

RANCIÈRE, SARTRE AND FLAUBERT FROM *The Idiot of the Family* TO *The Politics of Aesthetics*

Christina Howells (Wadham College, University of Oxford)

This paper discusses Rancière's attitude to Sartre through an examination of the two philosophers' analyses of Flaubert, and especially of Madame Bovary. It argues that Rancière simplifies Sartre's conception of literary commitment and seriously downplays the subtlety of his understanding of the relationship between literature and politics. Furthermore, by limiting his sources to Sartre's Qu'est-ce que la littérature? (1948), and not considering L'Idiot de la famille (1971–72), Rancière fails to recognise the similarities between Sartre's account and his own, with respect to both aesthetic theory and stylistic analysis.

To say that Rancière's attitude toward Sartre was ambivalent would be an understatement. Like Sartre, Rancière is fascinated by the relationship between literature and politics, and his aesthetics represents an increasingly concerted effort to come to grips with the precise way that the aesthetic and the political are inextricably linked. Both philosophers, not surprisingly perhaps, seem to share the same favourite nineteenth-century authors, especially Mallarmé and Flaubert, but Sartre's essay on Mallarmé, "*Mallarmé: La lucidité et sa face d'ombre*," is not mentioned in Rancière's own short book of 1996, *Mallarmé: La Politique de la sirène*. It is, however, cited in the very first lines of the slightly later essay, "*L'Intrus: politique de Mallarmé*," precisely in order to represent the approach to Mallarmé's work (accused of being elitist, aristocratic and petrifying of language) that Rancière sets out to oppose.¹ Indeed, in the first chapter of *La Parole muette: essai sur les contradictions de la littérature*, Rancière refers to Sartre as a "*contempteur fasciné de Flaubert et Mallarmé*," that is to say, as a denigrator or despiser of Flaubert and Mallarmé whom he allegedly scorns for their "petrification"

¹ Jacques Rancière, *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2007), 93–112. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PL.

of language, which aligns it with death rather than life.² But Rancière's sources seem to be primarily Sartre's essay on Mallarmé, written in 1953 and published posthumously, and *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* of 1948.³ I failed to find any serious engagement with Sartre's major work on Flaubert, *L'Idiot de la famille* (1971–72), which I shall draw on in this essay in order to attempt a brief comparison between Rancière and Sartre on the question of Flaubert's aesthetics.⁴

But first of all, there is another, more theoretical aspect of Rancière's tussle with Sartre that I would like to address. This is precisely the question of the *politics of literature*, an issue central to the aesthetic theory of both philosophers. Rancière's "Introduction" to *La Parole muette* refers to Sartre's famous (and nowadays perhaps infamous) question *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (What Is Literature?), and seems to prefer its bold and direct approach to the question over the mocking cynicism of Gérard Genette, whom Rancière describes, not without a certain irony, as "an eminent theoretician of literature." (PM, 5) For Genette is a theoretician of literature who nonetheless suggests that Sartre's question—What is literature?—can no longer be asked without attracting ridicule. Sartre, Genette hastens to reassure us, did not really answer it, and perhaps, he goes on, we would be wise nowadays not even to ask it: "*à sottte question, point de réponse*"—a stupid question has no answer. (*Ibid.*)⁵ We might recall at this point Derrida's discussion, in *La Dissémination*, of the possibility of asking the question, where he, too, suggests that the question can no longer be asked, not only because it sounds "like a quotation from Sartre,"⁶ but also, and more seriously, because "What is...?" is an ontological question that apparently asks for the (impossible) essence or truth of literature. (*Ibid.*) Derrida

² Jacques Rancière, *La parole muette: Essai sur les contradictions de la littérature* (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 1998), 17. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PM.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations II: Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as QL.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Idiot de la famille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971–72). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as IF.

⁵ Rancière here quotes Gérard Genette's *Fiction et diction* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990), 11.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *La Dissémination* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972), 203. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as LD.

goes on to say, however, that this problem need not stop us from attempting to discover “what was represented and determined by the term—literature—and why.” (LD, 253) Like Derrida, and unlike Genette, Rancière clearly believes that there is still plenty of mileage in the question, provided that it is approached in the right way. Indeed, he is arguably more interested in the question itself than in its answer, for it leads him to speculate as to *why* it should be such a difficult and contentious issue. *Why* is the question deemed ridiculous, even desperate? Genette’s solution is to offer two criteria for the literary: one he calls “conditional,” that is to say, the quality of a piece of writing, and the other “conventional,” that is to say, whether a piece of writing belongs to a literary genre, such as drama, that is an established part of literature. (PM, 6) But Rancière is not at all happy with this suggestion; indeed, he clearly considers it to be fundamentally misguided. It may seem self-evident to Genette that a theatrical play forms part of “literature,” but Rancière believes he is wrong, both historically and, to use Rancière’s term, “universally.” (*Ibid.*, 7) A play is type of spectacle, not a type of literature, and the idea that it should be considered part of literature, Rancière argues, would have been incomprehensible to Racine’s contemporaries. But this rejection of Genette’s categories does not lead Rancière to give up his attempt to understand literature; on the contrary, refusing both contemporary relativism and the convenience of empiricism, he sets himself the task of understanding *why* literature should be so very slippery and difficult to pin down, why it should be simultaneously so “evident” and so “indeterminate.” (*Ibid.*, 8) Literature, for Rancière, is neither a particular repertory of written works, nor a repertory of works which have some particular quality that we call “literary.” Nor has it been satisfactorily described by any previous attempts at definition; literature is not sacred, it is not absolute, it is not impossible. But Rancière is not so much interested in demolishing these “illusions” as in understanding why they came about. (*Ibid.*, 13) He wants to understand the paradigms that produced these different and changing conceptions of literature. Indeed, he devotes a considerable amount of intellectual energy to tracing the development of different conceptions of art—and in modern times, literature—from an initial ethical (Platonic) model associated with images, to a poetic model (Aristotelian) associated with representation and liberated from ethical utility, to the more recent model associated with the aesthetic and

liberated from representation.

We cannot look in any detail here at the three models outlined by Rancière, but we do need to look a little more closely at representation and aesthetics, because these are the two regimes of art with which Flaubert is allied. Indeed, Flaubert can be seen as being on the cusp of these two regimes, the representative regime, commonly (if, perhaps, mistakenly) associated with realism, and the aesthetic regime, commonly associated with modern and post-modern writing. Rancière's understanding of both regimes is unconventional, though in a way which may not be immediately apparent. The representative regime refers to the fictional imitation of actions, but Rancière does not thereby identify it with resemblance to the real. It refers, rather, to a form that is agreed to represent the real, but which does not necessarily do so by reproducing it. Moreover, it is subject to a strict hierarchy of genres and subject matters that determine the mutual appropriateness of content to form. As Rancière explains in the *Politics of Aesthetics*, the aesthetic regime is not, as is commonly thought, a primarily "intransitive" regime in which the medium matters more than the message, or where the materiality of the medium of the artwork is more important than what it is trying to say.⁷ Indeed, as Rancière points out, unlike painting, literature always says something. (*Ibid.*, 54) But this is not the point. The aesthetic regime is identified, for Rancière, mainly with the overthrow of the artistic hierarchy of style and subject matter, and with the equality or democratisation of both. To put it crudely, any subject may be treated in any style or genre. And this democratisation ultimately works to destroy the very specificity of art and literature, for there is no longer any sure way of determining whether a particular piece of writing, or a particular object, is or is not art. "The aesthetic regime asserts the absolute singularity of art and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity." (*Ibid.*, 23) So, paradoxically, the aesthetic regime of art is not so much tautological, as it might at first appear, but rather ultimately self-destructive.

Now, the term "democratisation" sounds political rather than artistic, and, as the titles of several of Rancière's recent works make

⁷ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, (tr.) Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2006), 53. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PA.

manifest, the relationship between politics and literature, or politics and aesthetics, lies at the heart of his current research. As we see very clearly, Rancière has little or no time for what is commonly called commitment or “engagement,” which he views as both politically and aesthetically vacuous. In Rancière’s view, an *artist* can be committed, but what does this mean for his *art*? The commitment of art operates very differently from the commitment of an artist, and “there is no criterion for establishing a correspondence between aesthetic virtue and political virtue,” or, in other words, “there is no criterion for establishing an appropriate correlation between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics.” (*Ibid.*, 61–62) By this, of course, Rancière does not mean that art and politics should not mix; on the contrary, they are inextricably intertwined, but the correlation between them is far from simple. The closest Rancière seems willing to go toward discussing a possible correlation is in terms of art as constructing political dissensus, or heterology, that is to say, as a disruption of the distribution of the sensible as it has hitherto been conceived. Art thereby has to steer a course between remaining “readable” by its public and creating a perceptual shock through something radical and uncanny. This may mean, in practice, that politically motivated work such as that of Zola may, in fact, be less politically challenging than that of Virginia Woolf, whose *intention* was not political but whose *impact* may be. (*Ibid.*, 65)

One of Rancière’s clearest accounts of how he envisages the politics of art is in *Le spectateur émancipé*.⁸ Here he explains that it is not by showing us revolting things that we will be motivated to revolt. (SE, 57) Indeed, the reader or spectator may not have the reaction desired, or at least anticipated, by the author or painter. Zola, to take a famous example, experienced this with respect to *L’Assommoir* (1877). Intended to show the terrible and degrading conditions of the working classes, the novel was used by right-wing readers as grist for their reactionary mill, as the revelation of working-class depravity, promiscuity and laziness. Despite his well-known contention in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* that it is easier for literature than the non-conceptual arts, such as music or painting, to be politically committed, Sartre, too, experienced this authorial inability to control a work’s

⁸ Jacques Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique editions, 2008). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as SE.

reception: *Les Mains sales* (1948) was initially interpreted as an anti-Communist play rather than as a play about ends and means, or about Communism and its relation to the intellectual.

This example is, of course, very telling. For if Sartre was not able to control the meaning of his own literary work, is his conception of literary commitment necessarily doomed to failure? As Rancière states so clearly, “The problem is not the moral or political validity of the message conveyed by the representational apparatus [*dispositif représentatif*]. The problem concerns the apparatus [*dispositif*] itself.” (SE, 61) Aesthetic efficacy, as Rancière describes it, is paradoxical, involving distance and neutralisation, in other words, his famous “aesthetic distance.” (*Ibid.*, 63) Indeed, it depends on a disjunction between the artist’s intention, the sensory form presented by the art object, and the response of the spectator or reader. And this is but one mode of the dissensus proclaimed by Rancière. So what might produce a workers’ revolution is not so much revolutionary subject matter in painting, *à la* David or Delacroix, but rather the possibility of paintings being viewed by anyone and everyone, in a neutral space, in the museum or as artistic reproductions, not the sole purview of kings, aristocrats or priests. (*Ibid.*, 69) There is, says Rancière, a politics of art that precedes the politics of artists. And within this democratic space, the aesthetic strategies of artists will change “the coordinates of the representable,” that is to say, our perception of events and subjects. (*Ibid.*, 72) Art, then, may transform what we perceive and what we think, it may create new forms of experience, new relations with the already-given. But it does not do this in a way that can be calculated and determined in advance. (*Ibid.*, 74) Its effect is undecidable and cannot be guaranteed. (*Ibid.*, 91) It proposes another “fiction,” that is, another way of dividing up and patterning the sensory/sensible, what Rancière would call a new distribution of the sensible. (*Ibid.*, 84)

This is all very well. Indeed, it is an attractive way of looking at art. But for anyone familiar with Sartre’s work, even just with *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*, it is hardly new. Like Kant, at least according to Rancière’s reading of him, Sartre sees the work of art itself as inherently democratic insofar as it is potentially a call to all readers or spectators. Just as Kant envisages the beautiful as universally accessible to all—subjectively universal to use his terms—Sartre’s conception of the art object is similarly universalising. For Sartre, the work of art remains

potential, a mere analogon, until it is activated and brought into being as an aesthetic object by the reader or spectator. He speaks of art as an “*appel*,” that is, a “call” to the reader or spectator to actualise it; and, as a call to any reader, the work of art is thereby necessarily a call to all readers, and thence a democratic call, a call that ideally requires a society in which all men and women can read (view paintings and listen to music) and thus bring the aesthetic object that underlies the artistic analogon into being. I have written elsewhere about this Kantian side of Sartre’s aesthetics at some length, and do not propose to repeat it here.⁹ Suffice it to say that Sartre conceives art as a form of imperative—the imperative to exist as an actualised and not merely virtual art object—that I have described as rivalling Kant’s own categorical imperatives, and as thereby having an implicitly moral and political dimension. Indeed, again in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*, Sartre wrote, “*au fond de l’impératif esthétique nous discernons l’impératif moral*” (at the heart of the aesthetic imperative, we may discern the moral imperative). (QL, 111) Since art depends on readers and spectators who are free to read and to view art objects, it thereby and of its own internal necessity as art, works toward a free and democratic society that will enable its full realisation as an aesthetic object. From its very nature *as* an aesthetic object, art calls out for democracy and freedom. This is a far cry from the conception of aesthetic commitment that is usually attributed to Sartre by lazy readers who focus only on the early stages of his complex argument. And, as Rancière says, this means that art may well transform what we perceive and what we think, for, in Sartre’s terms, “*dévoiler c’est changer*”—art patterns the world afresh—in Rancière’s words, art produces a new “fiction”) and by actualising the work of art, our relations to the world (that is, to the current distribution of the sensible) are thereby inevitably changed.¹⁰

If I just now seem to have implied that Rancière himself might be one of those “lazy readers” who find in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* what they always knew was there, it was not entirely unintentional. But

⁹ See Christina Howells, *Sartre: The Necessity of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 28–34.

¹⁰ See chapter 6 in Christina Howells, *Sartre: The Necessity of Freedom*, and chapters 1 and 2 in Christina Howells, *Sartre’s Theory of Literature* (London: MHRA Dissertation Series, vol. 14, London, 1979).

perhaps it's more than a matter of "laziness," perhaps it's primarily a matter of political hostility. If we turn to the two philosophers' analyses of Flaubert's aesthetics, particularly but not exclusively in *Madame Bovary*, we will see once again that Rancière restricts himself to a markedly hostile reading of Sartre's remarks on Flaubert in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* and has nothing, as far as I can see, to say about the later, and immeasurably longer and more complex work, *L'Idiot de la famille*.

Rancière often takes Flaubert as exemplary of his conception of democracy in art: "On the one hand, the absolutization of style corresponds to a principle of democratic equality. The adultery committed by a farmer's daughter is as interesting as the heroic actions of great men." (PA, 55) Moreover, almost everyone (in the 19th century) had access to *Madame Bovary*. But Emma is not able to aestheticise her life as she might wish, and the novel itself, Rancière argues, "is constructed as a constant polemic against a farm girl's desire to bring art into life." (*Ibid.*, 56) So Rancière sees *Madame Bovary* as embodying "a struggle between two forms of equality." (*Ibid.*) What interests him most in the novel is what he calls "literary indifference," (*Ibid.*) by which he means something quite specific— that Flaubert's real originality as a stylist lies in the way in which he refuses to prioritise the human subject over the microcosmic flux which traverses and constitutes both it and the so-called "natural world." In Rancière's terms, "Flaubert asserts a molecular equality of affects that stands in opposition to the molar equality of subjects constituting a democratic political scene." (*Ibid.*)

So Rancière understands Flaubert's definition of style as "*une manière absolue de voir les choses*" in a strong and etymological sense. "*Absolu*" is connected back to "solution" and dissolution, "*délié*." (PM, 107) It is not so much a matter of enchantment by style, as style conceived as a way of dissolving the entities and subjects with which we commonly surround ourselves. As we also see clearly in Flaubert's *Tentation de Saint Antoine*, the vision of the world which is proposed (here, by the Devil) as an alternative to our world of objects and people is one of disindividualisation, atomisation, indetermination: "*une goutte d'eau, une coquille, un cheveu*" (a drop of water, a pebble, a single hair).

(PM, 108)¹¹ Flaubert's famous *impersonality* is, for Rancière, as much a matter of the dissolution of the person as of narrative neutrality. Love and its objects are dissolved into perceptions, affections and atoms. (*Ibid.*, 110) Words, gestures, movements, silences, all are part of what Rancière calls the "regime of indetermination." (*Ibid.*, 113) Love and passion are "pure combinations of affects and percepts" (*Ibid.*, 114), "the dance of atoms." (*Ibid.*, 116) The sexual act is a matter of "*accrocs du tissu commun*" (the contact of common flesh) (*Ibid.*, 118)

"*La mise à mort d'Emma Bovary*" in *Politique de la littérature* makes Rancière's position even clearer. Emma's mistake is not to have confused literature with life; has anyone ever really done so?, Rancière asks. (PL, 61) Her problem is rather that she wants to live her life as a certain kind of literature. She is sentimental and selfish. She wants to aestheticise ordinary life and fails. The kind of literature that attracts her is itself sentimental and false. She looks for experiences that don't exist, and fails to recognise that the "sensorium of sensations" (PL, 70) is not a matter of personal, individual subjecthood, but a matter of a "multiplicity of atoms," impersonal and in flux. (PL, 72) She does not notice the happiness that lies in specks of dust in the sunlight and other "micro-events," but seeks excitement, adventure and action. Her expectations are on the wrong scale, framed in terms of subjects and predicates, things and their properties, rather than floating, impersonal configurations, as beloved by Rancière as by Deleuze.

Now, all of this is a splendidly sensitive reading of Flaubert, and one that literary readers will recognise at once. It is also beautifully conducted, and with a wonderful eye for detail. My quarrel with it, insofar as I have a quarrel, does not lie with its intrinsic quality as an interpretation of Flaubert. Instead, it lies with Rancière's frankly inattentive and, in my view, careless and reductive reading of Sartre's own account of Flaubert and his style. By choosing to focus on Sartre's brief remarks about Flaubert in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, Rancière ossifies him by seizing on his early description of Flaubert's style as an immobilising petrification, which represents a would-be *aristocratic* rejection of bourgeois utilitarianism. (PA, 16) And indeed, Rancière points out that Flaubert's contemporaries reacted to the very same

¹¹ Gustave Flaubert, *La Tentation de Saint Antoine, première version* (Paris: 1924), 419, as cited in Rancière, *La parole muette*, XX, 108.

stylistic techniques, but they interpreted them in terms of a frighteningly *democratic* tendency, that of an equalisation of vocabulary and subject matter. (*Ibid.*, 16–17)

But what Rancière conspicuously fails to do is look beyond *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* to *L'Idiot de la famille*, where, twenty five years later, Sartre, like Rancière himself, carries out an exceptionally fine and nuanced discussion of Flaubert's style, and comes to many of the same conclusions as Rancière. Whether this is genuine ignorance (or, perhaps, self-protectiveness) on Rancière's part, I will not venture to speculate.¹² *L'Idiot de la famille* is a very long book (three volumes of more than three thousand pages), but to discuss Sartre's work on Flaubert in 2007 without engaging with it surely cannot be mere oversight.

If we look briefly at a very small fragment of Sartre's analysis of Flaubert's technique in *Madame Bovary*, my point will, I hope, become clear. In a brilliant passage in volume II of *L'Idiot*, Sartre contrasts Flaubert's stylistic technique in his description of the ride around Rouen by horse-drawn carriage, when Emma consummates her relationship with Leon, with the earlier description of Emma's equally adulterous but far more ecstatic sexual relations with her first lover, Rodolphe. (IF, 1275–87) As Sartre so convincingly shows, Emma and Leon are reduced to the level of brutes as they have sex in the back of a hansom cab while a bewildered and frustrated driver goes round and round the town, repeatedly passing the same landmarks. Indeed, they are not even brutes, but are reduced to the level of inanimate objects, mechanically reproducing the self-same movements, dehumanised to a level far below that of the romantic subjects they imagine themselves to be. In his puzzlement and exhaustion, the cab driver is human; the lovers are mere automata, trying in vain to transform copulation into ecstasy. As Sartre reminds us, we have already seen Leon fear losing his erection while he waits for Emma in the cathedral (unlike Flaubert himself, perhaps, who once commented: "*Qu'il doit être doux de foutre là... cachés derrière les confessionnaux*" (How sweet it must be to screw there...hidden behind

¹² Rancière is not, of course, alone in his suspicion of Sartre. I have discussed Derrida's own belated acknowledgement of what he calls his "anamnesia" with respect to Sartre in Christina Howells, *Derrida: Deconstruction from Phenomenology to Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998) 143–44.

the confessional boxes).¹³ Even the mechanics of sex do not seem to run any more smoothly for Emma and Leon than the “love” they are frantically simulating.

By contrast, Emma’s “seduction” by Rodolphe in the woods is a scene of easy “jouissance,” at least where Emma is concerned. Rodolphe, being an old hand at the game, does not really have his heart in it, and feels little more than pity or even contempt for Emma when she pours out her feelings to him in her post-coital bliss. But Flaubert, Sartre suggests, seems, for once, to be on Emma’s side, and not merely because he implicitly criticises Rodolphe for failing to recognise Emma’s sincerity: “*Il ne distinguait pas, cet homme si plein de pratique, la dissemblance des sentiments sous la parité des expressions....*” (This worldly-wise man could not detect the difference in feeling underlying the similarity of expressions.)¹⁴ This is where Flaubert probably comes closest to giving us his own philosophy of language, one in which he laments our tendency to crack out tunes for bears to dance to when what we want to do is move the stars: “*la parole humaine est comme un chaudron fêlé où nous battons des mélodies à faire danser les ours, quand on voudrait attendrir les étoiles*” (Human speech is like a cracked pot where we beat out tunes for bears to dance to when we would wish to move the stars). (*Ibid.*) But we can also recognise Flaubert’s sympathy for Emma in his dissolution of her experience into its component microscopic elements—the very same dissolution that Rancière comments on so favourably in his own account, but which he is very far from recognising in Sartre’s analysis. Sartre cites the moment when Emma’s sexual abandonment is experienced as a kind of pantheistic effusion:

...elle s’abandonna. Les ombres du soir descendaient, le soleil horizontal...lui éblouissait les yeux...des taches lumineuses tremblaient.... Le silence était partout: quelque chose de doux semblait sortir des arbres.... Alors elle entendit tout au loin...un cri vague et prolongé, une voix qui se traînait, et elle l’écoutait silencieusement, se

¹³ Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*, tome 1, (ed.) Jean Bruneau (Paris: Gallimard, NRF, Pléiade, 1973). Letter to Alfred Le Poittevin, 1 May 1845, p. 227.

¹⁴ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (Paris: Gallimard, Livre de Poche, 1961), 230–31.

mêlant comme une musique aux dernières vibrations de ses nerfs émus.” (IF, 1282)¹⁵

(...she surrendered. The evening shadows were falling. The sun, low on the skyline, shone through the branches dazzling her... a flickering brightness.... Silence was everywhere. Sweetness seemed to breathe from the trees.... Then, far away...she heard a strange, long-drawn cry that hung on the air, and she listened to it in silence as it mingled like music with the last vibrations of her jangled nerves.)¹⁶

Sartre’s analysis is detailed and closely textual: the non-verbal quality of Emma’s ecstasy protects her from sentimental *clichés* and allows her to be penetrated and enveloped by Nature; the “sweetness” described is impersonal rather than subjective, attributed to the surrounding trees. Indeed, Emma loses her individuated selfhood and approaches the fusion with matter sought in vain by Saint Antoine. She is stunned (*étourdie*), and it is not until language re-enters her consciousness that her innocence and authenticity leave her, in her self-conscious awareness of her new status as an adulteress: “*Elle se répétait: ‘j’ai un amant’.*” (IF, 1283) Sartre’s sensitivity to the intense subtlety and irony of Flaubert’s style is light years away from the brief and critical comments about “petrification” in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* to which Rancière restricts his analysis.

Rancière is an accomplished, subtle and sensitive reader of Flaubert. But like so many other recent French philosophers, he is a careless, prejudiced and insensitive reader of Sartre. This might not matter, did he not constantly use Sartre as his whipping boy, especially where the question of the relationship between art and politics and the understanding of Flaubert’s aesthetics are concerned. For a reader like myself, who knows Sartre’s work far better than that of Rancière, the misreadings are flagrant, and, what is possibly more of a pity, they prevent Rancière from building on the very sophisticated work on aesthetics that Sartre carried out, particularly in *L’Imaginaire* and in *L’Idiot de la famille*.¹⁷ Were Rancière to use Sartre, and especially his

¹⁵ Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 196.

¹⁶ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, (tr.) Alan Russell (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1961), 174.

¹⁷ I have discussed Sartre’s analysis of Flaubert in *L’Idiot de la famille* at some length in both of my above-cited monographs. For the aesthetic implications of

conception of the intrinsic commitment of the art object itself, as a stepping stone rather than as a straw man, his own aesthetics might be further on the way to resolving, or at least developing, some of the *aporias* and contradictions with which he repeatedly tussles.

christina.howells@wadh.ox.ac.uk

L'Imaginaire, see chapters 1 and 5 in Howells, *Sartre's Theory of Literature*, and chapters 1 and 6 in Howells, *Sartre: The Necessity of Freedom*.