

REVIEW ARTICLE

Liliane Welch

FLAUBERT'S MODERNITY*

The publication of *Flaubert the Master 1856-1880*, the second and final volume of Enid Starkie's critical and biographical study of this great French writer, completes and presents for consideration one particular kind of historical approach to literature. The first volume entitled *Flaubert, The Making of the Master*, published in 1967, analyzes and comments upon Flaubert's life and work up to and through the time of the publication of his masterpiece, *Madame Bovary*, in 1857. This second volume continues chronologically, revealing in places Miss Starkie's haste in view of her own pending death from cancer. It is now published posthumously.

What is most modern in Flaubert himself is to be found in his *L'Education sentimentale*, which first appeared in 1869. This novel is not only impressive in itself, it has proven to be the foundation onto which the edifices of the now celebrated French New Novel have been built. It embodies a new perspective on human experience and at the same time the living proof of a renewed form of the novel. For the first time in literature we find here, as the chief protagonist, a hero distinctively passive in his bearing upon circumstances. In keeping with the character of the hero, the narrative style ingeniously introduced and developed by Flaubert is one which leaves the reader to his own devices. There is no omniscient narrator to help the reader out. Thus the reader views and experiences the world unfolded by this novel through the medium of the passive hero and through the reactions of this protagonist's consciousness. The reader, although presented with a detailed descriptive array, must still seek out his own orientation in the work and must, contrary to the prevalent passivity represented by the hero and by the style, develop into an active and attentive co-worker who clarifies the events for himself and defines his own stance within them.

In a commentary on Flaubert's style published in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1920 and contained in *Chroniques*, another great French writer,

**Flaubert the Master 1856-1880*. By Enid Starkie. New York: Atheneum, 1971. Pp. 390.

Marcel Proust, provides us with a poignant analysis of what is most significantly new in Flaubert's work. According to Proust, Flaubert "renewed our vision of things almost as much as Kant, with his categories, renewed theories of knowledge and theories of the reality of the external world".¹ The revolutionary accomplishment of *L'Education sentimentale* consists in allowing a coherent sequence of perceptions to occur without depending for this coherence upon rational and casual connections. Traditionally, coherence is achieved in terms of the human effort to put things into order, the execution of this effort being "action" in the most fundamental sense of the word. Proust rightly comments: ". . . what had been, until Flaubert, action now becomes impression. Things have as much life as men, for it is our faculty of reason which, afterwards, assigns to every visual phenomenon external causes. However, in the first impression which we receive such causation is not immediately evident".² In other words, an impression becomes what it is when we refrain from assigning reasons to things. The novels of the early nineteenth-century writer Balzac, for a contrasting instance, describe things in relation to a projected harmony with man. Things are seen here as the extensions of man: a city is described in its historical development as a servant of human interests, the furniture of a room is given a definitive description in terms of its gradual acquisition and modification by successive generations. In *L'Education sentimentale*, on the other hand, things are not experienced at any given moment in terms of their evolution, i.e. in terms of the manifold of meanings they have had for the human protagonists in the course of time. Rather, things are simply seen as they appear, as impressions.

The "story" of *L'Education sentimentale* is extremely simple: Frédéric Moreau arrives in Paris to embark upon the study of law—and what he hopes to be an artistic career; he fails indifferently in all his dilettantish endeavors; his most fervent and persistent desire to be the lover of Mme. Arnoux, a married woman, leads only to infinite pining; at the end we find him back in his provincial town leading the life of the average French *petit bourgeois* living off his pension. Of course, the narrative contains a great abundance of facts and details, innumerable descriptions of political plans and involvements, of masked balls, of fancy clothes, of industrial developments. However, these things do not form a plenitude of meanings distinctively designed for man. The reader used to action rather than impression is likely to perceive these things as merely punctuating the void. In the ball scenes we can see the structure of the novel in a compressed form. Nothing of moment happens in the course of the narrative here; one figure glides past another, snatches of

conversations are heard without being uttered by anyone in particular. What the reader experiences is a loose collectivity, not a rational individuality.

In his manifesto of the French New Novel, the contemporary novelist and film maker Alain Robbe-Grillet writes that with Flaubert's work things appearing in novels no longer exist as "metaphysical or anthropological contents, but as sheer forms". The passion for simple—as contrasted to explanatory—description is one of the essential elements in saliently contemporary novels. It is indeed the key of filiation from Flaubert to Kafka.³

One of the chief formal features of Flaubert's style which lend weight to the sense of impression is the use of tense. French novels are almost always written in the "historic past": a tense suggesting one-time, over-with events and loosely expressed by the simple past tense in English. Flaubert avoids this traditional tense, and employs in its stead the imperfect tense. In the context of a narrative, this tense gives a distinctive mood. Whereas the traditional narrative might say "he went . . .," Flaubert writes what might be expressed in English as "he used to go . . ." or perhaps "he would go . . .," thereby implying habit and repetition. The effect of this stylistic feature is to make every particular action appear as in itself banal. Proust ascribes to the power of this style the general character of *L'Education sentimentale* as "a long report of an entire life, without the characters taking, so to speak, an active part in the action".⁴

Unlike previous literary heroes, Frédéric Moreau is distinctly devoid of any powerful will. He merely has illusions, and when these dreams evaporate he sinks immediately into obvious mediocracy. He does not stand in any pronounced conflict with his situation; his circumstances merely fall over him. His passions and desires only affect him; they do not comprise moments of powerful response. He is driven by them as a derelict in the surf. Whereas Aristotle claims that action is the essence of dramatic presentation, Frédéric hardly does anything which could truly be called action.

In a letter of 1853 to his mistress, a letter in which he first announces *L'Education sentimentale*, calling it his "great modern novel", Flaubert remarks as follows upon the character of the hero: "It is this perpetual state of flux in Hamlet, this vague atmosphere in which he lives, this lack of decision in will-power and lack of resolve in thought, that makes him sublime. . . . Ulysses is perhaps the most impressive character in the whole of ancient literature and Hamlet in the modern".⁵ Like Stéphane Mallarmé, Flaubert was fascinated by the figure of the man caught between opposite courses of action, and he

succeeded in presenting this figure in a pure form.

The atmosphere of impotence is enhanced by the choice of general setting, namely mid-nineteenth-century France. For this is the time of the aborted 1848 revolution, of the growing evidence and feeling that the course of events is governed by impersonal forces. Just as Frédéric does not become a successful writer or lover, so he literally sits out the revolution, first waiting in vain for his would-be mistress, Mme. Arnoux, and then passing the time safely in the country outside Paris with an easy trollop who chances by. And it is just as well, since his entire generation seems condemned to impotence.

Proust comments on a complementary and unique feature of Flaubert's style in *L'Education sentimentale*: ". . . with mastery he gives the impression of Time. In my view, the most beautiful thing in *L'Education sentimentale* is not a sentence, but a blank".⁶ Flaubert develops for the first time the peculiar narrative technique of "leaping". An example is the manner in which the narration leaves decades out of account between Frédéric's departure from Paris and the resumption of the story—without the least effort to fill in the gap. In more traditional novels such as those of Balzac, one of the chief tasks of the narrator is to fill in all time with interconnected events forming a continuity. Proust remarks correctly that the effect of breaking with this tradition is, in the case of Flaubert at least, to heighten the impression of time. For a very powerful experience of time arises with the sense that whole periods are indeed empty of anything to say, and that some much later time ties in more directly with the distant past than does any of the intervening times. Many of the new novels of today, taking their cue from Flaubert, dissolve the linear narration altogether in favor of a fragmented narration spanning indifferent times; many current movies use profusely flashbacks and in some cases flashforwards (cf. *Slaughterhouse Five*). Going even further, some new novelists quite literally leave blanks on the printed page to suggest that the reader himself may insert what he pleases.

What is strange, intriguing and masterful about Flaubert's work is the opening of a new domain of beauty. Flaubert like Baudelaire ties the new sense of beauty to the consciousness of modernity. This consciousness emerges most vividly in the city scenes of *L'Education sentimentale*. Here the city is not simply described realistically. Rather, the sense of the modern city is evoked: the city shows itself as a presence. The frenetic life definitive of urbanity is not so much represented (depicted) as presented through the impressions of the hero. Yet the perception of the city does not emanate from

an individual human nature. The human individuality of the experience recedes behind the anonymous events. An art based on impression and not on action leads at its best to evocation rather than representation. Baudelaire's definition of modernity in his study *Le Peintre de vie moderne* applies equally well to the city scenes in *L'Education sentimentale*: "The pleasure which we derive from the depiction of the present does not lie simply in the beauty with which it might be endowed, but also in its actual quality of present".⁷

In her Introduction to *Flaubert the Master 1856-1880*, Miss Starkie states that her book has two aims. First, she intends to show, through a consideration of the works published after 1856—*Salambô*, *L'Education sentimentale*, *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, *Trois Contes*, *Boward et Pécuchet*—, how Flaubert was complete master of his art during this period and how he developed in each novel a different problem with an appropriate and unique style. Secondly, she wishes to "give a picture of Flaubert as a man, as a human being, not only as an artist" with a particular view to proving that he has been on this level especially misunderstood and unjustly attacked by many critics. The book as a whole tends toward the second of these aims, being predominantly bent upon showing that Flaubert was not so overly pessimistic and egoistic as some have claimed, but basically kind-hearted, well loved by many, and remained a happy and exciting person even in illness and disaster.

With a view to fathoming the life of Flaubert after the publication of *Madame Bovary*, and to establishing continuities between the events recounted in the author's novels and various events occurring in the author's life, Miss Starkie tells numerous anecdotes culled from different sources of hearsay; the author's own letters, memories and letter of friends and relations. These anecdotes touch upon such topics as aborted attempts to secure love relationships with women, possible homosexual relationships with men, the author's marked "love of salacious stories and lewd situations". Plot summaries and character analyses intermittently punctuate the biographical detail. Thus Miss Starkie's perspective is one deliberately denying any separation between the author qua ordinary man and the work qua poetic creation. For her it is Flaubert the man who is speaking in the work. There being no distinction between the writer's everyday, biographical self and his creative narrative self, the work of literature is understood as embodying the personal language of the author.

Of all the things which could be critically analyzed in *L'Education sentimentale*, the following is what we are asked to consider: "What might be called the main theme of the novel, its heart and core, goes back . . . very far into Flaubert's life: to his romantic love for Elisa Schlésinger". An anecdote reveals that Flaubert once pursued and rescued at the seashore a fugitive scarf from the advancing tide and received from its owner, the married Madame Schlésinger, a profuse, but verbal, expression of gratitude. One then surmises the spawning of a great but unrequited love. According to Miss Starkie's interpretation, Flaubert expresses his love for this woman by "enshrining her in the pages of *L'Education sentimentale*" in the figure of Madame Arnoux. In proposing this insight the critic is hoping to supply us with what would otherwise be missing from our understanding of the work. In the same vein other figures in the novel are explicated: "Flaubert has the gift of friendship and so too has Frédéric".

Miss Starkie's approach to literature is an oblique one: sidewise through the author's life and social circumstances, and only from these supposedly more accessible phenomena on into the work itself. Since such an approach aspires to scientific objectivity, and since the actual work of an author provides a very meagre quantity of empirical data, criticism of this sort drives the critic to remote provincial libraries and archives, into the private homes of the author's descendants, and through hours, indeed years, of painstaking collation, double-checking, and documentation. (Miss Starkie's earlier scholarship on Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Gide likewise displays her versatile powers in unearthing data concerning her authors.) Meanwhile, though, these procedures seem fated to reduce the genius of an author's works to commonplace origins: in the case of Flaubert, his passion for erudition, his belief in eternal love, his faith in the priesthood of art, his anti-bourgeois disposition. This is positivism, no matter how mild and inoffensive: the effort to avoid floundering in inconsequential intuitions by grounding one's articulation of the subject matter (here: Flaubert's genius) in origins drawn from everyday rather than exceptional events. For the faith, or the heresy, of positivism consists in the conviction that such factors as education, heredity, and environment are somehow truer because supposedly more accessible and more specifiable. It should not pass unnoticed, however, that, even granting the greater accessibility and specifiability of such data, we only find them such to the extent that we are ourselves professional and specialized critics.

For Miss Starkie, the work of literature is not primarily a work of language whose internal workings might be encouraged and promoted by

critical discourse. She is not even seeking to formulate an understanding of these internal workings and structures. Rather, her efforts are devoted to formulating and justifying a decision regarding a relation between events portrayed in and by the author's language and another set of events drawn from the author's life and portrayable in the critic's language. However, a work of literature was not written to be read in this way. Prolonged concern for external relations, although originally no doubt grounded upon the internal power and complexity of the work, is bound to have a numbing effect. For external relations are final and exhaustive, whereas the internal workings of anything, particularly of literature, are ever *resurgent*, explosively rich and ambiguously symbolic—i.e. they *are* only as *working*.

In an interesting short essay entitled "Criticism and Invention",⁵ the French critic and novelist Michel Butor argues that any kind of discourse is essentially "invention". That is, discourse, whether it be a novel or a critical review of the novel, is a manifestation of the peculiar human task of "putting it all together" (as the youths of today like to say). This togetherness, or the whole of what one says, is a particular arrangement of the parts (data, whether drawn from the heat of life itself or from the cool of painstaking scholarship). In arranging such parts, the novelist or critic owes a good deal to them, and he has a responsibility to preserve them in their respective integrities, but the discourse as a whole goes beyond the parts: it is in this sense invention. Thus, to understand anything requires of us that we steep ourselves in fiction. Literary criticism, too, as Butor goes on to say, partakes of fiction, no matter how much pride it takes in being scientific, objective, or empirical. For, just as the novelist, the critic must take materials as starting points of interpretations. If a critic attempts to reduce the elements of an author's work to the events of the author's life, he necessarily constructs a vision of the author's life from various isolated and fragmentary data, always of questionable truth. The "life" the critic thus takes as his standard of comparison is itself a fiction. The question then is: which is more likely to bear fruit for concentration—the critic's fiction or the poet's fiction?

The option is forced as long as the critical approach to literature aspires to a continuity with ordinary life rather than with the poetic language of its author. When asking what is happening—working—within the original language, criticism is also involved in a process of invention. But it continues the inventions of that discourse—language at its best—so that it may itself be the source of new horizons and new illuminations.

NOTES

1. Marcel Proust, *Chroniques* (Paris, 1927), p. 193.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
3. Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris, 1963), p. 13.
4. Proust, *op. cit.*, p. 199.
5. *Oeuvres Complètes de Gustave Flaubert. Correspondance III* (Paris, 1926-30), p. 257.
6. Proust, *op. cit.*, p. 205.
7. Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Edition de la Pléiade (Paris, 1961), p. 1153.
8. *Meanjin Quarterly*, vol. 28, 1969, pp. 461-471.