Flaubert’s realism is a topic that has been somewhat neglected of late—for a variety of reasons that at least deserve some reflection. First, though Madame Bovary remains the most widely read and studied of his novels, it would be fair to say, I think, that for critics of the last thirty years Bouvard et Pécuchet has become paradigmatic for Flaubert—as of course it is—and that stripped-down model of writerly activity, which centers the novel on the circulation of anonymous discourses, can lead one to neglect the extensive descriptions, analyses, and reflections that make up so much of Madame Bovary. Consider this passage.

D’ailleurs, il [Léon] allait devenir premier clerc: c’était le moment d’être sérieux. Aussi renonçait-il à la flûte, aux sentiments exaltés, à l’imagination; —car tout bourgeois, dans l’échauffement de sa jeunesse, ne fût-ce qu’un jour, une minute, s’est cru capable d’immenses passions, de hautes entreprises. Le plus médiocre libertin a rêvé des sultanes; chaque notaire porte en soi les débris d’un poète.

Il s’ennuyait maintenant lorsque Emma, tout à coup, sanglotait sur sa poitrine; et son coeur, comme les gens qui ne peuvent endurer qu’une certaine dose de musique, s’assoupissait d’indifférence au vacarme d’un amour dont il ne distinguait plus les délicatesses. (III.6, 296)¹

I quote these sentences to emphasize that moral pronouncements and analytic reflections which purport to tell us about the world coexist with the more famous style indirect libre which presents the thoughts or discourse of a character or a social perspective.

A second reason for the neglect of realism in Flaubert might be the

¹References to Madame Bovary cite part and chapter numbers followed by the page number in C. Gothot-Mersch’s Classiques Garnier edition.

ambiguity of the notion of realism itself: does it designate conformity with codes of verisimilitude or, on the contrary, what breaks with the déjá lu, vu, vécu? Finally, there is the fact, whose significance is difficult to estimate, that if realism entails a mimetic relationship to the social, the analysis of realism is likely to be much less interesting and rewarding to sophisticated critics than, say, the exploration of intertextual relationships or the discovery of complex internal patterns and homologies. At a conference on Flaubert’s realism in September 2006, which Barbara Vinken organized and which Jacques Neefs, Marc de Biasi and I attended, the participants got most exited, I believe, about a paper which developed an intricate argument about the relations between Madame Bovary and Notre Dame de Paris, highlighting that echoing relationship already present in the two titles (madAME boVARY, notre DAME de pARIS) and figurations of spiders, weaving, webs, etc. It was as though we had been freed from the question of realism and released into the realm of textuality, where we could freely disport ourselves.

But the problem of realism in Madame Bovary is hard to ignore. It was a problem from the outset. As we know, Flaubert was allegedly directed to this project when urged by his friends, who were appalled by the reading of La Tentation de saint Antoine—to tackle a realistic, down-to-earth subject, one of those incidents of which bourgeois life is full. Madame Bovary thus originates in opposition to the fantasme of Saint Antoine. Flaubert should undertake “un livre raisonnable,” rather than abandoning himself “à tous les lyrismes, gueulades et excentricités philosophico-fantastiques qui me viendraient” (Corr 2.11, Oct. 1, 1851). And Flaubert threw himself into empirical research, whether on club feet, agricultural fairs, children’s literature, or young girls dreams. Flaubert’s correspondence testifies to a realist novelist’s immersion in the real-world materials of the novel—to the point of nausea: “je suis dans les rêves des jeunes filles jusqu’au cou.” (Corr 2.56, March 20, 1852). Or again, “Voilà deux jours que je tâche d’entrer dans des rêves de jeunes filles et que je navigue pour cela dans les océans laitieux de la littérature à castels, troubadours à toques de velours à plumes blanches. Faites-moi penser à te parler de cela. Tu peux me donner là-dessus des détails précis qui me manquent”

he writes to Louise Colet—somewhat unflatteringly (2.56, March 3, 1852). “Ce matin, j’ai été à un comice agricole, dont j’en suis revenu mort de fatigue et d’ennui. J’avais besoin de voir une de ces ineptes cérémonies rustiques pour ma Bovary [. . .] J’en suis physiquement malade” (2.134, July 18, 1852). For Flaubert, it seems, this was the real, and he found it detestable: “Deux ans! toujours avec les mêmes personnages et à pautager dans un milieu aussi fétide [. . .] Je ne fais d’autre chose que de doser de la merde” (2.434, Sept. 21, 1853).

The fact that from the outset readers and critics have sought the originals of Madame Bovary and Yonville, in the story of Delphine Delamare, supposedly proposed by his friend Louis Bouilhet, or the death by arsenic of a Madame de Bovary in a local cause célèbre, or the story of the financial debacle of Louise Pradier, whom Flaubert knew well, recounted in the Mémoires de Mme Ludoïvica, suggests that the representation here has seemed entirely realistic. Flaubert, of course, insisted that the novel was wholly invented and was undertaken not only out of disdain for contemporary reality but also “en haine du réalisme”: “On me croit épris du réel, tandis que je l’exècre. Car c’est en haine du réalisme que j’ai entrepris ce roman. Mais je n’en déteste pas moins la fausse idéalité, dont nous sommes bernés par le temps qui court” (2.643, Oct. 30, 1856.) Hatred of realism would mean what? Hatred, first, perhaps, of the realism that tells us not to expect more of the world than what we see, tells us to be realistic, which Flaubert sees as the practical bourgeois attitude; but hatred of realism is certainly also hatred of the conviction that the goal of art is to represent accurately reality, which Zola hailed Madame Bovary for doing: “le premier caractère du roman naturaliste, dont Madame Bovary est le type, est la reproduction exacte de la vie, l’absence de tout élément romanesque” (126)—no children lost at birth and reunited with their families, and so on.

At the trial of Madame Bovary, the judgment that found Flaubert innocent of outrage to public morals nevertheless deemed the book to involve “un réalisme vulgaire et souvent choquant”; but the novel has, on the contrary, been hailed by critics as the closest thing to Flaubert’s “livre sur rien, un livre sans attache extérieure, qui se tiendrait de lui-même par la force interne de son style [. . .] un livre qui n’aurait presque pas de sujet [. . .]” (2.31, Jan. 16, 1852). Which is the real Madame Bovary: this depiction of the real world at its worst, or the autotelic structure almost without subject?

This question was already manifested in the two endings Flaubert devised for the novel. In the one he finally chose, the concluding
sentences with their present-tense verbs bring the world of the novel up to the present: Charles’ and Emma’s child Berthe lives with her aunt, who “l’envoie, pour gagner sa vie, travailler dans une filature de cotton.” Homais “fait un clientele d’enfer; l’autorité le ménage, et l’opinion publique le protège. Il vient de recevoir la croix d’honneur” (III.11, 356). This is our world, the novel declares, the consolidation of bourgeois France.

However, Flaubert projected another ending, an epilogue that would have followed the report of Homais’ present day triumph, in which Homais admires his decoration but then:

Doute de lui—regarde les bocaux—doute de son existence. [délie, effets fantastiques, la croix répétée dans les glaces, pluie foudre du ruban rouge], —“ne suis-je qu’un personnage de roman, le fruit d’une imagination en délire, l’invention d’un petit paltoquet que j’ai vu naître et qui m’a inventé pour me faire croire que je n’existe pas.”

—after which he reassures himself “par le grand mot du rationalisme moderne, Cogito ergo sum” (Flaubert, Nouvelle version 129).

With this latter ending, as Alain Raitt justly argues, Flaubert would have put in question novelistic illusion and forced readers, in good postmodern fashion, to confront the fact that Homais is the invention of a novelist—with the clause “pour me faire croire que je n’existe pas” providing a further turn of the self-reflexive screw, provoking the confusion of the reader, certainly mocking or disrupting the claims of realism, and installing us in the world of an autotelic fiction (184). In choosing not to include this epilogue, did Flaubert opt for realism? On the other hand, the court that tried Flaubert decided, against the prosecution’s determination to take the work as portraying incidents and tendencies in the real world which were worthy of censure, that while certain incidents and reflections did involve a “réalisme vulgaire et souvent choquant,” the book should be interpreted as a self-enclosed whole, “longuement et sérieusement travaillé,” a work of art therefore, and not a representation to be judged by its content, even if the author sometimes forgot “que la littérature, comme l’art, pour accomplir le bien qu’elle est appelée à produire, ne doit pas seulement être chaste et pure dans sa forme et dans son expression” (Procès 750).

This verdict has, of course, generally been seen as enlightened and progressive. The prosecution interpreted the book as a realistic representation of our world, in which certain statements about marriage, adultery, and Marie Antoinette should be censured, and the representations blamed for offering no positive images of reality, i.e. a
too direct or not idealized representation of persons. The prosecution objected, for instance, to the phrase “les souillures du mariage et la désillusion de l’adultère,” seeing realism as a negation of the ideal. The defense argued, in effect, that the book is a self-enclosed whole, in which the elements the prosecution cites should not be regarded as referential or realistic but as part of a pattern in which Emma’s atrocious death should determine their significance. As Frances Ferguson observes, “the perhaps surprising fact is that the judge’s ruling established the notion of autonomy for the work of art to a degree previously unimagined” (100).

This opposition between reference to a given world and an autotelic structure can be concretized in our attitude toward Emma Bovary, who can thus encapsulate a version of the problem of realism. The celebration of Flaubert’s novel as “the novel of all novels that the criticism of fiction cannot overlook,” to cite Percy Lubbock’s famous judgment, depends upon the fact that it may be seen as, to quote Lubbock again, “a book in which the subject is absolutely fixed and determined, so that it may be possible to consider the matter of its treatment with undivided attention” (59). That subject is Emma, who, he says, is “small and futile,” but as a fixed subject that allows us to focus on the masterful novelistic treatment, “her futility is a real value” (83). For Madame Bovary to be a magnificent “livre sur rien,” Emma must be “rien,” a nonentity that serves as mere occasion to allow the artistry of the sentences to flourish. And of course she has frequently been reduced to a psychological stereotype.

The counter arguments would treat Emma as a significant historical reality. One odd feature of Madame Bovary: Mœurs de Province, by contrast with Balzac’s novels of provincial life, is the lack of dates and precise references that situate the work historically. The fact that Emma and Rodolphe finally fix September 4, a Monday, as the date to run off together has enabled diligent scholars to work out a rough chronology—this must have been 1843, if Flaubert paid attention to the calendar. But the novel itself, in declining to date and specify, explicitly identifies provincial life as timeless—“depuis les événements que l’on va raconter, rien, en effet, n’a changé à Yonville” (II.1, 75). The one incident that might register a historical change, the expedition Homais organizes to see the new factory, a filature de lin, leads only to a site where there is nothing to see, no sign of concrete social and economic developments, only some rusting machinery. Even Rouen, which was undergoing changes in the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, does not seem much caught up in or determined
by historical events but only a scenic backdrop for Emma’s desires and disappointments.

The argument for historical reality of the representation, therefore, depends on Emma Bovary herself as representation of a historical reality, as representation of the historical situation of women, for whom possibilities had been bruited by the declaration of the rights of women of 1792 and various incipient feminist developments, but who, with the bourgeois reaction and the Second Empire found that essentially not much had changed, especially for provincial women. The title, Madame Bovary, applies to three women in the novel, defining Emma by a role. She is already a repetition in this world where nothing changes. And Flaubert’s powerful representation of her ennui and sense of entrapment—however foolish the posited alternatives might be—carries great weight for readers, male as well as female. Critics, wishing to side with the enlightened court and the defense rather than with the prosecution seeking to censor, have perhaps been too inclined to treat the novel as un livre sur rien and Emma as rien rather than seeing in this representation, which the prosecution found to be dangerous and to be censured for its rejection of any idealizing possibilities, a powerful realism. But of course modern feminist criticism especially, declining to treat Emma as small and futile and looking at the historical condition of women of her day, has stressed that her difficulties come less from some innate foolishness than from her situation as an imaginative woman in the provinces, with no occupation, deprived of the city that would give her more scope, or of the pen, as Naomi Schor suggests, which would allow the exploitation of her imaginings, however cliched—as a writer of romance novels, for instance (38–39).

Stephen Heath argues, in a fine little book on Madame Bovary, that although Flaubert had no interest in the emancipation of women or other progressive movements, “Simply, he takes and defines his realism, the reality of the social world, from women, from Emma, grasps her as the key point for the interrogation of that world, the demonstration of its oppressive mediocrity” (87). This is an issue of some complexity, since Emma’s dissatisfactions are treated as risible in their precise form, and readers must disentangle their critical value, despite the narrative voice’s distancing mechanisms and judgments. It does not hesitate to pronounce her small-minded in various respects: interested only in what serves her own pleasure, for instance. And her increasing boldness in her affair with Leon, which can certainly represent agency, is not a development readers are encouraged to take as normative.
But since realism is usually linked with a sense that the world is not responsive to our wishes but either counters them or else is just there independently of human desires and perceptions, and since Emma’s despair and anger at the world of Tostes and Yonville comes from its resistance to the romantic possibilities she imagines, her point of view, her impatience, can be, as Heath suggests, a source of realism, even though she does her best to avoid anything like realism.

In my Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty of 1974, writing in the excitement of the structuralist enterprise, which certainly felt revolutionary, I treated Flaubert’s novel as above all a radical departure from the Balzacian model, whether it be called realism or romanticism: a disruption of expectations established by Balzacian conventions of description and narration, for instance, as well as of analysis and of judgment. Flaubert himself notes how unexpected it is that a novelist “se moque de sa jeune première et de son jeune premier” (2.272, Oct. 9, 1852), and I saw him as producing a book constructed in such a way that, as he said of the Dictionnaire des idées reçues, “le lecteur ne sache pas si on se fout de lui, oui ou non” (1.679, Sept. 4, 1850). I was not particularly concerned with the problem of realism, partly, I think because of what I saw as the ambiguity of the term—though one could take just the opposite view and say that what makes realism a crucial term, incontournable, perhaps, is that it captures in itself a key opposition, marking both a discursive convention and the opposition to convention. Philippe Hamon treats realism as the integration of details into an organized, recognizable world: “Dans le discours lisible-réaliste la conjonction personnage-description peut être placée sous le signe général de la motivation: le personnage signifié par le signifiant descriptif est dans une relation de ressemblance avec le non-personnage, de redondance avec le milieu” (112). Realistic description is that which can be recuperated as illuminating character, motivating theme. Realism is, as Barthes taught us, livresque, a matter of verisimilitude, of conventional codes; for a detail or sequence to be realistic we need to recognize it as conforming to our notion of the world, as making sense, repeating or citing the codes by which we take the world to be ordered. But realism is also a force that disrupts convention, identifying it as convention and claiming to establish itself by reference to a brute reality that discourse has concealed or tamed: “My mistress’s eyes are nothing like the sun,” for instance. In the mid-nineteenth century realism has especially the connotation of reference to the low or vulgar that was not previously accommodated by literary discourse. In a splendid passage of a letter to Louise Colet, Flaubert urges her,
“surtout ne pas oublier les latrines! Il s’y élabore une chimie merveilleuse, il s’y fait des décompositions fécondantes,” and, speaking of the importance of manure to produce the smell of roses, he continues, “Nous sommes cela, nous autres, des vidangeurs et des jardiniers. Nous tirons des putréfactions de l’humanité des délectxtions pour elle-même [. . .]” (2.485, Dec. 23, 1853). The novelistic production of delectation is, of course, one way of recuperating what is marked as real because ignored by previously literary convention.

Latrines do not that I recall figure in Madame Bovary, though. We have to make do, for instance, with flies that drown themselves in the dregs of cider. In a passage that is exemplary of a certain aspect of Flaubert’s realism and of his narrative art, Charles returns to the Rouault farm, with the excuse of checking on Emma’s father.

Il arriva un jour vers trois heures; tout le monde était aux champs; il entra dans la cuisine, mais n’aperçut point d’abord Emma; les auvent étaient fermés. Par les fentes du bois, le soleil allongeait sur les pavés de grandes raies minces, qui se brisaient à l’angle des meubles et tremblaient au plafond. Des mouches, sur la table, montaient le long des verres qui avaient servi, et bourdonnaient en se noyant au fond, dans le cidre resté. Le jour qui descendait par la cheminée, veloutant la suie de la plaque, bleuissait un peu les cendres froides. Entre la fenêtre et le foyer, Emma coussait; elle n’avait point de fichu, on voyait sur ses épaules nues de petites gouttes de sueur. (I.3, 23)

This is realism in the details that do not belong to the mode of the romanesque: the drops of sweat on Emma’s shoulders, the dirty glasses on the table, the flies buzzing as they drown themselves in the dregs of cider, and the ashes of the chimney. This is a world with the density of that which can resist our desires; it is not subordinate to human purposes. But there is a recuperation; these beautifully crafted sentences make this not a scene that deflates or disgusts. Flaubert was right to say of artists like himself, “Nous tirons des putréfactions de l’humanité des délectxtions pour elle-même,” and such sentences enable us to treat this scene, despite its particular details, almost as an appropriate background for a potentially romantic encounter.

Flaubert’s revolutionary use of style indirect libre in many places in the novel has provoked a strong inclination on the part of critics to motivate description, make it realistic, as Hamon suggests, by taking it as the expression of a character’s point of view whenever this seems remotely possible (as of course it frequently is). The temptation to make sense of these details by relating them to a perceiving character is strong. But it seems to me important to resist making Flaubert into a
Henry James, for whom this was the key to novelistic technique. Flaubert often frustrates the attempt to recuperate such personalization of narrative stance, as in this passage about the return to les Bertaux, to which I shall shortly return, or even more strikingly in this curious passage where Léon returns to Yonville:

Léon pourtant se décida; il alla frapper à la porte du médecin: Madame était dans sa chambre, d’où elle ne descendit qu’un quart d’heure après. Monsieur parut enchanté de le revoir; mais il ne bougea de la soirée, ni de tout le jour suivant.

Il la vit seule, le soir, très tard, derrière le jardin, dans la ruelle;—dans la ruelle, comme avec l’autre! Il faisait de l’orage, et ils causaient sous un parapluie à la lueur des éclairs. (III.4, 264)

Though we have marks of style indirect libre here, it is surprisingly difficult to tell whose speech or thoughts are reported where: we have been following Léon up to now, but here is “Madame.” Léon’s thought or the indirectly reported speech of the maid Félicité, perhaps? Or is it, as in other passages in the novel, an imitation of general usage, the discours anonyme du monde bourgeois? And what about “Monsieur”? And the exclamation, “dans la ruelle, comme avec l’autre!” is marked as free indirect speech by the exclamation point, but if it is someone’s thought it must be Emma’s, as Serge Zenkine argues, since at this point Léon does not know about Rodolphe and so could not be thinking about “the other one” (23). But who knows? This passage offers a striking example of the difficulty of motivating details by linking them to the perspective of particular characters, even in discourse apparently marked as to be thus attributed.

In the scene at the Rouault farm, the opening sentence, which tells us Charles did not see Emma at first, certainly encourages critics’ inclination to deal with details by treating them as what a character sees or notices, explicitly opening the possibility of taking these sentences as marking what Charles did see, but the novel frustrates such attempts. From what we learn elsewhere in the novel about Charles’s language, discrimination, and thought processes, it is very difficult to take this language or these perceptions as his: would Charles notice the variegated play of light on the tile, the furniture, and the ceiling, and the slightly bluish tint of the ashes in the filtered daylight? And would little drops of sweat really be what particularly strikes Charles about Emma? What we encounter here, I think, is an effect very frequent in Flaubert—the difficulty of ascertaining qui voit or qui parle, at the very moment when we are prompted by various signals to think
of an observer or a speaker. The result may be a certain confusion but perhaps above all the sense of an anonymous voice that describes a world. “On voyait sur ses épaules nues” could of course be a report of what Charles sees, or of what anyone in that position would see, but perhaps especially of what was visible to anyone, whether or not someone like Charles noticed it.

This separation of descriptive details from the vision of characters on the scene or a thematic purpose helps to contribute to the sense of a world that is there, which anyone could see, not dependent upon a particular point of view. Flaubert’s descriptions often seem to me determined by this desire to destroy a plausible point of view, giving us, as here, a world that is simply there, in metaphors that do not integrate a theme or a character. After Charles’ and Emma’s marriage ceremony we are told: “Le cortège, d’abord uni comme une seule écharpe de couleur, qui ondulait dans la campagne, le long de l’étroit sentier serpentant entre les blés verts, s’allongea bientôt et se coupa en groupes différents, qui s’attardaien à causer” (I.4, 28). Though the metaphor is at odds with certain notions of impersonality—of giving us nothing but things themselves—this is no one’s vision but is seen from above and outside. We are presented with a world that seems autonomous of particular human purposes. Realism, one might say, is based on the sense that there is a world there, independent of any human meaning or desire, as well as on the theme of the world’s resistance to human purposes.

Roland Barthes famously identifies as the effet de râel the result of details that by their lack of motivation (their failure to integrate in the novelistic by contributing to plot, character, theme, or symbol) seem simply there and thus connote, “we are the real.” This effet de râel is an aspect of Flaubert’s disruptive art that I stressed in The Uses of Uncertainty, but now I am more interested in the complex construction and deconstruction of narrative stances.

So let us turn to the most famous problem of narrative point of view in the novel, “Nous étions à l’Étude,” the celebrated opening sentence. The “I” of the first person narration—“Nous étions à l’Étude, quand le Proviseur entra, suivi d’un nouveau habillé en bourgeois [. . .]” situates himself in the scene—I know this because I was there—and gives us an account of how the boys see and receive the nouveau Charles Bovary. But this first person narrative voice, which seems to claim the authority of someone who has experienced what he reports, then goes on to provide a witty synthesizing description of Charles’ father and Charles’ previous life, of which I cite just one striking moment:
Son père, M. Charles-Denis-Bartholomé Bovary, ancien aide-chirurgien-major, compromis, vers 1812, dans des affaires de conscription, et forcé, vers cette époque, de quitter le service, avait alors profité de ses avantages personnels pour saisir au passage une dot de soixante mille francs, qui s’offrait en la fille d’un marchand bonnetier, devenue amoureuse de sa tournure. Bel homme, habileur, faisant sonner haut ses éperons, portant des favoris rejoints aux moustaches, les doigts toujours garnis de bagues et habillé de couleurs voyantes, il avait l’aspect d’un brave, avec l’entrain facile d’un commis voyageur. (I.1, 6)

And then, after the detailed synoptic account of the family history leading to Charles’ arrival at the school, the narrator notoriously announces, “Il serait maintenant impossible à aucun de nous de se rien rappeler de lui,” though the book immediately continues to offer considerable apparently authoritative detail, although the first person vanishes: “C’était un garçon de tempérament modéré, qui jouait aux récréations . . .” (I.1, 9). I have in the past analyzed the introduction and then elimination of first person narration as a parody of narrative authority, a parody of the traditional narrative technique of the knowledgeable observer (99–102). This is certainly a flaunting of the artifice of narrative authority—a real narrator would have forgotten everything about such a banal personage. This marks the narrative voice as ghostly, fictional—a fictional narrative instance that is different from a narrating character, entirely conventional. Karen Westerwelle points out that the novel undermines the experiential authority of the narrator from the very outset—it does not wait until the “Il serait maintenant impossible à aucun de nous de se rien rappeler de lui.”

The Proviseur brings the nouveau to the classroom, passing him over to Monsieur Roger. “Si son travail et sa conduite sont méritories, il passera dans les grands, où l’appelle son âge.” New paragraph:

Resté dans l’angle, derrière la porte, si bien qu’on l’apercevait à peine, le nouveau était un gars de la campagne, d’une quinzaine d’années environ, et plus haut de taille qu’aucun de nous tous. Il avait les cheveux coupés droit sur le front, comme un chantre de village [. . .] (I.1, 3)

And there follows a detailed description, even though we are explicitly told that one could scarcely see him. Already here, then, we get a discourse without origin, cut loose from an authoritative source—as is made explicit later by the claim that “Il serait maintenant impossible à

This evacuation of authority both insidiously undermines the realistic illusion, establishing it as fictional, and produces an impersonal voice, a voice from nowhere, which immediately proceeds to tell us all about this "gars de la campagne."

This abrupt movement back and forth between an identifiable narrator and the decertification or undermining of a particular authority who sees or who speaks seems to me to go along with the curious oscillation in the novel between moments when a narrative voice offers explicit judgments or analyses of human propensities, like a Balzacian narrator, as in the passage I cited at the beginning about each bourgeois's belief in his capacity for immense passions and Léon's growing indifference to Emma, and those other moments, more frequent, when the narrative voice offers descriptions without explaining the significance of what is described or why it should be picked out—as in the case of the flies in the cider and the drops of sweat (I cite numerous examples in The Uses of Uncertainty). We seem to move between two notions of realism—realism as the representation of a world that fits our models, an object of knowledge and analysis, such as Balzacian narrators provide, and realism as the effet de réel, the confrontation with the facticity of a world that is just there, resistant to signification.

But a fuller account of these narrative underminings and their relation to realism would need, I think, to link the present time of this self-destructive first-person narrator's reference—"Il serait maintenant impossible à aucun de nous [...]" with the present tenses of narration that are surprisingly frequent during the novel, such as those of the ending, which I have already mentioned—"sa tante l'envoie, pour gagner sa vie, travailler dans une filature de coton"; Homais "fait un clientèle d'enfer; l'autorité le ménage, et l'opinion publique le protège"—or those of the presentation of Yonville, at the beginning of part 2, which tells us of a present reality:

Yonville-l'Abbaye [...] est un bourg à huit lieues de Rouen. [...] On quitte la grande route à la Boissière. [...] On l'aperçoit de loin, tout couché en long sur la rive [...] 

Au bas de la côte, après le pont, commence une chaussée plantée de jeunes trembles, [...]. Les toits de chaume, comme des bonnets de fourrure rabattus sur des yeux, descendent jusqu'au tiers à peu près des fenêtres basses [...]. (II.1, 71–72)

After lengthy descriptions of the houses, with details whose raison d'être is scarcely obvious—more of the effet de réel—we end with the
cemetery where Lestiboudois raises potatoes in the empty spaces of the graveyard:

[. . .] aujourd’hui encore, il continue la culture de ses tubercules, et même soutient avec aplomb qu’ils poussent naturellement.

Depuis les événements que l’on va raconter, rien, en effet, n’a changé à Yonville. Le drapeau tricolore de fer-blanc tourne toujours au haut du clocher de l’église; la boutique du marchand de nouveautés agite encore au vent ses deux banderoles d’indienne; les foetus du pharmacien, comme des paquets d’amadou blanc, se pourrissent de plus en plus dans leur alcool bourbeux, et, au-dessus de la grande porte de l’auberge, le vieux lion d’or, détéint par les pluies, montre toujours aux passants sa frisure de caniche. (II.1, 75)

Do these present tenses have the role of reinforcing the realism of the novel by dissolving the frontier between discours and histoire, insisting on the continuity of this world with that of the present impersonal narrating instance, even though its authority may have been shown up as artifice? Or is there a certain surreal, hallucinatory effect here—the fetuses eternally putrefying in the alcohol, and the streamers of the marchand de nouveautés perpetually fluttering? I am reminded of the way in which under Flaubert’s pen, too much referentiality can become hallucinatory. In the famous fiacre scene, the multiplication of references of place names—streets and neighborhoods of Rouen—starts as referentiality that connotes the real, but as the names proliferate, they become hallucinatory, incantatory:

Elle [la voiture] revint; et alors, sans parti pris ni direction, au hasard, elle vagabonda. On la vit à Saint-Pol, à Lescure, au mont Gargan, à la Rouge-Mare, et place du Gaillard-bois; rue Maladrie, rue Dinanderie, devant Saint-Romain, Saint-Vivien, Saint-Maclou, Saint-Nicaise,—devant la Douane,—à la basse Vieille-Tour, aux Trois-Pipes et au Cimetière Monumental. (III.1, 250)

Referentiality or effet de réel so hyperbolic as to become hallucinatory?

Similarly, we can ask whether the present tenses reinforce realism, by insistently connecting the world of the novel to our world, or whether such present tenses have the contrary effect, of positing an unreal world that remains the same—Homais perpetually has just received la croix d’honneur—a world that remains the same as time passes and our world evolves, a fictive world held up by la force interne de son style?

It seems as though these ought to be two discrete alternatives, the reinforcement of realism or the generation of a hallucinatory effect,
and that even if a given case seems in principle undecidable, we
readers ought to know as we encounter such discourse, whether we
experience it as realism or as hallucinatory. But that may be precisely
the puzzle of Flaubert’s realism—it keeps disrupting its own modes.
The oscillation in and out of different sorts of realism is one of the
things that reminds us that in reading Flaubert we are encountering
a text, a construction woven of different discursive strands, and not a
mirror, much less a “miroir que l’on promène,” in Stendhal’s famous
definition of realism. Flaubert spoke of his achievement in Madame
Bovary as producing “du réel écrit,” and we can allow that statement
to stand, so long as we remember that this is the name of a problem
as much as its elucidation.

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