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# How do *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, *Notes from the Underground* by Fyodor Dostoevsky and *Middlemarch* by George Eliot explore the nature of freedom?

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*What then is true freedom in the novel if there is only belief in determinism, and a 'hell of unsatisfied desires?' (Dostoevsky 14)*

Freedom, as a philosophical, political and literary concept, was put under increasing pressure during the 19th century. In a society stormed by capitalist interests and utilitarian values, literature became a medium of choice to express the struggle to define, promote, or delineate freedom. Literature's aim was no longer to communicate moral values; the act of writing had become increasingly private and psychological; the reader was left with the immense task of decoding written and dramatic works. In such a context, it is all literary actors – authors, readers and characters themselves – who were faced with the issue of freedom and its potentially dangerous and endless ramifications. In this essay, we will first aim to highlight the shortcomings of freedom using Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, questioning both its conceptual and concrete implications; we will then turn to Eliot's *Middlemarch* in search for a compromise, or a least, an acknowledgement of a type of freedom with liberating virtues, something which was no longer self-evident.

In Flaubert's and Dostoevsky's works, freedom's fundamental role is to be an instrument of evasion, an aesthetic or philosophical concept employed to escape bourgeois society or existential responsibilities. In *Madame Bovary*, freedom has no place in the concrete world: it is a fantasy, a succession of clichés picked up from sentimental novels. We must first highlight a recurring pattern in the novel, one that associates freedom with, in turn, passion, hope, happiness, change - 'What happiness there had been at that time, what freedom, what hope!' (227)[1]. In Emma's mind, the nature of freedom is vague, it is but a fancy idea in an inherently quixotic longing for something *other*. Its role in her existence is quite explicit in the following passage: 'Like shipwrecked sailors, she turned despairing eyes upon the solitude of her life, seeking afar off some white sail in the mists of the horizon. She did not know what this chance would be, what wind would bring it her (…)' (84). Here Flaubert, in a very straightforward manner, uses free-indirect speech to present an internal monologue riddled with literary commonplaces. Though this paragraph is a direct account

[1]The full quote is as follows: 'What happiness there had been at that time, what freedom, what hope! What an abundance of illusions!' (227), pointing to an ironic lack of self-awareness brought about by Flaubert's masterly use of free indirect speech, in which subtle judgement from the omniscient narrator mingles with Emma's internal monologue.

of Emma's thoughts, it also resembles a satire. Emma views life through a simplistic fictional prism, she is 'the vague 'she' of all the volumes of verse' (347). Freedom, in the form of a vague 'white sail', surfaces from an equally vague 'horizon', and is but one element in a long accumulation of superficial imagery associated with sentimental literature. Freedom thus exists within an artificial and fictional understanding of existence, which itself follows a basic narrative structure. We remember, for example, Emma's ever-disappointed belief that changes of scenery come with a change of mood, as in theatre plays[2]. Pages 84-85, Flaubert writes 'One adventure sometimes brought with it infinite consequences', in the original French, "*des péripéties à l'infini*". The "*péripéties*", loosely translated as adventures, lose their original connotation linked with the narrative *building* of fairytales and taught to children at a young age. Freedom, in this context, is purely aesthetic, allowing Emma to escape the dull, 'immovable' (84) life of the stay-at-home *bourgeoise*. It has no concrete incarnation and takes the form of the only 'exotic' representation of life available to middle-class women at the time: commodified, sentimental literature, whose consumption is not informed by any kind of education.

In *Notes from the Underground*, the concept of freedom depends on the protagonist's conflicted and ambivalent worldview. He 'holds a conscious belief in determinism (…) his consciousness tells him that he cannot be held responsible for his actions (or inactions) because the will is causally determined by something outside itself' (Powelstock 32). 'Nature' is a recurring word in the novel, used by him to refer to a sort of higher force that is never elaborated upon. See, for example, page 10, in which the 'laws of nature' are mentioned four times and systematically go unchallenged; on the contrary, page 16, the 'laws of nature', that of biology, evolution, physics, are not only clearly defined, but confronted: 'but what do I care for the laws of nature and arithmetic, when, for some reason I dislike those laws and the fact that twice two makes four?' (Dostoevsky, 16). A comparison of these excerpts brings to light freedom's concrete and conceptual utility. Page 10, the laws of nature prevent the protagonist from forgiving, as 'one cannot forgive the laws of

[2]Tostes, Yonville-l'Abbaye, the escapades in Rouen, the dreams of Parisian life: geographic displacement is always supposed to have an impact on Emma's frame of mind. Change can never occur within her, it must be prompted by external factors.

nature', and from moving on, 'for even if it were owing to the laws of nature, it is insulting all the same'. What is happening is 'to blame for no fault of [his] own but, so to say, through the laws of nature'. This lack of freedom allows the Underground Man to escape moral and social responsibilities: relationships cannot be mended, their improvement does not depend on him. Acts of the will are determined by natural laws; they are outside of his control. Laws of nature are only challenged when they allow him to assert his position as a social insurgent, with no concrete consequences. On the other hand, the Underground Man is constantly penetrated by 'some kind of deep-seated moral sentiment (rather than a consciously held philosophical position) resisting the belief in Determinism' (Powelstock 30). It is particularly flagrant when he meets with his former classmates and feels the depth of his social alienation. He craves absolute freedom; he longs to show them what he is capable of (Dostoevsky 97), and no subjection to laws of nature allows him to be satisfied with himself. More strikingly, he is incapable of accepting that he cannot control Liza. The following statement - 'Surely by now you must realise that I shall never forgive you for having found me in this wretched dressing-gown' (157), is unequivocal. The Underground Man craves absolute autonomy, and to remove that of others; he craves freedom from the social gaze, which is also his own; he craves total self-determination, clearing him from any sort of moral responsibility. Absolute determinism and absolute freedom allow the Underground Man to evade responsibilities towards himself and others alike.

Freedom is thus deeply *useful* as a concept, and the roles it takes on allow us to draw conclusions as regards to its nature. To affirm that the Underground Man *consciously* believes in determinism might appear surprising: does he not defend men's ability to choose, however irrationally, in the face of Rationality and Intellect? Does he not oppose the notion that men, being reasonable, always act out of self-interest? Isn't freedom, according to him, what is to be sacrificed on the altar of omnipotent Reason? In fact, what seems to be inherently human is the *desire* to assert one's freewill, not freewill itself. Freewill is the power of acting without constraint: yet, nothing defines our protagonist better than inertia. His hyper-consciousness prevents him from acting: 'I

was overcome by a sort of paralysis; but this was pleasant and good for me' (76). The novel is a constant confrontation between what the Underground Man wishes for, and what truly happens; at no point in the novel does he embody freewill. As Powelstock remarks, 'the gap between consciousness and will is simultaneously reflected as a gap between consciousness and reality' (34). What then is true freedom in the novel if there is only belief in determinism, and a 'hell of unsatisfied desires' (Dostoevsky 14)? The Underground Man is a type of individual inevitably brought about by society, aware that he is a social product, and despising himself for that very reason. He craves self-definition, but is ultimately *defined* in opposition with social norms: this is reflected in the novel's structure. In its first part, all realist conventions are challenged. By being a deeply unreliable, ambivalent speaker[3], the Underground Man leaves us unsure of what is true and real; the plot's development is not governed by logic, as there is no plot at all[4]. On the one hand, the novel does give the impression of an attempt at self-definition – the reader will feel that he lacks the codes to navigate it. However, in our endeavours to study it, we will try to define it - will talk of a confessional style, of a challenge to meta-narratives and literary conventions, of unpredictability and irrationality as *opposed* to what we are used to. The novel cannot define itself, and neither can its protagonist, who can't establish the grounds of his own freedom; as Liza remarks, he talks 'somehow like a book' (125). Each attempt at defining freedom thus leaves something out: it is virtually non-existent. Determinism doesn't account for the Underground Man's inner wish for absolute freedom; absolute freedom 'is not human freedom, but something speculative and absolute' (Powelstock 38) removed from reality and thus incompatible with everyday life. While the Underground Man does make a strong case against rational egoism, he fails to present us with an alternative: *Notes from the Underground* features the collapse of Freedom.

[3]See this quote: '*I will tell you another thing that would be better, and that is, if I myself believed in anything of what I have just written. I swear to you, gentlemen, there is not one thing, not one word of what I have written that I really believe.'* (50, Dostoevsky).

[4]The (narrative) plot is defined as a sequence of events in which each event affects the next one through the principle of cause and effect (The Free Encyclopedia). There is no decipherable sequence of events in the first part of the novel.

Emma's vague and aesthetic understanding of freedom leads us towards a similar conclusion: freedom is non-existent. Her 'febrile desire (…) for unrestricted freedom' (Hollahan 92) gradually removes her from the realities of life. We have shown that Emma's conception of freedom is a phantasm; we should now like to go even further and characterize it as a true neurosis. Freedom, simply put, refers to having the power to think, speak and act as one wants. This leads us to a disturbing realisation: Emma's fanciful desire for freedom is precisely what constricts her inner and outer selves. Flaubert writes that 'at the bottom of her heart, however, she was waiting for something to happen' (84): it is dreaming of passion and freedom that induces a pathological passivity in her. Similarly, we are told that Emma often 'turned despairing eyes upon the solitude of her life' (84). Putting aside the obvious use of literary clichés, this sentence is a striking summary of Emma's state of mind, which perfectly preserves the carefully crafted French grammatical structure: Emma is the subject, but is separated from her existence by the gaze she casts upon it – 'the solitude of her life' is only the *indirec*t object in the sentence. Desire for vague freedom is thus one of the main symptoms of *Bovarysme*, a pathological and paradoxical confusion between reality and imagination, resulting in one's dissociation from one's life (thus, the opposite of freedom). A slave of desire, Emma loses the ability to act: she becomes the mere spectator of her life. More terrible still, it seems that the only moment in which Emma approaches a semblance of freedom is when she is confronted with Death. When contemplating suicide, the passage reads as follows: 'What restrained her? She was free. She advanced, looking at the paving-stones, saying to herself, 'Come! Come!'' (270). It is one of the only instances in which she directly *addresses* herself, where no phantasm acts as an intermediary between her inner and outer selves. Freedom is no longer a vague and long-awaited thing, she *is* free to act. Freedom is thus so far removed from Emma's existence that its relation with Death, as a last resort, is more easily established in the novel. Emma and the Underground Man, though at opposite ends of the awareness spectrum, both share inherently passive, constricted, unproductive existences.

An attempt at drawing a conclusion from the following depictions of freedom leaves us with this inference: absolute determinism, absolute freedom and freedom as an aesthetic phantasm are all incompatible with both a healthy inner life and concrete life. A *practical* understanding of freedom might offer other perspectives. *Middlemarch* presents a nuanced vision of freedom implemented on individuals within a carefully devised social microcosm. Lydgate is a particularly interesting case study: he informs us about what Eliot makes of one's belief in total independence as opposed to social realities. Lydgate arrives in Middlemarch with a 'new and independent procedure' (906), persuaded that he can act according to his will alone. This apparent freedom is immediately judged in a negative light by the narrative voice, who notes that 'Lydgate's conceit was of the arrogant sort, never simpering, never impertinent, but massive in its claims' (203). Interestingly, the speaker speaks of 'conceit' in the context of Lydgate's 'hubristic belief' (Tang 3) that others 'have no power over him' (203); his sense of freedom is narratively replaced by a sense of pride. That such a belief in freedom is 'massive in its claims' is also a clear narrational stance. In *Middlemarch*, there is no place for absolute freedom discharging the individual from the pressure of social networks and moral responsibilities – the very one craved by the Underground Man. As a result, the plot very quickly puts pressure on this belief. As Newton writes, 'Lydgate also fails to make a choice based on any sense of objective moral principle when he casts his vote for Tyke (…) despite believing Farebrother is the more deserving candidate' (449). In this chapter, Lydgate yields to Bulstrode's social power and ultimately discards any moral accountability in his choice-making. A warning thus transpires through Lydgate and Fred Vincy's fates: belief in absolute self-determination and extreme passivity both have unfortunate consequences. Vincy, awaiting Featherstone's inheritance, left his life at the mercy of probability - his hopes were soon disappointed. Lydgate, by being unable to understand that his success depends on his determined actions, on others and even on luck, found himself in a precarious financial situation.

Lydgate shows us that freewill - the ability to decide what to do independently of any outside influence[5] - does not exist in a world of co-dependence. Strikingly however, *Middlemarch*

[5]Cambridge dictionary

does not reject the notion of freedom. 'For Spinoza as for Eliot, "the rejection of freewill does not entail the denial of freedom"'(Tang 4, from Gatens's *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza*). It is indeed clear that when Eliot details the growth of Dorothea, she depicts the acquiring of a degree of freedom. To free herself from the burden of her husband's legacy, Dorothea needs to gain an understanding of her relationship with Casaubon. Eliot writes that 'it had been easier for her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr. Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling' (285). Here, we are told that Dorothea needs to learn two things: first, self-awareness, as she must understand the (self-interested) reasons behind her marriage; second, the importance of emotional connexion in human relationships, as the fusion of 'reflection' with 'feeling' shows us (Henson 20). Her conversations with Ladislaw gradually open her up to a type of self-aware freedom: regarding their discussion on the importance of Poetry in chapter XXII, Henson notes that Poetry is ultimately defined as '[the] feeling become self-aware', requiring 'a functioning rational capacity' (20). This shows us the path followed by Dorothea towards self-growth. It is by *reflecting* upon her *feelings* that she ultimately decides against pursuing her husband's work: she concludes that doing so would impede her well-being, and would not benefit society. This is a true act of *productive* liberation, conditioned by her ethical responsibilities *as well as* by self-knowledge; moral responsibility comes under consideration as well, but Casaubon having passed away, the first two prevail. Eliot thus consistently 'highlights the ethical responsibilities of each person, as well as the way in which the freedom of each is connected to the freedom of every other' (Gatens 42). The closest we come to attainable freedom in *Middlemarch* is by equating it with an *integrative* knowledge, which Lydgate, amongst others, does not possess: he is incapable, as Spinoza would say, of recognizing the *causes* that determine his actions.

*Madame Bovary*, *Notes from the Underground* and *Middlemarch* thus all discuss the limitations of freedom, to greatly varying degrees. While Eliot makes a practical attempt at redefining it, Flaubert and Dostoevsky's protagonists turn it into a self-constraining commodity:

both novels make no explicit attempt for freedom to be viewed under another lens that that of illusion, or nullity. These different conceptions of freedom certainly fuel much reflection. Flaubert and Dostoevsky, who wrote in times of censorship, precisely demonstrate that *knowledge* of a constricted freedom can still be a vehicle of creativity: a thorough study of Flaubert's manuscripts demonstrates that he wrote with censorship in mind, which he tried to counter with formidable creativity and masterly use of literary devices. Still, we finish this essay with a bitter taste in the mouth: there is no denying that a co-dependent view of freedom seems counter-intuitive, and like the Underground man, we still feel that attempting to define it is perpetrating violence against the concept itself, which we have somewhat idealised. All three novels thus come from a place of existential questioning, still relevant today.

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