

Sentimental Education

G. Flaubert

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The rich and idle Frédéric Moreau is involved with three women. One for Love, one for Sex and a third for Ambition. Thus, first and foremost there is Mme Arnoux, whom he meets by chance on a boat, while he is still a very young man about to enter Law School. His passion for her is pure and elated. She is impossible to attain, trapped in what seems to be an unfortunate marriage to the enterprising Monsieur Arnoux, an art dealer, a totally unscrupulous character, a serial adulterer, a keeper of women, but of course as such people often tend to be disarmingly good-natured. Our protagonist does not dare to declare his love, perhaps not so much out of timidity, although that certainly plays a part, but more out of respect and a need to idealize. Many years pass, and the fortunes of the Arnoux family dwindle. There are law suits, spiraling debts, inexorably leading to an accelerated social descent. Arnoux gives up his art business and his journal, acquires a factory and dabbles into china wares. Finally Moreau steps out of his closet, declares his love to Mme Arnoux, only to be coldly rebuffed in no uncertain terms. In desperation he gets involved with a woman of easy virtue, intermittently kept by Arnoux, who has once introduced her to him. This is of course just a subterfuge, and when he later on finds success with his elusive object of desire, they engage in a blissful platonic orgy, opening their souls to each other. But his careful plans to actually physically seduce her, incidentally during the tumult of the February riots of the year 1848, are foiled, by the accidental sickness of her young son, who close to death, nevertheless recovers. Moreau utterly distraught in his selfishness, revenges himself by instead consummating his relationship with the courtesan. What follows is an interlude, not without erotic bliss, but he eventually tires of his charge, and when he accidentally meets Arnoux and his wife at a party thrown by the well-heeled Dambreuse, his love for Mme Arnoux is revived, and his distaste for Rosanette further deepened. However, the situation with Arnoux is as hopeless as ever, and instead he embarks on the ambition of seducing Mmm Dambreuse, to have her as a mistress would boost not only his social self-esteem, but enable him to climb in the social hierarchy. The situation now almost becomes comical, as he is juggling entertaining the two ladies simultaneously, the comedy not lost on our hero himself, reveling in the disgust he feels for his own behavior. Monsieur Dambreuse conveniently dies, good riddance according to his widow, who expects to get into his considerable fortune, as well as being free to marry her young and handsome lover. Further complications arise, Rosanette becomes pregnant, delivers a boy, who conveniently soon dies. However, in the end, as part of twists and complications in the plot, too contorted to be retold, Moreaus abruptly breaks off his promise of marriage to the rich Madame (who in fact, to her unremitting rage, is not quite as rich as she had expected, as her late husband turned out to will his fortune to his bastard daughter, pretended to be a niece) after she has publicly humiliated her rival Mme Arnoux by arranging a public auction of her belongings following the bankruptcy of the husband and forcing Moreau to be present while she does some bidding. Maybe his

breaking off is the only honorable action our hero performs. To the novel is added some appended chapters, in which Moreau is allowed to meet his love, now an older woman, her hair all white, and at older age to reunite with his childhood friend, to compare notes and contemplate how their youthful dreams came to nothing. In the case of Moreau, ostensibly because of the sentimentality of his character.

As can be inferred the plot is contorted, but plot is only secondary although it is usually plot that makes you turn the pages, execution is primary. The novel is written with verve and at times hilariously funny. The love story is at first taken quite seriously, but towards the end, with all the attendant complications, it becomes a burlesque, seemingly not rising above the level of the ordinary bedchamber farce, so beloved on the stage. I do not know how much the prose of Flaubert actually suffers through the translation. Into Swedish he can be transformed almost into strindbergian prose¹, the same vigour, and the same love of descriptive detail, that never gets merely tedious. Although with Strindberg you can feel the intense joy the author finds in articulation, this is not so obvious with Flaubert, who supposedly struggled with his sentences almost interminably, combing, as he put it, his prose. This makes one suspect that in Flaubert there is a formal elegance, which is absent in Strindberg and alien to Swedish as a language, and does not at all come across in the English translation. Nevertheless, one can be assured that Flaubert never heard of Strindberg, let alone read anything by him, while obviously Flaubert must have been known to the Swede, who as a realist must have been influenced by him as well as by his more obvious source - Zola². Anyway the realistic impulse finds its expression in his painting of a panorama of Paris in the 1840's.

Flaubert is a word-painter. This has its advantages and disadvantages. His description of people appear almost always to be merely self-indulgent, as one suspects them to be pointless, as with names of guests introduced at a party, one tends to forget them as soon as one has been exposed to them, hence they add little to our visualizations. On the other hand they can also when used accumulatively convey a vivid impression, when supplemented, with other details. I am in particular thinking of the description of the wild dancing at a masquerade, when our hero is for the first time introduced to the woman Rosanette, dressed up as a marshal (and hence often referred to as one). The dancing is wild, and so are the costumes, and Flaubert manages to depict a veritable bacchanal, which on one hand makes you think of a modern disco, but on the other hand manages to suggest that the 1840's were far more depraved than the 1980's. The scene is masterly done, I think, and the breathlessness of the prose and the descriptions, tumbling over each other, mirror the very breathlessness of the proceedings. In another chapter Flaubert engages in lyrical description of nature and weather in connection with an excursion our hero makes with his courtesan to the former royal palace of Fontainebleau. This too, while not forwarding the plot in any way, does constitute in my opinion one of the most charming parts of the novel, For one thing, Flaubert takes obvious pleasure in it, his eyes are those of a painter, and it makes palpable to the reader erotic bliss.

But to return to the main scene, that of Paris. Paris of the 1840's must have been quite

¹ This becomes clear in a recent Swedish translation by Bodegård of 'Mme Bovary'

² Flaubert was born in 1821, and died in 1880 when Strindberg (1849-12) had just emerged on the Swedish scene with his 'Röda Rummet' of 1879

a different thing than the Paris of the 1880's during the height of the 'Belle Epoque' so tenderly described by Proust and others. As a modern tourist it is not too hard to imagine the Paris of Proust walking along the boulevards, it is much harder, if at all possible to bring up the Paris of the 1840's during a modern stroll. One obvious reason is Haussmann, who under the sponsorship of Napoleon (the Ceausescu of his days) transformed the city into what we see now, doing away with the Mediaeval mess. The scenes that Flaubert conjures are those of Daumier, and to get the feel for them, you need to travel to a Third World City, littered with human destitution and refuse. Such things do not come up very clearly in the account of a contemporary who takes them for granted. This is why photography is so fascinating, photos provide windows into the past, which have not been filtered, at least not directly so, preserving evidence which were never noticed by their takers. Likewise the very many references to tilburies, broughams, and other horse-driven conveyances, would in the contemporary reader bring up vivid associations, which we are unable to form, no matter how much we study their make and appearances in encyclopedias. What is an omnibus by the way? To use one in the 1840's would be commonplace, to us it would be distractingly exotic. This is part of the tragedy of the passing of time, points of references simply vanish, and as with extinct species, they can never be made alive again, only preserved formally through faint and blurry images. Thus with the passage of time, much is lost in works of literature. Thus we have the criteria for a classic, a book which in addition to being wedded to its time and place, (as every realistic piece of fiction strives to be) also possesses more timeless aspects.

One such timeless aspect is social interaction, which tends to be fascinatingly similar over time. In this case our hero moves in a circle of intellectuals, painters, lawyers, actors, even mathematicians (although Flaubert seems to confuse them with accountants), to which merchants, shop assistants and capitalists are not barred. In fact the latter play an important role in providing meeting places, with open houses regularly provided during the weeks. The conversation may for the most part be inane, but that is part of life, which is seldom perfect. Courtesans also provide neutral meeting grounds, erotic desire transcending political divisions. Thus to an idle, but not untalented individual, such as our hero Moreau, life in Paris provides endless digressions. You go to art exhibits, attend theaters and operas, and during the season, go to the races. You make social visits, eat out, the supply of restaurants seems inexhaustible and serve many functions, in addition to eating, that we nowadays associate with homes, and there is always plenty of servants to take care of the more mundane matters. In addition to this there is shopping, for china, for art, and other luxuries. As noted our hero is not stupid, not devoid of talent, able to turn a phrase, have an article published, fancying himself a historian of ideas. But he utterly lacks purpose in life. Studying the law is a bore of course, and as he does not need it really, unlike his less fortunate brethren, he can safely ignore it, except for the intermittent cramming. A life purified of necessity, becomes a life devoted to beauty. So it is not hard to see where Mme Arnoux fits into all this, she becomes the focal point of his aestheticism, which is just an expression of his desire to savor worry-less existence. To contemplate the beauty of the moment, and the sweetness of desire. Ambition goes no further than sweet daydreaming, action no further than shopping for consumer goods. And money is in steady supply, although the enthusiasm for its spending, occasionally

generates temporary shortages, akin to traffic stockings interfering with the easy flow.

The novel is a panorama of the 1840's, and hence the revolutionary events of the spring of 1848, also play an important part. Once again, the descriptive power of Flaubert comes in good stead, as he depicts the excitement of the revolution. The shooting in the streets, while life seemingly goes on unaffectedly amid corpses lying around on the pavement, the revolutionary can take a break from his action, and have a beer inside a restaurant, only to emerge when he feels once again in the mood for some action³. And finally the mob swelling and breaking into the Palais Royale, entering the apartments of the departed royalty, stunned by the luxury, fascinated by it, and eventually taking possession of it, ripping it into pieces, tearing it apart, throwing it out through the windows, letting in the fresh air. The depiction of the uprising is both marred and charmed by the novelistic touch of improbable coincidence. There Arnoux is spotted in a military engagement, happy to be in the fray of things, on the other side, yet another acquaintance doing his bit. The world is small indeed, as if on a stage, or maybe better still in a dream. It must all be rather dreamlike, and this sense of unreality is once again skillfully conveyed by Flaubert. Flaubert is a realist, or at least known as such, and it must be fun for him to be able to wink at the reader.

There is talk. Endless talk. And much of it seem not very different from the fervor of later generations. Endless talk about the revolution, woman's rights. Not much new under the sun. Flaubert takes an ironic detachment, showing the emptiness of the verbiage, maybe sometimes too explicitly. He notes the turns of coats, how the fervent revolutionary by the very logic of his abstract reasoning becomes a strong proponent of authority. How many socialists utopias have not ended up in this way? Flaubert understood, without having to suffer the 20th century. It is of course the wit of Flaubert, which makes his novel so hilarious to read. It is sprinkled with small jewels of observations' *There are some men whose only function in life is to act as intermediaries; one crosses them as if they were bridges and leaves them behind..* Or a *propos* Monsieur Dambreuse, who after the upheavals that threatens his livelihood, he is quick to ingratiate himself with those he fancies being the new men of power. ... *for he had always been a Republican at heart. If he had voted with the Government under the monarchy, that had simply been in order to hasten its inevitable downfall..* Arnoux suddenly seized with a tender impulse towards his neglected wife, brings her to a private room in a restaurant. She resents being treated as a common whore, not understanding that for him, that is a sign of affection. To the very end Arnoux does not give up Rosanette, in fact during his duty as a National Guard, he takes a twenty-four hour leave to visit her, but returns much earlier as he had overtaxed his strength and in his exhaustion been stricken with remorse. And of course the much articulated proposal: *Long live Tyranny, provided the Tyrant does good.*

All through this there are endless references to contemporary political events and personages, utterly unknown to the modern reader. The translation comes equipped with almost one hundred endnotes, but consulting them is a distraction and adds little to the narrative. It is like jokes, they should be spontaneously grasped not pedantically explained. Still it gives a sense of the political burlesque which was France after the end

³ One is reminded of the Civil War in Lebanon, which in many respects seemed to have been indeed 'civil'.

of the Napoleonic era. While France during mediaeval times up to the beginning of the 19th century was a dignified great European power, thereafter it became a caricature. The grandness of the French Revolution soon petered out and were revived only to be betrayed by Napoleon. The revolution lived on, but only as fashion nostalgically maintained. Grand words, big gestures, upheavals, changes of government, but through all this capitalism not only held its grounds but also solidified them. Appalling economic inequality, allowing good-for-nothings, no matter how talented and filled with good taste, such as Moreau to flow through life without ever being ensnared by it. Reading it one is appalled at the heartlessness of the rich, their smugness, their grotesque consumerism, forgetting that this is still prevalent today, only on a grander scale. Now also people of modest means may indulge themselves in ways, that often exceed those available to the lucky few in the past. Of course this is what makes the social parts of the novel so familiar. It would not be hard to imagine Mme Arnoux, Mme Dambreuse, Rosanette and other women busy with their smart phones

As the translator confirms, the novel is to a large extent autobiographical, with Frédéric himself, the anti-hero, being modeled on Flaubert himself. While Flaubert, at least in the eyes of posterity, was a successful author, Moreau his alter ego, is for all intents and purposes, in spite of his talent, intelligence and good taste, a nonentity. What makes the difference? A question of will and the necessary discipline which becomes the fruit of the former? In fact, at least according to the translator, every major character has a counterpart in real life. The painter Pellerin, one of the more interesting of the supporting cast, who in the novel is for ever aiming at masterpieces, but whose only actual paintings in the novel is a vulgar portrait of a semi-nude Rosanette, and a hideous likeness of her dead baby, is supposedly drawn from Nadar, one of the few men a modern reader may know of. But most interestingly Mme Arnoux has a real counterpart, with whom the young teenager Flaubert feel hopelessly in love, married as she was to a German. In real life she succumbs to madness, of which there is no trace in the novel, although this might have been a tempting complication.

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