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Diana Knight

Excerpt

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Introduction

CHARACTER AND VALUE

Any study of a past writer is likely to be marked by the critic's own interests, and certainly by his theoretical presuppositions as to the essential areas of interest. Yet strangely, in the case of Flaubert, two contradictory critical approaches, representing opposed attitudes to literature itself, arrive at somewhat similar conclusions. On the one hand, contemporary French sensitivity to Flaubert's modernity leads to an insistence upon the lack of a stable meaning; on the other, a whole Anglo-Saxon tradition finds his novels severely wanting in human interest and moral complexity. Evaluation of Flaubert's status as a major writer is clearly at stake for both sides: the modern critic finds his attention to language and to the formal possibilities of the novel exemplary, while the Leavisite seeker of an appeal to the adult mind cannot honestly appreciate his work at all. The latter is unable to account for the merit which he nevertheless half recognizes in Flaubert;¹ the former, if asked to explain the long-held belief that Flaubert was not just a manic stylist, but equally a representational writer with a world-view to communicate, would doubtless relegate that belief to the realm of ideological prejudice and inferior, naive reading.

The influential view of Flaubert as not only elusive ironist but also supreme dismantler of all stable values and transcendental fixed presences, probably reached its high point at the 1974 Cerisy colloquium on the production of meaning in Flaubert (Gothot-Mersch, 1975). Its chairwoman, a highly respected traditional researcher into Flaubert's intentions,² gallantly sums up the mood of the conference with a ruling for 'la faillite de l'illusion représentative': 'C'est donc dans un jeu de déplacement (*décalage, discordance, hiatus, écart, intervalle* ...), dans un glissement perpétuel, que nous avons cherché le sens.' She adds, however, her own timid, but seemingly more seriously felt suggestion, that realism was in fact more important to Flaubert than the participants had implied, that he did not merely construct the deconstruction of meaning, but equally things as solid as

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bovarysme. Schematizing her dilemma as an obligation to choose between 'reproduction' or 'production' as the best description of Flaubert's method, she equates reproduction with a 'sens plein, idéologique', and production with the constant calling into question, by the 'work' of the language, of any stable meaning at all (pp. 431–4).

To show that this schematic choice is a misleading one is a central concern of my book. For in treating Flaubert as a self-conscious but representational writer, I shall explore the interaction of the illusion of reality and the supposedly more problematic sphere of 'production'. Calling attention to writing as writing and to the methods of literature need not demand the complete loss of illusion, nor the devaluation of 'subject matter'. Jean Ricardou, who treats all novels as battle grounds between the referential and the literal illusions – between what he calls, in a celebrated aphoristic formula, 'the writing of an adventure' and 'the adventure of a writing' (1968, p. 265) – praises Flaubert for insisting methodically upon this opposition, for refusing to reduce the presence of the text by fascinating the reader with events (1971, p. 34). I shall demonstrate, however, that despite Flaubert's important obsession with the material qualities of language, his readers are the object of a double seduction: that he aspires to fascinate them with text and events alike, that *both* are made the focus of an absorbed but self-conscious attention. The combination of both adventures to produce a particular aesthetic impact is achieved as much by the reader's engagement with a particular fiction as by the wallowing in sounds, rhythms and other textual effects that Flaubert encourages as well. The way in which a traditional content therefore relates to Flaubert's general artistic strategy should be distinguished from Ricardou's more radical claim for those novels (the *nouveau roman* and its precursors) which fall clearly into the 'adventure of a writing' camp: that themes and fictions offer a self-conscious dramatization of the novel's own formal concerns, that if fiction does use a vision of the world it does so in order to create a universe obeying the specific laws of writing, and that fictional psychologies and sociologies can thus only return the reader to the functioning of the book (1967, pp. 25–6). For I have no wish to suggest that Flaubert's novels are ultimately 'about' the process of writing. However, it is awareness of that process and its aesthetic purpose that conditions our evaluation of content, that affects the way we read story, theme and character.

Indeed, it is in their evaluation of Flaubert's 'subject matter' that my disagreement with the Anglo-Saxon moral tradition will be found

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to lie. While modern critics tend to admire Flaubert's supposed lack of content, James, Lawrence, Leavis and Turnell simply despise the content they find. To please the latter, the 'mature' novelist must not only write about life, he must also, unfortunately for Flaubert, like it as well. Flaubert is therefore condemned out of hand for his obvious lack of the 'reverent openness before life' which Leavis attributes to the writers of his Great Tradition (1972, p.18).³ Since, as is well known, Flaubert hated existence, himself, and a large proportion of contemporary humanity, he could not be expected to display the enthusiasm for life which subtle moral ramifications apparently demand. But one way in which I aim to reconcile a formalist approach with more traditional moral readings is by exploring the reader's engagement with Flaubert's work precisely on the level of values and evaluations, and by showing that this must take place *within* his awareness of reading as an aesthetic experience. Such awareness must be distinguished from the reader's recognition of the world, for it is undoubtedly its relentless search for such recognition, and a consequent 'relevance to life', that has led the moral tradition to misread Flaubert. A 'correct' moral reading will only be obtained if the joys of lived experience are mediated by the sophistications of formal awareness.

In particular I wish to reinstate the organizing function of *character* as a centre of value. It is striking that the denial of any value system in Flaubert by both moral and structuralist critics depends, in each case, on a particular aesthetic of character. On the one hand character is without doubt the traditional focus for the defence of the novel as a humanizing influence. The belief in the fundamental connection between character and value is stated clearly and typically by E. M. Forster. Whereas a novelist requires curiosity for his plot, he demands 'human feelings and a sense of value for the characters' (1941, p. 141), 'he prefers to tell his story about human beings; he takes over the life by values as well as the life in time' (p.92). Indeed Henry James focuses his dissatisfaction with Flaubert's 'lack of reach' (1962, p. 211) on his use of mediocre characters as reflectors of experience, dismissing them as a defect of Flaubert's mind – either because they are the best he can manage, or, if not, because he could deliberately create such paltry beings. Banished to the world of 'simpler souls' with no 'finesse' of mind (p.211), Emma Bovary is pronounced altogether 'too small an affair' (p.199); of Frédéric Moreau James asks 'why, why him?' (p.200); Mme Arnoux is condemned as a mistake 'somehow moral', a 'compromising blunder', the worse in that Flaubert does not realize he is committing it: 'We do not pretend

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to say how he might have shown us Mme Arnoux better – that was his affair. What is ours is that he really felt he was showing her as well as he could, or as she might be shown' (p. 204). That James is wrong about Flaubert's intentions in creating these so-called 'weak vessels' can easily be shown.⁴ What matters for the moment is that a particular view of the function of literature prevents him from even contemplating a positive explanation of banal and wilfully unsophisticated characters.

At the other extreme the structuralist dismantling of the individuality and psychological coherence of both the real-life and the fictional self has led to a sustained undermining of the previously assumed central importance of character in literature.⁵ Ricardou, certain that the whole notion of character is on the path of decline, claims that Flaubert's use of limited reflectors is a sign of his modernity, a metaphor for the function of character in a modern text. Discussing Flaubert's letter to Sainte-Beuve about *Salammô*, in which he suggests that the pedestal (the novel) is too big for its statue (*Salammô* herself), Ricardou argues that this cannot possibly be an unavoidable fault, but must be Flaubert's subterfuge for saying that character in a novel is no longer comparable to a statue on a pedestal (1971, p. 235).

Jonathan Culler, in his important argument about Flaubert's 'uses of uncertainty', sets out to read the novels through this changed convention:

Although it is possible to treat *L'Éducation sentimentale* as a study in character, to place Frédéric Moreau at the centre and to infer from the rest of the novel a rich psychological portrait, we are now at least in a position to ask whether this is the best way to proceed. When we approach the novel in this way, we find, as Henry James complained, an absence or emptiness at the centre. The novel does not simply portray a banal personality but shows a marked lack of interest in what we might expect to be the most important questions: what is the precise quality and value of Frédéric's love for Mme Arnoux? for Rosanette? for Mme Dambreuse? What is learned and what is missed in his sentimental education? We can, as readers and critics, supply answers to these questions and this is certainly what traditional models of character enjoin us to do. But if we do so we commit ourselves to naturalizing the text and to ignoring or reducing the strangeness of its gaps and silences. (1975, pp. 231–2)

Culler basically agrees with Henry James's assessment of Flaubert's characters, but sees them as one of several ploys for setting up an indeterminate space of uncertainty, for demoralizing the reader by blocking his search for coherence, for challenging the easy construction of meaning. Readers will be defeated by the banality of characters,

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and will be forced to organize their reading in a different and more sophisticated way.

If I have spelled out the impressive logic of Culler's argument, it is because I shall take issue with it on two grounds. First, as subsequent chapters will show, I cannot agree with the evaluation of Flaubert's characters upon which it depends. Second, as Culler himself has argued elsewhere, structuralist criticism should perhaps investigate as a habit of reading the conviction that 'everything in the novel exists in order to illustrate character and its development', rather than dismissing it as an ideological prejudice (1975, p.230).⁶ Roland Barthes contends that while characters should not be made 'psychological' (in the sense of removing them from their paper existence into the real world of possible motives and so on), they should not be wiped out either. For characters are 'des types du discours', produced by the discourse so that it can play with them, rather than let them play with each other (1970, p.184). Character and discourse are accomplices, and to study the construction and characteristics of the former hardly involves assuming that they are 'real people'.⁷ And it is surely the case that for the nineteenth-century novel at least 'character' is the novelist's *chief* accomplice. Certainly I am unconvinced that it is a concentration on character as such which severely limits readings of Flaubert,⁸ for he appears to work within the convention of character as a major totalizing force in fiction. The Anglo-Saxon tradition's 'mistake' is to ally character to the production of moral, life-relevant values, allowing room for 'form' only through a conception of style as the outer casing for 'content'.

Paradoxically, given that what Henry James says about Flaubert appears to foster this view,⁹ his own account of the double role of Maggie Verver in *The Golden Bowl* is perfectly applicable to the relationship between character, composition and value in Flaubert:

the Princess, in fine, in addition to feeling everything she has to, and to playing her part in just that proportion, duplicates, as it were, her value and becomes a compositional resource, and of the finest order, as well as a value intrinsic. So it is that the admirably endowed pair, between them, as I retrace their fortune and my method, point again for me the moral of the endless interest, and endless worth for 'delight', of the compositional contribution. (1981, p.9)

The difference, of course, is that James's compositional resources, even where their field of knowledge is restricted (take the extreme case of *What Maisie Knew*), are subtle reflecting intelligences 'of the finest order'. Clearly what limits James's reading of Flaubert is his search for *intelligent* characters.

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In taking character as the pivot between formal and moral values in Flaubert, I shall challenge both structuralist devaluations of the general role and status of character in his work, and traditional readings of many of his well-known protagonists. By arguing that the use of unintelligent reflectors of experience is part of a positive intention, I shall show that the very characters dismissed by both the moral and the formalist approaches as 'weak vessels' should be viewed as *exemplary*, since they acquire privileged aesthetic status and are central to the operation of Flaubert's value system. This privilege is won through their special role in relation to essential aspects of Flaubert's aesthetic: the opaqueness of language and experience, stupidity, repetition, fascination and reverie as the aim of art. All of these, I shall go on to claim, are brought about by the behaviour of Flaubert's characters, and in particular by their pathological relationship to both reality and language. It is the latter that renders them supremely complicit in Flaubert's creation of a self-consciously foregrounded illusion of reality, and it is by exploring the links between the content of his fictions and his aesthetic aims and practice, that I hope to refocus interest in Flaubert as a representational writer.

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1

ORIENTAL AESTHETICS

A ghostly meeting with a caravan in the Egyptian desert, which makes Flaubert shudder all over with physical pleasure, conveys the intensity of effect that he aspires to create for the readers of his novels:

une caravane nous croise, les hommes entourés de coufièhs (les femmes très voilées) se penchent sur le cou des dromadaires; ils passent tout près de nous, on ne se dit rien, c'est comme des fantômes dans des nuages. Je sens quelque chose comme un sentiment de terreur et d'admiration furieux me couler le long des vertèbres, je ricane nerveusement, je devais être très pâle et je jouissais d'une façon inouïe. Il m'a semblé, pendant que la caravane a passé, que les chameaux ne touchaient pas à terre, qu'ils s'avançaient du poitrail avec un mouvement de bateau, qu'ils étaient supportés là dedans et très élevés au-dessus du sol, comme s'ils eussent marché dans des nuages où ils s'enfonçaient jusqu'au ventre. (II, p.595)¹

Jean-Paul Sartre explains the acute enjoyment of this incident by the peculiar manner of apprehending reality which it permits. Flaubert would prefer (and comes to seek) a relationship with reality which puts man and the world similarly out of reach, for there is no contact in this encounter with the real people and animals who slip into a kind of nothingness. In a strange confusion of 'être' and 'apparition' impressions are received as if they were being imagined, and aesthetic joy is generalized from this to embrace any event which reveals experience as a product of the imagination, and which brings about what Sartre calls the 'derealization of the real':

l'être comme apparition, l'apparition réduite à l'apparence, l'essence de la communication se dévoilant comme non-communication absolue, l'imaginaire et le réel confondus, voilà ce qui, tout à coup, fait trembler Flaubert de terreur et de joie. On aura déjà compris que cette joie est celle de l'*esthète*: elle lui est donnée quand les conditions sont réunies pour que l'événement réalise la *déréalisation du réel* et lui montre l'espèce humaine comme un produit de son imagination. (*L'Idiot* II, p. 1564)²

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That Sartre's obsession with the question of why writers become writers should focus finally upon Flaubert, and that he should understand him so well, is certainly because Flaubert offers exemplary illustration of Sartre's early theses on the ontological status of both the artist and the artistic work. His analysis of the meeting with the caravan is an excellent reading of the passage; while the passage itself is a fine example of what Sartre means by the 'point de vue esthétique':

Dire que l'on 'prend' devant la vie une attitude esthétique, c'est confondre constamment le réel et l'imaginaire. Il arrive cependant que nous prenions l'attitude de contemplation esthétique en face d'événements ou d'objets réels. En ce cas chacun peut constater en soi une sorte de recul par rapport à l'objet contemplé qui glisse lui-même dans le néant. C'est que, à partir de ce moment, il n'est plus *perçu*; il fonctionne comme *analogon* de lui-même, c'est-à-dire qu'une image irréelle de ce qu'il est se manifeste pour nous à travers sa présence actuelle. (1940, p. 245)

This 'aesthetic attitude' is an essential concept for Sartre's early phenomenological descriptions of the activities of the imagination which are so central to his whole ontology and to his thesis on Flaubert. Since my own argument in this book owes some basic assumptions to *L'Idiot de la famille*, I wish to be clear from the outset about what Sartre means (and what I shall mean) by the aesthetic or imaginary attitude.

Every stage of the reasoning in *L'Imaginaire* (1940) could well apply to the case of Flaubert. Sartre starts from a phenomenological description of what imagining is like, and from an initial distinction between perception and imagination as two alternating modes of consciousness, he goes on to pose Kantian questions: what are the characteristics that can be attributed to consciousness from the fact that it is a consciousness capable of imagining? what must its general nature be for the construction of an image always to be possible? He concludes that it must possess the possibility of positing a hypothesis of unreality; that it must be able to escape from the world by its very nature. Imagination is neither some mental source nor some accidental feature of the mind, but is defined as an essential and transcendental condition of consciousness, the whole of consciousness adopting a different mode whereby it realizes its freedom to negate.

As a primary structure of consciousness imagining is still consciousness *of* something (the image is a mental form rather than a simple content of consciousness), but it involves forming objects which possess a trait of nothingness in relation to the whole of reality:

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une image n'est pas une sensation réveillée, ou remodelée par l'intellect, ni même une ancienne perception altérée ou atténuée par le savoir, mais quelque chose d'entièrement différent, une réalité absente, révélée dans son absence même à travers ce que j'appelais un 'analogon': un objet servant de support analogique et traversé par une intention. (1972, p. 118)

The distinction is between being 'given-as-absent' and being 'grasped-as-nothing', that is 'grasped-as-nothing-for-me'. It is because nothingness cannot be posited for itself, but only 'lived', that Sartre's complicated analyses are necessary, as in the helpful example of looking at the photograph of Pierre:

Je pense, disions-nous, Pierre dans le tableau. Ceci veut dire que je ne pense pas du tout le tableau; je pense Pierre. Il ne faut donc pas croire que je pense le tableau 'comme image de Pierre'. Ceci est une conscience réflexive qui dévoile la fonction du tableau dans ma conscience présente. Pour cette conscience réflexive, Pierre et le tableau font deux, deux objets distincts. Mais dans l'attitude imageante, ce tableau n'est rien qu'une façon, pour Pierre, de m'apparaître absent. (1940, p. 39)

But the 'attitude imageante' (at work as we remember people and things, as we watch actors, look at paintings, read books), is hard to maintain, and the 'object as image' acquires a discontinuous, jerky character, for it constantly appears and disappears. A long analysis of the experience of watching an impersonation (Franconay 'doing' Maurice Chevalier), clarifies this idea, for Sartre shows that we operate a continual to-and-fro between perception and imagination, between what Franconay is (a small woman wearing a straw hat and making faces), and what she is not (Maurice Chevalier as image). Though overall we may feel this as a mixed, ambiguous condition, we are at any moment free to adopt either attitude (pp. 40–5).

Similar analyses are applied to various aesthetic phenomena, for example looking at a portrait painting of Charles VIII, which involves a similar to-and-fro between 'blobs of paint on a canvas' and 'Charles VIII as image': 'Ainsi le tableau doit être conçu comme une chose matérielle *visitée* de temps à autre (chaque fois que le spectateur prend l'attitude imageante) par un irréel qui est précisément *l'objet peint*' (p. 240). In other words it is not the case that unreal ideas or an image are made real (on canvas, for example), but that real materials (say blobs of paint), are used to produce an imaginary or absent object, and it is in this sense that the aesthetic object is something unreal.

Since, by definition, there is no 'imaginary world', there can be no question of analysing the details of the absent object. What is at stake, as in fiction, is rather a matter of belief. Images remain isolated

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from each other, for there can be no other relationship between them except the ones consciousness can conceive at each moment in constituting them (p. 215):

L'objet n'est pas individué: voilà une première raison pour que l'irréel ne se constitue pas en monde. En second lieu, tout objet irréel apportant avec lui son temps et son espace se présente sans aucune solidarité avec aucun autre objet. Il n'est rien que je sois obligé d'accepter en même temps que lui et par lui: il n'a pas de milieu, il est indépendant, isolé – par défaut et non par excès; il n'agit sur rien, rien n'agit sur lui: il est *sans conséquence* au sens fort du terme. (pp. 174–5)

In an exchange of letters with Taine on the difference between the 'artistic hallucination' and a real one, Flaubert describes the former in terms that Sartre might happily have borrowed to explain what he means:

Dans l'hallucination artistique, le tableau *n'est pas bien limité*, quelque précis qu'il soit. Ainsi je vois *parfaitement* un meuble, une figure, un coin de paysage. Mais cela flotte, cela est suspendu; ça se trouve je ne sais où. Ça existe seul et sans rapport avec le reste, tandis que, dans la réalité, quand je regarde un fauteuil ou un arbre, je vois en même temps les autres meubles de ma chambre, les autres arbres du jardin, ou tout au moins je perçois vaguement qu'ils existent. L'hallucination artistique ne peut porter sur un grand espace, se mouvoir dans un cadre très large. Alors on tombe dans la rêverie, et on revient au calme, c'est même toujours comme cela que cela finit.

Vous me demandez si elle s'emboîte dans la réalité ambiante? non. – La réalité ambiante a disparu. Je ne sais plus ce qu'il y a autour de moi. J'appartiens à cette apparition, exclusivement.

Au contraire, dans l'hallucination pure et simple, on peut très bien voir une image fautive d'un œil, et les objets vrais de l'autre.

(*Corr. Suppl.* II, p. 96 (1866))³

The illusion and reality are on two different planes; it is not possible to grasp both at once – Flaubert refers to the 'fleeting' characteristic of the image in a way reminiscent of the to-and-fro involved in maintaining 'Maurice Chevalier as image'.⁴

Sartre himself puts the 'perpetual evasion' of the image in a slightly different perspective by going on to claim that it may seem to offer an escape from present preoccupation and boredom, if not from all worldly constraints. In other words a more radical conception of the imaginary attitude would use it as a negation of the actual condition of 'being-in-the-world' (1940, p. 175), and it is here that the difficult but very interesting question of an *evaluation* of the aesthetic attitude poses itself:⁵ 'Tout homme est une fuite de gaz par laquelle il