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Flaubert by [Michel Winock](#), translated by [Nicholas Elliott](#)

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'The good man's home is a mask,' Gustave Flaubert wrote when he was 16. Every ideal was a cover for vanity. How could it be otherwise, when our bodies were 'composed of mud and shit and equipped with instincts lower than those of the pig, or the crab-louse'? Born in 1821 to a wealthy family and growing up in the cautious conservatism of provincial post-Napoleonic France, Flaubert saw only hypocrisy and intellectual dullness all around him. At 17 he was condemning 'this good civilisation, this agreeable slut who invented railroads, poisons, clyster pumps, custard pies, royalty and the guillotine'. 'If I ever do take an active part in the world,' he concluded, as if he were far more likely to decide not to, 'it will be as a thinker and demoraliser.'

In his new biography, Michel Winock is inclined to dismiss this as juvenile posturing, yet his generous quotation from notes and letters written throughout Flaubert's life shows a remarkable continuity of attitude. From infancy to death Flaubert would condemn the world in much the same terms. Anything that appeared 'good' was the product of a stifling adhesion to received ideas. The only future that society could offer was to be 'just like anyone else ... a lawyer, a doctor, a sub-prefect, a notary, an attorney, a common judge, a stupidity like every other stupidity'. The appropriate response was mockery. With his friends, the adolescent Flaubert invented an imaginary character, Garçon, who laughed wildly at every propriety. Garçon would soon be followed by the god Yuk, who appears in a story Flaubert wrote at 18 and laughs at the world with a 'Homeric', 'inextinguishable' laughter. Later there would be other derisive voices: the Old Sheik was invented on a trip to the Middle East; later still there was the Reverend Father Cruchard of the Barnabites, 'spiritual director of the Ladies of Disillusion'. All these figures, like the wonderfully funny *Dictionary of Received Ideas* (published posthumously), allowed Flaubert to assume a position that involved neither dull goodness, nor mere transgression, but intellectual ridicule of bourgeois society across the board. Curiously, irreverence coincided with moral superiority: 'I call bourgeois,' Flaubert explained, 'anyone who thinks in a base manner.' It also offered relief from the boredom that would be his eternal enemy. One was bored because there was no way to engage positively with society, no project that would give life meaning and scope. 'Why,' he asks, 'is man's heart so big and life so small?'

Recounting Flaubert's youthful despair and talk of 'the inconvenience of being born', Winock wonders again if it wasn't all 'a pose'. Gustave was handsome and healthy, well-off and educated, with good friends who loved him because he made them laugh. But if we deny the healthy and wealthy their melancholy we will have to dispense with half of literature. The question we might ask instead is: how did this privileged young man come to feel there was no role for him in the world? Why did he desire to be good, yet equate goodness with stupidity? Why did he head for the brothel, but sometimes hang back, sublimating his sex drive in lingering observation of the prostitutes? Above all, in what relation does this behaviour stand to the wonderful books he gave us? Of the first time he had sex, he wrote: 'A woman presented herself before me, I took her; and I came out of her arms full of disgust and bitterness.' Of an encounter in a Marseille hotel, aged 20, he complained: 'Oh! Flesh, flesh! A demon who ... tears the book out of your hands and the gaiety out of your heart, makes you dark, fierce, egotistical.' If goodness was dull, sin was no solution. Only books offered gaiety and stability. 'What a *pleasure* it is to compose!' he remarked, at 14.

The words 'good' and 'intelligent' come together just once in Winock's biography, when Flaubert describes his father, Achille-Cléophas Flaubert, one of France's leading doctors and chief surgeon at a hospital in Rouen. Dr Flaubert was learned, competent and generous to his poorer patients. His son loved and admired him: he was 'extremely humane ... yet this didn't impair his efficiency as a surgeon.' In short, there was nothing false or laughable in him. At 27, Achille-Cléophas had married the 18-year-old Anne-Justine-Caroline and immediately produced a son, Achille, who, as his name foretold, was to follow in his father's footsteps. After Achille, however, there were three children

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who all died shortly after birth, so that Gustave was born eight years after his brother and would always be more attached to his sister, Caroline, born another three years later. It's strange that in this admirably documented biography Winock does not reflect on the special position of the child who survives after three siblings have died. One can imagine if nothing else that he was indulged by his parents; certainly he remained closely attached to his mother, living most of his life with her. What Winock does describe well is Gustave's childhood, when the family lived in a wing of the hospital where his father worked, and the boy and his sister would look in through an open window as the great doctor performed post-mortems, becoming precociously aware of the body's messy inner organs, its fragility, death. 'I can still see my father looking up from his dissection and telling us to go away,' he wrote many years later.

In this family of free-thinkers, the competent physician was the good man par excellence. So why didn't Gustave study medicine? Was it because this path to self-realisation was already occupied by the dour Achille? Or was it, as Sartre claimed in *The Family Idiot*, because Flaubert Senior thought the boy unworthy? Winock doesn't tackle the question. In any event, it was decided that the second son must accept a lesser destiny and become a lawyer. Those were father's orders; the problem was that Gustave thought of the lawyer's life as 'completely materialistic, trivial'. He was expelled from school. He failed exams. Yet he couldn't contemplate disobeying his 'good, intelligent' father. His two years at law school in Paris were spent oscillating between the penitential tedium of preparing for a profession he had no desire to practise and a busy social life where, with 'his golden-blond beard, his enormous sea-green eyes ... his voice resounding like a trumpet, his exaggerated gestures and ringing laugh', as one friend described him, he was the soul of every party.

A second means of escape was literature. Skipping lectures, Flaubert read constantly – Rabelais in particular – and wrote a first, largely autobiographical novel, *November*. Winock's many quotations from Flaubert's early writings – his *Memoirs of a Madman*, written at school, his letters, *Intimate Notebook*, and this novel – will be a revelation to those, like me, who knew only the masterpieces. While *Madame Bovary* and *A Sentimental Education* are extraordinary for their patient, clinical, elegant precision, these writings are urgent, extravagant, anxious, brimming with life:

Do you know that I have not spent one night, not a day, not an hour without thinking of you, without seeing you again as you came out from beneath the waves, with your black hair on your shoulders, your dark skin with its pearls of salt water, your dripping clothes and your white foot with pink nails sinking into the sand, and that this vision is always present, and that it always whispers to my heart? Oh! No, all is empty.

The words are addressed to a character who closely resembles Elisa Foucault, with whom the 14-year-old Flaubert had fallen in love on the beach at Trouville; he would dream of her for decades to come. Married and nursing a baby, this beautiful woman was clearly off limits for Gustave, who, despite many erotic descriptions – 'one could see azure veins snaking across that brown, rouged bosom' – insisted that he loved her without arousal. Later, with other women, he would fall into a pattern of brief erotic encounters followed by withdrawal and even disgust, or long correspondences where eroticism was sublimated in effusive and affectionate prose. 'The grotesque aspects of love have always kept me from indulging in it,' he admitted to a friend. Flaubert never lived with a woman, but was always tormented by desire. It was as if he were struggling in every area of life to reconcile longing and loathing, and always ready to punish himself.

But the mortification of studying law couldn't be sustained. It was 'killing', 'stupefying'. Afflicted with toothache, in 1843 he failed his second-year exam twice. It was a family disaster. 'Flaubert Senior was humiliated and did not hide it,' Gustave's friend Maxime Du Camp wrote. 'He was bewildered, as if faced with an unknown pathological case.' Pathological is what the situation soon became. Driving a coach with his brother in January 1844, Flaubert 'fell, as if struck with apoplexy ... and for ten minutes [Achille] thought I was dead.' It was the first of many nervous attacks. 'This paroxysm,' Du Camp wrote, 'in which his whole being was trembling, was invariably succeeded by a deep sleep and an aching stiffness ... He only felt safe at home.' And at home he stayed. Whatever the cause of the condition, the risk he would go the way of his siblings was enough to spare him law school and keep him at the new family property of Croisset, outside Rouen. The family was wealthy enough for him not to have to work.

A year later his sister Caroline married, at 20. It was a blow to Flaubert, who saw every marriage as a desertion and a lapse into dullness. But it did allow him to join the honeymoon to Italy, where, in Genoa, he saw Brueghel's *The Temptations of St Anthony* ('the saint between three women ... turning his head away to avoid their caresses'), a painting that had a great influence on his writing. Six months after that holiday the world was turned upside down again when his father died, at 62. Caroline gave birth a few days later, but shortly afterwards she too was dead, of a fever. In the space of two years Flaubert found himself removed from Parisian society, alone with his mother and his sister's baby, also called Caroline, in their secluded country house. His literary career could begin.

The book he decided to write was inspired by Brueghel's painting. Alone in the Egyptian desert, pursuing a life of renunciation, St Anthony is afflicted by vivid visions of luxury, eroticism, power. Spellbound, he is forever on the brink of succumbing, but always manages to draw back and save his purity. However far Egypt might be from Rouen, or the saint's third-century Christianity from the writer's 19th-century atheism, this was the shape experience took for Flaubert, a continual movement between contamination and purity. Isolating himself in Croisset, making enormous efforts of erudition to evoke St Anthony's world, he soon grew restless and was himself tempted. On a trip to Paris with the pious goal of ordering a bust of his much lamented sister, he fell for the charming poet Louise Colet. They became lovers and wrote scores of passionate letters, but met only four times over the next two years. Colet wanted more but Flaubert protested his mother's poor health and the importance of his writing. When he nevertheless found time for a walking holiday with Du Camp, Colet was furious. She would come to Croisset, she said. Flaubert was horrified. She might be pregnant, she announced. This was 'an appalling threat to my happiness', he protested. When the liberal revolution broke out in Paris in 1848, Flaubert went to observe it, but not to see Colet. 'I take the greatest delight,' he wrote to her, 'in observing all the crushed ambitions.'

In September 1849, after breaking with Colet, Flaubert invited his two best friends, Du Camp and the playwright Louis Bouilhet, to Croisset for a reading of his finished work; it took 32 hours over four days. The listeners had promised they would not comment until the end, and when it finally came they told him that *St Anthony* was a dreadfully repetitive bore. Defeated, Flaubert abandoned his hermitic life for an 18-month tour of Arabia with Du Camp, staying in the best hotels, alternating visits to brothels and temples, experimenting with pederasty, finding piety in prostitutes and vice in priests, writing frequent letters home to assure his mother of his good health and good behaviour. In truth, at this point, in addition to his nervous attacks he had contracted syphilis, something that would require frequent and painful treatment with mercury. Returning in 1851 to the seclusion of Croisset, he soon resumed the old affair with Colet, picking up the familiar pattern of passionate correspondence and very occasional sex, and at last began *Madame Bovary*. He was 29.

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Madame Bovary has become two distinct things in literary mythology, a magnificent novel of adultery and the affirmation of a new aesthetic: art for art's sake, the author painstakingly engaged with the manufacture of 'beautiful' sentences, but entirely detached from his characters. 'No reflections,' Flaubert wrote to a friend, 'the author's personality is absent.' Striving for perfection of form, his approach to content would be scientific. 'Literature will increasingly come to resemble science,' he pronounced, 'it will primarily *expose* which does not mean it will be didactic.' Even for a novel of manners considerable research was thus required, to get the exact details of the interiors, the cut and the cost of the clothes, people's occupations and linguistic habits. Characters would not be eccentric or highly individual, but types: the typical provincial doctor, the typical village shopkeeper, the typical country gentleman having the typical affair etc. And all of this, however 'vulgar' or 'ugly', would be saved from mediocrity by art, 'held together by the internal strength of its style', which was to be the work's greatest attraction.

Winock takes this aesthetic seriously, even solemnly, rebuking Flaubert's friends who 'didn't understand'. Yet nothing could be more corrosive of the formula, at least in the prescriptive form in which it is so often presented, than this biography. 'The vulgarity of my subject sometimes makes me nauseous,' Flaubert admitted, and 'my characters ... deeply disgust me.' That disgust was the opposite of detachment he understood all too well: 'Common environments disgust me, and it is because they disgust me that I chose this one,' he said of the novel's setting. Certainly, when you turn from the biography to the novel, the intensity of his contempt for ordinary society is everywhere apparent. As he assembles the characters for Bovary's wedding, or the common folk attending the agricultural fair where Emma flirts with Rodolphe, or gives us the pharmacist's inane reflections, one can hear, in suppressed form, the laughter of Garçon and the god Yuk.

Reading Flaubert's descriptions of the 'atrocious pain' the book caused him, it's impossible not to hear echoes of his complaints about cramming as a student. Renouncing the flamboyant manner, which he actually preferred, of his earlier writing, Flaubert forced this 'agony of art' on himself: 'My damn *Bovary* is tormenting me and exhausting me.' It is as if the mental suffering sustained by obeying his father and studying law had now been masochistically introduced into the act of composition, bringing with it a new control and intensity, but also a new sense of virtuous superiority. Rather than arriving at a universal formula for good writing, Flaubert had found a way of harnessing his antithetical energies to allow us to enter his own particular world of feeling. Emma Bovary is hardly St Anthony and neither of them is Gustave Flaubert, but the play of forces is recognisably the same. Emma's husband is repeatedly presented as 'good' but 'dull'. The arrival of a child does nothing to alleviate her boredom. To accept the role society offers her is to drown in dullness. Temptation is irresistible. Emma succumbs, but adultery takes her nowhere, becomes itself repetitive and destructive. Now she falls prey to a nervous disease, withdraws into renunciation and sanctity, then, nothing learned, repeats the adulterous experiment,

with much the same outcome, just as Flaubert was repeating, as he wrote the book, his affair with Colet. Again and again, Flaubert gives Emma and her second lover, Léon, frustrations and aspirations remarkably similar to those we read in his letters and notebooks, though rendered ironic by the inadequacy of the protagonists. However 'typical' Emma may or may not be, the patterns of behaviour she is trapped in are recognisably similar to her creator's.

Flaubert had to make life difficult for himself. After the triumph of *Madame Bovary*, he was determined not to be seen to be chasing popularity. He made intermittent returns to Parisian social life, where he was now a celebrated figure, while sweating for another five years to sustain the massive erudition behind the historical novel *Salammô*, an account of a third-century BC mercenary revolt against Carthage, during which the rebel leader, Matho, falls in love with the Carthaginian princess Salammô; the two meet and make love just once, after which Matho is tortured and executed while Salammô, looking on, dies of shock. Here high style and 'scientific' research hold together extremes of exoticism, cruelty and violence. It is not a happy combination. Most readers will share Sainte-Beuve's suspicion that Flaubert 'cultivates atrocity'. No doubt it works better in French, since a literary style that depends on acoustic and rhythmic harmony loses much in translation. But even in France, though successful, the book never matched the popularity of *Madame Bovary*. It's one thing to offer wonderful descriptions of a world readers share and dilemmas they can relate to, quite another to seduce with the amassed minutiae of two thousand years ago.

An event in Flaubert's private life now suggested how much an artist's vision can involve a failure of the imagination as much as its triumph, or rather how the imagination triumphs within and perhaps because of the limits that any sharp vision of the world involves. In 1863, his mother was eager to marry off his now 17-year-old niece, Caroline, to the 29-year-old Ernest Commanville, who ran a sawmill business. The girl was reluctant and turned to her uncle Gustave. 'Human life feeds on more than poetic ideas,' he told her, 'on the other hand if bourgeois existence kills you with boredom, what to do?' 'You are faced with having to take a young man of good character who is nevertheless inferior,' he went on. 'But will you be able to love a man whom you'll inevitably look down on?' Despite these reflections, Flaubert stressed that the decisive issue had to be money and nudged her towards accepting. Apparently, he could not imagine her finding any situation that was not more or less that of Emma Bovary. Caroline did as she was advised and was unhappy as foreseen. Ironically, far from providing for her financially, Commanville would eventually ruin the entire family, Flaubert included. It was a bad call.

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Winock, a historian by profession, is excellent at building up the political context of Flaubert's life, particularly the back and forth between liberal revolution and reactionary repression. Flaubert was appalled in 1848 by the prospect of popular rule and happy to accept the dictatorship of Napoleon III, who 'brought me back to contempt for the masses, and hatred of what is popular'. Essentially, he welcomed whatever form of government would allow him to go on moving between dinner parties in Paris and writing stints in the Normandy countryside. All the same he was magnificently shaken by the Prussian invasion of 1870, spurred at last to engage in his country's destiny. One would hardly have imagined this on reading *A Sentimental Education*, which was published in 1869, seven years after *Salammô*. It charts the life of Frédéric Moreau, who shares many aspects of his author's biography – above all, the idealised love for an older married woman – but lacks Flaubert's redemptive vocation. Again it is the story of a society so superficial and corrupt it offers no dignified future for ambitious youth. Love and money are hopelessly confused, every political faith is farce, every involvement in life brings contamination, to the point that when Frédéric finally has the opportunity to make love to the woman of his dreams, he chooses not to, for 'fear of being disgusted later'. The book, his friend Amélie Bosquet complained, had 'no other goal than to arouse a universal disgust in us'.

It was hardly surprising, then, that when France declared war on Prussia, Flaubert disassociated himself; it was merely confirmation that 'man's natural condition is savagery.' But no sooner did the Prussians gain the upper hand than he became intensely patriotic. 'My rifle is ready,' he declared. Appointed lieutenant of a militia he instructed his men to 'run a sword into the belly of the first to falter'. All of a sudden life offered heroism, the chance of glory, a common cause. It didn't last. The Germans took possession of Croisset without a shot being fired. When Paris surrendered, Flaubert was appalled, regretting that it 'wasn't burned to the last house, leaving only a great black void'. He hoped that the ensuing 'civil war will kill a lot of people for us' – which of course it did. He didn't lament the 20,000 who died during the suppression of the Paris Commune. He had reverted to his old position: the important thing was to be spared rule by the masses. Later, realising that a return to monarchy would only spark more conflict, he reconciled himself to a democratic republic run by a bland and conservative bourgeoisie. 'Perhaps its very lack of edification is a guarantee,' he reflected. Towards the end of his life, he had come to accept that the best one could hope for was an order based on the kind of empty convention he had always ridiculed.

Throughout this turmoil, Winock follows Flaubert's friendships, with Louis Bouilhet, with the extraordinary Goncourt brothers, with Turgenev and Maupassant. The correspondence with George Sand is particularly engaging. More than anyone else, Sand challenged Flaubert's advocacy of impersonality, astutely suggesting that it was his own personal issue more than anything else. She pointed out how good and generous he was to his friends, which was true, and how rigorously he kept that generosity out of his writing. While sticking to his position, Flaubert came to rely on Sand for company, both in her letters and at her many house parties. Other guests found him difficult, monopolising the conversation with his increasingly boorish manners. 'He doesn't like noise,' Sand wrote to her children, 'but he isn't bothered by the noise he himself makes.'

The more famous Flaubert became, the poorer he got, largely because of his determination to save his niece's husband from bankruptcy. Finally in need of an income, he accepted the humiliation of a government sinecure his friends arranged for him. But he still refused to write for money and never adjusted his fiction to please. Having finally published *The Temptation of St Anthony* in 1874, the last years of his life were spent working on the most obsessively researched novel of them all, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. Flaubert had always been interested in the idea of apparently intelligent utterance parroted with no understanding of what was said. Modern education had produced this phenomenon, he believed, and he hunted it down mercilessly in his *Dictionary of Received Ideas*. 'AGRICULTURE,' one entry reads: 'One of the two nourishing breasts of the state (the state is masculine, but never mind). Should be encouraged. Short of hands.' After reading the dictionary, he told Colet, 'one would be afraid to speak, for fear of inadvertently speaking one of the sentences it includes.'

Bouvard and Pécuchet reads like a vast expansion and animation of the dictionary, 'an encyclopedia of human stupidity'. Two clerks who have spent their lives copying documents come into some money and embark in their old age on any number of ambitious projects – farming, gardening, architecture, archaeology, biology, geology, psychology, poetry, novel-writing, gymnastics, medicine, spiritism, aesthetics – always reading widely, always consulting supposed experts and always with hilariously disastrous results. The pattern of illusion and disillusion, involvement and withdrawal, is familiar, but all moral tension or indeed serious consequence has gone; the two simply enthuse, study, go into action and fail. The sheer absurdity of their endless enterprises, coupled with the schematic nature of the narrative, looks forward to Beckett and Ionesco. But as each new enthusiasm is meticulously described, one can't help feeling a certain closeness between these men and the author who is obliged to undertake exactly the same research merely to reproduce their inanity; not to mention the reader who is wading through it all. Sometimes it's wonderfully difficult to grasp quite who is the target of the irony. 'Bouvard went on with Walter Scott,' we hear when the two are trying to learn how to write a novel, 'but ended by getting weary of the repetition of the same effects.' Indeed. Eventually, Flaubert allows the two to experience feelings that were very likely his own: 'The evidence of their own superiority caused them pain ... Then a pitiable faculty developed itself in their minds, that of observing stupidity and no longer tolerating it.' Who is the joke on here? There is a growing awareness that while their endless reading is doomed to produce little knowledge, the strategy of endlessly recounting stupidity is itself stupefying.

The book was driving him mad, Flaubert complained, and making him if possible even more irritable and intolerant. He left it unfinished, dying from a stroke at 58. It appears, though, that having finally given up on their ambitious projects, Bouvard and Pécuchet were to spend the last part of the novel returning to their old profession of copying; and one of the things critics suppose they would have copied down was the *Dictionary of Received Ideas*. With this gradual overlapping of the novelist's activity with that of his protagonists we can well imagine Flaubert appreciating that his name too would inevitably become 'a received idea'. He might have had his heroes copy an entry about himself:

FLAUBERT, Gustave. The hermit of Croisset. Art for Art's sake. Marvel over the time he took to write a sentence. Wonder if he ever really said, 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi.'

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