



Flaubert's Fictional Conversations

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Flaubert's overriding concern throughout his career was social critique: to satirize the habits, institutions, and beliefs that undergird and bond human communities throughout history. In 1651, Thomas Hobbes had warned: 'words are wise men's counters, they do but reckon by them; but they are the money of fools' (22). After Hobbes, the Enlightenment—of which Flaubert was a spiritual descendent—was 'preoccupied with the implication that words as arbitrary signs, dependent for their meaning both upon individual perception and upon consensus, can be employed for the purposes of moral obscurity and personal gain as much as for mutual benefit' (Schellenberg 13). As a realist, however, to implicit condemnations of the unscrupulous manipulators of discourse Flaubert adds scathing portrayals of both the villains' and the victims' conversational mediocrity and ineptitude. Like most skilful authors, he shows more than he tells. His characters unwittingly expose their ignorance, weaknesses, vices, and vanities, hoisting themselves upon their own petards. Critics have richly analysed the themes of Flaubert's attacks of society, but they have seldom scrutinized the form—as distinguished from the content—of the most extensively used vehicle for these attacks: conversations among Flaubert's fictional characters (but see Haig, and Gothot-Mersch 1981 and 1969).

For clarity and precision, let us propose a working definition of 'conversation' as limited to one particular type of dialogue. In this sense, conversation would exclude conventional, predictable social routines that state the obvious and function mainly for social maintenance rather than task, by politely acknowledging the existence of one's interlocutor. Neither would it include artificial disquisitions intended mainly to provide background for the audience or readership. Nor would 'conversation' include one-sided exchanges—repartee—in which one character serves mainly as a foil for the

other, providing 'straight lines' that enable devastating satiric retorts aimed at targets of social critique.¹ Conversation, rather, would be a verbal encounter, cooperative or combative, during which characters try to negotiate their respective social identities, working out what and how they should be for each other.²

Speech act theory clarifies the predominant nature of such dialogues (see Austin, and Searle). In a hierarchy of increasing impact, speech acts include:

- 1) Assertorics, straightforward statements of fact.
- 2) Expressives, statements revealing personal, emotional reactions to a state of affairs.
- 3) Commissives, resolving or promising to do something.
- 4) Directives, giving orders.
- 5) Performatives, accomplishing an action by virtue of the very act of enunciation, spoken by a person authorized to do so (a presiding officer opening or closing a meeting; a justice of the peace or a priest marrying two people; a bishop ordaining a priest; a high government official declaring war, and so forth).³

Much ordinary speech occurs at the extremes of the speech act scale. Greeting rituals and other small talk routines consist of assertorics. Command rituals employ performatives and directives to accomplish tasks. But conversation proper occupies the middle ground dominated by expressives and commissives, where something significant is at stake, and where no party to the discussion can rightfully claim absolute authority over other participants. More broadly, within reported speech in fiction, conversations and monologues resemble musical themes: the rest of the characters' spoken discourse resembles musical episodes that occur during periods of lessened interactive tension.⁴

Few of Flaubert's literary conversations attain the ideal of being interactively authentic or transparent. Even when a character expresses genuine, deep affection for another, this emotion often remains nearly inarticulate, or else other concerns distract the addressee, or both. Flaubert's dialogues succeed better at articulating conflict and rivalry, clashing ambitions, or temptation and resistance than in depicting growing heterosexual intimacy. His scepticism concerning the worth and integrity of most human beings, and their ability truly to communicate, leads him to depict many verbal interactions as flawed by hypocrisy, deviousness, deception, and mutual incomprehension. Coercive anti-conversations and insincere pseudo-conversations abound in his work. Most of the fictional relationships he depicts are like Potemkin villages, false fronts erected to create the illusion of substance. But Flaubert deploys a widely diverse

repertory of conversations. Each work uses dialogue in discrete ways whose variety reveals the 'Hermit of Croisset's keen sensitivity to modes of human verbal interaction. These do not all involve dupes persecuted by the unscrupulous, or dialogues of the deaf. Harmonious conversational mutuality—whether deluded or no in its premises—does appear, and with increasing frequency, as Flaubert's career progresses.

Processions of allegorical speakers in 'Smarh' and the first two versions of *La Tentation de saint Antoine* (1849; 1856) illustrate one-sided communication without conversation. In Europe, this device seems to date from the *Ordo prophetarum* during Advent. Communication without conversation also appears when a superior gives orders. The imperative mode shapes the entire novel *Salammbô*, which has to do with empire and political domination, so thoroughly that when the Greek slave Spendius wants to serve the Libyan warrior Mâtho, he says 'Ordonne!' commanding his desired master to tell him what to do.

Flaubert's early plays and the symposium 'Les Funérailles du docteur Mathurin' (1839) contain much sparkling repartee in dialogues where one character usually serves as a foil to the other.⁵ 'Les Funérailles', inspired by Plato's account of Socrates' death, reports the last day of the title character, a man of 70, who has resolved to end his life before he can no longer enjoy it. His disciples surround him during a final feast, questioning him in order to learn his wisdom.

--Et la Providence, maître ?

--Oui, je crois que le soleil fait mûrir le raisin, et qu'un gigot de chevreuil mariné est une bonne chose ... ; tout n'est pas fini, et il y a deux sciences éternelles : la philosophie et la gastronomie [...]

--Nierez-vous donc l'immortalité de l'âme ?

--Un verre de vin !

--La récompense et le châtement ?

--Quelle saveur ! dit Mathurin après avoir bu et contractant ses lèvres sur ses dents.

--Le plan de l'univers, qu'en pensez-vous ?

--Et toi, que penses-tu de l'étoile de Sirius ?⁶ penses-tu mieux connaître les hommes que les habitants de la lune ? l'histoire même est un mensonge réel.⁷

--Qu'est-ce que cela veut dire ?

--Cela veut dire que les faits mentent, qu'ils sont et qu'ils ne sont plus, que les hommes vivent et meurent, que l'être et le néant sont deux faussetés qui n'en font qu'une, qui est le *toujours* !⁸

--Je ne comprends pas, maître.

--Et moi, encore moins, répondit Mathurin. (OCI : 224)

In writing theatre, however, Flaubert adds a strong dimension of self-concealment and insincerity, betrayed by his characters' frequent use of asides to the audience. This is a melodramatic device, of course, commonplace in French theatre from the Revolution to mid-century; but the adolescent Flaubert adds to it a precocious awareness of the interplay of opposing political forces, which often rely more on feints and concealment than on the naked exercise of force. As historical dramas, *Salammbô* (1862), *L'Éducation sentimentale* of 1869, and *Le Candidat* (1874) will not exceed the subtlety of Flaubert's *Loys XI* (1838) in their analyses of political manoeuvring in conversation. Consider Act I, scene 3 (*OC I*: 131-32). The play contrasts the impulsive, flamboyant emotive style of Charles, the Duke of Burgundy, with the cautious understatement and insinuations of the King, who has just broken two treaties by secretly fomenting a revolt of the Liégeois against the Duke. In this scene, the unscrupulous king and Commynes, the historian currently serving Charles le Téméraire of Burgundy, who effectively holds the king prisoner, carefully sound each other out after Louis XI has dismissed an importunate servant of the duke on a pretext, so as to be alone with Commynes:

COMMINES : Il fait bien de sortir.

LOUIS XI : Oui, je l'ai envoyé à propos.

COMMINES : Eh bien ?

LOUIS XI : Eh bien ?

[Each waits for the other to make the first move.]

COMMINES : Que dirons-nous ?

LOUIS XI : Ce qu'il vous plaira, mon compère.

COMMINES : Que les temps sont mauvais, n'est-ce pas, et que ce siècle-ci est bien celui des gens habiles. [Commynes identifies his main affinity with the king.]

LOUIS XI : Oui, oui, ceux-là sont contents chez moi ; mais ici, qu'y faites-vous ?

[Louis suggests that Commynes is underemployed.]

COMMINES [concurring]: Cela n'est pas facile. Moi aussi, je ne fais rien de bien ; ici je perds mon temps, je voudrais un emploi où il y eût à gagner et à apprendre ; je suis bien chancelier, mais jamais je ne mets mon esprit à profit, et j'en ai, dit-on, et de la science pas mal, non celle des livres, mais celle de l'expérience, ce qui est plus rare et plus utile !

LOUIS XI, *à part* : Vante-toi plus fort, rusé matois ! (*À Commynes.*) [...] *ouvertement*. Vous vous appelez Commynes ? (*Commynes s'incline.*) C'est un nom qui me plaît, tape là dedans, camarade. [...] Eh bien, le duc de Bourgogne ...

COMMINES, *à part* : Ah ! ah ! il faut tout lui dire. (*À Louis.*) Eh bien, mon roi, voilà trois jours qu'il ne dort pas, la colère et l'orgueil l'étouffent, il a juré de vous tuer.

LOUIS XI : Ah ! qu'il fasse ce qu'il voudra. Commynes, mon ami, vous êtes un brave homme, venez en France, vous verrez quel vin on y boit et quel roi on y sert. [...]

An équivoque: Louis means that the Duke can fulminate all he wants, without making the King afraid. Commynes has just boasted that he would be a worthy servant; Louis shows by his calm that he in turn would be a worthy master. Without

making any specific commitments, he invites Commines to make a commitment to serve him.]

COMMINES: Et maintenant, il est à son conseil à délibérer sur vous. [Commines implies that he knows the Duke's secrets, and can influence his decisions, but that there is no time to lose.]

LOUIS XI: Et tu es puissant, dis-tu? [By switching to the familiar form of the second person, the King establishes an intimate relationship with Commines, tacitly accepting him as his servant—but the rhetorical question leaves all the onus of establishing Commines's political credentials on the Chancellor.]

COMMINES, *avec fierté*: Un homme comme moi ... [Although boastful, Commines carefully keeps his claims open-ended, on the level of implication]

LOUIS XI [tersely appreciating Commines's reticence]: On le voit. Eh bien, vas-y donc, travaille ; il y a des choses qui se comprennent et qui ne se disent pas. [Acknowledging Commines's claims to importance, Louis XI accepts him as a servant, without promising anything specific.]

In the following scene, between the King and his jester, Flaubert adds an extra layer of irony. Inwardly distracted and terrified, despite his outward tranquility, the King does not understand the jester's repeated coded urgings that they should flee. As in the title character of Alfred de Musset's recent play *Fantasio* (first in *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1834), apparent madness masks a deeper insight than that of most other characters.

In his realistic and romantic prose fiction, Flaubert introduced dialogue slowly. The youthful masterpieces *Mémoires d'un fou* and *Novembre* consist mainly in first-person narration. *L'Éducation sentimentale* of 1845-46, however, shows considerable development in Flaubert's art of representing discourse, especially the art of suggesting the origins of drama in banality.⁹ In collaborative conversations, Henry and his Parisian landlady Émilie work in harmony toward the same goal, their affair, although she initiates the flirtation before Henry has thought of it, when she enters his room as if to check on something:

--C'est moi, dit-elle, je vous dérange ?

--Oh non, entrez.

--Ce n'est pas la peine ... merci ... je n'ai pas le temps.

Et elle s'appuya du coude sur le coin de la cheminée, comme pour se soutenir [Her body language contradicts her claim that she is too busy even to enter the room.]

Henry s'était levé.

--Ne vous dérangez donc pas, continuez ce que vous faisiez, je vous en prie, restez à votre place.

Il obéit, et ne sachant quoi trouver à lui dire, il resta la bouche fermée. Mme Émilie, debout, regardait ses cheveux et le haut de son front. [Her gaze reveals that he is her true preoccupation.]

--Vous travaillez donc toujours ? continua-t-elle, jamais vous ne sortez ; vous avez vraiment une conduite ... exemplaire pour un jeune homme.

[Antiphrasis : by praising Henry's exemplary, chaste behaviour, Émilie wants to suggest the possibility of the contrary.]

--Vous croyez? fit Henry d'un air qu'il aurait voulu rendre fin. [Émilie has attracted his attention by appealing to his vanity].

--On le dirait du moins, reprit-elle en clignant les yeux et en lui envoyant un étrange regard à travers ses longs cils rapprochés, geste charmant dans sa figure et qu'elle faisait toujours en penchant un peu la tête sur l'épaule et en relevant le coin des lèvres. --Vous ne vous amusez donc jamais ? vous vous fatiguerez [Play with me].

--Mais à quoi m'amuser ? à quoi m'amuser ? répéta Henry, qui s'apitoyait sur lui-même et pensait bien plus à la demande qu'à la réponse [Still naive, he has not caught on].

--Ainsi, il n'y a que les livres qui vous plaisent ?

--Pas plus ça qu'autre chose.

--Ah ! vous faites le blasé, dit-elle en riant, est-ce que vous êtes déjà dégoûté de la vie par hasard ? pourtant, vous êtes si jeune !... À la bonne heure, moi ! j'ai le droit de me plaindre, je suis plus vieille et j'ai plus souffert que vous, croyez-moi [She invites him to exchange confidences, to become more intimate].

--Non.

--Oh ! oui, fit-elle en soupirant et en levant les yeux au ciel, j'ai bien souffert dans la vie—et elle frissonna comme si elle eût ressenti la douleur de souvenirs amers—un homme est toujours moins malheureux qu'une femme, une femme... une pauvre femme !

[And with this barely veiled appeal for a rescuer, she convulsively grips a phallic key that she has been restlessly spinning around her index finger.] (OC I: 283)¹⁰

Inevitably, in Flaubert's world, the illusions of Émilie and Henry's triumphant adultery will be deflated after their flight to New York, when they tire of each other and eventually separate, with ill-disguised mutual relief (OC I: 320-48). Influenced, perhaps, by Balzac's *La Physionomie du mariage*, the author concludes 'l'amour est pour tous le même voyage, fait sur la même route' (OC I: 346). As in Emma and Léon's letters in Part III of *Madame Bovary*, mutual passion degenerates into an empty simulacrum: 'Ils se répétaient les mêmes tendresses, ils se lamentaient avec les mêmes exclamations, mais chacun de plus en plus était longtemps à trouver ses mots et il lui en venait moins sous la plume' (OC I: 347). The routinization of charisma. Apparently influenced by John Locke and the Enlightenment tradition of psychology, Flaubert suggests that excitation progressively diminishes in proportion to the lessening novelty of one's sensations. After many affairs, he would remark in *Madame Bovary*, so many emotions have scampered across Rodolphe's heart that it has become like a schoolyard used for recess, where nothing can grow any longer. The more sensitive—if not the more admirable—protagonists of the mature novels appreciate the novelty and surprise of clever conversation. Charles's company

bores Emma because 'la conversation de Charles était plate comme un trottoir de rue, et les idées de tout le monde y défilaient, dans leur costume ordinaire, sans exciter d'émotion, de rire ou de rêverie' (Part I, ch. 7; *OC I*: 588). But in *L'Éducation sentimentale*, Frédéric Moreau enjoys Mme Dambreuse's clever conversation (Part III, ch. 2 ; *OC II*: 139).

Madame Bovary contains little dialogue in pure direct discourse. Flaubert wrote his masterpiece, more than any other major novel, in an introverted style. Repeatedly, when introducing characters, Flaubert presents them with an impressionistic description followed by speech that he summarizes unless the character is important. Conversational skill, nevertheless, is a talisman. That Charles Bovary can function in conversation less well than almost any other character except Hippolyte or l'Aveugle reveals his inferiority most clearly. In the famous opening scene, as the new boy in school, he stammers inarticulately while the irritated schoolmaster directs harsh orders at him. At his supreme moment, asking for Emma's hand in marriage, he again stammers until old Rouault, Emma's father, formulates the request for him and then grants it.

The conversations of Flaubert's romantic leads often seem even less worth knowing than those of his grotesques. At dinner in the inn *Le Lion d'or*, when the Bovarys first reach Yonville, Emma and Léon are quickly drawn to each other. Ignoring the other diners, they drift into 'une de ces vagues conversations où le hasard des phrases vous ramène toujours au centre fixe d'une sympathie commune' (*OC I*: 602). Flaubert alternates snatches of their conversation with the dialogue between Homais and Charles: 'Quoique la scène se compose uniquement de dialogue, tout environnement n'a pas disparu : chacune des deux conversations a l'autre pour toile de fond, chacune vient à son tour au premier plan, puis cède la place, exactement comme dans une scène où le dialogue alterne avec le récit et la description', as later in the Comices (Gothot-Mersch 1969: 114).

Gothot-Mersch's tendentious editing of Emma and Léon, however, leads her mistakenly to claim that although they are very different beings, little in this conversation distinguishes them: 'Ils ne sont pas seulement ici deux âmes qui s'accordent, mais les produits identiques d'une même société nourrie de romantisme' (116). To a perceptive observer, however, Emma's strong, restless character contrasts strongly with Léon's irresolute, dreamy personality. Flaubert underscores this difference through the very defects of Léon's imitation. When Homais sympathizes with Emma for having just been bounced around in the local stagecoach, she contradicts him: 'le dérangement m'amuse toujours : j'aime à changer de place', Even as the object of the verb in the first clause, she imagines herself as free; in the second clause, she takes the initiative. When

Léon chimes in: 'C'est une chose si maussade, soupira le clerc, que de vivre cloué aux mêmes endroits!' he presents himself as helpless, imprisoned, unable to effect change in his life. Later in the same conversation, Léon exclaims mawkishly: 'J'aime surtout les poètes. Je trouve les vers plus tendres que la prose, et qu'ils font bien mieux pleurer', Emma, in contrast, has little use for tenderness or tears: 'Cependant ils [les vers] fatiguent à la longue, et maintenant, au contraire, j'adore les histoires qui se suivent tout d'une haleine, où l'on a peur. Je déteste les héros communs et les sentiments tempérés, comme il y en a dans la nature' (OC I: 601-602). And the stark contrasts continue: Léon claims to seek the expression of a vapid ideal in literature; Emma seeks *sensations fortes*. Who would not find these two *un couple mal assorti*?

One finds similar discrepancies in the mutually admiring initial conversation between Bouvard and Pécuchet. When conversing, Flaubert's characters agree more on social-maintenance than on intellectual grounds—which helps explain the conservative priest Bournisien's surprising remark to the militantly Voltairean pharmacist Homais after they have argued vociferously at Emma's wake: 'Nous finirons par nous entendre!' (OC I: 687; Porter 139-141). Moreover, as Gothot-Mersch (1969, 116-117) perceptively observes, Flaubert's desire to create tableaux that will provide the opportunity to present a portrait gallery of social types motivate some odd, improbable groupings of acquaintances (e.g., Cisy with Sénécal and Deslauriers).

Otherwise, Flaubert does not bother to detail the content of most conventional, polite exchanges. For example, in reporting the first extensive conversation between Charles and Emma, while she shows him around her house after he has finished examining her father's broken leg, Flaubert notes dismissively 'les phrases leur vinrent' (OC I: 582).

Flaubert, however, often insists that banal exchanges in direct discourse may reveal inarticulate depths of strong feeling. In Part II ch.3, Emma and Léon discuss a troupe of Spanish dancers about to perform at Rouen: 'Vous irez?' 'Si je le peux', 'N'avaient-ils rien autre chose à se dire?', Flaubert intervenes. 'Leurs yeux pourtant étaient pleins d'une causerie plus sérieuse' (OC I: 606).

When Flaubert, as he often does, alternates summaries of one character's words with direct quotation of the words of the other, he means to show the person directly cited as dominant. When Lheureux first tries to persuade Emma to purchase luxuries she does not need (OC I: 609), Flaubert initially summarizes his words and cites Emma's. Later in the exchange, Flaubert switches to representing Lheureux by direct discourse, and Emma by summaries. We can infer that although Emma has not yet purchased anything, Lheureux has 'gotten into her head', When she reflects afterward, 'Comme j'ai été sage!' she reveals

a characteristic cycle of behaviour that we shall recognize promptly on a second reading: having resisted a temptation once, she feels entitled to succumb to it the next time.

Rodolphe's will is so strong and his plans so clear that his thoughts, unlike those of other characters, often appear in direct discourse. 'Oh! je l'aurai!' (*OC* I: 618) marks his decision to seduce Emma, a resolve underlined by his gesture of striking and shattering a clump of earth on the road. For the rest of the novel, the characters are mainly doomed to re-enactments. To compose a suitably sentimental letter to break with Emma, Rodolphe skims through correspondence from former mistresses. During Emma and Léon's long courtship conversation in Rouen, part III, chapter I, she adopts a melancholy, world-weary pose learned from Rodolphe's earlier seduction speeches, while Léon naively imitates her. The beggar's ditty heard at Emma's death reduces her existence to the stereotype of the sexually vulnerable, subordinate woman.

L'Éducation sentimentale of 1869 culminates Flaubert's art of the literary conversation. Two long conversations between Frédéric Moreau and his best friend Deslauriers frame the novel (*OC* II: Part I, ch. 2, 12-14; Part III, ch. 7, 161-162), affirming and then restoring the initial homosocial equilibrium disturbed by heterosexual adventures and rivalries. Frédéric's self-absorption throughout preserves and reinforces his naiveté. These traits help Flaubert revise the motif of hypercommunicability frequent in literature—the coincidentally overheard conversation or intercepted conspiratorial note—by having his protagonist overhear conversations without understanding them, even in retrospect. In assuming that Arnoux must be faithful to his wife because she seems so adorable to himself, Frédéric misses many signs of Arnoux's promiscuity, including, most flagrantly, the *corona veneris* of advanced syphilis. Moreover, Arnoux dominates the younger man during their meetings, as Flaubert shows by presenting the words of the former in direct discourse, and Frédéric's in indirect discourse (Haig 114-15). At another critical moment, Frédéric cannot read the dramatically obvious evidence that the child Louise Roque is passionately in love with him, when she weeps and embraces him frantically as he prepares to return to Paris from the country, (Part I, ch. 6, 44) Both Henry and Léon anticipate him as a bland *jeune premier*.

The extreme breakdown of communication occurs when one character violently silences speech that is offensive to him. Frédéric throws his plate full of food across the table into his host Cisy's lap during a banquet, and then refuses to apologise (Part II, ch.4, 87). Cisy had just gratuitously, fatuously insulted Madame Arnoux's virtue. Because Frédéric never explains his action, the guests cannot tell whether he was defending the honour of his friend Arnoux, of

Madame Arnoux, or of Rosanette. They do not realise that Cisy had recently stolen Rosanette from Frédéric on a bet, just as the latter eagerly expected to have sex with her at last. The ultimate refusal to listen is murder. Old Roque shoots an unarmed prisoner who is starving and yelling for bread (Part III, ch.1,131), and near the end of the novel, Sénécal, who has betrayed his Jacobin principles to become a *sergent de ville*, murders his former friend Dussardier with a bayonet for having shouted 'Vive la République!' (Part III, ch.5, 160). This latter atrocity so disgusts Frédéric that he leaves the country (we presume; Flaubert simply says 'il voyagea') and travels abroad for years. The fatuous self-preoccupation that blinds him in potential love relationship also blinds him in politics. His political disinterest prevents him from reflecting on the political meaning of Sénécal's uniform per se, or on the meaning of the prefect's uniform Deslauriers wears to his wedding, seen from afar. Both men had promptly sold out to Napoléon III's new Empire.

Mutuality in conversation emerges once Frédéric has a chance to speak alone with Madame Arnoux to assure her that he has no plans to marry Louise Roque and that Rosanette is not his mistress. The next day, they agree to see each other but to preserve a chaste relationship. In iterative narration, summarizing the meetings that follow, Flaubert comments: 'Leurs goûts, leurs jugements étaient les mêmes. Souvent celui des deux écoutant l'autre s'écriait: -Moi aussi!' Flaubert underscores their harmonious empathy stylistically with 'a unique example of a perfectly interchangeable direct discourse and [free indirect style]: 'Cependant, où serait le mal quand deux pauvres êtres confondraient leur tristesse?'' (Haig 140; Part II, ch.6, 107) He does not bother to report any conversation at this point because the members of the co-dependent couple have become interchangeable. Predictably, however, chastity at length becomes too frustrating for Frédéric—he rents a discreet apartment and pressures Madame Arnoux to meet him there. Her son's near-fatal illness that evening prevents her from coming, and for years, Frédéric does not understand what had happened. In the 1869 *Éducation sentimentale*, Flaubert grants perfect, lasting mutuality only to Frédéric and Deslauriers, in the denouement. There, despite multiple reciprocal betrayals, 'a fatality that obliged them always to love one another' (latent homosexuality) leads to reconciliation, and their mutual life review and reminiscence, which require no active commitment, produce perfect agreement (Part III, ch.7, 161-162).

Bouvard et Pécuchet dramatizes compatibility above all through the form rather than the content of the two retired copy clerks' conversations. When they first meet in the park on a very hot day, they quickly find many affinities. From the outset, their conversation unfolds in ways that illustrate their exceptional

bonding. It is metatopic: it carries over from the park to dinner together to the café, and then to each other's rooms. Their cybernetic verbal interchanges contain much metalanguage about conversation, which mends misunderstandings and assuages grievances. And one shared interest regularly leads them to another. Their affinities motivate the plot. In sum, they continually deepen and refine their amicable relationship while living it. The first person plural of mutuality, rare elsewhere except between Frédéric and Deslauriers at the beginning and the end of the second *Éducation sentimentale*, appears explicitly endorsed by the implied author. When Bouvard receives an inheritance, he exclaims: 'Nous nous retirerons à la campagne!' 'Et ce mot qui liait son ami à son bonheur, Pécuchet l'avait trouvé tout simple. Car l'union de ces deux hommes était absolue et profonde', (Part II, ch. 1, 206. Flaubert's habit of creating nearly inarticulate characters—realistic in itself—obliges him to dispel 'l'effet du réel' through authorial intervention). A mutual commissive that is fulfilled, the resolve to retire to the country, contrasts with all the private resolutions seldom realised elsewhere in Flaubert, except some shared by Frédéric and Deslauriers at the beginning of the second *Éducation*. Flaubert enhances our impression of their mutually reinforcing sameness when he eliminates differentiation in the narrative tags (*incises*) of their conversations ('disait l'un ... disait l'autre'), and has them speak in choral voice (spontaneously saying the same thing at the same time, a device common in children's literature), whereas the narrator per se virtually disappears (Haig, 162-163).¹¹

Flaubert enhances our impression of Bouvard and Pécuchet's ideal relationship by contrasting it, in the next narrative unit, with the account of their welcoming party for their new neighbours in the country. Their guests are self-absorbed—all speaking at the same time, greedy, competitive, and tactlessly critical of the two friends' garden. Afterward, the disappointed couple console each other and resolve to abandon society (Part II, ch. 2, 217-218). The middle chapters of the novel contain many dialogues, but these are primarily satiric-didactic exchanges distilled from Flaubert's extensive readings on many subjects, rather than plot-driven interactions between the two title characters.¹²

After disappointments in love, Bouvard and Pécuchet carry out their second noteworthy mutual commissive, which is to have nothing more to do with women. 'Et ils s'embrassèrent avec attendrissement' (Chapter 7; *OC* II: 262). Flaubert emphasizes their closeness here by reporting the first part of this conversation, an exchange of clichés about the perfidy of women, in free direct discourse where one cannot easily distinguish the speakers. To foreground it, Flaubert inserts a paragraph division just before their concluding embrace.

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When they despair of life on Christmas Eve, they quarrel, and Pécuchet rushes up to the attic to commit suicide. Bouvard follows him, calling 'Wait for me!' In a droll revisioning of Goethe's *Faust*, their suicide is prevented when they hear the culminating hymn of the Christmas Mass. At this point, Goethe's peripety leads toward involvement with women; in Flaubert, it reunites the two men. An authorial intervention here, however, does not allow us to infer an unvarnished homosexual or misogynist impulse from Flaubert's elaboration of the plot. For after the two friends have been temporarily converted to Christianity, we encounter the most clearly marked parastory (a hypothetical alternative to part of the actual plot) in the novel. A new acquaintance, Madame de Noares, obviously loves Pécuchet, but he never suspects 'cet amour, qui peut-être eût fait le bonheur de sa vie' (Ch.9; *OC* II: 284-285). Instead, the two men disparage marriage, leave the church, and experiment with acting out the parthenogenetic fantasy of parenting two orphaned youths at risk, Victor and Victorine. When this experiment fails disastrously, they decide to return to copying as before.

So perfect will their mutuality become in this activity that they will no longer need to converse with each other. Instead, like puppet-masters, and by sardonic juxtaposition, they will set the discourses of third parties into involuntary dialogue. Their projected *Sottisier* or *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* thus reveals the absurdity of the sociolect. This project's self-cancelling dynamics recall Lautréamont's *Poésies*, likewise attuned to the nihilistic tenor of the age of Schopenhauer, Hartmann, Laforgue, and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. Not only the florid sadism of *Salammbô* but also the bleak disenchantment of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* announced the decadent movement in Western Europe. When the hope of building romantic, community, or political relationships disappears, so does the tentative mutuality of conversation. As in Sartre's *L'Idiot de la famille*, social critique has led the despairing moralist to an impasse.

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NOTES

¹ More complex situations exist, of course. For example, in Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau*, the grotesque Lui ingenuously bares his own resentment in the role of a person who is 'médiocre et fâché', but simultaneously exposes the complacent hypocrisy of the self-satisfied, judgemental Moi, although, on the surface, the latter seems nearly always to have the upper hand.

² In moments of discouragement over the travail of creating *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert occasionally claimed that such attempts at communication would either fail, or provisionally succeed only when based on false premises on both sides: 'Tous les mots maintenant me semblent à côté de la pensée, et toutes les phrases dissonantes' (*Correspondance* II: 243-46, Letter to Louise Colet, January 29, 1853 [245]). It would, however, be mistaken to extrapolate from this lament to a generalized theory of art—or of society.

Haig differentiates 'conversation' (the language of 'the man in the street') from 'dialogue' on different grounds than I: for him, the latter is literary, eliminating false starts, repairs, and cooperation signals (19-21). He later makes a further distinction within the category of dialogue: direct discourse would contain no figures of speech (99).

³ In practice, these categories overlap and blur. The assertoric 'It's cold in here' can amount to a command that someone else present should close a door or window, or an expressive, meaning that the speaker finds the place uncomfortable or disagreeable. The Gricean notion of 'implicatures' attempts to deal with such difficulties (see Grice, *passim*).

⁴ Conversation, of course, also serves an author as a principal vehicle of characterisation. The author must choose whether to write dialogue in literary, oral, or mixed language (cp. Elad-Bouskila). Within oral language, s/he must select a linguistic level—*formel*, *familier*, *populaire*, *argotique* (widely understood only in a particular milieu) or *vulgaire*—for each occasion. Language, if not contemporary and thus unmarked, may be marked as *vieilli* ('icebox') or *vieux* (incomprehensible except to scholars), and further unmarked as standard, or marked as regional or dialectical. Studying the manuscript variants, Haig (3), following Gothot-Mersch, has shown that Flaubert eliminated many pithy incorrect expressions characteristic of actual petit bourgeois and peasant speech. Those that remain are carefully quarantined by italics, which brand Homais and certain others, or describe a particular milieu. Note for example the schoolboy jargon in the opening scene of *Madame Bovary*, or Rodolphe's hunting term when he prepares to leave town after abandoning Emma, lest she come to *relancer* him (to flush a game animal or bird from cover again after it has initially taken refuge). Flaubert regularly poeticizes clichés in Emma's discourse, Haig notes, by cloaking them in *style indirect libre* (55).

⁵ A major influence was Voltaire's plays, all of which Flaubert carefully analysed in writing during his adolescence. Homais himself recommends Voltaire's tragedies: 'elles sont semées habilement de réflexions philosophiques qui en font pour le peuple une véritable école de morale et de diplomatie', (Flaubert, *OC* I: 648)

⁶ An intertextual allusion to Voltaire's *conte philosophique* 'Micromégas', Haig (124 and 148) notes the influence of the dinner scene in 'Zadig' on the tableau of the Dambreuses' banquet in *L'Éducation sentimentale* (OC II : 131-35).

⁷ Note the oxymoron, a figure of undecidability.

⁸ Sartre enthusiasts take note.

⁹ Moreover, anticipating the famous Comices tableau in *Madame Bovary*, already here he weaves polyphonic, parallel conversations together with resemblances and contrasts that imply a satiric commentary on human enthusiasms.

¹⁰ Haig comments that Henry and Émilie seem to be trying to commune without words in this scene, their first flirtatious dialogue, where 'the suggestiveness of their words is thus not wholly independent of the framing text, and indeed, unspoken communication, in the first *Éducation sentimentale*, is tacitly valued above speech', (29)

¹¹ One should not overlook the paroxysms of repetition in the *Trois Contes* and especially 'Un cœur simple', where Loulou the parrot—whose echolaic name reflects its nature, performs absolute mimetic, miniature repetitions of the surrounding verbalized sociolect in his 'dialects' with his mistress (Ann L. Murphy 403-405). Julian Barnes mischievously compounds these repetitions in *Flaubert's Parrot*, where the narrator searches in vain for the bird's original in 'real life', only to be definitively stymied in the end, in a museum basement, confronted with a row of identical birds dusted with insecticide: 'Perhaps it was one of them',

¹² In considering *Bouvard et Pécuchet* as a moment in the prehistory of postmodernism, compare Benito Pérez Galdós's *El abuelo* (1897), where the author systematically experiments by hybridising dialogue and narrative, while resisting the ultimate consequence of reducing the narrator's voice to one among many, equal to and indistinguishable from them (Buchanan).