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Passion, Counter-Passion, Catharsis: Beckett
and Flaubert on Feeling Nothing

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The plot of *Madame Bovary* can be stated in a single sentence: a young woman reads too many romances, finds no satisfaction in her marriage to a mediocre husband, has two affairs, finds no more satisfaction in either, accumulates huge debts to her clothing supplier, and finally, when the bill comes due, swallows arsenic and dies. This, I imagine, is how most of us remember the work, when we are merely *remembering* it, rather than looking at it up close. This is the shape it comes to occupy in our minds: a single road which seemed for a moment as though it might lead to marital happiness but which quickly forks into the parallel paths of adultery and acquisition, before reconverging in apparently inevitable catastrophe. As we recall it, the novel begins in a convent, where Emma first reads dangerous literature handed to her by an old maid, and ends in a bedroom, where she breathes her last to the sound of a blind man's salacious song. (At most perhaps we recollect the galling triumph of Homais, the pharmacist with an excessively high opinion of his own abilities who winds up receiving France's highest honor.)

But the novel does not, as it happens, start and end with Emma. In fact, it would be closer to say that it starts and ends with Charles.¹ We follow him from youth, in the opening chapter, to death, in the final chapter, almost as though this were the story of *his* life, the story of a simple but well-meaning man who makes a bad choice in marriage. And if that is the case, then why do we so often relegate him to the periphery? Why does Flaubert devote the all-important overture and finale to Charles, if he also plans to make him so eminently forgettable? Who is Charles really: an interchangeable bit-player, good only, as Prufrock would say, for swelling a progress and starting a scene or two, or the (co-)protagonist of the whole tragic story?

Emma's Funeral

Matters in *Madame Bovary* are, as it happens, more complicated still, when we consider not just the quantity of space Charles occupies in the opening and closing

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sections of the book but also the quality of his actions. Almost immediately after his wife's death, he issues elaborate and peremptory instructions for her funeral.

I want her buried in her bridal dress, with white shoes and a wreath and her hair spread over her shoulders. Three coffins – one oak, one mahogany, one lead. No one has to say anything to me: I'll have the strength to go through with it. Cover her with a large piece of green velvet. I want this done. Do it.²

Homais the pharmacist and Bournisien the priest react as one: they are “much taken aback by Bovary's romantic ideas” (386) (“ces messieurs s'étonnèrent beaucoup des idées romanesques de Bovary,” 403). They are quite right to be stunned, but, I would like to suggest, they are surprised about the wrong thing. From their point of view, the shock is that Charles's ideas do not conform to ordinary standards of burial practice. From ours, however, it is that Charles is in any way capable of such outlandish flights of fantasy. Three coffins, one inside the other? White dress, white shoes, green velvet? Since when did Charles pay such attention to the details of décor?

Perhaps one wants to say that Charles has learnt this from Emma, been influenced by her over the years they have spent together; perhaps he intuits that the only way to do justice to her memory is to give her the funeral she would herself have wanted, which is to say, an absurdly overinflated caricature of grief.³ But one would still have to ask: where do his *specific* ideas come from? Even if he has heard that Napoleon (interred in 1821, but exhumed as recently as 1840) was buried in coffins of iron, lead, and mahogany, and even if (as is less likely) he has heard that Emma, on the death of her mother, expressed the wish to be buried one day in the same tomb, Charles's imagination is nonetheless still at work, selecting materials and accoutrements.⁴ Charles may well be capable of understanding that his wife had bizarre and baroque ideas, but is he really capable – are any of us capable – of learning, all of a sudden, to have an imagination?

Still more perplexing, perhaps, is what happens next. After discovering a stack of love-letters from Léon and a portrait of Rodolphe among Emma's effects, and after running into Rodolphe at a market, Charles collapses and dies in Emma's bower, suffocated, the narrator says, by “vague romantic vapours.”⁵ Summoned to perform an autopsy, Dr Canivet “l'ouvrit et ne trouva rien” (424).⁶ Charles, that is, has died of nothing. Or rather, Charles has accomplished a feat that, within the Flaubertian fictional world, is almost inconceivable: whereas his wife succumbed to the most brutally material causes imaginable – the ravaging of her insides from arsenic poisoning – Charles has actually managed to die of grief.⁷ It is not, then, just his ideas that have become romantic: his very *being* has, too.

How is *this* Charles imaginable on the basis of the man we have seen, the bovine ruminant, barely capable of articulate speech, the incompetent surgeon, hopeless husband, and overall lump? Or if you prefer: what happened to this Charles during the middle portion of the novel, this man who had begun by laying claim at least in part to our sympathy, who had been capable of a little eloquence when the occasion demanded,⁸ who touchingly blushed when he so much as thought of asking for Emma's hand? Where did that man go?

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The Charges Against Charles

At a first approximation, the answer is actually straightforward. It suffices to read carefully the charges against Charles:

Charles's conversation was flat as a sidewalk, a place of passage for the ideas of everyman; they wore drab everyday clothes, and they inspired neither laughter nor dreams. When he had lived in Rouen, he said, he had never had any interest in going to the theatre to see the Parisian company that was acting there. He couldn't swim or fence or fire a pistol; one day he couldn't tell her the meaning of a riding term she had come upon in a novel.

Wasn't it a man's role, though, to know everything? Shouldn't he be expert at all kinds of things, able to initiate you into the intensities of passion, the refinements of life, all the mysteries? (48)⁹

"Charles's conversation was flat as a sidewalk." Fair enough; that's more or less how it seems to us, judging from the snippets we overhear. "He had never had any interest in going to the theatre." That too appears to be correct, judging from his complete incomprehension, in part 3, of *Lucia di Lammermoor* (293–4). But now, "he couldn't swim or fence or fire a pistol"? Very likely so, but are we to judge him utterly incapable, on this basis, of inspiring love? And then – the final nail in the velvet-covered coffin – "he couldn't tell her the meaning of a riding term she had come upon in a novel." Again, I am entirely ready to believe that accurate, all the more so as I myself could probably not tell you the meaning of a riding term you found in a novel (or, to adjust for temporal inflation, the meaning of a motorcycle term you heard at the cinema). I have no idea what a crupper is, let alone a surcingle, a shabrack, or a bradoon. What are lauffer reins and chambons? What does it mean to "longe" a horse?

I'm not sure we're supposed to judge Charles too harshly for not knowing, any more than we do, the answer to such questions. Which is to say, I'm not sure we're supposed to judge Charles the way Emma does. For we are, of course, inside Emma's head here; in typically Flaubertian fashion, the paragraph gives us what appears to be objective description but what turns out to be a set of tendentiously selective, tendentiously evaluative, perhaps even tendentiously distorted details. Sliding imperceptibly from objective reportage to character assassination, it forces us to pull ourselves up when we suddenly notice that at some juncture along the way – and we cannot quite be sure where – Emma's voice has taken over. (Such, needless to say, is the power of free indirect speech.) It is *Emma* who considers it indispensable to know every single riding term. It is Emma who considers it impermissible not to be able to fence. (*Because* he cannot fence, *therefore* I cannot possibly love him: Mikhail Bakhtin would call this "pseudo-objective motivation."¹⁰) It is Emma who decides that Charles must be written off because his conversation is not interesting. And it is Emma who decides that Charles is responsible for every single one of her woes, "the cause of all her wretchedness."¹¹ Flaubert does not agree, and neither should we.¹²

Vapidity of Language, Fullness of Soul

In case we remain in any doubt, we receive explicit confirmation a bare three pages later. "Having thus failed to produce the slightest spark of love in herself," notes the narrator, "and since she was incapable of understanding what she didn't experience, or of recognizing anything that wasn't expressed in conventional terms, she reached the conclusion that Charles's desire for her was nothing very extraordinary" (51).¹³ Uncommonly forthright here, the narrator is chastising Emma for her crashing obtuseness, for deciding not only that Charles is unworthy of her but also that he does not even love her very much, and for doing so solely on the basis of his failure to express his feelings in the manner of Orlando Furioso or Amadis of Gaul. If Charles's affection appears mediocre, it is merely because Emma is incapable of imagining that anyone could feel differently from her and of recognizing love except when expressed in the form of romantic clichés. Fascinatingly, this is the mirror image of the mistake that Rodolphe will make in relation to her, perhaps a rare moment of poetic justice in Flaubert's almost Schopenhauerian universe. For where Emma wrongly assumes that only someone who speaks like a book can have genuine passion, Rodolphe wrongly assumes exactly the opposite:

He had had such things said to him so many times that none of them had any freshness for him. Emma was like all his other mistresses; and as the charm of novelty gradually slipped from her like a piece of her clothing, he saw revealed in all its nakedness the eternal monotony of passion, which always assumes the same forms and always speaks the same language. He had no perception – this man of such vast experience – of the dissimilarity of feeling that might underlie similarities of expression. Since he had heard those words uttered by loose women or prostitutes, he had little belief in their sincerity when he heard them now; the more flowery a person's speech, he thought, the more suspect the feelings, or lack of feelings, it concealed. Whereas the truth is that fullness of soul can sometimes overflow in utter vapidity of language, for none of us can ever express the exact measure of his needs or his thoughts or his sorrows; and human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to, while we long to make music that will melt the stars. (223–4)¹⁴

The above paragraph is, of course, widely quoted, and it seems to lend credence to Emma's position: she has great depths in her heart, and she therefore (there's that "therefore" again) deserves better than the clumsy oaf she somehow ended up married to, as well as the libertine oaf, blind to her unique charms, with whom she is having an ill-considered affair. Perhaps it does lend a certain amount of credence to Emma – indeed, for reasons I shall come back to, it is important that it does – but like all maxims, it applies universally if it applies at all, and that means that it applies also to Charles, another individual who is incapable of "giving the exact measure of his needs, his conceptions, his sorrows," and whose fullness of soul may perhaps be overflowing in the conversation as flat as a sidewalk.¹⁵ Endlessly sincere, devoted to the last,¹⁶ and

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with emotional depths at which we can only guess, Charles Bovary has every right to the concern we accord him in the opening and closing sections of the book. We are justified, early on, in wanting him to marry Emma, so that he may for the first time have something good in his life¹⁷ – we may later regret having wished for this, but that will be my point – and then, in the final chapter, we are justified in wanting him not to find Léon’s letters or Rodolphe’s portrait, justified in wanting him to go on living. His death, there are no two ways around it, is genuinely and deeply moving.¹⁸ *Charles Bovary, c’est moi.*

Behind Emma’s Eyes

In short, Emma misjudges Charles disastrously. And since the majority of the novel is filtered through her point of view, we too misjudge Charles disastrously. Granted, Charles is not the world’s greatest surgeon: he does indeed botch the operation on the club-foot.¹⁹ He lacks the talent of a Léon or a Rodolphe for stringing together romantic clichés. And he doesn’t know his equestrian terminology. But is Emma that much more eloquent herself? (“There’s nothing I love as much as sunsets,” she said. ‘But my favorite place for them is the seashore,’” 97.²⁰) That much more self-aware? More capable of genuine passion?²¹ Does Emma, as one might say colloquially, really deserve better than Charles?

My purpose here is not to defend a literary character against calumny by another literary character; the exercise would of course be highly questionable. Instead I am simply suggesting, along with Graham Falconer and others,²² that the reason we remember Charles Bovary as so unremittingly dismal, as so irremediably inferior to Emma, is that most of the story is told from her perspective. Where does the romantic, imaginative Charles disappear to in the middle section of the novel? Answer: *behind Emma’s eyes*. No wonder he is suddenly a different person once she’s dead; her gaze is no longer there to refract his image for us.

We are still left, however, with the need for a higher-level explanation. Why, if Charles is worthy of some caring attention, do his virtues suddenly find themselves buried for most of the novel? Or to put it the other way around: why, in a novel that largely concerns the hopes and dreams of its eponymous heroine, should a relatively sympathetic husband bookend the tale?²³ What does Flaubert have to gain from thus stirring our emotional investment? What is such empathy actually *for*?

Catharsis

It might be tempting to seek assistance here from Aristotle, for whom empathy (in tragedies at least) appears to be justified as a means to *katharsis*, which is to say “the purgation, by means of pity and fear, of these and similar emotions.”²⁴ The problem, of course, is that this famous definition leaves us, equally famously, with more questions than answers. In the first place, it’s not clear that we can extrapolate from fear

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and pity to anything about empathy *per se*, since we fear for *ourselves*, not for the character,²⁵ and we *pity* the character, rather than directly sharing his or her pain. Secondly, it's not clear what Aristotle actually means by "purgation." It might very well mean cleaning out, but it might, quite the contrary, mean cleaning *up*. Does Aristotle think pity and fear are prized possessions, so wonderful that they need to be polished from time to time, like one's best silver; or does he think instead that they are ugly accretions, to be washed away in the soapy water of Attic tragedy? (To put it another way, if tragedy is laundry day, are emotions the clothes or the stubborn stains?) While the cleaning out view, first advanced by Jakob Bernays in 1857, continues to be the dominant one, the cleaning up view, on which the function of tragedy is to refine the emotions, training them to aim reliably at the proper objects, has, thanks to the work of Nussbaum, Halliwell, and others, become an important rival in recent years.²⁶

Rather surprisingly, the likelihood is that Aristotle subscribed to neither of them. In his seminal article of 1988 (reprinted in this volume, chapter 11, CATHARSIS), Jonathan Lear demonstrated (contra Bernays) that Aristotle could not have been advocating the wholesale removal of fear and pity, since these emotions are an entirely appropriate response under many circumstances; that even if he had desired such an outcome, he would not have proposed a homeopathic remedy (curing emotion with emotion) as its means; and that even if he had believed in homeopathic treatment, he would not have seen it as operative in tragic catharsis, since according to him, cathartic poetry is not the improving kind.²⁷ Nor can Aristotle have been advocating the *clarification* of fear and pity (contra Nussbaum), since catharsis is supposed to benefit everyone in the audience, virtuous people included, and the emotions of virtuous people by definition require no such improvement. (Not to mention that watching a tragedy is poor practice for everyday reactions: in real life, we are hardly supposed to seek out and take pleasure in the suffering of others.²⁸) In short, Aristotelian catharsis does not make us virtuous and it does not make us calm; its benefits, which must be inferred from a massively enigmatic pair of passages, remain highly uncertain.²⁹

Limited Empathy

We may appear to be no further advanced – in trying to get to the bottom of these difficult matters, one risks ending up not so much using Aristotle to clarify tragic emotion as using tragic emotion to clarify Aristotle – but I think we may usefully hang on to two points from the discussion. First, the now standard understanding of the word catharsis (the rather sloppy usage of Bernays, which Aristotle clearly did *not* mean) may nonetheless be of help to us. Second, we can also keep on hand the idea, emphasized by the proponents of the clarification theory, that one component of virtue consists in *failing to feel certain emotions*. Not all emotion all the time, to be sure, but some emotion some of the time. And this places Aristotle in stark opposition to modern theorists of readerly emotion. For on the contemporary consensus, fictional empathy serves the function of increasing real-world empathy, and real-world empathy is what we need above all things; there is simply no such thing as too much *Mitgefühl*.

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The argument for this position – which is more or less that held by Lynn Hunt, William Roche, Richard Rorty, and others³⁰ – falls, as I see it, into three parts. First, we hold it to be self-evident that treating other people well is a good thing. (There are shades here, perhaps, of Adam Smith’s theory of moral sentiments: in commercial and egalitarian societies, Smith argues, honor plays a smaller role than before, and sympathy takes over as the predominant endorsed mode of interpersonal relations.) Second, we assume that the desire to treat other people well is strengthened, if not generated, by an ability to put oneself in their position.³¹ And third, we posit that such real-world empathy is strengthened, if not produced, by empathy toward fictional entities. Ostensibly, empathy for fictional characters guarantees more charitable treatment of one’s neighbors, those at least whose representatives feature in our imaginative reading.

The empathist approach, while attractive for various reasons, nevertheless faces a number of serious difficulties. For one thing, it’s not a given that understanding will lead to *compassion*. It’s entirely possible that from an evolutionary point of view, our capacity to assess the brain states of others is designed not just to help us cooperate with them but also to help us *defeat* them, to trick them out of food, find their weak spots, and so on.³² (Evolutionary psychologists, who claim to have detected just this behavior in monkeys and apes, refer to it as Machiavellian intelligence.³³) Some will use their knowledge of your preferences in order to buy you the perfect gift; others will use them, like O’Brien in *1984*, to extract what they need from you. For every Amélie Poulain, there is an Iago; for every Mrs Dalloway, there is a Mlle Vinteuil.³⁴

For another thing, it’s not a given that imaginative identification with those who are not like us is an absolute good, such that its presence automatically enhances, and its absence automatically lowers, the moral status of any given situation. Moral behavior is not just a matter of making benevolent, broad-minded judgments (for example, “people from a different country may be just as nice as people from my country”); it is also a matter of making the appropriate *negative* judgments (for example, “murderers are not nice people”). This means that if fictions really do train me to be compassionate towards all others, then I may actually start becoming *less* moral.

In order to see this, it is sufficient to imagine someone who reads Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* and concludes that abduction and sexual abuse are really not so terrible after all. This would be not only a disastrous reading of the text but, I think, also a disastrous event in that person’s moral life. In *Lolita*, the ideal reader is not one who gives herself over lovingly to the character but, on the contrary, one who continually *stands back* from her empathy. Indeed, the peculiar power of the work derives from the perpetual feeling of unease generated by the oscillation between disgust, connivance, and disgust at our connivance. Moralists will of course tell us that this is quite right, since that is how *Lolita* teaches us that pedophilia is to be avoided and condemned, and that, in general, we should pay attention to the desires of other people before selfishly using them as mere means.³⁵ But how many readers do not *already* think this before picking up the book? We don’t *learn* this from *Lolita*; on the contrary, a healthy moral compass is the price of admission, the price of entry into that vertiginous affective space.³⁶ And if we *did* learn that, then this would rather give the lie to the idea that we

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automatically empathize with novelistic heroes, gradually expanding the category “we” until it encompasses all of “them.” We don’t, and we shouldn’t. It is dangerous to empathize indiscriminately. It is almost as though Nabokov wrote *Lolita* with no other purpose than to provide a ready example with which to defeat the simplistic view of realist fiction as *caritas*-based savior of the world.³⁷

Multifocal Empathy

There is one final objection to the empathist view, an objection which will bring us back to *Madame Bovary*. The objection is this: if the aim of fiction is to invite imaginative identification with those who are not like us, then why do so many novels offer us *multiple* targets for our empathy? It is, I think, telling that the examples standardly deployed by the empathists focus our attention on a single character: Maggie Verver, Philoctetes, Pamela, Clarissa, Rousseau’s Julie, Ellison’s “invisible man.” But what about the multifocal text? How does the empathist view explain the fact that so many realist fictions shift focus from one character to another, indeed among characters whose temperaments are powerfully antithetical? There is no particular reason why stories, in order to increase our capacity for compassion, would need to give access to more than one mind at a time; on the contrary, one might worry that the reader’s compassion might become dangerously dispersed and thus, in each case, diluted.

Now in Flaubert, not only are we invited us to empathize with two separate characters; not only is it the case that the interests of the two are violently opposed; but empathy for the one positively *precludes* empathy for the other. As long as we are imaginatively projecting ourselves, with emotion, into Emma’s predicament, we can only see Charles as a buffoon, an oaf, an obstacle; and as long as we are imaginatively projecting ourselves, with emotion, into Charles’s predicament, we can only see Emma as a monster of heartless narcissism and blind superficiality. Charles is pitiable because he has a soul to be wounded; Emma is pitiable because her husband lacks a soul. Charles’s pain is meaningful *if and only if Emma’s is meaningless*, and vice versa. We pity her at his expense, and the other way around.

The situation here bears some comparison to that of Sophocles’ *Antigone*. There, too, we are asked to empathize with a pair of characters – Creon and Antigone – each of whom stands for a value diametrically opposed to that of the other, such that we cannot endorse both at once; hence the full force of tragedy, in Hegel’s view, as a situation in which no good solution is (yet) available, since the two “ethical powers” in question are “opposite but equally justified.”³⁸ But the difference is that here the collision of claims is entirely implicit, and, more importantly, that it is not the case that both sides are right. Flaubert is not, I think, hinting at a dialectical resolution of the predicament, or even drawing our attention to the existence, in life, of irreconcilable tragic conflicts. Nor is he merely offering us the opportunity to witness, from a (Leibnizian) God’s eye view, the perspectival nature of human experience. I wish to suggest, rather tentatively and in full awareness of the necessarily speculative nature of my hypothesis, as well as of the uses to which multifocal empathy may be put in

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other narratives,³⁹ a different rationale for Flaubert's procedure, one which we may best understand by taking a detour through Beckett.

Beckett and the Abdication of Intellect

[W]e would seem to know for certain . . . that it has not yet been our good fortune to establish with any degree of accuracy . . . if it's I who seek, what exactly it is I seek, find, lose, find again, throw away, seek again, find again, throw away again, no, I never threw anything away, never threw anything away of all the things I found, never found anything that I didn't lose, never lost anything that I mightn't as well have thrown away, if it's I who seek, find, lose, find again, lose again, seek in vain, seek no more. (*The Unnamable* 388–9)⁴⁰

What is going on here? What is going on, in general, in Beckett's Trilogy? The question here is not what Beckett's words *mean*, but rather what they are *for*. What are they supposed to *do* for us? Many critics appear to assume, as though it goes without saying, that Beckett is simply trying to *inform* us of something: that free will is an illusion, for example, that the self is in language, that Descartes is wrong, or that there is no ground for epistemological certainty.⁴¹ Others, anchoring themselves unsteadily on the shifting sands of the *Three Dialogues*, inform us that his aim is expression, the paradoxical expression of an inability to express. But both of these approaches take it for granted that the what-for question can and need only be answered with relation to the writer. Whereas it must also be answered, as Beckett is well aware, with relation to the reader.⁴² What do Beckett's texts do for *us*? Why do we, some of us at least, willingly put ourselves through them?

The answer can only be, I think, that readers of Beckett are suffering from the same disease as Beckett's characters, in search of the same recovered health, and eager to undergo the same treatment. (Incidentally, this may also explain why many do *not* take pleasure in Beckett's texts: these are presumably the healthy, or at least those suffering from *different* afflictions.) Now health here, let me add, means peace of mind; the disease, here, is philosophy;⁴³ and the treatment, here, is nothing other than the trilogy itself. "To know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in" (64). Molloy could not be any clearer: the ultimate *telos* of the Beckettian quest, whether or not such a *telos* may in practice ever be attained, is *peace*. And this means that Molloy, like most of Beckett's heroes, is not just a skeptic but an *ancient* skeptic, indeed a *Pyrrhonian* skeptic.⁴⁴ For him, that is, epistemological questions, questions about what can and cannot be known, and with what degree of certainty, are *secondary*, merely instrumental to the primary goal, which is ataraxia, freedom from disturbance, enduring peace of mind.⁴⁵

The problem, of course, is that peace of mind is precarious. In particular, it is liable to be disturbed by philosophical questions – Who am I? Is free will an illusion? Is there a God? What is the relationship between mind and body? – which tempt us both by

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their genuine importance and by their apparent susceptibility to resolution. Once down this path, we lose all hope of tranquility. And once down this path, as Aristotle was happy to point out, we cannot be cured by philosophy. "If one must philosophize," explains Aristotle, "then one must philosophize; and if one must not philosophize, then one must philosophize; in any case, therefore, one must philosophize."⁴⁶ No-one can *argue* herself out of philosophy, for argument is merely a continuation of philosophy. Further, it's not enough to have a particular approach to, say, the mind-body problem demolished; it is always possible to switch to a new approach. Nor will mere ignorance suffice, for the temptation to address the unanswered questions, the dim intuition that certainty is somewhere to be had, will never cease being a danger. *There is no way to make an end-run around intellect*: once we are started on the game of ruminating, we cannot simply will ourselves to stop. The intellect refuses to take orders from the intuition and the emotions. The only person it takes orders from is itself.

The sole remaining solution, at this point, is to convince the intellect to abdicate (as Proust would say) of its own accord, out of sheer despair. It must somehow be convinced not only that it *does* not know, but also that it *cannot* know; it must be convinced, as Molloy puts it, that it is "beyond knowing anything." And in order to bring about this state of affairs, one must bring before it *opposite hypotheses* in answer to every question that arises, the equal plausibility of which is sure to leave the intellect in the appropriate state of *epoché* (suspension of judgment).⁴⁷ Silence and resignation are not givens, but require to be *made*; nothingness is not a state that pre-exists objects and beliefs but is, instead, a state that results from their mutual cancellation.⁴⁸ Or again in Molloy's words, one must indulge the "two fools" within oneself, until both of them give up.⁴⁹

All this, of course, is straight out of the skeptical playbook. "Skepticism," writes Sextus Empiricus, "is an ability . . . which opposes appearances to judgments in any way whatsoever, with the result that, owing to the equipollence of the objects and reasons thus opposed, we are brought firstly to a state of mental suspense and next to a state of 'unperturbedness' or quietude."⁵⁰ *Antilogoi, epoché, ataraxia*; in Beckettian terms, "find again, lose again, seek in vain, seek no more." Or again: "You announce, then you renounce, so it is, that helps you on, that helps the end to come" (406).⁵¹

Beckett does depart from the ancient skeptics in one important way. The quotation from which we started speaks, to be sure, of the abdication of the intellect; but the self-correction here yields not uncertainty but *certainty*, to such an extent indeed that the sentence continues to build on the newly acquired foundation. In a way that is actually typical of Beckett at this stage of his career, epanorthosis (revision) repeatedly gives way to anadiplosis (a new clause opening with the last word of the previous).⁵² Beckett's text is constantly moving in two directions at once, forward into corollaries of premises already posited, backward to test or reject those premises. Regressing as much as it advances, it relentlessly pares away to the essential, builds another layer upon that foundation, finds that layer flimsy, knocks it down, builds another, and so on and on. At the end, every question has either been solved or dissolved (some issues, in Beckett, *are* actually settled, in spite of what many might say). At the end, we can hope at least to know what can be known, and to know of everything else that it cannot; to know, in other words, the limits of our knowledge.

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In all of this, what Beckett is offering us is not a reservoir of information but a spiritual exercise, one that has powerful affinities with those offered by the ancient skeptics, and as therapy for precisely the same disease.⁵³ We are not supposed to be edified by the “claims” presented in the texts, or to treat their protagonists as positive or negative models; instead we are to look to the *structure* of the text, and to look to it as a *formal model for the dissolution of philosophical questions* in circumstances of our own. What we stand to learn is not facts or arguments but a *method*, one by which philosophy can bring itself to an end.

Feeling Nothing

Recall, now, what Flaubert does to his reader. He makes us empathize first with Charles (we hope this kind-hearted man wins the hand of young Emma), then with Emma (she deserves so much better than this vapid non-entity), and then again with Charles (a soul tender enough, after all, to die of grief at a love betrayed).⁵⁴ And yet each of the empathies is, strictly speaking, incompatible with the other. We cannot simply extend our compassion to encompass both at once – let alone all of God’s creatures, as the empathists would like.⁵⁵ To feel for Emma is to feel for her *because* she is tormented by a non-entity. And to feel for Charles is to feel for him *because* his wife is a narcissist, incapable of perceiving the depth of his love for her. We are not supposed to empathize with both. On the contrary, we are supposed to empathize with neither.

But let’s be clear about this: empathizing with neither does not mean remaining aloof from each, and never feeling anything for anyone. It means, instead, allowing the two empathies to *cancel each other out*, like a force and a counter-force in physical equilibrium. We are *supposed* to feel pain for Emma, and we are *supposed* to feel pain for Charles, and it is only *after* we have felt pain for both that we can end up, on the other side, free of all feeling and at peace. This is how readers of Flaubert may achieve on the affective level what readers of Beckett may achieve on the cognitive. For human beings do not start out as passionless entities, emotional blank slates; rather, they constantly trail affective tendrils around with them, just waiting to attach to an object. We do not begin from nothing, but only *end* there, if we are lucky. (Emotional) nothingness is not a given; it is something that needs to be made.

And so it turns out that in this instance at least, and in one understanding of the term at least, empathy really does have the goal of catharsis. Just as the priest and the scientist cancel each other out with their equally fanatical claims on the eve of Emma’s death,⁵⁶ and just as, in Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, one theory relentlessly collides with its antithesis in an orgy of mutually destroyed beliefs, so here his goal of “loving nothing,”⁵⁷ the goal of being at last outside of desire, is achieved not by stopping *en deça* but by proceeding *au-delà*. There is no stopping short of involvement, only *ex post facto* extrication from it. And it is the *method* of such extrication that Flaubert seeks, I would argue, to offer us, in the fibers of his novel. We may learn to see our own lives, too, “au point de vue d’une blague supérieure,” just as long as we seek out

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those perspectives from which our greatest desires are the greatest obstacle, live into them empathetically, and let ourselves be cured by them.

One last scene from Flaubert. Emma and Charles are preparing for the ball at the Vaubyessard estate. "Emma devoted herself to her toilette with the meticulous care of an actress the night of her debut . . . Charles's trousers were too tight at the waist." (57) ("Emma fit sa toilette avec la conscience méticuleuse d'une actrice à son début . . . Le pantalon de Charles le serrait au ventre," 109.) Charles is, of course, ridiculous, bathetic; failing to appreciate the magnitude of what is in store, all he can think about is his trousers. We share Emma's frustration at being trapped with such an earthbound simpleton. Yet at the same time, do we really share Emma's view that the ultimate goal of life is to be able to attend such events? Isn't she, ultimately, just as ridiculous for failing to stay earthbound at all? And if so, isn't Charles a little to be pitied for being dragged off the ground in the direction of a cliff? To take this passage right is to feel excitement for Emma, superiority over Charles, distaste for Emma, and pity for Charles, all in succession – and then, as a result, to feel, with the hard-bitten, hard-won resignation of the ancient skeptics, the perfect calm of absolutely nothing.

Notes

This paper was originally given as a talk at the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought. I am grateful to all my interlocutors there, including Paul Friedrich, Jonathan Lear, Robert Morrissey, Thomas Pavel, and Robert Pippin, as well as to Andrea Nightingale for her very helpful insights on the subject of catharsis.

- 1 To be sure, it opens a split second before Charles's arrival in the narrator's classroom, and lingers on for a couple of paragraphs after his death; but these concluding paragraphs are mostly there to explain what happens to Charles's successors (driven away, one after the other, by the fearsome Homais) and to Charles's daughter (condemned to factory work).
- 2 Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Francis Steegmuller (New York: Random House, 1992), 386. Subsequent parenthetical page citations for English-language quotations from *Madame Bovary* refer to this edition. "Je veux qu'on l'enterre dans sa robe de noces, avec des souliers blancs, une couronne. On lui étalera ses cheveux sur les épaules; trois cercueils, un de chêne, un d'acajou, un de plomb. Qu'on ne me dise rien, j'aurai de la force. On lui mettra par-dessus tout une grande pièce de velours vert. Je le veux. Faites-le." Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1986), 403. Subsequent parenthetical page citations for French-language quotations from *Madame Bovary* refer to this edition.
- 3 It is true that Charles consciously begins emulating his late wife: "Pour lui plaire, comme si elle vivait encore, il adopta ses prédilections, ses idées; il s'acheta des bottes vernies, il prit l'usage des cravates blanches. Il mettait du cosmétique à ses moustaches, il souscrivit comme elle des billets à ordre. Elle le corrompait par delà le tombeau." (417–8; "To please her, as though she were still alive, he adopted her tastes, her ideas: he bought himself patent leather shoes, took to wearing white cravats. He waxed his mustache, and signed – just as she had – more promissory notes. She was corrupting him from beyond the grave," 403.) But this is some time after the funeral.

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- 4 As Jane Kairet notes, putting the velvet on the outside is itself a strikingly original gesture. My reading departs from Kairet's, and also that of Roberto Speziale-Bagliacca, in stopping short of symbolic readings (Kairet views the three coffins as standing for the three Madame Bovarys; Speziale-Bagliacca claims they testify to Charles's fear of Emma's ghost). See Jane E. Kairet, "Sur La Signification Mytho-Poétique Des 'Trois Cercueils' De Madame Bovary," *French Review* 70.5 (1997): 676–86, pp. 682, 677; Roberto Speziale-Bagliacca, *The King and the Adulteress: A Psychoanalytic and Literary Reinterpretation of Madame Bovary and King Lear*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998, 49. For Emma's wish to be buried in the same tomb as her mother, see *Madame Bovary* 98 (45 in the Steegmuller translation).
- 5 "Le lendemain, Charles alla s'asseoir sur le banc, dans la tonnelle. Des jours passaient par le treillis; les feuilles de vigne dessinaient leurs ombres sur le sable, le jasmin embaumait, le ciel était bleu, des cantharides bourdonnaient autour des lis en fleur, et Charles suffoquait comme un adolescent sous les vagues effluves amoureux qui gonflaient son coeur chagrin" (424). In Steegmuller's translation, "The next day Charles sat down on the bench in the arbor. Rays of light came through the trellis, grape leaves traced their shadow on the gravel, the jasmine was fragrant under the blue sky, beetles buzzed about the flowering lilies. A vaporous flood of love-memories swelled in his sorrowing heart, and he was overcome with emotion, like an adolescent" (410–11).
- 6 "He performed an autopsy, but found nothing" (411).
- 7 Some have argued that if Canivet opens Charles up and "finds nothing," this is simply because the latter is vacuous (see Tony Tanner, *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979, 252; Jean Améry, *Charles Bovary, Landarzt: Portrait eines einfachen Mannes*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1978, 151; Speziale-Bagliacca, *The King and the Adulteress*, 54). I follow Ulrich Schulz-Buschhaus ("Charles Bovary: Probleme Der Sympathiesteuerung Und Der Figurenkohärenz in Einem Flaubertschen Roman," in Wolfgang Riehle Herbert Foltinek and Waldemar Zacharasiewicz, eds., *Tales and "Their Telling Difference": Zur Theorie und Geschichte der Narrativik (Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag von Franz K. Stanzel)*, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1993, 243–62, p. 257) and Enid Starkie (*Flaubert: The Making of the Master*, New York: Atheneum, 1967, 318) in departing from this view.
- Fascinatingly, Flaubert's very first work of fiction ends with a death that the narrator explicitly deems fantastical: "At length, last December, he died . . . solely by the force of thought, without any organic malady, as one dies of sorrow – which may seem incredible to those who have greatly suffered, but must be tolerated in a novel, for the sake of our love of the marvelous." ("Enfin, au mois de décembre dernier, il mourut . . . par la seule force de la pensée, sans qu'aucun organe fût malade, comme on meurt de tristesse, ce qui paraîtra difficile aux gens qui ont beaucoup souffert, mais ce qu'il faut bien tolérer dans un roman, par amour du merveilleux.") Gustave Flaubert, *November*, trans. Francis Steegmuller, (New York: Serendipity Press, 1967), 163–4; *Novembre* (Neuchâtel, Switzerland: Ides et Calendes, 1961), 177.
- 8 "Words came to them both" (27); "les phrases leur vinrent" (82).
- 9 "La conversation de Charles était plate comme un trottoir de rue, et les idées de tout le monde y défilaient dans leur costume ordinaire, sans exciter d'émotion, de rire ou de rêverie. Il n'avait jamais été curieux, disait-il, pendant qu'il habitait Rouen, d'aller voir au théâtre les acteurs de Paris. Il ne savait ni nager, ni faire des armes, ni tirer le pistolet, et il ne put, un jour, lui expliquer un terme d'équitation qu'elle avait rencontré dans un roman.

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Un homme, au contraire, ne devait-il pas tout connaître, exceller en des activités multiples, vous initier aux énergies de la passion, aux raffinements de la vie, à tous les mystères?" (101)

- 10 Bakhtin: "the logic motivating the sentence seems to belong to the author, i.e. he is formally at one with it; but in actual fact, the motivation lies with the subjective belief system of his characters, or of general opinion." M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981), 305.
- 11 "N'était-il pas, lui, l'obstacle à toute félicité, la cause de toute misère . . . ? Donc, elle reporta sur lui seul la haine nombreuse qui résultait de ses ennuis" (173). "Wasn't he the obstacle to every kind of happiness, the cause of all her wretchedness . . . ? So he became the sole object of her resentment" (128).
- 12 Critical response to Charles Bovary has gone through two main stages. With the notable exception of Jules Sénard, Flaubert's trial lawyer – who noted that the novel's conclusion treats Charles with admiring tenderness and Emma with unmitigated contempt – readers agreed in emphasizing Charles's mediocrity, if they bothered to mention him at all. (No doubt they dismissed Sénard's remarks as rhetorical, as indeed they were.) Thus Charles Baudelaire, also writing in 1857, noted simply the "infériorité spirituelle" of his namesake; Albert Thibaudet, in 1935, went so far as to say that "Flaubert a donné à Charles tous les caractères qui lui étaient odieux chez les bourgeois"; Erich Auerbach spoke of "his stupid philistine self-complacency"; "Charles Bovary . . . concretely oozes boredom and greyness," agreed Jean-Pierre Richard in 1954; so too Anthony Thorlby, in his 1956 study, presented the novel's dénouement as a potentially moving ending "reduced to the level of Charles' mediocre intelligence and Rodolphe's cheap sensitivity."

Starting in the 1960s, however, Charles underwent something of a rehabilitation, starting with Harry Levin's declaration in *The Gates of Horn* (1963) that "for all his shortcomings . . . Dr. Bovary is the neglected protagonist" and culminating in 2006 with a novel actually presenting itself as a biography of Charles (Antoine Billot's *Monsieur Bovary*). In between, favorable comments have been heard from Victor Brombert, Maurice Bardèche ("only in the astonishing figure of Charles Bovary, to whom little justice has been done, does Flaubert allow us a glimpse of the unplumbed depths of the soul"), Dominick LaCapra ("Charles's devotion to Emma . . . bear[s] the closest of resemblances to Flaubert's own paradoxical dream"), Gérard Gengembre, Ulrich Schulz-Buschhaus, Michèle Breut, Dacia Maraini, and to some extent Jean-Marie Privat.

This has not prevented a number of critics from offering rather self-contradictory assessments. Enid Starkie, for instance, feels both that "The main characters – Charles and Emma – are drawn . . . always with compassion" and that "Charles is all the things most abhorred by Flaubert"; similarly, Eugene Gray suggests that while "Charles does have his good qualities, a point often overlooked," still his fidelity to Emma's memory is simply "foolish." (Compare Lowe, Nadeau, Turnell, and Williams.) Nor indeed has it prevented the periodic return of out-and-out dismissal, which one sees in Neefs and Mouchard, in Collas, in Berg and Martin, in Lattre ("la bêtise . . . le suivra jusque dans son engourdissement définitif, sous la tonnelle, dans le fond du jardin"), in Zenkine ("Charles Bovary est un grand enfant incapable de se mettre au niveau des exigences de la vie adulte"), and, most prominently, in Claude Chabrol's 1991 film adaptation.

See Jules Sénard, "Plaidoirie," in *Madame Bovary*, 461–515, p. 486; Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1980), 481; Albert Thibaudet, *Gustave Flaubert* (Paris: Gallimard, 1935), 108; Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. Willard R. Trask

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- (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 489; Jean-Pierre Richard, "The Creation of Form in Flaubert," trans. Raymond Giraud, in Raymond Giraud, ed., *Flaubert: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 36–56, p. 47; Anthony Thorlby, *Gustave Flaubert and the Art of Realism* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1956), 44; Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn: A Study of Five French Realists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 269; Antoine Billot, *Monsieur Bovary* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006); Victor Brombert, *The Novels of Flaubert: A Study of Themes and Techniques* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), 42; Maurice Bardèche, in *Madame Bovary* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française), 516 (quoted by Speciale-Bagliacca, *The King and the Adulteress*, 8); Dominick LaCapra, *Madame Bovary on Trial* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), 113; Gérard Gengembre, *Gustave Flaubert: Madame Bovary*, Paris: PUF, 1990), 93–6; Schulz-Buschhaus, "Charles Bovary: Probleme Der Sympathiesteuerung Und Der Figurenkohärenz in Einem Flaubertschen Roman," 259; Michèle Breut, *Le Haut et le Bas: Essai sur le Grotesque dans Madame Bovary de Gustave Flaubert* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 239; Dacia Maraini, *Searching for Emma*, trans. Vincent J. Bertolini (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 79, 137–8; Jean-Marie Privat, *Bovary Charivari: Essai d'ethno-critique* (Paris: CNRS, 1994), 123, 140; Enid Starkie, *Flaubert: The Making of the Master*, 1:315–6; Eugene F. Gray, "Bovary, Charles," in Laurence M. Porter, ed., *A Gustave Flaubert Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 38–9, p. 39; Margaret Lowe, *Towards the Real Flaubert: A Study of Madame Bovary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 33; Maurice Nadeau, *The Greatness of Flaubert*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: The Library Press, 1972), 138; Martin Turnell, *The Rise of the French Novel* (New York: New Directions, 1978), 189; D. A. Williams, *Psychological Determinism in Madame Bovary* (Hull: University of Hull Publications, 1973), 68, 72; Jacques Neefs and Claude Mouchard, *Flaubert* (Paris: Balland, 1986), 149; Ion Collas, *Madame Bovary: A Psychoanalytic Reading* (Geneva: Droz, 1985), 74, 113; William Berg and Laurey Martin, *Gustave Flaubert* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 59; Alain de Lattre, *La Bêtise d'Emma Bovary* (Paris: José Corti, 1980), 9; Serge Zenkine, *Madame Bovary et l'Oppression Réaliste* (Clermont-Ferrand: Association des publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Clermont-Ferrand, 1996), 115.
- 13 "Quand elle eut ainsi un peu battu le briquet sur son coeur sans en faire jaillir une étincelle, incapable, du reste, de comprendre ce qu'elle n'éprouvait pas, comme de croire à tout ce qui ne se manifestait point par des formes convenues, elle se persuada sans peine que la passion de Charles n'avait rien d'exorbitant" (103).
- 14 "Il s'était tant de fois entendu dire ces choses, qu'elles n'avaient pour lui rien d'original. Emma ressemblait à toutes les maîtresses; et le charme de la nouveauté, peu à peu tombant comme un vêtement, laissait voir à nu l'éternelle monotonie de la passion, qui a toujours les mêmes formes et le même langage. Il ne distinguait pas, cet homme si plein de pratique, la dissemblance des sentiments sous la parité des expressions. Parce que des lèvres libertines ou vénales lui avaient murmuré des phrases pareilles, il ne croyait que faiblement à la candeur de celles-là; on en devait rabattre, pensait-il, les discours exagérés cachant les affections médiocres: comme si la plénitude de l'âme ne débordait pas quelquefois par les métaphores les plus vides, puisque personne, jamais, ne peut donner l'exacte mesure de ses besoins, ni de ses conceptions ni de ses douleurs, et que la parole humaine est comme un chaudron fêlé où nous battons des mélodies à faire danser les ours, quand on voudrait attendrir les étoiles" (259).
- 15 Complaining to Louise Colet about women, Flaubert wrote: "Ce que je leur reproche surtout, c'est leur besoin de poétisation. Un homme aimera sa lingère, et il saura qu'elle est

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- bête et n'en jouira pas moins. Mais si une femme aime un goujat, c'est un génie méconnu, une âme d'élite, etc., si bien que . . . elles ne voient pas le vrai quand il se rencontre, ni la beauté là où elle se trouve." ("What I most blame them for is their need for poeticization. A man can love his laundry maid, and know that she is stupid, and be no less happy for it. But if a woman loves an oaf, he is an unrecognized genius, an elite soul, etc., so much so that . . . they do not see the real when it presents itself, nor beauty where it is to be found.") Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*, Paris: Nizet, 2001, 2.61 (April 24, 1852). Subsequent references to this edition will be cited parenthetically in the text under the abbreviation *Corr.*
- 16 In his notebook, Flaubert wrote of Charles that he "ADORES his wife, and of the three men who sleep with her, is certainly the one who loves her most." ("ADORE sa femme et des trois hommes qui couchent avec elle, est certainement celui qui l'aime le plus.") Claudine Gothot-Mersch, *La genèse de Madame Bovary* (Paris: Corti, 1966), 136 (quoted in Brombert, *The Novels of Flaubert*, 9). This is borne out by the novel, with Charles being the only one of Emma's three lovers to be profoundly affected by her death: "Charles lay awake, thinking ceaselessly of her. Rodolphe, who had spent all day roaming the woods to keep his mind off things, was peacefully asleep in his chateau; and Léon was sleeping, too, in the distant city" (400). ("Charles, éveillé, pensait toujours à elle. Rodolphe, qui, pour se distraire, avait battu le bois toute la journée, dormait tranquillement dans son château; et Léon, là-bas, dormait aussi" 415.)
- 17 "Up until now, had there ever been a happy time in his life? His years at the lycée, where he had lived shut in behind high walls, lonely among richer, cleverer schoolmates who laughed at his country accent and made fun of his clothes and whose mothers brought them cookies in their muffs on visiting days? Or later, when he was studying medicine and hadn't enough in his purse to go dancing with some little working girl who might have become his mistress? After that he had lived fourteen months with the widow, whose feet in bed had been like icicles. But now he possessed, and for always, this pretty wife whom he so loved" (40). ("Jusqu'à présent, qu'avait-il eu de bon dans l'existence[?] Etait-ce son temps de collègue, où il restait enfermé entre ces hauts murs, seul au milieu de ses camarades plus riches ou plus forts que lui dans leurs classes, qu'il faisait rire par son accent, qui se moquaient de ses habits, et dont les mères venaient au parloir avec des pâtisseries dans leur manchon? Etait-ce plus tard, lorsqu'il étudiait la médecine et n'avait jamais la bourse assez ronde pour payer la contredanse à quelque petite ouvrière qui fût devenue sa maîtresse? Ensuite il avait vécu pendant quatorze mois avec la veuve, dont les pieds, dans le lit, étaient froids comme des glaçons. Mais, à présent, il possédait pour la vie cette jolie femme qu'il adorait" 93-4.)
- 18 "Il faut," Flaubert told Louise Colet, "que mon bonhomme . . . vous émeuve pour tous les veufs" ("my fellow must move you on behalf of all widowers"). To Louise Colet, June 7, 1853, *Corr.* 2.339.
- 19 Even here, one could argue that he is talked into it, against his better judgment (242 / 205; cf. Gray, "Bovary, Charles," *A Gustave Flaubert Encyclopedia*, 38); he is otherwise a reasonably competent and well-liked doctor (Speziale-Bagliacca, *The King and the Adulteress*, 22; Marc Girard, *La Passion De Charles Bovary*, Paris: Imago, 1995, 8).
- 20 "– Je ne trouve rien d'admirable comme les soleils couchants, reprit-elle, mais au bord de la mer, surtout" (146). The entirety of Emma's first conversation with Léon (144–8 / 96–100) is in fact one long stream of clichés, some of them later reprinted in Flaubert's *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*.
- 21 Emma's strikingly cold-blooded treatment of her daughter, Berthe, may well imply the contrary. See 136 / 181, 262 / 227, and 265–6 / 231.

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- 22 See Gray, "Bovary, Charles," *A Gustave Flaubert Encyclopedia*, 39; Breut, *Le Haut et le Bas*, 227; Marc Girard, *La Passion De Charles Bovary*, 9; Schulz-Buschhaus, "Charles Bovary: Probleme Der Sympathiesteuerung Und Der Figurenkohärenz in Einem Flaubertschen Roman," 258; and Graham Falconer, "Flaubert Assassin De Charles," in Michael Issacharoff, ed., *Langages de Flaubert: Actes du Colloque de London* (Paris: Minard, 1976), 115–41, pp. 121–3.
- 23 For Falconer, the character shift is just a mistake, "tout à fait gratuit," indeed "un défaut esthétique" ("Flaubert Assassin De Charles," 140, 132). For Speziale-Bagliacca, it is evidence of Flaubert being mistaken about his own character (who is, incidentally, a sadomasochist (*The King and the Adulteress*, p. 18) with latent homosexual tendencies (*The King and the Adulteress*, 53)). More compellingly, Marc Girard suggests that the point is to force the reader to choose a side, in an act of existential self-determination (*La Passion De Charles Bovary*, 167–8). As will be apparent, I am offering a different hypothesis.
- 24 Aristotle, *On Poetics*, trans. Seth Benardete and Michael Davis (South Bend, IN: St Augustine's Press, 2002), 1449b.
- 25 Alexander Nehamas, "Pity and Fear in the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*," in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 291–314, p. 301.
- 26 See Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1998); Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). For a full history of catharsis theories, see Andrew Ford, "Katharsis: The Ancient Problem," in Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, eds., *Performativity and Performance* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 109–32, pp. 111–3.
- 27 Jonathan Lear, "Katharsis," *Phronesis* 33 (1988): 297–326, pp. 303, 301, 300. In *Politics* 8.5–7, Aristotle distinguishes between cathartic music and ethical music, strongly implying that the cathartic variety does not improve character (Lear 300). On the homeopathy point, cf. Nehamas, "Pity and Fear in the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*," 304.
- 28 Lear, "Katharsis," 301 (again with *Politics* 8.5–7); cf. Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 22; James Harold, "On Judging the Moral Value of Narrative Artworks," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64.2 (2006): 259–70, p. 267.
- 29 For Lear's positive view, see Lear, "Katharsis," 323–6; for an even more deflationary hypothesis, see Nehamas, "Pity and Fear in the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*," 306.
- 30 Thus Lynn Hunt argues that the theory of human rights, though it had multiple causes, could not have succeeded without an explosion of novel-reading. "In the eighteenth century, readers of novels learned to extend their purview of empathy," she writes. "As a consequence, they came to see others – people they did not know personally – as like them, as having the same kinds of inner emotions. Without this learning process, 'equality' could have no deep meaning and in particular no political consequence." (*Inventing Human Rights: A History*, New York: Norton, 2007, 40; cf. 32 and chapter 1 *passim*.) Similarly, Richard Rorty considers novels of the self-improving type not only "appeals to fellow feeling" but *indispensable* appeals to fellow feeling, since philosophy, religion, and science are unable to persuade people that others are like them, whereas novels, along with non-fictional "sad stories," are able to do so. (Richard Rorty, *Critical Dialogues*, ed. Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, 133, 132; see also *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers III*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 185.) Martha Nussbaum, whose view is sometimes that fiction gives us practice in handling complicated moral

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predicaments, at other times agrees with Rorty that “the literary imagination . . . seems to me an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own.” (*Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995, xvi; cf. “Invisibility and Recognition: Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* and Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,” *Philosophy and Literature* 23 (1999): 257–83, p. 265.) For a recent restatement of this view, see Mark William Roche, *Why Literature Matters in the Twenty-First Century*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004, 26.

- 31 Martha Nussbaum, for one, believes that altruism is generated by empathy: “Civic love comes before, and nourishes, civic justice.” (“‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Literature and the Moral Imagination,” in Anthony J. Cascardi, ed., *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, 167–91, p. 184.)
- 32 Cf. Gregory Currie: “In order to defeat my enemy I may need to simulate his mental operations, so as to know what he will do. That need not make me like him any better.” (“The Moral Psychology of Fiction,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73,2: 250–9, p. 257.)
- 33 See e.g. Richard W. Byrne and Andrew Whiten, eds., *Machiavellian Intelligence: Social Expertise And The Evolution Of Intellect In Monkeys, Apes, And Humans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). For connections to literature, see Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2006) and Blakey Vermeule, *The Fictional Among Us: Why We Care About Literary Characters*, forthcoming.
- 34 Part of the issue here has to do with a deficit of *historicity*. It appears to be assumed by some of the theorists in question that fictional empathy has always been marshaled in the service of real-world compassion to “those who are not like us.” But as we have just seen, it is entirely possible for a culture to place a premium on *limits* to real-world compassion; and this very fact may well have influenced the way in which contemporary spectators of Sophocles and Aeschylus experienced their tragedies. For the self-understanding of a culture will very likely have an effect – not an absolutely determining effect, but an effect nonetheless – on the way in which its individual members opt to situate themselves in relation to artworks.
- 35 Richard Rorty reads *Lolita* as a cautionary tale, one which ostensibly fills the reader with remorse for his or her moral failings (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 164). But he does not explain how this is consistent with his standard account on which fictions that describe lives different from our own have the effect of bringing people once thought of under the designation “them” under the designation “us.” One would presumably not want this to happen for real-life counterparts of Humbert Humbert.
- 36 Cf. Noël Carroll, “Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding,” in Jerrold Levinson, ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 126–60, p. 130.
- 37 I develop some of these ideas further in “A Nation of Madame Bovarys: On the Possibility and Desirability of Moral Improvement through Fiction,” in Garry L. Hagberg, ed., *Art and Ethical Criticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).
- 38 Hegel: “the heroes of Greek classical tragedy are confronted by circumstances in which, after firmly identifying themselves with the one ethical ‘pathos’ which alone corresponds to their own already established nature, they necessarily come into conflict with the opposite but equally justified ethical power.” (*Aesthetics*, trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, 2.1226.)
- 39 In the novels of Jane Austen, for example, multifocal empathy may well – as Lisa Zunshine suggests – serve the function of allowing the reader to practice his or her skills of nested

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“mind-reading,” with a view to increasing his or her capacity for social dominance. In other cases (such, for example, as Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, or W. M. Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*) the array of generally empathetic characters invites us, in Bakhtinian fashion, to define our own stance in relation and/or contradistinction to theirs. In Dostoevsky, it may be (here *pace* Bakhtin) that the situation is even more complex. If *The Brothers Karamazov* gives such eloquent voice to Ivan as well as to Alyosha, it is not because we are simply being offered a choice between faith and doubt but because the ideal stance is a *combination* of doubt and faith, an almost Kierkegaardian faith *sustained* by doubt; here, then, our empathetic engagement with antithetical characters becomes, surprisingly enough, a formal model for the attitude we are supposed to take to life. Ivan is necessary not as a foil to Alyosha, nor as a rejected position, nor yet as a Bakhtinian option, but instead as part of an accurate picture of a soul with the right kind of faith, and hence a blueprint for the reader of the shape his or her own soul could one day be in.

- 40 Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, the Unnamable* (London: Grove, 1994). Subsequent references to this edition will be cited parenthetically in the text.
- 41 The paradigmatic case is perhaps John Calder’s *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett*, which more or less opens with the claim that “What future generations can expect to find in his [Beckett’s] work is above all an ethical and philosophical message; the novels and plays will increasingly be seen as the wrapping for that message.” So too the Hamiltons also invoke “Beckett’s message about man”; John Fletcher speaks of Beckett’s works pointing a moral; in David Hayman, they shed light on existence; in Hugh Kenner, they affirm some general truth; in Thomas Cousineau, they seek to convince; in Maurice Blanchot, they make evident something that is merely implicit in other literary works; and in Georges Bataille, they are “telling us” about reality. John Calder, *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett* (Edison, NJ: Riverrun Press, 2001), 1; Kenneth and Alice Hamilton, *Condemned to Life: The World of Samuel Beckett* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Company, 1976), 11; John Fletcher, *The Novels of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970), 176; David Hayman, “*Molloy* or the Quest for Meaninglessness: A Global Interpretation,” in Melvin J. Friedman, ed., *Samuel Beckett Now: Critical Approaches to His Novels, Poetry and Plays* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970), 129–56, p. 156; Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 10; Thomas J. Cousineau, *After the Final No: Samuel Beckett’s Trilogy* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 120; Maurice Blanchot, “Where Now? Who Now?” trans. Richard Howard, in S. E. Gontarski, *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism*, New York: Grove Press, 1986, 141–9, pp. 147–8; Georges Bataille, “*Molloy’s Silence*,” trans. John Pilling, in Gontarski, ed., *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism*, 131–9, p. 131.
- 42 Thus the *Unnamable* speculates as to why exactly “they” have told him a particular story: “there’s a story for you, that was to teach me the nature of emotion, that’s called emotion, what emotion can do, given favourable conditions, what love can do, well well, so that’s emotion, that’s love, and trains, the nature of trains . . . , it was to teach me how to reason, it was to tempt me to go, to the place where you can come to an end” (407). Notice that there are three separate hypotheses here – instruction, training, manipulation – and that the instruction theory is bathetically undermined by the rather hilarious “trains.”
- 43 There is an important parallel here with the work of the late Wittgenstein (at least on one reading of the latter). “Thoughts that are at peace. That is what someone who philosophizes yearns for,” Wittgenstein famously claims (*Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, 43); and again, equally famously, “The real discovery is the one that makes

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- me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. – The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question.” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness, New York: Prentice Hall, 1999, §133.) On Wittgensteinian “therapy,” cf. Garry L. Hagberg, “On Philosophy as Therapy: Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Autobiographical Writing,” *Philosophy and Literature* 27 (2003): 196–210.
- 44 On Beckett and ancient skepticism, see David H. Hesla, *The Shape of Chaos: An Interpretation of the Art of Samuel Beckett* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 121; and Steven J. Rosen, *Samuel Beckett and the Pessimistic Tradition* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1976), 53–4. To cast Beckett as a Stoic, as does Calder (*The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett*, p. 1), is to miss the force of the carefully opposed claims.
- 45 “I grew calm again and was restored,” Molloy writes at one point, “to my old ataraxy” (42).
- 46 From the *Protrepticus*, in *Aristotelis Fragmenta Selecta*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), vii, 27–8.
- 47 “What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later? . . . I say aporia without knowing what it means. Can one be ephectic otherwise than unawares? I don’t know” (291). (“Ephexis,” like “epoché,” means suspension of judgment.)
- 48 Cf. *The Calmative*: “All I say cancels out, I’ll have said nothing” (*The Complete Short Prose, 1929–1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski, New York: Grove Press, 1995, 100–54, p. 62).
- 49 “For in me there have always been two fools, among others, one asking nothing better than to stay where he is and the other imagining that life might be slightly less horrible a little further on. . . . And these inseparable fools I indulged turn about, that they might understand their foolishness” (*Molloy* 48).
- 50 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. R. G. Bury, London: Heinemann, 1933, 1.8 (p. 7). See also 1.31 (p. 23) and 1.232 (p. 143).
- 51 This continues into the *Texts for Nothing*: “And it’s still the same road I’m trudging, *up yes and down no*, towards one yet to be named, *so that he may leave me in peace*, be in peace, be no more, never have been . . . believing this, then that, then nothing more” (*The Complete Short Prose*, pp. 144–5; my emphasis).
- 52 See Bruno Clément, “A Rhetoric of Ill-Saying,” trans. Thomas Cousineau, *Journal of Beckett Studies* 4.1 (1994): 35–53, pp. 41, 36.
- 53 Sextus: “The Sceptic, being a lover of his kind [i.e. humanity], desires to cure . . . the Dogmatists” (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 3:280, p. 511).
- 54 It is not the case, I think, that we are entirely prevented from empathizing with Emma. On the contrary, many readers view her as the rather appealing victim of a bad marriage, an unfair society, misleading fictions, and so on. Witness the plot summary recently provided by the online journal Salon.com: “Flaubert brings to life a hopeless romantic who believes that true love should strike with the blinding intensity of a thunderbolt that ‘plunges the entire heart into an abyss.’ Unfortunately, she is married to a dull clod of a man.” And compare the more measured Wayne Booth who, without going quite so far, nonetheless feels that Flaubert “takes sides” in Emma’s favor: “*Madame Bovary* is unfair to almost everyone but Emma” (Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric Of Fiction*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 78; http://www.salon.com/promo/97/09/08.classic_bovary.html.)
- 55 One might imagine the empathists arguing that the ideal would be to remain *neutral* between Emma and Charles, caring fully about both. I would contend, first, that this cannot be Flaubert’s intention, and also, second, that this would not actually count as *caring*.

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Where viewpoints are incommensurable, it is impossible to adopt both in the manner required for genuine *Mitgefühl*.

- 56 See René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 152. In Flaubert, writes Girard, “false oppositions . . . confront each other symmetrically and then fall back into the void; this impassive juxtaposition reveals the absurdity” (151).
- 57 “Je crois donc qu’il ne faut «rien aimer», c’est-à-dire qu’il faut planer impartialement au-dessus de tous les objectifs”: “I believe then that one must ‘love nothing’ – that is, that one must glide impartially above all objectives” (to Ernest Feydeau, end July 1857, *Corr.* 2.770). Flaubert has his moments of mystical detachment, as when he notes that “c’est une délicieuse chose que d’écrire! que de ne plus être soi, mais de circuler dans toute la création dont on parle. Aujourd’hui par exemple, homme et femme tout ensemble, amant et maîtresse à la fois, je me suis promené à cheval dans une forêt, par un après-midi d’automne sous des feuilles jaunes, et j’étais les chevaux, les feuilles, le vent, les paroles qu’ils se disaient et le soleil rouge qui faisait s’entrefermer leurs paupières noyées d’amour.” (“Writing is a delicious thing! no longer to be oneself, but to circulate in the whole creation of which one speaks. Today for example, man and woman together, lover and mistress at once, I rode around a forest on horseback, in an autumn afternoon under yellow leaves, and I was the horses, the leaves, the wind, the words they said to each other and the red sun which half-closed their eyelids drowned in love.”) (To Louise Colet, December 24, 1853, *Corr.* 2.487.)