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**Author**

Lucey, Michael

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How You Read *Madame Bovary*  
Michael Lucey

ABSTRACT: Prompted by prior work by critics like Ross Chambers and by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, this article pursues the possibility that there would be a way of reading *Madame Bovary* that is not just about learning to be a sophisticated and refined enough reader of Flaubert to appreciate all that Flaubert managed to achieve in that novel. Rather, while sophistication and refinement may constitute a typical first step, the novel also, from a different perspective, offers a critical experience of the symbolic violence of a cultural universe structured by hierarchies of sophistication, potentially leaving you wondering what your fought-for sophistication is really worth. While pursuing this possibility, I look at how *Madame Bovary* continually figures acts of reading such as the one it is offering its readers, at how a sensibility to free indirect style can be considered an index of sophistication, and at how Flaubert uses figural language and certain prosodic effects to create collisions of registers of diction that destabilize any secure sense of linguistic sophistication.

My title could mean several different things. It could mean I am going to offer you a lesson in how *Madame Bovary* should be read. On the other hand, it could also mean that I think you (whoever you are) read *Madame Bovary* in a way that is somehow different from the way I read *Madame Bovary*, and I am going to point out the difference to you. Or it could mean that I am going to demonstrate that there are different ways in which *Madame Bovary* is or might be read, and that there is something worth knowing about what those differences mean. In fact, I mean for my title to suggest all three of those things to some degree.

Let me start with a few paragraphs from the novel and suggest some ways in which they might be read, ways in which I might read them. They are from the ball scene at Vaubyessard in Chapter 8 of Part 1:

A few of the men (perhaps fifteen) between the ages of twenty-five and forty, scattered among the dancers or chatting in doorways, were

distinguished from the rest of the crowd by a family resemblance, despite their difference in age, dress, or feature.

Their coats, better cut, seemed made of suppler cloth, and their hair, brought forward in curls at their temples, glazed by finer pomades. They had the complexion of wealth, that white skin which is set off by the pallor of porcelain, the shimmer of satin, the finish of handsome furniture, and which is maintained in its health by a prudent regimen of exquisite foods. Their necks turned comfortably in low cravats; their long side-whiskers rested upon downturned collars; they wiped their lips on handkerchiefs embroidered with large monograms and redolent of a pleasing scent. Those who were beginning to age had a youthful look, while a touch of maturity overlay the faces of the younger. In their indifferent gazes floated the tranquility of passions daily gratified; and beneath their gentle manners was visible that particular brutality imparted by domination in rather easy things, in which one's strength is exerted and one's vanity tickled, the handling of thoroughbred horses and the company of fallen women.<sup>1</sup>

Quelques hommes (une quinzaine) de vingt-cinq à quarante ans, disséminés parmi les danseurs ou causant à l'entrée des portes, se distinguaient de la foule par un air de famille, quelles que fussent leurs différences d'âge, de toilette ou de figure.

Leurs habits, mieux faits, semblaient d'un drap plus souple, et leurs cheveux, ramenés en boucles vers les tempes, lustrés par des pommades plus fines. Ils avaient le teint de la richesse, ce teint blanc que rehaussent la pâleur des porcelaines, les moires du satin, le vernis des beaux meubles, et qu'entretient dans sa santé un régime discret de nourritures exquises. Leur cou tournait à l'aise sur des cravates basses; leurs favoris longs tombaient sur des cols rabattus; ils s'essuyaient les lèvres à des mouchoirs brodés d'un large chiffre, d'où sortait une odeur suave. Ceux qui commençaient à vieillir avaient l'air jeune, tandis que quelque chose de mûr s'étendait sur les visages des jeunes. Dans leurs regards indifférents flottait la quiétude de passions journallement assouvies; et, à travers leurs manières douces, perçait cette brutalité particulière que communique la domination de choses à demi faciles, dans lesquelles la force s'exerce et où la vanité s'amuse, le maniement des chevaux de race et la société des femmes perdues.

Someone is surveying a crowd at a party and comes to notice a resemblance between a certain number of people apparently scattered throughout the room. Or, we could say, someone is observing a crowded room and creates a set out of a certain number of individuals scattered here and there, as if they all had some family relation to each other. They are different in age; they don't look alike; they aren't dressed the same. Yet, from the point of view articulated here, they belong together.

What is this point of view? Or whose is it? Does it belong to a single person? These are the kinds of questions some readers of *Madame Bovary* have learned to ask in order to be able to appreciate the technical subtleties of this novel's composition. Not that you can't read the novel without ever asking some version of these questions (many people obviously do). But if you have learned, in some way or other, to ask such questions, then you have at least begun to train yourself to attend to the technical virtuosity of *Madame Bovary*.

In this scene, for instance, we might decide the point of view is composite. Clearly it would be possible to imagine a narrator (or a guest at the party) who would already know who everyone (or almost everyone) at the party is, and what their kinship relations are. And it seems appropriate to assume that Emma Bovary, present at the ball because her husband had performed a small medical service for the Marquis, their host, would lack that kind of knowledge. So we might speculate that someone like Emma, an outsider, but cultivated enough to be fascinated by and attuned to signs of distinction, is learning to notice, as she observes the guests, that certain men are better dressed than others, better coiffed, better nourished, more self-assured. Perhaps she even has enough time to do some actual counting and decide that there are precisely fifteen such men present. But could the specific language of these paragraphs also be hers, or the syntax, and could the kinds of observation that comprise the last sentence of the second paragraph have anything to do with her inner world?

Frequently paragraphs in *Madame Bovary* gather a certain kind of momentum as they move towards a concluding sentence that is then somehow surprisingly different in

tone or function from the earlier sentences in the paragraph. Here we see the movement from observation (their clothes, their hair, their complexion, their necks, their sideburns, their scented handkerchiefs,) to a more abstract form of description, almost as if the paragraph decides to offer a kind of lesson, part moral, part sociological.

In their indifferent gazes floated the tranquility of passions daily gratified; and beneath their gentle manners was visible that particular brutality imparted by domination in rather easy things, in which one's strength is exerted and one's vanity tickled, the handling of thoroughbred horses and the company of fallen women.

The rich are not like us. They have exquisite manners, but they are so used to having their needs and desires satisfied that those genteel manners belie a certain violence which can be seen both in the way they handle not only their thoroughbred horses but also the women they consort with for pleasure. By the time we get to "the company of fallen women," it might occur to us that somehow Emma's sad future is being signaled to us (but by who or what precisely?), and that perhaps there is even a small gesture towards an implied critique of certain forms of domination (based on both status and gender) that are somehow concomitant to a society that exhibits such an unequal distribution of luxury goods.<sup>2</sup>

Ross Chambers, one of the most astute readers of Flaubert, has called attention to the way a novel like *Madame Bovary* is always engaged in acts of self-figuration.<sup>3</sup> We could say that it is constantly figuring the difficulty of reading it and gesturing towards various kinds of problems associated with different manners of reading it. Certainly we

find some of that in this passage. Just as the technical subtleties of the novel's narration need not be noticed for the novel to be intelligible, so there is no necessity, in observing the ball at Vaubyessard, to identify and enumerate the 15 or so men around the room with their carefully pomaded hair and their tastefully scented handkerchiefs. You can enjoy the ball or the novel without having noticed them. You don't need to pause over these sentences as you read the novel. But perhaps it is more intriguing if you do. Perhaps you generate more interpretive matter by doing so. It is tempting to associate these ways of reading (obtusely) with Charles and (more cannily) with Emma, and then to notice that perhaps there is a suggestion (but made by whom?) that you need to be careful about reading cannily, because if you do so, but aren't canny enough, you might be seduced by these appealing and well-dressed charmers but then end up brutalized by their will to dominate the world for their pleasure. You could be so fascinated by the description of the virtuosity behind the writing of this text that it will wrap you around its little finger.<sup>4</sup>

Texts train readers in how to read them. It's a strange and awkward way of phrasing things. Saying something like that in an effort to describe the process of reading, we turn objects—texts—into active agents. Chambers, for instance, writes that “these self-figurations, once they are perceived by a reader, produce a kind of split or fold within the text through which it undergoes a process of self-differentiation, becoming both subject and object of the interpretive act. This split within the text gives rise to the instance of reading that is both anticipated and generated by the text” (3). Once, as a reader, we notice something about *Madame Bovary*, it changes as a text. It begins to perform work. It somehow makes us read (it) in a particular way. “The greatest

challenge,” Chambers writes, “is to conceive of reading not as an act exterior to the text, but as a self-contextualizing function that is anticipated, produced, and controlled by the text and yet, at the same time, is produced as the *producer* of the text. I am not denying the freedom of empirical readers; however, their reading is always foreseen and ‘situated’ by the text itself” (4-5).

I think that what Chambers is describing is the sense that once a reader has decided that some aspect of a text is significant, the text can, so to speak, reply to the reader by revealing other parts of itself that sustain that claim to significance. A claim to significance is made regarding a textual detail. That detail is then, perhaps Chambers would say, contextualized by the text. The text points to other aspects of itself that make the claim to significance cohere. The reader is called to notice a certain set of internal indexical relations that create a structure for meaning. The text interacts with the reader in order to reveal significant features of its composition.

But not just any reader. Because some readers might simply not notice. What might it mean that you are a reader with whom a text can strike up a certain kind of interaction? Pierre Bourdieu pondered this question from his earliest writing about aesthetic perception through the end of his career. In his early essay, “Outline of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception,” he observed (about paintings but it applies to novels too):

Individuals possess a definite and limited capacity for apprehending the “information” suggested by the work, a capacity which depends on their knowledge of the generic code for the type of message concerned, be it the



painting as a whole, or the painting of a particular period, school or author. When the message exceeds the possibilities of apprehension or, to be more precise, when the code of the work exceeds in subtlety and complexity the code of the beholders, the latter lose interest in what appears to them to be a medley without rhyme or reason, or a completely unnecessary set of sounds or colours. In other words, when placed before a message which is too rich, or “overwhelming,” as the theory of information expresses it, they feel completely “out of their depth.”<sup>5</sup>

Bourdieu was perhaps imagining a person with little prior exposure to painting plopped down in front of some masterwork in a museum somewhere as he wrote this, but he could also have been describing Charles and Emma at the ball. Socially inexperienced provincial doctors or their wives, invited to a ball at Vaubyessard, would likely be out of their depth at the event itself, and perhaps we could say that someone like Emma is treading water frantically, trying to stop from drowning in information that fascinates her, but that she barely understands how to capture. Here are a few snippets starting from the moment when she walks into dinner a few pages before the passage I began with:

As she went in, Emma felt enveloped in warm air, a mingling of the scents of the flowers and fine linen, the savor of the meats and the smell of the truffles. The candles in the candelabras cast long flames over the silver dish covers; the facets of the crystal glasses, covered in a dull mist, reflected a pale glimmer from one to the other; clusters of flowers stood in a line

down the whole length of the table; and on the broad-rimmed plates, napkins folded in the shape of bishops' mitres each held, in the opening between its two folds, a small oval roll. [. . .]

Madame Bovary noticed that several of the ladies had not put their gloves in their glasses. [. . .]

Iced champagne was poured. Emma shivered over every inch of her skin as she felt that cold in her mouth. She had never seen pomegranates or eaten pineapple. Even the powdered sugar seemed to her whiter and finer than elsewhere. (41-42)

Emma se sentit, en entrant, enveloppée par un air chaud, mélange du parfum des fleurs et du beau linge, du fumet des viandes et de l'odeur des truffes. Les bougies des candélabres allongeaient des flammes sur les cloches d'argent; les cristaux à facettes, couverts d'une buée mate, se renvoyaient des rayons pales; des bouquets étaient en ligne sur toute la longueur de la table, et, dans les assiettes à large bordure, les serviettes, arrangees en manière de bonnet d'évêque, tenaient entre le bâillement de leurs deux plis chacune un petit pain de forme ovale. [. . .]

Madame Bovary remarqua que plusieurs dames n'avaient pas mis leurs gants dans leur verre. [. . .]

On versa du vin de Champagne à la glace. Emma frissonna de toute sa peau en sentant ce froid dans sa bouche. Elle n'avait jamais vu de

grenades ni mangé d'ananas. Le sucre en poudre même lui parut plus blanc  
et plus fin qu'ailleurs. (100-101)

Pursuing the idea that Emma Bovary is a figure for a possible kind of reader of *Madame Bovary* (as Charles might also be), we could notice that she is initially overwhelmed by sensory detail and trying to organize it into orders of significance. She sometimes lands on a detail that can hold her attention: the decorative fold of a napkin into a holder for a bread roll. Perhaps she will store up this decorative detail to make use of at a dinner party of her own sometime in the future. The novel does not say this, but through absence of commentary encourages us to imagine an explanation for the ordering of details it provides: Emma absorbing, processing, sorting, learning—learning that some women take wine at dinner and some don't, and that this is signaled by placing one's gloves in one's glass. When, at the end of a short paragraph in which we learn that Emma has shivered after tasting iced champagne and encountered several unknown fruits, we read “le sucre en poudre même lui parut plus blanc et plus fin qu'ailleurs” (“even the powdered sugar seemed to her whiter and finer than elsewhere”), perhaps we recall how often at the end of a paragraph in this novel a final sentence seems to offer some kind of tonal shift, or some kind of new shading to the point of view, and we could wonder if suddenly Emma is being gently (or not so gently) mocked (shall we say, “by the novel”?) for her lack of sophistication or her rapid intoxication (the word “even” carries this possibility all by itself), and we might then ourselves think we should draw back from our own intoxicated appreciation of the subtle play of voicings and associated implications that has been captivating us.

In *The Writing of Melancholy*, Chambers distinguished between what he called “narrative” and “textual” functions that we might want to account for both as readers in general and as readers of *Madame Bovary* more specifically. If you emphasize the “narrative” function, Chambers suggests, you remain with the novel’s story and think about all the various things it might be about.

This is, in fact the way *Madame Bovary* has been read by most readers and notably by those who view the novel as a well-crafted ‘realistic’ text about Charles and Emma’s unhappy fate in rural Normandy. The documents from the 1857 trial of the novel clearly show that this was the usual reading of *Madame Bovary* among Flaubert’s contemporaries. Indeed, the judicial examination was limited to whether the novel condemned Emma’s “immorality” strongly enough to discourage other women from following her example. (20)

The “textual” function is different. Chambers describes it as “a collaborative event that arises from the relation between a text and its reader or, more precisely, from the relation between a piece of writing and an instance of reading” (1). For that collaboration to occur, a reader has already to be prepared to notice figurality or allegoresis. But what I have been driving at here is the idea that there is another kind of function in play in *Madame Bovary*, which has to do with how the narrative and textual functions relate to each other. There can be different kinds of play between these two functions, these two levels of reading, different forms of regimentation we might say. I have gestured towards an experience of this regimentation in the way I have described the import of the final

sentences of the two passages I have been dealing with, the sentences having to do with the underlying brutality of the 15 or so elegant men, or the fineness and whiteness of the powdered sugar at the dinner table. Chambers uses the word *duplicity* to refer to the kind of interplay he finds between narrative and textual levels in *Madame Bovary*. “When one knows how to *read*” texts like *Madame Bovary*, Chambers argues, they

bear witness against a social system and a political regime that together constitute the ruling order: the cultural hegemony of the bourgeoisie, the reign of capitalism in the economic sphere, and an authoritarian style of government. The duplicity of these texts can be described as “oppositional” [. . .] for though they do not directly challenge the dominant social order, they nevertheless offer “readable” evidence of fidelity to alternative values.

(9)

How do you know how to read these texts, though? How do you find (or construct, or activate) evidence of fidelity to certain kinds of value when they are not explicitly expressed?

I have been trying to piece together some evidence through this description of the way I see a few paragraphs from *Madame Bovary* working—in particular the way the play between point of view (Emma’s and the novel’s) and textual self-figuration (or the figuration of possible reading methods) produces tonal effects that themselves might index what Chambers refers to as “fidelity to alternative values.” That is, as Emma endeavors to absorb the social world around her in a way that is akin to the experience of reading a technically devious novel, something in the tone of the novel might make us

worry that her eager attentiveness to sideburns, collars, folded napkins, and the qualities of sugar is akin to our fascination with tonal subtleties, forms of literary indirection, allegorical possibilities, and the like. If this novel, like the men's pomade or the sugar on the table, is somehow laying a claim to be finer than other novels, what does it mean to aspire to be a reader worthy of its finesse? Does the novel critique a complicity that somehow accompanies the expertise it asks its skilled reader to acquire?<sup>6</sup> Would this be one of the ways in which it, in Chambers's words, "appears as a text bearing witness to the social conditions of its own production" (21)?

Bourdieu suggests that a novel such as *Madame Bovary* in fact cannot help but harbor a critique of the social world that enables its own distinctive existence. Here is a rich moment from *The Rules of Art* where he says as much:

It is certain that (at least in the sector of production for producers, and undoubtedly beyond it) the properly stylistic or thematic interest of this or that choice, and all pure stakes (meaning purely internal ones) of properly aesthetic experimentation (or, elsewhere, scientific research), *mask*, even in the eyes of those who make these choices, the material or symbolic profits which are associated with them (at least for a while) and which only present themselves exceptionally as such, in the logic of cynical calculation.<sup>7</sup>

If Flaubert is not Champfleury or Paul de Kock or Eugène Sue, it is because his aesthetic experimentation allows for different kinds of reading experiences, more subtle and complex ones, we might say, such as the ones I have tried to enact here, more satisfying for refined sensibilities. But interestingly, it is not just that he is therefore a better writer,

doing his best to be devoted to his art, and so exceeding the aesthetic achievement of his contemporaries. It is not just that his achievement has justifiably earned him a reputation that someone like Champfleury never earned. He does seem, the way I have been reading him here, also, pace Bourdieu, to *unmask* (but in a subtle, coded kind of way) the “material or symbolic profits” to be gained not only by writing in this way, but by becoming a reader who can appreciate that the novel has been written that way. If we are to take in the full measure of this novel’s duplicity (borrowing Chambers’s term), then perhaps we need both to experience a certain kind of complicity with the novel, and then (as it asks us to) step back from it. To give way too easily to an appreciation of the fine pomade and the finely scented handkerchiefs, to the nuanced voicing and delicate self-figurations, is a form of submission, as is giving way to the thrill of iced champagne, or the cachet of a napkin fold, or the fineness of the sugar on the table.

Technique in Flaubert, or at least certain aspects of his technique, are complex indices of oppositionality. Is it possible for us, especially if we are the kind of people for whom the expressions *free indirect discourse* or *reported speech and thought* roll trippingly off the tongue, still to experience the symbolic force that Flaubert’s deployment of these techniques had in his moment? That symbolic force involves an attempt to use technique to sort readers, we might say, into different kinds of camps. You might read *Madame Bovary* as a novel about adultery or about the gendered forms of domination experienced by women in provincial France in the mid-nineteenth century. Someone else might read *Madame Bovary* as a foundational text for modernist techniques of narration. Someone else might read *Madame Bovary* as a novel that stakes a claim for the novel as

an art form, an “art novel,” in the way we talk about “art films.” Or we might read it as a novel that teaches you to be a sophisticated reader, and then makes you feel uncomfortable about the structures of inequality and domination in the world that enable you to be such a reader while preventing others from being so.<sup>8</sup>

There are two problems I’d like to think about in relation to this kind of diversified response to a given cultural artifact. The first has to do with what Bourdieu called the “social effect of the work,” which, as he observed, is not a “blanket effect,” but rather a “differential” one, “since the work does not have the same effect on everyone.” He continued:

saying that there is an effect of the work of art is to say that some of the causes of this effect can be found in the work of art. The question then is whether we might not be able to use these effects to try to trace their causes, to try to see in these works something that will allow us to explain these effects. This aesthetic of the effect implies an exhortation to look for the effects of the work, the foundations of the effect of the work—what we might call the symbolic charge of the work—within the work itself.<sup>9</sup>

One interesting thing about *Madame Bovary* (and probably we could think of a set of other works that share this characteristic) is that it seems so explicitly designed to produce divided responses—assuming that its public continues to include people who will be affected by the work in these different kinds of ways because they are disposed to read differently. It seems a standard habit to think of “difficult” works of literature as requiring time in order to be understood. Somehow their initial public is not prepared for



them, and so they have, so to speak, to train their public in how to read them. Somehow, it is assumed, they carry their instructions within them. Given time, a public will arise that has assimilated those instructions. But the symbolic charge of *Madame Bovary* seems to be of a different kind. It is not, or not only, directed at teaching people how to read it. It has, somehow, to do with existing in such a way that it will continue to be read divergently. It will continue to produce manners of reading that will exist in hierarchical relations to each other, hierarchies that have to do with what is called sophistication. It may be the case that there will be some readers who will read in divergent ways almost simultaneously. (Flaubert was able, writing to different correspondents, to animate different ways of relating to his own novel, for instance.) It may be that some of us will move progressively through different manners of reading as we age. It may be that some of us will stubbornly refuse to go where others wish to lead us in our reading.

How do we think about the trajectory of a readerly habitus over the span of a reading career and also the topography that contains that trajectory? We don't read all kinds of texts in the same way. We haven't always been able to read this or that text in the way we might today. Our readerly habitus includes predispositions and proclivities, hard-won skills that perhaps reshape our predispositions, sometimes temporarily, sometimes more permanently. Perhaps sometimes predispositions and proclivities reassert themselves despite all the sophistication we have struggled to acquire.

The second problem I wanted to touch upon, regarding diversified responses to given socio-cultural artifacts has to do with the conditions of reading *Madame Bovary* today, in, say, an academic context (and there are different kinds of academic contexts, of

course). Bourdieu would speak of an act of successful comprehension as being a situation in which there is an adequacy that pertains between the habitus that went into the production of a work and the habitus that goes into its uptake: “Understanding is a special case, where the schemas invested in a production, a practice, a work or a discourse—that is, a symbolic production—are identical with the schemas that the viewer, the receptor or the reader invest in their reception” (M 42). A duplicitous symbolic production like *Madame Bovary* might perhaps be described as one that, by the way it is composed, solicits *partial* acts of comprehension that are not necessarily compatible with each other. A symbolic production objectifies structures of the social world, in Bourdieu’s description, and requires uptake or reactivation to be made whole: “a social object in its mutilated form, which is to say objectified, presents itself as something calling to be taken up, reactivated by a habitus adequate to the task.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps we could say about a text such as *Madame Bovary* that it does not wish to be made whole, that there is no habitus fully adequate to it, that it intentionally produces a condition of somewhat inadequate adequacy. We might believe, coming to the novel some century and a half after its production, that we could comprehend it more fully, that this is what a scholarly habitus looking back on the object might permit. Bourdieu is somewhat skeptical of one version of this possibility that he refers to as “philologism”: “Philologism consists in injecting the simple experience of reading with a philological awareness, reading texts as if they had been written to be read by philologists [. . .] read[ing] works as if they had been written to be read in the way we read books today” (HF40). Just possibly, however, Flaubert, in *Madame Bovary*, also imagined something of this kind of

philological habitus—maybe we could call it a specialist habitus; just possibly some of the manner in which we read today in certain academic contexts is responsive to one of the partial solicitations that *Madame Bovary* offers to its divergent universe of imagined readers. Bourdieu suggests that “if we are aware that a scholarly approach to the object is not the approach originally solicited by the object, we can find in the study of the material nature of the object clues to the habitus that it was seeking” (*HF* 44, translation modified). If part of what *Madame Bovary* does is have internal ways of pointing to (and maybe even encouraging) possible manners of reading it that are, we might say, inadequately adequate to its composition, if those ways of reading that it offers are in fact offered by the novel, but knowingly—knowing, that is, that they do the novel only partial justice—then part of the experience of reading the novel could be an experience of encountering a social object that asks to be read in a way that fails to account for its full achievement. (Reading *Madame Bovary* as a realist novel is itself something that can be done with varying degrees of sophistication. Reading *Madame Bovary* as a technical feat, constantly pointing to itself as a linguistic and literary construction, shaping the future of novel-writing by the way it creates a model of technical sophistication, similarly can be done with varying degrees of sensitivity. Reading *Madame Bovary* as a text that somehow grounds itself in its own social context in a critical way, an oppositional way, inscribes in itself the hierarchies of its own social world, by the way it houses divergent modes of reading indexed to different kinds of readers represents yet another option. Understanding that even today, because of the way it circulates and is taken up in different kinds of contexts it still manages to index differences in kinds of readers—some

drawn to a sense of its oppositionality, some blithely unaware of it, some frankly hostile to any oppositional force cultural objects might harbor--, or to offer itself as the ground on which habits of reading can be built, contested, and antagonized is yet another.) I want to explore this conundrum of a novel whose social existence over time is so intensely vexed in relation to two aspects of *Madame Bovary* that have attracted a fair amount of critical attention: its use of free indirect discourse and the phonetic and figural qualities of its prose.

## FID

Free indirect style or discourse or speech, *style indirect libre*, *erlebte Rede*, represented speech or thought, narrated monologue—there have been many terms used to refer to a form of narration notably present in Austen and Goethe, but that somehow definitively becomes a sign of novelistic sophistication post-Flaubert. “Perceptive students of [Flaubert’s] style,” Dorrit Cohn wrote, “agree that his systematic employment of the *style indirect libre* is his most influential formal achievement.”<sup>11</sup> In a note to *How Fiction Works*, James Wood contrasts Balzac and Flaubert:

The differences between Balzacian and Flaubertian realism are three-fold.

First, Balzac of course notices a great deal in his fiction, but the emphasis is always on abundance rather than intense selectivity of detail. Second, Balzac has no special commitment to free indirect style or authorial impersonality, and feels wonderfully free to break in as the author/narrator, with essays and digressions and bits of social information. (He seems

decidedly eighteenth-century in this respect.) Third, and following on from these two differences: he has no distinctively Flaubertian interest in blurring the question of *who* is noticing all this stuff. For these reasons, I see Flaubert and not Balzac as the real founder of modern fictional narrative.<sup>12</sup>

For Wood, it is at least partly true that “the history of the novel can be told as the development of free indirect style” (71).

Gilles Philippe tells us that it was in the 1880s that French and German linguists first started discussing the existence and characteristics of this particular form of language use, with the term itself, *style indirect libre*, slowly emerging over the course of several decades and firmly in place by 1912.<sup>13</sup> Something Flaubert wrote in a letter to George Sand on December 15, 1866 is often cited as evidence of his awareness of what he was up to:

I expressed myself badly when I told you that “one must not write from the heart.” What I meant to say was: one’s personality should not be on display. I believe great art to be scientific and impersonal. One must, through mental effort, transport oneself into characters and not draw them towards oneself. That, at least, is the method: which amounts to saying: try to have a great deal of talent and even genius if you can manage it. How useless are all these Poetics and all these critical writings! – and the cheekiness of all those gentlemen who produce them amazes me. Oh! they will stop at nothing, those kooks!<sup>14</sup>

Je me suis mal exprimé en vous disant «qu'il ne fallait pas écrire avec son cœur». J'ai voulu dire: ne pas mettre sa personnalité en scène. Je crois que le gd art est scientifique & impersonnel. Il faut, par un effort d'esprit, se transporter dans les Personnages ~~fictifs~~ & non les attirer à soi. Voilà du moins la méthode: ce qui arrive à dire: tâchez d'avoir beaucoup de talent & même de génie si vous pouvez. Quelle vanité que toutes les Poétiques & toutes les critiques! – & l'aplomb des messieurs qui en font m'épate. Oh! rien ne les gêne, ces cocos-là!

This is not exactly a detailed technical description, just a statement of a practice of creating a narrative instance that is somehow existing within the point of view of a character. Indeed, notable in the passage is Flaubert's charmingly mocking attitude towards any too detailed of an attempt to characterize a method, and especially towards the kind of critical kooks who would be interested in producing such detailed descriptions of method. And yet it is his virtuoso deployment of this technique that draws such kooks to him.

In any case, descriptions of the technique can be pedagogically useful, and they abound in Flaubert criticism. Dominick Lacapra's is helpful. For him, free indirect style is “the creation of a *dialogical* relation of a complex sort between narrator and character. The narrator is both inside and outside the character's ‘mind’ in a manner involving variations of irony and empathy. [. . .] The language used in free indirect style has differential relations to the language typical of characters, and these differential relations are bound up with modulations of irony and empathy.”<sup>15</sup> For some critics, say Wood and

Cohn, the technique is just that, *technique*, and it is valued for what is taken to be the sophistication and nuance that it enables. It is a kind of aesthetic advance. Once you have been sensitized to it, and proven capable of marveling at the representational nuance it enables, it can help you distinguish more advanced practitioners (Flaubert) from less advanced ones (Balzac), and can help you conceptualize a historical progress towards something like “state-of-the-art” novel writing. (I’m not endorsing this view, which I find silly; I was practicing a kind of free indirect discourse.)

Missing from such a perspective is any sense of the vast array of reasons a writer might have for availing themselves of this technique at any given point in time or in any given cultural field. Also lost is any ability to question whether “this technique” actually is a singular thing as opposed to an array of practices that fulfill different kinds of functions for different writers in different circumstances. Critics like Lacapra and Chambers are more successful at helping us appreciate a complex rationale behind the practice Flaubert develops. Lacapra speculates that “the larger cultural context that induces or facilitates the widespread use of free indirect style at least in the form it takes in Flaubert is one wherein the writer is fairly definite about what he rejects in the larger society (for example, ‘bourgeois stupidity’) but relatively uncertain and clearly undogmatic about viable alternatives” (140). This is consistent with Chambers’s view that it is the use of free indirect style that creates a doubleness in the way the text asks to be read, calling for sympathetic understanding and an appreciation of irony simultaneously (201).<sup>16</sup>

But how do we know that we have understood this technique correctly (so to speak)? Or how do we know if the understanding we develop of the use of “this

technique” by one author in one set of circumstances is adequate to its use by someone else in another set of circumstances? In one of the early (1912) articles by a linguist (Charles Bally) on this technique discussed by Gilles Philippe, Bally worries at the question of whether the technique is present in the minds of the reader or is present, as he puts it, grammatically:

The indirect style is a *form of thought* [. . .]. It is not a grammatical form, it is a mental attitude, an aspect, a particular angle from which it perceives things; and—something it is important to note—it is not by purely psychological observation that this form is discovered; it can be deduced from the study of language itself.<sup>17</sup>

Le style indirect est une *forme de pensée* [. . .]. Ce n’est pas une forme de grammaire, c’est une attitude de l’esprit, un aspect, un angle particulier sous lequel il aperçoit les choses; et—chose à bien noter—ce n’est pas une observation purement psychologique qui fait découvrir cette forme de pensée, elle se déduit de l’étude même de la langue.

That is where Philippe ends his citation, but it is Bally’s next sentence that is most interesting to me: “Were one to account in the first place for the manner in which free indirect discourse is thought, and then to look into how it is expressed, it is probably that its description would be more systematic” (“Si l’on se rendait compte d’abord de la manière dont le style indirect libre est pensé, pour chercher ensuite comment il s’exprime, il est probable que la description en serait plus systématique”) (606). That is,



Bally proposes a kind of fieldwork with speakers of a given language to find out how they think about, experience, cognize free indirect style, and then a move from there to an understanding of how that experience is formalized through linguistic conventions. Moving from linguistic convention to meaning, Bally suggests, is the wrong direction. “If to the contrary one takes as a point of departure a typical form of thought, but not one posed *a priori*, a form that the usage of a language reveals as characteristic of a group that speaks that language, if then, but only then, one looks for the procedures through which this form of thought is reflected in the idiom one is describing, then everything changes and linguistic facts appear in their true perspective” (“Si au contraire l’on part d’une forme de pensée typique, mais non posée *a priori*, d’une forme que l’usage même d’une langue révèle comme caractéristique du groupe qui la parle, si l’on cherche ensuite, mais ensuite seulement, par quels procédés cette forme de pensée se reflète dans l’idiome que l’on décrit, alors tout change et les fait linguistiques apparaissent dans leur véritable perspective”) (605). But what if, when dealing with a literary practice such as Flaubert’s it’s not clear either how one should experience the technique Flaubert deploys, or, indeed, precisely how and when it is in use? Or, indeed, when it is in use, if it is always to be experienced the same way!

Let us return to the passage about the 15 or so elegant men scattered around the room:

A few of the men (perhaps fifteen) between the ages of twenty-five and forty, scattered among the dancers or chatting in doorways, were

distinguished from the rest of the crowd by a family resemblance, despite their difference in age, dress, or feature.

Their coats, better cut, seemed made of suppler cloth, and their hair, brought forward in curls at their temples, glazed by finer pomades. They had the complexion of wealth, that white skin which is set off by the pallor of porcelain, the shimmer of satin, the finish of handsome furniture, and which is maintained in its health by a prudent regimen of exquisite foods.

I have suggested, even though nothing in the novel makes this explicit, that the narration is, so to speak, stationed behind Emma's eyes at this point, and that to some unspecified degree it is representing her thought processes; but then at some point as the description continues, it diverges from those processes, or overwhelms them with thoughts from elsewhere that seem beyond her. If it occurs to me to suggest this, absent any explicit justification in the novel itself, it might be because I have noticed the novel doing similar things before, as in the passage where Emma first arrives at the Inn in Yonville, and the novel describes her before introducing the person through whose eyes it seems to be seeing her, Léon:

In the kitchen, Madame Bovary went over to the fireplace. With the tips of two fingers, she grasped her dress at knee height, and, having raised it as far as her ankles, held her foot, shod in its little black boot, out to the flame above the leg of mutton that was turning on its spit. The fire shone on her fully, penetrating with a raw light the weave of her dress, the regular pores of her white skin, and even her eyelids, which she closed from time to

time. A bright red glow passed over her each time a gust of wind came through the half-open door.

From the other side of the fireplace, a young man with fair hair was watching her in silence. (69)

Madame Bovary, quand elle fut dans la cuisine, s'approcha de la cheminée. Du bout de ses deux doigts, elle prit sa robe à la hauteur du genou, et, l'ayant remontée jusqu'aux chevilles, elle tendit à la flamme, par-dessus le gigot qui tournait, son pied chaussé d'une bottine noire. Le feu l'éclairait en entier, pénétrant d'une lumière crue la trame de sa robe, les pores égaux de sa peau blanche et même les paupières de ses yeux qu'elle clignait de temps à autre. Une grande couleur rouge passait sur elle, selon le souffle du vent qui venait par la porte entrouverte.

De l'autre côté de la cheminée, un jeune homme à chevelure blonde la regardait silencieusement. (136)

We realize retrospectively, we might say, that during this description of Emma we have been situated behind the eyes and to some unspecified degree within the thoughts of the blond young man now being introduced into the novel. Or do we realize this? Some readers may, some readers may not. Some readers could decide that while the point of view may be located in the place where Léon is sitting, and while the description may be colored by the erotic fascination of the young man, still, something about the description—perhaps its concern with illumination or the clause regarding the “regular

pores of her white skin” index the presence of someone or something else. Perhaps the novel trains us, moment by moment and assuming we are susceptible to the training, in what we might call the metapragmatic codes that regiment its use of what has come to be called free indirect style. But how, in the end, you hear, how you experience, how you understand, what your mental attitude is towards this technique is produced interactively between the text and you, with your propensities and predispositions, your educational history, the history of your reading playing a role in what you experience. It is not just *Madame Bovary* that is a social object, we could say, but free indirect style itself. The capacity to recognize it, and to understand it in this way or that is a social achievement. To use the technique in a novel is to index, to rely on, an understanding of it (or understandings of it) that exists elsewhere, socially, thanks to trained individuals and institutions, formal and informal, in which reading practices circulate. In Flaubert’s case, there is what we might call a second-order indexicality in the use of the technique, in that by demonstrating your awareness of the technique, you register your difference from readers who read otherwise.

I have been endeavoring to illustrate the fact that *Madame Bovary* is a training ground for its own reading. It gives us lessons in how to do it justice—if we are knowing enough to attend to them. It is, we could say, an interactive object in this regard, helping us refine our readerly habitus in order to understand it. As Bourdieu observed, “if we look for it, we can find the suitable habitus in the work, but also in documents or in contemporary accounts” (HF, 44, translation modified). Flaubert’s correspondence and the slow accumulation of different critical literatures around *Madame Bovary* are among

the sources that help direct us towards this implicit habitus. Bourdieu continues, “if you keep in mind the fact that this object is itself designed to function in relation to a habitus, you can find in the object all sorts of indices though which it attempts to take charge of the habitus in advance or to satisfy it—for example, the use of underlining, italics, capitals, and the like. [. . .] Cultural objects [. . .] in as much as they are objects awaiting uptake or reactivation, harbor expectations of fulfillment” (HF, 45, translation modified). This is a good description of what I have been trying to demonstrate about *Madame Bovary* here, while insisting that it includes all the indexical signs necessary to enable it being taken up in multiple ways, in ways that even risk being contradictory. If Bourdieu appropriately insists that “it is important to maintain a self-conscious awareness of the natures of the scholarly habitus and the practical habitus, in order to make room for a social history of the various habitus of reading books, of perceiving works of art, of economic behaviour and so forth” (HF 45), then what is particularly striking about *Madame Bovary* and other texts like it is its receptivity to both scholarly and everyday modes of reading, its welcoming of both of them, its almost wicked way of playing one against the other, and perhaps to the disadvantage of both of them.

### **Phonemic effects and effects of register**

If I were to wish to determine a point at which, within a given paragraph or a given sentence, the predominance or proportion of the presence of Emma or Léon or Charles shifts, either augments or diminishes, how would I do so? Consider the moment at which Emma is hoping her unborn child will be a boy:

She wanted a son; he would be strong and dark, she would call him Georges; and this idea of having a male child was a sort of hoped-for compensation for all her past helplessness. A man, at least, is free; he can explore every passion, every land, overcome obstacles, taste the most distant pleasures. (77)

Elle souhaitait un fils; il serait fort et brun, elle l'appellerait Georges; et cette idée d'avoir pour enfant un mâle était comme la revanche en espoir de toutes ses impuissances passées. Un homme, au moins, est libre; il peut parcourir les passions et les pays, traverser les obstacles, mordre aux bonheurs les plus lointains. (146)

The syntax and the thinking are fairly simple. The vocabulary is restrained. Then there is that strange profusion of the letter *p* in the phrase that also contains a clumsy zeugma: “il peut parcourir les passions et les pays” (“he can explore passions and countries”—Davis’s translation unnecessarily elevates the diction of the phrase.)

Now the very fact that I have noticed the alliteration and the silly use of a zeugma perhaps says something about me. But then I also have to decide, as with free indirect discourse, how the phonemic and figural levels of language are being mobilized and to what end. I need to develop some ideas about the metapragmatic functions in play when it comes to alliteration or other ways of playing with sound (say assonance) or perhaps even with syntax and the use of figural language. Here too, I could wonder if there is some way of interacting with the novel so that it might teach me how it wants to be read,

and here too, as a reader inclined to the scholarly with certain resources at my disposal (e.g., the on-line edition of Flaubert's correspondence and an abundant critical literature on the novel), I have some advantages over most of Flaubert's contemporaries. I know, for instance, from the critical literature, how often people cite Flaubert's observations to Louise Colet from a letter of April 24, 1852 about his dream of a prose style that would be "rhythmic like verse, precise like scientific language, and with undulations and the rumbling of a cello, a spray of fiery gems, a style that would slice its way into your ideas like a stiletto, and where your thought would finally skate across smooth surfaces, as when you glide in a canoe with a good wind at your back" ("rythmé comme le vers, précis comme le langage des sciences, et avec des ondulations, des ronflements de violoncelle, des aigrettes de feux, un style qui vous entrerait dans l'idée comme un coup de stilet, et où la votre pensée enfin ~~volerait~~ voguerait sur des surfaces lisses, comme lorsqu'on est file dans un canot avec bon vent arrière"). I know the famous letter to George Sand from late December 1875, where he compares himself to the writers who are his friends and notes: "I swoon in the face of phrases that seem to them entirely ordinary. Goncourt, for example, is delighted when he overhears someone use a word in the street that he can then stick in a book. Whereas I am most pleased when I have written a page without assonances or repetitions" ("Des phrases me font pâmer qui leur paraissent fort ordinaires. Goncourt, par exemple est très heureux quand il a saisi dans la rue un mot qu'il peut coller dans un livre. – & moi très satisfait quand j'ai écrit une page sans assonances ni répétitions"). I know that the question of assonances comes up with some regularity in his correspondence, as when he writes to Colet on January 3, 1853, about the

painful profession (“dur métier”) that writing is: “There are days when it seems beyond the human. I can now no longer write a sentence from beginning to end, good or bad. I am as troubled *by placement*, in my sentence, as if I were writing verse and there were assonances to be avoided, repetitions of words, caesuras to vary. And finally, how to say properly and simply things that are vulgar, which could be said to be the highest art, in terms of difficulty” (“Il y a des jours où il m’apparaît comme plus qu’humain. Il m’est maintenant impossible d’écrire une phrase de suite, bonne ou mauvaise. Je suis aussi gêné *pr la place*, dans ma phrase, que si je faisais des vers et ce sont les assonances à éviter, les répétitions de mots, les coupes à varier. Et enfin, dire proprement & simplement des choses vulgaires ce qui est peut-être le comble de l’art, en tant que difficulté”). He is deeply preoccupied with the sound of what he writes, with the structure or balance of his sentences, with the challenges of finding the right style within which to house banality, mediocrity, vulgarity, those central qualities of the world through which Emma Bovary moves, and indeed qualities that she herself sometimes embodies.

So, for instance, he writes to Colet on July 22, 1853, of a certain joy he experiences in discovering a stylistic achievement of his:

Today I had a great success. You know that yesterday *we* had the *good fortune* of a visit from Mr. Saint-Arnaud. –Well, I found this morning in the *Journal de Rouen*, a sentence of the mayor’s as he gave a speech in his honor, a sentence which I had, the day before, written *word for word* in my *B[ovary]* (in the speech of a prefect at the Agricultural Fair). It was not only the same idea, the same words, but the same stylistic assonances. I will not



hide from you that these are the kind of things that give me great pleasure.  
 – When literature attains the same precise result as a science, it's intense. –  
 I'll bring it to you, this governmental discourse, and you'll see whether or  
 not I can do administrative speak and Hugo [le Crocodile—Colet and  
 Flaubert's nickname for Hugo in their letters].

J'ai eu aujourd'hui un gd succès. Tu sais que *nous* avons eu hier le *bonheur*  
 d'avoir Mr Saint-Arnaud. – Eh bien, j'ai trouvé ce matin, dans le *J. de R.*  
 [Journal de Rouen], une phrase du maire lui faisant un discours, laquelle  
 phrase j'avais, la veille, écrite *textuellement* dans ma *B.* [Bovary] (dans un  
 discours de préfet, à des Comices agricoles). Non seulement c'était la même  
 idée, les mêmes mots, mais les mêmes assonances de style. Je ne cache pas  
 que ce sont de ces choses qui me font plaisir. – Quand la littérature arrive à  
 la précision de résultat d'une science exacte, c'est roide. – Je t'apporterai, du  
 reste, ce discours gouvernemental & tu verras si je m'entends à faire de  
 l'administratif & du Crocodile.<sup>18</sup>

The implication seems to be that in *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert was seeking what we might call register effects on the phonemic and prosodic level, that he could use syntactic structures and assonances in a way that lies somewhere between imitation, parody, and pastiche—of genres of public speaking and of literary predecessors. So we might assume that on the one hand there are moments when he is using assonance, alliteration, repetition, and syntax in the service of register effects, and then on the other there are

moments where he is aiming for what we might think of as a high style of poetic prose in which, to his ear, certain kinds of assonance and repetition would be the signs of stylistic failure. Knowing precisely how to balance all of this is a science, he suggests—the science of register regulation, in which register is signaled (indexed) by level of diction, vocabulary, and prosodic effects.

The challenge then, we might then observe, for an author, is to signal when a register is being used to index some quality of the mental universe of a given character, and when it is being used “in its own right.” “Il peut parcourir les passions et les pays” is a phrase that feels comical because of the overuse of initial plosives, themselves seeming a bit on the comical side of the consonantal spectrum, and the clumsy figure of speech it mobilizes. The challenge for the reader of *Madame Bovary* is first to become sensitized to the play with register the novel puts on display and then to decide what the rules of use for registers within the novel are, when they are, so to speak, the novel’s own register, and when they are part of what the novel is representing.

Michael Fried’s 2012 book, *Flaubert’s “Gueuloir,”* is an intriguing and detailed study of what Flaubert aims to achieve on the prosodic and phonemic level in *Madame Bovary*. *Gueuloir* is the word Flaubert used with his friends and correspondents to describe his practice of vocalizing the sentences he was writing to make sure they sounded “right.” Fried cites the account of Flaubert’s practice given by Maupassant: “he would take up a sheet of paper, raise it to the level of his gaze, and leaning on an elbow, declaim in a loud, biting voice. He would listen to the rhythm of his prose, stop as if seizing a passing cadence, combine the tones, isolate assonances, place the commas with exact knowledge,

like the halting places on a long road.”<sup>19</sup> Here is the question Fried asks in his book:

“What does it mean for our understanding of Flaubert’s writerly achievement in *Madame Bovary* that his prose is intermittently, albeit not infrequently, shot through with

precisely the sorts of phonemic effects that he claimed he wished to eliminate?” (2). I

think that Fried goes astray in the way he poses and answers this question, as I will detail

in a moment, but the form of attention he pays to Flaubert’s text is instructive. Fried

worries over things like Flaubert’s “seemingly excessive alliteration” (13) in certain

passages, but also both encourages and exemplifies a kind of reading that demonstrates “a

heightened recognition of the play of syllables and phonemes” (28) throughout the novel.

Indeed, Fried gives a wonderful description of the act of reading a text like *Madame*

*Bovary*, whose many different channels, as we have been seeing, sometimes seem to

operate in tension with each other, as if to suggest that no one attitude of apprehension

could be sufficient.

My sense is of attending simultaneously, one might say fugally, to multiple

registers [. . .] without any of those registers actively interfering other than

extremely fleetingly with any of the others (like a dissonance in music that

is quickly resolved or otherwise got past). In other words, my sense is of a

general, and at certain moments ‘ecstatic’ heightening or intensification of

the act of reading, as if indeed, adapting Jacques Neefs, *Madame Bovary*

both calls for and rewards a new sort of readerly participation in the inward

“activation” (I do not quite want to say “production”) of the text, less a

condition of total absorption or immersion (of self-forgetting) than one in

which several different modes of awareness are present simultaneously to the reader's mind (and ear, and eye), in consequence of which the reader comes to experience almost a sense of "identification," if not with the act of writing as such at any rate with the text's seeming capacity to continuously [. . .] provide further compelling instances of its own special mode of literariness. (31-32)<sup>20</sup>

This is a compelling description not of any old reader, but of a highly trained one—trained not just by past experience, but by the novel itself—, coming to terms with multiple semiotic channels operating simultaneously but not always in harmony. It is interestingly hesitant about whether the intense experience of attention it describes is one that gives access to something like the sociolinguistic world of the novel's composition and the structures for meaning that existed there, or instead stays rooted in some more contemporary semiotic environment. Fried is using register in a musical sense (what the brasses are doing as opposed to the strings, or the basses as opposed to the tenors) rather than a linguistic one (elite intellectual registers of various kinds or the literary registers of certain significant predecessors versus provincial vernaculars or the speech of politicians or priests or pharmacists), but the linguistic sense of the word would in fact be more helpful. This is because Flaubert seems, in his attentive listening to his own prose, to have been interested in using various semiotic resources including assonance, alliteration, repetition, syntax, in order to embed different registers inside others as a way of signaling multiple presences within his prose. When he wrote to Colet of his pleasure in discovering that he had managed, through his science, to write a phrase

that he later learned a government administrator actually spoke, he is pleased that he even got the “stylistic assonances” to match. (“Non seulement c’était la même idée, les mêmes mots, mais les mêmes assonances de style.”) So Flaubert wasn’t always, in his *gueuloir*, getting rid of assonances. He was using them strategically. It would also seem possible that what he meant by “assonances de style” is something more general, like the vocal signature of a given register. His goal was to intricate one register within another—to different degrees at different moments. The *gueuloir* might then be taken as a space of linguistic improvisation, where the resources of a linguistic habitus are mobilized in the service of what were for Flaubert new kinds of effects, utterances that needed to index an interplay of conflicting registers held tensely together.

Here is an example. It comes from the moment in the novel where an enraged Homais is upbraiding his helper Justin for having removed a bowl from Homais’s pharmaceutical office and brought it into the domestic space to be used for jam making:

He was so angry he was quoting Latin. He would have quoted Chinese or Greenlandic, had he known those languages, for he was in one of those crises in which the entire soul shows indistinctly what it contains, like the Ocean, which, during a storm, gapes open from the seaweed on its shores to the sand in its abysses. (220)

Il citait du latin, tant il était exaspéré. Il eût cité du chinois et du groenlandais, s’il eût connu ces deux langues; car il se trouvait dans une de ces crises où l’âme entière montre indistinctement ce qu’elle enferme,

comme l'Océan, qui, dans les tempêtes, s'entrouvre depuis les fucus de son rivage jusqu'au sable de ses abîmes. (331)

Homais is ridiculous, as the mock-heroic description of the tumult in his soul makes clear. I wonder how, precisely, we are to parse the prosodic effects of that final image: “comme l'Océan, qui, dans les tempêtes, s'entrouvre depuis les fucus de son rivage jusqu'au sable de ses abîmes.” There is something parodic there, which requires just a hint of what we might call serious poetic rhetoric, but that must be subtly seasoned with irony. I wonder about that word *fucus*, a not particularly common word designating a kind of seaweed. Could we say that it is a word that concentrates assonance within itself, its two identical vowels encased in an ungainly sequence of uncomplementary consonants producing a kind of ugliness and pretentiousness that serves as an index of the novel's general attitude to the horrible Homais? In any case, let's take “depuis les fucus de son rivage jusqu'au sable de ses abîmes,” along with “parcourir les passions et les pays” as our emblems of Flaubert's technique of embedding or intrincating registers within each other (the poetic and the parodic, the literary and the vulgar), and being perfectly willing to use assonance, alliteration, and figural language to signal that intrication.

Fried is trouble by the presence of alliteration in Flaubert because he sees it as an index of unconscious, mechanical writing that would betray the intent of the *gueuloir*. He worries that the presence of such phenomena might be “the results of some sort of unconscious, in that sense automatistic, linguistic process” (54). His opposition of the voluntary/intentional and the mechanical/automatic serves him ill. “We are left,” Fried writes,

with the thought of a supreme literary masterwork, often viewed as *the* revolutionary achievement in the history of the modern novel, which turns out to be marked by two seemingly antithetical characteristics: on the one hand, a new and altogether radical thematization of writerly intention, directed toward the actualization of an almost unattainable ideal of stylistic perfection and imagined as essentially divorced from the expression of any merely contingent feature of the writer's life and opinions; and second, the proliferation throughout the novel of an extraordinary range and variety of linguistic and proto-linguistic effects categorizable, more or less, with the aid of terms like assonance, consonance, alliteration, rhymes, off-rhymes, resemblances between words and names, repetitions and near-repetitions of all sorts, and so on, some significant portion of which is attributable, it would seem, to something other than authorial control. (54)

What seems more productive is to understand someone's (Flaubert's) linguistic habitus as an improvisatory agency produced by the incorporation of the social aspects of language use, and to understand Flaubert's writing practice (including the practice of the *gueuloir*) as a methodical exploration of the ways various social aspects of language (including prosodic ones) could be put to use to achieve the canny blending of registers one finds in *Madame Bovary*. That blending or intrication of registers seems to be another example of *Madame Bovary's* duplicity (to evoke Chambers's term again), or another cause we can find within the work of its differential social effect, provoking different forms of response from readers with different predispositions (e.g., me and Fried).

Bourdieu was fond of a phrase that comes up in a letter Flaubert wrote to George Sand on February 2, 1869. Flaubert was lamenting the way literary works would be treated by “criticism”:

Do you know any works of criticism that worry about the Work in itself, in an intensive kind of way? People analyze in great detail the milieu in which it was produced, and the Causes that brought it about.—but the *unkenned* poetics of which it is the result? Its composition, its Style? The point of view of the author? *Never!*

Où connaissez-vous une critique qui s'inquiète de l'Œuvre en soi, d'une façon intense? On [~~illis.~~] analyse très finement le milieu où elle s'est produite & les Causes qui l'ont amenée. – mais la poétique *insciente*, ~~qui l'a produit~~? d'où elle résulte? Sa composition, son Style? le point de vue de l'auteur? *Jamais!*

The notion of a *poétique insciente* intrigues Bourdieu, an unknown or unkenned poetics that somehow governs the work's production.<sup>21</sup> The author would not need to *know* precisely in what that poetics consists, but it would be perceptible in the work; it would be linked to the point of view from which the author writes. It is through that unkenned poetics that an author such as Flaubert can, by the compositional work he does, evoke “as if by magic, a real more real than that which is offered directly to the senses” (*Rules* 107). That real of which Bourdieu speaks is the reality of the social world as it is incorporated into language-in-use. The intrication of linguistic register through phonemic and other



effects, as well as the mingling of different voices or minds through indirect style are key to the production of that kind of reality. Bourdieu is interested in how someone like Flaubert inscribes a social position, a social project, and an aesthetic project all into a novel through the effort of composition arising from this unkened poetics:

The research that could be called formal on the composition of the work, the articulation of the stories of different characters, the correspondence between the settings or situations and the behaviours or 'character types', as well as on the rhythm or the colour of phrases, the repetitions and assonances that must be hunted out, the received ideas and conventional forms that must be eliminated, is all part of the conditions of the production of a reality effect more profound than the one analysts ordinarily designate by this term. [. . .] To make of writing an indissolubly formal and material search, trying to use the words which best evoke, by their very form, the intensified experience of the real that they have helped to produce in the very mind of the writer, is to oblige the reader to linger over the perceptible form of the text, with its visible and sonorous material, full of correspondences with a real that is situated simultaneously in the order of meaning and in the order of the perceptible, instead of traversing it as if it were a transparent sign, read and yet unseen, in order to proceed directly to the meaning. It constrains the reader to discover there the intensified vision of the real that has been inscribed by the magical evocation involved in the work of writing. (*Rules* 108-109)

We could parse Bourdieu's thinking here by saying that certain writers are sensitive to the capacity language has to index the topography of any given social world in which it is being used. Register, accent, intonation, vocabulary, syntax, prosodic effects—all these linguistic features and others carry information about the organization, the structural features, of a social world. A literary text has the capacity to house this information, to give it an aesthetic organization. The compositional work that Flaubert did, including in his *gueuloir*, enhanced that indexical capacity. Certain readers then demonstrate or acquire the indexical competence to understand the kinds of information carried indexically in the “perceptible form of the text.” They wonder, when they read “parcourir les passions et les pays,” how all those p's, if spoken, might sound to Flaubert's contemporaries; maybe they would wonder how the rest of that sentence should sound: “parcourir les passions et les pays, traverser les obstacles, mordre aux bonheurs les plus lointains.” Does the diction improve as the sentence reaches its end? Does the degree to which Emma feels present in the phonemes shift? Does the language remain flat or does it begin to rescue itself? When we read that Homais finds himself in “une de ces crises où l'âme entière montre indistinctement ce qu'elle enferme, comme l'Océan, qui, dans les tempêtes, s'entrouvre depuis les fucus de son rivage jusqu'au sable de ses abîmes,” would we be wrong to laugh out loud, or should we perhaps instead feel a hint of Chateaubriandesque fervor? If we hesitate, or perhaps do both at once, perhaps in doing so we have recovered some of that “intensified experience of the real” of which Bourdieu speaks, “situated [. . .] in the order of the perceptible,” the very sound of the text.

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With the help of critics like Chambers, Lacapra, and Fried, I have been hovering in these pages between three different positions offered by Bourdieu in various of his discussions regarding what it means to understand a literary text. This is because *Madame Bovary* together with the history of its reception is exemplary in making the space in which I have been hovering almost uncomfortably perceptible. The first position has to do with a way of thinking about how certain social objects such as novels could be shown to “contain within themselves a tacit definition of the habitus that they call for, the habitus that would be adequate to them” (*HF* 42, translation modified). *Madame Bovary* mobilizes typefaces, paragraph structures, varying degrees of complexity of syntax, a supple use of free indirect style, imagistic language that can vary in the degree of irony with which it seems to be deployed, prosodic effects of various kinds—all in the service of some kind of project that Chambers has helpfully called duplicitous (although by now we might have decided *multiplicitous* would be the better choice). It “calls for” a reader with the competence to grasp what it is indexing not only aesthetically but also about its stance towards the world from which it emerges. In an ideal situation, we might say, the adequate readerly habitus would somehow intuit all the various aspects of what Flaubert called the *poétique insciente* that went into the work’s composition. “Understanding is a special case, where the schemas invested in a production, a practice, a work or a discourse—that is, a symbolic production—are identical with the schemas that the viewer, the receptor or the reader invest in their reception” (*M* 42).

Yet, as Bourdieu also notes, especially for works that attract controversy, “there is a social effect of the work, which is not a blanket effect, but is differential, since a work does not have the same effect on everyone” (M 27). Even Flaubert does not describe his novel in exactly the same way in his correspondence with different readers. Flaubert’s lawyer and Sainte-Beuve would not have described the novel in the same way. “This differential social effect,” Bourdieu observed, “may be analysed from the standpoint of a knowledge of the principles behind the differentiation of the public on whom this effect is exercised” (M 27). And as I at the outset of this paper and many other critics have noted, *Madame Bovary* itself figures kinds of differentiations in readerly publics by the way it describes Emma reading (reading both books and the rooms at Vaubyessard, probably proving a more sophisticated reader of rooms than of books). Bourdieu continues: “Saying that there is an effect of the work of art is to say that some of the causes of this effect can be found in the work of art. The question then is whether we might not be able to use these effects to try to trace their causes, to try to see in these works something that will allow us to explain these effects” (M 27). And that is one of the things I have been endeavoring to do here, understanding that a work like *Madame Bovary* offered (and continues to offer) itself to be read in different ways, offers a kind of elitist complicity to readers who follow it down certain paths, but then frequently pivots to offer a critique of the material (and linguistic) basis of the very aesthetic elitism it seems to have encouraged.

Finally, there is the difficult distinction between the effort to understand *Madame Bovary* today and the effort to understand how *Madame Bovary* understood the world and

was understood in the world from which it came. “If we are aware that a scholarly approach to the object is not the approach originally solicited by the object,” Bourdieu reminds us, “we can find in the study of the material nature of the object clues to the habitus that it was seeking” (*HF* 44, translation modified). That is to say, while we may originally read the novel as ourselves, at a certain point, we might choose to wonder, given our distance from it, how it would have, so to speak, sounded to people closer to it. Could we shape our habitus to it, or could we construct a hypothetical model habitus in which we stretch our ears to hear “fucus” or “parcourir les passions et les pays” or “leurs habits, mieux faits, semblaient d’un drap plus souple, et leurs cheveux, ramenés en boucles vers les tempes, lustrés par des pommades plus fines” or “les serviettes, arrangees en manière de bonnet d’évêque, tenaient entre le bâillement de leurs deux plis chacune un petit pain de forme ovale” not so much with the ears of a contemporary of Flaubert’s, but rather almost with Flaubert’s ears, capacious ears, simultaneously hearing how those utterances would sound, differentially, to the range of ears he knew (unknowingly) himself to be addressing? Could we, as we ourselves read *Madame Bovary*, and as we encounter the forms of uptake which *Madame Bovary* continues to receive, understand that it still operates as a differentiator, or as a revealer of difference, and how it does so? How you read *Madame Bovary* then would continue to make some kind of difference after all.

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and Comparative Literature 202C in Fall 2020, where we experimented with how you read *Madame Bovary*. Thanks also to a friendly Zoom audience at Merton College, University of Oxford in March 2021 and to the *Representations* board for helpful responses to earlier versions of this article.

<sup>1</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1857), ed. Thierry Laget (Paris, 2001), 103-104. The English translation I cite will be that of Lydia Davis, (New York, 2010), pp. 43-44 for this citation. Future references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Yee helpfully reminded me that it would be reasonable to take Flaubert's "une quinzaine" (fifteen) as some kind of a tip of the hat to Balzac's trio of stories (*Ferragus*, *La Duchesse de Langeais*, *La fille aux yeux d'or*) grouped together as *Histoire des Treize* (*History of the Thirteen*), thirteen entitled men who hold themselves above the law in their diverse (and deathly) adventures with women. Those of us who recognize this tip of the hat then must decide what to do with it—perhaps recognize a gesture of homage seasoned with some measure of that omnipresent Flaubertian irony.

<sup>3</sup> See chapter 1 of Chambers, *The Writing of Melancholy: Modes of Opposition in Early French Modernism*, translated by Mary Seidman Trouille (Chicago, 1993). Page references will be given parenthetically.

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<sup>4</sup> “To be sophisticated [. . .] is to be more sophisticated than, and to outsophisticate the other is to incorporate the other: to incorporate, at any rate, the other’s way of incorporating,” writes Joseph Litvak in a discussion of sophistication’s paradoxes. See his *Strange Gourmets: Sophistication, Theory, and the Novel* (Durham, 1997), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “Outline of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception,” in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York, 1993), 225.

<sup>6</sup> Writing of the experience of becoming an expert reader of an Austen novel, Litvak observes: “Reading an Austen novel means undergoing an education through intimidation, one of whose most striking [. . .] lessons is that sophistication *hurts*” (*Strange Gourmets*, 15).

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA, 1995), 237. Future referenced will be indicated parenthetically by *Rules*.

<sup>8</sup> Ross Posnock, like (and following) Litvak, writes interestingly about the paradoxes of sophistication and its intriguingly treacherous relation to oppositional stances in an article on James Baldwin and “the admittedly vexed angle of vision that ‘sophistication’ affords.” See Posnock, “‘Trust in one’s nakedness’: James Baldwin’s Sophistication,”

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*boundary 2* (2018): <https://www.boundary2.org/2018/12/ross-posnock-trust-in-ones-nakedness-james-baldwins-sophistication/>.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Manet: A Symbolic Revolution*, eds. Pascale Casanova, Patrick Champagne, Christophe Charle, Franck Poupeau, and Marie-Christine Rivière, trans. Peter Collier and Margaret Rigaud-Drayton, (Cambridge, U.K., 2017), 27. Future references to this volume will be indicated parenthetically by *M*.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Habitus and Field. General Sociology, Volume 2. Lectures at the Collège de France (1982-1983)*, eds. Patrick Champagne, Julien Duval, Franck Poupeau, and Marie-Christine Rivière, trans. Peter Collier (Cambridge, U.K., 2020), 39. Future references to this volume will be indicated parenthetically by *HF*.

<sup>11</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, 1978), 113-14.

<sup>12</sup> James Wood, *How Fiction Works*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (New York, 2018), 49n.

<sup>13</sup> Gilles Philippe, *Sujet, verbe, complément: Le moment grammatical de la littérature française 1890-1940* (Paris, 2002), 68-69.



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<sup>14</sup> All my citations from Flaubert's correspondence come from the on-line edition:

<https://flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/correspondance/edition/>. All English translations are my own.

<sup>15</sup> Dominick Lacapra, *"Madame Bovary" on Trial* (Ithaca, 1982), 134-35.

<sup>16</sup> Victor Brombert also offers a subtle and helpful account of Flaubert's use of this technique, a form of "intrusive self-effacement," an "excellent mode for communicating shades of insincerity, perfidy and hypocrisy." See his *The Novels of Flaubert: A Study of Themes and Techniques* (Princeton, 1966), 169-73.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Bally, "Le style indirect libre en français moderne II," *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 4 (1912): 605-606. Cited by Philippe, p. 70.

<sup>18</sup> See, on this letter, Anne Herschberg Pierrot, "Le discours des Comices: un discours modèle," *Flaubert* [Online], *Style/Poétique/Histoire littéraire*, <http://journals.openedition.org/flaubert/809> .

<sup>19</sup> Michael Fried, *Flaubert's "Gueuloir": On "Madam Bovary" and "Salammbô"* (New Haven, 2012), 10. "Il prenait la feuille de papier, l'élevait à la hauteur du regard, et, s'appuyant sur un coude, déclamaie d'une voix mordante et haute. Il écoutait le rythme de sa prose, s'arrêtait comme pour saisir une sonorité fuyante, combinait les tons, éloignait les

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assonances, disposait les virgules avec science comme les haltes d'un long chemin." (Guy de Maupassant, *Gustave Flaubert* [Paris, 2001], 60.)

<sup>20</sup> The article by Jacques Neefs that Fried is referring to is "«Du réel écrit»,” *MLN* 122, no. 4 (2007): 697-712.

<sup>21</sup> For Bourdieu's thinking about Flaubert's *poétique insciente*, see *Rules*, 87 and his article, "Le critique ou le point de vue de l'auteur," in *L'oeuvre et son ombre: Que peut la littérature secondaire ?*, edited by Michel Zink (Paris, 2002), 129-34. Chambers has a similar idea about something like a *poétique insciente* that can be observed when he comments about Flaubert and the other writers he is considering: "It does not make much sense to ask whether their duplicity is the product of conscious strategies, since (as in the case of any oppositional behavior) their disguise is the result of a certain 'knack' or savoir-faire, a trick of writing that could not be theorized then (and is perhaps not fully theorizable now) but that was far from being naïve" (9).