

Chapter 2

Literature and Ethics: Learning to Read with Emma Bovary

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2.1 Introduction

In January 1857, Gustave Flaubert received a summons at his address in Croisset to attend court to face charges that the publication by instalments of his novel *Madame Bovary* in the journal *Revue de Paris* was an “affront to public and religious decency and morals”¹ [11, pp. 251–257]. At the end of the preceding year the editors of the journal had been assailed by a growing number of indignant letters from provincial subscribers “outraged” at the novel’s immorality, as well as a notification from Napoleon III’s official censor that the Department of Justice was investigating the novel with a view to prosecution. Flaubert, who usually kept at a studied distance from the press, plunged into the case, preparing his own defence and soliciting help from friends in high places. “It is all so stupid that I have come to enjoy it greatly,” he wrote to his brother Achille² [12, p. 226]. The leading trial lawyer Antoine-Marie-Jules Senard, who had been a friend of Flaubert’s doctor father, offered to defend him. In the event, Maître Senard made much of Flaubert’s family connections and the support of distinguished public figures, aided no doubt by Flaubert’s diligent trawl for “embarrassing quotations drawn from the classics.” His closing argument also made sophistic capital from the fact that Emma dies at the end of the novel: she had expiated her crime in death and readers had duly been encouraged to be virtuous through fear of what might happen if they themselves were to quit the straight and narrow. It was, in Maître Senard’s summing up for the defence, “an incitement to virtue through horror of vice” [12, p. 227].

¹“Outrage à la morale publique et religieuse ou aux bonnes mœurs”: Flaubert’s correspondence around the time of his trial is gathered in its entirety in volume II of his *Correspondance*, published in the Pléiade edition [11], and abridged in translation in Steegmuller’s indispensable book, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert* [12, pp. 217–235]; see also Florence Vatan’s reception history in *Pensée morale et genre littéraire* [5, pp. 139–157].

²Letter to his brother Achille, c. 20 January 1857.

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The case was dismissed, and Flaubert retreated to his study to reflect on the strange effects of publicity. In view of the press coverage which his novel had attracted it was almost certain to be a commercial success on its publication in book form, but it infuriated him that the trial had drawn attention away from what he felt was a work of genuine artistic merit. It was also his boast to friends, no doubt salted with a dose of wry irony, that he had written a book that was “moral by its effect as a whole”³ [12, p. 222]. But Flaubert’s understanding of morality certainly wasn’t shared by his provincial readers. His impulse had always been iconoclastic. At the very beginning of his creative life, aged 18, he had announced his credo in no uncertain terms: “If I ever do take an active part in the world it will be as a thinker and demoralizer. I will simply tell the truth: but that truth will be horrible, cruel, naked”⁴ [12, p. 9]. Four years before he published *Madame Bovary*, he had told his former mistress and correspondent Louise Colet that moralising should not be part of a genuine artistic creation: the critical gaze should take form as if it were describing “natural history, without any moral preconception... When we will have become used to treating the human soul with the impartiality that goes into the study of matter in the physical sciences we will have taken a great step”⁵ [11, p. 450] He was greatly disturbed by what he called the ‘moralising rage’ of his contemporaries—“la rage moralisatrice”⁶ [11, p. 543]. To be a ‘moralisateur,’ the kind of person who presumes to offer others moral instructions and lessons was no commendation, certainly not on Flaubert’s lips.

Flaubert knew that a particular kind of morality worked itself out in the act of writing. He was after all a French writer, and keenly aware of the illustrious tradition of ‘moraliste’ writing from the time of Montaigne, Pascal, La Fontaine and La Rochefoucauld, and to which he himself was to contribute with his pithy set of commonplaces and platitudes *The Dictionary of Received Ideas*, which he started collating in 1849,⁷ at the time he was writing his great novel. The French adjective ‘morale’ is close to its Latin root *mores*, which implies in the widest sense human usages and customs, even styles of life—in short, human behaviour. It even embraces what we now understand as anthropology. Flaubert, after all, had given due warning: he subtitled his

³Letter to Edmond Pagnerre, 31 December 1856.

⁴Letter to Ernest Chevalier, 24 February 1839: even at this young age Flaubert seems to have sensed it would be his life’s calling to “épater les bourgeois” (shock the bourgeois), irrespective of the fact that he was an arch-bourgeois himself, not least in socio-economic terms. It is as well to remember however that Flaubert, like all artists, had an investment in a unified culture; and that only a decadent civilisation could possibly consider it the function of social institutions to foster subversion.

⁵Letter to Louise Colet, 12 October 1853 (my translation): this attitude would be taken to its logical conclusion in Emile Zola’s project of the ‘experimental novel,’ around 1890, in which the experimentation is meant to be taken straight. But this assumption hides a morality of its own, as I suggest in the Conclusion. Zola’s mistake was to think that as a novelist he was contributing to science rather than the more diffuse activity called ‘literature.’

⁶Letter to the Princess Mathilde, 1 July 1872.

⁷*Le Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues* was published posthumously, in 1911. Its aphoristic form brings it squarely within the French *moraliste* tradition, which is conventionally dated from the publication of Montaigne’s *Essays* in 1580, and can be either digressive, as in Montaigne or Voltaire’s writings, or pithy and lapidary, as in the maxims of Rochefoucauld or Chamfort.

novel ‘Mœurs de province.’ It was an announcement that he was offering a new kind of novel: provincial customs and manners were going to be put under the microscope. And to do that he had to devise a new narrative style. “There really is a time before Flaubert and a time after him,” writes James Wood [21, p. 39]: what we think of modern realist narrative form is his discovery. Flaubert used the French imperfect as past tense, as Marcel Proust noted, in a way that allowed him to mix the important and the unimportant; he stepped back from what he was describing, deferring emotion and even judgement. Such was the indeterminate nature of the famous indirect free style (‘style indirect libre’). Even here, in his manner of writing, Flaubert was thumbing his nose at the prosecutor or, better said, at the ‘legal model’ itself—insofar as readers expected the author to signal to them how they ought to feel and think about the behaviour of his characters, and judge their various intrigues and manoeuvres.

And where morals are at issue, there are women involved. Emma Bovary is a scandal. Her education hasn’t prepared her for the life she is going to lead. The age of miracles is long gone but it is for miracles that she pines—and what she learns from books turns her head. Like Cervantes in that great European classic *Don Quixote*, Flaubert in *Madame Bovary* shows us there is no such thing as ‘pure’ imagination; the imagination is always the plaything, for better or worse, of a collective game. And sometimes nature imitates art; for a novel never simply presents, it represents. In both novels, as Jean Starobinski observes, the novelistic imagination takes as its theme the ravages of an imagination corrupted by its very receptivity to novels: we have to read simultaneously on two different levels [17, p. 228]. Emma is aroused only if her imagination works on her, and tells her what she is doing is part of her great ideal of self-sacrificing love. She *wants* to feel, but it is precisely that element of volition that falsifies her feelings. So she has her first giddy love affair with the young boarder Léon and then a second one, more desperate, with the Paris fop, Rodolphe, who rapidly treats her “like any other mistress.” She becomes sexually aggressive and loses her idealism, returning to her first love Léon, who is taken aback by her desperation: she is now what used to be called a ‘fallen woman.’ She is the only high-stakes gambler amongst calculating rationalists and prudentialists. Confined to her room with the symptoms of sexual cloistering her maid tells her of a woman she knew with similar symptoms which had ceased on her marriage. “Mine,” replies Emma, “didn’t come on until I got married.”

It would take a blind man not to recognise that Emma Bovary is patently the first ‘desperate housewife’—taking her cue from books and magazines, caring for her possessions more than her child, looking for solace in the arms of a lover.

2.2 The Historical Background

Madame Bovary marks a significant turning point in the triumph of liberalism: censorship would no longer be the same. But what did Flaubert’s contemporaries expect of the novel? Why were so many people indignant at its depiction of marriage? And why did Flaubert feel so sure he would win his case?

To understand these questions we have to return to the nineteenth-century, and breathe the slightly stuffy atmosphere of the French Second Empire, which in many respects was not overly different from the Victorian era. One of the defining events of the nineteenth-century is the success of the novel itself, which had gone from being a picaresque, fantastic and often droll adventure of objects as well as persons to a genre which seemed to reflect modern conditions and dilemmas far more faithfully than any other art-form: it was not slow in finding a widespread and dedicated readership, especially among female readers.⁸ But where Diderot had defended the novel in his article ‘In Praise of Richardson,’⁹ [7, p. 1059] as being the broad road to moral elevation precisely because it appealed not only to arguments of reason but to the imagination, it had, barely over half a century later, become suspect—and precisely on those grounds. Charles Dickens’ tenth novel *Hard Times* (1854), whose publication history is contemporaneous with that of *Madame Bovary*, opens with Thomas Gradgrind’s booming defence of ‘Facts,’ which alone deserve to be taught. “Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!” [6, p. 1].

Physicians were quick to denounce novels as one of the major causes of hysteria, and a contributory factor to the calls for emancipation that rippled through the social order. Emma’s own problems in the novel were attributed to her avid reading of sentimental novels, and her mother-in-law describes the booksellers where she acquires them as “poisoners.” Just after its appearance in book form, *Madame Bovary* was described by the literary critic Gustave Vapereau in an annual review of new novels as “the history of a young woman in whom a convent education and the reading of popular novels have developed her taste for luxury and pleasure and her instincts out of proportion with her birth and the position in society to which she can rightfully aspire” [19, p.48, cited in 5, p. 141]. Emma’s behaviour in the novel was a threat to the social order. Female desire was subversive. The fact that she took pleasure in the act of adultery was the mark of a grossly ungoverned sensualism: she was neglecting her duties as a mother and spouse. She was lascivious and the novel consummated “the shipwreck of art and that of morality.” Flaubert was accused of writing ‘brutal literature’¹⁰ whose truths were all physiological, and which showed no understanding of the “psychology of intellectual and voluntary forces that

⁸ It is not without interest that the first two translations of *Madame Bovary* into English were by women: the first (unpublished) was made by the English governess of Flaubert’s niece Caroline, Juliet Herbert, and the second (published, in 1886) by Karl Marx’s daughter Eleanor, who was herself to die, like Emma, of self-poisoning. As discussed by Julian Barnes in his long essay-review, *Madame Bovary* is the most retranslated novel in English, appearing most recently in a reworked version by the American novelist Lydia Davis (2010) of which Barnes is not uncritical [1].

⁹ Diderot’s important essay ‘Eloge de Richardson’ first appeared in *Journal étranger*, 1762.

¹⁰ The title of Jean-Jacques Weiss’s contemporary review [20, p. 1].

sustain the good fight against the shock of sensation, and check the assaults of desire” [4, p. 191].

Readers of *Madame Bovary* complained not only about the mediocrity of Emma’s surroundings and her behaviour, the prevailing moods of boredom and eroticism, but the lack of any countervailing force. There was no virtuous figure to stand against this vapid woman, nobody of superior morals whose force might console the reader. Emma’s husband Charles is an incompetent ignoramus at the bottom of the medical ladder whose attempt to restore some kind of social respectability to their marriage goes badly wrong when he botches an operation to remedy the village idiot’s clubfoot. The local pharmacist Homais—in many ways Emma’s true foil—is an intellectual fool who feeds his vanity on exactly the kind of opinions Flaubert went on to satirise in his *Dictionary of Received Ideas*. There is, however, one character in the book, as Allan Bloom noticed, who might be the author visiting his own creation, although his appearance in the novel is so fleeting and incidental it could easily be overlooked. It is the character of the great surgeon Dr. Larivière, who is called in at the end to treat Emma when she is writhing in agony from the arsenic she has taken: he is described by Flaubert as being “hospitable and generous, like a father to the poor, practising virtue without believing in it, he might almost have passed for a saint had not his mental acuity caused him to be feared as a demon” [2, p. 299]. This is surely a whirlwind passage of the artist who, as Flaubert famously suggested, must be “like God in his Creation—invisible and all-powerful: he must be felt everywhere and never seen”¹¹ [12, p. 230]. “Practising virtue without believing in it” sounds like an agnostic’s confession. The novelist can’t turn away from his characters since he, like the God of Genesis, is their creator; but at the same time he mustn’t seduce them with the prospect of a backdoor to paradise if only they will they recognise his omnipotence. Nor will he sit on judgement on them. He is a *clinician*.

It was precisely the impartiality of this figure of the physician—there are three in the novel: Charles, Emma’s husband, the lowly medical officer, Dr. Canivet from Rouen, a vulgar surgeon who gets called in to perform an amputation subsequent to Charles’ bodged job of clubfoot repair, and the aforementioned Dr. Larivière—which was cast back in Flaubert’s face by the critics of the time. Flaubert was accused (particularly by those who knew his father had been a doctor in practice in Rouen) of being a surgeon who had missed his vocation: it was perfectly acceptable for medical reports to appear in professional journals but the novel ought not be the arena for an anatomist-clinician who wished to shove his readers’ faces in the blood-and-guts reality of operations. “We should no longer talk of literature,” wrote the critic Alfred Nettement, “we are in a dissection room and we have just read an autopsy report” [13, p. 129 and cited in 5, p. 145]. Flaubert had transgressed the rules of good taste, and committed a contextual sin. Not only had he not included a morally exemplary character to counter the flightiness of Emma, but he as author had shirked the task of telling readers how to judge this “provincial tale.”

¹¹Letter to Mademoiselle Leroyer de Chantepie, 18 March 1857.

As Flaubert himself insisted, this was precisely the form impartiality and detachment *had* to assume. One of his fundamental aesthetic principles was that the artist should not subordinate his conception of the work to a cause, whether it be political, moral or instructive: “there is no literature of good intentions: style is everything”¹² [11, p. 507]. Subjecting a work of art to an extrinsic morality was, for him, the true contextual sin. By defending the autonomy of art, Flaubert uncovered the complexity of what normally constitutes “evidence”, and the real difficulty of drawing moral judgements.

2.3 The Work

Flaubert’s strategy was to turn terms on their heads. The good should not be the precondition for a work of literature; it ought to be an effect generated by the work itself or—to use the term beloved by the spiritualists of his century—an ‘emanation.’ A work successful in its own terms cannot be bad. Works written with the express intention of being edifying are, on the other hand, doomed from the outset to aesthetic failure; they are obliged to foreshorten the riot of the human scene to a narrow perspective reflecting the stance of a narrator or personage whose sole function in the work is to give voice to contemporary morality. That was precisely his criticism of the book which appeared as he was writing his own great novel, and would go on to become the best-selling book of the nineteenth-century, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). The submission to an extrinsic code also applied, in Flaubert’s view, to writers who wrote out of a desire to preach to the masses, like the social reformer Henri de Saint-Simon, whose followers advocated a state-technocratic form of socialism and wrote books with a ‘message’ (as in the *diktats* of Socialist Realism a century later), as well as to the hordes of successful contemporary writers who wrote syrupy, wholesome novels for which, as he told Louise Colet, he knew the exact formula: “Lend it a sentimental ending, a mock nature, virtuous peasants, a few commonplaces about morality, with a touch of moonlight among the ruins for sensitive souls, the whole thing intertwined with banal expressions, tired comparisons, stupid ideas—and I’ll be hanged if it doesn’t become popular”¹³ [11, p. 251]. It is a choice irony that it is precisely this kind of ‘noble’ novel which Emma and her first lover imagine they are acting out in their adulterous liaison among the ‘disappointments of life.’

There was more. If the good is something that emerges from the work itself, then the logic of impartiality can be driven further. The morality to which Flaubert felt he was expected to conform was itself immoral, being based on a contrived, artificial, dichotomous notion of morality, as if there was a clear dividing line between the material world and the spiritual, the bad and the good. In a letter to his mother, Flaubert denounced in particular what he saw as the musty bigotry of the ‘moral

¹²Letter to Louise Colet, 15 January 1854.

¹³Letter to Louise Colet, 27 February 1853 (my translation).

corset' imposed on young women. The censoriousness, stuffiness and rigorism of traditional morality often hid a prurient interest in the lewd and salacious: Flaubert was amused to hear, some years after his trial, that the chief prosecutor had been exposed as the pseudonymous author of lubricious poems. Clearly it wasn't only the fictional inhabitants of Yonville l'Abbaye in his novel who exhibit the hypocrisy of a bourgeois morality that tolerates vice under the mantle of virtue. Flaubert's provincial characters are experts in lip-service and sham, full of good intentions but ultimately self-interested and manipulative in securing their own 'interest': the pharmacist Homais—the prototypical man of today—seeks to win the favour of Emma's husband Charles, so that he will turn a blind eye to his illegal practice of medicine (for the sake of 'advancing' Science); and Emma's two lovers are ready to drop their mistress the moment the whole masquerade of their adulterous relationship with her threatens to jeopardise their social standing.

What Flaubert suggests, in his endless curiosity at the diversity of human wheeling and dealing, is that where vice can prosper under the disguise of a clear bourgeois conscience, it becomes more difficult to grasp a character like Emma in the traditional categories of good and bad. Her actions and thoughts are, in fact, as hard to decipher as the intentions of her creator. She is *irresponsible*, which was precisely the quality Henry James hoped for his work in 1885 when he complained that George Eliot (whose masterpiece *Middlemarch* bears essentially the same subtitle as Flaubert's [9, p. 1]) was altogether too knowing in the way she wrote: characters should have their own life within novels.¹⁴ Indeed, at those moments in the novel when Emma displays charity and generosity she is also in the grip of envy, rage and hate. "She had such tender words and such lofty looks, so many ways of her own, that one could no longer distinguish egoism from charity, nor corruption from virtue" [10, p. 333]. Like those around her, Emma has middling, quite conventional thoughts; she distinguishes herself from the mediocrity of her entourage only in one respect: she has an overwhelming passion, a thirst for the absolute, like St Anthony, the desert anchorite whose temptations preoccupied Flaubert for much of his writing life.¹⁵ That is why she holds no charms for Homais, the comically self-satisfied rational man whose first words are "You've got to keep up with the times!" Emma is a provocation to the novel's readers to feel differently—to avoid the decorum,

¹⁴ Flaubert is significantly absent in Martha Nussbaum's magisterial *Love's Knowledge*, although her remarks on Henry James's way of being responsible to his created story (*The Golden Bowl*), even when its characters are ungovernable "in the old plastic, irresponsible sense", and the reader's way of responding to the text are germane to my argument: "We notice the way we are inclined to miss things, to pass over things, to leave out certain interpretative possibilities while pursuing others" [14, p. 144].

¹⁵ Anybody who encounters Flaubert's last book *The Temptation of St Anthony* (1874) will have no difficulty at all accepting his contention that he was not a realist: seven dramatic tableaux present a night of ordeals in the life of the fourth-century anchorite Saint Anthony, who withdrew from society to live a life of prayer in the desert. Flaubert was obsessed with this Christian anchorite, completing drafts of his book in 1849, 1856 and 1872 before final publication. Flaubert thought it was a masterpiece; it was a critical disaster. The spectacle of a saint tempted by false beliefs and worldly treasures is of course wildly suggestive in terms of Flaubert's own career—"Saint Antoine, c'est moi!" is what he ought to have said about himself.

pieties and perceptive automatisms which govern moral judgement and broaden their experience of the world that surrounds them, whether it happens to be the stony streets of provincial Normandy or, more improbably, the sands of the Egyptian desert.

The ‘moral’ of the art which Flaubert advances aims to cultivate a new kind of receptivity in the reader; it seeks to break with what he saw as the bourgeois order’s ‘autolatry,’ its conviction in the rightness of its own moral sensibility, its cult of the self. And that includes any attempt by the author to make his work a showcase for his own personality. It is necessary “to have sympathy for *everything* and for *everyone*,” he wrote to a correspondent¹⁶ [11, p. 785]. Indeed, as a logical extension of this conviction, a writer’s ethics can only mean not falling into an idolatry of the act of writing itself.¹⁷ What counts is the work, and not the way taken to get there, however agonisingly ‘heroic’ it might seem in retrospect. As Marcel Proust, a close reader of Flaubert (and a successor often regarded as the emblematic ‘heroic’ writer), put it, criticising the aestheticism of the English writer John Ruskin, in *Time Regained*, “It would be absurd to sacrifice to the symbol the reality that it symbolises” [15, p. 795]. This kind of sacrifice is a writer’s perpetual temptation, especially in France where the love of literature is more likely than anywhere else, according to the philosopher Jacques Bouveresse, to assume “the trappings of a religion” [3, p. 56]. We can see the monastic Flaubert struggling with this paradox himself in his letters, one of the most fascinating documents in the entire literary corpus of a writer’s effort to express the truth. After all, the truly ethical writer might just be St Anthony, who wrote nothing at all. What remains is the sacerdotal image.

The classic French moralists of the past were great writers not only because of their stylistic assurance but because they were free of any narcissistic urge to defend their place in the scheme of things: they were clear-sighted, forthright and unforgiving, including with themselves. Attentiveness to the perceptual world stands in opposition to the routines of the ordinary world of wear and tear: it is able to surprise and astonish. Rodolphe, the serial seducer in *Madame Bovary*, embodies its obverse: his practised dedications to Emma rapidly dull and fade. After the fervour of his first meetings with Emma, she becomes a somewhat indistinct presence in his life—she is just another name on a seducer’s list of conquests. She has lost her novelty. Flaubert’s own aesthetic strategy to combat habituation and monotony is to draw out the emotional context behind conventional feelings by attending to the hardly perceptible but telling detail. Gaps and blanks become as important as the explicitly pictured. A tissue of banalities can suddenly reveal a tiny fleck of discord, unnoticed by all except the narrator. When Léon one evening in the company of Homais spies the teeth of Emma’s comb “biting” the hair piled up on her head, the minor detail seems ominous beyond the very ordinary reality it represents. Emma’s “Ah!” which concludes their dialogue when Charles tells her of his grief about his father’s death, says everything

¹⁶Letter to Mademoiselle Leroyer de Chantepie, 12 December 1857.

¹⁷Asked in an interview by Georges-Elia Sarfati what the phrase ‘ethics and writing’ suggested to him, the contemporary French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut replied: “Off the cuff, I’d say ethics consists of not falling into the idolatry of writing” [16, p. 72].

about mutual solitude within the marriage: she cannot console her husband because he is incapable of expressing his own feelings, unable to declare himself to her. And he has no inkling of her inner life either. Each talks past the other. And another famous little phrase—“everything and herself had become unbearable”—points, as Julian Barnes remarks, in its simple but unidiomatic deployment of the conjunction, to the deed that will ultimately dislocate Emma’s self from the world entirely [1, p. 10]. Flaubert is appealing to us to respond to a sign not apparent in the usual envelope of symbolic experience. No wonder he once told Louise Colet in a letter that “it is possible to put an immense love in the story of a blade of grass”¹⁸ [11, p. 558].

2.4 Conclusion: The Ethics of Reading

This restitution of felt experience, the illusion of things being present in their immediacy requires great artistry, is what he called “the alchemy of style.” To be an artist was to adopt a professional ethics that requires the artist to turn away from easy options, to develop a taste for a thing well done, to work without a thought for gain or glory, and to learn a kind of patience—“talent is a long patience,” as the famous French naturalist Comte de Buffon had said in the previous century. Needless to say, all these characteristics were Flaubertian traits: he was famous for his perfectionism and tirelessness in his pursuit of the right word (“le mot juste”), telling Louise Colet that he had once spent a week trying to finish a single page. It was as if the responsibility towards the work in progress outweighed any other kind of moral or social task. While this purist attitude towards what he was writing might suggest a writer willingly removed from the cares of the world (Flaubert was not above portraying himself as an ivory-tower recluse), his work was no apology for an art-for-art’s sake aesthetic, or for an indifference to worldly concerns. Literature was about discovery, as much as it was about the recognition of experience.

And if that is an accurate depiction of Flaubert’s writing, the corollary of his ethics of writing is an exacting ethics of reading. After all, that is precisely what besets Emma: she discovers that the commonplace activity of reading—an act universally regarded as a mere means for passing the time or assimilating information—may save or damn you, depending on *how* you read. To assume, like the later French novelist Emile Zola—who took Flaubert’s ‘natural history’ thesis to the point of dissociating judgements of fact entirely from those of value—that characters are not responsible for their actions, being subject to the determinism of physical laws, is itself to adopt a moral stance, not just an experimenter’s ‘point of view’: Flaubert on the other hand still has a creator’s residual sympathy for his fallen creatures, and concern has its limits. He is just as finite and fallible as Emma, a guilty agent in the midst of his own creation. “Rabelais, Michelangelo, Shakespeare and Goethe,” he wrote in a letter while composing his novel, “seem to me *pitiless*... They are bottomless, infinite, manifold. Through small apertures we glimpse abysses whose

¹⁸Letter to Louise Colet, 22 April 1854 (my translation).

sombre depths turn us faint. And yet over the whole there hovers an extraordinary tenderness. It is like the brilliance of light, the smile of the sun; and it is calm, calm and strong”¹⁹ [12, p. 198]. While literary historians now doubt whether Flaubert ever uttered the famous phrase “Madame Bovary, c’est moi,” we could certainly all say “Madame Bovary, c’est nous”: Emma Bovary is the first literary character of our contemporary consumer culture, spending her way out of disillusion until she falls into the hands of the shady debt-collector M. Lheureux, who, as Allan Bloom points out, is “the nineteenth-century prefiguration of the Visa card” [2, p. 224]. Emma has discovered that “all the platitudes of marriage” exist in adultery, for it has been an assuagement too, one of the paraphernalia she has acquired on credit. But her ability to defer dissolution until the bitter end by assigning a quasi-novelistic significance to her actions, and to persons she favours, by dint of consumer goods, makes her the first literary character of our contemporary consumer society. After all, she commits suicide only when the money finally runs out.

When a final judgement has been suspended, when it is no longer possible to be prescriptive in a work of art, then the reader is compelled to face a text that offers no code for its deciphering other than a respect for internal structure and inner necessity: what Flaubert in a letter of 1869 to George Sand called “la poétique *insciente*”—a manner of seeing internal to the text itself (which might well escape the conscious intentions of its author, even as Flaubert’s other unsuccessful novel *Salammô*, set in historical Carthage, never conformed to his plan for it). Against the illusion of an objective realism, Flaubert sets what might be called ‘subjective realism’ [8, p. 53]. The Peruvian novelist Maria Vargas Llosa has memorably described Flaubert’s style as always “employed to give an account of intimate facts (memories, feelings, sensations, ideas) *from the inside*, that is to say, to bring the reader and the character as close to each other as possible... By relativising the point of view, the style indirect libre finds a way into the character’s innermost depths, little by little approaching his consciousness, drawing closer and closer as the intermediary—the omniscient narrator—appears to vanish in thin air”²⁰ [18, p. 18]. This movement into the recesses of his characters implies not merely perceiving consciousness before it expresses itself in the doings of a novel; it also applies to the narrative itself. Flaubert was also arguing for a radical autonomy centred on the work itself. He might not yet have got wind of any concept as absurd as the death of the author, but he had certainly intuited the birth of the reader.²¹

The ethics of reading requires the reader to assume the full privilege of his freedom and face up to the demands it imposes upon him. The text “constrains [him] to think, requires him to put in work,” he told his disciple Guy de Maupassant in one of

¹⁹Letter to Louise Colet, 26 August 1853.

²⁰The quote is from Mario Vargas Llosa’s *The Perpetual Orgy (La orgia perpetua: Flaubert y Madame Bovary)*, first published in 1975 and published in English (translator Helen Lane) in 1986.

²¹A notion which the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) somewhat impishly took to a logical extreme: if the public process of becoming a writer is increasingly absorbed by rites of expressiveness, celebrity cults and the imperious demands of the market (defined above as ‘idolatry’), then reading is actually the more radical activity. Good readers are more rare than good authors.

his last letters [11, p. 840]. It would be entirely a mistake to assume that the morality inherent in the work itself is a lesson to be learned, a list of catechisms, an account settled, or indeed any kind of certitude extricable from the substance of the novel itself. Flaubert detested the urge to wrap things up, to move towards ‘closure’ in today’s psychological language: “stupidity lies in wanting to draw conclusions” [12, p. 128]. He is much more likely to leave the reader in an uncomfortable state of perplexity and indeterminacy, marked by the difficulty of inferring any kind of final state. The moral of his art is not to hand out prizes and punishments, but to teach readers not to be moralising. That was the original thrust of Christ’s teaching too. What it seeks to do is to transform the reader by the adventure of reading, and show the reader how it relates to his or her own experience of life. And this is a liberating strategy: as the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu pointed out in a discussion of Flaubert’s work, it would be a further mistake to assume that this autonomy of the novel demands that its texts be read solely from a *literary* standpoint. After Madame Bovary, the future was open.

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