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978-0-521-03107-3 - Where Flaubert Lies: Chronology, Mythology and History

Claire Addison

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

«Il aura peut-être choisi le jour?» se disait tout bas Mâtho.(1, 746).

Those, such as Bovet, Dumesnil, Descharmes, Fay and Coleman, Bopp and Gothot-Mersch, who have studied the question of time in Flaubert have been unanimous in their concern for the number of irregularities in the chronologies of Flaubert's works. The verdict seems unanimous that Flaubert was more concerned with the establishment of a seasonal atmosphere, relating to the time of writing or to the character's mood, than with the establishment of a consistent linear progression. The pathetic fallacy explains all.

However, all who have studied the plans of Flaubert's works are also aware of a particularly cunning level of personal involvement on Flaubert's part in the treatment of contemporary or historical detail: it is the manipulation of the marginal which often impresses. De Biasi, in his study (in the edition) of the *cahiers de travail*, observes:

un clin d'oeil ludique à usage purement personnel, comme on en rencontre un peu partout dans les textes de cet écrivain «impersonnel» qui s'amuse à disséminer dans ses récits des détails (des «noms» en particulier) qui ne peuvent faire sens que pour lui-même. Seul un examen approfondi des «sources» biographiques et des documents de genèse permet d'en déceler la trace, occasionnelle (comme c'est le cas ici) ou plus profonde lorsqu'il s'agit de messages «cryptés» qui concernent des détails plus personnels ou plus anciens. (De Biasi, 425).

Anomalous details concerning names and dates are precisely what Flaubert's cryptic game is all about, and it is possible to

trace a process whereby he moves from writing texts which encode messages sent to the self to a greater concern for ‘cueing’ the reader (and what a reader those cues imply!) as to the workings of the system. Writing is an act of self-discovery, and the novelist did not mind admitting that, at the beginning of his career, he wrote purely for himself and not for the reader, as in the case of *TSA*, where he himself was Saint Antoine (C1, 127).

Yet this is the same writer who placed an unmistakable *cave canem* at the entrance to his work on numerous occasions. His motto from Epictetus, ‘Cache ta vie et abstiens-toi’ (C1, 89), does not, however, imply authorial absence; on the contrary, the artist is like God in His creation, everywhere present and nowhere visible. *Madame Bovary*, as novel and as eponymous heroine, is both the author’s self, ‘d’après moi’, and an entirely impersonal work. The two don’t fit, so we must conclude that Flaubert was issuing a challenge to the reader.

In *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, the narrator claims that his protagonists mix up events because they don’t know the dates, and that, from not caring about dates, they move on to a disdain for facts (II, 240). When they try to educate Victor, they find that their pupil can’t master the nomenclature of the kings of France because he doesn’t know the dates (II, 292) – which, in any case, are unreliable and not always authentic because of mistakes in the interpretation of calendar systems (II, 240). The details then given of the difficulty of measuring time show a sophisticated awareness of the history of chronometry, and the *cahiers de travail* show an even more detailed acknowledgement of temporal anomalies, as well as indicating that Flaubert had read *L’Art de vérifier les dates*, that accessible guide to the problem (de Biasi, 918–20).

Anne Green’s study of *Salammbô* shows that Flaubert had read his Plutarch as attentively as he had read Polybius, and the synchronic chart of events contemporary with those of the Inexpiable War (Green, 145–6) indicates that Flaubert was as concerned with historical context as with the dates from the Athenian calendar provided by Plutarch’s *Life of Furius Camillus* (ibid., 126–7). The responses to Sainte-Beuve and Froehner (II,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

75iff.) show Flaubert's concern to establish an awareness of historical 'fact' insofar as it could be gleaned from every form of reference to a wide variety of sources, including a visit to the sites of the events. This is not the concern of an art-for-art's-sake writer who eschews any relationship with 'reality', however textual that 'reality' may be.

During his school days, Flaubert's strong interest in history (Starkie, 19ff.), fostered by Chéruef and Gourgaud-Dugazon, formed the basis for the many historical subjects in the juvenilia. What also emerges over the course of his career is an equally strong interest in time measurement in its wide variety of forms, as *TSAI* shows: 'L'arbre de l'Eden qui portait chaque année douze fruits rouges comme du sang, c'est la femme' (1, 398). Woman's body as a menses-calendar is one of the earliest parallels to the moon as measurer, and Flaubert's correspondence features repeated references to calendrical phenomena:

'A la 2e h[eu]re du jour,
le ge jour des calendes de juillet,
mardi, jour de Mars (bière de).' (C1, 65).

For the equinox of 21 September 1841, Flaubert observes to Ernest Chevalier: 'Le temps n'est plus où les cieux et la terre se mariaient dans un immense hymen' (C1, 85). 24 June, *la saint-Jean*, is recognised as the longest day of the year when the sun turns as red as a carrot (C1, 23), and as the 'époque où l'on tond les moutons' (C1, 177).

L'Art de vérifier les dates (1783) was Ginzler's source for the times at which the Gregorian calendar superseded the Julian, and also provided tables enabling the reader to establish the day-date correlation for a point in time and the dates on which the festivals relating to Easter occurred. As the *carnets* show, Flaubert also showed an interest in its information regarding the Indictions, the birth of Christ, the various versions of the nineteen-year lunisolar cycle and the correlation between the Athenian year and the Olympiads (de Biasi, 918–20). These are not the interests of a writer whose concern is merely to match

mood and atmosphere, with scant attention to anomalies in the chronological development of his narrative.

Indications of the ways in which ‘writing with time’ can be used to encode cryptic messages are afforded by such gems as Gustave’s informing Ernest Chevalier that their friend Alfred is to be married in a fortnight, when the date of Gustave’s letter is *4 June 1846* (C1, 269). Since Alfred Le Poittevin was married on *6 July 1846*, the solution to the contradiction is afforded by the fact that *18 June* is the thirty-first anniversary of Napoleon’s final battle: their friend was about to meet his Waterloo. By far the most impressive of these cunning chronological contradictions occurs in *BeP*, when the simple device of referring to a *Sunday 20 March* which should be *Sunday 20 June 1841* produces a coincidence of *20 March* and *20 June*, so that the ten-day ‘Journey to Chavignolles’ time run becomes a condensed version of the Glorious Hundred Days of *20 March* to *29 June 1815*.

In *ESII*, a similar encoding is achieved by skipping a day: as the notes show, Flaubert was aware that the fighting on the boulevards ended on *4 December 1851*, which leads Gothot-Mersch to ask why Flaubert should choose *5 December 1851* for the death of Dussardier (G-M, 47) by the simple device of writing ‘le surlendemain’. One of the answers is that such a displacement creates a five-day time run which places the *1–5 December 1851* period in parallel with the *1–5 May 1847* period of the Champ de Mars and its aftermath. Another is that *5 December 1844* is the date when the Blind Man whose body is a ‘tête guillotinée’ is introduced to *MB* on the anniversary of the beginning of Louis XVI’s trial, and of Napoleon’s desertion of the army which was limping home from Moscow.

The system of five- and ten-day time runs, in which the penultimate and antepenultimate days respectively are occulted, is a sophisticated procedure which was developed over time. It is foreshadowed in the period of the elopement in *ESI* and begins to emerge in the period of Emma’s death in *MB*. By *Salammbô*, the system is in place, but it is the *chef d’oeuvre*, *ESII*, which exploits the method to the full. Nowhere is the system more comfortably ensconced than in *BeP*, however, where the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

many resonances established by the temporal manipulations in the earlier works produce a form of *mise en abyme* of the Flaubertian literary enterprise.

Salammbô is a crucial step in the development of the scheme. Through the fact that the Babylonians, whose calendar is the basis of the Canaanite one, used a six-month year concurrently with a twelve-month year (Bickerman, 65), Flaubert formed the habit of thinking in terms of a six-month displacement, which explains why the 'tête de veau' incident on 23 April 1848 in *ESII* bears so many resemblances to the 'nouveau' episode on 23 October 1827 in *MB*. However, the habit was older than *Salammbô*, as is illustrated by Flaubert's comment on his début to Ernest Chevalier on 22 September 1856: 'Je perds ma virginité d'homme inédit ... le premier octobre. Que la *Fortune-Virile* (celle qui dissimulait aux maris les défauts de leur femme) me soit favorable!' (CII, 634). *Fortuna Virilis* belongs to 1 April, under which date Ovid (*Fasti*, 199) gives an identical description of her functions. The reader who wants to understand the chronological system in Flaubert must pay attention to the slightest hints regarding the temporal situation, must learn to mistrust both the characters and the narrators (who are all equally subject to a vanity born of the desire to maintain cherished illusions), and must check the Flaubertian text against its 'pre-texts' in order to question the motivation of discrepancies.

Underlying this procedure is a repeated Flaubertian assumption: that reading is the ultimate act of laziness and vanity unless the reader becomes as active a participant in the process of textual construction as the writer is. If, like Flaubert's protagonists, the reader is willing to suspend disbelief concerning flagrantly anomalous statements about time, then that reader is overlooking the signposts that point to danger in the reading of both life and texts.

The sense of danger connected with the unfolding of time concerns the process of censorship, both personal and political. As the *Petit Larousse* informs us, the *calendarium* itself is a *registre de dettes*, a balance sheet in both the metaphorical and the literal senses. Because Flaubert's protagonists pay scant attention to

that balance sheet with life, they are brought down by others whom they have offended, or who have sought to exploit them after recognising their victims as blind to minute discrepancies. The act of writing for publication is always a challenge to the powers-that-be, in both the political and the personal senses: self-revelation is as damaging to one's personal illusions as it can be to the political regime which is the inevitable subject of such a subversive activity as writing.

Writing with time is a way of balancing the *registre de dettes* by settling scores and indulging in self-mockery. While a Napoleonic regime is an obviously oppressive setting for a novelist who has something to say with a vengeance, no political rule is as critical as today's writer is of yesterday's writing. The writer is a hero precisely because he stretches the bounds of the possible by the massive labour of a vocation which has the compulsion of Destiny. Like the imperial conqueror, he remakes the world in his own image and suffers for his efforts; like the hero, he is honoured after his death by devotees who make pilgrimages to his cultic sites, especially his tomb, and who honour the anniversaries of his birth and death.

The telling of 'time lies' is far from difficult in the context of a chronometrical system which calls the months by the 'wrong' names (September is not the 'seventh' month), which calls a week 'huit jours' and a fortnight 'quinze jours' and which has conflicting definitions as to what its basic unit of measurement, a 'day', is. The *calendarium* is always an ally of such fortunate friends of time as Lheureux, who defrauds the gullible Bovary by the simple act of defining '9bre' as September instead of November. In the *NV* of *MB*, Charles's thousand-franc loan made on 1 November is due for repayment the following 1 November (*NV*, 451). In the *DV* it is repayable, along with a year's interest, on 1 September (I, 646). Such inattention to temporal detail as is shown by Charles Bovary is repeated in the general sphere by all of us when we make use of any collective chronometrical term. Whether that term is a week, a month, six months, a year or several years, it is almost always understood as an approximation, as though time in larger slabs were something vague and ungraspable. The writer takes advantage

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

of that mental habit of temporal fuzziness to create precise but imperceptible patterns, which add a cryptic commentary to his narrative through the anomalies of time measurement itself.

Gustave Flaubert was one of the ‘victims’ of a temporal anomaly: the fact that, although in the modern era the conventional beginning-point of a twenty-four-hour period is midnight, the oldest definition of a ‘day’ is from sunrise to sunrise. He was born at 4 a.m. on *13 December 1821*, as Naaman’s reproduction (p. 18) of the handwritten birth certificate indicates. Yet the date of birth of an infant so weak that he was not expected to survive was registered as *12 December*, partly to avoid the ‘néfaste’ associations of the number thirteen, but also because of a long-term practice of defining the time of birth by the sunrise-to-sunrise count. Sunrise in Rouen in December occurs at about 8 a.m. (Bovet, 6), so Gustave’s official birthdate, acknowledged by him throughout his life but undermined in his fictions, is four hours out of date in either direction. If he had been born four hours earlier, then registered time would have coincided with experienced time. If he had been born four hours later, then the real date of birth would have been acknowledged in the recorded date of birth. This is not a minor point, for we may state, as a general rule, that whenever a period of four hours is enigmatically dropped from a Flaubertian narrative, that point in the narrative is, in some sense, the date of the writer’s birth or conception. Flaubert continued to acknowledge *12 December* in his ‘non-fictional’ writing throughout his life, because maintaining the fiction made him ‘twyborn’ – like all mythic heroes – and gave him a special temporal relationship with one mythic hero in particular.

Dates and words are intimately interconnected: through the festivals celebrated in the many calendars which have influenced the ones in current use, through seasonal phenomena such as sunrises, lunar phases, variations in flora and fauna patterns, and through rebuses and motifs which have a personal significance in the writer’s or the nation’s historical imagination.

The fact that many Flaubertian dates happen to be Napoleonic dates as well is a reflection of the inheritance passed from

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

one generation to another and from the anterior to the posterior in general. A heroic figure such as Napoleon Bonaparte changes the mental complexion of all who come after him while simultaneously reaffirming the links with all who have gone before. Alexander and Hannibal are more real because Napoleon's feats encourage comparison with them, and the writer, though always the enemy and rival of the conqueror, finds an appropriate basis for comparison in another son of the Sacred Soil of France who shares the writer's ability to remake the map and the calendar in his own image.

Romanticism in the nineteenth century had produced a tendency to authorial self-dramatisation and a penchant for encoding the least favourable elements of one's contemporaries' biographies in literary texts. In such an atmosphere of self-indulgence, Flaubert expounded the doctrine of impersonality, but always to those who, like Louise Colet, ran the risk of jeopardising the quality of their literary output by sacrificing objectivity in the name of revenge and the exploitation of the fame of others. In fact, there is a repeated pattern of interrelationship between autobiography, history and myth in Flaubert's literary texts which shows that he was concerned to reflect the flaws in the glass which warp/shape any chronicler's attempts to 'see' the world. Each of us acts upon time and is acted upon by time, and the interweaving of Flaubert family history with Europe's history and myth is an acknowledgement of the power of the personal in any attempt at objective portrayal.

Claudine Gothot-Mersch has, in one article alone, articulated the problems of chronometry in Flaubert's works. The thoroughness with which the temporal discrepancies are highlighted in this communication enables the most basic questions about Flaubert's method to be posed. What if those 'non-sequiturs' are consistent and have been followed up in the narration of Flaubert's texts? What are the effects of dropping a year or two here and there or giving impossible dates for events?

The first effect is to highlight suppressions/repressions of time and of the events those periods imply. In *ESII*, the

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Claire Addison

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

dropping of a year on two occasions has the effect of wiping out the period of Flaubert's *crise de Pont-l'Évêque* on 1 January 1844 and of the deaths of a father and a sister on 15 January and 22 March 1846 respectively.

Giving an obviously impossible date or temporal index, such as the timing of Pécuchet's departure from Paris or the *yesterday is equal to five months ago* of Charles Bovary's return to Les Bertaux, is a way of challenging the reader to discover the system which enables the equivalences established by those anomalies to exist. The period between the 'incorrect' date and the 'correct' date then creates a time leap or loop, so that the narration can double back on itself in such a way as to strike twice at the same date, thereby superimposing one set of events on another – as happens on the occasion of the news of Félicité's visitor and of Emma's relapse in *MB* – in order to show the workings of the unconscious of a character and/or of the nation.

One of the great ironies of time measurement is the coexistence of a single point in time with several different dates, a subject exploited in *La Légende de saint Julien l'Hospitalier*. The cult of anniversaries means that we see today's date as a locus for the repetition of past events occurring on the same date; but varying definitions of the beginning point of a 'day', and the measurement of time according to different calendars, mean that a particular moment may be defined as occurring on the date before or after the one enshrined in the calendar, or indeed as ten to twelve days before or after in terms of the calendar of mythical figures and/or saints.

Flaubert's correspondence contains a wealth of temporal lore, from a persistent conviction that all Tuesdays were 'néfaste' (Jacobs, 276¹⁸) to a familiarity with the Coptic religion, 'la plus ancienne secte chrétienne' (*CI*, 559), which enables the writer to encode the original locations of saints' days according to the Coptic and Greek calendars. The latter is the basis of such notations in the *Notes de Voyage* as 'jour de l'an de l'année grecque' for 13 January 1851 (II, 622) and 'l'Épiphanie des Grecs' for 17 January 1850 (II, 568).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

In the course of these pages, we shall discover the compulsive repetition of certain motifs relating to the most personal aspects of both the writer's life and the lives which loomed large in his mind and imagination. The persistent tendency to focus on the period of the conception of Adolphe Schlésinger in the context of a chronology which goes haywire as we approach that date; the repeated staging of the fantasy of Napoleon I's engendering of Napoleon III; and the staging of a real or fantasy elopement point to an awareness that the notion of discrete identity is a myth. The writer is a shared identity, an absorption of models and prototypes whose actions are re-staged in the lives of those acted on by the past. Yet desire is more powerful than action, interpretation than event, so the scenes staged on the dates of earlier events do not imply the occurrence of those events in the writer's life. If Flaubert manufactures a weight of evidence to suggest that he is the genitor of Adolphe Schlésinger and the heir of Napoleon Bonaparte, the inference to be drawn is that these are powerful truths of the imagination rather than brute facts. The game of *cache-cache* betokened by the motif of the *cache-mire* is a statement about the power of the cryptic as long as it remains undeciphered. As an apologia for the undeniably heretical fabric to follow, we offer a *cachemire* adorned with red coral to the reader's gaze: 'Je ne connais rien ... qui nous empêche ... de le croire' (1, 536).