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Flaubert's Provocation

ABSTRACT

Madame Bovary, which was scandalous in its own day for its focus on the adultery of a provincial woman, has had a strange, complex fate. Flaubert remade the image of the novelist, as pure artist, for whom style was all that mattered, and disrupted novelistic technique, in ways that critics and writers have found exemplary, treating this as the novel novelists cannot overlook; yet for readers *Madame Bovary* is not a "book about nothing" but provides a searing portrait of provincial life and of the condition of women. The vividness and complexity of the character Flaubert created here made Emma a type: a sufferer of "Bovarysme." Flaubert's revolutionary notion that a trivial subject was as good as a noble subject for a serious novel was taken to be connected to the democratic notion that every human subject is as worthy as another and allowed to have desires. Yet, while promoting Emma as a valid subject of literature, equal to others, Flaubert writes against the attempt to democratize art, to make it enter every life, and renders trivial the manifestations of this subject's desires, while making her an exemplary figure.

Keywords: Madame Bovary, novel, condition of women, provincial life, narrative technique.

It is scarcely obvious why Flaubert's tale of provincial adultery, whose heroine meets a sordid end, should have become one of the greatest novels of world literature, "the novel of all novels that the criticism of fiction cannot overlook," as the critic Percy Lubbock put it (59). What is it that makes Madame Bovary so special: not only scandalous in its own day (when it was brought to trial for outrage to public morals) but also stimulating for subsequent generations of writers and critics, who hold it up as exemplary for the practice of the novel, and also provocative for artists working in other media, as in the remarkable video installation, *Madame B*? Charles Baudelaire declared of *Madame Bovary*: "this book, fundamentally suggestive, could prompt a host of observations" (655).[1] And certainly the array of responses to this novel is quite fascinating.

For example, in a wonderful short story, "The Kugelmass Episode," Woody Allen describes the mid-life crisis of a neurotic New York professor, dreaming of amorous adventure, to whom a magician with a magic cabinet offers the possibility of entering the world of any novel whatsoever. Kugelmass surprisingly chooses *Madame Bovary*, getting the magician to set him down there after Emma has met Leon but before she encounters Rodolphe—*le bon moment.* The Nobel Prize-winning novelist Mario Vargas Llosa would doubtless have made the same choice. In *The Perpetual Orgy,* undertaken to "explore why *Madame Bovary* stirred me to such profound depths of my being, what it gave me that other stories could not," he writes of his unending love affair with Emma, through analysis of the book he calls the first modern novel (10). William Faulkner, whose novels are very different, apparently reread *Madame Bovary* every year; and the great American novelist, Henry James, who had serious reservations about some of Flaubert's novels, wrote that "*Madame Bovary* has a perfection that not only stamps it, but that makes it stand almost alone: it holds itself with such a supreme unapproachable assurance as both excites and defies judgment" (325). And he concluded that Flaubert is "the novelist's novelist" and "for many of our tribe at large, *the* novelist" (346, 316).

The reasons for this reputation are not far to seek. Flaubert remade the image of the artist, especially the novelist, in ways that have been crucial for the modern literary and artistic tradition. Taking what was a minor literary form, a form inferior to lyric, epic, and drama, despite its success in the hands of Stendhal and Balzac, Flaubert succeeded in making the novelist a supreme artist, with a fatal attraction to the art of language. His letters give us this image of the novelist not as an entertainer, teller of stories, but as an obsessional devotee of art.

[1] All translations from the French are mine.

It is actually quite a complicated image or conception. This novelist is not an inspired bard, though like the bard, he is marked off from the usual run of humanity—here in his devotion to a calling. He is not the vehicle through which a vision from elsewhere is transmitted; he is a craftsman, obsessional about the details of the construction of the art object, but he is not a classical craftsman, possessed of a special skill that enables him to proceed step by step, in finite progress towards a definable end, to craft the object, like a fine piece of furniture. On the contrary, for him the artistic process is interminable, by definition impossible, doomed to failure. It is not that there is a particular thing you are striving to achieve, which proves difficult; rather, the artistic condition is a commitment to strive for an impossible perfection. The artist labours mightily, day and night, but produces little—to be immensely productive would be to abandon any title to artistic integrity. In this hyperbolic condition, labouring for days to produce a few sentences is a mark of one's artistic calling, if not genius.

Sacrificing himself on the altar of art, the Flaubertian artist is often in agony, but agony comes not from the experience of the world but the creative act itself. Inexpressibility, once a property of feelings, mark of profundity, and possible source of pride, becomes an aspect of the creative act, an unending search for *le mot juste.*

Through his correspondence, Flaubert creates what is clearly a myth of the artist, an aesthetic ideology; but it is also extremely useful as an extraordinarily radical conception of the novel. The evocations of his aesthetic goals in his letters work to devalue the usual aspects of the novelistic art. Here is the most famous formulation:

> What seems to me beautiful, what I would like to create, is a book about nothing, a book with no external attachment, which would be self-sustaining thanks to the force of its style, as the earth holds itself in the air without being supported, a book where there would be almost no subject or where the subject would be almost invisible, if that is possible. The most beautiful works are those where there is the least matter . . . That is why there are neither noble nor ignoble subjects, and why, from the standpoint of pure art, one might almost establish it as an axiom that there is no subject, style being in itself an absolute way of seeing things.
>
> (Ce qui me semble beau, ce que je voudrais faire, c'est un livre sur rien, un livre sans attache extérieure, qui se tiendrait de lui-même par la force interne de son style, comme la terre sans être soutenue se tient en l'air, un livre qui n'aurait presque pas de sujet ou du moins où le sujet serait presque invisible si cela se peut. Les oeuvres les plus belles sont celles où il y a le moins de matière . . . C'est pour cela qu'il n'y a ni beaux ni vilains

> sujets et qu'on pourrait presque établir comme axiome, en se posant au point de vue de l'Art pur, qu'il n'y en a aucun, le style étant à lui tout seul une manière absolue de voir les choses.) (to Louise Colet, 16 Jan. 1852, *Correspondance* vol. 2 231)

Here are devalued the most obvious aspects of novelistic art, plot, character, theme, structure, moral, so that Flaubert's version of the artistic ambition acquires an ascetic purity—transcendent of the usual elements of the novelist's attention. He dreams, for instance, of writing a novel where one could ignore everything else and would only have to write sentences. And this perverse purity of ambition makes him exemplary, for critics, as well as novelists, giving us something of a limit case for thinking about narrative fiction.

I'll return later to this conception of the novel and its implications, which is of great interest to writers and to critics, but for most readers, from the beginning to the present day, *Madame Bovary* has not been *un livre sur rien* but *un livre sur* Emma Bovary, as the title certainly encourages us to think. And from the beginning the novel has provoked debates about Emma's character and situation. Reviewing the novel when it appeared, Baudelaire wrote that despite the author's efforts to divest himself of his sex, "He couldn't not infuse the veins of his creature with virile blood, and Madame Bovary remains a man in everything that is most energetic and ambitious about her but also most pensive" ("il n'a pas pu ne pas infuser un sang viril dans les veines de sa créature, et Madame Bovary,—pour ce qu'il y a en elle de plus énergique et de plus ambitieux, et aussi de plus rêveur,—madame Bovary est restée un homme") (652). And he concludes: "This woman, in truth, is very sublime of her kind, in her restricted milieu and with her restricted horizon" ("Cette femme, en réalité, est très sublime dans son espèce, dans son petit milieu et en face de son petit horizon") (654). Vargas Llosa celebrates her rebellion against her restricted condition and remarks, for instance, that it is "impossible not to admire Emma's capacity for sexual pleasure" (23). Flaubert himself, on the other hand, while writing the novel, calls her "my poor Bovary" and often complains about his character: "she's of a somewhat perverse nature, a woman of false poetry and of false feelings" ("c'est une nature quelque peu perverse, une femme de fausse poèsie et de faux sentiments)" (to Mlle Leroyer de Chantepie, 30 March 1857, *Correspondance* vol. 2 696–97).

Strikingly, the novel swiftly gave rise to the concept of "Bovarysme": shortly after the publication of *Madame Bovary,* Barbey d'Aurévilly, reviewing another novel, diagnosed the heroine as lapsing into "Bovarysme," which seems to mean a combination of self-deception, casting away of

social inhibitions, and yielding to sensuality (290).[2] But at the end of the 19th century the term was promoted and systematized in two books by Jules de Gaultier on Le Bovarysme, who recuperates the afflicted subject's agency.[3] Defining it as the human ability to conceive of oneself as other than one is, Gaultier identifies a sentimental or empirical "Bovarysme" and an intellectual or metaphysical version: the former a pathological state of self-deception, imagining oneself other than one is, despite the impossibility of making this image of the self a reality, but the latter a dissatisfaction to be welcomed, involving embrace of imaginative power and openness to the possibilities of the self. Flaubert himself once observed in a letter that "the measure of the soul is the dimensions of its desire" ("une âme se mesure à la dimension de son désir" (to Louise Colet, 21 May 1853, *Correspondance* vol. 2, 329).

But historically it was the first meaning of "Bovarysme" that prevailed as it was taken to sum up a type. "What distinguishes great geniuses," Flaubert wrote, "is generalization and creation. They sum up a range of personalities in a type and bring to the consciousness of humanity new characters" ("Ce qui distingue les grands génies, c'est la généralisation et la création. Ils résument en un type des personnalités éparses et apportent à la conscience du genre humain des personnages nouveaux") (to Louise Colet, 25 Sept. 1852, *Correspondance* vol. 2 164). People can argue about whether Emma is really a new character, but certainly the vividness and complexity of the character Flaubert created here became a type for mankind.

Despite important exceptions, from Baudelaire to Vargas Llosa, the prevailing interpretation of the "Bovarysme" Emma incarnates has been negative: she haplessly confuses imagination and reality, to a pathological degree. Percy Lubbock claims that the reason *Madame Bovary* was the novel of all novels that the criticism of fiction could not overlook, is because it is "a book in which the subject is absolutely fixed and determined, so that it may be possible to consider the matter of its treatment with undivided attention" (78). That subject is Emma, who, he says, is "small and futile," but as a fixed subject that allows us to focus on the masterful novelistic treatment, then, he writes, "her futility is a real value" (Lubbock 83). For *Madame Bovary* to be a magnificent *livre sur rien*, Emma must be

[2] The term is actually coined by Gustave Merlet in 1860 at the end of a long essay on *Madame Bovary*, but there it relates not to Emma but to a cynical and negative vision of society.

[3] *Le Bovarysme: La psychologie dans l'oeuvre de Flaubert* (1892) treats it as a pathological symptom. *Le Bovarysme* (1903) sees it rather as an important intellectual ability. See Per Buvik's "Le principe Bovaryque" in the modern editions of these books.

at its center but *n'est rien*, be nothing, a nonentity who serves to allow the artistry of the sentences to take center stage. In Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker's video installation *Madame B* Emma is also the center, but while she may suffer from a pathological condition, there is no question of making her an nonentity.

There are three issues I would like to take up here, closely related but separable for ease of discussion. The first derives from the subtitle of Flaubert's novel, "Moeurs de province," roughly "Provincial Mores." Though France is undergoing a period of transformation, Flaubert gives us an unchanging provincial world: at the beginning of part two we are told that "Since the events we are about to recount nothing, indeed, has changed in Yonville" ("Depuis les événements que l'on va raconter, rien, en effet, n'a change à Yonville") (1, 1), and Flaubert's characteristic imperfect tenses present life in these villages as ongoing, stultifying sameness, where characters conduct the same predictable conversations.[4] (There is, strikingly, no difference between Tostes, where the Bovary's first settle, and Yonville, to which Charles moves in the hope that a change of scene will dissipate Emma's depression.) Flaubert seems to have felt strongly about the centrality of the critique of provincial life, seeing Emma as representative rather than as a special case: he wrote to Louise Colet, "My poor *Bovary* is doubtless suffering and weeping in twenty French villages at the same time, at this very moment" ("*Ma pauvre Bovary,* sans doute, *souffre* et pleure dans vingt *villages* de France à la fois, à cette heure même") (14 Aug. 1853, *Correspondance* vol. 2 392). The novel shares Emma's boredom and dissatisfaction with provincial life but offers a critical view of the specific forms that her attempts to escape from this provincial *marasme* take. *Madame B*, a transformation that speaks to today's conditions, abandons this provincial issue. There is one scene where Emma, invited to a Parisian soirée, is made to feel out of place, but this is because she appears in a very fancy ball gown, while the other party-goers are not decked out in special clothes or high fashion. While Flaubert's Emma manages escapes from Yonville to the city of Rouen, *Madame B*'s Emma frequents over-the top fashion houses in Paris. Her problem, in short, is not trying to escape from provincial life.

The second issue is not specific to provincial life but is perhaps more intense there than elsewhere. Emma plausibly blames her dissatisfaction on the condition of women in 19th century provincial France: "A man, at least, is free; he can experience different passions, different lands" ("Un

[4] Because there are innumerable editions of *Madame Bovary*, my references give the part and chapter number.

homme, au moins est libre; il peut parcourir les passions et les pays") (2, 3); he has possibilities of action and escape. Certainly there are no women in these villages of *Madame Bovary* with interesting or significant roles: all the other women seem content to do their duty as wives and mothers. Vargas Llosa notes this and writes that Emma's "fate is more human and desirable than that of the other women of Yonville. She has profound experiences that they never will" (24). But in *Madame B*, as befits a modern reworking, there are women in other roles everywhere—lawyers, artists, teachers. There Emma's problem cannot be construed as a lack of opportunity for women.

Moreover, it is notable that Flaubert's novel is called not *Emma Bovary* (as later novels of adultery were called *Effie Briest* or *Anna Karenina*) but *Madame Bovary*. In fact, Emma is only one of three Madame Bovarys in the novel: the third, after Charles's mother and Charles's first wife. The title already defines her by a social role reserved for women, which she must struggle to escape. She is already a repetition, alienated in her very name, in this world where nothing changes. And Flaubert's powerful representation of her ennui and sense of entrapment—however foolish the posited alternatives prove to be—carries great weight, for readers, male, as well as female. Although Flaubert had no interest in the emancipation of women or other progressive movements, "he takes and defines the reality of the social world, from women, from Emma, grasps her as the key point for questioning that world and demonstrating its oppressive mediocrity" (Heath 87). *Madame B*, in a brilliant stroke, has all three of the men in Emma's life, Charles, Rodolphe, and Leon, played by the same actor, implying that they are all equivalently deficient, though each in his own particular way. For reasons one can certainly understand, it does not have all three Madame Bovarys played by the same actress, in part because that equivalency does not structure the world there being portrayed.

Madame B, eschewing the issue of the oppression of women in the provinces, takes up instead a modern problem that was already incipient in Flaubert's world but that has come to a head in our own time: consumer capitalism, the lure of a mercantile society making commodities privileged objects of desire. I said that the problem in *Madame B* was not a lack of opportunity for women; on the contrary, consumer capitalism targets them with all too many opportunities to supposedly exercise subjectivity. *Madame B's* Emma seeks fulfillment in frequenting over-the top fashion houses and buying gourmet foods—the sorts of objects modern commodity culture encourages people to imagine that they will bring status and satisfaction—and of course in so doing she meets financial ruin. This was already an issue in Flaubert's novel, but there it is more than

a matter of the excessive self-indulgence, or overindulgence that modern ideology encourages. There it is very much a class issue. At the trial of *Madame Bovary* for offense to public morals, Flaubert's defense attorney, Maître Senard, assured the judges that far from being immoral, this was a book with a moral, and the moral of the novel was that dangers lay ahead for the girl who received an education inappropriate to her class: "an education above the condition into which she was born." In this case, Senard declares,

> instead of pursuing the destiny that naturally belonged to her of being brought up for the farm where she ought to live or in a similar milieu, she is shown under the authority of a father who has the idea of having her educated in a convent, this woman born to the farm, who ought to marry a farmer, a man of the countryside. Here we see her sent to a convent outside her sphere. Mr. Flaubert sought to depict a woman who, instead of trying to settle herself in the condition that was given her by her situation, by her birth; instead of trying to make for herself the life that rightfully belonged to her, she remained preoccupied with a thousand foreign aspirations drawn from an education inappropriate for her. (Senard)

This may startle modern readers, who assume the problem is not the type of education or its appropriateness for a farm girl who should have married a farmer, who assume the problem is Emma's expectation that sentimental literature provides models to be pursued, but the class issue was a genuine concern in the 1850s. The French Revolution promised emancipation of the lower orders, which had not yet been realized, but which lay there as a promise, a smoldering potentiality, intensified by the revolution of 1848, and as more and more of the population became able to read, as newspapers and other new media proliferated, as urban life gained greater allure, as industrial processes made what had previously been luxury goods more widely available, the concern that these people would start desiring all the things they could read about and seek to "sortir de leur condition," was a genuine social fear, as Senard's calculated remarks at the trial suggest.

And yet there is a connection between Flaubert's revolutionary notion that a trivial subject was as good as a noble subject for a serious novel, that the worth of a work of art does not depend on what is assumed to be the worth of its subject, and the democratic notion that every human subject is as worthy as another and allowed to have desires. He writes to Louise Colet in 1853 that if the book he is struggling with is successful, he will have demonstrated "that in literature there are no beautiful artistic subjects, and that Yvetot is as good one as Constantinople, and that consequently one

can write about any old thing, as well as about anything else" ("qu'il n'y a pas en littérature de beaux sujets d'art, et que Yvetot donc vaut Constantinople; et qu'en conséquence l'on peut écrire n'importe quoi aussi bien que quoi que ce soit") (25 June 1853, *Correspondance* vol. 2 362). If there is a democracy of subjects, if a farm girl dissatisfied with her provincial life is as significant a subject as an aristocratic hero, that suggests a relation to democracy: equality of subjects, equality of desires, equality of votes.

Jacques Rancière argues that Flaubert's reactionary contemporaries clearly perceived the relationship between this sort of democratic realism and the threat of political democracy. Asking "Why was this text, from an author of aristocratic sensibilities and cultivating art for art's sake, immediately denounced as the literary incarnation of democracy?", he notes that "The book about nothing was for them democracy in literature, the literary incarnation of the power of people of no account ['gens de rien']" (*Tant pis* 482, 321). When *Madame Bovary* was published, Armand de Pontmartin declared: "Gustave Flaubert means democracy in the novel" ("Gustave Flaubert, c'est la démocratie dans le roman"), and in a denunciation of this "egalitarianism run wild" he writes: "*Madame Bovary* equals the pathological overexcitement of the senses and the imagination in discontented democracy" ("*Madame Bovary*, c'est l'excitation maladive des sens et de l'imagination dans la démocratie mécontente").

There is a paradox here, since Flaubert is by no means a champion of the people or of democracy—he called universal suffrage "the most ignominious absurdity imaginable" ("la plus ignomineuse bêtise qu'on ait rêvée") and famously declared "I'm certainly worth as much as twenty voters from Croisset," his village ("Je vaux bien vingt electeurs de Croisset") (to George Sand, 12 Oct. 1871, *Correspondance* vol. 4 194)[5]—yet he succeeded in depicting an Emma who, inspired by books, rebels against her condition, whose choices offer a critique of life as it currently set up. Concretely, as Rancière puts it, "Is there perhaps a link between Emma Bovary who tries to discover what is meant by words like happiness, ecstasy, intoxication that she has read in books, and those proletarians who also want to make real the words such as *liberty*, *equality*, and *emancipation of the workers*" (*Tant pis* 631).

At the very least, the beginnings of an industrial economy, which made many sorts of products more easily available to a larger public, accompanied an unleashing of new desires, which made people unhappy with the position and condition of life they were born into, creating a situation that

[5] In fairness, these statements come after the Commune in 1871, long after *Madame Bovary*, but his preference always was for an enlightened aristocracy.

provoked various sorts of concerns, from the fear that people no longer knew their place and were gaining ideas above their station, to a complaint about vulgar and sentimental attempts to bring art into life. The critique of consumer society, of consumer capitalism, which becomes central to *Madame B*, begins in the 19th century as disgust at these new forms of experience that the lower classes came to desire. Flaubert himself, while clearly sympathizing with Emma's discontent, her desire for other kinds of experience, explicitly denounces, in a letter to Louise Colet, the growing desire of large portions of society to bring art into their lives, in a letter that condemns many trends in modern life:

> But mediocrity seeps in everywhere. . . . Let's denounce gloves of flocked silk, office armchairs, mackintoshes, efficient cooking devices, fake fabrics, fake luxury, fake pride. Industrialism swells the Ugly to grotesque proportions. How many decent people who, a century ago, could have lived perfectly well without the Beaux-Arts, now have to have little statuettes, mini-music, mini-literature! Just think what horrifying propagation of bad drawings lithography must produce!
>
> (Mais la médiocrité s'infiltre partout. . . . gueulons donc contre les gants de bourre de soie, contre les fauteuils de bureau, contre le mackintosh, contre les caléfacteurs économiques, contre les fausses étoffes, contre le faux luxe, contre le faux orgueil! L'industrialisme a développé le Laid dans des proportions gigantesques! Combien de braves gens qui, il y a un siècle, eussent parfaitement vécu sans Beaux-Arts, et à qui il faut maintenant de petites statuettes, de petite musique et de petite littérature! Que l'on réfléchisse seulement quelle effroyable propagation de mauvais dessins ne doit pas faire la Lithographie!) (29 Jan. 1854, *Correspondance* vol. 2 518)

He may have deeply sympathized with Emma's unhappiness and boredom but had no patience with her attempts to decorate the house with what seemed to her luxury goods.

The point is that "literary democracy," in the sense of the equality of literary subjects, and political democracy only intersect at specific points, in the disruption of hierarchy, for example, and promotion of a principle of equality of subjects, but in that context Flaubert's novel works to delegitimize Emma as a subject by mocking her desires and choices (Rancière, *Tant pis* 321).[6] The book is structured as a conflict of equalities. While

[6] Cf. also Rancière, "La Mise à mort d'Emma Bovary."

promoting Emma as a valid subject of literature, equal to others, Flaubert writes against the attempt to democratize art, to make it enter every life and render trivial the manifestations of this subject's desires. It is important to stress that Emma's problem is not, as is often said, that she confuses literature and life; she knows all too well that her life is not like that which literature has represented, but she is not content to experience sentiments in and as literature only; she wants to give material form to the affective possibilities to which she has been exposed, to give material realization to her desires. Flaubert himself writes to la Princesse Matilde: "But art in itself is a good thing, when you lack everything else. For want of the real, one tries to console oneself by way of fiction" ("Mais l'Art, en soi, est une bonne chose, quand tout le reste vous manque. À défaut du réel, on tâche de se consoler par la fiction") (10 June 1868, *Correspondance* vol. 3 761). For him consolation comes from the experience of language, the production of literary affect, as in bravura descriptions in *Madame Bovary*. Practically-minded Emma, farm girl, who responds to literary language, to a certain mystique it creates, but wants practically enjoyable ideal pleasures, is not content with reading.

While readers have focused above all on Emma, an engaging character whose nature and situation is open to debate (is she a foolish woman or a tragic heroine, or neither, or both?), critics and other writers have been very taken by Flaubert's idea of *un livre sur rien*, where the evacuation of the subject would foreground novelistic art. Flaubert's novels are good to think with: they challenge our models of the novel, forcing us to reflect on the procedures and presuppositions that make possible our critical discourses—above all models for the production of meaning, based on conceptions of narrative posture and technique.

One of Flaubert's most striking challenge to assumptions about narrative technique, which helps sustain questions about Emma's nature and situation, is his obfuscation of the question "Qui parle?" Whose words, whose perspective are we encountering?[7] There are several aspects to this. One comes in the celebrated opening of *Madame Bovary*. "Nous étions à l'Étude," the novel begins, with the "I" of the first-person narrator, recounting what he has witnessed: "We were in study hall when the headmaster came in, followed by a new boy, not wearing the school uniform . . ." ("Nous étions à l'Étude, quand le Proviseur entra, suivi d'un nouveau habillé en bourgeois . . .") (1, 1). But this narrative voice, which claims the authority of a fellow student, goes on, after the opening scene in the classroom, to provide a witty, synthesizing description of Charles's father

[7] Cf. Culler chapter 2.

and Charles's previous life, which could not come from a classmate, and then notoriously announces, "It would be impossible for any of us today to recall anything about him. He was a boy of even temperament, who played at playtime, worked in school-hours, listened in class, slept well in the dormitory, and ate well in the refectory" ("Il serait maintenant impossible à aucun de nous de se rien rappeler de lui. C'était un garçon de tempérament modéré, qui jouait aux récréations, travaillait à l'étude, écoutait bien en classe, dormait au dortoir, et mangait bien au réfectoire") (1, 1). Who has been telling us all this then? The claim to authority is thus destroyed and the first person vanishes, the writing immediately continues to offer considerable authoritative-sounding detail: "He was a boy of even temperament, who played at playtime, worked in school-hours, listened in class. . . ." The introduction and then elimination of first person narration is a parody of narrative authority, of the traditional narrative technique of the knowledgeable observer, a flaunting of the artifice of narrative authority which marks the narrative voice as ghostly, fictional.

With the destruction of a first person narrative authority, one confronts the other major possibility, which narrative tradition calls by the misnomer "third person narration" (narration where no narrator says "I"). Flaubert's vaunted project of impersonality, which eschews first person narrative authority and seeks to make the author invisible, has frequently been misinterpreted, particularly in the wake of Henry James, as involving a limited point of view, where the narrative restricts itself to a particular angle of vision or limited knowledge, refusing to express opinions and depicting only the characters' point of view. But Flaubert plays mercilessly with such focalization, oscillating between a character's view and what is hard to attribute to the character.

In an article entitled "Over-writing as Un-writing," Mieke Bal identifies a nice case in the description of Charles's original fascination with Emma, where we seem to be getting what Charles notices:

> Charles was surprised at the whiteness of her nails. They were shiny, delicately pointed, more polished than the ivories of Dieppe, and almond-shaped. Her hand was not beautiful, however, not pale enough, perhaps; it was too long as well, and a bit dry at the knuckles, without soft inflections in the shape of its contours.
>
> (Charles fut surpris de la blancheur de ses ongles. Ils étaient brilliants, fins du bout, plus nettoyés que les ivoires de Dieppe, et taillés en amande. Sa main, pourtant, n'était pas belle, pas assez pâle, peut-être; et un peu

> sèche aux phalanges; elle était trop longue aussi et sans molles inflexions de lignes sur les contours.) (1, 2)

Whose focalization is put forward, Mieke Bal asks, in this *pourtant*, this *however*?

> Are we supposed to think that this man, in love and endowed with mediocre intelligence and little subtlety, is detailing and weighing what is and is not pretty about Emma? In retrospect, then, would he be sophisticated enough to envisage the kind of ivory of the metaphoric network put in place around the nail? Suddenly it all falls apart. Not only is Emma epideictically detailed to death by incoherence; so is the discourse that describes her. (136)

When *Madame Bovary* was indicted for outrage to public morals, for instance, centrally at issue in the trial was the author's responsibility for statements in the novel such as "the defilement of marriage and the disillusion of adultery" ("les souillures du mariage et la désillusion de l'adultère") (2, 15). One should write, the prosecutor argued, "les désillusions du mariage et la souillure de l'adultère" (Pinard). It is worth looking at the context of this statement for Flaubert's technique. Emma is at the opera with Charles, watching *Lucia di Lammermoor*:

> Lucie came forward, half supported by her women, a wreath of orange blossoms in her hair and paler than the white satin of her gown. Emma was dreaming of her wedding day; she saw herself at home again amid the corn in the little path as they walked to the church. Oh, why had not she, like this woman, resisted, implored? She, on the contrary, had been joyful, oblivious of the abyss into which she was throwing herself. Ah! if only in the freshness of her beauty, before the defilement of marriage and the disillusion of adultery, she could have anchored her life upon some great, strong heart, then with virtue, tenderness, voluptuousness, and duty blending together, she would never have fallen from so high a happiness. But such happiness, no doubt, was a lie invented for the despair of all desire. She now knew the pettiness of the passions that art exaggerated. So, struggling to divert her thoughts, Emma resolved now to see in this reproduction of her sorrows no more than a plastic fantasy, good only to please the eye, and she was even smiling to herself in disdainful pity when at the back of the stage under the velvet hangings a man appeared in a black cloak.

> (Lucie s'avançait, à demi soutenue par ses femmes, une couronne d'oranger dans les cheveux, et plus pâle que le satin blanc de sa robe. Emma rêvait au jour de son mariage; et elle se revoyait là-bas, au milieu des blés, sur le petit sentier, quand on marchait vers l'église. Pourquoi donc n'avait-elle pas, comme celle-là, résisté, supplié? Elle était joyeuse, au contraire, sans s'apercevoir de l'abîme où elle se précipitait . . . Ah! si, dans la fraîcheur de sa beauté, avant les souillures du mariage et la désillusion de l'adultère, elle avait pu placer sa vie sur quelque grand cœur solide, alors la vertu, la tendresse, les voluptés et le devoir se confondant, jamais elle ne serait descendue d'une félicité si haute. Mais ce bonheur-là, sans doute, était un mensonge imaginé pour le désespoir de tout désir. Elle connaissait à présent la petitesse des passions que l'art exagérait. S'efforçant donc d'en détourner sa pensée, Emma voulait ne plus voir dans cette reproduction de ses douleurs qu'une fantaisie plastique bonne à amuser les yeux, et même elle souriait intérieurement d'une pitié dédaigneuse, quand au fond du théâtre, sous la portière de velours, un homme apparut en manteau noir.) (2, 15)

In this marvellous passage there is modulation into and out of *style indirect libre*: into, with the question "pourquoi donc n'avait-elle pas comme celle-la . . .?", and out of it, with "S'efforçant donc d'en détourner sa pensée." So of course the phrase "les souillures du mariage,"coming as it does in a passage marked as *style indirect libre* by the elements that belong in direct rather than indirect discourse, such as "Ah, si," may be regarded as Emma's thought rather than Flaubert's. But the phrase comes casually, in a dependent clause, almost as if it were a cliché; it is not given as the product of a thought process, in this passage where we are above all witnessing a process of thought, as Emma identifies with Lucia, recalls her wedding, imagines "un grand cœur solide" that would have saved her, and then turns skeptical of the artistic representation of passions, just as she is about to be swept off her feet by the appearance of the hero, in his black cloak. If the passage had said something like "au lieu du bonheur espéré, elle n'avait connu que les souillures du mariage et la désillusion de l'adultère," we might be able to take the phrase as the expression of her thought, but placed as it is in a subordinate clause, we could certainly take it as the author's witty distillation of her experience—it is, after all, a clever chiasmus. On the other hand, it is certainly possible to imagine that Emma is now so disillusioned with adultery—she has lost the excitement of her "I have a lover! I have a lover!" ("J'ai un amant, j'ai un amant") (2, 9)—and so accustomed to thinking of herself as sullied by marriage with Charles, that this formulation could in fact be taken as her automatic way of thinking of the relationships she has suffered.

But finally, I think, one can conclude that it doesn't really matter—unless perhaps, you are a prosecutor trying to catch an author in the act of immoral cynicism; the effect of the passage does not depend on our making any sort of decision about whose formulation this is. This novel is not an exploration of the precise shades of moral evaluation, degree of self-consciousness and ethical judgment of the character—not a novel like *The Golden Bowl* or *Portrait of a Lady*. Despite the obvious *style indirect libre*, we do not know who speaks. We can say, simply, it is written.

It is hard to reproduce such effects in a modern video transformation of the novel, and *Madame B* does not try, but of course in producing visual images it may create similar uncertainty about whether we are seeing what we are seeing because it shows what Emma is thinking or whether this is an authorial, directorial construction. And the highly original device of having viewers circulate among different screens at their own pace gives us a different type of uncertainty, even impersonality, that would doubtless have interested Flaubert, even though he expressed the ambition to undertake a work where it would only be a matter of writing sentences (to Louise Colet, 25 June 1853, *Correspondance* vol. 2 362).

I hope that those who have not explored *Madame B* will do so, and those who have not read the novel, or have not read it recently, will take it up, for it is certainly a work that repays rereading, as all the famous writers I cited at the beginning can amply testify, and you may well come to see *Madame Bovary* differently in the light of *Madame B*.

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