

Jean-Paul Sartre

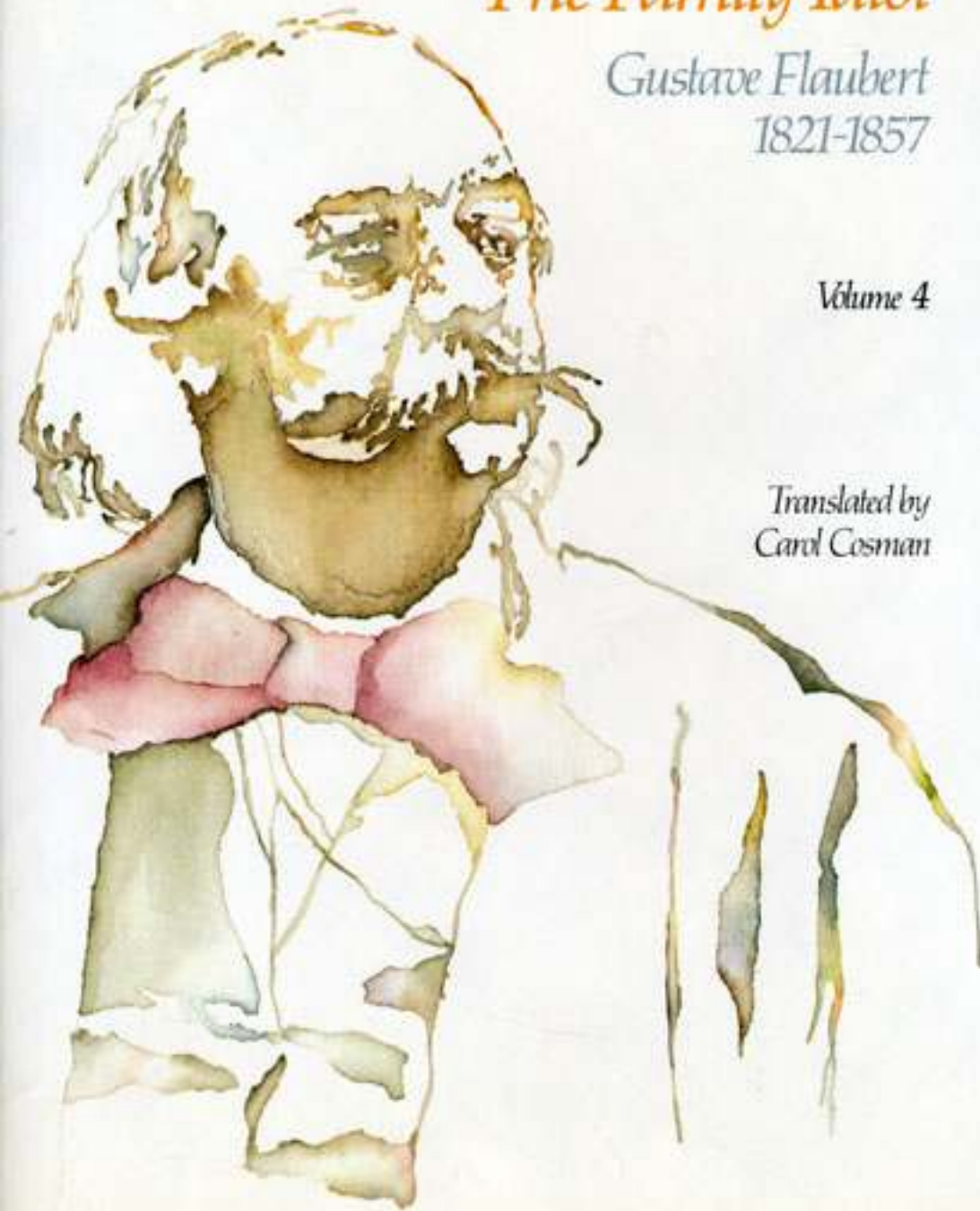
The Family Idiot

Gustave Flaubert

1821-1857

Volume 4

Translated by
Carol Cosman



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THE FAMILY IDIOT

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

I would like to give special thanks to James R. Lawler for his help in preparing this volume for publication.

CAROL COSMAN

PART THREE

Elbeion, or the Last Spiral

BOOK ONE

*The "Tall" Seen as the Immediate, Negative,
and Tactical Response to an Emergency*

Publisher's note

In the title of part three, the Gallimard edition uniformly shows the spelling "Elbeiron," which appears to be a misspelling of "Elbeiron," the name given by Flaubert's companion Knight of Nothingness, Stephane Mallarmé, in the subtitle of his strange metaphysical prose-poem of 1869, "Œuvre ou le Tableau d'Elbeiron." Several etymologies, none conclusory, have been proposed for this name, which Mallarmé invented in order to evoke a devalued region of the mind. In this translation, we have chosen to use Mallarmé's spelling.

The Event

One evening in January 1844, Achille and Gustave were returning from Deauville, where they had been to see the site of the new country house. It was pitch dark; Gustave was driving the cabriolet himself. Suddenly, in the vicinity of Pont-l'Évêque, as a wagon passed to the right of the carriage, Gustave dropped the reins and fell at his brother's feet as if struck by lightning. Seeing him motionless as a corpse, Achille thought he was dead or dying. In the distance, the lights of a house were visible. The elder son carried his brother to the house and gave him emergency treatment. Gustave remained for a few minutes in this cataleptic state: he had, however, retained full consciousness. When he opened his eyes, he may have had convulsions, but we have no firm evidence. In any case, his brother took him to Rouen that same night.

Before going further, we must determine the *date* of this attack. In a letter from Caroline written *17 January 1844* and addressed to rue de l'Est, we read: "Your letter reached us only at five last evening and we were afraid that you had been ill, so if we had not received news of you, you might well have had a visit from someone from the family." Since the Flauberts were worried on the 17th, Gustave must have departed at least three days before, hence, close to the date he had set in December. On the other hand, he writes to Ernest toward the end of January or the beginning of February: "I nearly popped off in the hands of my family (where I had gone to spend two or three days recovering from the awful scenes I had witnessed at Hamard's)."

Most commentators consider that the letter to Chevalier alludes to the *first* crisis, that is, to the one at Pont-l'Évêque. According to this supposition, Gustave would have left for Paris, nervous but unswayed, around 15 January. At Caroline's entreaty, he would have

paid a visit to Hamard, who had just lost his mother, after 17 January.¹ Shaken by the "awful scenes," he would have returned to his family around the 20th to calm down a little before getting back to his studies.

The incident at Pont-l'Évêque would have happened during the two days that followed his arrival at Rouen, since he writes that he had "come to spend two or three days." We could then safely locate the event between 23 and 25 of January—closer to the 20th if Gustave left Paris without warning, in a sort of retreat; closer to the 25th if he had first wanted to inform his parents—by a route which is now lost.²

This commonly accepted thesis is countered by Jean Bruneau, who contends that the crisis of Pont-l'Évêque had taken place before the 15th, during Flaubert's first visit to Rouen. It "could not have immediately worried the two doctors Haubert," since they allowed him to leave again for Paris. The attack that felled him, which in his letter to Ernest he calls "a miniature apoplexy," would thus be a second crisis, more serious than the first, and would probably have occurred in the town itself, perhaps at the Hôtel-Dieu. In other words, the letter to Chevalier describing his "congestion" and that of 2 September '53 in which he recounts to Louise his accident at Pont-l'Évêque would not concern the same event. We would have to accept the following chronology: during the New Year's vacation, a first "apoplexy"; then, from around the 18th to the 20th, Paris; after that, between the 20th and the 25th—approximately—a second attack, of which we know only what Flaubert tells Ernest, that is, almost nothing; indeed, he mentions neither the circumstances, nor the moment, nor the place, nor the singular form of this new accident.

That Gustave discovered his illness at Pont-l'Évêque when he suffered the first seizures, no one doubts. The question—an important one, as we shall see—is to determine whether this discovery took place before his return to Paris or during his second visit to Rouen. We lack precise information on this point. However, unless Bruneau has evidence that he did not provide in his book, his hypothesis of two crises seems inadequately supported.

What argues in its favor is that Flaubert "had an epileptic fit" when returning from Deauville, where he had gone with Achille to examine the work the chief surgeon was having done on the recently acquired

1. Caroline's letter informs us that at this date, Madame Hamard lay dying.

2. This would not be the only one. For example, the letter that Caroline says she received on the 17th at the outbreak of the evening—which might allow a better understanding of Gustave's mental state at this date—has been lost or destroyed.

land. Wouldn't Gustave have wanted to see this "country house," which "was preventing" him "from working," and to see it *right away*? He arrives on New Year's Day. What is the family discussing? The country house. That is enough for him to fix a date with Achille: they will go to inspect the work in three days, or at latest by the end of the week. Therefore, according to Bruneau, probability requires that this unfortunate journey should take place in the first half of January, and as near as possible to New Year's Day. Caroline's letter alone would suggest it; it betrays the family's anxiety: "If you were not to go . . ." This is not her usual way: obviously something has happened. Having searched carefully, I see nothing else to support this conjecture except perhaps the fact that Gustave in '52, recounting the first accident, mentions simply "the house where my brother cared for me"; whereas in the letter of '44 to Ernest he writes that he was given three simultaneous bleedings.

What are we to make of these hypotheses? That they have very little foundation. We know that, on 20 December, Flaubert was delighting in the thought of the country house that his father was going to have built. Let us note in passing that in the two letters where he speaks of it he does not even say that he wishes to see the work in progress. Had it ever begun? On 20 December, it seems they were still discussing the architect's plans. There is no evidence that Gustave wanted to go to Deauville, or that there was anything to see there. There is no evidence, either, that he did not go there twice: first before the 15th, and again on his return from Paris. It could even be that around the 20th, Achille-Cléophas, worried by his son's extreme nervousness, had the idea that a journey by cabriolet followed by a brief visit to the seashore would help calm him down. Thus, the attack could very well have taken place after the 15th, in the course of either a first or a second return from Deauville to Rouen.

There remains Caroline's anxiety. But no one doubts that during the New Year's vacation Flaubert appeared tormented, or that certain troubles of previous years recurred during his period at home. Besides, the postscript is curious: "Papa read your letter and said nothing to me about your arm, but here is my prescription: rest and grease." Flaubert was complaining of an arm: had he bruised a muscle? His father takes the letter from Caroline's hands, reads it in silence, and gives it back without a word: so the problem Gustave mentioned was a minor one. In any case, this is not the attitude of a doctor who feared the return of a "miniature apoplexy." Besides, is it conceivable that the two doctors Flaubert would have allowed

Gustave to return if Achille had "thought for ten minutes that he was dead"? Maxime tells us that Achille, at Pont-l'Évêque, "hoped, though he didn't really believe it, that the crisis would not be repeated," and that the father "was in despair." Certainly he is a doubtful witness and begins by mistaking the date and the place. But he had seen Flaubert during the winter of '44 and took this information from him. If the two doctors had allowed him to depart after the attack, Gustave's resentment would have prompted him to point out this huge professional error to Maxime, who would have taken pleasure in reporting it to us: Du Camp's testimony, in fact, aims at denigrating Achille-Cléophas by presenting him as a disciple of Broussais, "who doesn't know how to do anything but bleed people."

And then, if Gustave *had already* suffered his crisis by 17 January, his father's diagnosis would already have been made: cerebral congestion. In this case, the family's anxiety—as it becomes apparent through Caroline's letter—seems rather feeble: if he was in danger of a relapse, if to survive he urgently needed bleeding, it would not have sufficed to send someone to Paris; they should not have let him out of their sight. The words "we were afraid that you had been ill . . . you might well have had a visit from someone from the family" are justified only in a case of *moderate urgency*. If Flaubert was really subject to bouts of apoplexy, this "someone from the family," at the end of a long journey, was in serious danger of finding a decomposing corpse at rue de l'Est. The sentence becomes clear, on the other hand, if we suppose that Gustave left his family without notable incident but in an alarming mental state. When he arrives at the Hôtel-Dieu, he has just spent a day at Vernon with the Schlésinger family; he is certainly relaxed, happy. But the next day, a change of scene: in Paris, Rouen was hope, happy expectation, escape; now the expectation remains but offers up its true meaning: it is the Parisian prison that he awaits, the dreadful repetition of the already done, the already seen. He wouldn't dream of resisting, but in the inflexible temporalization that leads him toward a future so near and so detested he sees the symbol of his entire life, drawn by that other future, the *professeur*. From one day to the next he grows more nervous, more irritable; he is sometimes depressed, sometimes overexcited, always anxious. We shall say that the disorders are nonsignifying because they are symptomatic of neither an identifiable illness, nor an enterprise, nor a hidden intention: they simply indicate that Flaubert lives with increasing exaspera-

3. He writes "Tom Andromer."

tion a contradiction that can be neither borne nor transcended. If these disorders expressed anything, it would be the structural disarray of an unhappy young man who does not know what to do, who doesn't even take it into his head to devise a solution, who is at once convinced of the fate that awaits him and unable to believe in it; in sum, the disorders present themselves exactly for what they are: meaningless agitations that take the place of an impossible and even inconceivable behavior in a tormenting but unrealizable situation. Overexcitement feeds on itself: he sleeps badly, no doubt, scarcely eats, drinks too much, he flies into a rage over nothing. Maxime claimed that these disturbances were a consequence of his illness—rather quickly assimilated to epilepsy. "At the least incident disturbing the extreme quiet of his existence, he would go off his head. I have seen him shouting and running around his apartment because he couldn't find his penknife." But we have enough familiarity with his youthful works and the correspondence to know that these disorders long preceded the illness: Gustave's impulse to shout, to bellow, to smash everything, his sudden desire to throw himself on passersby and massacre them did not begin just yesterday. It seems certain that these "itchings"—as he himself calls them—or these panics probably grew in frequency and intensity at the beginning of January, to the point that the family finally took notice. For Achille-Cléophas, the tremors have *one* very precise meaning: they remind him of the "illness" which, from '39 to '42, compelled him to keep Gustave near him. Isn't his son cured, then? He lets him depart, nonetheless, but in this hypothesis his behavior is perfectly comprehensible; his paternal obstrusiveness aside, he does not want to "settle" his son into his illness by taking its vague symptoms too seriously: nothing could be worse for Gustave, he thinks, than to be authorized to interrupt his studies and once more sequester himself in his room. The father promises himself to watch over his son from a distance; after all, isn't Dr. Cloquet keeping an eye on him? For the moment, the paterfamilias intends to make no change of plans. Gustave must have left in a state of extreme dependency; for this reason his mother and sister are worried by his silence; and if it had lasted, one of them would have come to settle in at rue de l'Est; this is the meaning of "someone from the family." A woman to watch over him, to look after his needs while awaiting the father's decisions, and, especially, to "boost his morale." What the Flauberts dread, on 17 January, is not the return of a definite attack but the physical effects of solitude and anguish.

In the letter to Ernest of January-February 1844, we find a confirma-

tion of our conjectures. This time an attack has taken place, and he says so. Is it the first? The second? What is certain is that the description he gives of it can be applied precisely to the attack at Pont-l'Évêque. For ten minutes Achille thought I was dead, he would write in '52, and in '44: "I almost popped off in the hands of my family." Then I was bled, he tells Louise. And to Ernest he speaks of a triple bleeding. In both letters he says that he "opened his eyes again." Both mention the bad case of nerves that follow the "resurrection," etc. It is not conclusive, of course, that both letters are describing the same attack; the first attacks, in any case, must have closely resembled each other. But if the accident he reports to Chevalier is not the first, why doesn't he tell him that an earlier one preceded it? To be sure, he is not always sincere with his old friend. But what need does he have to conceal this particular truth from Ernest? Subsequently, between February and June, he readily speaks to him of his attacks, in the plural: "My last major attack," etc. Why not mention the original one? The lie would not jibe with a certain attitude Gustave took toward his ailment, an attitude we shall discuss shortly, it would also be absurd because unmotivated. Forgetfulness? Negligence? Quite the contrary: although he nowhere says, "This was the first time it happened to me," everything suggests that it was. Gustave is still astonished; he tells of his adventure with the importance of someone who has had a brush with death. But the most significant thing is that he unreservedly adopts his father's diagnosis, although within eight days he will radically challenge it.⁴ For him to believe he was the victim of a cerebral congestion, he must have been taken by surprise: this can be explained only by his stupelaction at an unfamiliar event, that is, an event which is unrecognizable, unique. In fact, he will very quickly understand, as we shall soon see. And if by the end of January he had undergone two experiences of the same kind, separated by an interval of a fortnight, if before the second attack he had been able to spend two weeks thinking about the first and doing some soul-searching, we can be certain that he would have seen the second in the light of the first and interpreted it quite otherwise.

To conclude: although firm proof remains impossible for lack of documentation, the strongest probabilities are that one evening at Pont-l'Évêque, between 20 and 25 January, Gustave fell victim to an affliction he had never before experienced. This shall be our working

4. 9 February 1844, to the same Ernest: "[I am following] a strand rugmen." We shall return to this point.

hypothesis. If the attack at Pont-l'Évêque had indeed taken place before 15 January, and if the two doctors Flaubert had treated it lightly, they would have found themselves in contradiction with the patient himself. For them, in effect, the second manifestation of illness would have been decisive. But for Gustave, the only one that counted was the first, which he still regarded ten years later as the chief event of his life. It was at Pont-l'Évêque, according to him, that his youth was "concluded," it was there that one man died and another was born. In the "attacks" that followed he never saw anything but weakened repetitions of this archetypal fulguration. Is such a misunderstanding likely? Is it believable that Achille-Cléophas regarded merely as a negligible incident what his son experienced as the "fatal moment" determining an entire existence? Of course, the good surgeon hardly knew his son. But in this case it was not a question of fathoming a heart: somatic disorders were manifest, and, for Gustave to have kept this terrifying memory of it, their intensity must have been extreme: he fell down, he says, in floods of fire, as if struck by lightning. To the credit of Achille and Achille-Cléophas, we refuse to believe that they could have been mistaken. For if there were two accidents—the first at Pont-l'Évêque before the 15th, the second after the 20th—and if they were similar, the repetition would most certainly have prompted them to change their diagnosis. It was after the attack at Pont-l'Évêque that they were able to settle on cerebral congestion. But a "miniature apoplexy" does not repeat itself after eight or ten days without being fatal. If the attack recurs, and if the patient survives it, other interpretations must be considered. This is precisely what Achille-Cléophas did in February: before the cyclical return of the problems, he abandoned apoplexies and congestions for the diagnosis of a "nervous illness" and, perhaps more precisely, epilepsy. He must be given credit for this correct aboutface: since it was made between the end of January and the beginning of February, he would have been capable of making it two weeks earlier. In short, it was perfectly excusable, if the first appearance of illness is situated around the 20th or the 25th, to reach the conclusion of congestion, and then, with its recurrence, of a nervous disorder; on the other hand, if the accident at Pont-l'Évêque had taken place before the 15th, it would have been absurd for him to begin by diagnosing a nervous illness and later, when it recurred, to decide that it was a cerebral congestion. And that is precisely what we cannot accuse Achille-Cléophas of doing: one more reason for situating at Pont-l'Évêque Gustave's first pathological experience and for dating it at the end of January 1844.

Toward the middle of the month, then, the young man once more finds himself in his Paris apartment, deeply shaken but still unscathed. For the neurosis to become structured, he needed to discover, during the trajectory of the return, the true meaning of passive activity: he does what repels him because he cannot find in himself the will not to do so. No sooner does he return to Paris than his despondence is transformed into a stupor: he *should not* be there, it is absurd since he cannot bear being there; and yet he is there; he came *willingly*, so he *must* be there. No contingency here: the necessary is indeed the impossible—and the reverse is also true. Merely being present between these walls seems at once an objective truth and a nightmare. The denial is total but passive, and conscious of being so; obedience—passive also but subsumed by the appearance of activity—seems convincing to him, like an underlying determination of his life: this is what will determine his future. Thus posed, the contradiction can find a precise solution within him: his passivity must be charged with depriving him of the means to obey. This scheme is abstractly linked to this temptation to collapse, which will give that abstract, rigorous form its content. Nothing is said, however, nothing is known; and yet nothing is hidden, no choice is made: it is a matter of setting up an arrangement that may facilitate a future choice. At the heart of clear consciousness, by contrast, is resentment on the one hand (he did not find the strength to write immediately to his family that he had arrived—*as if he wanted to enjoy their anxiety and prolong it awhile, as if he wanted to compel them to say to themselves: we were wrong to let him go*); and, on the other hand, a passionate desire suddenly to find himself at the Hôtel Dieu again, in his room, and to stay there forever. But this desire is not only disputed by rancor; it can end only in dream: it poses itself as unrealizable since there is no conceivable means of satisfying it. Gustave said so in his letter of 20 December, and he certainly said the same thing to his father: on 15 January he will start preparing for his February exam. This is what was repeated at their farewells: "Good-bye, see you soon, we shall expect you on 1 March." The young man knows he will have no excuse to renege on his commitments. But of course—illness. Yet he is not ill, just desperate. Simulation would be revolt and would testify to a cynicism of which this inveterate booster of vice is quite incapable.

1. But his submission prevents him from making the pleasure—*as often one day or, at the most, two, he sends a note to Caroline.*

Besides, as he knows from experience, it would be merely an expedient. For those few days, between the four walls of his room in Paris, Gustave felt as Baudelaire would feel later, "brushed by the wing of imbecility": the inconceivable realizes and imposes itself but can be neither lived nor thought; one can only fall into the daze or escape into the imaginary. He does not touch his law books: this time he does not even find the strength to push obedience to the point of active complicity. He waits for *nothing*: he vegetates, oversensitive, a stranger to himself, in the midst of a crisis of depersonalization.

Thus was the moment Caroline chose to advise him to pay a visit to Hamard: "The news of Madame Hamard's illness made me sorry for her son; in less than two years he will have lost everything he loved, poor Hamard; go see him, for he likes you and has often spoken to me about you."⁶ The tone is new; a few years earlier, Gustave, Hamard's friend and Caroline's brother, was their only link. Now it is Caroline who acts as intermediary, informing Flaubert of Hamard's feelings and dictating how he should behave toward his comrade. From the beginning of June '43, Hamard, who shuttles between Rouen and Paris, is charged with transmitting Caroline's letters to Gustave. He sees the girl frequently and regularly. It is true, they will not announce their engagement until November '44, but in this new year there is already something between them that is more than friendship. Gustave, who will feign astonishment when he announces the "big news" to Ernest the following autumn, does not know, perhaps, precisely that they are in love, he cannot be unaware that they now have a personal relationship and that he has no place in it. We are already familiar with his jealous rages, and, as I have shown above in my analysis of one of his letters, he will make a clean break with his sister—without telling her—the day the two young people make known their engagement. It is therefore perfectly clear from this time that he harbored a vigorous personal resentment of Caroline. Of course, he could not help being jealous, but there is more: the little sister was his vassal; she lived in his dependence and was the object—the thought—of his inexhaustible generosity. Here another man unexpectedly turns up: there is no question of sharing her; Gustave must be everything to her, or she must be nothing to him. A vassal's betrayal is more criminal than that of a friend: it is the denial of *homage*. And above all it casts doubt on the Lord; he perceives that his

6. Letter of 17 January 1844.

"man" was his objective truth; without fealty, no longer Lord, just a poor wretch. Vassal to his father and to Alfred, rejected by both, Gustave was sovereign only to Caroline. By breaking her bonds, she leaves him *desbête* and causes him to fall back into a dark, hopeless vassalage; she ravages his memory by sullyng the remembrance of their common childhood; beside her he was *himself*, a subject, an agent of history; she has returned him to his other-being, to his relative being. In short, in this moment of his life when the failures are accumulating, he experiences his sister's love affair as a new failure, more profound, perhaps, than all the others. We shall have no difficulty imagining his mood when he reads the letter in which she enjoins him, kindly but peremptorily, to go to her lover's home. He goes, nonetheless. Out of a masochism born of resentment: it is as if he were saying to his sister: I shall go, nervous and morose as I am; I shall do what you wish; but you will see what a state this visit will put me in.

He has another motive as well. According to him, Hamard is "pitifully stupid." Once, however, when he was telling Gustave about his brother's death throes, he was fascinating. As we have seen, Flaubert observed then: "I didn't like it at all; that man humiliated me. He was full of feeling and I was empty . . . I recall how I hated myself and thought myself loathsome for a moment." This time it will be even worse. No sooner emerged from his first bereavement, Hamard sees his mother die and is about to find himself utterly alone. We know the effect these repeated shocks would produce in this unfortunate man: after Caroline's death, he went quite mad. Beginning in '44, at the bedside of his dying or already dead mother, suffering makes him fall into mental disarray. Gustave suspects it: half-mad himself, he goes to the home of a madman; unfeeling and wretched, he goes to contemplate a despair incommensurate with his own. Not that Hamard's unhappiness is deeper: it is *other*. Gustave's, most of the time, is lived intensely and for short periods: he calls it *extase*, and at times must *summon* it by gestures in order to establish it inside him. The *other* has entered Hamard by breaking in: it imposes itself and sponges on him. Here again, Flaubert thinks, is the dichotomy of empty and full. In fact, he is mistaken. Mourning is an unlivable emptiness, and yet it must be lived, no matter how; it is a discourse that cannot cease to address the other; remaining a dialogue, it experiences itself as monologue. Lacking an answer, in these real moments when the living person, amputated, feels the mutilation internalized, there is some phantom of dark comedy that hurls in derision the worst suffering. Then comes mental disarray, prompted by the unrealizable fracture of

a reciprocal relation whose reciprocity the entire act of mourning maintains in a vacuum. In order to realize an impossible plenitude, one resorts to the craziest gestures or loses oneself in meaningless convulsions. Flaubert is unaware of all that; empty, and ashamed of being empty, he is about to contemplate a horrible void, which he takes for plenitude. He has understood for himself that our misfortune is to be lacunary; he has generalized in vain—he is unaware that this lacuna is characteristic of our condition and is to be found in all our feelings.⁷

Of course, the reality surpasses his hopes. Hamard is dazed, convulsive; he probably falls upon Gustave and clings to him, he may even be delirious. Flaubert abhors him and finds *himself* abhorrent. He is cold, stiff, exasperated: he doesn't "go along" with it, and yet this appearance of plenitude fascinates him. He would like to establish it inside himself, this beautiful suffering, this opaque block of unhappiness, in order to fill his emptiness at last, to realize Hell even as he scorns the man writhing before his eyes. It seems to him, in short—this is what disconcerts him—that Hamard does not deserve his suffering and that he, Gustave, who alone is worthy of it, is condemned not to feel it. At the same time, terror overtakes him: this fascination, already a temptation, may tomorrow be an attempt. He vaguely understands his pithiatism, as we have seen; he is afraid of autosuggestion, of letting himself go in an act of irreparable, total violence initiated by envy and self-loathing. Yes, he is transfixed by *his* doom: he wants to die and to survive, to play at once the role of mother and son, because he is sure that he can weep for only one death with that marvelous intensity—his own. He can no longer cut himself off from Hamard; apparently he returns several days in a row to the house of death, for he speaks to Ernest of some scenes that took place there. This will not be surprising if we recall that beginning in April '38, he evoked—out of a generalized prudence—the "natural feeling that impels man to become impassioned by what is hideous and

7. It goes without saying that I do not mean to deny the truth of such suffering. I am saying only that it is biologically *irrational* fact, the death of the other. It lives in fictionality because it is unrealizable and that, for this reason, all our acts are transaltered into gestures. To cite only one example, to carry out the last wishes of a dying man can lead to real and difficult endeavors. But they are derelictized from the outset because they are born of the father's decision to keep him alive, to substitute him as living by disclaiming that he is at the source of acts which are in fact born of our personal optics. The carrying out is in principle incommensurate with the intention one claims to realize: the results will be always other than what the dead man had foreseen, and we cannot help being aware of it.

bitterly grotesque." What is hideous, here, is agony and death; what is grotesque is that despair which has mistaken the sufferer and gives itself undeserved to Hamard, defrauding Gustave. Two words make Flaubert's real feelings manifest: "horrible scenes." He is rarely so pathetic where a death is concerned. These scenes, he says, so shook him that he needed to "recover" from them. Yet the word "horrible" betrays him: it implies a certain blame, a repugnance, which is not contained in "terrible." Hamard's terrible suffering horrifies Gustave. Precisely because it attracts him, it repels him. He must flee, flee these nightmarish days that he lives now at his friend's and now immured in his own room, trembling with fear. Here he has found the pretext for rejoining his family. But it is already too late. For what he flees is himself, the option that imposes itself on his shattered nerves. In vain: the choice is made. Barely two or three days after the return to Rouen, he will execute the sentence he has passed on himself. So it must also be understood that his haste is motivated by a presentiment: if the worst must happen, let it strike in the midst of his family. First of all because the "survival" will be less painful, and second because it will make his family eyewitnesses to the disaster they have provoked. We might say that he both retreats from this disaster and pursues it. Come tonight to Samarkand. This is what gives all its meaning to that sentence in the letter to Ernest: "I almost popped off in the hands of my family."

Before interpreting the attack at Pont l'Évêque, we must ask what role it played in that curious neurosis from which Gustave was to suffer for nearly ten years. Was it a warning signal, a symptom, the first appearance of an illness that would run its course, intensifying to a maximum point, after which it would begin to abate? Would this first disorder, original and definite, be followed by others, equally definite but of a different nature, which cannot be identified with it because, although they might have been the effect and expression of the same morbid entity, they manifested it at different moments in its evolution? In short, was it the initial stage of a complex and unforeseeable development, or did it embody the entire illness in a flash of lightning? Would this illness grow, overwhelming other aspects of his being, or, to the contrary, would it mark time, be lost in repetitions, in replays? Would there be, at least for a few months, a progression of psychopathic inventiveness, or was the neurotic structure completed at Pont-l'Évêque once and for all? In order to answer these questions, it will suffice to examine the subsequent attacks.

On those that took place from January to June we have little information: Gustave tells us only that they were numerous at first and subsequently became less frequent. On 7 June he writes to Ernest: "As for your servant, he is doing all right without precisely doing well. Not a day passes without my seeing something now and then like bundles of hair or fireworks passing before my eyes. This lasts for quite a long time. Still, my last big attack was milder than the others." In short, the frequency and intensity are diminishing; several years later, Flaubert will write to Louise that his "attacks" are repeated about every four months.

Maxime was not an eyewitness to the attack at Pont-l'Évêque. But he witnessed several of those which followed, and we have no reason to doubt his testimony.

He grew very pale . . . This state . . . sometimes went on for several minutes . . . He still hoped it was just a scare . . . Then he walked, he ran toward his bed, lay down, as dismal as if he were lying down alive in a coffin . . . He would cry: "Drop the reins; here comes the wagoner, I hear the bells! Ah! I see the lantern of the inn!" Then he would groan . . . and the convulsion would lift his body . . . a paroxysm in which his whole being would shake, [followed] invariably by a deep sleep and a fatigue that lasted several days.

This description calls forth several comments. First of all, the basic character of these attacks is that they are explicitly constituted as references to the first attack. In a way, they resurrect it. But these stereotypical repetitions of the archetypal event are also weakened reproductions. The attack at Pont-l'Évêque had jumped Gustave like a thief; now the young man has a warning. An unutterable malaise and the impression of seeing "fireworks" serve as alarms. He waits, conscious of the danger that threatens him, and instead of falling as if struck by lightning he has time to go and lie down on his couch. From this point on, the primal scene is relived in the imaginary on the basis of a few indices, always the same, provided by memory. "I see the wagoner, the lights," etc. In a sense, it is played and, above all, spoken: the psychopathic aggression that Flaubert suffered he reconstitutes here as a role. The content is, moreover, debased: Flaubert often spoke of the millions of images and ideas that rushed through his consciousness when he fell at his brother's feet; they were "all the ignited rockets of a fireworks display." This incommunicable richness of perception—illusory but experienced—contrasts with the poverty

of discourse, and consequently of thoughts, in the referential attacks. The wagoner's noisy cart, the distant lights, etc., make up the meager bunch of auditory and visual images or, rather, the assortment of words that monopolize his consciousness. It is like a conjuring trick: the patient *invokes* and *convoques* the false death that felled him one night. But it doesn't come: Achille believed for ten minutes that he was dead; Maxime doesn't believe it for a moment. Cataleptic immobility is replaced by convulsions; these disordered movements, it seems, are born of the futile quest for a former state and the impossibility of reproducing it. Did the "fireworks" of thoughts light up at that moment in Flaubert's head? It is unlikely. He repeated, of course, that he never lost consciousness on those occasions. But the "catalepsy" at Pont l'Évêque was favorable to "mentism" [the flight of ideas]. During convulsions, the jerks of the body suffice to occupy the consciousness; it is hard to imagine that they accelerate thought and foster ideas. *Physically exhausted*, the patient falls into a heavy sleep, and this is how it ends until the next time.

These referential attacks occur frequently in certain patients. Janet cites, among others, the case of a young girl who *reproduced* the terrible night she had kept vigil over her dead mother with her dead-drunk father close by. Autonomous systems, constituted *on one occasion*, reappear in progressively weakened form and are finally reduced to a symbolic skeleton, a few stereotypical movements. In Flaubert's case, a single moment seems to have assured the passage from a normal to a pathological state. The morbid creation and the *fait* (the neurotic consent to the neurosis) are merged into a single moment on a moonless night in January 1844. After that night, the neurosis in Gustave invented nothing more; it seemed out of breath. As a result, no other disorder appended itself to the first ones; the illness did not develop, it had no history, it was maintained in the circular time of repetition: it was an *involution* rather than an evolution. Flaubert feels this; he feels that his illness *consumes him*. In a word, the only moment that counts is that of the archetypal event: in it, the neurosis is chosen, structured, realized; in the depths, a choice has taken place, four years in the making, which has willed itself to be irreversible or, rather, was none other than a consented irreversibility. Afterward, for nearly ten years, disorders will occur that no longer have the same meaning, precisely because their purpose is merely to reproduce the original choice, maintain it across the temporal flow. The convulsive attacks are suffered yet playacted ceremonies intended to commemo-

rate the irreversible, to confirm the patient in his neurotic option. We shall certainly have to explain the meaning of this eternal return. And, in a sense, the original crisis *aims* to reproduce itself symbolically. Be that as it may, the original crisis is what creates the irreversibility and will consequently be the essential subject of our study: we shall attempt to use it in order to illuminate the entire "illness."

Gustave's Diagnosis

Despite Dumesnil's very convincing demonstration, the nature of the problems that began to afflict Flaubert in 1844 are still under discussion: Were they hysterical or was Flaubert an epileptic? Today it is acknowledged that certain forms of epilepsy originate in hysteria. So, to stay closer to the facts, we shall be frankly nominalist. The point is not to search for a concept that subsumes Flaubert's attacks but to ask ourselves whether or not they have *meaning*. The most prevalent thesis—and, curiously, one held by Dumesnil himself, who believed that they were of a hysterical nature—is that they were *accidental*. If that were so, they would originally have been nonsignifying—like a head cold or a purulent pleurisy—and Gustave himself would have given them meaning *a posteriori* by using these chance misfortunes as the means to reorient his life. In the preceding pages we have tried to establish the opposite thesis: the illness was organized as a function of an original intention; its sudden and terrible structuring at Pont-l'Évêque was not an accidental fact but a necessity *endowed with meaning*. Before establishing this underlying meaning by a detailed examination and interpretation of the circumstances, we should support our assumption by interrogating the principal witness, Flaubert himself. What does he think of his "attack"? How does he see it? How does he endure its "return" in the course of the years and months that follow? Does he see it as something *final*? Does he understand the archetypal event and the referential attacks as an absurd and mechanical whole merely involving his organism, or as a *comprehensible totality*?

It will be said, perhaps, that the patient, as judge of his own cause, is by definition a false witness, that his discourse must be regarded as one symptom among others and not as a valid interpretation. And this is true in certain cases, but not in Flaubert's. From the beginning of this study, we have understood him from the inside, in complicity

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