

MADAME BOVARY IN THE CONSUMER SOCIETY

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George Perec's Les Choses¹ marks a turning point in the development of the post-war novel insofar as it reworks the tired theme of alienation into the specific context of the Sixties' social dynamic. That is, what we see here is no longer Man confronting the abyss of his existence, but rather lost in the myths of advertising. The novel is informed by the critical tradition which underscores the inauthentic nature of Man's rapport with World in a technical age, and it uncannily anticipates the analysis of Baudrillard's Société de consommation.² Les Choses is indeed the novel of the Consumer Society: a tale of self-image derived from media-conditioned perception of reality. The theme of self-image distorted through media in the broadest sense can, of course, be traced to Cervantes, but Perec's more immediate model would seem to be Flaubert, in whose novels he has found the seeds of social phenomena which will come into full flower a century later in the post-war boom economy.

The problem of delusional self-perception fostered by media (of various sorts) was aptly termed "bovarysme" in a tome of the same name, which is a marvel of turn-of-the-century scientism, by Jules de Gaultier.³ Here we are still considering the word "media" in the most general sense--de Gaultier in fact uses the term "education"--but in any case what is being described is that function of furnishing images of potential selves which the mass media will have entirely usurped by the time of Perec's novel. De Gaultier at first defines bovarysme as a futile "vouloir ajouter quelque chose à son être." It is a state of conceiving of oneself as different than one is while being quite unable to realize that conception. This type of impotence is not peculiar to Emma but is shared by Frédéric Moreau, among others, and one might say that it prefigures

the general incompetence of modernist protagonists such as Leopold Blum and Zeno Cosini. What separates the bovaric character from these latter, however--as well as from the existentialist anti-hero--is the element of complicitous self-deception.

What Perec does, then, is apply a Flaubertian model of character to the context of the Consumer Society by substituting the influence of advertising for that of the Romantic novel as catalyst of delusion. There is a distance between Les Choses and this model which is a measure and reflection of the intervening development of the mass media and which shows why Mme Bovary⁴--as character or as novel--is no longer possible. Perec's Jérôme and Sylvie (most commonly referred to as the appropriately generic "they") are Emma and Frédéric with a MasterCard. Just as Flaubert called L'Education Sentimentale⁵ a "roman de moeurs moderne" and "l'histoire morale d'une génération," these descriptions apply equally to what Perec has subtitled his "Histoire des années soixante." The fact that Les Choses has none of the novelistic depth of Flaubert's works (it has no dialogue, for instance) is less a sign of departure from the model than it is a faithful application of it to the social context created by mass media. Baudrillard's analysis will allow us to justify Perec's novelistic strategy in terms of the semiotics of that media culture.

It can be said that both Flaubert's and Perec's characters suffer from an inability both to possess the object of their desire and to desire the object of their possession. They are in a generalized state of desire in which all objects are unfulfilling since the object after all is not really the target of their desire; they want rather to be not as they are. Or, as Baudrillard would have it, they are caught up in a succession of objects of desire all of which remain effectively undifferentiated since they have for the desirer no real presence, but only value as a sign which is indicating, in essence, a lack (indicating to the reader, that is; for the character the sign always functions as a cover). If we consider this mechanism in terms of libido, we see that for Emma

and Frédéric (as for Mme Arnoux, though in the non-adulterous direction) it is a question of rejecting or devalorizing one's rapport with an actual love object in favor of an idealized object. Jérôme and Sylvie, on the other hand, are not only not given any sexual being whatsoever, but they remain wholly undifferentiated as to gender, except, of course, by name. In this respect they are perfect illustrations of Baudrillard's idea that in the modern world there is no sex, only its parody, seduction, which of course does not deliver. What Baudrillard says of pornography in La Séduction is true on every level of the Consumer Society: "The real thing must exist somewhere, because I'm its caricature." And Jérôme and Sylvie are the ultimate exemplars of the consumer: they literally have no identity outside the code of consumer goods.

Bovarysme, inasmuch as wanting to add to one's being, might be interpreted as an attempted aestheticization of self. De Gaultier cites education in general as being the source of images projected into one's consciousness, but in the case of Emma and Frédéric one might be more specific and insist upon the aesthetic nature of their models, namely the literary. They respond to real encounter in terms of stock literary images and situations. Both books abound in examples, for instance, Emma's reaction to her first tryst with Rodolphe:

Elle entrait dans quelque chose de merveilleux où tout serait passion, extase, délire. . . . Alors elle se rappela les héroïnes des livres qu'elle avait lus. . . . Elle devenait elle-même comme une partie véritable to ces imaginations. . . . (p. 367)

And Frédéric shows a similiar response after finally having arranged a rendez-vous with Mme Dambreuse:

Il semblait à Frédéric, en descendant l'escalier, qu'il était devenu un autre homme . . . qu'il entrait définitivement dans le monde supérieur des adultères

patriciens et des hautes intrigues.
(p. 367)

In the Twentieth Century, however, the Aesthetic function has been supplanted by the media and Perec's characters, while conforming to the bovaresque pattern, reflect this change. Books for them are mere elements of decor, and while they may fancy themselves cinephiles (an image they consume), their real inspiration lies elsewhere: in publicity. What more apt definition of advertising's operation could be given than that (yet another!) which de Gaultier offers for bovarysme: a state of hypnotism in which the notion of free will takes the place of (masks) the real operant suggestion. Baudrillard marks the emergence of consumer culture as taking place "when media themselves become privileged objects of consumption and the message of publicity is absorbed with delectation and in priority" and advertising in all its forms is indeed the Walter Scott of Jérôme and Sylvie. The fact that Flaubert's characters' idealized images come from literature whereas those of Perec's characters are derived from mass media will account for the formers' romanesque depth and the latter's superficiality, and it will also provide a context for understanding the relationship of people to things in the respective novels. The point is that both authors follow the same procedure in adapting the semiotic system of the day's dominant genre (the bourgeois novel and advertising) to the conditioning of a relationship between Man and thing from which their characters will emerge.

To return to de Gaultier's analysis, bovarysme is the result of a dichotomy between one's real essence and potential as determined by heredity and one's identification with images produced by education. If we might include in the notion of education any source of potential models of identification, and if we accept as heredity not simply biological but social determinants as well, then this analysis would seem quite appropriate to a type of alienation that can be seen in the effect of mass media on the middle class. The role of the media in this schema is crucial to the notion of what

is particularly modern and what separates Flaubert's and Perec's characters from the would-be arrivistes of earlier literature. If one considers Julien Sorel, Rastignac, or even Marivaux's Paysan, it is obvious that these characters are motivated by sheer self-will in the context of a specific historical moment which creates their opportunity, and the same would also be true of such Naturalist characters as Verga's Mastro-don Gesualdo. What Emma and her descendants share, on the other hand, is a generalized wanting-to-be-other, which ignores or flies in the face of their historical situation and takes little account of the actual steps which would be necessary to realize their desire. They valorize mobility while denying distance.

Common to them all is the dilemma of an ever-widening gap between heredity and self-image which Positivist mythology and the media have made endemic to the working and middle class (those most without "inheritance") and which is the primum mobile of the Consumer Society.

From Flaubert to Perec, then, there is an evolution of the problematic of dichotomy between the innate and the conceivable as conditioned by media of one sort or another. With the progressive weakening of the perception of hereditary factors' relevance comes an increase in the importance of the idea of potential, deriving its power from images into which the self is projected. In this imagery, the self is associated with a notion of plenitude which takes concrete form in signifying objects. The thing is thus removed from its own presencing into a code in which it functions as a sign.

Flaubert's novels are written at a time when the thing still enjoyed a relative permanence compared to mortals, hence his ability to endow objects with a history, in the tradition of Balzac. (One need only think of the enormous inventory of antiques--historical fragments--in La Peau de chagrin.) But Balzac's objects refer to cultural and political history whereas in Flaubert the accent is on personal history. Claude Duchet⁶ in his analysis of objects in Flaubert's novels refers to "foyers sémiques": the organization of objects

into pertinent ensembles or series which create their own sense and integrate into the system of the work as a whole. In example, he mentions separate groups of objects which serve to signify Emma's origins, aspirations, and present status. These objects may retain a greater or lesser degree of use value, but the important point is that the accent is displaced toward connotative signifiers. An example is the *porte-cigares* which serves Charles for better or worse in its functional aspect and for Emma is a signifier of the milieu to which she aspires. Thus Flaubert's characters derive their novelesque consistency, to the most intimate degree, from their rapport with objects. This relationship is firmly grounded in the sensual; objects are not only described in physical detail but are endowed with tactile and olfactory qualities as well. This is in contrast with the decidedly non-sensual nature of the description of objects in P*erec*. As he says of his characters, "Their pleasure was purely cerebral . . . they loved wealth before life." And wealth for them is an entirely abstract notion, removed from the concept of sensual pleasure, for in their world neither they nor things have any use value but are rather in a state of pure signification. Perhaps paradoxically, their relationship to things is in a sense more direct: unlike Emma or Frédéric they are not at all concerned with access to the people who are significant of the level of their aspiration; quite the contrary, they hold them in general contempt as underserving appropriators of what should be theirs. Thus the director of an agency is a figure of ridicule, but the directorate itself is valorized because:

These are fine jobs: the offices have rugs on the floor, two telephones, a Dictaphone, a built-in refrigerator, and sometimes even a painting by Bernard Buffet on one of the walls. (p. 5)

Where the object in Flaubert accumulates a history and has a lifetime which is intimately tied to that of the character, in P*erec* the accumulation is quanti-

tative only and since the valorized objects and the characters only rarely come into any real contact the former have no temporal dimension. There is perhaps one sort of temporal dimension that comes into play, however, and that is when the character becomes more "sophisticated" in his aspirations (as when Jérôme discovers the semiotic hierarchy of various brands of shoes, for example) thus turning the former object of his desire into a sign of his past.

If objects in Flaubert are connotative of the character's past, present, and aspirations, they also have a more strictly internal semiotic value in serving as signs in a code by which characters identify one another and themselves. Each character is represented as the nexus or center of gravity of a set of objects of which he is the signified. Thus Rosanette is described amidst the apparatus of her boudoir, which seems to be "son vrai centre moral." The character is adept at appropriating for internal possession the signifiers of his desire. For Frédéric, Mme Arnoux is "le point lumineux où l'ensemble des choses convergeait," and his desire quickly moves from the love object to its signifiers:

Il souhaitait connaître les meubles de sa chambre, toutes les robes qu'elle avait portées, les gens qu'elle fréquentait; et le désir de la possession physique même disparaissait sous une envie plus profonde, dans une curiosité douloureuse qui n'avait pas de limites. (p. 5)

This "envie plus profonde" represents a shift from use value to semiotic value. Frédéric does not so much burn from desire to physically possess Mme Arnoux as from desire for access to her signifiers: he wants to be the sort of man who is signified by the "possession" of such a woman. The same is even more desperately true of Emma with regard to Léon and Rodolphe. Of course in all these cases it must be said that the signifying power of the love object is projected onto it by the desirer. The love object is not desired for its own qualities so much as for those which the

desirer would most like to "ajouter à son être." This is most clear in the case of Emma and Rodolphe: in her desire for appropriation of the objects/signs surrounding him, the narcissistic nature of her desire blinds her to the very real message which his possessions convey, namely that he is himself a hopeless narcissist. In the case of Jérôme-and-Sylvie the motivation is quite the same although, again, not passing through a human intermediary. They can in no sense be considered individuals but are rather a peculiar doubling of an individual desire which would seem to correspond to the consumer category of young couple. As a unit their desire functions just as that of the Flaubertians, i.e., is self defeating. They would seem to have "purchased" one another not on the basis of satisfaction of desire, but on the basis of community of desire.

The relationships of Flaubert's characters are often quite literally examples of consumption. We have for instance Frédéric's mania for giving away money whenever he encounters or learns something new about Mme Arnoux. In the first incident:

Ce n'était pas la vanité qui le poussait à faire cette aumône devant elle, mais une pensée de bénédiction où il l'associait, un mouvement de coeur presque religieux. (p. 9)

He is buying information--images for appropriation--associating her with what seems like a vague sense of plenitude, and he refers to new information about her as "une acquisition." Emma, like Frédéric, pays for her illusions, but in a much more sinister way. She is made to pay for her futile attempts at achieving her romanticized self-image by losing the things that represent her real status, the objects which represent her real ascent from the farm to the petite bourgeoisie. Her real things--thus her real self--are sold away. When the huissier comes to seize her (Charles's) property:

Ils examinèrent ses robes, le linge, le cabinet de toilette; et son existence, jusque dans ses recoins les plus intimes, fut, comme un

cadavre que l'on autopsie, étalée tout du long aux regards de ces trois hommes. (p. 301)

Here we see the complete identification of her self, in the most material sense, with the objects which surround her. Her greatest frustration comes when Rodolphe refuses to recognize her value as a consumer object. He will not buy her at the price of any of his possessions, thus refuting the very premise of her infatuation: that she could be signified by those objects.

As has been indicated, Perec's characters do not interact with others in a literally consumptive manner, but rather the semiotics of consumerism are reflected in their non-rapport. All signs in their world signify absence; like Baudrillard's pornography, they all suggest that the real thing must exist somewhere. There is one place in the novel where we do encounter things in their concrete reality, and that is in antique stores.⁷ The objects therein are not Balzacian: they do not represent real History⁸ but merely the notion that there is a past. They are more like a Flaubertian decor in potentia, present in the way that Dante, for example, is present in The Wasteland. Their ultimate significance for Jérôme and Sylvie is as potential signifiers of themselves: the antiques allow them to think that they are the sort of people who know enough to want to be people who know which of that stuff to buy and where to display it.

I have suggested that the mass media are to Perec what the Romantic novel is to Flaubert. Where Flaubert's indirect discourse gives voice to the romanticism that conditions Emma's response to the world, Perec's reflects the code of advertising. Like the Romantic discourse, advertising is a code in which the value of the concrete as signified is minimized compared to the value of the abstract emotional. That is, in both cases the signified object has meaning only as the signifier of some emotional quality, in the case of Romanticism generally unfulfillment and in advertising the opposite. The "advertised" object in Les Choses is given an implied value just by the naming of it, particularly in the

case of a brand name. "Chesterfield" on a couch entirely removes its signified from any use value, and this dynamic is true of all of the objects to which Jérôme and Sylvie aspire. The recognition of their privileged rank in the hierarchy of consumer objects is itself what gives them value. Thus the objects are surrounded by a sort of aura that is expressed literally in the language of advertising and figuratively in the lighting of a publicity photo or in the arrangement of a shop window (consider the typically snob expression on mannequins). This aura⁹ is the media age facsimile (Baudrillard would say parody) of Heidegger's "being there" or Benjamin's "aura" and it is this "glowing" discourse which defines the (non-) sensibility of Jérôme and Sylvie just as the Romantic defines the sensibility of Emma. Just as she has recourse to novels, Jérôme and Sylvie cannot avoid advertising.

But there existed alongside them, all around them, all along the streets they couldn't help but walk in, the deceptive yet heartwarming displays of antique dealers, grocers, stationers . . . Paris was a perpetual temptation. (p. 17)

In the world that was theirs, it was practically a rule always to desire more than one could acquire. It was not they who had so decreed; it was a law of civilization, a given fact of which advertisements in general, magazines, the art of display, the spectacle of the streets, and even, in a certain way, the whole of those productions commonly called cultural, were the truest expression. (p. 40)

Perec is here anticipating Baudrillard's analysis of the hegemony of consumerism: its parasitic code usurps that of all other discourses; everything becomes an ad in the Consumer Society. In this world there is a hierarchy of signification, but real things and events become homogenized; difference can only be quantitative. This is exemplified in their profession as survey takers, the oracles of the consumer age. In their world view

everything (soap, religion, mine safety, mashed potatoes, political persuasion, cough syrup, etc.) is put on an equal footing and measured. They are in effect the arbiters of Baudrillard's "least common culture;; it is they who measure the "least marginal difference" which enables the consumer to distinguish himself from--or identify with--his fellows.

It is in this context that L'Express, taking over from Homais's Fanal de Rouen, is given so much attention. It is an advertising circus wherein "false distance, innuendo, hidden scorn, simmering envy, false enthusiasm, footsie-playing, and suggestive winks reigned" (p. 37). It is not, of course, the characters who make this observation; for them it is first of all a signifier of their freedom, intelligence, gaiety, and youth, which we may assume to be ipso facto absent. True to Baudrillard's portrait of the role of the dutiful intellectual in the anti-discourse of consumerism, Jérôme and Sylvie voice scorn for L'Express, yet read it religiously. It "offered them all the signs of well being." Like their surveys, it is a melange of all levels: brilliant exposés, secrets of the gods, frozen fish.

All of these characters try to find fulfillment semiotically, but signs can never satisfy them, for they want not just access to a new signification, but always to have been that. Their desire leads them only to the pursuit of signs which can never take away the void in their being, of which their relationship to objects is symptomatic. Emma asks herself, after being disappointed by Léon, why

elle n'était pas heureuse, ne l'avait jamais été. D'où venait donc cette insuffisance de la vie, cette pourriture instantanée des choses où elle s'appuyait? (p. 289)

Jérôme and Sylvie also experience this futility:

The paths they followed, the values they embraced, their views, their desires, their ambitions: all these things, it is true, sometimes

seemed desperately empty to them. They were acquainted with nothing that was not fragile or confused. (p. 32)

And later comes an observation on the ephemeral nature of signs:

It did not take much to make the whole thing fall to pieces: the slightest false note, a simple moment of hesitation, a sign just a bit too crude, and their happy mood disintegrated. It became what it never had ceased to be, a sort of contract, something they had bought, something fragile and pitiful, a simple instant of respite that sent them violently back to what was most dangerous, most uncertain in their existence, in their history. (p. 32)

These characters all display what Frédéric refers to as the "défaut de ligne droite" which caused him to fail in his ambitions. This "détournement" is now away from use value to the semiotic order as exemplified in their conception of objects. The identification of self with objects betrayed by their behavior is indicative of the equality of man and thing on the semiotic level. This identification is carried out--and literally--to the end in Madame Bovary. When Emma is dying, "elle se perdait confusément dans l'entourage des choses," and these things--now signifiers with no signified--are sold off. The final irony is that the profit from the sale of the things, that is to say, the "remains" of Emma (that which survives the symbolic exchange), is so little that it guarantees young Mlle Bovary exemption from bovarysme: she will live the life that her mother would have lived without the effects of "education." Frédéric too experiences this sort of somatic identification with the things that belonged to Mme Arnoux. When they are being auctioned, "C'était comme des parties de son coeur qui s'en allaient avec ces choses." But Frédéric's case is much more modern if measured in terms of

Baudrillard's analysis of symbolic exchange, because more survives in the end: Frédéric is left with a fetish item, the locks of her hair.

In the case of Jérôme and Sylvie, there is no exchange at all, despite their feeling that they have "given up" something in "agreeing" to become what they have in fact been all along, consumers. The ironic implication is that they have sacrificed their self-image, but a self-image without material expression is just that, an image. In Perec's final depiction of their world, in the railroad car, he contrasts elements of 19th-century decor (fine linen, heavy table service) with the tastelessness of the meal served. Thus his presentation of the Consumer Society: a play of appearances with no substance, speeding along. In this setting delusion is the norm, so the characters need be neither disappointed nor destroyed, merely co-opted, smiling at one another in dumb complicity.

NOTES

¹Perec: Les Choses (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

²Baudrillard, La Société de consommation (Paris: S.G.P.P., 1970).

³de Gaultier, J., Le Bovarysme (Paris: Mercure, 1902).

⁴Flaubert, Madame Bovary (Paris: Garnier, 1954).

⁵L'Education sentimentale (Paris: Garnier, 1971).

⁶Duchet, Claude, "Roman et objets" in Travail de Flaubert (Paris: Seuil, 1983).

⁷The real antiques of the Consumer Society are, of course, those items which manage--through non-use--to last twenty years. Perec profits from this fact in another of his works, Je me souviens, which is a sort

of poetic counterpart to Les Choses. This work is comprised of a litany of consumer goods, radio and television programs, songs, news items and so forth, that he remembers from his youth, that is to say, that of the first real mass-media generation. Cf. the description of the collective childhood experience of Jérôme and Sylvie's generation on p. 42 of Les Choses.

⁸History in Les Choses has been displaced into Algeria; for J & S the war is a consumable event, comparable to the events of 1848 for Frédéric.

⁹This aura is reflected in Perec's use of the conditional mood in the first section of the novel. From the beginning "they" are defined not in human terms, nor through surrounding objects as in Flaubert, but in terms of a decor of objects that would exist in their dream house. Thus the object has completed its flight from the material, temporal world. This conditional decor is in contrast to the indicatif of their actual apartments in Paris and Sfax. These latter, merely real, are of course not valorized. Sfax could only have semiotic value if it were the sight of a Club Med. As it is, in the Arab Quarter "none of these objects, however sumptuous they were, gave them an impression of richness . . . everything seemed foreign to them, belonged to another world, didn't concern them." The Arab town is without reference in their code, and the French Quarter is just a bad parody of Paris.