Scenes From A Provicial Life Essay, Research Paper

Scenes from a provicial lifePart twoThis is a clear visual picture of a place but it is loaded with Madame Bovary’s ennui and her way of seeing. The cabbages have taken on silver lace trimmings from romance. The idea of paradise is excluded from this real place. The vine is just a vine, not the True Vine, and is indifferently identified with the serpent, who is sick. ‘Cloportes’ which drag themselves along are not angels to close the gates but woodlice. The verbs are in the indefinite past – ’seemed to sleep’ and ’saw… dragging themselves along.’ Flaubert wrote that he liked ‘clear sharp sentences… which must be clear as Voltaire, as abrim with substance as Montaigne, as vigorous as La Bruyère, and always streaming with colour.’ He orchestrates the colours of the book as he orchestrates Emma’s and the reader’s sensations – in the passage I have just quoted silver and white, elsewhere, notably in the seduction in the forest, the blue of romantic distances, which is transmuted into the blue of the bottle of arsenic powder Emma steals from Monsieur Homais. He planned and discarded a scene where Emma was observing the landscape through coloured glass.The effect of his spreading of the feeling of the characters, and the novels, into the physical world, varies with the distance from which the narrator watches the things. It is not clear, when Flaubert describes Charles Bovary’s first vision of Emma’s flesh, exactly where Charles’s thoughts end and authorial commentary begins. ‘Tout en cousant, elle se piquait les doigts, qu’elle portait ensuite a sa bouche pour les sucer.’ This is an erotic simple sentence, and it presents the young woman as unselfconscious and awkward with household tasks. It is followed by a long analysis – from very close – of her finger-nails, ostensibly from Charles’s point of view, though in fact there are several elements of the description which read oddly if the reader looks, so to speak, out of Charles’s head.’Charles fut surpris de la blancheur de ses ongles. Ils étaient brilliants, fins du bout, plus nettoyés que les ivoires de Dieppe, et taillés en amande. Sa main pourtant n’était pas belle, point assez pâle peut-être, et un peu sèche aux phalanges; elle était trop longue aussi et sans molles inflexions de lignes sur les contours. Ce qu’elle avait du beau, c’étaient les yeux; quoiqu’ils furent bruns, ils semblaient noirs à cause des cils, et son regard arrivait franchement à vous avec une hardiesse candide.’This is not exactly Charles’s thought – or sensation – process. It appears to be, and some critics have seen in the ostensible use of the technical ‘phalanges’ and the possibly diagnostic note of the absence of ‘molles inflexions’ Charles’s ‘medical’ eye. But the Charles whose life we have so far followed is not in the habit of making such precise discriminations about what is and is not beautiful. And the romantic comparison with the ivories of Dieppe is not Charles Bovary’s, nor is the tone of voice describing the effect of Emma Rouault’s ‘regard’ on an abstract ‘you’ which includes both the narrator and the reader? It is Flaubert mingling, but not fusing, his characters’ relations to the physical world with his own.Something similar happens when he tries very directly to involve us in a physical analogy which he ascribes directly to Madame Bovary herself. In this case she is thinking in a conventional way about why she wanted a son not a daughter. ‘Un homme au moins est libre; il peut parcourir les passions et les pays.’ ‘Mais une femme est empêchée continuellement. Inerte et flexible a la fois, elle a contre elle les mollesses de la chair avec les dépendances de la loi. Sa volonté, comme le voile de son chapeau retenue par un cordon, palpite a tous les vents; il y a toujours quelque désir qui entraine, quelque convenance qui retient.’Here again, although the comparison between the veil and the female consciousness inside it is a beautiful physical image of the constraints of a woman’s view of the world and of her volatile will on its string or cord, I do not quite believe the comparison is one Madame Bovary generated or thought out. It is beautifully articulated and precise, and is part of Flaubert’s vision of his creation, not of her vision of her world. It is almost a complex metaphor – and complex metaphors, as we shall see, are not the way in which Madame Bovary proceeds. Somebody tries to think with the analogy between a woman’s veil and a woman’s will. Whereas the most moving passages are flatter and more absolute. Consider Madame Bovary sitting in her inappropriate boudoir.’Elle portait une robe de chamber toute ouverte, qui laissait voir, entre les revers à châle du corsage, une chemisette plissée avec trois boutons d’or. Sa ceinture était une cordelière à gros glands, et ses petits pantoufles de couleur grenat avaient une touffe de rubans larges, qui s’étalait sur le cou-du-pied. Elle s’était acheté un buvard, une papeterie, un porte-plume et des envelopes, quoiqu’elle n’eut personne à qui écrire; elle époussetait son étagère, se regardait dans la glace, prenait un livre, puis, rêvant entre les lignes, le laissait tomber sur les genoux. Elle avait envie de faire des voyages ou de retourner vivre a son couvent. Elle souhaitait a la fois mourir et habiter Paris.’This is simultaneously beautiful, funny in its bathos and terrible in its implacable vision. Something similar happens in the pathetic description of her chatter to Charles early in her marriage – she tells him things she has found in novels ‘car, enfin, Charles était quelqu’un, une oreille toujours ouverte. Elle faisait bien des confidences à sa levrette. Elle en eut fait aux buches de la cheminée et au balancier de la pendule.’ This passage describes Emma’s world, and moves from the novels she reads to her uncomprehending but admiring husband and out, by way of the dumb animal to the world of inanimate objects. But those objects have a buried metaphorical meaning, in that – still described in the indefinite past tense of prolonged states of being – the burning logs in the hearth and the pendulum of the clock do represent the passing of time through the stasis of boredom. The logs and the clock are in a way Flaubert’s metaphor for the movement of Emma Bovary’s life, all the more effective for not being presented as metaphor, but simply as real objects. This precision and simplicity has the effect of making the whole book into one worked image, memorable for a reader simultaneously as a direct physical experience and as a whole as an articulated image for a certain state of things, the world of ennui, romantic longing, and physical restriction. Flaubert admired his heroic artists – Rabelais, Shakespeare, Cervantes – for their power to create simple, absolute types and scenes. He says somewhere that great art can appear almost silly, stupid, in its self-sufficiency. His descriptions have exactly that self-sufficiency, a simplicity of presence which is meaning.He knew very well what he was doing. He curbed his naturally flamboyant style. He wrote to Louise Colet ‘I think that Bovary will move along, but I am bothered by my tendency to metaphor, decidedly excessive. I am devoured by comparisons as one is by lice, and I spend my time doing nothing but squashing them: my sentences swarm with them.’ Some of the wisest comments on his style and its working are those by Marcel Proust. Proust wrote to defend Flaubert against hostile criticism in 1919. He said that he himself believed that ‘la métaphore seule peut donner une sorte d’éternité au style, et il n’y a peut-être pas dans tout Flaubert une seule belle métaphore.’ But he goes on to say that Flaubert has changed French prose by changing the possibilities of French grammar – including his use of the imperfect tense, the tense of states of affairs and states of mind. By the time of L’Education Sentimentale, Proust said, things which before Flaubert had been action, had become impressions. Things had as much life as men. Working with the life of things in Flaubert’s style and story is another great interest – idées reçues or clichés. One of Flaubert’s projects over many years was the compilation of a Dictionary of Accepted Ideas – a collection of platitudes which would be ‘the historical glorification of everything generally approved.’ It would he said, for instance, show that ‘in literature, mediocrity, being within the reach of everyone, is alone legitimate and that consequently every kind of originality must be denounced as dangerous, ridiculous etc.’ The work would, he said, be ‘raucous and ironic’ and would lead to the great modern idea of equality, demonstrating ‘everything one should say if one is to be considered a decent and likeable member of society.’ His collection is usually appended to his last unfinished comic novel, Bouvard et Pécuchet, the tale of two pedantic copy-clerks. He was fascinated by what could be learned about human nature by observing the automatic train of thoughts and words of conventional people in repetitive ordinary situations. Much of both the comedy and tragedy of Emma Bovary’s two love affairs arises from Flaubert’s merciless observation of the clichés in which the lovemaking is carried on. Here is his description of the writing of the first rapprochement of the young clerk Léon and madame Bovary,’Things have been going well for two or three days. I am doing a conversation between a young man and a young woman about literature, the sea, mountains, music – all the poetical subjects. It is something that could be taken seriously and yet I fully intend it as grotesque. This will be the first time, I think, that a book makes fun of its leading lady and its leading man.’The same kind of shocking rapprochement between the sentimental and the banal occurs on a grander scale – and much more brutally and cynically – in the grand scene of the agricultural show, where the public platitudes of French civic oratory (and M. Homais’s republican and scientific idées reçues) mingle with the practised seduction technique of Rodolphe, with his claims of ennui and sadness, his automatic flattery of Madame Bovary. Flaubert spent from July to the end of November in 1853 working on this one scene, and wrote of it in terms of orchestration. ‘If the effects of a symphony have ever been conveyed in a book it will be in these pages. I want the reader to hear everything together in one great roar – the bellowing of bulls, the sighing of lovers, the bombast of official oratory. The sun shines down on it all, and there are gusts of wind that threaten to blow off the women’s big bonnets. I achieve dramatic effect simply by the interweaving of dialogue and by contrasts of character.’ There is a sense in which the very flatness of the reported clichés of rhetoric and feeling has the same effect as the direct descriptions of things which are their own meaning. It is the kind of quality that Flaubert admires in Homer, Rabelais, Michelangelo, Shakespeare and Goethe as ‘pitiless.’ It appears in the profound irony of the juxtapositions in sentences like ‘Il admirait l’exaltation de son âme et les dentelles de sa jupe.’ Or ‘Elle souhaitait a la fois mourir et habiter Paris.’ And Flaubert himself felt that his irony was also moving. After the observation about his book making fun of its leading lady and its leading man, he added ‘The irony does not detract from the pathetic aspect, but rather intensifies it. In my third part, which will be full of farcical things, I want my readers to weep.’ Flaubert may appear to keep a controlled and glacial distance from his fictional world. In fact his attitude to it was double. He told Louise Colet ‘Rien dans ce livre n’est tiré de moi . . . Tout est de tête’, but he also told Amélie Bosquet, famously, ‘Madame Bovary c’est moi! – d’après moi.’ His mother told him ‘Your mania for sentences has dried up your heart’. But he lived the moments he was writing intensely – ‘for better or worse it is a delicious thing to write, to be no longer yourself, but to move in an entire universe of your own creating. Today, for instance, as man and woman, both lover and mistress, I rode in a forest on an autumn afternoon under the yellow leaves, and I was also the horses, the leaves, the wind, the words my people uttered, even the red sun that made them almost close their love-drowned eyes.’ And when he came to kill Madame Bovary he imagined her agony so intensely that he tasted the bitterness of the arsenic in his own mouth, to the point of vomiting.When the novel was finished, Flaubert sent it to Bouilhet to be published in six bi-monthly parts in the Revue de Paris. Bouilhet sent him a letter which is a warning to all editors tempted to respond to complex manuscripts with confident proposals for improvement.’Let us take full charge of the publication of your novel in the Revue; we will make the cuts we think indispensable. My personal opinion is that if you do not do this, you will be gravely compromising yourself, making your first appearance with a muddled work to which the style alone does not give sufficient interest. Be brave, close your eyes during the operation, and have confidence – if not in our talent, at least in the experience we have acquired in such matters and also in our affection for you. You have buried your novel under a heap of details which are well done but superfluous: it is not seen clearly enough, and must be disencumbered – an easy task. We shall have it done under our supervision by someone who is experienced and clever; not a word will be added to your manuscript, it will merely be pruned; the job will cost you about 100 francs which will be deducted from your payment, and you will have published something really good instead of something imperfect and padded. . .’Flaubert, understandably, objected furiously. The novel was finally published in the review with only one cut – perhaps the most famous scene – the wild journey of the cab through the streets of Rouen, the box inside which Emma consummates her affair with Léon. Madame Bovary was nevertheless prosecuted by the police for obscenity in January 1857. Flaubert and his publishers were acquitted on February 7th; Flaubert was afraid the Ministry of Justice would appeal but it did not, and the notoriety added to the book’s success, not entirely to Flaubert’s pleasure – he said he disliked Art to be associated with things alien to it. In later years, after the publication of Salammbô, (1862), a novel about a Carthaginian princess, L’Education Sentimentale in 1869, and his Trois Contes in 1877, he complained about the excessive notoriety of Madame Bovary, as authors do when they feel one of their books is being singled out at the expense of others.All novels create characters and worlds which are both particular and typical. The nineteenth-century realist novel is at the crossroads between two kinds of ‘type’ – the Christian typological figure, whose story is related to the biblical stories, to the struggle of virtue and vice, and the statistical type, the sociological example of phenomena in a state, a group, a section of society. The novels of Balzac and Dostoevsky present us with a phantasmagoric world, in which spiritual shapes and forces are felt to be struggling invisibly – or half-visibly – behind a membrane of observed life. Balzac’s ambitious plan is a taxonomy of French society and history. But it is also, as La Comédie Humaine, a direct descendant of Dante’s Divine Comedy, and the circles of Hell and Paradise map his frenetic contemporary Parisian struggle. He was Swedenborgian visionary as well as social analyst. Dostoevsky sets his spiritual vision of the necessity of the belief in Christ and immortality, with its narrative forms of folk-tales and monastic histories, against his detailed knowledge of the behaviour of poor clerks, revolutionary anarchists, and provincial vanities. Lionel Trilling, writing about Buvard et Pécuchet, makes the interesting point that French realism has a project which is based on French social science, and reveals different things about the sources of energy in a society from what is revealed by the great American novels of the nineteenth century – which do in fact all have a visionary quality, a religious and allegorical aspect, from Moby Dick to The Golden Bowl. Flaubert excludes this dimension rigorously from Madame Bovary.An exemplary scene is the one in which Madame Bovary meets the local priest in the church. She wishes to tell him that she suffers. He chats to her amiably and fussily about the misdemeanours of children and the bloating sickness of cows. It is a scene in a church completely devoid of any spiritual or religious feeling. When we read Flaubert’s account of his construction of this scene, we can see how carefully he achieved this effect.’…my little lady, in an access of religiosity goes to church; at the door she finds the curé, who, in a dialogue (on no definite subject) shows himself to be so stupid, trivial inept, sordid, that she goes away disgusted and undevout. And my curé is a very good man, indeed an excellent fellow, but he thinks only of the physical side (the sufferings of the poor, no bread, no firewood) and has no inkling of my lady’s moral lapses or her vague mystical aspirations.’ Flaubert’s priest, like his novel, concentrates on the ‘physical side.’ And Flaubert comments, ‘frankly there are moments when I almost feel like vomiting physically, the whole thing is so low.’Is Flaubert’s deliberate self-limitation to the physical an aspect of an attempt to be ’scientific’? Dostoevsky, who like Flaubert took his subject-matter from the faits divers of newspapers, almost anonymous tales of comedy and disaster, typical tales, was aware of the glittering fascination of the new discoveries of statistics – on suicide for instance. Durkheim’s theory of anomie derived from the scientific study of the curious regularity of the number of suicides in Paris, irrespective of the individual despairs that led to them. Dostoevsky believed that without God, in a universe that analysed bodies scientifically – since bodies were all that humans were, in the eyes of science – people would commit suicide because it was a matter of indifference to them whether they lived or died. Emma Bovary’s suicide certainly takes place in a meaningless world, and her emotions are not so much tragic as automatic and confused. Her corpse is watched over by a pharmacist who thinks in scientific clichés, and a clergyman whose anointing of her body is told in terms of the sins that body has committed – ‘les yeux, qui avait tant convoité toutes les sumptuosités terrestres… puis sur la bouche qui s’était ouvert pour le mensonge, qui avait gémi d’orgueil et crié dans la luxure. . .’ Emma dies and becomes pure body, but her death is not a scientific event. It is delicately absurd, and terrible in its meaninglessness.Contemporary writers were made uneasy by Flaubert. Henry James expressed a recurrent unease which he said was experienced by the ‘alien reader’ and persisted. ‘Our complaint is that Emma Bovary, in spite of the nature of her consciousness and in spite of her reflecting so much that of her creator, is really too small an affair.’ DH Lawrence, a naturally visionary and prophetic realist himself, was more vehement. Flaubert, he said, ’stood away from life as from a leprosy.’ Even Proust, writing his precise and elegant defence of Flaubert, begins with a caveat. ‘Ce n’est pas que j’aime entre tous les livres de Flaubert, ni même le style de Flaubert.’ All these express an unease which persists in readers faced with this very great novel. But between seeing Emma Bovary as ‘really too small an affair’, and Flaubert’s vision of life as a leprosy, and understanding that Madame Bovary, with all its realistic nineteenth-century apparatus, is the beginning of a new vision, a modern vision, is only a step. The resolution with which Flaubert polished his perfect surface, and kept it almost purely surface, not transparent, not revealing any deeper meaning than its existence, is behind the nausea of Sartre’s Roquentin, and the reduced worlds of Beckett’s bare survivors. Its beauty is enchanting and terrible. It shows us implacably the limitations of our habitation in our bodies, in space and time. Emma Bovary is indeed ‘really too small’ but there is a sense in which she is a type of everywoman. Flaubert’s relentless and fastidious observation and creation of his small world is itself a form of contemplation. He shows us laughter, irony and fear. And in the end gentleness, for sad, stupid, honest Charles, and silly, greedy, unsatisfied Emma. And grief for an unconsidered accidental daughter, who comes to a sad – and probable – end.· (c) AS Byatt. This is the introduction to a Norwegian edition of Madame Bovary. AS Byatt’s next novel, The Whistling Woman, will be published in September by Chatto at ?16.99