Why Emma Bovary Had to Be Killed

Jacques Rancière

At first sight there is something wrong with my title. When you announce that you will give the reason why a person was killed, you take for granted that he or she was killed, that his or her death was a murder. In this case however there exists strong textual evidence against the alleged fact. Even those who have never read *Madame Bovary* know at least one thing: nobody killed Emma, she committed suicide. Those who have read it know that, after absorbing the poison, she took care to write, "No one is guilty. . . ." Therefore the right question apparently reads as follows: *Why did Emma Bovary commit suicide?* The answer to that "right" question is well known: she killed herself because she could not pay her debts. She was indebted because of her extramarital love affairs. And she had love affairs because of the discrepancy between the life she had dreamed of, out of the romances she had read as a schoolgirl in a convent, and the life she had to live as the wife of a poor stubborn doctor in a murky, provincial, small town. In short, her suicide happened to be the last consequence of a chain of causes that reached back to a first mistake: as she had too much imagination, she had mistaken literature for life. Needless to say, it is easy to reach further back and invoke deeper social reasons: inappropriate education, social alienation, male domination, and so on. This is supposed to amount to a *political* account for the suicide.

Clearly enough, if I decided to change the question and ask, against all evidence, why she had to be killed, it is because I was not satisfied with the logic of the answers, not satisfied with the kind of cause-and-effect relation that they implemented as a political account. It seemed to me that they

Unless otherwise noted, translations from French are my own.

Critical Inquiry 34 (Winter 2008)

operated a suspect short circuit between two chains of reasons. On the one hand there are fictional reasons for Emma's suicide. They make the plot itself. So, there is no point in questioning them as such. On the other hand, there are social reasons that can be invoked to account for that fictional necessity. The first problem is that they can be invoked for any other fictional necessity. And they would not be different if the writer had managed to make Emma repent or find an agreement with her creditors. But there is something more to it. The main problem is that when you jump from the fictional reasons to the social, nonfictional reasons, you drop what is in the middle, between fiction and nonfiction: the invention of the fiction itself. You sweep aside what should be elucidated first: why this fiction of "social life"? What does it mean that a character in a book dies because she has read too many books? What does it mean to mistake literature for life? What does it mean in a piece of literature? In short, you discard what is at stake in the construction of the fiction and what might be the true politics of literature. The first reason why Emma Bovary died is that the writer, Gustave Flaubert, decided to write a book about a woman's death. We know that he was not concerned with social issues. Nor was he concerned with morals. His only concern was literature, pure literature. From that point of view, the right question seems to be: what relation can there be between Emma's death and the purity of literature? How does this death matter to that purity?

This is obviously what is encapsulated in my question: Why did Emma Bovary have to be killed?

In order to bring up the issue, we must start from a closer investigation of what is supposed to be Emma's fundamental error: the error of mistaking literature for life. *Madame Bovary* is supposed to be a realistic novel. Now, in real life, it would be hard to find anybody who mistakes literature for life. And even in fiction, where everything is supposed to be possible, it rarely happens, if ever. You can mention Don Quixote. But the fact is that from time to time Don Quixote himself explains to Sancho that they are in a fiction. When it comes to the letter that must be copied out at the next village and brought by Sancho to Dulcinea, while Don Quixote retreats in the desert, Sancho raises an objection: How will he reproduce Don Quixote's signature? Don Quixote tells him not to worry about that: first, Dulcinea does not know Don Quixote's signature; second, she does not know who Don Quixote is; third, she does not even know that she is Dulcinea; and, on top of this, she can't read.

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Emma Bovary is not as keen on paradoxes as Don Quixote. Nevertheless, when she comes upon lyrical verse on the delights of nature and country life, she is fully aware that country life has nothing to do with that idyllic nature. Therefore she drops the book. Emma does not mistake literature for life. She positively wants them to merge into one another. What defines her, as a fictional character, is that she refuses the separation between two kinds of enjoyment: the material enjoyment of material goods and the spiritual enjoyment of art, literature, and ideals. Flaubert characterizes her attitude by two apparently opposed adjectives; she is said to be both *sentimental* and *practically minded.* But there is no contradiction. Sentimentalism and practical-mindedness mean the same thing. The sentimental character wants the pleasures of art and literature to be real, concrete pleasures. He or she wants them to be more than a matter of intellectual contemplation: a source of practical excitement.

The fictional definition of Emma is in keeping with the big concern of the 1850s and 60s that was encapsulated in one word: *excitement.* At that time in France, the diagnosis could be heard everywhere at every time; society suffered from a fatal disease that affected the social order and individual behaviors as well. It had become an unrelenting turmoil of thoughts and desires, appetites and frustrations. In the good old times of monarchy, religion, and aristocracy, there had been a clear, long-standing hierarchy that put every group and every individual in its right place. It gave them a firm footing and limited horizons, which are the conditions of happiness for poor people. Unfortunately that order had been shattered, first by the French Revolution, second by the rise of industrialism, third by the new media—the newspapers, lithographs, and so on, which made words and images, dreams and aspirations, available everywhere to anybody. Society had become a hustle and bustle of free and equal individuals that were dragged together into a ceaseless whirl in search of an excitement that was nothing but the mere internalization of the endless and purposeless agitation of the whole social body.

Such was the discourse of the notables and the learned persons. What must draw our attention is the synonym they gave for that excitement. That synonym was *democracy.* They had first met democracy in the shape of the government of the people, the government of free and equal citizens, where the rulers and the ruled people are one and the same. Needless to say, they had efficiently worked during the French Second Republic (1848–51) to crush the threat of democratic anarchy, at the cost of handing over their own freedom to a new emperor. But it was not enough to crush it by force. They had to annul its political significance, make it a mere sociological phenomenon. Therefore a new democratic ghost was substituted for the older;

political democracy, they said, had been crushed, but there was a new, far more radical uprising of democracy that no police, no army could tear down: the uprising of the multitude of aspirations and desires, cropping up everywhere in all the pores of modern society. To be sure, the idea was not exactly new; Plato had invented it two millennia before by stating that democracy, in fact, was not a form of government but the way of life of those "free" Athenians who cared for nothing except their individual pleasure. The modern antidemocrats translated it into a more dramatic version, as the uprising of the multitude of unleashed social atoms, greedy to enjoy everything that was enjoyable: gold, indeed, and all the things that gold can buy, but also, what was worse, all that gold cannot buy—passions, values, ideals, art, and literature. Such was the big trouble as they saw it. It would be a lesser evil if poor people only wanted to get rich. Poor people are supposed to be "practically minded." But poor people were now taking a new view of what practical-mindedness meant. They wanted to enjoy all that was enjoyable, including ideal pleasures. But they also wanted those ideal pleasures to be *practically enjoyable* ideal pleasures.

For those who come upon Flaubert's book, Emma Bovary is the frightening incarnation of that desire. She craves ideal romance and physical love. She constantly negotiates between material and ideal sources of excitement. When she has resisted her love for Leon, she thinks that she deserves a reward. She buys a piece of furniture. And not any piece of furniture: a gothic prie-dieu. This is what respectable persons perceive as the law of democracy, the law of universal equivalence: anybody can exchange any desire for any other desire. A critic sums it up as follows: "Madame Bovary, this means the pathological overexcitement of senses and imagination in dissatisfied democracy."[1] That would be a good reason for sentencing her to death. But respectable persons are not asked to judge Emma; they are only asked to judge her inventor. The first person who has an interest in killing her is Flaubert. Besides the trial of the writer, there is the trial that the writer mounts against his character. Besides the evil that frightens respectable persons, there is the evil done to literature by Emma, which means the evil that he wants her to do, that he embodies in Emma.

This trial is trickier than the other, since the judge and the executioner are the same person as the inventor of the character; he is also, to a large extent, her accomplice. That complicity shows up clearly if one asks the question: What is the wrong done by Emma to literature? The answer is that it consists in fusing literature and life and making any source of excitement equal to any other. But those features that define her temper and the alleg-

1. Armand de Pontmartin, *Nouvelles Causeries du samedi* (Paris, 1859), p. 315.

edly "democratic" temper are also the features that define the poetics of her inventor and, more widely, those that define literature as a new regime of the art of writing. In fact this is exactly what literature means. Literature is the new art of writing that blurs the distinction between the realm of poetry and the realm of prosaic life. This new art of writing makes any subject matter equal to any other. In the good old times of belles lettres, there was a clear-cut separation between the realm of the poetical and the prose of ordinary life. There were poetic subjects and prosaic subjects, poetic situations and prosaic situations, poetic expressions and prosaic expressions, and so on. The border between the two territories had been drawn long ago by a short statement voiced by Aristotle: poetry is "more philosophical" than history because it deals with combinations of actions, while history deals with "life," where things just happen without necessity, one after the other. Action *versus* life: the formula tied poetical hierarchy to social and political hierarchy. According to the latter, there were, on the one hand, people who acted, who dedicated themselves to the pursuit of great designs or ends and faced the chances and misfortunes inherent to such a pursuit. And there were, on the other hand, people—mostly women—who were satisfied with living, reproducing life, and looking after their living. Now the emergence of literature went along with the collapse of the hierarchical distribution of the sensible that aligned poetic distinctions with the distinction between two kinds of humanity.

There are no noble subjects or ignoble subjects; such was the anti-Aristotelian statement voiced by Flaubert. This means there is no border separating poetic matters from prosaic matters, no border between what belongs to the poetical realm of noble action and what belongs to the territory of prosaic life. This statement is not a personal conviction. It is the principle that constitutes literature as such. Flaubert underlines it as the principle of pure Art; pure Art has it that Art owes no dignity to its subject matters, which means that there is no border between what belongs to Art and what belongs to nonartistic life. Such is the paradox; it is by the same logic that Art now exists in the singular and with a capital *A,* and that no border between art and nonart can exist any more. This is why the champions of the good old belles lettres denounce the complicity between the writer and his character. Just as she embodies the "democratic" equivalence of any source of excitement and any form of pleasure, he embodies the "democratic" equality of any subject with any other subject. Everything is equal for him. He feels just the same about all his characters; he has no personal opinion about any of their deeds. The democratic excitement of the character and the democratic impassibility of the writer are the two sides of the same coin, or two strains of the same disease.

Such is their verdict. Of course, the writer takes a different view of this complicity. As he sets down as the virtue of his art the capacity for making any nonartistic subject artistic, he cannot ignore the flip side of the coin: what's worth for him is worth for Emma too. The literary equality is independent from any political stance in favor of democracy. But it is dependent on a wider redistribution of the sensible, which has it that there is no difference of nature between two humanities, between the men dedicated to noble actions and refined passions and the men and women dedicated to "practical life." The blurring of borders and the leveling of differences that define his new artistic power also define new possibilities of life for anybody. Among the new possibilities available to anybody, there is the possibility of "fusing art and life." Flaubert can make art out of the life of a farmer's daughter to the extent that the farmer's daughter can make art of her life and life out of his art. Before him Balzac had addressed the issue. His novel *The Country Parson* tells the story of the daughter of an illiterate scrap-metal merchant elated by the discovery of literature and the power of the ideal. Balzac was above all concerned with the social aspect of the question; for him the fact that a daughter of the working class could change her life because she had read a book was part of the democratic disease, of the democratic overturning of conditions that had diverted the children of the people from their natural destination. This is why he did not kill his character. Instead he made her the accomplice of a killer.

Flaubert has no such concerns. His only concern is Art. He deals with democracy from the point of view of Art. This means that his concern is to untie the knot that ties artistic equality to that new distribution of the sensible that makes the ideal pleasures available to anybody. From the point of view of Art, the "democratic threat" appears as follows: if the future of Art lies in the equivalence of Art and nonartistic life, and if that equivalence is available to anybody, what remains specific to Art? The new artistic formula might be the death of Art as well. To avoid this consequence, it is necessary to disconnect the two equalities. This means that it is necessary to draw the portrait of the character as the antiartist. There must exist two opposite ways of handling the equivalence of art and nonart. There must be an artistic and a nonartistic way to deal with it, and the character is constructed as the embodiment of the wrong way. The right way, the artistic way, of dealing with the equivalence consists in putting it in the book only, in the book *as a book*. The wrong way, the way of the character, consists in putting that equivalence in real life. This is how the character of the fiction goes astray from the way of the writer. And this is what practical-mindedness means. Emma is practically minded in her view of Art. Art means distinction to her, it means a certain lifestyle. Art has to permeate all the aspects of exis-

tence. Such is the principle of the equivalence between practical-mindedness and sentimentality. To understand this point, let us focus on a short passage that describes Emma's feelings as she attends the Mass in the convent:

> Living among those white-faced women with their rosaries and copper-crosses, never getting away from the stuffy schoolroom atmosphere, she gradually succumbed to the mystic languor exhaled by the perfumes of the altar, the coolness of the holy-water fonts and the radiance of the tapers. Instead of following the Mass, she used to gaze at the azure-bordered religious drawings in her book.[2]

What is at stake here is the distinction between the way of the writer and the way of the character. We must not be mistaken about where the distinction lies; it is unlikely that Flaubert blames Emma for not following the Mass. He too thinks that the "mystic languor" of the perfumes and the azure bordering the drawings are the real content, the real enjoyment of the Holy Mass. He shares, as a writer, the same practice as his character: the practice of undoing an event—here a religious ceremony—into a mere set of sensations and emotions. He lets himself be lulled by the music of his own phrase in the same way that she gets lulled by the "mystic languor" of the altar. He actually treats the whole story of Emma's life and misfortunes as Emma treats the Mass: as a set of sensations and images. Therefore what is wrong with Emma is not the enjoyment of the "mystic languor." Instead it is that Emma does not keep faithful to that mysticism, that she betrays it. She wants to give a concrete figure to the sensations and the images. She wants to solidify them, to incarnate them in real objects and persons. Such is the deadly evil; she sets out to turn the elements of the "mystic languor" into the scenery of her existence and the furniture of her home. This is how he characterizes her: literature means to her a nice blotting pad and an artistic writing case. Art in her life means nice curtains on her windows, paper sconces for the candles, trinkets for her watch, a pair of blue vases on the mantelpiece, an ivory work box with a silver gilt thimble, and so on.

Such is the disease that the pure artist wants to display as the contrary of his art. We can give it its name: the aestheticization of everyday life. The expression does not yet exist at that time for sure. But the concern does. Flaubert utters it very clearly in a letter to Louise Colet: "How many good people who, a century ago, could have lived perfectly without Beaux-Arts now cannot do without mini-statues, mini-music and mini-literature! Take a single case: the ominous proliferation of bad drawings by lithography."[3]

2. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary,* trans. pub. (London, 1995), p.48; hereafter abbreviated *B.*
3. Flaubert, "Lettre à Louise Colet, 29 janvier 1854," *Correspondance,* 3 vols. (Paris, 1980), 2:518.

Flaubert already deals with what Adorno will spell out as the problem of kitsch. Kitsch does not mean bad art, outmoded art. It is true that the kind of art which is available to the poor people is in general the one that the aesthetes have already rejected. But the problem lies deeper. Kitsch in fact means art incorporated into anybody's life, art become part of the scenery and the furnishings of everyday life. In that respect, *Madame Bovary* is the first antikitsch manifesto. The whole plot of the novel is a plot of differentiation where the character does the exact opposite of what the writer does. In a bid to stress the difference, Flaubert sometimes goes overboard on the demonstration, for instance when he scoffs at Emma's literary concerns: "She studied descriptions of furniture in Eugène Sue, and sought in Balzac and George Sand a vicarious gratification of her own desires" (*B,* p.71). Obviously there are easier ways to know about fashionable furniture than reading Eugène Sue's novels. But Flaubert needs for his own sake to construct Emma's wrong or disease as the confusion between literature and furniture. He has to do it even more as he confesses himself to Louise Colet that literature is a compensation for his own dream of "dwelling in marble halls," reclining on "humming bird feather divans," and enjoying "swansdown carpets, ebony chairs and tortoise-shell floors."[4]

This is the point: the temptation of putting art in "real" life has to be singled out in one character and sentenced to death in the figure of that character, the character of the bad artist or the mistaken artist. Emma's death is a literary death. She is sentenced as a bad artist, who handles in the wrong way the equivalence of art and nonart. Art has to be set apart from the aestheticization of life. It is not only a question of preserving Art from vulgar people. Instead it will become more and more a question of preserving it from refined people. Emma's refinement may seem a little primitive. But it will find a new incarnation, thirty years after, in Huysmans's novel *À rebours.* The hero of the novel, Des Esseintes, is the refined man who wants to live surrounded with all the most exquisite refinements of Art, from Mallarmé's verse to exotic plants and perfumes. Thirty years after *À rebours,* Proust will mount the trial of all those men who want Art to charm their life and decorate their home. And he will invent various sentences in order to punish that crime against art and literature. He will marry Swann with the silly demimondaine whom he loves for her resemblance to a figure painted by Botticelli, send Saint-Loup to death at war as a reward for his dreamed epics, and chain up the refined aristocrat Charlus to the "rock of pure matter" in Jupien's brothel.

Such is the war of Art versus aestheticism, a war in which Flaubert is a

4. Flaubert, "Lettre à Louise Colet, 29 janvier 1854," 2:517–518.

forerunner. In order to win that war, it does not suffice that the writer punish his characters. He must also show the right way to achieve what they have missed, namely, the equivalence of art and life. The writer wants the equivalence to be enclosed in the book. What exactly does this mean? The Flaubertian answer is well known. Since the subject makes no difference between the artistic and the nonartistic, there is only one thing that can make that difference: the writing, which he calls the *style.* Style, he says, is an absolute manner of seeing things. That statement must not be misunderstood. Style does not mean the adornment of language that adds the beauty of the words to the description of common people and prosaic situations. If it meant that, there would be no difference between Flaubert and Emma. He would add elegant phrases to vulgar situations in the same way that Emma makes paper sconces for the candles and buys a bunch of trinkets for her watch. Style must do just the opposite: it consists in withdrawing the paper sconces and the trinkets. This is what the "absolute manner of seeing things" means. Emma could have felt it as she enjoyed the "mystic languor" of the Mass. Enjoying the "mystic languor" means enjoying a pure harmony of sensations, disconnected from any function and any story, from any personal feeling and any property of things. The "absolute manner of seeing things" is the manner of seeing things when you are no longer a personal subject, pursuing individual aims. Consequently, it is the manner of seeing them when they are released from all the ties that make them useful or desirable objects. It is the manner of enjoying sensations as pure sensations, disconnected from the sensorium of ordinary experience.

There is one person who could have explained it to Emma. Unfortunately it is the person whom you are not supposed to meet in a convent. It is the Devil. Before writing *Madame Bovary,* Flaubert had written the first version of his *Temptation of Saint Anthony.* The devil that tempted Saint Anthony was much cleverer and much more generous than the old nuns in the convent. He gave him the explanation of "mystic languor" as he dragged him on an aerial journey through space. He made him discover what life truly is when our sensations are released from the chains of individuality. With his help, the saint could discover strange forms of preindividual or impersonal life: "inanimate existences, inert things that seem animal, vegetative souls, statues that dream and landscapes that think."[5] In such a world our mind loses all its conventional bearings. It bursts into atoms of thought that come into unity with things that have themselves burst into a dance of atoms. The Devil reminded the saint that he had already felt that experience of fusion between the inside and the outside: "Often, because of anything

5. Flaubert, *La Tentation de saint Antoine* (Paris, 1910), p. 418.

at all, a drop of water, a shell, a strand of hair, you have stopped short, your eyes fixed and your heart open. The object you were gazing at seemed to encroach upon you, as you bent toward, and new ties were found: you clutched each other, you touched each other by subtle innumerable embraces."[6]

Those "subtle innumerable embraces," those shells, strands of hair, and drops of water, together with sunrays, breaths of air, and grains of sand or dust whipped up by the wind make up the sensory framework of *Madame Bovary.* They are the real *events* of the novel. Every time that something *happens* in the fiction—notably the birth of a love—they are the real content of the event, the real cause of the emotion. Let us remember what happens when Charles first falls for Emma: "The draught beneath the door blew a little dust over the flagstones, and he watched it creep along" (*B,* p.35).

When Emma falls for Rodolphe, she perceives little gleams of gold about his pupils, smells a perfume of lemon and vanilla, and looks at the long plume of dust raised by the stagecoach. And when she first falls for Leon, "weeds streamed out in the limpid water like green wigs tossed away. Now and then some fine-legged insects alighted on the tip of a reed or crawled over a water-lily leaf. The sunshine darted its rays through the little blue bubbles on the wavelets that kept forming and breaking" (*B,* p.107).

This is what happens: "little blue bubbles" on wavelets in the sunshine, or swirls of dust raised by the wind. This is what the characters feel and what makes them happy: a pure flood of sensations. Much later, the Proustian narrator will evoke the message addressed by the sensation to the person that it strikes, a message that he will sum up as follows: "Try to solve the riddle of happiness which I set you."[7] But the Flaubertian characters don't solve the riddle. They don't even understand what kind of happiness can be enclosed in swirls of dust and bubbles on wavelets. They want those microevents to be linked together in a real plot. They want the swirls and bubbles to be turned into properties of real things that can be desired and possessed, into features of individuals that they can love and who can love them. From the point of view of the writer, they don't mistake art for life. They mistake one art for another and one life for another. They mistake one art for another; this means that they are still trapped in the old poetics with its combinations of actions, its characters envisioning great ends, its feelings related to the qualities of persons, its noble passions opposed to everyday experience, and so on. They are out of step with the new poetics that has shattered the hierarchical poetics of action in favor of an "egali-

6. Ibid., p. 417.
7. Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu,* 3 vols. (Paris, 1954), 3:867.

tarian" poetics of life. This also means that they mistake one life for another. They still perceive a world of subjects and predicates, things and qualities, wills, ends and means. They think that things and persons have qualities that individualize them and make them desirable and enjoyable. In short, they think that life is defined by aims and purposes. They have not listened to the lesson of the Devil: life has no purpose. It is an eternal flood of atoms that keeps doing and undoing in new configurations. Much later, a philosopher fond of literature, Gilles Deleuze, will call such configurations haecceities. This is how he presents them in *A Thousand Plateaus:*

> A season, a winter, a summer, an hour, a date have a perfect individuality lacking nothing, even though this individuality is different from that of a thing or a subject. They are haecceities in the sense that they consist entirely of relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be affected.[8]

The decisive events of *Madame Bovary* are made of such relations of movement and rest. Their concatenation shows us what true life is: an impersonal flood of haecceities. Literature tells the truth and makes us enjoy it to the extent that it releases those haecceities from the chains of individualization and objectification. This is the right way of handling the equivalence of art and life. This is what literature has to do according to Flaubert and what he does in writing the novel. He separates his way from the way of the character by dealing in an opposite manner with the same events. Emma reinscribes the haecceities as qualities of things and persons; hence she reinscribes them in the turmoil of appetites and frustrations. Flaubert does the contrary: he extracts the impersonal haecceities from the personal appetites and frustrations. He hollows out within the narration of her desires and disillusions what he calls "small apertures" through which we "glimpse abysses."[9] He makes us feel the music of the impersonal, the music of true life, through the noise of her misfortunes. Phrase after phrase, he inscribes the difference of literature as a difference between two equivalences. He opposes to the equal right of any individual to any enjoyment the true enjoyment of the equality between preindividual haecceities. It is not a matter of personal philosophy. It is not a personal matter at all. It is the task of literature, as a new regime of writing, to inscribe the difference between two ways of making art similar to nonart. All the difference lies in the manner of grasping the microevents that weave the impersonal fabric

8. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* trans. Brian Massumi, vol. 2 of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* trans. Massumi et al. (Minneapolis, 1987), p. 261.

9. Flaubert, "Lettre à Louise Colet, 26 août 1853," *Correspondance,* 2:417.

upon which "personal" experience draws its plots. You can either tie them within the plot of a subject of desire—which is the way of the character—or weave out of them the fabric of an impersonal sensory life—which is the way of the artist.

Flaubert makes the difference without spelling out what he does, by merely opposing the impersonal respiration of the phrase to the fictional content of the novel. He can do so because he has pulled himself, as a writer, out of the story. Half a century later, Proust will take a more radical view of the problem. By identifying the narrator with the main character of the story, he will identify the fictional plot with the literary plot. And he will encapsulate the whole matter in the interpretation of one single perceptive event: a moving patch of color on a seashore. What the character has seen on the beach of Balbec is the patch made by a small group of young girls—or, rather, less and more than young girls: a collective being made of independent limbs; a pallid oval; black or green eyes, or rings of mica; a polo cap above pink cheeks; a bicycle; golf clubs; a swing of the hips; one or two phrases grasped in passing; and so on. From this point on, there are two ways of dealing with the mobile cluster of sensation. There is the way chosen by the narrator. He turns the shifting outlines of the moving stain into individual figures, and he elects among them the unique figure of the object of love, namely, Albertine. He is carried along with the desire to possess all the worlds that glitter on the rings of mica of her eyes, all the worlds she has crossed, all the worlds into which she may flee him and will indeed flee him. Then there is the opposite way of the writer. In this course he makes the "fluid, collective and mobile beauty" of the patch still more fluid, more collective, more mobile. He makes the young girls more unattainable, more inhuman by throwing them on the big wheel of metaphors where they travel through all the reigns of nature and the forms of art, becoming in turn a flock of gulls performing an enigmatic parade on the sand, a madrepore, a luminous comet, an Arabian king in Gozzoli's painting of the Epiphany, an appearance of statues exposed to the sunshine on a Grecian shore, and a bower of Pennsylvania roses on a cliff, a bower

> between whose blooms is contained the whole tract of ocean crossed by some steamer, so slow in gliding along the blue, horizontal line that stretches from one stem to the next, that an idle butterfly, dawdling in the cup of a flower which the ship's hull has long since passed, can wait, before flying off in time to arrive before it, until nothing but the tiniest chink of blue still separates the prow from the first petal of the flower towards which it is steering.[10]

10. Proust, *Within a Budding Grove,* vol. 3 of *Remembrance of Things Past,* trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York, 1981), p.856.

One has to choose between two stories: the love story with Albertine *or* the story of the speed race between a butterfly and a steamer between two roses. One has to choose, but the character will always make the wrong choice. Otherwise he would no more be a fictional character; he would be a writer. But Proust is a little more generous than Flaubert, or a bit more of a dialectician. He offers the character the chance of becoming a writer. The pain that the character has suffered because of his wrong choice can be turned into a benefit: if he loses Albertine, he may end up understanding the right way of looking at a patch on a seashore. He may realize the right identity of life and literature: literature is the true life, it is truly lived life. But he has to lose her for that, to lose her truly, which supposes that she die as individuality, as a "living" person. The object of love has to die, to die *truly,* in order that the illusion of life, of individuality, is destroyed. The narrator states it with a little reluctance. He understands that the grief that he has suffered because of his mistake benefits him at the end. He had to go through that experience in order to gain the health of the writer, the health of he who knows that the supreme truth of life lies in art. Nevertheless he feels a little reluctant to admit the sacrifice that it demands to the object of love. This is how he expresses it: "All those men and women who revealed some truth to me and who were now no more appeared again before me, and it seemed as though they had lived a life that had profited only myself, as though they had died for me."[11]

What justifies this killing is that it is not a mere matter of selfish profit. Nor is it only a question of drawing the border that gives Art its dignity. It is a matter of truth, which is also a matter of health. From the time of Flaubert to the time of Proust, literature became more and more a matter of health. If it is true life, it is because it cures the diseases that are brought about by the forces that threaten life. Those forces are two in number. As for the first one, it is an old affair. That which threatens life is *words.* Words tear life away from its natural destination. It is what happens when common people, who should care only for living and reproducing life, get elated by such words as *liberty* and *equality* and set out to have their say about matters of government, which are none of their business. It is also what happens when young girls like Emma, who are destined to family and country life, get involved in the deadly pursuit of what is meant by such words as *bliss, felicity,* or *ecstasy.*

This is an old affair that deals with the good order of family and society. But there is a new danger about which the learned persons get increasingly anxious at the time of Flaubert; life is threatened by a new enemy: *will.* In

11. Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu,* 3:902.

Balzac's *The Wild Ass's Skin,* this danger is bluntly stated by the old antique dealer who gives the skin to the hero. He says to him: "Two words express all the forms that these two causes of death can assume: will and power . . . The exercise of the will consumes us; the exercise of power destroys us. But the pursuit of knowledge leaves our infirm constitution in a state of perpetual calm."[12] What the English substantive *power* actually translates is the French verb *pouvoir.* This may be seen as an overstatement. But even the overstatement points to the core of the message. It tells us that men and women suffer because they want, because they take advantage of the availability of words and images to keep constructing objects of desire: goods to consume, ends to achieve, persons to conquer. . . . Literature emerged as the voice of this new anxiety. I don't mean just that literature expressed it. I mean that it gave this anxiety a voice; it gave it a frame. Literature emerged as the dismissal of the old poetic of action. It was committed to life, to the interpretation of what life means. It was committed to the demonstration and possibly the cure of the diseases generated by the misinterpretations of life. For Flaubert and Proust the cause of the disease is the wrong interpretation of sensation—of the swirls of dust, bubbles of water, and patches of color. It is their solidification as objects of desire and love—as causes of pain. This diagnosis stands close to a notion, which ascended between the time of Flaubert and the time of Proust and seems to name the disease literature is about. This name is hysteria.

Hysteria is a clinical term that underwent a radical shift during the second half of the nineteenth century, as what was considered an organic feminine disease became a psychic disease common to both sexes. But the history of that shift was not only a matter of medical science. Before becoming the name of a peculiar psychic disease in psychoanalysis, the name *hysteria* was circulated between science and literature, science and opinion, opinion and literature. It was circulated as a general notion designating the way in which bodies suffer from a pain that has no organic cause but is provoked by an "excess" of thought. As such, the word *hysteria* became an approximate synonym for the "excitement" caused by the excessive availability of words, thoughts, and images that was supposed to be inherent to modern life. Scientists would give a precise clinical signification to that vague notion, but literature purported to be itself a kind of clinical science. It proposed a coherent idea of that which caused hysteria, the solidification of the fleeting impersonal configurations of sensations into qualities of subjects and objects of desire and possession. And it proposed its own cure for the disease. It contended that the true sense of life—literary health—could be gained by splintering those solid qualities and returning them to the

12. Honoré de Balzac, *The Wild Ass's Skin,* trans. Herbert J. Hunt (London, 1977), p. 52.

identity of particles whipped by the impersonal flood. In that sense "literary health" stands close to another, opposed, disease, which is called schizophrenia. In the literary cure, the writer plays the part of the healthy schizophrenic. He unbinds the deadly connection of an apparition on a beach from the idea of individuality and the dream of love. He allows the patch of color to glide on the line that makes it become a flock of gulls, an assembly of Greek statues, or a bower of Pennsylvania roses. This is what his schizophrenia means.

It is a well-controlled schizophrenia indeed. The schizophrenic writer is a good doctor. He knows how to link the split elements. He knows the laws of literary metaphorization, which, as Proust claimed, obey the same sort of rationality as the scientific laws of nature. Moreover, he remains cognizant of the old Aristotelian poetics which turns ignorance into knowledge through peripeteia and recognition. Thus he can cure the hysterics at the cost of having some of them die. This means that he needs the hysteric for his own schizophrenic health, which means the health of literature. He does not only need the hysteric as the doctor needs a patient. He also needs him or her, he needs the fiction of his or her cure, in order to separate healthy literary schizophrenia from true schizophrenia. He releases the swirls and bubbles of impersonal, preindividual life, but he does not let himself be split up by them. The plot of the hysteric allows him to make the difference between healthy schizophrenia and real schizophrenia.

This is what is clearly taught to us by another novel, another fiction about the relation between literature and schizophrenia, namely, *The Waves.* We all know how Virginia Woolf in her novel split the identity of the individual into six characters, who embody six ways of dealing with sensation. But it is obvious that there are two characters whose significance outweighs the four others. They are the two characters that stand at the two extremities of the chain. The first one is Bernard, the character who cannot help identifying, who cannot help linking a sensation, a moment, or a word with another. The second one is Rhoda who, on the contrary, is unable to fix identities, unable to link a moment with the following one. In a sense this couple still embodies the couple of the writer and the character. But the distribution of the parts has changed. What Rhoda wants—and what defines her disease—is precisely what the schizophrenic writer proposed as a cure: breaking away from "the insanity of personal existence," spreading in wider and wider circles of understanding that may at last embrace the entire world. She dreams that "we might blow so vast a bubble that the sun might set and rise in it and we might take the blue of midday and the black of midnight and be cast off and escape from here and now."[13] What Rhoda is

13. Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York, 1931), p. 224.

dreaming of is exactly what Flaubert's Devil taught to Saint Anthony: to break the fences of individual subjectivity and embrace the haecceities of impersonal life. What she feels is the same atmosphere that Flaubert deploys around his characters but that they are unable to perceive. In a sense, Rhoda is cured of the disease that prevented Emma from choosing the true enjoyment.

But Woolf can no longer play the part of the healthy schizophrenic writer. She knows too well what schizophrenia means. She knows what the fairy dream of free association between patches of colors, swirls of dust, and bubbles of water means. It means being truly split up. She knows that the impression does not *write* in us, as it does in Proust's *Time Regained.* It only hurts and wounds us. And it condemns to death as well. Rhoda dies as well as Emma and Albertine. But she dies in a very strange way: no debts, no adultery, and no poison. Nor does she fall from any horse. She dies in one sentence, a very short sentence uttered by Bernard: "But now Percival is dead, and Rhoda is dead."[14] He says it in passing with no explanation. We know about Percival's death. He fell from a horse, just like Albertine. After all, he was nothing but their hysterical fantasy. But what about Rhoda? It is the first time that we are told about her death. And we shall know nothing more. She simply vanishes. She dies as the impossible figure of the writer as a healthy schizophrenic. She dies as the one who has the eye of the writer, the senses of the writer, but who cannot write precisely because of this. Therefore there can be no fiction of her death, no lesson from her death. She only dies in the words of Bernard who is the healthy—the too healthy—man who has to write the story in the place of the schizophrenic. Such is the conclusion that the writer has to draw if he or she takes the matter of schizophrenia seriously. This also means that the death of the character can still save the narrator. But it can no longer save the writer.

14. Ibid., p. 288.