

The Second Realities of *Madame Bovary*

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The extraordinary pearl of the tortured genius of Gustave Flaubert—the novel, *Madame Bovary*—exemplifies the kind of captivating puzzle that attracts attention well beyond the world of literary criticism.¹ In the early twentieth century, for example, it inspired Jules de Gaultier's philosophy of "Bovaryism," a psychological complex distilled from the novel and worked into a universal principle of human nature; it received existentialist treatment at the hands of Jean-Paul Sartre in his sprawling, multi-volume work, *The Family Idiot*; and it was seminal in the genesis of René Girard's provocative and influential theory of mimetic desire.² While Eric Voegelin's attention to Flaubert is confined to a handful of fleeting remarks, these remarks reveal a solid familiarity with Flaubert and point the way to a reading of *Madame Bovary* that would highlight the closure of the novel's central characters to transcendence, a closure that substitutes, in variously fumbling ways, second realities whose inadequacies drive the story to an unhappy end.

A tale of the country life of altogether undistinguished residents of small-town Normandy, the book centers on Emma Bovary, whose passions are fueled, from an early age, by books of romance and the rituals of a romanticized Catholic spirituality, who marries an earnest but exceedingly ordinary and unambitious country physician, Charles Bovary, whose cloddishness, along with the society of equally tedious townspeople in the rural town of Tostes, leads Emma

¹ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Eleanor Marx Aveling and Paul de Man, ed. Margaret Cohen (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005).

² See Jules de Gaultier, *Le Bovarysme*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Mercure de France, 1902); Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert 1821-1857*, Vol 5, trans. Carol Cosman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Pr., 1965).

into profound ennui and frustration. The couple seeks a change of life in a move to the town of Yonville, but its rural habits are no more stimulating for Emma; the couple bears a child, but Emma pursues motherhood with ambivalence. Her boredom and frustration mount, emerging, at times, as a simmering rage at everyone and everything that has deprived her of the intensity, the romance, and the cultural refinement that are, she is convinced, her proper destiny.

Eventually Emma finds an outlet for her passion in the unconsummated love of a young clerk, Léon—a love dashed when he leaves to pursue his career Rouen—then a torrid affair with a wealthy and unscrupulous landowner, Rodolphe, a master seducer who secures her complete devotion but who casts her away when she becomes too demanding. Rodolphe's rejection devastates Emma, who now seeks solace in dramatic displays of Christian repentance and charity, until a chance re-encounter with Léon initiates, by the device of weekly visits to Rouen under false pretenses, a full-blown affair. The affairs with Rodolphe and Léon are complicated by intermittent feelings of remorse and restlessness on Emma's part, and even the most fully realized of them exudes the stale aroma of domesticity when it carries on past its peak. Faced with the complex business of leading a double life, with its layers of deception and its financial demands, Emma salves her confusion and desolation with the trappings of elegance—ultimately at the cost of her household's solvency, and as the whole of her folly comes to be exposed, she worms her way into the local pharmacist's cabinet and swallows, greedily, handfuls of arsenic to die a gruesome death, as her hapless husband nurses her in despair and clueless devotion.

This is a book that would be a romance were the romantic themes not tinged with satire, as in one of Flaubert's inspirations, *Don Quixote*; it would be a satire were there not such moral gravity to its subject; it would be a piece of moral fiction were there not such a seeming inevitability to the relentless undoing of its central characters; it would be a tale of tragic ruin

were there some quality more than commonplace in its heroes; it would be a realist novel about the dignity of common people were its central figures not so utterly filled with a combination of lassitude and fantasy. It is a great novel about very little—about “nothing,” Flaubert once opined—wherein the hero is really the astoundingly precise and evocative prose in which it is written. As even the blandness of this rural life unfurls in sentence after sentence of artistic prodigy, one senses constantly that a wealth of creative spirit—the “smart,” as Erich Auerbach calls it—hovers somewhere inaccessibly around the relentless parade of folly.³

Madame Bovary is often hailed as a milestone in the development of the “psychological novel.” The narrative perspective shifts in uncanny ways—from frigid, analytic distance to the most intimate of heated reflections. One learns of Emma’s youth, her schooling in a convent, her return to her father’s farm, her courtship by Charles, the grand event of their wedding, and Charles’s boundless joy in life with his beautiful new wife; but only once Emma has settled into life in Tostes do we suddenly, for the first time, find ourselves truly in the privacy of *her* consciousness, with a terse and devastating realization: “Before marriage,” we are told, “she thought herself in love; but since the happiness that should have followed failed to come, she must, she thought, have been mistaken.”⁴ From this point on Emma’s inner thoughts become the unifying thread of the tale; yet we are also granted entry, at times, to the privacy of those who mask their feelings from her, as when Rodolphe first visits the household and sizes up the doctor’s character and Emma’s ripeness for seduction:

I think he is very stupid. She must be tired of him, no doubt. He has dirty nails, and hasn’t shaven for three days. While he is trotting after his patients, she sits there mending socks. How bored she gets! How she’d want to be in the city and go dancing every night! Poor little woman! She is gaping after love like a

³ Erich Auerbach, “On the Serious Imitation of the Everyday,” in Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, ed. Margaret Cohen (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), p. 431.

⁴ Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, p. 30.

carp on the kitchen table after water. Three gallant words and she'd adore me, I'm sure of it. She'd be tender, charming. Yes; but how get rid of her afterwards?⁵

Partly by means of this power of shifting perspective, the characters are shown to be living in largely self-enclosed worlds—dependent upon a community and yet emotionally and spiritually cut off from it. Auerbach makes this point as an observation on the psychology in the work, but from a Voegelinian perspective the self-enclosure that Flaubert evokes must equally be deemed existential, historical, and political. The human situation of metaxy—of existing consciously and intelligently amid a reality that is not of one's own ordering, with a mysterious beginning and a mysterious beyond—pervades every kind of seeking after meaningful and coherent living, whether in personal relations or political institutions. Metaxic mystery, when fully engaged, humbles one even as it draws one deeper into questioning and caring; it makes extraordinary demands that draw us beyond our limitations while yet reminding us of our finitude and constant need of grace. But this encounter with mystery, which is at the core of every authentic religious experience, can be rejected and in its place can be put something more obvious and comprehensible, more simple, seemingly more controllable than this reality of unfathomable mystery. This alternative is what Voegelin calls “second reality,” wherein human-made, world-centered and ego-centered stand-ins for the intimidating mystery of the metaxy are passionately embraced, yet fail, in their finitude, to sate the infinite longing at the core of the tension of existence.⁶ From a Voegelinian point of view, what Flaubert has captured is that longing, and he has unflinchingly reproduced the process by which desire, through second realities, becomes stubbornly alienated from its proper aim.⁷

⁵ Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, p. 106.

⁶ Eric Voegelin, “The Eclipse of Reality,” in *What is History? and Other Late Unpublished Writings*, ed. Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella, *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 28, pp. 111-62.

⁷ The dynamic of “openness” and “closure” of the soul has been central to the study of Voegelin's approach to literature, due in part, to Voegelin's own development of the theme in his interpretation of Henry James's *Turn of*

So, for example, Charles is presented to us as a simple man of complacent temperament who is altogether satisfied making modest contributions to the bourgeois social order, and who is “not of those who go to the root of things.”⁸ But through this temperament he embodies the mediocrity of the bourgeoisie itself—its use of material comfort to shield its social world from the moral and spiritual demands of the human existential situation. One feels sympathy for Charles, whose earnestness is so thoroughly abused by everyone in the book, yet one cannot but be pained by his lack of imagination and insight.

Emma is a woman of deep and genuine longing, but her passion becomes habitually connected with fantasies that reality cannot equal. Her religiosity becomes intense when it resembles romantic poesy, but it loses meaning when it is incorporated into ordinary life; her Christian devotion does not have a domestic form, remaining always strangely disconnected from her reality. Emma’s romantic imagination is filled with visions of the strong and genuine lover who will inspire her to a truly devoted domestic bliss, but no real person seems capable of matching this ideal. She longs for the majesty of aristocratic culture, and as such she offers an indictment of the bourgeois mediocrity that she is forced, by her status as a middle-class woman in a patriarchal society, to endure. One can admire her aspirations and creative imagination, yet at every turn it is embroiled in manipulative strategies that are sometimes comical, sometimes depressing, and usually tinged with an element of cruelty.

Goaded Charles and Emma on, from their different perspectives, are the thick-skulled and doctrinaire *abbé* of the town, Bournisien, and the book’s embodiment of Enlightenment

the Screw, in *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 12, Ed. Ellis Sandoz, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1990), pp. 134-71. See also, for example, Eugene Webb, “Eric Voegelin and Literary Theory” in Glenn Hughes et. al., eds., *Politics, Order and History: Essays on the Work of Eric Voegelin* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); Charles Embry, *The Philosopher and the Storyteller: Eric Voegelin and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Columbia, MO: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2008); Glenn Hughes, *A More Beautiful Question: The Spiritual in Poetry and Art* (Columbia, MO: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2011).

⁸ Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, p. 270.

hubris, the pharmacist, M. Homais, whom Voegelin has characterized as Voltaire without the wit or artistry.⁹ The *abbé* is a man for whom faith has become a matter of neither thought nor passion, but of obligation and routine. He is unable to conceive the depths of Emma's suffering and her spiritual needs. He embodies the failure of the Church, in the modern age, to be a force of inspiration and direction. His presence seems irrelevant, even when Emma is pleading for spiritual guidance. Homais, by contrast, is the representative of the modernist spirit. He is a loquacious but superficial intellectual, a self-promoter, and something of a quack—qualities that reach an ignominious denouement when he talks Charles into undertaking an experimental operation on the club foot of one of the boys in the town, with utterly dismal results. In his constant proclamations on the benefits of science and the scourge that is the clergy, Homais's second reality becomes manifest as one in which human reason has so perfectly solved the essential mysteries that even a rural pharmacist can effect medical miracles.

Lurking behind the scenes everywhere in the world of Yonville is the merchant, M. Lheureux, the literary instantiation of modern commerce, meticulously following Emma's consumer desires, luring her into taking on power of attorney, tempting her with delicious goods on ever-steeper terms of credit, going in for the kill, eventually, as is his habit and his commercial imperative. Commerce, in the world of Flaubert's novel, feeds on bourgeois fantasies. It is the means by which members of the middle class imagine themselves other than they are, at the risk of the ruin of what they are. Lheureux inhabits a second reality wherein the market is ultimate master of all meaning. He knows the human aspirations of his clients as means to material ends, and if the dreams yield, for these clients, a kind of fiscal self-immolation, one can certainly be on hand to reap the profits of the catastrophe.

⁹ Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas, Volume 6: Revolution and the New Science*, ed. Barry Cooper, *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 24 (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Pr., 1999), p. 68.

Part of the brilliance of Flaubert's characterization of this enclosure of the characters is his masterful portrayal of what Voegelin (following Bernard Lonergan) calls "scotosis"—the blind spot that operates negatively, as a kind of absence.¹⁰ The characters' relentless drive toward narrow ends is fueled by a profound inability to imagine things otherwise. Information that might seek to broaden, or chastise, or edify them simply has no place to land in their psyches. Alternative interpretations of life are simply out of view, rendered inaccessible by the stubbornness of the second reality. Charles cannot see what he lacks in Emma's eyes; Homais and Bournisien simply talk past one another; Lheureux cannot think in other than fiscal terms; and Emma simply cannot grasp how her own patterns of desire and disdain could be somehow the cause of her misery. At a point deep into her double life with Rodolphe, she receives a letter from her father, and recalls her youthful days on the farm:

What happiness she had known at that time, what freedom, what hope! What a wealth of illusions! It was all gone now. She lost them one by one, at every stage in the growth of her soul, in the succession of her conditions; maidenhood, marriage and love—shedding them along her path like a traveler who leaves something of his wealth at every inn along his road.

But who was it, then, who had made her so unhappy? What extraordinary catastrophe had destroyed her life? And she raised her head, as if seeking around her for the cause of all that suffering.¹¹

Scotosis is not a matter of having negative or positive views on a subject, but having no thoughts on the matter whatsoever, nor even the questions that lead to the thoughts, nor even the ability to see the troubling evidence that leads to the questions that yield opinions. The unrelenting drive of worldly passion distorts by what it leaves out, what it lacks the means to include. The suffering in this book is birthed out of the depths of unfathomable finitude which, in the Christian tradition, is why one needs the constant working of divine grace and forgiveness, as

¹⁰ Eric Voegelin, "What is Political Reality?" in *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, trans M.J. Hanak, ed. David Walsh, *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 6 (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Pr., 2002), pp. 399-400.

¹¹ Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, p. 140.

when Augustine, in the *Confessions*, begs of God to forgive the sins of which he is unaware. Indeed, for Voegelin, second realities bear a connection to the heresy by which one seeks to take over divine authority and order the world by one's own *libido dominandi*. Of this connection he took Flaubert to be perfectly aware: "He knew all about the perversions of gnosticism; he established a central connection between between *hérésie et cruauté*—in its tragic form and in its comic form."¹² In light of this connection, between the divorce from grace and the chilly power of benighted will, the great passions of Emma Bovary's heart are exposed as the workings of the heart of stone. Hers is a passionate closure within second reality that mirrors the scotosis of the age, as do the correlative closures of her story's other *dramatis personae*.

It is here, in the connection between scotosis, personality, and society, that we may wish to consider another, somewhat problematic term: "*Dummheit*," "stupidity," "*la bêtise humaine*."¹³ So indistinguishable is this term, at least in English, from a crude insult, it is awkward to try to grant it technical meanings. But it is Voegelin's word and Flaubert's word, a word they wish to use in specialized ways. For Flaubert, stupidity is a kind of force of history. In a letter, he wrote:

Stupidity is immovable; nothing can attack it without being shattered against it. It has the nature of granite, hard and resistant. At Alexandria a certain Thompson of Sunderland has written his name in letters six feet high on Pompey's column. It can be read a quarter of a league away. There is absolutely no way of seeing the column without seeing the name of Thompson of Sunderland, and consequently without thinking of Thompson of Sunderland. The imbecile is incorporated into the monument and is perpetuated with it. Nay, more—he overwhelms it with the splendor of his gigantic letters....All fools are more or less Thompsons of Sunderland. How many of them we meet in life—in life's most beautiful squares, in its purest corners! They are always bursting in upon us: they are so numerous, they come back so often, their health is so excellent!¹⁴

¹² Eric Voegelin, "In Search of the Ground," in *Published Essays: 1953-1965*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 11, pp. 224-5.

¹³ See Auerbach, "Imitation of the Everyday," pp. 430-1.

¹⁴ Reproduced in Francis Steegmuller, *Flaubert and Madame Bovary: A Double Portrait*, (New York: New York Review Books, 2005), p. 194.

In *Hitler and the Germans*, Voegelin wishes to connect his use of term, “stupidity,” with the *amathes* of Plato, the *nabal* of the Hebrew prophets, and the *stultus* of Aquinas. Such persons, in failing to consult reason, are severed from the intelligibility of the divine order, with a resulting impoverishment of language that creates a type of illiteracy, even among cultured persons.¹⁵ In spite of their benighted thinking, and in part because of it, they see fit to dominate and command their fellow citizens with relatively little concern as to what might make their ordering of things legitimate.

The Voegelinian idea of second reality squares with the basic definition of Gaultier’s “bovarysm”—a self-conception that is at odds with reality, one that becomes comic or tragic depending on the intensity of its pursuit and the distance between fact and fiction.¹⁶ Compatible, too, is René Girard’s elaboration of bovarysm as mimetic desire (i.e. acquired through imitation) and metaphysical desire (i.e. definitive of the person in his or her ultimacy).¹⁷ Voegelin is very much attuned, as well, to the kinds of connections that Girard finds between mimetic desire and violence—Flaubert’s connection of heresy and cruelty. Voegelin would reject, however, Gaultier’s Nietzschean interpretation of bovarysm as a corollary of the inadequacy of all conceptualization and language to the richness of reality, as an illusionism and deceptiveness that is seemingly an element of the human survival instinct—or is, at the very least, an essential component of the cunning of reason.¹⁸ And Voegelin would deem Sartre’s interpretation of *Madame Bovary* altogether confused. Sartre’s philosophy itself constitutes, for Voegelin, the epitome of second-reality thinking, beginning, as it does, with the dogmatic assertion of a

¹⁵ Eric Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, trans. and ed. Detlev Clemens and Brendan Purcell, *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 31 (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Pr., 1999), pp. 89-91.

¹⁶ Gaultier, *Le Bovarysme*, pp. 13-6.

¹⁷ “Flaubert...looked on bovarysm as a deviation of the need for transcendency.” Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, p. 62.

¹⁸ See Gaultier, *Le Bovarysme*, pp. 238 ff.

humanly-indifferent universe and ending with political support of the mass movements of Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot.¹⁹ In Sartre's reading, Flaubert's novel about "nothing" is a novel about "the nothing"—i.e. Sartre's *néant*—the void into which all temporal beings slide, which is equally, through its utter amorphousness, the condition of freedom for self-making. The characters in *Bovary* continually generate imaginary fantasies of eternal truth and happiness, all of which crumble, or reveal their absurdity, in the ineluctable passage of time toward nonbeing. The characters are studies in the "bad faith" by which one wishes one's personality to be absorbed and preserved in some given ideal model of successful personhood. Flaubert's own ironical feat of capturing the disruption of the eternal imaginary by the forces of time in the permanence of imaginative prose represents, for Sartre, the author's own appropriation (mixed with heaps of neurotic ambivalence) of the tensions of being and nonbeing.²⁰

Much as Voegelin would acknowledge self-imposed constrictions on the freedom of Flaubert's characters, he would see no sort of liberation in their migration to Sartre's universe of existential egoism and ontological nothingness.

By an act of imagination man can shrink himself to a self that is "condemned to be free." To this shrunken or contracted self, as we shall call it, God is dead, the past is dead, the present is the flight from the self's non-essential facticity toward being what it is not, the future is the field of possibles among which the self must choose its project of being beyond mere facticity, and freedom is the necessity of making a choice that will determine the self's own being. The freedom of the contracted self is the self's damnation not to be able not to be free.²¹

Certainly, it is unsurprising if the contracted self sees nothing in the ground of being but nothingness, for it has, by fiat, eliminated any alternative ground from the outset.

¹⁹ Sarah Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café* (New York: Other Press, 2016), p. 293.

²⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot*, Vol. 5, pp. 13-22, 396.

²¹ Eric Voegelin, "The Eclipse of Reality," in *What is History? and Other Late Unpublished Writings*, ed. Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella, *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 28 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1990), p. 111.

All of these interpretations of *Madame Bovary*, the Voegelinian included, are psychological to the extent that they center on intricate dynamics of inner symbolization and affectivity; but all of them also see vastly more at stake than the feelings of individual persons, for symbolisms shape the mediation of all meaning and thereby have powerful influence over the most momentous decisions of historical agents. And here we may return to the question of the status of style in the novel. Again, it must be considered, from a Voegelinian point of view, something other than the hypostatization of the aesthetic that Gaultier and Sartre imagine. Were it merely “stylistic” in the sense of an aestheticist exercise, it would not have the same weight and influence that it does. Were it a mere telling of the inevitable dissolution of life and dreams, it would not be so overcast with the feeling that Auerbach has highlighted, that things could somehow be otherwise. If the core of the novel is style, if style is language, and if language is a forest of symbols, then style can be seen as a means by which the tenacity of symbols works as a countervailing force in the tale despite the fragmentation and deformation of those symbols.

As neither the man who engages in deforming himself to a self ceases to be a man; nor the surrounding reality of God and man, world and society does change its structure; nor the relations between man and his surrounding reality be abolished; frictions between the shrunken self and reality are bound to develop....The frictions...will grow into a general conflict between the world of his imagination and the real world.²²

As with every symbolization, the power of engendering experience remains latent in Emma Bovary’s immanentized romanticism through meanings sedimented in symbolic expression, generating constant friction with her second reality. The “smart” that hovers everywhere in the interstices among the monadic interior worlds of Emma and the novel’s other characters cannot be utterly purged of its indexical character. Indeed, the power of Flaubert’s writing makes the

²² Voegelin, “The Eclipse of Reality,” pp. 111-2.

transcendent potentiality of symbols shimmer far beyond the pedestrian uses his characters make of them.