

Absorption and Theatricality in the Staging of Contempt: Flaubert, Baudelaire, Huysmans

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Abstract: Drawing on two categories suggested by art historian Michael Fried – absorption and theatricality –, this article suggests a specification relative to how we feel and express a particular emotion: contempt. To better understand the distinction between absorbed and distanced contempt, and all the emotional consequences that ensue, three specific and contrasting examples taken from Flaubert, Baudelaire and Huysmans are analysed here.

Keywords: contempt, emotions, Flaubert, Bovary, Baudelaire, Huysmans, dandyism.

In a 2010 article on contempt, philosopher Ronald de Sousa suggests a distinction between “strong contempt” and “common contempt”. While strong contempt is not in our everyday reach and “relegates a person to the status of a non-person”¹, common contempt has a broader application and a wider array of nuances. Without entering in the detail of his argument, I would like to draw on these two classes and submit a specification relative to how we feel and express contempt. In order to do so, I will borrow, to a

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¹ Ronald de Sousa, “Is Contempt Redeemable?”, *Journal of Philosophy of Emotions*, vol. 1, Issue 1 (Winter 2019), 24.



limited extent, two key concepts of art historian Michael Fried, namely *absorption* and *theatricality*. As Fried puts it, in *Courbet's Realism*, distinctive characters in the paintings of Chardin or of Courbet are often “so absorbed” that they appear “unconscious or oblivious of everything but the object of [their] absorption, as if to all intents and purposes there were nothing and no one else in the world.”² While other characters are far less oblivious of the spectator and, unlike the former example, seems to deliberately act on the stage of the painting, *for* the beholder’s pleasure.

Of course, Fried’s argument on absorption and theatricality deals specifically with painting and the characters in these paintings that are taking notice (or not) of the presence of the beholder. Although an equivalence between reader and beholder is fragile for a certain number of reasons – particularly concerning the boundaries of fiction –, I will consider, for the purpose of my argument, that certain characters in fiction can be immersed, absorbed or acting on a stage relatively to their own emotions, or rather to one in particular, that is contempt. Hence, following Fried’s model, I would distinguish *immersed* or *absorbed* contempt from *distantiated* or *sham* contempt. As a reader of fiction, we ask, in other words, the question of the sincerity or the genuineness of certain emotions – are these characters faking? should I trust their joys and angers, or do they belong to a role, a part performed on some kind of stage, or, worse even, a game they are unaware of playing? Contempt lends itself particularly well to these questions, as I will aim to show. To better understand the distinction between absorbed and distanced contempt, and all the emotional consequences that ensues, I wish to observe three specific and contrasting examples of these categories: the first is to be found in Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and offers a feature of a strong immersed contempt. The second is a social character, that enjoyed a rich literary existence, manifesting a more cool and distanced type of contempt: the dandy. The third, an irate and depressed *fin-de-siècle* dandy, will appear as a synthesis of the two former instances, blending both absorbed and distanced contempt.

² Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 7.

Emma's Absorbed Contempt

After the painful and boring first years of her marriage, Emma Bovary has been regularly cheating on her husband, Charles, a provincial and quite dull doctor. At length, she quarrels with her lover and reproaches herself to have neglected her husband. Following the unwise advice of the town pharmacist, she encourages Charles to perform a surgery to correct the leg of a club-footed boy. Emma puts all of her ambitions in this operation, but given Charles' doltishness, the whole thing fails lamentably. The scene that follows takes place when the poor boy is amputated by another doctor, while Charles still ponders, at home, on what went wrong:

Emma, opposite, watched him; she did not share his humiliation; she felt another – that of having supposed such a man was worth anything. As if twenty times already she had not sufficiently perceived his mediocrity. [...] “But it was perhaps a valgus!” [a variety of club-foot] suddenly exclaimed Bovary, who was meditating. At the unexpected shock of this phrase falling on her thought like a leaden bullet on a silver plate, Emma, shuddering, raised her head in order to find out what he meant to say; and they looked at the other in silence, almost amazed to see each other, so far sundered were they by their inner thoughts. Charles gazed at her with the dull look of a drunken man [...].³

But his look, as we can suppose, cannot prevent her bursting emotion:

Emma bit her wan lips, and rolling between her fingers a piece of coral that she had broken, fixed on Charles the burning glance of her eyes like two arrows of fire about to dart forth. Everything in him irritated her now; his face, his dress, what he did not say, his whole person, his existence, in fine. She repented of her past virtue as of a crime, and what still remained of it rumbled away beneath the furious blows of her pride. She revelled in all the evil ironies of triumphant adultery. The memory of her lover came back to her with dazzling attractions; she

³ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, transl. Eleanor Marx-Aveling (New York: Pocket Library, 1959), 195.

threw her whole soul into it, borne away towards this image with a fresh enthusiasm; and Charles seemed to her as much removed from her life, as absent forever, as impossible and annihilated, as if he had been about to die and were passing under her eyes.⁴

Emma's contempt is somewhat legitimate: it builds up gradually. She first tries to come back to Charles, rehabilitates his image, hoping that the operation would redeem him and his mediocrity would fade away. But no, nothing of the sort: even when he fails, Charles remains desperately identical. And the worse is that he does not even realize on what level these failures take place. On the professional level of course, but also on the affective one. To Emma's eyes, the justification of her contempt takes into account the wreck of her own hopes and ideals – had she been less ambitious, the outcomes would have been different.

Every feature of Emma revolves around her scorn: the dynamics of contempt often starts by a *self-evaluation* where the scorned object fails to reach the standards or the needs of the contemner. The first sentence of the passage states a humiliation that is, in fact, a *self-humiliation*, as if Emma could not bear the fact that she did really believe in Charles' success. Contempt appears then to be a sort of reassessment of her pride. The free indirect speech, subtly emphasizing the contemner's perspective, gives to Emma's reflexions a resentful and bitter twist:

How was it that she – she, who was so intelligent – could have allowed herself to be deceived again? and through what deplorable madness had she thus ruined her life by continual sacrifices? She recalled all her instincts of luxury, all the privations of her soul, the sordidness of marriage, of the household, her dream sinking into the mire like wounded swallows; all that she had longed for, all that she had denied herself, all that she might have had! And for what? for what?⁵

Would Emma have deemed herself “intelligent” if the operation had been a success? This timely statement comes in reaction to embarrassment

⁴ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 196.

⁵ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 195.

and prompts a movement of distinction and comparison: I am certainly not like this fool, and although I did consider quite credulously his capacities, I admit that I have been misled. And as soon as the idea of deception is raised, a sequence of embedded reproaches dawns in Emma's mind. Charles' error gives way to a series of frustrations that piles up at a dazzling speed, and reinforces, symmetrically, the desire to destroy all ties that linked her to him. Pride induces contempt, as she feels it again towards the end of the book: "strengthening herself in her pride, she had never felt so much esteem for herself nor so much contempt for others."⁶ Esteem and contempt are on a par, as in a counterpoint where the comfort of the first would balance or compensate the harshness of the latter. Absorbed, oblivious of the world, Emma is locked in her solipsistic, self-sufficient and generalizing reflection: the world hits me, I'll hit back with my scorn. Of course, in our passage, one could argue that Emma is caught by what can be called the illusion of lucidity: the more one's consideration of oneself and of the situation gets unsparing and dour, the closer he feels to truth. Yet, all of this construction, all of these helpless questions addressed to an even more helpless Charles, can only feed, foster and stiffen contempt.

In fact, Charles' sentence on the "valgus" strikes the *coup de grâce*. The coarse leaden bullet hitting the fine silver plate *figures* a brutal signal of total revocation of her feelings towards him. He is not indifferent any longer, he has now become worthy of hate. But hate would still be too warm a feeling. As soon as her anger tempers and mitigates, it solidifies into a strong, lasting and negating contempt, that is made out of all of the exasperating features of her husband: the details, the local contemptible parts *transforms* in one big contemptible whole ("his *whole* person"). It then becomes irrevocable: she will not come back on her feelings, the stain is indelible. Contempt seeps from her, it oozes out of her flesh: she is immersed in it. Until then, it had been in her *latently*, confusedly; but a single sentence makes it suddenly *patent*, glaring, complete. Contempt is, at this point, not quite warm but vindictively cold.

⁶ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 323.

The development of Emma's justification reaches all its strength towards the end of the excerpt, where she finds solace in re-evoking her lover with a "fresh enthusiasm"⁷. Not only does she feel all entitled to have a lover, but the image of the lover wipes out forcefully the remains of a common past with her husband. A trace of the swift transition from anger to contempt could even be seen in the detail of the broken coral branch: we can well imagine that the "valgus" sentence uttered by Charles triggered a jolty nervous move in Emma; it made her lose her temper a brief moment – her nerves and the coral branch snapped at the same time. Flaubert's genius relates this event in the past tense: we do not see the breaking of the branch but only hear the echo of the crack – it *has* happened, it is now too late, as Charles' love fate that is now severed and petrified.

The Dandy on Stage

Yet, contempt is rarely that impassioned and fierce. Let us now turn to the distanced contempt as it manifests itself in the character of the dandy (and I specifically think of the original 19th century dandy, shortly after the trend started to spread). A contemptuous dandy may be very serious; but there is always a certain margin of doubt. He is, in some ways, quite unreliable: one has to distinguish the man in representation, on stage in the mundane circles he frequents, from the man under the mask. The dandy in representation will not care about the particulars of a situation: his contempt is *a priori*. He will despise the world around him on the sole ground of a partial *decision* – before even analysing whether the contemptible object is worthy of contempt, if contempt is *fitted*, and without even caring to readjust or rectify his attitude. Regardless of the circumstances, he plays a part written in advance, a role that is set once and for all. In a chapter of *The Painter of Modern Life*, Charles Baudelaire thought that the "specific beauty of the dandy consists particularly in that cold exterior resulting from the unshakeable determination to remain unmoved"⁸. We have to appreciate the

⁷ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 196.

⁸ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, trans. P. E. Charvet (London: Penguin Classics, 1972), 422.

strong sense and emphasis given to “determination”: an intentional act that precedes the dandy’s entry in society and that he will not come back upon. One could almost talk, in this case, of a *training* or a *conditioning* to contempt, that would then lean towards a *mood* rather than an emotion. Out of this preliminary ground of contempt stems a variety of rude manifestations, such as impertinence, boldness, presumptuousness, all guided by the wish to shock or to amaze. Baudelaire, again, talks of “the pleasure of causing surprise in others, and the proud satisfaction of never showing any oneself”⁹.

If, as we have said, self-evaluation is at the core of contempt (it is in function of my own self-evaluation that I allow myself to be contemptuous), the dandy’s “self-worship”, as Thomas Carlyle names it, then becomes a natural extension of contempt : if I revere or venerate myself, no one can possibly meet the standards of my taste; everybody will fail to reach my approval. A good example of such discriminatory reaction can be found in a comment of Henri de Marsay, the dainty fashionable of Balzac’s *Girl with Golden Eyes*: “But is it nothing in your eyes to have the right to walk into a salon and look down at everyone from behind your cravat, or down through your monocle, and feel able to despise the most superior man because he happens to be wearing last seson’s waistcoat?”¹⁰ The dandy goes, in this case and very consciously, far beyond the rules drawn by society and hierarchy. A King is no longer a King if he is out of fashion. The contempt of the dandy is based on a hyper-correctness that sets the established rules anew, beyond birth or social condition. According to him, it is an objective “right” to do so, as if looseness in appearance would be a hindrance to power (like a soldier that would have a tear in his armour). Yet, when we read that some outmoded clothes are sufficient grounds for sincere contempt, we may laugh: the motive is a trifle, and there is a certain affected ridicule in making such a fuss of a negligible detail. Beyond all the seriousness entailed by contempt, there is certainly a great deal of irony and derision into play – but the observer cannot be quite certain of it. From the dandy’s point of view, his spectator has only to believe in the stunning effect he wishes to create.

⁹ Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 420.

¹⁰ Honoré de Balzac, *The Girl with the Golden Eyes*, transl. Peter Collier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 101.

As a matter of fact, contempt, for the dandy, is a strategy, a shield, a disruptive manner to avoid and refuse the connivance implied in the social game. It appears to be some kind of *anaesthetics* to the emotions: whatever may be the intrinsic feeling of the dandy, the outside perception of the beholder will remain the same: a mask of impassibility that shall neutralize joy as well as anger. In Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, the Russian dandy Prince Korasoff notices with admiration such features in Julien Sorel's guise: "Your future is assured, my dear Sorel [...] you naturally have that cold demeanour, a thousand leagues away from the sensation one has at the moment, that we have been making such efforts to acquire."¹¹ But Korasoff remarks at the same time that Julien does not strive to bear that expression, *i.e.* that he might not be as contemptuous as he seems since he only follows his "nature". Through Korasoff's guidance, Julien takes the measure of the leeway offered by a cold countenance: the less "readable" you get, the more room to manoeuvre you may enjoy.

On this line, contempt works paradoxically as a kind of affect regulator. A wide variety of emotions may stir up the dandy, nothing will come out of him except a blank look that one usually interpret as scornful. It thus can be misleading. Contempt, for instance, can be quite close to boredom, if we listen to the advices given by Korasoff to Julien:

A melancholy manner cannot be good form. What is wanted is an air of boredom. If you are melancholy, it is because you lack something, because you have failed in something. That means showing one's own inferiority, if, on the other hand you are bored, it is only what has made an unsuccessful attempt to please you, which is inferior. So realise, my dear friend, the enormity of your mistake.¹²

Korasoff's recommendations aims to build an impervious and over-controlled stance. For, once more, a dandy only thinks about the impression he wishes to elicit. How should I appear in society? Not afflicted but bored,

¹¹ Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, transl. Horace B. Samuel (New York: Barnes and Nobles Classics, 2005), 293.

¹² Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, 409-410.

simply, as if nothing of the richness of the world could content me – for I am superior to it. Anticipating the looks cast on him, he is in society as in front of a mirror, without allowing himself to be sincere to his own feelings, which would be a proof of gross manners. The dandy, therefore, is a faker, a vainglorious stoic that stands as indifferent, not *in sync* with events and surrounding life, and for whom contempt serves his flawless stone-face. We can hear the puzzlement of certain commentators as they witnessed the blossoming phenomenon. Such as the French translator of Leigh Hunt's memoir on Byron that blended in the original text a comment of his own invention, reporting Byron's notorious attitude in society:

A great contempt for men was at the source of so many oddities. Byron considered himself as superior to them, both by rank and by genius; unworthy of judging the intimate recesses of his soul and understand the secrets of his thought, he beguiled them; he would let them witness a fictitious character, sometimes a rogue and vainglorious dandy, sometimes a peer of England.¹³

When you consider your public to be gullible, you allow yourself an incessant mask game where no identity is settled anymore, while contempt remains the impetus of this behaviour.

But a distinction needs to be made: in what I call "sham contempt", artificiality or pretence does not question the *acting* but the ground *motivation* of the emotion. An actor that is playing contempt might well be contemptuous himself, or not. For some genuine dandies, such as Byron, the ground of contempt is *sincere* or *primordial*, hence the masks and character play; but for some others, it is only *sham*: they do not feel scorn, they fake it. Or even worse: they think they *are* contemptuous while they are not, and not even conscious about it. Such are the followers, who mimetically apply an attitude they see and perceive, but do not understand in its inmost incentives. In fact, historically speaking, as soon as the character of the dandy and his habits got well known and turned into a *type*, contempt became a simple accessory of

¹³ [Anonymous], *Revue encyclopédique* (Paris: Au bureau central de la revue encyclopédique, 1828), vol. 37, 443.

his features. Feeling superior to the mass, the bourgeoisie or the ideology of the century he lives in was quite indifferent: contempt had lost its ground motivation and had been transformed in a stagy and affected *pose*. One was to be cold without reasons and haughty in an artificial way, in order to better imitate the former models. With such baseless attitude, we are then quite close of Flaubert's *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*, where contempt appears to be an easy weapon, ready to use at any moment: one blindly fires at what opinion holds to be worthy of contempt. Thus, in Flaubert's *Dictionary*, the "Epicurus", "Racehorse" and "Doctrinaires" entries are all followed by an identical, blunt and imperative statement: "Despise him"¹⁴ "Speak of them only with contempt"¹⁵. The dandy cannot be a dandy anymore when his rants are so *common*.

Des Esseintes in Mid-water

Be that as it may, the sincerity and genuineness of contempt can still find some virulent dandy specimens such as the Duke Jean Floressas Des Esseintes, in Joris-Karl Huysmans' *Against Nature*. In a fit of misanthropy, this tired and waning descendant of great lineage, that has progressively come to loathe all of his contemporaries, decides to withdraw from society:

His contempt for humanity grew fiercer, and at last he came to realize that the world is made up mostly of fools and scoundrels. It became perfectly clear to him that he could entertain no hope of finding in someone else the same aspirations and antipathies; no hope of linking up with a mind which, like his own, took pleasure in a life of studious decrepitude; no hope of associating an intelligence as sharp and wayward as his own with any author or scholar.¹⁶

¹⁴ G. Flaubert, *The Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*, transl. Jacques Barzun (New York: New Directions Paperbook, 1966), 29.

¹⁵ G. Flaubert, *The Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*, 22.

¹⁶ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, transl. Robert Baldick (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1959), 22.

Although he remains on stage, although he continues to act affectedly and enjoy a life of “studious decrepitude”¹⁷ as other dandies would, his distress and anguish are genuine and sincere. Des Esseintes’ contempt is at the confluence of both features we have seen so far: absorbed to the point of being “fierce”, but fake at the same time, as it is still part of an over-mannered, thought-of and sought-after behaviour. Or rather, more precisely: if des Esseintes made his debut in mundane life as a posing dandy, he quickly was hostage of his pose and could not dissociate himself of the character he had come to be. Actually, des Esseintes cannot isolate a unique issue to his problem: the “fools and scoundrels”¹⁸ takes the proportions of gigantic *whole* mirroring the entire society. Des Esseintes is at war *with* the world, while remaining deaf, immersed, as if there were “nothing and no one else in the world”¹⁹, to take back Fried’s expression. Thus, the stifling feeling he experiences comes from a lack of communication, synonym of a dire seclusion quite close, but for other reasons, to the antique tradition of the *contemptus mundi*. In his case, all started with a carefully imitated contempt – devoid of real reasons – that grew sincere as he came to use it systematically. Then, like Emma Bovary, mere annoyance changed into latent contempt, that soon, as it swelled, blew into a fit of rage, but cooled immediately and became a solid, vindictive and irrevocable scorn.

The grounds to his contempt can also be understood as a *reaction* to the contempt of his fellow men – or, at least, what he takes to be contempt: “He could detect such inveterate stupidity, such hatred of his own ideas, such contempt for literature and art and everything he held dear, implanted and rooted in these mean mercenary minds, exclusively preoccupied with thoughts of swindling and money-grubbing [...], that he would go home in a fury and shut himself up with his books.”²⁰ The discrepancy with society takes place on the ground of values. The fact that other people scorn the very principles and thoughts according to which he lives is equivalent to negating his plain presence among them. Des Esseintes’ solution is that of mutual

¹⁷ Huysmans, *Against Nature*.

¹⁸ Huysmans, *Against Nature*.

¹⁹ M. Fried, *Courbet’s Realism*, 7.

²⁰ Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 39.

ignorance: while you leave me in peace, I will pay no heed to you – as if society did really care. For we have also to see the paranoid dimension of such a movement; the fictitious dialogue between des Esseintes and his contemporaries goes one way: his own reading of what society thinks is only due to himself. His contempt, therefore, appears in the light of a solipsistic exchange, where the firm belief that nothing is to be saved leads him to abandon a useless fight: the “merchant minds” are immovable, and he will not have the strength to convince them to go his way.

Conclusion

The three examples we have considered all share a radical stance: their contempt comes from an intimate and resolute choice. They are not followers. The only exception we touched upon was the *a priori* contempt of certain dandy imitators. And, as a matter of fact, they are the main actors of a contempt they purport to convey, a contempt we called *sham*, where the dandy falsely feels the contempt he shows. All the opposite of *Madame Bovary*, where the “valgus” episode elicits all of Emma’s autonomy, what Fried calls the peculiar “aleness” of absorbed characters. Bovary’s contempt is warm, deaf, and – in some ways – positive by uplifting her self-esteem (“I am *not* like that idiot!”), but also absolute, in that it considers itself, according to self-evaluation, as absolutely justified. The passage we analysed demonstrated a quality of contempt that *lasts*: it is a turning point in Emma’s relationship with Charles, and all the subsequent episodes of their story will take place in function of that *point de non-retour*. The dandy’s contempt is much more theatre-like, resolute but adaptive, opportunistic one might say. Contempt in this case stops at an equivocal point, between rhetoric and prudery, conventionally cold and impeccably polite. But des Esseintes leads us a step further, at the conjunction of both: too irritated to be completely detached but too annoyed and disillusioned to manifest his wrath, he remains alone, irreconcilable, constantly hoping, as Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly was writing in his diary a couple of years prior, that contempt would heal whatever bleeds (“*quelle pierre infernale que le mépris ! Il cicatrise tout ce qui*

saigne"²¹). At least he is not, as so many other offshoots of dandyism, pretending to be who he is not; the uncompromising slant of his lucidity could certainly not endure it.

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²¹ Jules Barbey d'Aureville, *Premier mémorandum : 1837* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1900), 122.

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