

GÁRDOS JÚLIA

AUTHORIAL PRESENCE AND ABSENCE

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN *TALKING IT OVER* BY JULIAN BARNES

"...if you decline to perceive me, then I really *shall* cease to exist..."

A Bíráló Bizottság tagjai:

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*In my paper I wish to examine the narrative techniques of *Talking It Over* by Julian Barnes and the way in which its innovative narration influences the structure of the whole work. The fact that the three main characters are talking, taking turns in telling their side of the story, seems to lead many reviewers to assume that they are in fact talking to the reader, addressing "us" directly.*

I set out to refute the arguments that there is no authorial presence in the novel and that it is the reader who is being addressed by the characters. On the contrary, in my opinion this work gets its unique quality from none other than the special role of the narrator. Invisible though he may be, and lacking the chance to speak his own words, he is perceived constantly by the characters and we see him reflected in their eyes, we see how they react to his reactions. He is standing in the centre of the "love triangle", at an equal distance from the three points, though sometimes moving closer to one or the other.

The other unique aspect of this narrative technique is that the characters are aware of their existence being fictional, of being characters in a novel, and they reflect on this knowledge to some extent. When they address their creator, the writer, they are aware of the process of their own creation. The tension between having free will and being subjugated to their writer gives an unusual aspect to what could otherwise be a conventional love story.

In the second section of my paper, I apply the narratological theory of Gerard Genette to Barnes' novel, and use his terminology to shed further light on the narrative intricacies of this work.

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"Quite who the characters are talking to is never resolved, but it is through him or her that their stories reach the reader. (...) Who is the person to whom the characters are talking? How does he or she know so much about them? How is the information transmitted?"

Pateman, 51, 55.

Julian Barnes's novel *Talking It Over* (1991) is given its unique quality by the narrative technique that is being used. There are nine different narrators (the three protagonists and six minor characters) who take turns to speak, so the perspective offered to the reader is constantly changing. The reader sees each set of events from three or more different viewpoints consecutively, "leaving it up to him or her to decide which of the differing accounts he or she is going to trust" (Pateman, 54). The relativity of truth and the importance of this notion in postmodernism could be discussed at length here, but now I wish to deal with a different issue.

Doubtlessly, the characters are talking *to someone*, their narration is aimed at a certain addressee. Several reviewers, and in an interview, even the author himself seem to claim that this addressee is the reader. The aim of this paper is to examine these arguments, and after having looked at them, to refute the theory that the reader is the one who is being talked to and the novel's form is "authorless" (Birnbaum). On the contrary, in my opinion this work gets its unique quality from none other than the special role of the "author" (or whatever we may wish to call him), who is actually a character in the work in a certain sense. Invisible though he may be, and lacking the chance to speak his own words, he is perceived constantly by the characters and we see him reflected in their eyes, we see how they react to his reactions. He is standing in the centre of the "love triangle", at an equal distance from the three points, though sometimes moving closer to one or the other.

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author, they are aware of the process of their own creation. The tension between having free will and being subjugated to their author gives an unusual aspect to what could otherwise be a conventional love story.

The first half of the paper will attempt to prove this supposition by using quotes from the novel itself. In the second half, I shall examine Gérard Genette's theory of narratology as discussed in his work entitled *Narrative Discourse*, and show how this theory can be applied to Barnes's novel.

Before looking at textual evidence supporting my thesis that the characters of *Talking It Over* are in fact addressing a sort of omnipotent author character, let us look at some claims which imply that the reader is being talked to and the author is absent.

Most interestingly, Barnes himself appears to hold this view about his novel, if his answers in an American interview are to be trusted. Speaking about the sequel, *Love, Etc.* (2000), he says, "One of the interesting things in this novel and in *Talking It Over* is that because there is no author there mediating it, because there is no third-person narrator introducing Oliver as a character, readers tend to respond much more quickly to the characters in the book. (...) Because the membrane between readers and characters is so thinned, that if it works, is like meeting real people." (Birnbaum) When questioned about why he wrote a sequel to *Talking It Over*, Barnes replies, "I think what came back to me was the pleasure and the stimulation of using this authorless form of just not being there, obviously running the whole but not being an obvious force in the book." (Birnbaum).

Let us quote some other reviews and sources which hold similar views to that of Barnes in the above interview. Cristina Sandru and Sean Matthews call *Talking It Over* "a novel written as a series of private monologues directed to the reader" on the www.contemporarywriters.com website.

Another similar interpretation is Merritt Moseley's essay on Barnes which can be found in the *Literary Encyclopedia* (www.litencyc.com). "The formal innovation of this novel consisted of the address straight to the reader of the three main characters, Stuart, Oliver, and Gillian, who not only strive to seduce the reader's admiration but inquire nervously about what the others are saying, provide warnings against their deceptions, and so on." (Moseley).

Furthermore, a quote from a review published in the *Library Journal*, which can be found on the www.barnesandnoble.com website, states the following: "The characters are "talking heads" who address the reader

directly, in three autonomous though interrelated harangues. There is no omniscient narrator to interpret the story; each character is defined entirely by speech.”

I agree with the point that the characters are defined by their own and each other’s speech (this is what Pateman calls “self-representation” and “other-representation” (Pateman, 58)). It is also true that this ensures a more direct relationship with the reader, as s/he hears them talking “live” instead of in reported speech, bringing this novel closer to the genre of drama. But the person being addressed, in my opinion, is described somewhat better than the above by Mick Imlah, who reviewed the novel for the *Times Literary Supplement*. He claims, “the events are described by each of the three in turn, as if taking shifts in the confessional”. (Imlah, 19.) The priest hearing confession is a more expressive simile for describing the mysterious addressee of the characters’ talk than identifying him with the reader, due to the fact that Imlah’s thought shows that there is a personal connection between speaker and listener. What we are dealing with is not entirely one-way communication - it is always interaction between the two parties. Even though one of them, the listener, fails to speak out loud, we know about several of his reactions from how the confessing characters change or continue their talk after his “inaudible” interruptions (we will soon examine such examples from the text).

Who is this listener, then? The textual evidence from the novel which - in my hope - will shed light on the identity can be grouped into four categories. These are the following: (1) places in the text implying that the listener is physically present during talking; (2) the characters asking the listener about things they do not know; (3) the characters showing special interest in the personal opinion of the listener; and, in connection with this (4) the characters expressing that the listener has power over them and their existence is subject to the listener’s will.

Let us look at the categories one by one. To begin with, the first group contains quotes which imply that during “confession”, the addressee of the characters’ talk is in the same space as they are, in their physical proximity. This is shown by references to common sensual experiences between speaker and listener, and references to something the listener said, even if we, readers, did not hear it. To cite a few examples: “Stuart... No, wait a minute. You’ve been talking to him, haven’t you? (...) I sensed that litt-

le hesitation... What's that? He wasn't wearing glasses? Of course he was wearing glasses. (...) What are you smirking at now?" (Barnes, 11). "Oh dear, you're giving me that look again." (Barnes, 25). "Oh, *please* take that disapproving look off your face. (...) Give us a break" (Barnes, 75). "That's Patsy. Well, you wouldn't not recognise the voice, would you?" (Barnes, 157). This last quotation implies that the song was actually played to the listener of Stuart's monologue, and he talks about the music after the two of them listened to it together. Two more examples of this sort: when Stuart breaks down and starts crying, he says "Shit, I... look, give me a moment, will you? No, it's all right. No, just leave me alone." (Barnes, 252). Finally, Mme Rives points to the house Gillian and Oliver had lived in, saying, "The house is for sale: it's that one over there, you see?" (Barnes, 262).

A sub-category of this group is the quotes dealing with cigarettes. As this is an important motif throughout the novel and it also shows a lot about the relationship between the speakers and their listener, let us look at these examples, too. First of all, one does not offer a cigarette to another if they are not physically present: "Cigarette? No, I didn't think you would. You don't mind if I do? Yes I *do* know it's bad for my health... God, we've only just met..." (Barnes, 8). This kind of arguing and jesting about smoking continues as the novel progresses. "So have another cigarette. Go on. Oh all right, please yourself. Everyone to his own taste." (Barnes, 14). "Have a cigarette? You don't? I know you don't – you've told me that before. Your disapproval still flashes in neon." (Barnes, 72). When Oliver and Stuart change places as the weathermen in the cuckoo clock, Oliver gives up smoking and Stuart starts. "By the way, would you like a cigarette?" (Barnes, 121). "Cigarette? Go on, take one. Look at it this way. If you help me out with this pack, then I'll smoke fewer and be less likely to die... Put it behind your ear and keep it for later if you like." (Barnes, 134). "And you've still got that ciggy behind your ear, by the way. Why don't you smoke it?" (Barnes, 145).

Beside the physical presence of the listener, I would like to call attention to the fact that this person seems quite unique and individual. He has his own personality, habits, opinions. The reason I argue against identifying him with the reader is twofold: the reader is not sensually present as a recipient to the confessions, and the listener in the novel is too individualised to be an "everyman". For example, what is a smoking reader to do

if s/he does not feel addressed? What if someone does not disapprove of Oliver? A listener with a clearly defined personality, with likes and dislikes, is unsuitable for the general public to identify with.

Let us look at the second group of quotes. These show that the listener knows more than the characters, and they interrogate him to find out about the others' confessions. But, as a good priest (or even psychiatrist, perhaps), he keeps his mouth shut. Even though the following texts still do not prove that the addressee is the author, they are noteworthy points. First, Stuart makes his enquiry: "Of course, *you* know if they're really fucking, don't you? *You* know. So tell me. Go on, tell me." (Barnes, 156). Next, it is Oliver's turn: "I hope to God they're not still doing it. I hope to God they're not even sleeping in the same bed still. I can't ask. What do you think?" (Barnes, 168). Later, worrying about his friend, Oliver asks, "Do you know if he [Stuart] has got a girl?" (Barnes, 240). At the end of the novel, Oliver and Gillian both try to find out about each other's feelings from the listener: "What is it with Gill at the moment? Can *you* tell?" and "Just out of interest, do you think Oliver's been faithful to me since we were married? Sorry, that's neither here nor there." (Barnes, 256-7).

One could, of course, object, saying that the characters are in fact asking the reader about what the other characters have said, as the reader knows more, having heard all their monologues. Pateman also points out, "Often the reader knows more than the characters, which implies a certain secrecy between the characters that it is part of the novel to unravel" (Pateman, 55). Just because the listener knows about the protagonists' lives, does not mean s/he is also controlling it. Or, to be more precise, the above evidence does not prove that.

Now, let us see what reasons there are to believe that the listener is in some way in charge of the characters' fates and has power over what becomes of them. To prove this point, I shall now deal with the quotes belonging to the third and fourth category.

Above I have said that the third group is made up of parts in the novel where the characters appear to be striving for the listener's approval of their thoughts and deeds. It seems doubtful that they "strive to seduce the reader's admiration", as Moseley put it (cited above). Why should the reader's admiration be so vital to them? And could we not find someone else, whose admiration is more important?

First, it is only Stuart trying to defend Oliver from the disapproval of the listener, "Please don't take against Oliver like that. (...) Try to give him the benefit of the doubt. For my sake. I'm happy. Please don't upset me." (Barnes, 30). Then it is Gill who seems to be striving for some sort of admiration or approval, when she is too embarrassed to confess her feelings for Oliver to the listener. "But I know why I feel guilty. Perhaps you guessed. I feel guilty because I find Oliver attractive." (Barnes, 109). "No, I'm not sure I can tell you the rest" (Barnes, 127). The "rest" being, as we later find out, her getting wet when Oliver telephones her. Gillian later also remarks, "You're not interested in this, are you? Not really. I'm boring you, I can tell. You want to hear about other things." (Barnes, 234). Oliver is pleased to find out the listener had been worrying about him having "the Aids", as Mrs. Dyer called it: "You weren't actually *worrying* on my behalf, were you? *Mes excuses*. I'm really touched. Had I realised I'd have told you as soon as I knew." (Barnes, 212.)

The above examples simply show that the characters want to be liked and approved of by everyone, which is very typical of Oliver, less so of Gill and Stuart. On the other hand, the following quotes will show *why* this approval is so important to them.

Oliver is the first one to show that the listener's admiration is vital for him. "I probably shouldn't be telling you all this if I want to keep your sympathy. (Have I got it in the first place? Hard to tell, I'd say. And do I want it? I do, I do!) It's just that I'm too involved in what's happening to play games – at least, to play games with you. I'm fated to carry on with what I have to do and hope not to incur your terminal disapproval in the process. Promise me not to turn your face away: if *you* decline to perceive me, then I really *shall* cease to exist. Don't kill me off! Spare poor Ollie and he may yet amuse you!" (Barnes, 82). One might at first assume that craving popularity is simply one of Oliver's personality traits. But in the second half of the above quote, it is obvious that being approved by the listener is in fact an existential issue, a question of "to be or not to be". If the listener does not like him, he can kill him – this is the first implication that the listener must be the author. If we suppose that it's the reader, the question arises whether Oliver would die, were the reader to stop reading (because s/he dislikes the character). It is true that a novel cannot exist without readers; the work of art on its own, without recipients, is a concept

which is difficult to interpret. So we may accept that the reader's attention is also vital for Oliver. But there is an endless number of potential readers in the world, opposed to only one author. If a character loses one reader, s/he will have infinite hope for finding another. Yet if the author decides to eliminate Oliver, all hope is lost.

Already at the beginning of the novel, Oliver says, "I don't ever want to get old. Spare me that. Have you the power? No, even you don't have the power, alas." (Barnes, 14.). This also shows that Oliver is in a kind of creation-creator relationship with the listener, that the listener has power over him and can influence his fate, even if he is incapable of making him immortal (as this would not fit into the novel).

It is worth noting at this point that Julian Barnes has in fact compared the author's role to that of a god in an interview concerned with a previous novel, *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984). "LV. Is the author still in hiding in your novels (as he was in Joyce's)? JB. I believe, with Flaubert, that the novelist should be in his work as God is in the universe, everywhere present and nowhere visible. He succeeded in being more invisible than me, probably." (Vianu). Using this simile is especially felicitous in the case of *Talking It Over* because the author is a God in the sense of having power over life and death, and he is invisible not only metaphorically but also because he is always present, always being talked to but never seen or heard by the reader.

Oliver talks to his creator with such consciousness at one other point: "We're stuck in this car on this motorway, the three of us, and someone (the driver! - me!) has leant an elbow on the button of the central locking system. (...) You're in here too. Sorry, I've clunked the doors, you can't get out, we're all in this together. Now what about a cigarette?" (Barnes, 75). Here it seems as if Oliver was having some sort of power-game with the author, as if fighting for the controlling position. But he knows he cannot win.

From this we can see that Oliver is one of the characters acutely aware of the fictionality of his existence, of his being a part of a work of art, an artifice. Gillian is also aware that she is being forced to play "a game" that she does not want to be part of, and that some outside force put her into the situation she is in: "It must be another of their games. (...) But it's not a game I want to play, this one, thank you very much." (Barnes, 36).

The other such character is Val. She has not even told the listener her name yet (so, it must be admitted, he is not omniscient) but she is already fighting for power: "What? What did you say? (...) YOU want MY credentials? Look, if anyone's got to provide documentation it should be you. What have *you* done to qualify for *my* opinions? What's your authority, incidentally?" (Barnes, 173). Val answers her own question soon: his "author-ity" is that he is in fact the author... "Think about it. I'm off now. You won't be seeing me again, not unless there's a real turn-up for the book." (Barnes, 173). When threatening with walking out and disappearing, Val seems to think she has free will, yet at the same time she is more aware than anyone else of being contained inside a book. If the aforesaid has not yet proved this, let us examine the scene in which she is literally "killed off" by the author, who succumbs to the will of Stuart and Oliver.

The killing of Val is too long to quote in its totality (Barnes, 208 – 210), but let us call attention to its most vital points. True, it can be interpreted so that she is actually strangled by Stuart and Oliver with a scarf. But then who would Stuart and Oliver be addressing when they say, "Get that bitch out of here"? And to whom is Val pleading "You can't let them do this to me"? She goes on to say, "I mean, you realise what you're doing here? (...) This is player power. Hey *you* – aren't you meant to be the manager, aren't you meant to own the whole fucking team? (...) This is a direct challenge to your authority. Help me. Please. If you help me, I'll tell you about their cocks." Here it becomes absolutely doubtless that Val is addressing the author, knowing her life is in his hands, and only his interference could save her from Stuart and Oliver. They are all at his mercy. He does not choose to save Val, though.

I do not mean to suggest that the characters have no degree of freedom whatsoever, that they are portrayed as being merely the playthings of the mute listener-character. But the very fact that they are at least sometimes aware of their fictionality and their constructedness, means that they must be creatures of their silent creator. In fact, to them he is not silent, as *they* hear his comments – it is only the reader who is not reached by his voice.

Finally, one last quote to show the characters' relationship with the listener. Gordon, another minor character (far from minor in significance, being Gillian's father, but getting to speak very few "lines") – like Val

– seems to have a fairly clear idea of his situation. He says, “I shouldn’t be talking to you, I’m sure it’s against the rules. After all, you know what you think about me, don’t you?” (Barnes, 226). Oliver, Val and Gordon are all aware of the fact that there are *rules* – they differ merely in how they relate to this knowledge. Oliver is constantly fighting against authority, Val is outraged by it, but pleads for her life, and Gordon accepts that there are “rules”. Even though he first does not strive for appreciation, he then attempts to clear himself and show his own point of view.

If we accept the claim that the characters of *Talking It Over* are speaking to the author of the work, who is in a sense also a character, then this novel can indeed be called noteworthy considering its narrative technique. Also highly important is the fact that the characters are to some extent aware of being characters in a literary work.

In Bruce Sesto’s introductory chapter to his Barnes monography, he talks about the traits of postmodernism which can be found in this author’s work, and can be related to the points made above. The first relevant point he makes is quoting Robert Stam on reflexivity in postmodernism: “Reflexive works break with art as enchantment and call attention to their own factitiousness as textual constructs.” (Sesto, 3). He then goes on to speak about the author’s role: “postmodernist authors frequently insert themselves into their texts in order to expose ontological “seams” and thereby reveal the inherent “constructedness” of fictional works”. (Sesto, 4). He introduces the notion of the self-conscious novel, in which “there is consistent effort to convey to us a sense of the fictional world as an authorial construct set up against a background of literary tradition and convention.” (Sesto, 5). Finally, as a conclusion to this chapter, Sesto enumerates those traits of Barnes’ fiction which allow him to be categorised as a postmodern author, pairing novels to the different traits. “Barnes’ postmodernism is reflected in (...) its awareness of fictionality (*Flaubert’s Parrot*, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, and *Talking It Over*).” (Sesto, 11).

From all this we can see that the novel discussed in this paper can be linked to postmodern literature by its narrative technique, its self-reflexivity and the authorial presence in the work. Not only is the work itself conscious of its being an artifice, but the characters are aware of their existence being fictional, too, and of being the author’s creations.

* * *

The analysis of narrative technique has so far been done only through the close reading of the primary text. Using Gérard Genette's theory of narratology may shed some new light on this issue, though, which may lead to further interesting results. Let us take a look at some of Genette's categories which are relevant to this paper, and see how they can be applied to *Talking It Over*.

Out of the three categories proposed in *Narrative Discourse*, it is the third one, "voice" which will be examined in more detail. Genette names three further subcategories in this section: time of the narrating, narrative levels and "person" (Genette, 215). All three are interesting to investigate in this novel, as they may explain some of the phenomena we have seen in the above train of thought.

In connection with time of narrating, Genette starts by noting that "I can very well tell a story without specifying the place where it happens, and whether this place is more or less distant from the place where I am telling it; nevertheless, it is almost impossible for me not to locate the story in time with respect to my narrating act, since I must necessarily tell the story in present, past or future tense." (Genette, 215). The question of space and time of narrating is interesting in *Talking It Over* precisely because it is so difficult to specify. The characters alternate between using present and past tense – sometimes they reflect on their current feelings (or their momentary level of intoxication, as Stuart sometimes does...), so it is out of the question that the whole act of "talking it over" would happen after the events described in the last chapter. These narrators clearly do not know the outcome of their story, and they reflect on their momentary emotions in each situation. Yet there are parts where they describe a sequence of events in retrospection. It is as if they had a pre-arranged series of rendezvous with the listener, perhaps as if with a therapist, always telling what happened in their last week and how they are feeling now. This would explain the mixture of *subsequent* narration of stories and *simultaneous* expression of feelings (Genette, 217).

What about space? Do they lie on the listener's couch? Do they go to his office? Unlikely. Would Stuart go to an office just to say "Cigarette?" or "Not very drunk. Just drunk" (Barnes, 169)? Also, at the beginning of

the novel we feel that the narrators (especially Gill) are somewhat reluctant to speak. It is more likely that the listener, like a journalist, always visits them to interrogate them. Stuart is probably narrating in his home when he shows the listener Patsy's songs. It is almost certain, in any case, that narration happens in several different places. We can see how well Genette's point is illustrated: time of narration has its ambiguities, but the place is even more vaguely specified, even though it would be interesting to imagine where the characters are pouring their hearts out.

"One of the fictions of literary narrating – perhaps the most powerful one, because it passes unnoticed – is that the narrating involves an instantaneous action, without a temporal dimension" (Genette, 222). This claim is also relevant because it is strange how the characters, in the midst of emotional turmoil, always have time to talk to the narrator regularly... Of course they know about each other's acts of narration, but still, it is odd to imagine, for example, the newly-wed Gill and Stu saying to each other, "You're alone tonight dear, I have to go and see Mr. Author". Or Gill sending Oliver out of her studio, saying, „Watch tv downstairs for a while instead of combing my hair, I need some private time with Mr. Author". Jokes aside, we can see that one of the unsolved problems in the novel is fitting the act of narrating into the life of the characters, in terms of space, time, and emotionally, too. It is realistic that Stuart is sometimes unable to speak, but we also do not get an explanation for the year after the second wedding, which passes without narrating, and then the return of the characters' regular utterances.

The second category, narrative level, is defined by Genette in the following way, "Any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed" (Genette, 228). In this way he differentiates between extradiegetic, intradiegetic and metadiegetic levels. If we look at Barnes's novel in these terms, we may say that the characters are intradiegetic narrators, because their acts of narrating are also represented by an "external narrator". This external narrator does not speak at all, but somebody must have, at least, put the speakers' names next to their lines. We do not have the traditional formulas of prose for changing narrative levels, eg. „and then Gillian said" or "Oliver told me the story of the flower store excitedly". But the act of narration is represented in the novel, so we may propose that

the characters are intradiegetic narrators. If this is so, then the events they relate are the metadiegetic world of the novel. They are of course characters in their own stories, as they narrate episodes from their own life, but in this way the three levels can be differentiated in *Talking It Over*.

The next notion worth discussing in connection with this novel is *metalepses*. In Genette's terminology this means "the transition from one narrative level to another (...) introducing into one situation, by means of discourse, the knowledge of another situation." (Genette, 234). The so-called *author's metalepsis* means "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe [which] produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical or fantastic" (Genette, 234-5). Strictly speaking, in *Talking It Over* it is the narratee who makes this intrusion, though we have postulated that he can be identified with the author, but he does not have a formal narrating role. He does not interfere by commenting on events or changing the course of events explicitly, but we have seen from all the textual evidence in the first half of the paper that his presence is felt through the awareness and the reactions of the narrator-characters. Genette claims that this means overstepping the boundary between two levels, the boundary that is the narrating itself, "a shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells." (Genette, 236). Quoting Borges, he adds "Such inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious", and „the narrator and his narratees – you and I – perhaps belong to some narrative." (Genette, 236).

This is a notable point in connection to our novel. The reader gets some sort of uncanny feeling precisely because the characters are, on the one hand, perfectly normal, everyday people, just like us, but on the other hand they are aware of the fictitiousness of their existence. Stuart, Gill and Oliver are people who we can identify with because of the directness and confessional nature of their utterances – but if this identification happens, then we cannot help wondering whether we, too, might have an "author" who we have to please to stop him from "killing us off early". The mixture of leading normal lives and yet having an awareness of being characters in a novel gives an absurd quality to the narrators of this work.

The third subcategory related to voice in Genette's theory is "*person*". He differentiates between the narrator being absent from the story he tells

(*heterodiegetic*) and the narrator being present as a character in the story he tells (*homodiegetic*). The latter type has two varieties: where the narrator is the hero of his narrative (*autodiegetic*) and where he only plays a secondary role. (Genette, 245).¹ In this sense, all of the narrators in *Talking It Over* are homodiegetic, but because of the abundance of people who relate the story, we encounter both autodiegetic narrators (Gill, Stuart and Oliver) and minor characters who take over narrating once in a while (Mme. Wyatt, Val, Gordon, the flower girl, Mrs. Dyer, and Mme Rives). This technique obviously serves to let the reader see from more perspectives, to enable us judge the protagonists both from inside and outside.

As for the function of the narrator, Genette differentiates between five different categories: *narrative function*, *directing function*, *function of communication*, *testimonial function* and *ideological function* (Genette, 255). Out of these, the narrative function is always present, but two other ones are worth mentioning in connection with Barnes's novel. The function of communication means "the narrator's orientation towards the narratee – his care in establishing or maintaining with the narratee a contact, indeed, a dialogue" (Genette, 255). In the case of *Talking It Over*, this function is exemplified by all the quotes from the novel that are listed in the first half of this paper, to show the relationship between the characters and their listener. It is also important to point out the role of the testimonial function in the case of these narrators: "accounting for the part the narrator as such takes in the story he tells, the relationship he maintains with it – an affective relationship, of course, but equally a moral and intellectual one." (Genette, 256). The characters in this novel relate very strongly to the story they tell, naturally, as it is the story of their life, and they narrate it in a highly emotional way. The notion of *testimonial* may in this case be taken even more literally than it is in Genette's definition, if we think of Mick Imlah's simile about the narrators confessing to a priest (quoted on page three). The narration may be seen as having the function of easing the characters' conscience, as being an attempt to free themselves of their sins by sharing them with the narratee and the readers.

The last category of Genette's that is important to discuss in con-

1 Genette's terminology is not gender inclusive, even though he speaks about female narrators as well as male ones. I have not changed the quotes from his work, but – needless to say – his theory applies to narrators (and narratees) of both sexes.

nection with *Talking It Over* is the narratee. He starts by pointing out how mistaken we would be to think "that the receiver's role is purely passive, that he is limited to receiving a message he must take or leave and to "consuming" after the event a work that was completed far from him and without him" (Genette, 259). We have seen how true this is in the novel being discussed, as the narratee is so far from being passive that the characters actually ask him to change their fates and to direct the course of events according to their wishes.

Genette goes on to say, "Like the narrator, the narratee is one of the elements in the narrating situation, and he is necessarily located at the same diegetic level; that is, he does not merge a priori with the reader (even an implied reader) any more than the narrator necessarily merges with the author. To the intradiegetic narrator corresponds an intradiegetic narratee (...) We, readers, cannot identify ourselves with those fictive narratees anymore than those intradiegetic narrators can address themselves to us, or even assume our existence." (Genette, 259). This train of thought seems to fit perfectly to the argumentation of the paper. We have stated that the characters of *Talking It Over* are intradiegetic narrators, because the process of narration is depicted by the novel. If this is so, then an intradiegetic narratee should be the recipient of their narration, who is *not the reader*. The listener in the novel is an intradiegetic figure, who does not smoke, frowns at Oliver's witty remarks and does not spare Val's life, whatever information she promises to share with him, etc. He is the author in his creations' perception, which of course does not make him identical with the extradiegetic Julian Barnes, but he is the author of the novel as represented in the novel. He is present in the intradiegetic universe of his work because his existence is sensed by the characters inhabiting this world (no story can be told if there is no one to listen to it). It is this representation of the author that gives Barnes's work its highly unique quality.

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