

# Descriptions in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*

György C. Kálmán

Institute for Literary Studies, Center for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, H-1118  
Budapest, Ménesi út 11-13, Hungary  
kalman.gyorgy@btk.mta.hu

*Although it is a common perception that Flaubert's Madame Bovary employs a conventional set of procedures in order to balance story-telling and description, not only is the number of descriptions contained in this work surprisingly low but also these descriptions are rather peculiar and have a special function. This paper focuses on Flaubert's descriptions regarding the cap of the young Bovary, Emma and Bovary's wedding cake and the town hall of Yonville; all these are the emblems of bad taste, the philistine ideal of happiness and the artificial sublimeness of the public space. These descriptions raise further questions in connection to the narrator's special point of view, their aims and position as well as the function of these segments. From a textual standpoint, these elements are also paralleled and partially interwoven with a kind of cataloging or listing type of text formation. I contend that they are in fact parodical in quality and that the end effects result in a mockery of the conventions of narration which were about to become established at the time: instead of being conventional, the descriptions of Madame Bovary are ironically counter-conventional.*

Keywords: narratology / French literature / Flaubert, Gustave: *Madame Bovary* / narrative technique / description / realism / parody

While most of us must have some memories of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the details of these images are most likely rather faint. We do remember the story, for sure: a lame husband possessing no prestige, his wife brimming with desires and volatile in her despair, a married couple living in a French village and surrounded by a *petit bourgeois* setting. We know, of course, that the novel is much more than this: it is both a realization and a parody of the romantic topic of adulterous woman. We may even recall that there is something upsettingly dissonant in the text as one does not feel any empathy or even sense of judgement suggested to the reader, a set of symptoms traditionally labelled as *impassibilité* that sometimes carries just a tinge of the grotesque about it. In any event, *Madame Bovary* used to be considered

one of the peak accomplishments of the great realist narrative tradition, one representing a grand social panorama, a formation and demonstration of the conventions of the realist novel.

According to the conventions of realism, description forms a seminal part of the narrative. There is obviously no need to define the concept of description; suffice it to say that one extreme version will call storytelling itself into question (this would be the “too much” type of continuous description) while the other challenges all elements outside of verbal action. This latter version corresponds to the drama, in which there is no description at all, only the speech of the characters and the events themselves. To put it in a very rough way, during description the narration stands still as the narrator takes the floor: it is the narrator’s turn to describe the settings, the objects surrounding the event and the characters. We tend to recollect realist novels as a balanced structure of dialogues accompanied by the narrator’s telling of the story and descriptions. Readers may also look back on *Madame Bovary* as a typical, paradigmatic example of the realist novel: a rather conventional structure possessing the same elements listed above, a work that is along the lines of Balzac or Tolstoy. Yet we may also remember that *Madame Bovary* is much more than that: in my estimation, it is an example and a parody of the theme of romantic adultery, with something worrying and dissonant embedded within the text.

Since different kinds of description exist the segments of texts which we tend to label a “description” may be different in several aspects. It is a common assumption, for instance, that description is a part of the text when and where narration *stops*: it is a *pause* in the course of the narration, a time in which nothing happens. Within this framework, description may be opposed to segments of the text where the *story* has been foregrounded, as is particularly true in the case of dialogue, which lacks description.

Yet this perception of description is not at all satisfactory for several reasons. First, many types of descriptions (however small or minimal), or traces of descriptions can be found in all segments of the narrative: when a story is told, it always refers to characters who possess gender, age and are positioned within a certain setting. Even when the scenery is not *described* or what we are looking at is a case of a pure dialogue form, references to the world surrounding the speakers and to the speakers themselves still appear as a sort of description itself, inasmuch as it contributes to the image or representation on the part of the reader, which may amount to description.

Secondly, as Genette notes, “Descriptions ... as constituents of the spatio-temporal universe of the story, are *diegetic*, and thus when we deal with them we are involved with the *narrative* discourse” (Genette 94). This implies that every description is *part* of the narrative and therefore does not exist in opposition to it. As Genette continues, “Every description is not necessarily a pause in the narrative” (ibid.). There is *descriptive pause*, “which is therefore not to be confused either with every pause or with every description” (ibid.). In several cases, a description is included into the time passing within the narrative: it is part of the story, so to speak. Observing or describing an object takes time, an aspect that may be thus represented in the course of the narrative.

When I state that there are relatively few descriptions in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, I am actually referring to the fact that there are very few occurrences of a specific type of description: while the text contains a number of descriptions, the frequency of descriptive pauses is highly limited. In other words, when an object (or person or environment) is described, the lack of a descriptive pause means that the passing of time cannot be perceived by the reader. This type of description commonly occurs as a feature of the realist mode of writing. Since realist conventions dictate that description is an important part of the narration, it is expected that plot narration will sometimes be interrupted by shorter or longer segments of descriptions. It is furthermore expected that the proportion of these parts be somewhat balanced, meaning that the reader is provided with sufficient information regarding the surroundings and characters, but the narrative's progress remains unimpeded by an excess of superfluous information.

Before turning to some descriptive pauses in *Madame Bovary*, a few other types of description utilized in this novel must be mentioned. One type concerns Léon and Emma's famous ride in a cab, along the streets of Rouen, which provides a description of the city, albeit a very strange one since the reader essentially receives a list or catalogue of the streets of Rouen. While it can be argued that this description is not a pause since the trip does have a duration and *something* is happening at this point; the fact, however, remains that the end result is only a lot of street names. These names could be interpreted as a kind of map, yet one which lacks directions or points of reference in favor of a sort of absurd exactness. In other words, this section embodies a meticulous description of a seemingly concrete location which is impossible to imagine. Despite this circumstance, Flaubert's “map” still succeeds in contributing to the story: we understand that the streets of Rouen

must be *imagined* in order to fully visualize the narrative, yet this type of visualization is simply impossible.

Other, similar catalogues appear in the novel's narrative that bear a much closer resemblance to a descriptive pause in that these examples do not take part in the narrative course, have no real duration and time therefore seems to stand still when these segments are being narrated. One example consists of a list of Emma's readings: her favorite books when she was in the nunnery, a list of bad literature and sentimental readings that essentially amount to kitsch. Not only the description of these works is ridiculous, but also the endless and disordered jumble in which they are presented (the catalogue) creates a humorous effect. Once again, the reader is not led anywhere as there is no direction, no climax or rise or fall in the narration: the reader must instead face an enumeration of items of bad taste. Another list appears in the course of Emma's dreams of honeymoon locations, which are to include tall mountains, blue seas, a house in the Alps, stars above... In short, this grouping of details reveals the shallow vision of a shallow spirit. The narrator borrows yet another description from the character, Léon, who has in turn borrowed it from a cousin:

A cousin of mine who travelled in Switzerland last year told me that one could not picture to oneself the poetry of the lakes, the charm of the waterfalls, the gigantic effect of the glaciers. One sees pines of incredible size across torrents, cottages suspended over precipices, and, a thousand feet below one, whole valleys when the clouds open. Such spectacles must stir to enthusiasm, incline to prayer, to ecstasy; and I no longer marvel at that celebrated musician who, the better to inspire his imagination, was in the habit of playing the piano before some imposing site. (Part II., Ch. 2.)<sup>1</sup>

Once again, Flaubert provides the reader with a sort of inventory of commonplaces: a catalogue, a list, an account of obligatory ingredients that have been happenstance placed one after the other. This usage of catalogue-like descriptions would not be complete without another brief list of the presents Monsieur Homais brought as the godfather of Emma's child. "His gifts were all products from his establishment, to wit: six boxes

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<sup>1</sup> "J'ai un cousin qui a voyagé en Suisse l'année dernière, et qui me disait qu'on ne peut se figurer la poésie des lacs, le charme des cascades, l'effet gigantesque des glaciers. On voit des pins d'une grandeur incroyable, en travers des torrents, des cabanes suspendues sur des précipices, et, à mille pieds sous vous, des vallées entières, quand les nuages s'entr'ouvrent. Ces spectacles doivent enthousiasmer, disposer à la prière, à l'extase ! Aussi je ne m'étonne plus de ce musicien célèbre qui, pour exciter mieux son imagination, avait coutume d'aller jouer du piano devant quelque site imposant."

of jujubes, a whole jar of *racahout*, three cakes of marshmallow paste, and six sticks of sugar-candy into the bargain that he had come across in a cupboard" (Part II., Ch. 3.).<sup>2</sup> In this case, a list of random, useless objects perfectly projects the character and petty nature of Homais.

As a short digression, it may be added that Flaubert's cataloging technique also appears in other contexts found in the narration itself. Following the scene containing the marriage cake, the narration describes the guests' behavior, their activities and sources of entertainment in a vein that very much resembles Pieter Brueghel the Elder's style in *Children's Games* or *Proverbs*: in other words, the reader is confronted by a list of actions which are isolated, disconnected, incoherent and discontinuous:

But with the coffee everyone woke up. Then they began songs, showed off tricks, raised heavy weights, performed feats with their fingers, then tried lifting carts on their shoulders, made broad jokes, kissed the women. At night when they left, the horses, stuffed up to the nostrils with oats, could hardly be got into the shafts; they kicked, reared, the harness broke, their masters laughed or swore; and all night in the light of the moon along country roads there were runaway carts at full gallop plunging into the ditches, jumping over yard after yard of stones, clambering up the hills, with women leaning out from the tilt to catch hold of the reins. (Part I., Ch. 4.)<sup>3</sup>

In Flaubert's usage, a catalogue or inventory containing disparate and disjointed elements can therefore produce a comical effect due to the random, often surprising nature of this type of description. To mention another work in which the author employs this type of strategy, Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet* contains a catalogue of the heroes' fields of study which are not in the least connected to one another, just as no connection is frequently to be found linking the subjects themselves to different parts.

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<sup>2</sup> "Il donna, pour cadeaux, tous produits de son établissement, à savoir : six boîtes de jujubes, un bocal entier de racahout, trois coffins de pâte à la guimauve, et, de plus, six bâtons de sucre candi qu'il avait retrouvés dans un placard."

<sup>3</sup> "Mais, au café, tout se ranima; alors on entama des chansons, on fit des tours de force, on portait des poids, on passait sous son pouce, on essayait à soulever les charrettes sur ses épaules, on disait des gaudrioles, on embrassait les dames. Le soir, pour partir, les chevaux gorgés d'avoine jusqu'aux naseaux, eurent du mal à entrer dans les brancards ; ils ruaient, se cabraient, les harnais se cassaient, leurs maîtres juraient ou riaient ; et toute la nuit, au clair de la lune, par les routes du pays, il y eut des carrioles emportées qui couraient au grand galop, bondissant dans les saignées, sautant par-dessus les mètres de cailloux, s'accrochant aux talus, avec des femmes qui se penchaient en dehors de la portière pour saisir les guides."

As was mentioned previously, Flaubert's usage of description does not halt at descriptive catalogues of items: two other, famous descriptions found in *Madame Bovary* present clear examples of the descriptive pause, as opposed to a descriptive list. Most readers can recall both, as one consists of a description of the hat of the young schoolboy, Charles Bovary, and the other depicts the wedding cake of Emma and Charles. Within the realm of literary analysis, a considerable amount of literature has dealt with both the cap and the wedding cake, such as Amann 2006, Bernard 1985, Begam and Soderholm 2015, Collas 1985, Kalka 2017, Porter and Gray 2012, Nabokov 1980, Privat 2013, to mention just a few sources.

The 'new fellow,' was still holding his cap on his knees even after prayers were over. It was one of those head-gears of composite order, in which we can find traces of the bearskin, shako, billycock hat, sealskin cap, and cotton night-cap; one of those poor things, in fine, whose dumb ugliness has depths of expression, like an imbecile's face. Oval, stiffened with whalebone, it began with three round knobs; then came in succession lozenges of velvet and rabbit-skin separated by a red band; after that a sort of bag that ended in a cardboard polygon covered with complicated braiding, from which hung, at the end of a long thin cord, small twisted gold threads in the manner of a tassel. The cap was new; its peak shone. (Part I., Ch. 1.)<sup>4</sup>

Found on the first pages of the novel, the description of Charles Bovary's cap as a schoolboy first leads the reader to believe that this segment represents the first unit of a *system*. In other words, this description forms a part of "the rules of the game" for the narration, which will subsequently contain interesting, characteristic objects, scenes, landscapes etc., some of which will be important later on and are therefore described by the narrator in a detailed way. The case of Bovary's cap, however, does not accomplish this at all since the description is not followed by any other description possessing a similar amount of detail or

<sup>4</sup> "Mais, soit qu'il n'eût pas remarqué cette manœuvre ou qu'il n'eût osé s'y soumettre, la prière était finie que le *nouveau* tenait encore sa casquette sur ses deux genoux. C'était une de ces coiffures d'ordre composite, où l'on retrouve les éléments du bonnet à poil, du chapska, du chapeau rond, de la casquette de loutre et du bonnet de coton, une de ces pauvres choses, enfin, dont la laideur muette a des profondeurs d'expression comme le visage d'un imbécile. Ovoïde et renflée de baleines, elle commençait par trois boudins circulaires ; puis s'alternaient, séparés par une bande rouge, des losanges de velours et de poils de lapin ; venait ensuite une façon de sac qui se terminait par un polygone cartonné, couvert d'une broderie en soutache compliquée, et d'où pendait, au bout d'un long cordon trop mince, un petit croisillon de fils d'or, en manière de gland. Elle était neuve ; la visière brillait."

length. Moreover, until the wedding cake scene, the narration contains no descriptive elements whatsoever. Only two descriptions of this type exist in the entire novel. Secondly, the cap itself will not prove to be at all important since further reference will not be made to it (the only, somewhat similar case occurs later on, when a separate, more elegant cap is described). When viewed from retrospect and within the context of the entire text, the initial description of Bovary's cap is surprising as it does not fit, is not part of the narrative (or any) system, is overblown and, therefore seems quite peculiar.

We do not have an overall view or comprehensive perception of the cap. Our sight is directed vertically by the narrator and follows a projection that starts below and moves down upwards while relaying the details of the object, one after the other. It is highly questionable why the cap is being described at all, since any overall image of the object in its entirety is missing from the text and thereby impedes the reader from visualizing what one assumes the narrator is striving to depict.

One possible interpretation of why Flaubert included a description of Bovary's cap is that the text is meant to convey the ridiculous, absurd, unconceivable and indescribable nature of the cap, similar to what Horace discusses in the first lines of his *Ars poetica* regarding a text's contradictory, incongruous or incompatible elements: it is ridiculous, he says, if a painter unites a horse's neck to a human head, and then mixes all parts of different animals, so that what is a beautiful woman in the upper part terminates unsightly in an ugly fish below (Horatius 292).

Based on Horace's estimation of the effect incongruous, textual elements possess, one interpretation is that the description of Bovary's cap functions as a demonstration of confusion, inadequacy and bad taste. The text is composed so that just these traits come to the fore when one tries to imagine the object depicted: an unimaginable, unconceivable, blurred image.

Yet another possibility is that this description also signifies the character of the owner of the cap and his wretched, characterless, shabby nature; the metonymical connection between the accessory and its proprietor is transformed into a metaphorical relationship as if the reader has realized the essence (or lack thereof) of Charles Bovary via his cap. It is as if the sense of confusion, ugliness and clumsiness which characterizes the cap and its presentation simultaneously illustrates the very character of Bovary. Moreover, the narrator even inserts the following, rather telling half-sentence: "one of those poor things, in fine, whose dumb ugliness has depths of expression, like an imbecile's face." While

it is naturally clear that Bovary is not an imbecile, this short insertion still directs the reader's attention to identify the idiotism of the cap with that of Bovary. In conclusion, it can be stated that the cap places Bovary's "calling card" on the table of the reader by becoming an emblematic representation of this particular character.

I argue that at least one additional issue is at work in Flaubert's depiction of Bovary's cap as the reader is left unaware of who exactly is viewing and describing Bovary's cap in such a detailed and meticulous manner. The narrator of the novel's first pages may in fact be one of Bovary's classmates who is speaking in the first-person plural as somebody who is in the act of observing the adventures of a new boy who has joined the class, an episode that suddenly appears immediately after the cap episode: "[E]n montrant de façon minutieuse les composantes de l'objet [le narrateur], finira par le faire disparaître complètement devant nos yeux" (Lőrinszky and Ádám, 2003: 180). Some analyses tend to label this initial narrator a "collective" narrator (Hajdu, "The Collective"); strangely enough, he does not survive the first pages. Other interpretations (Röhrig 54) refer to the similarity between his and Homais's voice, as if the two were, in a way, identical. After the detailed account of the cap, this narrator turns into an impersonal, faceless, nameless observer of the events unfolding in the novel. Even if he were a classmate, the only thing he notices, observes and describes is Bovary's cap. No account is provided of the students or the teacher's appearances, their clothes, features, the classroom or anything else. It is as if this insignificant (as well as ugly) object were the only object worthy of being remembered and described.

The reader may additionally gain the impression that this whole section could be a parody or mockery of the convention of description itself. Do you need some description? Am I supposed to supply one? A description to characterize the class and the new boy? Here you are. Observations down to the tiniest details, an exactness to the level of manic, a circumscription of the implications of the object, without taking care of its visualization and its sense. And all this is told by a narrator who does not even care of describing anything else in the room, and emphasizes—in an absurd way, again—an insignificant part of a student's clothes, and remembers every inch of it.

Now let us turn to the case of the wedding cake description:

A confectioner of Yvetot had been entrusted with the tarts and sweets. As he had only just set up on the place, he had taken a lot of trouble, and at dessert he himself brought in a set dish that evoked loud cries of wonderment. To begin with, at its base there was a square of blue cardboard, representing a

temple with porticoes, colonnades, and stucco statuettes all round, and in the niches constellations of gilt paper stars; then on the second stage was a dungeon of Savoy cake, surrounded by many fortifications in candied angelica, almonds, raisins, and quarters of oranges; and finally, on the upper platform a green field with rocks set in lakes of jam, nutshell boats, and a small Cupid balancing himself in a chocolate swing whose two uprights ended in real roses for balls at the top. (Part I., Ch. 4.)<sup>5</sup>

A similar conclusion can be drawn in the case of this description; even if it can be argued that “two points make a line,” any attempt to draw a comparison between these two instances will still not produce a system within the text as their presence does not suggest the existence of a rule. Although these two descriptions resemble one another (a feature I will expand upon at a later point in this examination), they do not resemble any other part of the novel. The final impression is that the narrator can only be intent upon deceiving or leading the reader astray by dangling the promise of something (or at least foreshadowing a possible continuation of further descriptions) then betraying this expectation as the promise is not kept since no description whatsoever figures in the text of the novel, let alone any continued, narrative purpose for the object itself.

The description of the wedding cake represents both a very similar yet also remarkably different instance of Flaubert's usage of description. The main, striking similarity between this passage and that containing Bovary's cap is that the reader's eye is once again directed vertically, from the bottom layer of the cake to the top. Similarly, the cake is comprised of heterogeneous, inconsistent, confusedly connected elements. Like the cap's patchy parts, the stories surrounding the cake are elevated one upon the other in a way that lacks any sense of harmony. If one were to make an effort to classify these levels, the reference to the base as a Greek temple represents classical religion. Above this fol-

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<sup>5</sup> “On avait été chercher un pâtissier à Yvetot, pour les tourtes et les nougats. Comme il débutait dans le pays, il avait soigné les choses ; et il apporta, lui-même, au dessert, une pièce montée qui fit pousser des cris. À la base, d'abord, c'était un carré de carton bleu figurant un temple avec portiques, colonnades et statuettes de stuc tout autour, dans des niches constellées d'étoiles en papier doré ; puis se tenait au second étage un donjon en gâteau de Savoie, entouré de menues fortifications en angélique, amandes, raisins secs, quartiers d'oranges ; et enfin, sur la plate-forme supérieure, qui était une prairie verte où il y avait des rochers avec des lacs de confitures et des bateaux en écales de noisettes, on voyait un petit Amour, se balançant à une escarpolette de chocolat, dont les deux poteaux étaient terminés par deux boutons de rose naturels, en guise de boules, au sommet.”

lows the level of a romanticized medieval age containing the scene of grim battle, crowned by the top, which symbolizes idyllic family life, the center of happiness. One difference between the case of the cap and the wedding cake is that in the latter instance the reader may find it easier to visualize the overall image of the cake as the overall sense of confusion and error is less evident. Yet the meticulous itemization of the cake's characteristics suggests the impression of total senselessness as the reader is left to wonder why all the components, motives and ingredients to this cake are described and listed when the cake has no role at all in the following narrative. It is as if this description that creates a sense of complexity and overcrowded richness serves the purpose of expressing the type of grandiosity, imagined uniqueness and even historical importance that the novel's *milieu* so desires, naturally accompanied by their praise for the "art" of the confectionary as well as the careful wedding preparations. If the cap of Bovary stands for *petit bourgeois* bad taste, ugliness and misery, the wedding cake signifies ridiculous, cheap illusions and fake happiness.

The description of the wedding cake is additionally significant in that it once again raises the question of who is the one seeing and describing this object. While the narrator must evidently be performing this task, the fact is that the narrator has not taken the trouble to describe anything in such detail since the cap episode. Once again, the reader is left with the feeling that the narrator is mocking the technique of description itself, as if the cake alone were the most important, most spectacular, most memorable element found in the entire wedding. In the case of the cap we may suspect that we are hearing the voice of a classmate; it is not inconceivable that the one describing the wedding cake is a guest of the party, or perhaps the confectioner himself who is expressing pride for his masterpiece. In any event, this detailed, cataloging technique creates an artificial effect that strikingly diverges from the texture of the whole novel as regards both its length as well as its function. This description stands so far out from the preceding and following parts of the text that the gesture of the description itself (and this very type of description) appears as an obstacle or challenge to the process of reading: it creates a feeling of artificial and fabricated nature that is furthermore relayed by a new character who takes over the narration with a pedantic, pompous, overly detailed voice. This dislocation pushes the description toward fictionality since the reader suddenly shifts his or her focus from the described object to the change in the narrating voice: the process of textual construction is suddenly made clumsily and obviously visible

to the reader. To repeat, the role of the descriptions is not primarily that of description itself, but rather the aim to unsettle the reader by creating a sense of uncertainty concerning the identity of the narrator who is seeing, describing and narrating these particular objects. They are parts of the irony not only inasmuch as what they describe but also in who describes and for whom.

A final example of Flaubert's ironic usage of description is contained in the depiction of a remarkable sight in Yonville which in turn symbolizes the superficial, fake and conceited nature of the city's society.

The market, that is to say, a tiled roof supported by some twenty posts, occupies by itself about half the public square of Yonville. The town hall, constructed 'from the designs of a Paris architect,' is a sort of Greek temple that forms the corner next to the chemist's shop. On the ground-floor are three Ionic columns and on the first floor a semicircular gallery, while the dome that crowns it is occupied by a Gallic cock, resting one foot upon the 'Charte' and holding in the other the scales of Justice. (Part II. Ch. 1.)<sup>6</sup>

Albeit on a smaller scale, this description is a repetition of the same technique used in describing the cap and the cake: if these objects were emblems of a pitiful, miserable philistine taste or a shabby marriage containing no perspective, Flaubert's depiction of Yonville allows the reader to perceive its public square as an emblem of the city and its hypocritical, superficial and conceited community. Similar to the case of the wedding cake in which the "confectioner of Yvetot" serves as an important stamp of authenticity of the product, in this instance it is the Paris architect who serves to legitimize the entire product; even if his name is not mentioned, the "presence" of a prestigious personage (one whose name is perhaps not even remembered) serves to guarantee the work of art, the expression is even typeset in italics. As someone to be boasted of, the unknown architect is also proof that the village or little city of Yonville has an obvious connection to the important towns of Yvetot or, even to Paris itself. The eye is led here, again, in a vertical way, from the bottom to the top the building consists of three, disjointed parts which display very different styles and functions. Similar

<sup>6</sup> "Les halles, c'est-à-dire un toit de tuiles supporté par une vingtaine de poteaux, occupent à elles seules la moitié environ de la grande place d'Yonville. La mairie, construite *sur les dessins d'un architecte de Paris*, est une manière de temple grec qui fait l'angle, à côté de la maison du pharmacien. Elle a, au rez-de-chaussée, trois colonnes ioniques et, au premier étage, une galerie à plein cintre, tandis que le tympan qui la termine est rempli par un coq gaulois, appuyé d'une patte sur la Charte et tenant de l'autre les balances de la justice."

to the cake, the base is a Greek temple on the first level followed by the gallery which functions as a site of representation where the mayor may stand, give a speech and invite his guests to view his city. Finally, the third level, the upper façade, is once again hard to visualize and remains a somewhat obscure structure (or sculpture? Relief?) that has been crowded with a variety of symbols. The question again emerges regarding the narrator's identity, beyond that of observer and the person providing an account of the building. The third level must be rather high since it is barely visible to the passer-by: the details connected to this final level seem to be an altogether superfluous description of something which cannot be observed, an excessively precise and pointless text regarding something of no interest. It cannot be the voice of somebody just walking by the building—it is a very well informed account by somebody who knows the tiny details and even the history of the building, that is: the voice of the narrator. This contributes to the humorous nature of the description, the narrator pretending to be an enthusiastic observer, a proponent of the petty and pretentious object, one that proves just as ridiculous as the cap or the cake.

Through my examination of three, pivotal—yet dissonant—descriptions contained in *Madame Bovary* I aimed to demonstrate that Flaubert's handling of how certain objects are depicted acts to subvert the regular function of descriptions. By distorting the expected function of a description via the inclusion of confusingly detailed observations and the displacement of the narrative voice, the cases of Bovary's cap, the wedding cake and Yonville's town hall transform description into mockeries that "abducts" the reading process in a way that forces the reader to reconsider the role of the narrator and its function. Ultimately, the conventions connected to the act of description as well as the reader's conventional expectations are ridiculed. It is a well-known interpretation of Flaubert that his works deconstructed, questioned and parodied the conventions of realism well before the norms connected to text formation had even been established or consolidated. Strangely enough, some of the most excellent writers (Cervantes, Sterne or Pushkin) similarly deconstructed literary conventions as they were still in the process of being introduced. Thus, as has already been widely recognized, *Madame Bovary* follows this "tradition" by querying many types of conventions, including that of description.

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## Flaubertovi opisi v *Madame Bovary*

Ključne besede: naratologija / francoska književnost / Flaubert, Gustave: *Gospa Bovary* / pripovedna tehnika / opis / realizem / parodija

Na splošno se zdi, da Flaubert v romanu *Madame Bovary* uporablja konvencionalen nabor postopkov, da bi uravnotežil pripovedovanje in opisovanje, vendar so opisi v tem literarnem delu presenetljivo redki pa tudi dokaj nenavadni in imajo prav posebno funkcijo. Pričujoči prispevek se osredotoča na Flaubertove opise čepice mladega Bovaryja, na Emmine in Bovaryjevo poročno torto ter na yonvillsko mestno hišo; vse to so emblemi neokusnosti, filistrskega ideala sreče in zlagane sublimnosti javnega prostora. Ob navedenih opisih se porajajo nadaljnja vprašanja v povezavi s posebno pripovedovalčevo optiko, cilji in umeščanjem teh opisov kot tudi njihovo funkcijo. Z besedilnega vidika kažejo ti elementi podobnosti s katalogiziranjem oziroma se delno prepletajo s tipom besedilotvornega postopka, značilnega za naštevaje. Zastopam stališče, da so v resnici parodični, saj je njihov končni učinek norčevanje iz pripovednih konvencij, ki so se v tistem času ravno uveljavljale: namesto da bi bili konvencionalni, so opisi v *Madame Bovary* ironično antikonvencionalni.

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original scientific article  
UDK 821.133.1.09Flaubert G.