The Sublimity of Charles Bovary

Rebecca Gould
The Sublimity of Charles Bovary

REBECCA GOULD*

From Henry James to Jacques Rancière, readers of Madame Bovary have assumed that the novel hinges on the author’s identification with his heroine. Such readings overlook Charles Bovary, a character whose generosity powerfully contrasts with Emma’s self-absorption. This essay looks beyond the stereotype of Charles as a bungling idiot in order to shed light on the sources of Emma’s tragedy. Emma’s suffering, I argue, begins not with marriage-induced oppression but rather with her terror at the prospect of her husband’s forgiveness.

After her belongings have been seized by the debt collectors and Emma Bovary stands on the brink of financial ruin, she pauses in the midst of her despair to imagine what her husband’s reaction will be when he learns that she has squandered all his fortune. “Go away!” Emma imagines telling Charles, “This carpet on which you are walking is no longer ours. In your own house you do not possess a chair, a pin, a straw, and it is I, poor man, who have ruined you.” Emma’s familiarity with Charles’s personality enables her to conjure up her husband’s imaginary response to her declaration: “there would be a great sob; next he would weep abundantly, and at last, the surprise past, he would forgive her” (329). The specter of Charles’s forgiveness inspires Emma with more contempt than does the prospect of her lovers’ everlasting disdain. “Yes,” Emma murmurs through her teeth, “he will forgive me, he who would give me a million if I would forgive him for having married me!” (330). Rather than being tormented by her husband’s forgiveness, Emma chooses death. Indeed, for Emma the most horrifying prospect of all is the “oppression” induced by her husband’s “magnanimity” (330).

Emma is hardly the only reader to despise Charles’s weak-willed ways. As discerning a critic as Henry James qualified his acknowledgement that Charles Bovary is “the only good person of the book” with the rejoinder that “he is stupidly, helplessly good.” In James’s, as in many subsequent readers’ estimations, Emma alone of all the novel’s characters commands our sympathy and affection. Such an approach to the text may seem to find substantiation in Flaubert’s own conspicuous reticence towards his unlikely hero. While Flaubert is reported to have proclaimed “La Bovary, c’est moi (I am [Madame] Bovary),” after reading Baudelaire’s review of his novel, he maintained a seemingly contemptuous silence with respect to Madame Bovary’s husband. And yet,

---

*Rebecca Gould, Assistant Professor, Literature, Division of Humanities, Yale-NUS College, Singapore. E-mail: rebecca.gould@yale-nus.edu.sg


2 Henry James, French Poets and Novelists (London: Macmillan and Co, 1878), 263.
even in the absence of explicit authorial appeals to Charles’s goodness, there is much in
the novel to suggest that Charles is worthy of more readerly attention than he has yet
received. Even as it dwells satirically on Charles’s personal shortcomings, the novel sug-
gests that, as oppressed as Emma is by her provincial middle class life, her husband is not
the source of her suffering. Moreover, Emma’s inability to appreciate her husband’s
goodness contributes to her destruction. The time has come to read Charles Bovary
against the grain of a hermeneutic tradition that treats Emma’s unfortunate husband
as a mere summation of everything his wife is not. The ethical landscape of Flaubert’s
magnum opus is more diverse than most readers have acknowledged. Consequentially,
suicide was not Emma’s only option. Had she lived, Emma could have learned from her
husband’s capacity to forgive.

Emma is seen by most of her readers as she sees herself: as a woman oppressed by
bourgeois mores, gifted with the ability to see beyond provincial conventions, but lacking
the wherewithal to realize her exalted dreams. And yet there are many occasions in
Charles’s interactions with Emma when the husband appears less chained to conventions
than his wife. When Emma’s soon-to-be-lover Rodolphe Boulanger invites Emma for a
horseback ride, Emma initially resists. It is ultimately Charles who persuades his wife to
flout conventions that dictate that a married woman should not go out riding alone with
another man. Emma protests that such behavior would be unacceptable because it would
appear odd (droôle) to their neighbors (170). She worries that sight of a married woman
riding alone with a man other than her husband could cause a scandal. “What the deuce
do I care for that?” Charles counters boldly, “Health before everything! You are wrong”
(170). Whereas a conventional or jealous husband would have insisted on riding with his
wife rather than letting her ride alone with another man, Charles exerts himself to per-
suade Emma to go riding with the man who, unbeknownst to him, will soon become his
rival and set into motion the destruction of their marriage.

Just as Charles unwittingly prods Emma toward her love affair with Rodolphe by
encouraging her to ride with him into the forest, so too does Charles provide the initial
impetus for the consummation of Léon’s and Emma’s desire, while the three acquaint-
ances converse in Rouen following the Lagardy’s performance of Donizetti’s opera Lucia
di Lammermoor (based on Sir Walter Scott’s novel). While Léon and Emma share their
disdain for Lagardy’s performance, Charles expresses his regret that they had to leave
before the show was over. As if wishing to give his wife the opportunity to enjoy the
pleasures he cannot afford, Charles suggests that Emma stay in Rouen an extra night,
while he returns home alone. In persuading Emma to follow the course that will culmin-
ate in the destruction of his marriage, Charles repeats his earlier charge that Emma is
wrong (tu as tort) to constrain her behavior by social propriety: “You are wrong,” he says,
“not to stay if you feel that this is doing you the least good” (248, emphasis added).
Charles’s insistence on Emma’s being in the wrong is ironic in that in both cases this
charge propels Emma along a path that wrecks their marriage, for staying longer in
Rouen an extra night gives her the opportunity to take Léon as her second lover.
Notwithstanding the unintended irony of his words, Charles’s attempt to look beyond
social convention for the sake of his wife’s happiness is boldly unconventional. Even more
unusually for a husband in his milieu, Charles endorses Emma’s weekly escapades into
Rouen by agreeing to pay for her weekly piano lessons with Mademoiselle Lempereur,
which in fact never take place. These (falsified) lessons provide the pretext for Emma’s weekly rendezvous with Léon.

But it is not merely his indifference to convention that marks Charles out from Yonville’s other inhabitants. More compelling, if not necessarily more attractive, is the intense, undying affection that Charles nourishes for his wife and which leads him to love and forgive her even when he learns after her death that she has slept with other men. After Emma has died, Rodolphe and Charles cross paths on the way to the market at Argueil. Perhaps to evade the awkwardness of meeting so soon after Emma’s death, Rodolphe invites Charles to drink a beer with him at the local pub. Charles accepts his offer. As they converse, Rodolphe avoids the subject of Emma’s death, instead “filling with commonplace phrases all the gaps” that might afford an opening for an allusion to his affair with Emma. Charles however rejects such circumlocutions, and interrupts Rodolphe’s monologue with the forthright if unexpected declaration: “I don’t hold it against you” (376).

Naming Emma’s love affair, the act for which Charles offers Rodolphe his forgiveness, would have diluted the intensity of his interjection. As attuned as any character to the subtleties of silence, Charles makes no attempt to specify his meaning. Instead, he adds to his declaration of forgiveness a remark that according to the narrator is the only eloquent statement (grand mot) Charles ever uttered: “It was the fault of fatality” (376). Rodolphe considers Charles’s remark to be in bad taste, “excessive for a man of his situation, comic even, and a bit vile” (376). But, laced with clichés and dissimulations as his own speeches are, Rodolphe is hardly qualified to pass judgment on someone whose sincerity and empathy far exceeds his own. By the narrative’s end, it appears that Rodolphe, for all his cleverness, is limited more than Charles by a failure of the imagination. Rodolphe cannot make sense of the nuances that deepen Charles’s character, and which are further attenuated by his wife’s infidelity. Owing to the obtuseness of his imagination, Rodolphe can only perceive in Charles’s unsolicited forgiveness for his trespasses a failure of social grace. Had Emma been able to discern these flaws in Rodolphe’s own interpretive capacities, she might have found happiness, even in provincial Yonville.

While readers are left with an impression of Charles as an awkward, cumbersome, bungling, and at times mediocre man, these very weaknesses cause the occasional sublimity of his character to shine through all the more brightly. Indeed, Charles is nothing if not perceptive. When he learns of Emma’s infidelity through the letters stuffed in her drawer, his first impulse is sympathy. This is surely an unusual response for a cuckolded husband, even for one whose wife is dead. Rather than being consumed with rage at Emma or his rivals, Charles seeks to penetrate the depths of his wife’s suffering. His longing to live within his wife’s pain—the pain that caused her to end her life, and left him feeling abandoned and alone—is even more intense than the desire for ego gratification.

Rather than being dominated by more conventional and predictable forms of jealousy, Charles is overcome by a desire that is at once sentimental and sexual for his deceased wife. This desire is intensified by his discovery of the desire she stimulated in other men. Emma’s infidelity, Charles reasons, refusing to stand in judgment on his beloved, was only logical. “All men assuredly must have coveted her,” he reflects (370). The narrator extrapolates with Proustian insights concerning the treacherous entanglements of time and desire: Emma “seemed but the more beautiful to him for this; he was seized with a
lasting, furious desire for her, which inflamed his despair and was limitless because it was now unrealizable” (370). Charles is no saint. He is not immune to the paradoxes of human affection, as evinced by the mimetic susceptibility of his desire for Emma, which is contingent on her desirability to other men, as well as by the fact that his desire along with his critical intelligence is most powerfully ignited only after its consummation has become a physical impossibility. In these respects, Charles’s affection is flawed in ways that bear comparison with the carnal affections of Rodolphe. The salient difference between these rivals’ ways of loving is that Charles’s fallible love does not harm its object, whereas Rodolphe’s helps to bring about Emma’s destruction.

All these examples demonstrate the radical difference between Charles’s love for Emma and the alternately carnal and romantic satisfaction after which Emma hankers, without actually knowing what she really wants. Charles loves Emma even when this love holds out no prospect of personal gratification. He loves Emma in part for her beauty, which is a material attribute, as carnal as the physical qualities that Emma finds attractive in Rodolphe and Léon. But, unlike Emma, unlike any character in Madame Bovary, Charles loves Emma for the simple and selfless reason that he has consecrated his life to loving her. Charles loves Emma for being herself, and for being part of his self. Herein lies the sublimity of Charles Bovary, which no character in the novel and astonishingly few of its readers have been able to perceive.

Charles’s uncanny empathy anticipates that of the servant Félicité, the protagonist of Flaubert’s “A Simple Heart” (1877). Like Charles, if to an even greater extreme, Félicité defines her entire life through her affection for others. Flaubert wrote “A Simple Heart” to demonstrate his ability to portray simple characters sympathetically. Like Charles, Félicité is gifted with an uncanny empathy that is thoughtlessly dispensed without regard for profit or self-gratification. When Virginie, the child whom her mistress Mme. Aubain has entrusted to Félicité’s care, approaches the chalice for her first communion, Félicité observes the procession as though she were undergoing the rite of passage herself. Flaubert’s language aligns the writer’s capacity for depicting alien lives with Félicité’s—and Charles’s—creative ability to live through others’ experiences as though they were themselves the actors. “With the imaginativeness of deep and tender feeling,” the narrator writes, “it seemed to Félicité that she actually was the child” approaching the chalice: “Virginie’s face became hers, she was dressed in her clothes, it was her heart beating in her breast. As the moment came to open her mouth she closed her eyes and nearly fainted.”

Even Félicité’s own experience of communion “did not give her the same exquisite delight” (21) as that which she felt when observing her surrogate child partake of the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. Such empathy is a quality in which Emma, Rodolphe, and even Léon, are singularly lacking.

Charles’s simple, unquestioning loyalty sets him apart from that of Emma, whose desire is invariably voluptuous and self-gratifying, whether it is directed at Rodolphe, Léon, or even God. Emma pays homage to this very distinction when Charles asks her on her deathbed why she decided to take arsenic. To his question: “Weren’t you happy? Is it


my fault? and his statement “I did all I could,” Emma assents in fragmented diction: “Yes, that is true. You are good—you!” (344). As if realizing what Charles’s empathetic imagination could have offered her had she been able to receive its blessings, shortly before she dies, Emma strokes her husband’s hair more lovingly than she had ever done before.

Notwithstanding their roles in the novel as each other’s foils, Charles and Emma are not as radically opposed, or even as ill matched, as they seem. So absorbed is Charles in his wife’s tastes that he even shares her admiration for Rodolphe. Staring at his rival over their beer and clichés, Charles becomes “lost in reverie at this face that she had loved... It was a marvel to him. He would have liked to be this man” (376). Charles’s instructions for Emma’s burial additionally betray a romantic temperament that parallels that of his wife. “I wish her to be buried,” Charles orders, “in her wedding-dress, with white shoes, and a wreath. Her hair is to be spread out over her shoulders. Three coffins, one of oak, one of mahogany, one of lead... Over all is to be placed a large piece of green velvet” (355). Flaubert’s irony is active even in these burial instructions, for green velvet—the color of cuckoldry—is the fabric in which Rodolphe was wrapped when he first visited the Bovary home (138). But these elaborate preparations also anticipate Félicité’s elaborate procedures for dressing the corpse of her beloved Virginie. While still a child, Virginie dies from a sudden illness. Félicité lavishes her attentions upon the deceased’s body in much the same way as Charles dictated elaborate commandments for Emma’s burial. While preparing Virginie’s body for the funeral, Félicité “made the girl’s toilette, wrapped her in a shroud, lifted her down into her bier, put a garland on her head, and spread out her hair” (32).

Out of generosity of spirit and without suspecting that his disdain for convention might bring suffering to his wife as well as to himself, Charles incessantly pushes Emma toward other men. That Charles does everything in his power to secure his wife’s freedom gives the lie to Emma’s own belief that her suffocation is caused by her marriage to a stupid man. Had she wished even to divorce Charles, surely he would have forgiven her. Perhaps he would even have helped her to bring about her desired result. What Emma finds unbearable is not Charles’s cruelty, but rather his kindness, his infinite pliability, his boundless empathy, and his rich reservoirs of affection. Even if such character traits are not directly held up to the reader as worthy of emulation, their complex workings in Charles’s imagination, and specifically the way these forms of generosity so often militate against his best interests, anticipate Flaubert’s conception of Félicité’s “simple heart.”

While his acts of kindness are at one level fatal mistakes, Charles bears no responsibility for their outcome. If blame lies anywhere, it is with the author, who created Emma Bovary as a frustrated wife in order to exorcise his anxieties about literature. French philosopher Jacques Rancière has recently argued that Emma “is sentenced as a bad artist, who handles in the wrong way the equivalence of art and nonart.”5 In literalizing art, Emma ends by cheapening her life. Above all, she cheapens Charles, and renders herself insensible to the depths of his affections. As Charles himself states to Rodolphe, the tragedy of Emma’s life is dictated by fate. Like Rodolphe, if somewhat more tragically, Emma’s self-absorption renders her deaf to the hidden depths that resound “in the emptiest metaphors, since no one can ever give the exact measure of his needs, his

---

conceptions, nor of his suffering” (208). Emma’s failure of imagination is balanced against Charles’ surplus of imaginative empathy.

Emma’s death is the result of her author’s inexorable need to expose the line mercilessly severing life from art, and to separate bourgeoisie hypocrisy in all of its sordid pomposity from the realm of the imagination. And yet Charles, who is in some ways more perceptive than his author, experiences no such need. Because Emma is insensible to Charles’s love, she denies herself the only true happiness she could ever have had. Emma herself recognizes her own incapacity for happiness, even and especially when she attains her ends. As her love affair with Léon sours, she acknowledges to herself the vicariousness of all desires: “Every smile hid a yawn of ennui, every joy a curse, all pleasure, satiety, and ... the sweetest kisses left upon the lips only an unattainable desire for a greater delight” (307). Emma’s awareness of her internally induced suffering suggests why she is so terrified by the prospect of her husband’s forgiveness. More than any other fear, Emma’s dread of her husband’s forgiveness drives her toward suicide.

To have accepted Charles’s kindness would have forced Emma to confront her delusions concerning the shifting boundaries of art and life. Neither Flaubert nor Emma are able to cope with the fluidity of these imaginary lines. Such a confrontation between Emma’s impossible dreams and Charles’s mediocrity would have shed an unflattering light on the fantasies that justified her betrayal of her husband. Like her chivalric predecessor in the art of fantasy, Don Quixote de la Mancha, Emma Bovary dies a victim to her own need to dream.6 Although she is a tragic heroine who earns the readers’ hard-won sympathies, Emma’s tragedy is entirely the product of her failed imagination.

Far from opposing her to her husband, Emma’s idealism suggests the kinship she shares with him, for both Charles and Emma are dreamers. The difference between husband and wife is that, whereas Charles is satisfied by reality, Emma is not. But while Emma and Charles are both Don Quixote’s children, the unfolding of their idealisms also distinguish them from each other. Whereas Emma is an heir to Don Quixote’s cruel self-absorption, which produces, among other things, the knight’s indifference to the beatings of poor villagers who cross his path, Charles is an heir to another side of Don Quixote’s personality, the one that inspired Dostoevsky to conjure the Christ-like holy fool Prince Myshkin, the protagonist of The Idiot (1869), in his image. Like Charles, Prince Myshkin is entirely content with his reality, because he perceives it as suffused with divine grace. As with the conflicting values of Rodolphe and Charles, the basic difference between Emma’s and Charles’s idealisms is that the first causes suffering to others while the second causes suffering only to one’s self.

As with Félicité of “A Simple Heart,” Madame Bovary’s narrative point of view oscillates between admiration for Charles’s empathetic imagination and disdain for the clumsy language in which he expresses his affection. Early in the narrative, Rodolphe is said to display the “superiority of judgment appropriate to someone who holds all passions at a distance” (208), but, by the end of the narrative, Rodolphe is simply a callous bore who fails to grasp the complexity of his rival’s love. Although Flaubert yoked his identity to Emma in his earliest public pronouncement on his first major literary progeny, the reader cannot but suspect that he came increasingly to value the simple hearts of

---

6For Emma Bovary as a “female Quixote,” see Harry Levin, Contexts of Criticism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 96.
characters like Charles and Félicité as his writing progressed. When Félicité sees a gigantic parrot hovering above her head on her deathbed (53), this hypertrophy of green signifies, not the cuckold’s jealously, but the fecundity of the literary imagination. From this vantage point, Flaubert’s ethical ideals approximated those embodied in Dostoevsky’s holy fools more thoroughly than the reception of either author suggests.