MADAME BOVARY: ROMANTICISM, MODERNISM, AND BOURGEOIS STYLE
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The strident opposition to Romanticism of such Modernists as Eliot and Hulme has not dissuaded critics like Frank Kermode, Robert Langbaum, and more recently, Walter Ong, from discerning Modernism's kinship to Romanticism, from discovering the origins of Modernism at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Ong argues that Romanticism and Modernism reflect a major shift in consciousness: a conservative society which can only preserve what it knows by oral and manuscript tradition, gradually transforms into a modern society secure enough in what it knows to seek new forms of knowledge. This shift is made possible by the improvement of technology for information storage, retrieval, and dissemination. Yet Ong's hypothesis cannot plumb the recesses of Flaubert's darker understanding of the modern technological age emerging before him, in which bourgeois entrepreneurs now will mass produce and distribute exotic experiences for a clientele which imagines that its romanticism is anti-bourgeois, and in which novelist entrepreneurs will disseminate realistic fictions to an audience which imagines its scrupulous objectivity protects it from a romanticism it has outgrown.

Everyone knows the story of how Flaubert came to write Madame Bovary. After listening to him read La Tentation, du Camp and Bouilhet insisted that he must curb his lyricism. If Romanticism was once an escape from bourgeois mediocrity, it was now obsolete, as repetitious and banal as the imbecility it fled from. Madame Bovary was the stern antidote prescribed by his friends; the narrator is a recently disabused romantic who now maturely regards a romanticism at one with bourgeois stupidity. But Flaubert already knew, as the first generation romantics had come to realize, that Romanticism was by now out-of-date; thousands of bourgeois were bored with emotions they had never felt. Flaubert was trying to go beyond Romanticism in La Tentation, but du Camp shrewdly writes: "sous prétexte de pousser le romantique à outrance, Flaubert, sans qu'il s'en doutât, retournait en arrière, revenait à l'abbé Raynal, à Marmontel, à Bitaube même, et tombait dans la diffusion." The promise of Modernism is to place oneself beyond the anxiety of belatedness (pace Harold Bloom). But
Flaubert's attempt to go beyond the derivative romanticism of others only exposes, once again, his kinship to the bourgeois. Bourgeois style is the attempt to mask one's belatedness by slavishly imitating or competing with the modernity of others who are themselves masking their anxiety by compulsively rehearsing their antipathy to the bourgeois. By fulfilling his worst fears of self-exposure, du Camp and Bouilhet help Flaubert, in *Madame Bovary*, to render the bourgeois and the antipathy to the bourgeois as a single phenomenon endlessly repeated, to reveal Modernism as bourgeois style.²

My discussion of the bourgeois devaluation of symbols consciously parallels Siegfried Giedion's analysis of Empire Style in *Mechanization Takes Command*.³ Napoleon, whom Giedion calls the first self-made man of the nineteenth century, encouraged the two Paris designers, Percier and Fontaine, to create a style for France that would at once gain respect for Napoleon's imperial aspirations, and compensate for his common origin. Empire Style randomly plundered other cultures for symbols of authority and juxtaposed them in a single object without regard for the radical difference of their original contexts. The development of mass production and distribution allowed these objects to be reproduced and marketed cheaply until, by Flaubert's time, France had been flooded with devalued symbols. The aristocratic forms of pre-revolutionary France, as well as pseudo-relics of Egypt and ancient Greece, emerge as bourgeois commodities now available to anyone.

The special enterprise of the nineteenth-century bourgeois becomes the devaluing and merchandizing of symbols. By purchasing symbols divorced from their original contexts, the bourgeois escape their belatedness by experiencing vicariously the aristocratic signifieds of Greece and Egypt. But these objects fail to sustain the climate of nobility they promise, and are quickly discarded for newer objects, each new purchase inspiring a greater desire and a greater disappointment. The emptiness of the signifiers increases the desire for a more substantial experience, but it is a substantiality only a voyeur would desire. To a voyeur, vicarious experience looks substantial (or, as we shall see, realistic) because it is empty. The Elysichthonic appetite for new experiences is the classic double bind that nourishes the compulsive accumulating and discarding of symbolic objects in modern society.⁴

The world of *Madame Bovary* is glutted with commercially devalued symbols like Charles' hat.⁵ One thinks immediately of the scratched dinner plates which set forth the story of Mademoiselle de la Vallière (48), or the wedding cake which the new Yvetot confectioner, anxious to impress potential customers, creates for Emma; a temple on the bottom, a dungeon in the middle layer, and a green field on top. Or even the Yonville town hall, directly influenced by Empire Style ("construite sur les dessins d'un architecte de Paris"—99, Flaubert's italics), with its incredible melange of incompatible architectural motifs.

These irrational objects promise to realize for their owners the excite-
ment that romantic literature can only describe as someone else's. But the novels that Emma reads are something more than a wholesale catalogue for bourgeois commodities. Romantic literature specializes in uncommon experience designed to relieve boredom; eventually, the genre of romantic literature becomes like an overflowing warehouse where the stock gets confused (52-53). The lending library exacerbates the chimerical by flooding consciousness with contradictory images whose only relation is that they are uncommon, anti-bourgeois, that is to say, romantic. These images follow one another in such profusion that, “à la fois,” they merge into one entity. The country that Emma desires as an alternative to petits bourgeois imbéciles exists as a single landscape only as a bourgeois commodity.

In their first conversation Emma and Léon enthusiastically confirm the convenience, the accessibility of experience packaged in books.

On ne songe à rien, continuait-il, les heures passent. On se promène immobile dans des pays que l'on croit voir, et votre pensée, s'enlaçant à la fiction, se joue dans le détail ou poursuit le contour des aventures. Elle se mêle aux personnages; il semble que c'est vous qui palpitez sous leurs costumes. (114-15)

Romantic literature teaches how to desire as well as what to desire. Léon describes to Emma the meditative position that frees the soul to travel to the country of romance. By renouncing physical involvement, the reader can experience romance vicariously, and engage the sympathetic companionship of a character who is in fact the reader himself returning from the far side of the fiction. Reading romantic literature is the exemplary spiritual exercise in bourgeois culture.

The structure of romantic desire creates the illusion of a painting in linear perspective, which tells the viewer where he stands, and invites the imagination to leave the body to travel into the painting towards the vanishing point along the path of his gaze. Emma follows the path to the vanishing point (Paris) in her thoughts, but in the end her dreams are never realized. “Au bout d’une distance indéterminée, il se trouvait toujours une place confuse où expirait son rêve” (80).

We, however, examine Emma's naïveté from a sophisticated point of view we share with (or copy from) the narrator: we know le genre of vicarious experience, we know better than to try to eat the grapes off the canvas. We know that romanticism fails to escape bourgeois mediocrity because romanticism is itself a bourgeois commodity appropriate for a later stage of bourgeois consciousness.

D'ailleurs, il [Léon] allait devenir premier clerc: c'était le moment d’être sérieux. Aussi renonçait-il à la flûte, aux sentiments exaltés, à l'imagination:—car tout bourgeois, dans l'échauffement de sa jeunesse, ne fût-ce qu'un jour, une minute, s'est cru capable d'immense passions, de hautes entreprises. Le plus médiocre libertin a rêvé des sultanes; chaque notaire porte en soi les débris d'un poète. (400-401)
The narrator’s generalizing tone shares with a like-minded reader his assumption that he is articulating wisdom all mature men have learned. Ultimately one must recognize that desire is not fulfilled in this world. But the ultimate bourgeois folly is to imagine that one has finally outgrown an emotionally and financially extravagant compulsion for exotic experiences. Mature realism is only the bourgeois screen for voyeuristic self-titillation. Each renunciation prepares for a fiercer abandonment.

Let us consider the sequence of events by which Emma comes to understand her love for Léon in Chapter 5, Part II. She is interrupted from her meditation by Lheureux, who attempts to sell her some exotic merchandise. She ultimately refuses to buy anything, but Lheureux is not fooled. She is only crediting her account with virtue she can spend again later. ("Comme j’ai été sage! se disait-elle en songeant aux écharpes"—46). Her rejection of Léon’s intimacy likewise increases her desires and his also. Repression is more erotically enervating than satisfaction.

par ce renoncement, il la plaçait en des conditions extraordinaires. Elle se dégagea, pour lui, des qualités charnelles dont il n’avait rien à obtenir; et elle alla, dans son cœur, montant toujours et s’en détachant à la manière magnifique d’une apothéose qui s’envole. (148)

The narrator, older than Léon, understands the pleasure of thwarted passion. Isolation is the proper environment for relationships informed by the standards of vicarious experience. The narrator scrupulously accentuates the serenity of Léon’s renunciation, as opposed to the dangerous unrest of Emma’s self-inflicted privation (149-50). The ascetic air of self-denial ("Je suis vertueuse") which wins the esteem of the bourgeois cannot assuage Emma’s frustration. The profusion of commodities in the marketplace revealed by Lheureux, like the countless romantic novels in the lending libraries, display all that Emma has foregone through a wisdom later regretted as timidity. The frustrations of flesh, money, and passion confound themselves because they obey the same law of desire: the new technology celebrates its power by exaggerating and manipulating to an intolerable degree the disparity between the depiction of the wealth of others and the comparative impoverishment of the self. The romantic novel is the microcosm of the bourgeois marketplace. Customers must be made to feel that they cannot escape boredom by standing pat with what they already have; only new purchases can avail them of the more exciting lives of others. Aristocratic forms which can only be delivered by divorcing them from their original contexts are engaged vicariously by a self denying its own context. The novel (and the marketplace) arrange an engagement of empty signifiers organized by a voyeur’s conception of a future world of pure signifieds.

The relationship of passion, material possessions, and sexual love is continuous. Emma compensates for resisting Léon by reversing the scruples of domestic virtue with which she confounded him.
Une femme qui s'était imposé de si grands sacrifices pouvait bien se passer des fantaisies. Elle s'acheta un prie-Dieu gothique, elle dépensa en un mois pour quatorze francs de citrons à se nettoyer les ongles; elle écrivit à Rouen, afin d'avoir une robe en cachemire bleu; elle choisit chez Lheureux la plus belle de ses écharpes; elle se la nouait à la taille par-dessus sa robe de chambre; et, les volets fermés, avec un livre à la main, elle restait étendue sur un canapé, dans cet accoutrement. (173)

Emma finally buys Lheureux's best scarf, but it will end up in the closet with all her other fantaisies, devalued symbols which cannot deliver what they promise. Emma wants to appropriate the ascetic nobility of intellectual self-discipline to confer dignity on her sexual repression. The bourgeois marketplace creates a climate of expectations that reduces history and philosophy to commodities which, as commodities, can only disappoint their customers. This, in turn, increases their appetite for future satisfaction, like a gambler trying to break a losing streak by doubling his bet. One begins to feel the menacing pertinence of the councillor's description of the new age at the agricultural fair: "partout fleurissent le commerce et les arts; partout des voies nouvelles de communication, comme autant d'artères nouvelles dans le corps de l'Etat, y établissent des rapports nouveaux" (198).

With the instincts of a merchant like Lheureux, Rodolphe seduces Emma by offering to break the relentless cycle of promise and disappointment in which Emma and Léon have acquiesced. Rodolphe promises to realize in her world the vicarious experience of romantic reading (198-99). Predictably, Rodolphe knows the fantaisies et folies of the women he seduces, but he also knows the structure of romantic desire. He paints her past disappointment and hopes for future bliss, as she does, in linear perspective. He knows that romantics derive their dreams from books, then attempt to fulfill them in action. Like Paolo and Francesca, they dream (read), act, then read again, "tour à tour." Emma regards him as the successful voyageur who has gone down the dark corridor, opened the door to the light, and returned. He subtly identifies himself as the companion of her dreams who resides at the horizon. He encourages her, like the heroes of her books and dreams, to experience vicariously his success in passing beyond the vanishing point of romantic desire.

Emma chooses to believe what Rodolphe only pantomimes. Emma repeatedly abandons the fixed point of view of bourgeois desire. While watching the intense passion depicted in the stage production of Scott's *Lucy of Lammermoor*, Emma considers, then rejects, the safety of the emotional detachment characteristic of Rodolphe, Léon, and the narrator.

Mais ce bonheur-là, sans doute, était un mensonge imaginé pour le désespoir de tout désir. Elle connaissait à présent la petitesse des passions que l'art exagérait. S'efforçant donc d'en détourner sa pensée, Emma voulait ne plus voir dans cette reproduction de ses douleurs qu'une fantaisie plastique bonne à amuser les yeux.
et même elle souriait intérieurement d'une pitié dédaigneuse quand, au fond du théâtre, sous la portière de velours, un homme apparut en manteau noir. (312)

Emma is creating a pose for her own protection. She would think of the *bonheur* of romance as destructive of desire because she wants to see herself as mature and realistic, beyond desire, beyond the optical illusion of romance. Disdain would protect her from her suicidal desire for the same passion as others seem to experience. But realistic detachment is useless when Lagardy, as Edgar, appears on stage.

Il devait avoir, pensait-elle, un intarissable amour, pour en déverser sur la foule à si larges effluves. Toutes ses velléités de dénigrement s'évanouissaient sous la poésie du rôle qui l'envahissait, et, entraînée vers l'homme par l'illusion du personnage, elle tâchait de se figurer sa vie, cette vie retentissante, extraordinaire, splendide, et qu'elle aurait pu mener, cependant, si le hasard l'avait voulu. (313)

This is what Léon, Rodolphe, and the narrator are protecting themselves from, by convincing themselves that they have exhausted romanticism. They have completed their sentimental education, experienced the last new wave, everything from here on is boring but safe. Not the bourgeois boredom that romanticism rejects, but the wise ennui of mature realism that has outgrown romanticism. Like Léon, Rodolphe becomes immune to the lure of experiences with Emma that seem to him monotonous repetitions of what he has already known.

Il s'était tant de fois entendu dire ces choses, qu'elles n'avaient pour lui rien d'original. Emma ressemblait à toutes les maîtresses; et le charme de la nouveauté, peu à peu tombant comme un vêtement, laissait voir à nu l'éternelle monotonie de la passion, qui a toujours les mêmes formes et le même langage . . . Mais, avec cette supériorité de critique appartenant à celui qui, dans n'importe quel engagement, se tient en arrière, Rodolphe aperçu en cet amour d'autres jouissances à exploiter. (265)

We recognize again the bourgeois confounding of flesh, money, and passion. Emma is judged as a commodity whose *nouveauté* has diminished, in a sexual metaphor of slackening passion which echoes Rodolphe's initial fantasy of exploiting Emma after their first meeting: “il revoyait Emma dans la salle, habillée comme il l'avait vue, et il la déshabillait” (181). Rodolphe survives disappointment, minimizes risk, through emotional detachment: he knew he wouldn't be happy with her anyway. But this narrator who convinces us he has fitted the precise word to each occasion, who treats cliches with disdainful italics, suddenly unmasks himself, relinquishes his protective distance from Emma, and speaks with fierce eloquence of the degrading standards of originality and novelty. We compare, in the brilliant turn occasioned by the paragraph following (“Mais, avec cette supériorité . . .”), the hysterical, dangerous (where can it lead except madness?) sympathy of the narrator, and the ruthless objectivity of Rodolphe.
The universal compulsion for new experiences has trapped the narrator between cruel indifference and suicidal empathy. It is in this context of a recently completed decision to be vulnerable no more, that we must regard the objectivity of the narrator's presentation of the triumph of Homais and Lheureux.

Homais' initial appearance in the novel clarifies the already initiated movement of a tradition-bound society disappearing before a modern society addicted to novelty. "Tout est changé! Il faut marcher avec son siècle!" (102). Homais advises Madame Lefrançois how to profit commercially from the lust for new experiences: get rid of the old pool table for a new one in the contemporary style, and set up a benefit for the independence of Poland. Madame Lefrançois is scandalized: people will continue to come to the Lion d'Or because they always have and, as for the pool table, it sleeps six and is also useful for folding clothes on. For Madame, le billard signifies (without rupture) that solid four-footed useful object in her front room, but for Homais it appropriates by association the romantic symbols of Paris fashion. By the end of the novel, Homais' prophecy of competition from across the street is fulfilled. Lheureux takes over the café français, renames it les favorites du commerce (!), and threatens to lure away the picturesque Hivert.

Homais knows how to take advantage of the devaluation of symbols during the reign of le roi bourgeois: signifiers now float free of signifieds, and derive their intelligibility from other families of empty signifiers. His greatest triumph is to arrange around himself, by his own journalism (the voies nouvelles de communication of the councillor's speech), a kindred diction powerful enough to attract, by sympathy, the croix d'honneur.

The narrator is trapped between a suicidal romanticism and an inhuman realism. He cannot allow himself to feel the plight of Emma and Charles, lest he become abused like they do. To protect himself from Rodolphe, he must become like Rodolphe, and betray Emma; to protect himself from Homais, he must, like Homais, regard style, the art of signifying, as the absolute manner of seeing things, and regard what he writes about as nothing.

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NOTES

2 I have previously discussed Modernism as a system of futile oppositions in "Toward a Redefinition of Modernism," Boundary 2, II, 3 (Spring 1974), 539-56.
4 Du Camp, having reached "maturity," observed the failure of desire in the more "naive" Flaubert the way the narrator of Madame Bovary observes Emma.
Je m’attendais, de la part de Gustave, à une explosion d’enthousiasme; il n’en fut rien; cette autorisation qu’il désirait avec une intensité douloureuse, lui causa une sorte d’accablement dont je fus stupéfait. On était dit qu’il y avait chez lui une détente subite d’aspiration et que son projet n’avait plus de prix du moment que l’exécution en devenait certaine. Cette observation, que je faisais pour la première fois, m’affligea; j’eus lieu de la renouveler souvent, car le rêve le satisfaisait bien plus que la réalité. Il désirait les choses avec une ardeur qui allait jusqu’à la souffrance, se désolait de ne les pouvoir obtenir, maudissait la destinée, nous prenait à témoin de son infortune, et dès qu’il était mis en possession de l’objet de ses convoités, se trouvait déçu et s’en occupait à peine. “Plus grands yeux que grand ventre,” disait ma grand-mère, qui le connaissait bien.

(Paris: Louis Conard, 1930), p. 95. All future page references will be in parentheses after the quotation.

5 Where Charles is introduced as “un nouveau habillé en bourgeois” (p. 23).

6 Jonathan Culler, in Flaubert. The Uses of Uncertainty (London: Paul Elek, 1974), characterizes Flaubert as a forerunner of modern semiology, who discovered the stupidity of signs, the absolute difference between signifier and signified. Culler discusses Charles’ hat, for example, as an overabundance of signs that defies integration or recuperation (p. 91). Culler is surely right to sense the intimacy of Flaubert’s thought to modern semiology, but Foucault’s analysis of madness offers here a suggestive analogy. Should we work backwards to discover in Flaubert an anticipation of what we already know, or might we discover in Flaubert’s work the origin of modern semiology in bourgeois culture?

LA BANDE DES VIOLENTS DANS LES PSAUMES D’ISRAËL

Les hommes règlent leurs désirs sur les désirs des autres. Ils souhaitent ce que recherchent leurs modèles. Aussi des désirs différents se heurtent-ils sans cesse sur le même objet. Inconsciemment surgissent des rivalités et la tendance spontanée à la violence entre en jeu. La coexistence pacifique entre les hommes n’est rien moins que naturelle. L’ordre menacé est rétabli quand les multiples “auteurs de violence” viennent à s’unir pour un sacrifice éventuel. Les hommes retrouvent la paix perdue en reportant leur agressivité mutuelle sur un bouc émissaire qui est ainsi exclu de la communauté troublée.

Ce processus est vécu différemment par les hommes qui y participent. La masse agressive éprouve un effroi mystérieux et sacré en recouvrant la paix à la suite du sacrifice d’un individu. Quant à l’homme rejeté, il subit un sort amer. Certes, il lui est possible de s’identifier à la perspective de la majorité qui, en même temps qu’elle le condamne à mort, est secrètement fascinée par lui. Alors il se considère lui-même comme “coupable” et partage la conviction qu’il lui faut être sacrifié pour apaiser la “colère des dieux.” Dans les sociétés archaïques les victimes devaient ordinairement subir leur destin avec une telle résignation.