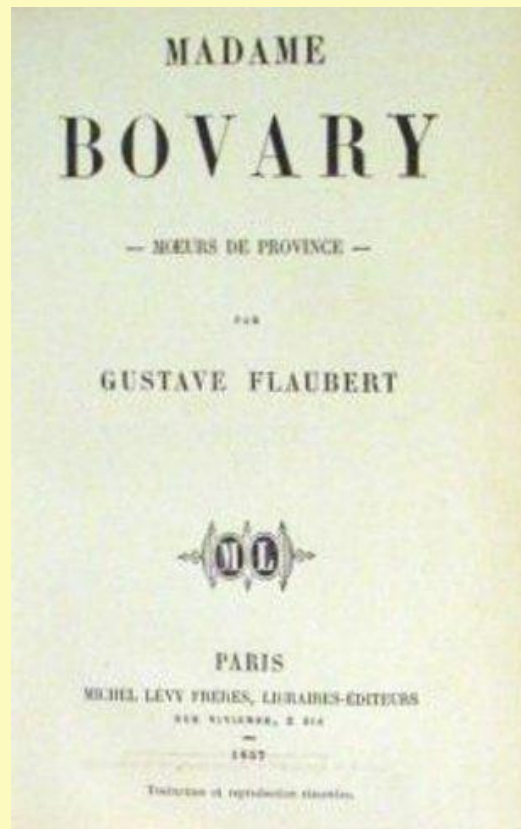


Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* and the Twilight of Romanticism

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Publisher: Mercurius Press, Australia, 2013. A version of this essay appeared in 'The Angel of Luxury and Sadness, 2001, by Ian Irvine (first published by via Booksurge – now Create-Space).

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Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* and the Twilight of Romanticism

I am bored with crying, I no longer feel much sadness. I have much ennui, however, I feel old, used up, disheartened about everything. I am old like the pyramids and tired like a donkey.¹

Of all the pre-modernist novelists it is perhaps Flaubert who best articulates the nature of the formless angst that hovers like a ghost over so much nineteenth century literature. *Madame Bovary* represents a crucial shift in the European consciousness. It is not merely a shift in France toward Realism though obviously, along with Balzac, Flaubert helped to establish the realist tradition there. Rather, the work represents a shift toward the realistic portrayal of a certain kind of internal suffering which at that time was just beginning to affect the middle classes. Flaubert's Realism was founded on the psychic despair of ennui which became more and more widespread as the century wore on.²

Flaubert Critiques 'Escapist Romanticism'

When *Madame Bovary* is contrasted with earlier novels by the likes of Austen, Fielding, Thackeray, Trollope and Scott (i.e. early proponents of what might be termed Romantic Realism in fiction), we begin to see the enormous implications of the strange mood shift that the work heralds. It is a stark text devoid of many of the escapist clauses of Romanticism. Indeed, it has been read as a deliberate demolition of a certain kind of Romanticism. All through the text Flaubert contrasts various motifs popular in 'escapist' Romanticism with the dreary realities of Emma's provincial bourgeois existence. Romanticism, as it manifests in Emma's mind, serves as a way of avoiding certain uncomfortable realities. It also stops her facing her own personality failings.

The problem for Emma is that her dreams and fantasies become mental rituals to remain inauthentic. Repeatedly throughout the novel she is tricked by addiction to these fantasies – their seductive, yet patently unrealistic promises of a more colourful 'real' life. They are not grounded in healthy feeling, however, but in unrealistic longing and wish fulfilment. For Emma, Romanticism seems to function as a kind of psychic drug to escape the petty trivialities of her bourgeois existence. We note also transgressive impulses that when acted out only serve to tie her ever more firmly to the life she so despises. Romantic 'escapism', Flaubert seems to suggest, can aid flight from self. In this sense, Emma is hopelessly trapped, not only by social circumstances, but, also inwardly by an inability to confront her own morbid expectations and desires. Pettiness and triviality, the essence of bourgeois ennui, breed unreal fantasies of escape which become structured into Emma's psyche in the form of symptoms associated with a nineteenth century version of the normative ennui cycle (see my writings elsewhere on this topic). In this sense her Romanticism reveals itself to be part of the illness. Throughout the novel we note that Emma appears to be unable to respond honestly to anything—at a

¹ Flaubert, as cited in Christin (1923, p.241). Trans. Arnaud Gallois (1996).

² Many critics, French and English, have specifically noted the role chronic ennui plays in *Madame Bovary* in particular, and in Flaubert's literature in general. This analysis is in dialogue with many of the points made by the following writers on the topic: Kuhn, (1976, pp.259-269); Bouchez (1973, p.91); O'Connor, (1967, p.389); Clive (1965, pp.365-66); Sagnes (1969).

fundamental level she is unable to be herself in the world. Her malady is self-estrangement coloured by lack of genuine joy and contentment.

Emma and the Symptoms of 'Normative Ennui' – *horror loci* and *taedium vitae*

Throughout the story Emma suffers from classic ennui symptoms associated with the *horror loci*, wherever she is she wants to be somewhere else, whoever she is with, whatever she does, fails to move her according to the expectations of her imagination. Her goals and life energies are constantly directed toward a future happiness that can never actually eventuate, even if certain goals (e.g. taking a dangerous and exciting lover) are apparently fulfilled. Beneath all the activity and striving, all the desperate attempts to feel something real, there is the parasite that is chronic ennui and consequently 'her life was as cold as an attic facing north, and the silent spider boredom wove its web in all the shadowed corners of her heart.'³

Clearly, symptoms associated with *taedium vitae* ('boredom with life') also haunt Emma's existence. There are numerous descriptions of Emma's 'waiting' in the text. It is a metaphysical waiting, a waiting for self, or a feeling of self that somehow retreats the more she chases it. In a sense, Emma is forever waiting for life to begin, for something to happen that will make her feel alive. In terms of the ennui illness, this waiting represents a state of *death in life* for the present is eternally abandoned as a source of joy and contentment; only the future holds out hope of real life:

And all the time, deep within her, she was waiting for something to happen. Like a shipwrecked sailor she scanned her solitude with desperate eyes for the sight of a white sail far off on the misty horizon.⁴

Normative Ennui and Emma's Relationship with Charles

Emma's marriage to Charles provides us with the first major example of the links between tedium, hope and the ennui cycle as they conspire to ruin her life.⁵ A belief in magic, in miraculous events that will transform her consciousness forever, is central to her choosing to marry Charles. The reader is also told that it was 'anxiety' that impelled her to fall in love with him, to 'believe herself possessed at last of that wonderful passion which hitherto had hovered above her like a great bird of rosy plumage in the splendour of a poetic heaven ...'.⁶

On her honeymoon Emma almost believes that she is finally feeling those ecstasies of the soul that she feels are her birthright: 'To savour all its sweetness it would doubtless have been necessary to sail away to lands with musical names where wedding nights leave behind them a more delicious indolence.'⁷ Love born of anxiety, however, is no

³ Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1987, p.57).

⁴ Ibid (1987, p.75).

⁵ Emma's schoolgirl experiences of convent life also display signs of chronic ennui, after rebelling against the religious life Emma is sent home. Upon arrival the narrator says of her: 'Home once more, Emma ...sickened of the country and longed for the convent again.' Ibid (1987, p.52).

⁶ Ibid (1987, p.53)

⁷ Ibid (1987, p.53).

love at all; it is the desperate need to be in love, the 'desire for desire' spoken of by Tolstoy in relation to ennui. Even on her wedding night the fantasies, the heady images that populate her mind, are in danger of dispersing in favour of an 'intangible unease that shifts like the clouds and eddies like the wind.'⁸

After the initial glow afforded her by marriage Emma begins to feel bored and confined by Charles and the stultifying bourgeois social circumstances that surround her. Perceptions of passive almost intolerable waiting give rise to fantasies of ideal love, which impel frantic activity (marriage), which inevitably lapse into the boring realities of bourgeois marriage. Emma's marriage to Charles is thus, from the very beginning, a study in what the Existentialists call 'bad faith'.

Charles is part of Emma's unease; he is described as ennui incarnate: 'Charles' conversation was as flat as a street pavement, on which everybody's ideas trudged past in their workaday dress, provoking no emotion, no laughter, no dreams.'⁹ Emma's experience of sex with Charles only delivers her further into the talons of chronic boredom. She is forced to develop a certain false consciousness about her true feelings. The truth is she is experiencing sexual misery – there is no variety, no excitement, no genuine feeling exchanged between her and Charles during sex. The themes of ennui's relationship to 'habituation' and life numbing 'routine' enter the text. Whether, however, Charles is the ultimate cause of Emma's misery or whether the problem (at least in part) is in Emma herself is open to debate. Certainly the Flaubert depicts Charles in a rather unfavourable light. He is insensitive to Emma's anguish:

[Charles'] ardours had lapsed into a routine, his embraces kept fixed hours; it was just one more habit, a sort of dessert he looked forward to after the monotony of dinner.¹⁰

Social Climbing as a Cure for Emma's Boredom

Emma's feelings of boredom and frustration give rise to unreal fantasies of escape. She comes to believe that relating to a better social milieu will relieve her of her ennui symptoms (we note that the idea that the external world can change an impoverished interior world is a common illusion for those suffering chronic ennui). The Marquis' ball becomes the focus of these new fantasies of escape. A night at the ball raises all her hopes for Romantic versions of happiness. It also exposes, more than ever, the shallowness of her rural existence and as a consequence Emma is overcome with chronic ennui all the more profoundly having experienced something (at the ball) of her dreams.

The next day went, oh, so slowly! She walked round the garden, up and down the same few paths, stopping in front of the flower beds or the fruit-wall or the plaster *cure*, staring in bewilderment at all those old familiar things ... The visit

⁸ Ibid (1987, p.53).

⁹ Ibid (1987, p.54).

¹⁰ Ibid (1987, p.56).

to La Vaubyessard had made a gap in her life, like those great chasms that a mountain-storm will sometimes scoop out in a single night.¹¹

The sad irony here is that her illusions about aristocratic life function as part of her illness. A Romantic pining for the life of idealised aristocrats—note: she sees them as truly alive in comparison to herself and Charles—in the end assists Emma to avoid a confrontation with her own emptiness. Flaubert, describes this moment in her life well:

Theirs was a higher life, 'twixt heaven and earth ... The rest of the world came nowhere, had no proper status, no real existence. In fact the nearer home things came, the more she shrank from all thought of them. The whole of her immediate environment – dull countryside, imbecile petty bourgeois, life in its ordinariness – seemed a freak, a particular piece of bad luck that had seized on her; while beyond, as far as eye could see, ranged the vast lands of passion and felicity.¹²

When this escape route fails – she receives no invitation to the Marquis' October Ball – ‘stage one’ symptoms of chronic ennui return with a vengeance:

... After this dreary disappointment there was the same void in her heart again, and the succession of identical days began anew ... And so they would follow on, one after another, always the same; innumerable days that brought nothing.¹³

Affairs (Transgression) as an Antidote to Emma's Chronic Ennui

And so Emma's life begins to spiral out of control, her emotional life alternates between passivity, with its unrealistic fantasies for action, and destructive activity aimed at appropriating aspects of the external world as though they can make good the core inner lack.

Inevitably such appropriations fail and consequently the darker, depressive elements of her cycle reappear. At such moments she seems on the verge of facing the truth of her self-delusionary condition:

Next day was a day of mourning for Emma. Everything seemed wrapped in a drifting, clinging, darkness, and sorrow sank deep in her soul with a muffled wailing, like the winter wind in a derelict chateau. It was the spell cast by the departed, the lassitude that follows the event, the pain caused by any accustomed motion breaking off or prolonged vibration abruptly ceasing. ... Sombrely melancholy, numbly despairing as when she had returned from La Vaubyessard with the dance tunes whirling in her head ...¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid (1987, p.69).

¹² Ibid (1987, p.72).

¹³ Ibid (1987, p.76).

¹⁴ Ibid (1987, p.136).

Even affairs cannot release her from her chronic ennui. Though initially exciting they repeatedly end in desensitised routine as passion flares before inevitably burning out—evidence, it would seem that Charles is not the entire cause of her troubled state:

Gone were the tender words that had moved her to tears, those tempestuous embraces that had sent her frantic. The grand passion into which she had plunged seemed to be dwindling around her like a river sinking into its bed; she saw the slime at the bottom. She refused to believe it. She redoubled her tenderness. And Rodolphe took less and less care to hide his indifference.¹⁵

Indeed all her relationships with men function as opiates, temporary diversions or desperate attempts at release from lack of feeling—from existential numbness:

Emma was like any other mistress; and the charm of novelty, gradually slipping away like a garment, laid bare the eternal monotony of passion, whose forms and phrases are forever the same. And difference of feeling underlying a similarity in the words escaped the notice of that man of much experience. ... Her attachment to him was a thing of idiocy, full of wonderment for him, full of voluptuous pleasure for her, a drugged blessedness; and her soul sank deep in its intoxication, drowned and shrivelled up in it like the Duke of Clarence in his butt of malmsey.¹⁶

Here the problem of unrealistic 'fantasy and hope', an aspect of the first stage of the ennui malady in chronic form, is attached, for Emma, to men. Men who look or act like 'Romantic heroes' represent release from her impossible circumstances. This is why Emma's dreams of life with Rodolphe can take on no definite shape:

... And yet, in the vast spaces of that imagined future, no particular phenomenon appeared. The days, all magnificent, were all alike as waves. The vision hovered on the horizon, infinite and harmonious, in a haze of blue, in a wash of sunshine.¹⁷

Dreams built on self-annihilation are doomed to failure. Sooner or later the 'silent spider' returns to stare her in the face. When Rodolphe leaves her she comes down with a classic attack of the 'hypp', otherwise known as 'hysteria' or 'the female malady'. Normative ennui becomes, for a time, dysfunctional ennui:

She used to lie in bed and have little meals brought up to her, or ring for the maid to ask her about her invalid drinks, or just to have a chat. And every day the snow on the market-roof cast its white glitter into the room. When the snow

¹⁵ Ibid (1987, p.183).

¹⁶ Ibid (1987, p.203).

¹⁷ Ibid (1987, p.208).

went, the rain came. Emma would wait, in a kind of suspense, for each small daily event to come inexorably round, little though it might concern her.¹⁸

The experience with Rodolphe does not stop her from repeating the same disaster with Leon. Indulgence in unreal activity (i.e. actions based upon her illusions) inevitably ends in depression, a deeper loss of self and a more tenuous hold on reality:

... They began to talk more of things indifferent to their love. Emma's letters were all about flowers, poetry, the moon and the stars – ingenious shifts of an enfeebled passion endeavouring to recoup its powers from any and every external source. She would look forward to a profound happiness at the next meeting, then have to admit that she felt nothing remarkable. Disappointment was quickly overlaid by fresh hope.¹⁹

Social Roles and Emma's Ennui

Central to Emma's ennui cycle is a certain annulling of the self in relation to others in society. The more she struggles to be the Emma of her dreams the more imprisoned she is by the values and opinions of others, the less access she has to a sense of self capable of withstanding the social world into which she has been thrown.

Her response to her mother's death illustrates certain aspects of both her ignorance and her disengagement from reality. There is a desire to idealise the situation which results in a certain estrangement from more genuine emotions. Perhaps (from a psychoanalytic perspective) she flees from aggressive or ambivalent feelings toward her mother and, indeed, her entire upbringing:

Emma was inwardly gratified to feel she had attained at the outset to that rare ideal of sensitive beings to which the common soul cannot aspire. And so she drifts off down the meandering ways of Lamartine, listened to harps on lakes, to all the songs of dying swans, all the falling leaves, the pure virgins rising to Heaven and the voice of the Eternal speaking in the valleys. It palled on her, she refused to admit the fact, and kept on at first from force of habit, then from vanity: until quite suddenly she was surprised to feel herself at peace, with no more sadness in her heart than wrinkles on her brow.²⁰

Clearly Emma is *playing* at grief. She longs to feel what is socially expected of a perfect daughter at the death of her mother. She is disturbed by the fact that what she actually feels is peace. She lapses into the melodrama of the false self, which is to say that there is a certain amount of theatre, a certain desire to exist for others, a certain insentience of the soul which she dare not admit to herself.

Does Emma suffer from Normative, Dysfunctional or Creative Ennui?

¹⁸ Ibid (1987, p.224).

¹⁹ Ibid (1987, p.293).

²⁰ Ibid (1987, p.52).

All through the book, Emma avoids a more authentic sense of self by resort to various mental tricks which are cyclic in form. Her mood swings, however, do not lead to emotional or spiritual growth, rather, in the end they lead only to ruin, stagnation, suicide. The more Emma's life deteriorates the more prominent becomes the 'otherness' of these psychological rhythms. Her chronic boredom has a life, a rhythm, of its own, alien to the rhythms of her true needs and desires. Her symptoms of *taedium vitae*, of *horror loci*, of a fundamental joylessness covered over by frantic activity prove that she suffers from the classic primary symptoms of chronic ennui. Emma's illness also displays many secondary characteristics, notably lack of awareness (as associated with normative ennui), estrangement from self, hysterical episodes, manic activity followed by depression, addiction to objects, petty activities, values typical of the mass, sexual alienation and so on.

Emma's lack of awareness of her malaise might suggest that she suffered from normative ennui. However, I would argue that her ennui is too virulent to sustain such a reading. Certainly there is a fundamental lack of awareness of self, also a more or less continuous addiction to status, objects and other things that the masses – rich and poor – are taught to esteem as substitutes for emotional and spiritual well-being. Likewise, she exhibits a constant desire to flee from ascending anxiety at all costs; there is no desire to confront it such as one might see in a nineteenth century poet experimenting with drugs, bizarre forms of sexuality or the occult. All of these aspects of Emma's illness are fundamental aspects of the emerging normative ennui cycle. However, Emma does not suffer from normative ennui. Her ennui is not functional, rather it is some mixture of dysfunctional and creative ennui. It can be argued, that at critical points in the novel Emma approaches a partial understanding of her malaise. It is an awareness born of genuine adversity, an awareness denied to the rest of the characters in the book, rich and poor alike. Emma's ennui thus breaks the bounds of normative ennui; it is too keen, too feverish, too real (despite her constant attempts to remain inauthentic) to be contained within the straightjacket of bourgeois functionality. This is not to say that Emma is always or even most often 'aware' of what it is that truly gnaws at her soul. For most of the book quite the opposite is true she is as unaware (and intent on staying so) as the rest of the novel's more functional characters.

Is Emma's Ennui a Distinctly 'Female' Version of the Malady?

The question of whether Emma's ennui is the same as the ennui suffered by men of the period is an important one. Clearly, in some respects it is, however, in others it isn't. Many theorists (feminist and otherwise) have recently attempted to chart the differences between male and female emotional disturbances and their causes.²¹ Such research emphasises the fact that particular social stresses may predispose different people to different psychosomatic illnesses. Emma's malaise may be understood as a specifically feminine and middle class version of chronic ennui. The importance of Emma's gender to the course of her illness is clearly stated in the text:

²¹ See Showalter (1985) and Rohrbaugh (1981, Part V). See also Chapter Eight of this work.

The thought of having a male child afforded her a kind of anticipatory revenge for all her past helplessness. A man, at any rate, is free. He can explore the passions and the continents, can surmount obstacles, reach out to the most distant joys. Whereas a woman is constantly thwarted. At once inert and pliant, she has to contend with both physical weakness and legal subordination. Her will is like the veil on her bonnet, fastened by a single string and quivering at every breeze that blows. Always there is a desire that impels and a convention that restrains.²²

These conditions, brought on by a specific kind of oppression, make Emma's ennui different (however similar in form) to that of the men of the same period. The passage above also provides insight into the psychic strain placed on nineteenth century women possessed of the artistic sensibility (even in small measure). Economic and cultural forces meant that Emma could not choose to become a female artist without exposing herself and her family to potential economic hardship. An exploration of her ennui through creative expression is unavailable to Emma – as it was to most lower and middle class European women in the 19th century. Her gender and her class together remove the possibility of her opting for the role of a suffering, angst-ridden artist, a role at that time more or less reserved for upper class men. The only course of escape from normative ennui for any but the strongest creative female was a collapse into morbid symptomology – dysfunctional ennui. Certainly Emma's ennui turns out to be dysfunctional. However, her suffering, as depicted by Flaubert, is meant to be more than personally significant. Her illness implicates all society, in particular, it forces us to view secularised forms of patriarchy much more critically.

Terrifying Epiphanies at Rock Bottom

It may be argued that Emma does indeed have moments of awareness worthy of artists and philosophers. At critical moments in the text she realises that her malaise is first and foremost an internal one; nothing in the world can truly fulfil her, her fantasies only feed the illness:

She had no illusions now. She had laid them out in all the varied ventures of her soul, the successive phases of maidenhood, marriage and love, strewing them along her path like a traveller who leaves behind a portion of his gold at every wayside inn ... But if that were so, why was she unhappy? Where was the rare catastrophe that had cast her down? She raised her head and glanced about her as though to detect the cause of her suffering.²³

This pitiful gesture, half conducted in bad faith (i.e. as the Romantic gesture of the heroine's despair), brings the reader close to the true source of Emma's suffering and likewise near to a description of the chronic ennui suitable to an age which has lost almost all metaphysical perspectives on such a malaise. Emma exhibits a similar moment

²² Flaubert (1987, p.101).

²³ Ibid (1987, p.185).

of dawning awareness later in the book. Like the first, it occurs during stage one of the malaise, i.e. at the point before new fantasies and illusions take a hold on consciousness and begin to impel her toward renewed meaningless activity:

No matter, she still wasn't happy, she never had been. What caused this inadequacy in her life? Why did everything she leaned on instantaneously decay? ... Oh, if somewhere there were a being strong and handsome, a valiant heart, passionate and sensitive at once, a poet's spirit in an angel's form, a lyre with strings of steel, sounding sweet-sad epithalamiums to the heavens, then why should she not find that being? Vain dream! There was nothing that was worth going far to get: all was lies! Every smile concealed a yawn of boredom, every joy a misery. Every pleasure brought its surfeit; and the loveliest kisses only left upon your lips a baffled longing for a more intense delight.²⁴

The insubstantiality, the toxicity, and the internal nature of Emma's malaise needs no better symbolic embodiment than that of the rat poison that eventually kills her:

... At the word 'nurse', which revived the memory of her lusts and her miseries, Madame Bovary turned her head aside as though another, stronger poison were rising nauseously in her throat.²⁵

This poison symbolises the literal existence in her body, psyche and spirit of poisonous social and cultural forces imbibed since childhood from the world around her – and now, at the point of death, they seem to have their final victory.

Socio-Cultural Ennui in *Madame Bovary*

In what sense then, does *Madame Bovary* diagnose forms of socio-cultural ennui?

A dearth of genuine feeling seems to be the norm among the characters that Emma comes into contact with. What is worse, for a sensitive spirit like Emma, is the impression we are given that her desires and dreams, her interests even are of no 'practical' value to the people with whom she mixes. By resort to humour and irony various bourgeois institutions are criticised (almost along Romantic lines) in terms of the limitations they impose on subjective existence. In particular: bourgeois marriage, the pettiness, parochialism and conformity demanded by small town life, and the rigid categorising of 'life' by resort to Enlightenment versions of what constitutes real knowledge.

Clearly, the spectre of normative ennui looms ominously behind much of Flaubert's critique. The idea that ennui is almost universal, at least among the middle classes, is well illustrated by the following comments made by the narrator about Leon late in the book.

It was time to be serious. Accordingly he was renouncing the flute, elevated sentiments, and the imagination. Every bourgeois in the ferment of his youth, if

²⁴ Ibid (1987, p.295).

²⁵ Ibid (1987, p.330).

only for a day or a minute, has believed himself capable of a grand passion, a high endeavour. Every run of the mill seducer has dreamed of Eastern queens. Not a lawyer but carries within him the debris of a poet ... It bored him [Leon] nowadays when Emma suddenly started sobbing on his chest. Like those people who cannot endure more than a certain dose of music, his heart grew drowsily indifferent to the clamour of a love whose niceties he could no longer appreciate ... They knew each other too well to feel that astonishment in possession which multiplies its joys a hundred-fold. She was as sated with him as he was tired of her. Emma had rediscovered in adultery all the banality of marriage ... But how to break free? Humiliated though she might feel by that low level happiness, she clung to it from habit or depravity, worrying it the harder every day, exhausting all felicity by demanding too much of it.²⁶

A critique of false, or escapist, romanticism is again implicit. Likewise, 'habituation', 'routine' and 'loss of vision' are taken as an inevitable result of addiction to both escapist Romanticism and unimaginative bourgeois conformity (being central to the normative male middle class versions of the ennui cycle). Every 'philistine', so Flaubert seems to say, has been emotionally gutted, he substitutes 'grand passion' for mere habit—for the ennui of comfortable normality. Leon (since he is able to function in society) ends up more unconscious of his illness than Emma. His is the sickness of what the Existentialists later termed 'bad faith', of 'being for others'. Emma, on the other hand, is unable to opt for such an existence. Her life ends in dispersal and destruction, and it is precisely at that point, at the moment of her greatest defeat, that she perhaps finally transcends the malady she had so failed to defeat by conventional means. Paradoxically in the 'realism' of her death she becomes truly heroic – for the malaise behind ordinary bourgeois existence has, for a moment, finally been forced to show its face and that face is death without glory (Romance).

The theme of the corrosive effects of the public will is dramatised and personified in the novel and it can be argued that particular figures stand for specific aspects of the bourgeois world-view: e.g. the townspeople of Yonville generally believe in the idea of progress; the farmers of Yonville embody the idea of productivity; Monsieur Homais symbolises a faith in the accumulation of scientific facts and figures; Lheureux personifies the capitalistic ethic, and Emma herself seems to typify the consumeristic mentality that seeks substitute happiness in the accumulation of objects and the escapist mentality which flees from uncomfortable realities into various cultural opiates.

Emma as a Prisoner of Mercantile Formulations of Time

Of particular relevance to our attempts to understand the social forces that gave rise to nineteenth century versions of the ennui cycle is Flaubert's critique of the bourgeois attitude toward time. Emma's ennui cycle is related to a perception of time as bequeathed to – *engraved* upon – her psyche by her culture. Many of the perceptions of time that would haunt Baudelaire in *Paris Spleen* and Beckett in plays like *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*, are already apparent in Emma's battle with ennui; more generally, such

²⁶ Ibid (1987, p.301).

perceptions may be deemed to be representative of the nineteenth century female ennui cycle.

The understanding of time that was sweeping Europe in the nineteenth century – scientific time, mercantile time, mechanistic time – becomes Emma's gaoler. It is as though the great forces unleashed during the Enlightenment create a socialised view of time that shunts the lives, histories and meaning creation impulses of millions of human beings into the prison yard of self as activity, striving, accumulation, or, in the case of the women of the period 'consumption'. All other orientations of the self in relation to the passage of time (for example the religious or artistic orientations) were eroded by the new world-view typical of the middle classes of the age. This collective view of time placed new burdens on subjectivity. It forced individuals to make their own time rhythms match the time rhythms of normative humanity as 'industrial/mercantile' humanity. In the process time became even more linear than it had been in the Christian tradition, but also more international and abstract (rather than local), mathematical and secular (rather than intuitive and sacred).

Collective time had, in a sense, become enslaved to a mass version of the ennui cycle as sociocultural well-being became synonymous with material well-being and a scientific view of knowledge. By sleight of hand psycho-spiritual anxiety and disquiet was simultaneously generated and then dulled by the new perception of time – at the cost of placing all of life somewhere between the abyss of anxiety/tedium and the false high of striving for substitute goals such as money, scientific knowledge, status, objects and so on. This existential abyss makes all activity into mere routine (habit) since life energies are directed at relief and numbness (*not being*) rather than feelings of joy and aliveness. Life easily becomes flat and disenchanted under such circumstances. Individuals become enslaved to objects which appear to consciousness as alternately desirable in terms of the relief they offer (the objects that 'softened the bitterness of Emma's life'²⁷) and malign, because approached from the perspective of joyless routine. Such activities assert a negative influence over one's life energies (by dulling them). This is the essence of the phenomenon of objectification: things are robbed of essential characteristics and are given an essentially non-human role functioning as objects for the individual's ennui cycle – that is, to ward off tedium, anxiety and, paradoxically, insight and awareness.

The bourgeois view of time proves to be oppressive and leads directly to the objectification of people on two levels. Firstly, the objects which are coveted in order to keep a person numb and unaware eventually appear to the psyche in demonic form (Emma's 'beautiful objects' eventually turn on her and help precipitate her suicide). Such objects are thus like heroin to a drug addict: they simultaneously relieve and destroy. Secondly, when objects in the world are viewed primarily in terms of their ability to allow a person to flee from anxiety/tedium (malign ritual) into relief (malign transcendence) it becomes very easy to confuse people with things and thus with the measuring systems proper to things. Normative post-Enlightenment 'happiness' (really: *not being*, or numbness) inevitably becomes oppressive. Ennui-afflicted individuals are encouraged by the prevalent cultural codes to simplify their perceptions of other human beings who are viewed as means to 'malign transcendence' ie. as potential 'money earners' (Lheureux's attitude toward Emma and Charles' parents' attitude toward Heloise), as

²⁷ Ibid (1987, p.307).

scientific objects (the whole town's treatment of Hippolyte the club foot), as objects to be consumed on the way to creating profit (the man of capital's attitude toward workers in general). Interpersonal relations, now ruled over by the tyranny of normative perceptions of time, become enslaved to the rhythms of the ennui cycle and thus become characteristically vacuous, oppressive and exploitative. Life easily degenerates into abstract mathematical formulae.²⁸

Emma's delusions all proceed from this peculiarly nineteenth century distortion in the perception of normative time. They begin in the imaginary realm during periods of *tedium vitae*, anxiety and passivity, and end up as frantic self-defeating activities in the real world. Though presenting to her consciousness as Romantic opportunities for happiness, they are really aimed at defeating the worst excesses of anxiety and tedium, i.e. she craves *nullity*. At cycle's end such delusions are revealed (usually by events) as destructive. No sense of self results from such manoeuvres, indeed her unreal activity (because focused on the future) leads to a deepening of an already existent rupture between self and cosmos.

Summary: Emma's Tragedy and the Two Types of Romanticism

Let us summarise the key components of Emma's tragedy. It is the tragedy of a woman trapped by unfavourable social circumstances, a woman unable to work out in her own mind the difference between reality and fiction—trapped as much by fiction as by reality. In a paradoxical way, *Emma is tragic precisely because of her normality*. The reader in identifying with her is made to feel both frustration and pity. What other responses can we muster to a woman who feels very little that can be described as authentic, who '... tried, according to theories she considered sound, to make herself in love.'²⁹ *Madame Bovary* is thus a book about 'limitation', about the binding of human life energy, about the draining of life energy. It is about disenchantment, about the shrinking down of existence into the petty spirit-numbing world-views of a materialistic, colourless society. In Existentialist terms the work is about the conflict between the 'mass mind' and the individual. It is also about soul murder under cover of civility. And it is precisely because Emma is so 'normal' and therefore, like all of us, so ineffective against the great bourgeois and patriarchal machinery that imprisons her that the work is a classic. Emma is in many respects the archetypal nineteenth century middle class woman suffering from what Elaine Showalter calls 'The Female Malady'.³⁰

This line of argument renders problematic simplistic readings of Flaubert's criticism of Romanticism. I would suggest two things here: (1) That he was criticising a certain kind of Romantic impulse, an impulse that had become disconnected from the literary realities of the age, a Romanticism that had, as it were become a tool for the juggernaut of modernity. This is the romanticism that is now seen as a form of 'escapism', a phenomenon itself pointed to by many of the Romantic poets and artists themselves as symptomatic of the spiritual *malaise* of ennui. (2) Flaubert struggled all his life to separate the genuinely life-affirming aspects of Romanticism from its more insidious

²⁸ See the way in which Charles' parents treat Heloise once it is discovered that she has very little money, Ibid (1987, pp.24-32).

²⁹ Ibid (1987, p.56).

³⁰ See Showalter's (1991, pp.15-17) specific comments on Emma Bovary.

elements. It is important to recognise that he considered *Madame Bovary* to be his minor work. The book he worked on for several decades, *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, was in his own eyes his major work. It is in that work that Flaubert's Romanticism—his belief in revelation, imagination, the supernatural, the great possibilities of human existence—comes to the fore.³¹ If *Madame Bovary* is a diagnosis of the malaise, the illness, the cause of the infection, than *The Temptation* was the closest Flaubert came to a cure, one perhaps containing many of the hallmarks of a revised Romanticism.

In my view, *Madame Bovary* is more of a critique of aspects of the Enlightenment than of the Romantic spirit proper. It is precisely the values of the Enlightenment that define the material limits of Emma's existence, that regulate (and always regulated) her social relations. The great achievement of the work is to show how these bourgeois values actually manifest in the consciousness of the subject.

D.H. Lawrence made a particularly stinging criticism of *Madame Bovary* on the grounds that its themes were too small for a creative genius like Flaubert.³² The evidence before us, the fact that Flaubert was in fact developing an ancient theme, the fact that his reading of the malaise of ennui was one of the first to explore in detail the nature of the malaise that was reaching epidemic levels in his time, the fact that the novel uses Emma's everyday domestic hell to launch a full scale attack on bourgeois society and on various pathological tendencies in escapist forms of Romanticism, might force a critic to take exactly the opposite stance to that of Lawrence. It is here argued that the kind of 'modern tragedy' that Flaubert was trying to describe, the tragedy of chronic ennui, *had to be* presented via these 'little people,' that it could not have been otherwise, that their littleness is the source of the work's greatness. The ambivalence people still feel toward this work may be in direct proportion to the ability of the work to mirror, in certain respects, a consciousness still typical in our own time. If the work uneases us, if it seems 'tedious', if it frustrates us with its subject matter, then we are probably confronting something of that oppressive, soul-destroying force, that normative *ennui*, that Flaubert, among many others, saw at the centre of modern life.

In terms of the book's sociocultural dimension I have attempted to present two strands of a single argument: (1) That *Madame Bovary* is primarily a critique of the middle class world of the day, the values that motivated it and the principles of 'modernity' in general. This is to say that the novel continues and broadens many of the Romantic critiques of society and the Enlightenment. (2) That the book's dialogue with Romanticism advances on two levels. Flaubert both criticises the sentimentalist and escapist tone of certain manifestations of Romanticism, and, paradoxically, attempts to strengthen its original

³¹ Flaubert, *The Temptation of St. Antony* (1983). Significantly a supernatural side to ennui is presented in this text which shows Flaubert's awareness of the connection between the ancient state known as *acedia* and the ennui he has Emma suffer.

³² D.H. Lawrence (1973, pp.273-274):

I think it is a final criticism against *Madame Bovary* that people such as Emma Bovary and her husband Charles simply are too insignificant to carry the full weight of Gustave Flaubert's sense of tragedy. Emma and Charles Bovary are a couple of little people. Gustave Flaubert is not a little person. But, because he is a realist and does not believe in 'heroes', Flaubert insists on pouring his own deep and bitter tragic consciousness into the little skins of the country doctor and his uneasy wife. The result is a discrepancy. *Madame Bovary* is a great book and a very wonderful picture of life. But we cannot help resenting the fact that the great tragic soul of Gustave Flaubert is, so to speak, given only the rather commonplace bodies of Emma and Charles Bovary. There's a misfit, you have to let in all sorts of seams of pity. Seams of pity, which won't be hidden.

aims. I would argue that the book represents a cutting out of Romanticism's dead wood and that the underlying intention was to prepare the way for a more genuinely Romantic critique of modern culture from the perspective of the suffering subject. To this end, Flaubert suggests that whole institutions, cultural and otherwise, can easily become toxic to the real needs of the subject. He shows the way in which such institutions and attitudes act to aid and nurture the normative ennui cycle's of subjects.

Epilogue - Flaubert's Monk: To the Desert One More Time

It is a commonplace problem with literature that solutions to major issues raised in a text are not often spelled out in the text itself. Flaubert's cure for chronic ennui, for example, is not clearly outlined in the text of *Madame Bovary*. We probably have to look beyond that work for his perspective on this issue. However, if we were to look for a 'cure' for Emma's problem we might begin with the mood created by Flaubert's critique. The reader might experience the critique most thoroughly by reading *Madame Bovary* and *The Temptation of St. Antony* in succession. In *Madame Bovary* Flaubert asks the reader to identify with a character who is being destroyed by the ennui malady. In this sense the text allows the reader to see more clearly the possible sources of his/her own unhappiness (should it exist) and the unhappiness of others. We begin to live Emma's dilemma, the terrible agitations of her soul, we experience her addictions and delusions, her successive disappointments, and bit by bit, we are perhaps stripped of such delusions ourselves. In short, the text impels its readers to uncover and confront, in their own souls, the 'addictions' nurtured by bourgeois society. It is as though Flaubert offers his readers a solution by extinguishing every false solution to which they may routinely resort.

Flaubert's other possible solution for ennui, not particularly evident in *Madame Bovary*, is, perhaps, his belief in the process of psycho-spiritual catharsis. Such a solution is made much more explicit in *The Temptation of St. Antony*. In this work a rather Flaubertian Antony is put through a torturous series of mystical encounters with the Seven Deadly Sins, encounters not unlike those experienced by the desert anchorites of old. As with the Desert Fathers, solitude, prayer, harsh living conditions and the withdrawal of external diversions brings on a crisis of the soul which, though painful and taking the holy man to the point of madness, eventually leads to inner calm and wisdom. Not surprisingly *acedia*, or aridity of the soul, figures prominently in the text. After Antony has confronted and resisted a series of active temptations (which are related to the more active 'diversions' associated with the ennui cycle) he must confront this aridity before he can find peace. Upon awakening exhausted and weary from a discussion with the devil who uses the discoveries of science to prove the nonexistence of God, Antony says: 'Ah, madness! madness! Is it my fault? I find prayer intolerable. My heart is as dry as a rock! It used to overflow with love! ...'³³

Encouraged by the apparition of an Old Woman, Antony then comes close to committing suicide – a final flight from self-knowledge and *acedia*. As with the other temptations, however, he resists the impulse, only to be once again bombarded, in condensed and monstrous form, with lust and other temptations which come in the form of a young woman. These temptations he again manages to resist only to once again feel

³³ Flaubert *The Temptation of St. Antony* (1983, p.213).

a longing for self-annihilation. There follows a short conversation between Antony and the Old Woman in which they discuss the hollowness and bitterness of empty pleasures and of life itself. The ancient ennui symptom of *taedium vitae* is central:

OLD WOMAN: One needn't have these joys to be aware of their bitterness! To see them at a distance is enough to put people off. You must be sick of the same monotonous actions, the long drawn-out days, the ugly world, the stupid sun!

ANTONY: Oh yes, everything it lights is loathsome.³⁴

The two women then become Lust and Death respectively (thus echoing Pascal's and Schopenhauer's assertions that life unfolds between the two extremes of diversion and asthenic lethargy) and it is at this moment that Antony's inner struggle reaches its climax. Again, he manages to resist temptation and at this point his happiness and the health of his soul is assured. There follows a series of visions of fabulous creatures and monstrous demons. One of the demons is the Catoblepas which is described as 'A black buffalo with a hog's head which lolls on the ground and is attached to his shoulders by a narrow neck, long and flaccid like an emptied gut.' When the apparition speaks, it reveals its connection to sloth and ennui: 'Fat, melancholy, moody, I subsist with the constant sensation of warm mud under my belly.'³⁵

The book concludes with a description of St. Antony swimming peacefully in all the wonder and glory of a cosmos reanimated by God. In the final paragraph Flaubert shows us that his crushing vision of ennui, as found in *Madame Bovary*, is counterbalanced by a profound and serious pantheism, a love of life's mysteries. Such an animate experience of life, he seems to suggest, does not come easily; it must be fought for through self-reflection and a willingness to open up to the infinite wonders of the cosmos. When St Antony says: 'O happiness! happiness! I have seen the birth of life, I have seen the beginning of movement. The blood in my veins is beating so hard that it will burst them...' he describes a joyous state of being exactly opposite to that of chronic ennui. It is a state opposed to the normative ennui of shallow materialism and indulgence in diversion. For the purposes of this essay it is notable that Flaubert, a nineteenth century French novelist, should return to the African desert for a cure to the sickness of life that is chronic ennui.³⁶ His cure is both a spiritual and Romantic one. It is, however, cleansed of the escapist tendencies that characterised much of the religion and 'Romance' of his age.

³⁴ Ibid (1983, p.217).

³⁵ Ibid (1983, p.228).

³⁶ In two letters to Turgenev (cited in Kuhn 1976, p.42, dated August 5, 1882 and June 1, 1884) Flaubert seems to plainly understood the connection between chronic ennui and *acedia*. In the letters he says that his personal experience of creative ennui is similar to the *acedia* ('the state of aridity') written about by the desert monks.

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Dr. Ian Irvine is an Australian-based poet/lyricist, writer and non-fiction writer. His work has featured in publications as diverse as *Humanitas* (USA), *The Antigoneish Review* (Canada), *Tears in the Fence* (UK), *Linq* (Australia) and *Takahe* (NZ), among many others. His work has also appeared in two Australian national poetry anthologies: *Best Australian Poems 2005* (Black Ink Books) and *Agenda: 'Australian Edition'*, 2005. He is the author of three books and co-editor of three journals – *Scintillae 2012*, *The Animist* ezine (7 editions, 1998-2001) and *Painted Words* (8 editions 2005-2013). Ian currently teaches in the Professional Writing and Editing program at BRIT (Bendigo, Australia) as well as the same program at Victoria University, St Albans, Melbourne. He has also taught history

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