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Crossing Literary Borderlines in “A Simple Heart” by Gustav Flaubert

How can we speak of borderlines in a work of fiction? What are the spaces that stories demarcate? Who introduces us, the readers, to these spaces and makes us cross their borders? Along with a brief review of some spatial approaches to fiction and their treatment of the notion of borderlines, this essay will focus on a story by Gustav Flaubert. Following the movement – both physical and mental – of the story’s protagonist in the everyday space she inhabits, enables one to reflect on the meanings of boundary crossing in fiction. In the course of the discussion, the notion of borderlines will expand beyond its denotation as a mapping practice, as the story’s character and form present a challenge to other kinds of borders, such as the boundaries of subjectivity and personality.

The servant Félicité in Flaubert’s tale “A Simple Heart” (1877) misses her nephew, Victor. On the day of his departure, she had rushed to the harbor in Honfleur, where his boat was docked. On her way, Félicité has a vision of horses in the sky. These were the horses – she later discovered – that were hauled up into the air by a derrick and dumped into the boat. The boat sails, however, before she has the chance to bid farewell to her nephew. As Félicité’s knowledge of the world comes from an illustrated geography book presented to her mistress’s children by the lawyer Monsieur Bourais, she has only a vague notion of Havana – the destination Victor’s vessel had reached:

Was it possible, she wondered, “in case of need” to come back by land? And how far is it from Pont-l’Évêque? To find out she asked Monsieur Bourais. He reached for his atlas and launched forth into an explanation of latitudes and longitudes, smiling like the pedant he was at Félicité’s bewilderment. Finally, he pointed with his pencil at a minute black dot inside a ragged oval patch, saying: “There it is.”

She bent over the map, but the network of colored lines meant nothing to her and only tired her eyes. So when Bourais asked her to tell him what was puzzling her, she begged him to show her the house where Victor was living. He threw up his hands, sneezed, and roared with laughter, delighted to come across such simplicity; and Félicité could not make out why he was laughing – her intelligence was so limited that she probably expected to see an actual portrait of her nephew! (36).¹

¹ All quotes from the story come from Flaubert, “A Simple Heart” (1877), in *Three Tales*, with slight changes to the translation. Following references to this work are indicated by page number in the text.

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Félicité's intelligence might be limited, but her wish to see her dear one's face, in a map that simulates reality in real time, is shared by great minds, by Lewis Carroll, Jorge Luis Borges, and by the inventors of today's Global Positioning System and interactive maps. In contrast, the atlas map – a maze of colored lines, imperceptible points, oval blotches, abstract representations of space – hurts her eyes. Likewise, the dogma recited in church wearies her mind. Félicité prefers the New Testament stories about Jesus, the man who "had chosen out of humility to be born among the poor, on the litter of a stable" and had lived in a familiar landscape of "the sowings, the harvests, the wine-presses" (29). In *Madam Bovary*, an imagined Paris "glimmered before Emma's eyes in an atmosphere of vermilion."² While 'walking' the streets of a Paris map with the tip of her finger, Emma willingly loses her hold on the "nearer things" and "immediate surrounding."³ The opposite is true for Félicité, who domesticates the geographically far and religiously sublime with the aid of the near, the familiar, and the mundane: Victor's face, his house, Jesus's lambs, and the stable in which he was born. At the same time, she maps her immediate surroundings, the commune of Pont-l'Évêque, with her routine acts, sketching her own lanes and routes by her regular walks: to the river to do laundry, to Geffosses' farm when the weather is good, to the *Roches-Noires* every Sunday during her visit to Trouville. When Virginie, her mistress's daughter, is dying, she goes every Tuesday to the monastery.

In his introduction to Flaubert's *Trois Contes*, Raymond Decesse presents a map of the commune of Pont-l'Évêque at the time that "A Simple Heart" was written⁴; is it possible, however, to mark Félicité's everyday trajectories on this map? The "maze of colored lines" on a map suggests the borderlines and lanes that represent, as well as regulate, one's movement in space. How do these lines interact with the invisible lines drawn by Félicité in her daily movements? Do they conform to the logic of the map that Félicité fails to grasp or do they undermine them? The connection between these lines and borderlines, and their interplay with other literary borderlines and spaces, is the focus of my reading of Flaubert's story. Before continuing with "A Simple Heart," however, I shall make a theoretical detour to touch upon some of the meanings that "borderlines" and "space" bear in narrative discourse. Subsequently, I shall apply some of these generalizations more specifically to my discussion of "A Simple Heart."

In the basic sense, stories introduce us to different kinds of space with different kinds of borders. Some of these borders are natural: rivers, mountain ranges, seas, oceans. It is the ocean, an impassable boundary, which separates Félicité from her nephew. Sometimes the borders are human-made: fences, barricades, walls. Kafka's "The Building of the China Wall" tells about the process of constructing such a border.

2 Flaubert, *Madam Bovary*, 60.

3 *Ibid.*, 61.

4 Raymond Decesse, "Introduction to *Trois Contes*" by Gustav Flaubert, 43.

It is a fragmented wall, strewn with breaches and holes, but it is still a border; on the other side, lurk the intimidating People of the North.

Stories also contain objects that create boundaries framing the space if one looks through them: windows, doors, peepholes, mirrors. Sometimes, a frame bounds another space embedded in the story, as in pictures or photographs. These framed spaces often form what is known as *mise-en-abyme* – a term that stresses their reflection and duplication of the story they inhabit.

Such framing is important in our context mainly because it is analogous to the metaphorical demarcation line inherent in fiction. As a convention (which is sometimes breached), a story sets boundaries between the reality in which it is told and the fictional space it invites us to enter for a while. The borders that surround this space have points of entry and exit: a beginning and an end.⁵

We thus slide from the segment of space into which the story places us into a segment of time that begins and ends. Indeed, we can access the story’s space or the space *in* the story only through temporal acts and practices that make it accessible: reading, telling, describing. These actions introduce us to fictional space, and when they end, we return to our point of origin or are transported to other domains. This transportation allows us to cross, as it were, the boundaries to a story’s space and mentally “move” across fictional spaces. In Greece, says Michel de Certeau in his discussion of “Spatial Stories,” the vehicles of mass transportation are called “metaphorai.”⁶ “Stories,” he argues, “could also take this noble name; they traverse and organize places.” Therefore, “every story is a travel story.”⁷

The reader-traveler, sitting (adapting Proust’s simile) in a magic armchair that will “carry him at full speed through time and space,”⁸ cannot, however, cross the boundary into fictional space or its internal boundaries without a little help from friends: narrators who describe this space and characters who see it and move in it. With their aid, the reader undergoes the miraculous, multisensory experience of immersion, which preoccupies writers, literary critics, and cognitive psychologists who are interested in the reading process.

Immersion, which transports readers from one place to another, involves boundary crossing in another, metaphorical sense. We assume that the drivers of the mass transportation of fiction, i.e., the characters, have borders between inside and outside, similar to those of people in the real world. In our spatial, metaphorical organization of experience,⁹ these imaginary borderlines are what define one’s

5 For this meaning of framing (beginning and end), see Jurij Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, 75–77; Boris Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition: The Structure of the Artistic Text and Typology of Compositional Forms*, 137–51.

6 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of the Everyday*, 115.

7 Ibid.

8 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: Swann’s Way*, 4.

9 As theorized by Mark Lakoff and George Johnson, especially in their discussion of orientational

separate identity, a physical and psychological interiority, only part of which is revealed to others. Furthermore, critical discourse presumes that fiction excels in its ability to enter, in the most refined and precise manner, the private domain of a character’s mind: his or her thoughts, emotions and sensations.¹⁰ In Dorrit Cohn’s formulation, fictional minds are “transparent,” as fictional discourse has the ability to melt, as it were, the boundaries of another person’s subjectivity.¹¹ True, other minds are not completely opaque and most of us are capable, to some degree, of reading minds through body language, gestures, and facial expression – what cognitive psychology calls “theory of mind” (TOM). In fiction, however, according to Monika Fludernik, we truly enter another person’s mind, comprised of thoughts and feelings, and the more elusive embodied experience deriving from the body’s positioning in time and space. Narrative discourse succeeds in conveying this with its subtle tools: focalization, free indirect speech and metaphor. Thus, while crossing the border to another world, transported by narrators and characters, the reader might also cross boundaries of body and mind, or rather, be situated in the borderline. He or she can experience the world through another’s subjectivity yet still be situated in his or her own subjectivity. This intense, inter-subjective experience may not be as overwhelming as the ones offered by the creators of digital games and virtual reality; yet it is unequaled in terms of its subtlety, sophistication, and depth.

Are borders set only to be crossed? This idea appears, in different guises, in the writing of thinkers who are usually associated with Post-Structuralism. Thus, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari maintain that art begins with the act of demarcation and framing; a work of art, however, contains “lines of flight” that, at the same time, break through the frame.¹² Jacques Derrida of the ambivalence of the frame (the *parergon*), which blurs, as much as it marks, the line between inside and outside.¹³ De Certeau describes a “dynamic contradiction between each delimitation and its mobility.” The dynamic interactions that stories produce between characters initiate “distinctions resulting from encounters.” Stories reveal the “paradox of the frontier: created by contacts, the points of differentiation between two bodies are also their common points. Conjunction and disjunction are inseparable in them.”¹⁴ The limit in stories is ambiguous. It subverts “the political freezing of the place” by turning “the frontier into crossing.”¹⁵

The writing of these thinkers itself intentionally blurs the boundary between the discourse of criticism and its poetic objects. Moreover, the writing about space

metaphors and container metaphors (*Metaphors We Live by*, 15–20, 29–33).

10 See the works by Monika Fludernik, Alan Palmer, and David Herman listed in the bibliography.

11 Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*.

12 Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, “Percept, Affect, and Concept,” in *What is Philosophy?* 186–8.

13 Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 15–47.

14 De Certeau, *The Practice of the Everyday*, 127.

15 *Ibid.*, 128.

tends to be interdisciplinary, as it crosses boundaries between philosophy, literature, sociology, and the discourses of architecture and visual art. Geocriticism, a new interdisciplinary field, explores the meanings of ‘space’ in texts, as well as the acts of transgression it involves, both geographical and political.¹⁶

Before Post-Structuralism and Post-Colonialism took an interest in the political and cultural aspects of space and boundaries, space had been considered from a phenomenological approach. Focusing on the experience of literature – of characters as well as of readers, Bachelard introduced “Topophilia,” which explores the images of habitable places in literature.¹⁷ These are spaces of introversion, intimacy, and dreaming that poetic texts both represent and create in the reading mind. Bachelard, and other phenomenologists such as George Poulet assume an encounter between the subjectivity of the character (or author) and that of the reader, as the reader is transported (hence, crosses the boundary) to a space experienced by other minds. From another direction, current scholars of narrative such as Monika Fludernik define narrative in terms of experientiality.¹⁸ This complex term rests on the assumption that readers process stories using the same cognitive schemas that serve them in daily experience, especially embodied experience that derives from physical existence and positioning in time and space. Similar to the phenomenological approach, the narratological view suggests conjunction between the physical and sensory experience of the character positioned in a fictional space and that of the reader in his or her real space.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives treat different aspects of boundary crossing in fiction: geographical boundaries (in the representation of space), esthetic boundaries (between the space of the work and the space of the world), and mental ones (between minds in the space of fiction and the space of reading). Keeping these different meanings of borderlines and crossings in mind, I shall now return to “A Simple Heart.” Drawing on the spatial approaches I have mentioned, especially that of de Certeau, I suggest that Félicité – both in her movement in space and in her mental dynamic – manifests a challenge to the boundaries imposed on her as a subject. At the same time, I would like to show how the story as “experientiality” – a venue of the encounter between the subjectivity of the reader and that of the characters – simulates this challenge to borderlines by its very form.

Félicité of “A Simple Heart” does not get along with maps or with dogma and abstract ideas. She has her own way of becoming familiar with space – mostly through the habitual movement of the everyday: “In return for a hundred francs a year, she did all the cooking and the housework, she sewed, washed, ironed. She could bridle a

¹⁶ Bertrand Westphal, *Geocriticism: Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies*.

¹⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*.

¹⁸ See the works by Monika Fludernik in the bibliography. See also Marco Caracciolo, “Experientiality,” in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*.

horse, fatten the poultry, and churn the butter, and remained faithful to her mistress, who was by no means an easy person” (17). The women (*les bourgeoises*) of Pont-l’Éveque envy Madame Aubain, her mistress, for having her. They regard Félicité as a valuable asset whose worth exceeds its price – a working person who “looked like a wooden doll working automatically” (18). It is the automatic or *habitual* movement, however, that turns space into a *habitable* place.

The description of Madame Aubain’s house at the beginning of the story (17–18) – one of Flaubert’s accomplished descriptions – is an example of the way the space is appropriated and becomes – as Deleuze and Guattari suggest¹⁹ – habitable through habitual movement. Praising Flaubert’s art of description,²⁰ and this description in particular,²¹ readers have noted that it is more than a catalogue of objects. It conveys the depth and volume of the space by mentioning the interconnections between its outside and inside parts (“between an alley-way and a lane”; “Inside, there were differences in level”). It absorbs the movement of the body (the differences in level “make you stumble”) and sensory impressions (“the whole room smelt a little musty, as the floor was on a lower level than the garden”). The description of the house unfolds in the order the house is revealed to one who enters it (“the first floor began with ‘Madam’s’ room.... It led to a smaller room ... then came the drawing room.... Next came a passage leading to a study”). Moreover, the description is fragmented, highlighting only segments. We get, for example, only one detail about the second floor: a dormer window lighting “Félicité’s room, which looked out upon the meadows.” The small window overlooking the open space (a view that will also close the story) seems to be symbolic, as the house and its description open toward the invisible realm of memory. We sense this in the glimpses of Madame Aubain sitting in the parlor as one of its silent objects or in the image of the bare cots of the children. The exact time of the description is impossible to pinpoint. Madame Aubain is mentioned but so is the bare cot whose mattress was taken after her death. This description does not represent the vision of an all-knowing, timeless eye; rather, it seems to accumulate memories from different times. These are probably the memories of Félicité, whose scratches of speech are embedded in the titles in quotations marks (“Madam’s” “Monsieur”), and who preserves the house in her memory, as she collects the remains of its contents in her tiny room until her death. Indeed, this house, that no one seems to be interested in buying, has no exchange value except that given to it by memory.

Madame Aubain’s house, wavering between layers of time in memory, embodies the lived place or “space” (*espace*) of de Certeau or the spaces of intimacy explored by Bachelard. In de Certeau’s fine phrasing, “...it is the very definition of a place, in fact, that it is composed by these series of displacements and effects among the

19 Deleuze and Guattari, “Percept, Affect, and Concept,” 105.

20 Gérard Genette, “Flaubert’s Silence.”

21 Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays*, 24 and “Canto VII,” 26; Roland Barthes, “L’effet de réel,” 84.

fragmented strata that form it and that it plays on these moving layers.” The places people live in are for de Certeau “presences of diverse absences.” They are haunted by spirits “one can ‘invoke’ or not.” The place’s inhabitants connect to “the in-visible identity of the visible.”²² The lived place inverts, according to de Certeau, the schema of the Panopticon, the mechanism that for Foucault stands for the surveillance powers of the modern political system. Whereas the Panopticon sees the individual without being seen, in a lived place, one’s eyes are open to the invisible that eludes the gaze of power – the power that also sets boundaries, marks lanes, and maps an abstract, policed, and impersonal space.

De Certeau contrasts the map with the tour. Unlike the map, the tour is created by the walking person.²³ It is tentative, filled with bypasses and shortcuts, and forms a personal adaptation of the map’s abstract structure. The tour does not consciously oppose the city plan, which often creates the space as much as it outlines its scheme. Rather, walkers are inside the mapped space and conform to it; yet, inside this maze of fixed lines they create – through walking and everyday movements – a “dynamic partitioning,” transient and elusive.²⁴ Whereas space on the map is homogeneous, timeless, and confined by the boundaries it outlines, the space experienced by walking and by habitual actions is always in motion and shuttles between times: it is open to the past and to memory, and this infuses it with otherness, making its boundaries fluid. “Stories,” therefore “traverse places,” because, in addition, they enable displacement and transport one into the invisible identity of space, experienced in the memory of its inhabitants.

In fact, displacements are inherent to stories. De Certeau points to a triple analogy among walking, dream, and discourse. These three domains function within symbolic systems, but they stray from the systems’ main roads, that is, from the ‘literal meaning’ of signs.²⁵ They accomplish this by the improvisations and drifting away of walking, the displacements and condensations of dreams, and the *topoi* of discourse.

Does “A Simple Heart” draw an analogy between Félicité’s walking routes that cross the lines of the map and the discourse of the story? The story has few linguistic *topoi*. Félicité resembles a “wooden doll” (18). The long weeds at the bottom of the river wave back and forth “like hair of corpses floating in the water” (37), but these figures are exceptional. Flaubert’s language in this story is lucid and factual. The lack of metaphors is compensated for, however, by the psychic dynamics of the plot, which can be described as a chain of metonymic and metaphoric displacements. Indeed, the metonymic detail plays an important role in the working of Félicité’s memory: Virginie’s plush hat or the articles of the old house that no one desires but her. The movement of displacement, however, also occurs in the chain of beloved creatures

²² De Certeau, *The Practice of the Everyday*, 108.

²³ See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 51.

²⁴ De Certeau, *The Practice of the Everyday*, 123.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

that substitute for each other in Félicité’s heart: Victor fills the place of Virginie; Loulou fills the place of Victor; and the stuffed parrot replaces Loulou. Completing this chain of displacements is the Holy Ghost envisioned by Félicité – a parrot instead of a dove. This ending renders the story, among other things, a reflection on the dynamic of substitution in the Catholic sacrament, which enables the transformation from the human to the divine and from the physical to the metaphysical. For Félicité, animals play an important role in this transformation: the lambs of Jesus, a parrot in the blue sky, horses up in the air. These manifestations of the process of metamorphosis underlying the story suggest that the demarcation lines defining subjects and identities are supple and changeable.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the psychic movement of displacement, where Félicité shifts her affection from one object to another, unlike the substitution of value in economic systems, does not devalue the “replaced” object of love. Rather, as in metaphors and in the condensation in dreams, both new and old objects of love co-exist in a tension of separation and conjunction. Félicité has a hard time understanding how the Holy Ghost is “not just a bird, but a fire as well, and sometimes a breath” (30). Yet the Holy Ghost revealed to her at the end of the story is a parrot transformed from a dove (as they are “linked together in her mind” (50), and the parrot is connected to Victor *and* Virginie, who are “linked together in her heart” (35).

In fact, the capacity to include many identities in one entity and the flexibility it suggests about the boundaries of identity are what distinguish Félicité. Her ability to feel deep empathy seems to blur her own identity. The story opens with a confusion of pronouns between Félicité and her mistress (as both are addressed as “she,” at first reading is hard to differentiate²⁶); when people insult Loulou “every sneer cut Félicité to the quick” (44). On warm days, she suffers the thirst of her nephew in faraway lands, and in the stormy weather, she “saw him being buffeted by the very same storm” (34). The most striking manifestation of her exceptional empathy appears on Virginie’s communion day: “Félicité leaned forward to see her, and in one of those imaginative flights born of real affection, it seems to her that she herself was in the child’s place. Virginie’s face became her own, Virginie’s dress clothed her, Virginie’s heart was beating in her breast” (31).

In one sense, the elements associated with Félicité’s character – the erasure of the subject’s identity, its automatic functioning, the Sisyphean daily tasks, the accumulation of objects, the substitution – are all signs of the materialist society that Flaubert so poignantly depicts. In fact, Flaubert has been criticized for enhancing, rather than diminishing, the effect of these elements with his subjective, descriptive style.²⁷ In “A Simple Heart,” however, these very signs of the oppressive power

²⁶ This is not the case in the English translation, which “corrected” this confusion.

²⁷ George Lukács, *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, 110–48.

structure of bourgeois (already capitalist) society also contain “exits”²⁸ or “lines of flight”²⁹ outside of the boundaries of this system and the borderlines that demarcate them. Objects thus become tokens of memory and exceed their monetary value; a chain of substitutes verges on the metaphysical; a daily movement constitutes a “tour” outside the map’s routes; and an empathetic displacement exceeds the boundaries of the subject as defined by outside forces.

This double move – whereby the character is subjected to outer, defining, forces, and at the same time exceeds this definition through empathy – is reflected in Flaubert’s formal compositional choices. Flaubert wrote the story under the influence of his dear friend, George Sand, who criticized him for the cold and satirical approach in his art (Flaubert 1930, 281).³⁰ In “A Simple Heart,” Flaubert was determined to “move sensitive souls to pity and tears.”³¹ He wrote it originally in the first person, from the “inside” of his protagonist’s experience, but he found it false, both esthetically and psychologically, and he rewrote it in the third person. Fortunately, he thus moderated Sand’s sentimental influence and did not entirely relinquish his irony. In this version, he depicted Félicité from outside as “a wooden doll working automatically,” a servant in the reifying bourgeois order, yet, as Decesse suggests, in a series of *Tableau Vivant*, which enhances the effect of the saint legend.³²

Flaubert’s decision to shift from first to third person narration offers an opportunity to reflect on a writer’s possibilities when approaching a character’s subjectivity. The first person mode seems to be a direct line to a fictional mind, as it presents the uninterrupted, inner speech of the character. This mode, however, is also subject to self-delusion and is hardly capable of conveying the unconscious, non-verbal levels of a character’s psyche. In addition, the first person marks a definite division between the character, the narrator, and the reader. Can a reader be positioned, in terms of time and space, in a discourse issued by another “I”? On the other hand, in third person discourse, empowered by the potent devices of free, indirect speech and focalization, a reader can experience, from within, different aspects of another subjectivity – physical and psychological, verbal and non-verbal, conscious and unconscious – and still think of him or her as “he” or “she” – a skill we lack in everyday life. Flaubert developed and refined free, indirect speech – itself a borderline case: between narrator and character and between direct and indirect speech. This device enables a crossing to another subjectivity, which, unmarked by a shift in pronouns, is more ambiguous, subtle, and effective. The text of “A Simple Heart” often slides into free, indirect speech in the (sometimes ironic) rendition of Félicité’s speech and thoughts; yet her experience is present far beyond the representation of inner speech. We see

²⁸ De Certeau, *The Practice of the Everyday*.

²⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, “Percept, Affect, and Concept,” 187.

³⁰ Flaubert, *Correspondance. Septième Série*, 281.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 307.

³² Decesse, “Introduction to *Trois Contes*,” 39.

her from the outside, automatically moving in space; yet this space is imbued with her subjectivity. It is a habitable place, blending the movement of her body with the flow of memory and the movement of reading.

The habitable space is the space of stories. In it, tours take place, and they stray from the lanes of the homogeneous, policed space of maps. Through their form and language – their topoi, metaphors and analogies – stories simulate the displacements that transgress the order of space and language. De Certeau’s insights about space and boundaries in stories, combined with the notion that fiction allows for transporting one to the inner experience of another subjectivity, reveal Flaubert’s achievement in “A Simple Heart.” This story of a person who, by “imaginative flights born of real affection” (31), melts boundaries of place and identity is also an invitation to reflect on the borders of space and mind that stories both present and challenge.

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