

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

**Myra Jehlen: Five Fictions in Search of Truth**

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2008, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

Follow links for Class Use and other Permissions. For more information send email to: [permissions@press.princeton.edu](mailto:permissions@press.princeton.edu)

# Prologue

## A Real Madeleine Is a Work of Art

### I

A croissant dipped in a café-au-lait would not have worked the trick of recovering the past for Marcel Proust, only a morsel of madeleine half-dissolved in a teaspoon of linden-tea. Proust's memory of Sunday mornings in Combray might have been lost forever had a confection made of flour, butter, sugar, and eggs, delicately flavored with lemon and vanilla, and then baked in a ridged mold, not intervened one day as he was having tea with his mother. Remembrance of the past needed study of the present: Marcel, the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time*, sends a madeleine to catch a madeleine, one experience to evoke another, and literature is both the process and the outcome.

In literature, invention is discovery: Marcel does not make up the meaning of the madeleine, he finds it out.<sup>1</sup> When its taste fills him with a mysterious joy, he has been thinking of quite other matters and, in fact, seems to have mostly forgotten Combray, except for the sorrow of bedtime. Nor is there a shock of recognition to accompany the shock of pleasure. Mystified, and sensing that something hugely significant lurks in his astonishing response, Marcel peers after it into the recesses of his mind, but the something is skittish. He falls back, waits patiently, is disappointed, waits again, until, finally, a memory rises slowly from oceanic depths.

The memory he pursues lies within while still being an affair of the world outside, both in content (the happy times in Aunt Léonie's room) and in the method of its recovery. Since it takes a second tea-soaked biscuit to recover the memory of the first, all through *In Search of Lost Time*, knowledge will depend on serendipity. Repetition is crucial and repetition waits on circumstances in the world out there. Marcel's posture before his own epiphany is appropriately diffident.

At the same time, one's recovery of lost memory is hardly self-effacing. In the last volume of the *Search*, *Time Regained*, after a series of episodes like that of the madeleine, Marcel envisions something like a power of

personal resuscitation. Ordinarily the past, into which each present moment instantly slides, languishes in a limbo of semi-abstraction, so that (given the delay with which consciousness operates) life's meaning is lost faster than it is produced.

But let a noise or a scent, once heard or once smelt, be heard or smelt again in the present and at the same time in the past, real without being actual, ideal without being abstract, and immediately the permanent and habitually concealed essence of things is liberated and our true self, which seemed—had perhaps for long years seemed—to be dead but was not altogether dead, is awakened and reanimated as it receives the celestial nourishment that is brought to it. A minute freed from the order of time has re-created in us, to feel it, the man freed from the order of time. And one can understand that this man should have confidence in his joy, even if the simple taste of a madeleine does not seem logically to contain within it the reasons for this joy, one can understand that the word “death” should have no meaning for him; situated outside time, why should he fear the future? (*Time Regained*, 264–65)

Mais qu'un bruit, qu'une odeur, déjà entendu ou respirée jadis, le soient de nouveau, à la fois dans le présent et dans le passé, réels sans être actuels, idéaux sans être abstraits, aussitôt l'essence permanente et habituellement cachée des choses se trouve libérée, et notre vrai moi qui, parfois depuis longtemps, semblait mort, mais ne l'était pas entièrement, s'éveille, s'anime en recevant la céleste nourriture qui lui est apportée. Une minute affranchie l'ordre du temps a recrée en nous pour la sentir l'homme affranchi de l'ordre du temps. Et celui-là, on comprend qu'il soit confiant de sa joie, même si le goût d'une madeleine ne semble pas contenir logiquement les raisons de cette joie, on comprend que le mot de “mort” n'ait pas de sens pour lui; situé hors du temps, que pourrait-il craindre de l'avenir? (*Le Temps retrouvé*, 451)

Who is this man feeding on divine fruit that frees him, not from mortality but even better, from the myopia of the temporal and lifts the veil that conceals the abiding truths of life from the living? *A writer*. Madeleine number one and madeleine number two each pertain to the order of time and the world, but their juxtaposition in the writer's imagination reveals a larger reality. Proust wrote scornfully about the kind of literary realism content to describe how things appear on the surface.<sup>2</sup> But this was only to claim a more adequate, more profound realism, one that incorporated experience: the significance of the madeleine along with its physical reality. The house of reality has many mansions, among them the mansion of the interior life.

Proust treated his interior life, his memories, his impressions, as an objectively existing territory to which he gained access when objective con-

ditions permitted it. The taste of the madeleine, the uneven pavements in the piazza San Marco that recalled the courtyard he had watched Swann cross one evening, these experiences that trigger memories, do not occur at Marcel's will, and he is glad of it. For by occurring in response to unprejudiced, unprogrammed events, they vouch for the truth they recall: "And I realized that this must be the mark of their authenticity" (274). (Et je sentais que ce devait être la griffe de leur authenticité [457].) His authenticity depends on theirs. Art enables "the discovery of our true life, of reality as we have felt it to be, which differs so greatly from what we think it is" (277) ([la découverte de] notre vraie vie, [de] la réalité telle que nous l'avons sentie et qui diffère tellement de ce que nous croyons" [450]). What we believe is distorted by subjectivity, but somewhere in the past exists a real experience, and it is when we recapture this reality objectively that we really live it. The logic is clear: life becomes real in its writing. "Real life, life at last laid bare and illuminated—the only life in consequence which can be said to be really lived—is literature" (298). (La vraie vie, la vie enfin découverte et éclaircie, la seule vie par conséquent pleinement vécue, c'est la littérature [474].)

Proust took great care to make it clear that by life he meant not only one's personal life:

But art, if it means awareness of our own life, means also awareness of the lives of other people—for style for the writer, no less than colour for the painter, is a question not of technique but of vision: it is the revelation, which by direct and conscious methods would be impossible, of the qualitative difference, the uniqueness of the fashion in which the world appears to each one of us, a difference which, if there were no art, would remain forever the secret of every individual. Through art alone are we able to emerge from ourselves, to know what another person sees of a universe which is not the same as our own and of which, without art, the landscapes would remain as unknown to us as those that may exist on the moon. (299)

Notre vie; et aussi la vie des autres; car le style pour l'écrivain aussi bien que la couleur pour le peintre est une question non de technique mais de vision. Il est de la révélation, qui serait impossible par des moyens directs et conscients, de la différence qualitative qu'il y a dans la façon dont nous apparaît le monde, différence qui, s'il n'y avait pas l'art, resterait le secret éternel de chacun. Par l'art seulement nous pouvons sortir de nous, savoir ce que voit un autre de cet univers qui n'est pas le même que le nôtre et dont les paysages nous seraient restés aussi inconnus que ceux qu'il peut y avoir dans la lune. (474)

Literature is a voyage to Earth's farthest horizon, to the moon; and when it is a voyage into oneself, we go to survey interior landscapes as if they were on the moon. Science and art are allies, logic and intuition work

together. “The impression is for the writer what the experiment is for the scientist, with the difference that in the scientist the work of the intelligence precedes the experiment and in the writer it comes after the impression” (276). (L'impression est pour l'écrivain ce qu'est l'expérimentation pour le savant, avec cette différence que chez le savant le travail de l'intelligence précède et chez l'écrivain vient après [459].) The actual and the real, the real and the true, authenticity and self-knowledge, properly understood and practiced, are the coherent categories of the paradoxical (in being often conducted through invention and even fantasy) but not contradictory pursuit of knowledge that is literature's highest calling.

The madeleine episode exemplifies this scientific process in which objects play the essential role. Initially, an object lent an actual taste to the pleasure of visits to a favorite aunt; now the past reappears tasting of madeleines. Marcel's mind does not assign itself objective correlatives arbitrarily. Subjectivity itself is an objective event that a literary work embodies in its own objective existence.

In an article about Flaubert's style (see note 2), Proust found the perfect occasion to express his irritation with certain readers who should have known better when they cited the episode of the madeleine to show that *Swann's Way* was an essay in subjectivity, “a sort of collection of memories following one another by association of ideas” (une sorte de recueil de souvenirs s'enchaînant selon les lois fortuites de l'association des idées [328]).

This is exactly what *Swann's Way* is not. Instead of flowing along the stream of consciousness, it swims against the current in search of the source; reality is both its origin, which is an actual fact of the matter, and its destination, which is a work of art composed of and composing real experiences.

In fact, both in the one case and in the other, whether I was concerned with impressions like the one which I had received from the sight of the steeples of Martinville or with reminiscences like that of the unevenness of the two steps or the taste of the madeleine, the task was to interpret the given sensations as signs of so many laws and ideas, by trying to think—that is to say, to draw forth from the shadow—what I had merely felt, by trying to convert it into its spiritual equivalent. And this method, which seemed to me the sole method, what was it but the creation of the work of art? (*Time Regained*, 273)

En somme, dans un cas comme dans l'autre, qu'il s'agisse d'impressions comme celle que m'avait donnée la vue des clochers de Martinville, ou de réminiscences comme celle de l'inégalité des deux marches ou le goût de la madeleine, il fallait tâcher d'interpréter les sensations comme les signes d'autant de lois et d'idées, en essayant de penser, c'est-à-dire de faire sortir de la pénombre ce que j'avais senti, de le convertir en un équivalent spirituel. Or, ce moyen qui me parassait le seul, qu'était-ce autre chose que faire une oeuvre d'art? (*Le Temps retrouvé*, 457)

The careless readers who mistook *Swann's Way* for a personal memoir had a partial excuse in that the particular that is both origin and destination in Marcel's search is not the classic exterior venue of the real. He himself begins searching for the madeleine's astonishing effect where it might be expected to arise, in the tea, the biscuit, the room, on his tongue. Only when this normal approach fails does he turn elsewhere. "I put down the cup and examine my own mind. It alone can discover the truth. But how?"<sup>3</sup> How can he look into himself and not create as much as he discovers? He solves the problem by incorporating it, observing that creation and discovery are anyway intertwined. To create is never to invent out of whole cloth, but to search out the truth using one's imagination or intuition of whatever it is that hovers out of reach of observation. Finding himself unable to recover the elusive memory directly—successive swallows of tea only dull the impression—Marcel resorts to a strategy that combines creation and search. He approaches the elusive knowledge formally, treating sensation and image as organized events. The objective of the *Search* is to realize life beyond what its narrator understands of it along the way, a project for the aesthetic intellect.

I will not be writing about Proust beyond this prologue but have begun by invoking his great epic of the interior life for its unlikely and thereby striking demonstration of literature's commitment to objective reality. *Objective* reality, not *absolute*: Proust's aspiration to recall the past as he lived it offers an excellent representation of the distinction, essential to my thesis, between objective and absolute truth. Proust sought to know exactly what happened to him, including how it affected him, and this knowledge was an affair of objects, touchable, visible, audible, sometimes intelligible, sometimes not. He would know these objects, the stuff and circumstances of his life, no less objectively for not knowing them absolutely. Literature has nothing to do, can do nothing with absolute truth, which, taken as given, the way religion takes it, bypasses understanding and precludes knowledge. On the contrary, as the narrator Marcel explains, literature happens when writers try to figure things out as objectively, as truly as they can.

## II

This is a book in praise of literature, and in particular of literature as a way to know, to discover the truth.

The five fictions of my title are Gustave Flaubert's *Salammbô* and *A Simple Heart*, Henry James's *The Sacred Fount* and *The Ambassadors*, and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. I could have written about many other works but chose these because their authors were particularly explicit in regard to the idea I wanted to explore and, indeed, expound, that, insofar as the facts of nature and society can be ascertained, a well-made fiction is the best

way to fetch and weigh them. In that each took this as a principle of his writing, Flaubert was a major reference for James, and James and Flaubert for Nabokov. For all three, the issue was never whether fiction and truth were linked, but how: how, formally, to produce a well-made story, in which case it would find out the truth.

I write “the truth” conscious that it is a phrase to raise eyebrows. Yet Flaubert, James, and Nabokov were not naïve in their ambition, and none knew better that reality can wear many faces. Working to make their fictions portray the truth, they posited (to repeat the distinction I made earlier) not any single absolute truth, but a truth that was nonetheless objective, one among several that were possible: fiction and reality shared the same range of possibilities. Their novels were to describe the real world more fully than it was otherwise apparent, and invent only what could have happened. When Flaubert confessed that he had invented an aqueduct for his fictional Carthage, despite knowing from his research that there had been none in the historical city until after the time of *Salammbô*, he insisted that this invention in no way attenuated the truth of his novel. A Carthaginian aqueduct was a distinct possibility. (See page 22, figure 1.)

His invention implemented the real; it was as real as the real, as true as the truth, maybe more so. He was not making an extravagant claim. On the contrary, it will emerge, I hope, from this series of readings that being true to the real world is the ordinary, necessary condition that authors of fiction set for their works. Flaubert was particularly explicit in pointing to the ground on which he staked his claim: the aqueduct’s truth was assured by an aspect of fiction that trumped all its other aspects and subsumed them, namely, its *form*. He had not been arbitrary in adding an aqueduct to the archeological landscape but had acted in response to a formal imperative. The aqueduct was the creature of *Salammbô*’s plot. It was not inevitable, it was perhaps inadvisable. In a letter Flaubert actually regretted its invention: he had been cowardly, he should have persisted and found something to the purpose in the historical record. But cowardly or not, he still maintained, through its remarkable formal expediency—its truth to the story—the aqueduct was true, it was real. It had emerged out of the work of form, and form, plot in this case but as well style working at the level of words and sentences, was a guarantee of truth. By the force of its own logic and necessities, form could bring out the logic and necessities of the object it described.

So fiction-writers approach reality formally from the first. Their initial responses to a potential subject are formal speculations. This in turn heightens the importance of the subject on which they speculate: the right form guarantees the content, and the right content is a formal necessity. Henry James often expanded on this theme. One of the prefaces in which he summed up his critical career describes how a novel first appeared to him wonderfully adumbrated in a friend’s report of a conversation the friend had

had with a mutual acquaintance.<sup>4</sup> The anecdote of the conversation was a box full of story-making materials: there was a model protagonist (a middle-aged writer of reflective bent) speaking on the most pregnant of subjects (living life to the hilt), and the conversation's setting, an "old Paris garden," was a "token" in which "were sealed up values infinitely precious." James recalled gloating over his gift: "There was of course the seal to break and each item of the packet to count over and estimate."

Best among the packet's wonderful contents was a hint that the protagonist-to-be had recently come to see something new about himself, "so that the business of my tale and the march of my action, not to say the precious moral of everything is just my demonstration of this process of vision." The task the anecdote set James, and he embraced with such a sense of opportunity, was to describe the unfolding of this protagonist's consciousness with a clarity and depth unavailable to the man's own un-enhanced eye. It was a real subject made for James's signature form. Writing the preface, he was pleased to note that his writer's instinct had been sound, and that *The Ambassadors*, his favorite of all his novels, had fulfilled the promise of its worldly origin, to which he could point as a sort of primal scene, still visible at the heart of the novel.

The connection that was evident for Flaubert and James, between writing and discovering the truth, has become controversial, in part through the influence of the postmodernist theory of the relation of language to reality that both questions fiction's claim to tell the truth and finds "truth" itself a suspect idea. Moreover, the foundational definition of postmodernism—"To simplify extremely, we take 'postmodern' to designate incredulity in regard to meta-narratives"<sup>5</sup>—by raising disbelief into a formal principle, has rendered form as suspect as truth. The meta-narratives in question have been denounced by postmodernists for being as duplicitous in form as in content. Indeed, it is the form of the meta-narrative that is viewed as its most misleading aspect.

I have no quarrel with disbelieving meta-narratives but see no reason to extend an incredulity toward the meta-narrative of bourgeois progress into a suspension of belief in *Le Père Goriot*. Flaubert yielded to no one in his furious scorn for meta-narratives, while believing as fiercely in the power of form and style to find the truth and ensure its telling. For him, to describe was to penetrate beneath appearances. He represented appearances so as to reveal their unapparent truths. The postmodernist sense of representation, on the contrary, casts it as an alternative to true description. More relative even than interpretation, its ties to reality cut, anchors in the sea of the actual world weighed, postmodernist representation is a *re*-representation. When such a *re*-representation is not naïve, it lies, and writing becomes obfuscation.

Flaubert, James, and Nabokov recognized (who does not?) that no

complete or exact account of things can ever be acquired or tendered. But relativism is not the only alternative to empiricism. Taking “true” as a judgment and uncertainty as grounds for finding out, they tried for the most likely story. In the five fictions that provide the material for this book, representation emerges as an ambition to take hold of a more encompassing, knowing, disinterested, in a word, truer reality than can be apprehended directly and in the moment with eyes, ears, and hands.

More than to these, more than to philosophy, in order to apprehend the real, Flaubert, James, and Nabokov gave priority of judgment to form: it was the work of form, they believed, that made their fiction truer. Postmodernism, incorporating it in the category of discourse, has generally neglected literature’s peculiarly formal nature. I have sought here to recall this special quality and to retrieve the idea that form is inherently truth-seeking; that, better than any other way of representing the world, artistic form takes in uncertainty yet decides.

Indeed, what Flaubert, James, and Nabokov—Proust too—took as axiomatic about form, that it was material, physical, concrete, could be, I think, a major contribution to current studies of how we think, the ways we know. Fiction is certainly not the only way to describe reality immanently. Newton wrote about the earthly fate of apples, Poincaré about the difference between pies and donuts. But they wrote in ciphers and symbols, while Flaubert, James, and Nabokov addressed reality in its own tongue, in a common language of concrete detail. Proust’s memories-become-literature, “ideal without being abstract,”<sup>6</sup> are both reason and matter, and suggest that the mind’s aesthetic capability may be its greatest cognitive attribute.

For Flaubert, James, and Nabokov, literature came about immanently, in active rejection of transcendence. In the first chapter I will quote from a letter in which Flaubert mused that he might have been a great mystic, but for his love of form. This is in the context of telling Louise Colet about the terrible night he has spent reading Balzac’s *Louis Lambert*, in whose hero, maddened by metaphysics, Flaubert is terrified he may recognize himself.<sup>7</sup> Only literary form has kept him from the same fate, by recasting metaphysics into physics. Firmly under the jurisdiction of the law of gravity, he has resisted the siren song of disembodied transcendence, to which he could not have listened and still written, there being no abstract, theoretical, ideal *Madame Bovary*.

That form was a kind of stuff in itself, and lent this stuff to its content, is the inspiration for repeated emphatic paragraphs in his correspondence. For instance: “Style is life! it’s the very blood of thought!” (Le style c’est la vie! c’est le sang même de la pensée!) Or, “Form is the very flesh of thought, as thought is its soul, its life.” (La forme est la chair même de la pensée, comme la pensée en est l’âme, la vie.) Or, stooping to simile despite

his often expressed contempt for comparison: "Form is like the sweat of thought. When it agitates itself within us, it sweats poetry." (La forme est comme la sueur de la pensée. Quand elle s'agite en nous, elle transpire en poésie.) Or, explaining to Louise Colet that the most provincial hamlet was as good for writing about as Constantinople: "*The artist has to elevate everything*; he is like a pump, he has inside himself a great pipe that descends into the bowels of things, into the deep layers. He breathes in and makes what lay flat under the earth and no one ever saw burst into giant sheaves in the sun." (*L'artiste doit tout élever*; il est comme une pompe, il a en lui un grand tuyau qui descend aux entrailles des choses, dans les couches profondes. Il aspire et fait jaillir au soleil en gerbes géantes ce qui était sous terre et ce qu'on ne voyait pas.) Style was matter, it engendered matter, and it gave birth in blood and sweat.

In the same letter in which Flaubert credits form with keeping him terrestrial when he might have transcended into lunacy, he describes himself subject to another kind of mental dilation. For once, he tells his friend, the writing of *Madame Bovary* is going well, and this anomaly has been accompanied by a certain "exaltation" or "vibration." "At the slightest idea that is about to come to me, I feel something like that odd sensation one feels in one's nails when passing near a harp. This damn book! It hurts; how I feel it!" (A la moindre idée qui va me venir, j'éprouve quelque chose de cet effet singulier que l'on ressent aux ongles en passant près d'une harpe. Quel sacré livre! Il me fait mal; comme je le sens!)<sup>8</sup>

Art is the most radically immanent of our ways of thinking, and its process, as Flaubert described it, crossing modes of consciousness on its way into the depths of the mind, extends reason seamlessly into intuition. Flaubert wrote every sentence twenty, thirty, forty times, sometimes shouting them aloud so he could hear them, sense them. When he finally arrived at what was then a perfectly evident solution, the explanation for this being at last the right sentence (its clarity, elegance, and simplicity) was indistinguishably rational and intuitive: a fusion of thought and taste. James, for his part, often spoke of finding a subject by intuition, a "glimpse" at a dinner party or riding about London. Nabokov ascribed *Lolita* to a newspaper paragraph that caught his eye one day, although it was years before he made anything out of its account of a caged gorilla trying to write.

These moments of inspiration were not emotional states. The exaltation, the vibration Flaubert felt upon getting *Madame Bovary* right was a bodily response to a mental state, and he insisted that it had nothing to do with his feelings, although he reacted to it with feeling. He once waxed very wroth with a book whose terrible writing, he said, arose from the author's emotionalism: "One does not write with one's heart but with one's head, once again." (On n'écrit pas avec son coeur, mais avec sa tête, encore une

fois.)<sup>9</sup> The ideal expressed in his eternal war on adjectives was a writing that, suffused with its subject, has passed beyond eloquence to description. The point was to write so that the writing worked free of one's partiality, of one's heart, using all the resources of the mind, conscious and unconscious, known and unknown, since the goal was to know what was unknown.

James, advising a young writer to be one on whom nothing was lost, was describing the same process at another stage. His point was that a writer starts work by looking outward, toward the world, and must not lose anything of what he sees, not just because it might be just the thing for him, but because it is not his thing. This gossip at a London dinner party, that silhouette in the doorway of a Roman museum, is a momentary settling of the kaleidoscope of circumstance. A writer needs to attend to possibility, and James took his own advice, not only in finding his subjects but in the form in which he developed them. The unfolding of a James story leaves no aspect of its possibilities unexamined nor, to that extent, unrealized; and the rejected possibilities remain, after the close of the novel, as tangible as those selected. Isabel Archer's refusal of Caspar Goodwood and her return to her odious husband at the end of *Portrait of a Lady* make entire sense without diminishing our knowledge of the alternatives to that decision, which remain permanently accessible to the reader, hardly even inflected by the ending.

A literary work has to produce an ending, but these endings are seldom conclusive in shaping our understanding of what has been going on. Readers are notoriously critical in regard to endings and disapprove of them as often as not. This is one sign that literature is peculiarly unteleological, preserving the knowledge lost to choice or happenstance, and in that way soothing the nostalgia of unused opportunities, of paths not taken. In the last paragraph of his preface to *The Golden Bowl*, which, because of its length, I have put into a note, James wrote that "our literary deeds enjoy this marked advantage over many of our acts, that, though they go forth into the world and stray even in the desert, they don't to the same extent lose themselves."<sup>10</sup>

This passage promises the preservation not just of memory but of unrealized possibility, and this seems to me an important reason for trusting in literature, personally and politically. By preserving and valuing lost or demoted knowledge, it represents as well the contingency of any established order: however partisan the writer, the work is almost certain, through its form, to exceed his or her conviction. In the quip that a writer writes better than he or she knows, the paradox is only apparent, not real: by its nature, literature knows better than anyone.<sup>11</sup>

I conclude with a glance ahead to the first chapter, which is about Flaubert's novel *Salammbô*, a baroque, orientalist fable that may not be self-evident as an illustration of fiction's commitment to truth. The solidly real-

istic *Madame Bovary* could appear more suitable, yet it was in connection with writing *Salammô* that Flaubert was most explicit about the necessary relation of his fiction to facts, the truth, the real. Also, *Salammô* is a perfect case in point in not defining “the real” naïvely. Its sometimes phantasmagoric scenes and events are all based on archival research, or so Flaubert claimed. But he never said he was simply reporting what he had read. He extrapolated, speculated, guessed, imagined: he argued fiercely that his Carthage was real, his admission that he had invented at least one piece of it not withstanding.

Having chosen a subject about which it was impossible to be strictly accurate, he represented reality in *Salammô* in much the same way any physical reality is represented in scientific models: Flaubert’s Carthage is plausible, probable, surely analogous to whichever of the possibilities for that city was in fact realized by history. I want to recall Proust’s association of literature and science to suggest that Flaubert can be seen as having elaborated the laws of aesthetics the way a scientist would the formulas of physical laws. He treated beauty as an organizing principle and style as a tool, in order to discover truths about the past and about his own time that were not empirically evident. It could be said of Carthage and Pont l’Évêque, of *Salammô* and *Félicité*, that Flaubert worked them out by dint of form and style: the ancient capital and the modern village, the princess and the servant are “ideal without being abstract,” true in that they are beautiful and made beautiful in the quest for truth.

In literature if not in life, seeking truth brings power. “Here is why I love art,” Flaubert wrote.

It’s because at least there, in the world of fiction, everything is freedom.—You are sufficient unto all its needs, you do everything there, you are at once the king and his people, active and passive, sacrifice and priest. No limits; humanity is for you a puppet with bells that you ring at the end of his sentences, like a tumbler those at his shoe-tips. (I have often that way avenged myself nicely on my existence. I deeded myself piles of lovely things with my pen. I gave myself women, money, travels.) How the cramped soul unfolds in this blue yonder that extends all the way to the frontiers of the True.

Voilà pourquoi j’aime l’art. C’est que là, au moins, tout est liberté dans ce monde des fictions.—On y assouvit tout, on y fait tout, on est à la fois son roi et son peuple, actif et passif, victime et prêtre. Pas de limites; l’humanité y est pour vous un pantin à grelots que l’on fait sonner au bout de sa phrase comme un bâteleur au bout de son pied. (Je me suis souvent ainsi bien vengé de l’existence. Je me suis repassé un tas de douceurs avec ma plume. Je me suis donné des femmes, de l’argent, des voyages). Comme l’âme courbée se déploie dans cet azur, qui ne s’arrête qu’aux frontières du Vrai.<sup>12</sup>

The capital “V” of his “Vrai” ennobles the mundane truth but does not abstract it. Flaubert was no Platonist, and the world of his fiction was free not from reality but within it. There are more things in literature than in life: in life, contingency excludes; in literature, it includes. Past contingencies of time, place, circumstance, and chance, art could travel beyond existence to the frontiers of the True, where reality abounds with women, money, voyages, princesses, gods, and aqueducts.