

against Dreyfus as an intellectual treat for the educated, proclaimed that 'he will be honoured wherever men have free souls'.

The Disappearance of Emile Zola honours its hero not only for his fortitude, consistency and sense of purpose but also for the way in which *J'Accuse...* and Zola's related writings exposed the Dreyfus case as a stalking horse for anti-Semitism in its most virulently sophisticated form. From the ritual humiliation of Captain Dreyfus on the parade ground it was a short step to Nazi round-ups, internment at Drancy or one of the other holding camps for Jews

and a cattle truck to Auschwitz. Michael Rosen presents a plausible image of Zola as the harbinger, throughout his career, of a new kind of politics, internationalist in its struggles against poverty, injustice and racism. This book needed better editing – the author has an irritating habit of starting too many paragraphs with a date – but its evocation of a Britain confident enough to absorb and shelter a foreign dissident without the institutionalised hostility of visas or internment camps is, to say the least, timely. *To order this book from our partner bookshop, Heywood Hill, see page 3.*

BENJAMIN IVRY

An Uncommon Life

Flaubert

By Michel Winock

(Translated by Nicholas Elliott)

• (Belknap Press/Harvard University Press 549pp £25)

French-language authors still have a problem with the art of biography. With no shining predecessors such as James Boswell, Elizabeth Gaskell or John Forster to guide them, Gallic writers tend to produce hagiographies or demolitions, with scant room left for other approaches. For this reason, it was useful when the historian Michel Winock produced a biography of Gustave Flaubert for Gallimard in 2013. The book has now been translated into English. It is stately and plump, like its subject, as well as thought-provoking. To be sure, Geoffrey Wall and Frederick Brown have in recent decades produced English-language biographies of Flaubert, but Winock has the depth of knowledge and familiarity with Flaubert's times to add something new. One of the most dramatic moments of Flaubert's life came during the Paris Commune, and Winock's first book, published in 1964, was about the *communards*. Winock has also produced books on Victor Hugo and Madame de Staël, showing special interest in how literature and politics mix. Flaubert once wrote to his friend Jules Duplan, 'characters from history are more interesting than fictional ones'. Having written previously on history and literature, Winock is well qualified to

shed light on Flaubert. And there is surely light to be shed.

In a 1951 essay, Saul Bellow asserted:

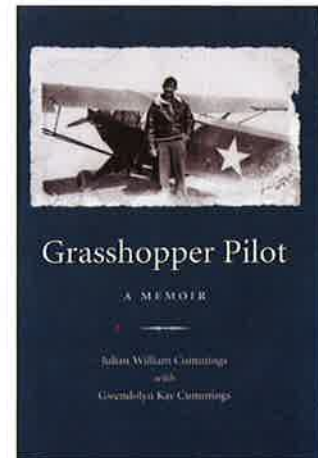
Flaubert, hating common life, displaced his enormous energy from subject matter to style. If literature was a heroic enterprise, it had to be so in spite of the degeneration of life. Flaubert's aim was an aesthetic one: the creation of beauty as a reply to the punishment and pain of degraded existence. Thus for him, and for those who followed him, mastery over language comes to represent mastery over human difficulties, and method in fiction is a symbolic triumph of sense, order, and harmony over them ... But the system was hermetic, closed to the great disturbances with which Flaubert tried to cope ... [He] armored himself too greatly in his art to act freely.

Such a view of Flaubert as an author hampered by self-constraint is most often held by those who read his novels in English. Translating it from the French alters Flaubert's prose in irreparable ways. Even in lauded translations by Margaret Mauldon, Geoffrey Wall and Raymond MacKenzie, *Madame Bovary* (1856) is still called by that name. The exotic-sounding 'Madame' – redolent of

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Flaubert: Croisset's finest

a brothel keeper or a romantic heroine such as *Madam Butterfly* – should have long ago been replaced by the humdrum but accurate ‘Mrs’, with all the conjugal drabness that title implies. Likewise, *L'Education sentimentale* (1869) is not well served by the standard title, *Sentimental Education*. The critic Michael Wood has proposed ‘Education of the Heart’ as one alternative. In the original French, Flaubert sculpts a world from language. In 1920, Marcel Proust called Flaubert

a man who by his entirely new and personal use of the simple past, the compound past, the present participle, certain pronouns and certain prepositions renewed our vision of things nearly as much as Kant did with his *Categories*, his theories of the Knowledge and Reality of the outside world.

Inevitably, readers in English miss this philosophical system created through language. An experienced guide such as Winock can offer practical advice on understanding these elements of Flaubert's work. A reactionary who was neither a royalist nor a democrat, Flaubert loathed the era he lived in, particularly its stupidity. He disapproved of the Paris Commune's insurrectionists, but, following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, reserved even more violent hatred for

Germans who invaded his country. An opponent of universal suffrage, Flaubert felt that his vote should count more than those of his dimwitted neighbours in Croisset, outside Rouen in Normandy. ‘I am certainly worth twenty other Croisset voters!’ he wrote immodestly – if perhaps accurately – to George Sand. The posthumously published *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas* (1911), compiled from notes of clichés Flaubert made in the 1870s, expresses a bitter fury echoing earlier examples of the genre, such as Charles Baudelaire's *Poor Belgium* (1864). Despite his unsurpassed attention to detail, Flaubert cannot be classed among France's great aphorists, though he was a devoted reader of La Bruyère's *Characters*. An appendix to Winock's book offers ‘A Compendium of Flaubert Quotations’, many drawn from his letters. While revealing much unhappiness, these quotes hardly represent useful observations on how to live or write. Instead, Flaubert's compilation of idiocy, like the figure of the odious apothecary Monsieur Homais in *Madame Bovary*, seems intended to spark indignation among readers. Yet he was also capable of creating stolid, naive characters empathetically and humanely, such as the maid Félicité Barette in the tale ‘A Simple Heart’, or Dussardier, the martyred shop worker in *L'Education sentimentale*.

Winock explores these apparent paradoxes by drawing on Flaubert's majestic correspondence, which has been called his masterpiece by some readers. Winock seems sympathetic to this point of view, even if it means relegating the novels in importance. Placing Flaubert's letters at the head of his oeuvre, Winock believes, ‘gives us a feeling for the admirable nature of this epistolary opus, an unrivaled source for an understanding both of Flaubert himself and of his era’. Although there are many letters to eminent literary figures such as Ivan Turgenev and Sand, Winock believes that Flaubert's ‘personality is most apparent’ in the ones he sent to more obscure individuals, such as Léonie Brainne, a widow living in Normandy. To Brainne, Winock adds, Flaubert unveiled ‘his development, desires, ideas, obsessions, discoveries, and his manner – or rather manners – of loving’.

Among the many illuminating aspects of Flaubert's letters are details about his vast reading in preparation for novel-writing, much like the labours of a historian attempting to grasp the essence of an era. His research was also intense for novels set in times he had lived through. In *L'Education sentimentale*, the character of Sénécal was intended to serve as the ‘personification of socialist ideology, which he abhorred’, Winock informs us. To bring Sénécal to life, Flaubert read an ‘abundance of books on socialism’, claiming to have devoured twenty-seven volumes in six weeks. In doing so, he discovered the ‘Christian sources of the so-called utopian socialists’, which hardly endeared them any further to him.

On the other hand, by choosing historical or legendary settings for novels such as *Salammbô* (1862), set in Carthage during the third century BC, or *The Temptation of St Anthony* (1874), Flaubert did more than escape from his own time: he constructed an alternate historical reality through language. Winock explains that writing *The Temptation of St Anthony* entailed a ‘reading frenzy’ on the gods of Egypt and Greece and deep research on the ideas of Spinoza, Kant and Hegel: ‘He “lost” himself in Antiquity, he told George Sand, the better to forget the contemporary world's wickedness.’

The horrors of 19th-century life made Flaubert ill-equipped for assimilating historical changes in his lifetime. As Winock notes:

At the same time conservative and republican, anticlerical and reactionary, nostalgic for a lost aristocracy of the mind and deeply hostile to democratic society while speaking of its ‘development’ as a necessity, Flaubert is reminiscent of Tocqueville, the man who had predicted the advent of such a society. But Tocqueville, as nostalgic as he was, resigned himself to the new society as a sort of accomplishment of divine will. For his part, Flaubert could not stand it. He continued to suffer from the success of mediocre people.

‘Abominating mediocrity’, Flaubert, Winock remarks, made the art of writing ‘transcendent ... placing it above everything the modern world stood for’.

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