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Literature and Journalism in Julian Barnes' "Letters from London"

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Abstract

Well known as an accomplished novelist, Julian Barnes had also a prodigious journalistic career which proved that he had the talent to adopt and adapt both ways of writing and reflecting reality. The peak of his media experience was the period of more than five years spent as the correspondent in Great Britain for the American magazine *The New Yorker*. The journalistic essays addressed to the public across the Atlantic were later gathered between the covers of a book called *Letters from London*, a collection of texts that reveal the fascinating way in which a literary writer observe and decode reality in order to explain it to a public that is rather unfamiliar with the actuality in a country far away.

Keywords: Julian Barnes, literature, journalism, essays

The connections between journalism and literature have been a certainty ever since the occurrence of the very first forms of press in which several writers were involved to a greater or lesser extent. The temptation of becoming a so-called "chronicler of the moment" and the sense of urgency specific to journalism seemed to prove irresistible to the masters of the pen, and the examples are numerous and relevant, from Charles Dickens and Mark Twain to Ernst Hemingway, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer and Hunter S. Thompson, to highlight only a few of the many of those who experienced both facets of writing. The similarities and differences of these two forms of expression were analyzed in several studies throughout the history of this cohabitation and the mutual influence of literature and journalism has been stressed by the theoreticians who dealt with notions as veracity, verisimilitude, and authenticity: "Over the past three centuries and more, thousands of American men and women have sought to capture truth in words. Many have published their accounts in newspapers and magazines aimed at mass audiences, usually following the conventions of something that has come to be called journalism. (...) Reporters and other journalists have frequently chosen material based on accepted news values, such as timeliness and impact, and packaged this material in conventional ways"¹. Mark Canada, a reputed professor of English at the Indiana University Kokomo, emphasizes also the boundaries and demarcation lines to be observed when referring to the interconnection between journalism and literature, evoking the structural and formal distinctions between the media and literary styles and the ways in which the two of them make a representation of reality: "Other American writers, equally concerned with reporting truths to their readers, have published their writing in books and literary magazines, where journalistic criteria and conventions did not apply. Literature, a loose term for this kind of writing, shows signs of other sorts of conventions— those of

¹ Mark Canada, *Literature and Journalism. Inspirations, Intersections, and Inventions from Ben Franklin to Stephen Colbert*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2013, p.2

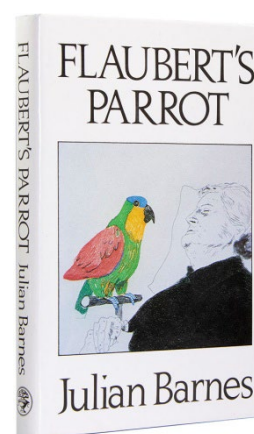
plot, character, rhyme, and rhythm, for instance— but displays a great deal of freedom, as well”². The main distinctions are to be observed in the way in which a journalist and a literary writer relate themselves to time and truth and the linguistic freedom they have at their disposal in order to reflect facts and thoughts: “Writers of novels, short stories, plays, and poems generally do not have to write about timely subjects or present their information in any defined order. They don’t even have to stick to facts. Even the authors of nonfiction writing, such as essays and autobiographical narratives, have wide latitude when it comes to language and approach. Their audiences, which tend to be smaller than those of newspapers and general-interest magazines, expect and prefer a much looser approach to truth telling. In short, we might say that journalism reports timely facts in prescribed formats for mass audiences, while literature explores timeless truths in a variety of artistic ways for select readers”³.

Both literary writers and journalists are aware of these differences but the obstacles, when deciding to change sides, are not insurmountable and, more importantly, certain inter-influences can prove beneficial for improving the ways of expressing in both media reporting and literary phrasing. For instance, writers enrich the means of expression for journalism and the men of letters borrow the sense of conciseness from the media style. But beyond a shadow of a doubt a writer remains a writer even in a context gravitating around the rules of factual reality and newsworthiness and their articles are as close as possible to be genuinely considered literature per se. The style of a literary writer would come to the surface sooner or later and their original ways of conveying and wrapping opinions and ideas represent a trademark of literature which can primarily improve journalistic techniques. And in this regard Julian Barnes is yet another illustrious example of a journalist and literary writer whose media products were to be afterwards assembled in a book, “Letters from London”, a collection of his correspondences for *The New Yorker* (1990-1995).



Image 1. Photo: www.julianbarnes.com

Born in Leicester on January 19, 1946, Julian Barnes was educated in London and Oxford. The future novelist began a career in journalism at the *Times Literary Supplement* and in 1977 was appointed as contributing editor for the *New Review*. Then he worked for other publications such as *New Statesman* magazine, *Sunday Times*, *The Observer*, before being hired as correspondent in London for *The New Yorker* in 1990. Meanwhile, he established himself as a reputed writer with the novels *Metroland* (1980), *Before She Met Me* (1982), and mostly *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), an acclaimed book which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction and won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize (1985) and the Prix Médicis (1986)⁴. Perceived as both a novel and a collection of essays, *Flaubert's Parrot* is considered by Sebastian Groes and Sean Matthews an exercise of fiction after years of dealing with the factual “tyranny” imposed by the norms and rules of journalism: “Barnes elaborates and expands upon his previously published journalism in the process of writing *Flaubert's Parrot* because he thinks journalism is sometimes too much rooted in reality. Fiction offers the possibility to create symbols, metaphors, and multiple layers of meaning not easily represented in journalism or that too often are disregarded in real life”⁵.



² Mark Canada, *Literature and Journalism. Inspirations, Intersections, and Inventions from Ben Franklin to Stephen Colbert*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2013, p.2

³ Ibid.

⁴ <https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/julian-barnes>

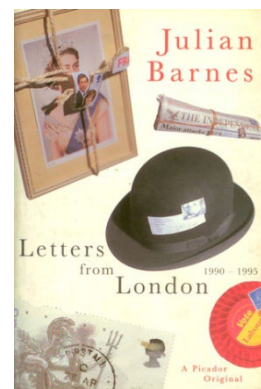
⁵ Sebastian Groes and Sean Matthews, *Julian Barnes*, Continuum, New York, 2011, p.36

Image 2. Photo:www.biblio.co.nz

Barnes' most acclaimed book, who paved his way to literary stardom at the international level, triggered an ardent debate upon the genre to be attached to, some critics considering it was a proper novel, others labeling it as a volume of essays, which links the author again with the journalism of opinion, a stylistic debate that Cornelia Stott decided to rather disregard in her book "The Sound of Truth": *Constructed and Reconstructed Lives in English Novels since Julian Barnes's "Flaubert's Parrot"*: "Critics have shied away from being categorical about the book's genre, but the terms 'biographical' and 'biography' have nevertheless kept reappearing in reviews. However, the approach of this analysis is not to resolve the genre question. It aims to show that reading 'Flaubert's Parrot' as an experimental and thought-provoking Flaubert biography which uses many different means of portrayal yields the most interesting results"⁶.

Julian Barnes published afterwards *Staring at the Sun* (1986), *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* (1989), *Talking It Over* (1991), winner of the French Prix Fémina, *The Porcupine* (1992), and *Letters from London* (1995), the collection of journalistic and literary essays followed by *Cross Channel* (1996) *England, England* (1998), *Love, etc* (2000), *Arthur and George* (2005), *Something to Declare: French Essays* (2002), *The Pedant in the Kitchen* (2003), originally a series of articles for *The Guardian*, *Nothing To Be Frightened Of* (2008), *Pulse* (2011), *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), winner of the Man Booker Prize for Fiction, *The Noise of Time* (2016) and *The Only Story* (2018)⁷.

Image 3. Photo:www.goodsreads.com



Letters from London is a suggestive example of journalistic and literary creativity, a fusion which comes for Barnes both natural and paradoxical: "Well, to be honest I think I tell less truth when I write journalism than when I write fiction. I practise both those media, and I enjoy both, but, to put it crudely, when you are writing journalism your task is to simplify the world and render it comprehensible in one reading; whereas when you are writing fiction your task is to reflect the fullest complications of the world, to say things that are not as straight-forward as might be understood from reading my journalism and to produce something that you hope will reveal further layers of truth on a second reading"⁸. And Barnes displays, in *Letters from London*, a series of journalistic essays on politics, arts, and media that are written in an obvious literary manner, a sharp, humorous and witty radiography of the British society in the first half of the 1990s: "Relishing the role of journalist, Barnes anatomises three British Prime Ministers (Margaret Thatcher, John Major, and Tony Blair as PM-in-waiting) and much of the book focuses on the intrigues, pomposity, and farce of politics, but in these epistolary essays he also ranges over transport, the City, chess, and TV. Barnes gives one account of himself campaigning with the actress turned Labour Party Member of Parliament Glenda Jackson and another of reading the memoirs of the Conservative Prime Minister Thatcher, whom he characterises as running the country like a parade-ground sergeant-major (LL, p. 241). The book covers a variety of English subjects from the royal family to the Rushdie fatwa and it is hard not to see it as contributing to the thoughts that would issue in 'England, England' in 1999"⁹.

A declared supporter of the Labour Party, Julian Barnes depicts the political turmoil of the time with incredibly clever sarcasm, and his irony isn't aimed only at the Conservative representatives, but also,

⁶ Cornelia Stott, *"The Sound of Truth": Constructed and Reconstructed Lives in English Novels since Julian Barnes's "Flaubert's Parrot"*, Tectum Verlag Marburg, 2010, p.72

⁷ <https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/julian-barnes>

⁸ Shusha Guppy, "The Art of Fiction CLXV", *The Paris Review*, 165, 2000, <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/562/the-art-of-fiction-no-165-julian-barnes>

⁹ Peter Childs, *Julian Barnes*, Manchester University Press, 2011, p.12

when the attitudes and statements demand it, at the members and leaders of the Labour Party as well. This is a proof of objectivity specific to journalism, while the means of expression and the periodical flashes of subjectivity are specific to literature itself. But the most pungent criticism and the most sarcastic remarks are nevertheless reserved for the Tory administration: “Barnes repeatedly denounces the attitude of the British government from 1989 to 1993, which he variously describes as ‘inactivity and glacial indifference’ (p. 294), ‘conciliatory passivity’ (p. 296), ‘torpor’ (p. 300), ‘apathy’ (p. 301), ‘Torpid pragmatism laced with a little upside-down racism’ (p. 302) and ‘active indifference’ (p. 303)”¹⁰.

All these 15 epistolary essays were originally published in *The New Yorker* and they were addressed to a highly educated, well read American public for whom, although not entirely familiar with the events taking place across the Atlantic, Great Britain was not just another country (“about the size of Oregon”), but a geographical and cultural space of real interest, an area of the world from where they wanted to receive information and opinions in an elevated and postmodern manner. And that is exactly what Barnes delivers, a set of “letters” that describe and decode with frequent glimmers of genius facts taking place in the UK, a world far away from the readers of the American magazine who, as Vanessa Guignery notices, are not quite familiar with the customs and events of Great Britain. The 15 articles are “witty and insightful reports on late Thatcherite and post-Thatcherite England”¹¹, “a mixture of political analysis, commentary on the arts, and contemporary history”¹² that, as Merritt Moseley emphasizes, have the power to fascinate because “Barnes is a good political commentator, not just because he is well informed, with an original approach to his analysis, but also because of his style. His descriptions come alive”¹³. The essays tackle a wide range of topics, from Margaret Thatcher’s fall from grace and John Major’s arrival to the relationship between the press and the Royal Family, the unexpected rediscovery of mazes in UK, the controversial selling of Harrods, the fall of Lloyd’s and the opening of the Channel Tunnel (Eurotunnel) on May 6, 1994.

By re-examining “the supposedly” familiar environment, Julian Barnes recalls that he found himself, during the contract with *The New Yorker*, in the position “to be a foreign correspondent in my own country”¹⁴. His most heavy fear was that, by being constrained to reflect on a regular basis the events taking place around him in a (more or less) journalistic manner, he would miss the big picture delivered only by the literary approach, in his opinion. In other words, to not be able to write novels anymore. But “as he has published two novels and a collection of stories in the five years covered by ‘Letters from London’, there seems no sign that reporting has hampered his fiction writing”¹⁵ and this journalistic experience had some positive consequences for the writer himself, as Merritt Moseley concludes: “Meanwhile, disclosed an additional talent, for writing thoughtful commentary on contemporary life, which is both entertaining and informative”¹⁶. Julian Barnes’ ways of reporting are not to be done by everyone, they are intellectual to the core and not easy to receive for an average audience, because a literary writer uses unpredictable associations of ideas, cultural references, symbolic layers, original semantics and unusual words, even when commenting on “mundane” subjects: “His method of attack was to compose cunning reports as artfully layered as roses (or onions), leading stubborn and provincial browsers along the byways of late- and post-Thatcher England”¹⁷. Often a sophisticated manner of reflecting the facts taking place around him clearly reveals his love and admiration for French language and literature (Barnes describes himself as “an English

¹⁰ Vanessa Guignery, *The Fiction of Julian Barnes*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p.99

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.97

¹² Merritt Moseley, *Understanding Julian Barnes*, University of South Carolina Press, 1997, p.167

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Robert Birnbaum, *Interview with Julian Barnes*, 1999, <http://www.julianbarnes.com/resources/archive/birnbaum.html>

¹⁵ Merritt Moseley, *Understanding Julian Barnes*, University of South Carolina Press, 1997, p.169

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Eden Ross Lipson, *Letters From London*, *The New York Times*, Aug. 6, 1995,

<https://www.nytimes.com/1995/08/06/books/letters-from-london.html>

Francophile” and is obviously obsessed with Gustave Flaubert). His intelligent, ironic and erudite techniques of “reporting” have a tremendous power of attraction on readers who sometimes pay more attention to the style than the information revealed. There is a vivid depiction in *Letters from London* of an eventful era through the eyes of a literary writer turned journalist who has the ability to express emotions, opinions and ideas in relation to a vast array of events in a manner which not only fascinates, but also persuades and, most of all, enlightens.

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