Flaubert and Emma Bovary: The Hazards of Literary Fusion

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Romantic love has been one of our most effective myths for making sense out of our sensations. It organizes bodily intensities around a single object of desire and it provides a more or less public theater for the enactment of the body's most private life. In love, desires and sensations are both structured and socialized. The loved one invests the world with a hierarchy of desirability. At last we have a measure of value, and even the unhappiest lover can enjoy the luxury of judging (and controlling) his experience according to the distance at which it places him from the loved one's image or presence. Passion also makes us intelligible to others. Observers may be baffled as to why we love this person rather than that one, but such mysteries are perhaps more than compensated for by the exceptional visibility in which the passionate pursuit of another person places the otherwise secret "formulas" of individual desire.

Love is desire made visible, but it is also desire made somewhat abstract. We do not yearn merely for sensations in romantic desire; we seek the more complex satisfaction of another desiring presence. To desire persons rather than sensations is to indicate a certain predominance of mind over body. The sublime-sublimating nature of love is clearly enough pointed to by the notable fact that, as we see in Racine, even the most obsessive sexual passion can be adequately described with practically no references to the body. Indeed, the more obsessive the passion, the more insignificant the body may become; sexual fascination steals some of the body's vitality, and therefore partly dissipates physical energies. Love, like art, is a cosa mentale; like art, it systematizes, communicates and dilutes the fragmented intensities of our senses. But this is of course too one-sided. Even in passions as diagrammatic as those of Racine's protagonists, the diagram itself is initiated by a traumatic encounter with another body ("Je le vis, je rougis, je pâlis à sa vue," Phèdre says of her first meeting with Hippolyte). And, even more decisively, the rich verbal designs which express the Racinian lover's passion never divert him from the single purpose of possessing another body. An abstract psychology of mental states constantly refers to an impossible and indescribable meeting of bodies. The dream of certain happy sensations sustains all speech, while the realization of that dream would be the end of speech. In its continuous allusiveness to both sensation and thought, love once again reminds us of art. They are both pursuits of sensual intensities through activities of sublimation. Love, then, can be considered as an ideal subject for literature; it is the
most glamorous of dramatic metaphors for the "floating" of the literary work itself between the sensual and the abstract.

The various sorts of intelligibility which literature brings to the life of the body are Flaubert's subject in Madame Bovary. Character has an interesting superficiality in the novel. Flaubert's intention of giving a realistic and inclusive image of bourgeois provincial life—the book's sub-title is Moeurs de province—partly disguises a certain thinness and even disconnectedness in his psychological portraits. True, the portrait of Emma Bovary is eventually filled in with an abundance of psychological and social details, but, during much of the narrative, she is nothing more than bodily surfaces and intense sensations. Emma first appears in Chapter 2; her personality begins to be analyzed in Chapter 6. For several pages, Flaubert's heroine is a patchwork of surfaces: a "blue merino dress with three flounces," excessively white fingernails, a thick mass of black hair, the moving reflections of the sun through her open parasol on her face, a tongue licking the bottom of a glass.1

(This attention to physical detail can of course be partly explained in terms of narrative strategy: Flaubert economically conveys the desires of the men looking at Emma by describing those aspects of her presence which stimulate them.) Not only do we thus see Emma as a somewhat fragmented and strongly eroticized surface; when we move to her point of view, we have an exceptional number of passages which describe the life of her senses. Mediocre in all other respects, as Brunetiere wrote, Madame Bovary becomes a superior creature thanks to a rare "finesse des sens."2 Emma's greedily sensual awareness of the world has often been noted. The dinner and ball at la Vaubyesard, for example, provide a feast of brief but intense thrills for all her senses: "certain delicate phrases of the violin" which make her smile with pleasure, the cold champagne which makes her entire body shiver, the dazzling gleam of jewelry, the warm air of the dining room which envelops her in a "mixture of the scents of flowers and fine linen, of the fumes from the meats and the smell of the truffles" (pp. 369–371).

At moments of more overpowering sensuality there even emerges a "formula" for Emma's sensual intensities, a characteristic style of sensation which, as we know from Flaubert's other works, wasn't invented for Emma alone but rather seems to be a basic formula for Flaubertian sensation in general. Sexuality in Flaubert is frequently expressed in terms of a rippling luminosity. "Here and there," Flaubert writes as part of his description of Emma's first happy sexual experience (with Rodolphe in the forest near Yonville), "all around her, in the leaves and on the ground, patches of light were trembling, as if humming-birds, while in flight, had scattered their feathers" (p. 472). The

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moon, during Emma’s last meeting with Rodolphe in the garden behind her house, “cast upon the river a large spot, which broke up into an infinity of stars, and this silvery gleam seemed to writhe to the bottom of the water like a headless serpent covered with luminous scales. It also resembled some monstrous candelabra, with drops of molten diamond streaming down its sides” (p. 506). While the experience of pleasure itself seems to include a vision of discreet points of light (the diamond light is perceived as distinct “drops”), the anticipation or the memory of sexual pleasure frequently diffuses these luminous points into a heavier, even slightly oppressive atmosphere. In the garden description the brilliantly decorated serpent and the candelabra plunging into the water are hallucinated participations of the external world in Emma’s sexual pleasure. At a certain distance from sex the thought of pleasure, or the images connected with it, makes for a less dazzling hallucination, and light now suffused with color becomes softer and thicker. After that first day in the forest with Rodolphe, Emma feels that “she was surrounded by vast bluish space, the heights of feeling were sparkling beneath her thought” (p. 473). Much later, as she lies alone in bed at night enjoying fantasies of running away with Rodolphe, Emma imagines a future in which “nothing specific stood out: the days, all of them magnificent, resembled one another like waves; and the vision [cela] swayed on the limitless horizon, harmonious, bluish, and bathed in sun” (p. 505). A world heavy with sensual promise (and no longer blindingly illuminated by sexual intensities) is, in Flaubert, frequently a world of many reflected lights blurred by a mist tinged with color. As the carriage draws her closer to her meetings with Léon in Rouen, the old Norman city seems to Emma like a “Babylon” of pleasure. She “pours” her love into its streets and squares; and “the leafless trees on the boulevards seemed like [faisaient] purple thickets in the midst of the houses, and the roofs, all shiny with rain, were gleaming unevenly, according to the elevation of the various districts” (pp. 564-565). Purplish masses of trees against an even darker background, millions of liquid light reflections which both brighten and obscure the city’s outlines: this typical Flaubertian landscape recurs frequently during Frédéric’s idle walks in Paris early in L’Education sentimentale, and, as in the case of Emma’s Rouen, it seems to be what Flaubert’s “hero” finds in the world when he looks at it with sensual longing. Desire has (or rather makes) its own atmosphere in Flaubert.

Now as soon as we speak of a characteristic formula of sensation or desire we are of course giving a certain intelligibility to what at first seemed to be the discontinuous and fragmented life of the body. But the intelligibility is all for us; nothing in Madame Bovary indicates that Emma has the slightest awareness of a durable and defining style in her sensuality. Furthermore, in the passages quoted in the last paragraph, it’s by no means clear whether the images are meant to express what Emma is actually seeing or hallucinating in the world, or whether they are Flaubert’s descriptive and metaphorical equivalents for sensations or states of mind to which they allude but which in fact don’t include them. Put in this way the question is unanswerable and irrelevant.
I ask it partly because, irrelevant or not, it is bound to occur to us, and partly because it is one way of formulating a problem I’ll soon be looking at more closely: that of the relation between literature and sensation. For the moment, we can simply note that even if Emma does see the bejewelled candelabra in the river, that doesn’t seem to be of any help to her in making sense of her sensations or in locating continuities in her experience. Of course, this is merely one aspect of her general mediocrity. She is inattentive even to that which makes her superior: the exceptional refinement of her senses. Emma’s consciousness is intense, but it carries very little. She thinks in clichés, and, as far as her moral awareness goes, she is hardly less self-centered or more scrupulous than Homais. One has only to think how richly Jane Austen’s and George Eliot’s novels are nourished by all the ideas and principles of their heroes and heroines to appreciate the risk Flaubert takes in creating, to use a Jamesian term, such an insubstantial center of consciousness as Emma for his novel. (Indeed, James found Emma too thin a vessel to carry the weight of the novel’s meaning.) But the most interesting fact about Emma, as I’ve been suggesting, may be precisely that she has so little consciousness. For in spite of the fact that she is, after all, part of a realistic fiction in which characters have names, social positions and personalities, she almost succeeds in existing without what the realistic novel generally proposes as an identity. When she is not having intense sensations she does little more than long for sensations. Her principal activity is that of desiring. But what exactly is there for her to desire? In what images will she recognize a promise of happy sensations?

Love sublimates and novelizes sensation. The literature of romance on which Madame Bovary gorges herself is the only spiritualizing principle in her life. The dangers of this literature are so emphatically illustrated in Flaubert’s work that we may tend to overlook the service it performs for Emma’s intense but random sensuality. For a moment during the performance of Lucia di Lammermoor at the Rouen opera house, Emma manages to smile with a “disdainful pity” as she thinks of all the lies which literature tells about life; “she now knew,” Flaubert adds, “how small the passions were which art exaggerated” (p. 531). The next day, when Léon visits Emma at her hotel, they attempt, with the help of literary clichés, to recompose their past, to fit the quiet, uneventful love of the days in Yonville to an ideal of glamorously desperate passion. “Besides,” Flaubert philosophically remarks, “speech is a rolling mill which always stretches out feelings” (p. 539). But what alternative is there to the exaggerations and the extensions of language? In this same scene at the Rouen hotel Emma and Léon finally stop talking: “They were no longer speaking; but they felt, as they looked at each other, a humming in their heads, as though something audible had escaped from their motionless eyes. They had just joined hands; and the past, the future, reminiscences and dreams, everything was merged in the sweetness of this ecstasy” (p. 540). In the same way Emma’s sensual torpor as Rodolphe speaks to her of love on the day of the agricultural fair is a state in which “everything became confused” and the present merges with images from the past. Emma’s consciousness is invaded
by the odor of Rodolphe’s pomade, the memory of a similar odor of vanilla and lemon which came from the viscount’s beard as she waltzed with him at la Vaubyessard, the light from the chandeliers at that same ball, an image of Léon, and finally the smell of the fresh ivy coming through the open window next to which she and Rodolphe are seated (p. 459). As Jean-Pierre Richard has brilliantly shown, a fundamental theme of Flaubert’s “material” imagination is that of a fusion between the self and the world, as well as among all the elements of consciousness. Contours are blurred, boundaries disappear, and the great danger in Flaubert’s imaginary world is that of being drowned in a kind of formless liquid dough, in a sea of thick, undifferentiated matter. I’ll be returning to the dangers of fusion; for the moment I want to emphasize that even at moments of great sensual pleasure, as in the passage just quoted, the intense sensation tends to break down differences in Madame Bovary—differences between people, between the present and the past, and between the inner and outer worlds. Thus, not only does Flaubert present Emma as a patchwork of bodily surfaces; not only does he tend to reduce her consciousness to a series of strong but disconnected sensations; he also indicates that by its very nature sensation makes a mockery of the distinctions we invent in thought.

There is, however, the rolling mill of language to rescue us. Language defuses; its conceptual nature attacks the intensity of sensations, and words unwrap the bundle of sensory impressions and extend them, as distinct and separate verbal units, along the “lines” of space and time. More specifically, in the case of Emma Bovary, stories of romance raise her sensations to the level of sentiment. They replace the isolated and anonymous body with couples sharply characterized socially, and they provide spatial and temporal elaborations—that is, a story—for the ecstatic instant. But, interestingly enough, Emma re-charges literary language by retaining only its inspirations for visual fantasies. Probably every reader of Madame Bovary has noticed that Emma “thinks” in tableaux. Indeed, the sign of desire in the novel is the appearance of a tableau. The desire for an ecstatic honeymoon is a mental picture of driving in the mountains, to the sound of goat-bells and waterfalls, toward a bay surrounded by lemon trees; the desire for an exciting existence in Paris is a group of neatly compartmentalized images of the different worlds of ambassadors, duchesses and artists in the capital; and the desire to run away with Rodolphe takes the form of an exotic travel fantasy through cities with cathedrals of white marble and finally to a picturesque fishing village. These desirable tableaux could be thought of as halfway between verbal narrative and the hallucinated scenes of intense sensations. As she indulges in them Emma enjoys a tamed version of bodily desires. There isn’t a single original image in these romantic tableaux drawn from literature, but, perhaps because of that very fact, all the books which Emma has read collaborate to form a satisfyingly consistent love story, a highly intelligible cliché which imposes order on ecstasy.

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Given the immensely useful function of literature in Emma’s life, it is, in a sense, merely snobbish to complain about the inferior quality of the books she reads. But something does of course go wrong with the function itself. Emma is extremely demanding. She wants the intelligibility of literature in the ecstatic sensation. At the risk of making things overly schematic, let’s say that we have followed her from disconnected sensations to the sublimating stories of art; how will she now return from art to life? There wouldn’t be any problem if Emma could be satisfied with transposing literature into desirable mental tableaux. She is, however, engaged in a much more complicated enterprise, one which literature itself, to a certain extent, encourages. Literary romance gives a seductive intelligibility to the body’s pleasures; but it perhaps also invites its readers to expect the body to confirm the mind’s fictions. The lie of which Emma’s novels are guilty is their suggestion that the stories which in fact modulate and dilute existential intensities are equivalent to them. It is as if writers themselves were tempted to ignore the abstracting nature of language and to confuse an extended novelistic fantasy with the scenes of hallucinating desire and sensation. Emma welcomes the confusion: she waits for experience to duplicate literature, unaware of the fact that literature didn’t duplicate life in the first place.

This fundamental error naturally leads Emma into considerable trouble. For example, the books she reads (like all literature) make use of a conventional system of signs. Flaubert enumerates several of the gestures and the settings which signify love in the novels Emma read when she was at the convent: “[These novels] were filled with love affairs, lovers, mistresses, persecuted ladies fainting in lonely pavilions, postriders killed at every relay, horses ridden to death on every page, dark forests, palpitating hearts, vows, sobs, tears and kisses, skiffs in the moonlight, nightingales in thickets, gentlemen brave as lions, gentle as lambs, virtuous as no one really is, always well dressed, and weeping like fountains” (pp. 358-359). To use favorite categories of contemporary French criticism for a moment, we could say that in this passage Flaubert gives us a list of the principal signs used in popular romantic fiction; and the referent for all these signs is love. The connection between the sign and the reality is of course arbitrary (as it is for individual words), although it is also necessary for the coherence of a specific literary system. Emma, on the other hand, sees the connection as inevitable, as a natural one. She consequently takes a short cut and dreams of “persecuted ladies fainting in solitary pavilions” and of “nightingales in thickets” as if they were romantic passion. It’s as if some one expected to possess the object “chair” by pronouncing the word which designates it. Love seems impossible to Emma unless it appears with all the conventional signs which constitute a code of love in fictions of romance. Since Charles doesn’t respond to the romantic clichés she tries out on him, Emma, “incapable . . . of believing in anything that didn’t manifest itself in conventional forms,” decides that his love for her must be diminishing (p. 365). (Rodolphe, incidentally, makes the opposite mistake on p. 500: unable to see “the differences of feeling under the similarities of ex-
pression," he doubts Emma's passion because she uses formulas he has heard from so many other women.) There are particular words, costumes, gestures and settings which, so to speak, manufacture passion. As Flaubert says of Emma: "It seemed to her that certain places on the earth must produce happiness, like a plant indigenous to that soil and which would be unable to thrive anywhere else" (p. 362).

In a sense, however, there is a subtle rightness in Emma's confusion. We can point to a tree or a chair to indicate what we mean by those words, but where is the object "love," the definite shape we might evoke each time we say the word? Like all abstract concepts, love is a phenomenon created by its own definition. It is a synthetic product (the result of a synthesis, and existing nowhere in nature), and its only reality is on the level of the sign. (And, like all conceptual codes, it is subject to historical change: twentieth-century love is not the same as love in ancient Greece.) But if love is a certain composition of signs, is Emma so wrong to feel that she won't have found love until she assembles the signs in the right combination? "In her desire," Flaubert writes critically, "she confused the sensual pleasures of luxury with the joys of the heart, elegant habits with delicacies of feeling. Didn't love, like Indian plants, need a prepared soil, a particular temperature?" (p. 379). But the concept of love does in fact "grow" only in the "soil" of romantic fictions. We should therefore qualify what I said a moment ago: Emma's mistake indeed seems to be to confuse the literary props of passion with its reality, but more profoundly she errs in thinking that passion is a reality which can be determined at all outside of literature. Now I don't mean that she (or anyone, for that matter) is "wrong" to use abstract words to describe concrete experiences; conceptual syntheses are as necessary outside of books as in books. The dangerous confusion is between the usefulness of a synthesizing vocabulary and a pre-existent reality which we often assume it contains. For if we make this confusion, our experience comes to have a crippling responsibility to our vocabulary, and people far more intelligent than Emma torture themselves with the vain question of whether or not certain relationships can "really" be called "love." Emma Bovary is an impressively rigorous if narrow thinker; having picked up certain words in literature, she refuses to use them a bit sloppily (which is the only way to use them) in life. "... Emma tried to find out exactly what was meant in life by the words felicity, passion and rapture, which had seemed so beautiful to her in books" (p. 356). But nothing is meant by those words in life; they "mean" only verbally, and especially in books.

Furthermore, in seductive (and treacherous) fashion, the books which Emma reads attribute duration to the rapturous instant. Romantic love in literature may end tragically, but it is not likely to run out of emotional steam and end in boredom. Of course, all literature not only makes sense of the instant; it also makes time from the instant. The life of the body sublimated in time is the history of a person. But in Emma's favorite books history is glamorized as a succession of intensities. Romance conceptualizes sensation; furthermore, it
suggests that time never dissipates sensations. Emma does experience sensations which seem to her to live up to her definitions of romantic ecstasy; but she learns that romantic ecstasy doesn’t last. And we find the dramatization of this banal fact interesting only because it is made through a character who, quite remarkably, refuses to make any compromise at all with time. While Flaubert gives detailed attention to the modulations of feeling in time (I’m thinking, for example, of the chapter which summarizes the change in Emma between her return from la Vaubyessard and the move from Tostes to Yonville, pp. 377–387, and of the few pages—418–425—which describe her agitated, rapidly changing feelings after she discovers that Léon loves her), his aristocratic heroine expects each moment to repeat the rapture of a previous moment. But Emma’s thrilling excitements are quickly submerged in ordinary time, and it is this shattering absence of drama which wears her out, which leads her to complain bitterly about the “instantaneous rotting away of the things she leaned on” and to feel that “everything was a lie!” (p. 584).

Maurice Blanchot has suggestively said of Flaubert that he shows us “the horror of existence deprived of a world.” We might consider this remark in two different ways. On the one hand, as I’ve suggested, Emma finds in literature a world in which to place and to identify her sensations. One could say that without literature she has existence without essence: disconnected, unidentifiable sensations on which literature will confer a romantic being or essence. On the other hand, she returns from literature with everything except the physical world in which the romantic existence might be lived. And she is finally crushed by the weight of an insubstantial imagination which has been unable to discharge itself of its fables, which has never found a world. The gap between an excessively signifying imagination and an insignificant world occasionally produces attacks of acute anxiety in Emma. Boredom is a crisis in her life because it is the lie which experience gives to the constantly interesting stories of literature. Things continue not to happen; and even the most trivial sight or sound can provoke panic simply by not corresponding to the mind’s expectations, by illustrating the indifference of the world to our fictions. Jean Rousset and Gérard Genette have perceptively spoken of certain “dead moments” in Flaubert’s work, of descriptive passages which seem to have no dramatic function but merely interrupt or suspend the novel’s action. A Balzacian description, however superficially digressive, is never dramatically irrelevant; it either provides information necessary for our understanding of the story or metaphorically characterizes the people involved in the story. In Flaubert, on the other hand, descriptive detail often seems to be given for its own sake; suddenly the story is no longer “moving,” and we have an almost detachable literary morceau. These apparently gratuitous descriptions have a relation to the rest of the story similar to the relation be-

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tween Emma’s uneventful life and her action-packed imagination. They are the formal narrative equivalents of experience which fits into no design. A certain carelessness on Flaubert’s part about the dramatic significance of description educates the reader into being somewhat casual about meaningful patterns. In Bouvard et Pécuchet, Flaubert will finally bloat his narrative with information which we can dismiss as soon as we have received it. And even in Madame Bovary there are signs of his wish to train us to experience literature itself as having some of that boring insignificance which Emma is so exasperated to find in life.

Of course, one could scarcely imagine a novel more likely to exasperate Madame Bovary than Madame Bovary. A striking peculiarity of realistic novels, as Harry Levin has emphasized, is their hostility to literature—or, more specifically, to that continuously significant and fully designed literature of which the novels Emma reads are, after all, merely inferior examples. I’m thinking of the dramatically gratuitous and even boring descriptions in the later Flaubert, as well as Stendhal’s affection for the random and unexpected detail, for a life and for books imaginatively improvised. Emma’s distaste for Flaubertian art can be assumed from the way she eventually turns against even non-Flaubertian art. Literature has served Emma very poorly indeed. It makes sense of experience for her, but experience doesn’t confirm the sense she brings to it. And this is especially disastrous since Emma can’t really return to literature. If Madame Bovary is a critique of the expectations imposed on life by literary romances, it is also a critique of the expectations which those same romances raise concerning literature itself. Flaubert’s novel is an extraordinarily subtle dialectic between literature and sensation; the movement between the two creates a rhythm less immediately obvious but more profound than the alternation between exalted fantasies and flat realities.

Emma indicates her impatience with the literary imagination when, in answer to Léon’s remark (the evening of her arrival in Yonville) that verses are much more “tender” than prose and are better for making one cry, she says: “But in the long run they’re tiring . . . ; and now, on the contrary, I love stories in which the action doesn’t let up from start to finish, and which make you frightened” (p. 401). It’s true that as disappointments accumulate in Emma’s life, books provide her with the “up” she no longer finds in love; unable to feel any “profound bliss” in her meetings with Léon (p. 582), Emma turns to literature for a “quick fix.” She stays up at night reading “lurid books full of orgiastic scenes and bloody deeds. Often she would be seized with terror, she would cry out” (p. 588). At these moments of terror Emma has, it might be said, finally achieved her ideal if unbearable equilibrium between mind and body. An organized activity of sublimation (literature) is providing her with extraordinary sensations. The intensities of a body left to itself are discontinuous and mystifying. Literature explains those sensations, but it also dilutes them in the abstract, somewhat ghostly time of verbal narrative. The explanations of literature don’t work in life, and the intensities of life are

lost in the endless and tiring meanings of literature. Consequently, what else is there to do but cultivate a style of reading in which the mind would excite itself out of consciousness? To get the fantastic fables of romantic literature without the words of romantic literature would be to allow imagination to act directly on the body without the cumbersome mediation of language. In her nocturnal screams, Emma—however briefly and unviably—has resolved the paradox of seeking sensations in the airy fancies of imagination.

An unbearable and an unviable solution: in reading those wild stories, Emma is of course profiting from neither the originality of her own talent for sensations nor from the sense-making structures which literature invents for the life of the body. Now Flaubert seems more sensitive to the sin against literature than to the sin against life. Much of the force of a potential argument in Madame Bovary against literature’s violation of experience is lost because experience hardly seems worth the trouble. The alternatives to literary romance in the novel are Homais’ invulnerable self-sufficiency, the boredom and pettiness of provincial life, Charles’s bovine mediocrity, Rodolphe’s egoism and brutal sensuality, and Léon’s pusillanimity. Indeed, even when, as in L’Education sentimentale, Flaubert broadens the social context of his fiction beyond the narrow limits of dull provincial towns, he is never even mildly tempted by the “serious” activities and institutions of adult life (such as marriage, political involvements, or even ordinary sociability). And the only characters who appear to have his unqualified approval are the inaccessible and vaguely outlined Madame Arnoux, and those mute, simple-minded, virtuous creatures, Dussardier in the Education and Félicité in “Un Coeur simple.”

Flaubert’s radical critique of almost all versions of sentimental, intellectual and political “seriousness” could be thought of as expressing a profound distaste for all those sublimating activities which organize life in society. And Flaubert seems to encourage this view of his work by the attention which he gives, as we have seen, to the variety of sensual contacts which his characters have with the world. Emma Bovary is a sentimentalist, but her creator de-sublimates her sentimentality for us by presenting her both as an exciting physical presence and as having an exceptionally refined talent for sensual responses. But Flaubert’s attitude toward this aspect of Emma is ambiguous. He may be seduced by the physical presence he has created, but nothing in the novel suggests that Emma’s moral and intellectual emptiness and her genius for sensations have been imagined as part of an experiment in de-structuring personality. That is, Flaubert is not trying out novelistically the viability of fragmented and de-sublimated desires in the specific time of an individual life. For Flaubert, I think, finds Emma’s sensations both fascinating and terrifying. The dangers of losing the self in uncontrollable fusions with the world seem to deprive the Flaubertian imagination of the leisure necessary for disengaging what I have called the personal formula of Emma’s sensual intensities and allowing her to test that formula in her history. It even seems as if Flaubert were anxious to avoid the slightest possibility of making that test. The powerful deadness of Emma Bovary’s environment would defeat even the most
energetically inventive desires, and, when the environment is perhaps rich enough to contain spaces not yet absorbed by established modes of feeling and thought (as in the Paris of L’Education sentimentale), Flaubert creates a hero without Emma’s energy, a figure too weak to inscribe on any terrain the traces of his original desires.

The natural inclination of Flaubertian desire is toward dangerous fusions; in other terms, desire leads to the nightmare of a loss of form. There are, it’s true, fusions as well as a kind of material and spiritual oozing which indicate ecstasy rather than panic: the “vague and prolonged cry” which Emma hears after she and Rodolphe have made love in the forest blends harmoniously “like a piece of music with the last vibrations of her throbbing nerves,” and a few moments earlier “. . . something sweet seemed to emanate from the trees” (p. 472). But the hallucinated sense of substances breaking out of their forms is also a sign of terror in Flaubert. After Rodolphe refuses to give her money, and just before her suicide, Emma’s very being seems to jump out from her body and explode in the air or sink into the moving soil:

She stood there lost in stupor, no longer conscious of herself except through the beating of her arteries, which she thought she could hear escaping like a deafening music that filled the countryside. The earth under her feet was softer than the sea and the furrows seemed to her like immense dark breaking waves. All the reminiscences and ideas in her head were rushing out, in a single leap, like a thousand pieces of fireworks. She saw her father, Lheureux’s office, their room in the hotel, a different landscape. She was going mad, she had a moment of fright, and managed to take hold of herself... (p. 611)

Emma regains her sanity only to kill herself; how will Flaubert protect himself from these “escapes” of being?

Only art is saved from Flaubert’s pessimism about sensation and the sublimating mechanisms of social life. The Flaubertian cult of art explains Flaubert’s severity toward inferior art. The realistic claims of Emma’s favorite novels depend on their ignoring their own mediating processes, on their attempt to hide the differences between the nature of the intensities they seem to exalt and that of the exalting narrative itself. As I’ve said, they encourage Emma to search in life for the abstractions invented in books, and they also invite her to expect that real time, like the printed time of a novel, can be an uninterrupted succession of intense passages. Emma contributes to the sins of literary romance and, in a way, skilfully dismisses art by trying to separate the romance from the literature and thereby ignoring the work—the effort and the product—of the writer. She brings to these books exactly what they require: a lack of imagination. She reads literature as we might listen to a news report. Emma Bovary parodies all the pious claims which have been made by realism in Western esthetics for the relevance of art to life. Down-to-earth even in the midst of her raptures, Emma “had to be able to extract from things a
kind of personal profit; and she rejected as useless everything which didn’t contribute to the immediate gratification of her heart,—being by temperament more sentimental than artistic, seeking emotions and not landscapes” (p. 358).

Flaubert’s writing is a continuous correction, through stylistic example, of Emma’s confusions. The book we are reading constantly draws our attention to its own nature as a composed written document. Flaubert speaks in his correspondence of moments when he himself is, as it were, so taken in by the realism of his own writing that he begins to experience the incidents he describes: he shares both Emma’s and Rodolphe’s sensations in the scene of their love-making in the forest, and he writes the section on Emma’s death with the taste of arsenic in his mouth. Occasionally Flaubert thus tends to draw from his own writing something like the immediate “personal profit” which Emma demands from literature. But to spend a couple of weeks shaping a single paragraph hardly seems calculated to leave the writer capable of “seeing through” his writing to the experiences it describes. The painfully slow composition of Madame Bovary is much more likely to leave Flaubert with the taste of verbal agonies rather than with the taste of arsenic.

More importantly, Flaubert’s language, unlike Stendhal’s, calls attention to its own strategies, sounds and designs. Flaubert’s text has kept traces of being continuously worked over; and while this gives something awkward and heavy to his writing (which, in my previous work on Flaubert, I now think I’ve tended to over-emphasize), we might also feel that a certain stylistic opacity is Flaubert’s decisive refutation of Emma’s confused argument for a literature of pure sensation. The very fact that, because of Emma’s sensuality, Flaubert has so often to describe moments of intense sensation gives him frequent occasions for illustrating the “proper” literary use of sensation. And what Flaubert shows us is a detailed process of establishing intervals within sensations of fusion which seem to allow for no intervals. In the passage I quoted some time ago, which describes Emma and Rodolphe’s last night together, Flaubert compares the reflection of the moon in the water to a “headless serpent covered with luminous scales,” and also to an enormous candelabra with drops of molten diamond flowing down its sides. The sexual suggestiveness of these images is obvious. As I’ve said, they transpose Emma’s sensual pleasure into a hallucinated scene in the external world. But also, by the very fact of being literary images, they are the sign, for us, of a certain distance from the sensations they describe. In her sexual exaltation, Emma may actually see the serpent and the candelabra; a much cooler novelist tells us that the moon’s light “seemed to writhe to the bottom of the water like a headless serpent covered with luminous scales,” and then, somewhat awkwardly, he starts the second comparison (in a new sentence) with: “It also resembled . . .” These last few words could have been eliminated; we might have had a single sentence, with the two images closer to each other. “It also resembled [cela ressemblait aussi à]” is a heavy but salutary reminder of the work of comparison. To make a verbal analogy is to bring together two things which may usually not go together, but at the very instant we say the second term of the analogy we es-
tain a difference between it and the first term. We create a linguistic space which no similarity can abolish.

Writing is the creation of such intervals, spaces, and differences. To speak and to write are the sublimating activities which allow us to spread out sensations in time and in space. Flaubert, whose terror of sensual fusions seems to have made this a literally saving truth, makes the point for us in more extreme ways than most other writers. Comparisons can be particularly obtrusive in his work; a somewhat creaky machinery for making analogies almost mangles the object of comparison. In a famous and frequently derided analogy Flaubert compares Emma’s memory of Léon to an abandoned campfire in the snow of a Russian steppe, and by the end of the second paragraph of an extravagantly extended comparison, there is some question of whether or not Emma’s anguish is going to survive this exercise in Slavic meteorology (p. 438).

Proust, in an often quoted remark, declared that there is not a single beautiful metaphor in all Flaubert. But the presumed “real” point of departure for a Proustian comparison is, as in Flaubert, but even more frequently than in Flaubert, volatilised and absorbed into the imaginative logic of a process of composition. What is not “beautiful” in Flaubert is not the content of his metaphors but the glaring visibility of his literary strategies. He is far more concerned than Proust, perhaps because of those terrors of the sensual imagination which we have briefly looked at, in maintaining a sharp distinction between art and the rest of life. The heaviness of much of his writing could therefore be thought of as pedagogically useful: he is constantly demonstrating the extent to which literature renounces the immediacy of sensations in order to express them.

As an example of those fusions which take place in Flaubert at moments of great sensual excitement, I’ve spoken of the passage which describes Emma’s sensual torpor in the city hall of Yonville on the day of the agricultural fair. Present and past, Rodolphe and Léon, the odor from the viscount’s beard and the odor from Rodolphe’s hair merge into a single swimming sensation. “The sweetness of this sensation [of smelling Rodolphe’s pomade] thus penetrated her desires from the past, and like grains of sand in a gust of wind, they swirled in the subtle breath of the perfume which was spreading over her soul” (p. 459). Everything has merged into a single, indistinct, whirling sensation—everything, that is, except the only thing we are really given, which is this exceptionally complex sentence. And the coherence of the sentence depends on our moving carefully from one distinct unit to the other in order to follow the construction of Flaubert’s metaphor. The sentence begins with a kind of abstract chemistry, suddenly switches to the concrete image of sand in the wind, which seems to authorize the verb “swirled [tournbillionnaient]” when we return, in the last part, to the penetration and dancing of past desires in a present sensation. As even these brief remarks indicate, the fusions of literature are always separations or articulations, and they invite the critic to even further articulations. The Flaubertian workshop is one in which a master craftsman—somewhat at the expense of his own craft—teaches us to read. 