

# **“An Ecstasy of Heroism”: Spinozan Immanence and Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary***

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**Abstract:** Gustave Flaubert has commonly stated his respect for seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza. Contemporary critic Roger Huss picks up on Spinozan influences—like Spinoza’s anti-teleological metaphysics of immanence—in Flaubert’s novels. While Huss focuses largely on these influences in Flaubert’s authorial style and in particular scenes from *Madame Bovary* (1857), like the scene involving Hippolyte’s foot operation, I argue that these Spinozan elements are also apparent in Emma Bovary’s failed attempts to attain an idealized state of ecstasy. Emma turns towards affair as a means of attaining her desired end in order to transcend beyond a mundane and determined existence—however, within a Spinozan world view of immanence, such transcendence is, for her, a tragic impossibility.

*Je tombe avec voracité sur mon vieux et  
trois fois grand Spinoza. Quel génie, quelle  
œuvre que l’Ethique!*

—Gustave Flaubert, “CCXIX,” *Correspondance*

Emma Bovary, the tragic, adulterous, and hysterical heroine of Gustave Flaubert’s 1857 novel, *Madame Bovary*, is in some ways a character of her bourgeois time and place. Emma is a young, middle-class woman, passively married to a mediocre older man, Charles Bovary. Under the constraining social conventions of her time, she longs to transcend her barriers to attain a more ideal end. Flaubert’s character develops through a battle between active and passive passions—she grows to take on a more active role in a desper-

ate struggle to overcome the mundane determinism of living under such conditions. The seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza describes human nature as a balance between active and passive capacities (a balance which determines a level of freedom, but not complete freedom). Emma's active desires will increase as she turns to an affair as a key means of breaking out of her constraints. The tragedy of Emma Bovary is that she can never completely transcend her barriers to attain the object of her desire; the essence of her desire is always continually out of reach. She is after a teleological end—a sense of absolute freedom, happiness, and passion. This desired end is a form of eternal and absolute ecstasy; it is an ideal and is sought to give deeper meaning and purpose to her life. However, the paradox of treating such a state as a teleological end is that it is ultimately unattainable, or at least always fleeting. Her human passions are limited, even though she continually wants more. The constraints imparted on her through social conventions merely operate under the deterministic cycles of nature. Emma's affairs (and eventually her death), rather than freeing her, only continue the eternal determinism of these natural cycles.

Emma's passivity and her desire to escape it is apparent early in the novel as she starts to attain glimpses of excitement from external causes. After gaining an interest in romantic and chivalric literature, she attains a strong desire for an indescribable notion of love and passion. Such literature, however, only conveys the female character as passive; there needs to be a "white-plumed knight" to bring passion to these female characters. Charles, far from containing such knightly and passionate characteristics, fails to bring this passion to Emma (Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* 33). She is, in her bourgeois marriage, restrained to a life of repetition and monotony. This existence for her consists of mundane, predictable progressions (marriage, procreation, and death) and repetitive daily cycles (Charles goes to work, Charles comes home, and they both go to sleep). While miraculous *événements* do occasionally give Emma glimpses of romanticized passions (as in the spectacle of the

Vaubyessard ball to which she and Charles were invited), such occasions always end at the mere glimpse of what she wants. These passions would no longer enter her life from such external causes, just as “God had willed” (54). Instead, it seems, her fate would go on to keep her from attaining further “adventure[s] ... [and their] infinite consequences” that she so desperately longs for (54). Given their low to middle-class social standing, the Bovarys’ invitation to the Vaubyessard ball proves to be a one-time coincidence. Instead, Emma remains confined to the monotony of the repetitive “series of identical days” and seasons; while her inner longing for passion grows, her constraints keep her from moving beyond her mediocre marriage and existence (54). She waits for more passion-filled events and for romantic saviours like Léon to free her as she constantly idealizes a break from her pre-determined and quiet life of which she has little freedom or control over. However, with each glimpse of ecstasy that entices her (but always ends in disappointment), Emma’s activity increases—she slowly begins to seek a more active role in attaining her idealized experiences rather than waiting for the ideal to come to her.

Emma’s longing continues to grow, but she ultimately remains limited from transcending to her desired end. Her object of desire becomes focused on an indefinable feeling of “ecstasies she had not yet experienced” (57)—she is, as Baudelaire describes, “in pursuit of the ideal!” (Baudelaire 409). In setting up such an ideal, Emma is guided towards it as a sort of teleological end; the very essence of her being relies on the attainment of this end. Without it, existence is meaningless and amounts to nothing but mundane repetitions. There is a strong Spinozan element in Flaubert’s novels that Roger Huss describes in his article “Nature, Final Causality and Anthropocentrism in Flaubert”: Flaubert’s works are in some ways an “attack on final causes” (291) and “teleological views of nature” (288). This is a fitting statement for Flaubert’s self-described “book about nothing” (“Letters” 300). Flaubert goes on to echo these anti-teleological views further in an 1854 letter to Louise Colet: “What is the goal of nature? Well, I think the goal of man-

kind exactly the same. Things exist because they exist, and you can't do anything about it ... We are always turning in the same circle, always rolling the same stone" (Flaubert, "Letters" 310). Flaubert suggests here that there is no teleological end to life—there is no transcendent realm or goal that exists beyond the worldly life that we experience and can work towards. Instead, we are condemned to this singular and embodied realm of existence and daily cycles. Emma's drive becomes a futile one towards unattainable ends, towards an imagined realm that exists beyond her cyclic and worldly existence. While a similar anti-teleological concept makes up a part of the metaphysical world view of the *Ethics*, Spinoza still recognizes that "men *act* always with an end in view ... [and are] always looking only for the final causes ... [I]f they fail to discover them from some external source, they have no recourse but to turn to themselves" (*Ethics* I Appendix, emphasis added). Spinoza suggests that we aim towards such ends even though they are nothing but fictitious ideas. In treating her idealized state of ecstasy as an end, Emma will have to turn inward to pursue her passions more actively after failing to receive such an end from external causes—the failure of further invitations to balls and the initial departure of Léon initiates this turn for Emma. Emma sets out to attain a state "where all would be passion, ecstasy, delirium" (Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* 131). This state is what she pursues as her ideal end, and she is starting to realize that she must progress from passivity to greater activity to attain it. However, that same circle, with its repetitive cycles of the seasons, daily life, mundanity and mediocrity, along with the limits of human freedom, always inhibits Emma—in a Spinozan fashion—from reaching any end.

Emma begins to realize a need for active pursuit after her initial flirtations with Léon. She attains a mere glimpse of passion with Léon, but after he soon leaves for Paris, the narrator's free indirect discourse offers Emma's realization to the reader: "Why did she not keep him from leaving, beg him on her knees, when he was about to flee from her? And she cursed herself for not having loved Léon" (101). When

Rodolphe enters the picture, she is hesitant, but continues moving towards greater agency. She is encouraged by Rodolphe to embrace the passions rather than “cry out against them” (117). Her passions for Rodolphe grow in this scene in correlation with the events of the Yonville agricultural fair. The fair is an event that celebrates the harvest and offers symbols of natural cycles, rebirth, spring, and fertility. Agriculture does not represent humanity’s complete domination of nature, rather it suggests a level of cooperation between human activity and the forces and cycles of the natural world. Ultimately, human existence functions within the necessary cycles of nature. Her growing passion for Rodolphe in this scene may symbolize a rebirth for Emma as she attains further glimpses of her ideal ecstasy and starts to actively move closer towards it. However, the very theme of spring and the fair itself continues to ground her reality in cyclic determinism—spring always turns to winter eventually, as it does figuratively for Emma. After starting their affair, Emma attempts to prevent this figurative changing of the seasons to prolong the state of passion with Rodolphe and break from a life of passivity and determinism by meeting him unexpectedly (135). Rodolphe, however, soon becomes bored of Emma (just as she had become bored of her husband), and the inevitable cycle of mundane existence returns to her.

When Léon returns from Paris (following her affair with Rodolphe), Emma increases her active desires further through her pursuit of adultery, which she uses to overcome the mundane passivity of her existence and to attain her ideal end. As Georges Bataille opines, human “[e]roticism, unlike simple sexual activity, is a psychological quest independent of the natural goal: reproduction and the desire for children” (Bataille 11). Bataille discusses human eroticism as transgressing the seasonal and habitual sexuality of animals to express a more subjective and active “innerness of the desire ... We fail to realize this because man is everlastingly in search of an object *outside* himself but this object answers the *innerness* of his desire” (29). In Spinozan terms, this form of human eroticism is a higher expression of the

active capacities, raising humanity to a level of freedom under which we are less constrained by passive, deterministic forces and cycles of nature. Emma's affairs are an attempt at gaining more freedom and become necessary to guide her beyond the determinism of passivity towards her ideal end of ecstasy.

Emma's active pursuits become more evident in her affair with Léon; while both feel immense passion for one another initially, Emma continues towards becoming the pursuer in the relationship. Her desperation for attaining her end, which often seems so close, guides her towards such activity: "And she took full and free advantage... Whenever she was seized with the desire to see Léon, she would set out upon any pretext whatever" (Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* 218). Through such actions, Léon is "becoming her mistress rather than she his" (219). While passions flourish for the two of them initially, the season eventually changes to autumn (227) as Léon starts to get bored of Emma, and Emma becomes "sick of him as he was weary of her. Emma found again in adultery all the platitudes of marriage" (231). By actively pursuing her end goal she gets further glimpses of her ideal ecstasy, but she remains limited. Her freedom only goes so far in her affairs—ultimately, she cannot control either Léon's or Rodolphe's passions for her. As if by a force of nature, she is inevitably constrained by cycles that always bring back moments of despair and mundanity.

The unattainability of Emma's teleological end is epitomized by the human limitations of arriving at a state of eternal flourishing. This limit coincides with Spinoza's description of humanity as in balance between the completely active (God, Nature) and the completely passive (inanimate objects). Humanity seems free to an extent but is ultimately unable to express complete freedom: "Nothing in nature is contingent, but all things are from the necessity of the divine nature determined to exist and to act in a definite way... [Human] will cannot be called a free cause, but only a necessary cause" (Spinoza, *Ethics* Ip29, Ip32). As Gilles Deleuze describes it in his 1970 book on Spinoza, we have "capacities for affecting and being affected on this plane of imma-

nence” (Spinoza 125). The plane is the range between these capacities, but we are limited from transcending completely beyond it towards complete freedom—there is no teleological, transcendent end beyond this plane, even though, as Spinoza states (and as Emma tragically expresses), we act as if there is (Spinoza, *Ethics* I Appendix). Emma longs to break from her mundane cycles, but her imagined teleological end is only ever glimpsed at through her affairs—like an orgasm, these glimpses are only ever fleeting, or not quite the everlasting ecstasy hoped for. Instead, there is always longing for more. The constant crashing back to mundanity after *la petite mort* presents an aspect of the cyclic nature of an immanent (non-transcendent) existence. Nevertheless, Emma increases in desperation, even though she is never ultimately able to reach her end. After her failed attempts to actively pursue her end through her affairs, the only end she can conceive of to remove herself from the confining and seemingly determined cycles of existence is death.

After her affairs have failed and her financial debts become insurmountable, she directs herself towards the end of death. Feeling abandoned by her lovers and now under growing pressures from her creditor, Monsieur Lheureux, Emma’s anxiety reaches its climax as she rushes in a flurry towards her suicidal end:

Now her plight, like an abyss, loomed before her. She was panting as if her heart would burst. Then in an ecstasy of heroism, which made her almost joyous, she ran down the hill, crossed the cow-plank, the footpath, the alley, the market, and reached the pharmacy. (Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* 248)

Emma’s failure to reach an end beyond her life of mundanity has left her in a seemingly abysmal plight. Her last chance for escape, like “an ecstasy of heroism” (248), comes to her at this moment. Always associating a sense of ecstasy with her ends, she directs herself towards this final solution (via the pharmacy’s arsenic). Her suicide is more than just an attempt to avoid the pain of failed love and material repossession; it is as if death is the only way to transcend the inevi-

table determinism of the mundane cycles of her existence. However, even her death is not an end. Emma's death is still strongly situated within the inescapable cycle of nature, and the continuation of these cycles will persist through those who continue living, like her own biological extension, her child, Berthe. Death cannot give Emma her ideal ecstasy nor an escape from the cosmic cycles of nature. Emma comes to realize this fate with "an atrocious, frantic, desperate laugh" (257) while she overhears the blind man singing in the background. The re-emergence of the blind man at this moment hints at his eerily prophetic abilities. At the moment of Emma's death, the blind man continues the song he had begun earlier when Emma and Léon were enflamed in their affair. The song, being about the seasons ("summer"), passion ("dream her heart away") and fertility (the song's agricultural references), is a warning about the inevitability of the cycles of nature (210, 257–258). The blind man reminds Emma at her deathbed that the cycle is inescapable and will only continue after her within those she had loved and given life to.

Rather than merely portray Emma Bovary as a character who is unable to arrive at satisfaction because of mental hysteria, Flaubert uses his adulteress to tragically depict the limits of the human passions. He enforces these limits in a manner that invokes the Spinozan-Deleuzian plane of immanence, and highlights the dangers in striving towards unattainable ideal ends. The objects of Emma's desire are always something existing outside the self. No matter how much freedom and pursuit one practices in attaining such objects, it is impossible to exhibit complete control to attain the desired outcome of the absolute ideal. Constraint on absolute freedom exists at the sociological level (the institution of marriage, the *mœurs de Provence*), the natural level (the cycles of the seasons), and the individual level (the psychological struggle between varying levels of active capacities and different subjective, inner passions). As Emma tragically realizes, greater active pursuit towards a teleological end like infinite pleasure cannot allow one to tran-

scend these obstacles—we are instead merely condemned to continue to “exist..., [always] turning in the same circle” (Flaubert, “Letters” 310).

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