I

The Family Idiot

Achille-Cléophas and Caroline Flaubert had plans for their children, and Sartre observes, that when parents have plans their children have destinies. Achille, the first born son, fulfilled his destiny by becoming a doctor like his eminent father, and Caroline, the only daughter, made a good match in marriage like her mother for whom she was named. Only Gustave, the second son, did not seem able or willing to conform to the family plan. He paid a price for his resistence. Sartre does not mince words: "Gustave's relationship with his mother deprived him of affirmative power, tainted his relationship to the word and to truth, destined him for sexual perversion; his relationship with his father made him lose his sense of reality" (2: 69). [1]

Do parents have this much influence over a child? Usually parental presence is tempered by the influence of relatives and friends; but when the family structure is tight, as it was with the Flaubert family, the infant can enter the real world only through the family. But, if through lack of love, this door to the real world is closed, only one other path beckons the infant, that of the imaginary. (Later, the child or the adolescent may choose death.) Thus, the infant Gustave Flaubert chooses the imaginary. Too young to put a bundle of cloths over his shoulder and leave a home in which he felt unwanted, he found a way – as do many others – of keeping his fragile body at home while living elsewhere. In this way, from his earliest years until he was about seven, Gustave Flaubert gave himself over to his daydreams and he seemed always to be in a stupor. He was incapable of that quick learning that characterized his

[1] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert* 1821–1857, Vol. 2, translated by Carol Cosman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 69. The whole work, Volumes 1–5, were all translated by Carol Cosman, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1981; 1987; 1989; 1991; 1993). In the chapters dealing with this work, only the volume and page numbers will be given in the references. Otherwise, the work will be cited as "Family" with appropriate volume and page number. For the French title and a discussion of the division of this massive work, see the introductory remarks to Chapter 8 of this text. See also the excellent study, Hazel E. Barnes, *Sartre & Flaubert* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

older brother and was later true of his younger sister. In comparison, Gustave seemed to be a dunce. Nevertheless, by ten or eleven years of age, he who could not read was already writing with exceptional competence. "Indeed, let us not forget," Sartre writes, "that from his thirteenth year the cards were on the table, Gustave wrote books and letters, he had permanent witnesses. It is impossible to take liberties with facts so well known" (1: 46).

Let us begin an initial reflection on Gustave's passage from extreme linguistic backwardness to fluency in both spoken and written language. Skipping for the present his infancy and reflecting on his early childhood – from two or three until he is seven years of age – let us try to understand his imaginary life. All children love the imaginary; but to make it one's true home, even for a while, requires dedication, even for a child. A few years later, however, we witness this same child rerouting himself back to reality, speaking and writing stories. What are these early stories like: They are veiled stories about his hatred of his family, particularly, his father. Indeed, for Sartre, this "family idiot," throughout his entire life, will carry within himself a permanent psychic *wound* that will influence his writing of *Madame Bovary.* If we are to understand this idiot become genius, we must pause and examine this psychic wound induced in Gustave by his family.

THE WOUND

History in the form of culture permeates the fibers of our lives; yet an infant has a unique dependence on the adults that are immediately attentive to it, usually the mother and father. A baby needs milk, love, and the names of things. Without milk a baby dies, and without love it begins to resent its survival, and without gradually acquiring the names of things it gazes at the world in an unknowing stupor. Just as malnutrition can harm this vulnerable body, rejection can stunt its psychic and linguistic growth. Is this indeed the case with Gustave? The written testimony makes at least this much clear: Gustave was frequently in a daze, confused by questions, incapable of learning the alphabet, and yet his senses were biologically sound. Whatever the source of his linguistic backwardness, it must have been different from that of our deaf and blind American, Helen Keller. We may also note in passing that Keller's parents were not at fault for her early separation from language and for her consequent rage at not being able to name things. To a great extent, the connections of touch to language had to be forged anew, and, although these efforts did not then and do not now fully acknowledge the linguistic power of true sign language, they worked – Keller learned to communicate. Further, when through the generous efforts of Ann Sullivan, Keller was awakened from her linguistic slumber, she could advance to reading and writing without carrying the weight of childhood rejection.[2] For the child Gustave,

[2] Helen Keller was not congenitally deaf and blind, but she was deprived of both sight and hearing before she was two. See, Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (New York: Doubleday,

on the contrary, a linguistic slowness and a habit of daydreaming were hastily judged by the parents as abnormal and this sentence induced in the child a "wound," which he nursed throughout his life: "What we must try to understand," Sartre writes in the Preface, "is the origin of the wound that is 'always hidden' and dates back to his earliest childhood. That will not, I think, be a bad start" (1: x).

What, then, is this wound? It is the strange bond that Gustave has to the very family that cruelly considers him to be incurably slow-witted. Although Gustave would not conform to the destiny his parents had mapped out for him, he would also not completely divorce himself from his family. If he refused to add luster to the family by entering one of the honored professions like his father and older brother, he would, nevertheless, always cherish the belief in the nobility of his Flaubert blood.

This childhood tension might have dissipated as Gustave grew older; but its roots were deep. The father was an established doctor–philosopher and the mother was socially established. It was the father's project that each child, each "Flaubert," was to combine the new bourgeois belief in the merit of works with the older belief in nobility of blood. The mother, Caroline, totally approved of this (probably never formulated) family project: The blood from her well-established family would mix with the blood of her self-made husband to give the children the gratuity of inherited grace. Further, to repeat, this family bond was tight and closed. The mother taught the children at home and she never let them forget their father's importance as well as her own social standing. They too were destined for great things, and they could not be spoiled by a tenderness that would make them soft and unfit to make their mark in the world.

There was also another facet to the family life, one that particularly affected Gustave. The children's destiny was controlled by a return to the older notion of the right of primogeniture – the firstborn son was to be *the* Flaubert child. Caroline's first born was, in fact, a son, Achille. No doubt, the mother would have dutifully cared for a firstborn daughter, but the expectation of a son would have shadowed this birth. When, in fact, a daughter, another Caroline, was born, she was the only daughter and thus she had her own special place within the family. Gustave, however, was at birth an in-between, a second son who could never surpass the firstborn status of his older brother.

Finally, there was another consideration that made Gustave's childhood life somewhat ambiguous. The family wanted more children, particularly sons, but there were deaths, one before Gustave was born and one after. Indeed, as far as sons were concerned, only the first seemed both strong and fully awake to the world: "Big brother Achille became, alone, the fragile hope

Page & Company,1903), particularly the first three chapters. See also, Joseph P. Lash, *Helen and Teacher: The Story of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan Macy* (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1980), particularly chapter four, "The Key Is Turned."

of a family plagued by death. When Gustave arrived, the chips were already down" (1: 101).

The reference to "the chips are down" recalls the language of *Being and Nothingness*, and the general implication of the phrase is that reflective decisions frequently follow upon more basic earlier attitudes. For example, we may wonder where to take a vacation, but this question keeps firm the choice of our profession – indeed it retains our hold on our general view of life. In the present context, the phrase, "the chips are down," refers not only to the precarious position of Gustave as a child who might die, but more specifically to his twofold secondary place within the family project – he was not only the second-born son but also fragile in body and slow in mind. Thus, whatever attention was given to Gustave, this attention arose from the doubt whether he would survive and, if he did survive, whether he would make the grade as a Flaubert.

THE FAMILY PROJECT

Thus, during Gustave's life, the historical conditions that were always present and always knocking at the family door – the rising bourgeoisie, the ambiguous status of the former nobility, and the painful efforts of the working class to gain recognition, as well as a France simmering under the defeat of Napoleon and looking for its own way out of resentment – were kept at a distance by this family group and what Sartre terms its "project."

The notion of a project, more specifically the "fundamental project," takes us back again to *Being and Nothingness*. For each of us, this project is our general outlook on life, an outlook that outlines our relations to others as well as our bond to our planet, Earth. In Part Four of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre observes, "My ultimate and initial project – for these are but one – is, we will see, always the outline of a solution of the problem of being," and he adds, "But this solution is not first conceived and then realized; we are this solution."[3]

For the father, Achille, the solution to the problem of being was to establish a small but an important family dynasty, based on the mystical union of merit and blood. This choice was specific and temporal. Earlier, it would have merely reflected the accepted belief in nobility of blood; later, it would

[3] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, translated with an introduction by Hazel E. Barnes. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 463 (pagination from the hardback edition and paperback editions differ, and thus I will generally give the part, chapter, or section). Hereafter this work will be cited as, BN. Chapter 5, note 1 gives the French title and date of publication. See also, Joseph S. Catalano, *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's "Being and Nothingness"* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974; with added preface: Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980; Midway Reprint: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 196–202 (pagination the same in all editions). Hereafter this work will be cited as "Commentary, BN;" but, in general, I will not cite further references to this work.

be reinvented in many ways as the new rich attempt to bred "gifted" children. The Flauberts, however, were ambiguously placed within the social milieu of the time. The father did not belong to the rising merchant class; he was a doctor equally distinguished in practice and in medical research. Still, he was a self-made man and could thus fit within the rising class.

The father's project imbued a sense of urgency within the family. The bloodline was not yet firmly established, and it was crucial that the children should be considered exceptionally talented. An idiot or two among the older nobles could be considered the exceptions that prove the rule or the price that one had to pay for keeping blood pure. Or, where it was clearly the rule and not the exception, enough money, then as now, imparts a glow to the offspring. For Achille-Cléophas and Caroline Flaubert, however, an idiot in the family would be a disaster. In our reading, we should keep recalling the title of this massive work: *The Family Idiot.*

Achille-Cléophas's project, however, was not merely urgent; it was also effective. It was a mystical arm reaching out and molding his children's freedom from within. Caroline, the mother, could have intervened; she could have placed her love between her husband and her children's needs. She might have thus given Gustave the additional love that his linguistic backwardness seemed to demand. She simply did not do so; for she accepted her husband's family project and thereby increased its effectiveness.

We are thus concerned with a family adventure. Sartre constantly warns us against early generalizations. It is impossible to decide beforehand whether the historical or family situation will be the more important for a particular life. For a slave or for one born in deep poverty or for one culturally fixed by color, race, or sex, the historical forces are frequently primary, tending to overdetermine a life by limiting the paths on which freedom may follow. This inner restructuring of a budding freedom is not innocent: "One does not make use of the oppressed as a machine, contrary to what is often said, but as a limited freedom," Sartre had earlier observed in the *Notebooks for an Ethics* – written after *Being and Nothingness* but published posthumously.[4] Nevertheless, even in the most oppressed conditions, there are family dramas, and while enough love cannot overcome every disadvantage, it can do a great deal. Here, however, Sartre's point is that, even in a socially advantaged family, the parental attitude can move a child in the direction of subhumanity, as frequently occurs with daughters. In the case of the Flauberts, however, Gustave was the one most deeply affected; the family project instilled in him a deep inferiority. Sartre writes:

> Far from touching the child's "human nature" and affecting some so-called universal faculty for suffering, this inferiority assaults the *Flaubert* in him; in the younger son's *Flaubert-being* lies his concrete determination, his singularity; as for

[4] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, translated by David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 328.

sufferings, they do exist but they will be Flaubert sufferings. For the excellent reason that a family drama is involved. (1: 365)

AN IDIOT CHILD?

We are merely at the door of this family drama; let us enter and begin our reflection anew. Gustave is slow to learn, *very slow* – at six and even seven years of age he is not able to make any sense of the alphabet. Worse, he is always in a fog. What can be the cause? Neither nature – the blood from the parents – nor culture – the mother's effective instruction, her social refinement, and the like – seem at fault. Nevertheless, at the intersection of nature and culture, accidents may happen; for example, an infant may die or be born blind, all through no fault of the parents. In the case of Gustave, fate did not cause death; but it did seem to have induced a weakness of will that encouraged excessive daydreaming and made learning difficult. On other hand, perhaps only additional help was needed. Thus, the source of all learning was called upon, the father, who "set himself to work and bungled everything; humiliated by his son, he humiliated him for the rest of his life" (1: 355).

Nevertheless, this idiot child who could not make sense of the alphabet when he was almost seven years of age, would write of himself when he is not yet eleven years of age, "I have nearly thirty plays and Caroline and I act out many of them" (2: 119). How is this possible? However it happened, it is important to note that the family held firm to its initial judgement: Gustave *is* slow-witted, and thus if he who was not able to read could now write, why that writing must also be a form of linguistic backwardness. That is to say, while Gustave previously daydreamed, now he writes and acts out his daydreams in his writings; but a Flaubert – even a second son Flaubert – is supposed to do something important with life. Still, the parents would wait and see. Perhaps some good would emerge from this child.

The parents do observe, but this is not a casual affair: "The paternal power is manifest everywhere; from the cellar to the attic" (1: 329). The firstborn son and only daughter accept the father's pervasive presence as a sign of his love, and they do not question their role within the family. Somehow, Gustave, just awakening into freedom, reacts to his father's presence as a terrible force molding him in a direction that he does not wish to go: "The child feels moved by a secret malice: I will not become a bad copy of my older brother" (3: 32).

Why does the young Gustave experience malice? After all, even within the rule of primogeniture, there are many ways a second son can cope with this situation. For example, when Gustave was older and able to support himself, he could have restructured his life with his friends and broken the tie to his family. He refused, however, to make the break: "*Flaubert lived within the domestic group and never left it.* From one end of his life to the other, the younger son regarded himself as an inessential accident: the essential thing

for him would always be the family" (1: 71). Again, our attention is drawn to the distinctness of this family drama, and thus Sartre writes, "Certain universal circumstances might be found if we could compare lives. But this doesn't concern me; what is important here is Gustave's choice" (2: 174). The specificity of Sartre's analysis accounts for the length and complexity of this study of Gustave Flaubert. Nevertheless, universality is also an issue and it too has its own motif in the book, as Sartre makes clear in the first page of his Preface:

> For a man is never an individual; it would be more fitting to call him a *universal singular*. Summed up and for this reason universalized by his epoch, he in turn resumes it by reproducing himself in it as singularity. Universal by the singular universality of human history, singular by the universalizing singularity of his projects, he requires simultaneous examination from both ends.

Thus, even as Sartre is mainly concerned with the singularity of Gustave's own project, universal as well as historical characteristics do emerge and interact in his study. Indeed, no human life begins with a neutral outlook on the world. The infant's cloths, the crib, the crucifix on the wall or statue of the Buddha on the mantle or the colored objects floating above it as well as the smiles, the frowns, the touches, the feeding and care – all this comes to the infant as from some heaven, transcending and enveloping its budding freedom, inclining it to develop in this way rather than in another way. This is normal and healthy. Nevertheless, a child who is loved *for itself* will later begin to think for itself, moving forward in life on the memory of its early days in paradise:

> The valorization of the infant through care will touch him more deeply the more this tenderness is manifest … Let a child once in his life – at three months, at six – taste this victory of pride, he is a man, never in all his life will he be able to revive the supreme voluptuousness of this sovereignty or to forget. But he will preserve even in misfortune a kind of religious optimism based on the abstract and calm certainty of his own value. We shall say, in any case, that an adventure begun in this fashion has nothing in common with Flaubert's. (1: 129–130, note 2)

Still, Caroline was a dutiful mother, and Sartre goes so far as to admit that she would have died for her children. He is not, however, impressed by this Kantian duty. The same sternness that might require a mother to sacrifice her life for her child could require the child to sacrifice its life to measure up to family standards. These parents would never require their children to die rather than tarnish the family honor; they did, however, require something like death – unquestioned obedience to *their* ideal of the good life.

In some remarkable way that we have yet to examine, Gustave learned to resist the family project. We have, nevertheless, reached a more informed beginning. Let us thus once again pause to wonder about this idiot of the Flaubert family. How shall we approach the unfolding event of his passage from deep linguistic backwardness to remarkable linguistic fluency? Is the

young Gustave acting the role of an idiot? Does he cloak his genius with a prolonged feigned stupor? Shall we believe that Gustave succeeds in outwitting his parents for six or seven years? Or, rather, are we witnessing a genuine adventure with language, an adventure born of and opposed to the parent's own adventure?

AN IDIOT BECOMING A GENIUS?

The quality of genius is not a general trait that exists in each individual with slightly different characteristics; it is, in each instance, a radically unique manifestation of freedom. Granting this specificity, we can still note that in cases such as Jean-Genet and Gustave Flaubert, where the family conditions aim at limiting a child's developing freedom, genius, according to Sartre, is the child's own discovery of a path out of the family prison – out of the hell of others. Toward the end of his study of Genet, in answer to someone who insisted that Genet's path from prison life to the life of a writer was due to some inborn natural talent, Sartre writes, "What do you think talent is? Mildew of the brain? A supernumerary bone?" And, he answers his own question: "I have shown that his work is the imaginary aspect of his life and that his genius is one with his unswerving will to live his condition to the very end."[5] A few pages later he adds: "I have tried to do the following: to indicate the limit of psychoanalytical interpretation and Marxist explanation and to demonstrate that freedom alone can account for a person in his totality" (Genet: 584). Sartre has never wavered from this view of freedom; rather, his analysis of freedom has only become more complete and complex, as it shows how only the freedom of one person can limit that of another. True, extreme poverty limits freedom, but, as the *Critique* will make clear to us, the "scarcity" of the person in need is created by those with wealth and power.

Our task is thus to understand Gustave's early adventure with life and language, not by seeking causes that would eliminate in advance his budding freedom, but rather by seeking the intelligible conditions that made his freedom possible:

> I, for my part, do not conceive an act as having causes, and I consider myself satisfied when I have found in it not its 'factor,' but the general themes which it organizes: for our decisions gather into new syntheses and on new occasions the leitmotiv that governs our life. (Genet: 427–428)

We thus begin by accepting the reality of the phenomenon before us, no matter how strange it appears. We accept the following temporal evolution: A child truly linguistically backward becomes, in a short time, a child truly linguistically brilliant. We allow ourselves to face the possibility that we here

[5] *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, translated by Bernard Frechtman. (New York, George Braziller, 1963), 569. (See Chapter 2, note 2 for a discussion of the translation of the title.)

encounter a genuine adventure with freedom and language. Every child, of course, has an adventure with language, and thus Sartre notes, "invention characterizes speech – we will invent if the conditions are favorable; if not, we will have badly named experiences and live them badly. No, nothing is guaranteed" (I: 29). Nothing is guaranteed, not even the naming power of language. Can Gustave name things as other children? Can he reinvent for himself the language he has received from his parents?

All children invent language without knowing it. They receive words and then remake them as their own, sometimes using received words against the adults who gave them the words. Still, a child does not normally question the existence of words as names of things. Things have names and one learns the names without the wonder of their connection – that is, unless, like Helen Keller one has from almost infancy been deprived of their social connections. All of which is to note that the child learns within the prelinguistic web of family life. (Imagine parents, who like Descartes's demon, aim at deceiving their child by inventing words that have no social use.) This prelinguistic web existed for Gustave; otherwise his brother and sister could not have learned to speak and read so quickly. Sartre writes, "Thus the verbal act can *in no instance* be defined as the passage from one order of things to another. How could this be possible, since the reality of man living and speaking is created from moment to moment by the mingling of these two" (I: 28). But with the Flauberts, the intermingling of words and things were constantly within the family project – the father's watchfulness and the mother's dutiful care; that is to say, the price of the admission into this linguistic web is the child's acceptance of his role within the family, a role that Gustave resists.

True, we are in danger of projecting a too explicit reflective consciousness onto this young child. But let us not go to the other extreme: A child is not an infant; there is childhood awareness. We have seen that the child daydreams excessively. Through these daydreams, Gustave hears words, words that he somewhat accepts but does not reinvent for his own use. This condition continues until he is about seven years of age. Then, sometime between eight and eleven years of age he *invents all – speaking, reading, and writing.* Let us proceed; but let us not cheat and dilute the wonder.

We are in the face of a profound linguistic leap, one that is beyond the power of a normal child. But then a normal child does not have the *need* to make such a linguistic jump. Gustave, however, could not communicate in a normal way with his family, for everything in that family belonged to them and not to him. Thus, before he could leave daydreaming and speak in a normal way, he had to solve for himself the relation of words to the naming of things: "The question then bears on everything, and this is the stupor: why do names exist?" (I: 154). Strangely, the child solves this problem, and with this solution, Gustave has the totality of language within his grasp. How are we to understand this childhood solution to the problem of language?

GUSTAVE AND THE BIRTH OF HIS GENIUS

Once again, let us make a fresh start. Gustave receives words from his parents, no doubt, first from his mother. Do these linguistic gifts differ in quality from the touches and gazes he receives? It is more reasonable to assume that both the sounds, the touches, and the looks all had the same motherly quality. The child lives in the milieu of duty, not of generosity. Sensing this weight of duty, he may intuitively respond by not being generous in his own childhood relations. We do not know this for certain, and yet Gustave complains of certain passivity throughout his life. He works hard, but he must overcome an initial inertia. Sartre remarks that, even if we grant that Gustave had low blood pressure, this would not have accounted for the degree of his linguistic daze nor for the way he later related to his own passive constitution. Gustave's passivity seems to result from the tension caused by his need to depart from the family project and still remain within it to the extent that he prided himself on being a Flaubert. Did this internal conflict exhaust Gustave? Clearly not, but it must have had its price, and his passivity does not appear to be excessive dues for suppressing his hate–love relation to his family.

We are beginning to approach the area of Gustave's understanding of himself, that is, his notions about himself, or more accurately, his ego. For Sartre, the ego is that aspect of the self, the *I,* that comes to us from others and from the world – especially but not exclusively when we are young or vulnerable – and which we slowly mold until it becomes part of our personality. While initially arising from others, the ego almost immediately begins to reflect our own response to the world's view of us. Every child sees itself reflected in the eyes and gestures of adults, but then the child gradually learns how to impart to this image a spark of its budding personality and freedom. Indeed, what distinguishes our personality from our ego is that this later is the quasi frozen image of our freedom that is equally accessible to us and to others. Thus, in Sartre's early and blessedly short monograph, *The Transcendence of the Ego,* we read the remarkable words: "My I, in effect, is no more certain for consciousness than the I of other men. It is only more intimate."[6] That is, we can never discover within us a pure center that is our self, independent of its relation to others. Although a child receives all of its *initial* notions about itself from others, usually its parents, these will normally be given to him in such a way that he is invited to reexamine them, and this possibility is usually made real by other childhood relationships, for example, grandparents, relatives, or young companions. But Gustave is locked within a tight family, and later, when he can break the bond, he chooses not to do so.

Sartre's reflections, which we will gradually expand upon, lead him to conclude that the young Gustave found it difficult to impart anything of

[6] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego,* translated by Forest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick. (New York: Noonday Press, 1957), 104.