

Capernaum and the Lame and the Blind: A Complex Metaphor

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Flaubert's metaphorical concern is evident in the manner in which names are assigned to objects (and people), names that suggest multiple associations and which properly traced tie together details throughout the work that might, at first blush, seem random.

One such name is that applied to the storeroom in Homais's combined shop and home: *capharnäum*.

In addition to the reference to the town where miracles were performed by Jesus, we also have in French the meaning assigned to a place in which things are jumbled together in a confusing manner and further a "lieu de désordre et de débauches."¹

Flaubert, in naming Homais's storeroom, *capharnäum*, sets up multiple associations. It is Emma who, seeking a "cure" for a malady now beyond human help, seizes the key to which is attached the label with the name that accumulates ironies as we observe her and Homais's activities.

Emma, as a result of her "désordre et débauches" hurries to the storeroom from which the miracle of her deliverance will come, and obtains the arsenic with which she kills herself. Ironically, Homais, unwittingly, from his Capernaum supplies the chemical that will effect the cure Emma desperately needs.

That the label attached to the key is not merely a reference to the jumbled state of a storeroom becomes apparent when we review the "medical" career of the fatuous and pedantic Homais. Homais would, in imitation of Jesus, cure the lame and blind. He can do neither. It is he, in pursuit of his own advantage and interests, who suggests to Emma, and she to Charles (in pursuit of her own interests) the possibility of effecting an operation on Hippolyte which would benefit all. In one facile stroke (and literally the operation was, indeed, one stroke, a "snap" and it was over) all would profit; Charles would win renown as a surgeon, Emma would find cause for admiring her husband, Homais would gain fame by proclaiming to the world (via his "journal") the success of such an operation, and Hippolyte would be cured of his clubfoot. Ignorance, ambition, and pride join in crippling Hippolyte further, in shaming Charles, infuriating Emma, and momentarily checking though not harming the opportunistic Homais.

Hippolyte, the victim, ironically yields, finally, not out of vanity nor out of the concerted attack of all the "interested" inhabitants of Yonville, but simply because the operation would cost him nothing. Flaubert does not cast Hippolyte in the role of a suffering victim (though he suffers, we well know), but on the contrary, as a dolt resistant to the barrage of the advantages of a normal gait, of a newfound attractiveness that would draw women to him, or the possibility of serving his country as a soldier. His immunity is overcome

¹E. Littré, *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française*.

by an inverted greed. The Flaubertian irony extends to the victim and stresses the complex of motives that shatters the appearance of charity towards Hippolyte and even makes the victim ridiculous.

The "miraculous" nature of the operation is stressed and ridiculed when, after its completion, Homais presents himself to the "multitude" awaiting the results, "cinq ou six curieux . . . qui s'imaginaient qu'Hippolyte allait reparaitre marchant droit."² This aspect of the miracle invades the relationship between Charles and Emma; an animation, unprecedented, renews the dying relationship, and dreams seize upon both. Hippolyte, immediately after the operation "n'en revenait pas de surprise; il se penchait sur les mains de Bovary pour les couvrir de baisers" (p. 207). The scene and its immediate consequences are an ironical prelude to the disaster that follows. The miracle becomes a mockery and Homais, the would-be miracle worker, instead of abdicating this role will assume it once again when he promises to cure the Blind Man.

Flaubert, immediately upon the ecstasy that transforms Emma and Charles as both revel in the imagined happy consequences of the operation upon Hippolyte, has Homais read the panegyric composed by him for the paper that in part extols Charles Bovary and which, significantly, anticipates the next "cure" promised by Homais. In effect, the "medical" Homais decries the miracles promised by religious zealots offering instead "science" for "les aveugles verront" and "les boiteux marcheront" (p. 209; italics mine). Flaubert ironically anticipates the *scientific* cure promised by Homais to the Blind Man.

Both the Blind Man and Hippolyte serve as part of a complex set of associations that in turn fleshes out the fraudulent Homais that "high priest of venality"³ and serve to symbolize the nature of a world in which faith and spiritual qualities are lamentably absent, and where egotistic concerns flourish, masked, although thinly.

The Blind Man, simply a person, a repugnant, horrifying vision to Emma, and the butt of Hivert's jokes, is assured by Homais of a cure, a cure to be effected by an ointment. The ointment (presumably stored in Homais's *capharnäum*) is offered as a cure after Hivert casts doubts upon the efficacy of a regimen recommended by Homais: ". . . de bon vin, de bonne bière, de bons rôtis," offered seriously by Homais and ironically by Flaubert, a regimen obviously beyond the means of the Blind Man. In effect, Homais promises a miracle and sets in motion a series of events which impinge directly upon Emma's mental and emotional states as she lies dying from the effects of the arsenic snatched from the shelves of *capharnäum*.

It is fairly obvious that both Hippolyte and the Blind Man function in a complex set of associations. They serve to delineate further the principal characters as is ably demonstrated by P. M. Wetherill.⁴

Also in a symbolic fashion the Blind Man assumes a number of meanings, as Fate, Destiny or an unmasked Cupid. But further they are homologues as are Homais and Bournisien. There are similarities in the details in the episodes involving the Blind Man and Hippolyte that underline their homologic nature.

²Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), p. 207.

³William Bysse Stein, "Madame Bovary and Cupid Unmasked," *Sewanee Review*, 73, No. 1, 204.

⁴P. M. Wetherill, "Madame Bovary's Blindman: Symbolism in Flaubert," *The Romantic Review*, 61, No. 1 (February, 1970), 35-42.

Both are "immured," Hippolyte in the elaborate box that restrains the lame leg and immobilizes him and the Blind Man in an asylum. Both are victims of Homais's ambition and "scientific" ardor. Though both are victimized, neither one obtains the sympathy of the reader. They are ciphers deprived of any possible dignity or compassion deriving from their infirmities. Lame and blind, they are elements in a complex pattern outlined against an implied religious event founded on the rock of faith and charity.

Flaubert with exquisite irony outlines the tawdry elements in the "charity" dispensed by both Homais and Emma. The Blind Man performing before *L'Hirondelle* in the presence of Emma and Homais becomes the recipient of their "generosity." William Bysshe Stein comments that the Blind Man is "the final Cupid of a series that embodies romantic, secretive and corrupt passion . . . to whom Emma, significantly tosses her last cent [sic] on the ride home that was to commence the advent of her doom."⁵ However, Stein's slight error, which at first blush would merely require a substitution accurately conveying the value of the coin Emma actually flings to the Blind Man, draws attention to the significant fact that there are *two* donors and the sums they pay to the Blind Man differ in value, and point to differing intentions. Homais hands a *sou* to the Blind Man while Emma tosses grandly a coin worth five francs. Flaubert insists upon Homais's parsimony to the extent that he has him ask the Blind Man to return a part of the value of the *sou*. He also insists upon Emma's "generosity" in having her fling the Blind Man a five franc coin, her last sum of money. Both are payments; neither has to do with helping the Blind Man. Homais pays to see a spectacle that disgusts Emma. Flaubert carefully chooses the verb ("tiens") to characterize Homais's gesture. He *hands* the *sou* to the Blind Man, the contact is almost physical and maintained by his request for the change. It is a concerned gesture, one that involves a *quid pro quo*. Emma pays to rid herself of the same spectacle and Flaubert has Emma fling the coin over her shoulder: "Emma prise de dégoût, lui envoya, pardessus l'épaule, une pièce de cinq francs. C'était toute sa fortune. Il lui sembla beau de la jeter ainsi" (p. 350). Though the motives seem obvious, associations in the mind of the reader suggest a useless sacrifice on the part of Emma. She pays, disgusted, to rid herself of the debased image of a fallen God, Cupid unmasked, and casts him out of her mind only to have the Blind Man return, with his erotic song, to harry her precisely at the moment of her death and change dramatically Emma's apparent serenity to one of frenzied despair.⁶ Strangely, at Emma's burial service, there is echoed the "charity" shown by Homais and Emma towards the Blind Man. *Sous* fall upon the plate passed during the ceremony placed there by those attending and Charles tormented, flings a *five franc coin* declaring his impatience and anger at the same time. As Emma seemed to wish to hurry away the Blind Man, Charles with his offering wished to hasten the service that preceded Emma's burial. The two incidents reinforce one another and render a total feeling far in excess of each one taken separately through oversight or forgetfulness on the part of the reader.

There are other associations that elaborate the Blind Man's role. Homais's boast to cure him with his ointment is an unconsciously ironic remark if we

⁵Stein, p. 207.

⁶"The laugh, atrocious, frenzied, despairing, was her last act in life; it arose because she believed that the scrofulous Blind Man was to be with her for eternity. The symbol gives forceful statement to Flaubert's meaning: religion cannot preserve man from having to face his own nature, man cannot save him from his sins." *Madame Bovary and the Critic, A Collection of Essays*, ed. B. F. Bart, (New York: N.Y.U. Press, 1966), p. 103.

accept the notion of a relationship between Cupid's beautiful eyes (bandaged, unseen but obviously exquisite) and the unbandaged, repellent eyes of the Blind Man. Homais, the quack chemist, the miracle man who with his ointments promises to cure a physical ailment (difficult in itself), unwittingly proposes to cure an affliction that lies in Emma's soul. Homais in his foolish assertion draws to himself the unwelcome attention of the Blind Man. His "sacrifice" like Emma's only brings the Blind Man to Yonville and he must then use his influence to have him put away. The *sou*, the change requested, and the ointment define Homais's parsimony and quackery but they also link God and victim.

Homais, it will be remembered, is an outspoken opponent of the Church and significantly his tirades most often fall on deaf or unheeding ears or are directed at Bournisien who, incompetent, is unable either to annihilate his pedantic and foolish opponent or to formulate or defend the essential spiritual qualities of any great religion, including his own. Homais specifically rejects the notions of a God intervening or interfering in human affairs, and stands as the champion of reason and science. He is bereft of any real religious insights or competence in the fields he defends in his comic, pedantic fashion. Flaubert, while having Homais *pose* as a man of science and reason and as an avid enemy of the Church, subtly has him function (as a fraud) in the sphere of miracles, a sphere contingent upon faith, belief, and a renunciation of worldly goods.

The trail of association which involves the Blind Man and Hippolyte as homologues also involves Homais and Bournisien as homologues. Homais is a scientist, which is what he professes to be, but enters upon a forbidden sphere of faith, and promises cures. Bournisien who is a priest and yet not a man of God, instead of spiritual help desperately sought by Emma, offers her *medical* advice (through Charles Bovary). Homais, after Emma has poisoned herself and in discussing pedantically with Dr. Lavivière his attempts to help her, is rudely reminded by the eminent doctor that he should have stuck his finger down her throat. The sudden brusque and vulgar though efficacious advice (given perforce too late to an incompetent and consequently dangerous individual), serves better than any other device to light up the self-serving terrain that Homais has created out of his absurd, pedantic, and pseudoscientific jargon. At the same time, it parallels the "religious" scene where Emma desperately seeks spiritual comfort or advice from Bournisien whose aspirituality is stressed in the description of the tobacco-stained priestly vestment that should be the outward manifestation of the spiritual quality of the inner man consecrated to the understanding and alleviation of spiritual disease in others. At the respective, crucial moments, both failed Emma. Both failures are not simply failures towards Emma, but symbolize the attitudes of both Bournisien and Homais towards all who might be in need.

The implicit comparison between a Christlike attitude and Homais's is stressed by Flaubert. In the choice of the name *caparnäum* to designate Homais's storeroom, not only do we have the association between it and the town where Christ performed his miracles among the lame and the blind, but we also have the thoroughly mercantile aspects of both places. Through Homais's "gift" of a *sou* (less the change) to the Beggar (a figure who along with the Leper in literature is associated with Divine testing), Flaubert stresses Homais's concern with worldly goods and lack of heed of the biblical admonition to surrender them. From his *caparnäum*, there can only come ointments that do not cure and arsenic that kills.⁷ Homais made a mockery of charity to the

⁷See Stein, p. 199.

Blind Man; Emma could not see the sightless Beggar as an unmasked Cupid. Neither the one nor the other fathomed their own blindness in their search for lust without love.

It is not by chance that Homais and Emma are intimately linked to both Hippolyte and the Blind Man. In an intricate play of homologues, we have Homais and Bournisien who, paired, define one another and who relate to Emma in a number of ways. Bournisien fails to render the spiritual need that could only come from one who, himself, would be a reservoir of that faith. Homais supplies both Léon (he had harbored and preserved him in his home) and the "cure" (arsenic) to Emma. Ironically, his one medication is efficacious. Homais and Emma, paired, both bent upon the acquisition of things—he money, fame, she ideal lovers—define one another. Flaubert's world, as Stein puts it, is a "world under the blind spell of love." However, perhaps the last word should be changed to "lust" and with that we sweep Homais along with Emma into the net fashioned by Flaubert. For if Emma sins and suffers, Homais sins and prospers and that, perhaps, is an aspect of his world that Flaubert most regretted.

Unlike Christ who can forgive the adulteress, Homais and the rest can hound her to her death. If Flaubert consistently points up the pseudo-Christ in Homais, he does so by concatenating circumstances that form a large pattern.

The final irony that caps the metaphor is the awarding of the cross (*la croix d'honneur*) to Homais. Where Christ's renunciation of worldly things, and his sacrifice are made manifest upon the cross, Homais's concentration on their acquisition and his self-aggrandizement is symbolized by the cross, a diminutive decoration, the ultimate Flaubertian irony, the last touch of the metaphor that condemns Homais and expresses the lack of charity (*caritas*) that pervades *Madame Bovary*.