

Michal Peled Ginsburg

FLAUBERT WRITING: A STUDY IN NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

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Reviewed by Graham Falconer

The starting point of Michal Ginsburg's rereading of Flaubert is the halting, stammering quality of the early works like *Mémoires d'un fou*, a hesitancy attributable not so much to inexperience or the posturings of Romantic irony as to an inherent conflict between the desire to narrate and the desire for self-knowledge. Flaubertian narrative reveals a built-in need for repetition and pattern which, in Ginsburg's attractive thesis, is at odds with the interest of the characters, who can only achieve identity by means of closure and paradigmatic labeling (Emma as dreamer, Frédéric as "velléitaire," Félicité as victim and so on). The narrative strategies of the subtitle are therefore ways of getting round the dilemma inherent in the very act of representing the self. Since the fictional worlds, whether in the imagination of the reader or in the lively imagining of the characters, are nothing but forms of self-projection, and since there is no reliable narrative presence guaranteeing truth or meaning, the characters tend to be caught between a distorting narcissism and suicidal self-projection. As for the formal patterns (such as the binary or ternary oppositions in which several generations of critics found solace and security), detailed textual analysis reveals them to be rather porous vessels, unlikely repositories of either truth or beauty.

Even from this sketchy summary, it will be apparent that the true ancestor of Michal Ginsburg's perceptive study, despite the proper obeisances made in her introduction to Lacan, Derrida, and Barthes, is the Sartre of *L'Idiot de la famille*. What, in brief—unlike Sartre, she is mercifully brief and admirably clear—happens to the self when it is put into narrative? From the opening paragraphs of *Mémoires d'un fou* to the epistemological doubts that assail Bouvard and Pécuchet as they grapple with the life of the Duc d'Angoulême, Flaubert's novels consistently remind us that the problematic status of biography (and of the sister art of autobiography) is a central issue in any discussion of what philosophers and historians of art refer to as the crisis of representation.

Inevitably, when matters of such complexity are addressed in a book of 200 pages covering the entire oeuvre, some stages of the argument are more convincing than others. I, for one, would have appreciated a much fuller explanation of the term "interest" used to contrast the conflicting claims of character and story. That it is in a character's interest to avoid distortion of self-effacement seems obvious; but it is by no means as clear why the narrator's interest is to narrate, to go on telling the story, since one might equally well assert, with a great deal of formalist analysis in support, that it is in the narrator's interest to "get to the point," to achieve closure and, thereby, meaning. The author is occasionally guilty of bending the text to suit her thesis, both in matters of detail and in more general assertions: to state that "Charles (Bovary) is not present at the very beginning of the narration" (100) may be a mere slip of the pen, but to claim that Flaubert's works as a whole lack a sense of closure flies in the face of

what many articulate readers have discovered in *Madame Bovary* and at least two of the *Trois Contes*. Other old-timers such as the present writer will miss the almost complete lack of French in the quotations, perhaps reflecting a publisher's decision rather than authorial preference (page references to "L'Intégrale" edition facilitate access to the original). Above all, in an argument built almost entirely around the metaphor of the *impasse*, one misses any sustained estimate of how the various strategies that Flaubert devised to circumvent the problem of narrating the self without either distorting it or destroying it can be regarded as successful. At no point is the matter of why one might actually enjoy such novels and short stories even alluded to.

Still, while she will make few converts, Professor Ginsburg has given specialists a great deal to think about. On the whole, this seems to me the best book on Flaubert in English since Jonathan Culler's *Uses of Uncertainty* (1974).