

# MADAME BOVARY

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GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

*With an Introduction and Notes  
by Chris Kraus*

Translated by Eleanor Marx Aveling

GEORGE STADE

CONSULTING EDITORIAL DIRECTOR



**BARNES & NOBLE CLASSICS**  
NEW YORK

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## FROM THE PAGES OF *MADAME BOVARY*

Emma seated in an armchair (they were putting her things down around her) thought of her bride flowers packed up in a bandbox, and wondered, dreaming, what would be done with them if she were to die. (page 34)

Before marriage she thought herself in love; but the happiness that should have followed this love not having come, she must, she thought, have been mistaken. And Emma tried to find out what one meant exactly in life by the words *felicity*, *passion*, *rapture*, that had seemed to her so beautiful in books. (page 35)

In their unconcerned looks was the calm of passions daily satiated, and through all their gentleness a manner pierced that peculiar brutality, the result of a command of half-easy things, in which force was exercised and vanity amused—the management of thoroughbred horses and the society of loose women. (page 51)

Léon was weary of loving without any result; moreover, he was beginning to feel that depression caused by the repetition of the same kind of life, when no interest inspires and no hope sustains it. (page 112)

She had sent for him to tell him that she was bored, that her husband was odious, her life frightful. (page 173)

Human speech is like a cracked tin kettle, on which we hammer out tunes to make bears dance while we long to move the stars. (page 177)

She had that indefinable beauty that results from joy, from enthusiasm, from success, and that is only the harmony of temperament with circumstances. (page 180)

She appeared dazzling with whiteness in the empty heavens that she lit up, and now sailing more slowly along, let fall upon the river a great stain that broke up into an infinity of stars; and the silver sheen seemed to writhe through the very depths like a headless serpent covered with luminous scales. (page 183)

Every bourgeois in the flush of his youth, were it but for a day, a moment, has believed himself

capable of immense passions, of lofty enterprises. The most mediocre libertine has dreamed sultanas; every notary bears within him the debris of a poet. (page 268)

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Emma found again in adultery all the platitudes of marriage.  
(page 269)

There is always after the death of any one a kind of stupefaction; so difficult is it to grasp this advent of nothingness and to resign ourselves to believe in it. (page 301)

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# GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Gustave Flaubert was born in 1821 in Rouen, France. His father, a respected surgeon, raised his family in quarters near the hospital where he worked. Young Gustave would sometimes observe his father's medical procedures, including autopsies. The clinical, almost detached detail with which Flaubert depicted *Emma Bovary* inspired a famous cartoon recalling his childhood experience: Emma on the cadaver block, being dismembered by the surgeon's son.

But Gustave was also a deeply romantic young man, and he developed an early and permanent disdain for the life of the French bourgeoisie. Its banalities and exigencies trapped him for a time, but he was encouraged to study law, like many a respectable bourgeois son. However, in 1844 his schooling in Paris came to an abrupt halt when he had a series of health problems resulting in seizures and a coma. These attacks, now thought to be symptoms of epilepsy, required Flaubert to leave school and return to the provinces. Established on his estate in Croisset, he dedicated himself to his true passion—literature.

Flaubert's convalescence was soon disrupted. His father died in January 1846, and his beloved sister Caroline, who had recently given birth, died six weeks later. In his mid-twenties, Flaubert became the head of a household that now included his mother and his sister's daughter. Although the three lived a placid country life together for many years, Flaubert often visited Paris, where he fell in love with Louise Colet, cultivated a friendship with writer and photographer Maxime du Camp, and witnessed the Revolution of 1848. He worked for many years on a novel, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (finally published in 1874), that in its early drafts was criticized by his friends for being overly romantic.

Upon returning in 1851 from a tour of the Near East, he began a novel in which he experimented with a new narrative style. Working tirelessly for almost five years, taking great care over each sentence, Flaubert composed his masterpiece, *Madame Bovary*, the story of a disenchanted provincial wife. When it was published (in installments in 1856, in book form in 1857) *Madame Bovary* caused a sensation; its frank depiction of adultery landed Flaubert in the courts on charges of moral indecency. Exonerated, the author became a respected frequenter of the Parisian salons, was awarded the French Legion of Honor, and formed friendships with George Sand, Emile Zola, and Guy de Maupassant.

Although he continued to visit Paris frequently, Flaubert lived for most of the year in Croisset where he wrote and revised his works, and amassed an astonishing body of correspondence. He is also remembered for his novels *Salammbô* (1862) and *A Sentimental Education* (1869) and for the collection *Three Stories* (1877). Financial troubles beset him late in his life, and he spent his final years somewhat isolated and impoverished. Gustave Flaubert died on May 8, 1880, in Croisset.

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# THE WORLD OF GUSTAVE FLAUBERT AND MADAME BOVARY

- 1821** Gustave Flaubert is born on December 12 in Rouen, France. His father is a surgeon and medical professor; his mother is from a distinguished provincial bourgeois family.
- 1824** Flaubert's sister, Caroline, is born.
- 1829** Honoré de Balzac publishes *Les Chouans*, his first literary success and the earliest of his works to be included in what he later will call *La Comédie humaine* (*The Human Comedy*).
- 1830** Victor Hugo's *Hernani* appears, as does Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* (*The Red and the Black*). The July Revolution results in the abdication of King Charles X and the establishment of the "citizen king" Louis-Philippe.
- 1831** Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*) is published.
- 1832** Gustave enters school at the College Royal in Rouen; he studies the ancient Greeks and Romans, and favors such Romantic writers as Goethe, Byron, Chateaubriand, and Hugo.
- 1833** George Sand's *Lelia* appears. Jules Michelet publishes the first volume of his monumental *Histoire de France* (*History of France*); the seventeen-volume work will be completed in 1867.
- 1836** Flaubert falls deeply in love with Elisa Schlésinger, eleven years his senior; he later will take her as his model for several of his literary heroines.
- 1837** An avid writer from an early age, Flaubert publishes two stories.
- 1840**  
— He begins studying law in Paris.
- 1841**
- 1844** Flaubert has his first "nervous" attack, probably an epileptic seizure. The resulting coma and further illness cause him to  
  
abandon his legal studies for the life of a writer at his estate in Croisset, on the River Seine between Paris and Rouen. *Le Comte de Monte Cristo* (*The Count of Monte Cristo*), by Alexandre Dumas (père), is published.
- 1845** Flaubert completes the first version of *L'Éducation sentimentale* (*A Sentimental Education*). His beloved sister, Caroline, marries.
- 1846** Flaubert's father dies in January, and Caroline dies in March. Devastated, Flaubert sets up house in Croisset with his mother and Caroline's infant daughter—a living arrangement that will persist for the next twenty-five years. During a visit to Paris, Flaubert meets the poet

Louise Colet, who becomes his mistress.

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- 1847** Flaubert and writer and photographer Maxime du Camp take a walking tour along the River Loire and the Brittany coast. The journal Flaubert keeps during this tour will be published posthumously (1886) as *Par les champs et par les grèves* (*Over the Fields and Over the Shores*).
- 1848** In Paris, Flaubert witnesses the Revolution and the establishment of the French Second Republic. After some months of political turmoil, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte is elected president.
- 1849** The manuscript of *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* (*The Temptation of Saint Anthony*) is criticized by Flaubert's friends for its overly Romantic style. Later in the year, Flaubert journeys to the Near East with du Camp.
- 1850** Eugène Delacroix paints the ceiling of the Louvre's Galerie d'Apollon (Gallery of Apollo).
- 1851** Back in Croisset, Flaubert begins writing *Madame Bovary*—a painstaking process that will last almost five years. Gérard de Nerval's *Voyage en Orient* (*Voyage to the East*) is published.
- 1852** Having staged a coup late in 1851, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte seizes the monarchy as Napoleon III and establishes the French Second Empire.
- 1853** Georges Haussmann begins redesigning the streets, parks, and other physical aspects of Paris.
- 1855** Flaubert and Louise Colet end their relationship.
- 1856** Late in the year, *Madame Bovary* appears in installments in the *Revue de Paris*.
- 1857** Flaubert is brought to trial for the novel's alleged moral indecency but is exonerated. *Madame Bovary* is published in book form. Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*) is published; Baudelaire is tried and fined for the content of his work.
- 1858** A trip to Tunisia provides Flaubert with inspiration for *Salammbô*, a novel about ancient Carthage.
- 1862** *Salammbô* is published. Flaubert begins to spend more time in Paris, cultivating friendships with George Sand, Emile Zola, and Ivan Turgenev. Hugo's *Les Misérables* is published.
- 1866** Respected by the court of Napoleon III, Flaubert is made a knight in the French Legion of Honor.
- 1867** The mother of the young Guy de Maupassant is a friend of Flaubert and introduces her son to the author.
- 1869** *L'Education sentimentale* is published.

- ~~1870~~ The Franco-Prussian War leads to the end of the French Second Empire and establishment of the Third Republic. When de Maupassant returns from military service in the war, he begins
- ~~1871~~ a literary apprenticeship with Flaubert, who coaches him in his writing and introduces him to other leading writers.
- 1872 Flaubert's mother dies.
- 1873 Arthur Rimbaud's *Une Saison en Enfer (A Season in Hell)* and Jules Verne's *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingt jours (Around the World in Eighty Days)* are published.
- 1874 The production of Flaubert's play *Le Candidat (The Candidate)* is a failure. *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* is published.
- 1877 *Trois Contes (Three Stories)* is published. Émile Zola's *L'Assommoir (The Drunkard)* is published.
- 1880 Gustave Flaubert dies, suddenly and unexpectedly, in Croisset on May 8.
- 1881 The novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, unfinished when Flaubert died, is published.

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# INTRODUCTION

A joke is the most powerful thing there is, the most terrible: it is irresistible... Great pity for people who believe in the seriousness of life.

—*Gustave Flaubert, Intimate Notebooks*

## *What Is Reality?*

Flaubert has often been credited as being the Father of Realism. *Madame Bovary*, his first and most classically plot-driven novel, has been labeled as “realist” because of—as many critics would have—the author’s choice to depict “mediocre” and “vulgar” protagonists circling around a subject “trite” as adultery. Like much criticism, these readings tell us a great deal more about the critics than the novel. Implicit in such statements are the assumptions (a) that there is anything “trite” about the conflict between human desire and the social demand for monogamy—which, as we will see, was applied selectively in Flaubert’s time to the lower reaches of the French middle class; and (b) that the author himself was immune to the trashy and fickle illusions embraced by his characters.

Writing in 1964, critic and novelist Mary McCarthy describes Emma Bovary as “a very ordinary middle-class woman with banal expectations of life and an urge to dominate her surroundings. Her character is remarkable only for an unusual deficiency of human feeling” (“Foreword”; see “Further Reading”). Sensing, perhaps, a need to distance herself from the proto-feminist implications of Emma’s dilemma, the brilliant, prolific McCarthy could only describe her as “trite.” Instead, she chooses to valorize Charles for his unfailing love of his wife—a love that is no less misguided and false than Emma’s romantic illusions.

Except for the brief deathbed appearance of Dr. Lariviere, a man who “disdainful of honours, titles, and of academies ... generous, fatherly to the poor, and practising virtue without believing in it ... would almost have passed for a saint if the keenness of his intellect had not caused him to be feared as a demon” (p. 295), all of Flaubert’s characters are equally flawed and deluded. There is the rapacious, progressive pharmacist Homais and the dull-witted Charles, who loves his young wife for all the wrong reasons. Pleased with himself for possessing such a fine wife, Charles is so completely seduced by Emma’s well-rehearsed feminine wiles—her new way of making paper sconces for candles, the flounces she puts on her gowns, her little wine-red slippers with large knots of ribbon—that he cannot see her unhappiness. There is Emma herself, whose suffering never opens her eyes to the misfortunes of others. Her affairs, and her two lovers themselves, Rodolphe (the seducer) and Leon (the poet of adultery), prove to be equally untrustworthy and disappointing. There is Lheureux, the usurious loan-shark and salesman, and a large cast of pompous officials and idiot villagers. In a novel that is so technically modern and ground-breaking, it is interesting to note that Flaubert draws on the medieval slapstick tradition of naming his characters after their foibles: the Mayor Tuvache (“you cow,” in translation); the booster-ish technocrat Homais (“what man could be”: “homme,” the noun “man,” cast, like a verb, in the future conditional tense); and Lheureux, the purveyor of expensive false dreams, his name taken from the French word for “happiness.”

Finally, it is the very idea that romantic love could be conducive to happiness that is most deep

discredited. When Rodolphe makes Emma fall in love with him at Yonville's agricultural fair, it's not exactly Rodolphe she falls in love with. When she is caught in his gaze, the little threads of gold in his eyes and the smell of pomade in his hair sets off a rapture of memories of all of the men she's been in love with. Because she is in love with love, Rodolphe merely serves as a trigger, and at the time this is marvelous. But as the novel moves on, Emma behaves more and more like an addict. By part three, chapter six, when the novelty of her affair with Leon begins fading, Emma summons an imaginary Leon in a letter-writing delirium. "But while she wrote it was another man she saw, a phantom fashioned out of her most ardent memories, her finest reading, her strongest lusts, and at last he became so real, so tangible, that she palpitated wondering, without, however, the power to imagine him clearly, so lost was he, like a god, beneath the abundance of his attributes" (p. 269). After the free-basing binge, Emma "fell back exhausted." These "transports of love" gave way to a "constantly ache all over her." (In *Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania*, philosopher Avital Ronell extrapolates from this metaphor with wild perfection.)

"There is no goodness in this book," wrote Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, the most eminent critic of Flaubert's time, in an otherwise favorable review of the novel. And yet the book breathes with compassion. Preparing to write the scene of Emma and Leon's first meeting, Flaubert describes a strategy that informs the whole book in a letter he wrote in the early 1850s to his sometime-lover and literary confidante, Louise Colet: "My two characters ... will talk about literature, about the sea, the mountains, music—all well-worn poetical subjects. It will be the first time in any book, I think, that the young hero and the younger heroine are made mock of, and yet the irony will in no way diminish the pathos, but rather intensify it" (*The Selected Letters of Gustave Flaubert*). In the tour-de-force scene of the book, Flaubert cuts back and forth between the civic banalities spewed on the floor of the agricultural show and Rodolphe's worn-out seduction scene, staged for Emma on the balcony. The technique of dual recitative, used to tragic effect in opera, becomes giddy high comedy as the pace escalates from whole speeches to fragments of sentences: "Seventy francs." "A hundred times I wished to go; and I followed you—I remained." "Manures!" ... "And I shall carry away with me the remembrance of you." ... "But you will forget me; I shall pass away like a shadow." ... "Pig races—prizes—tied by Messrs. Lehérissé and Cullembourg, sixty francs!" (pp. 139-140). And yet Flaubert ends the scene by breaking our hearts, with the final award given to one Catherine Nicaise Elizabeth Leroux, an elderly servant, who spent fifty-four years on one farm taking care of the animals. The elderly woman feels no emotion. Living close to the animals, she has assumed their wordless, placid state of being. Finally, a smile crosses her face as she realizes she can give her award to the priest to say masses.

Later, at the peak of another duet of clichés that marks Emma's second seduction, her soon-to-be lover Leon (or is it Flaubert now who is speaking?) observes, "Language is a machine that continually amplifies the emotions" (p. 218).

"Madame Bovary, c'est moi," Flaubert famously stated when his book was a hit and he was hounded by critics and fans to identify the real-life, *verité* source of his character. Yet he also liked saying the opposite: "There's nothing in Madame Bovary that's drawn from life," he wrote to Mlle. Leroyer de Chantepie in a letter dated March 18, 1857. "It's a *completely invented* story. None of my own feelings or experiences are in it." And yet Flaubert also wrote, in his youth, "There are days when one would like to be an athlete, and others when one longs to be a woman. In the first case it is because our muscles are aquiver; in the second, because our flesh is yearning and ablaze" (*Intimate Notebook*, 47).



In fact, the word “realism” was initially applied to *Madame Bovary* by its first publishers, who also acted as censors. After agreeing to issue the book in six installments, Flaubert’s friends at the *Revue de Paris* asked him to cut several scenes that its readers would find much “too real.” At the top of the list was one of the book’s strongest and funniest scenes (part three, chapter one), in which Emma finally yields to Leon’s advances. Having made no prior arrangements, they take an eight-hour ride on the back of a cab. “Where to, sir?” asks the cabman. “Where you like!” answers Leon, and they’re off on a fornicator’s grand tour past all of provincial Rouen’s doubtful attractions. “Real” in this case was a euphemism. They meant obscene.

When the final installment appeared, Flaubert, and the editors and printer of the *Revue de Paris* were subpoenaed to court for offenses against public morals and religion. (Installed via a coup five years previously, the government of Napoleon III had begun to enforce its draconian laws of political censorship.) Public prosecutor Ernest Pinard (who later, hilariously, would be exposed as the anonymous author of self-published pornography) denounced the book’s “realism.” Attorney for the defense Jules Senard argued persuasively that this very “realism,” and Emma’s meticulously described and horrible death, served as caution against the dangers awaiting young women like Emma when they are educated and exposed to *certain ideas* beyond their comprehension and station (“Appendix: Speech for the Defense”). The charges were dropped, and *Madame Bovary* was published in book form by Michel Levy.

“Everyone thinks I am in love with reality,” Flaubert protested, at the pitch of the controversy “whereas I actually detest it. It was in hatred of realism that I undertook this book. But I equally despise that false brand of idealism which is such a hollow mockery in the present age” (Steegmüller, *Flaubert and Madame Bovary*, p. 377).

In a sense, Emma Bovary’s dreaminess is not so very different from Flaubert’s own; he simply adapted it to the limits of her situation. The only child of a prosperous peasant, Emma Rouault is sent to a convent school in Rouen at the age of thirteen. Here she excels, until the nuns realize it is the erotics of Catholicism that Emma embraces. Emma has a particular talent for recognizing and responding to the sexual subtext of the religio-romantic ideas of her time as taught to young ladies. She swoons at the mortification of Jesus, practices fasting, and senses the pressing of flesh guarded over by golden-winged cherubs. She yearns along with the virgin hearts who aspire toward heaven. After the premature death of her mother, she abandons herself to more secular forms of soft-core pornography, devouring popular romances written by viscounts and counts. Like Flaubert, she is a child of the Romantic era, in which Great Men of Letters like Lamartine and de Musset concocted washes of sentiment in the noble verse form of Alexandrine couplets.

Charles Bovary is the first and last suitor she meets after returning from the convent to her family’s isolated farm. Flaubert has already told us a great deal about Charles before their first meeting. Awkward and bumbling throughout his youth, he was a mediocre student who barely managed to pass despite hard work and discipline. He attends medical school but never achieves the full status of a doctor. Instead he becomes a public health officer, a job that was roughly equivalent to physician’s assistant. Charles knows his limits: His treatments are as noninvasive as possible. He fears killing his patients. The two meet when Charles is summoned to treat Pere Rouault’s broken leg. He rides eighteen miles through desolate countryside from the small town of Tostes to the Rouault family farm. At the time, he is still married to the forty-ish “rich widow” picked out by his mother. Still, he notices Emma, and in the second chapter of part one, a vaguely sado-erotic scene occurs between him and Rouault’s virginal daughter. (Flaubert was a great fan of the Marquis de Sade.) After checking out

her father, Charles lingers before leaving the farm. He stops in the parlor, where Emma is gazing absently out the front window. Startled, she speaks her first line of dialogue.

“Are you looking for anything?” she asked.

“My whip, if you please,” he answered.

He began rummaging on the bed, behind the doors, under the chairs. It had fallen to the ground between the sacks and the wall. Mademoiselle Emma saw it, and bent over the flour sack. Charles out of politeness made a dash also, and as he stretched out his arm, at the same moment felt his breast brush against the back of the young girl bending beneath him. She drew herself up in scarlet, and looked at him over her shoulder as she handed him his whip (pp. 19-20).

A year later when Charles’s wife dies, it is a foregone conclusion that Emma will accept his faltering proposal of marriage.

Like Flaubert himself, Emma, a perpetual dreamer, was ill-suited to marriage or life in the provinces. As McCarthy points out, “Emma’s boredom is a silly copy of Flaubert’s own,” although when we read his letters and diaries, it’s a toss-up to say which of the two was more melodramatic. Describing Emma’s adolescence, Flaubert writes, “She rejected as useless all that did not contribute to the immediate desires of her heart, being of a temperament more sentimental than artistic, looking for emotions, not landscapes” (p. 37). Writing to Louise Colet after their first sexual encounter, Flaubert exclaims: “I am broken, dizzied, as after a long orgy, I am bored to death. I have an incredible void in my heart. I once so proud of my serenity, I who worked from morning to night with a sustained rigor, can neither read nor think nor write. Your love has made me sad. I can see that you’re suffering, I foresee that I shall make you suffer. For your sake first, then for mine, I wish that I had never known you” (Gray, *Rage and Fire*, p. 140). Later, in a more conversational vein, Flaubert confesses to spending an entire day dreaming of a special pair of divans: one stuffed with swansdown, the other with hummingbird feathers. This dream, he reports, left him sad all through the evening.

Emma’s despair after the first disillusion of marriage echoes Flaubert’s shortly before he started work on the novel. In part one, chapter nine, Emma abandons her former pastimes and hobbies because “What was the good?” (p. 61). Writing to his friend Louis Bouilhet, Flaubert at age twenty-nine is plagued by the same question: “From the past I go dreaming into the future, where I see nothing, nothing.... Something—the eternal ‘what’s the point?’ sets its bronze barrier across every avenue that I open” (*Flaubert in Egypt*).

Two years after beginning the novel, Flaubert wrote to Colet about the hours he wastes spending an imaginary fortune. He’d give oyster banquets, he’d have golden finches let loose in the house, his shoes would be studded with diamonds. He dreamed of the Orient. Likewise, to Emma it seemed that “certain places on earth must bring happiness, like a plant peculiar to the soil, and that cannot thrive elsewhere. Why could not she lean over balconies in Swiss chalets, or enshrine her melancholy in a Scotch cottage?” (p. 41). In a passage whose cadences echo a Nike ad targeted toward female consumers (“You decide to be president. You decide to be a veterinarian. You decide to be the president’s veterinarian”), Emma “wished at the same time to die and to live in Paris” (p. 59). Exiled in Tostes, she lived in a state of perpetual torpor.

And what, argues Flaubert, through the immaculate construction that is *Madame Bovary*, could be more real than illusion?

## *Double Lives*

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In fact, the novel's characters, emotional atmosphere, and plot were derived from a multiplicity of sources. Flaubert scholars agree that *Madame Bovary's* literal plot outline was drawn from the story of Eugene and Delphine Delamare, a local scandal. According to Flaubert's first American biographer Francis Steegmuller, Delphine, a country girl who had been educated at a Rouen convent, married Eugene when she was seventeen and died of an overdose of poison nine years later. Bored with her marriage to an adoring, unambitious husband, she had numerous affairs and amused herself by buying clothes and decorating. These pastimes resulted in an avalanche of debt. When the bills came due, afraid of facing ruin, she killed herself by taking poison. Delphine's death occurred in Rouen in 1848, the year of the "second" French revolution. (Fifty years after Delphine's death, Eleanor Marx Aveling, *Madame Bovary's* first English translator, would kill herself in exactly the same way in London; she was forty-three when she ingested prussic acid.) In 1848 the activist and writer Amelie Bosquet, who would become Flaubert's friend and correspondent, was giving fiery speeches about women's rights at revolutionary rallies. Twenty-one years later, Flaubert would ridicule Bosquet through the character of La Vatnaz, the ugly feminist hack who couldn't get a man, in his novel *A Sentimental Education*.

In fact, Flaubert had vaguely known the Delamares, or at least known of them. Eugene had been a medical student of Gustave's father, Achille Flaubert, who was chief physician at the Rouen hospital. During their early childhood, Flaubert and his sister, Caroline, had lived with their parents in an apartment at the hospital. Their childhood games included hiding in the morgue and spying on all kinds of medical procedures. Like Charles, Eugene Delamare became an officer of public health after failing to pass all his medical exams. Throughout his marriage, he had been blissfully unaware of Delphine's lovers and indebtedness. He idolized her. After Delphine's suicide, Eugene also died by his own hand, leaving behind their young daughter.

This tabloid subject matter was suggested to Flaubert by his friend Louis Bouilhet. Returning home in May 1851 from a two-year trip to the Near East with his friend Maxime du Camp, a trip on which he had spent a large part of his inheritance, Flaubert was oscillating between despair and panic. Not yet thirty years old, he had dropped out of law school in Paris (at his father's advice, and to Flaubert's great relief) when he experienced a series of epileptic attacks at age twenty-two. For the next six years before he left on his travels he had lived with his mother and young niece at the family estate at Croisset.

While still at college and during his first year of law school, he had already written one novel, *November*, and started another, a nascent version of *A Sentimental Education* (1869), which he would finally rewrite and publish nearly three decades later. While there probably would have been a market for this early work in the thriving mid-century Parisian literary world, Flaubert recoiled from ordinary ambition. His aspirations were grander. He wanted his debut to be a "thunderclap"; he wanted to be a great writer, not a toadying hack. He wanted to live in the company of literary heroes like Shakespeare, Corneille, and Chateaubriand; he craved immortality, and these two books wouldn't do it.

Three years after abandoning his studies, installed at the family home in Croisset, he had written what he believed to be his first "real" work, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. Inspired by the Pieter Brueghel painting of that title, it was a visually rich, ambitious, and grotesquely overwritten story about a fourth-century monk, told in a lurid prose style borrowed from his Romantic predecessor. Three weeks before leaving for Egypt, Flaubert invited Du Camp and Bouilhet to Croisset for a long

weekend. He read the novel to them (this would take three days) and awaited their judgment. The advice: “We think you should throw it into the fire, and never speak of it again.”

Flaubert was devastated. During the first several months of his travels in Egypt—a trip he had dreamed of since childhood—he asked himself, *What is the point?* “I saw everything through the veil of sorrow that this disappointment had cast over me, and I kept saying to myself, ‘What’s the use?’” (Wall, *Gustave Flaubert*, p. 157). But this unhappiness did not stop him from keeping a notebook. Throughout the trip, when he was not brooding about his future as a writer, Flaubert took spare descriptive notes about what he saw. Determined not to editorialize, not to embroider, he did his best to keep an accurate record of the landscape, people, and customs he knew he would not see again. “Return to Wadi Halfa in the dinghy, with Maxime. Little Mohammed is as he was this morning. Rocked by the wind and the waves; night falls; the waves slap the bow of our dinghy, and it pitches. The moon rises. In the position in which I am sitting, it was shining on my right leg and the portion of my white sock that was between my trouser and my shoe” (*Flaubert in Egypt*, p. 136).

As Steegmuller suggests, it was in this way that Flaubert arrived at the seemingly detached descriptive style he would use when writing *Madame Bovary*. Compare that journal entry to this (one of many) evocatively spare descriptive passage in the novel. Recalling Charles’s student days, Flaubert writes:

On fine summer evenings, at the time when the close streets are empty, when the servants are playing shuttlecock at the doors, he opened his window and leaned out. The river, that makes the part of Rouen a wretched little Venice, flowed beneath him, between the bridges and the railing yellow, violet, or blue (p. 13).

Here, Flaubert’s writing is as luminous and presciently modern as the paintings of Vermeer. This passage evokes a whole century, yet it feels suspended and timeless. In the literary atmosphere of late Romanticism that was still current in Flaubert’s time, with its emphasis on “self-expression,” he is as cool and deliberate as a surgeon. Traveling in Egypt, Flaubert was far from unaware of what was happening. Answering a letter from his mother in which she wonders if he plans to find “a little job” after his travels, he reminds her that his “job” will be writing. “Is Saint Anthony good or bad? That is what I often ask myself... However, I worry very little about any of this; I live like a plant, filling myself with sun and light, with colors and fresh air. I keep eating, so to speak; afterwards the digesting will have to be done, then the shitting; and the shit had better be good!” (*Flaubert in Egypt*, pp. 74-75).

In 1851 Flaubert returned to Croisset and there he would stay, except for spending some winters in Paris. Unlike his friend Du Camp, Flaubert’s family was not extremely rich; they were merely well off: He and his brother, like other children of the haute bourgeoisie, were expected to enter various professions. He could never have afforded living full-time in Paris without being a lawyer, or writing quickly and prolifically for money, two things he refused to do.

But even though he would be thirty-five before *Madame Bovary* was published, Flaubert hadn’t wasted his time before starting the novel. Everything he would go on to publish was begun during his late teens and twenties; he remained incredibly faithful to his young self. His *Dictionary of Received Ideas*, a hilarious compendium of bourgeois truisms published after his death, was an extension of an alter-ego called *le garçon* that he created with a high-school friend; “the boy” spoke exclusively in clichés. As Steegmuller notes, “More consciously and more exclusively than most novelists, he used the feelings and experiences of his early years as the basis of his creations” (*Intimate Notebook*, p. 10).

Flaubert made up very little. Beginning with *Madame Bovary*, he became a prodigious appropriationist and researcher, a habit that would metastasize with time. He confessed to taking notes on 1,500 books in preparation for *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, his last published novel. During the five years he spent working on *Madame Bovary*, he holed up for a month at a hotel in Forges-les-Eaux to study the local pharmacist, who, like Homais, was a raging anti-clericalist and republican. The botched surgery Charles undertakes on Hippolyte's club-footed leg is not unlike the fatal amputation of Flaubert's father's leg, performed by Achille, Flaubert's older brother. Researching Emma's childhood, he dug out his own childhood story books and colorings to re-enter the world of secret castles, fairy tales, and pirates. Before attempting to describe Emma's suicide, he went to the Rouen hospital library and read for weeks about the effects of arsenic. He spent one afternoon wandering around the Norman countryside and looking at the fields through colored glass.

Still, he found, it would take more than all of this to write the novel *Madame Bovary*.

## *Cosmopolitan*

Gustave Flaubert and Louise Colet met in Paris, where she was posing in the studio of James Pradier. Pradier was a renowned and well-connected sculptor, and Flaubert had taken the train into the city on a mission for his family: to have a marble bust produced in memory of his sister.

Flaubert was twenty-four years old and living with his mother. Except for a brief encounter with his mother's maid and an unrequited passion for an older, married woman, all his sexual experiences so far had taken place in brothels. Colet was thirty-six. Married to a music teacher, Hippolyte Colet, she had twice been honored for her poetry by the Academie Française. For the past six years she had been lovers with Victor Cousin, seventeen years her senior; a well-known critic and philosopher, he had worked his way up from poverty to become a peer of France and director of the Ecole Normale. Though she remained married to Hippolyte, it was understood that Cousin was the father of Colet's daughter. Cousin extended his protection not only to Louise and to their daughter, but to her husband, helping him get a better teaching job.

Flaubert's friend Du Camp boasted in letters about having fabulous sex with Mme. Valentine Delassert, wife of the Paris prefect of police (she would later show up as Mme. Dambreuse in *Sentimental Education*): "She squirms ... she screams." While "adultery" (or a multiplicity of sexual friendships and relationships) may be the source of shame and scandal in the provincial world of Charles and Emma Bovary, in the intellectual and society worlds of Paris it was very much the norm.

At Pradier's, Flaubert and Colet chatted. The next night, he showed up at her apartment, and they discussed their favorite books, her poetry, and his ambitions. One day later their affair began. Since Flaubert was not about to move to Paris, and he did not want her visiting his family home, the relationship would be conducted in two phases over seven years, and mostly through the mail. "In the deepest and most comprehensive sense, [their correspondence] was the source of *Madame Bovary*," writes biographer Geoffrey Wall. After their first meeting, they corresponded for two years before Flaubert left for the Near East. During this time, Flaubert began a simultaneous affair with Louise Pradier, wife of the sculptor, and went on a four-month walking tour of Brittany with Maxime Du Camp. Colet had a concurrent Polish lover, got pregnant by him, and would later lose the baby.

But Louise Colet was the only lover Flaubert wrote to on an extended basis, or about literature and art. From the very start, his side of the correspondence functioned as a kind of diary. Late at night

when the Croisset household was in bed, Flaubert took out his relics of Louise—a miniature portrait, blood-stained handkerchief, a lock of her blonde hair, a pair of her slippers—and arranged them on his desk. This was, perhaps, Flaubert’s first experience of writing as a performance. “Twelve hours ago we were still together. Yesterday at this very hour I still held you in my arms.... Do you remember your little slippers are here even as I write, facing me, I stare at them.... I would like to offer you one more joy.... So, a kiss, a quick one, you know what kind, and one more, and oh again still more, and still more under your chin, in that spot I love on your very soft skin, and on your chest where I place my heart” (Gray, p. 139.)

She fell in love with him. Who wouldn’t? As their meetings became less frequent, his addiction to the correspondence grew. Just as Emma Bovary created a universal lover in her letters to Leon, Colet became Flaubert’s universal listener for his thoughts on literature. “Bah!” Colet once complained. “Gustave only writes to me about himself, and art.”

Though she is variously described by Flaubert’s biographers as “a pest,” “impossible,” “a nymphomaniac,” and “an incurably minor poet,” Colet was a considerable person of her time. She published more than twenty books of poetry and fiction, and wrote for most of France’s leading journals. She was a champion of feminism and an enemy of Catholicism and colonialism; the things for which she was criticized most harshly—her use of personal experience and “poetry of the human body”—have long since passed into acceptability. While Flaubert responded to scenes of human slavery witnessed on his travels by comparing the skin-tones of the Nubian women to the color of the earth (*Flaubert in Egypt*, p. 103), Colet saw the same things in Egypt decades later and expressed her outrage. “Brutes,” wrote Flaubert, “take these things as a matter of course.” It is tempting to overlook the race and gender bigotry of great writers like Flaubert as endemic to their century. But in that same century, writers like Colet, Bosquet, and Eleanor Marx Aveling were speaking passionately against those bigotries. Their works are rarely studied. Nor has Colet’s part of this great correspondence been read or studied. Her letters to Flaubert were lost or destroyed.

“The truly mad are not content with merely telling stories: they have to act them out,” writes Fanny Howe in her novel *Indivisible*. Flaubert was notoriously slow in writing his four novels not just because he sought the perfect cadence for his sentences, but because to some extent he had to live them. Writing to a friend in 1869, Flaubert confided, “When I was writing the poisoning of Emma Bovary, I had such a strong taste of arsenic in my mouth, I had poisoned myself so badly, that I suffered two attacks of indigestion, two very real attacks, for I vomited up all my dinner” (Vargha Llosa, *The Perpetual Orgy*, p. 73). Flaubert scholars find it no coincidence that in 1851, three weeks before he started *Madame Bovary*, he chose to resume relations with Colet.

## ***Cosmos***

“What I would like to do is write a book about nothing,” Flaubert wrote to Colet, four months into *Madame Bovary*. “A book with no external attachment, one which would hold together by the internal strength of its style, as the earth floats in the air unsupported, a book that would have no subject at all or at least one in which the subject would be almost invisible” (Wall, p. 203).

As we have seen, *Madame Bovary* could hardly be described as being “about nothing.” It was meticulously researched, and drawn from numerous primary sources within Flaubert’s life and the lives of those around him. And yet the feeling of the book is that it is suspended, floating, caught

time like Eadweard Muybridge's stop-motion photographs or a painting by Vermeer. "Everything on invents is true," Flaubert wrote to Colet as he entered his second year of working on the novel. "Poetry is just as precise as geometry. Induction is as valid as deduction, and after a certain point, one is never wrong about matters of the soul." How does Flaubert do this?

In his book-length essay about Flaubert and *Madame Bovary*, novelist Mario Vargas Llosa describes Flaubert's invention of a literary form known as indirect free style. In this form, the "omniscient narrator" of the classic story-driven novel moves so close to his characters that the reader can no longer be sure who is speaking. (T. S. Eliot's original title for early sections of *The Waste Land* was "He Do the Police in Different Voices.")

In *Madame Bovary*, the point of view shifts constantly among the speakers. For example, in part one, chapter three, while seeming objectively to describe the brief negotiation between Charles and Pauline Rouault of Emma's marriage, Flaubert slips effortlessly into Rouault's head: "He certainly thought him a little meagre, and not quite the son-in-law he would have liked, but he was said to be well conducted, economical, very learned.... Now, as old Rouault would soon be forced to sell twenty-two acres of 'his property,' as he owed a good deal to the mason, to the harnessmaker, and as the shaft of the cider-press wanted renewing, 'If he asks for her,' he said to himself, 'I'll give her to him'" (p. 26).

As Vargas Llosa notes, Flaubert makes good use of the interrogative. The characters question themselves, unleashing interior monologues. In part one, chapter five, describing Charles's happiness, Flaubert lets Charles ask himself: "Until now what good had he had of his life?" When Rodolphe enters in part two, chapter seven, the rhythm of the "objective" narrative becomes suddenly as terse and brutally direct as Rodolphe himself.

Yet this technique, so crucial to twentieth-century modern literature, did not entirely originate with Flaubert. During their first night of flirtation, Colet read him her translation of *The Tempest*. Flaubert himself studied, read, and translated Shakespeare, and would return to Shakespeare's plays throughout his life. He studied Greek and Latin, and read the classics as avidly as the works of his contemporaries. Still, since the eighteenth century, novels had been earmarked by their author's point of view. Fielding, Defoe, Balzac, Austen succeeded by establishing themselves as "the most credible witness." The narrator was a wit, a raconteur, a knowing friend, a moralist. But in *Madame Bovary*, the narrator virtually disappears.

"An artist," wrote Flaubert to Mlle. Chantepie, "must be in his work like God in creation ... I should be everywhere felt, but nowhere seen" (Vargas Llosa, pp. 124-125). What Flaubert achieved in *Madame Bovary* was the imposition of a medieval worldview, in which everything—landscape, people, animals—was alive, and similarly charged, upon a modern story. It is the construction, not the author's voice, that holds it all together. Despite its bone-deep irony—the daughter of Romanticism, Charles and Emma will end up in the poorhouse, and cupidity and avarice in the person of Homais will triumph—an experience of poetry and grace pervades the novel.

Reading the Marquis de Sade for the first time at age nineteen, Flaubert wrote in his notebook: "When you have read de Sade and recovered from your dazzlement, you begin to wonder whether it isn't all true, whether everything he teaches isn't the truth—and this is because you cannot resist the hypothesis of limitless mastery and magnificent power that he makes us dream of" (*Intimate Notebook*, p. 27).

Flaubert would finally achieve this mastery through composition. After finishing the scene where Rodolphe and Emma consummate their flirtation, in which Flaubert notes that "something sweet

seemed to come forth from the trees” (p. 150), he reported to Colet: “It is a delicious thing to write whether well or badly—to no longer be yourself, but to move in an entire universe of your own creating. Today, for instance: I was man and woman, lover and beloved, I rode in a forest on an autumn afternoon beneath the yellow leaves, and I was the horses, the wind, the words my people spoke, even the red sun that made them half-shut their love-drowned eyes” (Steegmüller, *Flaubert and Madame Bovary*, p. 330).

In 1861, having dinner in Paris with his friends the Goncourt brothers, Flaubert explained: “The story or plot of a novel is of no interest to me. When I write a novel I have in mind rendering a color, a shade. For example, in my Carthaginian novel [*Salammbô*, 1862], I want to do something purple. In *Madame Bovary* all I was after was to render a special tone, that color of the moldiness of a wood mouse’s existence” (Goncourt, *The Goncourt Journals*, p. 98).

Years later Flaubert would state that the impulse for *A Sentimental Education*, his next contemporary novel, which set out to “tell the moral history of the men of my generation” around the revolutionary events of 1848, began with a desire to recall a certain shade of peeling yellow paint around a windowsill he had once seen in Paris. The book was attacked and praised by Flaubert’s contemporaries. One correspondent claimed it evoked “a spineless cowering half-baked generation that has produced nothing.” Critics spoke more about Flaubert’s subject matter than the form of the book. Still, *A Sentimental Education* would influence a new generation of French writers who called themselves the Naturalists and favored description over plot. Most found it depressing. Others memorized it.

“Work,” Flaubert told the Goncourts, “is still the best means of getting the better of life.”

**Chris Kraus** is the author of the novels *I Love Dick*, *Aliens & Anorexia*, and *Torpor*, and a collection of essays, *Video Green: Los Angeles Art and the Triumph of Nothingness*. Writing in *Artnet*, the critic Giovanni Intra noted that *I Love Dick*, her first novel, “reads like *Madame Bovary* if Emma had written it.” Kraus received a B.A. from Victoria University of Wellington (New Zealand) and studied performance in New York City with Lee Breuer, Ruth Maleczech, and Louise Bourgeois. She is co-editor, with Sylvere Lotringer and Hedi El Kholti, of the independent press Semiotext(e). She teaches in the graduate program of the San Francisco Art Institute.



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