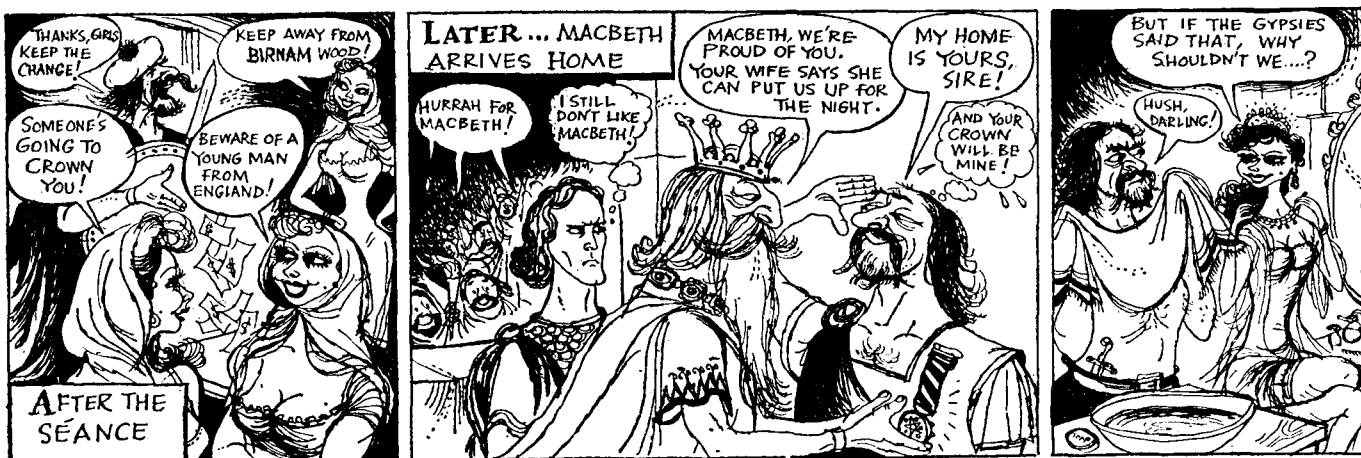


# Local Thane Makes Good"



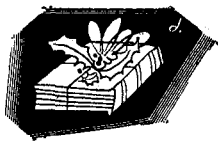




# Flaubert: Method and Mastery

## A Classic Revalued—XI

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EVERY writer, no matter how great, when he forsakes this world's stage, serves a term in limbo, during which his work suffers a kind of eclipse. Fortunate are they whose ideas continue to be discussed or even violently opposed. The very bitterness of the criticisms demonstrates the recognized extent of the effect they had upon their contemporaries. For fifteen years after his death Flaubert, as chief exponent of realism in literature (in spite of himself, head of a school of thought!), did not cease to attract followers. Théodore de Banville, writing toward the end of the nineteenth century, was thus able to say that "the contemporary French novel" had "sprung from" "L'Education sentimentale."

Many years have passed since all this. What today is Flaubert's standing; how are his works and ideas now judged?

First of all, it must be noted that his books have continued without interruption to enjoy a good sale, both abroad and in France. The number of his readers has increased rather than diminished. But, though Flaubert is still loved and admired, it is clearly no longer for the same reasons that made "Madame Bovary" a success in 1857 and "Salammbô" a sensation in 1862. The literary movements that earned for him his first admirers and his first enemies have ceased to count much. The quarrels of different schools of thought, the discussions on realism versus romanticism have died down. Flaubert's works nowadays are regarded as "classics," and as such are viewed with the dispassionate objectivity accorded by critics to authors definitely ranked among the great. Finished the time when the "immorality" of "Madame Bovary" and "Sa-

lammbô" or the irreligion of "La Tentation de St.-Antoine" were subjects for argument. Instead, and without a doubt, it is to the publication of his early works and his "Letters" that Flaubert largely owes his continued popularity.

There is something paradoxical in his case, which pretty well explains his literary survival. To him was allotted a strange destiny. His aim throughout his life was to write novels so perfectly objective that it would be impossible to guess whether he blamed or approved the words, actions, and behavior of his characters; yet now, through the publication of his intimate papers, he has become one of the writers most completely stripped naked before posterity. But also, contrary to what he could have thought, he has emerged from the ordeal on the whole all the greater because of this posthumous adventure, which, could he have anticipated it, would have filled him with despair.

To begin with, though, did he not unconsciously often transgress this dogma of "objectivity," which was the unique article of faith in his artistic credo? His style was very personal, and, try as he will, a writer whose style is personal often discloses many things he believes he is hiding. What we "guessed" about Flaubert his intimate letters have made evident without the least vestige of doubt, for they reveal his sensitive nature, his generosity, his pity for suffering. Thus it is that the great reading public of 1950 knows a real Flaubert that was not known to his contemporaries except to those who were among the very small number of his friends.

In addition, this correspondence of his, which extended over more than half a century and fills nine big published volumes (to which will soon be added 1,500 letters hitherto unpublished), is noteworthy in another respect. It is a document of the first or-

### In Print

"MADAME BOVARY" is published in many editions, ranging from Pocket Books (25¢) to Peter Pauper Press (\$3.95). "Salammbô" and "L'Education sentimentale" are both available in the Everyman's Library (Dutton, 95¢ each), "La Tentation de St.-Antoine" in the Halcyon House series (Garden City, 69¢). New Directions lists the "Three Tales" (\$1.50). The "Letters," unfortunately, have not yet been published in America.

der on the nineteenth century (from 1835 to 1880) in the history of literature, primarily, but also valuable as political and social history. Through the "Letters" we are introduced to a wide range of literature: his reading, in the course of preparation for the writing of works as diverse as his—novels of manners, historical novels—was enormous. His correspondents, who were among the most eminent minds of the period, were equally varied—Baudelaire, Renan, Taine, George Sand, Michelet, Turgenev, Zola, Maupassant, to name a few at random. Then, there are the letters to Louise Colet, of a very special character, full of advice on the art of writing and remarks on the dignity of the writer's craft. All this makes of Flaubert's correspondence a unique monument. His letters are the sort we read and reread, return to again and again.

THEREIN lies another paradox: the more time passes, the more it is seen that these letters of Flaubert, which reveal what he would have blushed to divulge, these letters, which he would have done everything, if he could, to abolish, comprise his veritable *chef-d'oeuvre*. The style of the letters is quite different from the style of his books. He lets himself go in them, no longer struggles for the right word, even neglects to watch his whoms, whiches, and whats that are so carefully controlled in his novels. Disregardful of mistakes, he gives himself wholly. His mastery in writing shows through these very mistakes, in fact; they are liberties such as Saint-Simon took in order to go directly to the point, as swift as an arrow.

Do these letters of Flaubert refute, then, the theories he takes so much pains to defend even in the course of this correspondence? Not at all. Merely, they illustrate how salutary is a rigorous self-discipline. Writing a letter to a friend and writing a book are

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Because wanton, mercenary lips had murmured similar protestations in his ear, he had no great belief in the sincerity of this, his latest conquest. Strip away the exaggerations of language, he thought, and there's nothing left but the same old mediocre emotions. As though the fulness of the heart does not sometimes overflow into the emptiest of metaphors. . . . Human language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, when all the time we are longing to move the stars to pity. —"MADAME BOVARY."