Flaubert’s Voice: Retranslating Madame Bovary

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Precursors

Translation, especially retranslation, is an extravagant activity, a species of folly. Wasteful, futile and yet glorious.

I spent four years translating Madame Bovary. You have to be slightly crazed to do that. Objectively, you have a publisher’s contract. Subjectively you have those long afternoons when the sentences don’t happen, when nothing comes through. You feel that the creative energy of your work has gone. You realise that you need to stop and do something else.

This is the translator’s daily dilemma: how to keep going. Knowing when to stop. I now see that my own translation of Madame Bovary was driven by an amorous imaginative fascination for the little details, for the textures, the shapes, the sentence-by-sentence immediacy of Flaubert’s writing. That is what held me, kept me going, as a translator. That writing has entangled me, induced me to spend half a life-time playing with Flaubert. Playing with his words, as his translator. Playing with the events of his life, as his biographer. Sustained by the impossible desire to be Flaubert, to voice his words once again, in my own voice.

It was this careful textual passion that sustained me, hour by hour, in the task of translating yet again a novel that was obviously already there, already translated.

A good literary translation will probably last for thirty years. Within that time it will begin to show its age, betray its origins. The dialogue will date first, because the colloquial is essentially ephemeral. Then the translator’s unspoken cultural and literary assumptions will slowly fade into view. Revealing, merely, a period piece.

Let me anticipate that process and explain how Flaubert came to me. I arrived at the University of Sussex in the autumn of 1968. Flaubert was at the...
height of his 20th century reputation. Sartre was writing *L’Idiot de la famille*. Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Nathalie Sarraute and Maurice Nadeau were all variously praising and celebrating Flaubert as the exemplary writer. Flaubert was Our Contemporary. We had “contemporised” him, brought him back to life.

I realised with some excitement that Flaubert was the still-unsurpassed precursor of literary modernism, the Anglo-American literary modernism that I was eager to explore. My poetic heroes, James Joyce and Ezra Pound, were both great admirers of Flaubert, and I now began to read *Madame Bovary* and *L’Education sentimentale* alongside *Ulysses* and *The Cantos*. Here was modernity, my modernity, the modernity of 1968. How alluring it was. How volatile. How gloriously shadowy, as it flitted between Dublin, Yonville-l’Abbaye, and Urbino.

I could soon see several versions of Flaubert. I began to separate them out. There was Ezra Pound’s reading and there was the James Joyce reading. The Pound reading was simpler. For Pound, Flaubert was a master of clarity. That’s the Flaubert of Pound’s early review of Joyce’s *Dubliners*. Pound’s Flaubert was an aggressively satirical realist. Joyce’s Flaubert was more elusive, more comprehensive, more inward, more intimate in its scrupulous linguistic attention to psychical realities.

When I began my translation of *Madame Bovary* in 1986, Joyce’s *Ulysses* was still my favourite book. Joyce was to be my model, my bridge between French and English. I drew upon the early chapters of *Ulysses*, written in that relatively simple “initial” style which was Joyce’s affectionate farewell to realism.

In *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert was similarly attached to the traditional requirements of the storyteller. It was my ambition as a translator to write sentences in that richly modulated Joycean English. I wanted a voice in English that was somewhere between Joyce and Flaubert. Joycean English seemed to me the perfect medium in which to capture and convey the insidious pleasures of free indirect style. There is a glorious duplicity in Flaubert. He is the master of a teasingly disembodied ambivalence. This playful tension, perpetually in between delight and dismay, drives Flaubert’s language. In *Madame Bovary* the impulse of delight and the darker impulse of dismay are still in exquisite tension. My rendering of the free indirect style had to catch the complexity of that harmony, that psychological harmony.

My reading of *Madame Bovary* was assisted by Joyce and Pound. I had them on my side. Joyce offered me a gentle but persistent linguistic estrangement, a strangeness that runs through his writing sentence by sentence. Translating
Madame Bovary was a glorious (and professionally legitimate) opportunity to play with the English language, to work on the shape of individual sentences, to depart slightly from normal English order, syntax, and lexis. Translating Flaubert I had to make it clear that this was not quite English as we know it. This was English with an elusive but pleasurable supplement to it. English that was going somewhere.

On my desk as I worked, I had with me the three translations that I respected. I didn’t have them open the whole time. They were there, on the desk, temporarily closed, but invitingly available in case of need, with a marker by the relevant passage. Whenever I got stuck I would turn to them, as if consulting a friend. But I knew that if I read them first I wouldn’t be able to invent anything of my own. I had to be careful.

The fact that there were three precursor translations made a big difference. It diffused the aggressiveness that any translator feels against those who have gone before. None of them could be blamed for their alternatives. I discovered a happy plurality of voices available to me. In an emergency I could draw upon two or three precursors, simultaneously, sometimes within a single sentence, making their words my own. It was a most sustaining posthumous conversation.

Baudelaire’s outrageous comments about George Sand also helped me a great deal. Baudelaire denounced Sand’s style as “le style coulant cher aux bourgeois” (“The wretched flowing style so dear to the bourgeois reader”). I wrote that phrase out in large fancy letters and hung it up above my desk while I was translating Madame Bovary.

Flaubert was writing against that “wretched flowing style”, that fluency, that degradation of the written word that he detected all around him in the journalism, in the critical writing, in the fiction of his day. Madame Bovary was written against the grain, against the great tide of unthinking mediocrity. Although it was not written under the sign of an infinite absolute negativity. Flaubert was not —as I now see— a prototype Robbe-Grillet. He was, thank goodness, the reluctant son and heir of Balzac as well as the grandfather of James Joyce.

Practicalities

In my translation. I made it a principle to respect Flaubert’s sentence boundaries. I felt that Gerard Hopkins (1949)¹ made Flaubert flow too swift and

¹ For all quoted translation, see excerpts in Fascicule des textes de référence.
smooth by altering sentence boundaries, by changing psychological verbs such as "songer". Hopkins' translation is a pleasantly readable approximation to Flaubert. I respected that, and yet I wanted something more demanding, more textured.

Sentence boundaries are easy. You can see them. But there were other less tangible boundaries that interested me equally. I mean those boundaries between the real and the imaginary which Flaubert negotiates with such teasing precision. Here was the inner world of the text, the hidden world the translator must strive to enter. Hopkins speeds things up and makes them flow. Alan Russell (1950) is doing something different. Russell has more respect for Flaubert's boundaries and for the peculiarity of his style. Yet when my mother read Russell-Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* she galloped through it in six hours and observed that really it was just like a woman's magazine story. So that for all their virtues, neither Hopkins nor Russell were to be trusted. My translation had not to flow that fast. It had to be disconcertingly slower than was entirely comfortable.

Eleanor Marx's translation (1886) is a very special case. She is well known as the elder daughter of Karl Marx. She turned to the translation of *Madame Bovary* in the years just after her father's death. In some sense, translation was an escape from the kind of intellectual work that would have connected her with her father. Curious to think of the daughter of Karl Marx immersing herself so intimately in the bourgeois world.

Eleanor Marx, as far as I can tell, was bilingual or trilingual. German was spoken at home. English was not her first language. It must have been her third language, after Polish and French. You can tell because she writes English with a perpetual engaging oddity. She escaped the flowing style. Her translation achieves an austere literalism, which I greatly admire. She respects sentence boundaries and she respects the syntactical order of the original. Unfortunately, she mangles the poetic moments. Her translation falls down at those moments where Flaubert has invested, imaginatively, in his subject-matter.

In conclusion, I want to explore a piece of text. It comes from early in the novel, evoking Charles' first meeting with Emma.

Here is my translation:

First they talked about the patient, then the weather, the great frost, the wolves that roamed the fields, at night. Mademoiselle Rouault did not greatly enjoy living in the country, especially now that she was almost entirely responsible for the farm. As the room was slightly cold, she shi-
vered as she ate, showing some of the fullness of her lips which she had a habit of nibbling in moments of silence.
Round her neck was a white collar, turned down. Her black hair, brushed so smooth that each side seemed to be in one piece, was parted in a delicate central line that traced the curve of her skull; and, just revealing the tip of her ear, it coiled at the back into a thick chignon, with a rippling pattern at the temples, something that the country doctor now observed for the first time in his life. Her cheeks were touched with pink. She had, like a man, tucked into the front of her bodice, a tortoiseshell lorgnon.

I want to look at the first two sentences, as if I were about to translate them.

On parla d’abord du malade, puis du temps qu’il faisait, des grands froids, des loups qui couraient les champs, la nuit.

Not exactly dialogue — there is hardly any in the book — this is a catalogue, a prosaic list of the topics that any young man might exchange with any young woman, something out of the Dictionnaire des idées reçues. They speak to each other under the sign of The Typical. Translator beware.

Comme la salle était fraîche, elle grelottait tout en mangeant, ce qui découvrait un peu ses lèvres charnues, qu’elle avait coutume de mordillonner à ses moments de silence.

Mordillonner: Nibbling. I like the sound pattern, the apt touch of innocent infantilism. “Biting” is too emphatic, too masochistic.

What rapt attention to the unconscious bodily subtext of human behaviour. Yet there is no “Emma” in this passage. There is no unifying point, no sense of self, no integral-integrated self beyond the writing. Emma is described in bits and pieces. She is a sequence of attributes. The tender poetry of the thing arises from Charles’ sexualised perception of Emma, from a certain masculine erotic code which is poised ambiguously between culture and biology.

In my translation I wanted to project that sense of Emma as a set of bits and pieces. The crucial word is “découvrait”. In my working notes I recorded six synonymous alternative forms: “emphasising”, “revealing”, “displaying” “baring”, “exposing”, “showing”. I laid them out, stacked up vertically, then left them alone. I came back to this crux only when I had forgotten the French. I chose “showing”, the simplest, the most neutral of my synonyms.

Finally, frivolously, how is one to translate “salle”? It ought to be the simplest
word in the dictionary. Yet it raises problems. Russell (1950) has “living-room”. His word belongs all too obviously to the bourgeois code of Russell’s day. The “living-room” was precisely the place where people gathered around the wireless in the 1950’s. I wanted a different voice for my translation, not the suburban voice of my own childhood but something with a deeper resonance.

My Cheshire grandparents had a best room which was used to entertain guests. They called it “the parlour”. So I chose “parlour”, for its modest gentility.

Here it is, the vast and fascinating problem of multiple cultural reference. The translator must negotiate between the 19th and 21st century, between rural France and rural England. To bring the sense across, into the here and now, for the contemporary reader, that is the task. And then, for all the knowledge it requires, you must do it with the perfect appearance of effortlessness.