# *Je Sois Autre Moy-Mesmes*: Generic Blending and French Heritage in Julian Barnes's *Levels of Life*

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Julian Barnes has always been a creative postmodern writer in the sense of cultivating different genres in an innovative manner and forging a rather personal style. He has gone from writing noir novels under the pen name of Dan Kavanagh—a clear homage to his wife—to collections of journalistic essays (*Letters from London*, 1995) or essays of literary criticism (*Through the Window: Seventeen Essays (and One Short Story)*, 2012), a practice in essayistic style that is essential for his fictional work. In fact, *Keeping an Eye Open*, a meaningfully titled collection of noteworthy essays chiefly about French painters, was published in May 2015. Moreover, his oeuvre is well known for two unique books: the fictional biography *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), and his collection of prose pieces—some fiction, others resembling essays—*A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989). Similarly, *Arthur & George* (2005) is a re-creation of an historical episode that occurred in the life of one of the icons of Englishness, the renowned detective writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. In addition, Barnes has written short stories, such as *Pulse* (2011), and has contributed to less conventional genres, such as *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (2008), an uncharacteristic autobiographical and philosophical essay on mortality and death, published months before the loss of his wife.

So, how can one best classify *Levels of Life*, if at all? Emma Brockes regards it as "a hard book to describe; no summary will capture the experience of reading it—the way in which, as the slim volume progresses, something not quite central to your vision builds, so that by the end you are blindsided by a quiet devastation" (n. pag). Barnes uses a tripartite structure of narratives unconventionally linked by thematic motifs related to rising and sinking in ballooning and love. In an attempt to pigeonhole it merely for the sake of highlighting its singular novelty, namely an unprecedented and smooth transition from real-life French characters from the past to his own putative

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grief memoir, we must start with a brief clarification of the main genre concepts of memoir and essay, which will inevitably lead us to a revision of the French tradition epitomized by Montaigne as his main source of inspiration.

## Postmodern Fiction and Blurred Genres

First, in order to intertwine postmodernist fiction with the various interactions between autobiography and fiction, we can turn to Linda Hutcheon, who coined the term *historiographic metafiction* as a form of the novel genre (5) and spotlights *Flaubert's Parrot* specifically as an example of postmodern novels that "teach us the fact and its consequences [...] [that] the institutions of the past, its social structures and practices could be seen, in one sense, as social texts" (16). She concedes that the genre categories are regularly challenged: "Fiction looks like biography [...], autobiography [...], history. Theoretical discourse joins forces with autobiographical memoir and Proustian reminiscence" (60). Therefore, she considers that fictional writing causes doubts about the connections between reality and text, past and present.



Second, in this sense, Jean-François Lyotard defines the postmodern condition as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv) set within a large methodological framework, so these global cultural narrative schemas will be replaced by *les petits récits* or localized narratives, such as the history of everyday life. In fact, this history of everyday life, specifically autobiography, "has become the quintessential postmodern genre (if it is a genre, which postmodernism cannot know)" (Saunders 4). Similarly, we perceive that reductionist or inadequate canonical notions have led to a redefinition of terms, as Robert Lehnert provided in his insightful discussion of the concepts of memoir and autobiography, as well as fiction and non-fiction: "A systematic overview proves more difficult, with contemporary definitions found in standard reference books tending to contradict each other" (762). Still, in accordance with Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir's illuminating volume, these fuzzy borderlines are not solely inherent to postmodernism, considering that "generic differences and questions about the definition of the genre of autobiography are inevitably constant preoccupations for anyone writing on autobiography" (3). Therefore, for the purposes of the present study, in defining the field's central term of *autobiography*, I shall be using this term bearing in mind the imprecise limits of the life writing style, and shall not attempt to establish state-of-the art definitions of these terms, but rather adhere to the most inclusive usages. According to their introduction to the concepts of *life writing* and *life narrative*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson consider *memoir* and *autobiography* encompassed in the term *life writing* for written forms of the autobiographical (4), with a life narrator who usually employs the first person (7), even if the innovative forms of biographical writing emerged in the past two decades "shuttle between the fictive and the autobiographical" (8), as in the case of *Levels of Life*.

Indeed, Barnes's opening nonfiction piece, "The Sin of Height," features true-life

anecdotes of Englishman Fred Burnaby (1842-85), a soldier and adventurer who crossed the Channel in a hot-air balloon in 1882; Gaspard-Félix Tournachon (1820-1910), known as Nadar, a celebrated French photographer who took the first aerial photographs and "who first put two things together" (the motto found on the first pages of the three stories)—the two things being here hot-air ballooning and photography—and the most popular actress in the world, the divine Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923), another 'balloonatic.' The second, quasi-fictional section, "On the Level," tells of a fanciful romance between the English soldier and the godly actress, which introduces a style of fictionalized biography that is fairly familiar to Barnes's work. By contrast, and as the central piece of the triptych, the third piece, "The Loss of Depth," is a peculiar autobiographical depiction of Barnes himself as an uxorious man trying to come to terms with the loss of his wife: "We were together for thirty years. I was thirty-two when we met, sixty-two when she died. The heart of my life; the life of my heart" (*Levels of Life* 68). Many echoes from the first two texts reappear in the third, which is almost double the length of the two previous ones, with recurring allusions to ballooning and Nadar's aerial photography (84), along with Burnaby's and Bernhardt's fictitious romance (108), and the actress's personality (84-87).



If "one of his 'key motivations' is to experiment with new narrative forms" (Guignery, "History in Question(s)" 57), an outstanding aspect of such experimentation is linked to what Peter Childs defines as *fabulation*: "To write not just fiction that seems fresh to him but fiction which reinvents the novel itself. This is the element of fabulation that comes through the novels he has written under his own name, characterised by inventiveness, and a scepticism towards concepts like truth, history, and reality" (9). Consequently, Barnes's determination to offer a postmodern vision of unstable history in these aforementioned works, which humorously mingle history with fiction, truth, and art, is a constant exercise. Thus, in the two first pieces of *Levels of Life*, he has the virtue of blurring the limits of the intimate portrayal of historical characters such as Sarah Bernhardt, a near-memoir vision that steers away from the strict documentation inherent to *History*: "History properly claims the authority of documentary record. Memoir, especially in recent times, angles forward with strong claims for the individual voice. History charges the big picture, memoir offers the intimate portrait" (Hampl and May 3-4), even though both the historian and the memoirist share the same "blank spaces" where history intersects with imagination.

In his eagerness to play with the objective and imaginative truth, Barnes himself has confessed, "Biographies in a way ought to be more boring. Biographies make people's lives more interesting than they probably were" (Guignery, "History in Question(s)" 54). Perhaps his ultimate goal in *Levels of Life* is to create an autobiographical portrait in the third story; nonetheless, the author has denied this in the past: "All right, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* isn't Barnes's autobiography, but it's certainly autobiographical, and the selective stories he tells about his childhood, his brother, his parents, his grandparents are all sharp, vivid, funny, unsparing but not

unkind" (Jones 32). If apart from that, as Peter Childs notes, "his novels [...] are also often formally unusual and almost perversely experimental" (5), one of the dilemmas we are faced with is to discern to which field(s) the game between history and reality in *Levels of Life* belongs: "this new project crosses different genres, blending, with the author's customary expertise, history, fictionalised biography, and tough, clear-sighted memoir" (Jonathan Barnes 198). However, Barnes supplies no justification for this unannounced construction.

Could we claim then that this book is, *malgré lui*, a new attempt at writing another atypical mode of life writing, "given the extraordinary elasticity of autobiographical experimentation" (Miller 545)? We should recognize that the author himself has until now been opposed to any attempt at being pigeonholed: "Barnes says that this book is not his autobiography, but it is the closest the reader will come at this point to having anything autobiographical of his to read" (O'Connor 105). Nevertheless, with regard to autobiography, it is paramount to refer to Cornelia Stott's study of some of Barnes's books, in which she deals precisely with postmodernism and biography, classifying *Flaubert's Parrot* as "Setting a New Standard in Biography," and *Metroland* in the section of "Negotiating Fiction and Autobiography:" "Metafictional signposting as well as the experimental use of biography traits in novels and novelistic traits in biographies abound and are difficult to categorise" (212). It is precisely this double recreation that Barnes achieves in *Levels of Life*.



In turn, in *Through the Window: Seventeen Essays (and One Short Story)*, Barnes includes the essay "Regulating Sorrow" (215-27), in which, although he never mentions his own loss, he does already employ the term *grief-struck* (216, 220, 224). The essay focuses on spousal bereavement and compares the "widow memories" of literary couples: Joyce Carol Oates (widowed after forty-seven years) and Joan Didion (married for forty years). Significantly, the dust jacket describes *Levels of Life* as a Biography/Memoir. In an effort to be even more specific, we may regard its main theme as a rare variation of "a very popular subgenre—the confessional memoir provoked by the death of a parent or spouse" (Lodge 184) or the "grief memoir" (Prodromou 57).

Yet, the unique, original nature of Barnes's literary experimentation lies in transgressing borders and thereby highlighting the chronological gap among the three stories as well as the choice of historical characters that are completely outside of Barnes's background. It is an unusual game of displacement that runs the risk of estranging readers-cum-confidants through his conversational prose style. However, the shift from the fictional to the factual—from the true and imagined past of Sarah Bernhardt, Burnaby, and Nadar, to Barnes's painful present—is nevertheless an unusual, faultless transition, mostly due to repeated thematic motifs and to two different writing techniques: common language, a metaphorical continuity, and a progressive sequence from objectiveness to a more personal stance. In his tale of widowerhood, in search of new metaphors to convey his deep sorrow, Barnes laments the lack of vocabulary to express his feelings and scorns the usual euphemisms,

complaining that the English language has no specific terms such as the German *Sehnsucht*, meaning "the longing for something" (*Levels of Life* 112). Hence, Barnes testifies to the ineffability of pain, taking the rationalization of his grief as his subject matter. Not only do English concepts seem deficient and lacking to him, for as he puts it, "I did already know that only the old words would do: death, grief, sorrow, sadness, heartbreak" (71), but even grammar fails: "the grammar, like everything else, has begun to shift" (108). Indeed, in an attempt to renew linguistic expressiveness—"We have lost the old metaphors, and must find new ones" (96)—he creates a lucid approach in dialogue with the reader. As a result, with his noted and typical sarcasm, he bitterly states: "Someone I had only met twice wrote to tell me that a few months previously he had 'lost his wife to cancer' (another phrase that jarred: compare 'We lost our dog to gypsies' or 'He lost his wife to a commercial traveller')" (83). Consequently, alongside the repeated term *grief-struck* in the most literal sense of the word, he ventures to coin neologisms such as *grief-work* or its derivative *grief-workers*, filled with connotations of the never-ending endeavour involved in the process of grieving. He dissects the down-to-earth landscape of sorrow like a mantra and insists on his *grief* as a keyword, by creating an allegory of uncomplicated metaphors related to ballooning, "*gasbag, ballast, valve-line*" (88), inextricably connected to the movements of ascending and descending (*go down* is one of the most frequent expressions throughout, in a figurative sense or not) to *earth* or *ground*: "Grief is vertical—and vertiginous—while mourning is horizontal" (87-88). In all of those motifs, ballooning figures always as a vehicle of freedom.



Even before his wife's death, Barnes's recurrent themes have always been those he fears the most: "'The usual things: death, pain, loneliness.' These deepest anxieties seem to encapsulate one set of concerns that run through Barnes's work" (Childs 4). Certainly, after his wife's passing, in his later opus he turns to memory, "the workings and mechanisms of retrospection, recollection, and remembrance" (4), whilst his writings reveal, with great reserve, an increasing pessimism. To cite a few examples, there are the last two lines of *The Sense of an Ending*, an opus filled with remorse and regret: "There is accumulation. There is responsibility. And beyond these, there is unrest. There is great unrest" (Barnes 150). Likewise, "Marriage Lines," a short story in the collection *Pulse* (120-27), tells of a recently widowed man who returns to a Scottish island where he and his wife used to holiday, only to discover that he is unable to assuage his grief (again the haunting keyword): "But he was not in charge of grief. Grief was in charge of him. And in the months and years ahead, he expected grief to teach him many other things as well. This was just the first of them" (127). Related to this, in an earlier article, Sue Sorensen compares A.S. Byatt to Julian Barnes, who meditated on death more pragmatically in *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984): "Barnes does not, however, attempt to represent death directly, as Byatt does. He concedes the limits of language and gives no vigorous indication that he argues with the construction of death as a void" (121). Pragmatism or not, he has not yielded to the temptation of exposing their death, but rather outlined the expressible part of

his and their intimacy since then. Consequently, in *Levels of Life*, he neither mentions the name of his late wife nor does he cite episodes of their life together, but focuses on the process of his own solitary distress.

## French Heritage

Does this perhaps mean that the more intimate tone of Barnes's late oeuvre is counteracted by a type of restraint or *pudeur*—"the Montaignesque element in literature," which in turn is intertwined with literary postmodernism (Marchi 584)? Montaigne's approach has promised the reader, "*c'est moy que je peins*" ("it is myself that I portray"; 2), even if he then desired to create "*une arrière boutique toute nostre*" ("a back shop all to ourselves"), stated "*Je Sois Autre Moy-Mesmes*" ("I am different myself") and refused to share his innermost secrets with the reader: "Montaigne lui-même autorise cette hypothèse, en révélant, indirectement, qu'il ne s'est pas peint 'tout entier', ni 'tout nu'" ("Montaigne himself authorises this hypothesis, revealing, indirectly, that his self-portrayal is neither 'complete' nor 'completely naked'"; Gaspari 42). In order to explore Montaigne's influence on Barnes more deeply, we must consider Thomas Jones's observation of "an essayistic quality to much of Barnes's fiction, and many of the pieces that he (or his publisher) categorises as stories, or chapters of novels, or entire novels, might more conventionally be classified as essays" (31). Before all else, a wider concept of the essay genre must be taken into account: "*Essai* in French is different from 'essay' in English; [...] 'essay' in English is strictly nonfictional, whereas *essai* in French is a much broader term—it's not quite *jeu d'esprit*, but it can be something broadly imaginative" (Freiburg 44). Undoubtedly, *Levels of Life* belongs to this French concept also in its etymological sense of *exigere* (in English, *examine* or *test*).



## Montaigne's *Essais*

The wider French concept—the French verb *essayer*, meaning 'to attempt' or 'to experiment'—is undoubtedly where Barnes's imaginative notion of truth and fiction should be placed, following the model of his favourite philosopher: "It was precisely this interest in documenting uncertainty and change that led Montaigne to give his writings the name *essai*" (Fernald 169). Montaigne is the most cited author, slightly more than Barnes's beloved Flaubert, in his previous essay on death, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*. Indeed, he evoked his admiration for the creator of the *essai* genre, whom he discovered as a student at Oxford (39). His passion for the French thinker even led him to visit the writer's tower outside Bordeaux (146-47) and inspired him to coin the neologisms *Montaignean* and *Montaignery* (122, 181).

Montaigne is undoubtedly a clear source of stylistic inspiration for Barnes. On the one hand, his *Essais* create a hybrid space inhabited by historical background

and autobiographical elements: "Memorable anecdotes (*petites histoires*) are set against the common thread or context of the *Essais* (*le grand récit*), the long fabric of Montaigne's self-portrait" (Losse 1066). On the other, Montaigne's mode of expression lies in a common language because he equated rhetorical eloquence with deception, and he mistrusted words in the same way as Barnes. This "pure conversational prose style" (Koutsantoni 32), so far removed from the scribbler's style (Barnes, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* 169), is a way in which to build the close interaction between essayist and reader: "Like written *Lives*, he offered up *Essais* as a living object, its enigmatic title the first sign of its novelty, which with the reader is meant to dialogue and develop the power of judgment" (Calhoun 75). Thus, *Levels of Life*, particularly the third narrative, appeals to the reader as a faithful and silent confidant, sharing the author's loss in the straightforward manner of Montaigne, this "compendious writer" (Barnes, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* 42). Hence, Barnes addresses the reader directly using *we* and *you* in the same conversational way; for example: "So how do you feel?" (*Levels of Life* 77), or "We grieve in character" (70). Unlike traditional life writing, in which the author-narrator commonly provides narrative coherence, Barnes reveals abundant autobiographical details to the reader in which he makes use of fragmentation, "a common technique in postmodern writing, but it acquires a different function if this postmodern writing is supposedly non-fictional [...] The reader's interpretation is never definite" (Lehnert 790). In fact, Montaigne's style shows a lack of logical progression from one chapter to the next as if in deliberate disorder, with a variety of digressions and recollections: "The anecdote lies at the heart of both historical and fictional narrative" (Losse 1055-56). In this regard, we can again note Montaigne as a forebear: "Despite the presence of autographical elements in the essays, they are peppered with fragments of imagined life stories as well" (Kritzman, "Montaigne and the Crisis of Autobiography" 51). Surely Barnes has drawn inspiration from these Montaignean writing techniques.



Finally, broadly speaking, another similarity between Barnes and Montaigne is that death is one of the recurring themes throughout the Frenchman's oeuvre, which is what led him to entitle chapter nineteen in Book I "Que Philosopher, c'est apprendre à mourir" ("That to philosophize is to learn to die"; 56-67). We should keep in mind that "[f]or Montaigne, the essay form becomes a way of survival [...] Autobiography, as opposed to the writing of the essay that Montaigne conceives of it, is a kind of synthesis that makes up a life and situates it beyond the precipice of death" (Kritzman, "Montaigne and the Crisis of Autobiography" 50), because for him, the work of the imagination is also a work of mourning (Kritzman, *The Fabulous Imagination* 18). Barnes is also a keen observer of the land of death, which becomes a haunting obsession since his wife's passing.

## All Things French

As is common to Barnes's entire oeuvre, this book overflows with allusions to all things French. This is especially true of the first story, in which a selection of writers are mentioned, including Jules Verne (*Levels of Life* 10), Victor Hugo (10, 13-14, 21), Baudelaire and Gérard de Nerval (14), Théodore de Banville (17), Balzac (23), Gautier (24), and Edmond de Goncourt (24); as well as some painters, such as Manet, Douanier Rousseau, and Odilon Redon (22). To a lesser extent, the same is true for the second and third narratives, in which Francophiles such as Henry James (34) or Turgenev (35) are mentioned, as well as Cocteau (72), Sartre (112), the painters Bonnard (99-100) and Odilon Redon (101-02), in addition to Ford Madox Ford (102), some of them due to their shared trait of uxoriousness.

In this section, after highlighting the presence of some of these real-life personae, Nadar and Sarah Bernhardt, who have become the protagonists of the first two stories, I will focus on two French writers, Alphonse Daudet and Jules Renard, and their diaries as crucial sources of stylistic inspiration for the final narrative: "The inclination towards journals and correspondences may be partly explained by the fact that they are fascinating documents not only about the life and work of its authors, but also about the literary and cultural context of time" (Guignery, "A Preference for Things Gallic" 45). Indeed, Guignery has always insisted on Barnes's particular fascination and engagement with French writers of the nineteenth century.



Thanks to the vicissitudes of life, Renard wrote a four-page article in his journal in 1898 after Daudet's death, "où j'ai résumé les impressions que m'a laissées Daudet" ("where I summarized the impression Daudet left me with"; 470). On the other hand, Nadar wrote his chapter reflections "La première épreuve de photographie aérostatique" ("The first aerostatic photography attempt") with a very flattering preface by Léon Daudet, who was Alphonse's son (75-98). Then, according to Léon Daudet, Nadar inspired Alphonse Daudet's character Caoudal in his novel *Sapho* (1884) (Barnes in Note 74). Furthermore, Renard noted in his journal his awe of the actress Sarah Bernhardt (281) and her "llama eyes" (527). Despite feeling so deeply captivated by the actress at the beginning, "de son regard, elle soulève un monde" ("her glance stirs a world"; 361), a few months later he rectified his attitude due to the actress's disproportionate passion for life: "Décidément, cette grande actrice me devient insupportable, comme le monde [...] Elle avale la vie. C'est de la glotonnerie déplaisante" ("The great actress is certainly becoming unbearable, like the world [...] She devours life, a most disagreeable gluttony"; 404). It is not surprising that Sarah Bernhardt, whose flamboyant life and passionate nature became a legend, went on to become one of the most famous actresses of all time.

## Nadar and Sarah Bernhardt

Initially, Nadar invented *photographopolis* and therefore conceived a city like Paris as a series of copies of photographic images, which acted to create a memory of the city:

> Nadar's text is not a chronicle, however, because it does not offer a sequence of chronological events, a historical record in which the facts are narrated without adornment, or any attempt at literary style; it is, in Benjamin's sense, a question of *Darstellung*—a matter of representation, presentation, performance, and, in a chemical sense that Nadar would have appreciated, of recombination. (Cadava 59)

Echoes of his theory appear in Barnes's conceptions of history and of the human capacity of *Darstellung*: "Memory—the mind's photographic archive—is failing" (*Levels of Life* 98), as "binocular memory" has become monocular, on account of the *We* becoming an *I*: "And so that the memory, now in the first person-singular, changes [...] And nowadays—having lost height, precision, focus—we are no longer sure we trust photography as we once did" (110). In Nadar's 1864 book with the meaningful title, if we consider Barnesian metaphors, *À terre et en l'air: Mémoires du Géant* [*On Land and in the Air: Memories of the Giant*]—parts of which are incorporated into his later memoirs—death is always evoked: "But what is this death? This is the question that all photographs ask us to consider, and it can be registered everywhere in Nadar's photographic trajectory and on each page of his memoirs" (Cadava 72). In fact, death is legible in his photographic registration and, at the same time, in the disappearance of the world he has captured in his imagery.



Sarah Bernhardt's presence is more anecdotal, although her portrayal is faithful and well documented. To cite a simple example, in her own memoirs she recalled the truth about her travels, some of them eventful, in the balloon that she christened *Doña Sol* after the heroine of Victor Hugo's play *Hernani*, whom she had just successfully played (Gidel 127).

## Jules Renard and Alphonse Daudet

The systematic publication of the posthumous journals of great French writers such as Sand, Flaubert, Goncourt, and Mallarmé, which Barnes reviewed (Guignery, "A Preference for Things Gallic" 45), began in the nineteenth century: "Les écrivains y feront souvent leurs débuts ou, plus prosaïquement, y gagneront leur pain quotidien" ("Writers will often make their debut there or, more prosaically, earn their crust"; Laporte 43). Thus, since the aim of the private confession was mixed with that of financial gain and subsequent publication, Philippe Lejeune asserts, "on peut hasarder que presqu'aucun journal n'a été publié comme il avait été écrit. Peut-être le journal est-il par définition impubliable" ("one could hazard that almost no diary has been published as it was truly written. Perhaps diaries are, by definition, unpub-

lishable"; qtd. in Meynard and Jacquelot 11). In this case, if we look for a common thread with fictional manipulation of biography, we find that the starting point of intimate reality could be subsequently elaborated: "L'écriture pour soi peut masquer une écriture pour autrui, voire se confondre avec elle" ("Writing for oneself may disguise writing for others, it may even merge with it"; Meynard and Jacquelot 7-8). For example, French writer Roger Martin du Gard (1881-1958) finished his *Journal* (three volumes published in 1992-93) in 1949, one month after his wife's death, despite spending thirty years on the process; perhaps this is because he was affected by the *autrui*' loss—in this case, his spouse: "The fact that I have not been tempted even once to open this diary, to record the most serious event of my entire life, surely proves that this diary is finished, that it no longer responds to my needs" (qtd. in Lejeune 193). Could this reflect Barnes's approach, albeit in reverse, where this type of fragmentary, intimate life writing began after the loss of his wife, as a way of expressing the inexpressible to *autrui*? In truth, Barnes recognized that he did possess a diary "written twenty and more years ago" (*Nothing to Be Frightened Of* 99), in which he found the inspiration for the title, based on a reflection from Renard's *Journal*: "The word that is most true, most exact, most filled with meaning, is the word 'nothing'" (100). However, he shielded himself so as not to be labelled, steering clear of categorization: "Ah, the therapeuto-autobiographical fallacy [...] Jules Renard, *Journal*, 26 September 1903: 'The beauty of literature. I lose a cow. I write about its death, and this brings me in enough to buy another cow.' But does it work in any wider sense?" (97). This blasé attitude and seeming lack of concern may hide a general trend in French life writing, since "personal writing is thus doubly alien to French traditions that, on the one hand, scorn identity-based strategies of liberation and, on the other, retain the defensive *pudeur* I have linked with Pascal, who expresses in his *Pensées*: 'Le moi est haïssable' 'The self is detestable'" (Kolb 277-78). Be that as it may, Barnes often reflects on Daudet's and Renard's oeuvres (*Nothing to Be Frightened Of* 86-100), which only proves his fascination with their journals, the only works of theirs that he quotes.



## Jules Renard and His *Journal (1887-1910)*

With regard to intimate journals, it is worth mentioning that in 1901 Renard (1864-1910) confessed that he intended to write a volume with his notes, meaningfully entitled *Tout nu, nu* (688)—which evokes the aforesaid famous line "tout entier, et tout nu" ("myself here entire and wholly naked"; Montaigne 2). After his death, his wife allowed regionalist novelist Henri Bachelin to read the fifty-four notebooks that comprised the journal Renard had written over twenty years, and agreed to have it published on the condition that he delete several passages that were rather controversial or in which his private life would be exposed. Half of the final text was mutilated, and Renard's wife threw the original *cahiers* into the fire herself so that no one could ever question Bachelin's version (Gougelmann 313). In spite of all this, it would be

wrong to claim that such a journal is "complètement expurgé de tout élément intime" ("completely void of any intimate detail"; 317), since it was not totally destroyed, so we are able to discern Renard as a "moraliste du langage, il a fait de son *Journal* un espace introspectif au sein duquel les mots sont interrogés et prennent le pas sur le moi" ("a linguistic moralist, he made his *Journal* an introspective space at the heart of which words are questioned and move towards the self"; Laporte 82). Even to most French readers, Renard still remains an otherwise unexceptional writer, even though "[i]n a grand and rather grudging tribute to Renard, Sartre wrote that the *Journal* 'is at the origin of many more modern attempts to seize the essence of the simple thing'" (Barnes, *Through the Window* 127). Thus, for example, W. Somerset Maugham was so enthusiastic after discovering this piece that he published his own collection of thoughts for nearly fifty years, *A Writer's Notebook* (1949), with a preface dedicated to Renard's journal.



Quotations from Renard appear repeatedly in Barnes's *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (52, 38, 100, 193-94) as well as a more-than-controversial coincidence regarding the negative image that both authors projected of their parents, especially their mothers. Even if Barnes has asserted, "This is not, by the way, 'my autobiography.' Nor am I 'in search of my parents'" (34), he has conceded, "Renard père et mère sound like an extreme, theatrical version of our parents" (159). As a matter of fact, over the twenty-three-year writing process of his *Journal*, to take revenge on his own mother (Renard IX), he has often been reproached for "d'avoir noirci sa mère et sa propre enfance" ("having blackened his mother and his own childhood"; VIII). Actually, with an unusual frankness for the nineteenth century, he confessed taboo feelings between him and his parents, namely his mother.

Lastly, amid many other coincidences in *Levels of Life* with Renard's conception of God, we perceive his idea of death: "Or l'écrivain ne regarde pas la mort: il l'extrait de sa propre substance et lui donne corps, qui devient œuvre"("Writers do not look at death: they extract it from their own substance and shape it, which becomes an oeuvre"; Laporte 61). Even the ghost of suicide is ever-present, both that of his parents—his father in July 1847 (Renard 404) and his mother in August 1897 (1248)—as well as his own: "De me relire, c'est me suicider" ("Re-reading myself, is suicide"; Laporte 58). His journal covered the period from 1887 to a month before his own unexpected death, at 46, in 1910.

## Alphonse Daudet and *La Doulou* (1931)

As far as Alphonse Daudet (1840-97) is concerned, it should be noted that his posthumously published diary *La Doulou* (1931) presented the grim reality of thirteen years' agony of syphilis and represented a "'philosophie' de la douleur, [...] un remède contre la solitude, [...] une écriture du salut" ("'philosophy' of pain, [...] a remedy for loneliness, [...] a writing of salvation"; Dufief 125). Thanks to Barnes's transla-

tion *In the Land of Pain* (2002), this gem was rescued from oblivion, whilst the most recent French edition of *La Doulou* in 2007 includes a preface, notes, and a postscript from Barnes's scrupulous translation, given the silence on this work even in the most meticulous studies, as in the following quotation from 1997, in reference to the 743-page study: "In fact, among the most recent studies on Daudet, Anne Simone Dufief's is noteworthy because she only devotes one short chapter to the *journal de malade*" (Calafat 63). It is, therefore, quite significant that Barnes should choose as a text to translate (the only one at present) an intimate journal that contains the main features of the Barnesian oeuvre we have been revisiting:

> Comme beaucoup de journaux intimes, *La Doulou* peut se lire comme le carnet préparatoire d'une œuvre, qui ne verra jamais le jour, et dont les contours incertains oscillent entre roman, essai, et autobiographie (As in many intimate diaries, *La Doulou* can be read as the preparatory notes for a work which will never see the light of day, and whose uncertain contours waver between novel, essay, and autobiography; P. Dufief 125)



In point of fact, with reference to the peculiarities of the translation, which Barnes painstakingly undertook, journalist Hermione Lee, in one of their five interviews for BBC Radio 4, suggests that it was closer to rewriting given that "his translation sounds uncannily like [Barnes]. It's very eloquent and elegant without being mannered" (Guignery, "A Preference for Things Gallic" 49). In her study, Lucy Bending comments on Daudet's struggle to find the right word: "Daudet starts with a statement of the fact of his suffering in an attempt to convey its reality; yet he moves on from this, through despair at the paucity of language, to more abstract musings on the ideas of pain and passion themselves" (131). Undeniably, the French author pioneered the desperate search to find the expression that would reveal the true nature of pain: "Are words actually any use to describe what pain (or passion, for that matter) really feels like? [...] They refer only to memory, and are either powerless or untruthful" (Daudet 15). In the prologue to his translation, Barnes deemed this task almost impossible: "How is best to write about illness, and dying, and death?" (V). Whilst Daudet was unable to express himself freely, his response was to write in plain language about his suffering, in the same way as Montaigne and Julian Barnes, "But how could he write an honest confession—which would include the 'sexual desires and longings for death that illness provokes'—when he was a married man? [...] Autobiography is still ruled out, even if published posthumously" (XI).

Daudet chose to minutely describe the progress of his disease and the cruelty of the treatments with utmost veracity: "I am suspended in the air for four minutes, the last two solely by my jaw. Pain in the teeth. Then, as they let me down and unharness me, a terrible pain in my back and the nape of my neck, as if all the marrow was melting" (30). In contrast, we should stress again that *Levels of Life* has a rather restrained tone. Among many other plausible and even tangential sources of Daudet's influence, we should mention that the French writer also expressed his pain in terms of ascent and descent, using "Boat's metaphor: The ship has fouled; boat: 'My friends, the ship is sinking'" (7); "Effect of intense emotions: like going down two steps at the

time" (11); "It's over, it's a peak I shall never be able to climb again" (25). Likewise, as with Daudet, who was frequently "musing on suicide" (10), Barnes contemplates suicide on account of deep sorrow (*Levels of Life* 80, 90). But again, Barnes minimises any direct boundaries with his own distress: "I don't think I've translated [Daudet] now because I've suddenly got gloomier and started becoming obsessed by death. I've always been obsessed by death. It's been a constant thing" (Wild 96). Barnes's work has truly concerned itself, for almost forty years, with death and other related subjects, but also with life and love.

## Conclusions

Among the new examples of the postmodern autobiographical genre, Barnes achieves a singular appropriation of these French authors' life writing, producing a more accurate fabulation of the lived experience of history which forces the reader to re-examine "how the past is always mediated to us" (Gudmundsdóttir 256). Besides, by juxtaposing several disparate subjects in a visionary combination of the factual and the fictional for figures from another era to his genuine and candid confession, *Levels of Life* constitutes a truly particular sample of (self) life writing whose roots fall within the French essay tradition: "The British writer situates himself within a rather ancient French (but also, more broadly, European) tradition of the essay as a type of writing which is—somehow paradoxically—simultaneously personal and abstract, intimate and metaphysical" (Guignery, "A Preference for Things Gallic" 42). More precisely, when it comes to finally labelling Barnes's book, we envisage a postmodern hybridity that conveys a vague and complex classification that defies a distinct genre categorization (grief memoir, essay...), and where we might find a precedent in Montaigne: "Indeed his [Montaigne's] essay project is neither a monographic memoir nor an intimate journal" (Calhoun 2). With or without a label, the work is a unique elegy, a discreet, utterly poignant and heartfelt tribute to love, borne out of bereavement and sorrow: "His new book, *Levels of Life*, is another hybrid; part essay, part short story and part memoir [...] But it is a mistake to see the book as anything other than whole: an effort by Barnes, using everything he has, to look down on the landscape of loss" (Brockes).



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