

Irony and 'Style Indirect Libre' in *Madame Bovary*

The role of irony in the 'style indirect libre' is central to the debate over the nature of this elusive stylistic mode. It is linked to the issue whether the 'style indirect libre' denotes the projection of a dual perspective, or whether it is limited to one consciousness in any given sentence. The question of irony has even sparked a discussion over the existence of a third voice in SIL,¹ a voice which is neither that of the narrator nor of the fictional character. If one of the first and one of the latest scholarly opinions on the subject have considered SIL and irony to be incompatible, it is nevertheless obvious that Flaubert's frequent use of the SIL in *Madame Bovary*, which greatly contributes to the novel's originality, is inextricably connected to its ironic basis. In spite of the fact that numerous students of Flaubert have recognized the essential role of irony in this novel,² there has been to date no analysis of the strategy which governs its emergence in SIL passages. By examining several examples of SIL in *Madame Bovary*, this article will attempt to delineate such a strategy through a scrutiny of the factors which generate an ironic stance within a seemingly univocal perspective.

In his pioneering work at the beginning of the century, Charles Bally wrote that irony is 'incompatible avec le style indirect libre, qui exige une attitude strictement objective du rapporteur.'³ Ann Banfield's contention

- 1 See Claude Perruchot, 'Le Style indirect libre et la question du sujet dans *Madame Bovary*,' in Claudine Gothot-Mersch, ed. *La Production du sens chez Flaubert* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions 1975) 278-9 and below. This abbreviation will henceforth replace 'style indirect libre,' variously referred to in English as 'free indirect discourse,' 'free indirect speech,' 'narrated monologue.' I am indebted to Brian McHale and Meir Sternberg of the Porter Israeli Institute for Poetics and Semiotics for stimulating discussions on this topic.
- 2 V. Brombert has aptly summarized this fact: 'Irony in the structure of the novel... points to the author's chronic "intrusion," and constitutes, so to speak, a built-in commentary.' *The Novels of Flaubert: A Study of Themes and Techniques* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1966) 74.
- 3 Quoted in Burkhardt Wagner, *Innenbereich und Äußerung: Flaubertsche Formen indirekter Darstellung und Grundtypen der Erlebten Rede*, Freiburger Schriften zur romanischen Philologie, No. 18 (München: Wilhelm Fink 1972) 158-9.

that in SIL 'only one expressor is tolerated,'⁴ leads to the conclusion which eliminates the possibility of irony.⁵ The positions of Bally and Banfield represent, however, a minority opinion; most scholars recognize the bivocal nature of SIL without detailing the mechanism of interplay between irony and objectivity. Even Roy Pascal's recent comprehensive study of the subject,⁶ while stressing that irony is a signpost of SIL, 'fails to specify how such irony works.'⁷ With the exception of Charles Jones who offers an analysis of 'irony of register' in SIL⁸ and Michael Gregory who examines along similar lines an episode in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*,⁹ the way in which irony emerges from SIL has remained unexplored. During a discussion at Cerisy-la-Salle of Claude Perruchot's paper on Flaubert's SIL, it was suggested that there exists a 'third level,' that irony in SIL 'serait effectivement une espèce de plan intermédiaire par rapport auquel joue ce qui est dit par Flaubert et ce qui est mis dans l'esprit d'Emma.'¹⁰ However, the theoretical basis for such a 'third level' and the manner in which it functions within the context of SIL was not clarified.

The question of irony and SIL presents itself in numerous passages of *Madame Bovary*, and the ironic spectrum ranges from self-pity to caricature. The gap between what the character experiences and what he is made to denote, is filled with differing types of irony drawing their impact from either immediate, proximate or distant contexts. The irony can be either verbal or situational and involve both deep personal feelings and Romantic clichés.

Towards the end of the first part of *Madame Bovary*, we find Emma daydreaming. She is contrasting the imaginary joys of life in Paris with her own condition ('campagne ennuyeuse,' 'médiocrité de l'existence,').¹¹

4 Ann Banfield, 'Narrative Style and the Grammar of Direct and Indirect Speech,' *Foundations of Language* 10 (1973) 32

5 Ann Banfield, 'The Formal Coherence of Represented Speech and Thought,' *PTL* 3, No. 2 (1978) 311

6 Roy Pascal, *The Dual Voice: Free Indirect Speech and Its Functioning in the Nineteenth-Century European Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1977)

7 Brian McHale, 'Free Indirect Discourse: A Survey of Recent Accounts,' *PTL* 3, No. 2 (1978) 279

8 'Varieties of Speech Presentation in Conrad's *The Secret Agent*,' *Lingua* 20 (1968) 162-76

9 'Old Bailey Speech in *A Tale of Two Cities*,' *A Review of English Literature* 6, No. 2 (1965) 42-55

10 Perruchot, 278

11 Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, ed. C. Gothot-Mersch (Paris: Garnier Frères 1971) 60. All references to *Madame Bovary* will henceforth be given in the text under the abbreviation 'M.B.'

She associates in her mind passionate love with, among other things, luxurious furnishings, jewels and such signs of affluence as uniforms decorated with 'aiguillettes de la livrée.' Then the following paragraph appears:

Le garçon de la poste, qui, chaque matin, venait panser la jument, traversait le corridor avec ses gros sabots; sa blouse avait des trous, ses pieds étaient nus dans des chaussons. C'était là le groom en culotte courte dont il fallait se contenter! Quand son ouvrage était fini, il ne revenait plus de la journée; car Charles, en rentrant, mettait lui-même son cheval à l'écurie, ... (M.B., 61)

'C'était là le groom en culotte courte dont il fallait se contenter!' is an example of SIL embedded within the narrative, descriptive context of the preceding and following sentences. The reader's initial response is that the exclamation transmits Emma's anguished voice expressing a sentiment of self-pitying irony. In her distress, she is contrasting the appearance of the 'garçon de la poste' with the dress of the imaginary groom. The contrast provokes in her an ironic observation akin to, 'Is this the kind of life I must be content with?' This verbal irony relates well with what the reader already knows about Emma's boredom with country life and her obsession with things Parisian.

Yet, the very specificity and precision concerning the decorous uniform of the dreamt-of-groom — 'le groom en culotte courte' — provokes a different kind of ironic response in the mind of the reader. He soon realizes that Emma's comment implies more than an expression of self-pity; it betrays an ambition which goes beyond the preference for a better dressed groom. The exaggeration implicit in her insistence on the precise details of elegance in the uniform of the imaginary groom represents a kind of provocation to the reader. The contrast between the immediate reality ('sa blouse avait des trous, ses pieds étaient nus dans des chaussons'), and the expressed dream ('le groom en culotte courte'), is too sharp not to spark in the reader an ironic reaction in which the character is seen being ironic about the wrong thing.

A version of the same sentence which could have avoided provoking the reader into an attitude which turns Emma's wish into proof of the misguided nature of her values should have read: 'Est-ce là le servant dont je dois me contenter?' Had the sentence intended to represent a single consciousness strictly limited to the heroine, it should have logically omitted any reference to the details in the groom's dress. Such details would have been redundant; from the preceding paragraph where she dreams of 'aiguillettes de la livrée,' from her observations at the Vaubyessard where a maître d'hôtel wore a 'culotte courte,' (M.B., 50)

and from her 'frémissements' in her convent days at the sight of engravings portraying carriages led by 'postillons en culotte blanche' (*M.B.*, 39), it is evident that Emma, thinking or speaking to herself, was well aware what a properly dressed groom should look like. Thus, the detail of 'culotte courte' in this context, would appear to be superfluous and to belong to a consciousness other than the speaker's, and, as such, tends to draw the reader's attention to a different perspective.

The element of exaggeration which emerges from the realization of the redundancy of the specific detail stimulates the emergence in the reader's mind of a juxtaposition embracing a wider context. A second level of irony appears. It contrasts our sentence with the narrator's implicit or explicit judgments about his heroine already known to the reader and which are aptly summarized in the preceding paragraph: 'Elle confondait, dans son désir, les sensualités du luxe avec les joies du coeur, l'élégance des habitudes et les délicatesses du sentiment' (*M.B.*, 60-61). The appearance of this second level of irony is thus aimed at Emma's 'bovarysme,' her flawed conception of happiness. The authorial voice mimicking his character reminds the reader that behind the obsession with a properly dressed groom, there is a mentality which mistakenly assimilated 'les joies du coeur' with the illusory pleasures associated with wealth and elegance. Thus, in this situational irony, Emma's ironic remark — not intended as ironic at this level, since she is genuinely affirming her values (embodied in 'le groom en culotte courte') — appears ironic in the larger context.

A few pages later, we find the following SIL passage:

Elle abandonna la musique. Pourquoi jouer? qui l'entendrait? Puisqu'elle ne pourrait jamais, en robe de velours à manches courtes, sur un piano d'Érard, dans un concert, battant de ses doigts légers les touches d'ivoire, sentir, comme une brise, circuler autour d'elle un murmure d'extase, ce n'était pas la peine de s'ennuyer à étudier. Elle laissa dans l'armoire ses cartons à dessin et la tapisserie. A quoi bon? à quoi bon? La couture l'irritait. (*M.B.*, 65)

If 'Pourquoi jouer?' is an example of SIL conveying with impact the heroine's despair and anguish, and the long sentence which follows an elaboration of the motives for the self-interrogation, the accumulation of the trivial details about the imaginary concert constitutes a mocking judgment. A more moderately framed dream, a more subdued exposition of Emma's feeling could have aroused understanding; the mere wish to perform in public is not laughable and the lack of prospects for it could plausibly engender dejection. The inclusion, however, of such details as 'robe de velours à manches courtes,' 'un piano d'Érard,' and 'un murmure

d'extase,' provokes irony. These trivial details clash with the tone of sympathetic heightened 'emotiveness'¹² established at the beginning of the paragraph in 'Pourquoi jouer?' As such, the details constitute a countervailing element which can only be attributed to an ironic intent.

In addition to this immediate verbal irony, there is a situational irony related to the wider context of the novel. It reinforces in the reader's mind certain traits of Emma's character he has already been given. The heroine who is thrown into despair because her piano playing may not lead to a fantasy-like glorious success, is the same young woman who was brought up in the convent on 'l'attirante fantasmagorie des réalités sentimentales' (*M.B.*, 39), and confounds elegance in dress ('le groom en culotte courte'), as well as fame ('Elle aurait voulu que ce nom de Bovary ... fût illustre,' *M.B.*, 63), with true happiness.

A similar 'excessive' fantasy, also involving precise details of dress, appears two chapters earlier:

Que ne pouvait-elle s'accouder sur le balcon des chalets suisses ou enfermer sa tristesse dans un cottage écossais, avec un mari vêtu d'un habit de velours noir à longues basques, et qui porte des bottes molles, un chapeau pointu et des manchettes! (*M.B.*, 42)

The irony is immediate and it stems from exaggerated unrealistic expectations. The gap separating Emma's environment in Tostes from the dreamt-of Swiss chalets and Scottish cottages is too great not to elicit an immediate mocking attitude. However, by inserting distinctly romantic clichés, the ironist betrays this time greater heavy-handedness. Also, the formulation 'enfermer sa tristesse' points to an oblique kind of SIL (to be discussed more extensively below), which presents a summary of the character's utterances rather than their exact wording. This is indicative of greater authorial intrusion which tends to diminish the subtlety of the ironic impact.¹³ Nevertheless, this example of SIL shares similar elements with the others cited above. It is the 'demesure' in Emma's aspirations, their capriciousness ('bottes molles,' 'chapeau pointu'), rather than their nature, that embodies the ironic reaction.

12 A concept attributed to W.J.M. Bronzwaer, *Tense in the Novel: An Investigation of Some Potentialities of Linguistic Criticism* (Groningen: Walters-Noordhoof 1970) 67, quoted in George L. Dillon and Frederick Kirchoff, 'On the Form and Function of Free Indirect Style,' *PTL* 1, No. 3 (1976) 438

13 This SIL passage is also more moderate, less over-indulgent, since it occurs within the context of fantasizing about an ideal site for a honeymoon which cannot be said to be unique to Emma; 'heavenly' honeymoon retreats are imagined by most young women.

Other examples of ironic SIL containing elements of excessiveness, exaggeration or categoricity can be cited.¹⁴ In all of them, irony is created within a context of opposing points of view in a single SIL sentence. The 'functional contrast' is established without specific syntactic elements by means of exaggerated 'emotive' details, and, if the narrator may 'choose to imitate the language of the character,'¹⁵ the very presence of the imitating process is indicative of an authorial presence, of a 'contrast.' The narrator could be 'assenting' to the language of his heroine, but the 'assent' is indeed ironic.¹⁶ The passages cited, disprove the claim that in SIL 'an ironic reading cannot be ascribed to a second, contradictory point of view which functions as the sentence's alternate SELF,'¹⁷ and question the categoricity of the statement that 'there is no syntactic sign of another SELF in these passages.'¹⁸

The presence of irony in SIL, the apparent existence of opposing points of view within a single sentence, can be linked to a concept elaborated recently by Meir Sternberg. According to his theory of 'informational redundancy,' a literary text can be intentionally redundant in order to create a desired specific effect, in order to draw the reader's attention to a particular phenomenon. The more a word is conceived of as redundant, the more perceptible it becomes, the greater its power of suggestion.¹⁹

If through its direct, intimate transmission of feelings SIL tends to increase the rhetorical, emotional power of a sentence and thus the reader's

14 'Elle aurait voulu que ce nom de Bovary, qui était le sien, fût illustre, le voir étalé chez les libraires, répété dans les journaux, connu par toute la France.' (*M.B.*, 63) 'Comment donc avait-elle fait (elle qui était si intelligente!) pour se méprendre encore une fois? Du reste, par quelle déplorable manie avoir ainsi abîmé son existence en sacrifices continuels? Elle se rappela tous ses instincts de luxe, toutes les privations de son âme, les bassesses du mariage, du ménage, ses rêves tombant dans la boue comme des hirondelles blessées, tout ce qu'elle avait désiré, tout ce qu'elle s'était refusé, tout ce qu'elle aurait pu avoir! et pourquoi?' (*M.B.*, 189) 'le souvenir de Rodolphe, comme un grand éclair dans une nuit sombre, lui avait passé dans l'âme. Il était si bon, si délicat, si généreux! Et, d'ailleurs, s'il hésitait à lui rendre ce service, elle saurait bien l'y contraindre en rappelant d'un seul clin d'oeil leur amour perdu.' (*M.B.*, 314) 'Un homme, au contraire, ne devait-il pas tout connaître, exceller en des activités multiples, vous initier aux énergies de la passion, aux raffinements de la vie, à tous les mystères?' (*M.B.*, 42, italics mine)

15 Dillon and Kirchoff, 435-6

16 Ibid.

17 Banfield, 'The Formal Coherence of Represented Speech and Thought,' 311

18 Ibid.

19 'Delicate Balance in the Story of the Rape of Dinah: Biblical Narrative and the Rhetoric of the Narrative Text,' *Ha-Sifrut* 4, No. 2 (1973) 200 (in Hebrew); 'Structure Repetition in Biblical Narrative: Strategies of Informational Redundancy,' *Ha-Sifrut* 7, No. 25 (1977) 111 (in Hebrew)

understanding, if not sympathy for the character, the accumulation of details which the logic of the initial point of view in the text would deem unnecessary, creates a countervailing effect producing irony. Thus, in the examples cited, Flaubert, the master stylist obsessed with economy of language,²⁰ effects a switch from an objective presentation of the character's viewpoint (self-pitying irony, distress) to a mocking authorial stance signalled by the insertion of redundant, seemingly superfluous details revealing the ridicule-provoking mentality of the character. Rather than intensifying the initial response, the self-revealing precision of the character's thought becomes damning, totally erasing the previous reaction. The situation is not devoid of pathos since the character is used in the effort to undermine his own standing in the eyes of the reader. As in another instance in the novel, Flaubert, through his use of an ironized SIL, 'throws ... into high relief' the 'tragicomedy' of Emma's 'self-deception.'²¹

Beyond the contradictions of the immediate context, Flaubert's text builds a redundancy based on a wider context, on information about the character supplied previously. The portrayal of Emma Bovary's personality is almost completed in the initial chapters of the novel. The data on her convent up-bringing, her readings, her obsession with things Parisian, early establish the main lines of her character. Thus, the episodes which follow this exposition hark back to the information the reader already possesses, and can be said to constitute 'informational redundancy.' Moreover, by early establishing an unmistakable ironic stance toward the romantic influences in his heroine's education,²² the narrator prepares the ironic responses which would follow.

There is another category of SIL passages in which irony is also present. In these passages, instead of an accurate transmission of the character's speech or thought expressed in a language the character is likely to have used, the text conveys an approximation of the character's 'voice.' Some critics have referred to these examples of SIL as 'oblique,'²³

20 Louis Bouilhet wrote in the *Préface aux dernières chansons* about Flaubert's style: 'Peu d'auteurs on autant pris garde au choix de mots, à la variété des tournures, aux transitions,' quoted in R.J. Sherrington, *Three Novels by Flaubert: A Study of Techniques* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1970) 19.

21 Paul Hernadi, 'Free Indirect Discourse and Related Techniques,' Appendix to *Beyond Genre: New Directions in Literary Classification* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1972) 200

22 'Elle se laissa donc glisser dans les méandres lamartiniens, écouta les harpes sur les lacs, tous les chants de cygnes mourants, toutes les chutes de feuilles, les vierges pures qui montent au ciel, et la voix de l'Éternel discourant dans les vallons.' (*M.B.*, 40)

23 Hernadi, 195

as a 'résumé' presented by the author in the character's name,²⁴ or as material felt by the character but put out in 'raw form' by the narrator.²⁵ In these instances, the style often indicates that the narrator has couched the message in terms so 'sophisticated' that their attribution to the character appears implausible.

Elle allait donc posséder enfin ces joies de l'amour, cette fièvre du bonheur dont elle avait désespéré. Elle entrait dans quelque chose de merveilleux où tout serait passion, extase, délire; une immensité bleuâtre l'entourait, les sommets du sentiment étincelaient sous sa pensée. (*M.B.*, 167)

C. Perruchot comments on this passage: 'Ce qui émerge là ... c'est le contour de ce délire, le profil de l'impensé, le "discours de l'inconscient."' ²⁶ What is significant is that the 'discourse of the unconscious' appears to be described from the 'outside' by a narrator using a style which logically cannot be Emma's, while maintaining a viewpoint that is clearly hers. It is as if the consciousness of the character has been deprived of its own mode of expression. The 'donc' at the beginning of the sentence is an indicator of SIL, yet Emma could not have said, 'une immensité bleuâtre m'entoure,'²⁷ nor did she see 'summits of feeling sparkle under her thought.' As a result, in spite of the presence of a type of SIL in which 'the narrator appears to withdraw from the scene and thus present the illusion of a character acting out his mental state in an immediate relationship with the reader,'²⁸ the reader perceives the character's feelings less directly, less intimately. Instead, the accumulation of the highly literary clichés as well as the poetic 'passion, extase, délire' point to a narrator whose intent is ironic.

The main indicator of the irony is not the 'excessive detail' mentioned in the previous examples, but rather the concentration in one sentence of several extravagant romantic clichés, of the type Flaubert scornfully referred to earlier as 'méandres lamartiniens.' And since these clichés cannot be reasonably credited to Emma, they must be attributed to the narrator. 'Officially' the clichés belong to Emma, since the sentence is

24 Pascal, 47

25 Susumu Kuno, 'Three Perspectives in the Functional Approach to Syntax' in R. Grossman, L.J. San and T.J. Vance, eds. *Papers from the Parasession on Functionalism* (Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society 1975), cited by Dillon and Kirchoff, op. cit. 431 n. 2

26 Perruchot, 269

27 Ibid. 278

28 Dillon and Kirchoff, 438

given through her perspective (in front of her mirror, she could have felt something approximating 'sommets bleuâtres'), but, logically, she could not have said it. The effect is similar to another passage in *Madame Bovary* in which 'that phrase in its ironic context points to the omnipresent yet invisible creator of Emma's world,'²⁹ and where 'reader and narrator share an ironic distance' from the heroine.³⁰

On the other hand, the weight of the accumulation of the factors mentioned constitutes a semantic indicator which almost negates the intimacy and understanding SIL is usually meant to convey. As a consequence, the irony in these passages is more direct, more obvious than in the examples where the narrator resorted to the more subtle means of 'redundant' details. The use of 'oblique' language establishes a more immediate ironic distance. What we have then, is a kind of ironized, 'exaggerated' reproduction of what the character feels and thinks, so that, instead of an exact reproduction of his words, we have a gist of his thought with an ironic commentary, 'a subsequent ordering undertaken by some mediating narrator.'³¹

The elements examined put into serious question the contention that free indirect speech tolerates only 'one expressor,' only a single perspective. On the contrary, the combination of free indirect speech and irony points to a dual perspective, to the 'uncertainty' that so fascinates modern criticism,³² in this intriguing mode which has renewed 'presque autant notre vision des choses que Kant, avec ses catégories ...'³³ Without delineating the components of a 'third voice' strategy the theory of 'informational redundancy' suggests a method for discerning the specific intentionally 'redundant' element carrying with it the 'other' voice implicit in the ironic distance.

University of Toronto

29 Hernadi, 200

30 Ibid. 194

31 McHale, 279

32 See Jonathan Culler's provocative *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1974).

33 Marcel Proust, 'A Propos du "style" de Flaubert,' *Nouvelle Revue Française* (Nouvelle série), 76 (1920) 72