

## **Problematics of Nineteenth-Century Life Style in « Madame Bovary »**

Many things could be said about Flaubert, in connection with nineteenth-century concepts of being, of living and of life style. There is Flaubert the artist : as such, he would define the art of living as the art of writing. This can be understood literally. Flaubert made many statements about his life style as a writer, about his seclusion in the house he inherited from his father in Croisset (Normandy) and his intense concentration on his work. In his last novel, « Bouvard et Pécuchet », two gentlemen retire to Chavignolles in order to pursue private studies : they act in mature age the same way Gustave Flaubert did since the outburst of his disease (January 1844), when he stopped being a student of law in Paris, and ever after his father's death (1846). Only, he retired at the age of twenty-four. Now, in nineteenth century it was honorable for a person to live as a « rentier », from the outcome of a « rente », and when Flaubert had to indicate a profession, he said he was a landowner (« propriétaire »). For him, being an artist was conditioned by being a « rentier », but he never considered that being an artist was a profession. He would never have called himself a « novelist ».

But writing in itself is a substitute for living. Again, Flaubert was aware of that. He used to call himself « un homme-plume » : that means he identified with his pen. If you identify with a pen, having to live your own life recedes into the background. Writing embraces all of life-experience, particularly if you write fictions representing the lives of other people. Flaubert had a gift for induced hallucination and he was attracted to acting parts and swapping roles. As a writer of fiction, he tried to get « inside » his characters, to feel like them, to be « with them ». He could even change roles with an idiot, an animal, a thing, a stone.

It must be said that already when he was very young, Flaubert did not feel like conforming socially. He was born into a provincial, affluent and respected bourgeois family. But for some unknown reason, he felt secretly apart. This being apart he felt very strongly about. It was not just a fit of teenage crisis in the spirit of Romanticism. The comparison can be made with Franz Kafka. Young Gustave feels he is a « stranger » among his fellow-men, and the word « stranger » has to be taken in the true existential meaning. Sometimes Flaubert gives such insights into this « strangeness » of his (in some of his letters) that his speech resembles very much that of Kafka in his diaries.

In Flaubert's early and unpublished work, there are attempts to translate this experience into romantic fiction. A good example is the leading character in a short story called « Quidquid volueris » (a Shakespearian title meaning : Whatever You Like, but a text relevant to the tradition of the Gothic novel, announcing modern science fiction). Just consider that this character, called Djalioh, is half a human and half an ape ! Such a character invented by a fifteen-year old author offers a tremendous image of the romantic outcast. Djalioh is not only socially speaking a pariah, he does not belong to humanity. One can imagine that life is impossible for somebody like Djalioh. Through Djalioh, young Flaubert says that living among the bourgeois is impossible for him. Who is the monster, he asks : the well-to-do bourgeois, M. Paul, a cold scientist who created Djalioh out of scientific curiosity, or Djalioh, the silent, sensitive and ugly young poet secretly in love with Adèle, M. Paul's wife ? At that stage Flaubert doesn't

see any way out, so he lets Djalioh die a tragic death, after the half-ape has assaulted and murdered Adèle. M. Paul lives on, happy and untroubled. M. Paul forecasts the famous character of M. Homais, the pharmacist in « Madame Bovary ». Indeed, the self-satisfied bourgeois is the epitome of humanity (« Homais » goes back to « homme »). In a world of bourgeois, there is no understanding for young poets, artists, apes, for those who do not accept to live in terms of profession, matrimonial and financial planning, career and social conventions, for those who favor imagination and transgression. Gustave's favorite author when he is around seventeen is the Marquis de Sade : the ultimate « antibourgeois ». It is a paradox that it is his father's death which will give Flaubert the freedom to experience (inwardly) a highly subversive life, under the mask of a retired bourgeois in Croisset.

There is a difference between Flaubert's early work and the mature novels that he released to be published. How he sees the ways of the world, what he thinks of society and of the human condition and of the philosophical question of being has been set by him very soon and is not going to evolve. The story « Quidquid volueris » exemplifies that his fiction is conceptual or experimental. Flaubert builds an experimental plot in order to study the possibilities and impossibilities of human experience in contemporary society, as referred to the impossibility of being. But something new happens with his writing « Madame Bovary ». He now takes into account not only the fact that living is impossible, but also that writing is impossible. With « Madame Bovary », Flaubert discovers that he is not just a storyteller. He is now really an artist. That means : he does not only have the status of the artist, he does artistic work. Of a younger generation than Théophile Gautier, he nevertheless sustains the doctrine of « l'art pour l'art ». The writer's medium is the language, words. Flaubert is well aware that literature is something else than just communication and representation. Literature as art has emerged around 1850 precisely because some prose writers started making use of the language for something else than just communication and representation, something uncertain and out of reach. To write (in French, one speaks of « l'écriture ») became a challenge, a sacrifice. If writing is living, then the writer, the artist in the art of writing, lives the full experience of impossibility.

So far, I have spoken of Flaubert's conception of life, which was so closely connected to his being a writer. I shall now focus on his famous novel, « Madame Bovary », in order to point out the process which converts the novelist's conception into a literary text, with a plot, a set of characters and formal choices, creating a specific textual object. This novel, the first of Flaubert's to be published (it happened exactly one hundred and fifty years ago), was a turning point both for him and in the history of modern literature. With this text, Flaubert is at the cross-roads. « Madame Bovary » is typical of nineteenth-century fiction and of the new trend of the fifties : Realism. It relates to Flaubert's new aesthetics at that precise moment when he was not the romantic poet any longer, but not yet the unpredictable experimental artist he became later, leading the bemused reader towards modernity and sometimes even postmodernism. « Madame Bovary » is a modern and sometimes a postmodern novel, there is formal experimentation everywhere, but there is still something classic as well. There is a solid construction. The novel does tell a consistent story about real life. One could even speak of hyperreality, because fiction concentrates reality and makes it seem « more » real. Flaubert as a novelist appears to be a keen observer of society. And society, the relation between the individual and society, the possibility for the individual to come to terms with society and find some personal accomplishment, is what we're interested in. We must just keep in mind that what Flaubert aims at in « Madame Bovary » is beyond realism. His main care now is « l'écriture ». He does not make use

of a word, a group of words, a sound, a verb form, a rhythm, a dot, without being conscious of the effect every single detail will have on the whole. I'll quote English-speaking critics : « The novel as a whole is [...] constructed around clusters of images, all of which are part of definable, yet interrelated cycles » (Victor Brombert, *The Novels of Flaubert*, University of Princeton) ; « The tightly knit structure of « Madame Bovary » is one of the main reasons why it conveys such a sense of inevitability and fatality » (Alan Raitt, *The Originality of Madame Bovary*, University of Oxford). It took Flaubert five years to write the novel, and he wrote ten drafts for every page. The drafts have been kept and collected, they come up to 4 000 pages.

« Madame Bovary » is thus a novel of very dense texture. As a result, any page can be sorted out and taken as an illustration of several leading themes and techniques. Here, you have two double pages. Now, I can imagine that not all of you are familiar with this novel. Therefore I have to sum up the plot, very shortly. The novel is divided into three parts, it follows the biographical line of the main character, Emma Rouault, a young woman living in the country, in Normandy, in the 1840ies. In Part I, she is a young girl living at her father's farm. She has had a good education in a religious boarding school where she's had upper class girls as school-mates, and she dreams of another, more refined life. She has also read some romantic stuff and her relation to literature has been compared with that of Don Quixote : that is, she sees reality through her readings. She meets and marries this young recently widowed country doctor. The unfortunate thing with Charles Bovary is that he is a good person, but with a very flat personality. The couple first stays some three years in a village north of Rouen, but Emma suffers from disillusion and boredom. She starts being chronically ill (her disease is psychosomatic) and her husband decides to move to another place. End of Part I, beginning of Part II. (For those who want to know the end : in Part III, Mme Bovary will have an affair with a young man in Rouen, she'll get more and more involved in debts, and ultimately she'll commit suicide.)

When we enter the book, in the two double pages I shall comment on, we are in Part II, chapter 11 and 12. The Bovarys live now in the little country town of Yonville, east of Rouen, and Emma's affair with a neighbor, the gentleman-farmer Rodolphe, has started in the previous autumn. The two double pages suit my purpose because they show how Flaubert constructed the story. He conceived the narrative as a montage of sequences, each sequence being a closed one. (He never proceeded to the next before he had finished a sequence.) Each sequence takes up a moment in Emma's life. It can be a unique moment or it can be a period, and in this case the narrator often tells about recurrent moments. The French tense « l'imparfait » conveys this sense of iteration, in the English version (Oxford University Press, 2004, a new translation by Margaret Mauldon) the translator makes use of the auxiliary form « would ».

II, 11, page 152

Old M Rouault's letter is a unique moment.

II, 11, page 153

So is the remembrance moment for Emma, but it becomes soon a flash back going back to recurrent moments in her childhood.

II, 12, page 166

After Charles' failure as a surgeon, Emma and Rodolphe have a revival of their love affair : the narrative offers a sample of their dialogues and then shifts to a general representation of the heroin's behaviour.

II, 12, page 167

The same can be said about the recurrent scene showing the boy Justin watching the maid Félicité as she is ironing. Here Emma is the absent character, but she is the focus of their recurrent conversations.

Pages 152 and 153, the letter, the memories :

The letter is a unique event, but it signals repetition, custom, rituals, calendar, traditional society : every year, the farmer sends a turkey.

The letter is not a real letter, of course, but it is a pastiche : the novelist imitates the style which is characteristic of people with little education (but the farmer is above other peasants, since he is literate). In a way, it is a collage, the more so that Flaubert quotes the complete letter. (Later he will develop aesthetics which is closer to our modern or postmodern experience, he'll make use of fragmentary storytelling, ellipsis, logical gaps and strong limitation of dialogue.)

The letter is written in oral style. It reminds one of intimate conversation inside the family, about simple events set in simple country life. But a closer look shows that the elements are unconnected, the logic purely associative. The image occurring to Emma on page 153 : « Emma pondered over the affectionate thoughts that clucked their way through the letter like a hen half hidden in a thorn hedge », suggests that the letter is meaningless. The message signifies less than the contact.

Another irony is of course that old Rouault misunderstands his daughter's life, he misjudges the couple, he doesn't know how low Emma is rating Charles, he ignores that she is already deeply engaged in adultery. To mention « two horses in the stables » is insulting for Emma, because the second horse is the old mare — « a bit broken in the knees » — that the benevolent husband offered her as a present, a few pages before (Charles cannot afford a better horse). At the same time, the second horse refers to riding in the woods with Rodolphe, it is symbolic of adultery. In an oblique and involuntary way, the father happens to hint at truth. Understanding and misunderstanding can be quite close.

A straightforward sociological approach of Flaubert's novel is possible, among other approaches. In this regard, Mme Bovary is a desperate housewife. The more so that she lives in the nineteenth century, in a rural context, with a husband who has a very limited circle of interests and who never asks any question. With his early history of « estrangement », it is not surprising that Flaubert took a woman as the focus-figure of his story. He knew perfectly well what woman's condition was, how she was oppressed by masculine power in the times of the July Monarchy — and the next régime, the so to say « Victorian » French society of the Second Empire was not going to bring significant changes. Of course Flaubert does never interfere, he is not a feminist. He would hate delivering political messages. But taking a woman radicalizes the problematics of the social self. What Flaubert is interested in is the complexity of power structures and the variety of responses that individuals find when they are caught in unbearable situations. During her pregnancy, Emma wishes for a son, and she faints when she gives birth to a girl. There is a confrontation between man's and woman's conditions in some of the dialogues. « We poor women are denied even that means of escape ! » says Emma to Rodolphe, meaning a man's freedom to do whatever he wants, particularly in his private life. The bachelor was an ideal figure for many in those times, nearly all artists were bachelors. Being a bachelor is part of Rodolphe's glamour. Another bachelor in the novel is an interesting minor character : Captain Binet, the tax-collector and occasional poacher. His answers to the problematics of existing are this paradoxal activity of poaching (a transgression not unlike Emma's) and also : having a

hobby. His hobby is a lathe : a machine that holds and turns a piece of wood in order to give it a certain shape. M. Binet's lathe is his attribute and his drug. In moments of crisis, the villagers can hear the purring of his lathe. When young Léon, the clerk, complains about being depressed, Binet tells him : « If I were you, I'd get a lathe ! » When Flaubert was depressed, he sometimes compared his activity of writing to having a lathe.

Coming back to the letter, it delivers a philosophical message : you never understand the other person, and another message on the sociological level. It says that society (here, the father) cannot understand the heroin, since she has excluded herself from the social standards applied to women. Freedom is authorized to a man, the more so if he is a bachelor belonging to the upper classes, but certainly not to a married woman. Parallel to the heroin's secret exclusion, we have the old farmer's solitude. He doesn't complain openly, but the theme of abandon, of loss, is there, particularly when he mentions his granddaughter. The future and sad destiny of little Berthe is written in these lines. More generally, somebody, something is missing. Fulfilment is impossible, the simple country life is not more genuine, does not make one more happy, than the more sophisticated style of life Emma has access to.

One of the themes running in « Madame Bovary » is the conflict between traditional society and modernity. Emma is a victim of both. The farmer's letter reminds the reader that traditional society was still ruling people's lives at that time. In such a society, the individual submits himself to the group. Emma hates being submitted to the group (as we already know from the chapter describing her wedding). She would rather be a city girl, but Yonville is more a village than a big city. Yonville combines the disadvantage of peasant society and of bourgeois society. The heroin has no vocation to answer the expectations of either. For instance she is a total failure as regards motherhood, and it is significant that the narrator, on page 153, forgets to mention her motherhood (« at each successive stage of her experience — in virginity, in marriage and in love — »). The farmer's daughter who left the farm to become the doctor's wife, hoping for escape, in Yonville finds herself displaced. There are moments when she has fits of energy and when she fights for her accomplishment as an individual. At such times she is provoking, glamorous. But soon enough, social control takes hold of her again. The charm of letters is that in the dialogue, one of the two is absent. Time is twofold : there's a time for the letter to be written, and a time for the letter to be read. The gap between those two times expands in an unfathomable distance between Emma and her father. However, she has a passing feeling of familiarity, a whiff of nearness. One could say the letter has the effect to make her reconsider her choice of life. But with Emma, reflection is a dim process. The heroin does not really think, she lives like in a daydream. Besides, Emma's childhood memories are not the novelist's favorite theme. The character was not meant to be the emotional type. On page 153, Emma's subliminal state of mind suggests some more general, almost anonymous experience. Making use of the technique later called « stream of consciousness », Flaubert mixes it with the technique of impersonality due to the use of free reported speech (« style indirect libre »). « The foals would whinny when you came near » : whose recollection is it really ? Such flashes of recollection might belong to Flaubert himself, to the narrator, to the heroin, to the reader, to anybody. They have an impressive sensuous quality. They merge and create this vague psychological substance which was to be later explored by Dostoyewski, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf or Nathalie Sarraute.

Page 166, Emma and Rodolphe :

Flaubert liked jokes and had nothing against trivial similes : when complaining to friends in his letters about his everlasting dissatisfaction, he would say : « When I am in Normandy, I dream of oranges, and when I am in the Far East I long for apples ! » The short narrative and the dialogue that open chapter 12 have the quality of a little comedy. But going away, departing for ever, is a leitmotiv in all of « Madame Bovary », just as it was the obsession of the romantic generations. Young Flaubert had indeed been a traveller. During the journeys to the Pyrenees, Corsica, Italy, the family kept the young man under control. But in 1847, touring Bretagne for four months with his friend Maxime was an experiment in freedom. Bretagne acted as a preview of the next trip, the oriental journey. With Maxime again, he toured the Mediterranean in 1849-1851, counter-clockwise, starting with Egypt. The difference between the novelist and his heroin is that he has his trips behind him and that coming back to Croisset has not made him unhappy. On the contrary : his exotic journeys are in his mind, they are ahead of him, they are located on sheets of paper.

What is displayed on page 166 is the particular quality of the relationship between Emma and Rodolphe. Without any doubt, this relation is superficial, but there is something deep in it, which is Emma's desire. Emma's desire is not aimed at an object. Rodolphe is an object easy enough. It is amazing how smoothly the love affair is organized. But beyond the easy plot and amused storytelling, something else is conveyed : Emma's desire is desire of the impossible. Which is what genuine desire is. After the dialogue part, the narrator takes over and analyses Emma's « passion », a big word at the time, suggesting transgressive love. There is some discrepancy between the realistic, almost documentary side of this little piece of prose, and a deeper undercurrent. The reader (and particularly the reader of today) is offered a reportage about fashion, interior decoration and feminine beauty around 1840. It is life style in the most trivial meaning : the heroin carries out most of the clichés of her time. Emma's apartment is transformed into a beauty-parlour (it is even possible that a brothel is hinted at !). She adopts only too easily woman's eternal role : waiting for the male. There are no sexual scenes in « Madame Bovary », but the novelist has smuggled sex between the lines. On another level however, the narrator's analysis is interesting because it focuses exclusively on the heroin. Emma is alone with her passion. I admit that the text says : « It was for him..., for him... » But there is irony here. We must remember that Flaubert took pains to imagine Rodolphe as a completely shallow character, he pointed to the relation in the couple as being built upon nothing but misunderstandings, manipulation, lies and ultimately indifference. The issue is not that Emma has been mistreated, deceived and betrayed — which is quite true. The issue is that Emma Bovary is a single and closed entity. In a way, there is no « other » in front of her. Thus, she remains as a pure, an absolute figure of desire.

Page 167, Justin and Félicité :

This is an interesting page because it is one of the rare occurrences when the novelist focuses on some other character than the heroin. Most of the time, when this happens, it would be Charles. Here we have two minor characters, two servants. The atmosphere is patriarchal and intimate, as it was in the letter passage. In the plot, those two minor characters have close links with the heroin. Félicité is a kind of shadow of her mistress, a parody. Just like « Madame », Félicité has an affair, with Théodore ; after Emma's death, she inherits her dresses ; and she finally elopes with her lover, accomplishing the elopement scheme Emma was unable to put through with Rodolphe. The boy Justin, the pharmacist's helper, is secretly in love with the doctor's wife.

This scene is actually a recurrent scene, because of Justin's infatuation. Flaubert makes use of the minor characters the same way opera does, or classical theatre : their presence points to the main characters who have left the stage for a moment. One of the lines in the dialogue alludes quite openly to « Figaro's Wedding » : Félicité would be Susanna and Justin Cherubino. And just like Mozart, Flaubert succeeds in conveying something which is beyond words : a whiff of femininity, something of the feminine approach to everyday life, with small household repetitive tasks, with moments of chat, with an aptitude to experience time as slow, to experience presence. Needless to say that Emma is a much more modern figure, she is impatient and impulsive, she is greedy of pleasures, she is restless, she is unable to feel the simple presence of the world around her. Here again, the novelist draws a line between traditional life and modernity. In traditional life, one does what has always been done, the modern individual takes care only of himself.

It is the paradox of this scene that Emma, though absent, is present in every word and in every item. Obviously, Justin has been contaminated by Madame's radiant figure. He is in love not as much with Madame as with her energy, her recklessness. Again Flaubert suggests sex, taking advantage of the documentary obligation assigned to realistic novels. Emma's seductive body is outlined by her undergarments, and we have them all on display, including her underpants. To proceed so was rather bold in Flaubert's time, slightly trivial as well. The final description of Emma's boots is a cult passage. Readers and critics have observed that there is a thematic network in « Madame Bovary », made up of feet and shoes — all sorts of footwear, alternatively worn by Emma, Charles and Rodolphe, and extending to the club-foot of the stable-boy, Hippolyte (and the drama of his amputation). True enough, cleaning Emma's shoes brings Justin closer to Emma's feet. Heavy symbolism hovers over the passage. At the end of the novel, when Mme Bovary is dying, the priest conducting the ritual of extreme unction puts oil on her feet : « ...and lastly upon the soles of the feet, once so swift in speeding her to satisfy her desire, and which now would never walk again ». Most of all is admired on page 167 the visual image of the mud crumbling into dust under Justin's fingers and floating in a ray of sunlight. Emma running across muddy fields to join Rodolphe in his château : it could be a short sequence in a movie. But here, such a sequence has not been written.. Instead, there is just a pair of boots caked with dry, stiff mud : something like a postmodern installation. Just a material object, a thing, a not very appealing concretion of the heroin's elusive being. Now Justin comes into the picture and he gracefully transforms dried mud into golden dust motes dancing in a ray of light. And suddenly Emma's being acquires an immaterial, a spiritual quality.

The concept of being, the existential question, life style as the expression of the self : these issues belong to Flaubert's emotional and intellectual sphere. They are particularly well carried out in a novel which is concerned with everyday life among average people who strongly contrast with the heroin's outstanding personality. The quality of Flaubert's writing opens all sorts of directions. The only certain statement that can be uttered is : there are many questions, and no answers.