

The Voice of Flaubert

THE LETTERS OF GUSTAVE FLAUBERT 1830-1857

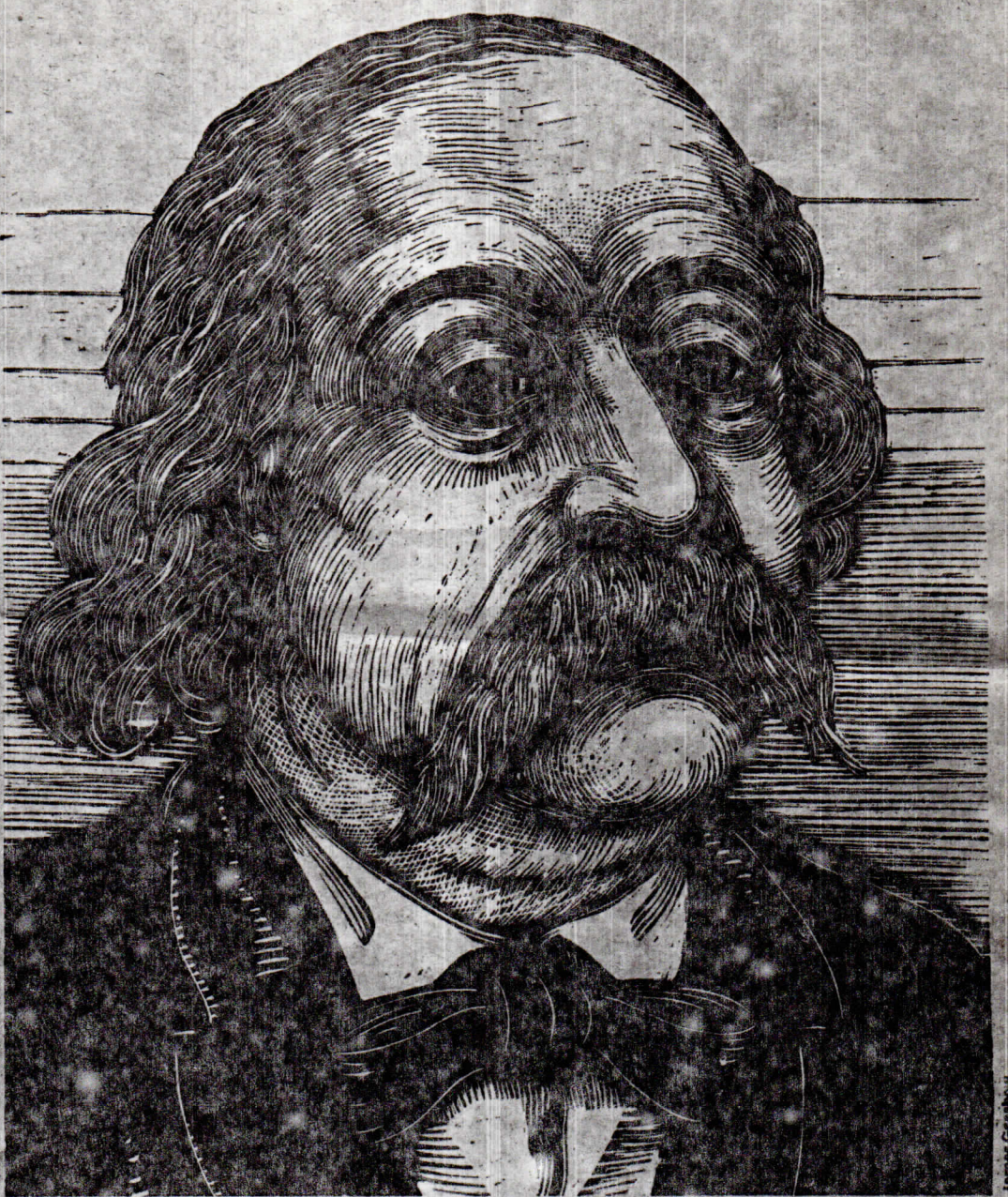
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and translated
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By DIANE JOHNSON

LAST week I spent five days writing one page." What lazy novelist has not felt reproached by the example of the industrious and self-sacrificing Flaubert, toiling over his phrases, eschewing the world, for the sake of his art exacting from himself prodigies of effort, patience and perfect taste. We know of these prodigies mostly from often-quoted passages from his letters: "What trouble my Bovary is giving me! . . . This inn scene will perhaps take me three months, I can't tell. There are moments when I want to weep, I feel so powerless. But I'll die rather than botch it."

Here is a new edition of his correspondence, selected, edited and translated by Francis Steegmuller, the admired biographer and translator of "Madame Bovary," an earlier, briefer volume of the letters, and other works from the French. The Flaubert who emerges in this, the first of two volumes, is reassuringly not quite the long-sufferer we may have thought he was -- he was even odder, and much more a creature of his time and place than his timeless "Madame Bovary" has allowed him to seem. The letters cover the period from 1830, when he was 9, to 1857, after the publication and prosecution (for "outrage of public morals and religion") of "Madame Bovary," and include, most notably, some precocious, prescient letters to a boyhood

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Gustave Flaubert.

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friend, letters to a friend of his young manhood to whom he confides sexual details of an 18-month trip to the Middle East (and other letters about it to his mother), and letters to Louise Colet, who was for some years his mistress and the only woman with whom he would have an extended affair. Mr. Steegmuller's selection, based on the French Pléiade edition being prepared by Jean Bruneau, is accompanied by valuable biographical material and extensive notes.

Flaubert was the son of a provincial doctor of Rouen, brother of another doctor and himself destined for the law, perhaps because, as Jean-Paul Sartre has suggested, his sensitive and bookish nature had made his robust father think him unfit for medicine. He did not finish his law studies, which he hated, because of the onset of rather propitious epileptic fits. He had in fact always wanted to be an author. At 9 he was writing his friend Ernest Chevalier, "if you'd like us to work together at writing, I'll write comedies and you can write your dreams, and since there's a lady who comes to see Papa and always says stupid things I'll write them, too." In this he more or less perfectly foresaw his own artistic direction, except that he would write the dreams, too, and Ernest would become the respectable lawyer.

The epilepsy came on when Flaubert was 24. He lived to the age of 58. "My illness has brought one benefit, in that I

am allowed to spend my time as I like, a great thing in life." And that, on the evidence of these letters, is exactly what he did, settling down to a sedentary bachelor existence with his mother, who lived until 1872. Apart from some travel and social visiting, and an occasional turn in Paris, he spent his life writing — with excruciating deliberation, to be sure, but also with love and satisfaction. The context of his cries of protest — "if you knew how I was torturing myself you'd be sorry for me" — makes them appear a little more

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This is the conclusion

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period, his political conservatism and estheticism from the later one, but his character was unusually consistent. As early as 18, he had expressed the wish simply to "tell the truth: but that truth will be horrible, cruel, naked," a clear intimation of the connection of the daily subjects that concern him in "Madame Bovary" to that most Romantic of emotions, disgust.

When, once, in the stage of wanting to create "great sumptuous things — battles, sieges, descriptions of the fabulous, ancient Orient," he gathered his friends together to read aloud to them from an early version of "The Temptation of St. Anthony," the truthful Louis Bouilhet reportedly advised him to "throw it into the fire and never speak of it again," advice that some readers since have wished he had followed, and advice that doubtless had a salutary effect on his choice of his next subject, provincial adultery. How lucky that his friends did not put his letters into the fire — the fate of many such frank 19th-century letters. In his novels, Flaubert scrupulously followed the example of God. Only in his letters, these brilliant notes from underground, can one hear his unflinchingly interesting human voice.

Flaubert ③

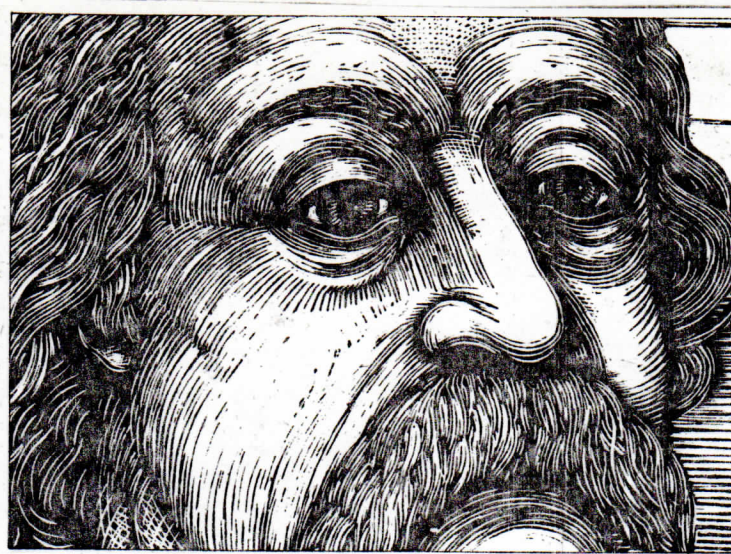
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strategic than may have been thought. To be sure, they contain recognizable articulations of any artist's suffering: "Now, I will confess to you it seems to me I have nothing that everyone else doesn't have, or that hasn't been said equally well, or that can't be said better." But it also seems that he may have exaggerated, no doubt unconsciously, to protect himself from the demands of others, most conspicuously Louise Colet, who lived in Paris and was always teasing him to visit, but perhaps from his poor old mother as well, who may have wished for a more sociable domestic companion than this strange son who spent long hours shut away in his study shouting his phrases aloud.

One interruption in his solitary life of reading and writing was to influence his future choice of Oriental subjects. In December 1849 he set out with a friend, Maxime DuCamp, for a journey of a year and a half to Egypt, Palestine, Turkey, Greece and Italy, ostensibly charged with a trivial government mission but actually poeticizing, romanticizing, photographing, working their way through brothels and Turkish baths with truly astonishing energy and, if Flaubert's letters to Louis Bouilhet do not exaggerate, picking up a truly astonishing amount of venereal disease. In their determination to experience all types of exotic vice they were the most conscientious of travellers, alert to the cross-cultural implications of everything:

"In Beirut I picked up (I first noticed them at Rhodes, land of the dragon) VII chancres, which eventually merged into two, then one. . . . Finally it cured itself. In two or three days the scar will be closed. I'm being desperately careful about it. I suspect a Maronite woman of making me this gift, or perhaps it was a little Turkish lady, The Turk or the Christian? Which? Problème! Food for thought! That's an aspect of the 'Eastern Question' the *Revue des Deux Mondes* doesn't dream of."

This and other more elaborately described anecdotes give one of the most vivid pictures, by any literary man, of what young men of the 19th century expected to do on their Eastern



grand tours. (Young Englishmen seemed to expect they had to travel no farther than France to do such things; but English travel accounts of this period are notably more modest, and Dickens's little references to "oystering and roistering" seem reticence itself.) On the subject of venereal disease, Mr. Steegmuller thoughtfully acknowledges one's curiosity by providing an appendix, "Flaubert on Syphilis," which confirms one's impression that "more or less everybody" was afflicted with this epidemic disease, of which many famous French writers — Mr. Steegmuller mentions Maupassant, Jules de Goncourt and Baudelaire — would die in their 40's; and it does make you wonder about those bouts of blindness and ataxia which afflicted many famous English writers, too, at the ends of their lives.

Although Flaubert's celebrated pronouncement, "Madame Bovary, c'est moi," has usually been understood to express a literary principle about an author's identification with his characters, it is clear from his letters that Flaubert was also expressing his preoccupation, if not identification, with fallen women. "I like prostitution," he wrote Louise Colet. "My heart has never failed to pound at the sight of one of those provocatively dressed women walking in the rain under the gas lamps, just as the sight of monks in their robes and knotted girdles touches some ascetic, hidden corner of my soul." That he suffered to an unusual (or rather, usual) extent from the malady Freud was to describe as the primary degradation in the erotic life of 19th-century men may account as much as artistic self-preservation does for his failure to marry, or even, apparently, to feel any sexual desire for women in the

same station of life as his sister or mother.

His one long romance, with Louise Colet, came to an end because, among other reasons, she insisted on meeting his mother, something he evidently could not bring himself to permit: "It is because I am persuaded that if she were to see you she would behave coldly toward you, less than politely, as you put it, that I prefer you not to see one another. Besides, I dislike this confusion, this bringing together of two very dissimilar kinds of affection."

Colet was a beautiful, rather tiresome woman, a minor poet and friend of other literary and artistic figures living in the semi-respectable demimonde of Paris. She was married, with a daughter by a well-known lover, and had received a little unwelcome notoriety by trying to stab a gossip columnist with a kitchen knife. Her connection with Flaubert was first in 1846-48 and later, after she was widowed, from 1851 to 1855. The affair was broken off because of her importunities about meeting his mother, perhaps because of a general cooling of affection, and when Flaubert's friends warned him that she was hoping for marriage. The last letter, provoked by circumstances not known, is notably cruel: "Madame: I was told that you took the trouble to come here to see me three times last evening. I was not in. And, fearing lest persistence expose you to humiliation, I am bound by the rules of politeness to warn you that I shall never be in."

Luckily for literature, theirs had been a mostly epistolary affair anyway, as Flaubert usually resisted efforts to get him to Paris. The first letters are endearing in their passion and spontaneity, and the later letters abound in thoughtful expressions of his views on art

("What a man Balzac would have been had he known how to write!") and on his own work habits ("This evening I was writing a summer scene, with midges, sun on the grass, etc. The greater the contrast between what I am writing and my actual surroundings, the better I see my subject") and in many of his famous literary dicta — the best-known of which ("an author in his book must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere") he saved and repeated to another lady, to whom he was writing in 1857, after the publication of "Madame Bovary" and its unsuccessful prosecution by the French Government had made him famous.

The correspondence printed here is not complete: For instance, the first 12 letters from Flaubert to Louise Colet have been translated "almost" in their entirety; the last 12, which "abound in outrages," have been omitted, and many are left out in between. This is a matter of editorial decision and could be defended on the ground that people with a scholarly interest will want to read the letters in French anyway, but it doesn't stop you from wishing that they were all printed here, and in their entirety. The usefulness of editions of "selected" letters is always somewhat qualified; and the wisdom of elisions in any printed letters is open to question. Omissions, especially those which seem to wish to preserve the reader's good opinion of Flaubert, instead animate his apprehensions. At the least, one wishes for a fuller discussion of the translator's rationale in determining what to cut out. Shocking passages? Boring ones? Quotidian gossip? At least there is nothing boring or mundane left in these letters, which are interesting in every phrase even though they have a notably difficult subject — Flaubert himself.

Because of "Madame Bovary" he has been perceived as a great realist, and critics have expended much ingenuity reconciling this view to the undoubted romantic tendencies he exhibited in "The Temptation of St. Anthony" and "Salammbô." The impression of Flaubert that emerges from his letters and from the biographical material is decidedly that of a romantic, which is indeed how Flaubert described himself and was seen by later romantics such as Baudelaire, Wilde and Pater. His love of Byron and of Oriental tales arises from the earlier