evidence, the notion of a single true biography becomes untenable.

The novel's most explicit demonstration of ontological multiplicity occurs in chapter eleven, "Louise Colet's Version," which presents a first-person narrative by Flaubert's mistress that directly contradicts the version of their relationship established in earlier chapters. This contradiction is foregrounded in chapter twelve, "Braithwaite's Dictionary of Accepted Ideas," which provides two incompatible dictionary entries for Colet:

COLET, LOUISE a) Tedious, importunate, promiscuous woman, lacking talent of her own or understanding of the genius of others, who tried to trap Gustave into marriage [...]
b) Brave, passionate, deeply misunderstood woman crucified by her love for the heartless, impossible, provincial Flaubert.
(Barnes 153-4)

The two characterizations of Louise Colet exemplify a fundamental contradiction in biographical representation, operating from incompatible epistemological positions that produce mutually exclusive portraits of her historical significance. The first representation

constructs Colet through a dismissive, patriarchal lens that reduces her to negative attributes—"tedious," "importunate," "promiscuous," and "lacking talent," positioning her primarily as a threat to Flaubert's artistic genius whose domestic ambitions would have produced misery and stifled creativity. In stark contrast, the second representation recuperates Colet as a sympathetic, even heroic figure, "brave, passionate, deeply misunderstood" who suffered at the hands of a "heartless, impossible, provincial Flaubert," validating her complaint about his self-absorption and reframing her desire for emotional reciprocity as proto-feminist consciousness rather than unwelcome importuning. These representations are contradictory because they rest on fundamentally incompatible assumptions about gender, artistic genius, and emotional labor: where (a) pathologizes Colet's desire for marriage and emotional engagement as obstacles to male genius, (b) valorizes these desires precisely as evidence of emotional maturity and ethical superiority, challenging the assumption that domestic entanglement necessarily diminishes artistic production. These are not merely different emphases but competing ontological claims about what constitutes virtue, talent, and historical worth in evaluating women's lives in relation to canonical male artists.

Chapter eleven gives voice to World WB, allowing Colet to present her version of events.

She challenges Braithwaite's (and literary history's) characterization of her:

I know what they say about me; what his friends have said. They say I had the vanity to suppose that I might marry him. But Gustave used to write me letters describing what it would have been like if we had been married. Was I therefore wrong to hope?

(Barnes 151-2)

Colet's narrative is not simply an alternative perspective on agreed-upon facts; it contests the facts themselves. She claims that Flaubert promised marriage, that he invited her to Croisset, that he praised her work. These claims contradict the documentary record as presented in earlier chapters. The reader is left with two incompatible storyworlds that cannot both be true. Significantly, Barnes does not resolve this contradiction. Colet's chapter is not marked as unreliable narration or wish-fulfillment fantasy. It is presented with the same narrative authority as Braithwaite's chapters. As Colet herself predicts:

I know what will become of us when we are both dead. Posterity will jump to conclusions [...] Someone—perhaps even Gustave himself—will burn my letters; his own (which I have carefully preserved, so much against my own best interests) will survive to confirm the prejudices of those too lazy to understand. (Barnes 152)

This passage explicitly thematizes the problem of authentication in historical reconstruction. The

documentary record survives selectively: Flaubert's letters remain, Colet's were burned. Posterity constructs a possible world (World WA) based on this incomplete evidence. But the true world (World WB) may have been quite different. And now, a century later, one has no way to authenticate which world corresponds to historical actuality.

This is a case of radical authentication failure. The normal procedures by which one determines truth in historical narrative (documentary evidence, corroboration, consistency) cannot resolve the contradiction between Worlds WA and WB. The reader is left with an open ontological structure: multiple possible worlds, no means of authentication, no way to determine which (if either) corresponds to actuality. The implications extend beyond the specific case of Colet. If one cannot authenticate even this relatively well-documented relationship between a famous writer and a published poet, both of whom left extensive written records, then what hope does one have of accessing the truth about more obscure historical figures or more private aspects of experience? The novel suggests that all historical reconstruction generates multiple possible worlds that cannot be definitively ranked or integrated.

Counterfactual and Apocryphal Worlds: The Biography That Was Not

Chapter nine, “The Flaubert Apocrypha,” is the novel’s most sustained exploration of counterfactual possible worlds. The chapter catalogs not only Flaubert’s fantasized alternative lives but also his unwritten books, including the novels, plays, and stories he planned but never completed. Braithwaite frames this material as essential to understanding Flaubert:

But what of the unled lives? These, perhaps, are more truly tantalising; these are the real apocrypha [...] It is not just the life that we know. It is not just the life that has been successfully hidden. It is not just the lies about the life, some of which cannot now be disbelieved. It is also the life that was not led. (Barnes 121)

This passage articulates a philosophy of biography grounded in possible worlds ontology. The real Flaubert is not simply the historical individual who lived from 1821 to 1880 but the modal entity who existed at the intersection of multiple possible lives. To understand Flaubert, one must understand not only what he did but what he might have done, the alternative selves he contemplated and rejected. The chapter traces the evolution of Flaubert’s fantasized lives chronologically:

At seventeen, he announces that he wants to spend his whole life in a ruined castle by the sea. At eighteen, he decides [...] he was born, he declares, to be Emperor of Cochin-China, to smoke 36-fathom pipes, to have 6,000 wives and 1,400 catamites [...] At

twenty, he still wants to become a muleteer [...] At twenty-four [...] he plans what to do with his life should his mother die as well: he would sell up everything and live in Rome, Syracuse or Naples [...] (Barnes 122–3)

Each of these statements generates a counterfactual world, a complete and consistent possible world in which Flaubert lives differently. These worlds are not merely fantasies (though they originate in Flaubert’s imagination); they represent genuine historical possibilities that were available to Flaubert at specific moments. The fact that he chose otherwise does not diminish their ontological status as possible worlds.

This passage articulates a key insight of possible worlds theory: actuality is always shadowed by possibility. Every life contains not only what happened but also what might have happened—the apocryphal, the counterfactual, the unrealized. Biography that attends only to actuality misses an essential dimension of human experience: the modal horizon of possibility within which choices are made and identities formed. Competing characterizations of Flaubert in the novel, in this regard, construct incompatible possible worlds that cannot be reconciled into a single coherent identity, thereby demonstrating that “Flaubert’s identity turns once more into a list of more or less arbitrary facets rather than a concrete entity” (Stott 93).

Significantly, these counterfactual lives cease around age thirty-five, when *Madame Bovary* is published: “At thirty-five, however, the apocryphal life, the not-life, begins to die away. The reason is clear: the real life has really begun” (Barnes 124). This observation suggests that the relationship between actual and possible worlds changes over the course of a life. In youth, the modal horizon is wide, many possible lives remain available. But as choices accumulate and possibilities foreclose, the actual life increasingly determines the modal space. By middle age, Flaubert has become what he is; the alternative selves have been definitively rejected. This temporal structure of possibility and actualization has important implications for biographical narrative. It suggests that biography should attend not only to what happened but to when possibilities foreclosed—to the moments when the modal horizon narrowed, and certain lives became unavailable. The “real” life emerges not simply through positive choices but through the progressive elimination of alternatives.

Counterfactual worlds are not ornamental but constitutive of narrative meaning. The modal structure of a narrative (its distribution of the actual and the possible) determines its thematic and existential significance. In *Flaubert’s Parrot*, the proliferation of unlived lives suggests that Flaubert’s actual life was not the inevitable unfolding of some essential self but rather one path among many, selected through a series of

contingent choices (or refusals to choose). Moreover, these counterfactual worlds are not confined to Flaubert’s consciousness; they structure Braithwaite’s narrative as well. Throughout the novel, Braithwaite generates hypothetical scenarios: what if Flaubert had married Louise Colet, what if Bouilhet had been rich and Flaubert poor, what if the railway had never been built, and what if Flaubert had finished *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Each question opens a counterfactual possible world that competes with the historical record for narrative attention. Braithwaite’s biography of Flaubert is not simply a reconstruction of what was but an exploration of what might have been, a mapping of the modal space surrounding Flaubert’s actual life. This proliferation of embedded possible worlds has important implications for biographical epistemology. It suggests that understanding a historical figure requires attention not only to what they did but to what they imagined, desired, feared, and rejected. The actual life is only one thread in a complex modal fabric; to grasp the life fully, one must attend to the entire fabric, including the threads that were never woven.

The chapter also catalogs Flaubert’s unwritten books (the novels and stories he planned but never completed), revealing a parallel literary universe of unrealized narratives. These phantom works include “Mycerinus” (1850) and “Une nuit de Don Juan” (1850), which reached the planning stage but was never written; “Anubis” (1850),

“My Flemish novel” (1850), about “the young girl who dies a virgin and a mystic” (Barnes 119); and “La Spirale” (1852–53), described as “a grand, metaphysical, fantastical and bawling novel” (Barnes 119). Additional unrealized projects encompassed a novel about chivalry (1853), a novel about insanity (1861), “Harel-Bey” (1860s), an Eastern story, a book about the Battle of Thermopylae (planned after *Bouvard et Pécuchet*), and “Under Napoleon III” or “A Parisian Household,” a novel about the Second Empire. This inventory of abandoned literary ambitions demonstrates the vast scope of Flaubert’s creative imagination and the significant gap between artistic conception and realization that characterizes his career. Braithwaite reflects on the significance of these unwritten books:

Do the books that writers don’t write matter? It’s easy to forget them, to assume that the apocryphal bibliography must contain nothing but bad ideas, justly abandoned projects, embarrassing first thoughts. It needn’t be so: first thoughts are often best [...] (Barnes 115)

This passage challenges a common assumption about literary history that what gets written is necessarily superior to what does not. Possible worlds theory suggests otherwise: the unwritten books are not inferior versions of the written ones but alternative possibilities that might have been equally valuable had they been realized. The literary canon is not the inevitable selection of the

best works but a contingent configuration determined by circumstances (time, money, health, encouragement) as much as by quality.

Moreover, the unwritten books haunt the written ones. Braithwaite notes that Flaubert’s “third project” from 1850, the story of a young girl who dies a virgin and mystic, may be “a vague forerunner of either *Madame Bovary* or *Un cœur simple*” (Barnes 119). This suggests that the actual novels contain traces of the possible novels—that *Madame Bovary* as one knows it is shadowed by the *Madame Bovary* that might have been written differently, earlier, in Flanders rather than Normandy. In possible worlds terms, the unwritten books function as accessible alternatives to the written ones. They occupy nearby possible worlds—worlds that differ from actuality only in Flaubert’s choices about which projects to pursue. These worlds are not radically different from ours (unlike, say, a world in which Flaubert never wrote at all), but they are different enough to generate alternative literary histories, alternative canons, alternative understandings of Flaubert’s achievement. One of the most poignant counterfactual worlds in the novel concerns the ending of *L’Éducation sentimentale*. Braithwaite reports Du Camp’s account of Flaubert’s regret:

A year after publication came the Franco-Prussian war, and it seemed to Gustave that the invasion and the débâcle at Sedan would have provided a grand, public and irrefutable conclusion to a novel which set

out to trace the moral failure of a generation.
(Barnes 116)

Du Camp then quotes Flaubert's detailed description of how the scene would have unfolded: Napoleon III, defeated and dejected, sitting in his carriage at a crossroads; a column of French prisoners passing by; one soldier recognizing the emperor and shouting, "Ah! There you are, you villain; we have been ruined by you!"; ten thousand men yelling insults and spitting on the carriage (Barnes 117). This counterfactual ending generates a complete possible world, a world in which *L'Éducation sentimentale* concludes differently. Braithwaite asks: "Should we mourn such a lost ending? And how do we assess it?" (Barnes 117). These questions are not merely rhetorical; they raise genuine issues about literary evaluation. How does one judge a text that does not exist? How does one compare an actual ending to a possible one? Braithwaite's answer is instructive:

Its appeal is clear: the fortissimo climax, the public conclusion to a nation's private failing. But does the book need such an ending? Having had 1848, do we need 1870 as well? Better to let the novel die away in disenchantment; better the downbeat reminiscing of two friends than a swirling salon-picture. (Barnes 117)

This judgment implicitly compares two possible worlds: World W1 (the novel as written, with its quiet ending) and World W2 (the novel with

Flaubert's imagined ending). Braithwaite concludes that W1 is superior that the actual ending is better than the counterfactual one. But this judgment is itself contingent and debatable. Du Camp might have preferred W2; other readers might as well. The point is not to determine which ending is really better but to recognize that literary value is always comparative and modal. One evaluates actual texts by comparing them (explicitly or implicitly) to possible alternatives to the book as it might have been written differently. Every editorial decision, every revision, every abandoned draft generates a possible world that shadows the actual text. The text the reader reads is not the only possible version but one version among many. This insight has profound implications for literary criticism. It suggests that interpretation should attend not only to what the text says but to what it might have said—to the alternative versions that were rejected, the roads not taken, the possibilities foreclosed. The meaning of a text emerges not simply from its actual configuration but from its relationship to the modal space of textual possibilities. This approach is valuable not because it licenses free speculation, but because it shows how literary meaning is shaped by acts of selection and exclusion. In a novel like *Flaubert's Parrot*, where lost drafts, unwritten books, contradictory evidence, and unrealized alternatives are central, interpretation must attend not only to what is actualized in the text but also to the suppressed or foreclosed

possibilities that give those actualizations their force.

The Inaccessible Actual: Braithwaite's World and Ellen's Story

One of the novel's most radical strategies concerns not Flaubert's life but Braithwaite's. For twelve chapters, Braithwaite narrates Flaubert's biography while revealing almost nothing about his own life. He mentions his wife Ellen only in passing, usually in contexts that suggest marital harmony. These references construct a possible world—call it World WB1—in which Braithwaite has a happy marriage to a bookish, compatible wife. This world is consistent with everything Braithwaite tells the reader for the first twelve chapters. Based on the principle of minimal departure, readers naturally assume that WB1 is the TAW, the world that is actual from Braithwaite's perspective. However, chapter thirteen, "Pure Story," reveals that WB1 is not the actual world but a carefully constructed fiction. The chapter begins with a shocking statement: "This is a pure story, whatever you may think" (Barnes 160). Braithwaite then reveals that Ellen had numerous affairs throughout their marriage, that she fell into despair, that she attempted suicide, and that Braithwaite as her doctor-husband switched off her life support, effectively killing her.

This revelation requires readers to reconstruct the novel's ontological structure. The

world the reader thought was actual (WB1: happy marriage) turns out to be a possible world constructed by Braithwaite's selective narration. The actual world (WB2: unhappy marriage, affairs, suicide, mercy killing) has been present all along but inaccessible to readers because Braithwaite has deliberately withheld information. In possible worlds terms, this structure creates a delayed authentication. For twelve chapters, readers lack the information necessary to determine which world is actual. Multiple possible worlds remain open:

WB1: Happy marriage (suggested by early references).

WB2: Unhappy marriage (the actual world, revealed in chapter thirteen).

WB3: No marriage (never explicitly ruled out until late in the novel).

WB4: Ellen is still alive (never explicitly ruled out until chapter thirteen).

Braithwaite's narration maintains this ontological uncertainty through strategic omission. He does not lie about Ellen—everything he says is technically true—but he withholds crucial information that would allow readers to authenticate the actual world. The text provides insufficient information to determine truth, leaving readers to navigate multiple possible worlds simultaneously (Doležel, *Heterocosmica* 143–45).

The novel's structure creates a parallel between Braithwaite's pursuit of Flaubert and his

avoidance of Ellen. Both quests concern authentication—determining what is true, what really happened, what the person was like. But the two quests move in opposite directions: Braithwaite obsessively pursues knowledge about Flaubert while deliberately avoiding knowledge about (or acknowledgment of) Ellen. This parallel is made explicit in chapter thirteen:

Books say: She did this because. Life says: She did this. Books are where things are explained to you; life is where things aren't. I'm not surprised some people prefer books. Books make sense of life. The only problem is that the lives they make sense of are other people's lives, never your own. (Barnes 168)

This passage articulates the novel's central epistemological claim: there are different kinds of access to different possible worlds. Other people's lives (like Flaubert's) can be studied, analyzed, explained; one can construct multiple possible worlds and attempt to authenticate them through documentary evidence. Braithwaite continues:

Perhaps I am too accepting [...] Remember the botched brothel-visit in *L'Éducation sentimentale* and remember its lesson. Do not participate: happiness lies in the imagination, not the act. Pleasure is found first in anticipation, later in memory. Such is the Flaubertian temperament. (Barnes 168-9)

This passage suggests that Braithwaite has adopted Flaubert's philosophy of non-

participation, the preference for imagined over experience. But the novel reveals this philosophy as a defense mechanism, a way of avoiding emotional engagement with his own life. By obsessing over Flaubert's life, Braithwaite avoids confronting the painful actualities of his own. In other words, Braithwaite prefers possible worlds to the actual world. He would rather speculate about which parrot is authentic than acknowledge that Ellen is dead. He would rather imagine Flaubert's unlived lives than confront his own. The pursuit of Flaubert is not simply intellectual curiosity but a form of mourning or rather, a form of deferred mourning, a way of avoiding grief by displacing attention onto someone safely dead and distant.

Even after Braithwaite reveals Ellen's story, she remains fundamentally inaccessible to him—and to the reader. He acknowledges this explicitly: "Ellen. My wife: someone I feel I understand less well than a foreign writer dead for a hundred years. Is this an aberration, or is it normal?" (Barnes 158). This statement articulates a paradox central to the novel's epistemology: one may understand distant historical figures (like Flaubert) better than one understands those closest. Why? Because historical figures can be studied objectively, from multiple perspectives, through documentary evidence. But intimate relationships resist this kind of objectification. Braithwaite attempts to reconstruct Ellen's inner life—to access her private possible worlds: "At

first I was hurt; at first I minded, I thought less of myself. My wife went to bed with other men: should I worry about that? [...] Ellen was always nice to me: should I worry about that?" (Barnes 163). But this reconstruction remains speculative, hypothetical. Braithwaite does not know why Ellen had affairs, whether she loved him, what she felt. He can construct multiple possible worlds to explain her behavior:

World WE1: Ellen had affairs because she was bored with Braithwaite.

World WE2: Ellen had affairs because she was interested enough.

World WE3: Ellen had affairs out of despair, like someone committing suicide.

World WE4: Ellen's affairs had no psychological explanation; she simply rushed into things.

Braithwaite cannot authenticate any of these worlds because Ellen never explained herself. Her inner life remains inaccessible—a set of possible worlds that cannot be integrated into a single coherent account. This inaccessibility extends to Ellen's suicide. Braithwaite constructs a possible world to explain it:

Ellen was about fifty when the mood began to come upon her [...] She had had a husband, children, lovers, a job. The children had left home; the husband was always the same. She had friends, and what are called interests [...] She wasn't religious. Why go on? (Barnes 166)

But this explanation is explicitly marked as hypothetical: "I have to hypothesise a little. I have to fictionalise" (Barnes 165). Braithwaite admits that he does not know why Ellen killed herself; he can only construct a plausible possible world to make sense of her action. The actual world of Ellen's consciousness remains forever inaccessible. This inaccessibility has profound implications for the novel's epistemology. If Braithwaite cannot access Ellen's inner life and he lived with her for decades, loved her, was a doctor trained in observation, then what hope do we have of accessing Flaubert's inner life across a century's distance? The novel suggests that all biographical knowledge is fundamentally limited: one can construct multiple possible worlds to explain people's actions, but one can never authenticate these worlds with certainty. The actual world of consciousness remains inaccessible; one has only the traces (letters, actions, objects) from which to construct hypothetical worlds.

Conclusion:

Flaubert's Parrot systematically demonstrates that the distinction between actual and possible worlds, so clear in philosophical theory, collapses in practice when one attempts to access the past or understand other minds. The novel presents the reader with multiple parrots that cannot be authenticated (one actual, but which?), multiple chronologies that cannot be integrated (all

possible, none privileged), multiple versions of characters that cannot be reconciled (Louise Colet, Flaubert himself), and multiple interpretations that cannot be ranked (was Braithwaite a murderer or a merciful husband?). In each case, what should be a simple matter of authentication, determining which possible world is actual, proves impossible. The normal procedures by which one determines truth (documentary evidence, institutional authority, empirical observation, textual comparison) fail to resolve ontological uncertainty.

This heterogeneity has profound implications for biography and historiography. If one cannot authenticate even simple material facts (which parrot?), then one certainly cannot authenticate complex psychological or motivational claims (why did Flaubert reject Louise Colet? why did Ellen have affairs?). The actual world of the past recedes beyond grasp; one has only the traces from which to construct multiple possible worlds, none of which can claim final authority. Wilson's analysis suggests that this epistemological position serves a larger aesthetic purpose: foregrounding "art as process, performance, and self-projection" (368) rather than as completed artifact. Barnes's novel extends this insight to historical worlds: the past, like fiction, is an autonomous semantic domain accessible only through textual mediation. One cannot compare reconstructions of the past to the past itself (which is gone); one can only compare

different reconstructions to each other. And since these reconstructions often prove incompatible, one is left with multiple possible pasts rather than a single actual one. The novel's most radical claim concerns the nature of biographical knowledge. Traditional biography assumes that the biographer's task is to discover the actual world of the subject's life to determine what really happened, what the person was really like. But Barnes demonstrates that biography is better understood as world-making: the construction of possible worlds from incomplete evidence.

Biography, then, is a form of fiction, not in the sense of being false, but in the sense of being a constructed possible world. The biographer selects, organizes, and interprets evidence to create a coherent narrative. But this narrative is one possible world among many that could be constructed from the same evidence. As the three chronologies demonstrate, Flaubert's life can be organized around artistic development, personal suffering, or technological modernity, each principle generates a different possible world, and none has ontological priority. This insight challenges the epistemological foundations of biographical writing. If biography is world-making rather than world-discovering, then one cannot evaluate biographies by asking whether they correspond to the actual past (which is inaccessible). Instead, one must evaluate them by asking whether they construct coherent, plausible, illuminating possible worlds. Truth becomes a

matter of internal consistency and explanatory power rather than correspondence to an independent reality.

Flaubert's Parrot belongs to what Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction"—postmodern novels that problematize the entire notion of historical knowledge (120). But Barnes's novel goes beyond typical postmodern skepticism about truth. Rather than simply asserting that one cannot know the past, the novel demonstrates how and why historical knowledge is problematic: because the past is accessible only through possible worlds constructed from incomplete evidence, and because multiple incompatible worlds can be constructed from the same evidence. The novel's recurrent epistemological concern suggests that the narrator "does not consider historical or biographical knowledge as an unproblematic category, but questions the ways in which we come to know the past" (Guignery 42). This is not relativism in the crude sense (all interpretations are equally valid). The novel clearly privileges some possible worlds over others. Braithwaite's careful scholarship, his attention to documentary evidence, his willingness to revise his views, all suggest that some reconstructions are more plausible, more coherent, more explanatorily powerful than others. The point is not that anything goes but that multiple well-supported possible worlds can coexist, and the reader often lacks the means to authenticate one as the actual world. This epistemology has important

implications for how one understands history and biography. It suggests that historical knowledge is inherently plural: not a single story but multiple possible stories, each with its own coherence and plausibility. The task of the historian or biographer is not to discover the one true story but to construct the most plausible possible world, while acknowledging that other worlds remain possible.

The novel's conclusion perfectly encapsulates its possible worlds poetics. When Braithwaite finally learns the truth about the parrots—that there were fifty, that both museums chose from the same collection, that most have been sold or destroyed—he responds with an emotion that captures the novel's epistemological stance: "I felt pleased and disappointed at the same time" (Barnes 189). This ambivalent response acknowledges both the satisfaction of solving the mystery (pleased) and the recognition that the solution is not a solution (disappointed). Braithwaite has learned the truth: there is no way to authenticate the parrot. But this truth is itself disappointing because it forecloses the possibility of ever accessing the actual world of Flaubert's study, the actual parrot that sat on his desk. The phrase "pleased and disappointed at the same time" also describes the novel's attitude toward possible worlds generally. One is pleased by the proliferation of possibilities, the multiple chronologies, the alternative lives, the competing versions. This proliferation is intellectually stimulating, aesthetically rich, philosophically

profound. But one is also disappointed by the loss of certainty, the collapse of authentication, the recognition that one cannot access the actual past. The novel ends not with resolution but with acceptance of irresolution. This irresolution reflects Barnes's fundamental conviction about the relationship between fiction and truth. As Roberts argues, Barnes's "experiments with form create a text with more universal appeal and with a greater ability to resonate the underlying truths of Flaubert's life" (36). The parrots remain multiple; the past remains inaccessible; Ellen remains mysterious. One inhabits a world of possibilities rather than certainties.

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