

The Prometheans of the Novel

Balzac and Flaubert, the author says, dared heroic tasks to fulfill their conception of the artist's role

By Ralph Fox

MARX concluded one of his articles in the New York Tribune during 1854 with a reference to the Victorian realists: "The present brilliant school of novelists in England, whose graphic and eloquent descriptions have revealed more political and social truths to the world than have all the politicians, publicists, and moralists added together, has pictured all sections of the middle class, beginning with the 'respectable' rentier and owner of government stocks, who looks down on all kinds of 'business' as being vulgar, and finishing with the small shopkeeper and lawyer's clerk. How have they been described by Dickens, Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë, and Mrs. Gaskell? As full of self-conceit, prudishness, petty tyranny, and ignorance. And the civilized world has confirmed their verdict in a damning epigram which it has pinned on that class, that it is servile to its social superiors and despotic to its inferiors."

About the same time as these words appeared in the New York paper, Flaubert in physical agony was writing to his friend Louis Bouilhet: "Laxatives, purgatives, derivatives, leaches, fever, diarrhoea, three nights without any sleep, a gigantic annoyance at the bourgeois, etc., etc. That's my week, dear sir." English and French novelists were alike faced with the same problem, that of giving artistic form and expression to a society which they could not accept. In England they only succeeded in the end by a kind of compromise with reality, but the whole history of France made such a compromise impossible in that country. No country of the modern world had passed through such terrific struggles as France, with her great revolution followed by twenty years of wars in which French armies marched and counter-marched across the feudal states of Europe till the final catastrophe of 1814.

Napoleon was the last great world-conqueror, but he was also the first bourgeois emperor. France was only able to support that vast war machine because in those years she began to catch up on her rival, England, to develop her industries, to introduce power machinery on a large scale, to create a great new internal market from her liberated peasantry. When the process was completed, a generation after Napoleon's fall, you had the strange paradox that a completely new France, a France in which money spoke the last word, a France of bankers, traders, and industrialists, was being ruled by the feudal aristocracy whom the revolution had apparently smashed into fragments. Yet the heroic tradition of this new France with its old rulers remained

essentially revolutionary, on the one hand the Jacobin of '93, on the other the soldier of Napoleon.

Balzac, the great genius of the century, consciously set himself the task of writing "the natural history" of this society, Balzac who was himself a monarchist, a legitimist, and a Catholic. His *Comédie Humaine*, that encyclopædic study of human life, was a revolutionary picture of his age; revolutionary not because of the intention of its author, but because of the truth with which the inner life of his time is described. Engels, in his letter to the English novelist, Margaret Harkness, has emphasized the truth of Balzac's realist method:

Balzac, whom I consider a far greater master of realism than all the Zolas, *passés, présents et à venir*, in his *Comédie Humaine* gives us a most wonderfully realistic history of French society, describing in chronicle fashion, almost year by year, from 1816 to 1848, the progressive inroads of the rising bourgeoisie upon the society of nobles that reconstituted itself after 1815, and that set up again as far as it could the standard of *la vieille politesse française*. He describes how the last remnants of this, to him, model society gradually succumbed before the intrusion of the vulgar, moneyed upstart, or were corrupted by him, how the *grande dame*, whose conjugal infidelities were but a mode of asserting herself, in perfect accordance with the way she had been disposed of in marriage, gave way to the *bourgeoise* who gains her husband for cash or customers; and around this central picture he groups a complete history of French society, from which, even in economic details, for instance, the rearrangement of real and personal property after the Revolution, I have learnt more than from all the professed historians, economists, and statisticians of the period together. Well, Balzac was politically a legitimist; his great work is a constant elegy unto the irreparable decay of good society; his sympathy is with the class that is doomed to extinction. But for all that, his satire is never more cutting, his irony more biting than when he sets in motion the very men and women with whom he sympathizes most deeply—the nobles. And the only men of whom he speaks with undisguised admiration are his bitterest political antagonists, the Republican heroes of the Cloître-Saint-Merri, the men who at that time (1830-36), were indeed the representatives of the popular masses. That Balzac was thus compelled to go against his own class sympathies and political prejudices, that he saw the necessity of the downfall of his favorite nobles and described them as people deserving no better fate; that he saw the real men of the future where, for the time being, they alone could be found—that I consider one of the greatest triumphs of Realism, one of the greatest features in old Balzac.

BALZAC has himself explained in the preface to the *Comédie* that he saw man as the product of society, saw him in his natural environment, and that he felt the same desire to study him scientifically as the great naturalists feel

who study the animal world. His political and religious views were those of the old feudal France, but this attitude to man, this conception of the human comedy, was the product of the Revolution, of the Jacobins who so ruthlessly smashed the social fetters on French society, of the marching soldiers who brought the monarchies of Europe to their knees before the leadership of Napoleon. Balzac, indeed, was France's literary Napoleon, for he destroyed feudal ideas in literature as thoroughly as the great soldier destroyed the feudal system in politics. In Restoration France, criticism of capitalist society, of the new capitalist social relations, was concealed under the mediæval disguise of romanticism. The extravagances of the Romantics in their personal lives, quite as much as their extravagances in art, were a protest against the present as well as an escape from it. Balzac neither protested nor escaped. He had all the imagination, the poetry, and even the mysticism of the Romantics, but he rose above them and showed the way to a new literature by his realist attack on the present. He was able to conceive the reality of contemporary life imaginatively, to

conceive it almost on the scale on which Rabelais and Cervantes had conceived it. It was his fortune, however, to have lived in the early part of the century when the force and fire of that immense outburst of national energy which made the Revolution and the Napoleonic epic was still able to make itself felt in the literary movement of the thirties and early forties.

It was a long way from Balzac to the



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Flaubert whose dominant passion was hatred and disgust for the bourgeoisie, who signed his letters "Bourgeoisophobus," and suffered such physical and mental agony in the long years of creative work he gave to a single novel on the life of this hated and despised class. Balzac was consciously proud of his political views, of his royalism and Catholicism. The Goncourt brothers wrote in their *Diary* that their disillusionment in the good faith of politicians of all sorts brought them, in the end, to "a disgust in every belief, a toleration for any kind of power, an indifference towards political passion which I find in all my literary

friends, in Flaubert as well as myself. You can see that one should die for no cause, that one should live with any government there is, no matter what one's antipathy to it, and believe in nothing but art, confess no faith but literature."

So many writers since, of considerably less talent than the two Goncourts and whose names cannot even be mentioned in the same breath with Flaubert, have professed (and still profess) a similar outlook, that it is worth our while to seek the origin of this apparent disillusionment and detachment from life. I say "apparent" because in Flaubert's case at least (he was a great writer) there was no detachment, but a bitter battle to the death with that bourgeois society he hated so violently.

The Goncourts knew Balzac personally, their diaries are full of anecdotes about that vital and Rabelaisian genius. Flaubert, like themselves, also overlapped him in his creative work. Whence comes the great difference between the master and the disciples, a difference not in time but in outlook that divides them like a gulf? The energy engendered by the Revolution and its heroic aftermath had died out by the advent of Flaubert's generation. The bitter struggle of classes and the real predatory character of capitalist society had become so clear that they aroused only disgust; whereas Balzac, still inspired by the creative force that built this society, sought only for understanding.

The democratic and Jacobin ideals of '93, in the mouths of the liberal politicians of the nineteenth century, had become intolerable and monstrous platitudes. The real leveling character of capitalism was becoming apparent, its denial of human values, its philosophy of numbers that covered its cash estimate for all things human and divine. The old aristocracy whose corruption Balzac had drawn in such masterly fashion was nothing but a decayed shadow of its old self, an obscene ghost muttering and grumbling in the forgotten drawing-rooms of provincial country houses, or else indistinguishable from the new nobility of hard cash. Socialism, only known to Flaubert and his friends in its Utopian form, seemed to them as stupid and unreal as the worst extravagances of the liberal politicians who daily in word and deed betrayed their great ancestors. (That Flaubert considered them great ancestors there is plenty of evidence: "Marat is my man," he writes in one letter.) Socialism was only another form of the general leveling of all values which so revolted them, and rendered the more disgusting because of its sentimental idealizing (it seemed to them) of the uneducated mob.

The period of 1848 saw the end of many illusions. Who after that bitter experience would ever again believe that fine words could butter parsnips? The June days, in which the Paris workers took the spinners of phrases at their word and fought in arms for liberty, equality, and fraternity, were the writing on the wall. Flaubert was a novelist, not a student of the social history and economic

Prewar Vision

Down dark ways my feet are led
guided by the reckless blind
past the houses of the dead
beyond the limits of the mind.

Strident orchestrated fear
trumpets shrieking out my name
crazy drums drove me here
nerves commanded and I came

through the gravedge deathsweet smell
of the spectral frontline camp
where beneath a silent spell
countless murdered armies tramp

to the wind's marshaling.

A squad front a company back
struck in mirth these shadows swing
breathless bones to mock attack

precise and perfect. No mistake
disturbs deadlock with defeat
no thrust allows ranks to break:
from this last field is no retreat.

I wheel and run defy wind
leap wire jump trench shrilly
scream

wild to leave that place behind.

I fall entangled in the dream.

Before me no room for doubt
my own head barring escape
grinning mouth nose eaten out
eyesockets agape.

JOSEPH KEHOE.



machinery of mankind, and to him the June days merely proved that flirting with empty slogans roused dark forces that were a threat to the very existence of civilized society. The dictatorship of the blackguard Louis Napoleon which followed was just a dictatorship of blackguards, the apotheosis of the bourgeois, and all that could be expected from the follies of preceding years. So the *Education Sentimentale* is a bitter and mercilessly ironical picture of the end of all the fine illusions of the liberal bourgeoisie, illusions which the red flag and rifle shots of June, 1848, shattered forever. After that, the vulgarity of the Empire. Nothing would be the same again, and one could resign oneself to the long process of social decay and destruction of civilization by this stupid and miserly bourgeoisie, with its wars, its narrow nationalism, and its bestial greed.

It might be thought that between Flaubert's theory of god-like objectivity of the artist and Balzac's theory of the natural history of social man, there is no great difference. In fact, there is all the difference in the world. Balzac's scientific views were possibly naïve and incorrect, but in his view of life he was truly realist. He looked at human society historically, as something struggling and developing through its struggles. In Flaubert, life becomes frozen and static. After 1848, you could not observe and express life in its development be-

cause that development was too painful, the contradictions were too glaring. So life became for him a frozen lake. "What appears beautiful to me," he writes to his mistress. "what I should like to do, would be a book about nothing, a book without any attachment to the external world, which would support itself by the inner strength of its style, just as the world supports itself in the air without being held up, a book which would be almost without a subject, or in which the subject would be almost invisible, if that is possible. The most beautiful books are those with the least matter. The nearer the expression comes to the thought, the more the word clings to it and then disappears, the more beautiful it is."

ONCE this view was accepted, the way was clear for the new "realism" which took the slice of life and described it minutely and objectively. But life, of course, proved too restive a creature to slice up artistically, so the novelist grew finicking about the choosing of his slice, demanding that it be cut off such a refined portion of life's anatomy that in the end he came to describe little more interesting than the suburban street or the Mayfair party. Revolting against the narrow view imposed on their vision by this theory, others drew their inspiration from Freud and Dostoevsky in order to give us the poetic picture of their own stream of consciousness. So in the end the novel has died away into two tendencies whose opposition has as little about it that is important to us as the mediæval battles of the schoolmen.

Flaubert, however, was an honest man and a great artist. If his successors were content to avoid the task of mastering the reality of their age and substitute the "slice of life" or the subjective stream of consciousness, he was not prepared to make any such easy surrender. His letters are the confession of a most frightful struggle with a life, a reality, that had become loathsome to him, but which nevertheless must be mastered and given artistic expression. No man has ever raged against the bourgeoisie with the hatred of Flaubert. "I would drown humanity in my vomit," he writes, and he does not mean humanity as a whole, but only the capitalist society of nineteenth-century Europe, immediately after the Paris Commune of 1871.

Letter after letter describes his struggle to find expression. He takes two months to write the tavern scene for *Madame Bovary*, the duration of which in the novel itself is only three hours. Over and over again he mentions that in the last month he has written some twenty pages. Can this be explained simply by his devotion to the perfect phrase, to the exact word? Is it an artist's conscience which will be satisfied with nothing less than perfection in style? Hardly that. He himself says that the works in which the greatest attention has been paid to style and form are mostly second-rate, and in one place declares outright that he is not sure if it is possible to find a criterion for perfection in style. When he writes of the great authors of the world, it is enviously: