

9-2009

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Recommended Citation

Goodman, Richard, "The Hermit of Croisset: Flaubert's Fiercely Enduring Perfectionism" (2009). *English Faculty Publications*. Paper 86.
https://scholarworks.uno.edu/engl_facpubs/86

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The Hermit of Croisset: Flaubert's Fiercely Enduring Perfectionism

Richard Goodman

The Writer's Chronicle September, 2009



It could be said that the modern novel, or at least the sensibility of the modern novelist, was born when Gustave Flaubert went to live with his mother.

Big biographies—including a massive five-volume tome by Jean Paul Sartre¹ and a recent 620-page book by Frederick Brown²—have been written about a man who, save for a few interludes, lived his entire life in the same house in the same small village in Normandy. For years, Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) lived with his mother, and, when she died in 1872, he stayed on alone in this village of Croisset. He made his study in a room on the second floor of this three-story house. There he wrote *Madame Bovary*, the book that, in his lifetime, would make him infamous and, after his death, immortal.

Toiling day in and out—or, really, night in and out, since he preferred to work late into the night—he slaved for his art. This relentless and agonizing search for *le mot juste*, the exact word, has made him the icon for the pursuit of literary perfection in the eyes of writers ever after. Writers from Henry James (“...he is for many of our tribe at large *the* novelist...”³) to Hemingway (“He is our most respected, honored master”⁴) to those of the present day like Mario Vargas Llosa (after reading *Madame Bovary* he wrote, “I now knew what writer I would have liked to be”⁵) to Julian Barnes (who, after a pilgrimage to Croisset, wrote *Flaubert's Parrot*) to scores of others, including the contemporary essayist Sven Birkerts, who, as a young writer, had been “deeply influenced by stories of Flaubert’s grail-quest for *le mot juste*”⁶—all have turned to Flaubert for inspiration.

This legacy of inspiration lives on and no doubt will continue to live on. We can, as writers, still count on Flaubert to urge us onward, to show us that what we’re doing is worth the blood, sweat, and tears. Once, when Oscar Wilde was asked what he had done that day, he said, “I was working on the proof of one of my poems all the morning, and took out a comma. In the afternoon I put it back again.”⁷ We may or may not believe Oscar, because he was his own most precious work of art, and he was forever shaping it for public view. (By the way, Wilde once

declared that “Flaubert is my master.”⁸) But when Flaubert writes a friend that he spent three days making two corrections and five days—normally twelve-hour days—writing one page, we believe him. In Flaubert we have, perhaps for the first time, a writer who brought into the center ring of the three-ring circus of writing—and with a bright spotlight at that—the *idea* that we should search for the exact word, the most beautiful sentence, the most realistic scene, as if our life depended on it. He had a fierce confidence that what we do as writers matters and that it is worth a lifetime of sacrifice and pain. The proof is all there in the writing.

He never married. He had no children. He had no profession outside his writing. In his youth, he studied law, but, just before graduating from law school, had a kind of nervous breakdown. He did not return to law. He just wrote. He was eventually dubbed “the Hermit of Croisset.” There, in his house, he lived like a monk. As Timothy Unwin writes in the *Cambridge Companion to Flaubert*,

...up and down the avenue of lime trees in his garden, sometimes in the company of his friend and mentor Louis Bouilhet, Flaubert bellows out the sentences of *Madame Bovary* to the amazement or amusement of the folk in passing river craft. This is the legendary *gueuloir*, or ‘yelling place,’ where the novelist puts his writing through the test of sound, rhythm and vocal fluidity, subjecting it to the final quality control.⁹

This is a man gripped by the throat by writing, a death grip that he cannot free himself of.

It is through Henry James that we have one of the clearest and most appealing portraits of Flaubert. Gustave Flaubert was a large man, six feet tall, with a booming voice, flowing blonde hair—he seems like a character out of *Asterix*—and a dragoon-like drooping mustache. In addition to the house in Croisset, he kept a small apartment on the Right Bank of Paris. From time to time he would emerge from his isolation in Normandy and stay for a month or two in Paris so as to see his friends and to expose himself to humanity. When his mother was still alive, he brought her too, and set her up in a place nearby. There, in his sixth floor walk-up, on Sunday afternoons, he would hold forth, and his artistic friends would flock to see him. On any given Sunday you might find Turgenev, the brothers Goncourt, his old friend Maxime du Camp, the critic Sainte-Beuve, and the young Zola. And, on a few occasions, Henry James. Remember that James knew French intimately. In an essay written after Flaubert’s death, James remembered:

He had... a small perch, far aloft, at the distant, the then almost suburban, end of the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, where on Sunday afternoons, at the very top of an endless flight of stairs, were to be encountered in a cloud of conversation and smoke most of the novelists of the general Balzac tradition.... There was little else but the talk, which had extreme intensity and variety; almost nothing, as I remember, but a painted and gilded idol, of considerable size.... Flaubert was huge and diffident, but florid too and resonant, and my main remembrance is of a conception of courtesy in him, an accessibility to the human relation....”¹⁰

Flaubert never stayed in Paris too long. He always returned to Croisset, to his smoke-filled study, and, in later years, his trips to Paris became less and less frequent. He did indeed become the hermit of Croisset, a monk, and eventually became completely celibate, like a monk—though

Julian Barnes has pointed out that he may not have been so celibate on those infrequent trips to Paris. As a young man, especially in his travels to the Middle East, he had left no stone unturned sexually. No more. In 1878, in a letter to Guy de Maupassant—who was the nephew of an old friend—he wrote, “You complain about fucking being ‘monotonous.’ There’s a very simple remedy: stop doing it.... You *must*—do you hear me, young man?—you *must* work more than you do.... You were born to write poetry: write it! *All the rest is futile.*”¹¹

Flaubert was thoroughly modern in that, like James Joyce who followed him, and William Burroughs even later, he—or, really, *Madame Bovary*—was put on trial for obscenity. It is difficult to imagine a book as mildly sexual—in which there are no four letter words and no explicit sexual consummation—would cause the public prosecutor to demand its destruction. For a man as private and ultimately misanthropic as Flaubert, this was a terrible thing, a trying thing, to be forced into the public eye as blatantly as he was. *Madame Bovary* began its life in the *Revue de Paris* in 1856, to be serialized in six parts. Almost immediately it attracted the government’s eyes and, eventually, the government struck: Flaubert and the owners of the *Revue* were put on trial for “outrage of public morals and religion.” Adultery and suicide, however elegantly portrayed, were just too much for Napoleon III’s regime. Ultimately, Flaubert won his case. But it only enhanced his desire to rid himself of the world at large. He wrote a friend, “...all this has left me so exhausted physically and mentally that I haven’t the strength to walk a step or hold a pen.... I long to return, and forever, to the solitude and silence I emerged from; to publish nothing; never to be talked of again.”¹²

So, wary of humanity, he went back to Croisset. He did write, of course, and he did publish again.

It doesn’t matter to us that Flaubert wrote in French, and not English, because the pursuit of the exact word—and all other forms of artistic excellence he strove for—knows no linguistic barrier. We may not know enough French to read *Madame Bovary* or *Sentimental Education* in the original and pass judgment on whether or not we believe Flaubert achieved his lofty goal, but no matter; the philosophy is fully translatable. The question is: how do we *know* about Flaubert’s relentless work habits, about his tortured search for perfection? And it was tortured: Henry James wrote that Flaubert “felt of his vocation almost nothing but the difficulty.”¹³ (This is not entirely true, as we shall see.) How do we know that he spent three days making two corrections? How do we know that after he composed the suicide scene in *Madame Bovary* where Emma Bovary swallows arsenic, there was such a strong, imagined taste of arsenic in his own mouth that he actually vomited? He did everything to avoid being what we would call a celebrity. According to Julian Barnes, Flaubert “allowed no photograph of him to be published in his lifetime.”¹⁴ (Photographs do exist, so we must put the emphasis on “published.”) He gave no interviews that I know of. He hated the press. (“The press is a school that serves to turn men into brutes, because it relieves them from thinking.”¹⁵) He was an intensely private man.

We know because of his letters. Now, nearly 130 years after his death, almost all of them have been published, and many of them translated into English, as well as into other languages. The fact is, though, quite a few of his letters came into the public view amazingly early. In 1884, just four years after his death, Flaubert’s correspondence with George Sand, the great friend of his

later years, was published with an introduction by Guy de Maupassant.¹⁶ From 1887 to 1893, his niece, Caroline, with whom he had a complex, sometimes troubled relationship, published four volumes of his letters.¹⁷ Henry James reviewed the last volume for *Macmillan's Magazine*. In 1895, the first English translation of a selection of his correspondence was published.¹⁸ Since then, various editions of his letters have been published, including, from 1926-1933, a nine-volume edition¹⁹—right on up to the splendid two-volume English translation by Francis Steegmuller (1980-82) referred to earlier, and to, finally, the Pléiade edition, edited by Jean Bruneau and completed, upon his death, by Yvan Leclerc and other scholars.²⁰ We can be certain there will be more editions.

Restless shade or not, the letters are there for us
to read.... They are endlessly inspiring and uplifting. Flaubert writes about many things to his
correspondents, but he is always obsessed
and doomed by writing, by art.

It is in these letters that we see Flaubert unplugged. They reveal him as his novels never will. He was the man who said that “an author in his book must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere.”²¹ Anyone reading *Madame Bovary* would, I think, be surprised to find the kind of man its creator is within the pages of his letters. He is as stormy and wild as his great novel is calm and collected. His letters make for great reading, and it is here we find the Flaubert that writers have come to put on their pedestals. (We also see him with his hair down in the journals of Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, and there are indeed some wonderful moments in those pages, but there is nothing as direct and forceful as what we get by reading the letters.)

I'm certain Flaubert would have been appalled, horrified, and fiercely angry at this public display of his private thoughts and communications. “May I be skinned alive,” he wrote, “before I turn my private feelings to literary account.”²² He was a preternaturally private man who, for example, hated surprises, hated an unexpected, unannounced guest. With his close friends, he could be extremely warm, generous, and even ridiculous. He became friends with George Sand after the publication of *Madame Bovary* and visited her on several occasions at her house in Nohant. During one such visit, Sand wrote in her diary, “Lunch at noon. Lolo dances all her dances. Flaubert puts on woman's clothes and dances the cachucha with Plauchet. It's grotesque—we all behave like lunatics.”²³ But this is the private Flaubert, and even now I feel his shade moving uneasily at my revelation. Henry James called the publication of his letters by his niece a “posthumous betrayal.”²⁴ In this desire for privacy, Flaubert was like W.H. Auden, who commanded his friends to destroy all his letters.

It seems, though, that very few of Flaubert's letters to his correspondents were destroyed. As Julian Barnes wrote in a review of Flaubert's letters, alarmed “by the posthumous publication of two series of (the writer Prosper) Mérimée's love letters, he had a letter-burning pact in 1877

with Maxime Du Camp, which wiped out ‘our life between 1843 and 1857.’ Two years later, in an eight-hour session with his protégé Maupassant, a lifetime’s incoming correspondence was assessed, ordered, packeted, and in some cases—certainly that of (Flaubert’s mistress) Louise Colet... burnt.”²⁵ This was the exception, however, not the rule. Louise Colet kept Flaubert’s letters to her—as did many others. When we read the Steegmuller translations, we see that Du Camp and—obviously from the letter cited earlier—even Maupassant did not throw all of Flaubert’s letters away.

Restless shade or not, the letters are there for us to read. I, for one, despite a slight sense of voyeuristic guilt, say, *good*. They are endlessly inspiring and uplifting. Flaubert writes about many things to his correspondents, but he is always obsessed and doomed by writing, by art. As Henry James wrote in an introduction to an English edition of *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert “was born a novelist, grew up, lived, died a novelist, breathing, feeling, thinking, speaking, performing every operation of life, only as that votary.”²⁶ These letters, demonstrating his unstinting dedication to his art, can bolster the frustrated and agonized artist. It is a fierce dedication. “When one does something,” Flaubert wrote to his mother from the Middle East, “one must do it wholly and well. Those bastard existences where you sell suet all day and write poetry at night are made for mediocre minds—like those horses equally good for saddle and carriage—the worst kind, that can neither jump a ditch nor pull a plow.”²⁷

He wrote many of his most inspiring letters about art to Louise Colet during the time he was writing *Madame Bovary*. Colet, herself a published poet, was Flaubert’s mistress for a number of years until he cut her out of his life like a dead rose, with a sure swift snap. As far as I know, she never visited him at Croisset. (Well, yes, once—unannounced—but Flaubert was not at home.) They usually had their infrequent rendezvous in Paris or elsewhere. While they were together—which is somewhat of a misnomer, since he saw her irregularly and he never lived with her—he wrote her long letters filled with passion about his feelings for her and his feelings for art. He met her in 1846, when he was twenty-five. She stayed in his life through most of the composition of *Madame Bovary* until, in a curt note written in March of 1855, he dismissed her forever. It is because of these letters that we know so much about Flaubert’s composition of *Madame Bovary*.

He began writing *Madame Bovary* in September 1851, and finished it five grueling years later in April 1856. He wrote to Colet the day after beginning, “Last night I began my novel. Now I foresee difficulties of style, and they terrify me.”²⁸ A month later, he is already in pain: “I suffer from stylistic abscesses; and sentences keep itching without coming to a head. I am fretting, scratching.”²⁹ Yet, onward he plowed. A month later he wrote Colet, “I am advancing painfully with my book. I spoil a considerable quantity of paper. So many deletions! Sentences are very slow in coming.”³⁰ In January of 1852, he proclaimed to her perhaps the core of his literary belief, “...there are no noble subjects or ignoble subjects; from the standpoint of pure Art one might almost establish the axiom that there is no such thing as subject—style in itself being an absolute manner of seeing things.”³¹ This would result in his ideal book—“What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the internal strength of its style.”³²

Flaubert soon realized his book would take him years to write. “There is nothing at once so frightening and so consoling as having a long task ahead,”³³ he wrote to Colet in March of 1852. In April, he wrote to her about the “pleasures” of writing—“I love my work with a love that is frantic and perverted, as an ascetic loves the hair shirt that scratches his belly.”³⁴ In the same letter he summed up for anyone who has ever put pen to paper the bizarre, manic-depressive state writers often find themselves in:

Sometimes, when I am empty, when words won’t come, when I find I haven’t written a single sentence after scribbling whole pages, I collapse on my couch and lie there dazed, bogged in a swamp of despair, hating myself and blaming myself for this demented pride that makes me pant after a chimera. A quarter of an hour later, everything has changed; my heart is pounding with joy. Last Wednesday I had to get up and fetch my handkerchief; tears were streaming down my face. I had been moved by my own writing: the emotion I had conceived, the phrase that rendered it, and the satisfaction of having found the phrase—all were causing me the most exquisite pleasure.³⁵

However, he was soon back to talking to Colet about the difficulties of writing. “What a bitch of a thing prose is!” he wrote to her in July of 1852. “It is never finished; there is always something to be done over.”³⁶ Later that month he wrote, “Writing this book I am like a man playing the piano with lead balls attached to his knuckles.”³⁷ Always his goal was to be absent from his book, “‘How is all that done?’ one must ask; and one must feel overwhelmed without knowing why.”³⁸ In a December 1852 letter to Colet, he sarcastically wrote what must be music to the ears of any writer who has tried to do something new, “I would show that in literature, mediocrity, being within the reach of everyone, is alone legitimate, and that consequently every kind of originality must be denounced as dangerous, ridiculous, etc.”³⁹ How does one go forward against the tide of mediocrity? “One must sing with one’s own voice,” he wrote Colet in January 1853.⁴⁰

“Sentences must stir in a book like leaves in a forest, each distinct from each despite their resemblance.”

In June 1853, he wrote to Colet about the difficulty of the mundane in writing: “It is so easy to chatter about the Beautiful. But it takes more genius to say, in proper style: ‘close the door,’ or ‘he wanted to sleep.’”⁴¹ Then, in the same letter, he vented about critics, and what author who has been scorched by someone in print can’t take solace from this: “Criticism occupies the lowest place in the literary hierarchy: as regards form, almost always; and as regards ‘moral value,’ incontestable. It comes after rhyming games and acrostics, which at least require a certain inventiveness.”⁴² And, no, it isn’t all pain, this writing of *Madame Bovary*. In December of 1853 he wrote to Colet, “...it is a delicious thing to write, to be no longer yourself but to move in an entire universe of your own creating.”⁴³ Then there is a marvelous gem from one of his last

letters to Colet before he tosses her aside: “Sentences must stir in a book like leaves in a forest, each distinct from each despite their resemblance.”⁴⁴

Then the letters to Louise Colet, increasingly more passionate about art than about love, stop.

After Louise Colet’s summary dismissal in 1855, Flaubert would live for another twenty-five years. He would finish *Madame Bovary*, and then write five more books: *Salammbô*; *Sentimental Education*; *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*; *Three Tales*; and the unfinished *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. He continued to write letters, many of them to George Sand, but also to Ivan Turgenev, Alphonse Daudet, Guy de Maupassant, Émile Zola, and, frequently, to his niece Caroline. All of them are inspiring in some way or another to the writer working away alone, often distressed, sometime elated, many times lost and bewildered. The letters bristle with frustration, and with perseverance. In April of 1880, in one of his last letters, written to his niece, Caroline, he wrote, “...will I have reached the point I’d like to attain before leaving my dear old Croisset? I doubt it. And when will the book (*Bouvard and Pécuchet*) be finished? That’s the question. If it is to appear next winter, I haven’t a minute to lose between now and then. But there are moments when I feel like I’m liquefying like an old Camembert, I’m so tired.”⁴⁵

Less than a month later he was dead. But if we open his letters, he springs back to life, the irascible, impassioned, relentless perfectionist, still slaving away for his art, still agonizing over every word, every phrase—still searching, like the pearl fisher he compared himself to, for *le mot juste*. With that in mind, I’ll leave the last word to Flaubert himself,

“What an atrociously delicious thing we are bound to say writing is—since we keep slaving this way, enduring such tortures and not wanting things otherwise.”⁴⁶

AWP

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NOTES

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12. *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert, 1830-1857*, Francis Steegmuller, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 227.
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15. *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert, 1857-1880*, 180.
16. *Lettres de Gustave Flaubert à George Sand, précédées d'une étude par Guy de Maupassant* (Paris: G. Charpentier et Cie, 1884).
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20. Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*, édition établie, présentée et annotée par Jean Bruneau et Yvan Leclerc. Index par Jean-Benoît Guinot, et al (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1973-2007). *Note*: There is a very good one-volume selection of Flaubert's letters (in French) in paperback published by Gallimard in its *Folio Classique* collection, edited by Bernard Masson. It is culled from the Pléiade edition.
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24. James, 295.
25. Barnes.
26. James, 315.
27. *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert, 1830-1857*, 113.
28. *Ibid.*, 145.
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30. *Ibid.*, 152.
31. *Ibid.*, 154.
32. *Ibid.*, 154.
33. *Ibid.*, 157.
34. *Ibid.*, 158.
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42. Ibid., 190.
43. Ibid., 203.
44. Ibid., 215.
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