The Literal Truth: Enquiry into novels and reality

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Abstract

In this study I shall discuss the "dangers" inherent in the misinterpretation of reading and the consequences of treating life as novelistic creation. By examining two famous readers in literary history, Don Quixote and Emma Bovary, I shall demonstrate in what ways they apply fictitious ideas and beliefs to a mundane and everyday world that appears to be hostile and not conducive to such ideals.

In order to show the emergence and importance of "realistic" novels, I will briefly outline the history of the novel in its historical and social context. We will see differences in thought and philosophy in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the so-called modern, scientific age of ours. By underlining the significance of the philosophy of the times, the Zeitgeist, we shall gain insight into the processes of reading and writing.

Furthermore, I shall attempt to explain the ambiguity and vagueness of language itself, as both a means of communication and of conveying ideas. Here I will use examples of post-structuralist thought, which attempts to undermine the importance of language in the scientific age and reveal its problems and difficulties.

The reading process and its psychological ramifications are then singled out through the use of concrete examples of the two novels under study, Don Quixote and Madame Bovary. The characters of these two novels embody different perspectives on and paradigms of the world, which have been coined as quixotic and bovarystic, respectively. This entails the assumption that books contain truth and reflect reality as it is. However, since books give us a biased and distorted account of reality and stand in
contrast to everyday reality, books can be deceiving and misleading. Emma and Don Quixote are misled by the lure of fiction and search for literal truths. This acts as a source of conflict and constant disillusion in their lives. We will see what such literal truths entail and in what ways the two readers may have been mistaken about the world.

This discussion will hopefully give us a better understanding of literature, of both reading and writing and show the relevance and importance that literature plays in the texture of our lives.
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Chapter 1: The developing "realistic" novel

**Historical and social processes of the novel**

Literature not only reflects the moral, political, and social issues in our world, it also has the capacity to reflect on itself. The evolution of a new genre or form of literature is often associated with historical, political and cultural change. In England the novel began to flourish under writers such as Defoe, Fielding and Richardson in the wake of the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1689. Similarly, the French Revolution had “placed the French middle class in a position of social and literary power” (Watt 300), enabling writers like Balzac and Stendhal to “mobilize” and “revolutionize” the genre.

In such a time of “disintegration of traditional values”, when French men and women were drawn towards literature “to organize their existence” (The Determined Reader Peterson 154), the novel contributed to a new understanding of a changing society. The novel of that period has become the “forme par excellence” of its time (Zola cited by Levin 32) in depicting the bourgeoisie and describing city culture.
Through the openness towards social mobility and the resulting subjectivity (i.e., the new consciousness of a modern age) literature, especially the Bildungsroman, became the means of expression for the evolving middle class (Moretti 4). Other innovations and philosophies of the 19th century, as well as the growing need for scientific observations and nonreligious explanations of the natural world, have influenced and shaped the form of the novel.

The novel has been self-reflexive and critical of its own legacy. Lotman distinguishes the 'classification' from the 'transformation' principle, which constitute a move from narrative events that result in closure orfinality to a more "open-ended process", where stories become less normative and do not necessarily lead to a final destination or insight, a form of writing favoured by Stendhal, Pushkin, Balzac, and Flaubert (cited by Moretti 7). ¹

The concept of self-reflexive writing concerning the novel is not necessarily limited to those writers or to that period. Writers before the 19th century have already examined the influence of the novel and reading and have explored the idea of the novel within the novel. Cervantes' Don Quixote, Diderot's Jacques le fataliste and Sterne's Tristram Shandy are among the best known and accomplished works that have dealt with the limitations and problems of the novel genre itself. As Robert Alter states in Partial Magic, the novel has often taken "reading, writing, and communication as its subject matter" (cited by The Determined Reader Peterson 2). ² Since its inception, literature comments on the world and the society that it portrays; at the same time, it self-consciously scrutinizes and questions its own methods.

¹ The idea of open(-ended) works of literature becomes more essential when we consider modernism and the nouveau roman. Modernism is a culmination of self-awareness, and the nouveau roman has been, rather self-consciously, referred to as the "école du regard".
The importance of context and paradigm

Societies are and have always been liable to change and our perspective of reality and of the world changes also with them. When reading Don Quixote, for example, we need to keep in mind that the worldview of both the author and his readers was different from ours. We may easily succumb to the illusion that the written text is "timebinding", namely that it manages to bring "together the author and the reader although they may be centuries apart" (Hatt 51). Yet this is an attributive error on the reader's part since "[s]tates are always made in the context of a particular time and place, and they should always be read with an awareness of the context" (Hatt 52).

The expectations of what constitutes literature and reality for both the reader and the writer, are contingent upon their respective Zeitgeist. By understanding how people of a specific epoch thought and wrote, we have a better understanding of how they read and interpreted literary material.

According to medieval belief, since the world was created by a "benevolent deity", it must "conform to a perfect design"; that "design", however, was "hidden from man" (Williamson 2). The fact that we are not able to perceive this design would be due to our limited perspective of the world or, to put it in religious terms, due to "man's imperfections" (Williamson 2). In fact, corporeality is seen as "distance from God" and as an "indication of inferiority on the scale of creation" (Erickson 12). Sight or imaginative vision becomes the lens with which spiritual truth  

2 Henceforth referred to as Determined.
may be perceived. For that reason, one's "perception of God would ultimately come through the purification of [. . .] sight" (Erickson 214).

The universe was divided into an "intelligible" and a "sense-perceptible" world. "True reality" was embodied in, and indeed, could only be found in the "intelligible world, which alone was unchanging and which alone, therefore, was true" (M.-D. Chenu cited by Williamson 4). Nature is then but a reflection of the divine order: "l'ordre visible des sphères les plus hauts viendra se mirer dans la profondeur plus sombre de la terre" (Foucault 46). In other words, in the medieval world-view religious truths are considered to be "the ultimate logic of existence" (Erickson 29). God was not only the Creator of the universe but he could literally be seen as its literary Author.

There are two important observations and conclusions that can be drawn from such an idea. First of all, the world is comparable to a book that needs to be deciphered: "Le monde est couvert de signes qu'il faut déchiffrer [. . .] " (Foucault 47). In order to comprehend the reality of the seemingly meaningless and random occurrences that comprise our lives, we need to learn to read the world by becoming spiritually literate: What is essential to us cannot be seen by our eyes, tied as they are to the sense-perceptible material world, which is nothing more than a "sort of mask" hiding the true nature of things (Marc Bloch cited by Williamson 3).

Secondly, this also implies the following distinction between primary and secondary qualities. The secondary qualities are the "world of nature as it appears to the senses", where everything is caught up in physical motion and temporal flux, and this "continual change" makes them ultimately "unknowable" (Spiegel 15). However, the primary qualities are to be "apprehended through the mind" and have an unchanging nature and are "ultimately knowable" (Spiegel 15). Hence in the medieval mind, "[i]ntellectual discovery was often linked to a falling away of barriers of sight" (Erickson 42). This stratum points to the essence or essential, one could
even say eternal, qualities of the world - the “truth” that lies beneath the layers of “ever-changing external reality, a world of shifting, impermanent, and often ambiguous appearances” (Spiegel 16).

Consequently, we would need to study the “Word” of God to become ‘spiritually literate’. We are told in the Bible, which in this perspective could be seen as a codebook to ‘true reality’: “In the beginning there was the Word and the Word was God [...]”. Generally it has been assumed that the “Word” is the Holy Bible itself, or the Gospel, which implies that if we fully comprehend the Bible, we will get to understand God. This leads us to the next realization that brings us closer to literary theory. We discover the author of a text through a close scrutiny of his or her work. The Bible can serve as a tool or method to decipher nature, to read into it the messages and the symbols already encoded by its sender, in this case, God. This is what Foucault calls “signature”: “Dieu pour exercer notre sagesse n’a seme la nature que de figures à déchiffrer [...]” (48).

According to the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic Fray Luis de Granada, if the “world is a book, then the things of this world are the letters of the alphabet in which this book is written” (cited by Manguel 169). We, the “creatures of this world” then are “illuminated letters” and by means of these “living letters, we are to read the excellency of our Creator” (Granada cited by Manguel 169).

Similarly, Don Quixote, as we shall see shortly, is a living book, “le témoin, le représentant, le réel analogue” of the texts he has read (Foucault 61), and who will wander the earth in the guise of a knight-errant to demonstrate the truth of his readings to the world around him.
The "new" ideology and subsequent techniques of the novel

The medieval worldview was eroded by intellectual trends in the Renaissance, which, over the ensuing centuries, led to an eventual overthrow of an “all-encompassing, multifold reality” (Erickson 8) in favour of a more subjective, relative and unstable truth and understanding of the world. Thus the groundwork was laid for the 'rise of the novel', which became a more accurate tool for reflecting contemporary society and philosophy, as opposed to epic poetry or theatre.³

The previous so-called traditional literature could no longer address or satisfy the needs of an emerging public of readers and it is the novel, “le genre le plus libre qui soit” (Bakhtine cited by Chartier 31), that came into being to fill this void. Since the novel, contrary to the more rigidly defined and established genres of theatre and poetry, lacked formal rules or guidelines, its style and tone are flexible, multiple and variable (Chartier 2).

As Watt makes clear, the social, political and economic upheavals of 17th and 18th century England displaced the courts and the nobility and created a “vacuum” in literary patronage. This vacuum, however, was “quickly filled by [...] the publishers [...] the booksellers” (Watt 52). In the "Age of Property", to borrow E.

³ Incidentally, the term “novel” had not come to be used in our modern understanding of it until the end of the eighteenth century (Watt 10). It stems from the Italian novella, which “purports to be both recent and true” in the sense of “news” (Levin 39). Curiously enough, another “invention” of that period has been journalism, which had led to the growing rise of newspapers and a new distinct style of (objective) reporting. One should keep in mind that the French term roman started out basically as a term of distinction in the Middle Ages, separating the vernacular romance languages from the more traditional and more exclusive Latin, and the romancier of the 13th century was a “translator” – in the sense of transferring the text - from Latin to French (Chartier 29).
M. Forster's phrase (cited by Levin 33), the novel itself was turned into a "mere market commodity" (Watt 53). Yet this new trend has contributed to the relative economic and philosophical independence of emerging authors of that period, such as Defoe, Richardson, Balzac and many others. Since they were not bound by the "classical critical tradition", the field of literature opened up for them so that they could create their own style of writing, which was of course an "indispensable condition of their literary achievement" and popularity (Watt 56).

All these factors paved the way for the novel. Literature has come to mirror the philosophical, moral and social developments of its time and has found new and appropriate ways of representing that reality. Essentially that is what Spiegel means by "concretized form" or what Watt describes as "formal realism", terms which have come to shape our modern understanding of the novel. Spiegel defines "concretized form" as a "way of transcribing the narrative, not as a story that is told, but as an action that is portrayed and presented", independent of authorial involvement and mediation (6). One of the foremost examples of this kind of "highly sensuous and visualized" narrative is Flaubert's writing, which indeed represents a new "mode of apprehending the world" (Spiegel 8).

In our present discussion two novels, Don Quixote and Madame Bovary, are of particular importance not only because of their insistence on reading and writing, but also because they represent important stages in the development of the novel. They have, each in their own terms, refined and redefined the art of fiction and both deal with the effects of reading on the human psyche. There are, however, significant differences in their writing style, especially in relation to spatial and temporal contexts, voice, and perception of the world, which reflect to a large degree the attitudes and the stance of their respective epochs.
Don Quixote does not begin in the 'middle of things'. Before the action can take place, there is an exposition, in which we are introduced to the protagonist of the novel. He is "removed from his spatial context, extricated from the temporal flux, and examined by the author as an autonomous, self-contained whole" (Spiegel 10). The narrator gives us some information about his whereabouts, his occupation (or, what would seem to us, lack of it), his age and his preferences and hobbies.

When we - literally we, since Madame Bovary starts with the ambiguous and elusive nous - meet Charles (incidentally, not the major protagonist of the novel), it is at his school at the age of fifteen. We see him out of place with his awkward demeanour and his ridiculous hat. From these idiosyncratic, well-crafted details we get our first impression of the character; it is only later that the story leads to an exposition delineating the historical period. When we encounter the major protagonist of the novel, Emma, for the first time, she is first seen, before she is known or named, and is introduced "amid a welter of inanimate objects and environmental detail" without the action stopping or time and space ceasing to exist for her, as was the case with Don Quixote (Spiegel 19). Her character is revealed gradually, as she "unfolds, evolves, modulates, and emerges before us in time and through space, aspect by aspect, moment by moment" (Spiegel 20).

As we can note from the very beginning, there is little description in Cervantes' writing, especially if compared to Flaubert's, who minutely describes individual objects, or Balzac's, for whom the setting of a novel is almost as important as characterization or plot. We get to know Don Quixote through his words, mostly his dialogues with his squire Sancho, and the resulting actions or adventures, but we can hardly visualize him based on the little physical description that we have of him. We know, for example, that his face is "lean" and "gaunt" but these are details that illustrate the fact that his "temperament is ascetic and idealizing and [that he] abhors the fleshly realities" (Spiegel 14). We return to the question of world
perception and it seems that to Cervantes the appearance, that which can be seen with the "five sense modalities", is inherently deceptive and that what is essential is a more "conceptual rather than a sensuous reality" (Spiegel 14).

Before Cervantes, authors had preferred to give their characters either "historical names or type names" (Watt 18) and this preference reflected the thought of Aristotle, namely that names were supposed to be 'characteristic' (cited by Watt 19).

The characters were then not individualized but tended to represent types or abstractions. Therefore there was little need for what today we consider to be the hallmarks of verisimilitude since the characters of fiction did not need to resemble real people and did not have "both given name and surname" (Watt 19). Being was less personified in particular and individual traits but was regarded more as the idea or the typology that characterizes and underlies these traits.

In fact, the word 'characteristic' implies both a particular and a typological approach to personality. It could be defined as the typical part, the "forming part of the character [. . . ] of a person or thing" or as a "distinguishing feature" (Oxford Advanced Dictionary 188). But whether we confront a fictional character or a real person, the name has become an essential and distinguishing feature in our society.

The name plays a relevant role in Don Quixote. In fact, the narrator claims at the beginning that he doesn't even know his character's real name. Nonetheless, there is hardly a moment of doubt concerning the assumed name of Don Quixote. Our protagonist spends four days to find a suitable name for his horse and eight other days to name himself (Cervantes 71). This newly acquired name for his horse is not only characteristic of its past; it also denotes future successes to come since it is going to be the horse of the famous chevalier. The new name is indeed important because it "should make manifest an essence which appearances had hitherto concealed" (Williamson 132). Ever since Don Quixote attains his new name, he
sheds his old rather mediocre and insignificant life and becomes, in his own eyes, Don Quixote, the man "who has given up his worldly possessions in behalf of a knightly quest" (Spiegel 13n).

From that moment on, he turns his back on the society to which he once belonged, differentiating himself from the members of his class. He embodies a new spiritual typology, which "gives complexity and vitality to his character" and delineates him as an individual (Spiegel 13n). At the end of the novel we find out, through the protagonist's own mouth, that his name is actually Alonso Quixano (the narrator was wrong) and he claims that one should congratulat him for ceasing to be Don Quixote. He finally comes to his senses but it is Don Quixote the madman that has attained fame. Don Quixote is not only famous with the reader, but he has acquired quite a name within the story itself. In fact, particularly in the second part, he encounters many people who have read the first book published on his exploits, and know of him. We even feel a sense of regret for both the characters in the story and the reader when Don Quixote is eventually cured of his madness, since it is this very madness that not only characterized him, as opposed to the mediocre Quixano and his uneventful life, but it also made him out to be a constant source of wonder and amusement (admiratio) for both the characters in the story and for us, the readers. Hence, the myth of Don Quixote has been created not only through a fictional character, but it is doubly fictitious, as Quixano gives himself another name and assumes a different identity within the story.

Names are highly relevant to Flaubert as well, who paid great attention to choosing subtle yet characteristic names for his characters. The name Bovary with its slight hint of "Bovine-ness" perfectly captures not only the slow and dull mediocrity of provincial bourgeois life but also the misplaced languid sentimentiality of Emma. However, it is important to note that even though the title of the novel is "Madame Bovary", which means that Emma has been incorporated or assimilated into this
"bovine" world of ennui and dullness, Rodolphe correctly observes: "Madame Bovary! . . . Eh! Tout le monde vous appelle comme cela! . . . Ce n'est pas votre nom, d'ailleurs; c'est le nom d'un autre!" (Flaubert 197).

Even though we get a glimpse of Emma’s youth in a flashback of her life at the convent, her "novelistic" existence is tied to Charles, whom she marries and who, after her death, buries her. Thus, Emma Rouault changes her name and identity in a manner similar to Don Quixote. When she adopts the name Bovary, she begins to live out the adolescent fantasies she has read about. In a dialogue with her maid, she confesses to Félicité that it is precisely since her marriage that her troubles have begun (Flaubert 145).

The essential elements of the protagonists' personality are hence represented in both works, albeit in different ways. Flaubert delivers us a mass of details and sensations through which we get a view of Emma’s personality; Cervantes focuses more on the intellectual perceptions and the discourses of his protagonist.

However, the differences in terms of philosophy and social and intellectual paradigm are most strongly felt in the style of these two works, particularly the narrator's voice and point of view. Spiegel surmises that the tone of voice of Cervantes' narrator is "remarkably human" and that we sense an "individualized personality" and a "sense of humour" behind his words (10). This reflects the confidence that existed in a so-called stable ordered society at his time. He further concludes that Flaubert, who lived in a society which was "sceptical in religious matters, unstable in social structure, and uncertain and relativistic in moral values", incorporated those uncertainties and anxieties and gave them form through his impersonalized or de-personalized style (Spiegel 17-18). T. S. Eliot was a firm believer in the "continual extinction of personality" and according to him, it was in this "depersonalization" of the author that art could possibly approximate science (cited in Con Davies 29).
In the convention of 19th century realism, a novelist cannot "simply tell his story"; he or she must "prove it moment by moment" and "provide a continuing demonstration of the palpable certainty of his characters and events" (Spiegel 18). In realism, sensual perception is the key element, and "truth" becomes an individual undertaking that involves the senses, a view that has its origins in the philosophy of Locke and Descartes. In fact, the novel form is best suited to such individual pursuits for "truth" is "conceived of as a wholly individual matter" and it is the "form of literature which most fully reflects this individualist and innovating reorientation" (Watt 13). Hence we witness a gradual movement from abstractions and generalities to an increasingly personal, particular environment.

Time and space, more specifically "setting", has become central for this novelistic conception, which adds a "new dimension to the representation of reality" (Watt 25). The novel of this period attempts to rid itself, not only of long-standing literary traditions like epic poetry and tragedy, but also of artificiality, contrivance and anything that would interfere with an accurate description of human experience and real life. This results in a style reflective of the way people talked and thought; it also represents a greater need to "capture" reality in such a way that readers recognize themselves in the novel.4

In the case of Flaubert's narrator, we seem to encounter a disem bodied "impersonalized voice", a narrative device intended to deflect the "reader's attention from the author's personality" to the "unmediated action" itself (Spiegel 23).

According to Spiegel, we, the readers, identify more closely with the characters and,

4 This need for "verisimilitude" was one reason for the change of style; however there was also a need to appeal to new emerging readers who were less familiar with classical literature and who were often less educated. In fact, the growing market, which stressed "speed and copiousness" as "supreme economic virtues", contributed to "proximity", and a sloppier, less revised style, with Balzac being one of the main examples for this kind of writing (Watt 56). The fact that style has become easy and more accessible also contributes to novels being "the most translatable of the genres" (Watt 30).
as a whole, the work itself because we are led to "experience the action the way the characters themselves experience it" (23). There is then a larger margin for ambiguity and uncertainty. We only get to view the (fictional) world through the point of view of the character and his or her experiences are often fragmented and embody only a "personal" and "partial truth" (Spiegel 22). However, this sense of doubt causes us to identify more closely with the character simply because we also find ourselves in a similar position in real life which is comprised of ambiguous stimuli and events.

Yet Spiegel underplays the fact that the impersonal narrator does intervene in more subtle ways. It may not be as vocal as a Balzacian narrator, but one never shakes off the feeling that there is someone constantly behind this Flaubertian voice. Flaubert's narrator is indeed not as impartial as he is said to be, since we find he is often judgemental and he reaches particular effects through the use of irony. In fact, irony, whether verbal, situational, or dramatic, is "one of the narrator's principal resources for telling his tale and coaching the reader" (Wimmers 70). Consequently, we actually feel a certain kind of detachment from the characters and the novel itself. Indeed Flaubert seems to keep us at a critical distance through various "illusion-breaking devices" (Wimmers 58-59), that is, the constant reminder that we are reading a novel, which gives the whole work an element of self-consciousness. However, Spiegel is right in the sense that we enter more fully inside the consciousness of a character, through the use of the style indirect libre, which culminates in the stream of consciousness in other modernist works.

Cervantes moves away from the assumption of a unified worldview and truth and presents us with a character who has to deal with an ambiguous world, where he is confronted not with a single truth but with an array of truths, which indeed even contradict each other (Kundera 21). In fact, this "madman" needs to make sense of
seemingly random events and he attempts to give them unity and meaning by ordering them according to his own narrative - his text.
Chapter 2: The world as text: Reading the signs

Reader response

Borrowing from communication models, human interaction, whether written or verbal, may be subsumed into the following three basic factors: sender - message - receiver. The sender encodes the message into commonly shared signs, or shared vocabulary/language. The message is transmitted to the receiver or addressee whose task it is to decode those signs and attribute meaning to them and to deduce from its content what the sender wishes to communicate. However correct, this model is nonetheless too simplistic, because it does not take into account the intricacies of the interaction. As a matter of fact, the message is more than a
“message”; it functions as a *text*: a “network of different messages depending on different codes and working at different levels of signification” (Eco 5).

What the communication model has not taken into account is, among other elements, “subcodes”, by which we mean a “‘philological’ effort to reconstruct [the] sender’s codes” (Eco 5), as well as the context and the circumstances of the receiver. Put simply, the reader has been assigned a passive role, when in fact he or she is actually an active principle of interpretation and is a “part of the picture of the generative process of the text” (Eco 4). This observation seems persuasive, especially in the wake of Reader Response theories, where the reader is given a larger part to play in what constitutes literary criticism. In contrast to more formalist approaches, Reader Response claims that there is no definitive (reading of a) text, nor an exclusive interpretation, but there are only multiple textual versions produced by the reader(s). There are “as many ‘readings’ of a text as there are readers” and these multiple reactions to a given text arise from the fact that what we “take from a reading situation depends partly on what we bring to it” (Hatt 38). As Iser has pointed out, “the potential text is infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations”, which means the text accommodates and allows for different readings or interpretations (280).

For now it is important to note that in the act of reading, it is the reader who *chooses* the book. In fact, readers turn to books they believe will satisfy their needs and approach them on the basis of certain drives and/or goals (Hatt 20). In addition to that, readers may (ab)use the message insofar as it is relevant to them. As we shall see shortly, this is the case with Emma. Readers will then accommodate the new information into their *schemas*, by “forcing” it into their preconceived mental sets and expectations about the world (Hatt 20).

As we can see, readers in some respects already possess their own text. They are not *tabulae rasaee* - waiting to be imprinted upon; they already have their own
narrative. And it is the intermingling of two kinds of texts that makes literary criticism and the act of reading so complex and challenging. Since the reader is not a passive entity, he or she cannot merely objectively assimilate and incorporate “the message of the sender” but the message actually becomes transformed. Similarly, the sender has to keep the reader’s responses in mind, in terms of their vocabulary; their possible objections, their perspective and understanding of the message.

These issues have been dealt with in phenomenological and structuralist theories about reading, where we find Eco’s Model Reader, or Iser’s “implied reader”. These are fictitious readers that the writer keeps in mind, as he or she is composing the text. According to Iser, the “end product”, is not the text itself, but the “interaction between text and reader” (276). Thus Iser distinguishes between “artistic” and “esthetic” creation: while the former refers to the “text” created or composed by the author, the esthetic component is attributed to the realization or Konkretisation accomplished by the reader (Iser 274).

However, there is another factor that needs to be kept in mind, namely the vagueness and ambiguity caused by language, the chosen medium for interaction. This is an issue that post-structuralism has amply focused upon, as we will see in a moment.

The problem of language

Language as a referential medium has been the subject of much research in our time. In fact, this idea dates back to the Middle Ages, with the unifying principle of the “transcendental signified” and the distinction between signans and signatum, or the symbolic value of referent- representamen.
The transcendental signified used to be connected to an absolute and irreducible being or presence (Derrida 33). Words or signifiers were seen as symbols or an "instrument of cognition" that "revealed the presence of God in the physical universe" and these symbols are what Foucault calls "resemblance" (Williamson 4). Language becomes then the "théâtre de la vie ou miroir du monde" (Foucault 32).

Since the advent of scientific thought, that presence has been, to use Derrida's expression, sous rature; language is not seen as symbolic anymore but rather as a system of signs. However, these signs have been imbued or charged with various meanings or traces throughout history. Thus any word carries a baggage of residues from bygone ages that denote particular meanings.

All of these factors de-place language from its primacy and add doubt and uncertainty to clear communication or interaction. In terms of the novel, which is a text comprised of various "ambiguous" signs, we enter into a fictional world where nothing really "is" what it seems. Flaubert has aptly described this dilemma or vagueness of language. It is nearly impossible to give exact expression or referents to what one feels, thinks, believes, since human language is inadequate to demonstrate a one to one correspondence. Flaubert states in a central and poetic passage of Madame Bovary that sums up the frustration of every serious-minded writer, who, by definition, lives and thrives on language: "personne, jamais, ne peut donner l'exacte mesure de ses besoins, ni de ses conceptions, ni de ses douleurs, et

5 In literature, we have currents against such scientific views of language. In particular the symbolists and surrealists have gone against such a trend and revived the notion of symbolic thought and imagery.

6 Foucault uses the analogy of the Tower of Babel to illustrate the displacement of language:

Sous sa forme première, quand il fut donné aux hommes par Dieu lui-même, le langage était un signe des choses absolument certain et transparent, parce qu'il leur ressemblait [. . . ] Cette transparence fut détruite à Babel pour la punition des hommes. (51)
"[...] la parole humaine est comme un chaudron fêlé où nous battons des mélodies à faire danser les ours, quand on voudrait attendrir les étoiles" (236).

This passage exemplifies an "awareness of language" and brings to the foreground the problems linked to linguistic uses and abuses, namely the "manipulation and shortcomings of language, and the dangers of misreading" (Wimmers 58).

Not only does language give an inadequate representation of "reality", even the perception of reality is fraught with ambiguities. One need only to see the world through Emma's or Don Quixote's eyes to realize that reality is indeed open to interpretation. The problem with these two protagonists is that their respective Weltanschauungen in general have been coloured and shaped by books. But books themselves offer an interpreted, hence distorted, view of reality to begin with. In addition to that, the readers add their own text or their projections to the already "inaccurate" signs contained in the novels they read and thus the interpretation of their world becomes more "flawed" or transposed.

Thus, unsurprisingly, for Emma and Don Quixote reading becomes a dangerous activity. Neither of them can properly decode the written information, and similarly they misread reality. In Emma's case we have a reader who has the capacity to merge fully into the world of fiction: she even screams when reading about gory battle scenes (Flaubert 344). She is one of those readers who "become totally absorbed in their books, fuse with them, and feel no boundaries between self and text" (Determined Peterson 29). Victor Nell differentiates between "absorption", which is a rather deep involvement with the text, and "trance", which actually "resembles an altered state of consciousness" (2). Emma's manner of reading may "lend itself to pleasurable gratifications", yet it does also lead to "dangerous delusions" (Wimmers 67), as we shall see shortly.
Don Quixote is also "afflicted" with such a kind of intense reading, as we see him in a trance at the beginning of the novel, "devouring" novel after novel on the topic of chivalry. He is so completely immersed in the chivalric novels he reads day and night, that his brain "dries up" (Cervantes 22-23) and he consequently loses his mind. A discussion on the background and the psychology of these characters should illuminate their manner of reading and the reasons for their idiosyncratic interpretations of books. In fact, they choose only a certain genre of books, namely those that mirror their inner expectations and worldviews.

**Reading Emma Bovary**

Emma, we are told by her father, has "trop d'esprit pour la culture" and does not help him much at the farm (Flaubert 45). That is why he is not against the idea of getting rid of her - "qu'on le débarrassât de sa fille" (Flaubert 45) - by marriage. A clear indication of her lack of experience is the fact that she pricks her finger at the needlework (Flaubert 35). In fact, she is referred to as his "demoiselle" (Flaubert 33, italics in text). This already suggests that she is not suited for work on the farm and that she has, as the people of Yonville later note, "[d]es airs évaporés" (Flaubert 163) of aristocracy, what Madame Dubuc would later call "fla-fla" (39) and Madame Bovary mère would refer to as "ces vapeurs-là" (Flaubert 164).

Her "belle éducation" at the Ursulines, her convent, comprises "la danse, la géographie, le dessin, faire de la tapisserie et toucher du piano" (Flaubert 38).
Already one realizes that her education is not going to help her deal realistically with the outside world. Peterson calls this type of education “ornamental”, which was rather the norm for most bourgeois and petty bourgeois women of that epoch (“The Heroine as Reader in the Nineteenth-Century Novel: Emma Bovary and Maggie Tulliver” 168). The goal of that society was to give women an education that touched mostly upon religious and moral issues and which, supposedly, prepared them for marriage and for being good (house-)wives. Such an education is of course “sterile, meaningless, and totally unsuited to Emma’s temperament” (Determined Peterson 163).

In fact, reading was considered a “dangerous and evil” activity for a young woman at that time, which is why, at the convent, her reading takes place in secret, en cachette: “les keepsakes [. . .] Il les fallait cacher; c’était une affaire; on les lisait au dortoir” (Flaubert 62). Since this activity is forbidden, it brings about a new sense of excitement, adds to the thrill, and intensifies the impact of reading.

Emma entered the convent at the age of thirteen and it is two years later that she “se graissa donc les mains à cette poussière des vieux cabinets de lecture” (Flaubert 61). As this description shows, reading is from its onset equated with sensuality; the physical sense of touch is as important as the act of reading itself. For the impressionable and highly sensual and curious girl that she is, it is not surprising that she is more interested in the sentimental and emotional aspects of her readings than in the artistic ones (Flaubert 60). As we are given a list of subjects of interest to her, we note that almost all of them are directly related to love: “Ce n’étaient qu’amours, amants, amantes, dames persécutées [. . .] troubles du coeur, serments, sanglots, larmes et baisers ” (Flaubert 61). The first three words are rather redundant and repetitive, but show her obsession for the same thing- amours, amants, amantes.

7 Henceforth referred to as “Heroine”
Indeed Emma’s languid sensuality is not limited to the sphere of literature. She transforms her religious experience as well into a sensual one. She loves the “langueur mystique” of the incense at the altar (Flaubert 59); more importantly, she misreads or misunderstands certain religious sermons and conventions. For example, she takes the idea of Christ as bridegroom as a literal union and puts religious and Platonic terms such as fiancé, époux, amant céleste and mariage éternel into a personal and sensual context, which gives her “des douceurs inattendues” (Flaubert 60). In her religious readings, which were endorsed by the nuns at the convent and included works such as Chateaubriand’s Génie du Christianisme, she picks out and focuses mostly on the sensual and romantic aspects, as “la lamentation sonore des mélancolies romantiques” (Flaubert 60).

Throughout her life Emma returns time and time again to religion for help, most notably when she seeks out the Abbé Bournisien for spiritual aid and guidance (Flaubert 148). On different occasions she turns to the Virgin Mary for help, as in the Cathedral when she meets Léon and looks for “divine intervention” (Flaubert 292).

There are two important scenes that act as mirror sequences to each other, both involving Emma receiving the sacraments. After Rodolphe’s break-up, Emma suffers a nervous breakdown. The “vomissements” are foreshadowing her death scene and Charles assumes that they signal the early symptoms of cancer (256). However, she is relieved just by the view of the cassock of the priest (Flaubert 259) and, with a “joie céleste”, she accepts the body of the Saviour (Flaubert 260) and even addresses to him “les mêmes paroles de suavité qu’elle murmurait jadis à son amant” (Flaubert 261). Later we witness a similar situation albeit with more dire and fatal consequences: this time she has taken arsenic. She protrudes her lips to kiss the cross, the body of Christ with “le plus grand baiser d’amour qu’elle eût jamais donné” (Flaubert 382). Given Emma’s early adolescent upbringing and her temper
and life experience, we are not surprised at such behaviour. In fact, for a moment, everyone erroneously believes that the sacrament has healed her (Flaubert 383).

Emma’s understanding of religion is simple and naïve, and it thrives on clichés. For example, she envisions God on a “trône d’or”, sending angels with burning wings to lift her up to their sphere (Flaubert 260). At this stage in her life, she has once again turned to religion to fill the emotional void and she wishes to become a saint (Flaubert 260). Once again, sensual imagery is implicated here, as she replaces her search of bonheur for des félicités plus grandes, and she conceives of her religious feelings as “un autre amour au-dessus de tous les autres amours, sans intermittence ni fin, et qui s’accroîtrait éternellement!” (Flaubert 260).

In fact, this manner of reverence exercised by Emma shocks the curé who fears heresy and extravagance (Flaubert 260) and who writes to M. Boulard, the libraire of the monseigneur, to recommend books for this “personne du sexe, qui était pleine d’esprit” (Flaubert 261 italics in text). After M. Boulard comes up with a rather random religious reading list, we are told that Emma does not yet have the intelligence to apply herself to such serious study and reflection and that one of her flaws has been that she undertakes her readings with “trop de précipitation” (Flaubert 261). It is one of Emma’s characteristics to exaggerate and to dramatize her experiences, which is apparent in her dealings with her sexual relationships as well as her approach to reading.

Her ‘mentalité’ about life and the world is rather childish and borders on superficiality, partly due to her lack of intellectual clarity, to her rather mediocre surroundings, and of course due to her upbringing and her education, or rather lack thereof. She loves the church for its flowers, music for its romantic lyrics, and literature for its “excitations passionnelles” (Flaubert 64), all of which are linked with or rather reduced to a superficial romantic perspective. In fact, her personal text or
narrative or paradigm is to romanticize reality. This will be of particular relevance when we discuss her personal relationships.

Her convent years have shaped her to a large degree and like most adolescents, she is curious about love and sex. In the nineteenth century sex was regarded as a “taboo subject” and by default books became a “chief source of information and also of arousal” (Determined Peterson 15). That means that her first contact with literature has been for “une sorte de profit personnel [. . .] la consommation immédiate de son coeur” and that she rejects any material that she finds “inutile” (Flaubert 60).

She began reading in order to satisfy her drives, and this approach to reading continues in her adult years. She turns to literature whenever she needs to escape or stumbles upon particular needs that she cannot manage to satisfy in real life. For example she ‘studies’ Eugène Sue because of “descriptions d’ameublements; elle lut Balzac et George Sand, y cherchant des assouvissements imaginaires pour ses convoitises personnelles” (Flaubert 84). As I noted earlier, she never really reads for literature’s sake but she always looks for answers to extract from her readings. Often it is either pleasing images of romantic love, or aristocratic life and manners, as her interest for fashion magazines clearly indicates.

She loves looking at pictures and vignettes, such as “le pauvre Jésus” (Flaubert 60) or gravures, where aristocratic paintings, signed by comtes or vicomtes are illustrated with anonymous portraits of English ladies or young men embracing young girls in white dresses (Flaubert 62). She also subscribes to magazines for women such as la Corbeille or Sylphe des Salons, which tend to portray this kind of idealized view of Parisian aristocratic life (Flaubert 84). Reading becomes less important for her, as she is in these cases more engaged with looking at pictures or illustrations.
This raises the question of how often she actually reads? Of course at first glance this question seems absurd, since Madame Bovary is regarded as “primarily a novel about the reading of novels and about imaginative visions derived from such reading” (“Reading and Imagining in Madame Bovary” Peterson 163). Even though this statement is valid, it would be more precise to argue that Emma appears to be reading books, when in fact she does not. But what has she actually read? We shall look for clues of her reading material in the text.

She has read *Paul et Virginie* (Flaubert 59) and some of Walter Scott’s works (Flaubert 61). She is well-versed in romantic literature, has learnt many poems by heart and recites them on several occasions, and models herself on literary characters such as Hugo’s Sachette (Flaubert 142) or other female protagonists of books she has read (Flaubert 204).

There are, however, many instances where she has a book in her hands but does not actually read. She takes a book and then, dreaming between the lines, she lets it fall on her knees (Flaubert 86). At other times she closes the blinds and “avec un livre à la main, elle restait étendue sur un canapé, dans cet accoutrement” (Flaubert 163). There is a clear sense that here the pose is more important than the reading itself and the scene actually has the qualities of a painting. Over all, it is more about daydreaming than actual reading. This is somewhat similar to Léon’s claim of taking a book to watch the sunset (Flaubert 112). Is he watching the sunset or is he reading?

When Emma does appear to read one night and pretends to be amused by her reading, it is in order to deceive Charles and to meet her lover soon (Flaubert 211). She hides the torches behind books, out of Charles’ sight (Flaubert 211). Books indeed act as a way of meeting and getting to know one of her lovers. Her first encounter with Léon is all about books and full of romantic clichés. Her memories of him are linked to books, as she remembers reading under shady trees
or tête-à-tête at the fireplace. The beginning of their relationship is "un commerce continué de livres et de romances" (Flaubert 133) behind the back of the unsuspecting Charles. Charles, on the other hand, has no access to such a world of books, hence he does not understand or foresee anything, and Emma is annoyed that he does not read.

It is worth mentioning that from her discovery of books until her death, Emma lacks any authoritative source or guidance for her reading material. As Peterson states, "without the presence of a teacher, no dialectical uncovering of meaning is possible; the written text remains fixed, rigid, imposing its authority without yielding its latent meanings to questing readers" (Determined 29). In other words, Emma may be a "model reader" for her ability to immerse herself into the text, yet she still remains an inadequate reader throughout her life because she has never learnt to interpret the texts and nobody has ever taught her. Her husband Charles, for example, cannot, to her annoyance, explain a riding term she has encountered in a novel (Flaubert 66). The Abbe Bournisien, as we know, is equally incapable of answering her spiritual questions or aiding her.

Since Emma lacks both education and resources to read and understand literature, she ends up accepting "as reality what is pure fantasy and imagination" ("Heroine" Peterson 171). Her understanding of life outside the convent is based on this subjective interpretation of her readings. She constantly "evaluates her own life against the background of what she has learned [i.e., mislearned] from texts" (Wimmers 69). In her way of reading Emma cannot discern that fiction is an abstract representation; instead, she reads it literally ("Reading" Peterson 170), as if it were a newspaper article ("Flaubert and Emma Bovary: The Hazards of Literary Fusion" Bersani 313). Of course, a newspaper article also contains elements of fiction and

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8 Henceforth referred to as "Flaubert and Emma".
we are never presented with the “literal truth”, but clearly our approach to such a

text is different.⁹

In fact, Emma reads “in generalities of plot, of histoire, from which she can

extract pleasing visions of life that she can apply to her own” (“Heroine” Peterson

171). When Emma as a reader approaches a book, she already has a clearly defined

and rather rigid set of expectations, and because of these preconditions she chooses

those elements of the books that not only please her, but even confirm and in fact

strengthen her own convictions.

This need to seek messages to “support and stabilize our view of the world”

(Hatt 98-99) has been an object of study in the social sciences. According to

Festinger and the theory of cognitive dissonance, any information that a person (or a

reader) finds “dissonant with his present store of knowledge and attitudes, he simply

will not attend to” (cited by Hatt 90). This is why Emma’s reading is so limited and

one of the reasons why she prefers to read in a manner that is “disintegrative rather

than synthetic, literal rather than metaphorical, distanced rather than involved”

(Determined Peterson 170). Indeed, as noted earlier, she tends to zoom in and

magnify specific aspects of her readings. She desires to romanticize her reality and

focuses on subjects related to love and romance rather than looking at the whole

range of experience. It is a “process of distortion” that takes place with her, where

she misreads “the message in order to make it say” what she wants it to say (Hatt

91). Since a reader must to some extent ‘make’ the message, any reading involves a

certain amount of distortion (Hatt 105), and the question to ask is not “what effect

reading has on people, but what appears to ensue from this reading by this reader of

this text” (Hatt 109).

⁹ The same applies to non-fiction, such as history books or biographies, where we

actually expect the events to have taken place in real life, which is most often not

the case with fiction being a product of the imagination. It becomes more
The popular novels of that period, particularly those she reads, are often *inferior literature*, what is commonly termed as *le bas romantisme*, such as roman-feuilletons, keep-sakes, and magazines. Nonetheless, we find certain known authors in her repertoire such as Sand, Chateaubriand, and Balzac. However, it is not only the reading material itself that is problematic but, as previously mentioned, her understanding and interpretation of it. In fact, she turns to religious literature with the same needs and expectations as she does to *bas romantisme*. Indeed, in her case, even religious literature "does not deflect her from romantic ideals; on the contrary, she makes it serve them" ("Heroine" Peterson 176).

Emma’s readings never lead her to any insights about herself; as a matter of fact she "experiences only vague dissatisfaction and unfulfilled longing" after each reading ("Heroine" Peterson 164). The dissatisfaction is vague, and Flaubert uses that word quite consistently in the novel not only to show the "vagueness" of his protagonists’ desires but also the ambiguities of language. Emma does not exactly know what she wants. Her desires are "unfulfilled" because they are frequently grounded in the "plan imaginaire" (Tipper 213) and have no real concrete counterpart or signifier in reality.

She does not project "herself into the situations depicted" but rather "tries to draw them out of the realm of the imaginary and into her own life" ("Heroine" Peterson 173). As we can see in her case - and the same can be said of Don Quixote - the danger lies less in the contents of the novels these protagonists read, and more in their *flawed* and *misconstrued* interpretation of them. Worse, they attempt to transpose novelistic ideas from the realm of fiction into everyday life, a practice which in no small part contributes to their downfall.

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problematic when considering the Bible. Is it fact or fiction, history or allegory – or all of these?
Thus, Emma strives to comprehend enigmatic terms such as “felicité”, “passion” and “ivresse” (Flaubert 58 italics in text) that she has encountered in the books she has read. Bersani believes that these words “mean” only “verbally” and that they derive their meaning only from books; however, taken out of their context, that is, when applied to life, “nothing is meant by those words” (“Flaubert and Emma” 309).

Consequently she expects life to “duplicate” literature and believes that everything conforms to what she has read “unaware of the fact that literature didn’t duplicate life in the first place” (“Flaubert and Emma” Bersani 308). She is also blind to the fact that all of her ideas are indeed “second-hand” and she accepts them and assimilates them as her own without thinking (Spacks 197).

She looks around her and finds nothing but ennui – a sense of boredom and nagging dissatisfaction with life. Spacks interestingly defines boredom as an “incapacity fully to engage” with one’s surroundings, with one’s own ideas etc. (192). According to Spacks, Emma’s boredom dominates, controls and alienates her from life, and eventually leads to her death (196). Indeed, Emma is bored with a world that is “inadequate with her dreams of romantic excitement” (Balzac to Beckett: Center and Circumference in French fiction Bersani 154).10

Her marriage to Charles, who is the opposite of what she was hoping for as a husband, seems a disaster to her and she imagines what it would have been like to meet some other man who would accord with the ideal, on the basis of the “romantic tableau” or “mental picture” that she has drawn for herself (“Flaubert and Emma” Bersani 306).

These unrealistic expectations, to which she clings desperately despite constant contradiction in actual life, are a prime example of an idée reçue. She does

10 Henceforth referred to as Balzac to Beckett.
not really attempt to confront reality but constantly evades it by using literature and
daydreaming as a means of escape. Her text or "narrativity" seems to be the
accumulation of all the books she has read and which "collaborate to form a
satisfying consistent love story" ("Flaubert and Emma" Bersani 307). Her novelistic
or romanesque imagination is indeed filled with intense and dramatic events, even
though they never take place in her life. For example, she believes that love is a
sudden emotion that hits like lightning, "avec de grands éclats et des fulgurations, –
ouragan des cieux qui tombe sur la vie, la bouleverse, arrache les volontés [. . .]
" (Flaubert 135). Hence she feels surprised and somewhat cheated when this does not
happen. But when she meets Rodolphe, an obvious womanizer, she takes his
seductive words at face value and does not see the hypocrisy behind them. She
surrenders to him and is duped simply because he speaks the language of clichés
she knows so well and that she associates with true romantic sentiment. She gives in
quite easily to him because of the "chaleur de ce langage" (Flaubert 197). Indeed
when she first hears him speaking like this, she looks at him as if he were a traveler
from an extraordinary place (Flaubert 183). Evidently, this unspecified place is her
romantic dream-world, where love grows easily and naturally like Indian plants
(Flaubert 85) and where she hopes Rodolphe will take her, both literally and
figuratively. To her, love "seems impossible [. . .] unless it appears with all the
conventional signs which constitute a code of love in fictions and romance" ("Flaubert
and Emma" Bersani 308). In fact, this codified romantic language does not work on
her husband, who has had no access to this kind of world, even though she tries it
out on him ("Flaubert and Emma" Bersani 308). She acts out those romantic codes,
that is, gestures, language, actions, but to no avail, because he seems rather
unresponsive and she hardly feels anything in the process (Flaubert 68).
She has made up theories about love and becomes frustrated when they don’t correspond to what she believes are “formes convenues” (Flaubert 69). As Bersani points out, for Emma there are “particular words, costumes, gestures and settings which, so to speak, manufacture passion” (“Flaubert and Emma” 309), and it is not surprising that she believes that for love to grow one needs the right climate and environment. The “concept of love” to which Emma subscribes does indeed “grow only in the ‘soil’ of romantic fictions” (“Flaubert and Emma” Bersani 309). Bersani further states that Emma “kills herself because of her failure to find a situation worthy of her vocabulary [. . .] Emma tests each episode in her life in the light of the language she has learned from books” (Balzac to Beckett 142). Such a language is mostly based on literary traditions that have shaped our conception of a ‘romantic code’: “Les amants n’inventent pas leurs moyens d’expression, ou ne les inventent que pour une très faible part. Ils les reprennent, tout faits” (Lecercle 18). Not only is her perception of the world in contrast with reality, but her language, the code she follows from books, is inadequate as well.

In romantic literature we do not see a duplication of life but an exaggerated, much more “interesting”, condensed version of it. Novels of the time are filled with intense emotions, tragic events and operatic drama. One of their main features is to entertain and amuse the reader. Emma is very much interested in intense moments and unrestrained passion, and she attempts to create those conditions for herself. Her meetings with Rodolphe on the garden bench under the moon are altogether consistent with romantic clichés. She asks for eternal love, tells him to think of her at the stroke of midnight and even asks him if he has a gun to protect them from her husband if he should by chance see them together. Anyone who knows Charles will laugh at the latter comment because there is absolutely nothing threatening about Emma’s husband and that is why Rodolphe dismisses her fancy, calling her sentimental and in fact ridiculing her (Flaubert 212). Yet such an image is not only
consistent with her romantic world-frame, it also supplies an element of danger and excitement for her.

The same element applies to her desire to elope forever with her beloved and thus escape the narrow-minded town-life and her husband. Nevertheless, Emma realizes that “romantic ecstasy” does not last (“Flaubert and Emma” Bersani 310) and that love is likely to “run out of emotional steam and end in boredom” (“Flaubert and Emma” Bersani 309). She notices that her relationship with Léon over time becomes not only similar to her married life but reveals the very platitudes from which she has been meaning to escape (Flaubert 346).

At that point, she attempts desperately to keep up the façade and she continues to write him letters, not because she wants to, not because she loves him, but simply because that is what lovers are supposed to do (Flaubert 346). When her “thrilling excitements are submerged” in real or ordinary time, she realizes that in her life there is a “shattering absence of drama” which devastates her (“Flaubert and Emma” Bersani 310). Nothing, no matter how exciting it may look at first, no matter how passionate it may seem, can resist the erosion of time and will eventually be caught up in the same slow dull rhythm of ennui. In fact, Rodolphe is right, after all, when he states in his letter to her that “cette ardeur (c’est là le sort des choses humaines) se fût diminuée, sans doute!” (Flaubert 248). It is a desolating experience that her dreams and wishes are, according to Bersani, “unrepresentable in the world she inhabits”; instead they “remain ideally abstract” (Balzac to Beckett 155).

One should however keep in mind how “hopelessly mediocre” her surroundings are (Balzac to Beckett Bersani 159). All the men she meets, from the well-meaning but ineffectual Charles, to the conceited, shallow, and rather brutal Rodolphe to the dreamy but cowardly Léon, cannot possibly fulfill her expectations. Yet these are expectations, according to Bersani, so farfetched and “absurd that no lover could help her to realize them”; they constitute her “sickness of imagination”
originating with her "interest in literature" (Balzac to Beckett 159). Her readings are responsible for many of the images and clichés that she applies to her life.

As we can see, Emma falls prey to the illusions represented in literature. She becomes "victime de la lecture de romans romantico-érotiques" in the same way as women in a later era were captivated and fascinated by Hollywood cinema (Hatzfeld 272) and continue to do so in our times.

In my opinion, there is one central metaphor that perfectly captures the dangers of reading and which has its origin in Socrates, the philosopher who mistrusted books: the idea of poison.

**Literature as poison**

As Derrida has shown, books may "contain essential forms of knowledge" but at the same time, they can be "carriers of artificial and sterile knowledge, falsehood, and even death" (cited by Determined Peterson 1). Socrates condemns writing because it leads readers away from the truth; "written language for its poverty and its inefficacy" is an obstacle to attaining "true knowledge" (Determined Peterson 6). In fact, in Plato's works, writing is presented as poison and this idea has persisted in the Romantic period and even throughout the nineteenth century (Determined Peterson 8).
In his essay “Madame Bovary and the Bitter-Sweet Taste of Romance”, Paul Tipper has artfully applied the notions of sugar and poison to lay bare the inner workings of Emma’s mind. Sugar stands for *le sucre en poudre* she finds at la Vaubyessard that appears whiter and finer than anywhere else (Flaubert 75). It serves as one of the “props to fuel Emma’s dreams of romance, whilst its counterpart, the reference to arsenic, marks the end of all illusions as reality supersedes dream” (Tipper 207). This “motif of sweetness”, which he means both in its literal and figurative sense, demonstrates the “discrepancy between illusion and reality and the lethal dangers inherent in (con)fusing the two” (Tipper 207).

Emma’s encounter with a world she has read and dreamed about, the world of aristocracy she finds at the chateau, is obviously of great symbolic importance. It stands in rather sharp contrast to her rustic wedding, in terms of atmosphere, behaviour, customs and manners. Undoubtedly, she belongs to the former society – she sees peasants peering through the window and is reminded of her own past and her social status (Flaubert 77). However, Emma refuses to acknowledge the fact and continues to “play the part of a Romantic heroine in the arms of the waltzing Vicomte” (Tipper 208).

Indeed, for fleeting moments, the “illusion of bliss has been realized” for her, yet as time passes “the memory of the events fades fast in Emma’s mind, showing it to be what it always was - pure illusion” (Tipper 208). Emma constantly attempts to remind herself of those events and she counts the days to next year’s ball but she never does experience that *bliss* again. The only trace that remains is the cigar box, which she, predictably, believes to belong to the Vicomte (Flaubert 83).

Emma has consumed or “ingested” romantic or “metaphorically sweet” literature in her youth; she has “taken [it] to be a mirror of the real”, and it is only at her death that she “comes to see that the sweet signifiers of literary romance are all lies and deception” (Tipper 209). To return to the image of poison, her so-called
bliss, or “dazzling white sugar at La Vaubyessard” has its ghastly counterpart in the “white powder of the arsenic” which kills her (Tipper 209). It is Madame Bovary mère who notices the dangers of reading, or at least its destructive impact on her daughter-in-law, especially considering the collection of mediocre literature that Emma prefers. Consequently, Charles’ mother attempts to keep Emma away from the bookseller in his “métier d’empoisonneur” (Flaubert 164), who is regarded as a “supplier of toxic reading matter” (Tipper 212).

Of course, equating literature with poison amounts to a foreshadowing, since it is due to those very same books that she will literally poison herself. Even when it comes to death, Emma is misled by romantic delusions. She compares death to deep sleep, as she says to herself: “Ah! c’est bien peu de chose, la mort! [. . .] je vais m’endormir, et tout sera fini” (Flaubert 373). In a sense, she also seems to believe, rather naively, that her suicide could be a kind of revenge directed at a world that has denied her permanent happiness.11

However, as we have seen throughout the novel, and in particular in Emma’s life, these romantic notions stand in sharp contrast to the actual tragic events, which Flaubert recreates in its chilling details. Her death is indeed not a “romantic and painless passage into oblivion”, but it is then that the white sugar “reveals its true colour- the deathly, ghastly white of vacuous illusion” (Tipper 212). The poison that she eats also was a “poudre blanche” (Flaubert 372).

As Flaubert continues to describe her sensations while death approaches, it is said that the poison left a terrible taste of ink in her mouth (Flaubert 373) and when after her death her head is turned, her mouth emits black liquid (Flaubert 390). This

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11 Other critics have focused on Emma’s self-inflicted death as a final refusal to submit to a male-dominated world. Peterson claims that Emma will never be contented with the domestic and subservient role of women at this time (“Heroine” 176) and that in the end, however, it is the “male-dominated” society that asserts itself by using its “primary texts”, such as money and legal edicts, to bring her down
is the very "ink" that Emma "took to be the real thing" in the soil of fictions, those books, or rather the romantic illusions that she derived from them, which she used to believe in and live by. At the same time, the black liquid can represent the ink that Flaubert himself used to "create, then to destroy an incompetent reader of fiction" (Tipper 212). But ultimately, and this Tipper does not mention, it seems that this is also the ink which we, other readers of fiction, come in contact with when we read the tale of Emma Bovary. ¹²

Tipper however omits to discuss two important passages that clearly show the link between reading and poison. Emma finds out about the existence of the arsenic and its actual location because Homais accuses Justin of having entered his capharnaüm, his sanctuary (Flaubert 298). Homais claims that Justin could have accidentally poisoned everyone since there is a bottle of arsenic on the shelf, a white powder labelled "Dangereux!" (Flaubert 299, italics in text). Then, Justin drops his book, L'amour conjugal, a book deemed not only indecent by Homais, but actually considered as dangerous, mostly because of its illustrations. The pharmacist is worried that this book could fall into the hands of his children and might corrupt them (Flaubert 301). In this juxtaposition we see literature and poison clearly associated with each other.

Later, Homais attempts to cover up the fact that Emma could have obtained the poison from him and he writes in his article that the cause of her death was a mistake of hers: She was making "crème à la vanille" and mistook arsenic for sugar (Flaubert 386). This justifies the point made by Tipper, by bringing together the motifs of the sweet and the poisonous.

¹²Umberto Eco has treated a similar motif in his Name of the Rose. In the novel, a "dangerous" book by Aristotle is limed with black poison on the edges of its pages. When the unsuspecting readers turn the page, they inadvertently apply the poison to their tongues by moistening their poison-stained fingers.
While we cannot pinpoint when exactly Emma loses her sense of judgment, the opposite is true when it comes to Don Quixote. We assume that he has been a reader all his life since in his library he has a collection of a few hundred books, mostly chivalric novels. When we meet him, he is completely absorbed in the reading of chivalry novels and he tends to neglect other aristocratic pastimes such as hunting. His passion for reading interferes with his domestic affairs, and he even parts with some of his land in order to acquire more books (Cervantes 22). However, he is not the only one who loves this genre of literature, for both the priest and the barber of his town are also avid readers. They have had frequent disputes about who is the best knight, Palmerin d'Angleterre or Amadis de Gaul (Cervantes 22). It is around this time that Don Quixote dedicates himself fully, night and day, to the reading of chivalry novels. From that point on, his imagination is so filled with 'chivalric absurdities' that he accepts as historical truth what the narrator labels a "whole system of chimeras" (Cervantes 23).

Since Don Quixote believes all these imaginative accounts to be factual, he falls "into one of the strangest conceits" (23) one day to become a caballero andante, that is, a knight-errant. From this point onward he seems to set aside

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13 "toda aquella máquina de aquellas sonadas soñadas invenciones que leía [...]” (Cervantes 33).

The Spanish word historia connotes both story and history and does not, like its reader-protagonist, make a distinction between them. Cervantes is fully aware of this fact and he incorporates and alludes to this throughout his novel by ironically claiming that everything told in the story is historically true.

14 "vino a dar en el más extraño pensamiento” (Cervantes 33)
reading, for we do not see him in the process of reading after that (with the exception of reading letters or his own poems and madrigals). Instead, he steps out into the world to realize and manifest his chivalric ideals.

Already after the first pages we enter into the mind and madness of the hidalgo. His misinterpretation of the books and his lack of judgment make him believe that he can, indeed, that he is destined to, resuscitate the vanished order of chivalry. Obviously the hidalgo has chosen a profession that has vanished from the “espace réel” (Zumthor 267) and has become “pure fiction, sans plus aucun rapport avec la vérité commune” (Zumthor 261). In fact, seventeenth-century Spain is a “cadre historique et sociologique inadéquat” (Schrader 207) for Don Quixote’s enterprise and he ends up confronting a world hostile to chivalric ideas (Auerbach cited by Schrader 207). Both his elevated language and his appearance - perhaps a better word would be apparition - seem surprising, bizarre and completely out of context for most of the characters with whom he comes in contact during his sorties as a knight-errant.15

Indeed, he is not cut out to be a caballero, which increases the grotesque impression he makes on others. Physically one would imagine a knight to be strong and not “spare-bodied” and “meagre” (Cervantes 21).16 Although he may believe himself to have strength and ‘prouesse’, his outward appearance does not support such a claim. He is not very young either; he is in his fifties and hardly ‘young and dashing’ like his literary models, Amadis and Roland – who, nonetheless, remain youthful and “ageless” in the literature.

15 There is a link to Charles who also has been out of place albeit in a different context, his school. Yet the schoolmaster makes a blunder and calls Charles’ casquette a casque. One cannot help being reminded of Don Quixote’s self-fabricated ridiculous helmet.

16 “complexion recia, seco de carnes, enjuto de rostro.” (Cervantes 31)
Nor does he seem very good-looking; on the contrary, he is vaguely repulsive as certain descriptions and some of the characters' reactions purport. Thus we are confronted with a man who appears completely out of touch with reality and is not a knight-errant but a madman. It is the "conception" of being a hero that occupies the "center of the narrative", and this 'knight' is "ineffectual in the material world", which is the cause for many "mock adventures" (Murillo 56).

In sum, it becomes clear that we are not dealing with the epitome of a knight, the flower or cream of chivalry, but rather with its living parody. Don Quixote is a distorted satirical version of what fictional knighthood ought to be, but ironically – and here lies his madness – he does not know it or refuses to acknowledge it, despite constant evidence refuting his vision.

Several characters in the novel, among whom we find the "homme d'église" of the second part, attempt to reason with him and convince him to return home, to raise a family, and lead a "normal" life instead of pursuing the insane business of roaming around the country, trying to be a knight-errant. At other points in the story, people are astonished to meet such an extravagant character, especially in Part One of the novel. Everything, from his looks to his words and actions, is clearly and stubbornly set according to the parameters of chivalry, or rather according to pure fiction. That is also why the library of the hidalgo has come to be viewed as responsible for his madness (Schrader 207) and seen as downright evil from the perspective of Don Quixote's niece and his domestic, who would like the priest to burn all of those books (Cervantes 48). Nonetheless, the secret fondness for some of these books comes out when the priest and the barber spare and save some of the books from the fire.  

17 What is rather striking is the fact that among other books, the priest and the barber "save" *Amadis de Gaul*; the priest first claims that this particular book is the foundation of all chivalric novels and decides to burn it without mercy, yet upon the barber's response that it is said to be the best in its genre, the priest promptly
The "authority of print" (Watt 197), namely the assumption that what is printed must necessarily be true, is of great importance in this novel. The German proverb "Luegen wie gedruckt", which literally means to lie as printed (the equivalent of our "lying through one's teeth") reveals how closely lying is associated with the act of printing, and demonstrates the ambivalence of the printed word. One should not trust what one reads or, even more radically stated, anything that is printed is a lie or fiction.

In fact, we face a paradox when we claim that it is possible for fiction to be realistic. By definition, anything that is fictitious cannot be real; it cannot exactly duplicate life as it is. We often state that fiction is drawn from life and that the imaginary scenario or the world-making that is inherent in the novels is but an illustrated version of life. Anything we encounter, whether photography, journalism or history, has to deal with the "burden of fiction".

According to Riffaterre, fiction holds tautologically true, which means that it does not refer to factual truth, but to a truth embedded within the fictional realm. He distinguishes between meaning and significance, in the following terms:

Meaning is merely referential: it results from the relationships, real or imagined, between words and their nonverbal equivalents. Significance, on the other hand, results from the relationships between these same words and verbal systems outside the text [. . .] (cited by Wimmers 6)

Through reading we encounter an abstract truth that is not congruent with reality or our personal experience of it, but serves as a reflection (in both senses of the word, of mirroring and thinking) on our reality. In fact, language can be reduced changes his mind. When the priest finds The History of the renowned knight Tirante the White, he is surprised that it should be there and gives it to the barber to take home with him and to read it because, apparently, it is an excellent book. Palmerin of England, Ten Books of the Fortune of Love by Antonio de Lofrasso, Book of Songs by Lopez Maldonado, The Araucana by Don Alonso de Ercilla, The Austriada by John Rufo, The Monserrate by Christoval de Virues, Tears of Angelica by Luis Barahona de Soto and rather ironically, The Galatea by Cervantes himself, are all books that the priest exempts from the fire.
to a system of symbols, which convey objects and ideas that have their equivalent counterparts in the real world.

However, in accordance with the phenomenological approach, the interpretant or the reader is part of the Transferstruktur, the structure of exchange, and it is his or her "recognition of analogies between the fictional world and his own life experience" (Haverkamp cited by Wimmers 10). A work of art has then "philosophical significance", which means that we can "find truth through a work of art that we could not find in any other way" (Gadamer cited by Wimmers 15).

As we have seen, Don Quixote does not have the ability to discern between fiction and reality, though it seems not uncommon to do so. The innkeeper, also fond of chivalric literature, understands it as a record of actual historical events. His argument is that if fiction were all a lie, the government would not allow its publication - an argument that Don Quixote uses himself later when he talks to the Canon of Toledo (Cervantes 440) - to which the priest replies to the innkeeper that the government had counted on the common sense of the reader, not to confuse the fictional realm with reality (Cervantes 277). But even a person as educated and well-rounded as Don Quixote has fallen into the trap of fiction and has been seduced by the lure of print.

Print plays a vital role in the Second Part of the novel, however with different connotations. In the First Part, print is understood in terms of Don Quixote’s reading of chivalry books and his way of treating fiction, imaginary printed words, as real, as signifiers that point to concrete signified events. He expects everything to conform to his erroneous expectations of the world, and when windmills are nothing but

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18 For a different philosophical point of view, see Kaethe Hamburger’s Wahrheit und aesthetische Wahrheit, where she defines truth as "nonrelative, nonsubjective, and absolute" and where she claims that the "notion of truth cannot be applied to aesthetic works, because they are subject to plural interpretations" (cited by Wimmers 14)
windmills rather than giants, as he first made them out to be, he explains it to himself and to Sancho in terms of an enchantment. In fact, whenever he cannot find in his memory any chivalric explanation for ambiguous events or stimuli, he blames it on the 'envious enchanter' who pursues him and tries to take his glory away from him by changing the appearance of objects or of people. It is an idée fixe that stands in the way of his guérison but at the same time protects him against disillusionment: “This solution appears each time the exterior situation establishes itself as in insuperable contrast to the illusion” (Auerbach 340).19

Don Quixote’s accumulated readings on the topic form the framework or matrix of his paradigm and everything that he sees or does becomes print or pure fiction. By this I do not allude only to the fact that, as Girard has explained, his principal external mediators are fictitious literary models, which modulate and control his ambitions and desires. According to Girard’s model, Don Quixote is “la victime exemplaire du désir triangulaire” (Girard 12). Girard claims that Don Quixote has renounced “en faveur d’Amadis, à la prérogative fondamentale de l’individu” - his free will (11-12).20

However, this is not entirely true, as Rushdy has pointed out, since Don Quixote may use external mediators to regulate his desires, but his goal is to exceed those models, not to be limited to them (106). Don Quixote wants to create, rewrite himself in the annals of chivalry, and, indeed, everything he says, thinks, or does actually becomes recorded in a book, the one that we know and cherish as Don Quixote.

19 “Dieser Ausweg findet sich jedesmal, sobald die äußere Lage in unüberwindbarem Gegensatz zur Illusion tritt [ . . . ]” (Auerbach 324).
20 Girard treats in detail the problems of what he calls internal mediation in the light of Proust’s, Stendhal’s, and Dostoevsky’s works, but falls rather short on his discussion of external mediators, to which he assigns Flaubert and Cervantes. Emma has her eyes set upon an external mediator, in her case, not a person or a role model, but romantic ideas induced by the reading of novels.
The situation changes and becomes more complicated in the Second Part. There, print has asserted itself in two major ways. One of them is the publication of the hidalgo’s and his squire’s exploits recounted ‘faithfully’ by Cid Hamet Ben Engeli, his official ‘transcendental’ biographer who finds constant access to Don Quixote and Sancho, their conversations and thoughts, without ever being physically present. Since the publication has been a huge success with the public, Don Quixote has become famous, and people - by that I mean the characters in the novel that he meets in the Second Part - already know of him and his extravagances. It is in the interval between the first and second part that Don Quixote becomes real (Foucault 62). Earlier, that is in the first part, he had been nothing but “langage, texte, feuillets imprimés, histoire déjà transcrite” (Foucault 60).

Characters like the duke and the duchess, who know about the worldview of the hidalgo, create for their amusement a world that corresponds to the fictions represented in the chivalry novels. They also possess a wealth of information about the knight-errant and can more easily manipulate him. Interestingly, the Arab narrator notes that the duke and duchess must be equally crazy, as they go to great lengths and costs to create a fictional world for the Don and hence the “the mockers were as mad as the mocked” (Cervantes 919). The same applies to some degree to Samson, who, after his defeat, adds a personal motive and incentive to beat the Chevalier de la Triste Figure in a duel. Antonio, as well, likes to amuse himself with the folly of Don Quixote and he openly claims that it is a greater folly to cure the hidalgo from his illness because that would deprive the world of a rare sort of entertainment (Cervantes 895).

Yet there is also another publication, namely, the “false” and “treacherous” version of a certain Avellaneda of Tordesillas, who claims to have written about the

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21 “Ser tan locos los burladores como los burlados.” (Cervantes 1125)
adventures of the famous pair but ends up reproducing 'pure fiction'. It is Don Quixote himself who chances upon that book at the printer's and claims that "true histories themselves are so much better, by how much the truer" (Cervantes 880), thus indirectly dismissing that particular version as lies. This same book of the 'fake' biographer, the native of Tordesillas, appears again in Altisidore's 'vision' of hell, where devils play tennis using books as balls (Cervantes 920-21). One of the devils claims that the book is indeed so bad that not even he could have written a worse one (Cervantes 921).

When the hidalgo and his squire meet Alvar Tarfé, who believes he has met another Don Quixote, our Don Quixote agrees to a legal declaration that affirms that he is indeed the real Don Quixote and not the one portrayed in Avellaneda's book (Cervantes 932). Both Don Quixote and Sancho are very concerned to prove to others that they are the only true characters, and that any others would be fraudulent impostors. They become so joyful once they have the official declaration in print that they forget they do not need a piece of paper to tell them who they are. They already prove their existence and set themselves apart from the impostors through their words and deeds, as the narrator himself comments (Cervantes 932).

Thus, what appeared to be print in terms of a protagonist reading turns into a complex web of reading and writing. In fact, both Don Quixote and Sancho are writing their history because anything they say or do in those moments is going to be recorded and published in the upcoming Second Part of the novel, the Cid Hamet Ben Engeli version.

The narrator of Cervantes presents us with complex and playful layers of irony. The novel purports to be historical and true, namely "not to swerve a jot from

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22 "que las historias [...] verdaderas tanto son mejores cuanto son mas verdaderas" (Cervantes 1079)
the truth” (Cervantes 21)\textsuperscript{23} and often gives mock-examples and details to emphasize that assertion. The narrator posing as a historian creates verisimilitude by giving us exact descriptions, which often seem absurd and unnecessary. For example, at the beginning of the novel, the narrator claims not to remember the name of Don Quixote’s village (Cervantes 21) and is not quite sure (and quite wrong, as we learn at the end) about the protagonist’s actual name, Quixada or Quesada (Cervantes 21). By admitting certain doubts or uncertainties, the novel increases the “illusion of verisimilitude” or the “effet de réel” and approaches a historical account, where not all the details are known as fact, unlike a work of fiction where the author could simply make up all the events and circumstances and to whom the characters would be “entirely transparent” (Spiegel 11).

The original narrator apparently runs out of material and finds the conclusion of the exploits of the famous knight by accident and in Arabic. As he claims that Arabs are generally not to be trusted (Cervantes 69), it is already ambiguous whether the Moor’s writing is all true and can be fully trusted. In fact, the Arabic version is then translated by a Morisque, who promises to deliver a faithful and speedy translation (Cervantes 68). Thus the first narrator must trust the translator’s judgment to be valid because he himself cannot read or speak Arabic. The text appears to shift further away into an ambiguous terrain; it becomes more and more distorted so that in the end we are left with a text that cannot possibly be literally true. By these devices, Cervantes keeps the irony intact throughout the novel and makes sure that the reader will get the message. The events told in the story, just like any chivalric novel for that matter, are nothing but pure fiction, a ‘machine of lies’. In a sense, he is also making sure that we, the readers, do not fall into the same trap as his protagonist and instead learn our lessons from his mistakes. This “illusion-breaking” technique is also true of Flaubert’s narrator who keeps us at a

\textsuperscript{23} “basta que en la narración dé el no se salga un punto de la verdad”. (Cervantes 32)
remove from the narrated events: "[b]y keeping us at a critical distance, the narrator checks our emotions and freezes our illusions. We are not allowed to get carried away by affect" (Wimmers 78).

As Manguel points out, Cervantes invites the reader to a game, in which "the levels of reading are constantly shifting" and he uses all these artifices and tricks to keep us guessing and to retain our interest (314). In fact, such a reading is "active" and "participatory" and arouses and maintains our interest and curiosity.

**Synthetic reading: Looking at Emma and Don Quixote**

Why does Don Quixote go mad? Is he afflicted with the same "sickness of imagination" as Emma, or do the causes for his madness lie elsewhere? There is obviously a similarity between the two probably most famous and tragic readers in literary history. Emma has often been termed the feminine counterpart to the Don (Levin cited by Hatzfeld 271), a "Don Quixote in skirts" (Gasset cited by Spiegel 8) and one could say that just as Cervantes wanted to deliver the death-blow to mediocre novels of chivalry, Flaubert tried in his own epoch to counter the growing popularity of shallow romantic fiction (Montégut cited by Levin 246).

Similarly, both attempt to impose the world of fiction onto the real world: while Don Quixote wants to revive the order of chivalry, Emma, albeit in a more subconscious way, attempts the same for romantic sentiment and passion. One critical difference is that, while Don Quixote poses as a comedy and a satire,
Madame Bovary, with its tragic consequences, is too serious and tragic a text to evoke laughter.24

The hidalgo is mistaken about the world but he has gone mad and, in Watt’s words, the “distortions produced by romance issue in actions whose ridiculous unreality is evident to everyone” (205). Emma’s fundamental mistake pertains to herself and her personal relationships; her “conception of reality” may be “equally distorted” but her “collisions with reality” are not as apparent as Don Quixote’s, who takes windmills for giants or sheep for armies, and they are more subtle and subjective (Watt 205).

There is also an important age difference between these two characters. When Emma encounters literature, she is of an impressionable young age; her readings substitute for the life experience she does not have and constitute her éducation sentimentale. She has had barely any contact with the outside world, being sheltered in the convent and later at her father’s farm. Don Quixote, on the other hand, loses his mind at a stage in life where he must have had contact with the world or at least some life experience. Since he is already in his fifties, it cannot be adolescent fancy or curiosity that drive him towards literature.

Auerbach explains this in terms of the hidalgo’s social position and his alienation from his community (348). Don Quixote has a modest amount of land and his lack of resources seems in conflict with the life he aspires to. Indeed he seems to look for a way to escape his ennui, and he finds it in literature. He appears as a lonely sad man, the knight of the sorrowful figure, and he feels that he is

24 Evidently, there are comic instances and effects in Flaubert’s novel as well. Apart from the use of irony and ironic juxtaposition, such as the famous Comices Agricoles, and the portrayal of self-satisfied hypocrisy, in the form of Homais, there are many exaggerations in the character of Emma herself that may seem funny to us, the readers. However, in comparison with Don Quixote, the events have a tragic end, they end in a suicide, and the romantic illusions of the heroine pose a much greater threat to her life than the sporadic cudgelling and beating that the hidalgo must pay for his delusions.
approaching the end of a life that must have been rather uneventful and boring to him up to then. He selects readings not to illuminate or inform him about the world but to alter it, transform it, and to make it more interesting. He has, as Edward Said has pointed out about narratives in general, a "kind of appetite for wanting personally to modify reality" (cited by Rushdy 101). This process may happen subconsciously, yet it is nonetheless apparent that he has a sense of drama and excitement similar to Emma's. He creates in his mind a specific framework for dealing with the world, at the same time giving himself an excuse and purpose to leave behind his home and sheltered life in order to engage in the world.

As Auerbach points out, social class does play a factor in Don Quixote. This does not mean that the novel is sociological, yet class could be seen as partly responsible for Alonso's decision to turn knight-errant. Alonso Le Bon does not have the means to make a huge impact on society, due mostly to his social standing. He is a relatively poor hidalgo whose dreams are not only about personal fame and renown, but also to a large degree about helping people. A knight, as he often proclaims, is supposed to help the orphans, succour the poor and the widows; in other words, everyone who experiences pain and distress, yet lacks the means to defend themselves. Knighthood, particularly for Don Quixote, is a "religion" that aims at creating justice and may give him the opportunity to manifest his compassion. As he himself claims, he has plans to achieve renown and with it fame, power and money in order to help the poor and distressed (Cervantes 442). All these avenues are normally closed to a poor hidalgo, but through this fictional representation of himself as a caballero he is convinced he will attain all the worthy and commendable qualities such as courage, patience and generosity, among others (Cervantes 442).

While Flaubert is interested in revealing Emma's reading processes in order to explain her behaviour, Cervantes only presents us with a short exposition that
explains, in brief terms, the hidalgo's madness as stemming from his over-reading of chivalric novels. Nonetheless, he has many lucid moments and has proven his reasoning power on many occasions. Yet anything that is even remotely related to chivalry (and his readings) will immediately trigger the symptoms of madness.

Cervantes is more interested in showing the continuous grotesque conflict of his protagonist's ideals with the real world, to illustrate "a clash between Don Quijote's illusion and an ordinary reality which contradicts it" (Auerbach 339), rather than giving us a detailed psychological study of his character. We hardly know anything of the hidalgo's past and witness only the span between his first sally and his final return and subsequent death.

As alluded to earlier, apart from the introduction, we do not see Don Quixote read. However, he displays his knowledge of chivalric books throughout the novel. The "sickness of imagination" lies not so much in the faulty interpretation of novels per se; what is more dangerous is the intention to imitate and implement novelistic ideas in a world that is hostile to the actualization of such literal, "impossible" truths.

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25 "ein Zusammenprallen der Illusion Don Quijotes mit einer alltäglichen und der Illusion entgegengesetzten Wirklichkeit" (Auerbach 323)
Chapter 3. The fictional world: literary models and webs of narrative

Reading and writing

Emma and Don Quixote are not passive readers. To them reading functions as a gateway to another world; it is indeed the fictional world that becomes fused with the "real" world. In their minds, they transform the worldly signifiers according to their personal texts: A regular basin becomes the helmet of Mambrino, and the empty clichés of Rodolphe become true romantic speech.

For these two idealists to be reconciled with society and everyday life, they either have to give up their ideals or the world has to conform to them. This is the temporary bliss that Don Quixote experiences when the duke and the duchess play their tricks on him or when he arrives in Barcelona and is (or believes to be) greeted...
by a great crowd of supporters. He actually feels at home in this fictional world, which corresponds to his imaginary realm. Everything goes according to his text, his unwritten script or matrix; he is addressed and treated as a chevalier and has no need to prove himself against an incredulous world.26

Emma experiences an analogous bliss when she is at la Vaubyessard, where she is treated like a great lady. She actually dances with a Vicomte and she walks through this aristocratic world in awe and takes in as much as she can. The language spoken there sounds foreign to her (Flaubert 77); it is an aristocratic world that is strange yet fascinating.

Emma's perception is marked by her readings and she reads her life in that manner. Events in her life are weighed against the world of fiction that comprises her personal text. When she first rejects Léon, she does so not because she feels that adultery is immoral but because, for the time being, she relishes in the fact that she is virtuous.27 When she then commits adultery with Rodolphe, she is thrilled by the idea that she has a lover: "J'ai un amant! un amant!" (Flaubert 204). She then remembers all the heroines of the books she has read, examples of famous adulteresses and she believes that now she has finally become "une partie véritable de ces imaginations" and that she has realized "la longue rêverie de sa jeunesse" (Flaubert 204).

Later, she similarly resists Léon just until he pronounce the magic word that decides her, namely that "[c]ela se fait à Paris" (Flaubert 294-95). For a person to whom Paris is "comme un bourdon de cathédrale" (Flaubert 83) and who buys a map

26 In fact, Don Quixote is a very self-conscious character. He constantly attempts to prove to Sancho and to all the other characters, the value of and need for chivalry. He is also concerned about what others, nobles and common folk of his town, think of him and his sorties and adventures.

27 We are told, that the heroes of the novels she has read are "vertueux comme on ne l'est pas", which could be seen as a running ironic commentary on Emma's and the other characters' lives.
to take imaginary walks through the city (Flaubert 84), copying its fashion and manners is an irresistible must.

A scene that sums up Don Quixote's confusion of fiction and reality is the puppet scene. As he is witnessing a staged event with marionettes, he, at some point, believes all those events to be real and actually happening; he takes the "puppets made of paste-board" for real-life "Moors" and therefore intervenes and attempts to save the damsel by almost killing Pierre (Cervantes 642).2829

He literally believes that by changing his status from spectator to active agent, he has influenced and changed the course of dramatic (fictitious) action and saved a "couple en danger" (Zumthor 208). Eco shows the relation between fiction and fact, or rather reveals fact within fiction. There are some propositions that hold true and are inalterable, such as "Sherlock Holmes était célibataire [...] Anna Karénine se tue" ("Sur quelques functions de la littérature" Eco 59). These 'fictitious facts' stay true "éternellement" and hence not even Don Quixote can change those events; they are not open for interpretation but are fixed and frozen in time. In other words, any attempts to save the princess will be in vain, as her fate has already been sealed and determined - the narrated events have already taken place - which is something that Don Quixote does not comprehend.30

The hidalgo's whole Weltanschauung is summed up in what Gaultier calls the "formule bovaryque", which is not "la conclusion d'un raisonnement, elle est

28 According to Girard, "c'est au Don Quichotte destructeur des marionettes de Maître Pierre, c'est au Don Quichotte perturbateur d'un spectacle qu'il ne sait pas contempler avec un recul esthétique suffisant" (150). Girard discards a romantic reading of the novel, calling such an interpretation even more quixotic than the novel itself, and claims that Cervantes was exposing here the romantic fallacy of blindly praising and following the hidalgo's example.

29 "no son verdaderos moros, sino unas figurillas de pasta" (Cervantes 790)

30 Woody Allen's movie The Purple Rose of Cairo is a great illustration of fictitious characters breaking free and trying to escape their predetermined fate. In the movie,
l'expression d'un mode de vision et peut devenir aussi une méthode de vision” (Gaultier 55). It is this very transformation from mode to méthode that characterizes the fate of both characters. Don Quixote sees prostitutes as princesses, sheep as warriors, and windmills as giants, all due to this method of perception.

Such self-deception is indeed unique in literature and deserves a new term to describe it. We use quixotic to denote someone who is blind to the facts and keeps insisting on his point of view or his vision despite contrary evidence and despite constant defeats.

The term “bovarysme” was first coined by Jules de Gaultier, and he defines it as “le pouvoir dé parti à l’homme de se concevoir autre qu’il n’est” (2). So far there is no negative connotation to the term and indeed Bovarysme can have positive effects since “[s]e concevoir autre, c’est vivre et progresser” (Gaultier 212). However, Emma and Don Quixote suffer from the pathology of “bovarysme” since they cannot approximate the models they have proposed to themselves; those models, or “external mediators” – to use Girard’s term - are far beyond their reach (Gaultier 14).

Both characters are in the process of “self-fashioning” (Greenblatt cited by Rushdy 85), in a manner similar to an artist who copies the work of previous masters to learn and develop his or her craft. Indeed, not only does Don Quixote mention that desire to his squire, he understands his life as “a work of art (a text)” (Rushdy 106). He does not become a victim to his mediator Amadis - as Girard purports – but “conceives of his life as a textural process existing in the same world, and within the same modalities, as Amadis’s life” (Rushdy 105). His aim is not to follow a model slavishly, but to exceed that mediator and to re-create, or rather, re-write himself within the parameters of chivalry. Girard conceives the hidalgo as a static and

a bored, dissatisfied housewife imagines that a movie star (Jeff Daniels) steps out of the movie screen to elope with her towards freedom.
passive character, hence proposes a “reflective” model - but the model that best captures the hidalgo’s paradigm is the “narrative web”.

**The metaphor of weaving and the text**

When approaching a text, we usually find certain themes and reappearing metaphors, which can all be summed up in a “master metaphor” (Burke cited by Rushdy 83). In Western philosophy, we have the recurring image of the mirror, which facilitates describing “operations of thinking, representing and desiring” (Rushdy 83). We need only look back to the ancient Greeks to find this symbol in use, and it reappears in the domain of the novel, in particular with Stendhal’s assertion of the “mirror riding along a highway” or Taine’s observation that the novel is a “kind of portable mirror [...] for reflecting all aspects of nature and life” (cited by Levin 19).

The mirror, in terms of reflecting nature and the world, has been “applied by the ancients to comedy”; comedy being regarded as “the original vehicle of realism: the mirror of custom” (Levin 19). Comedies of that era were of course targeted more at the “common folk” and represented an approximation to real life, whereas tragedy, with its elaborate plots and its sophisticated language and noble characters, was aimed at a more eclectic audience. Yet the idea of *imitatio* or *mimesis* has been persistent since then and is, as we have seen, one of the major underlying themes of our two novels in question.

Yet can literature accurately “portray” or “reflect” life? With the advent of television, we have come to rely mostly on visual *stimuli* and take them at face value for true representations. Even as the camera has become our *forme par excellence* for apparently reflecting life as it “really” is, we should not forget that every scene
shot in a movie, documentary, or even news report depends on many choices. One of the most basic factors is of course the angle of the camera. The camera may be seen as an impersonal or objective means of representation; however, it can never be entirely objective since the way a scene is shot, like the style of a novel, can be already a commentary on the whole scene itself.

In fact, we have found in literature, that some mirrors “are less reliable than others” and that if one does not want to be fooled by distorted (as opposed to reflected) information, one should attempt to “determine the angle of refraction” (Levin 19-20). Levin also gives us a good example of how we should be cautious when approaching so-called realistic literature (25). The French word *vraisemblance* can indeed be taken apart into *vrai* and *semblance*; in other words, it is only the *semblance* of reality or the truth, the image in a mirror, or, in Buddhist terms, the pointing to the moon, but not the actual moon itself.\(^{31}\) There is a better metaphor, I believe, that can be applied to the two novels, which summarizes many facets of their themes and the interplay between reality and truth; it is the “narrative model” of the web.

A careful perusal of Madame Bovary yields an interesting reference to the head of Minerva, in the form of a drawing made by Emma, which she dedicates to her father (Flaubert 36). When we examine other parts of the novel we find important references to “sewing, darning, embroidery, spinning and weaving”, which all combine to “form a consistent framework” of weaving both in its “literal” and “figurative level” (Lowe 31). Apart from Penelope, weaving brings back to mind the myth of Arachne, the weaver who tried to rival the goddess Athena (Minerva), the daughter of Zeus (Jupiter), the goddess of crafts and trades. When Athena realized

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\(^{31}\) According to Maupassant, if what we call realism is to give the “complete illusion of truth”, then “les Réalistes de talent devraient plutôt s’appeler des Illusionistes” (cited by Chartier 148).
that a mere mortal tried to challenge her, she killed her and eventually took pity on her and turned her into a spider. Similarly, as Lowe remarks, Emma challenges the goddess herself by rivalling and “presumptuously assuming her capacity to compose the pattern of her own life” (36).

Yet this challenge is doomed from the start. Emma realizes that “sa vie était froide [. . .] et l’ennui, araignée silencieuse, filait sa toile dans l’ombre, à tous les coins de son cœur” (Flaubert 70). Ennui is compared to a silent spider enveloping her and from then on she becomes more and more entrapped in its web of desire, betrayal and finally death. Her existence becomes nothing but “un assemblage de mensonges, où elle enveloppait son amour comme dans les voiles, pour le cacher” (Flaubert 325).

Her words are the needle with which she "becomes progressively more accomplished at the figurative embellishment of plain truth” (Lowe 32). In fact, lying becomes an obsession for Emma: “C’était un besoin, une manie, un plaisir” (Flaubert 325). In the end, her life can be summed up as a “history of a series of disillusions and betrayed dreams”(Lowe 36) thus being completely enveloped in the web of illusion. Her corpse is compared to “une toile mince, comme si des araignées avaient filé dessus” (Flaubert 388). Since according to the legend, Arachne’s curse lasts several generations, it is not surprising that Emma’s daughter Berthe should end up poor and work, of all places, in a “filature de coton” (Flaubert 410).

Nonetheless, it is not only Emma who becomes trapped in the spider’s web, but she entraps several other innocent people as well, such as Justin, Félicité, and her poor husband Charles. Justin, who falls in love with her, is so mesmerized by her beauty and her long black hair that he watches her “comme enlacé dans les fils innombrables d’une rêverie soudaine”(Flaubert 322).

Her young servant Félicité, who is trained by Emma, knows of her secrets and becomes her accomplice in her endeavours. She eventually becomes equally corrupt:
she steals Emma’s clothes and elopes with her lover Théodore, which is what Emma herself had desired to do with her lover Rodolphe (Lowe 34).

Obviously Charles is the person who suffers most and who dies from grief in the end. He is enthralled by anything that is connected with Emma, from her possessions to her clothes and keepsakes. He goes to great length and costs to preserve all her belongings and furniture, and he keeps her room the way it was (Flaubert 403).

We are told that he has changed completely after her death (Flaubert 401). He asks for a lock of her hair and it is with the “longue mèche de cheveux noirs” in his hands that he is found dead in the garden (Flaubert 410). In fact, we find that Charles becomes more and more like Emma; he is filled with novelistic ideas that surprise everyone. He wants her buried in her wedding dress, her white shoes, a crown (Flaubert 386). He believes naively and unrealistically that there are doctors who could miraculously find a cure to bring her back to life (Flaubert 394). In order to please her, he even adopts her ideas and opinions and buys boots and white ties and applies cosmetics to his moustache. Emma finally corrupts him from her grave (Flaubert 403).

In any case, one can take the metaphor of the web a step further and apply it to the novel’s entire narrative structure. The Latin word for “web” is textura, which refers to the work both of the weaver and of the poet (Rushdy 97). It recalls the intricate and elaborate weavings of plot of Ariosto’s entrelacements, which serve as a model for Cervantes’ work. Indeed, Cervantes does pick up the loose ends of his novel and creates a harmonious whole, where characters – be it through coincidence or divine providence - eventually come together. However, we feel that the artist himself is at work here since all of these events seem too contrived and deliberate to be realistic. Yet as Kundera points out, this is not the case since Cervantes wanted to
"amuse, surprise and bewitch" (120). In other words, he wants us, the readers, to be wound up in his narrative design.

Such a narrative, or the "textural component" of the novel, is what Lacan has called the "text of our experience" or what Bettina Aptheker describes as the "web of life" (cited by Rushdy 97). The mirror serves as a reflection and implies passive reception; however the web or the texte is, according to Barthes’ definition, "experienced only in an activity of production" (cited by Rushdy 97).

Interestingly, Derrida, who defines writing itself as a web, compares its author to "a spider who is somewhat lost in a corner of its web, off to the side" (cited by Rushdy 100). In this case, writing can be compared to an intricate net with which the weaver catches and envelops his or her prey. We have already discussed how Emma falls into that 'textual trap' and how she entraps others in her narrative structure. The same applies to Don Quixote. According to Rushdy, Don Quixote "pursues a paradigm of behavior based on a prior textural representation in order to make his life a textural representation along the same continuum" (105). Rushdy rejects the specular image, proposed by Girard, and claims that Don Quixote does not blindly copy or imitate his literary models but that he wants to equal and even excel them in his Age of Iron. Like Emma, who stands in rivalry with Athena, Don Quixote would rival his own prototype of chivalric romance, namely Amadis, the perfect chevalier, or Orlando, the furious warrior and lover. He turns his life into a work of art, a text, in the same way the later romantic poets would attempt to "live their writings and write their lives" (Levin 21).

Don Quixote’s text is so strong that he becomes contagious to others. Others fall prey to his madness, as Sancho is ensnared through his master’s promises, and the duke and the duchess “treat him like a knight-errant because they are familiar with his previous text (the first part of Don Quixote) and eager to structure his
The Literal Truth

Accepting fiction as literal truth can be deceptive and dangerous. Nonetheless, we may enjoy immersing ourselves temporarily in the 'illusion-building' narrative structure of the novel. Diderot’s manner of reading Richardson’s Clarissa would be a prime example: “Ne le croyez pas, il vous trompe . . .” – he would say to Clarissa - “Si vous allez là, vous êtes perdu. Mon âme était tenue dans une agitation perpétuelle” (cited by Chartier 74). Don Quixote’s puppet-scene comes to mind, and Diderot’s manner of reading does not fall too short of quixotic behaviour in this case, for he is trying to intervene in a fictional world to warn the heroine against committing a mistake.

Yet we are, or should be, constantly aware that what is presented is not reality or truth but fiction. The moment we take a book in our hands and open its first page, we know that “we are about to enter an imagined world”, yet despite this knowledge we are not immune to the “illusion that fictional entities exist or seem real” (Wimmers 4). When reading a story, we do not believe that any of these events are real and actually taking place, but we enjoy “suspending our disbelief” - to quote T. S. Eliot’s phrase - and pretend to take it for real. This has been perceived as a kind of pact between reader and writer, which ensures a playful entering into the world of fiction. The reader is “drawn into the text in such a way that one has the
feeling that there is no distance between oneself and the events described" (Iser 291).

Knowing all of this beforehand, how and why do we still succumb to the illusion? One of the reasons is that we become entangled in another person’s narrative or text, what Diderot calls “s’engager dans une vie seconde, délicieuse” (cited by Chartier 75). We get to know and identify with a character, that is, we become aware of their thoughts, emotions, characteristics, and we see them act and react as “real” individuals in given situations. According to Poulet’s definition, such “identification’ is the establishment of affinities between oneself and someone outside oneself – a familiar ground on which we are able to experience the unfamiliar” (cited by Iser 291). It is somewhat similar to a mild form of split-personality, where in the end, the conflicting two “levels” of the reader – the “alien ‘me’” and the “real, virtual ‘me’” – are (hopefully) synthesized into one reading event or experience, or, in Poulet’s terms, consciousness (Iser 293). To put it differently, and to state it more simply, we can see reading as a potential means of understanding oneself better. We as readers appropriate the characters in the novels, which, in this case, means that “the interpretation of a text is completed in the self-interpretation of a subject who henceforth understands himself better” (Ricoeur cited by Wimmers 8). It is in such a manner that novels can help us see certain parts of our existence.

Conversely, the process can backfire: When we lack the ability to discern truth from fiction, we potentially enter the world of madness. This is true of Don Quixote, who takes a puppet show as real and thereby seems more gullible than a child; the same applies to Emma who falls prey to the “illusion du personnage”, since she ends up believing that the actors at the opera are identical with the characters they are supposed to portray (Flaubert 274).
Which then is the best approach to reading and to the fictional world? And what sort of truth can fiction possibly contain, if not a 'bunch of lies'? Is fiction nothing but a lie, and literal truth an oxymoron?

As Iser explains, the "literary text involves the reader in the formation of illusions and the simultaneous formation of the means whereby the illusion is punctured", which would make reading a "process by which we gain experience" (290). Such experience is only gained when we are conscious of the textual traps contained in the narrative and are not misled by illusion or delusion. Blanchot warns us that the novel is built on the premise or principle of "mauvaise foi":

Le roman est une oeuvre de mauvaise foi [...] Mauvaise foi du lecteur qui joue avec l’imaginaire, qui joue à être ce héros qu’il n’est pas, qui joue à prendre pour réel ce qui est fiction, et finalement s’y laisse prendre, et dans cet enchantement qui tient l’existence écartée, retrouve une possibilité de vivre le sens de cette existence (cited by Chartier 182).

This is the world of make-believe that is characteristic of both our protagonists. These are the 'traps' that are contained in the mensonge romantique of the vérité romanesque, an emblem of the bovaristic or quixotic Weltanschauung.

Levin describes Madame Bovary as "a novel which is at once cautionary and exemplary, a warning against other novels and a model for other novelists" (269). While taking the novel into new terrains, Cervantes and Flaubert have refined and redefined the craft of this genre and their realism is based on the "illusion-building" device of "reality effect" or l’effet de réel, as well as the "illusion-breaking" "effet de fiction", which "draws attention to the fictionality of the text, thus destroying, rather than reinforcing, the referential illusion" (Wimmers 18). In doing so, the self-reflexive novel deconstructs the process of novelistic writing and reading and exposes its artifices in order to make us, the readers, aware of the difference between novelistic ideas and life.
In modern theory, the role of the reader has been more prominent and the "reader's experience – at least in interpretation – is always a fiction: a narrative construction in a story of reading" (Culler cited by Wimmers 163). By de-placing a didactic meaning or interpretation of literature, the reader becomes an active and creating agent or "writer" in his or her own right. Readers create fictionalized versions of narrative texts and bring into literature - and literary theory – their own particular illusions: "Les grands artistes [...] sont ceux qui imposent à l'humanité leur illusion particulière" (Maupassant cited by Chartier 148).

Picasso was right when he claimed that "fiction is a lie that makes us realize the truth". It is also P.-D. Huet's position, for he claims that we can discover, or rather uncover, truth by means of deception: "[C]es faussetés qui sont significatives, et enveloppent un sens caché, ne sont pas des mensonges, mais des figures de la vérité" (cited by Chartier 56). Fiction, mysterious and ambiguous as it is, dangerous as it might be for some, adds to the texture of our lives and provides us insights into many areas of our existence. And, more than anything, beyond the age-old quest for (self-)knowledge and truth, reading literature, literally, is a true pleasure.
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