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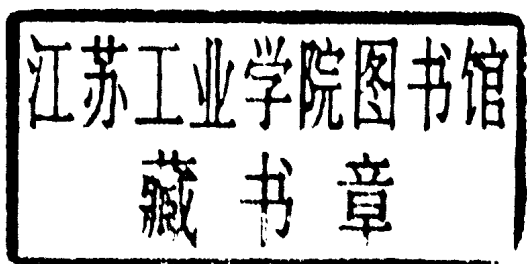
Madame Bovary

The End of Romance

Eric Gans

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ERIC GANS

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Madame Bovary: The End of Romance
Eric Gans

Twayne's Masterwork Studies No. 23

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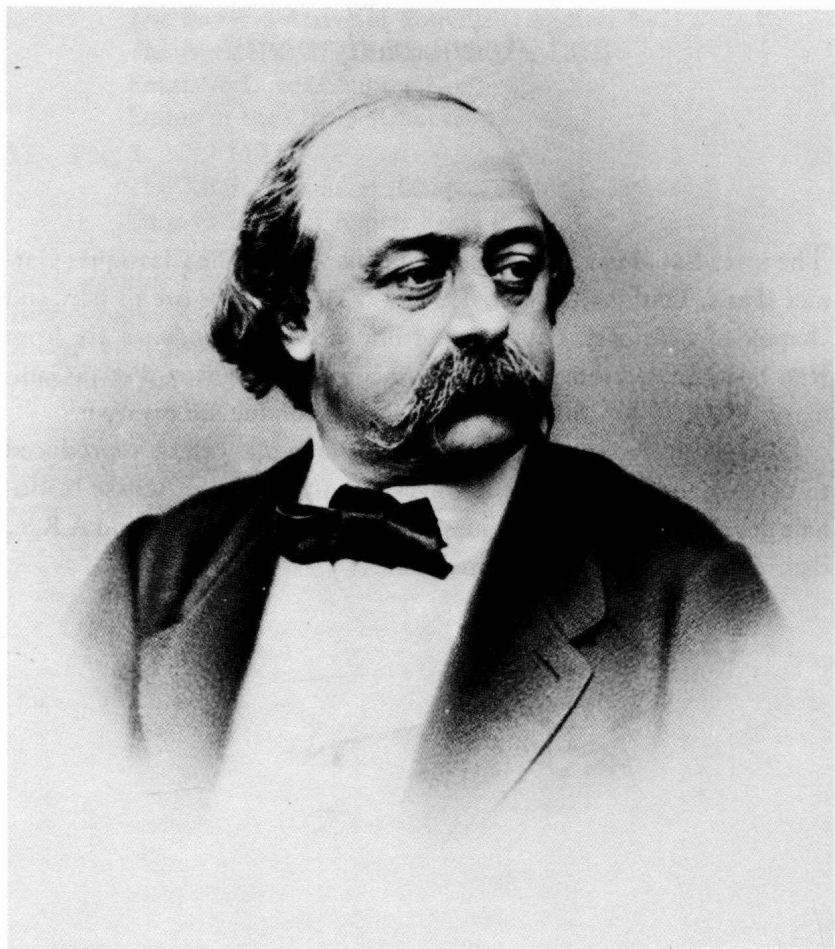
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The text of *Madame Bovary* used for this work is the Classiques Garnier (Paris: Editions Garnier, 1957, 1971). Citations are to part and chapter of the novel. Quotations from the correspondence are from Jean Bruneau's edition in the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1973, 1980). All translations in this volume are my own.

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Chronology:

Gustave Flaubert's Life and Works

- 1821 12 December, birth in Rouen of Gustave Flaubert, second son of Achille-Cléophas Flaubert, medical director of the city's main hospital, and his wife, Anne-Justine-Caroline, née Fleuriot. The father is a self-made professional, son of a veterinarian from the Champagne region; the mother, an orphan of the local gentry. Gustave's brother Achille, who will follow in his father's professional footsteps, is nearly nine years old.
- 1824 15 July, birth of Gustave's sister, Caroline. Gustave became very attached to her; after she died of childbed fever at age twenty-two, he remained devoted to her daughter (also named Caroline) until his own death.
- 1832 Composes plays to be acted out on his father's billiard table with Caroline and friend Ernest Chevalier.
- 1834–1835 Flaubert, in *cinquième* (seventh grade) at the Collège Royal de Rouen, produces his first literary efforts, including a "literary journal" entitled *Art and Progress*. One of his first extant works is a dance scene that is the far-off ancestor of the Vau-byessard ball in *Madame Bovary*.
- 1836 Summer, meets Elisa Schlésinger, a married woman some ten years his senior, for whom he will maintain a long quasi-Platonic attachment. This "great love" inspired the figure of Mme Arnoux in his *Sentimental Education* (1869).
- 1837 February–March, with the help of his friend Alfred le Poitevin, Flaubert has two of his short stories published in a Rouen literary magazine, *Le Colibri*.
- 1838 Composes *Mémoires d'un fou* (*Memoirs of a Madman*), in which he recounts a romanticized version of his meeting with Mme Schlésinger.
- 1840 August, receives his Baccalauréat (high school diploma).

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- 1841–1843 Pursues law studies in Paris with no great enthusiasm or success.
- 1842 Composition of *November*, an autobiographical work inspired by youthful experiences of love and sexuality.
- 1843 February, begins his first novel, *Sentimental Education* (not to be confused with the rather different novel published under this title in 1869).
- 1844 January, a severe epileptic attack both forces and permits Flaubert to abandon his legal studies, and with them, all thought of an active career. For the rest of his life he will devote himself entirely to his writing. Jean-Paul Sartre (*The Family Idiot*) considers this attack the decisive event of Flaubert's life.
- 1845 January, completes *Sentimental Education*. Perhaps as a result of the crisis of January 1844, the novel changes sharply in tone in the later chapters, which emphasize the life of the artist Jules over the worldly Henri whose adventures had dominated the first part.
- 1846 January–March, deaths of Flaubert's father and sister Caroline; lives with his mother in Croisset (a suburb of Rouen) until her death in 1872. June, meets Louise Colet, with whom he will maintain a stormy relationship until 1854; many of his most important letters are addressed to her. August, writes to Louise Colet: ". . . what I love above all is form, provided it be beautiful, and nothing else. Women whose hearts are too ardent and whose minds are too exclusive don't understand this religion of beauty detached from feelings."
- 1849 September, completes the first version of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, which his friends Louis Bouilhet and Maxime du Camp urge him not to publish. A month later, he leaves with du Camp for two years of travel through the Near East, Greece, and Italy.
- 1851 19 September, begins *Madame Bovary*.
- 1852 January, writes to Louise Colet. ". . . what I would like to write is a book about nothing. . . . The most beautiful works are those in which there is the least matter. . . . I think the future of Art lies in this direction. . . . Form, in becoming dexterous, is attenuated. . . . That is why there are neither beautiful nor ugly subjects, and one might almost establish as an axiom that, from the point of view of pure Art, there are no subjects at all, style being all by itself an absolute way of seeing things." March–May, composition of chapters on Emma's

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childhood, the Vaubyessard ball. July, completes draft of part 1 of the novel; attends an agricultural fair in preparation for the *Comices Agricoles* in part 2. September–October, composition of the opening scenes of part 2, including Emma's romantic conversation with Léon.

- 1853 June, writes to Louise Colet: "I now feel for my fellow man a serene hatred, or a pity so inactive that it's just the same. . . . The political state of affairs [Napoleon III's authoritarian regime] has confirmed my old *a priori* theories about the featherless biped [man], whom I consider to be at the same time a turkey and a vulture." July–December, works on the Agricultural Fair scene. August, writes to Louise Colet: "Everything we invent is true, be sure of that. Poetry is as precise a thing as geometry. . . . My poor Bovary, no doubt, is suffering and weeping in twenty French villages at once, at this very moment." December, works on Emma's seduction by Rodolphe. Writes to Louise Colet: "Today . . . man and woman together, lover and mistress all at once, I rode on horseback in the forest . . . and I was the horses, the leaves, the wind, the words they said to each other and the red sun that half-closed their eyelids drowned in love."
- 1854 May, makes final break with Louise Colet. The termination of their correspondence makes it difficult to follow the composition of the remainder of *Madame Bovary*.
- 1855 May, begins work on part 3 of *Madame Bovary*. September, writes to Louis Bouilhet: "I hope that within a month la Bovary will have her arsenic in her belly."
- 1856 April, completion of *Madame Bovary*. May, correction of the final copy. The chapter divisions within the three parts were added at this stage. October, writes to Mme Roger des Genettes: "People think I'm in love with reality, but I despise it. For it was out of hatred for realism that I undertook this novel." October–December, installment publication of *Madame Bovary* in the *Revue de Paris*.
- 1857 January–February, Flaubert, together with the director and printer of the *Revue de Paris*, is tried for "offenses to public morality and religion" in publishing *Madame Bovary*. He is acquitted along with his codefendants. March, writes to Mlle Leroyer de Chantepie: "There is nothing true in *Madame Bovary*. It's a *totally invented* story; I put nothing in it of my feelings or of my existence. The illusion (if there is one) comes on

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the contrary from the *impersonality* of the work. . . . The artist should be in his work like God in creation, invisible and all-powerful; one should feel him everywhere, but one should not see him." April, publication of *Madame Bovary* in book form by Michel Lévi. Flaubert would always regret having sold Lévi his five-year rights to the novel for the modest sum of 800 francs. (About \$8,000 today, if one considers that the book—in two volumes—sold for two francs.) September, begins work on his next novel, *Salammbô*.

- 1858 April–June, trip to North Africa to do research for *Salammbô*, which is set in ancient Carthage (now Tunis).
- 1862 November, publication of *Salammbô*.
- 1864 September, begins work on his most ambitious novel, *Sentimental Education*, a historical transformation of the first (1845) version in which the protagonist's romantic illusions are coordinated with the failure of the Revolution of 1848.
- 1869 November, publication of *Sentimental Education*, a few months before the Prussian victory over France puts an end to the Second Empire of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte. Flaubert, disappointed with the relative lack of interest in his novel, would claim that if the French had read it attentively the disastrous war of 1870 might have been averted.
- 1872 April, death of Flaubert's mother; retains habitation rights at Croisset, ownership of which passes to his niece.
- 1872–1873 Having completed the final, greatly reduced version of the *Temptation of Saint Anthony* (June 1872), Flaubert tries his hand at the theater, with little success. He also begins his last novel, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, at which he will work until his death.
- 1874 April, publication of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*.
- 1875 Financial ruin to Ernest Commanville, the husband of his niece Caroline. Flaubert sacrifices his financial security to protect the young couple.
- 1875–1877 Composition and publication of the *Three Tales* (*A Simple Heart*, *Saint Julian the Hospitaler*, and *Hérodiades*). In these stories, as opposed to the novels, the protagonists attain a form of religious salvation analogous to that of the extra-worldly artist. Flaubert returns to work on *Bouvard and Pécuchet*.
- 1879 In financial straits, accepts a government sinecure of 3,000 francs per year.

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- 1880 May 8, dies from a stroke at his home in Croisset. *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, nearly complete at the time of his death, is published the following year. A few months after Flaubert's death, his niece sells the Croisset property; the house is torn down and a distillery built on the site.

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Historical Context

French cultural life at the time when Flaubert was writing *Madame Bovary* was dominated by the disillusionment with romantic cultural and political ideas that had followed the events of 1848–52.

In February 1848 the monarchy of Louis-Philippe, itself founded in 1830 on the overthrow of the Restoration monarchy, was overturned and an abortive Second Republic created. Flaubert, often thought of as a political reactionary because of his artist's contempt for the masses, reacted positively to the February revolution. The revolt was led by men of the same social class as his father, the so-called capacities or professionals who felt underrepresented in Louis-Philippe's regime, which favored financial and landowning interests.

The choice of the poet Lamartine as the first leader of the new regime was a clear sign of the connection between romantic culture and romantic politics, a link stronger and more apparent in France than elsewhere. By the same token, the death of the Second Republic after a mere three years with Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte's December 1851 coup d'état was a demonstration of the bankruptcy of romantic ideals. After dissolving the Republic's ineffective parliament, Louis-Napoleon had his action confirmed by plebiscite, and became France's

second emperor a year later. He ruled France until 1870, when his regime was brought down by its disastrous defeat in the Franco-Prussian war.

The events of 1848–52 taught the bourgeoisie a lesson that Karl Marx for one would make much of: that it was no longer a revolutionary class but a conservative one. This change became visible as early as June 1848 in the young republic's crushing of a worker's rebellion. Romanticism had held forth the perspective of universal harmony through the pursuit of the revolutionary egalitarianism of 1789; the "days of June" made it clear that the old division between the "Third Estate" and the privileged aristocracy was no longer the hot point of social conflict. Henceforth the middle classes were threatened not from above but from below, and whether they accepted this fact or not, only an authoritarian regime of the sort that Louis-Napoleon provided was fitted to deal with this problem. By electing him in December 1848 by a huge majority as the first (and only) president of the Second Republic, the French citizenry was in effect asking for the coup d'état that he would carry out three years later.

The Second Empire was for the French bourgeoisie, to which its most important writers and artists belonged in spite of themselves, a period more of humiliation than of actual suffering. The coup d'état had demonstrated the political, but not the economic, bankruptcy of this class. The bourgeoisie had proved unable to govern France, but once relieved of the burden of government it prospered more than ever. Industrialization began in earnest during this period. Paris was redesigned in more or less its present form; for reasons of military security, the wide boulevards we know today were sliced through the crowded neighborhoods of the old city, affording huge opportunities for real estate speculation and construction.

Although Napoleon would mellow in the 1860s, the early years of the Second Empire during which *Madame Bovary* was written were repressive and alienating. Flaubert, who would later frequent the imperial court, had no love for the emperor, but the brutal extinction of the hapless Second Republic confirmed his intuition of the self-indulgent mendacity of romanticism, both in art and in politics.

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While some, like Victor Hugo, who remained in exile from France for the duration of Louis-Napoleon's regime, never lost faith in the romantic ideal, the most characteristic cultural achievements of this period reflected a drastic reassessment of the artist's role. For the romantics, the artist's intuition of personal uniqueness was the fundamental source of aesthetic originality; the generation of the 1850s distrusted the personal and sought to expel it from their works. Inspired by the great popular painter Gustave Courbet, a "realist" school of novelists emerged in this period, emphasizing the less glamorous aspects of life that had been neglected by the romantics. The only product of this group still remembered by nonspecialists is Henri Mürger's *Scenes of Bohemian Life*, which later inspired Puccini's opera *La Bohème*. This sentimental depiction of the lives of struggling young writers and artists hardly corresponds to what we would call "realism" today. Flaubert had no relations with these writers, who signally failed to realize that *Madame Bovary* represented the real fulfillment of their doctrines. Yet two of the best novels of the school, Champfleury's *The Bourgeois of Molinchart* and Duranty's *The Troubles of Henriette Gérard*, which describes the difficulties of a strong-willed young woman who could almost be taken for a heroine of George Eliot, have a good deal in common with Flaubert's masterpiece.

Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*), perhaps the most significant book of poetry ever written in France, appeared in 1857, the same year as *Madame Bovary*. Only a few months after Flaubert had been acquitted of the charge of offending "public morality and religion," Baudelaire was convicted of the same offense, obliged to pay a fine, and ordered to remove six "obscene" poems from his book. In sharp contrast to the romantic poetry that Hugo was continuing to write, Baudelaire's poems were short, with an emphasis on fixed forms (most are sonnets), and took a blatantly theatrical, ironic attitude toward the truths of personal experience. Baudelaire was the first to understand the problematic, guilty nature of the poetic self who dares to write the word "I." The romantics had fancied themselves the universal spokesmen of humanity; Baudelaire emphasized the poet's necessarily hateful egoism. Woman in Baude-

laire's poetry is not an object of male protection; both angel and monster, she is man's dangerous Other, and ultimately his double. *Madame Bovary* would demonstrate woman's central role in modern society; Baudelaire displayed the bitter ironies inherent in affirming at all cost the poetic self's masculine perspective.

Although Baudelaire's influence would be supreme among the poets of the following generation, in England as well as in France, the dominant poetic school in Flaubert's time was that of the "Parnassians," whose name was derived from that of a widely read anthology, *Le Parnasse contemporain*. The Parnassians emphasized the precise, impersonal description of stark natural scenes as well as "noble" classical and religious subjects. Leconte de Lisle, the leading figure of this school, heaped scorn on the romantics for their shameless baring of their souls in their poetry. Flaubert sympathized with Leconte's lofty aims, but found his work too idealized and the man himself a bit of a prig.

It may safely be said that without the events of 1848-52 Flaubert would never have written *Madame Bovary*. Like many latecomers to romanticism, the young Flaubert was unable to operate effectively within its limits. His first novel, the 1845 version of *Sentimental Education*, had lost its concrete focus on the worldly hero Henri as the author turned to a contemplative analysis of the budding literary career of the "artist" figure Jules. Flaubert seemed incapable of taking a middle path between depiction of the vanity of worldly desires in a satiric and ultimately indifferent tone and subjective identification with a character who was little more than a mouthpiece of the author. Nor does the 1849 version of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* provide a genuine solution to the problem of constructing a unified literary work. The saint is tempted by figures of sins, heresies, and monsters of all sorts; these fascinate him, but he can neither conquer nor succumb to them. The self, as modeled by Anthony, is divided between a worldly part that must be rejected and a spiritual part that has no real content of its own. Only the failure of the romantic political experiment could provide Flaubert with the humiliated self that would create a new form of novel.

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His innovation was this: the author would no longer identify with the characters, inhabiting their world in the form of a personal narrator, but must remain apart from it and them. The truth about human society could only be observed from without, not lived from within. No reconciliation was conceivable between worldly and authentic existence; but the author could forget about attempting to reconcile them, and the world would nonetheless continue to exist. Emma Bovary, Flaubert's heroine, would demonstrate the vanity of any such attempt; the author, detached from his fictional universe, would neither share nor condemn her illusions.

The acceptance of a separation of the world of the novel from the author's own consciousness, perpetuating the split that romanticism had promised to repair, was the beginning of a new cultural era that would lead in the century that followed *Madame Bovary* to increasingly radical experiments in an art of alienation. The most extreme of Flaubert's successors would speak of literary language as an autonomous force independent of the imaginary world it depicted. The artificiality of the literary would be continually emphasized, and the reader's presumably naive attempt to deal with the fictional world as though it were a real one would be systematically frustrated.

In the minds of the radical moderns, the last vestiges of the romantic ideal of harmony between the imagination and the real were being purged; yet this ideal always sprung up again, if only to be purged anew. Flaubert and Baudelaire had fewer illusions about the process they had set in motion. The appearance in 1857 of *Madame Bovary* and *Les Fleurs du mal*, two sister works conceived out of the frustration of the bourgeois idealism of 1848, marks the birth of aesthetic modernism as the never-ending transcendence of romantic illusion.