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ARTIFACTS OF ADULTERY:
FLAUBERT'S USE OF KITSCH IN *MADAME BOVARY*
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In *Phänomenologie des Kitsches*, Ludwig Giesz refers to Emma Bovary as ‘kitschy’ and to Gustave Flaubert as ‘a great artist’.¹ Emma is definitely ‘kitschy’ in her fetishistic fascination with objects; and, Flaubert, an artist for his ‘painterly’ renditions of landscapes in *Madame Bovary* and other works.² In his description of objects, however, Flaubert appears to be as kitschy as Emma, for he invested them with so many superfluous and incongruous details that they ultimately reveal, as Jacques Chessex has noted, the author’s obsessive fascination with kitsch.³ Besides its recognizably inartistic morphology, what is interesting about kitsch is the manner in which, semiotically, as Abraham Moles has observed, it can illuminate a relationship between a human being and an object.⁴ In literature, such an understanding can elicit important disclosures about what objects may tell about characters and their world views.

As Barthes has pointed out in a reference to Mme Aubain’s barometer, there are some objects in Flaubert’s texts that cannot be easily, if at all, recuperated by the semiotic structure of the narrative.⁵ Nonetheless, there are others that, when ‘assigned an indirect functional value’, Barthes concludes, may ‘constitute some index of character or atmosphere and [...] ultimately be recuperated by structure’ (p. 141). If kitsch objects are morphologically characterized by altered functionalities and superfluous ornamental features,⁶ ‘painted’ dinner plates and ‘blazoned’ cigar cases are then epitomes of kitsch; and, as such, objects that have, as this reading will show, a functional value in the characterization of Emma Bovary.

References to the painted dinner plates appear in the analeptic account of Emma's conventual education. Right before Mr. Rouault settles his 13-year-old daughter, Emma, in the convent, they stop over to eat at an inn at the Saint Gervais district in Rouen, where, the narrator reports, 'ils eurent à leur souper des assiettes peintes qui représentaient l'histoire de Mademoiselle de La Vallière'.⁷ Louise Françoise de La Baume Le Blanc de La Vallière (1644–1710), to be exact, was the maid of honor to Louis XIV's sister-in-law, Henrietta of England. Caught in the amorous intrigue that surrounded the court, Mademoiselle de La Vallière became the King's mistress in 1661 until she was supplanted by Mme de Montespan in 1667. Unable to get over her disillusionment, she left the court and became a Carmelite nun in 1674.⁸ Although this piece of history seems trivial, it is rather crucial for the narratorial revelation of Emma's fervent interest in romantic material, which would later determine the choice of her clandestine readings of literature at the convent. If kitsch is 'a condensation symbol or referent that draws on a given history and culture and carries both information and emotional significance',⁹ the painted dinner plates appeal to Emma because of their identifiable images of romance. Yet, it is this very representation that ultimately conspires to her romantic disappointments.¹⁰ Noting that the inscriptions on the plates were 'coupées çà et là par l'égratignure des couteaux' (p. 357), the narrator seems to forewarn the reader about the integrity of the inscribed information. Such warning could very well be extended to the mode of representation of kitsch itself, which tends to cut things out in order to increase emotional appeal. Thus, the ostentatious association of Mademoiselle de la Vallière with Louis XIV (unenlightened by the former's ultimate social withdrawal and reclusion) make an indelible impression on Emma's mind. Perhaps for that reason, this glamorous version of Mademoiselle de La Vallière's story would serve as a point of

reference for her readings romantic and historical novels at the convent, which in her mind always summoned back the ‘souvenir des assiettes peintes où Louis XIV était vanté’ (p. 359).

The full version of Mademoiselle de La Vallière’s life story, however, would not be disclosed until Emma found herself in similar circumstances. Rodolphe breaks up with her and, like the courtier, she turns to religion for solace. Only then does the narrator reveal the heroine’s consciousness of the rest of the story through an undistinguishable fusion of narrative voice and figural point of view: ‘Emma se comparait à ces grandes dames d’autrefois, dont elle avait rêvé la gloire sur un portrait de La Vallière, et qui, traînant avec tant de majesté la queue chamarrée de leurs longues robes, se retiraient en des solitudes pour y répandre aux pieds du Christ toutes les larmes d’un cœur que l’existence blessait’ (p. 522). Such personal identification seems to indicate that Emma had, after all and in spite of all, lived up to the romantic example of Mademoiselle de La Vallière.

With the cigar case episode, Flaubert completes his incarnation of Emma as a potential adulteress. On the way back from the ball at the Vaubyessard, Charles stops to repair a broken harness when he finds a cigar case between the hoofs of his horse (p. 375). It appears almost coincidental, to say the least, that this very act of picking up discarded objects from the streets, which the Germans call *kitschen*, is the most referenced etymological source of the word *kitsch*.¹¹ When Charles collects the case from the ground, he notices a heraldic design embroidered on the silk covering of the case. It was not just a case; it bore an artistic reproduction of a blazon. As Charles points out, the case was lined in green silk upon which a heraldic design was embroidered in its center, like a blazon on a carriage door. Charles’s observation is rather revealing, for ‘[k]itsch occurs each time a single element or a whole

work of art is “transferred” from its real status and used for a different purpose from the one for which it was created’.¹² However artistic, the needlework on the case appears to have no aesthetic value for Charles. He immediately identifies it as a cigar case, opens it, and later smokes one of the cigars.

For Emma, on the other hand, the cigar case transcends its own functionality. As Nathaniel Wing has noted, the case becomes a ‘fetishized object’.¹³ Regarding it as a precious keepsake, Emma takes possession of the cigar case and hides it away in her linen closet. In Charles’s absence, she takes it out and smells its interior, performing an apparently fetishistic act of adultery.¹⁴ ‘A qui appartenait-il? ... Au Vicomte. C’était peut-être un cadeau de sa maîtresse. [...] Un souffle d’amour avait passé parmi les mailles du canevas; chaque coup d’aiguille avait fixé là une espérance ou un souvenir, et tous ces fils de soie entrelacés n’étaient que la continuité de la même passion silencieuse’ (p. 377). The cigar case evokes the adulterous desire of the Vicomte’s mistress but, more importantly, prefigures Emma’s own offering of ‘un porte-cigarettes tout pareil à celui ... que Charles avait ramassé sur la route’ (p. 499) to Rodolphe, reenacting the text (*tissu*) of the original case (p. 499).

Emma seems to overlook, however, the circumstances in which the cigar case came into her hands and the implicit probability that, for the experienced lover, the figural object of desire might not be as valuable. The narratives of desire that these gifts represent, which seem so appealing to Emma, may mean nothing to the Vicomte or Rodolphe, who were accustomed to receiving them from their mistresses. Then it is not surprising that the Vicomte dropped or threw away the cigar case he received from his mistress and that, when Emma showered Rodolphe with gifts—among which was a cigarette case—, he flatly refused and only accepted them to put an end to Emma’s overbearing insistence (p. 499).

For Emma, both the painted dinner plates and the cigar case are considered treasures when, in fact, the expression and integrity of the information on the painted dinner plates are damaged, and the cigar case is technically rubbish.

In sum, Flaubert resorts to kitsch in his characterization of Emma at points where ordinary description would not produce the same effect. In describing the protagonist's interest in the images on the painted dinner plates and her fetishistic fascination with the cigar case, the narrator 'shows' this young woman's romantic and adulterous propensities. Kitsch seems to propose the perfect medium for such demonstration, for what characterizes this mode of representation is the emotional appeal that the depicted object exerts on the consciousness of the viewer.¹⁵ If 'kitsch clearly thrives on some emotional needs that are generally associated with the romantic world view', as Matei Calinescu submits,¹⁶ its appeal on Emma rests on her familiarity with the romantic code. All in all, it is not surprising that Emma would emulate the proto-narratives of adulterous desire that she gleaned from the painted dinner plates and the cigar case. What is surprising, as Jacques Chessex puts it, 'c'est que cette démonstration, cette sédimentation, cette mise en œuvre du kitsch, vont *dans le sens* de la tragédie' (Chessex's emphasis, p. 172).

Notes

¹ 2nd edition (Munich, Fink, 1971), p. 54.

² For an excellent exposition on the ‘painterly’ aspects of Flaubert’s descriptions of landscapes, see Adrienne Tooke’s *Flaubert and the Pictorial Arts: From Image to Text* (Oxford University Press, 2000), especially pp. 195–212.

³ *Flaubert ou le désert en abîme* (Paris, Grasset, 1991), p. 170 (subsequent references appear in the text). As Claude Duchet has remarked, Flaubert — the man — did not escape the popular fascination with kitsch (‘Roman et objets: l’exemple de *Madame Bovary*’, *Europe*, 485–87 (1969), 172–201 (p. 200)). To support this claim, Duchet cites J.-P. Pontalis’s reference to the writer’s bedroom at Croisset as a ‘bel exemple d’arrangement factice’ in ‘La maladie de Flaubert’, *Les Temps Modernes*, 101 (1954), 1889–1902 (p. 1896). In a letter to Louise Colet (August 1848), Flaubert himself admitted to what may be interpreted as a weakness for kitsch when he wrote that he liked glitter as much as gold (‘autant le clinquant que l’or’) (*Correspondance*, ed. by Jean Bruneau, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 4 vols (Paris, Gallimard, 1973), I, 278).

⁴ *Psychologie du kitsch: l’art du bonheur*, ed. by Elizabeth Rohmer (Paris, Denoël-Gonthier, 1977), pp. 6–23.

⁵ *The Rustle of Language*, tr. by Richard Howard (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989), pp. 141–42. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.

⁶ Abraham A. Moles and Eberhard Wahl, ‘Kitsch et objet’, *Communications*, 3 (1969), 105–29 (p. 106).

⁷ Gustave Flaubert, *Œuvres*, ed. by A. Thibaudet and R. Dumesnil, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2 vols (Paris, Gallimard, 1951–52), I, 586. Subsequent references to this novel will be to this edition, and will be noted parenthetically in the body of this article.

⁸ Jolas, Paul, ed., *Madame Bovary: Extraits*, by Flaubert, Classiques Larousse (Paris, Larousse, 1966), p. 47, note 2.

⁹ Catherine Lugg, *Kitsch: From Education to Public Policy* (New York, Falmer Press, 1999), p. 3.

¹⁰ This is perhaps what Victor Brombert meant when he remarked that ‘the apparently gratuitous detail [of Flaubert’s descriptions] can have both a prophetic and a seductive value’ (*The Novels of Flaubert: A Study of Themes and Techniques* (Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 49).

¹¹ Giesz, as the source of all those references, defines *kitschen* as ‘den Straßenschlamm zusammenscharren’ [to collect rubbish from the streets], *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹² *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (New York, Universe Books, 1970), p. 17.

¹³ *The Limits of Narrative: Essays on Baudelaire, Flaubert, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 52.

¹⁴ J.-B. Pontalis claims that Flaubert transfers his own sexual fetishism to characters like Emma, ‘pour qui l’univers paraît toujours réduit à ses aspects sensibles, à ce qu’on peut respirer, caresser du regard et de la main’ (*op. cit.*, p. 1896).

¹⁵ Tomáš Kulka, *Kitsch and Art* (University Park, PA, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), p. 42.

¹⁶ *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1987), pp. 239–40.