

DA CAPO

Illusion and the *Illusio*



To be true consists of giving the complete illusion of truth, following the ordinary logic of facts, and not transcribing them in servile fashion and pell-mell order. I conclude from this that the Realists of talent ought to call themselves illusionists instead [. . .] Each of us simply makes *an illusion of the world*, a poetic, sentimental, joyous, melancholic, dirty, or lugubrious illusion according to our natures. And the writer has no other mission than to reproduce faithfully this illusion, with all the artistic processes which he has learned and has at his command.

GUY DE MAUPASSANT

It has to be acknowledged, therefore, that it is historical analysis which allows us to understand the conditions of the 'understanding', the symbolic appropriation, real or fictive, of a symbolic object which may be accompanied by that particular form of enjoyment which we call aesthetic. But this is not to elevate knowledge of the historical truth to the condition and the measure of aesthetic pleasure (which would amount to condemning those literary or artistic pleasures that, as in the legend of Amphitryon, are the product of a misunderstanding).

The 'impious dismantling of the fiction' – whether it gives itself away as feigned and fictive, as literary fiction does (at least when it achieves an awareness of itself), or whether as Searle observes, it takes seriously what it says and agrees to be accountable for it (and hence, in some cases, agrees to be convinced of an error, as in science fiction) – leads to discovering, along with Mallarmé, that the *foundation of belief* (and of the delectation which, in the case of literary fiction, it procures) resides in the *illusio*, the adherence to the game as a game, the acceptance of the fundamental premise that the game, literary or scientific, is worth being played, being taken seriously. The literary *illusio*, that originating adherence to the literary game which grounds the belief in the *importance* or *interest* of literary fictions, is the precondition – almost always unperceived – of the aesthetic pleasure which is always, in part, the pleasure of playing the game,

of participating in the fiction, of being in total accord with the premises of the game. It is also the precondition of the literary *illusion* and of the belief effect (rather than the 'reality effect') which the text can produce.

To understand this belief effect itself, distinguishing it from the one produced by the scientific text, one must observe, following Faulkner's analysis in action, that it rests on the accord between the presuppositions (or, more precisely, the schemas of construction) that the narrator and the reader (or, in the case analysed by Baxandall, the painter and the spectator) engage in the production and reception of the work. Because they are held in common, they serve to construct the world of common sense; the almost universal agreement on these structures, especially spatial and temporal ones, is the foundation of the fundamental *illusio*, the belief in the reality of the world.

Flaubert extends, by making them more profound, both Mallarmé's questioning of the foundations of a belief one could call scholastic (since it is linked to the existence of fields which all presuppose the *skholè*), and Faulkner's questioning of the foundations of a belief in what the text expresses. Flaubert does so in fictions which make use of the belief effect in order to question the foundations of the belief effect. He is not content just to dramatize characters who, like Frédéric or Madame Arnoux, live in a literary way a literary adventure, the myth of a grand impossible passion, and who push the belief in literature, meaning in fiction, into unreality, to the point of really living the most tired, hackneyed tropes of fiction, like the myth of purity in love ('it seems to me you are there when I read passages about love in books'). He links this propensity to take the illusions of art and love seriously and to confront the real only through a literary anticipation (doomed to disillusion) to a sort of pathology of the primordial belief in the reality of social games, to an incapacity to enter into the *illusio* as an illusion of reality collectively shared and approved. Flaubert explicitly connects this irrepressible inclination to escape into fiction – which he shares with Frédéric, and which he actively achieves by writing a work in which he objectivizes it – to a sort of powerlessness to take seriously the most real of society's games, the world of common sense, of the doxic experience of the common world procured by successful socialization, capable of ensuring the incorporation of shared structures, which grounds what Durkheim calls 'logical conformism' and, thereby, the consensus on the world's sense.

In short, in coming back tirelessly, from *Madame Bovary* to *Bouvard and Pécuchet* via *Sentimental Education*, to characters who live life as a novel because they take fiction too seriously, for lack of

being able to take the real seriously, and who commit a 'category error' totally similar to that of the realist novelist and his reader, Flaubert reminds us that the propensity to grant the status of reality to fictions (to the point of wanting the reality of existence to conform to fiction, as do Don Quixote, Emma or Frédéric) perhaps finds its foundation in a sort of detachment, an indifference, a passive variant of the stoical ataraxia, which leads to seeing reality as illusion and to perceiving the *illusio* in its truthfulness as a 'well-founded illusion', to take up once more the expression Durkheim uses about religion.

To take the literary illusion seriously is in fact to play one *illusio* off against another: the *illusio* reserved for the *happy few*, the literary *illusio*, the belief of learned people [*clercs*], a privilege of those who live literature and who can, by writing, live life as a literary adventure, is played off against the most common and most universally shared *illusio*, the *illusio* of common sense. Sancho is to Don Quixote what the Thracian servant is to Thales, a permanent reminder of the reality of the world of common sense, of the common world, almost universally shared, unlike special worlds which are microcosms founded, like the universe of literature or of science, on a rupture with common sense and with the doxic adherence to the ordinary world.

But Flaubert achieves this analytic work on the forms of the illusion and the forms of the *illusio*, and on their relations, by means of a properly literary *mode of expression*, thus giving us an opportunity to grasp the difference between literary expression and scientific expression. If he poses the problem of reality's fiction and of reality *as* fiction, it is within a fiction which, undoubtedly more than any other, is able to produce the illusion of reality. This is because, like Faulkner, he mobilizes the most profound structures of the social world, these being at the same time the mental structures which readers engage in their reading and which, as the product of the incorporation of structures of the real world, are granted to this fictional world and are able to ground the most complete belief in the fiction which describes them, just as they ground the belief in the ordinary experience of the world. But these structures are not marked out as such, as in scientific analysis: they inhabit a story, where they are realized and dissimulated at the same time. Literary expression, like scientific expression, relies on conventional codes, socially grounded presuppositions, historically constituted classificatory schemas, such as the opposition between art and money which organizes the whole composition of *Sentimental Education* and the reading of that work. But it delivers these structures and the questions it asks about them, such as those I have just examined, only in concrete

stories, singular exemplifications which (to speak like Nelson Goodman) are like samples of the real world. These representative and representational samples, exemplifying very concretely, like swatches of cloth, the reality described, thereby present themselves with all the appearances of the commonsense world, which is also inhabited by structures, but ones dissimulated in the guise of contingent adventures, anecdotal accidents, particular events. This suggestive, allusive, elliptical form is what makes the literary text, like what is real, deliver up its structure, but by veiling it and by snatching it from our gaze. In contrast, science tries to speak of things as they are, without euphemisms, and asks to be taken seriously, even when it analyses the foundations of this quite singular form of the *illusio* which is the scientific *illusio*.

POSTSCRIPT

For a Corporatism of the Universal



Once the Sophists spoke to a small number of men; today, the periodical press allows them to lead a whole nation astray.

HONORÉ DE BALZAC