

CAREER,
LIFE AND
INFLUENCE

“L’Homme n’est rien: l’œuvre est tout”: On Gustave Flaubert

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Quand un artiste a le malheur d’être plein de la passion qu’il veut exprimer, il ne saurait la peindre, car il est la chose même au lieu d’en être l’image. L’art procède du cerveau et non du cœur. Quand votre sujet vous domine, vous en êtes l’esclave et non le maître.

(Honoré de Balzac, *Massimilla Doni*, 1839)

In a letter of December 20, 1875 to his dear friend and fellow writer, George Sand—and written some four months before her death—Flaubert took up her accusation that he lacked “une vue bien arrêtée et bien étendue sur la vie.” His reply was at once assenting and ironic— “Vous avez mille fois raison!”—as he explained that, yes, he wanted no metaphysics, no big words like “Progrès,” “Fraternité,” “Démocratie,” “Égalité,” and so on. No, he told Sand, it wasn’t possible today to establish any new principles, or to respect the old ones. There was, however, one thing needful, though elusive. “Donc je cherche, sans la trouver, cette Idée d’où doit dépendre tout le reste” (Flaubert, *Correspondance* 4: 1000).

He was echoing his notable utterance of twenty-two years earlier: “je crois même qu’un penseur (et qu’est-ce que l’artiste si ce n’est un triple penseur ?) ne doit avoir ni religion, ni patrie, ni même aucune conviction sociale” (Flaubert, *Correspondance* 2: 316). His friend, the poet Charles Baudelaire, shared the disdain of the artist for the popular mind-set, but definitely adhered to a “religion”: an idiosyncratic Catholicism that held God to be the creator of an indivisible totality, and thus each of our human senses possessed a relationship to all the others: a sound, a color, a taste, mutually “corresponded.” Therefore, a painter could be discussed as if he were a melodist, and a composer could be discussed as if his music

suggested that which was pictorial. This theory of “correspondances” pervaded Baudelaire’s poetry and prose.

Flaubert rejected any such system, any integrated vision of life. In his *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy’s View of History* (1953), Isaiah Berlin attempted a flexible classification of writers into two camps, along the lines of an utterance by the Greek poet Artilochus: “The fox knows many things but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” The hedgehog possesses an integrative vision, a clear system of thought and feeling: everything is related to such a unitary way of looking at the world, everything is interrelated. The fox, however, follows no single set of principles and prefers to pursue a plethora of “often unrelated and even contradictory” phenomena; his “thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects, for what they are in themselves.” While warning against oversimplifying categorizations, Berlin suggests that writers such as Dante, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Proust are (broadly speaking) hedgehogs; Shakespeare, Goethe, Balzac, and Joyce are foxes. We could, I suggest, add Baudelaire to the list of hedgehogs; Flaubert tends towards the fox.

Yet in coming to Tolstoy, who is the focus of his book, Berlin suggests that the great Russian novelist “was by nature a fox, but believed in being a hedgehog” (Berlin 7–11 and *passim*). Tolstoy wanted “the one big thing.” In his own, very different way, Flaubert also agonized about dealing with the multifariousness of things and people (and which so often excited his disgust) and yearned for his one thing needful, his “one big thing,” his “Idée.” In essence, that would be Art, Art with a capital A, which he would pursue with almost a religious fervor, with a notoriously monkish asceticism in the way he practised that Art to the exclusion of so much else in life. “Le mariage pour moi,” he wrote to his mother in December 1850, “serait une apostasie qui m’épouvante. [...] Tu [i.e., himself!] peindras le vin, l’amour, les femmes, la gloire, à condition, mon bonhomme, que tu ne seras ni ivrogne, ni amant, ni mari, ni tourlourou. Mêlé à la vie, on la voit mal; on en souffre ou [on] en

jouit trop. L'artiste, selon moi, est une monstruosité, – quelque chose de hors nature” (Flaubert, *Correspondance* 1: 720).

To summarize: a fox's obsession with his art makes him hedgehoggy, and Flaubert knew how to be both crafty and prickly.

Such complexity raises the question: could Flaubert see patterning, principle, only in the practice of Art? Wasn't there something more to his hedgehog's vision of ultimate-essence as distinct from the fox's recognition of actual existence? Flaubert was, after all, a reader as well as a writer and possessed of a culture wider than that of many a narrowly focused practitioner of arts and crafts. He ruminated much on the hedgehog-essence of such great fox writers as Shakespeare and Goethe, especially their respective *Hamlet* and *Faust*. (The latter may well have influenced his own *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, whose protagonist is tempted by the devil, and *Bouvard et Pécuchet* whose eponymous pursuers of knowledge are, in effect, a double-act parody of the legendary German scholar.) There is a revealing but little-noticed passage in an 1853 letter in which Flaubert reflects on two of the greatest literary archetypes of all time: here he seems to transcend his obsession with his own artistry: “Hamlet ne réfléchit pas sur des subtilités d'école, mais sur des pensers humains. C'est, au contraire, ce perpétuel état de fluctuation d'Hamlet, ce vague où il se tient, ce manque de décision dans la volonté et de solution dans la pensée qui en fait tout le sublime. Mais *les gens d'esprit* veulent des caractères tout d'une pièce et *conséquents* (comme il y en a seulement dans les livres). Il n'y a pas au contraire un bout de l'âme humaine qui ne se retrouve dans cette conception. Ulysse est peut-être le plus fort type de toute la littérature ancienne, et Hamlet de toute la moderne” (Flaubert, *Correspondance* 2: 368).

Hedgehog and fox, it would seem, are constantly aspiring to become each other. The Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev, one of Flaubert's closest friends, gave a lecture on “Hamlet and Don Quixote,” in which he suggested that the Danish prince was the great ironist and the Spanish knight was the great enthusiast: for that and much more they represented two contradictory principles in human life, “for ever uniting and for ever parting with one another”

(Turgenev 200). Turgenev's lecture has served as a key to his fiction: we might here invite readers to consider Flaubert's remarks on Hamlet and Ulysses as similarly illuminating on his work as a whole. Flaubert was, after all, both a Hamlet-like skeptic/ironist and a *voyageur* in a modern counterpart to the Ulyssean tradition. (He wrote that austere letter of December 1850, as quoted above, from Constantinople: in spite of its "ni amant" claims, his behavior with indigenous women during his Oriental travels was hardly consistent with monkish chastity...)

Moreover, as regards literary archetypes, Flaubert could be said to have created one of his own, worthy (or, arguably, unworthy) enough to stand alongside Hamlet, Faust, Quixote, and others. In 1902, Jules de Gaultier brought out his book *Le Bovarysme*, the title of which is his own term that he defines as "as a basic human faculty, the power to conceive of oneself as other than what one is" (qtd. in Porter 43). Though the term immediately and obviously refers to Emma Bovary, "Gaultier sees variants of bovarysme in other works of Flaubert: in *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, it is the attempt to surpass human limitations; in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, it is the disproportion between human knowledge and the individual's illusory attempt to appropriate it" (Porter 43).

Before focusing on Flaubert's art *per se*, it is worth continuing to situate him in wider literary and cultural contexts. One striking example of such is a very French context: he shares with his contemporaries and compatriots a fascination with relationships between the sublime and the grotesque, and the extent to which these polarities actually approach and even blend with each other. In his capacity as an art critic, Baudelaire suggested that a meeting-place of the two could be discovered in the monstrous visions of the Spanish artist Francisco Goya; Victor Hugo, who praised a mingling of the sublime and the grotesque in the plays of Shakespeare, followed that example in his own work, as witnessed by the personally-admirable though physically-deformed Quasimodo and Gwynplaine in, respectively, his novels *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831) and *L'Homme qui rit* (1869). For his part, Flaubert referred to "le grotesque triste" (Flaubert, *Correspondance* 1: 307), and the darkly

comic was for him more than just a laughing matter. In the course of writing *Madame Bovary*, he maintained that “L’ironie n’enlève rien au pathétique. Elle l’outre au contraire.—Dans ma 3e partie, qui sera pleine de choses farces, je veux qu’on pleure” (Flaubert, *Correspondance* 2: 172). How far this would apply to the ever-exploited, parrot-worshipping Félicité in his later tale “Un cœur simple” is at least debatable: many if not most would feel that here (as well as elsewhere in his fiction) the grotesque holds sway over the sublime. For more detailed consideration of this story, the reader is referred to the chapters by Kathryn Oliver Mills and Michael Sayeau in the present volume.

At the core of Flaubert’s aesthetic is his doctrine of impersonality: this is the expression, in his writing practice, of his detached, ironic, and even disgusted attitude to life. In one of the much quoted items in his correspondence, he writes: “L’artiste doit être dans son œuvre comme Dieu dans la création, invisible et tout-puissant; qu’on le sente partout, mais qu’on ne le voie pas” (Flaubert, *Correspondance* 2: 691). James Joyce, who was considerably influenced by Flaubert, echoes this passage in the course of a conversation between the self-conscious, posing student-aesthetes of his novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916): “The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (Joyce 221). Joyce is part-mocking, part-according with this utterance by the sophomoric Stephen Dedalus, his novel’s main character and not altogether unmodelled on himself.

However, Flaubert wanted to keep himself, the man Gustave Flaubert, out of his work altogether; indeed, in reading his books, one often has the sense that they created themselves, without external human (or, for that matter, divine) intervention. His most succinct statement on his “impersonality” came in the course of that 1875 letter to George Sand cited at the beginning of this chapter: “L’homme n’est rien, l’œuvre est tout” (Flaubert, *Correspondance* 4: 1000). This has the quirky distinction of being quoted by Sherlock Holmes, no less, at the conclusion of Conan Doyle’s 1891 story “The Red-Headed League.”

For Flaubert, then, the art of fiction was just that, an art, to be sharply distinguished from messy “life,” even if it drew its subject-matter from “life.” It was no wonder that Flaubert resented being labelled a “realist,” as that would imply that he was relying too heavily on “life,” that he was leaving his raw material pretty well unprocessed—leaving it, as it were, raw. “La Réalité, selon moi,” he wrote to Turgenev in 1877, “ne doit être qu’un *tremplin*” (Flaubert, *Correspondance* 5: 337).

The most “impersonal” of all the arts is music: it is the least autobiographical, and for the most part, we are unaware, as we listen, of the composer himself as an actual human being. (There are exceptions—for example, Tchaikovsky). Flaubert led the way in what would become a tendency, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to distance literature from too-obvious reference to “life.” The challenge here was that words *mean* something. Ideally, Flaubert wanted to drain them of meaning, of any connection with the banal bourgeois reality that he so loathed:

Ce qui me semble beau, ce que je voudrais faire, c’est un livre sur rien, un livre sans attache extérieure, qui se tiendrait de lui-même par la force interne de son style, comme la terre sans être soutenue se tient en l’air, un livre qui n’aurait presque pas de sujet ou du moins où le sujet serait presque invisible, si cela se peut. Les œuvres les plus belles sont celles où il y a le moins de matière [...] (Flaubert, *Correspondance* 2: 31).

Accordingly, he stressed the necessity for prose, no less than poetry, to *sound* well, whatever the *sense*, if any, might be. As the poet Verlaine would later proclaim: “De la musique avant toute chose” (Verlaine 23). Musicality is a recurrent theme in Flaubert’s correspondence, and this goes a long way towards explaining why he would labor for the maximum of hours and days for even the minimum of sentences that would be easy on the ear: “Quand je découvre une mauvaise assonance,” he told George Sand, “ou une répétition dans une de mes phrases, je suis sûr que je patauge dans le Faux; à force de chercher, je trouve l’expression juste, qui était la seule—et qui est, en même temps, l’harmonieuse” (Flaubert,

Correspondance 5: 26). He would make passionate claims for the verbal music that was possible to the writer who wished to rise above the general mediocrity: “Nous avons un orchestre nombreux, une palette riche, des ressources variées” (Flaubert, *Correspondance* 1: 627); he aspired to a style “avec des ondulations, des ronflements de violoncelle” (Flaubert, *Correspondance* 2: 79). François Coppée’s praise for Flaubert as the Beethoven of prose may be taken as no little recognition of his success in that regard.

It wasn’t only literature that was moving in such a direction; indeed the critic Walter Pater—a leading English admirer of Flaubert—famously declared that “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.” (Pater 140). “All” art included painting, and the American James Whistler took that art a long way towards the abstract; he disdained the primacy of subject-matter and would call his pictures “symphonies” or “nocturnes” (that later term a favorite of Chopin’s), irrespective of their apparent depictions of Battersea Bridge, the River Thames, or a lone figure approaching a well-lit tavern on a misty night.

The English novelist E. M. Forster seems almost to echo Flaubert when he ruefully observes “Yes—oh dear yes—the novel tells a story [...] and I wish that it was not so, that it could be something different—melody, or perception of the truth, not this low atavistic form” (Forster 34). The French were very much ahead of the English in seeking to overcome this malady, if malady it was; style, composition, shape, structure—these qualities mattered more to Flaubert and his “disciples” more than telling a rattling good yarn. He had a certain regard for Charles Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers* (1837), “mais quelle composition défectueuse! Tous les écrivains anglais en sont là, W. Scott excepté. Ils manquent de plan! cela est insupportable pour nous autres Latins” (Flaubert, *Correspondance* 4: 547).

The most celebrated aspect of Flaubert’s art, however, is his deployment of *style indirect libre*, the nature of which is well summarized by the critical theorist Gérard Genette: “le narrateur assume le discours du personnage, ou si l’on préfère, le personnage parle par la voix du narrateur, et les instances sont alors

confondues” (Genette 194). This device both intensified Flaubert’s irony and looked forward to the interior monologue and stream of consciousness techniques that would be taken up by Proust and Joyce. Here is one of the many examples of *style indirect libre* in *Madame Bovary* and indeed throughout his œuvre: Emma Bovary is attending a performance of Donizetti’s opera *Lucia di Lammermoor* with her decent, but dull, husband Charles: her sometime toyboy, Léon, is also in the audience. Emma, all too prone to romantic fantasizing, compares the opera’s female protagonist, the unhappily married Lucia, to herself:

Lucie s’avançait, à demi soutenue par ses femmes, une couronne d’oranger dans les cheveux, et plus pâle que le satin blanc de sa robe. Emma rêvait au jour de son mariage; et elle se revoyait là-bas, au milieu des blés, sur le petit sentier, quand on marchait vers l’église. Pourquoi donc n’avait-elle pas, comme celle-là, résisté, supplié? Elle était joyeuse, au contraire, sans s’apercevoir de l’abîme où elle se précipitait ... Ah! si, dans la fraîcheur de sa beauté, avant les souillures du mariage et la désillusion de l’adultère, elle avait pu placer sa vie sur quelque grand cœur solide, alors la vertu, la tendresse, les voluptés et le devoir se confondant, jamais elle ne serait descendue d’une félicité si haute. (Flaubert, *Œuvres complètes* 349)

The charismatic, if hammy, tenor Lagardy appears on stage:

[...] entraînée vers l’homme par l’illusion du personnage, elle tâcha de se figurer sa vie, cette vie retentissante, extraordinaire, splendide, et qu’elle aurait pu mener cependant, si le hasard l’avait voulu. Ils se seraient connus, ils se seraient aimés! Avec lui, par tous les royaumes de l’Europe, elle aurait voyagé de capitale en capitale, partageant ses fatigues et son orgueil, ramassant les fleurs qu’on lui jetait, brodant elle-même ses costumes; puis, chaque soir, au fond d’une loge, derrière la grille à treillis d’or, elle eût recueilli, béante, les expansions de cette âme qui n’aurait chanté que pour elle seule; de la scène, tout en jouant, il l’aurait regardée. Mais une folie la saisit: il la regardait, c’est sûr! Elle eut envie de courir dans ses bras pour se réfugier en sa force, comme dans l’incarnation de l’amour même, et de lui dire, de s’écrier : « Enlève-moi, emmène-

moi, partons! À toi, à toi! toutes mes ardeurs et tous mes rêves!
Le rideau se baissa. (Flaubert, *Œuvres complètes* 350)

Pathos ends in bathos. Emma has been seduced by layers of illusion: the singers are performing, not actually feeling, the emotions represented in a French translation of the libretto of an Italian opera, which in turn derives from a novel by a Scotsman, Walter Scott (as pointed out in Porter 243).

Style indirect libre can create a sense of both detachment on the part of the author (and/or narrator), but as it is merging a character's subjective point of view with omniscient narration, such ambivalence can also create the opposite mode, i.e., a closeness, even an identification, of the author with the character. Flaubert may have resisted the label of realist, but he had an awareness that he was a frustrated romantic—not altogether unlike Emma Bovary; his well-known utterance “Madame Bovary, c'est moi” is not as enigmatic as it first appears. When he composed the scene in which Emma poisons herself, he could taste the arsenic in his own mouth, and this caused him to vomit. He was compelled to confess that he wasn't as aloof as his artistic credo would suggest.

“Je ne me reconnais pas le droit d'accuser personne,” he wrote to George Sand in 1868. “Je ne crois même pas que le romancier doive exprimer *son* opinion sur les choses de ce monde. Il peut la communiquer, mais je n'aime pas à ce qu'il la dise” (Flaubert, *Correspondance* 3: 786). That indeed echoes the familiar claim of standing apart from the world and from his own creations. However, the ambivalence is subtly there. It doesn't mean that he *lacks* opinions: it's a question of how they're conveyed. In other words, if we apply this to the representation of his characters, of their thoughts, feelings and actions, Flaubert the novelist may *imply* his judgment of them, though he's certainly not going to *pronounce* such judgment.

Moreover, there's an inevitability about the implying. We come back to the inescapable fact that words have meaning, are referential, and cannot entertain the *neutrality*, as it were, of musical expression. Words are loaded, biased: we know this at the crudest

levels from the practice of politicians and advertisers, when they choose language that is meant to bamboozle us with its seemingly innocent, pseudo-objectivity of tone. That's the nature of ideology, and we may well feel no little sympathy with Flaubert for his mistrust of the big words, such as "Progrès" and so on.

The artist, according to Flaubert, is "invisible" in relation to his work, "comme Dieu," but he is also "tout puissant," and as a god, he both directs and judges, his judgments being both artistic and, yes, moral. The moral dimension is, however, conveyed by techniques that are as "indirect" as *style indirect libre*, which itself, as we've observed in Emma Bovary's musings at the opera, can brilliantly suggest (rather than state outright) a character's sadly self-indulgent and deluded attitudes. Another much celebrated device in *Madame Bovary* is the ironic juxtaposition of two different and seemingly contrasted discourses occurring at the same time and almost in the same space: the instance here is the agricultural show in Part 2, Chapter 8, where the councillor's pompous speech is intercut with the mocking comments of Rodolphe in the course of a tête-à-tête with Emma.

We can take it that Flaubert himself would go some way with Rodolphe's sentiments regarding the smug pronouncements of a pillar of the provincial community. Indeed the author's implicit sympathy with an old peasant woman, as she awkwardly mounts the platform to receive her silver medal (valued at a mere twenty-five francs) from the excruciatingly patronizing bigwigs, is pretty clear: "Ainsi se tenait, devant ces bourgeois épanouis, ce demi-siècle de servitude" (Flaubert, *Œuvres complètes* 283). However, Flaubert's satirical purpose, for such it is, includes Rodolphe as much as the smug dignitaries droning on and on, as Emma's beau drops from his silver tongue the kind of romantic (or rather sentimental) clichés that are the stock-in-trade of an equally smug seducer; Rodolphe's utterances are just as shallow and insincere as those of the self-important Monsieur Lieuvain on his petty pedestal. One kind of bullshit is countered by another.

Following his novel about Emma Bovary the frustrated romantic, Flaubert wrote another novel, which was the expression of

Gustave Flaubert the frustrated romantic: *Salammbô*, a lurid tale of extreme passions, of lust and cruelty conducted in the exotic setting of ancient Carthage. It couldn't be further, surely, from the humdrum quotidian life of provincial, bourgeois France; it was grand-operatic in tone, all high (if bloody) heroics. Certain twentieth-century writers shared something of Flaubert's mood. The poet T. S. Eliot, also a keen satirist of the mediocrity (as he saw it) of his own times, invoked ancient splendors that had been long lost: "Where are the eagles and the trumpets?" (Eliot 45). James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) takes Homer's epic as a template for a mock-heroic exploration of the dingy Dublin of 1904.

Flaubert's attraction to the distant past can be viewed in the context of a widespread devotion, among nineteenth-century French writers, to the novels of Sir Walter Scott. Stendhal, Balzac, Hugo, Dumas the elder, and Flaubert himself were, in their various ways, indebted to him. Scott has been regarded as a major influence on that romanticism which came late to France, and, more universally, as the father of the historical novel. For all its reconstructions of ancient Carthage, however, could *Salammbô* really be considered a historical novel? Scott's *Waverley* (1814) was set "sixty years hence," in relative terms, not all that long before its date of publication. Such was the gist of the judgment of the critic Charles Sainte-Beuve: for him, *Salammbô* was a work whose splendors were ultimately sterile. A similar position was argued, and with greater sophistication, by the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács in his book *The Historical Novel*: Flaubert may have aimed to write a "modern" novel set in ancient times, but the result was oddly disjointed. "When Scott describes a medieval town or the habitat of a Scottish clan, these material things are part and parcel of the lives and fortunes of people whose whole psychology belongs to the same level of historical development and is a product of the same social-historical ensemble as these material things. This is how the older epic writers produced their 'totality of objects.' In Flaubert, there is no such connection between the outside world and the psychology of the principal characters. And the effect of this lack of connection is to degrade the archaeological exactness of the outer world: it becomes a world of historically exact

costumes and decorations, no more than a pictorial frame within which a purely modern story is unfolded” (Lukács 224–5).

L'Éducation sentimentale, set during the period of the 1848 Revolution and thus within Flaubert's own lifetime, would appear to come closer to the genre of the historical novel, though Lukács does not discuss it at length and indeed finds Flaubert's choice of historical subject-matter to be quite “arbitrary” (Lukács 265). However, what unfolds in *L'Éducation sentimentale* is not *history*, with its organic relationships between private individuals and the public events that affect them (or are affected by them), but *time*. No wonder Marcel Proust was such an admirer of the novel.

Time: and so we have the poignancy of Frédéric's last meeting with his ideal woman, his “Madonna” figure Madame Arnoux, when as a parting gift she hands him a lock of her hair, which has turned white. *Time*: when Frédéric and his down-to-earth “whore” figure, Rosanette, visit the once royal palace of Fontainebleau, there is the sense that all of us, high or low, have our little lives that will pass. Even this mellow mood can't escape Flaubert's wicked desire to undercut it: he has Rosanette make a characteristically crass response:

Les résidences royales ont en elles une mélancolie particulière, qui tient sans doute à leurs dimensions trop considérables pour le petit nombre de leurs hôtes, au silence qu'on est surpris d'y trouver après tant de fanfares, à leur luxe immobile prouvant par sa vieillesse la fugacité des dynasties, l'éternelle misère, l'éternelle misère de tout;— et cette exhalaison des siècles, engourdissante et funèbre comme un parfum de momie, se fait sentir même aux têtes naïves. Rosanette bâillait démesurément. Ils s'en retournèrent à l'hôtel. (Flaubert, *Œuvres* 353–4)

It's a moment comparable to the theatre curtain falling abruptly on Emma Bovary's *Lucia di Lammermoor*-induced fantasies. However, Flaubert's poetic insight survives even Rosanette's yawns and is, moreover, intensified a little later in the couple's expedition: here, the point is that, for all the transience of human life, there is much in our universe and our planet, which endures. Frédéric is Flaubert's

ineffectual anti-hero, yet he is affected by the scene much as Flaubert himself would be: reality is bigger than Frédéric Moreau; bigger also than Gustave Flaubert. Rosanette, of course, has to say the wrong thing; yet she's attracted to the pretty purple flowers that, for all their own transience of being, are part of that which is in nature and is perpetual:

Un bruit de fer, des coups drus et nombreux sonnaient; c'était, au flanc d'une colline, une compagnie de carriers battant les roches. Elles se multipliaient de plus en plus, et finissaient par emplir tout le paysage, cubiques comme des maisons, plates comme des dalles, s'étayant, se surplombant, se confondant telles que les ruines méconnaissables et monstrueuses de quelque cité disparue. Mais la furie même de leur chaos fait plutôt rêver à des volcans, à des déluges, aux grands cataclysmes ignorés. Frédéric disait qu'ils étaient là depuis le commencement du monde et resteraient ainsi jusqu'à la fin; Rosanette détournait la tête, en affirmant que « ça la rendrait folle », et s'en allait cueillir des bruyères. Leurs petites fleurs violettes, tassées les unes près des autres, formaient des plaques inégales, et la terre qui s'écroulait de dessous mettait comme des franges noires au bord des sables pailletés de mica. (Flaubert, *Œuvres* 357)

Opinion has always been divided on *L'Éducation sentimentale*. The very title of his essay on the novel, "The Politics of Flaubert," indicates that the critic Edmund Wilson found it solidly sociohistorical in content and treatment. "There are no hero, no villain, to arouse us, no clowns to entertain us, no scenes to wring our hearts," writes Wilson. "Yet the effect is deeply moving" (Wilson 95). The chapter just quoted has surely much to do with that. An equally respected critic, Martin Turnell, disputes Wilson's enthusiasm for a novel, which he, for his part, finds diffuse and artificial, though not without its merits (Turnell 292–311, *passim*). Readers are advised to weigh up Wilson's and Turnell's assessments: over fifty years on, both critics have much to teach us about *L'Éducation sentimentale*.

The *Trois contes* of 1877 are a distillation of Flaubert's art: their relative brevity brings home to us the precision and shapeliness of his work as a whole. The put-upon servant woman Félicité in "Un

cœur simple” is a reincarnation of the old woman receiving her cheap prize in *Madame Bovary*’s agricultural show; “La Légende de saint Julien l’Hospitalier” displays the craftsmanly care of the stained-glass window that inspired the story; “Hérodiades” sums up the exotic-erotic in Flaubert.

In *L’Éducation sentimentale*, Frédéric Moreau is one of those “Young Men from the Provinces” whom the critic Lionel Trilling perceived as an archetype of nineteenth-century fiction: such youthful fellows were new arrivals in the big city, ambitious if not opportunistic in their pursuit of social, political, artistic, and/or sexual success. True, Frédéric is passive and half-hearted when compared to Stendhal’s Julien Sorel in *Le Rouge et le noir* (1830) and Balzac’s Rastignac in *Le Père Goriot* (1834), but Trilling still includes him alongside these more ruthless souls (Trilling 72–5). When we come to Flaubert’s last novel, the unfinished *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, we might be forgiven for feeling that Flaubert is having a retrospective joke at the expense of the Young Man from the Provinces pattern. For here, we have a couple of old-timers who make a reverse journey from Paris to the sticks, where they aspire to become walking encyclopedias. Yet even here Flaubert can blend the grotesque with the sublime: our two ageing idiots are not without an awareness (like Frédéric Moreau) that the universe is bigger than they are. *Bouvard et Pécuchet* is tragedy disguised as farce.

La Tentation de saint Antoine (1874), one might think, does not seem to be by the same man who left *Bouvard et Pécuchet* behind him. It’s the exotic-erotic again, surely, and indeed together with *Salammbô* and “Hérodiades” this strange novel was plundered by the symbolists and decadents working in both literary and nonliterary media during the decades following Flaubert’s death in 1880. *La Tentation de saint Antoine*’s legacy to the *fin-de-siècle* sensibility was a parade of *femmes fatales*, like the novel’s Queen of Sheba and, towards its end, personifications of “La Mort” and “La Luxure” and the vision of a skull with a crown of roses, atop the white torso of a woman whose body forms a tail that undulates like a giant worm. A Glasgow School of Art colleague once summed up French symbolism/decadence for me as “sexy Death” and not something to

be taken over-solemnly. If we, no doubt unfairly, blamed all this on Flaubert, we might consider that *La Tentation de saint Antoine* was farce disguised as tragedy.

Yet the most abiding, and most disturbing, scene to be found in *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, in its concluding pages, is that between the Sphinx and the Chimera (Chimère). These are symbols (though not intentionally proto-Symbolist) and are, therefore, extremely complex and subtle, not reducible to a few glib or easily-abstracted concepts. However, it's the nature of symbols to be suggestive, and the appearance of these contrasting figures has occasioned much discussion of their possible significance. The Sphinx and the Chimera could even be two sides of Flaubert himself, in conflict with each other, respectively as the coolly scientific observer versus the passionate romantic, the sceptical rationalist versus the idealistic pursuer of pure "Art." Such speculations may not, after all, be all that far-fetched. One early critic remarked that "On peut dire de Flaubert que l'imagination était sa muse et la réalité sa conscience" (Faguet 66)—with, we might add, the Chimera as the first and the Sphinx as the second. This was Flaubert's ultimate challenge as an artist: to reconcile the Sphinx with the Chimera, as the Hedgehog with the Fox. If he failed in that, or if he believed he had failed, it would be his tragedy, his farce, or both.

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