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## Documents and the Malady of Truth

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The “disease of documentation” is a term that may be taken as synonymous with a certain version of modernity itself, namely that of bourgeois modernity. The historical genealogy of this disease can be found in literature as one symptom of such a disease, specifically in the 19<sup>th</sup> century realist novel. Though literature usually is said to deal with texts and not documents, fiction and not knowledge, both literature and its documentary other sometimes appear together in a work, such as the one that I’ll analyze here, Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (Flaubert, 2002), where both literature and scientific documentation become information for the main characters. In *Madame Bovary*, the naïve appropriation of fictional literature leads to the death of Emma Bovary and the naïve appropriation of medical literature nearly kills her husband’s patient and certainly his career dreams.

My topic in this paper is knowledge and documentality, so why discuss literature? Because in *Madame Bovary* we are presented with a picture of the emergence of modern information in bourgeois space and its ambiguous forms of representation: that of Truth as pure representation and that of the true as mediated representation. Pure representation points back to premodern forms of knowledge, suggesting that reality can be pictured by texts and other forms of semiotic representation—what we’ll call here “Truth” with a capital “T.” Mediated representation in modernity considers its own representational forms, which is to also say its production through institutions, technologies, and techniques of modern science, not just texts. This latter is modern knowledge production, made up of recordings that are then modified and adjusted according to new information, resulting in knowledge processes of modified and adapted information lifecycles. What we see in *Madame Bovary* is the emergence of a bourgeois world whose actors remain tied to Truth, whether their modes of life are guided by romance or even by professional alliances to modern medicine and science. That is to say, they are tied to a form of personal knowledge that rely on representational belief, not on a public knowledge and its traditions and institutions. (Or, rather, there is a misrecognition of both literary and documentary texts by Emma and Charles Bovary, namely one that refuses to see their representations as products of traditions and institutions—*Madame Bovary* still has lessons for both literary readers and critics, as well as science or medical professionals.)

Modern document managers are not free from premodern notions of documentality either, as the father of European Documentation, and who some see as the early pioneer of modern Information (and Library) Science, Paul Otlet, had an epistemic theory of the Truth of documents, which he called “documentation” (Otlet, 1934). Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* is an exquisite dissection of the misleading role of both literary and scientific fictions of truth, which remain today, creating havoc within a contemporary form of literary delusion, a contemporary form of vision blinded by pure textual semiosis, called “the internet.” Flaubert’s novel remains exemplary not only as an historical document showing the

emergence of modern information and the premodern nature of bourgeois values for information but as an example of how literary realism can break its own representational bounds by showing within itself its own limits and production.

To begin, we should recall with the malady of Truth as delivered by “literature”—that is, most broadly understood, published inscriptions, and most narrowly understood, drama, poetry, and fiction—Madame Bovary Senior’s foresight in her complaint about her daughter-in-law, Emma: namely, that Emma has been poisoned by the local librarian who plies her with rehashed 18<sup>th</sup> century romances. With romance novels as her guide, Emma engages in an affair with a local aristocrat, Rodolphe, whose love she hopes will raise her social status. (Instead, of course, he is a cad and is merely taking advantage of her naivety.) Eighteenth century romance novels were written for aristocratic women, by whom they were taken up as moral maps for women’s advancement through romantic love, one of the few options available for women for economic and social advancement at that time. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, similar romance novels as those of the 18<sup>th</sup> century were produced for women in the emerging bourgeoisie (I have previously discussed this in Day, 2019). Such complaints about librarians as Emma’s mother-in-law makes were not unique in novels of that time. I will take the unpopular stance here and propose that far from being the concerns of a troublesome old hag, Madame Bovary Senior’s complaint should be a warning to all of us today if we take reading itself, that is basic literacy, as the golden pathway to the church of Truth, whether such a pathway exists in “literature,” writ large or small, inscription generally or fiction, or even the voice of a doctor. And in regard to libraries and librarians, some libraries are part of knowledge networks (academic), others are part of knowledge and entertainment networks (public). And still, others can be part of memory institutions (archives) or social justice institutions (community archives). We can’t just say “libraries in general” nor understand libraries outside of the networks of information to which they belong, and which give them their documents and make their documents useful (Latour, 1996).

This is not at all to suggest that we shouldn’t take Truth as important—as perhaps the most important issue of our day upon which so many others depend. After all, everyone says it is! (And reading, too, though it is true that we read today probably more than we ever did—critical reading being a different matter.) But what I am suggesting in this article is that with Truth we haven’t really understood the true of modern knowledge (or the true of literature, for that matter), that we have remained not only in Plato’s cave but in Plato’s complaint, one which was better solved even in Plato’s day, or soon after, by Aristotle’s methods, rather than by Plato’s literal suggestion is to step outside the epistemic cave into pure and absolute enlightenment. For what I’m calling the “malady of Truth” is Platonism today, an era of nearly everyday crises in the news, many caused by the absence of not Truth,

but the true, and basically literate people not being able to tell them apart. (And likewise, not being able to tell news and journalism apart, information and knowledge.) And, just as there are no atheists in foxholes, there are few Aristotelians willing to analyze matters and many Platonists willing to offer a cure as bad as the disease in times of crisis, which today means nearly every minute. Such is the nature of our epistemic and emotional reactions as highly representational animals.

Like any good doctor, when we have an ill patient, we should first try and name our disease through a nomenclatural ontology and taxonomy that seems to fit the symptoms. In the case of the malady of Truth regarding documents and other texts, we have many different definitions. Let's start with a well-known one, taken from Madame Suzanne Briet's definition of a document in her 1951 book, *Qu'est-ce que la documentation? (What is Documentation?)* (English translation Briet, 2006), a definition borrowed from Littré's dictionary: "A document is evidence in support of a fact." As I have pointed out many times elsewhere, Briet then modifies this definition to suggest that documents assign names to things through indexical relationships, based on systems of difference and sameness. (For example, x is an antelope because it is different in this or that way from a deer or buffalo or some other, similar, animal.) For Briet, "initial" documentary systems, that is ontologies and taxonomies, name an entity by differences within a taxonomical system, and then other, secondary, discursive relationships further assign meaning to a thing (as "secondary" documentary systems).

Briet's definition and redefinition of documents presents documents as evidence. But how can evidence be a disease? I would suggest that to pursue this question we have to return to the initial definition: documents are evidence in support of a fact. But what are facts? This, in turn, I would suggest, is the problem that divides up two lines of understanding documents as evidence and produces the problem of the malady of Truth. The malady of Truth occurs not only because of lies and distortions, of course, not only because of misinformation, but because of the way we think about documents, evidence, and facts as Truth. If we move from the small "t" to the big "T" of Truth this isn't due to the true, but rather due to a metaphysical way we often think about truth and how truth occurs with documents. The difference between the Truth *produced* by documentary evidence in knowledge processes and the Truth *contained* in documents as evidence of what is is the difference between documents as epistemic tools and documents as representations of beings and events. It is the difference between knowledge and information, with the latter understood as representations of reality. ("Fact" understood epistemically versus "fact" understood ontologically.)

The term "fact" in English is a rather peculiar term. It is peculiar because it can mean two very distinct things. On the one hand, "fact" can mean some state of affairs in the world—reality. And on the other hand, it can mean some statement or

document about states of affairs in the world—what is shown or proved as real. So, it is a fact, for example, that the world exists. On the one hand, this means that the world existing is an uncontroversial state of affairs. If the world didn't exist, then how could I be writing this sentence since I need to be in the world to do so? But, on the other hand, to say, “the world exists” is to assert a fact that needs evidence in order for it to be true (that I am writing, and hence existing, are pieces of evidence for the world existing, or at least my world existing). So, on the one hand, an empirical state of affairs is called a fact, and on the other hand, statements about a state of affairs that have been verified by evidence is called a fact. These are two different grammars of fact, just as Truth and truth— ontological and epistemic senses for the term. To confuse these two grammars of “fact,” just like “truth,” leads to many errors concerning facts, truth, information, and knowledge.

How is the true established? Let's take the case of death. Every human that has ever existed has died, to the point that we can say that one of the properties of “human being” is that of finitude—death—, which means that individual human existence ceases at some point in time. The truth of human finitude is arrived at by synthetic reasoning (when taking account of as many human lives as one can find, each appears to die at some point in time), and then analytical reasoning (since all human beings die, we can say that death is a property of human being). The truth of human finitude is, thus, derived from synthetically true observations of human existence and analytically true derivations of what constitutes that existence. We often like to see “Truth” as transcendental of true assertions and inferences from these, but as in this case, we see that the truth of human finitude is no stronger than the true assertions we make from observations and the logical inferences we make from true assertions. In other words, both the synthetic and the analytic processes lead us to assert the truth that if ‘Tom’ is a human being then Tom will at some time or another die. Truth needs processes of evidence to be true.

The ontological fact of Tom's finitude is a condition of knowledge claims made in reference to Tom as a human being. Truth is the result of epistemic (knowledge) processes.

Documents are said to be evidence, but it might be better to say that *they function* as evidence in evidential or “knowledge” processes. The products of such evidential or knowledge processes are called “knowledge.” If we accept this assertion, then we might also observe that much of what is called “information” today does not function as evidence in knowledge processes nor is it the product of such, at least in modernist senses of knowledge, where statements about the world need evidence from research about the world so that evidence can transform informational statements into being knowledge statements. Much of the information floating around the internet may be informative, but it may not pass as evidence when understood within modern knowledge processes. What may be “news” to someone may not pass muster to be journalism. Modern journalism uses

fact checking and fact checking verifies that informative statements made in news articles refer to actual states of affairs and events in the world. Modern medicine also uses institutional methods of verification to check statements. However, as we know, none of this stopped former President Trump from making fallacious statements, such as saying that hydroxychloroquine might be a likely cure for COVID and this being repeated throughout the internet. Hydroxychloroquine *might* be likely to cure COVID in a universe of information based on sheer belief, but it was unlikely to do so in a knowledge universe, and, indeed, when tested by knowledge processes it failed to do so. Information-of-any-sort and documents diverge from one another because the second is involved in knowledge production and the first only in belief production. Documents act as evidence in knowledge production. Information-of-any-sort has no need of such types of evidence or processes. Knowledge can only be true, it can't be the Truth, because modern knowledge processes cannot give us absolute Truth, if Truth is said to exist in the world independent of knowledge processes (as a synonym for facts or reality).

“Truth,” with a capital “T” is often taken representationally, in the sense that the true, as an epistemological condition, is taken as subordinate to Truth as an ontological condition. There are occasions when this sense of Truth—a sense devoid of documents as evidence in knowledge processes—is useful. For example, in religious belief or literature, where belief can be a sufficient condition for understanding, or as I have suggested elsewhere (Day, 2021), in clinical psychology, where the truth offered by the clinician to resolve the patient's symptoms may have little need of evidential support in documented reality and is supported only by the patient's own words and/or by clinical theories adopted by the patient as a mode of explanation.

How then do we evaluate the library's holdings that Madame Bovary Senior sees as “poisoning” Emma? Should we refer to the novels as “texts” or “literature” in distinction from “documents”? We would be justified in this by the traditional definition of documents, which sees them as types of inscriptions that become evidence in knowledge processes.

On the other hand, if we are looking for evidence in the modern sense of “literature,” then we can find it in how, for example, novels and poems can be taken as pictures of life or themselves as historical evidence, or more materially, may incorporate empirical statements of fact within them (e.g., the use of documents in literature). Particularly, in the first instance, we have the evidential use of imaginary cases of the world. This can give us analogical insights about our own lives and worlds, but it also can lead us, like Emma's application of 18<sup>th</sup> century romance novels to her own life, to delusional beliefs and errors. And as I mentioned, in some contexts, like the psychological treatment of trauma, imaginary constructions of the self may be desirable. And, of course, we are all aware of the value of imagistic representations during crises, for example, that of imagining a “life after death.” As

I put it at the end of my book *Documentarity*, “Especially in moments of crisis, we are all more likely Platonists, rather than Aristotelians” (Day, 2019).

The danger, of course, is when such “metaphysical comforts” (as the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche called them) lead us astray. For example, climate change is not a matter of belief. It is a matter of knowledge. Climate change has been understood as a fact through scientific research on an empirical world of radically changing temperatures and other climatic shifts. For a person to say that he or she doesn’t believe in climate change is to say that he or she doesn’t believe in modern knowledge, in science, or he or she is saying that it is inconvenient for them to accept this type of knowledge. Of course, we are free to be skeptical of modern knowledge in particular domains when the knowledge impacts us individually, but we are not free to be cynical of such knowledge if we then live in the modern world through such types of knowledge. If the doctor tells me something important about my health, then I am best to listen, though in some situations I may also want to investigate the matter the best I can, though with my limitations in mind. Skepticism doesn’t mean cynicism; it can simply mean having doubts enough to want to become educated on something. Skepticism is built into modern knowledge processes as part of those processes since truth is not guaranteed but derived from evidence and evidential processes. If I find contrary evidence in the research literature or contrary indications in my own body, and if I suspect that institutional processes may be or have been flawed or incomplete, then I can try acting on that by modifying the doctor’s advice or asking for further tests and see how it works out. We may be skeptical of some knowledge processes, but then saying that we don’t believe in them at all is nonsense when we live our lives as modern lives, not medieval lives, that is to say, when we enjoy the benefits of institutions of modern knowledge instead of trusting symbolic systems of sheer belief. Metaphysical comforts can be harmless enough, and even individually helpful, but they can be disastrous when applied empirically and when amplified by modern technological, media, and bureaucratic means across social and political space.

But in times of crises, we often want the truth, not what is merely true. Truth—with a big “T” as it were—is evidence of ideal knowledge, not knowledge of the real. It’s a sign of harmonious beauty, not reality. Flaubert shows us in the case of Emma Bovary the pure beauty of her wishes and beliefs, but also the tragedy of her judgments, when the ideal and the real that live together harmoniously in fiction and personal imagination then crack apart against empirical reality.

Let’s take a somewhat different example than Emma Bovary in looking at the importance and confusion of documentary evidence in relation to Truth in bourgeois life, that of her husband, Dr. Charles Bovary. Bourgeois life is the life that many people lead today, too, one based on achieving documentary and documented successes and one based on having opinions negotiated by newspapers

and other forms of published writing. It's a life of paper pushing, one way or another, or to put it in digital terms, information and communication.

Emma Bovary's husband, Dr. Charles Bovary, is not so much a self-made man as one made by the force of his mother's nagging and perseverance. Probably not capable of competing in Paris's medical community and believing that Emma needs the fresh air of the countryside to cure her malaise, he takes up his medical practice in a small country town. Yet, as a professional, he still dreams of national fame in his profession. His means for this are, as any bourgeoisie of the time, or of our time still (particularly one not in the cities and outside of oral communication with professional colleagues), that of published writings. In one of the most important parts of Flaubert's novel, we see Dr. Bovary taking up the surgery of a poor peasant's club foot, applying the techniques he has learned from reading medical journals. Lacking colleagues and further training, he learns by reading of others' successes. Working from these journal articles, he dreams of becoming a famous physician through performing a revolutionary surgery for club foot. He dreams of professional glory and his wife's admiration (like Emma dreams of being elevated in society through her romantic travails with the local aristocrat). And, of course, like Emma, reading alone is insufficient to accomplish his dreams. The operation he performs is a disaster and he needs to call a surgeon from Paris to save his patient's life.

What is the issue that leads to the failures of Emma and Charles? In one sense, of course, it is hubris. But it is a hubris driven by not only personal dreams, but by class dreams, and beyond this, class means. The class dreams are those of any bourgeoisie, namely to become aristocratic, to remove one's self from the constant struggle of the "progress" that defines the *raison d'être* of their class. "Progress" is the given of bourgeois life—to become better by study and a profession and to have one's children become better than one's self by study and a profession. And the ultimate dream is to rise out of this struggle and have enough wealth for one's self and one's children so that they no longer have to struggle, that is, that they become aristocracy. Such achievement will be achieved by studying, by reading, and it will be certified by still more documents, tests, written renown, and recommendations. And so, this dream, this contradiction of values in bourgeois life—struggle and progress, and then progress and no more struggle—constitute the central, but unseen, dialectical image that drives Emma and her husband through their lives apart and together. They take documentary and textual items at face value, as representations of the real, and they combine such with ideological images so that they misunderstand documentary sources, literary sources, and even—tragically for them and for others—their own lives and class inscriptions.

What drives both Emma and her husband are books and journal articles produced from elsewhere, books and journal articles being applied without tests as to their applicability, stripped of their lineage and production in literary and



scientific institutions, networks, and modes of production, and, at least in Emma's case, books originally written for people of an entirely different class and time period. Emma and Charles are rural bourgeoisie, who take written sources as Truth.

From such documents each falls ill with disillusionment, depression, and finally collapse. What is the documentary disease they suffer from? In short, representational imagination, understanding writing as the *imago* of the real, instead of as inscriptions. The disease is texts understood as containing Truth, instead of as a means to the possibly true in a variety of different truth conditions.

But are illiterate people better off in judging the true? Within "civilization," understood as literary civilization, the answer seems to be an unequivocal "no." Inscriptions afford improved memory and communication, they afford extended research and learning. But to the question of writing and reading, we perhaps need a more nuanced reply of: "it depends." On the one hand, Flaubert's novel describes the peasant with the club foot as having been quite able to do his job of hauling items on and off wagons without a "normal" foot and without the help of the medical journals and books that claim that they will be able to construct a normal foot for people like him. He submits to the operation because of the prodding of his more educated employers and neighbors. He didn't need any further operation to be normal, really. The operation was meant to "restore" him to a state that he wasn't in before, to an ideal of what it would be to be normal. This state, like all states of Truth, was transcendental to his own existence. Dr. Bovary, with his textbook examples, promised to give the peasant a better life. The life that comes with a "normal" foot. In this, *the bourgeois dream of finding a way out* is passed on even to the illiterate.

The true of knowledge is mediated by methods, technologies, and institutions that attempt to negotiate and avoid the pitfalls of ordinary experiential prejudices. The true in modern science is governed not by writing alone, but rather by testing claims of writing in the world so as to see if written claims remain stable across the powers and changes of entities and events in the world. And here is the difference between a sick and a healthy use of documents. A sick use of documents and other types of texts forget their materiality, their mediating functions, and their relations with institutional and technical practices, and beyond all else, the powers of entities in the world not to conform to their representations. A sick use of documents and other types of texts forget their use within evidentiary structures and processes of knowledge. A healthy use of documents and other types of texts acknowledge and show these relations. They mark the difference between information-of-any-kind and knowledge.

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