

JEAN AMÉRY & ADRIAN WEST

From *Charles Bovary, Landarzt: Porträt eines einfachen Mannes*
(Charles Bovary, Country Doctor: Portrait of a Common Man, 1978)

Translator's Note: It is doubtful anyone believes, despite protestations to the contrary, that life and art are truly separable: that Nabokov's interest in young women was purely aesthetic or that Kafka's traumatic engagement to Felice Bauer, in the presence of his parents and sisters, had no influence on his work's minatory, juridical character. More likely, the idea of the autonomy of the work of art reflect writers' discomfort with excessive scrutiny and intellectual lassitude on the part of critics for whom the rehashing of plot turns, the exploitation of whatever intuition attends upon the gluttonous consumption of novel after novel, and the indiscriminate application of a startlingly constrained range of adjectives—brave, bold, lucid, wooden—turns out to be a more congenial pastime than an engagement with theoretical disciplines that might yield more robust or original interpretations.

It may be the purely aesthetic approach only suffices for writers of limited interest, and is only a more complex and ritualized manner of expressing likes and dislikes. In any case, Jean Améry's concern with Gustave Flaubert is of an entirely other order. Situated at the shipwreck of the existentialist ideal of the individual, which proves, when trimmed of its exponents' lofty rhetoric and a certain hardly explicable lurid glamor, barely to have transcended the Kantian idea of the sovereign moral subject, Améry's philosophy is that of a man who hung by his shoulders until they tore from their sockets, who was imprisoned, starved, and enslaved, who had intimate acquaintance with freedom's brute physical limits. A man therefore suited to compassion for the doomed husband of Gustave Flaubert's immortal heroine, Emma Bovary,

whose stolid benevolence is repaid by a series of mounting torments that inspire as much mirth as pity. Why did Flaubert choose to treat him thus? Might he have been wrong to do so? If so, is one not obliged to say a word in Charles Bovary's defense?

Responding in the affirmative, Améry approaches Flaubert's masterpiece in a manner reminiscent of medieval writers for whom rights of authorship devolved less from originality than from the expression of literary truth in its ideal form; who did not hesitate to "correct" the texts of others to address their moral and aesthetic shortcomings. Améry challenges Flaubert's claim to his own creation, arguing for Charles Bovary's spiritual independence and his concomitant right to dignity. Equal parts novel, essay, biography, and polemic, *Charles Bovary* is an artful work of exceptional intellectual and moral depth. That it has not been published in English seems to confirm a fear that preoccupied Améry in the decade before his suicide, when he finally freed himself from the shackles of hack journalism to write in his own voice and at his own behest: that of becoming a professional victim or, in his words, "Auschwitz-clown." This is the last but perhaps most lingering insult trauma imposes on its victims: their ontological abridgement, the divestment of their right to speak as anything other than a casualty. It is from regard for this right, and for the singular nature of Améry's work, its erudition and its unique sensibility, that I have chosen to undertake the translation excerpted here.

Noch einmal: Was soll das bedeuten, die Wirklichkeit einer Kunstfigur? Nichts, so ließe sich antworten. Der Erfinder einer Gestalt hat willkürlich gewaltet, hat gespielt—das ludische Element einer jeden Kunst, geriere sie sich als "realistisch" oder suggestiv, als démarche, recherché oder als wissenschaftliche Durchleuchtung (wie im Falle Zolas), ist nur selten und unzureichend untersucht worden; wir spielen alle, wer er weiß, ist klug.

So hat Gustave Flaubert gespielt, als er ächzend unter der Last andrängender Wörter die Bovary schrieb; und also wurde weiter Spiel getrieben in diesen Blättern, nach anderen Regeln freilich. Der arme Mann Charles Bovary, dem

alles genommen ward, Liebe, Liebste, Habe, ja sogar die Erinnerung, da er doch erkennen mußte, er habe verkehrt gelebt, wurde von Flaubert als eine quantité négligible behandelt. Hier wird er seiner selbst gewahr als Opfer und Träger der fatalité, als Mensch des Abgrunds. Eine Spiel-Wirklichkeit in ihren imaginierten Sachaussagen (nicht, leider, nach dem Gewicht ihrer Wörter) so gut wie die andere. Kein Maß, kein Wahrheitskriterium, kein haltbarer Realitätsbegriff ist zuhanden. Nicht als ein Axiom: die Frau eines Landarztes läßt sich nacheinander in zwei Liebschaften ein, bringt den Ehemann um Hab und Gut, tötet sich. Das ist alles.

RETURNING TO THE QUESTION: what should we take the reality of a figure from art to signify? Nothing, one might say. Its inventor has acted arbitrarily, has played a game—and the ludic element of every sort of art, whether its intent be “realist” or symbolic, *démarche*, *recherché*, or radioscopia (as in the case of Zola), is only rarely investigated, and then with insufficient rigor; we are all merely playing, and it is wise to recollect it.

And so Gustave Flaubert was playing as he composed *Madame Bovary*, groaning under the crushing weight of words; and the game is played on within its pages, albeit according to a different set of rules. Charles Bovary, the poor man from whom everything was stripped away, love, his beloved, his possessions, and even his memory—for, as he is made to realize, he has lived in error—was treated by Gustave Flaubert as a *quantité négligeable*. He becomes aware of himself as victim and bearer of *fatalité*, as a man of the abyss. It is a game reality, its imaginary precepts (though sadly, not the weight of its words) as valid as any other. No moderation, no criteria of truth, no palpable notion of reality is ready to hand. Nothing more than an axiom: the wife of a country doctor gets caught up in two love affairs, brings her husband to ruin, kills herself. That is everything. The axiom being accepted *tel quel*, the literary operation was not examined in relation to its logical correctness—a narrative game cannot be reduced to mathematical reductionism—but only according to the realism of the course of action, and this in utterly conventional terms, without the least deference to epistemology. (What is “real”? What is “real-

ism”? This was never thought through, but only acquiesced to, relying on the commonsense equilibrium of everyday speech.) And moreover, holding fast to this precarious equilibrium of everyday jargon, accepting without argument the ludic maxims conceived by the bourgeois Flaubert, it is nonetheless permissible to leave this ludic element aside and to question the reality of this country doctor who is now present in the imaginative life of millions and over whom the ownership rights of the bourgeois landowner from Croisset have long expired—even without hope of any “real” insight.

What we see before us is a man from the bourgeois monarchy of Louis-Philippe. The great adventures of the French nation have come to an end; the universal allure of the Revolution, the imperial-pathetic escapade of Napoleon I, have run their course. In Waterloo, the eagle, rapacious hunter and heraldic seal, is beheaded; only once more will he rise from the ashes as the outsized general with the oddly small mouth uttering phrases that are the grandest, most solemn literature, before flying off and vanishing forever in the heavens.

We have a new king, no longer of the empire, but rather of the rich, a bourgeois race that yearns for nothing more than peace and order and prosperity; alongside them lives another group, historically embodied by the silk weavers of Lyon, who vegetate and yearn. After what? Not after liberty, equality, fraternity; only a few crumbs of the wealth achieved by the bourgeoisie of every station. No nation has the strength to strive onward unendingly. Law and statute, which authorize child labor and perpetuate the unequal distribution of goods, nonetheless preserve for the individual a previously inconceivable path upwards. *Enrichissez-vous*: a majestic phrase, for money is freedom and honor, dignity and tranquility. Just as the Grand Emperor thrust a marshal’s baton in every soldier’s knapsack, so the July Monarchy gave to every bourgeois the certified right to be Julien Sorel [protagonist of Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*]. *Quel maréchal, le pauvre Julien!* Had he lived a bit less zealously, he would have been spared his dreadful end; for the bourgeois, forbearance is not granted from above, he has to impose it upon himself. So with the ancestors of Gustave Flaubert, they were people on the lower fringes

of the middle class, veterinarians who elevated their rank, working their way up to be healers of the human body and its complaints. Gustave's grandfather had still looked after livestock, yet his father became the eminent doctor of the Département Seine-Maritime, *docteur*, member of the Academy of Arts and Sciences of Rouen, of the Royal Academy of Medicine. The emblematic restraint of the bourgeois has carte blanche to unseat itself and be replaced by something else. The deliverance can be brutal, as it was for Julien Sorel. In the majority of cases the process was less hasty.

Why did Charles Bovary not follow the trajectory his era had laid before him? Why did he take that dubious leap over the line of demarcation, choosing for his wife Emma Rouault, who by her beauty was *marked* for destiny? For his creator, it was a foregone conclusion. Charles Bovary remains the person presented to us on the novel's very first page: a tubby mediocrity. That he was moreover risible—*ridiculus erat!*—was an additional bit of malice from that incorrigible aesthete, who claimed only to find escape from himself in raging verbal debauchery and in whose bulging eyes the world of the bourgeoisie—from which in reality he never broke free—was a flat caricature; thus the petits bourgeois laugh at themselves, making vapid jokes about cuckolds in the Café du Commerce. They do not like themselves because they do not wish to *be* themselves— and not because they look away when the simple hearts turn out not to be so simple, as they too must long after a few crumbs from the bourgeoisie's wealth! Charles, his creator makes known, was not a bad country doctor, only a mediocre one. Such as might have met with great success, for example, performing a bold operation on a clubfoot. But it was not to be; the omnipotent master willed it otherwise. Charles Bovary had as little sanction to succeed as the two companions Bouvard and Pécuchet, concerning whom it is far from clear why all their lust for learning, their diligence, had to come to nothing. No secret. The haut bourgeois Gustave Flaubert, whose income was secured and who found protection in his father's name against the judges who would ultimately pronounce, as was foreseeable, a *balanced* verdict over his novel, deeply detested the petit bourgeois, the country doctor, whom he had most likely met with or else had heard disparaging remarks about from

his father's lips, even more so than the huddled masses who barely existed for him and about whom it was therefore easy to fabricate tales of simple hearts, stirred and stirring but not obliging any substantive engagement.

Charles, a man of duty, does what he can. Maybe it isn't much—but how much more did the great Doctor Achille-Cléophas Flaubert accomplish? How much was accomplished by his counterpart, Doctor Larivière, forced to admit defeat at Emma's death? For the farm people, Charles's work was one of boundless generosity. He came, and with a stroke of the lancet did away with an abscess. He allayed the difficult hours of the fever-stricken, swathing them in cold compresses. It is true they died nonetheless. But they died as well at the hands of Larivière, just as they meet their deaths under the meticulous care of the medical luminaries of the present day. The poor devil, who even on the first day of school made the sons of the better families erupt in laughter because, stricken with fear and embarrassment, he pronounced his name *Charbovaricharbovaricharbovari*, was not allowed to thrive. Because that is the way the story was conceived. Naturally. But *that it was* conceived in this way is unnatural to the highest degree. The unsavory pleasure taken by the author in this bourgeois tragedy from an era in which, indeed, the bourgeoisie scarcely produced any comedies, devoting themselves rather to the codification in history of their constant upward ascension, reflects Flaubert's profound and sinister predilection for misfortune, which was appealing —so long as he didn't fall victim to it.

This selfsame Charles whom we meet in Flaubert's company can easily be imagined happy: with a buxom wife who would have taken pleasure in the kisses from his fat lips; with Emma, even, had he only been intemperate enough to be give himself over to the role of the passionate lover which in fact he was (albeit, at the poet's behest, only after his wife's death). This is not an absurd idea, nor even a completely unbourgeois one. It is rather that the author never actually troubled himself to engage critically with the bourgeoisie. Nor with historicity. He does not place his novel precisely in time; were there not talk of "the king" here and there, we would never know it was set in the era of Louis-Philippe. It is from this lack of historicity and social

engagement, as well as the unbelievable nature of the country doctor's story, that the temptation arises to fill in with glimmering colors the sharp-edged, caricaturesque contours Flaubert has sketched out. To his character, the poet has refused to concede that existential liberty inscribed in invisible letters in the code of bourgeois society as well as in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. He has denied legitimacy to the bourgeois subject. Because in the end, the latter is not only the prisoner to that duty that Charles Bovary fulfills when he rides out to see his patients, come rain or shine; it also has (because it won't) liberty and dignity, not only with respect to the social ascent that Gustave Flaubert's grandfather and father realized, but also to passion, which Charles, at the behest of Flaubert, suffers from but never fulfills. Gustave Flaubert wanted to confront the reality of this man neither in the belief or superstition of "scientific" insight, nor as a lived subjectivity, having reserved this quality solely for his Emma, who was none other than himself. In place of analysis, which is subsumed completely into a poetic metaphor bestowed only upon the inner life of Emma, we have *la fatalité*—as if Charles had not also, in principal, *been able to do something other than what he was condemned to*, as if he had not also been, as man and bourgeois, free within the confines of his situation.

"Look, Emma, you were not at Mlle. Lempereur's, Emma! I'm onto you, and I will strike you dead with my own two hands, you and your lover, if you don't break with that mendacious scoundrel who in any case wouldn't think twice about leaving you in the lurch!"

It is conceivable.

"Enough of these riding excursions with the imposter from La Huchette. Let him debauch himself with his degenerate floozies from Paris. For the wife of Monsieur, his false Excellency, the farmer's daughter from Rouault isn't good enough. Well she is too good and too precious to be his whore."

This is not inconceivable, rather the opposite: It suggests itself. For not even the petit bourgeois from the time after the revolution would truckle under slavishly before someone who happened to live in a castle, go hunting, and dress in finery.

The ball in Vaubyessard at the home of the Marquis d'Andervilliers:

“My trouser straps will be uncomfortable for dancing. But no objections, my love! I will dance, as guest and as the doctor who freed the Marquis from an agonizing abscess in his high-born mouth with a stroke of my lancet, and if I step on the train of some countess, what of it? It won't be the end of the world.

“The operation turned out badly—and so? More than once in Rouen I've seen a patient meet his end in the operating room under the well-groomed hands of Dr. Achille-Cléophas Flaubert. That is how it goes in our line of work, which you don't know a damned thing about. One time you get lucky, the next you don't, that's it. So undress and lie down next to me, and I will demand my conjugal right, just as I perform my own marital duties, being a sound husband and provider. Not a word more! Unless you want a thunderstorm to break out in this house that will drown out the wails of poor Hippolyte. My father was an army surgeon under the Great Emperor, he could saw away at a Christian soldier like he was tearing into a plank of wood, get that into your head once and for all!”

All this can be conceived, from the ludic perspective, as the reality of Charles Bovary, and is no less legitimate than the woebegone failure we are acquainted with. No fool is *only* a fool, petrified as such and beyond redemption in his foolishness. Even supposing that Charles Bovary *were* shackled to his benevolent stupidity, failing to search for the way out that was due to him by his rights as a citizen, still, the *duty* he carried out every day by the sweat of his brow should have, ought to have, brought him greater respect. The merit and wellbeing of the bourgeoisie did not represent an irresolvable contradiction, and the second was not always simply a veneer to cover up the absence of the first. Not to recognize the universality of the values of the bourgeois form of life, even where the particular interests of the bourgeois seem to exceed themselves, is an error that may be overlooked in the case of Marxist-dialectical speculations, which in the Hegelian triads of their hurried steps toward the vanishing point of complete human freedom are bound to skip awkwardly over so much that lies in their way, but not for the son of a

bourgeois who rigs his exquisite game from a position of wealth and favor. Such labors of reverie are only truly good and beautiful when their reality is not merely lexical, but also societal and moral: an acknowledgement of essences and their overarching reality. There is thus more human substance in [Schiller's] bourgeois tragedy *Intrigue and Love* than in the anti-bourgeois drama *Madame Bovary*. The reality of Luise Millerin, with all the pallor of the bedroom of the woman drinking her lemonade and all the pathos of the father stroking his violin, is of an order of brilliance and penetration far higher than the reality of Charles, Flaubert's plaything.

Translated by Adrian West