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RETHINKING MADAME BOVARY’S
MOTIVES FOR COMMITTING SUICIDE

Flaubert’s Madame Bovary differs in a striking way from other canonical, male-authored realist novels of female adultery of the nineteenth century. Unlike them, it is not a cautionary tale warning women of the painful consequences of domestic infidelity. The eponymous heroines of Effie Briest (Fontane) and Anna Karenina (Tolstoy) are punished for their marital trespasses by their husbands’ vindictiveness, by society’s scorn, and by their own feelings of guilt. And they suffer terrible consequences. Effie spends the rest of her life a virtual prisoner in her parents’ house, excluded from society and deprived of the right to see her daughter. Anna commits suicide to end a life made unbearable by her husband’s punitive behaviour and by her tortured conscience. But Emma, by far the most wayward of these three fictional adulteresses, is not repudiated by her husband. Nor is she ostracized as a fallen woman by those citizens of Yonville who know of her affairs. Nor, even, does she show signs of remorse for being an unfaithful wife, a negligent mother, an undisciplined housekeeper, or for lying, stealing, and behaving profligately. It is no doubt owing to the absence in the novel of any obvious source of censorship of Emma’s behaviour that its author was brought to trial for ‘offence to public morals’.

Still, Emma ends her life by committing suicide. Because her motives for killing herself are not those common to nineteenth-century realist novels of female adultery, we readers are left to ask ourselves why exactly she takes her life. In fact, the motives that Flaubert deliberately allows us to anticipate—Emma’s remorse for her unfaithful behaviour, her husband’s wrath at being cuckolded, a social scandal caused by her breach of the marital contract, or finally, the degradation of financial insolvency—all of these turn out to be so many ironic false leads offered by the impersonal narrator. I hope to show that to pose the question of why exactly Madame Bovary commits suicide is another way of posing once more the question of what Madame Bovary is ultimately about.¹

Let us first examine the reader’s anticipated reasons for Emma’s suicide, beginning with remorse or fear vis-à-vis her husband for her unfaithfulness. Up until Emma’s end, there is always the possibility of Charles’s discovering his wife’s infidelities, which creates some mild suspense in the novel. But whenever he wanders close to the truth, he not only fails to see it, but repeatedly becomes the unconscious facilitator of Emma’s amorous adventures. Only after her death does he learn of his wife’s affairs upon discovering letters from Rodolphe and Léon in her rosewood desk. Far from erupting into fury at her betrayal, however, Charles imagines what it would be like to be one of her lovers and melts with amorous desire in her conjured presence: ‘On avait du, pensait-il, ¹ Bruce Fleming, ‘An Essay in Seduction; or, The Trouble with Bovary’, French Review, 62 (1989), 764–73, speaks of his ‘sense that neither the characters nor the plot can, in fact, really be the point of this work’ (p. 764), and he cites other critics (Erich Auerbach, Tony Tanner) who have felt that there is a ‘hole at the center of the novel’ (ibid.). Ion Collas, Madame Bovary: A Psychological Reading (Geneva: Droz, 1985), finds Emma’s suicide to be ‘a psychological puzzle not realized by many readers’ (p. 23).
l’adorer. Tous les hommes, à coup sûr, l’avaient convoitée. Elle lui en parut plus belle; et il en conçut un désir permanent, furieux, qui enflammait son désespoir et qui n’avait pas de limites, parce qu’il était maintenant irréalisable. Charles, in other words, even if he had found out the truth of her infidelity during her lifetime, would not have been one to serve his wife her lover’s heart at the dinner table or threaten her with other forms of psychological torture. In fact and ironically, Emma would actually have preferred it if he had been more virile and domineering. ‘Il ne savait ni nager, ni faire des armes, ni tirer le pistolet [. . .] Il n’enseignait rien, celui-là, ne savait rien, ne souhaitait rien’ (I/7, p. 588). If Emma ever feels regret for her marital infidelity, it is only momentarily and as a tactical mistake, when her love affairs are languishing. But when her affairs seem promising, she compares herself to adulterous heroines in the romances she has read and feels the delight of belonging to ‘la légion lyrique de ces femmes adultères’ (II/9, p. 629), not to mention the pleasure of revenge for suffering ‘les bassesses du mariage’ (II/11, p. 637). ‘D’ailleurs, Emma éprouvait une satisfaction de vengeance. N’avait-elle pas assez souffert! Mais elle triomphait maintenant, et l’amour, si longtemps contenu, [. . .] elle le savourait sans remords, sans inquiétude, sans trouble’ (II/9, p. 629). Far from repenting her adultery, ‘elle se repentait comme d’un crime de sa vertu passée’ (II/11, p. 637). In short, fear of Charles’s wrath should he find out about her affairs, or a guilty conscience for them, cannot have been the motivating forces of her suicide.

Another Flaubertian reversal of the reader’s expectation is that the mounting scandal concerning Emma’s behaviour in the eyes of her fellow citizens of the small town of Yonville, like the fireworks at the end of the agricultural fair, fails to ignite, much less explode. There are, to be sure, indicators in the novel that at first seem, if not to censure, at least to propose a symbolic moral warning issued from some place in the world in which Emma dwells. At the Vaubyessard ball, for example, amid all the lavishly displayed food, there are red lobster claws trespassing beyond the borders of their platter, suggesting the kind of excesses one sees depicted in Dutch seventeenth-century vanitas paintings; or, at the same ball, we find the Duke de Laverdière, a reputed former lover of Queen Marie Antoinette, dribbling gravy from his senile, licentious lips. But Emma sees only the prestige of these visions in their aristocratic setting, not any presage of her own moral failure. Then there is the gun barrel that a frightened Emma suddenly finds directed at her from behind some bushes as she returns home in the pre-dawn from one of her trysts with Rodolphe. The pointed weapon, held by Binet, the tax collector and captain of the volunteer fire brigade, looks for a moment like an indictment, and Emma is afraid that Binet will talk. But he is no more interested in Emma’s affairs than she is in his. He has been hunting illegally and is more concerned that she might inform on him.

In a similarly inconsequential way, some of the women in town gossip about

\(^{2}\) Madame Bovary, Part II, Chapter 11, in Gustave Flaubert, Œuvres complètes, ed. by Bernard Masson, 2 vols (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1964), 1, 575–692 (p. 690). The page numbers of all subsequent quotations from Madame Bovary refer to this edition; part and chapter numbers are also indicated (as ‘II/1’1’1’) to facilitate location of the quotations in other editions of the novel.

the way Madame Bovary risks her reputation in the company of unmarried men. They have seen her walking with Léon to visit her baby girl at the wet-nurse: ‘Dès le soir, cela fut connu dans Yonville, et Madame Tuvache, la femme du maire, déclara devant sa servante que “madame Bovary se compromettait”’ (II/3, p. 605). Townspeople have also seen her strolling with Rodolphe Boulanger at the local agricultural fair. To Homais Madame Lefrançois points out Emma ‘au bras de Boulanger’ (II/8, p. 620). Much later, when, to stave off bankruptcy, she begs various notables for a loan, Madame Tuvache and Madame Caron watch from a nearby attic window as Emma attempts to persuade the wooden Binet to lend her money: ‘“Est-ce qu’elle lui fait des avances? [. . .] Ah! C’est trop fort! [. . .] On devrait fouetter ces femmes-là!”’, dit Madame Tuvache’ (III/7, p. 678). Still, with respect to the plot of the novel, nothing comes of this gossip about a likely violation of the marriage contract, which, as one commentator has argued, was the ‘all-subsuming, all-organizing, all-containing contract’ of nineteenth-century bourgeois society.4

It is true that at the beginning of her marriage Emma is worried about what people would think of her were they to discover her with other men. But she soon changes her attitude, feeling only contempt for the bourgeois provincialism of her fellow Yonvillians. And before long she actually seeks to shock public opinion by parading through town on horseback at Rodolphe’s side after their lovemaking in a nearby forest, while people look out at her from their windows. On another occasion, ‘elle eut même l’inconvenance de se promener avec M. Rodolphe une cigarette à la bouche, “comme pour narguer le monde”; enfin, ceux qui doutaient encore ne doutèrent plus quand on la vit, un jour, descendre de l’Hirondelle, la taille serrée dans un gilet, à la façon d’un homme’ (II/12, p. 639). But again, nothing comes of her sallies, for no one does anything about these provocations. We could even say that a major aspect of Emma’s pent-up frustration with her life is precisely that no matter what she does, no momentous consequences follow.

It is as though in Madame Bovary there is a narrative conspiracy to prevent scandal from erupting and too easily explaining Emma’s final, desperate act. We become aware of this irony most clearly in Rodolphe’s letter to Emma, in which he calls off their planned elopement and seeks to end a relationship which has begun to bore him. The excuses he gives, namely his fear of ruining her reputation and hence her life, are of course hypocritical, and being hypocritical, seem to mock the conventional plots of adultery novels. ‘Le monde est cruel, Emma,’ he writes. ‘Partout où nous eussions été, il nous aurait poursuivis. Il vous aurait fallu subir les questions indiscrètes, le dédain, l’outrage peut-être’ (II/13, p. 643). In short, if the world is so unbearable to Emma that she chooses to die, it certainly will not be unbearable to her for the reasons that Rodolphe is proposing.

What appears later in the novel as the most obvious, proximate reason for Emma’s suicide is her financial insolvency. One might contend that here, if ever, the scandal finally erupts, with the public posting in the market square of a notice announcing the imminent seizure of the contents of the Bovary

house for bankruptcy. Emma has all along been incurring a mounting debt in her husband’s name—but without his knowledge—in order to finance the attempted realization of her desires and fantasies. Soon after she sees the notice and is refused further loans to ward off bankruptcy, she runs to the pharmacist’s shop to steal and swallow a handful of arsenic powder. But the occasion for her suicide is not necessarily its cause, and we should not conclude that Emma kills herself primarily to escape the ignominy of financial ruin and the likely revelation of her moral transgressions. Here again we are dealing less with the real motivation of her suicide than with a confounding of our expectations about what it must be.

The plotting of Emma’s financial ruin is entrusted to the moneylender and fancy-goods dealer Lheureux, who, curiously, has many of the traits of the novel’s narrator: virtual omniscience about Emma’s weaknesses and inner thoughts, artfulness in his ruses and calculations that produce the effect of ‘the force of fate’, and the personal impassivity of one who has no visible needs or emotional life of his own, other than his unbending commitment to his (con) art. Most of the wares with which Lheureux tempts Emma are textile goods, many of them made out of cotton spun and woven in the burgeoning mills, themselves products of an industrial revolution whose impact forms the basis of much of the novel’s socio-economic realism. Some of the items that Emma consumes are imported from the southern reaches of France’s growing colonial empire and trade networks. Emma has no doubt already seen advertisements for these goods or their like in the ladies’ fashion magazines that she reads, where they appear either as talismanic elements in exotic-erotic stories, or in the guise of information on how to improve one’s social standing. Lheureux, a master at exploiting the consumer potential provoked by the romantic publications of his time, instructs Emma on the Parisian and upper-class connotations of his wares, while supplying her with easy credit for their purchase. To keep the credit flowing, he helps her to obtain power of attorney over her husband’s affairs, and then assists her in selling off her husband’s landed property once his liquid assets have gone. In collaboration with the town’s lawyer (Guillaumin) and a Rouen banker (Vincart), Lheureux represents in the novel a very real historical force at work in France at the time, when provincial wealth was being bought up and transformed into mobile investment capital by lawyers, bankers, wealthy merchants, all with the co-operation of a liberalized government.

By the time Emma has exhausted her sources of credit and the announcement

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6 Emma has two different subscriptions to this type of fashion magazine, *La Corbeille* and *Sylphé des Salons*. Among the creditors who come to her house during the bankruptcy seizures are envoys from these magazines demanding money for three years’ worth of unpaid subscriptions.

comes of seizure ‘de par le roi, la loi et justice à madame Bovary’ (III/6, p. 673), we are tempted to infer that Emma has become a victim of the new capitalist practices, a prominent subtheme of the novel.

There is little evidence, however, that Emma had enough concern for money, and the institutions that established and maintained its power, to feel shamed and undone by her financial destitution to the point of seeking relief in suicide. The kind of severe financial trouble that she faces might be a sufficient motive for a businessman or a Balzacian character to kill himself, but Emma has an ‘aristocratic’ as well as a sensualist’s disdain for money. What she honours is gifts bestowed gratuitously, even prodigality, not utilitarian exchange, or the petty bourgeois parsimony and thrift of those in her own social environment. She despises her mother-in-law’s injunctions to run a more frugal household, regarding the woman as low-class in her economizing ways. One reason why the dazzling pyramids of food at the Vaubyessard banquet so appeal to her is that they embody in her eyes aristocratic prodigality bordering on the sublime. Little does she care to know of the utilitarian calculation behind the Marquis’s largesse, designed to win himself votes in the forthcoming municipal elections from a newly enfranchised citizenry.

In keeping with her ideology of gratuitousness and her disrespect for the laws of contract and exchange, Emma borrows freely from all sorts of people—her maid, Madame Lefrançois, and the concierge at the Croix Rouge inn—without any thought of repaying them. She even urges Léon to steal money from his boss when they cannot pay for their lavish expenditures. To be sure, Lheureux weaves such a complex web of loan-renewal transactions with Emma that even the reader has a hard task mentally unravelling the ever more intricate knots of interest calculations designed to trap her. But Emma makes only a half-hearted effort to keep track of her financial situation. Most of the time, we are told, she lived all absorbed in her passions ‘et ne s’inquiétait pas plus de l’argent qu’une archiduchesse’ (III/6, p. 670).

Liberality and excess are essential to her ideal of a life of ‘intoxication’ and ‘passion’. They are like the champagne she drinks with Léon in their hotel room: ‘elle riait d’un rire sonore et libertin quand la mousse du vin de Champagne débordait du verre léger sur les bagues de ses doigts’ (III/5, p. 664). In her clandestine financial affair with Lheureux, she even seems to be his accomplice, conspiring with him in the grand liquidation of her assets. She persists to the end in buying expensive and useless objects: ostrich feathers, Chinese porcelain, and trunks for fantasized voyages. She particularly relishes the sovereign gesture of throwing her last coin to a hideous-looking blind beggar: ‘Emma [. . .] lui envoya, par-dessus l’épaule, une pièce de cinq francs. C’était toute sa fortune. Il lui semblait beau de la jeter ainsi’ (III/7, p. 676).

As for Charles coming home and finding out that the contents of his house are to be seized by the bank for auction, this she does dread—not, however, because he would be furious and condemn her for her profligacy and treachery, but because she knows he will forgive her. ‘“Oui, murmurait-elle en grinçant des dents, il me pardonnera, lui qui n’aurait pas assez d’un million à m’offrir pour que je l’excuse de m’avoir connue . . . Jamais! jamais!”’ (III/7, p. 677).
And yet it is hard to imagine her taking her own life to avoid the infuriating situation of being forgiven by a person whom she hardly respects.

One might argue that although Emma does not feel explicitly bound by contracts and the laws of exchange, and while debts have no aristocratic or erotic legitimacy in her eyes, she is none the less traumatized by her insolvency, because money is for her a symbol of the love she craves. The cessation of Lheureux’s free flow of credit could be experienced by Emma as a drying up of all sources of unconditional love. According to one commentator, ‘Emma kills herself not because of money problems but because money problems have revived ancient feelings of deprivation together with all the violent rage attached to them.’ Emma, after all, in her pleas for a ‘loan’ of three thousand francs to ward off bankruptcy procedures, has been rejected not only by several brokers in Rouen as well as by the lawyer, tax collector, and Lheureux in Yongville, she has also been denied funds by both of her lovers. After the lawyer has refused her a loan when she rejected his implied exchange of money for sexual favours, Emma indeed becomes enraged: ‘Quelque chose de belliqueux la transportait. Elle aurait voulu battre les hommes, leur cracher au visage, les broyer tous; et elle continuait à marcher rapidement devant elle, pâle, frémissante, enragée, furetant d’un œil en pleurs l’horizon vide, et comme se délectant à la haine qui l’étouffait’ (III/7, p. 677).

Let us therefore examine what kind of love it is that Emma feels the loss of so acutely just prior to her resolve to run to Homais’s pharmacy for the arsenic. For at that moment there does indeed appear to be a greater concern over lost love than over unprovided money: ‘elle ne se rappelait point la cause de son horrible état, c’est-à-dire la question d’argent. Elle ne souffrait que de son amour, et sentait son âme l’abandonner par ce souvenir, comme les blessés, en agonisant, sentent l’existence qui s’en va par leur plaie qui saigne’ (III/8, p. 680).

Love is Emma’s life-pursuit, and ‘amour’ is a major thematic word in the novel. What goes under the name of love in Emma’s universe, however, is something wondrous and absolute. Ever since her pubescent years at the convent school in Rouen, where she apparently had no friends, and where she seems to have been left much to her own devices with respect to her sentimental and spiritual education, she has entered into fictional worlds in order to explore the sensation of this prized emotion called love. Her reading, which supplies most of the reference points for her relationship to the world, comprises manuals on religious piety, classical Romantic literature, popular romantic fiction, keepsakes with engraved illustrations, and later, after marriage, the fashion magazines already mentioned. Before marriage we see her trembling ‘en soulvant de son haleine le papier de soie des gravures, qui se levait à demi plié et retombait doucement contre la page. C’était, derrière la balustrade d’un balcon, un jeune homme en court manteau qui serrait dans ses bras une jeune fille en robe blanche, portant une aumônière à sa ceinture’ (I/6, p. 587). She searches desperately for the real-world referents of the words and images that she finds in stories of sentimental and erotic salvation. Her approach of course disap-

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Collas, p. 122.
points her, but rather than causing total disenchantment, it merely reinforces her tendency to make words and fictional beings more real in her eyes than the people around her. She married Charles because her excitement in anticipating that which lay encoded in the word ‘amour’ had made her believe that she was in love with him; ‘mais le bonheur qui aurait dû résulter de cet amour n’étant pas venu, il fallait qu’elle se fût trompée, songeait-elle’ (I/6, p. 586).

I think we can presume that authentic love requires sincere dialogue. Yet we find very little actual dialogue between Emma and anyone else in the novel. When we are provided with direct dialogue between Emma and a lover, the lovers rarely speak to each other in the second person, and even more rarely face to face, without the intermediary of fictional models before their eyes. When Léon, an apprentice lawyer, and Emma meet for the first time at the Lion d’Or upon the Bovarys’ arrival in Yonville, the two talk at the fireside about the reading that they have in common and imperceptibly begin to read each other as stand-ins for poetic, fictional models. This misidentification is precisely what enables their initial, mutual attraction and eventually their so-called falling in love. The result is that Emma will never really see Léon for himself or even care to know who he is: ‘Elle voulut qu’il se vêtit tout en noir et se laissât pousser une pointe au menton, pour ressembler aux portraits de Louis XIII’ (III/5, p. 668).

It is not surprising, furthermore, that this ‘love’ thrives on absence and that presence is actually detrimental to it. At the beginning of their mutual attraction, we learn that Emma ‘était amoureuse de Léon, et elle recherchait la solitude, afin de pouvoir plus à l’aïse se délecter en son image. La vue de sa personne troublait la volupté de cette méditation. Emma palpitait au bruit de ses pas: puis, en sa présence, l’émotion tombait, et il ne lui restait ensuite qu’un immense étonnement qui se finissait en tristesse.’ (II/5, p. 610). Disillusionment is inevitable when she eventually discovers that Léon has none of the ideal characteristics she had attributed to him: ‘il était incapable d’héroïsme, faible, banal, plus mou qu’une femme, avare d’ailleurs, et pusillanime’ (III/6, p. 669). To rekindle the missing passion for him in order to forestall an end to their ‘love’, she returns to fiction, this time her own, by writing love letters to him. While writing to him, we learn, ‘elle percevait un autre homme, un fantôme fait de ses plus ardents souvenirs, de ses lectures les plus belles, de ses convoitises les plus fortes; et il devenait à la fin si véritable, et accessible, qu’elle en palpitait émerveillée’ (III/6, p. 672).

Emma similarly idealizes and misreads her other lover, Rodolphe. A gentleman farmer of modest means, with a ‘brutal temperament’, we are told, this predator of pretty women is well-read and shrewd enough to know how to seduce Emma by rhapsodizing in the mode of popular romantic poetry. When they first come together at the agricultural fair, their conversation is hardly dialogue, but instead a long exchange of romantic clichés, taken seriously by her, but performed entirely for tactical purposes by him. As he speaks to her about irresistible attractions initiated perhaps in some prior existence, she begins to merge his image with her memory of other men. A yellow trail of dust that she espies on the horizon reminds her of Léon at his most desirable, when he departed by coach for Paris to study law. Then, almost simultaneously, the scent
of Rodolphe's pomade recalls that of the Viscount at the Vaubyessard ball, with whom she danced one memorable waltz that had for a moment brought her fantasy life and her real life as close together as these worlds would ever come.

What further helps Rodolphe to become the idealized recipient of Emma's longings is that he possesses the trappings and wears clothes that match those described in the texts Emma would like to live by. The trappings include a chateau and certain possessions that for Emma are the signs of privileged male power: horses, carriages, whips, hunting-guns inlaid with silver, and cigars. These objects, as many readers of Madame Bovary have observed, become fetishes for Emma, the promissory indicators that Rodolphe will have the wealth and power quite literally to carry her away from her mundane existence. After the agricultural fair has taken place, when Rodolphe comes to the Bovary house on the pretext of consulting with Charles concerning an ailing farm hand, but really to seduce Emma, what first catches her eye is his apparel. Rodolphe is wearing a green velvet riding coat, white jersey breeches, and tall, supple leather boots, emblems of masculine grandness, and regarding which he correctly predicted when dressing 'elle n’en avait jamais vu de pareilles' (II/9, p. 627). What later persuades her to accept his daring proposal to accompany him on horseback to a nearby forest is that Charles, encouraging her for the sake of her health to take up the visitor's offer, agrees with her that she needs to buy herself a riding habit for the occasion. ‘L’amazone la décida’, for with it, she can fictionalize herself into the role of an English lady. And thus begins their love affair, which, as one commentator has pointed out, is not so much an affair between two people as between two people’s clothing.

Rodolphe’s lack of interest in Emma for herself is matched by her lack of interest in him for himself. His usefulness to her is as a vehicle, as someone who can transport her away from her boring, contingent existence to some new, exciting, necessary realm. Even the beds in which she makes love are mostly made of wood carved in the shape of boats, with curtains that resemble sails. By the time Rodolphe appears more and more like an ordinary person and Emma is growing bored with the relationship, she extracts a promise from him to elope with her to a southern country. They are to embark at Genoa for their journey. Lheureux has already supplied her with her travelling cloak and a steamer trunk. Rodolphe, however, weary himself of the relationship, especially as she becomes more demanding, calls off the trip at the last minute. Emma, in shock and disappointment upon receiving the news, is tempted thereupon to let herself fall out of her attic window, when the square below and all of her surroundings begin to sway like a ship. Three years later, after she does commit suicide, all that is left of her planned trip with Rodolphe are the cloak, travel bag, and trunk that she had obtained from Lheureux on credit.

But if Emma tires of her relationships with her lovers, indeed if she never

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9 Michel Picard, for example, 'La prodigalité d’Emma', Littérature, 10 (1973), 77–97, notes not only that sentiments are transferred to objects, but that ‘un double mouvement chez Flaubert anime les choses et réifie les gens’ (p. 80).

10 Walter D. Redfern, 'People and Things in Flaubert', French Review, 44 (1971), 79–88, aptly remarks: 'The whole account of adultery is conveyed largely through things. The dialogue is trivial: actions are minimized; descriptions of scenes or objects have to take on much of the burden of narration' (p. 81).
really loved Léon and Rodolphe for themselves to begin with (nor they for herself), then their rejections of her requests for money, even if she takes them to be rejections of her, cannot be an adequate explanation of her suicide. With Rodolphe she discovered ‘la désillusion de l’adultère’ (II/15, p. 650), just as with Léon ‘Emma retrouvait dans l’adultère toutes les platitudes du mariage’, to the point where she even wishes for ‘une catastrophe qui amenât leur séparation’ (III/6, p. 672). Well before the financial rejections by her lovers, we already know from listening to her inner monologue that her unhappiness has been chronic: ‘elle n’était pas heureuse, ne l’avait jamais été. D’où venait donc cette insuffisance de la vie, cette pourriture instantanée des choses où elle s’appuyait?’ (III/6, p. 670; emphasis added).

The suicide note that Emma writes immediately after swallowing the arsenic might have shed light on her ultimate motives for wanting to die. But we are not allowed to see it. All we learn, as Charles reads it in despair, is Emma’s injunction against interpretation. ‘Qu’on n’accuse personne’, he reads, an imperious command that echoes the one she made when handing him the letter: ‘Tu la liras demain; d’ici là, je t’en prie, ne m’adresse pas une seule question! . . . Non, pas une!’ When Charles, after reading the note, asks his dying wife, ‘Pourquoi? Qui t’a forcéé?’, all that she replies is: ‘Il le fallait!’ (III/8, p. 681). Charles’s conclusion, after her death, as to why Emma committed suicide is delivered on the last page of the novel as his last utterance before he dies of grief: ‘C’est la faute de la fatalité’ (III/11, p. 692).

Now, while we are supposed to take Charles’s pronouncement ironically, as one more instance of his blindness or stupidity—we are told that it was the first and only ‘grand mot’ he ever uttered in his life—there is no doubt more signified by his comment than at first appears, as is true of so many statements in the novel that on an immediate level reveal a character’s fatuousness, but yet are incisive on another level. And although the notions of ‘fate’ and ‘destiny’ are parodied as pretentious Romantic clichés whenever they are invoked by the characters in the novel, the text in other respects is curiously full of portentous images.

Margaret Lowe, in her study of a possible symbolic substructure in Madame Bovary constructed with Flaubert’s famous ‘ruses of style’, speaks of the wheel as the most ubiquitous of these images of fate.11 Emma’s maiden name, ‘Rouault’, itself harbours a wheel—‘une roue’—as does ‘Rouen’, the city of her erotic trysts with Léon. Yonville has the wheels of three grist-mills on its river; and to run the three mills, three millers. These three mysterious millers happen to be sitting in a small parlour at Madame Lefrançois’s inn just as the Bovarys arrive in Yonville, and then leave the room when Emma enters, never to appear in the novel again. Their appearance cannot be gratuitous realism. It is, fairly clearly, a stylistic device suggesting the three Fates of Greek lore who determine human destinies. Moreover, the wheelwright’s house is pointed out to us as we readers are given our initial ‘tour’ of Yonville. Carts and carriages sit idly in the

11 In Towards the Real Flaubert: A Study of ‘Madame Bovary’ (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 34–37, Lowe detects in Flaubert’s use of wheel and spinning imagery multiple allusions to ancient Greek and Egyptian mythology, with which, in her view, he wanted to bestow upon the mundane events of the novel an inevitability of cosmic dimension.
wheelwright’s yard, while other carts and carriages spin by at various moments carrying goods and people to their destinations. There is also the constantly turning wheel of Binet’s lathe, the droning of which can be heard well beyond the confines of his attic workshop as it spins out countless rounds of superfluous napkin rings. Another fateful character is the wet-nurse, who spins flax while she looks after Emma’s baby girl. There are also unassembled wheels lying on the ground next to the new spinning mills being built. And, finally, it is to a cotton spinning mill that Emma’s orphaned daughter will eventually be sent to join the ranks of the new, industrial, working poor.

In addition to the wheel-of-fate imagery, suggesting a deterministic subtext of the novel, in addition to the dogs that howl in the night, the blackbirds and crows that fly away, and the oft-repeated threefold occurrence of things, there are images and incidents right at the beginning of our acquaintance with Emma that seem to foretell her death. While a courtship is about to begin, when the widower Charles comes to the Bertaux farm to visit the lovely Emma, we are shown how some flies on the kitchen table ‘montaient le long des verres qui avaient servi, et bourdonnaient en se noyant au fond, dans le cidre resté’ (I/3, p. 581). We are shown too how the daylight that came in down the chimney ‘bleuissait un peu les cendre froides’ (I/3, p. 581). Emma herself is sitting sewing and will later prick her finger, drawing blood. After her wedding, when she enters the conjugal bedroom of her new home in Tostes, she notices on the desk near the window the dried-up wedding bouquet of Charles’s first wife. As Charles goes to put it in the attic, she wonders what would be done with hers ‘si par hasard elle venait à mourir’ (I/5, p. 585).

Finally, and most tellingly concerning the ominous fatality at work in Emma’s life and death, there is the repetition of the same event in opposite manifestations, what I shall call ironic doubles. Events that occur in the mode of eros are echoed later in the mode of thanatos, and vice versa. Perhaps the most striking and emblematic of the many ironic doubles in the novel concerns Emma’s thirst. During Charles’s springtime courtship of her at the Bertaux farm, she had drunk with him a glass of curaçao, pouring less into her own glass (as befitted a woman). When her glass was almost empty, ‘elle se renversait pour boire; et, la tête en arrière, les lèvres avancés, le cou tendu, elle riait de ne rien sentir, tandis que le bout de sa langue, passant entre ses dents fines, léchait à petits coups le fond du verre.’ (I/3, p. 581). The gesture of the reaching tongue is repeated on Emma’s deathbed after the arsenic has taken effect: ‘Sa poitrine aussitôt se mit à haleter rapidement. La langue tout entière lui sortit hors de la bouche’ (III/8, p. 684). We can also link the white arsenic powder with its antecedent, the powdered sugar at the Vaubyessard ball: Emma ‘n’avait jamais vu de grenades ni mangé d’ananas. Le sucre en poudre même lui parut plus blanc et plus fin qu’ailleurs’ (I/8, p. 591). Or we can pair the poison with yet another form of sugar, an ingredient of the fiction that Homais published in a local newspaper article, which contended that Emma had mistaken the arsenic ‘pour du sucre en faisant une crème à la vanille’ (III/9, p. 685). In a similar vein, the sensual shivering that iced champagne caused her at the Vaubyessard ball—‘Emma frissonna de toute sa peau en sentant ce froid dans sa bouche’ (I/8, p. 591)—is repeated later in the ‘icy cold’ that came over her in the throes
of death: ‘elle sentait un froid de glace qui lui montait des pieds jusqu’au cœur’ (III/8, p. 681). And the sensation of a whirling environment, experienced by her as ecstatic dizziness while waltzing with the Viscount—‘tout tournait autour d’eux, les lampes, les meubles, les lambris, et le parquet’ (I/8, p. 592)—returns in another key just before Emma, her plea for money having just been rejected by Rodolphe, rushes to the pharmacy for the arsenic: ‘La nuit tombait, des corneilles volaient. Il lui sembla tout à coup que des globules couleur de feu éclataient dans l’air comme des balles fulminantes en s’aplatissant, et tournaient, tournaient, pour aller se fondre dans la neige, entre les branches des arbres. Au milieu de chacun d’eux, la figure de Rodolphe apparaissait’ (III/8, p. 680).

What are we to make of these ‘ruses of style’? Are they sheer artifices that only create the ‘effect’ of fatality? Of course in one sense it is the author who, like a skilful and diligent spider, has created this web of ironies that poetically demand Emma’s end. Upon her death we even see Charles noticing that her eyes look as though they are covered by a spider web: ‘ses yeux commençaient à disparaître dans une pâleur visqueuse qui ressemblait à une toile mince, comme si des araignées avaient filé dessus’ (III/9, p. 686). Is the author, in a metaphorical and meta-narrative gesture, tacitly claiming that Emma is merely the victim of his textual ink, counterpart traces of which Emma discovers in her mouth as the poison begins to take effect? ‘Une saveur âcre qu’elle sentait dans sa bouche la réveilla. [. . .] Elle but une gorgée d’eau et se tourna vers la muraille. Cet affreux goût d’encre continuait’ (III/8, p. 681). After her agony, as neighbourhood women were dressing the dead body and raising the head to place a wreath upon it, we learn that ‘un flot de liquides noirs sortit, comme un vomissement, de sa bouche’ (III/9, p. 686).

But it seems that Madame Bovary would hardly be the complexly moving and enduring classic that it is were we persuaded that Emma’s sufferings and suicide are to be read as the result of a poetic prank. I would like to claim instead that the ‘ruses of style’, far from being a gratuitous artifice, are motivated by the deeper subject matter of the novel. For the remainder of this article, I shall argue that it is her whole stance towards the world, partially described earlier, that best explains the fateful, or morbid, nature of her eroticism and why she inevitably commits suicide.

If her death is in so many images foretold from the beginning, before she is even ‘wrongly’ married, I take these images to be expressions of Emma’s disposition to apprehend ‘love’, as she seeks it, and death as one phenomenon. Of her conflation of ‘love’ and death there are countless examples in the novel, a memorable one being her first tryst and lovemaking with Leon. Their meeting-place is the Rouen cathedral. After the verger has shown Emma the many tombs of the illustrious dead, Leon calls for a cab, and to vanquish her hesitation to enter it, decisively persuades her that ‘cela se fait à Paris’. The cab itself, in which they make love as it races wildly through the streets of Rouen, is seen by astonished pedestrians as ‘une voiture à stores tendus, [. . .] plus close qu’un tombeau et ballottée comme un navire’ (III/1, p. 657), a description that anticipates the movements of Emma’s actual coffin as it is carried on the pallbearers’ shoulders to the cemetery: ‘elle avançait par saccades continues,
comme une chaloupe qui tangue à chaque flot’ (III/10, p. 688). For their three-day ‘honeymoon’ at the Hôtel de Boulogne, Emma comes dressed in the black fabric that Lheureux sold to her for a mourning dress. ‘Et ils vivaient là, volets fermés, portes closes, avec des fleurs par terre’ (III/3, p. 661). Later in their affair, as their passion threatens to wane, Emma becomes all the more avid in making love with Léon: ‘Elle se déshabillait brutalement, [. . .] et, pâle, sans parler, sérénue, elle s’abattait contre sa poitrine, avec un long frisson’ (III/6, p. 670). In her erotic grip Léon senses something deathly about her ardour: ‘il y avait sur ce front couvert de gouttes froides, sur ces lèvres balbutiantes, dans ces prunelles égarées, dans l’étreinte de ces bras, quelque chose d’extrême, de vague et de lugubre’ (III/6, p. 670).12

But the most blatant instance of Emma’s desire both to be and not to be comes early in the novel, when she returns to her tedious life with Charles after the Vaubyessard ball, and in particular after the waltz with the Viscount has awakened keen desires in her. She expresses the curious wish both to die and at the same time to live in Paris, not simply and insignificantly to live and die in Paris. ‘Elle souhaitait à la fois mourir et habiter Paris’ (I/9, p. 594; emphasis added). How are we to understand Emma’s strange wish?

Now here, in addition to Emma’s longing for two contradictory states of being—dying and at the same time living in Paris—we encounter a related problem, which concerns her—actually anyone’s—cognitive ability to grasp the phenomenon of her own death. As Epicurus, Montaigne, Freud, and other thinkers have argued, the subject cannot strictly or logically speaking conceive of its own death. The reason that this cannot be done is that one’s own death, from the first-person point of view, is literally unimaginable and therefore unthinkable. Why? Because to imagine one’s own non-existence would be to form a picture of nothing whatsoever, one’s own consciousness ceasing to be a consciousness. And this self-contradiction simply cannot be. For how can one conceive the annihilation of one’s own conceptual capacity? What one ordinarily does, in attempting the impossible conceptual feat, is to form images suggestive of one’s death, imagining, for example, the darkness inside the coffin, assembled mourners, excavated dirt at the graveside, and so forth. In these imaginative acts the actual target of our efforts, however, is not our own non-being but, on the contrary, something else or, if a person, someone else’s non-being, someone who looks very much like us, but who in fact is not us. Of course from a third-person point of view, we can think and say that we will die; but this kind of cognition is simply a deduction from the rule that all humans die.13

If this reasoning is correct, then Emma not only cannot imagine her own

12 Michael C. Hydak, in ‘Les suicides d’Emma Bovary’, Romanica, 13 (1976), 145–49, documents in a compelling manner how the very language of Emma’s liaisons ‘montre que sa quête de l’amour est en réalité une recherche de la mort’ (p. 145). But all that he concludes from the evidence he gathers is that she simply behaves this way because of an innate defect (‘une tare innée’, p. 149).

13 Cf. Sigmund Freud, ‘Our Attitude towards Death’, Part II of Thoughts for the Time on War and Death, in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953–74), xiv: On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology, and Other Works (1962), pp. 275–300: ‘It is impossible to imagine one’s own death; and whenever we attempt to do so, we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators. Hence the psycho-analytic school could venture on the assertion that
death, she cannot desire or choose it either, because one cannot desire or choose something that is unimaginable. And yet she does choose ‘to die’ in that she commits suicide. What, then, is she choosing if not her own death? My claim is that she is attracted to suicide by what she envisages, however confusedly, as another manner of being. Not non-being, that is, but a preferable mode of existence. She can wish to die if dying means to her something like dwelling in paradise, a realm to which, like Paris, she has never been and wishes to go. Not only is Paris connotatively close to paradise for her, because of its romantically storied wealth and prestige, but it is also phonetically suggestive of ‘par(ad)is’.

To understand more about the nature of the ‘par(ad)is’ that Emma seeks through death, let us return to the discussion of her basic stance towards the world. We have already seen how in her relationship with her lovers she prefers dreaming about their virtual reality to engaging with their actual existence and helping them realize their and her most authentic possibilities. Her relationships are doomed from the start, it would seem, if what she tells Léon when they first meet and talk about their shared interest in fiction is true: ‘Je déteste les héros communs et les sentiments tempérés, comme il y en a dans la nature’ (II/2, p. 602). Her mother-in-law’s diagnosis of Emma, while no doubt oversimple, is therefore not totally wide of the mark. In her opinion Emma spends too much time ‘à lire des romans, de mauvais livres’. And Madame Bovary senior takes it upon herself to have the lending library discontinue Emma’s subscription and to threaten the Rouen bookseller with police action if he persists ‘dans son métier d’empoisonneur’ (II/7, p. 617). The arsenic that tastes to the dying Emma like ink and the inky black liquid that spills out of her mouth in death seem to accuse both the romantic fictional realms that she inhabits and the real world of the print industry that creates and supports them. That commercial world’s signature on Emma’s corpse is, I believe, thematically related to the web-like design that Charles sees in Emma’s lifeless eyes. The degree of truth in the mother-in-law’s prophetic diagnosis I take to lie not in her finger-pointing to a simple relation of cause and effect between Emma’s reading and her moral poisoning. It has more to do with the fact that Emma, from our first acquaintance with her, has always been disposed to prefer the coherence, meaning-giving quality, and completeness of fictional narratives to the contingent, uncompliant, and ambiguous aspects of her own life and world, which are at the source of her ‘ennui’.

There are essentially two ways in which Emma tries to overcome this ‘ennui’—‘l’araignée silencieuse, [qui] filait sa toile dans l’ombre à tous les coins de son cœur’ (1/8, p. 587). One way is to become will-less and totally dependent, giving herself over blindly to some imagined greater force, made absolute and necessary by her oblation. This Other, she feels, would magically rectify all of her past disappointments by providing a ground of ontologically satisfying purpose. Another way, seemingly its opposite, is to reaffirm and intensify her will-ful desires, to seek either to dominate the world so that others do her precise bidding, or, failing that, to pulverize or dissolve it and them into elementary,
indeterminate particles. These opposing dispositions, it seems to me, point to the deepest reason for her suicide, the explanation, in so far as one can legitimately speak of such a thing, for Emma’s constantly wanting ‘to die’ and then finally choosing to effect her ‘death’. According to this interpretation, death as Emma conceives it is the extreme realization of a state of utter will-lessness or of supreme will-fulness.

We first notice Emma’s desire to become will-less, dependent, and diffused most obviously in the ‘mystical’ sensuality she experiences during her early convent days, for which she has nostalgia throughout the rest of her short life. In one of her acute distresses, after Léon has left to study law in Paris, she longs to go back to her convent, ‘être encore confondue dans la longue ligne des voiles blancs [. . .] parmi les tourbillons bleutâtres de l’encens qui montait’ (II/6, p. 611). Thereupon ‘un attendrissement la saisit: elle se sentit molle et tout abandonnée comme un duvet d’oiseau qui tournoie dans la tempête; et ce fut sans en avoir conscience qu’elle s’achemina vers l’église, disposée à n’importe quelle dévotion, pourvu qu’elle y courbat son âme et que l’existence entière y disparût’ (II/6, p. 611). When the church fails her in the incarnation of its corpulent, earthy, and unintuitive priest, Emma refuses food and becomes seriously sick and weak, a state which, curiously, she cultivates (drinking vinegar, for example, in order to lose weight), just as she will later cultivate long periods of self-mortification and self-denial. At the height of her most serious bout of sickness and weakness, which lasts for forty-three days following Rodolphe’s refusal to elope with her, she savours the feeling that she is fading away and asks for holy communion. As her room is being transformed into an altar, ‘Emma sentait quelque chose de fort passant sur elle, qui la debarrassait de ses douleurs, de toute perception, de tout sentiment. Sa chair allégée ne pesait plus, une autre vie commençait; il lui sembla que son être, montant vers Dieu, allait s’anéantir dans cet amour comme un encens allumé qui se dissipe en vapeur’ (II/14, p. 646). A vision comes to her of ‘Dieu le Père tout éclatant de majesté’. This vision, ‘la chose la plus belle qu’il fût possible de rêver’, she continues to evoke as an ascetic mantra. We are told that her soul, ‘courbature d’orgueil, se reposait enfin dans l’humilité chrétienne; et, savourant le plaisir d’être faible, Emma contemplait en elle-même la destruction de sa volonté, qui devait faire aux envahissements de la grâce une large entrée’ (II/14, pp. 646–47).

The relationship she seeks with God, a relationship of total submission to a source of absolute goodness, omnipotence, and purpose, reflects the kind of relationship she has also tried to create and sustain with Rodolphe: ‘Je suis ta servante et ta concubine! tu es mon roi, mon idole! tu es bon! tu es beau! tu es intelligent! tu es fort!’ (II/12, p. 639), she recites to him as an incantation. But later, immediately upon learning that Rodolphe has cancelled the great voyage of no return in which she was to surrender her fate to his care, Emma, rather than give up hope, pursues the goal of her longing, although in a strange way, contemplating a vastly different kind of completion of her being, as she leans out of her attic window: ‘Elle se tenait tout au bord, presque suspendue, entourée d’un grand espace. Le bleu du ciel l’envasissait, l’air circulait dans sa tête creuse, elle n’avait qu’à céder, qu’à se laisser prendre’ (II/13, p. 644).

Later still, having become disillusioned by the failure of all of the men in her
life, by their inability to save her, Emma, on her deathbed, seeks salvation in Christ. The arsenic—with which, she had told the pharmacist’s young assistant, she hoped to kill the rats in her house that were preventing her from sleeping—has begun the debilitating effect she wished for. At the sight of the violet stole of the priest, summoned to Emma’s bedside to administer extreme unction, she is reminded of ‘la volupté perdue de ses premiers élargissements mystiques, avec des visions de bénédiction éternelle qui commençaient’ (III/8, p. 684). When the priest proffers a crucifix, ‘elle allongea le cou comme quelqu’un qui a soif, et, collant ses lèvres sur le corps de l’Homme-Dieu, elle y déposa de toute sa force expirante le plus grand baiser d’amour qu’elle eût jamais donné’ (III/8, p. 684).

But, as I have said, besides Emma’s striving for willlessness and total submission, including her desire to vaporize herself into celestial air, we also see in her, paradoxically, an obverse disposition, a reassertion of will and will-fullness, a desire to shape the world according to her wishes, and even, when it fails to respond to them, to vaporize it. One of Emma’s most ecstatic moments, experienced just before she makes love for the first time with Rodolphe, occurs as she is standing with him on a prominence high enough above Yonville to cause its ugliness to dissolve into misty blueness: ‘Emma fermait à demi les paupières pour reconnaître sa maison, et jamais ce pauvre village où elle vivait ne lui avait semblé si petit. De la hauteur où ils étaient, toute la vallée paraissait un immense lac pâle, s’évaporant à l’air’ (II/9, p. 628). While Emma’s repeated attraction to the most volatile particles of matter—powder, dust, sand, water droplets, mist—as well as to incense and refracted light, can be associated with her languor and desire to yield, the text also allows us to interpret her interest in dissolution as her desire to have the world yield to her idealizing and destructive will.

Instead of shaping a world through artisanal or artistic production or even reproduction—Emma successively gives up drawing, embroidery, and piano-playing—she endeavours to shape others’ actions according to her desires. She particularly tries to seduce men, whom she regards as having more power than herself, into fulfilling her dreams, but lives perennially frustrated in these attempts. Both Rodolphe and Léon come to feel the despotic element of her ‘love’ and seek to distance themselves from her. Rodolphe baulks, for example, at all of the presents she has been forcing on him, presents that were to help make him into the person she wanted him to be: ‘Cependant ces cadeaux l’humiliaient. Il en refusa plusieurs; elle insista, et Rodolphe finit par obéir, la trouvant tyrannique et trop envahissante’ (II/12, p. 639). Léon too feels that with the insistence of her tender words and kisses ‘il devenait sa maîtresse plutôt qu’elle n’était la sienne [. . .] Où donc avait-elle appris cette corruption, presque immatérielle à force d’être profonde et dissimulée?’ (III/6, p. 668). As for the Lord, to whom she turned during her periods of supposed will-less devotion and self-denial, we can only imagine how He might be supposed to receive her ‘love’ when, kneeling on her Gothic prie-dieu, ‘elle adressait au Seigneur les mêmes paroles de suavité qu’elle murmurait jadis à son amant, dans les épanchements de l’adultère’ (II/14, p. 647).

When the men in her life do not conform to her dreams or provide for her needs, she wants to strike them, as we have already seen, and even kill
them. Concerning Charles, ‘elle s’étonnait parfois des conjectures atroces qui lui arrivaient à la pensée’ (II/5, p. 611). After seductively pressing Lheureux’s impassive knee in an attempt to persuade him to extend her credit, she wants to hit him, and on several occasions has fantasized that he is dead. But instead of striking or killing the people who thwart her, she usually bites her lip or opens the window for fresh air. When the accumulated disappointment has reached massive proportions, however, and the rage is as great, biting her lip is not enough. To take on the whole world, she engages her whole person. Her rage, one might say, becomes global. Her suicide, then, may be seen as a confused effort to corrode and pulverize the whole obdurate, unloving world. During her first thoughts of suicide at her attic window, the blood in her arteries beats ‘comme à grands coups de belier’. ‘Elle jetait les yeux tout autour d’elle avec l’envie que la terre croulât. Pourquoi n’en pas finir? Qui la retenait donc? Elle était libre’ (II/13, p. 644). And just before her definitive resolve to kill herself, ‘dans un transport d’héroïsme qui la rendait presque joyeuse’ (III/8, p. 680), Emma likewise feels the beating of her arteries ‘qu’elle croyait entendre s’échapper comme une assourdissante musique qui emplissait la campagne. Le sol, sous ses pieds, était plus mou qu’une onde et les sillons lui parurent d’immense vagues brunes’ (III/8, p. 680). Instead of enjoying the sovereignty of a creator, Emma in desperation opts for the sovereignty of a total destroyer. When she comes to the pharmacy to demand the arsenic from the assistant, she now appears to him ‘majestueuse’. After swallowing the corrosive powder, she feels the calmness of mastery over everything—her debts, her faults, her disappointments: ‘je vais dormir, et tout sera fini!’ (III/8, p. 681). The ‘everything’ I take to be the world in its unyielding otherness.

I have interpreted the thrust of Emma’s sensuality and her suicide project as doubly, even ‘oppositely’, motivated. I have tried to show how, in submission, her project is to achieve a kind of absolute heteronomy of her being by dissolving her self in the Other. Conversely, her project is also to conquer, since she seeks to achieve a kind of absolute autonomy of her being by dissolving the other into an expanded Self. While the two motivations appear to aim in diametrically opposite directions, and therefore to contradict each other, they in fact merge, at a deeper level, in their totalizing extremity and thus can be understood as one.14 What these seemingly opposite solutions to Emma’s ‘ennui’ have in common is that they both enact merger fantasies that would convert difference into sameness, to form a whole that consists not of independent yet related parts, but a whole of no parts at all. In other words, if it is a fundamentally failed relationship with any significant form of otherness that incites Emma’s despair, we should view her contemplated solution as the renunciation of any dialogical relationship whatsoever. The firecracker whose display neither we nor Emma were ever allowed to see at the close of the agricultural fair, ‘le morceau principal’ that never went off because the powder had become too damp to

14 It is interesting to note in the third version of Flaubert’s La Tentation de Saint Antoine that St Anthony’s zeal for penitence and self-laceration, including his announced hatred of himself, blends imperceptibly into a lust for aggression, rape, and murder. In fact his desire to destroy others emerges so abruptly out of his desire to destroy himself that he loses consciousness from the confusion. See La Tentation de Saint Antoine, ‘version définitive’, in Œuvres complètes, 1, 522–71 (pp. 528–29).
ignite, ‘devait figurer un dragon se mordant la queue’ (II/8, p. 626). This dragon biting its tail, both a figure of infinity and of self-devouring narcissism, could be regarded as the unseen emblem of the dialectic at work in Emma’s search for happiness, a kind of happiness that by its very nature could not possibly exist.

What is most tragic about Emma’s unhappiness is that rather than learning from her suffering, she merely redoubles her efforts in the same fateful directions. Right through her horrible agony to the bitter end—an end she sees prefigured in the scrofulous blind beggar who, at the moment preceding her death, arrives in Yonville seeking from Homais an impossible cure for his condition—she has no moral insight into her true condition. She is saved by no grace. Flaubert, who so identified with Emma’s affliction, perhaps had to create Emma in order to kill her, to overcome and save himself from his own despotic and infantile yearning for absolute oneness with otherness.

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