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Madame Bovary



包法利夫人

Gustave Flaubert (法) 著
Margaret Mauldon (英) 译

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INTRODUCTION

Readers who do not wish to learn details of the plot will prefer to treat the Introduction as an Epilogue.

I

Flaubert's approval rating among his fellow writers has always been exceptionally high, and for many of them *Madame Bovary* (1857) has been a particular object of veneration. 'It has a perfection that not only stamps it, but that makes it stand almost alone,' wrote Henry James in 1902; 'it holds itself with such a supreme unapproachable assurance as both excites and defies judgment.' Nearly twenty years later, Proust pointed to the 'grammatical beauty' of Flaubert's style in *Madame Bovary* and elsewhere, and to the new vision of the world, comparable to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, that Flaubert had achieved by way of an artfully reinvented imperfect tense. Vladimir Nabokov, lecturing to students at Wellesley College in Massachusetts in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, picked up the refrain, and performed a dazzling close analysis of the novel. 'Stylistically it is prose doing what poetry is supposed to do,' he announced, before setting out to expose the compressed layers of poetic implication that Flaubert had packed into his most celebrated work. For well over a century, this approving chorus has sounded internationally, and brought together a range of otherwise dissimilar critical voices.

Great writers cannot be expected to approve unreservedly of their predecessor's efforts, however, for each has his own slant of vision to find, and his own

battery of stylistic effects to nurture and perfect. Emma Bovary, for James, was a limited 'reflector and register' of the real world, and suffered from the selfsame poverty of consciousness that his own heroines were uniformly spared. Proust was rude about Flaubert's style, finding in it something of the moving pavement and the mechanical digger, and he entertained a further subversive thought: perhaps Flaubert was a great writer who had schooled himself out of writing well. Even Nabokov, the most admiring of these three witnesses to Flaubert's genius, spends a delicious page itemizing the avoidable implausibilities that the master had incorporated into his text. What all Flaubert's fellow professionals agree on, despite their reservations, is that *Madame Bovary* marks a moment of decisive discontinuity in the history of the European novel, and that prose fiction produced in its wake, and under the influence of Flaubert's singular style, could move in directions that were quite new.

In part, the surprise that Flaubert sprang on the first readers of *Madame Bovary*, and that many readers coming to him for the first time at the beginning of the twenty-first century are still likely to experience, has to do with the banality of his subject matter and the relentless microscopic vision that he brought to bear on it. Emma and her provincial neighbours are little in moral stature, limited in intelligence, stunted in their ambitions, sordid in their private thoughts, and ridiculous in their public prating and posturing. Around his centrally placed married couple, locked into their miseries, Flaubert has laid out a gallery of unedifying stereotypes:

Homais the self-seeking pharmacist, who represents secularism and republican virtue at their lowest ebb; Bournisien the fleshly priest, much given to empty ecclesiastical exhortation; Rodolphe the well-to-do landowner and full-time rake. No trade or profession escapes Flaubert's derision. No individual represents true decency. How can a serious novel, a work of high art, be made from material of this kind? And how can an artistic project aiming so low be sustained over hundreds of pages? These are genuine sources of puzzlement, and even when Flaubert's astonishing ironic gift has been recognized many readers are likely to find themselves wondering how it was ever possible to expend so much irony on targets such as these. With undimmed malice, Flaubert has Bournisien and Homais watch over Emma's corpse at the end of the novel, one of them sprinkling her room with holy water and the other with chlorine. This double gibe, although delivered in exquisite symmetrical syntax, surely comes too late in the day, and after too many sallies of the same sort.

If we follow various of the tourist trails through modern Normandy, looking out for the legacies of Emma, Charles, Homais, and Bournisien as we go, we are likely to be confirmed in the view that Flaubert has misjudged the task of the novelist and the wishes of his audience. The secluded world of Yonville-l'Abbaye and its surrounding hamlets exists to this day. The river Andelle still flows, and sudden vistas still guide the eye across the fields to an isolated church or chateau. The modern Ry, with its long main street, prides itself on being the prototype for Flaubert's imaginary village, and reminders of the

novel, down to its tiniest descriptive phrases, are everywhere in the locality: the grey-white cliffs in the area are streaked with brick-red, as described at the beginning of Part Two, and flowers grow on the roofs of thatched cottages, exactly as Flaubert specifies towards the end of the book (p. 482). For the modern visitor, as for Emma herself, the metropolis of Rouen is at once nearby and as remote from this quiet rural landscape as Jerusalem or Constantinople. Finding the topography of the novel still largely intact, preserved in a green museum just north of the N31, those who worry about such things are likely to begin worrying all over again about realism in fiction. Surely novelists of note must have better things to do with their time than to tell their readers what they already know, or can easily discover elsewhere. If one is going to map the contours of *la France profonde*, or trace out the flat expanses of an average bourgeois marriage or adulterous affair, one needs the leaven of metaphor, or ideas, or speculative adventure. The writing must crackle with invention at some level. One cannot just preside, poker-faced, over the everyday world, setting it down as a procession of precisely observed details, and expect one's reader to stay the course.

Flaubert certainly wanted to create a first impression of himself as the author of a guileless guide-book to a region and its manners. The flat, deadpan tone mattered to him, and he returned to it at intervals throughout the work. But other impressions are soon superimposed on this one. The miracle of Flaubert's writing is in the stealth with which he adjusts its focus from one word to the next, or from

sentence to sentence. Proust's excavating machine is often to be heard in the background, and there are entire paragraphs of *Madame Bovary* that seem to be made of constricted telegraphic utterances placed end to end, but even here the enumeration of details has a living pulse to it:

As there were not enough stable boys to unharness all the horses, the gentlemen rolled up their sleeves and got down to it themselves. Depending on their social position, they wore dress coats, frock coats, jackets both short and long: good-quality dress coats, treated with great respect by the entire family, and brought out of the wardrobe only on solemn occasions; frock coats with voluminous tails that flapped in the breeze, cylindrical collars, and big pockets like miniature sacks; jackets of coarse cloth, generally worn with a brass-banded peaked cap; very short-skirted jackets with, at the back, two buttons close together like a pair of eyes, and tails that might have been hacked straight from a single piece of cloth with a carpenter's hatchet. (p. 40)

These are the male guests arriving for the wedding of Emma and Charles, or rather this is their attire come loose from their bodies and recorded as a series of shapes and sociological meanings. On the one hand, the narrator seems to be having fun at the expense of his country folk, and to be suggesting, by way of a determined transfer of attention from persons to clothing, that local festivities of this kind are nothing but show and pantomime: all right if you live in a village, as Gertrude Stein once remarked, but if not, not. Failures of dress sense have been sorted into a jeering catalogue by one who clearly knows better about such matters than his Norman

neighbours. On the other hand, however, something more akin to a musical exposition is also going on in this paragraph. There are three thematic kernels—dress coats, frock coats, and jackets—and each of them is no sooner stated than subjected to an elaborate process of variation. Flaubert's prose speaks of an ordinary world that is becoming fantastical even as each separate notation is set down: these country-dwellers are beginning to flap like birds and to grow eyes in the back of their jackets. And it speaks, too, of a playful, self-delighting intelligence at work upon whatever undistinguished fragments of the real world it finds to hand.

It will be plain to many readers of *Madame Bovary*, from its first page onwards, that this is a novel in which something strange and undeclared is going on, and that Flaubert has other than 'realist' designs upon us. Charles's famous cap—'Ovoid in shape, its curves enlarged with whalebone, it began with three circular sausage-shaped layers'—is already much more than a preliminary indicator of its owner's character. To be sure this exercise in ponderous description does tell us about the clumsiness and ill-fittingness of Charles himself, but it introduces us at the same time to another major tendency of Flaubert's imagination, by which he devalues and simultaneously revalorizes the objects that fall beneath his gaze. The cap is a concoction and a contraption, a bundle of heterogeneous components, yet at the same time it resembles a complex measuring device, a theodolite or an astrolabe perhaps, designed for use in two or more dimensions at once. In its concoctedness it resembles

a work of art, and in its intersecting planes and conjoined materials it resembles an instrument of intellectual enquiry. This strange, stranded piece of headgear is a warning of excitements and provocations to come, and the first in a long Flaubertian series of uncanny, proto-surrealist assemblages.

By far the commonest, and most acclaimed, device used by Flaubert to float his own and his reader's attention between incompatible value-systems is the one known to critics of the novel as 'free indirect style'. This is a familiar enough feature of many literary works, and of everyday conversation for that matter, but Flaubert uses it with a persistence and range of implication that are quite new. Sometimes it simply involves a momentary discord, a single word that switches us from an impersonal to a personal viewpoint: 'And her husband, knowing that she enjoyed going for drives, found a second-hand gig which, once it was fitted with new lamps and splash-boards of quilted leather, looked almost like a tilbury' (p. 48). The conveyance named at the end of this sentence takes us from a no-nonsense narrative viewpoint, in which the refurbishment of shabby vehicles can be mentioned without shame, to the very heart of Emma's impatient aspirations. A tilbury, even an approximate one, would mark the beginning of an upward gradient in Emma's social life.

More telling, however, are those extended passages in which two systems seem to be cross-hatched, or in which two ways of looking at the world each provide the other with a distorting gravitational field. In

this slightly later account of Emma's fantasies in full self-dramatizing swing, for example, narrator and character enter into a rapturous dialogue. Emma is already making damaging comparisons between her own marriage-partner and those that others are likely to have found for themselves:

For indeed not all husbands were like this one. He might have been handsome, witty, distinguished, attractive, as were no doubt the men her old school friends from the convent had married. What must they be doing now? In the city, with the noises of the streets, the hum of the theatres, and the bright lights of the balls, they were leading lives where the heart had space to expand, the senses to blossom. But her life was as cold as an attic with a skylight facing north, and boredom, like a silent spider, was weaving its web in every shadowy recess of her heart. (pp. 63-64)

This is an impulsive interior monologue, a moving picture of daydreaming as it happens, and at first the narrator's voice edits it only lightly. Emma speaks for herself, and is discreetly nudged from time to time towards symmetry in her phrasing or precision in her diction. But in the last sentence there is a change of gear. The narrator both wants and does not want to share her view of things. The meagre skylight, the northern prospect, and the busy spider are borrowed from Emma's favourite adolescent reading. They are literary hand-me-downs, the prefabricated parts of a Gothic stage-set. Yet *ennui*, that special, virulent sub-species of boredom, was a badge of honour for certain of Flaubert's poetic contemporaries, and for the novelist himself at times.

Baudelaire praised its repulsiveness highly, and imagined with relish a hideous population of spiders at work in the bored individual's brain. Emma, using her own version of the image, has become a woman of her time, and a poet of sorts. Her still adolescent habits of imagination have brought her into radical company, and the commentator who seemed to despise her a moment ago has suddenly found in her a soul-mate, and a fellow devotee of extreme emotional states.

There is, then, a counter-current of poetic suggestion running through Flaubert's portrait of the Normandy landscape and its desperate middle-class inhabitants. On the face of it everything in the human realm is flat and drab, and the beauties of nature can do little to enliven or elevate the minimal life-stories that unfold here. Yet the voice of the narrator, as it shrinks and then suddenly expands its range of sympathies, proves to be a very unreliable guide to this supposedly worthless rural scene. That voice absorbs and re-inflects other people's points of view, and in so doing becomes mobile and accommodating. 'What will he do next?', the reader begins to ask of this capricious narrator. There can be no real doubt, for example, that Rodolphe, the first lover Emma finds outside her marriage to Charles Bovary, is a cad and a boor, and the following passage certainly begins by emphasizing his lack of discrimination. Rodolphe is reacting to Emma's declarations of love and admiration, all of which he has heard before, from earlier mistresses:

He could not see—this man of such broad experience—

the difference of feeling, beneath the similarity of expression. Because wanton or venal lips had murmured the same words to him, he only half believed in the sincerity of those he was hearing now; to a large extent they should be disregarded, he believed, because such exaggerated language must surely mask commonplace feelings: as if the soul in its fullness did not sometimes overflow into the most barren metaphors, since no one can ever tell the precise measure of his own needs, of his own ideas, of his own pain, and human language is like a cracked kettle-drum on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, when what we long to do is make music that will move the stars to pity. (pp. 269-270)

With the words 'as if the soul in its fullness' a halt is called to the flow of Rodolphe's self-justifying reverie on the language of lovers. The narrator takes Rodolphe's views seriously, thinks of them indeed as a fledgling philosophy of language, and enters into debate with them. Even a scoundrel may be worth arguing with. The narrator corrects an imperceptive character, and offers a superior philosophical basis for any future enquiry into amorous speech. The arbitrariness of the verbal sign, much discussed in modern linguistic theory, is already here, as is the importance of considering context in seeking to understand any communicative act. A hinge in the middle of the paragraph thus connects the views of a cad with a fine tragic insight into the limitations of human language. Abruptly, in the last sentence, a universal sorrow and rage sing out, and mere Rodolphe has acted as the pretext for their song.

Flaubert clearly enjoys the company of fools, and beats the drum with relish for his dancing bears. But there is much more to the design of the book, and to the virtuosity of its execution, than these singular moments of collusion between a storyteller and his cast of characters. Such moments are distributed throughout the novel and together create a pattern of long-range echoes and refrains, but much of the internal architecture of Flaubert's narrative involves a smaller and more elastic series of supporting struts. For many readers of the text in its original French the first inkling of this quality will come not from large movements of recurrence, but from the fall of sounds and phrases within individual sentences. Flaubert has a predilection for things, action or attributes that come at him in threes, and the shoes worn by the young Charles Bovary on the first page of the novel — 'heavy, badly shined, and studded with nails' — offer a foretaste of countless formulations of the same three-fold kind. He also enjoys assonance, alliteration, rhyme, and near-rhyme, and these features can descend as a seemingly gratuitous sound-texture upon any incidental observation: 'L'air, passant par le dessous de la porte, poussait un peu de poussière sur les dalles' ('A draught of air from under the door stirred a little dust on the flagstones', p. 34). On occasion the triadic obsession and the sound-play coincide to produce a bizarre effect of motiveless emphasis: 'Un peu plus bas, cependant, on était rafraîchi par un courant d'air glacial qui sentait le suif, le cuir et l'huile' ('But just a little further away, refreshing gusts of chilly air smelling of tallow, leather, and oil could be felt',

p. 312). Emma is about to see Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* for the first time, and the air of Rouen is already alive with a premonition of tunes and harmonies. In both these cases, it is the silent air that suddenly breaks into sound inside the Flaubert sentence, but any neutral or characterless medium can be turned into sensory stuff in the same way. At this local level, the novelist's self-appointed task is clearly that of bringing ordinary things together into an enchanted interlace. Even agriculture can be musicalized by verbal art: Emma's father, visiting the young couple at their first home together, talks insistently of 'veaux, vaches, volailles' ('calves, cows, poultry', p. 93).

The web of connections operating on a larger scale between the separate phases of Flaubert's plot is the novel's most extraordinary feature. Moreover, one of these combined patterns of sound and sense comes close to offering Flaubert's own commentary on his narrative technique. It concerns the passage of meaning across space and time, and the waning of meaning that sets in as the novel moves towards its bleak denouement. The key terms in the miniature lexicon concerned are 'loin', 'lointain', 'éloigner', 'vague', and, bringing with them a further series of events that unfold in empty air, 'vibration' and its synonyms. This language of distance and remoteness, of far horizons and reverberating sound, cuts across the exact technical languages—of farming, pharmacy, medicine, and commerce—that Flaubert also exploits exhaustively. Flaubert's dry-goods store of useful objects has a current of vagueness and inscrutability running through it.

II

Emma Bovary is one of European literature's most celebrated dreamers and fantasists, and she is introduced to us as a specialist in long perspectives that end mistily. In Part One of the novel, this note is struck often, and with no more than a tinge of disapproval on the narrator's part. Looking into the distance may, after all, be the sign of a forward-flung creative mind at work:

And in her thoughts she followed them, up and down the hills, through the villages, racing along the highway by the light of the stars. Then, always, after an indeterminate distance, things became a blur, and her dream died away. (p. 82)

But, very gradually, the circle whose centre he was grew larger round him, and that halo he wore shifted away from him, to shine its radiance on other dreams. (p. 83)

They lived on a higher plane than other people, somewhere sublime between heaven and earth, among the storm clouds. As for the rest of the world, it was lost in shadows, it was nowhere, it seemed not to exist. Indeed, the closer things were to Emma, the more her thoughts avoided them. (pp. 83-84)

In the first of these extracts, Emma is imagining the travels of a fish-vendor's cart, in the second remembering the mysterious Vicomte with whom she had danced at the ball of La Vaubyessard, and in the third dreaming of superior people at large. But in all three cases, her mind, for all its lack of self-aware analytic power, is presented as an active force. It

builds possible worlds. It projects itself into realizable futures. And even when a blur sets in and dreams die away. Emma is in good company—that of all strenuous thinkers who have had exactly this sensation of an intellectual limit being reached.

Flaubert's heroine is soon to be firmly censured for her distance-seeking habits of mind and for the cult of vagueness that they seem to foster, and her error is linked with the misuse of the printed word. Léon, a clerk who has a serious passion for prose fiction, has just praised books for the fantasies they encourage, and for the passions they allow readers to savour at second hand:

'That's true! That's true!' [she said.]

'Have you ever had the experience', Léon continued, 'of finding, in a book, some vague idea you've had, some shadowy image from the depths of your being (*de loin*), which now seems to express perfectly your most subtle feelings?'

'Yes, I have,' she replied. (p. 118)

Passages of this kind are theatricalized exercises in literary criticism and have two principal targets: literary authors who promote either sentimentality or mental slackness generally, and readers who do not know how to read. Flaubert assails both groups with acerbity and irrepressible comic invention. If Emma had read better books, and read them better, he seems to imply, she would not now be in her advanced delusional state. Second-rate books have rotted her judgement, and undermined her survival

instinct. If only she had been able to keep a clear eye on things close at hand—been more of a realist, as one might say—she could have achieved intellectual coherence, self-control, and a worthwhile role in the community.

Yet Flaubert's criticism of poor reading habits does not in fact take him very far in this direction. His tenderness towards Emma is intense, and all the more moving for having no loose sentiment in it. The plain facts of her case are what matters, and the material medium in which her life is led. And this is where resonance and reverberation enter his drama, offering their own view of distance, disappearance, and the ending of the human life-span. Bells ring often in *Madame Bovary*. Their sound carries over long distances, and expires slowly. They join forces with other resonating chambers, man-made and natural, to create an animated acoustic picture:

She sank into that kind of brooding which comes when you lose something for ever, that lassitude you feel after every irreversible event, that pain you suffer when a habitual movement is interrupted, when a long-sustained vibration is suddenly broken off. (p. 174)

Then she heard, in the distance, from the other side of the wood, on those other hills, a vague, long-drawn-out cry, a voice that seemed to linger in the air, and she listened to it in silence, as it blended like a melody with the last vibrations of her tingling nerves. (p. 227)

The chill of the night spurred them to more passionate embraces; the sighs on their lips seemed to them more