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# SALAMMBO



GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

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FICTION

SALAMMBO

BY GUSTAVE FLAUBERT · TRANSLATED  
BY J. S. CHARTRES · INTRODUCTION BY  
FREDERICK C. GREEN

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, born at Rouen on 12th December 1821. Nervous breakdown in 1843, and lived for the rest of his life at Croisset, near Rouen. Health rapidly declined after 1870 and he died on 8th May 1880.

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## INTRODUCTION

THE life of Gustave Flaubert is singularly lacking in those spectacular crises, either of an emotional or material kind, which for no very clear reason are usually associated with the creation of great art. After all, whether a man's life shall be dramatic or not rests very largely with himself, and Flaubert's attitude here can be summed up in his favourite dictum: *La vie est bête*. The simplists, who see mankind conveniently divided into two categories, realists and idealists, have of course no difficulty in assigning Flaubert to the former. For them he is a pessimist, a fatalist, the man who rescued the French novel from the frenzied mysticism of the Romantics and planted it firmly on the solid road reading to Naturalism and truth. So Flaubert becomes for them *par excellence*, as the author of *Madame Bovary*, the novelist who gives us "the facts of life," that is, the ugliness of life, since, according to their curious creed, there are no beautiful "facts." How utterly false and one-sided is this conception of Flaubert will be obvious to any one at all familiar with his *Correspondence*. There we discover another and strangely perplexing Flaubert, a man haunted by apocalyptic visions of beauty, to which he dared not abandon himself, lest by so doing he should compromise his austere ideal of artistic perfection, that ideal of complete *impersonnalité* which for him was the essence of great art. Flaubert thought life stupid because, so far as he could see, it did not evolve in obedience to any perceptible law. Even to regard it as tragic or comic would be to assume that human existence, like some stupendous drama, is staged and controlled by an unseen will. That Flaubert refused to admit, and if in *Madame Bovary* he was weak enough to cast his story of Emma's life into a dramatic mould, he afterwards bitterly regretted this weak pandering to the public taste for *le côté vaudeville*. The business of the artist, Flaubert held, is not to dramatize, to simplify life, but to interpret it. The artist is not a moralist: he is not required to *conclude* but only to express as perfectly as he can the inexplicable complexity of that experience we call living. The "facts of life" are neither

good nor bad, beautiful nor ugly: they simply exist. What makes them beautiful or ugly is their expression, the form given to them by the artist; for all great art is beauty.

To the casual observer there is nothing dramatic in the life of Flaubert. He was not even poor, since his father, a well-known doctor, left enough money to save his son those battles with poverty which are commonly supposed to lend a fine temper to the soul of an artist. If only for one reason it is fortunate that Flaubert was not called upon to test the truth of this popular belief. After some years spent at the *lycée* of Rouen he went to Paris in 1841 to study law, which he detested. Whilst on a visit to his parents in 1843, the young man suffered the first attack of a nervous malady, most probably epilepsy, that was to shadow his whole life though it never clouded his luminous intelligence. He was then only twenty-two. Abandoning all idea of proceeding to the bar, Flaubert now devoted himself exclusively to study and to the pursuit of art. On the death of his father and sister, he settled down with his mother at Croisset, a little village on the Seine near his native town of Rouen. Often, however, he paid lengthy visits to Paris and on two occasions realized his youthful dream of seeing the East. The publication, in 1857, of the first novel, *Madame Bovary*, brought unwelcome notoriety, and he had to defend himself against a stupid charge of immorality, though, as is well known, the Government was attacking, not Flaubert's work but the *Revue de Paris* in which it was published. His triumphant acquittal made him famous and increased the circle of his literary friends. Gradually, to his intense chagrin, and thanks to his association with the Goncourts, Tourguenieff, Taine, Maupassant, and Zola, he found himself hailed as the father of Realism, a paternity which he violently repudiated, though many years were to elapse before his artistic creed was fully understood.

His one love affair, the liaison with that possessive blue-stockings, Madame Louise Colet, dragged along for some nine years, ending only in 1853. In no sense can it be said to have contributed to the enrichment of Flaubert's art, save perhaps to strengthen his already firm conviction that any human experience, if it is to be of value to the artist, must be sublimated and ruthlessly stripped of its subjective elements. This he tried to do with his love,



and it is scarcely surprising that Louise Colet, for whom love was an emotional cathartic, found it impossible to understand a man who, as he ingenuously explained, wanted to regard her as a "sublime hermaphrodite." He wrote: "I should like to make you something quite exceptional, neither friend nor mistress. That is too restricted, too exclusive. One does not love a friend enough and with a mistress one is too stupid. It is the intermediary term—the essence of these two sentiments interfused." Into these sublunary regions Madame Colet could not follow Flaubert. As for the latter, his great mistake was in ever imagining that she could. It took several years for him to realize her essential mediocrity, for she was not, as he fondly believed, a great artist and his intellectual peer. On the contrary she belonged to a category of women whom Flaubert abhorred, women who, to use his own words, "kiss sacred relics, weep at the moon, get delirious with tenderness when they see children, swoon at the theatre, and look pensive before the ocean." The inevitable misunderstandings arose: Louise was jealous; she nagged Flaubert; spied upon him, following him even into restaurants. Her crowning indiscretion was to appear at Croisset where, in the presence of his mother, she made a scene. Flaubert, in a curt note, put an end to their relations.

All this was disagreeable, sordid, no doubt, but not tragic. Flaubert had always felt that he was incapable of what is technically called a *grande passion*. He roared with laughter when Louise, true to type, vilified him in two tenth-rate novels. Now, at any rate, he could devote himself completely to his true mistress, Art. This was in 1855. *Madame Bovary* was practically finished, and to his unspeakable relief, for the writing of it had been a long gehenna, the supreme sacrifice of Flaubert the Romantic to Flaubert the Artist. In his desk lay the first version of his *Tentation de Saint-Antoine*, written in 1849, which had alarmed his friends Bouillet and Du Camp by its frenzied lyricism. However, with *Madame Bovary* he had made complete amends for that indiscretion, for was not this book a perfect illustration of his doctrine of complete impassiveness in art? "There are in me," he once wrote, "two distinct fellows: one who loves *gueulades*, lyricism, great eagle flights, the sonorous phrase, the peaks

of the idea; another who digs and burrows as far as he can into the truth, who likes to throw into relief the little fact as vividly as the big one, who would like to make you feel *almost materially* the things he reproduces." "Do you think," he asked in 1856 of Pichot, in reference to *Madame Bovary*, "do you think that this ignoble reality, the reproduction of which disgusts you, does not turn my stomach as much as it does yours? If you knew me better you would realize that I execrate ordinary life. I have always personally avoided it as much as possible. But æsthetically, this once and only this once, I wanted to experience it thoroughly." Clearly it was now the turn of the other Flaubert, the lyrical Flaubert of the "great eagle flights."

Ever since his boyhood he had been haunted by apocalyptic, coloured visions of exotic beauty, visions that he vaguely desired to express in an Oriental tale. In 1849, with his friend Maxime Du Camp, he had left to spend two years in Egypt, Syria, and Greece, returning by way of Italy. This journey was to be of capital importance to the future author of *Salammbô*.

Yet, strangely enough, in this Orient of reality, what impressed him most was not what his vivid imagination had already conjured up in the Orient of his dreams; not the changing, coloured pageant of its horizons, landscapes, and seas, but what Flaubert calls the "psychological, human, and comic side," the violent contrasts of beauty and hideousness, the motley hues of the Eastern mind with its core of "old, immutable, unswerving *canaille*." In Greece for the first time he glimpsed the true spirit of classic beauty, which hitherto he had seen only through the distorting glass of French neo-classic art. In true Classicism he found all the elements which had attracted him originally to the Romantics—violent passion, imagination, immensity, realism—elements, moreover, which the Ancients contrived to weld into a form of perfect, plastic beauty. Now Flaubert realized the inherent æsthetic defect of Romanticism, its subjectivism, its constant anxiety to *judge* and to simplify life, instead of impassively interpreting it. "Yes," he reflected, "the stupidity consists in desiring to conclude. We are but threads and we want to know the pattern." Christianized modern Rome deepened his reverence for pagan art and culture. His natural pessimism regarding all Utopian schemes for the

moral regeneration of mankind was confirmed by his recent experiences. The only possible attitude for the artist towards humanity, he concluded, is one of tranquil indifference and serene contempt. In this spirit he returned to write *Madame Bovary*, but no sooner was it in print than the old Adam grew clamorous.

Thanks to the precious *Correspondence* it is almost possible to follow step by step the creation of *Salammbô*. In May, 1857, Flaubert talks of a novel on Carthage, a *truculente facétie* demanding immense archæological researches. In March he had already set aside *Saint-Antoine* in order to address himself to the immense documentation involved in this attempt to evoke the atmosphere of Carthaginian life. His mood is a perplexing and curious one. The old Romantic frenzy is tempered by a cool spirit of objective curiosity: the savant holds the poet in leash. With dogged, Benedictine perseverance he pursues his task. By August he has "ingurgitated" a hundred volumes on Carthage and in a fortnight "eighteen tons of Cahen's *Bible*"! He rips the classics asunder for their military lore, and devours curious forgotten tomes, treatises on the pyramidal cypress, on cookery, old armour, Arabian materia medica, on the costumes, cults, customs, architecture, and perfumes of the Ancients.

Still the moment is not yet ripe: still there is some question unanswered. The plan gives Flaubert infinite trouble and the psychology baffles him. By November he realizes that he must go back to Africa, to bathe anew in the original fount of inspiration. Early in 1858 he sets out to explore the site of Carthage, and returns in June. The novel is to be completely remade. "I am demolishing everything. It was absurd! impossible! false!" The subject is a gorgeous one but it bristles with difficulties. Remembering the first *Saint-Antoine* he is afraid of his violence, fearful lest it degenerate into mere melodrama. Flaubert's problem is how to strike the right note, to compromise between what he conceives as the real Carthage and the traditional idea that every one has of it. *Salammbô* evolves slowly in an aura of hope and despair. "Reality is an almost impossible thing in such a subject. There remains the resource of doing it poetically, but then one slips back into a quantity of old twaddle, familiar to every one since *Télémaque* and the *Martyrs*. I am not mentioning

the archæological work which must not make itself felt, or the style, which is almost impossible. To be true one would have to be obscure, to speak gibberish, and to stuff the book with notes." At any cost, however, the novel must avoid being subjective in the Romantic sense: it will be neither "historical, satirical, nor humorous." *It will prove nothing.* On the other hand neither must it be a scientific treatise but a work of art; and the secret of all masterpieces for Flaubert is "the concordance of the subject with the author's temperament."

Here we have an interesting problem. *Salammbô*, though a work of genius, is not Flaubert's masterpiece. Yet none of his other works, one ventures to say, reveals such perfect harmony of subject and temperament. As Flaubert tells us, it was the Thebaïd to which he was driven by his disgust for modern life. The writing of *Salammbô* was an arduous but a joyous task: *Madame Bovary*, we know, was a painful labour, and the *Correspondence* reveals the loathing he felt for its characters. But we must not let this deceive us. The subject of *Madame Bovary* was essentially in concordance with Flaubert's temperament. Like *Salammbô* it also reflects his hatred of modern life. Only, the earlier work is a positive, the later a negative expression of that hatred. However much a writer may strive to attain an ideal impassibility he is always to some degree the slave of his temperament, and Flaubert is no exception. Indeed his work furnishes perhaps the most convincing refutation of his doctrine that great art must be completely impersonal. Even *Salammbô*, which deals with a period remote in time and with peoples regarding whose psychology history tells us very little, is saturated with Flaubert's immense pessimism. Yet this serene sadness, far from compromising the artistic integrity of the book, entrances its illusion of reality.

In *Salammbô* there is no joy, only a savage laughter. Its characters have no sensibility. All Flaubert's creatures here are violent and passionate. Their spiritual life is of a like temperature. The hero, Matho, is childlike and credulous, and his passion for *Salammbô* is a naïve blend of divine and sexual love. In her, too, there is a similar confusion, a mystic and fanatical adoration for the goddess Tanith, which is of its essence largely sexual because Tanith is the symbol of fecundity. Sainte-Beuve objected that Matho's

love was *une folie* and was rightly rebuked by Flaubert, who pointed out that, for the pagan, love was precisely a kind of madness, a terrible affliction of divine origin. Sainte-Beuve's error was in regarding *Salammbô* through modern eyes: we must not hope to find in the souls of its characters the climates which surround our own. It would be absurd, for instance, to expect in Hamilcar the Christian ideals of a Bayard. For the Carthaginian, religion is an intellectual and not an emotional stimulus. The contemplation of the divine essence purges his soul of pity and fear and lends Hamilcar that serene intrepidity which, with his superior military genius, alone distinguishes him from the other Ancients or from the obscene leper, Hanno. For the rest, like them, he is crafty, ruthless, and suspicious, with an inordinate appetite for material riches. The true divinity of Carthage is neither Moloch nor Tanith, but Mammon. Recollect that magnificent chapter describing the return of Hamilcar. The news of the loss of the sacred veil and of *Salammbô's* dishonour no doubt affects him, but what decides him to assume command of the Carthaginian army is the destruction of his property by the Barbarians.

Flaubert's greatest character, however, is Spendius the ex-slave, son of a Greek rhetorician and a Campanian prostitute. Spendius is the Figaro of this sombre comedy, the fertile source of all its action. In the gardens of Hamilcar it is he who incites the Mercenaries to revolt. But for Spendius the superstitious, brooding Matho had never stolen the *zaimph*. It is he who arouses the Barbarians against Hanno, snatches victory from defeat by the ruse of the blazing swine, cuts the aqueduct, saves Matho from the dagger of Narr' Havas. He is unique in that of all the characters his intelligence is unclouded by passion. All his actions are marked by a malicious and devilish humour, which springs from the consciousness of what Beaumarchais would call *une disconvenance sociale*, the discrepancy between the baseness of his social condition and the superiority of his intellectual gifts. Physically he is a coward, because he has a vivid imagination; but in the agony of crucifixion he attains a strange and stoical courage. Spendius dies in the grand manner, with a jest upon his lips.

*Salammbô* is a superb pageant, glowing with colour, alive with movement, clamorous with the shock and din of

weapons, reeking with pungent perfumes and fetid odours. The focus of interest is not Salammbô but Carthage; the real drama lies not in Matho's passion but in the fate of the city on the hill. Handled by a great artist like Flaubert, this conflict between Carthaginian and Barbarian becomes the theme of a mighty symphony whose orchestration is wonderfully rich in colour and sonority. What Flaubert so rightly emphasizes again and again is the cosmopolitanism of the force that menaces Carthage. This *motif* opens the novel, and it recurs with swelling intensity in a variety of scenes, culminating in that gorgeous account of the final massing of the Barbarians under the walls of the beleaguered city, that terrible kaleidoscope of races, dissimilar in every conceivable respect but now fused into a dreadful fraternity by their common lust for blood. The fearsome trait in these nomads is their dynamic energy. Physical inaction, for them, implies inevitable disintegration. In repose they fall an easy prey to nostalgia and to nameless superstitious terrors. That is why the rain saves Carthage: it condemns them to inactivity. Like children weary of play they drift away. All the memorable scenes therefore are battle scenes—visions of swaying, writhing masses, black and brown and white; of galloping stallions, of elephants splendidly caparisoned squealing and trumpeting; of walls swarming with faces, fierce, exultant, contorted with rage; of great jagged rocks crashing into the streets of Carthage; of battering-rams rhythmically pounding at the ribs of the agonizing city.

Three qualities distinguish *Salammbô* from other historical novels: its spaciousness, its greater credibility, and Flaubert's peculiar genius for evoking the secret life that is latent in so-called inanimate things. Note in that first description of dawn over Carthage the subtle use of verbs of movement side by side with words expressing complete immobility. The sky *grew larger*, the houses *reared* and *massed themselves*, the deserted streets *lengthened*. Contrast with these the fixity of the emerald sea, the immobility of the palm trees and the water in the courtyard. How truly observed! For only at dawn or at moonrise do we surprise this miraculous reversal of nature's usual processes, when the things that are normally inanimate leap into life and the restless sea, the waving trees, the ruffling wind in the pools are suddenly struck with rigidity. Remember, too,

that night march, the road lengthening as if to escape the weary marchers, the mountains that suddenly block the horizon, slipping reluctantly away as the troops approach, the rock rearing up like the hull of some great ship bearing down upon them.

The one valid criticism that can be levelled against *Salammbô* is the one which Flaubert himself made in his reply to Sainte-Beuve's inept and malicious strictures. "The pedestal is too big for the statue." Nothing more true. *Salammbô* is sketchily drawn: it is difficult to grasp the nature of her sentiments and emotions. She lacks that psychological density which makes Emma Bovary such an arresting character. Yet this is a minor defect, almost perhaps inevitable in a novel conceived on the scale of *Salammbô*, a novel concerned primarily with crowds and not with individuals. Flaubert's chief aim was to fix what he calls the mirage of antiquity, and he has triumphantly succeeded. Moreover, not only does he communicate that illusion of reality which is the soul of all great novels. In *Salammbô* Flaubert displays an immense suggestiveness. He has the secret, known only to the great poet, of condensing in a word or in a phrase an infinity of perspectives, so that, whilst to read *Salammbô* is a rare pleasure, to reflect upon it is a perennial source of delight.

1931.

F. C. GREEN.

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## CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. THE FEAST . . . . .	I
II. AT SICCA . . . . .	17
III. SALAMMBO . . . . .	36
IV. BENEATH THE WALLS OF CARTHAGE . . . . .	43
V. TANITH . . . . .	59
VI. HANNO . . . . .	73
VII. HAMILCAR BARCA . . . . .	91
VIII. THE BATTLE OF THE MACARAS . . . . .	125
IX. IN THE FIELD . . . . .	142
X. THE SERPENT . . . . .	156
XI. IN THE TENT . . . . .	168
XII. THE AQUEDUCT . . . . .	185
XIII. MOLOCH . . . . .	203
XIV. THE PASS OF THE HATCHET . . . . .	236
XV. MATHO . . . . .	270
APPENDIX . . . . .	279



# I

## THE FEAST

It was at Megara, a suburb of Carthage, in the gardens of Hamilcar. The soldiers whom he had commanded in Sicily were having a great feast to celebrate the anniversary of the battle of Eryx, and as the master was away, and they were numerous, they ate and drank with perfect freedom.

The captains, who wore bronze cothurni, had placed themselves in the central path, beneath a gold-fringed purple awning, which reached from the wall of the stables to the first terrace of the palace; the common soldiers were scattered beneath the trees, where numerous flat-roofed buildings might be seen, wine-presses, cellars, storehouses, bakeries, and arsenals, with a court for elephants, dens for wild beasts, and a prison for slaves.

Fig-trees surrounded the kitchens; a wood of sycamores stretched away to meet masses of verdure, where the pomegranate shone amid the white tufts of the cotton-plant; vines, grape-laden, grew up into the branches of the pines; a field of roses bloomed beneath the plane-trees; here and there lilies rocked upon the turf; the paths were strewn with black sand mingled with powdered coral, and in the centre the avenue of cypress formed, as it were, a double colonnade of green obelisks from one extremity to the other.

Far in the background stood the palace, built of yellow-mottled Numidian marble, broad courses supporting its four terraced stories. With its large straight ebony staircase, bearing the prow of a vanquished galley at the corners of every step, its red doors quartered with black crosses, its brass gratings protecting it from scorpions below, and its trellises of gilded rods closing the apertures above, it seemed to the soldiers in its haughty opulence as solemn and impenetrable as the face of Hamilcar.

The Council had appointed his house for the holding of this feast; the convalescents lying in the temple of Eschmoun had set out at daybreak and dragged themselves