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Madame Bovary

Rosemary Lloyd



Madame Bovary

Madame Bovary ranks among the world's most famous and widely read novels, and has inspired numerous critical theories. First published in 1987, this study draws on both twentieth-century and traditional critical views to provide both students and scholars with a fresh analysis of the novel: its narrative techniques, social background, and underlying structures. By setting the novel in an historical context, and exploring the ways in which it offers a hinge between romanticism and realism, the book establishes a framework through which the reader can assess questions of narrative strategy, of symbolic patterning and most importantly, parody and pastiche. Throughout *Madame Bovary*, Rosemary Lloyd argues, a series of intertwining voices challenge assumptions about the nature of narrative and the relationship between reader and writer.

This reissue will provoke and stimulate debate among students and lecturers in French and English literature, for whom *Madame Bovary* is a key text in the development of the novel.

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

First published in 1990
by Unwin Hyman Ltd

This edition first published in 2014 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN
and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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A Library of Congress record exists under LC control number: 89036516

ISBN 13: 978-1-138-79934-9 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-1-315-75608-0 (ebk)

MADAME BOVARY

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London
UNWIN HYMAN
Boston Sydney Wellington

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Published by the Academic Division of

Unwin Hyman Ltd
15/17 Broadwick Street, London W1V 1FP, UK

Unwin Hyman Inc.,
8 Winchester Place, Winchester, Mass. 01890, USA

Allen & Unwin (Australia) Ltd,
8 Napier Street, North Sydney, NSW 2060, Australia

Allen & Unwin (New Zealand) Ltd in association with the
Port Nicholson Press Ltd,
Compusales Building, 75 Ghuznee Street, Wellington 1, New Zealand

First published in 1990

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Lloyd, R.

Madame Bovary. — (Unwin critical library)

1. Fiction in French. Flaubert, Gustave. Madame Bovary—Critical Studies

I. Title

843'.8

ISBN 0-04-800084-1

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Lloyd, R.

Madame Bovary / Rosemary Lloyd.

p. cm. — (Unwin critical library)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-04-800084-1

1. Flaubert, Gustave, 1821-1880. Madame Bovary. I. Title.

II. Series.

PQ2246.M3L5 1989

843'.8—dc20

Typeset in Bembo by Gecko Limited, Bicester, Oxon
and printed in Great Britain by Billing and Sons, London and
Worcester

For Penny

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PREFACE

The text used in this study is C. Gothot-Mersch's edition, first published by Garnier in 1971. Page references to this edition are placed immediately after quotations. The translations are my own: I have aimed for accuracy rather than beauty in these renderings of Flaubert's texts and drafts.

Abbreviations used in the notes are as follows:

Corr = Flaubert's correspondence in the Pléiade edition. Since this edition has so far only reached the year 1858, letters written after that date are referred to by the date of composition.

Ebauches = *Madame Bovary, Ebauches et Fragments inédits*, 2 vols (Paris: Louis Conard, 1936)

MBNV = *Madame Bovary, nouvelle version*, ed. J. Pommier and G. Leleu (Paris: José Corti, 1949)

I should like to record here my gratitude to my New Hall colleagues for many fascinating lunchtime discussions during the period when I was working on this book; to Alison Fairlie, for the helpful and stimulating remarks she made on an earlier version of this study; and to my husband, Paul, for everything.

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CHAPTER 1

Overture

Roughly one-third of the way through *Madame Bovary*, we come across the story of la Guérine. At this point in the novel, Emma Bovary, unhappily married and physically unsatisfied, disappointed by the apparently unbridgeable gap between her expectations of life and her experience of life, lacks as yet the courage and the opportunity to take a lover. Her despair assumes both a physical and an emotional form, beyond the understanding of either her doctor husband or the village priest and it prompts her maid, Félicité, to recount the following tale:

—Ah! oui, reprenait Félicité, vous êtes justement comme la Guérine, la fille au père Guérin, le pêcheur du Pollet, que j'ai connue à Dieppe, avant de venir chez vous. Elle était si triste, si triste, qu'à la voir debout sur le seuil de sa maison, elle vous faisait l'effet d'un drap d'enterrement tendu devant la porte. Son mal, à ce qu'il paraît, était une manière de brouillard qu'elle avait dans la tête, et les médecins n'y pouvaient rien, ni le curé non plus. Quand ça la prenait trop fort, elle s'en allait toute seule sur le bord de la mer, si bien que le lieutenant de la douane, en faisant sa tournée, souvent la trouvait étendue à plat ventre et pleurant sur les galets. Puis, après son mariage, ça lui a passé, dit-on.

—Mais, moi, reprenait Emma, c'est après le mariage que ça m'est venu (112).¹

Among the many narratives nested in *Madame Bovary*, this one has particular significance. Related by a woman, to a woman, about a woman, it is presented, by its narrator, as offering a mirror of Emma's condition: 'Vous êtes justement comme la Guérine', and although Emma signals a difference ('Mais moi,

c'est après mon mariage que ça m'est venu'), it is a difference of time, not of emotion. The text's narrative voice is deafeningly silent here: Félicité is allowed to tell the tale in her own words, and Emma's remarks herald the end of the chapter. Apparently no ironic comment, explicit or implicit, nor any hint of how to read this brief passage is given to us. Yet it raises several questions about the ways in which we respond to stories: on a most basic level they are seen as paradigms, allowing for substitutions (Emma for la Guérine, 'after marriage' for 'before marriage'), reflections of universal truth, which the hearer may apply to her own situation. Of course Emma is encouraged to do so, not merely by Félicité's opening statement, but also because the heroine has sought help from the same sources as she herself has, the doctor and the priest, those who minister to the body and those who minister to the soul. For both women, moreover, the source of the sickness is sexual, and its nature seems incapable of being expressed in language. Félicité suggests a parallel with fog, but wraps that simile around with 'so it seems' and 'a sort of'. Emma's own desire to confide in another person is shown to founder both on the social fact of there being no one else of her class and age in the village, and on the difficulties inherent in giving expression to emotions as fleeting and changeable as clouds.

The whole question of how individuals use language, which is so central to the novel, is also raised here, in the way in which Flaubert explores the possibilities of conveying peasant diction in direct speech, drawing on the simplicity and intensity of the images – the comparison between la Guérine and a shroud, the picture of her lying flat on her stomach on the pebbles – and the forms of emphasis – the repetition of 'si triste' – to offer parallels with Emma's own sufferings, which are usually expressed in the more analytical and polished language of *style indirect libre*. Equally important is the visual side to the story: however much Emma's response to reality is conditioned by her reading, it is also very much a product of engravings and paintings, and a study of the pictures conjured up by her imagination indicates the extent to which she is most touched by that which she can most clearly visualize. Flaubert's desire to explore such psychological realities and to indicate how different individuals react under similar circumstances is evident not only in the

novel itself but also in remarks in his letters, where, for example, he reflects that the first version of his *Education sentimentale* needs a chapter revealing 'pourquoi telle action a amené ce résultat dans ce personnage plutôt que telle autre'² and insists that *Madame Bovary* represents the entirety of his psychological knowledge, the 'somme de [sa] science psychologique'.³

For the reader of Flaubert's novel the temptation to proceed to a substitution of Emma for la Guérine is intensified by the fact that both women bear names that reveal, not their personal identity, but their relationship to a man: Madame Bovary and la Guérine. Indeed, the tale indicates very clearly the extent to which identity is a product of social position, since la Guérine is defined by her relationship to a family group, and her father is identified by his function in society, that of fisherman in a particular village. Throughout *Madame Bovary* Flaubert explores the importance of social forces on the shaping of individuals and clearly relishes the opportunity of capturing and analysing forms of behaviour and thought that typify French society at the time in which he was writing.

Félicité's simile, moreover, pulls into sudden sharp focus the many links between love and death that the novel suggests: 'elle vous faisait l'effet d'un drap d'enterrement'. Emma's response is not to reject the similarity suggested, but to point instead to minor differences. But here, too, suggestions of death are present, for if la Guérine could move from one situation to another by marriage, Emma is in a position from which there is no exit other than death, her own or that of her husband. Moreover, the fact that marriage solved la Guérine's problem is only indirectly attested, by an unidentified 'on' (in 'dit-on'). The traditional fairy-tale ending of 'they married and lived happily ever after' is not provided directly by Félicité, and is in any case ironically subverted, since the habitual tag is replaced by a mere negation: 'something left her after her marriage', and is undermined by Emma's gloss on her own marriage. And if we assume that for *ça* can be substituted 'le brouillard', we fall into a further trap. Can la Guérine's situation be substituted for Emma's when Emma is so demonstrably not 'justement comme la Guérine'?

One final ironic detail should be mentioned: Félicité's passing reference to the sea-shore, which Emma finds so romantic in

literature and imagination, but which here serves only as a grim background to la Guérine's melancholy. No golden beach or setting sun here, only the cobbles of a rocky and decidedly unromantic shore. Indeed, throughout the novel Flaubert systematically refuses Emma the surroundings, relationships and experiences her reading had led her to expect from life.

It is the assumptions about the contract between story and life that Flaubert's irony sets out to unravel, since it is precisely her simplistically mimetic and analogical reading that leads Emma astray. Questions concerning difference, similarity and substitution lie at the heart of *Madame Bovary*, although it will be my contention in what follows that Flaubert does not necessarily reject or deny the possibility and indeed the pleasure of mimesis. One of the major challenges of responding to the novel is posed by the very richness of the text, for Flaubert habitually operates on at least three levels: the exploration of social patterns of behaviour, the psychological analysis of an individual's development, and the narratological experiments with the point of view adopted, the different forms of language employed and the presentation of time and space. What this study of *Madame Bovary* attempts to do is to focus on some of the questions the text raises, while remaining aware that concentrating on separate issues always leads to a sense that the other elements involved also call for analysis.

Notes: Chapter 1

- 1 'Ah! yes', continued Félicité, 'You're just like la Guérine, the daughter of old Guérin, the fisherman of Le Pollet. I knew her at Dieppe before I came to work for you. She was so sad, so very sad, that if you saw her standing at the entrance to her house, you'd think she was a shroud spread out in front of the doorway. What she was suffering from, so it seems, was a sort of fog in her head, and the doctors couldn't do a thing about it, nor the priest either. When it was particularly bad, she'd go off all alone to the sea shore, and the customs officer, when he was doing his rounds, often used to find her lying flat on her stomach and crying on the pebbles. Then, after her marriage, they say it left her.'
'But', replied Emma, 'In my case, it was after my marriage that it came to me.'
- 2 Corr, II, 30: 'why a certain action produced that particular result in a certain character, rather than any other action'.
- 3 Corr, II, 124.

CHAPTER 2

Preparing the way

Aussitôt, cependant, apparaît Flaubert
(Robbe-Grillet: *Le Miroir qui revient*)

The decade in which Flaubert produced *Madame Bovary*, and particularly the year 1857 in which the volume was first published, were especially rich in the history of Western literature. Although the death of Balzac in 1850 heralded a brief eclipse for the novel form, these ten years saw a remarkable proliferation of poetic publications, and a lively and wide-ranging aesthetical debate concerning the possibilities of prosodic forms and the interrelationship of truth, beauty and morality. In the world of the visual arts, Realism was taking over from Romanticism as the dominant mode, with the leading Realist painter, Courbet, questioning traditional assumptions about what was acceptable subject-matter for art, and exploring ways in which art could present the humdrum and banal. The publication in volume form of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* and of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* marked a significant turning point both in poetry and in prose fiction, calling into question modes of writing and bringing into sharp focus the problematics of language. *Madame Bovary*, despite the hostile reception given it by certain critics, has come to be seen as a vital testing ground for theories of narrative, and Flaubert, through the sophistication of his techniques, the sardonic force of his social criticism and the acuity of his psychological insights, remains one of the most challenging and demanding of all prose writers.

Much of the novel is, to varying extents, a response to the main literary movements of the age. Romanticism, after the débâcle of Hugo's *Les Burgraves* in 1843, was on the wane, although its enthusiasm for the macabre, the emphasis it placed

on the individual and on emotions, and several other of its more easily assimilable commonplaces continued to be current coin among the reading public. With the defeat of republican ideals after the revolution of 1848 and Napoléon III's coup d'état and declaration of empire in 1852, many writers had turned away from political involvement in the age, but some, mainly novelists, adopted and revised the techniques of Balzac to create what they saw as a mimetic representation of reality. One further movement should be mentioned here, if only for the revulsion it aroused in Flaubert, as in Baudelaire: the now justly-forgotten school of good sense, which promoted the ideals of the bourgeoisie, the double standards of its morality and above all the moral value it conferred on material wealth.

The years in which Flaubert was working on his novel were ones of comparative stability for France, seeing the country's increasing industrialization and a continuing movement away from traditional sources of wealth and social status towards a hierarchy based on money created by industry or the stock exchange. Noticeable, too, was the rise in power of the press. Once the cost of producing newspapers had been transferred from the consumer to the advertisers, the increase in sales and in the number of newspapers produced was immense and, as part of a bid to attract and hold readers to a particular periodical, the practice of including a serialized novel was also becoming increasingly common. Predictably, the government sought to control such power by a series of frequently draconian legislative measures, using the power of censorship not merely to curtail what were seen as infringements of public morality but also to force opposition papers to temper their political attacks. Flaubert's decision to publish his novel first through a periodical carried therefore the risk of censorship both from the editor and from the government, and his association with the often controversial but highly influential *Revue de Paris* may well have meant that the accusations of offending public sensibilities were, as he himself claimed, merely a front to enable an attack on the paper itself.¹

Born in 1821 in Rouen, Flaubert was the fifth of six children, three of whom died in infancy. Gustave's older brother, Achille, became, like his father, a successful doctor: the youngest child, Caroline, was to die of puerperal fever at the age of twenty-one.

Gustave himself embarked on a law course, but suffered an attack of what might have been epilepsy in 1844 and henceforth lived with his mother, apart from various voyages in France and abroad. He had in fact been writing since his early teens, creating a weekly magazine in 1834–35, to which he gave the ironic title 'Art et Progrès', parodying bourgeois assumptions about the role of art in a way which points forward to much of his later work. In 1837 he published a short story, 'Bibliomanie', in a Rouen literary journal, *Le Colibri*, and in a spirit of buffoonery that presages *Bouvard et Pécuchet*,² he wrote a 'Leçon d'histoire naturelle, genre commis'. Indeed, the strongly marked links between the juvenilia and his later writing indicate the extent to which he had already formulated his central concerns, and had begun to refine his main techniques, from a remarkably early age. Certainly the complexity of his character, with its surges of Romantic lyricism counterbalanced by a desire to reveal the everyday reality of existence, is clearly reflected in the variety of subject matter to be found in his early writing. With *Smarh*, completed in 1839, Flaubert traced out a first version of the work to which he most frequently returned, *La Tentation de Saint-Antoine*, and revealed that side of his nature which was 'épris de gueulades, de lyrisme, de grands vols d'aigle, de toutes les sonorités de la phrase et des sommets de l'idée'.³ *Un parfum à sentir* and *Passion et Vertu*, however, reflect the other 'bonhomme distinct' that made up his literary personality, the one 'qui fouille et creuse le vrai tant qu'il peut, qui aime à accuser le petit fait aussi puissamment que le grand, qui voudrait vous faire sentir presque matériellement les choses qu'il reproduit'.⁴

These early works reveal just how deeply ingrained in Flaubert's character are the preoccupations both with subject matter and with style that underpin *Madame Bovary*. From a very early stage Flaubert was clearly fascinated by the individual's power of self-delusion and the way in which the need for an existence of intensity and coherence could drive even the more mediocre individuals to acts of violence and self-destruction. Moreover, this image of a possible life vastly different from the quotidian is presented, both in the juvenilia and in the later novels, as a product primarily of language. Stylistically, too, these works, for all their immaturity, already reveal some of the techniques of Flaubert's later novels, particularly the ability

to convey sounds and light, and the characteristic nature of his imagery. A somewhat self-mocking authorial comment at the end of *Un parfum à sentir*, moreover, offers a sidelight on the young Flaubert's image of writing, which helps to set in context a study of the works of that period:

Vous ne savez peut-être quel plaisir c'est: composer!
Ecrire, oh! écrire, c'est s'emparer du monde, de ses préjugés, de ses vertus et le résumer dans un livre; c'est sentir sa pensée naître, grandir, vivre, se dresser debout sur son piédestal, et y rester toujours.
Je viens donc d'achever ce livre étrange, bizarre, incompréhensible.⁵

Passion et Vertu, completed in December 1837, shows the young Flaubert already concerned to explore 'cette route immense de la passion, qui commence avec un sourire et qui ne finit que sur une tombe'.⁶ The theme itself is, of course, a familiar element of Romanticism, particularly that of the later Romantics, but Flaubert's treatment of it suggests, even at this early stage, the deflating irony that marks *Madame Bovary*. Like Rodolphe, Ernest, for instance, is presented to us from the outset as offering little in common with the typical Romantic hero: 'loin d'être une de ces âmes d'exception comme il y en a dans les livres et dans les drames, c'était un cœur sec, un esprit juste, et par-dessus tout cela, un chimiste'.⁷ The science of seduction practised by Ernest will be that of Rodolphe, but it is conveyed in the early work with even greater cynicism through the concision with which it is elucidated:

Mais maintenant un homme s'avance vers une femme, il la lorgne, il la trouve bien, il en fait le pari avec ses amis; est-elle mariée, la farce n'en sera que meilleure.
Alors il s'introduit chez elle, il lui prête des romans, la mène au spectacle, il a surtout soin de faire quelque chose d'étonnant, de ridicule, enfin d'étrange; . . . c'est une cruauté d'anatomiste, mais on a fait des progrès dans les sciences et il y a des gens qui dissèquent un cœur comme un cadavre.⁸

Just as Rodolphe's awareness of Emma's dissatisfaction with her married life led to the conclusion: 'ça bâille après l'amour,

comme une carpe après l'eau sur une table de cuisine. Avec trois mots de galanterie, cela vous adoreraït' (134),⁹ so Ernest, as brutally but more concisely, concluded on the basis of Mazza's love of poetry, the sea and Byron: 'C'est une sottise, je l'aurai'.¹⁰ Similarly, too, the way in which Rodolphe's seduction of Emma during their afternoon ostensibly spent riding reveals a pattern of brusqueness, followed by apparently platonic adoration leading to the act of love, traces a pattern already established in that Ernest, when Mazza visits him in his room, claiming that she wants the relationship to end, begins by locking the door, then feigns adoration before proceeding to the 'voluptés qui brûlent'.¹¹ Mazza's convictions and responses, moreover, herald those of Emma, particularly in her tendency to perceive the external world as an extension of her own emotions and in her recurrent dissatisfaction with the limitations and disappointments of existence: like Emma, Mazza wonders if, 'derrière la volupté, il n'y en avait pas une plus grande encore, ni après le plaisir une plus vaste jouissance'.¹²

Similarities of character, moreover, are increased by a preoccupation with light and sound, and by the presence of certain images that recur in the later novel. The problem of conveying in language the quality of the light shed by a lamp clearly intrigues Flaubert even at this early stage, although his solution in adolescence is markedly more influenced by Romanticism than that of his later works: 'la lampe brûlait et jetait au plafond un disque lumineux qui tremblait en vacillant sur lui-même, comme l'œil d'un damné qui vous regarde'.¹³ Equally, the emotive importance of sound, which will add so much to the evocation of Emma's boredom, is seized on in *Passion et Vertu* as a means of conveying Mazza's desires and fears:

elle resta longtemps, jusqu'au jour, à écouter les heures qui sonnaient à toutes les cloches, à entendre tous les bruits de la nuit, la pluie qui tombe et bat les murs, et les vents qui soufflent et tourbillonnent dans les ténèbres, les vitres qui tremblent, le bois du lit qui criait à tous les mouvements qu'elle lui donnait en se retournant sur ses matelas.¹⁴

Even certain recurrent images of *Madame Bovary*, that of wine as a symbol of human temperament, for instance, or that of the

circle to indicate the way in which the individual longing for the exceptional finds herself locked into the banal, can be discovered in prototype form in *Passion et Vertu*.¹⁵

Novembre, which Flaubert wrote in 1842, also points forward to the later works, particularly in the vision of humanity it expresses and in its exploration of the power of language to dominate the mind. Indeed, Flaubert was to affirm to Louise Colet in 1853: 'J'ai relu *Novembre*, mercredi, par curiosité. J'étais bien le même particulier il y a onze ans qu'aujourd'hui.'¹⁶ Mankind offers the first-person narrator of *Novembre* the image of a 'surface mouvante de méchants, de lâches, d'idiots et de laids',¹⁷ while the very word *maîtresse* is sufficient to incite long ecstasy,¹⁸ and the term 'adultery' carries with it an intense evocative charge:

il y eut dès lors pour moi un mot qui sembla beau entre les mots humains: adultère. Une douceur exquise plane vaguement sur lui. Une magie singulière l'embaume; toutes les histoires qu'on raconte, tous les livres qu'on lit, tous les gestes qu'on fait le disent et le commentent éternellement pour le cœur du jeune homme, il s'en abreuve à plaisir, il y trouve une poésie suprême, mêlée de malédiction et de volupté.¹⁹

Emma, and Léon, too, both reveal a similar tendency to embroider a vision of reality on the deceptive web of words.

The first version of Flaubert's novel *L'Education sentimentale*, written between 1843 and 1845 (a period during which he suffered the fit that led him to abandon his law course and devote himself to writing), allowed him, particularly through his character Jules, to explore and refine his philosophy of art, but it also contains much which more specifically points forward to *Madame Bovary*. The complex interrelationships between art and life, between language and experience, between the individual and society, which are so vital to the later novel, are also central here. The scene depicting the first meeting between Emma and Léon and showing in particular their artistic and literary preferences offers many parallels with the description of a conversation between Henry and Mme Renaud, in which they speak of the great delight of being borne away by a genius's dream, on some golden cloud, beyond the known worlds²⁰ and

where Flaubert conveys the essence of what they have said in the elliptical list-form that he so frequently uses for purposes both of ironic mockery and nostalgic longing:

ils parlèrent ensemble des histoires d'amour fameuses au théâtre, des élégies les plus tendres; ils aspirèrent en pensée la douceur des nuits étoilées, le parfum des fleurs d'été; ils se dirent les livres qui les avaient fait pleurer, ceux qui les avaient fait rêver, que sais-je encore? ils devisèrent sur le malheur de la vie et sur les soleils couchants.²¹

The characteristically sardonic juxtaposition of the final sentence quoted above marks this passage as unmistakably Flaubertian. The same episode reveals the extent to which he is already collecting the *idées reçues* with which his later work is studded: 'L'Allemand, à qui on demanda son avis [sur la musique], répondit qu'il ne se connaissait pas en musique, ce qui sembla drôle, les Allemands devant être musiciens'.²² The degree to which the individual's ability to savour an experience is shaped by reading is a further point already present in this youthful work: 'Henry se reprochait de ne pas sentir les exagérations magnifiques qu'il avait lues dans les livres, et chaque jour cependant il lui arrivait au cœur d'inexprimables sensations qu'il n'avait jamais rêvées'.²³ Jules, too, turns to literature as a means of making sense of life: 'Pour trouver quelque chose d'analogue à ce qui se passait dans son âme, il chercha, dans les poètes et dans les romanciers, une situation semblable à la sienne, un caractère comme le sien; . . . il croyait que rien n'approchait de sa douleur, que toutes les autres étaient bornées, que la sienne seule était infinie'.²⁴ Indeed, Jules, whose nature is described as nervous and feminine,²⁵ seems to present an example of bovarysme *avant la lettre*, when we are told that 'ce qui le rendait à plaindre, c'est qu'il ne savait bien distinguer ce qui est de ce qui devrait être'.²⁶ Moreover, the images of enclosure and restriction that convey Emma's sense of the stifling nature of everyday existence are also very much present in the first version of *L'Education sentimentale*. Having asserted, for example, that Henry and Emilie were happy because they believed themselves to be so, since happiness depends only on the idea one has of it, Flaubert adds an image in which the allusion to birds is typical of *Madame Bovary* even if the

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