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Madame Bovary and the Dissolution of Bourgeois Sexuality

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IT IS WIDELY CONCEDED that Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* represents an important turning point in western culture. In a recent study, for example, Eric Gans noted that the work was a "watershed in the history of the novel," thus constituting a "major transformation in both content and form."¹ Condemned as subversive and even obscene when published in 1856, *Madame Bovary* continues to fascinate critics, many of whom regard it as an adumbration of the androgynous world of late twentieth-century consumer culture. In this context, many of these critics have attacked Emma Bovary, the novel's protagonist, as excessively "narcissistic" and thus infantile. Indeed, in his *Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch went so far as to disparage Emma as the "prototypical consumer of mass culture."² But the use of the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism to stigmatize Emma Bovary merely covers up her real crime of challenging the middle-class sexual order.

To better understand how the stigma of narcissism has helped to preserve that order, it is necessary to recognize that the modern concept was constructed by sexologists in the last decade of the nineteenth century. At a time when the cultural assumptions of the bourgeois epoch were under increasing assault, the emerging science of sex codified these assumptions in what appeared to be an eternal law of desire. Sexologists advanced an evolutionary theory that explained self-love as the remnant

¹See Eric Gans, *Madame Bovary: The End of Romance* (Boston, 1989), p. 6.

²Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York, 1979), pp. 95, 152; and see Dominick LaCapra, "Madame Bovary" on Trial (Ithaca, NY, 1982).

of an earlier phase of asexual reproduction in which the love for the other necessary for sexual reproduction had not yet appeared. Because it was one of the givens of evolutionary theory that females differentiated less from this asexual phase than did males, it made sense to assume that women retained a larger component of self-love. Moreover, the simple empirical investigation of the contours of middle-class life familiar to sexologists seemed to support the notion that women were more self-absorbed and vain than were men. In 1896, the American psychologist Colin Scott thus described a “primary law of courtship” in which “the male is physically active, but non-reflective, the female passive, but imaginatively attentive to the states of the excited male.” Scott’s work suggested that woman normally sees herself through the eyes of man, thus desiring herself because she desires only what her man desires. Around this time, Havelock Ellis wrote of a “tendency which is sometimes found, more especially perhaps in women, for the sexual emotions to be absorbed, and often entirely lost in self-admiration.”³ In 1899, the German psychiatrist Paul Näcke coined the term “Narcismus.” It was within this context that Freud developed his conception of narcissism during the years from 1910 to 1914. In the latter year, Freud actually published his epochal paper “On Narcissism: An Introduction.” In that piece, Freud reinforced the tendency to associate narcissism with femininity, although in a more subtle way than did his precursors. “On Narcissism” actually portrays the self as the original focus of desire, a focus displaced to external sexual objects only by the exigencies of reality. The first duality is thus that between a focus on the self and a focus on external objects. Within this theoretical framework, Freud was able to distinguish between two ways of choosing objects in the external world, a “narcissistic” object-choice based on the original self-love and an “anaclitic” object-choice modeled on the more advanced love for the “mother or her substitute.” Of course, Freud believed that “complete object-love of the anaclitic type is, properly speaking, characteristic of the man,” while women (and children) tend to make a more narcissistic object-choice.⁴

Nevertheless, the sexologists in general and Freud in particular were in some ways ambivalent toward the middle-class life their theories ostensibly supported. Not only was psychoanalysis based on a Darwinism that subtly subverted the bourgeois sexual order by postulating a her-

³Colin Scott, “Sex and Art,” *American Journal of Psychology* 7 (January 1896): 207; Havelock Ellis, “Auto-Erotism: A Psychological Study,” *Alienist and Neurologist* 19 (January 1898): 280.

⁴Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London, 1957), 14:73–102.

maphroditic ancestry for humankind, but Freud himself was aware of the tragic implications of that order which, however well based on natural sexual difference it claimed to be, could not take into consideration the individual sexualities of all who lived within it. While some writers such as Herbert Marcuse and Daniel Yankelovich have accentuated this radical or pluralistic side of psychoanalysis in order to justify the dissolution of bourgeois society, defenders of that society have tended to exaggerate the conservative side of Freud's work. Freud himself, in the wake of the Darwinian hypothesis of humanity's androgynous ancestry, could hypothesize that people were at base transsexual, polymorphous, and narcissistic even if he did stigmatize these characteristics as primitive in the adult. By diluting the idea of an original (if primitive) narcissism as a positive force and instead treating it as a deficit, critics like Lasch are in effect reviving the elements of a pre-Darwinian world view. This squares with their very clear interest in conserving the middle-class ideology of sexual difference by portraying it as eternal and natural.⁵

In reality, it appears that an ideology of sexual difference was associated with the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie in western Europe after the middle of the eighteenth century. Recent historiography suggests that western societies were at one time less concerned with sexual inequality than with political inequality. Up to the French Revolution, the argument goes, the cultures of the west had institutionalized the old Indo-European division of society into three orders or "estates," the first devoted to prayer, the second to war, and the third to the creation of wealth. The primacy of this "asymmetrical" distinction between clergy, knights, and commonality was registered in the way in which gender was encased within order. Consequently, an aristocratic woman possessed the potential to exercise political power not necessarily available to bourgeois men. And while asymmetrical sexual functions existed within each order, the inequality between orders possessed such greater significance that it made possible the potent royal mistresses, regents, and female saints preminent in early modern history.⁶

⁵In addition to Lasch, see Joel Kovel, *The Age of Desire: Reflections of a Radical Psychologist* (New York, 1981); Alexander Lowen, *Narcissism: Denial of the True Self* (New York, 1983); Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside-Down* (New York, 1981); Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston, 1966). The narcissism debate is well handled in Stephanie Engel, "Femininity as Tragedy: Re-examining the 'New Narcissism,'" *Socialist Review* 10 (September–October 1980): 77–104; and in Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference: The Resistance to Contemporary Feminism* (New York, 1987). For my own views on this important subject, see Lawrence Birken, "The Sexual Counterrevolution: A Critique of Cultural Conservatism," *Social Research* 53 (Spring 1986): 3–22.

⁶The ideas in this paragraph are discussed at length in Traian Stoianovich, "Gender and

In the context of this argument, a case can be made that the domestication of the aristocracy, culminating in what Nobert Elias has called the court society, helped to erode sexual distinctions among the clerical and lay elite. Certainly, the emergence of the modern state was bound up with the disintegration of the old religious and military functions and the consequent reduction of aristocrats to courtiers and eventually mere ornaments in the royal household. In baroque courts modeled on the French, both sexes engaged in affairs, took lovers, dressed in beautiful clothes, and displayed a conspicuous vanity. But in the course of the eighteenth century, the emergence of a “bourgeois” critique of the Old Regime was accompanied by a radical reorganization of baroque social and psychosexual categories. Enlightenment thinkers, such as Rousseau, wrote as if the emancipation of the male population and the consequent establishment of a natural society practically demanded deemancipation of the female population. In particular, the enfranchisement of the middle-class male appeared to require the disenfranchisement of the aristocratic female whose power was so emblematic of the Old Regime and its caste system. Thus, for Rousseau the establishment of a universal citizenship among males was accompanied by the foundation of a “natural” sexuality in which the distinctions between the sexes were accentuated and women were effectively excluded from the realm of citizenship; if it was man’s right to be a citizen, it was woman’s duty to nurture citizens.⁷

What happened—in France rather quickly after 1789, though elsewhere in Europe in a more leisurely fashion—was a radical restructuring of gender. Society thus was reorganized so that all men theoretically stood within the polity, while women were gathered from the various orders, lumped together, and expelled from that polity. As Traian Stoianovich has noted, the tripartite order of clergy/nobility/commonality simply gave way to a new, two-part male/female order.⁸ Consequently, a chasm opened between the male and the female, between the public and the private, between the political and the personal, and between the state and the family. In this context, the distinction between the sexes was actually accentuated, now appearing in sharp relief

Family: Myths, Models, and Ideologies,” *History Teacher* 15 (November 1981): 67–117.

⁷For more on the bifurcated model of society that prevailed between 1750 and 1900, see Lorenn Clark and Linda Lange, eds., *The Sexism of Social and Political Theory* (Toronto, 1979); and more recently, Linda Nicholson, *Gender and History* (New York, 1986); and Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, 1988).

⁸See Stoianovich, pp. 67–80.

against the universal equality ascribed to all males. The “embourgeoisement” of political discourse was thus accompanied by an increasing recognition of sexual dimorphism. Writers such as the revolutionary orator Joseph Barnave seemed to treat liberty as a natural characteristic of the male. Indeed, Barnave believed that “in a nation long nurtured in liberty the citizens have acquired a manly and vigorous character.” Eighteenth-century writers thus contrasted the masculine west with an effeminate East where men were made passive and weak by submitting to absolute rule. Against this background, the baroque itself may have appeared increasingly “Oriental” and the old court society increasingly like those Eastern despotisms that made men effeminate by denying them their natural liberties.⁹

Evidence for what Stoianovich has identified as a profound “virilization” of western culture after the French Revolution appears on several levels. For example, the way in which the emerging middle-class culture took its stand against the comparatively androgynous baroque is exemplified by the increasing dichotomization of dress. In his study of the history of fashion, René König noted how the bourgeois male broke with the court by dressing in cheerless dark clothes. It was as if, in the course of the nineteenth century, the very idea of fashion was relegated to the newly constituted feminine domain while bourgeois men purged themselves of what appeared to be the effeminate manners of the aristocracy. Amplified by that “revolutionary asceticism,” which linked republicanism to masculinity, “men’s fashions, apart from a few minor changes, crystallized into a kind of permanent form.”¹⁰

At the same time, the banishing of masculine fashion was accompanied by the decline of male nudity in the arts. In nineteenth-century painting, the uncovering of women went hand in hand with the covering-up of men. It was as if the biblical taboo against looking at the nudity of the father (Gen. 9: 22–27) was extended to the whole male sex within the bourgeois order. The Enlightenment thus did not so much abolish political asymmetry in favor of liberty and equality as it made sexual asymmetry the new form of political caste, so that sex (and in this way eventually race) became the ideological limit of democracy. We need not embrace the Marxism of art critic John Berger to agree with him that the association of nudity with femininity was a historical phenomenon somehow connected with the emergence of a middle-class order. Writers such as Kenneth Clark have long noted that during the

⁹See Immanuel Chill, ed., *Power, Property, and History: Barnave’s “Introduction to the French Revolution” and Other Writings* (New York, 1971), p. 141.

¹⁰René König, *A la Mode: On the Social Psychology of Fashion* (New York, 1973), pp. 154–64.

late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, female nudity increasingly eclipsed male nudity in western painting. In describing that painting, Berger affirmed that “men look at women” while “women watch themselves being looked at,” thus underscoring the ultimately historical character of Scott’s primary law of courtship as well as Freud’s conception of narcissism. The decline of masculine fashion and nudity toward the end of the eighteenth century suggests a repudiation of the values of court society. Male fashion may have withered when the objectification of the male came to be associated with the hated Old Regime, male nudity when the bourgeois began to insist that he could no longer be an object of aristocratic rule.¹¹

Bourgeois society was thus bedeviled by a profound contradiction. Identifying itself with universal freedom and liberty, the bourgeois world actually depended on the limitation of freedom and liberty implicit in sexual dichotomization in order to reproduce itself. But just as baroque society had created the conditions for its own disintegration and thus the emergence of a middle-class order, so the very successes of the bourgeois world paved the way for its dissolution. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the growth of science and industry, as well as the growing participation of women in the political world, pointed toward the erosion of the middle-class sexual order. By the middle of the nineteenth century, there may have been a growing sense of the artificiality of sexual distinctions that had once seemed natural. Within this context, a realistic portrayal of middle-class society might even seem offensive to a middle-class public. One of the earliest artists to use realism and irony in this way was Edouard Manet. In his controversial *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, painted in the same era that *Madame Bovary* was written, two fully clothed and well-dressed men lunch in bucolic surroundings with a nude young woman. In the background there is a second young woman, dressed in a light, nearly translucent garment. On the one hand, Manet’s painting is almost surrealistic in the sense that it portrays a scene that was not likely to occur in well-mannered French society (at least in the open). On the other hand, the piece is utterly realistic in portraying the power relationships implicit in the bourgeois sexual order. In the foreground group of three figures, the juxtaposition of clothed men with the unclothed woman reveals the *political* asymmetry of the sexes later codified by Freud in “On Narcissism”; woman’s possession of a body deprives her of the world while man’s possession of the world de-

¹¹See John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York, 1985), p. 47; Edward Lucie-Smith, ed., *The Male Nude: A Modern View; An Exhibition Organized by François de Louville* (New York, 1985), preface; Donald Lowe, *History of Bourgeois Perception* (Chicago, 1982), pp. 97, 100–105.

prives him of a body. By contrasting unclothed woman with clothed man in the same picture, Manet shockingly portrays the internal contradictions of middle-class sexuality.¹²

But what is merely implicit in Manet's work Flaubert makes explicit. If the former delineates the contradictions of bourgeois sex in all starkness, the latter not only depicts these contradictions but introduces as his protagonist a woman who actively (if unsuccessfully) seeks to resolve them. In Flaubert's most famous novel, Charles Bovary, a rather mediocre and physically unimpressive country doctor, marries the beautiful and refined Emma Rouault. By the middle-class standards of the time, Charles is a good husband, and he has made a good marriage. Far from abusing his wife, he idolizes her with boundless and heartwrenching tenderness. Far from denying her, he showers her with all the material goods and benefits his hard-earned income can provide. In every sense Charles appears to love his wife selflessly, "overvaluing" her.¹³

Emma, by contrast, appears predictably vain and self-absorbed. She merely tolerates her husband, her indifference seemingly growing in proportion to his love for her; she is possessed of "a kind of icy charm." She ignores her own daughter, hardly even thinking of her. Taken as a whole, Emma appears to exemplify those beautiful, narcissistic women who, Freud tells us, "have the greatest fascination for men" precisely because they are indifferent to them.¹⁴

On the surface, then, the Bovary household is a textbook example of the sexual dimorphism later delineated in "On Narcissism." Yet a deeper analysis reveals that Emma is hardly one of those women who wish to be loved rather than to love. On the contrary, Emma is completely loved and yet remains completely unhappy. Dissatisfied with a husband who only looks at her and never at himself, she wants a husband at whom she can look back. But it is precisely this wish that cannot be accommodated within the bourgeois sexual order. For Charles is the kind of mediocre but hardworking man who epitomizes that order. Such a petit bourgeois citizen was hardly supposed to be attractive. Charles, Flaubert reminds us, was dull, sluggish, unimaginative, boorish, disheveled, inclined to corpulence, and none of these qualities improve with age. We thus hear that his "trousers were too tight for him round his stomach" and that "his puffy cheeks seemed to be pushing his eyes, which had always been small, right up into his temples." Now, this is not the grandiose ugliness

¹²Robert Ray, *Manet* (New York, 1986), pp. 22–23, 49.

¹³See Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (New York, 1981), pp. 47, 62–63.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 62–63, 80, and the "icy charm" reference on p. 120; compare to Freud, pp. 89–90.

of the aristocratic epoch but the mediocre dumpiness of a France whose smallholders had been multiplied into the millions by the Revolution. This unattractiveness is the result of a process that, in only a few generations, has transformed a nation of revolutionary ascetics into a complacent petit bourgeoisie. In emphasizing Charles's unattractiveness, Flaubert is also indicting a whole mode of life.¹⁵

But it is not merely that Charles is unattractive; it is that he cannot imagine being attractive. Within the horizon of bourgeois values, Emma cannot complain. Indeed, her problem can barely be put into words.¹⁶ And to whom, within the compass of respectable society, could she complain? Could she say that her husband was dull and unattractive when the very nature of bourgeois society conspired to render men so? It is of course all too easy to say that Emma was simply the victim of her own objectless discontent or that she was a woman who did not like the limitations of being a woman. But these limitations, after all, were imposed by the logic of history, not nature. It was bourgeois society that had banished women from politics. Men, with a monopoly of political power, could look at women. Women, dismissed from politics, could not look back. In this sense narcissism was merely the compensation for the powerless, the hunger for attention taking the place of ambition. So Freud himself concedes that "women, especially if they grow up with good looks, develop a certain self-contentment which compensates them for the social restrictions that are imposed on them in their choice of an object."¹⁷

But it is precisely the case that Emma is *not* possessed of this self-contentment. It is not that she is too narcissistic but that she is not narcissistic enough, not that she is too vain but that she is not vain enough to simply absorb the affection and admiration of a husband who looks only at her and not at himself. Because her desire for a self-aware and even self-absorbed husband cannot be accommodated within the bourgeois sexual order, Emma turns to fantasy and eventually adultery. That order has purged adult men not only of vanity, but of the sensuality that vanity stimulates. Neither the druggist Homais nor the moneylender Lheureux, the two pillars of the local petit bourgeoisie, possess the slightest residue of sensuality. They are complacent men of commerce. In Emma's world the qualities she wishes to find in a man are relegated to the world of women, children, and the immature. Thus her attentions turn to Léon, the exception who proves the rule. Flaubert accordingly emphasizes Léon's androgynous characteristics, noting that his "nails

¹⁵Flaubert, pp. 62, 75.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁷Freud, pp. 88–89.

were longer than was customary at Yonville” and that he possessed “an exquisite candour in his bearing” as well as “long, fine, curving lashes” and a “smooth cheek,” the marks of undifferentiated youth. And it is that very youth, embodied in his charming “timidity,” that compels Emma to look back at him and to take him in hand, making it impossible for her to be merely the object of *his* desire.¹⁸

But Léon’s immaturity underscores the ultimate inability of Emma to satisfy her desires within the framework of the bourgeois epoch. It is perhaps for this very reason that she longs for those earlier ages in which, among the aristocracy at least, certain women had the power to look at men, and certain men enjoyed being looked at. If past epochs are the stuff that dreams are made of, Emma seeks out the remnants of those epochs in order to realize her dreams. It is at the ball at La Vaubyessard that she first comes into physical contact with the past—if only in an attenuated form. A once-in-a-lifetime event, the ball becomes for Emma a peak experience that serves as the standard against which all future happiness must be measured. Surrounded by what in reality are the ghosts of a dead social order, Emma nevertheless experiences the waking dream of La Vaubyessard as more real than bourgeois reality. It is a dream saturated with desire, in which the bourgeois Charles is completely out of place. Emma refuses to dance with her husband, ostensibly because “it’s not quite the thing for a doctor to dance,” but she appears more than willing to dance with the dandified young men whose “handkerchiefs . . . were embroidered with large monograms and emitted a delicious scent.”¹⁹

Emma is in fact drawn to the sleek, catlike remnants of the aristocracy. She is mesmerized by the dandies, relics of the past who preserve the aristocratic ethos in an increasingly middle-class world. Above all, the dandy retains the androgynous character of court society and consequently rejects the bourgeois differentiation of the sexes. Emma is attracted to the “gentleman” Rudolphe Boulanger “of La Huchette,” a vain and insensitive man who affects the manners and eccentricities of the aristocracy. If Charles is kind but unattractive, then Rudolphe is unkind but seductive, with his “curl of black hair, that figure at once so strong and so elegant.” Here is a man—and not merely a boy—at whom Emma can look back. Of course, even the real aristocrats that Emma meets at La Vaubyessard are only remnants of what was once a ruling class, and Rudolphe is only a pseudoaristocrat. Nevertheless, at the margin of the bourgeois world, among the dandies and the pseudo-

¹⁸Flaubert, pp. 107, 248.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 64.

aristocrats who affect a dandified air in order to convince the world that they are aristocrats, Emma seems to find some kind of ideal.²⁰

If Emma's rejection of Charles represents a refusal to be limited to the feminine sphere that bourgeois society has assigned her, her choice of lovers represents an almost conscious appropriation of the rights of the masculine sphere. Thus, she moves toward an androgynous state. But Emma's androgyny signals her inability to reconcile her desires to the highly differentiated sexual order instituted by the triumphant bourgeoisie in the years following the French Revolution. Emma repudiates this sexual differentiation by demanding the right to love others like a man, as well as herself like a woman. But the only models available to her were models rooted in a baroque past, in which the court and the salon were the focus of a male-female intimacy and community of interests alien to the highly polarized world of the nineteenth-century middle-class sexual order. Emma was obliged to live in this past, haunted by the ghosts of a vanished civilization.²¹

It is thus ironic that in the fullness of time Emma Bovary appears something like a visionary and that her fundamentally reactionary attitudes now seem revolutionary. But as the nineteenth-century bourgeois culture has given way to twentieth-century mass society, women have reentered the public sphere in greater numbers than ever before. In the century since the death of Flaubert, the two-function male/female order, which had ousted the tripartite system of the baroque, has given rise to what in effect is a single-function culture united under the sign of consumption. But when women enter the public sphere, they appear to gain the right to look at men as men have looked at women. Men, in other words, may be becoming more self-conscious of their bodies even as women are becoming more conscious of their ambitions, so that the two sexes converge. Can we not then speak of the reappearance of certain elements of the baroque, albeit on a much vaster scale worthy of the enormous wealth that makes mass culture possible? No longer confined to court or salon, this new baroque permeates the societies of the west, although it is most dramatically evident in the nightclubs and bars that dot our erotic landscape. In a more subtle way, the twentieth century has led at least in the west to what French writer Guy Hocquenghem refers to as the imminent "sexualization of the world" that "corresponds to the dissolution of the human [or bourgeois]." The disintegration of classic bourgeois society registers itself in the adoption of an increasingly flamboyant style of dress by males and females alike and in a

²⁰Ibid., p. 199.

²¹For another analysis of Madame Bovary as a woman in conflict with her age, see E. J. Sabiston, "The Prison of Womanhood," *Comparative Literature* 25 (1973): 335–51.

greater awareness of sexual ambiguity. Indeed, the availability of sex-change surgery suggests that sex itself has come to be a matter of individual choice. Within this context, there has been a restoration of a community of interests between the sexes often missing from the nineteenth-century world. But it is precisely this affinity between Baroque and mass cultures that helps to explain why Flaubert's reactionary challenge to the bourgeois sexual order could adumbrate a genuinely revolutionary dissolution of that order; baroque culture and mass culture are equally opposed to the system of values underpinning bourgeois sex.²²

The argument elaborated above suggests that the defense of those values by writers on both the Left and the Right rests on shaky ground. If the middle classes of nineteenth-century France and a few other western nations accentuated sexual distinction to an unusual degree, then critical theory is wrong to make use of a theoretical apparatus such as psychoanalysis, which takes these unusual conditions as typical and natural. Even if psychoanalysis marked a partial emancipation from bourgeois conditions, it preserved and naturalized a whole set of middle-class assumptions about sexual life. Chief among these was the postulation of a fundamental asymmetry between the sexes, which encased women in a double-bind from which they could not escape. This sexual asymmetry loosely equated androgyny, femininity, and narcissism in a way that closed off any options for transgressing the gendered spheres in an acceptable (that is, healthy) way. Thus a normal woman was passive and narcissistic, but a woman who rebelled against her sexual role moved toward an androgyny that was also narcissistic. Exploiting these theoretical difficulties in Freud's original work, a plethora of cultural conservatives have purged that work of any revolutionary content and turned it into a mere defense for a dying middle class. Thus, the idea of narcissism very likely may go the way of the earlier concept of degeneration, which even in Havelock Ellis's era was beginning "to disappear from scientific terminology, to become a mere term of literary and journalistic abuse."²³ This abuse is heightened by the tendency of cultural conservatives to conflate the Freudian notions of the primitive and the pathological. When Freud stigmatized deviations from bourgeois sex as "primitive," he did not see them as necessarily "pathological." Instead, he believed that illness arose from the conflict between the non-bourgeois desires he considered primitive and the bourgeois society. Modern psychoanalysis, however, apparently regards sexual deviations

²²Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire* (London, 1978), p. 131.

²³For the original reference, see Havelock Ellis and J. A. Symonds, *Sexual Inversion* (London, 1897; rpt. New York, 1975), p. 137.

from the bourgeois order as pathological in themselves, just as it regards nonbourgeois societies as nonviable in themselves, abandoning the original Freudian dialectic between individuals and the society in which they live. In this way, a parochial set of nineteenth-century standards are preserved into our age under the guise of science.

In this context the alleged narcissism of Emma Bovary becomes politically significant. On the one hand, when Giles Mitchell argues in the pages of *American Imago* that Emma's narcissism is a morbid condition that leads to the "death she has always carried in her beautiful body," he is in effect equating the dissolution of bourgeois sexuality with the disintegration of life itself. On the other hand, when Christopher Lasch presents Emma as the forerunner of today's well-adjusted consumer, he is equating the nonbourgeois values of mass culture with the destruction of all culture. In this sense, Emma is the embodiment of all women whose transgression of the limits of gender threatens to disintegrate the sexual order that cultural conservatives—and perhaps secretly all of us—equate with life itself.²⁴

²⁴See Giles Mitchell, "Flaubert's *Emma Bovary*: Narcissism and Suicide," *American Imago* 44 (Summer 1988): 124; the way in which the dissolution of bourgeois sexuality is often equated with the disintegration of life itself is further explored in Lawrence Birken, *Consuming Desire: Sexual Science and the Emergence of a Culture of Abundance, 1871–1914* (Ithaca, NY, 1988).