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TIMOTHY UNWIN

Gustave Flaubert, the hermit of Croisset

Famously dubbed the 'novelist's novelist' by Henry James,[1] Flaubert has preoccupied almost every generation of writers since the mid-nineteenth century. From the seclusion of a large family home on the banks of the Seine near Rouen, the so-called hermit of Croisset raises the art of prose narrative to new levels and reveals its modernity. As he stomps up and down the avenue of lime trees in his garden, sometimes in the company of his friend and mentor Louis Bouilhet, Flaubert bellows out the sentences of *Madame Bovary*, to the amazement or amusement of the folk in passing river craft. This is the legendary *gueuloir*, or 'yelling place', where the novelist puts his writing through the test of sound, rhythm and vocal fluidity, subjecting it to the final quality control. For, as he writes to his mistress Louise Colet on 24 April 1852, 'prose was born yesterday, that is what we must tell ourselves. Verse is the quintessential form of ancient literatures. All the combinations of poetry have been tried out. But as for prose, far from it' ['la prose est née d'hier, voilà ce qu'il faut se dire. Le vers est la forme par excellence des littératures anciennes. Toutes les combinaisons prosodiques ont été faites, mais celles de la prose, tant s'en faut' (Cor. II 79)]. And so, as he opens up new pathways in technical and formal experiment, Flaubert also heightens awareness of the complexities and the possibilities of the novelist's craft.

His impact on Maupassant, Zola, Joyce, Proust, James, Gide, Beckett, Borges, Calvino, Kundera and a host of key figures in the history of the genre is well documented, and his interest for theorists of literature is beyond doubt. Famously analysed by Lukács, Sartre, Poulet, Richard, Genette, Bourdieu and many others, Flaubert is one of those writers on whom almost everyone has had their say. His massive legacy extends to such votaries as Woody Allen (whose character Isaac in the 1979 film *Manhattan* listed *L'Education sentimentale* among the things that made life worth living);[2] Claude Chabrol who adapted *Madame Bovary* to the screen in 1991 with an icily intense Isabelle Huppert in the lead role; and Julian Barnes, whose unwavering enthusiasm for Flaubert has been expressed from *Flaubert's*

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Parrot through to the recent collection of essays entitled *Something to Declare*.[3] As Mario Vargas Llosa will argue in the concluding essay to this volume, Flaubert is the first modern novelist, and he revolutionises the art of narrative fiction. But importantly, Flaubert's work is also grounded in the past (a point that will be discussed and developed here by Alison Finch in her discussion of Flaubert's stylistic achievements). His debt to Homer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Rabelais, Montaigne, Byron, Rousseau, Goethe and many others is attested continuously throughout his novelistic writings and his correspondence. He is a writer who remains throughout his life a voracious reader, always supremely concerned with literature and with the questions it raises. Such questions include a preoccupation with boundaries and where they may or may not lie: boundaries between different literary genres and traditions, of course, but also the boundaries between literature and philosophy, or between literature and history, or literature and the visual arts. With Flaubert, as Barthes observed in his 1953 essay *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, literature turns in on itself as never before, scrutinises its own status and function, and emerges into truly modern self-awareness.[4] For all that, and perhaps because of that, Flaubert stands firmly at the crossroads of different styles and approaches, different literary traditions, different epochs. Amenable to vastly differing approaches, he is an exemplary literary case.

Strangely, despite Flaubert's reputation as one of the foremost technicians and philosophers of the genre, his work is also shot through with self-doubt and with a very modern anxiety about the novelist's authority. Where Balzac proclaims triumphantly that his fictional world is real, that novelists 'invent truth by analogy' ['inventent le vrai, par analogie'],[5] for Flaubert the truth-value of fiction is precisely what is in question. With him, fiction becomes a hall of mirrors in which uniform representation ceases to be a possibility and absolutely everything is problematised. There are no unassailable truths, and there is no longer any stable vantage point from which the novelist is able to depict his world. Moreover, as Aimée Israel-Pelletier will argue in her essay here, this holds as much for the visual as for the textual in Flaubert's work, which often highlights the instability of the human gaze and dramatises its inability to find coherence in a world of proliferating objects. And while Flaubert holds 'art' as the supreme value, he at the same time muses that art itself might be no more than a joke, a metaphysical hoax, at best a harmless obsession without meaning. 'Art', he writes to Louise Colet in November 1851, 'may be of no greater consequence than the game of skittles. Perhaps it's all just some immense joke' ['L'Art n'est peut-être pas plus sérieux que le jeu de quilles. Tout n'est peut-être qu'une immense blague' (Cor. II 16)]. From his earliest writings (as my own chapter in this volume will emphasise)

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we find him turning round the very beliefs on which his work is constructed, putting into question the novelist's or the narrator's apparent judgments on the world, and destabilising the framework within which textual meaning is established. Flaubertian irony is notoriously double-edged, exposing not only the illusions of the characters but also the potential errors of the novelist himself, and almost always, Flaubert writes in such a way as to challenge the very novelistic authority upon which his narrative also depends. The unfinished *Bouvard et Pécuchet* asks deeply uncomfortable questions about the relationship between narrative and knowledge, indeed about the novelist's own attempt to be original. In it, Flaubert uses cliché and recycled knowledge as the very building blocks of his novel, confronting himself with the near impossible challenge of finding novelty through his very refusal of it. The projected ending of the novel has the two clerks returning, armed with new learning, to their former profession as copyists – an allegory, it seems, of the novelist himself copying out the platitudes of his own characters in an attempt to recover meaning that may have regressed into infinite emptiness. Similarly, in *Un cœur simple*, a parrot becomes the symbol of pointless repetition, language without content, words without origin or purpose. That the central character, Félicité, should find both emotional and spiritual fulfilment in her relationship with such a creature, even after it has died, is suggestive of the novelist's own worst nightmare in which empty sentences are rehearsed, then merely remembered in some endless void. From the writer's point of view this is, as Mary Orr will argue later in this volume, not only a struggle with the death of meaning, but a confrontation with death itself and the 'meanings' it confers on human life.

It is hardly surprising, then, that even at a relatively early stage in his career Flaubert discovers 'the torments of style' ['les affres du style'], for he sees writing as an almost impossibly difficult balancing act. As he writes up his sections of the journey that he and his friend Maxime Du Camp had made through Brittany in 1847, in a text entitled *Par les champs et par les grèves*, he complains that he sees nothing but problems in even the simplest of passages: 'The more I progress, the more difficulty I have in writing the simplest things, and the more emptiness I see in those I had judged the best' ['Plus je vais, et plus je découvre de difficultés à écrire les choses les plus simples et plus j'entrevois de vide à celles que j'avais jugées les meilleures' (Cor. I 486)]. (The crucial place of *Par les champs et par les grèves* in Flaubert's development as a writer will later be discussed by Adrianne Tooke.) Yet, if the writer is faced with the constant possibility of the failure of his own activity, it is Flaubert's paradoxical and inherently 'postmodern' achievement as an artist to have problematised that very issue – a point that will be developed in more detail in Lawrence Schehr's chapter, which analyses Flaubert's creative obsession

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with failure. Emptiness lurks everywhere, yet Flaubert seeks throughout his career to confront it, to sound out its possibilities, and to write it into his approach. This is where we find the depressing undercurrent of absurdity that lurks within even the most beautifully crafted passages in the Flaubertian *œuvre*. So complex is the task, so evanescent are the thoughts the artist is trying to fix on paper, that he is left with the constant sense that meaning may have escaped between the lines and eluded his grasp: 'There is so much thought between one line and the next! and what you sense most clearly remains floating on the white of the paper' ['Il y a tant de pensée entre une ligne et l'autre! et ce que l'on sent le mieux reste flottant sur le blanc du papier' (Cor. II 456)]. Art may itself end up as an empty and meaningless charade, yet Flaubert will, like Beckett a century later, stare long and hard into the void and seek to make sense of it. And there is sometimes a rich seam of gold in the most unpromising of locations. In *Un cœur simple*, Félicité finds her own spiritual fulfilment in the face of all odds. In *Madame Bovary*, Emma is, for all her tawdry and sentimental platitudes, capable of poetic feelings and mystical impulses that raise her beyond the inherent dreariness of her surroundings. If, for Rodolphe, 'Emma was like every other mistress' ['Emma ressemblait à toutes les maîtresses'], the narrator is quick to remind us that 'this man so full of experience could not distinguish the variety of feelings beneath the similarity of expressions' ['il ne distinguait pas, cet homme si plein de pratique, la dissemblance des sentiments sous la parité des expressions'], and that for Emma, as for everyone else, the problem is that language itself is a faulty, inadequate instrument that cannot register the complexity of her emotions, 'as if the plenitude of the soul did not on occasions spill over in the emptiest of metaphors, since no one can ever give the exact measure of their feelings' ['comme si la plénitude de l'âme ne débordait pas quelquefois par les métaphores les plus vides, puisque personne, jamais, ne peut donner l'exacte mesure de ses sentiments' (OC I 639)]. (Further discussion of this crucial passage will be found later, in Alison Finch's chapter on Flaubert's stylistic achievements.) Thus *Madame Bovary* becomes, like so much of Flaubert's work, a wager to find the poetic in the trivial, an attempt to extract richness from the banal monotony of daily life. As Flaubert himself was to put it on one occasion, it is a novel 'suspended over the double abyss of the lyrical and the vulgar' ['suspendu entre le double abîme du lyrisme et du vulgaire' (Cor. II 57)], seeking beauty in combinations never before associated with art. In this respect, there are clear parallels between what Flaubert does with the novel in the mid-nineteenth century, and what Baudelaire does with poetry, for each works their art in new spaces and with new materials. Between them, they usher in a radically new concept of beauty, and pave the way towards a modernist aesthetic.

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Although by Flaubert's own admission there is a side of him that is 'enchanted by *shouting*, lyricism, great flights of the eagle, all the sonorities of the sentence and the summits of the idea' ['épris de *gueulades*, de lyrisme, de grands vols d'aigle, de toutes les sonorités de la phrase et des sommets de l'idée'], there is another 'which searches and digs out truth as much as it can, and which likes to bring out the small fact as powerfully as the big one' ['qui fouille et creuse le vrai tant qu'il peut, qui aime à accuser le petit fait aussi puissamment que le grand' (Cor. II 30)]. From 1845 onwards, the year in which he completes the first *Education sentimentale* – this early novel has little but the title in common with the more famous work of 1869 – the process of tracking down the hidden details and the unlikely truths is one that is painstakingly built into Flaubert's method. Voracious reading and research is accompanied by extensive jottings and notes, progressively honed through many stages. No longer will writing be a question of putting the sentences spontaneously on paper as the mood dictates. It is an exacting task accompanied by constant self-criticism, and involving repeated redrafting and reworking, as well as being a journey through vast terrains of scholarship or along the highways and byways of literary history itself. It is in the 1840s, in particular as he is writing the first *Education sentimentale*, that Flaubert first develops this concept of literature. At the same time – and partly because, following an epileptic seizure in January 1844, he abandons his law studies in Paris and renounces the prospect of an active professional life – he establishes himself as the hermit of Croisset, withdrawing officially into the world of his writing and devoting himself wholeheartedly to it. After the deaths of his father and his sister in 1846, there is no longer any looking back. Croisset will be the shared home of Flaubert and his mother until the latter's death in 1872. To be a writer now is, in Flaubert's view, to live in and through literature, to think and feel in terms of his writing. He will declare to Louise Colet in 1852: 'I am a man of the quill. I feel through it, because of it, in relation to it, and much more with it' ['Je suis un homme-plume. Je sens par elle, à cause d'elle, par rapport à elle, et beaucoup plus avec elle' (Cor. II 42)]. One of the consequences of this approach to writing is that Flaubert left thousands and thousands of pages of jottings, drafts, plans and scenarios which, strictly speaking, have to be considered as much a part of the corpus as the completed texts. For the body of work that Flaubert left is a continuum which, in the eyes of many commentators, can be seen to extend seamlessly from rough notes through to the finished product. As Tony Williams will demonstrate in his essay here, it is in the nature of the questions that Flaubert raises about literature that we have on occasions to return to the *avant-texte* ['pre-text'] and set it alongside the completed version, by way of entering into the creative processes and the decisions involved in writing.

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Another reason why we might find ourselves wishing to delve into earlier versions of the Flaubertian text is that the final draft, rich and multifaceted as it is, is almost invariably a pared down and reduced version of what came earlier. Flaubert proceeds by distilling and condensing his material, excluding what is deemed either factually or artistically superfluous. Many lines of research that are conducted for, say, *Salammbô*, may only appear fleetingly if at all in the final text, yet Flaubert's overall understanding of his subject is second to none, and following publication of his novel in 1862 he was able to take on the archaeologist Guillaume Froehner in a very public quarrel in the Parisian press. And as Anne Green will argue here, the presence of history is absolutely central throughout Flaubert's work, informing his approach both to his own era and to earlier ones and underpinning his meticulous and exacting method. Yet what is excluded and unspoken in the Flaubertian text is nonetheless sometimes as important as what is actually said, and this applies not only to the factual details or the research that goes into the making of narrative, but also to the complex web of ironies that is woven around so many apparently 'innocent' and deadpan sentences. One of the fascinations of reading Flaubert is that he often seems able to say so much with so little. A small phrase such as '. . . and the violin started again' ['. . . et le violon recommença' (OC I 592)], when Emma sees the Viscount waltz back onto the dance-floor with a new partner at the Vaubyessard ball, is loaded with a terrible, tragic irony, and a sense of finality all the greater for its being so blandly understated. Of comparable status is the final line of *Salammbô* which offers an ironically simplified and falsified explanation of the death of the heroine: 'Thus died Hamilcar's daughter, for having touched the mantle of Tanit' ['Ainsi mourut la fille d'Hamilcar pour avoir touché au manteau de Tanit' (OC I 797)]. And then there is the devastating line at the end of the penultimate chapter of the 1869 *Education sentimentale*, when Madame Arnoux leaves for the final time, making her exit both from Frédéric's life and from his heart: 'And that was all' ['Et ce fut tout' (OC II 161)]. (The rich resonances of this final 'judgment' on Frédéric's love for Madame Arnoux will be more fully developed in Mary Orr's essay in this collection.) These small transitional or concluding moments, infinitesimal in terms of their relation to the overarching narrative, are where Flaubert steeps his text with layers of emotion and irony. At such points, he is capable of turning the telescope around, shrinking the macro-narrative to tiny proportions while placing the fleeting transitional statement absolutely in the foreground – a reversal of perspective which, as Alison Finch will remind us in her essay here, was very much at the heart of Proust's fascinating response to Flaubert. This is the sort of procedure that delights enthusiasts of Flaubert, confirming their conviction that meaning in the Flaubertian text is to be sought in places

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where it may not immediately be apparent. Of course, for such elements of the text to operate successfully, they have to be prepared well in advance through long sequences of narrative. The more alert we are to Flaubert's writing, the more we become aware of these complex operations embedded in the tiniest details of the text, often stretching over several chapters. It also means that Flaubert is quintessentially a writer who repays both close reading and frequent rereading. This, no doubt, is one of the consequences of his habit of progressive working and reworking of the text.

Flaubert's method of work and composition is thus radically different from that of, say, Balzac or Stendhal. Stendhal, with magical spontaneity, wrote *La Chartreuse de Parme* over a period of fifty-two days, much of it dictated. Balzac found himself working against the clock to complete *La Cousine Bette* after serial publication of the novel had already begun. Flaubert could never have contemplated writing in such a manner or in such circumstances. Of the author of the *Comédie humaine* he once wryly observed: 'What a great man Balzac would have been if he had known how to write!' ['Quel homme eût été Balzac, s'il eût su écrire!' (Cor. II 209)] Flaubert himself took several years over each of his main novels and reserved his spontaneity for correspondence when his day's work was done. There is no value-judgment in this; rather it is the mark of Flaubert's particular approach to writing, which is based on the minute assembly of detail in an overall framework. Of course, Balzac remained a crucial model for him, as much to work with as to work against, a vital point that Michael Tilby will develop and explain in the next chapter. But Flaubert's ascetic commitment to his own vocation as a writer involved the working through of each project from initial preparatory jottings and research through to plans, composition and redrafting, including the test of the *gueuloir*. Like most writers, he had notebooks full of plans and scenarios that were never used, but the projects that were followed through show an extraordinary degree of care. Meanwhile, 'normal' life was, it seems, put on hold. We know from the many letters to Louise Colet that the novelist's proposed meetings with his mistress, often planned to coincide with the end of a section or a chapter in the writing of *Madame Bovary*, were regularly put off. Whilst Flaubert manfully tried to persuade Louise that they were companions in art above all, and that this sacrifice was all in the name of the higher love that bound them together, she was having none of this excuse-making and saw right through it. (For more on the strategies Flaubert adopts with different correspondents, and the fascinating revelations that the correspondence vouchsafes about him, see the chapter by Rosemary Lloyd.) We shall briefly revisit the question of Flaubert's turbulent and surprisingly busy amorous life, though it is a basic truth that his commitment to writing overshadowed his commitment to human relationships.

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Apocryphally, his mother confronted him with this when she uttered the withering and memorable phrase: 'Your obsession with sentences has dried up your heart' ['Ta rage des phrases t'a desséché le cœur']. It is true that, for Flaubert, the adventures of prose narrative were, despite its enormous difficulties and frustrations, often the most fulfilling and the most rewarding form of engagement. As happens in his novels, life itself is sometimes viewed through the wrong end of the telescope, and a fleeting, passing sentence assumes overwhelming proportions in the daily drama of his existence. As the scandal of *Madame Bovary* is brewing and he is about to be put on trial, he writes to Elisa Schlésinger: 'And so I am going to resume my poor, dreary, tranquil existence in which sentences themselves are adventures and where the only flowers I gather are metaphors' ['Je vais donc reprendre ma pauvre vie si plate et tranquille, où les phrases sont des aventures et où je ne recueille d'autres fleurs que des métaphores' (Cor. II 665)]. After all, Flaubert had long maintained that life itself is such a hideous thing that the only way to put up with it is by immersing oneself in art.

It is perhaps inevitable that critics of Flaubert focus on his misanthropy, suggesting that this contaminates his art and restricts his vision of the human condition. It is true that a fascination with stupidity (*bêtise*) and a sense of the grotesque are everywhere in his work, as will become apparent from many of the essays in this volume, and that there is often cruelty in his dissection of human folly. To George Sand, he once offered a highly revealing insight into one of his motives as a writer when he claimed that dissection is an act of revenge (Cor. III 711). But while Flaubert is perhaps a long way from having the Olympian qualities he so admires in Homer and Shakespeare, it would be quite wrong to dismiss him as a writer devoid of compassion or psychological finesse. Generations of readers have identified with Emma Bovary and rightly found extraordinary richness and delicacy in Flaubert's portrayal of her tragic predicament.[6] That Flaubert's techniques and modes of character representation are astonishingly varied and complex is, moreover, brought out later in this volume by Laurence Porter. But it may well be precisely *because* Flaubert cultivates a stance of aesthetic detachment that he is the better able to enter into the complexities and nuances of human feeling. Condemning the emotive approach of Romantic writers like Alfred de Musset, for whom strong and passionate feeling is the basis on which the poet or artist must build, Flaubert decides early in his career as a writer that he must stand outside or above his own (and therefore his characters') emotions and hold them in check, in order the more fully to explore them. At the end of the first *Education sentimentale*, the artist-hero Jules understands that 'you have to be sober to sing of the joys of the bottle, and entirely without anger to portray the rages of Ajax' ['il faut être à jeun pour chanter la

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bouteille, et nullement en colère pour peindre les fureurs d'Ajax' (OJ 1041)]. Every emotion and every state of mind has unique resonances that the artist is better able to perceive if he contemplates it lengthily, without sentimentality. Thus, 'holding back emotion that might disturb him, Jules knows how to bring out the sensitivity within him that must create something' ['arrêtant l'émotion qui le troublerait, [Jules] sait faire naître en lui la sensibilité qui doit créer quelque chose' (OC I 370)]. In this sense, what is often perceived as an apparent lack of emotion or sympathy in Flaubert is, in fact, a more refined manner of sifting through and expressing the intensity, the depth and the particular qualities of human experience. It is a point that Flaubert was to make in various ways in his correspondence with George Sand, and which led to the writing of *Un cœur simple*, a text which would, he hoped, show that he was eminently capable of tenderness and compassion. It is, indeed, this 'contemplative tenderness' that gives some of Flaubert's minor characters such a strong emotional appeal to the reader (one thinks of Justin, in *Madame Bovary*, or Dussardier in *L'Education sentimentale*). Flaubert maintained that the uniqueness of every emotion, every sensation, even every physical object should be apprehended by the writer who was alert and attentive. It was a lesson that his protégé Maupassant was to remember well, when he described in 'Le Roman', the preface to his 1888 novel *Pierre et Jean*, how Flaubert had taught him to contemplate his subject long and hard, until every tiny facet of it was apparent to him.[7] Such a lesson was as true of people as it was of ideas or objects. Everything and everyone, in Flaubert's view, had unique qualities that it was the artist's duty to seek out. And as Michael Tilby will point out in the next chapter, Maupassant's view – though it may not have corresponded precisely to the reality of Flaubert's practice – did much to promote the image of 'Flaubert the Master' which became common currency by the end of the nineteenth century.

Given the contemplative, ascetic dimension to Flaubert's approach, it is hardly surprising that we find throughout his writing a monastic and mystical quality. His fascination with religion and the discipline it imposes is evident, and if he cannot himself believe in God, the transfer of mystical contemplation into the writing process provides the logical alternative. The nineteenth century, for Flaubert as for so many thinkers and artists, was truly an era of the twilight of the gods. In 1875 he writes: 'The nineteenth century is destined to see all religions perish. Amen! I weep for none of them' ['Le XIXe siècle est destiné à voir périr toutes les religions. Amen! Je n'en pleure aucune' (Cor. IV 997)]. And yet, his work is full of saints, monks and mystics, and the history of religion is a subject of which he came to have a profound knowledge, as we see in *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, *Salammbô* and *Hérodias*. But for Flaubert, modern life has replaced the quest for God by the quest for the

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eternal, indeed transcendent, truth of art itself. The theme recurs frequently during the years he is writing *Madame Bovary*, though we should be aware that it may sometimes be a strategy to maintain his ivory-tower seclusion when faced with the demands of Louise Colet. In September 1852 he states: 'I am turning towards a kind of aesthetic mysticism' ['Je tourne à une espèce de mysticisme esthétique' (Cor. II 151)], and in December: 'Had it not been for the love of form, perhaps I would have been a great mystic' ['Sans l'amour de la forme, j'eusse peut-être été un grand mystique' (Cor. II 218)]. So the writer is himself the modern mystic, a lonely hermit wearing his hair shirt and tormenting himself with his discipline. He writes on 24 April 1852: 'I love my work with a frenetic and perverted love, as the ascetic loves the hair shirt that scratches his belly' ['J'aime mon travail d'un amour frénétique et perverti, comme un ascète le cilice qui lui gratte le ventre' (Cor. II 75)]. The writer's lot, like the lives of saints, is a painful one that involves unremitting tribulation as his faith is challenged by the jealous God of Art. Yet there are rare moments of artistic joy as the hermit of Croisset senses himself dissolving into his own creation, escaping from the burden of his individuality and the suffering that goes with it. These moments may have their root in genuinely mystical experiences at various stages in Flaubert's life outside of his writing. In the paragraph following his evocation of the hair shirt, he writes: 'On my great days of sunshine, I have sometimes glimpsed a state of the soul superior to life itself, and for which glory would be irrelevant and happiness itself of no consequence' ['J'ai entrevu quelquefois (dans mes grands jours de soleil) [. . .] un état de l'âme ainsi supérieur à la vie, pour qui la gloire ne serait rien, et le bonheur même inutile' (Cor. II 76)]. The great days of sunshine are there in the writing too. On 23 December 1853, after an afternoon spent working on the scene of Emma's seduction in the forest by Rodolphe, Flaubert declares: 'It is a delicious thing to write, no longer to be oneself, but to circulate in the whole creation one speaks of' ['C'est une délicieuse chose que d'écrire! que de ne plus être *soi*, mais de circuler dans toute la création dont on parle' (Cor. II 483)] – though interestingly, a few lines earlier he had suggested, pre-empting this intuition of the sublime with characteristic earthiness, that he now felt 'like a man who has done too much fucking' ['comme un homme qui a trop foutu'].

According to one exuberant biographer in the 1980s, Flaubert was indeed a man who massively over-indulged his sexual appetite. Jacques-Louis Douchin, author of a prurient account of Flaubert's sexual liaisons, set out to destroy a number of long-held myths about the hermit of Croisset.[8] One of these myths was that Flaubert had a single lifelong passion for Elisa Schlésinger, an older woman encountered during a family holiday in Trouville in 1836, and often considered to have been the model for Madame

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