

Mrs. Aubain's Barometer

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The first paragraph of "A Simple Heart" brings a brief description of the main character, Mrs. Aubain, a concise presentation of her maid Felicia and a much more detailed description of the house that both characters lived in:

This house had a slate roof and stood between an alley and a narrow street leading down to the river. Inside, the floors were at different levels, making it very easy to trip up. A narrow hallway separated the kitchen from the living room in which remained all day long, sitting in a wicker armchair close to the casement window. Against the wainscoting, which was painted white, there stood a row of eight mahogany chairs. A barometer hung on the wall above an old piano, piled high with a pyramid-shaped assortment of packets and cardboard boxes. Two easy chairs upholstered in tapestry stood on either side of a Louis-Quinze-style mantelpiece in yellow marble. The clock, in the middle, was designed to look like a Temple of Vesta and the whole room smelt musty, due to the fact that the floor level was lower than the garden¹.

The style used above can be easily recognised. This is a realistic description, dominated by visual elements, stylistically expressive and rather static². It appears at the beginning of the story for a simple reason – it serves a kind of the initial presentation of space and an invitation to the created world. The theory of literature perceives the description as something plotless, non-temporal, summative and additive, unable to function on its own in a novel. The "additivity" means that the aforementioned "semantic block" serves a kind of "appetizer"³ to

¹ G. Flaubert, *A Simple Heart*, in: *ibid*, *Three tales*, translated by Roger Whitehouse, Penguin Books, 2005, p. 3.

² Its dynamics is based only on the movement between the general and local plan and describing the house sequentially – we subsequently visit the living room, the study, "Madame's" room and Felicia's wardrobe.

³ Ph. Hamon, *Qu'est-ce qu'une description?*, *Poétique* 12 (1972). See also: J. Sławiński, *O opisie*, in: «Pamiętnik Literacki» 1983, 1, *Próby teoretycznoliterackie*, Kraków 2000; D. Korwin-Piotrowska, *Problemy poetyki opisu prozatorskiego*, Kraków 2001.

the story, i.e. to the proper narration, reporting on the events. This is also visible in “A Simple Heart”; the descriptive part takes up the first few paragraphs, laying the ground for the story of Felicia’s love adventures.

But the more conventional the story’s location and role are, the more they trigger questions. Is the description’s function purely rhetorical (we wait until the action begins), rather amplifying (we gather knowledge about places and characters), or perhaps ornamental (we admire the writer’s craft)? How to integrate it into the whole work? We can easily interpret the purpose of describing Mrs. Aubain (the main character): an early widowed mother of two children, and Felicia as an exemplary maid. But how to understand the individual components of this description? Should we analyse them as the elements of the main plot, assigning them an explicatory function? Yes, the house is old and neglected, which is not surprising, as Mrs. Aubain had to cash in her property and live in a modest cabin in order to pay off the debts of her deceased spouse. But what to do with the information that the roof was slated? Are we to recognize a marker of architectural style (architecture of northern France?), social class (middle-class bourgeoisie?), or rather treat it as a meaningless literary ornament? Do marble fireplaces and soft berries belong to the general narrative of “A Simple Heart”? Or do they disrupt the main plot? What interpretative use can we make of a pile of boxes and cardboard files? And why on earth are we being informed that there’s a barometer hanging over an old piano in Mrs. Aubain’s house?

These were the questions asked by Roland Barthes in his famous text entitled “The Reality Effect”. He stated that from the point of view of the structure of the text, its cohesiveness and the functionality of particular parts, the barometer seems to be a “narrative excess”⁴, for there is nothing to justify his presence. While the piano appears as a sign of the bourgeois status of Mrs. Aubain and the boxes constitute a sign of disorder in the home and in the life of the heroine, the barometer does not belong to *l'ordre du notable* – it seems not worth noticing. Its presence makes it necessary to pose a number of interrelated questions: about the rules of interpretation, about the mechanisms of representation and about the nature of the presented reality, and finally about the condition of the reality itself.

The devil is in the details

Of course, Barthes was not the first one to reflect on the role of excessive details in Flaubert’s prose. The multitude of things described (or merely referred to) in the novel has for long stirred discussion. In general, this discussion developed in two distinct directions. Some embarked on finding functional justifications for descriptions, associating them with the development of the plot or the characters. To give an example, Jean-Paul Sartre claimed in “Family Idiot” that particular objects in “Madame Bovary” replace psychology, even that they function as “objectified people” according to the rule of “inertia-objectivity”. The philosopher gives an example:

⁴ R. Barthes, *The Reality Effect* 1982, p. 101.

Example: wedding bouquet – Emma cleans up, the bouquet stings her, she is covered with dust, she throws it away: nothing simpler. But it is something like a myth, like a rhythm; she thought about it herself in a romantic way. So she says goodbye to her marriage: she is ready to commit adultery⁵.

From this point of view, providing for a precise presentation of the world in question is one of the three basic elements of a realist strategy⁶. Of course, much depends on how we define realism – whether as a set of techniques (based on veristic and structural representativeness and a certain classification) or, for example, as an aesthetic category that makes writing “critical sociology”. Depending on the adopted definition, a detail such as a barometer can be a tool in the hands of a realist (introducing “unnecessary data” in order to hide their purpose) or a “historian of customs” (subserving the analysis of collective unconsciousness through investigating material symptoms⁷). It can also be a subversive element, serving as a parody of the rules of a realistic novel, provoking reading habits, which make us associate the details of the description with the whole work, treat them as the development of the main plot. Observing the “rules of excessive detail” brings an end to the aforementioned style, sending us back to the material world, indifferent to the meaning and independent of the world of human aspirations and goals⁸. Finally, this style may be described succinctly as questioning the existing descriptions of reality; in this light, Flaubert does not describe reality, but rather the different ways in which it can be discredited (ideologies that pretend to the truth) in order to deconstruct it⁹. Detailed descriptions of the subjective environment illustrate the solidification of deregulated languages into grammaticized discourses and the strengthening of ideologies that objectify themselves in the form of dogmas, institutions and material objects.

Flaubert turns out to be a modern writer whose main concern is the problematic access to the real world, a kind of “realisation” of the world – not so much its phantasmagoric character (this *déréalité* about which Barthes wrote¹⁰), as its absence or incomplete presence (*peu de réalité*, as Jean-François Lyotard put it¹¹). In this light, realism, with its characteristic cognitive beauty, is only a way to avoid problems with reality; The author of “Sentimental Education” rejects the conviction that literature should accurately and faithfully recreate the outer layer of reality, to embark on the search for a way to grasp the gist of essence and/or to create a perfectly independent *livre sur rien*, a pure novel construction liberated from any mimetic obligations¹².

⁵ J.-P. Sartre, *The Family Idiot 1: Gustave Flaubert 1821-1857*, University of Chicago Press 1981.

⁶ Apart from the probability of the external layer of the plot and the ironic distance between the author and the reader (which makes the character seem to be relatively independent). *Ibid*, p. 324.

⁷ P. Dufour, *Le Réalisme*, Paris 1998, p. 8-9.

⁸ J. Culler, *The Real Madame Bovary*, in: *Le Flaubert réel*, ed. B. Vincken, P. Fröhlicher, Tübingen 2009, p. 17-18.

⁹ P. Dufour, see above., p. 90-91.

¹⁰ R. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 2000, p. 139.

¹¹ J.-F. Lyotard, *Answering the Question: What is postmodernism?*, in: *ibid*, *Postmodernism for children. Correspondence of 1982-1985*, 1984.

¹² J. Culler, see above, p. 14.

Reflecting on the role of detail in Flaubert's prose is often free from the search for a specific semantic function and value of the described objects, as well as from the question of realism, defined in every case in a different way, the philosophical dimension of this writing practice is at stake. It seems to have a value similar to Haiku's "Oto" or "punctum" in photography; the hypertrophic detail says "I am real!" and: "I am the reality that écriture is trying to become"¹³. Objects reveal themselves in the form, as Jean Starobinski put it, of pure sensory phenomena, intense and poor (in thought and meaning)¹⁴, and literature becomes a record of man's immersion in the material world, to the point of losing all meaning, to the point of nausea¹⁵. This last formulation may lead us to draw a line of continuity between the excess world of things in Flaubert's prose and the traumatic experience of contact with the absurd and redundant being that has so strongly marked the modern epic (with objects that "break free from their names"¹⁶, with an "inexhaustible scar" composed of "intrusively present things that will annihilate the well-known world"¹⁷). The devil, as we know, is in the details, and when it happens to get out of them, the tame reality goes into disarray, something we usually push into non-seeing and unthinking, i.e. the infinite domain of impersonal material existence, is revealed.

In the case of "A Simple Heart", i.e. the novel opening *Three Stories*, the last book published during the writer's lifetime, the situation is slightly different than in the case of "Madame Bovary". It is more difficult to argue in favour of the idea that the unjustified existence of things is revealed there, being a permanent scandal for our need for meaning. At first glance, the descriptive strategy under analysis is rather to get closer to the ordinary and everyday routine. After an episode of unfortunate engagement, Felicity, coming from common people, becomes a maid in the house of Mrs. Aubain, a representative of the impoverished small bourgeoisie. She spends her whole life there, taking care of the affairs and children of Mrs. Aubain: Paul and Virginia, as well as her nephew, Victor. Her life is marked by subsequent tragedies (the death of Virginia and Victor, Paul's departure, deafness, and finally the death of the employer, loneliness and poverty), but the plot consists mainly of small facts from the life in the house and Pont-l'Évêque:

The years passed, one very much like another, marked only by the annual recurrence of the church festivals: Easter, the Assumption, All Saints' Day. It was only little incidents in their daily lives that, in later years, enabled them to recall a particular date. Thus in 1825 two glaziers whitewashed the entrance hall; in 1827 a part of the roof fell into the courtyard and nearly killed a passer-by. In the summer of 1828, it was Madame's turn to distribute consecrated bread to the parishioners. This was also about the same time that Bourais mysteriously left the town.¹⁸

¹³J. Neefs, *La prose du réel*, in: *Le Flaubert réel*, ed. B. Vinken, P. Fröhlicher, Tübingen 2009, p. 24-25.

¹⁴J. Starobinski, *L'échelle des températures. Lecture du corps dans « Madame Bovary »*, in: *Travail de Flaubert*, Paris 1983, p. 46.

¹⁵J. Culler, see above, p. 19.

¹⁶J.-P. Sartre, *Nausea*, 1938.

¹⁷As stated by Gombrowicz and Michał Paweł Markowski; see *ibid*, *Czarny nurt. Gombrowicz, świat, literatura*, Kraków 2004, p. 151.

¹⁸G. Flaubert, *A Simple Heart*, p. 48.

The first impression is that the immovable existence of things illustrates the static richness of this provincial life, and that their multiplicity and disordered nature correspond to the consequences of isolated events, between which the causal links have disappeared. The fate of objects also indicates the permanence of the class hierarchy; Felicia recovers “all the junk thrown away by Mrs. Aubain”¹⁹, and then stores them with great respect. In the final passages depicting her room, transformed into a real junk shop, the barometer cannot be found among the objects gathered there. Therefore, let us go back to the beginning of the novel, to the dining room of Mrs. Aubain – and to the reflection of Roland Barthes.

The Reality Effect

As early as in the Introduction to the structural analysis of short stories from 1966, there is an example taken from the discussed novel:

If in “A Simple Heart” Flaubert says at the beginning, as if in passing, that the daughters of the Pont-l’Évêque sub-prefect had a parrot, it is because the parrot then acquires great significance in Felicia’s life: providing for this detail (regardless of its linguistic form) gains therefore a function, of a narrative unit.”²⁰.

The structural analysis focuses on cardinal functions and their correlations. The sequence of functions – their selection and arrangement – builds the dynamics of the story and equips the text with meaning (everything in the text – says the researcher – has meaning, in this sense “art does not know noises in the meaning of information theory”²¹). The parrot appears as a phenomenon of the surface and then, as the narrative develops, it turns out to be a phenomenon of the structure, penetrates into the core, opens up an alternative to the developing story and constitutes a “moment of risk in the story”. Unlike functions or the gist itself, the descriptions play secondary narrative roles and reflect the “safety, relaxation, luxury zones”²². As catalysts, they perform secondary, relational functions (they maintain contact between the narrator and the recipient) and take part in the general economics of the message (they are responsible for accelerating, anticipating, delaying and suggesting that something has or will have meaning). The removal of catalysis distorts the expression, but leaves the core intact (because catalysis, like signs and information, is only an extension of the core or gist). In short, while it is impossible to remove a parrot without disturbing the overall meaning of the novel, erasing the barometer from the initial description would not change anything.

However, in “The Reality Effect”, i.e. the text delivered two years later, it is this inconspicuous catalysis that attracts the researcher’s attention. The basic assumptions of the structural analysis remain in force; the description, unlike the story, has no predictable features, “does

¹⁹Ibid, p. 56.

²⁰ R. Barthes, *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative*, *New Literary History*, Vol. 6, No. 2, On Narrative and Narratives. (Winter, 1975), pp. 237-272.

²¹Ibid, p. 261.

²²Ibid, p. 265.

not contain this trajectory of choices and alternatives, giving the narrative the appearance of a control center of motion with a referential (and not only discursive) temporality²³. Its structure is purely summative and its character is eminently anarchic, while it is protected from uncontrolled growth only by *le vertige de la notation*²⁴ (the innovative prose is not afraid of this dizziness and revives the tradition of enumeration and catalogue, and with it the pure pleasure of “meaningful beyond meaning”, “ceases to revert back”²⁵). However, the insignificant objects appearing in the descriptions (like fleeting words and gestures, redundant words) have a different function: they denote “a concrete reality” (le “*réel concret*”), they recommend themselves to us as “a naked account of what is (or was), they appear as a kind of resistance to meaning”²⁶. This stems from the common opinion that “reality” is self-sufficient and has enough immanent power to invalidate the idea of “function”, so that “its termination does not have to be integrated into any structure and that the fact that things were there is a sufficient basis for speaking”²⁷. In other words, the barometer gives rise to a reference illusion – it says: “I am real”. The object being labelled here is the category of ‘reality’ itself, not the content.²⁸ If there was a thermometer hanging over the piano, nothing would change – the “thermometer” as sign would also point out to “reality”, which in fact is nothing more than a derivative of a text game²⁹.

From the point of view of historical poetics, one could say that Barthes exaggerates when commenting on the difficulty of interpreting the meaning of the barometer. Each description serves a certain rule (Flaubert does not mention all the objects in Mrs. Aubain's dining room!), while these rules are frequently hidden under mixed details (which will evolve into functions or at least act as signs) and redundant data (from the point of view of the story's structure). This is how realistic prose masks its literary quality, subject to the rules of selection and evaluation, thus masking the overall composition and building a surprise effect³⁰. Moreover, this unnecessary detail (which Orwell found in Dickens's prose³¹) is an element of every realistic description; it is used in statements of different modalities, both fictional and documentary (let us recall the “rule of useless detail” in Oscar Lewis's sociological works³²).

Nevertheless, the history of narrative forms omits what is most interesting in Barthes's reflections. The question is: does the work of the text actually generate two different effects – the effect of fiction, when the representation subserves the *signifié*, and the effect of reality,

²³R. Barthes, *The Reality effect*, p. 121.

²⁴Ibid, p. 123.

²⁵J.-M. Rabaté, *Lapsus ex Machina*, in: *Post-structuralist Joyce*, ed. D. Attrigde, D. Ferrer, Cambridge 1984, p. 97-98.

²⁶R. Barthes, *The Reality Effect*, p. 123.

²⁷Ibid, p. 124.

²⁸Ibid, p. 125.

²⁹About the relationship between the reality (*la réalité*) and realness (*le réel*) according to Barthes: M. P. Markowski, *Między nerwicą i psychozą: rzeczywistości Rolanda Barthes'a*, in: “Teksty Drugie” 2012, no. 4; A. Grzegorzczak, *Utrata i odzyskiwanie podmiotu. Roland Barthes i Paul Ricoeur w optyce humanistyki obecności*, in: *Imperium Rolanda Barthes'a*, ed. A. Grzegorzczak, A. Kaczmarek, K. Machtyl, Poznań 2016.

³⁰W. Weintraub, *Wyznaczniki stylu realistycznego*, “Pamiętnik Literacki” 1961, no. 2, p. 409-410.

³¹G. Orwell, *Charles Dickens*, in: *ibid, Collected Essays*, London 1961, p. 71.

³²M. Głowiński, *Dokument jako powieść*, in: *ibid, Poetyka i okolice*, Warszawa 1992, p. 273-274.

when the signifiant gains autonomy? Note that “reality” is defined in negative terms: it is something that escapes fiction and takes on a residual form. This approach seems to derive from the method adopted. The simplicity of Proppowski’s model, which was perfect for the magic fairy tale, turns out to be deceptive when confronted with realistic prose. Its narrative is burdened with details that cannot be reduced to any function, and which thus acquire a parasitic character. In the light of analytical hyperfunctionalism, based on the assumption that in the text “everything means something”, every element needs a place. Barthes, a semiologist (who has not yet started to look for escape routes from the “sign empire”), turns the *insignifiant* into a second-level *signifiant*. He states that the usefulness of the barometer is that it is useless and, as such, a modern substitute for probability. It is used for direct marking of (bourgeois) reality, which it naturalizes in this way. The reference illusion itself is a by-product of the functional analysis of the narrative text, since it does not exist in itself, but only in so far as it disturbs the latter³³.

This theoretical manoeuvre is subject to various kinds of criticism. Let us recall two of them – the sociological and philosophical ones. Jean-Claude Passeron argues that the effect of reality is only strengthened by the independent and primary ‘sociographic effect’, which, by aligning the system of text signs with the historically established system of reading expectations, makes it possible to interpret a literary text as ‘faithful’, ‘typical’ and ‘representative’ of the real world. The effect of reality does not change perception; the recipient of a text that is considered to be “realistic” recognizes his or her own historical world in the novel (close to his experience or his knowledge of the past)³⁴. All text data – including those “unnecessary” from the point of view of the plot economy – form a coherent system of formal signs. Literature is defined here as the domain of talking about the world as a whole composed of individual, peculiar and resistant elements. The barometer participates in this sociographic project on an equal footing with the piano and the parrot.

To Barthes, the barometer stirs reflection as a non-significant object, challenging our need for meaning. There is some space for unobvious questions such as those posed by Jacques Rancière in “Le fil perdu”. According to what criteria do we separate meaning from meaninglessness? What kind of classification is it rooted in? And isn’t the procedure itself designed to cover up another scandal? Let us devote a little more attention to this philosophical discussion.

The Equality Effect

Jacques Rancière has often written about Flaubert³⁵, but we are interested in those works related to “A simple Heart”, formulated along the discussion with Barthes. The author of “Le

³³S. Chaudier, *L’insignifiant: de Barthes à Proust*, in: *Écritures de l’insignifiant*, vol. 45 (2009), no. 1, p. 17. See also: L. Adert, *Les Mots des autres. Lieu commun et création romanesque dans les œuvres de Gustave Flaubert, Nathalie Sarraute et Robert Pinget*, Lille 1996, p. 164-165.

³⁴J.-C. Passeron, *L’illusion de représentativité. Note sur un effet de littérature réaliste, conjointe à une remarque sur -graphie, -logie et -nomie*, in: « Enquête » 1998, no. 4.

³⁵Jacques Rancière, *Why Emma Bovary had to be killed?* Critical Inquiry 2008, 34 (2): 233-248; See also: S. M. Guénoun, *Le romancier démocrate et le philosophe plébéien. Gustave Flaubert et Jacques Rancière*, « Revue Flaubert » 2007, no. 7.

fil perdu” agrees on the general diagnosis: the specificity of a realistic novel lies in the weakening of the classically understood action and boosting the description. How to apply this diagnosis to the text? It was frequently said that the proliferation of descriptions and objects corroborates the presence of the bourgeois world (or shapes the illusion that the bourgeois world is stable). Barthes’s opinion is not dissimilar: writing down a “pure encounter between an object and its expression”³⁶ abolishes mimetic mediation and, as a result, naturalizes the social world. Rancière goes in the opposite direction, arguing that a realistic narrative and its proper appreciation of detail have a socially subversive dimension. And as such, they were perceived by Flaubert’s contemporaries. Why does the structuralist have similar problems with the detail as the reactionary critics of the 19th century? This is due to the fact that the idea of the structure was derived from the organic model of the work of art governed by the representative order, i.e. the art regime³⁷ destroyed by modern literature... and meticulously restored by the modern Theory.

To show this analogy, Rancière quotes Barbey d’Aurevilly, who criticised Flaubert (as the author of “Sentimental Education”) for working “without a plan”, and his action resembling “wandering around insignificant and trivial [*une flânerie dans l’insignifiant*], vulgar and disgusting – for the very pleasure of walking”³⁸. The work consisting of “mere details”, breaks away from the Aristotle’s view of fiction and destroys the division into two types of action and the corresponding two types of people: those destined for great deeds (“active”) and those who are only engaged in supporting and reproducing life (“passive” or “mechanical”). The social basis of the artistic form, related to the hierarchical distribution of roles, was even more clearly described by Armand de Pontmartin. The author of *Causeries littéraires* argued that in earlier novels, such as the *Duchess de Clèves*, “the human personality, represented by a higher birth, spirit, education and heart, left little room in the economy for secondary characters and even less for material objects. (...) This is how sentimental education could take place, more subtle and complicated in the elite than in the common people; this is how it opened up and filled with splendour”. However, in Flaubert’s case, all characters are equal and similar, they cannot be distinguished from each other by their souls, because “in this literature the soul does not exist”³⁹. In these texts, the anxiety associated with the aesthetic revolution is clearly known. This anxiety stems from the fact that the mechanisms of representation inherent in the representation regime concealed the controlling *divide et impera*, i.e. the division of community calculated to eliminate emptiness and excess and to precisely separate noble souls intended for subtle feelings from small, mundane activities trapped in the world⁴⁰. Flaubert’s

³⁶R. Barthes, *The Reality Effect*, p. 125.

³⁷In Rancière’s terminology, the regime of representation is (irrespective of ethical and aesthetic regimes) one of the types of relations between the production and practice of art, the forms of visibility of these practices and their conceptual approach. In this regime, art is subordinated to the principle of mimesis, and imitations are simultaneously verified (by reference to the principles of art and the rules of the genre) and protected from declaring them true. Its normativity is manifested precisely in the presentable and unrepresentable separation, in the distinction of species to which specific topics correspond, in the shaping of the rules of imitation according to the principles of probability. J. Rancière, *La Parole muette. Essai sur les contradictions de la littérature*, Vanves 2010, p. 17-30.

³⁸B. d’Aurevilly, *Gustave Flaubert*, in: *ibid*, *Les hommes et les Œuvres. Le roman contemporain*, Geneve 1968, p. 103. After: J. Rancière, *Le fil perdu. Essais sur la fiction moderne*, Paris 2014, p. 21.

³⁹A. de Pontmartin, *Nouvelles causeries de samedi*, Paris 1860, p. 321-322. After: J. Rancière, *Le fil perdu*, p. 24.

⁴⁰J. Rancière, *Le fil perdu*, p. 25.

prose is a model realization of the literary democracy that governs the pre-legislative equality of all people, building a rudimentary affectual and sensual community. It is strictly political in nature, as it introduces a disturbing excess in the relationship between bodies and words. “Literary democracy means precisely that: too many people, too many similar characters, unworthy of being distinguished by fiction”⁴¹.

Writers defending the representational order, and structuralist theoreticians whose interpretative models derive from this order are thus united by mistrust of the pointless abundance of details related to mundane life, and low tolerance for l’insignifiant. If the details of the description appear to them as insignificant [insignifiant], it is precisely because they concern people whose lives are meaningless [insignifiante]. The defence of l’ordre du notable is ultimately derived from upholding the hierarchical system of role distribution (note that notable as an adjective means “notable”, but as a noun “important personality, notable”). Meanwhile, the “new music” resounding in Flaubert’s prose results precisely from the indistinguishability of meaningful and insignificant, ordinary and extraordinary, noble and common⁴². The barometer constitutes a sign of this indistinguishability. It can be said that it has no function, that it appears in the story without any intention, simply because the writer “noticed” it. However, it is not about the author’s intention – the barometer was “noticed” because it summarizes the sensual world. On the one hand, it illustrates the persistence of the old order: only someone who can manage their own time reads the barometer, someone who can e.g. look if the weather allows for selected activities (which the maid is not free to do). But the barometer also points to a link with the supra-individual (“atmospheric”), to a “democracy of sensual coexistence”⁴³. Felicia and her mistress, despite their status and wealth differences, meet in pain after losing their loved ones, in loneliness, in small joys and in common pleasures. Both share the same zone of sensual intensity⁴⁴. The supposed effect of reality thus turns out to be an effect of equality.

The barometer from “A Simple Heart” is a strictly scandalous detail, in the etymological sense of the word⁴⁵. It makes interpretation difficult, as interpretation aims to integrate all textual signs and points to the *l’insignifiant* that challenges our thinking habits. In its unjustified presence, Barthes sees the pursuit of a referential fullness, and at the same time the consolidation of the existing world-image with its inherent inequalities. Rancière sees in it a sign that disrupts the image of the world, pointing out not even to the artificial “reality”, but primarily to the “scandal of equality and democracy”. The invasion of redundant descriptive elements results from the discovery of a multitude of worlds that do not fit into the organic

⁴¹Ibid, p. 23.

⁴²Ibid, p. 29.

⁴³Ibid, p. 26.

⁴⁴Perhaps the same view is present in the famous “sort of introduction” to the *Man without qualities*: “There was a depression over the Atlantic. It was travelling eastwards, towards an area of high pressure over Russia, and still showed no tendency to move northwards around it. The isotherms and isotheres were fulfilling their functions.” R. Musil, *Man without qualities*, 1930, p. 9

⁴⁵Old Greek *skándalon* (σκάνδαλον) stood for ambush, trap or obstacle. See: J. Turkiel, *Skandalon w LXX (Księgi Historyczne ST)*, in: *Skandal w kulturze europejskiej i amerykańskiej*, ed. B. Płonka-Syroka, M. Dąbrowska, J. Nadolna, M. Skibińska, vol. 1, Warsaw 2013, p. 49-54. I wrote more about the scandal and politics according to Rancière elsewhere. See: J. Franczak, *Błądzące słowa. Jacques Rancière i filozofia literatury*, Warsaw 2017, p. 170-178.

whole of the plot, as well as from the discovery of rudimentary equality in an impermanent *sensible* order. The epic phrase from “A Simple Heart” refers to that detail, and to the fate of ordinary people, that *subalternes* of the representational regime, to which certain genres, ways of speaking and patterns of action, defined by the social stereotype, were assigned. Flaubert revolts against the “fatherly tyranny of intrigue”⁴⁶ and lets go of the thread of the plot in order to open himself up to a multitude of stimuli and senses, and at the same time – to a multitude of potential subjectivities that undermine the hierarchies considered permanent and conditional. The barometer is no less important than the piano, the clock, the berger, the whole house covered with a slate roof, as well as the parrot, which Felicia finally identifies with the Holy Spirit. By the same token, the prayers the maid addresses to the stuffed bird⁴⁷ constitute *pars pro toto* blasphemy, which we call modern literature.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

⁴⁶J. Rancière, *Le fil perdu*, p. 100-101.

⁴⁷G. Flaubert, *A Simple Heart*, p. 57.

KEYWORDS

Gustave Flaubert

ROLAND BARTHES

ABSTRACT:

The article discusses the function of redundant details in realistic descriptions, especially in Gustave Flaubert's prose. The analysed fragment of the description from Gustav Flaubert's "A Simple Heart" was also discussed by Roland Barthes' in *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative* and in *The Reality Effect*. The barometer hanging over the piano – the mentioned superfluous detail – was supposed to trigger a reference illusion by belonging to the category of "reality". The article presents numerous views on the mentioned issue. It focuses on what Jacques Rancière writes in *Le fil perdu*. The philosopher reverses Barthes' thesis: Namely, Mrs. Aubain's barometer does not serve as a figure of a referential fullness, but rather as a sign disrupting the image of the world. In this light, the redundant detail is *stricte* scandalous: it prevents proper interpretation that aims to integrate all text signs and reveals a scandalous, rudimentary equality inscribed in the sensual order.

JACQUES RANCIÈRE*literary description***REALISM****NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

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