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Stephen Heath  
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## Introduction

‘Ink is my natural element’ (14 August 1853, C)

‘The novelist’s novelist’, wrote Henry James of Flaubert, declaring *Madame Bovary* his masterpiece. Novelist and masterpiece have been decisively influential and remain an inescapable – at times obsessive – fact of modern literary experience. Doubtless the most remarkable testimony to this is the massive study of Flaubert as author of *Madame Bovary* undertaken by the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and still unfinished at his death, after nearly 3,000 pages. Conceptions of the book have varied strongly and importantly: Zola saw it as providing ‘the code of the new art’ he was developing as naturalism; Nabokov regarded it as essentially ‘a prose poem’; Robbe-Grillet today considers it ‘a *nouveau roman* before its time’, unsettling our assumptions of realism and initiating a whole modern ‘practice of writing’.

From the start, moreover, Flaubert’s novel had an intense *social* reverberation. Brought to trial for offences against family and religion, it gained a notoriety that focused it at once as part of a questioning of marriage, sex, and the role of women. Its achievement was to transpose those given social elements into a new configuration that captured and articulated a fundamental experience of the post-romantic, commercial-industrial, democratic period. Indeed, the depiction of Emma Bovary was appropriated as a *general* representation and *bovarysme* entered French and other Western languages as the word for a typical attitude and its understanding. The disturbing aspect of the achievement, to which the trial was one response, involved quite directly Flaubert’s artistic creed of impersonality, which was perceived as leaving his work

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dangerously indifferent, with no clear moral, no message; only what Nietzsche would call 'the desire for nothing' and D. H. Lawrence condemn as a withdrawal from life 'as from a leprosy'. Nietzsche's attack bore too on *Madame Bovary* as exemplary of what he considered the damaging 'feminisation' of modern art and feeling, on the terms of its presentation of – its own implication in – *bovarysme*.

The story of the novel is briefly told: Emma Rouault becomes Madame Bovary, is disappointed in the marriage, has two affairs, catches herself inextricably in a mesh of debts, commits suicide. Its world is that of the provincial life so familiar to Flaubert, and the dissatisfaction with the marriage expresses an overall dissatisfaction with that world, a yearning for *something else* that the affairs cannot give, themselves in the end mere repetitions of the same banality. It is in the writing – in the *style*, to take Flaubert's word for the realisation of artistic vision, for the strength of the conversion of reality into art – that this simple material is produced as a richly complex work. Flaubert is close to Emma, *is* Madame Bovary, yet is also at the distance of his novel, *is* *Madame Bovary* as well as its heroine, is the writer–artist she cannot be. Through her, he records what he too knows as the disillusion that being in this world entails, a withdrawal from life indeed where 'life' in the first instance is the all-englobing reality of their bourgeois society; through the novel, he seeks to attain a value nevertheless, that of art (or Art, the capital letter stressing the value it is), proposed as sole possible fulfilment, sole possible truth to which one therefore owes exclusive commitment – Flaubert duly retreating to the room of his own in single-minded service to style. But then the ideal of art brings an intense problem of writing, since Flaubert the recluse is still bound to his age, entangled in its language and forms, held to a reality that threatens to overtake his novel, as Emma is overtaken, at every phrase. How is style to be secured, the novel made good as art, the distance gained from Emma and her – and his – world? It is these tensions that we read in *Madame Bovary*, that are the matter of its richness.

Hence the story of the novel is also the story of its writing

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in a quite unprecedented way. 'I am a pen-man', declares Flaubert soon after beginning *Madame Bovary* (31 January 1852, C), and indeed he is, living in and through and for words, the right words, suffering in solitude a whole martyrdom of creation. In his correspondence during the years of composition, he details in page after page, letter after letter, his torments as a writer, his conception of style, his literary opinions, his problems with the novel in hand. The letters were personal outpourings, the very antithesis of what art should be, in no way for publication: to insist on impersonality was to insist on the work as self-sufficient, separate from the artist's particular life and beliefs. Where a James would write prefaces to his own novels, essays on the art of fiction, innumerable critical reviews, Flaubert wrote nothing of the kind: readers in 1856 had only the novel, had none of Flaubert's ideas which were precisely elsewhere, in these – private – letters. Yet the latter have since been made available and we now read them too, know their extraordinary documentation of the years of *Madame Bovary*. Without reducing the novel to the letters, there is insight to be gained from grasping it with them in such a way as to understand the particular ideas and meanings and feelings that make up its determining context. How, from where, can Flaubert's identification with *Madame Bovary* be made? What is at stake in the calling of art? And in the writing of *this* novel, the masterpiece of the novelist's novelist?

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### *Chapter 1*

## *Madame Bovary*: composition and context

### Writing *Madame Bovary*

‘What a damned profession! What an infernal obsession!’

(5 March 1853, C)

Flaubert began writing *Madame Bovary* on the evening of 19 September 1851; on the last day of May 1856 he sent the final manuscript to his friend Maxime Du Camp for publication in the *Revue de Paris*. His novel thus represents almost five years of a labour of composition that has become the very example of literary creation, of the vocation of the writer as artist. Two people shared in something of the trials of this labour: Louis Bouilhet, the Rouen schoolfriend, himself a poet, to whom the work in progress was read on Sundays; Louise Colet, the mistress, herself a poet and author, the recipient in Paris of the expression of Flaubert’s passion of writing as recorded in more than 180 extant letters from 1851 onwards. When they broke up in 1854 and the letters came to an end, Flaubert was at the episode of the club-foot, the terms of the novel were set. *Madame Bovary*, indeed, was written to the rhythm of their relationship; or rather, the relationship was carried on to the rhythm of its writing, with meetings as and when this and then that section was completed; ‘We won’t see each other before. . .’ became a constant refrain.

To write to Colet was to write to ‘the eiderdown on which my heart comes to rest and the handy desk on which my mind can open’ (27 February 1853, C). The letters are lengthy, mostly written late at night after the hours of struggle with the novel, as a respite from style: ‘it’s so easy to chatter on about the beautiful but to say in good style “close the door” or “he wanted to sleep” requires more genius than giving all the

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literature courses in the world' (28 June 1853, C). If in the first three months or so of 1853 Flaubert drafted thirty-nine pages of *Madame Bovary*, in the same period he wrote some twenty-three letters to Colet; that of 27 March, for example, running to well over 4,000 words. Untiringly he set out his ideas on the novel in hand and on art in general: 'one must esteem a woman, to write her such things as these' (23 October 1851, C). But then Colet was also a fellow-writer, already an established literary figure on the Paris scene. At the same time that Emma Bovary in her convent would have been delicately handling the satin bindings of keepsakes – elegant albums for women – before blowing back the tissue paper over the prints and losing herself in the world of romance, Colet was contributing to them. *Le Royal Keepsake* of 1842, dedicated 'Aux Femmes', contains her 'Qui est-elle?', the pathetic story of 'a pure woman' who, learning that for years she has been the object of a famous painter's hopeless passion, comes to his sick-bed, disguised as a nun, and gives herself to him in an act of blameless redemption, keeping her identity for ever unknown. At the same time that Flaubert was working on his novel, Colet was publishing volumes of poetry with titles such as *Ce qui est dans le cœur des femmes* (1852) and *Ce qu'on rêve en aimant* (1854), and reproaching him as someone who 'will always have feeling yield to art'. He indeed was offering correction after correction to her poems, trying to counter her use of art as 'emotional outlet', hardening her style against 'the female element' – 'only be a woman in bed' (4 September 1852, C). The commitment must be to art, not sentiment, to art as a calling with style as its aim. Against Colet's fluency, the letters record the pangs of art, give us the torment and something of the terms of the writing of *Madame Bovary*, documenting both the difficulties of this or that episode and those of the overall conception of the novel.

The novel was written in seclusion at Croisset, Flaubert shut in his room, nothing but work, drafting and redrafting in an apparently interminable grind: 'in four days I've done five pages' (16 January 1852, C); 'for my whole week three pages' (26 June 1852, C); 'this whole week in which I've written about

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one page' (3 July 1852, C). Even then the pages may not survive: 'four whole days for one really good page that I'm cutting . . . because it's out of place' (28 November 1852, C). Composition turned first and foremost on the agony of sentences, 'real tortures to write the simplest sentence' (2 November 1852, C). The sentence is the unit of style, the unit of work, the unit of life: 'the rage for sentences has dried up your heart' his mother informed him (27 June 1855, B). When the sentence will not come, he lies 'dazed, inwardly bogged in despair'; when it does, the satisfaction has a sexual intensity, Flaubert talking of 'ceaselessly masturbating [his] head so as to ejaculate sentences' (28 October 1853, C). The sentence is like the line in poetry, requiring the same concern with the placing of words, the avoidance of assonances and repetitions, the variation of pauses; but where poetry has its rules and defined forms, its established poetics, prose is a new and arduous terrain for art: 'How many repetitions of words I have just caught! . . . That is what is diabolical about prose, it's never finished!' (28 June 1853, C). Sentence and style, moreover, can be a trap: 'This book, which is only in style, has style itself as its continual danger. Intoxicated by the sentence, I lose sight of the idea' (23 January 1854, C). As paragraphs are tightened to perfection, so they at once need to be 'unscrewed', loosened to allow movement from one to the next, and so on and on, impossibly. 'So where is style? What does it consist in? I no longer know what it means. And yet, and yet I do! I feel it in my stomach' (29 January 1853, C). Only a saint would take on the atrocious, fanatical labour style requires: 'I love my work with a frenetic, perverted love, as the ascetic loves the hair shirt that scratches his belly' (24 April 1852, C).

Flaubert's priority is art over life, his commitment as artist is this fanaticism of style; at the same time, *Madame Bovary* is proposed as 'a reasonable book' (21 October 1851, MDC). Precisely. The subject is ordinary, provincial, bourgeois; everything is in the art, the style, the artist's work. Yet how reasonable can art be? How far can this subject sustain his ambition for style? The running complaint of the letters concerns the fetidness of

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the matter of the novel, the novelist 'dealing in shit' (21 September 1853, C). Flaubert is sick of it, physically sick; it sends him into a hysteria of *ennui*, with difficulties in breathing, wanting to vomit at table, a full complement of symptoms. From the novel he is engaged on to the age in which he lives and back again, everything is stifling; he, like Emma, cries for 'Air!' (15 July 1853, Victor Hugo). As far as his writing is concerned, this translates into a constant preoccupation with how to write the mediocre well. Form and content are inseparable, *and yet* form and content clash; there are no beautiful subjects, everything is in the art, *but* this novel will never be beautiful because of its subject, *but* the artist can transmute the ugliness of that, *but* then again. . . and so on and on in Flaubert's circle of endeavour and despair.

What is style? The internal strength, the *force* of a work. Only a few months after beginning 'the reasonable book', Flaubert is writing:

What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would hold up on its own by the internal strength of its style, just as the earth, with no support, holds up in the air; a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible, if such a thing is possible. The finest works are those that contain the least matter. . . I believe that the future of Art lies in this direction. I see it growing ever more ethereal. (16 January 1852, C)

Art has priority over life, style is the term of this, the transformation of the real, but also an object in itself, hence the possibility – the ideal – of a book about nothing. Here is a fundamental aspect of the impersonality on which Flaubert lays such stress: the work must hold up on its own, dependent on nothing external and so free from any ties with its author's person.

*Madame Bovary* is conceived too with a more immediate impersonality, that of its very subject. This is not *my* book, insists Flaubert, contrasting it with his previous literary project, *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, a cosmic prose poem relating the temptations of the fourth-century desert father: 'In *Saint Antoine* I was at home, here I'm at the neighbour's' (13 June

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1852, C). If Flaubert can refer to *Madame Bovary* as an 'exercise', it is inasmuch as it represents what he understands as a deliberate movement from the personal to the impersonal, from lyric flow to the hard muscle of making sentences, achieving style. The reasonable book is to mark a break with what went before: gone is the previous ease of *his* style ('dithyrambic and puffed-up', 2 June 1853, C), the loss of which Flaubert laments time and time again as he struggles with his new novel and its fetid, ordinary matter.

'Take a down-to-earth subject, one of those incidents of which bourgeois life is full.' Such was the advice given to Flaubert by Du Camp and Bouilhet in 1849 and which was one beginning of *Madame Bovary*. The advice followed the reading aloud to them of *La Tentation*: thirty-two hours over four days of this just-completed book in which Flaubert had only had to let himself go, free to indulge in lyricism to excess. *La Tentation* indeed was to stay with him for the rest of his life, always in his thoughts, always to be started over again; the day he announced the sending of the manuscript of *Madame Bovary* to Du Camp he also announced that he was reworking *La Tentation*, some extracts from which were then published in the journal *L'Artiste* in the weeks immediately following the last instalment of Emma's story in the *Revue de Paris*. In 1849, however, Bouilhet declares that *La Tentation* should be thrown on the fire and forgotten; Flaubert sets out on his trip to the East under the shock of this blow and returns to write *Madame Bovary*, down-to-earth, *terre à terre*.

## 1830–1850

'alias the last romantic fool' (3 February 1880, Léon Hennique)

Writing to Sainte-Beuve, the most eminent critic of the day, in gratitude for his important review of *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert defined himself as a 'vieux romantique enragé': 'I'm a rabid old romantic, or a fossilised one, whichever you prefer' (5 May 1857). Sainte-Beuve had spoken of the emergence of a new generation of writers, so many anatomists, physiologists,



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realists; which prompted Flaubert to make 'a purely personal point' in his letter: 'Don't judge me by this novel. I do not belong to the generation you speak of, at least that's not where my heart is. I'm insistent on belonging to yours, the good generation, that of 1830.' The 'good generation' here is that of the great moment of French romanticism which Flaubert, in fact younger than Sainte-Beuve by some seventeen years, experienced not in adulthood but in childhood and youth; the 1830s were formative years, but he was of the generation that came of age in the 1840s (Flaubert, like Baudelaire, was twenty-one in 1842) and wrote in the context of the 1850s, after the experience of 1848.

Had Flaubert written nothing after the first version of *L'Education sentimentale*, completed in 1845, he would stand for us as an interesting but minor romantic author. His numerous youthful writings include historical dramas, fantastic mystico-philosophical tales, and autobiographical narratives; with a taste for the heights of emotion, horror, spectacle, colour. His heroes and heroines are beings desperately in thrall to some exorbitant passion – an adulterous woman who kills husband and children in her delirium for her lover (*Passion et vertu*), a human ape who rapes and kills in his frustrated love (*Quidquid Volueris*). The compulsion of desire is expressed in long reveries of escape, 'limitless daydreams' of distant 'exotic' lands: 'Oh! to feel oneself swaying on the back of a camel!' (OC I, 271). Coupled with which is the disillusionment inherent in this 'frenzied race of the imagination', these 'ardent yearnings' (OC I, 249); a frustration that comes down inevitably to a wearied disgust with life: 'Very young, I had a complete premonition of life. It was like some nauseating smell of cooking' (7 April 1846, MDC).

Yearnings and frustration crystallise around the idea of a great love, an idea which the autobiographical narratives (*Mémoires d'un fou*, *Novembre*) intensely record, drawing on the fourteen-year-old Flaubert's encounter with Elisa Foucault on holiday in Trouville in 1836 (Elisa, twenty-five, was there with her husband-to-be and their child). What the encounter gave Flaubert was his image of *the* woman, the passion of an

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essence *woman* that Elisa represented but that no woman could be, that can have no reality – it is precisely fantasy – other than as loss, impossibility (Flaubert in his forties claimed still to be a virgin: none of the women he had slept with were *this* woman, the sole truth of his desire). Such an impossibility sums up that general experience of frustration and disgust – ‘isn’t happiness a metaphor invented one day of boredom?’ (OC I, 252). At the same time as the idea of love and the woman, Flaubert is thus also writing out a negative metaphysics, an anathema on life, in a series of works (*Rêve d’enfer*, *La Danse des morts*, *Smarh*) whose vision is that of the world of human doings seen from on high with Satan as guide to this – his – kingdom: ‘the world is hell’ (this from the brief 1835 *Voyage en enfer*, OC I, 42). The only expression of any fulfilment is provided by the theme of the pantheistic experience of nature as ‘total harmony’, the revelation of a universal order – an immense sympathy of things and beings – whose laws are outside human understanding, ‘that ecstasy alone can hear’ (OC I, 257). Flaubert from early on feels himself able to enter into a stone or an animal, to become nature in passionate realisation of its harmony – ‘the brother in God of everything that lives’ (26 August 1846, C). Traces of this pantheism can be found in *Madame Bovary* in the moments of vibrant silence known by Emma in the forest when she yields to Rodolphe (II, 9) or in the garden with him, beneath the stars, on their nightly encounters (II, 10).

For a number of reasons romanticism came late in France, lagging behind its major developments in Germany and England. Innovation was difficult in a country where literature was so powerfully institutionalised, regulated through academies, official theatres, and so on. Moreover, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods were hostile to any attack on canonical French models in favour of foreign ones – Shakespeare versus Racine – and the 1789 Revolution anyway dispersed the literary audience into exile and emigration, breaking up the *salons* that could have provided the initiating context for the new literature. What the Revolution offered too was a full-