

Flaubert . . . and the wo

THE LETTERS OF GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, 1830-1857, selected, edited and translated by Francis Steegmuller (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 250 pages, illustrated, \$12.50).

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New York Times Service

At the age of 29, Flaubert had three literary projects in mind. "Une Nuit de Don Juan" consisted chiefly of two dialogues, one about the Don's way of life and one about earthly and mystical love. "Anubis" was an "Oriental" story about a woman who wanted to sleep with a god. A "Flemish" novel would depict a young girl who died a virgin and mystic after living with her mother and father in a small provincial town.

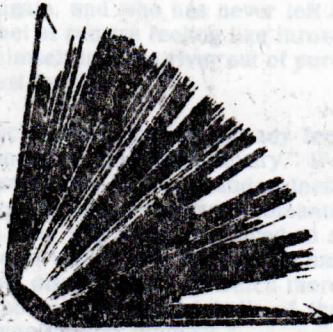
There was no hint that Flaubert was capable of conceiving and writing "Madame Bovary" — except in his letters, which are now brilliantly edited, translated and annotated by Francis Steegmuller. Here, after a few boringly conventional love letters to his mistress Louise Colet, Flaubert finally settles down to his "eternal hubbub of Forms and Ideas."

In one of the longest apostrophes in literature, Flaubert used Louise Colet, who, according to Steegmuller was a "tiresome" woman, as a captive audience for his evolving literary theories. He was talking to himself, but fortunately for us, he wrote it all down and mailed most of it to her. Except for a few letters to friends and to his mother, she was his diary. In an age like ours which is not given to letter writing, we forget what an important part it used to play in people's lives.

In a letter written when he was only 9, Flaubert spoke of writing about "a lady who comes to see Papa and always says stupid things." Referring to a former mistress, he foreshadows his monk-like immersion in work: "I lacked eagerness," he says. "I always lack eagerness except where art is concerned." "My desire," he added, "is too universal, too permanent, too intense, for me to have desires."

"When I was still very young," Flaubert writes, "I had a complete presentiment of life. It was like a nauseating smell of cooking escaping through a ventilator." On a trip to the Middle East with Maxime DuCamp, he says that, on one occasion, when he was seized by prostitutes in a bazaar, he deliberately denied his impulse to go with them, "in order to preserve the sweet sadness of the scene and engrave it deeply in my memory." On another occasion, when he did not abstain, he was bitten by bed bugs and wrote that "for me, they were the most enchanting touch of all. Their nauseating odor mingled with the scent of her skin, which was dripping with sandalwood oil. I want a bitter undertaste in everything."

Cultivating the proverbial melancholy after love, Flaubert said "yes, that man has missed something who



Books



Gustave Flaubert, who (fortunately) talked to himself by mail. The drawing is from David Levine's popular collection of literary caricatures, "Pens and Needles" (Gambit).

man who was his diary ^②

has never awakened in an anonymous bed beside a face he will never see again, and who has never left a brothel at sunrise feeling like throwing himself into the river out of pure disgust for life."

In such letters, we can already feel the mood of "Madame Bovary." We can sense her boredom and sadness struggling with a desperate romanticism. She had been sentenced to a world in which "the picturesque has almost disappeared," in which there are no more "masked balls of the imagination."

Turning to questions of technique, formulating the ideas that will produce "the first modern novel," Flau-

bert writes that "it is no small thing to be simple." "It takes more genius," he continues, "to say, in proper style, 'Close the door,' or 'He wanted to sleep,' than to give all the literature courses in the world."

He worried about "how to move quickly without being dry." He wondered whether he could assume that "ideas are action." He was the first novelist to believe that "an author in his book must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere." He wanted his readers to feel "a kind of amazement," to be "overwhelmed without knowing why," to ask "how is all that done?"

With "Madame Bovary" in mind, we

can see an ironic counterpoint between her grand passion and Flaubert's uninspired relationship to Louise Colet. It is a further irony that, in spite of her ardent feminism, Madame Colet wanted him to write to her not about his ideas, but about her sexual charms.

Steegmuller has eliminated some of Flaubert's letters to her, and in this, as in everything else, he appears to have done the right thing. The first of two volumes of selections from his correspondence, "The Letters of Gustave Flaubert, 1830-1857" is a splendid, intimate account of the development of a writer who changed the nature of the novel.