MADAME BOVARY'S EROTICIZED VEHICLE

Much has been written about narrative discontinuity in *Madame Bovary*. Jonathan Culler, in *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974), p. 15, provides one of the more interesting explanations of this strategy. Flaubert, Culler finds, shifts narrative perspective to produce uncertainty. In the frequently discussed carriage scene, for example, the point of view moves away from the characters toward mystified observers, for the coachman and the townspeople fail to recognize the closed cab as an erotic machine.

The particular narrative mode employed in the carriage scene may be further linked to the concept of "defamiliarization" discussed by the Russian formalist V. Shklovski in relation to Tolstoi and others: objects glimpsed from a non-initiated viewpoint appear singular or strange. Since the unfamiliar image breaks the string of automatic associations, it generates new possibilities. Shklovski states that this technique applies particularly to erotic discourse, for instead of naming them directly, such texts frequently represent sexual objects and acts indirectly, euphemistically, or as unrecognized for what they are.[1] This article will consider Flaubert's description of the carriage ride in *Madame Bovary* as an instance of such indirect erotic discourse.

First, however, the intricate preparation for this scene needs to be examined. The beginning pages of Part Three focus on Léon's erotic determination activated simultaneously by renewed passion, a romantic dream, and a cynical albeit almost reluctant will to conquer: "Il fallait, pensait-il, se résoudre enfin à la vouloir posséder." This last sentence, bristling with verbs of duty, resolve, and volition draws attention to Léon's act of will. In a version later discarded by Flaubert, the text continued: "Et immédiatement, il se proposa cette tentative comme la suprême épreuve de sa valeur personnelle." Still another variation states: "Et le jeune homme, immédiatement, se proposa cette tentative, comme l'épreuve suprême de son énergie."[2]

The two draft versions and the first page of Part Three, to which I have drawn attention, although suggesting a multiplicity of motivations, emphasize the voluntary aspect of Léon's seduction. His reawakened desire, fed by memories, dreams, and hopes, is transformed into a determined project of conquest mediated by theories on woman – Emma, for example, because of her mediocre social position is considered an erotic object of relatively easy access and yet enough *femme du monde* to be a respectable mistress in the eyes of Léon's social class – as well as by society's expectation that a young bourgeois prove his valor through amorous conquest.

In the subsequent scene between Léon and Emma at the *Croix Rouge*, the contradiction of the bourgeois moral code – the simultaneous interdic-

tion and expectation – and the paired dichotomies, popularized by romanticism, that accompany it – the desirer, usually male, as idealized dreamer and satanic seducer; the desired, usually female, as angelic presence and sexual object – are played against each other. The characters are staged as conscious players in a ritualized mating duet. Fabricating idealized and melancholic personas for themselves out of the clichéd material at hand, they fail, however, to conceal their erotic maneuvers. Emma's ironic smiles mock Léon's pre-meditated tactics: play the dreamer to the angelic woman in order to pursue his project of seduction. Emma recognizes the strategy because it is her own: play idealized woman to the dreamy young man while maneuvering him. He is as much erotic object for her as she for him. Here then is a case of equality: both the woman and the man, depending on shifts of point of view indicated in the text, oscillate between the opposite positions inscribed in this version of the duel of the sexes. Although the two share the same physical desire, they are intent on idealizing it, or on forcing themselves to will the inevitable: copulation becomes an act of energy and valor.

According to Sartre, the characters use their trite gesturing to affirm – in vain – their human dignity and inner freedom in the face of the fatality of sexual impulses.[3] As Flaubert stages them, however, Emma and Léon, gesticulating to guarantee their independence from a dehumanizing automatism, fall into the commonplaces of a degraded bourgeois myth. They suffer a double alienation.

In the subsequent cathedral scene, Flaubert heightens the opposition between the sexual impulse and a religious and moral order. True to the ironic mode, like the idealization of the desired, the attacking and delaying tactics of the seduction ritual, the religious interdictions serve only to raise the pitch of erotic expectancy. The literary, cultural, and religious codes intended to modulate the materiality of sexual desire are equally mocked. They function only as unrecognized signifiers for always the same signified.

The narrative perspective in the previous scenes, oscillating between Léon and Emma, invites the reader to smile at the couple's ridiculous posturing. After the cab sets off, however, the point of view moves abruptly to a distant observer of the vehicle and to puzzled witnesses of its passage. This sudden shift – which has startled many readers – elicits a different reaction. Indeed, in contrast to the previous scenes, the writer's irony, the character's mimicry, the readers' superior smile give way to pleasure. The transformation is partly achieved by an expert preparation for the erotic scene which the writer then declines to represent. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a description of the love-making that would correspond in intensity to the reader's expectation. How is the writer to avoid disappointing the reader? Flaubert chose a poetic solution to this problem. Indeed, he cannot simply stop the scene when the couple enters the cab, since the temporality of the text would force the reader either to turn away

to the next episode or to close the book. On the other hand, by keeping the cab in view from a different angle of vision, the text rivets the reader's attention onto the copulation. Using the estranged point of view, Flaubert produced an excellent example of indirect erotic writing. Every element in the text is made to evoke a succession of sexual acts.

The carriage itself, a vehicle of seduction, functions as one of the most persistent codes of erotic literature. A reader of Flaubert's time or of our time would each possess a store of literary and cultural associations linking moving vehicles and vessels to sensual pleasures. (According to Sartre, the code is energized for Flaubert by autobiographical reminiscences as well.)[4] Without necessarily going as far back as Tristan and Iseult, countless scenes of love-making in vehicles isolated either in water or city come to mind from Marivaux to Proust before the modern affair with and in pleasure boat and car. Flaubert's manipulation if this code, however, is one of the more intriguing and notorious.

It is well known that Flaubert excels in imitative or metaphorical writing. In this passage then, the motion of the cab simulates the action the reader is invited to imagine within. Or more precisely, the flow of the sentences, imitating the rhythm of the vehicle, evokes the moves of seduction inside the carriage. The motion of the cab around Rouen suggests first a repetition of the progressive rhythm of seduction, followed by an adagio of relief, giving way to a crescendo of sweeping waves of motion and finally discordant frenzy before subsiding in fatigue. The sentences pulsate with intensity, flow smoothly, or precipitate their rhythm in accordance with the motion described. The text itself functions like an eroticized vehicle.

The first movement covers the drive from the cathedral to the train station. From the beginning Léon disengages his moral responsibility; the cab can go where it will. Indeed, Flaubert rewrote the passage to heighten the opposition between cathedral and carriage.[5] The immobility of the cathedral, a moral order preserved in stone and particularized by the Portal of the Damned through which Emma and Léon are asked to exit, gives way to an amoral force, the heavy machinery of sexual passion: "Et la lourde machine se mit en route."

The progressive distance effected from the moral order is traced move by move. The itinerary of the cab evokes once again the classical strategies in the game of seduction: the bridging of a natural and contrived distance – la rue Grand-Pont, le pont Neuf – through artful maneuvers buttressed by the will to conquer – la place des Arts, le quai Napoléon. A last-minute moral hesitation – the stop by the statue of Corneille, encoding no less than the cathedral the conflict between passion and moral duty – set aside by the command to continue, precipitates a galloping descent and entry: "La voiture repartit, et, se laissant, dès le carrefour La Fayette, emporter vers la descente, elle entra au grand galop dans la gare du chemin de fer". The

first portion of the ride reinforces the voluntary aspect of the mutual seduction brought to a victorious conclusion.

The second sequence marks a reflux, a period of rest. The cab trots gently along the river, among the trees, next to the lawn. The fluidity, suggested by the flow of the words, the river, and the vegetation, contrasts with the preceding staccato rhythm and hardness of imagery and sound. Text, cab, landscape, and city are eroticized as the places visited become emblems of the female body.

In the third instance, the tempo turns suddenly ("s'élança d'un bond") as the cab circles the town on either side of the river. In tracing the itinerary, we find two circular sweeps, one to the south, the other to the north, linked by the bridge. The cab inscribes a vast figure eight onto the eroticized surface of the city.

Finally, all ordered progression – the stages and stops of the first part – and continuous motion – the circular paths on each bank – are abandoned for erratic movements left to chance. The coachman, failing to understand the frenzy of his passengers – "Il ne comprenait pas quelle fureur de la locomotion poussait ces individus à ne vouloir point s'arrêter." – abandons control of the vehicle. His desperation and thirst point to the after-effect of the activity inside, a particularly grotesque detail.

The predominance of fluid imagery in sexual contexts – often pointed out by Flaubert's critics – has been most immediately apparent from the recurrent mention of the river, the harbor, and the profusely sweating horses and coachman. Moreover, from the point of view of the astonished townspeople, the cab resembles a boat tossing in the sea. This association, following immediately upon the image of a tomb, likens the erotic vehicle to a watery grave or the womb-like unconsciousness suggested from the beginning by the cab's closed-off darkness. The associations, cab – erotic machine – boat – womb and tomb, linking Eros and Thanatos (as Flaubert is often known to do), simultaneously energizes and points to the mythical force of the vehicle code in erotic discourse.[6]

At the end of the itinerary then, the will to conquer, the social and moral codes activitated in the scenes leading up to the carriage ride have been progressively overpowered by sexual impulse – an asocial and amoral force – coded in terms of the mechanical, the animal, elemental, and botanical. Although they will the seduction, the characters progressively turn into the plaything of erotic machinery. Having passed through the seduction according to pre-coded rituals, they are caught up in the whirlwind of uncontrollable motion and impersonal forces.

A final comparison reinforces the element of chance: the bits of Emma's letter, thrown out of the cab, dispersed by the wind, settle like butterflies on a field of blooming clover. The allusion to the driving wind and the chance process of pollination mocks the feeble moral resistance contained in the letter and makes desire the toy of elemental drives.

The entire passage may then well be considered an example of indirect

discourse, of the metaphoric style which, as Paul de Man puts it "seems to be Flaubert's natural idiom,"[7] or an instance of Flaubert's grotesque and mocking view of human sexual alienation, as Sartre finds, or indeed a piece of writing about nothing as Culler would have it. If one refuses both the metaphoric reading into which the text undoubtedly entices the reader, and which we have followed until now, and the thematic interpretation so brilliantly constructed by Sartre, the text's narrative strategy literally does point to a void: the cab as ghostly ship and tomb – "trimballement du fiacre, partout – boule du cocher. – rien que la boîte" – Flaubert had noted in a draft.[8] Or one could say that the absence of both a personal narrator and characters/actors turns this text into a game of hide and seek with the nothingness inside the cab (from the narrative perspective) and the erotic activity readers are invited to glimpse through their own point of view. Led on by the indirect discourse, readers fill the vacant place of the narrator peeking through the shades of the carriage.

Certainly, readers have reacted strongly to this passage, beginning with the editor of the *Revue de Paris*, who refused to publish it in 1856, and the imperial prosecutor Pinard, who seemingly sensing the crucial role played by the reader, exclaimed: "Nous savons maintenant, messieurs, que la chute n'a pas lieu dans le fiacre. Par un scrupule qui l'honore, le rédacteur de la *Revue* a supprimé le passage de la chute dans le fiacre." Without the reader, nothing takes place in the cab even though, as Pinard realized, the reader is given a sensuous description of the subsequent rendez-vous at the Hôtel de Bourgogne.[9]

Could it be that as Roland Barthes writes, it is the staging of the appearance-disappearance phenomenon, the quick peek rather than the strip-tease, that produces the most intense erotic pleasure?[10] It could also be that readers have felt tricked, not because the passage is a form of peekaboo with nothing, but because they were lured into an indirect erotic experience by the materiality of the text. They were seduced before the social and moral censors could awaken, for the text not only simulates but functions like an erotic vehicle or sex-textual machine.

University of Maryland
Baltimore County ANGELA B. MOORJANI

Notes

1. See V. Chklovski, "L'Art comme procédé," in *Théorie de la littérature*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov (Paris: Seuil, 1965), pp. 76-97. See also Culler's introduction in the op. cit.
2. *Madame Bovary, Ebauches et fragments inédits*, ed. Gabrielle Leleu (Paris: Conard, 1936), II, 258-59.
3. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Idiot de la famille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), II, 1276.
4. Sartre, II, 1287.
5. See *Madame Bovary, Ebauches*, ed. Gabrielle Leleu, II, 295.
6. For further examples of the link between sexuality and death in Flaubert see the chapter, "L'Insuffisance du rêve," in Victor Brombert, *Flaubert* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), pp. 51-73.

Flaubert's texts, moreover, associate Eros and death both paradigmatically and syntagmatically. The carriage scene, for example, is followed by the announcement of the death of Charles's father. Jean Rousset, in a passage from *Forme et signification* (Paris: José Corti, 1962), translated in *Madame Bovary: Backgrounds and Sources; Essays in Criticism,* ed. Paul de Man (New York: Norton, 1965), p. 455, writes about Emma: "In her life, every ecstasy is followed by a smaller version of death; her actual, ultimate death harmoniously blends with the prefigurations that prepared it."

7. Paul de Man, op. cit., p. xii.

8. *Madame Bovary, Nouvelle version précédée des scénarios inédits*, ed. Jean Pommier and Gabrielle Leleu (Paris: José Corti, 1949), p. 105.

9. "Réquisitoire de M. L'Avocat Impérial M. Ernst PINARD" in *Madame Bovary* (Paris: Garnier, 1961), p. 338. And in December, 1856, Flaubert wrote to Laurent-Pichat of the *Revue de Paris* about the censored passage: "En supprimant le passage du fiacre, vous n'avez rien ôté de ce qui scandalise. ... Vous vous attaquez à des détails, c'est à l'ensemble qu'il faut s'en prendre. L'élement brutal est au fond et non à la surface". In *Correspondance* (Paris: Conard, 1926-33), IV, 137-38. The carriage scene as only one of the surface structures of an underlying deep structure sounds astonishingly modern.

10. Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), pp. 19-20.