Monsieur Flaubert vs. Herr Marx

Round I

David, this is an imaginative,
inspiring, and well-developed dialogue. The arguments in
the initial scene are apt and so are
—in my view—-works not for
others—the conclusion you
feel is right.

I suggest a more standard kind
of 2nd take—at least a some
close analysis of particular passages.

David Kramer
Professor Ahearn
The question is, what is to be done? What is to be done with Madame Bovary?

Marx: At the outset, I will say that literature does have a use. My broad generalization that the point of philosophy is not to interpret the world but to change it, is especially fitting for Flaubert. He has said he can not enwison any state of mind other than the aesthetic. I would like to turn him on his head, and bump it against reality.

In fact, he has written a great book without realizing it. He has given a realistic account of the bourgeoisie. Look at Lherureux creating false wants in Emma, and his destruction of her through continuous extension of credit she can never repay. Or Guillaumin's manipulation of commercial transportation, in the name of economic progress, but in reality under the banner of monopolization and capital concentration. It is ironic that the factory they visit is barely begun (and seems so bland and innocuous). Just wait ten years, things get worse.

(Wouldn't it be ironic, to use a term Flaubert is so fond of, if Emma's daughter ends up being employed there as child labor.)

But Flaubert has gone further. To be more "philosophical", what could be more man's estrangement from sensuous reality than Emma's need to resort to dreams in the face of the paucity of direct experience. What could be more objectifying than Binet as defined by the product of his lathe. Self-confirmation? I am a napkin ring!

I have mentioned the great conflict between existence and essence, between the individual and the species. What has Emma
resolved? She has no essence because she has never existed in
real life. She does not work (although her step-mother's
suggestion that honest work would cure her is simplistic).
She has no control over the means of her social production.
Her society has told her what it is to be a women, a wife, and
a mother—-an object of desire, property of a man, and little
more than a babysitter. We know that she lacks the ability to
express her essence, in the famous passage with the Viscount.
As for her species being, she has no friends; her great tragedy
is that she feels herself to be unique, she can never find anyone
to complement her...

Flaubert: Let me interject quickly. First much of what you
say is true. I certainly despise the bourgeoisie. But please
don't call me a realistic writer(more of that later).

At the outset, I will say that an artist can have no
social convictions. His duty is to beauty. Preoccupation
with morality makes a work of imagination so false and boring.
Therefore the simple answer would be nothing at all should be
done with it. Except read with pleasure (more of that later),
and if I may flatter myself be imitated.

And tell me, what would you say if I told you that my text
calls for a reactionary return to aristocracy. And that if you
bring up the proletarian revolution, I will say it's too late,
the world is already bourgeoisie. Now, what will you do with
my Emma (and me too because, "Madame Bovary, c'est moi")?

Marx: Immediately, a work of art raises consciousness. (For
the moment we will suspend my conviction that future changes
are inevitable, and say that change requires conscious action.) Your work will spread truth about the way things really are. And, reading a book does not merely lead one to another book, the world is not on giant lending library, to use the metaphor, overdue fines build up and demand collection.

Yet, you may say, no solution is given within the novel. Who is the good guy? Here, I will bring you in personally. You and your book epitomize the endpoint of the bourgeoisie impulse.

You are the alienated bourgeoisie artist. (We know, for one, that you receive your income from real estate rent.) In practice, you feel estranged from almost all fellow men, you admit to Louis Colet that love can never provide wholeness (you objectify it as season on the dish of life); sexually you draw a distinction between above the waist and below—the teeth shall never meet. You have said that you believe in nothing, not even yourself.

In theory, you seek disinterested knowledge. Therefore, the art you create is detached from yourself, as it is detached from life. Because bourgeoisie life has become the absence of life.

Speaking of those proletarians, where are they? We meet none, and especially none who think of themselves as such. (I will say that Bovary is no class fantasy; you and I agree that the bourgeoisie have failed to 'save the world'—Homais' illusions to the contrary.) It is not so much that all are bourgeoisized but rather, in this rural, transitional province the proletariat have not crystallized. It is their absence and your negation of the status quo that is the solution.

You are too much the "morbid bourgeoisie"—one who sees all the symptoms of the disease, but not its cure; you also mistake
them as psychosomatic in a sense, all in the head, when there is a bodily (a real) cure. But if I may metaphorize, if you were able to kill the bourgeoisie as you desire, the proletarian would arrive like vultures to feed healthily. You have found yourself at the end of the dialectic, but the dialectic does not end there. I know you believe in the dialectic—you say "Jamais l'homme ne connaîtra la Cause, car la Cause, c'est Dieu"—but you are too mystical, like men in the middle ages who could never fathom where the parasites on the corpse came from (they came from within). It is one thing to give up bourgeois reason, the reason of Homais, but not reason itself, not the dialectic.

As for your politics, it is fitting that you should crave aristocracy and reaction, yet write a book so the opposite. For one thing, a return to feudalism is impossible, certainly in Bovary that is not an option. And finally, if an alienated man points one way, must not the truth lie in the opposite direction?

Flaubert: I commend you for not being able to find my clear cut solution in Emma. To me, ineptitude consists in wanting to reach conclusions. The function of art is not to provide answers.

You know I could easily have added the conventional jargon and two or three acceptable ideas, and I would be a socialist humanitarian writer. A renovator, a harbinger of the evangelical future dreamed of by the poor and the mad (you can't think the poorest and maddest character—the blind apostle of death—is an ideal for the new man).

And why haven't I (besides the injustice to beauty)? Let us accept Bovary as an adequate picture of life. I have included
no alternative because there is none (I too am a dialectical materialist of a sort, only I call it fate). There is simply Emma's void upon death—even Homais is quiet in the face of it. This is not a critique of society, but of life. I could talk history moving in futile circles, man's anguish in the face of the unknowable and unexpressable, the absurdity of life and especially of collective man... but I don't need to, I have shown it in Emma, in her ruin, in her death rattle, in the people around her.

But you have found the absent cause, the latent solution to the riddle—the proletarian. You are more mystical than I. I don't see these ghosts—only soulless men as greedy as their masters. It is mediocrity I hate, the vast conforming mass of men, artless, "foul specimens of humanity". And your revolution wants to make them into Gods? A race of bovines.

Let us look at Homais. You and he have similar form yet opposite content. Both ultimately judge an artwork by its ideas, though you have different ideas. And both of you believe in human advancement (yours is more apocalyptic)—that man will get better. Where do you get the faith? The best I could do would be the doctor who practiced virtue without believing in it. "O lumieres! O Progres!...Quelle éternelle horloge de bêtises que le cours des âges".

Now every piece of writing must have its moral significance, must teach its lesson, elementary or advanced or advanced; a sonnet must be endowed with philosophical implications, a play must rap the knuckles of royalty, and a watercolor contribute to moral progress. If man could resolve himself through thinking,
not art (except maybe your characters; they are made up).

You cannot escape life, consciousness, and choices. And even if you do, your characters cannot (ironically). History will judge and vindicate Emma. Or rather, save future Emma.

Flaubert: OK. Did I ever tell you that I thought the Communist Manifesto was a beautiful poem. The mundane raised to the epic. And what form.
or even living, he would not need art.

Marx: Obviously I am not as simplistic as that. Truth does not come out in easy moralizing, because moralizing is a way of masking truth.

You say there is no progress. But you admit that form must change with the times. That prose is the only possibility for modernity. And you say that prose will continue to get more and more scientific. That the artist will be drawn further and further from his work. This is economic "progress". Just like economic progress, each step is an advancement but brings with it new alienations. When art finally corresponds to life (even if the artist has disappeared)...presto!

Flaubert: I did say that form necessarily changes. And I have bemoaned the great totalizing visions possible only in the past, while we throw around pebbles. So called "realism" is not an exact duplication but the only way to express beauty now. But the content stays the same, inconclusive life. Art can only unify itself, not life. I have said to read my book for pleasure. It may seem to be the pleasure of repulsion. Fine: be repulsed from life into art. I am convinced that everything is a question of style, or rather of form, of presentation.

Marx: You contradict yourself. You say you have no convictions as at least none that get into your art, yet you do. In fact, they are just conservative ideas—in a radical book.

You artists are odd. You provide us with meaning and content and say they are just decoration. But even your decoration gives you away, your "style" that is.

You have wonderfully exemplified a moment in world-historical time. And all men have to live in time and history,