

VICTOR H. BROMBERT

Novels of Flaubert

A Study of Themes and Techniques



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THE NOVELS OF FLAUBERT

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FLAUBERT

A STUDY OF THEMES
AND TECHNIQUES

VICTOR BROMBERT

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My analysis of all texts has been based upon a reading of the originals. Translations are my own. I have, however, consulted with profit Eleanor Marx Aveling's translation of *Madame Bovary* and Robert Baldick's translation of *Trois Contes*.

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To Beth

To Mary and Mike Keeley

ALSO BY VICTOR BROMBERT

The Criticism of T. S. Eliot

Stendhal et la voie oblique

The Intellectual Hero:

Studies in the French Novel, 1880-1955

Foreword

This study of Flaubert's novels grew out of a series of Christian Gauss Seminars in Criticism which the late R. P. Blackmur invited me to give at Princeton University in the spring of 1964. I am deeply grateful for this challenging opportunity.

I am further indebted to the stimulating participation of friends and colleagues present at the seminar: E. B. O. Borgerhoff, Edward T. Cone, Claudio Guillén, Armand Hoog, Joseph Frank, Léon-François Hoffmann, Edmund Keeley, Jean Rousset, Edward D. Sullivan, Karl D. Uitti. It is difficult to wish for a more acute and more demanding audience. Discussions about Flaubert and the art of the novel continued in R. P. Blackmur's living room, and were often prolonged late into the night at Lowrie House. To these spring days in Princeton I owe warm memories and many intellectual pleasures.

But I must not forget that many years earlier, during another memorable spring, Jean Boorsch kindled the desire to explore Flaubert's work. His elegant lucidity was, and still is, an inspiration.

My largest single debt is, however, to one who is too modest to know how much I owe her.

V. B.

Yale University

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THE NOVELS OF FLAUBERT

. . avec la rage que l'on a pour les
choses impossibles

Flaubert, *Novembre*



Flaubert's Literary Temperament

"Realist" or "Troubadour"?

Literary history has rendered Flaubert a poor service by indiscriminately linking his name with theories of realism and by presenting him to posterity as the founder, chief practitioner and high priest of a literary school. Flaubert himself might have applauded Paul Valéry's famous quip: one cannot indeed get drunk, nor even quench one's thirst, by staring at labels on bottles. In fact, Flaubert was prodigiously irritated by the very word and concept "realism." "Do not speak to me of realism . . .," he writes to Maupassant. "I am fed up with it. What empty nonsense." In another outburst, to Paul Alexis, he refers to the theories of realism as childish poppycock, "puérilités." A letter to George Sand is still more explicit: "I abhor what has been called realism, although they make me out to be one of its high priests."¹

These are no doubt the biting reactions of one who did not wish to be associated with any group, least of all with writers for whom literature was not the loftiest of exercises, and whom he suspected of cultivating sensationalism. The hermit of Croisset, whose artistic and financial aloofness allowed him to view the Parisian world of journalism and of sales promotions with zestful aversion, disliked and successfully shunned all cliques and *cénacles*. Polemical

¹ "Ne me parlez pas du réalisme, du naturalisme ou de l'expérimental! J'en suis gorgé. Quelles vides inepties!" (Flaubert, *Corresp.*, VIII, 317); *ibid.*, VIII, 368; VII, 285. Complete citations for all notes may be found in the Bibliography.

manifestoes, whether in the form of articles or prefaces, seemed to him in about as bad taste as an actor's direct address to his public. "Why spoil one's works with prefaces and slander oneself with sign-boards?"² But even worse than histrionics was narrow dogma. The theoretical pronouncements of a Zola, for whose growing talent he otherwise showed much esteem, appalled him; he complained of his "narrow ideas."³ For it was not merely the polemical noise made by the Realists and the Naturalists which he found unpalatable. It was a perspective on art with which Flaubert, out of the depths of his artistic convictions, could not possibly sympathize. If he held one consistent belief, it was indeed the priority of Art over life. Not only was he shocked by what he considered the materialism of Zola and his friends ("ce matérialisme m'indigne"), and willing to be concerned with "reality" only insofar as it was a springboard ("tremplin") to something else, but he emphatically proclaimed—and this much earlier, at a time he was planning *L'Éducation sentimentale*—that reality (or "vérité," as he put it) was not for him the primary condition of art.⁴

There is another, more ambiguous reason behind Flaubert's violent reactions to the word and concept of realism: his hatred of reality. The very subject of *Madame Bovary*, and of so many of his works, is of course drawn from everyday life. But Flaubert never ceased proclaiming his abhorrence for these subjects, his nauseous contempt for the "ignoble reality" he forced himself to depict, partly out of self-imposed therapy to cure himself of his chronic idealism, partly also out of a strange and almost morbid fascination. "J'ai la vie ordinaire en exécration," he wrote to Laurent Pichat, the director of the *Revue de Paris*, which was publishing *Madame Bovary*. His comments to Mme Roger des Genettes are even more characteristic: "People think I am in love with reality, though I hate it; for it is

² Flaubert, *Corresp.*, VIII, 368.

³ Flaubert, *Lettres inédites à Tourgueneff*, p. 118.

⁴ Flaubert, *Corresp.*, VII, 359; V, 92-93.

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out of hatred of realism that I undertook the writing of this novel."⁵ Hatred of reality and hatred of realism are to be sure far from one and the same thing; yet Flaubert curiously equates them. Thus, while repeatedly inflicting similar subjects or projects on himself (among his unrealized projects were novels to be entitled *Sous Napoléon III* and *Les Bourgeois au XIX^e siècle*), Flaubert continued with passion his denunciations of "realistic" subjects and chronically indulged in escapist reveries. The fact is that Flaubert always considered that the highest and purest pleasure of literature is its power to liberate those who practice it from the contingencies of life. Art was for him quite literally an escape. Its superiority over life was precisely its ability to transcend the conditions of living. For hatred of reality was in the case of Flaubert intimately bound up with an inherent pessimism; and pessimism in turn was one of the prime conditions of his ceaseless quest for ideal forms. "Life seems tolerable to me only if one juggles it away," he confided to George Sand.⁶ The cure, according to him, was either to read a book or, better still, to write one.

Flaubert's paradoxical and almost obsessive love-hate relationship with "reality" is no doubt the chief reason for the prevailing misunderstanding concerning his "realism." The lengths to which he went in documenting himself—whether on the site of Carthage, the menu of a Parisian restaurant, the means of locomotion to Fontainebleau, or the most suitable location for the geological studies of his two pathetic clerks Bouvard and Pécuchet—only confirmed the widely held belief that he was above all a painstaking recorder and observer, a "descripteur" as Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly nastily put it, whose descriptions were a substitute for invention and imagination.⁷ Not everyone, of course, has been taken in by the cliché. The "realism" of Flaubert has convinced neither Sartre, who resents what

⁵ Flaubert, *Corresp.*, IV, 125, 134.

⁶ Flaubert, *Corresp.*, VII, 38.

⁷ Barbey d'Aurevilly, "Gustave Flaubert," in *Le Roman contemporain*, p. 99.

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he calls Flaubert's "masked lyricism," nor the Marxist realist critic Georg Lukács, who denounces his distortions of reality, his decadentism and hopeless subjectivity.⁸ Even if one turns to the strictly scholarly criteria of a René Wellek, according to whom realism is distinguished by its underlying didactic, moralistic and reformist intent,⁹ it is obvious that Flaubert does not conform to this pattern. Harry Levin quite justly observed that the realistic alternative was always for him *malgré lui*.¹⁰ Only in the broadest historical and cultural sense, as understood by a Levin or an Auerbach, can one indeed speak of the realism of Flaubert. For realism, definable by the author's socio-politico-economic consciousness of his own time, is marked also, in each case, by a quite peculiar and unique "transposition of reality into romance."¹¹ The reader and the critic may thus find labels of little use. The real task, as for all writers, still lies ahead: that of defining, as far as is possible, the particular talent or genius of an individual artist by looking closely at the texture and structure of his work, by discussing in detail the meaningful interrelation of themes and techniques. Ultimately, it is the novelist's unique temperament and vision that determine and characterize his work.

Henry James, in the wake of the critic Émile Faguet, somewhat naïvely believed that Flaubert was formed intellectually "of two quite distinct compartments"; that the divisions of his literary production, falling either into the category of the "real" or the "romantic," were as clearly marked as the sections on the back of a scarab.¹² A quick glance at Flaubert's correspondence totally invalidates such a partition. At the very time Flaubert was composing *Madame Bovary*, he confessed to Louise Colet that he was "devoured" by a need for metamorphoses, that he felt a

⁸ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, p. 94; and Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, pp. 184-199.

⁹ Wellek, "Realism in Literary Scholarship," in *Concepts of Criticism*, p. 253.

¹⁰ Levin, *The Gates of Horn*, p. 285.

¹¹ Levin, *The Gates of Horn*, p. 55.

¹² James, "Gustave Flaubert," in *Notes on Novelists*, p. 74.

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permanent desire to transmute reality. "I would like to write all that I see, not as it is, but transfigured." This alchemical urge is a permanent trait. He diagnoses his metaphoric obsession almost as a disease. "Je suis né lyrique."¹³ Above all he knows that he is a poet in search of the magical, incantatory secrets of language. His struggle against words, his love of a sonorous, flexible, muscular prose, his attempt to create plastic effects that would transform words and rhythms into palpable forms, are those of an artist haunted by a compelling sense of vocation. But equally significant is his unflinching allegiance to his own Romantic heredity. His earliest works, such as *Smarh* or the autobiographical *Mémoires d'un fou* and *Novembre*, are clearly influenced by his exposure to the most extreme manifestations of Romanticism. Of this exposure Flaubert never felt ashamed. On the contrary, much like Baudelaire, he never ceased proclaiming his fidelity. "Je suis un vieux romantique enragé," he writes to Sainte-Beuve after completing *Madame Bovary*.¹⁴ And, many years later, to his friend Turgenev, he still describes himself as a "vieux romantique," a "vieux fossile du romantisme."¹⁵

Troubadour was another word he cherished: he liked to think of himself as one of the last of an almost extinct race. The *troubadour's* propensity to dream went hand in hand, in his mind, with an immense capacity for enthusiasm. Flaubert loved nothing better than to admire. He happily records his "cris d'admiration" while reading Tolstoy.¹⁶ And his admiration, for which he had a robust capacity, went instinctively to grandiose schemes and grandiose visions. His idols were Homer, Shakespeare, Hugo. Intellectual and artistic longings, sumptuous in their extravagance, filled his mind. The subjects that haunted him were exotic, violent, stretching human passions to the very

¹³ Flaubert, *Corresp.*, III, 320, 375.

¹⁴ Flaubert, "Lettres inédites de Flaubert à Sainte-Beuve," presented by B. F. Bart, *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, July-September 1964, pp. 427-435.

¹⁵ Flaubert, *Lettres inédites à Tourgueneff*, pp. 6, 29.

¹⁶ Flaubert, *Lettres inédites à Tourgueneff*, p. 218.

boundaries of excess. The multiple forms of ugliness seemed to him, in true Romantic fashion, more exciting than monotonous beauty; in them he found "*moral denseness*."¹⁷ The recurrent themes of his work are estrangement and the madness of desire. Love itself, he felt, was only one of the forms of madness: "une folie, une malédiction, une maladie. . ."¹⁸ For twenty-five years or more he lived with the obsessive image of a hermit-hero assailed by infernal temptations of the flesh and of the spirit. *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, of which there are three versions extending from 1849 to 1874, is perhaps more than any other work representative of Flaubert's permanent taste for what he himself called the lyric and metaphysical "guelade," a term almost impossible to translate, but which binds together, in Flaubertian usage, love of extravagance, rhetorical fireworks and unquenchable longings for the inaccessible. "Let's put on the buskin," he writes after finishing the story of Emma Bovary, and "entamons les grandes gueulades."¹⁹ The *grandes gueulades* were most conspicuous in the "Oriental" novels: *Salammbô*, *La Tentation*, *Hérodias*—but they are present everywhere: in the exotic dreams of Emma, in Frédéric Moreau's ceaseless nostalgia for the impossible, in Pécuchet's and Bouvard's formidable appetite for knowledge.

"Let's be disheveled," he cries out as he begins work on *Hérodias*²⁰—and the advice seems at first glance incompatible with Flaubert's repeated call for artistic impassibility. But here precisely rests the crux of the paradox: the Flaubertian "serenity" is in the service not of impersonal mimesis, but of a higher ability to cultivate dreams. Impersonality, Flaubert explained to Louise Colet, is a sign of vitality and strength. Great works of art are, he felt, both "serene" and "incomprehensible." In other words, their supreme function is to transcend reality and to set sail for lost worlds—"faire rêver."²¹ Did he not, even as an adoles-

¹⁷ Flaubert, *Corresp.*, III, 269.

¹⁹ Flaubert, *Corresp.*, IV, 199.

²¹ Flaubert, *Corresp.*, III, 322.

¹⁸ Flaubert, *Corresp.*, V, 59.

²⁰ Flaubert, *Corresp.*, VII, 369.

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cent, choose to believe that he was "born elsewhere"?²²

Thus, side by side with the so-called realist whom he most often evinces, there appears another, perhaps more authentic Flaubert endowed with an irreducible faith in the evocative witchcraft of imagination or its substitute, memory. If Flaubert the realist exists, so does Flaubert the escapist, and even Flaubert the mystic. Ecstatic reveries are for him a permanent temptation. For it is not merely love of formal or abstract beauty that makes him challenge the "scientific" approach to truth. Writers such as Sainte-Beuve and Hippolyte Taine—and he admired both—did not, he felt, take Art and Beauty (he capitalized both words) sufficiently into account.²³ As for Zola and his friends, they had altogether lost sight of the chief aim of art: "viser au beau"—perhaps an impossible task, but the only truly worthwhile one.²⁴ Flaubert took his own expression "culte de l'Art" quite seriously and quite literally. It was for him an almost religious vocation to "maintain the soul in a high region"²⁵ through a redeeming cult of Art which glorified the divorce between artistic creation and life.

Flaubert's quest, as he himself saw it, was after a higher, more general truth. And in that quest the servile reproduction of surfaces or the concern for everyday triviality was not, he knew, the most effective method. Nor could one speak of historic progression. "Henry Monnier is no more true than Racine," he tersely concludes in a letter to his young disciple Guy de Maupassant.²⁶ It is in this light that one must read Pellerin's vituperative remarks against reality in *L'Éducation sentimentale*. But behind Flaubert's esthetic revulsions and preferences, behind his lofty reaffirmations of the universalizing vision of all true art, one can also detect undeniable mystic velleities. One of his most symptomatic literary projects is that of *La Spirale*, which was to describe the state of permanent somnambulism of

²² Flaubert, *Corresp.*, I, 76.

²³ Flaubert, *Lettres inédites à Tourgueneff*, p. 15.

²⁴ Flaubert, *Corresp.*, VII, 351.

²⁵ Flaubert, *Corresp.*, VII, 10. ²⁶ Flaubert, *Corresp.*, VII, 377.