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Emma Bovary, Nathan Marx and the Writer's Art

by
VIVIAN DEBORAH WILSON*

*The novelist asks himself, "What do people think?"; the PR man asks, "What will people think?"*¹

For five years, Gustav Flaubert, law school drop-out, chronicler of exotica,² lived a driven, obsessive existence in the village of Croisset, suffering the delights and the tortures of the writer's calling. "What a miracle it would be if in one day I were to write two pages," he wrote.³ And yet, it was for him, "a delicious thing to write . . . to be no longer yourself but to move in an entire universe of your own creating."⁴ To his lover, Louise Colet, he confided, "That is why I love art. It is because there, at least, in this world of fictions everything is freedom."⁵

In 1856, the *Revue de Paris* published, in serial form, his novel, *Madame Bovary*, the story of a "[s]elf-centered, self-dramatizing, . . . improvident [woman], . . . desperate with the raging of unsatisfied desire"⁶ who ended her life in debt, abandoned by her lover, disillusioned, racked with the convulsions of arsenic poisoning.

"Who was she?" they asked him (the young women of Normandy who saw themselves as Emma, the men who denied any connection with Charles,⁷ any similarity to the pharmacist, Homais).⁸ Who was his model for this woman of the provinces, encumbered by a clod of a husband, a provincial heroine without vocation or occupation?

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1. P. ROTH, *READING MYSELF AND OTHERS* 156 (1975).

2. F. STEGMULLER, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, in *FLAUBERT AND MADAME BOVARY* (1968).

3. *Id.* at 301.

4. *Id.* at 281.

5. M. VARGAS LLOSA, *PERPETUAL ORGY: FLAUBERT AND MADAME BOVARY* 238 (H. Lane trans. ed. 1986).

6. G. FLAUBERT, *MADAME BOVARY* 9 (1857) (A. Russell trans. ed. 1950).

7. Charles Bovary, Emma's husband.

8. "[H]e is Technical Man, Apostle of Progress . . . imitation Voltaire." G. FLAUBERT, *supra* note 6, at 9.

"Mme. Bovary is pure invention," Flaubert answered. "All the characters are completely imaginary."⁹ But again and again he reiterated, "Mme. Bovary, c'est moi."¹⁰

This seemingly enigmatic response speaks to the truth of what writers do. In their feats of imaginative invention, writers become the characters they create. Once he embarked on the adventure that was to produce one of the memorable heroines of literature, as stunning and as compelling as Anna Karenina,¹¹ as Isabel Archer,¹² as Miranda,¹³ Sylvia,¹⁴ and Kristin Lavransdatter,¹⁵ Flaubert, the prototypical writer, entered unknown territory, shattered the fixed boundaries of his habitual consciousness, and thus engaged in an act of personal transformation. "Today, man and woman, lover and beloved, I rode in a forest on an autumn afternoon under the yellow leaves, and I was also the horse, the leaves, the wind, the woods . . . even the red sun."¹⁶

His was an experience that every writer recognizes, some describe,¹⁷ and few transcend. He had thrust himself into the life of Emma Bovary, probed the depths of a passionate, daring woman's spirit, imperiled as she was by conventional morality, assaulted by the imperatives of an invasive respectability which practices its silent, implacable violence upon us all. In giving himself to one human being's longing for color, for romance, for release from the horrors of the provincial conventions that fettered "her body, her dreams, her appetite,"¹⁸ Flaubert felt the sufferings, the joys and the sorrows implicit in the human condition. He was not only Madame Bovary; he was everywoman.¹⁹ In the fervor of epiphany he understood, "Everything one invents is true. . . . Poetry is as precise as geometry. . . . My poor Bovary, without a doubt, is suffering and weeping at this very instant in twenty villages in France."²⁰

It was, he understood, risky business that engaged him. "Style, art in itself, always appears insurrectionist to government, immoral to bour-

9. F. STEEGMULLER, *supra* note 2, at 338.

10. G. FLAUBERT, *supra* note 6, at 8.

11. L. TOLSTOI, ANNA KARENINA (1878).

12. H. JAMES, PORTRAIT OF A LADY (1881).

13. K. A. PORTER, FLOWERING JUDAS (1930).

14. E. GASKELL, SYLVIA'S LOVERS (1863).

15. S. UNDSSET, KRISTIN LAVRANSDATTER (1958).

16. F. STEEGMULLER, *supra* note 2, at 281.

17. B. GHISELIN, THE CREATIVE PROCESS, A SYMPOSIUM (1952).

18. VARGAS LLOSA, *supra* note 5, at 12.

19. There are men who, despite the stifling influence of the patriarchal heritage that sustains them, have written with a woman's consciousness. I think of Vladimir Nabokov, Henrik Ibsen, Leo Tolstoi.

20. F. STEEGMULLER, *supra* note 2, at 282.

geois. . . .”²¹ When the first installment of *Madame Bovary* appeared, the “subscribers rose in wrath, crying that it was scandalous, immoral . . . ,” wrote Max Levy, Flaubert’s publisher, “accusing us of slandering France, disgracing it in the eyes of the world. ‘What! Such creatures exist in our lovely France, in the provinces where life is so pure?’ ”²²

The editors expurgated sections of the novel but, nevertheless, in late January, 1857, Flaubert and the *Revue de Paris* were prosecuted for “outrage of public morals and religion.”²³ The court found insufficient evidence; the *Revue* and Flaubert were acquitted. And, in April, *Madame Bovary* was published in two volumes.

The question that presents itself is not who was Flaubert’s model, but what was his intention? How are we, the readers, to understand the novel, to receive Emma? Does she represent the pitiable victim of a morality play? Is Flaubert preaching? Is he offering warning of the penalties exacted for outrageous rebellion? Was it his objective to encourage us in self-satisfaction with our established practices, our fixed habits of perception, our safe, orderly and numbing pieties? Did Flaubert, perhaps, mean to provide a sense of distance, of superiority to “my poor Bovary?”

The writer who puts himself at risk requires only that we engage, follow the path of a story whose ultimate outcome we cannot predict. The adventure proposed is discovery; there is the danger that we may never be the same. Like the thirsty child in the fairy tale who cannot forbear from drinking the water that splashes from the leaping spring,²⁴ we offer ourselves to a repletion of challenges that constitutes the radical uncertainty that is life. The customary world—with its comfortable vistas, fixed locations, convenient hypocrisies, its unquestioned biases and unexamined assumptions—is in jeopardy. Reading is an experience that shatters as it illuminates, that, perhaps, illuminates only as it succeeds in shattering. James Boyd White puts it this way, “Literary texts are invitational: they offer an experience that will . . . change one’s way of seeing and being, of talking and acting.”²⁵ An experience that has, in other words, the capacity to transform. “What literature has most to teach us

21. VARGAS LLOSA, *supra* note 5, at 240 (quoting G. Flaubert in the preface to a poem by Louis Bouilhet).

22. F. STEEGMULLER, *supra* note 2, at 323.

23. *Id.* at 25.

24. J. GRIMM & W. GRIMM, *Brother and Sister*, in *THE COMPLETE FAIRY TALES OF THE BROTHERS GRIMM* (J. Zipes trans. ed. 1987).

25. White, *What Can a Lawyer Learn From Literature?* (Book Review), 102 *HARV. L. REV.* 2014, 2018 (1989).

is how to put our habitual methods of thought in question, how to think about, criticize and reform them."²⁶

Of course. Reading offers the strenuous, taxing pleasure of dislocation.

My assumption, in daring such rhetorical assertions, is that the business that is literature's is all to the good. But literature has, of course, its dark side. There are bad books as well as good books, bad writers as well as good writers. And there are bad readers as well as good readers. There are practitioners of the craft who preach intolerance, bigotry, hatred and violence. There are readers who find in these works consoling messages of intolerance, bigotry, hatred and violence; readers who contrive to find, in writings that offer no such experience, confirmation for their own fully developed intolerance, bigotry, hatred and violence. And there are also readers, discerning enough to perceive the writer's intention, who nevertheless fear the comfort that may be offered to the malicious, the vengeful and the simply ignorant.

"What will people think?" is an unceasing concern. It is not only the bourgeois readers of the *Revue de Paris* who feared the damage Flaubert had inflicted on their nation. Philip Roth, the novelist, has been castigated as a self-hating Jew whose fiction has "done as much harm as all organized anti-Semitic organizations have done to make people believe that all Jews are cheats, liars, connivers."²⁷ Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*²⁸ has been attacked for portraying "blacks in an extremely negative light [that] degrades the black man . . . degrades black children . . . degrades the black family."²⁹ Salman Rushdie has been threatened with death for committing the crime of blasphemy in his novel, *Satanic Verses*.³⁰

One writer, recommending legal sanctions for what she identifies as racist messages, focuses on the negative effects upon the group portrayed. "[T]he effect on one's self esteem and sense of personal security is devastating."³¹ Extending her criticism to literature, she selects Mark Twain's "realism" in his use of racist dialogue for condemnation. Her analysis acknowledges, if only implicitly, the connection between the harm children suffer and the fear of what people will think. "The problem for some African American parents is that their young children may suffer harm from further exposure to racist language. . . . There is a danger of

26. *Id.* at 2028.

27. P. ROTH, *supra* note 1, at 160.

28. A. WALKER, *THE COLOR PURPLE* (1982).

29. L.A. Times, Dec. 20, 1985, § 6, at 1, col. 4-5.

30. S. RUSHDIE, *SATANIC VERSES* (1988).

31. Matsuda, *Public Response to Racist Speech: Considering the Victim's Story*, 87 MICH. L. REV. 2320, 2337-38 (1989).

some of the students missing entirely . . . the ironic message and simply enjoying the racist dialogue on its face."³² She suggests, "We should look to the victim group to tell us whether the harm is real harm to real people."³³ Censorship, then, is justified because "[w]e need safe harbors before we begin rocking boats."³⁴

I do not doubt that the harm is real; I mean neither to deny nor to diminish the depth and the range of the damage.³⁵ But I do not recall that anyone has ever claimed a harbor so safe it could not be besieged. I feel compelled to inquire what iniquity is accomplished, what silent, unacknowledged violence when *Huckleberry Finn*³⁶ is suppressed? For it is not the techniques of "realism" (whatever that is) that are at stake when readers are deprived of a work that uncompromisingly reveals the reticular connection of the language of slavery to the institution, thus exposing the ways in which racist speech is inextricable from the ideology and practices of racism.

The solution, I think, is not in fewer books but in a multiplicity of books, not in banning good books but in educating bad readers.³⁷ Writers must write, particularly when the rest of us will not dare. But no writer needs, or can, tell the whole story. There is not only Alice Walker. There are James Ellison, Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Audre Lorde, James Baldwin. There are, as well as Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, Cynthia Ozick, I.J. Singer, Edith Broner and Grace Paley.

As for Mark Twain: his *Huckleberry Finn* has been banned as racially offensive (among other accusations) since 1885 and in every decade of this century.³⁸ Twain is, of course, not the problem. He is the solution.

There is one story, in particular, which seems to me to dramatize, with telling intensity, the ambiguities and the paradox that a writer con-

32. *Id.* at 2369. I think it is *Huckleberry Finn* to which Professor Matsuda refers.

33. *Id.* at 2368.

34. *Id.* at 2369. "Expressions of hatred, revulsion and anger against historically-dominant-group members by subordinated-group members" would not be protected because they are interpreted as "a victim's struggle for self-identity in response to racism." *Id.* at 2361-62. Malcolm X's "white devil" statements are given as an example. *Id.*

35. *Id.* I want to say here that my disagreement with Professor Matsuda does not foreclose my admiration for her thorough exploration of a subject that has suffered too long from an imposed invisibility.

36. M. TWAIN, *HUCKLEBERRY FINN* (1884).

37. Linguistics Professor Robin Lakoff, University of California, Berkeley, suggests a course examining the distinctions between racist writings and writings that expose racism.

38. H. Beaver, cited in Phelps, *The Story of the Law in "Huckleberry Finn,"* 39 *MERCER L. REV.* 889, 889-90 nn.5 & 6 (1988). "If Mr. Twain cannot think of something better to tell our pure-minded lads and lasses," said Louisa May Alcott, "he had best stop writing for them."

fronts when he (the writer is Philip Roth) plumbs the depth of his material which is, of course, his own life and the lives of those who personify the culture of his origin.

*Defender of the Faith*³⁹ asks, with its ironic title: Who is the defender of the faith? The storyteller is Sergeant Nathan Marx, who has been rotated back to Camp Crowder, Missouri, in 1945, after two years of combat in Europe. The war has damaged him and he realizes he's developed "an infantryman's heart. I had changed enough . . . not to mind the trembling of the old people, the crying of the very young, the uncertain fears in the eyes of the once arrogant."⁴⁰

Into the scene comes Private Sheldon Grossbart, artful, scheming manipulator who, having identified Marx as Jewish ("Like Karl and Harpo, I was one of them,"⁴¹ says Marx), sees the sergeant as a likely target for exploitation, a tool for the satisfaction of his needs. And Grossbart needs. He needs to be excused from the weekly barracks-cleaning duty. He needs a weekend pass prohibited the other trainees. He needs a special diet because "his religion forbids him to eat certain foods."⁴² He needs. He needs. He needs. Because he is Jewish. "I am different." (He tells Marx.) "Better, maybe not. But different."⁴³

Marx is the story's bearer of consciousness, the character Roth has chosen to convey the experience he offers us as readers. Marx' dislike of Grossbart, as he feels himself led into an undesired intimacy that "excludes everything about the two of us except our hearts,"⁴⁴ is immediate and intense. He sees through Grossbart's cynical use of his religion but, as Grossbart makes his moves, escalating his entreaties, practicing his unrelenting assault on what he views as Marx' conscience,⁴⁵ Marx suffers a crisis of consciousness. For all Grossbart's mendacity, he has awakened an unexpected sense of kinship, "touched deep memory. . . . I began to grow exceedingly tender about myself . . . I felt within as though a hand had opened and was reaching inside me. . . . past the dying I'd refused to weep over . . . [the] books we'd burned to warm us and which I couldn't bother to mourn."⁴⁶

39. P. ROTH, *GOODBYE COLUMBUS AND OTHER STORIES* (1959).

40. *Id.* at 161.

41. *Id.* at 165.

42. *Id.* at 178.

43. *Id.* at 188. Roth sees Grossbart "as a Jew who acts like the stereotype, offering back to his enemies their vision of him, answering the punishment with the crime." *Id.* at 159. I see this incisive analysis as a potential the story does not reach.

44. *Id.* at 163.

45. "Ashamed, that's what you are." Grossbart tells Marx. "So you take it out on the rest of us. . . . You even talk like a goy." *Id.* at 189.

46. *Id.* at 170.

In one telling scene, Marx becomes Grossbart's apologist when Captain Barrett, portrayed as the stereotypically callous Army officer, practiced in the deployment of ridicule, questions why Grossbart's mother called some "god-damned Congressman about the food."⁴⁷ (Actually it's Grossbart's father who has written a letter.) Marx tells the captain, "Jewish parents, sir, they're apt to be more protective than you'd expect. I mean Jews have a very close family life. . . . Jewish parents worry."⁴⁸

Later Marx accuses Grossbart. "I've seen you eat like a hound at chow. Why did you say you threw up all the time?"⁴⁹ Grossbart deflects the accusation. "I was really talking about Mickey. . . . He'll waste away to nothing if I don't help. . . . [It's] Mickey and Fishbein, too, I'm watching out for."⁵⁰

As Marx continues to resist Grossbart's duplicity, Grossbart emerges as Marx' antagonist, the agent of Marx' temptation, the cause of his struggle and the source of his emotional development. Awakened to his own humanity, increasingly alive to the deeper qualities of his nature, Marx taps unexpected resources within himself. His native perceptions sharpen. His vision broadens. He feels vulnerable not only to his own natural warmth and sympathy but also to his capacity for disdain, fury and self-contempt. Inevitably, he becomes sensitive to the person who is Grossbart, capable of realizing that he, too, is human. "When he spoke I saw that his teeth were white and straight, and the sight of them suddenly made me understand that Grossbart actually did have parents; that once upon a time someone had taken little Sheldon to the dentist. . . . It was hard to believe in Grossbart as a child . . . as related by blood to anyone. . . . This realization led me to another."⁵¹ The realization that the letter, ostensibly written by Grossbart's father to the Congressman was, in fact, composed by Grossbart. He confronts Grossbart. "[W]hen our eyes met, his seemed to jump back, shiver in their sockets."⁵²

Irredeemably self-justifying, impervious to self-criticism, self-doubt, and the possibility of self-discovery, Grossbart is righteous. "It's what my father would have written if he had known how. . . . He signed it. He even mailed it. I sent it home. For the New York postmark."⁵³

Soon after this exchange, Grossbart retreats. And Marx, in an unerring perception that has its double edge, "becomes a non-combat-

47. *Id.* at 175.

48. *Id.* at 175-76.

49. *Id.* at 182.

50. *Id.*

51. *Id.* at 181.

52. *Id.* at 182.

53. *Id.*

ant.”⁵⁴ He finds himself able to read. He writes letters to people he’d known before the war. He sends for the Columbia Law School catalogue. He imagines he has seen the last of Grossbart and speculates that Grossbart had “seen that wisdom lay in turning back before he plunged us over into the ugliness of privilege undeserved.”⁵⁵

Grossbart, his avidity for the accumulation of favors unabated, has been lying in wait. This time he pleads for a weekend pass to spend Passover at his aunt’s Seder. Marx’ realization that Passover had been celebrated weeks before is sudden and shocking.

Grossbart is undaunted. “Who says no? I was in the field eating hash! And now all I ask is a simple favor—a Jewish boy I thought would understand. My aunt’s willing to go out of her way—to make Seder a month later. . . .”⁵⁶ Close to tears, remorseless, he accuses Marx, “Stop closing your heart to your own. . . .”⁵⁷ He threatens to go AWOL and Marx, depleted by the struggle to survive the grip of the conflict Grossbart has provoked, not only produces the pass but asks for a piece of gefilte fish from the Seder.

Imagining the contest has ended, Marx feels momentary relief. (“And it had cost me nothing. Barrett would never find out and, if he did, I could manage some excuse.”⁵⁸) But Grossbart is voracious. He shames Marx into issuing two more passes—for his friends, Mickey and Fishbein.

Depleted by his own resistance, vulnerable in defeat, Marx succumbs to self-derision. “What was I that I had to muster generous feelings? Who was I to have been feeling so grudging, so tight-hearted . . . to be such a penny-pincher with kindness?”⁵⁹ He has relinquished himself to sentimentality and, learning that the men are to be sent to the Pacific, he feels shock “as though I were father to [Mickey,] . . . Fishbein and Grossbart.”⁶⁰

This is the nadir of the story and Grossbart exploits it with his final claim: Where will the Army send the men? What can Marx do? It’s Mickey, not himself, for whom he claims concern. He had heard Mickey crying during the night “crying so, it could have broken your heart. Real sobs.”⁶¹

54. *Id.* at 185.

55. *Id.*

56. *Id.* at 188.

57. *Id.* at 189.

58. *Id.* at 190.

59. *Id.* at 193.

60. *Id.* at 194.

61. *Id.*

Realizing that Mickey's crying, true as it may have been, has become a tactical lie when Grossbart speaks it, and recognizing as well that he, himself, is gifted in strategy, Marx tells Grossbart the truth. Grossbart leaves, looking like a "dazed prizefighter"⁶² and Marx notices a little paper bag in his hand. He discovers he has been duped again. The image, at once ridiculous and shattering, that turns the story toward its unexpected finale, is a damp, greasy egg roll, Grossbart's gift to Marx from the Seder that never was.

Marx' fury explodes. He calls Grossbart a liar, a schemer and a crook. "You've got no respect for anything! . . . Not for me, for the truth—not even for poor [Mickey!]. . . . You use us all I'll make your life miserable."⁶³

He does. In the conclusion of the story, Marx learns that among all the trainees there is one who will not go to the Pacific—Grossbart. Grossbart has schemed for orders to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. This time it is Marx who schemes. He has Grossbart's orders changed.

Grossbart, of course, knows whom to blame. His self-righteousness is pathological. "Would it kill you for me to be near my father, God knows how many months he has left to him. . . . There's no limit to your anti-semitism. . . . The damage you've done. . . ."⁶⁴

In the final passage of the story, Philip Roth offers his readers the shock of recognition that the best of fiction invites—the opportunity to experience the reaches of our own venality and our strength. In a moment of heightened self-realization Marx could not have attained without his sustained opposition to the intransigent self-deception Grossbart practices, Marx acknowledges the moral danger he has invoked. He rejects temptation—pleads no justification for his guile, begs no forgiveness. As he watches the men preparing to leave, accepting their fate, he imagines Grossbart "swallowing hard, accepting his. . . . And then, resisting with all my will an impulse to turn and seek pardon for my vindictiveness, I accepted my own."⁶⁵

Perched on the brink of the ignominy of self-betrayal, Marx claims himself as a participant in the human condition and, thus, retrieves his honor.

When *Defender of the Faith* appeared in the *New Yorker* in April 1959, one reader wrote to the editors, "What is being done to silence this man?"⁶⁶

62. *Id.* at 195.

63. *Id.* at 196.

64. *Id.* at 199.

65. *Id.* at 200.

66. *Id.* at 160.

"I had informed on the Jews,"⁶⁷ Roth explains. "I had told the Gentiles what apparently it would otherwise have been possible to keep from them: that the perils of human nature afflict the members of our minority."⁶⁸ Of the letters he received, only one mentioned Marx "and only to point out I was no less blameworthy for portraying [him] . . . as a kind of Jewish Uncle Tom."⁶⁹

"That many blind people are still blind does not mean that [the story] gives off no light,"⁷⁰ Philip Roth has written of Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*.⁷¹ It is a comment strikingly appropriate for *Defender of the Faith*.

Should this man be silenced?

67. *Id.* at 161.

68. *Id.*

69. *Id.*

70. *Id.* at 167.

71. R. ELLISON, *THE INVISIBLE MAN* (1952).