Objet petit ‘Ah!’: Backstory Dramas and Sentimental Histories in Flaubert’s *L’Éducation sentimentale* and Beckett’s *La Dernière bande*

Mary Orr

The title of this essay refers to a key instance in Flaubert’s *L’Éducation sentimentale*, where the quality of the exclamation ‘Ah!’ (among 168 counts in the novel) is particularized, and specifically as ‘petit’.¹ The instance occurs in Part 3, chapter 1, during the famous tour of the Château de Fontainebleau, when Frédéric and Rosanette examine the painting of ‘Diane Chasseresse’ in the salle des Fêtes from very different, personal, angles of vision:

Frédéric fut pris par une concupiscence rétrospective et inexprimable. Afin de distraire son désir, il se mit à considérer tendrement Rosanette en lui demandant si elle n’aurait pas voulu être cette femme.

– « Quelle femme ? »
– « Diane de Poitiers ! »

Il répéta :

– « Diane de Poitiers, la maîtresse d’Henri II. »

Elle fit un petit : « Ah ! » Ce fut tout.

Son mutisme prouvait clairement qu’elle ne savait rien, ne comprenait pas, si bien que par complaisance il lui dit :

– « Tu t’ennuies peut-être ? »
– « Non, non, au contraire ! »

Et, le menton levé, tout en promenant à l’entour un regard des plus vagues, Rosanette lâcha ce mot :

– « Ça rappelle des souvenirs ! »

Cependant, on apercevait sur sa mine un effort, une intention de respect :

et, comme cet air sérieux la rendait plus jolie, Frédéric l’excusa.

L’étang des carpes la divertit davantage.²

¹ Thanks to the Bibliothèque Nationale’s collection of electronic texts on Gallica, word-searches of this order can produce such surprising statistics, but still need fuller contextual processing and analysis. Page references in the remainder of this essay are to the 1891 edition of Flaubert’s *L’Éducation sentimentale* on Gallica (No069168_PDF_1_-1DM.PDF).
In an article published in 2005, I unpacked Frédéric’s patronizing assumptions here, conveyed through the style indirect libre (‘Son mutisme prouvait . . . ’), of the emptiness behind Rosanette’s ‘petit “Ah!”’ and banal ‘souvenirs’ as all there was to the matter. A few pages later, however, the fullness of the ‘petit “Ah!”’ is made manifest, as too is Rosanette’s fulsome articulacy. We learn of her terrible memories that would cause any face to grow ‘sérieux’, of the night when her alcoholic mother sold her (underage) into prostitution, of attempted suicide to end her misery and, because she was saved from drowning, of her subsequent life as a ‘maîtresse’, including most recently Frédéric’s. Rosanette’s ‘petit “Ah!”’, including the overwhelmingly emotive pause following it, is no ‘mutisme’. Rather it is the intensely visceral expression accompanying re-silencing of personal pain that the verb ‘lâcha’ further underscores. If the ‘petit “Ah!”’ thus unleashes Rosanette’s most moving and poignant backstory drama and sentimental history several pages later (with due delay causing further shock effects), it also allows the reader to review Frédéric’s even greater lack of understanding triggering it, and hence grasp the cruel ironies of his earlier remarks about Diane de Poitiers.

The punning allusion to Lacan’s ‘objet petit [a](h)’ of my title thus refers not so much to the serious import of women as objects and non-existence as subjects in *L’Education sentimentale* and, indeed, Beckett’s *La Dernière Bande*, although such a reading of the main narrative viewpoints of both works needs to be undertaken. Rather, Rosanette’s exemplary ‘petit “Ah!”’ signals her expression of education from life, where in poignant and unmediated backstory dramas, chance (le hasard), circumstance and interventions of external forces have more prominence for an individual than personal agency, autonomy, will and choice. While women are more acted upon than agents, there can be no neat gendering of will and choice. In consequence, exclamation of ‘Ah!’ in this novel operates frequently as a marker, or as yet empty cartoon thought-bubble, prefiguring a speech version in later contexts with the same interlocutor(s). Only in words are more complex backstory dramas brought to light, that allow the previously silenced victim’s side of events to come partially to view. Over half of the 168 ‘Ah!’ in this novel are uttered by its minor (male) characters and secondary women protagonists – Mme Moreau, Mme Arnoux, Mme Dambreuse, Mlle Vatnaz and Louise Roque as well as Rosanette – to convey the inexpressible ‘real’ of their experiences at the hands of others. Yet these ‘Ah!’, and what they represent, cannot be neatly conflated with ‘Woman’ (whose

---