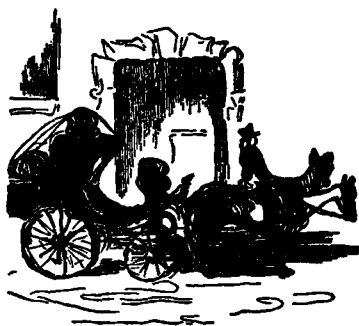


Madame Bovary

PATTERNS OF PROVINCIAL LIFE



by Gustave Flaubert

TRANSLATED BY
FRANCIS STEEGMULLER



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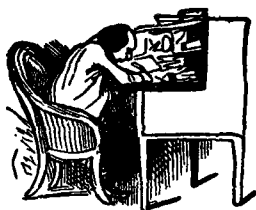
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Madame Bovary

Translator's Introduction



SCHOLARS WITH A CALENDRIAL TURN OF MIND HAVE COMPUTED that the first scene of *Madame Bovary*—Charles's entry into the classroom—takes place in October, 1827, and the last scene—Charles's death—in August, 1846. The married life of Charles and Emma extends over a period of nine years, beginning in 1837.

In French history, this was the heyday of the "July Monarchy"—the reign of King Louis-Philippe, who was brought to power by the Revolution of 1830 and ousted by the Revolution of 1848. Louis-Philippe was known as the "Citizen King"—also as "The Pear," from the unfortunate resemblance of the shape of his head to the fruit whose name is sometimes used in France to denote a dull fellow.

vi • *Translator's Introduction*

Member of the Orléans family though Louis-Philippe was, his regime was blatantly, almost aggressively, middle-class. His advice to his subjects was: "Get rich!" He strolled about Paris carrying an umbrella, like a bourgeois. In dress, furniture, architecture and decoration the style associated with his name connotes everything graceless, pretentious and unimaginative. The French bourgeoisie—heirs of the victors of the first French Revolution of 1789—were solidly in the saddle.

Characteristics of life under the July Monarchy, and events of the regime, are thickly mirrored in *Madame Bovary*. The novelist's smallest touch is apt to be a political or social echo, employed to "situate" his story. When Emma burns incense that she had "bought at an Algerian shop in Rouen," it is a reminder that Algerian products were in fashion during the French conquest of Algeria in the 1840's. Her surprise, at the chateau of La Vaubyessard, at seeing that "several of the ladies had failed to put their gloves in their wineglasses," points up a difference between social classes. Provincial *bourgeoises* of that time, brought up in a spirit of genteel puritanism, considered it ladylike to eschew wine at dinner parties; they proclaimed their intention by filling their wineglasses with their flimsy evening gloves or with a lace handkerchief. Ladies of the old aristocracy were freer in their behavior.

In laying his novel in the July Monarchy, Flaubert was writing of the period of his own youth. He was born in 1821; and he witnessed, in his twenty-seventh year, some of the Paris street-fighting that marked the end of the regime that he had always considered frustrating to noble aspirations. In the autumn of 1849 he set out with a friend for an eighteen-month tour of the Near East to get a "bellyful of color." So far he had produced some turgid, "escapist" writing, but had published nothing. Now on his return to France he sat down almost immediately to write

the novel that marked his break with the romanticism of his early days. His declared aim was to paint a mercilessly accurate picture of lower middle-class provincial life in all its stifling dreariness. His method was to contrast it with the fantasies of his heroine, whose romantic yearnings reflect both the futility and the persistent attraction of older ways of life.

The composition took him five years. *Madame Bovary* was first published serially in a magazine, the *Revue de Paris*. The editors, fearing censorship, attempted to bowdlerize it by cutting; but even so Flaubert was summoned before the public prosecutor for "offenses against morality and religion." After a sensational trial, marked by fiery exchanges of French eloquence between the state and the defense lawyers, he was acquitted; and the publication of the novel in book form, under the title *Madame Bovary*, was announced on April 18. Its popularity was immediate. Superficially it seemed a *succès de scandale*, but the best French critics and artists knew that this was no ordinary best seller, and that for once public acclaim and true merit coincided.

The poet Baudelaire, who had himself recently been fined by a court for the "immorality" of his volume *Les Fleurs du Mal*, was among those who sensed the epoch-making significance of *Madame Bovary*. Since Balzac, he said in his review, the art of the novel had been stagnant in France, and despite various attempts to renovate it, general interest had not been captured. Now Flaubert had come and opened a new horizon. Analyzing Flaubert's

The story of Flaubert's youth, his Near Eastern tour, and his emergence as a writer, the story of the composition and reception of *Madame Bovary*, can be read in the translator's *Flaubert and Madame Bovary* (Farrar, Straus and Company, 1950; Knopf, Vintage Books, 1957). Flaubert described his own literary birth-pangs in incomparable letters: see *The Selected Letters of Flaubert* (Farrar, Straus and Young, 1953; Knopf, Vintage Books, 1957).

achievement in detail, Baudelaire showed that every element of *Madame Bovary*, whether of form or content, was perfectly designed to break the public's apathy and to give society and literature the needed sting of the gadfly.

Indeed, the translator who seeks to do justice to the original of *Madame Bovary*, and who by the very nature of his effort becomes more intimate with the text than any reader no matter how critical, soon realizes that nothing in this novel has been left to chance, that nothing is arbitrary. Everything flows from the central conception, as by a natural law. The plot, the psychology of the protagonists, the tragic end, the triumph of that epitome of bourgeois banality, Monsieur Homais, are all of a piece. This extraordinary coherence is reflected in the masterly and subtle construction, full of foreshadowings and echoes, points and counterpoints, intricate cross-references.

Exactness of time-portrayal had to be matched by place-description of the utmost precision. Flaubert chose a setting which he knew intimately. He was born in the city of Rouen, a river port on the right bank of the lower Seine. Before the French Revolution, Rouen had been the capital of the province of Normandy; and with the redivision of France into departments it was made the prefecture of the department of the Seine-Inférieure (rebaptized Seine-Maritime in 1955), whose sub-prefectures are the Channel ports of Le Havre and Dieppe. The action of the book takes place partly in Rouen, partly in the countryside lying between Rouen and those two sub-prefectures—a countryside known as the *pays de Caux* (probably from the Latin *calx*, chalk, referring to the quality of the soil). The inhabitants are called *cauchois* (male) and *cauchoises* (female); and *Madame Bovary* abounds in references to their local customs and costumes. It also contains a certain amount of the rural dialect and habits of speech—peasant and near-peasant words and characteristic turns of phrase.

Certain earlier translators, Englishmen or persons living in England, have attempted to reproduce the flavor of this popular language by making some of the "lower-class" characters—Emma Bovary's father, for example, and Madame Lefrançois the hotel-keeper—sound like a cross between present-day British rustics and Shakespearean clowns. In the present translation no attempt has been made to transform *cauchois* country speech into a New England twang or a Texas drawl. Incidentally, not all of Flaubert's rural references are clear even to French readers of the present day. Most of them have to be told, for example, that the maggoty moles which Monsieur Rouault saw hanging on tree branches had been put there by peasants in the belief that they would frighten away live moles.

Flaubert was the son of a surgeon. His father—the model, supposedly, for the Doctor Larivière who comes galloping to Emma Bovary's deathbed—was for many years head of the Hôtel-Dieu (public hospital) of Rouen. The family lived in a wing of the building, and from his earliest youth Flaubert was accustomed to the sight of illness, death, operations and dissections. This medical background was undoubtedly decisive in his making Emma Bovary's husband a medical man. And since Charles Bovary was to be depicted as a creature in many ways inferior, his creator made him an *officier de santé*—a licensed medical man without an M.D. degree. Such a practitioner could treat patients only in the department of France in which he had passed his examination, and could perform important surgical operations only when an M.D. was present. The category of *officiers de santé* (which existed under other names in Germany, Russia and elsewhere) was originally created to assure medical service in French country districts. It was abolished in 1892. Not everyone holding the inferior rank of *officier de santé* was a poor physician. Flaubert himself, when he lived in the country, often consulted a

"*simple officier de santé*" named Fortin, whom he greatly respected. In the present translation the term has been kept in French, since the rank it designates does not exist in American life and a literal rendering ("health officer") would only mislead. On the other hand, Charles Bovary is referred to in these pages as a "doctor" whenever Flaubert calls him a "*médecin*"—a term which in France is also applied to real M.D.'s.

Depending on how well acquainted, and how sympathetic, one is with the ardors of novel writing, the five years that Flaubert spent on *Madame Bovary* will seem very long indeed, or a normal amount of time, or perhaps even somewhat short. Flaubert's letters are full of laments about the time and effort his task required. Still in existence are numbers of his preliminary drafts and rewritings: many a passage was slowly and painfully composed, slowly and painfully recast in a dozen or more different versions, only finally to be discarded entirely. Very occasionally the multiplicity of his different versions was a source of error for the author. For example, Flaubert originally made Charles's fee for the setting of Monsieur Rouault's fracture one hundred francs; later he reduced it to seventy-five; but he forgetfully left the rest of the sentence unchanged. The resulting impossibility—"seventy-five francs in two-franc pieces"—is Flaubert's most famous nod. Attentive readers will also note that the façade of the Yonville town hall has three columns on one page and four on another, that Yonvillians turn sometimes right, sometimes left, to reach the cemetery from the town square, and that Emma's financial transactions are somewhat mixed up mathematically. Slips of this kind have been left untouched. In one or two instances of a different kind, however, the translator has presumed to emend. At La Vaubyessard, the travel snobs chattering about Italy

speak (in the French original) of "*les Cassines*"—a mysterious reference: surely Flaubert meant the Cascine, the public park in Florence, at that time a particularly fashionable spot for afternoon drives. In the Hotel de Boulogne, where we are told that Emma "even said 'our slippers,' meaning a pair that Léon had given her," all the French texts (both manuscript and printed) read "my slippers." The word "my" in this place seems merely an inadvertence: to retain it would render meaningless a particularly keen bit of observation.

Quite distinct from those rare slips is another type of departure from exactitude. Famous though he is for precision of detail, Flaubert felt free to neglect it when such a course was justified artistically. Painstaking scholars have been able to show, for instance, that Emma could not have spent as much time with Léon in Rouen on Thursdays as she did, if the time schedule of the Hironnelle and the duration of the Yonville-Rouen run were as Flaubert describes them elsewhere in the book. Her rendezvous with Rodolphe, both at his chateau and in her garden, do not invite too-close chronological and topographical scrutiny. In the present translation, no attempt has been made to eliminate such discrepancies: they will disturb only those who confuse artistic realism with mechanical faithfulness to detail, regardless of its significance. On the other hand, a few minor imprecisions, apparently resulting from merely mechanical causes—for instance, illogical sequence of verbs describing an action—have not been preserved in translation.

One of Flaubert's great concerns during the years of writing *Madame Bovary* was for the rhythm and assonance of his prose. He had a specific artistic idea in mind, which required the transformation of even the most sordid subject matter by the magic of style. Typically eloquent of his effort is a passage from a letter to his friend Louis

Bouilhet about Emma Bovary's financial difficulties: "Speaking of money, I'm tangled up in explanations of promissory notes, discounts, etc., that I don't understand too well myself. I'm arranging all this in rhythmical dialogue, God help me!" Only a Flaubert among translators could do full justice to Flaubert the novelist in this respect. It is of course impossible to retain in translation the precise rhythm of each of Flaubert's carefully polished sentences; nor would an attempt to reproduce the general characteristic cadence of his prose in a foreign tongue lead to anything but disaster. But there must be an English equivalent of the French music. Without it, the idea of what *Madame Bovary* "is like" in the original could not begin to be conveyed. An over-all rhythmic flow is inseparable from the novel's total coherence.

A work as "realistic" as this, filled with concrete details, many of them belonging to another age, constantly defies any translator to accomplish even his most basic task—accurate rendering of individual terms. In *Madame Bovary*, children walking through the fields don't merely pull the flowers from the oats; they "pull the bell-shaped flowers from the oat stalks." The various versions of the novel already existing in English are strewn with unintentional comedy. Emma's cousin, the fish peddler, who brings "a pair of soles" (fish native to the English Channel) as a wedding present, turns up in one translation as a cobbler who brings a pair of (shoe) soles. In another, Emma doesn't wear "a cocked hat over one ear" at the mi-carême ball as she should: rather, as she dances she has "a Chinese lantern dangling from one ear"—a merry picture indeed. And Charles, the medical student, instead of singing songs at student gatherings, ("*aux bienvenues*"), is made to sing them to "women who were always welcome." But even apart from trying to avoid such howlers as those, the translator has often to cope with other, subtler puzzles.

What sound did Flaubert have in mind, exactly, when he wrote that the strings of Emma's old piano "*frisaient*" as she pounded? What is a "*cliquetis des capucines*," which at a present-arms makes a noise "like a copper cauldron rolling down a flight of stairs"? When bourgeois in the streets stand "*au coin des bornes*," what is the picture? To find out, one exhausts dictionaries, encyclopedias and reference librarians; one telephones to friends, acquaintances and strangers; one consults practitioners of various trades, both at home and abroad. An occasional word one decides to leave in French. "*Huissier*," for example: "bailiff," the usual rendering, does not evoke anything specific in the American reader's mind, whereas "sheriff" is too full of Western connotations.

Madame Bovary was not only the most "realistic" novel of its age. It was also the most "psychological." More than any of his predecessors or contemporaries among fiction writers, Flaubert probes his characters' minds, trying to account fully for their actions and emotions. He excels at showing the unconscious mind at work: were it not for the vocabulary, it would be easy to forget that Freud was less than a year old when *Madame Bovary* was published. Often the translator has to resist the temptation to interpret Flaubert's words in the light of present-day theories. When Emma, consumed by her repressed early passion for Léon, finds her husband exasperating, Flaubert says that she "*s'étonnait parfois des conjectures atroces qui lui arrivaient à la pensée*"—"sometimes she was surprised by the horrible possibilities that she imagined." Does Flaubert imply, here, that Emma feared accidents happening to her husband, and that these fears reflected wishful thinking? Plausible as such an interpretation would be, the translator regretfully decides to confine himself to translation. In other cases, however, detailed and precise passages of psychological analysis must be almost para-

phrased to make their rich allusions as intelligible and as telling in English as they are in the original.

A whole body of critical literature has grown up around *Madame Bovary*, which makes the most of all possible symbolic implications of individual words and phrases. Some critics point exclusively to the many biological metaphors denoting fading and decay; others tell us that the *leitmotiv* is physical, namely, the motions of slipping and falling; and the novel has even been described mathematically, as a "circular" concept. It is not the translator's role to judge these various theories, but he cannot help noticing that occasionally their authors resort to arguments based on obvious, if minor, mistranslation. For example, when Doctor Larivière, at Emma's deathbed, says, "*C'est bien, c'est bien*," he is merely murmuring the equivalent of "Yes, yes"—expressing more or less polite impatience with Doctor Canivet, whose circumstantial narration of the case is pointless now that Emma is beyond help. On the basis of an inaccurate rendering ("Good, good"), Doctor Larivière's words have been interpreted as expressing his satisfaction in Emma's imminent death, a satisfaction reflecting Flaubert's supposed conception of his heroine as a character too sublime for this world.

On the other hand, a perfectly "correct" translation of a phrase can be inadequate, in that it fails to render an essential symbolic meaning. On the last page of the book Flaubert proclaims Homais' growing prosperity by saying "*Il fait une clientèle d'enfer*"—which appears in various English versions as "His practise grows like wildfire," or "He is doing extremely well," or "He has a terrific practise." All these are faithful to the French idiom. And yet, surely, the word "*enfer*" ("hell") isn't present in the original for nothing. The mere use of the term suggests at once that Homais, prince of the bourgeois, is an earthly counterpart of the prince of darkness.

The foregoing notes make it apparent, perhaps, that to translate a masterpiece with any justice requires an effort which parallels the author's own labor in translating his idea into adequate words. Problems of language, transition, rhythm, symbolism, and secret relationships that make up texture—all these have to be solved anew, in a new medium. The great difference is, of course, that the translator does not work in the dark. Even though the trail he follows has to be followed in a vehicle which it was not meant to accommodate, there *is* a trail. The author has blazed it in his lonely and perilous earlier journey, leaving behind him the certainty that the terrain is not impassable. The translator of *Madame Bovary* knows that all these ideas, all these emotions, all these subtleties and shadings have been expressed in French. And he takes it for granted, as a kind of postulate, that they can all be re-expressed in English. His faith in his own language is such that he will never be tempted to excuse inadequacies by pointing to its inherent limitations; he will blame only his own human fallibility.

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PART ONE

