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Aaron Matz
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CHAPTER 1

Order and Origin

Where should we look for the origins of the modern novel? There is a way of answering which isolates particular national traditions, so that *Dead Souls* inaugurates the Russian novel and *Robinson Crusoe* or *Pamela* initiates the English. But there is a more capacious reply to the question too, one that seeks some common fount from which a larger and more comparative idea of modern fiction springs. And to that wider question there is one answer that recurs more than any other.

"The novels of Flaubert appear to us today to mark a turning point in the history of the novel," wrote Peter Brooks a generation ago. Flaubert "is the novelist," James Wood wrote at the turn of this century, "from whom the Modern, with all its narrow freedoms, flows" (several years later Wood added: "Novelists should thank Gustave Flaubert the way poets thank spring: it begins again with him"). "The First Modern Novel" is the title for the culminating chapter of Mario Vargas Llosa's study of Flaubert and *Madame Bovary*. These terms – history of the novel, modern – are used capaciously. For Anglo-American critics Flaubert can be a progenitor of James and Wharton, an ancestor of Joyce and Beckett. The French have meanwhile understood him as something more than a French writer, rather as one of their principal offerings to the world republic of letters. When Sartre wrote that "Flaubert, creator of the 'modern' novel, stands at the crossroads of all our literary problems today," he did not mean the problems facing only France.[1]

We might well ask what we mean when we say that Flaubert initiated the modern novel. Usually *Madame Bovary* serves as the principal exhibit: the narrator is detached and the milieu is ordinary; the tone is cold and the detail is fastidious. The ironies are stifling. An impression of order and control is compulsory. Here the *Correspondance* is brought in too, for if *Madame Bovary* is the prototype then Flaubert's letters are the manual. They explain how the modern novelist came to write his modern books.

Style is not ecstasy but labor. Writing prose is a torture like wearing a hair shirt that scratches, or weights on one's knuckles that slow down composition, as Flaubert himself testified. Such discipline serves always to venerate art: the sanctity of the aesthetic demands unconditional fealty and obedience. The reader is imagined not in popular but in exclusive terms; indeed the best thing to do with one's supreme, unadulterated novels may be not to publish them at all.

I am among those readers who value the *Correspondance* as an achievement equal in value, originality, and force to any of Flaubert's novels. (André Gide was an early advocate of this view.) But often discussion of Flaubert's letters is reduced to their scenes of the writer's labor, or his fetish of prose style. The shape of a sentence or the direction for how to approach one's own work as a serious craftsman are ancillary concerns, and they keep biography unnecessarily cordoned off from criticism. There are more trenchant questions to ask about a modern artist's letters, especially if they offer a kind of theory of the novel, as Flaubert's do. What is the writer's temperament or constitution, seething like magma under the crust of prose? And namely: what can a temper vented in epistolary form tell us about attitudes expressed more obliquely in the novels?

If it is the astringency, the austerity, and the distillation of Flaubert that mark him as the forerunner of twentieth-century writers like Beckett or Robbe-Grillet, such qualities must be understood as constitutional long before they are stylistic. The pronouncements about art in the *Correspondance* arise from dispositions and prejudices which then get resolved in literary form. Here the context of those pronouncements, the situations from which Flaubert's views on the novel sprang forth, are essential. Let us take one example: the famous December 9, 1852 letter to Louise Colet, which has often stood as the preeminent apologia for the modern narrator's necessary invisibility and non-interference. Flaubert scolds Balzac for his irritating penchant for giving opinion and commentary. Instead, he explains, "The author, in his work, must be like God in the universe, everywhere present and nowhere visible. Art being a second nature, the creator of this nature must act according to similar processes: one must sense in every atom, in all aspects, a hidden and infinite impassibility."

This crystalline axiom is always cited on its own, presented as a self-contained utterance of genius, and understandably so. But what was going on in the background? In these same weeks of December 1852 Louise Colet told Flaubert that her period was late. The novelist, absorbed in writing *Madame Bovary*, was horrified that he might become a father.

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Eventually she let him know that the danger had passed. Here is his next letter, from two days later:

> I begin by devouring you with kisses, such is my joy. Your letter from this morning has lifted a terrible weight from my heart. It was time. Yesterday I couldn't work all day. . . . For three weeks I have suffered horribly from apprehension: I thought about you every minute, but in a disagreeable way. Oh! yes, this thought tortured me. . . . It would take a whole book to develop, in a comprehensible way, my feeling in this regard. The idea of giving life to someone *fills me with horror*. I would curse myself if I became a father. A son of my own, oh no, no, no! may my flesh perish completely, and may I never transmit to anyone the nuisance and the indignity of existence. My entire soul rebels against it . . . In any case, praise God, there is nothing to fear.[2]

The fervor with which Flaubert expresses both his terror and his relief might come, for some readers, as a surprise: this seems very far from the detachment for which he is commonly celebrated. But this is an entirely typical passage. His antipathy toward procreation carries some of the same passion as his hostility to the garrulous Balzacian narrator. Indeed these two concerns from early December 1852 resemble one another in a telling way. They both involve Flaubert's wish – or need – for some entity to be absent: the interfering narrator, the unwanted child. The author who appears conspicuously and speaks volubly in the work does not belong. Neither does the imagined offspring: the perpetuation of existence produces a similar disgust, since it marks another misapplication, a mistaken extension of oneself further into the realm of indignity. These two sentiments, or convictions, were coincident in Flaubert's imagination and recorded at the same time. Yet it would seem, from the long history of reading Flaubert's letters for their inexhaustible wisdom, that one kind of aversion is deemed literary while the other is ignored, presumably because it falls into the realm of the merely personal.

In fact these two aversions are equally native to the Flaubertian imagination – and they are equally foundational for the development of the modern novel. The narrator who is like God in the universe: this is an article of faith that we will find explicitly in Joyce. The novelist who is haunted by a fear of bringing new life into the world: this is a profile we will see in Hardy, Lawrence, Woolf, Lessing. They are both part of the history of the novel since the middle of the nineteenth century, and they both come mostly from Flaubert.

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There are other kinds of refusal that we associate with Flaubert, of course. The antipathy to having a child is impossible to detach from other objections and predilections which are rooted deeply in both his life and his work, and which have themselves become characteristic of our image of the modern writer. That writer will disdain the bourgeois, live isolated from commerce and distraction, and (if at all possible) avoid marriage and other entanglements. Order must be maintained at all costs. An early letter, written at age 25, makes it clear that for Flaubert these were interlocking desiderata from the beginning: he advises a friend to "stay always as you are, don't marry, don't have kids, have as few attachments as possible, give as little room to the enemy as you can" (1, 261).

A common designation for Flaubert, in light of this attitude, is that he was a "monk." The word suggests self-removal, self-discipline, and (not least) celibacy. Flaubert was "afraid of life," Henry James noted more than once, following a confession Flaubert once made.[3] The solution was to retreat from the degraded arena of the world into a sanctum of art – his house at Croisset would do – where he could be untouched and unsullied. The simplest reading of this wish emphasizes its practicality: having children interferes with work. The serious writer should not have to tolerate such an overwhelming burden of distraction. For many people this is the first thing that comes to mind when asked why an artist might have hostile feelings toward procreation. It is a coherent concern, and a persistent one, and it will surface later in this book, especially in the chapter on Virginia Woolf. Cyril Connolly's maxim – "There is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall" – is the best-known formulation of this idea.[4]

The autonomy of the modern artwork depends in no small part on the autonomy of the modern artist.[5] That freedom can take many forms – freedom from the demands of the marketplace, freedom from political affiliation – and certainly we would be naïve to underestimate freedom from domestic responsibility. Connolly's proverb is a very modern one: its premise about good art takes for granted a certain professionalization in the making of that art, and therefore it supposes that this serious purpose might have something like an enemy in the first place. It is not something we can imagine Montaigne saying. (But nor does its contemporary familiarity mean that it can't be contested by a modern writer. J. G. Ballard, in his autobiography *Miracles of Life* – the title of which honors his own children – had no use for Connolly's aphorism: "My children were at the centre of my life, circled at a distance by my writing . . . My greatest ally was the pram in the hall.")[6]

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It is difficult to think of a writer who guarded his quarantine, his shelter from interruption, more jealously than Flaubert. Indeed it would not be grandiose to say that this need for withdrawal is intertwined with his doctrine of authorial impersonality, itself a means of avoiding commitment and affiliation. But this is not the only (or even the primary) basis for his particular aversion. His hostility toward reproduction stems not only from how it may interfere with something else but from what it is in itself. From an early age Flaubert was disturbed by the prospect of adding new things to the world, of participating in any enlargement of it. Inconveniently, this is what a writer is supposed to do; and yet even the bringing forth of new books, to be published and circulated, was for Flaubert the source of significant ambivalence and anxiety. A similar trepidation concerning new life arises throughout the *Correspondance*. An early instance appears in 1846, when he was 25: he was absorbed in a first affair with Louise Colet, and as in the episode six years later, she thought she might be pregnant. She raises the idea of a child together. He insists he would love that child but also calls her wish "terrible for my happiness"; he would rather jump into the Seine to prevent bringing such an idea to fruition (1, 311–12).

Gradually the attitude gains an expression that seems not merely personal but theoretical. A somewhat conventional male panic at the prospect of fatherhood deepens into a more capacious anti-natalist position. The next month he writes to Colet, who seems in these weeks to have been considering getting an abortion: "All the better if I have no posterity! My humble name will die away with me and the world will continue . . . The idea of absolute nothingness pleases me." A month later: "I would not have been a bad father. But what is the point of bringing forth from nothingness something that stays sleeping there?" Two months after that, near the end of 1846, he writes again to Colet: "I have always argued against the idea of having a child. What a sad being I would create! He would want only to speak, and would ask to die before being born" (1, 342, 375, 410).

These are passages just from the first volume of the *Correspondance*. A similar thread runs through many of the later letters too. In his twenties Flaubert seemed already determined by a tendency we will see soon again in Hardy: a kind of terror of addition or multiplication. This can take the form of an ambivalence toward literary expression (as with the Hardy who "resolves to say no more"), a paradoxical condition for a writer but a characteristic one for twentieth-century figures like Beckett; and it can take the related form of a deep misgiving toward the addition of new existence through procreation, which Hardy will also share. In Flaubert's morbid

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imagination of a hypothetical child who would ask for death before birth we can detect a prefiguration of Father Time.[7]

This may seem like a logical attitude for Flaubert, a novelist who wrote each day only to pare what he had drafted back to nearly zero. His fixation on order and restraint demanded consistent omission and exclusion: he was more comfortable in subtraction than addition, more sculptor than painter. Expansion of the world of matter brings with it the threat of dishevelment, even entropy. Reproduction, on the Flaubertian view, might in fact be worse than addition, for it is more like perpetuation, the extension or copying of something that already exists, and so resembles his ultimate bugbear: cliché. We can say that procreation resembles both poeisis *and* mimesis, and that for Flaubert each one was a mistake. It is clear from the early letters that he chafed at the idea of creating new life in part because he resisted the idea of extending his own self.

According to Sartre this is a lesson not only of the early letters but of Flaubert's earliest works of fiction too. The first volume of *L'Idiot de la famille*, his enormous study of Flaubert, is devoted mostly to the Flaubert family drama that Sartre divines from these sources, and in juvenilia like *Quidquid volueris* and *Rêve d'enfer* Sartre sees a recurring pattern of "Gustave's horror of fecundity." What so offends Flaubert, Sartre writes convincingly, is not the randomness or arbitrariness of existence but rather its deliberativeness.

> Gustave's basic grievance against his parents does not have to do with the accident of his birth. Certainly he feels the accident – it is the factitiousness, the singular flavor of experience as it expresses in its irreducible but "indescribable" originality the uncontrolled violence of a copulation, the spouses abandoned to the filthy kitchens of nature. But it is not so much this brief folly that he despises; quite the contrary, it is the premeditation. No, the anthropoid is not the product of chance: he has been sought for a long time and sought *precisely as he is*. Achille-Cléophas had decided that he would engender Gustave, and it is indeed Gustave that he engendered. (206)

"Gustave's rancor," Sartre claims, "is so tenacious it leaves him *all his life* with a radical disgust for procreation." Sartre goes further: this rancor may represent the very motivation for the adversarial nature of Flaubert's writing, the craving for reprisal that, as we so often sense, underlies nearly all his work. Sartre writes of the young Flaubert's need for "obliging the adults to recognize that they are the ones, through their cruel and stupid designs, who bear the entire responsibility . . . Gustave at fifteen years old – at thirteen too, we shall soon see – wrote *in order to be understood and to be avenged*" (207–11).

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That this raw theory has the ring of truth is a testament to both Sartre's brilliance and Flaubert's consistency. If the writer feels existence to be a burden then he must seek to hold to account those responsible for it. The haphazardness of procreation is something we will see in *Jude the Obscure*: Father Time is enraged at Jude and Sue because they participate in an action, the sex which he does not understand, without stopping to consider its implications. The different scenario of Sartre's Flaubert, where it is not the randomness but the calculation that so incenses, is closer to the logic of a different writer I will consider in the following pages. In *Erewhon*, Samuel Butler imagines a world where parents seem somewhat more alert to what they are doing through procreation, and they are so organized in their guilty feeling that they have conspired to make their children take responsibility for their existence. Butler's story of resentment and reprisal, developed across both *Erewhon* and *The Way of All Flesh*, is similar to Sartre's chronicle of Flaubert: the child has not asked to be born, holds a grudge against his parents for it, and eventually seeks to take revenge through the only path he knows – literature.[8]

Biographers are now more likely than they used to be to note Flaubert's antipathy toward the prospect of having children.[9] In these accounts, though, Flaubert's anxiety about Louise Colet's late periods tends to be an idiosyncrasy of character that trembles in the background, while in the foreground the master writes his novels. But there is a theory of the novel in these epistolary complaints about procreation. For Flaubert this kind of prejudice or distaste could be seen, to begin with, as a precondition for the aridity of so much of the fiction: the aura of sterility that looms over *Salammbô*, for example, or the recurring protestations against fecundity in *La Tentation de saint Antoine*. These landscapes of barrenness and privation hold an unmistakable appeal to Flaubert; we can nearly hear his 1846 paean to "the idea of absolute nothingness," and understand his valuation of such a concept as much more than the ode to style (the famous "book about nothing" that he aspired to write) that it's usually taken for.

*

It is in the three major novels – *Madame Bovary*, *L'Éducation sentimentale*, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* – that we can see how the deep misgivings concerning procreation, expressed so volubly and repeatedly in the *Correspondance*, take complex representational form. *Madame Bovary* is the novel Flaubert was writing in 1852, when Louise Colet's apparent pregnancy moved him to say that "It would take a whole book to develop, in a comprehensible way, my feeling" about "the idea of giving life." Is *Madame Bovary* that book? On the one hand it seems to say very little on the subject. Most critical accounts of Emma Bovary's experience of marriage and adultery neglect altogether the facts of her pregnancy and her daughter. But viewed from a certain angle this is Flaubert's first significant effort to work through the problem.

It begins with the final line of Part I, a one-sentence paragraph that marks the Bovarys' relocation from Tostes to Yonville-l'Abbaye: "When they left Tostes, in the month of March, Madame Bovary was pregnant."[10] Then there is a vacant white space. Part II begins on the following page. This moment recalls the chapter break near the end of *L'Éducation sentimentale* that Proust preferred to anything else in that novel, due to its masterful pacing and marking of time: "In my opinion the most beautiful thing in *L'Éducation sentimentale* is not a sentence, but a blank."[11] The lacuna that follows the acknowledgment of Emma's pregnancy produces a similar effect: a vacuity of time, even a void suggesting that there is something that defeats speech. Nothing more is said about Emma's pregnancy in those opening chapters about life in Yonville, which are instead given over to the description of the mediocre landscape, the introduction of Homais, and the flirtation with Léon.

Does the novelist's silence on this subject mean that it's not quite narratable, or simply not worth narrating? (Again a tendency in Flaubert seems quintessentially, prototypically modern: Gérard Genette calls such silences Flaubert's "project of *saying nothing*, this refusal of expression that inaugurates the modern literary experience.")[12] Flaubert says nothing about the pregnancy until it is nearly time for Emma to give birth. But here the experience of pregnancy is circumscribed by an oppressive irony: seen less through Emma than through her dim husband. Charles gazes at her, wants to touch her and call her little mommy. "The idea of having impregnated her was delectable to him," Flaubert writes, "Finally he lacked nothing. He knew everything about human existence, and he sat with serenity, both elbows on the table" (405). Here a gender division from the *Correspondance* has been reversed: the woman is ambivalent, and the man is not an austere anti-natalist but a fool whose uxoriousness is second only to his self-satisfaction and mistaken pride. Charles's delight at his fertility seems dubious enough; his serene confidence about knowing life is more ominous yet.

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For her part Emma wants a son: “the idea of having a male child was like having a hoped-for revenge for all her past powerlessness.” This means of course that Flaubert will give her a daughter:

> She gave birth one Sunday, at around 6:00 in the morning, as the sun came up.
> —It’s a girl! said Charles.
> She turned away and passed out.

Flaubert’s terseness, here as everywhere, creates a particular disquiet. The void opened up by Emma’s unconsciousness is filled in the most alarming way: the repellent bourgeois Homais arrives, pronounces the baby to be in good shape, and before long is suggesting names. Soon he is designated the godfather to the baby, now called Berthe. Before the birth Flaubert had written that Emma “first felt a great astonishment” at being pregnant and “wanted to know what it was like to be a mother,” but that she mostly experienced the frustration at not being able to spend much money on cradles and baby clothes. Once Berthe arrives things turn even worse, with the newborn child sucked into a postnatal sphere of inanity and mediocrity.

Flaubert’s reticence on Emma’s sentiments about having a child is consistent with the general inscrutability of her character in the novel’s early chapters. *Madame Bovary*’s expressions of ambivalence toward procreation are deflected onto the existing child once it appears. Outwardly Emma makes a point of her affection for the child: “She declared that she adored children; it was her consolation, her joy, her craze, and she paired her caresses with lyrical effusions” (422). This sounds a lot like the entry for “Enfants” in the *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*: “Affect a lyrical tenderness for them, when there are people around.”[13] In less public moments a different kind of mother appears. In a scene only a few pages later, little Berthe tries to touch Emma but is turned away repeatedly, the mother pleading with the infant daughter to leave her alone; Berthe ends up falling on a chest of drawers and injuring herself. Emma, contemplating her child, is startled by how ugly she finds her. Later, in one of the few scenes where Berthe appears, Flaubert gives us a long passage of Emma contemplating her misery, written in the *style indirect libre*: “But then who made her so unhappy? Where was the extraordinary catastrophe that had overwhelmed her? And she lifted her head, looking around her, as if to find the cause of what made her suffer” (483). Flaubert provides no answer to this ineluctable question, but the first thing Emma hears is her child laughing. Again

Emma insists on her love for Berthe; again we are left with an acrid sense of her underlying distaste.

In Emma's motherhood Rachel Cusk sees an inevitable contradiction: Emma's urge is to be subject and center, and this cannot be confined by the parameters of a child.

> To love her baby in turn would be to proclaim the limit of herself . . . Motherhood for Emma Bovary is an alias, an identity she occasionally assumes in her career as an adulterer. She is the essence of the bad mother: the woman who persists in wanting to be the centre of attention.[14]

On this view the very existence of a child poses a problem for a certain kind of novelistic protagonist, indeed for a certain kind of novel. The individual moral adventure of the hero, especially the quixotic hero, and perhaps especially the female Quixote, cannot compete with the rival demands of a dependent person. The logic of the novel is centripetal, with all forces converging on the self-consumed protagonist at the center, while the logic of children is centrifugal, as attention and energy – and love, as Cusk notes – flows away from us to our offspring. This means that Berthe is doomed from the start, and that no amount of charm or beauty (which she is shown to lack) could save her from Emma's solipsism. It is the idea of the child rather than the identity of the child that poses such an insuperable challenge for the novel.

Certainly this way of reading *Madame Bovary* helps to account for Berthe's marginality: the girl seems always on the periphery of the action, brought in only when on a whim Emma asks to see her. After Emma's death Berthe is raised by Charles, but after he dies, on the novel's last page, she is foisted first on her grandmother, then on her aunt, and finally sent to work at a cotton mill. The end of Flaubert's novel needs to reckon with the problem of what to do with a child who was never much wanted in the first place – not by her mother, to be sure, but nor perhaps by the novel itself, which has little use for her. Berthe, for *Madame Bovary*, is not so much a discernible character as the residue of the novelist's dilemma, which is how to manage the procreative consequences of sex in a book that is not, finally, very interested in the adult experience of raising small children. Behind this indifference we cannot help sensing that greater Flaubertian antipathy to reproduction – to providing the origins for somebody else – *tout court*.

Some of the writers I discuss in the following chapters will face a similar problem. But I am most interested in the way that an attitude in the novels that may begin as an aversion deepens and expands into a much more