Madame Bovary and *The Man Who Loved Children*

There are some interesting similarities between Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) and Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children* (1966), both in their major characters and in their exploration of the ways in which people who can use language effectively come to dominate those who cannot.

The lives of Emma Bovary and Henrietta Pollit, both romantic, highly emotional women, follow a familiar pattern: trapped in unhappy marriages, both come to loathe their husbands; both have love affairs; in both cases, suicide by poisoning is precipitated by despair, accumulated debts, and the defection of a lover. Homais[1] and Sam Pollit, Emma's and Henny's male antagonists, follow a complementary pattern. Dogmatic, insensitive and articulate, these men thrive in the very environments which to Emma and Henny are unbearably sordid.

Both Homais and Sam are compulsive talkers, who gratify their ravenous egos through lecturing. Quasi-scientific vocations confer on them a kind of linguistic invulnerability, and their unsophisticated listeners are unable to perceive the hollowness of their platitudes and the questionable validity of their "scientific" explanations. Their vast self-esteem is reflected in a grotesquely inflated verbal style, revealed in all its absurd pomposity in the articles Homais writes for the town newspaper. Chronicling Dr. Bovary's ill-fated operation on the stable-boy's clubfoot, the pharmacist brings forth his most elaborate stylistic embellishments: "Honneur donc aux savants généreux! Honneur à ces esprits infatigables qui consacrent leurs veilles à l'amélioration ou bien au soulagement de leur espèce! Honneur! trois fois honneur!"[2] The agricultural fair inspires him to even more ludicrously inappropriate excesses of anaphora and Latinate diction: "Pourquoi ces festons, ces fleurs, ces guirlandes? Où courait cette foule, comme les flots d'une mer en furie, sous les torrents d'un soleil tropical qui répandait sa chaleur sur nos guérets?" *(MB,* p. 212).

Sam Pollit's private world is fashioned with similar verbal tools. Like Homais, he luxuriates in aphorisms and sententious paraphrases of famous authors, particularly those which embody ennobling, if somewhat vague, sentiments: "Books are sacred to me . . . who would hurt them, would hurt a human being,"[3] and "The laws of nature are few, and she follows them inevitably" *(MLC,* p. 282). Sam never limits himself to one word when there is a chance of using three or four: "Who tarnishes, assaults, threatens or hates the spirit of man is guilty of a crime" *(MLC,* p. 126); and he outdoes Homais in his fondness for superlatives: "I love my children as no man ever loved his before" *(MLC,* p. 135). Sam's eloquence serves him well, however; in the face of personal disaster—the loss of his house and job, scandalous stories about his wife's adultery—he is able to emerge with ego unscathed by taking refuge in his own verbiage, and appropriately finds a job on his own radio talk show.

The women, of course, have none of the impressive verbal resources available to the men. Although Emma Bovary's private world of romantic

[1]Of several men who act as Emma's foils, Homais is most conspicuous because of the care with which Flaubert parallels his rise to success with Emma's decline.

[2]*Oeuvres Completes de Gustave Flaubert* (Paris: Louis Conard, 1930), I, p. 247. Hereafter cited in the text by page number after the abbreviation *MB.*

[3]Christina Stead, *The Man Who Loved Children* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 15. Hereafter cited in the text by page number after the abbreviation *MLC.*

adventure is fully as cliché-ridden and as remote from reality as Homais's world of provincial glory and scientific progress,[4] Emma's is of necessity a private and illicit world, for she is a married woman living in a small town and the traditions of *amour courtois* require that her passions be secret. None of the other characters in *Madame Bovary,* not even Emma's lovers, has any idea of the pervasiveness of her romantic fantasies; her daily conversation is as ordinary and prosaic as her neighbors' and gives no inkling of the grandeur of her imaginings. Since words are continually defined through use, the fact that Emma has no one to talk to results in a sense of verbal uncertainty. At the beginning of her marriage, for example, we learn that she tried without success to find out exactly what was meant in life by the words "félicité," "passion," and "ivresse" *(MB,* p. 47), which had seemed so beautiful to her in books.

Henrietta Pollit, like Emma, becomes an outsider, verbally as well as physically: she withdraws to her room and refuses to speak to Sam, communicating with him by letter or sending messages through their children. She dissipates her energies in furious, indiscriminate outbursts against even those who, like Louisa, her stepdaughter, are her natural allies.

Recognizing their own powerlessness, Emma and Henny never challenge the men on their own intellectual ground. They tacitly acknowledge that significant expression belongs to the masculine world from which they are excluded. Unequipped by education and temperament to combat the verbal and intellectual tyranny of men, Emma and Henny withdraw, become increasingly isolated and finally commit suicide.

In both novels, the women's suicides reveal the moral obtuseness of their male antagonists and the frightening effectiveness of their verbal domination. Unmoved by the news that Emma has poisoned herself, Homais discourses on causes and effects and has a handy cliché with which to confront tragic experience: "Le néant n'épouvante pas un philosophe" *(MB,* p. 457). Sam's reaction to Henny's suicide is simply denial. When Louisa explains that she had intended to poison both her parents, and that her mother "seemed to know," Sam simply dismisses her statement as "a melodramatic lie" *(MLC,* p. 487), the outcome of "a stupid adolescent crisis" *(MLC,* p. 489), and the next morning he is his jolly self, apparently free of guilt and suffering.

In the final chapter of *Madame Bovary,* the sea of banality and linguistic dislocation, symbolized by the worldly triumph of Homais, rolls on unchecked. "Public language," lies, and clichés prevail. In *The Man Who Loved Children,* however, there are survivors. As Henny declines, the Pollit children, particularly Louisa, begin to rebel against their father's domination. Their rebellion takes the form of a battle over language, as the children, who for so long listened in uncritical attention to Sam's lectures, begin to analyze them. Ernie, for example, thinking about one of Sam's typical homilies on money, suddenly perceives its hypocrisy and its political function. But it is Louisa whose moral and intellectual growth leads to the most far-reaching challenge to her father's rule. An avid reader and writer, she discovers in literature analogies to her experience, finds words for her feelings, and is ultimately able to "break Sam's monopoly on language."[5]

[4]Leo Bersani discusses Flaubert's obsession with and distrust of language in his introduction to Lowell Bair's translation of *Madame Bovary* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), pp. xiii-xviii.

[5]Graham Burns develops this point in "The Moral Design of *The Man Who Loved Children,*" *The Critical Review* (Melbourne), 14 (1971), 50.

Both *Madame Bovary* and *The Man Who Loved Children* explore the lives of women who suffer from intellectual and verbal poverty. Emma and Henny are unable to perceive the hollowness of the language of wisdom and significance to which Homais and Sam lay claim. Only Louisa comes to understand that the platitudinous language of her father is a vehicle of deception and self-aggrandizement, a perversion of true intellectual discourse.

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Dickens's Phenomenological Reality

One does not have to accept the phenomenological nature of all perceived reality—although I think I might—to recognize that the "reality" we experience in works of literature can be so described: "It is a commonplace of phenomenology that any given act of consciousness is a highly complex and highly structured *synthesis* of elements and 'forms' which, though they can be isolated for purposes of analysis, are given together inseparably in the united whole which is an actual act of consciousness. Elements of 'the imaginary,' of 'the fictive,' of 'the past,' of 'the historical,' of 'the cultural,' of 'the ideal,' surround and are inextricably *given with* any complete act of perception, not to mention the qualities of feeling, mood, volition, or emotion such an act may contain as well."[1] So much so, in fact, that any thorough and sensitive reader or critic might respond to such formulations much as M. Jourdain took the news that he had been talking prose all his life. Or, as Merleau-Ponty says, get the impression "not so much of encountering a new philosophy as of recognizing what they had been waiting for."[2] Such recognition has by now found a home even in the pages of *PMLA*.[3]

Five recent interpretations of the reality in/of Dickens's fiction show the range and limits of this literary "reality."[4] All five of these books, even Slater's, show how we could experience Dickens's writings, what forms our acts of consciousness toward them could take.

[1]James M. Edie, "William James on the Structure of Experience," *New Essays in Phenomenology* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), p. 235.

[2]Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "What Is Phenomenology?" in *European Literary Theory and Practice*, ed. Vernon W. Gras (New York: Dell, 1973), p. 70.

[3]See, for example, Thomas E. Lewis, "Notes Toward a Theory of the Referent," *PMLA*, 94 (May 1979), 459-75.

[4]Robert Newsom, *Dickens on the Romantic Side of Familiar Things* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); Barry Westburg, *The Confessional Fictions of Charles Dickens* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1977); John Romano, *Dickens and Reality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978); Michael Slater, ed., *Dickens on America and the Americans* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978); Michael Steig, *Dickens and Phiz* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).