

EMMA BOVARY, THE BAKER'S PARAMOUR

by Robert Goodhand

One of Flaubert's most frequently quoted statements is his comment pertaining to the resistance of the raw material with which he struggled in composing the agricultural fair scene of *Madame Bovary* and the effect he hoped the finished product would create: "J'ai bien peur que mes *comices* soient trop longs, c'est un dur endroit. J'y ai *tous* mes personnages de mon livre en action et en dialogue, les uns mêlés aux autres et par là-dessus un grand paysage qui les enveloppe, mais si je réussis ce sera bien symphonique."¹ Less frequently quoted is Flaubert's letter dated several days later in which he expresses doubts concerning the impact of the scene upon the reader: "Quand j'aborde une situation, elle me dégoûte d'avance par sa vulgarité. . . . A la fin de la semaine prochaine, j'espère être au milieu de mes comices. Ce sera ou ignoble ou fort beau. . . ." ² One segment of the total description of the "comices" which Flaubert may have had particularly in mind when he refers to possible coarseness is the presentation of Rodolphe Boulanger's advances to Emma against the verbal backdrop of the speech of one of the dignitaries at the fair. I single out this scene because it is Monsieur Lieuvain's account of the process by which wheat is made into bread and his reference to the occupation of baker which serves as a point of departure for an interpretation of the ironic and, as I shall suggest, somewhat distasteful connotations of the name Boulanger and of other allusions in the novel to wheat, flour, and bread. Rodolphe's dallying with the sentiments of Emma is punctuated by the discourse of Lieuvain who drones on to his rapt bovine audience — both man and beast — gathered for the festivities of the Yonville fair:

Qui donc pourvoit à nos besoins? qui donc fournit à notre subsistance? N'est-ce pas l'agriculteur? L'agriculteur, Messieurs, qui, ensemençant d'une main laborieuse les sillons féconds des campagnes, fait naître le blé, lequel broyé est mis en poudre au moyen d'ingénieux appareils, en sort sous le nom de farine, et, de là, transporté dans les cités, est bientôt rendu chez le boulanger, qui en confectionne un aliment pour le pauvre comme pour le riche. (p. 201)³

Lieuvain's speech is invariably treated by general reader and critic alike as meaningless bombast and as an amusing counterpoint to the exchange between Emma and Rodolphe which occurs simultaneously. More can be

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said about the Councillor's grandiloquent discourse. An ironic symbolism comes to light if one considers his words as a figurative adumbration of Emma Bovary's life.

In such a context the references to "the farmer" suggest, of course, Emma's father who "fait naître le blé." The choice of the expression "fait naître" lends weight to such a reading, as does also Lieuvain's allusion a few sentences later to cultivated land which is likened to "une mère généreuse." Figuratively speaking, the wheat is harvested on the day the daughter as a young bride leaves the farm. In this regard, I think it significant that Flaubert describes Emma's wedding party as winding its way "entre les blés verts" (p. 37). What is more, he seems to direct attention to this particular detail of the landscape when, many pages after this description and many years after the wedding day, Emma has a vivid recollection of herself on that fatal day: "Emma rêvait au jour de son mariage; et elle se revoyait là-bas, au milieu des blés, sur le petit sentier, quand on marchait vers l'église. Pourquoi donc n'avait-elle pas . . . résisté, supplié?" (p. 312).

She did not resist and, just as the wheat is ground up into powder by "ingenious machinery" (according to Lieuvain's extravagant account of the whole process), Emma finds that married existence with Charles in the hinterlands of Tostes and Yonville has the effect of pulverizing her life — leaving as a residue powder which settles over everything. It appears to me undeniable that Flaubert has inserted the allusion to powder in Lieuvain's discourse on the transmutation of wheat into bread not merely for the sake of rhetorical padding, but for the very compelling reason that some of the most effective images in the novel are those of light and dark substances composed of very tiny particles: powder, dust, and ashes. This imagery conveys desiccation, disintegration, and sordidness. Accordingly, in the cemetery at Yonville there is only one small verdant area: "tout le reste n'était que pierres, et couvert continuellement d'une poudre fine, malgré le balai de la sacristie" (p. 154).

Dust and ashes evoke most forcefully existence ground into a dark powder by the monotonous and dreary "machinery" of the provincial train of life. The crumbling of Emma's hopes and aspirations has its analogue in the dust blowing over the highway in Tostes on a gloomy Sunday: "Comme elle était triste le dimanche, quand on sonnait les vêpres! . . . Le vent, sur la grande route, soufflait des trainées de poussière" (p. 88). The same idea is again communicated poetically in the memorable scene in which Emma cuts her finger on her bridal bouquet: "C'était un fil de fer de son bouquet de mariage. Les boutons d'oranger étaient jaunes de poussière. . . . Elle le jeta dans le feu. Il s'enflamma plus vite qu'une paille sèche. Puis ce fut comme un buisson rouge sur les cendres . . ." (p. 94).

The image of powder recurs in the context of Emma's affair with Rodolphe, this time juxtaposed with the jolting expression "crotte des rendez-vous": ". . . il atteignait sur le chambranle les chaussures d'Emma, tout empâtées

de crotte — la crotte des rendez-vous — qui se détachait en poudre sous ses doigts, et qu'il regardait monter doucement dans un rayon de soleil" (p. 261).

The culminating point in the development of the ironic motif of powdery substances is the heroine's choice of the means by which she ends her life: ". . . elle alla droit vers la troisième tablette, tant son souvenir la guidait bien, saisit le bocal bleu, en arracha le bouchon, y fourra sa main et, la retirant pleine d'une poudre blanche, elle se mit à manger à même" (p. 434). With the mention of Charles's bewildered inspection of "white sediment" it would seem that the author returned with some insistence to this particular symbol which now echoes in a macabre fashion Lieuvain's reference to wheat ground into flour: "A huit heures, les vomissements reparurent. Charles observa qu'il y avait au fond de la cuvette une sorte de gravier blanc, attaché aux parois de la porcelaine" (p. 436).

From farmer to miller and then to baker; from farm to marriage and then into the arms of Boulanger: such are the associations which might be qualified as "ignoble" (to fall back upon Flaubert's own epithet) and which are brought to mind by Councillor Lieuvain's talk at the Yonville fair and by the name Boulanger. Given the attention of commentators to the humorous denotations and connotations of most proper names in *Madame Bovary*, it is a bit surprising that Rodolphe Boulanger's name has been viewed only in terms of the ironic juxtaposition of the flamboyant first name and the prosaic last name.⁴ It is true that the allusions to bread, which take on a new resonance when linked to Emma's affair with Boulanger, are by no means multitudinous in the novel. However, once the somewhat scabrous overtones of these associations are acknowledged, it is quite understandable that Flaubert used a great deal of restraint and discretion in treating this motif.

One example of what might well be taken as the novelist's attempt to direct attention to this veiled motif and, at the same time, to attenuate overtones of "vulgarité" is the scene in which Charles observes his wife kneading bits of bread. At first glance the description would seem to have no implicit ramifications. The focus of a second glance would be narrowed by rereading of the novel and would suggest a prefiguration of Emma as the adulteress whose body is handled by the "baker" — whose destiny is shaped, in part, by the whims of Rodolphe Boulanger: "Elle dessinait quelquefois; et c'était pour Charles un grand amusement que de rester là . . . à la regarder penchée sur son carton, clignant des yeux, afin de mieux voir son ouvrage, ou arrondissant, sur son pouce, des boulettes de mie de pain" (p. 58).

Indeed, discretion is the better part of artistic valor in venturing into the esthetically perilous symbolism of bread and baker! And so it is that Homais makes an oblique reference to bread at the moment that Emma faints upon seeing Rodolphe leave Yonville. Homais hypothesizes about the causes of fainting "chez les personnes du sexe, qui sont plus délicates que les autres. On en cite qui s'évanouissent à l'odeur de la corne brûlée, du pain ten-

dre . . ." (p. 289). Homais's curious examples seem to fall into the category of an old wives' tale and this serves, of course, to undercut the reputation of erudite progressionist which he covets. At the same time, what could better explain the mention of "pain tendre" as prompting such a reaction than the link between bread and the real cause of Emma's swoon, the lover whose family name is Boulanger?

And what could better explain Homais's curious bit of medical advice to the blind man than this same link. As the "Hirondelle" sets out from Rouen with the pharmacist and the adulteress among the passengers, Homais leans out the window of the coach to yell at the blind man: "Pas de farineux ni de laitage!" (p. 415). Since this sightless derelict haunts the novel as the incarnation of the heroine's fate, most utterances he makes and most remarks addressed to him take on added suggestiveness. The veiled meaning in the admonition to avoid farinaceous foods is to be found in the network of allusions which I have sought to elucidate; the probable meaning of the inclusion of "dairy products" in Homais's warning is to be found in the startling simile which communicates the paroxysm of passion Emma experiences in Rodolphe's arms: ". . . elle sentait . . . le sang circuler dans sa chair comme un fleuve de lait" (pp. 223-224).

A less discreet notation which forms part of the concatenation of references relating to the occupation of baker is Flaubert's choice of the container used by Rodolphe to deposit epistolary trophies of past loves: "Afin de ressaisir quelque chose d'elle, il alla chercher . . . une vieille boîte à biscuits de Reims où il enfermait d'habitude ses lettres de femmes, et il s'en échappa une odeur de poussière humide et de roses flétries" (p. 278). The cooky tin, which, significantly enough in the light of the flour-dust motif, gives off an odor of dust, impels one to measure in rather unusual terms the distance of Emma's fall from the naive expectations of a young bride into the disillusionment of unrequited adulterous love: the colossal and resplendent wedding cake dwindles into a dusty "boîte à biscuits" (notwithstanding the fact that such an association of ideas might conceivably violate the distinction in the mind of the Frenchman between *boulangier* and *pâtissier*!).⁵

The point of departure which leads to this pathetic fall is, as noted in Lieuvain's speech, the harvesting of wheat. It is fitting, therefore, that the blind man's song which Emma hears on her death bed connotes not only the conventional symbol of death as the grim reaper but also recalls the view of Emma amidst ears of grain on her wedding day, a view which foreshadows and evokes the ironic figuration of Emma's life: sliced down by marriage and pulverized by the torpid monotony of her surroundings, Emma, as the "baker's" paramour, allows herself to be kneaded and finally discarded. Images of flour, powder, and dust return in the form of poison; the image of wheat cut down returns in the form of death.

Pour amasser diligemment
 Les épis que la faux moissonne,
 Ma Nanette va s'inclinant
 Vers le sillon qui nous les donne.
 (p. 449)

Now it is quite probable that the application to Emma's life of the constellation of references which I have sought to interpret tends to lessen the modicum of dignity which the character possesses. In addition, this ironic symbolism tends to mitigate slightly the poetic force of a work of art which endures, perhaps above all, through its richly resonant orchestration of images and symbols. In this connection, one of Flaubert's most arresting and successful techniques is to surround his heroine with objects which communicate the conflict between dream and reality, objects which convey, on the one hand, the glitter and excitement of the dream and, on the other hand, the common and sordid elements of the real world (e.g., satin shoes yellowed by wax, jasmine branches without leaves, the "Hirondelle" splattered by mud, and "la crotte des rendez-vous"). However, this kind of poetic tension is neglected in the case of the symbolism I have been discussing. What weighs heaviest in the balance is the overriding awareness of Emma as the "baker's" paramour and of the attendant associations brought to mind by allusions to products of the "baker." Once one has elucidated and evaluated this symbolic and ironic strain in the novel, the key section of the "comices" scene which unlocks the door to this analysis may well, as Flaubert feared, strike the ear as a discordant note — a discordant note which, to be sure, is barely audible since the total "symphonic" creation of the Yonville agricultural fair and, for that matter, of the novel as a whole bears the mark of Flaubert's supremely beautiful orchestration.

NOTES

1. *Œuvres Complètes* (Conard Edition, 1910), vol. II, p. 357.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 362.
3. *Œuvres Complètes* (Conard Edition, 1910), vol. VIII. Page references in parentheses are to this edition.
4. See, e.g., J. Pommier, "Noms et Prénoms dans *Madame Bovary*," *Mercure de France*, CCCVI (Juin 1949), 256. For some illuminating comments on many of the proper names in the novel, see Alfred G. Engstrom, "Flaubert's correspondence and the ironic and symbolic structure of *Madame Bovary*," *Studies in Philology*, XLVI (1949), 470-495.
5. Apropos of containers of baked goods, I am indebted to Professor Engstrom for mentioning to me a significant detail which lends additional support to my exegesis: "La Huchette," which is the name of Rodolphe's property and which he tags on to his name in announcing himself at the Bovarys' house, conveys the possible sense of "little bread-bin."