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The Madness of the Everyday

It is through the eyes of a madman that we are best equipped to view reality. More than any other author we have read, Flaubert is best equipped to portray the *real* because of his madness and maladies.

Flaubert wrestled with various mental illnesses throughout his life. From seizures to gender and sexual uncertainty, his life was troubled greatly by the burdens of his mind. In the modern era the mentally unstable have but a quiet, little voice in the world; in the late 19th century they had almost none. But through Flaubert, a man flirting with insanity and seizures, the historical reality of his time comes into the greatest focus because of his madness. It takes someone who knows the highest peaks and lowest depths of humanity to fully realize the breadth of reality. Only with a panoramic view of life can one fully recreate a portion of it. And so it is with Flaubert—his travel through madness provides the raw materials needed to bring the lives of the heroically mundane into focus and produce the quintessential historical realist novel.

Flaubert, in both *Three Tales* and *Madame Bovary*, approaches realism through the "Smallest details," (Lukacs, 42). The move towards historical realism was one based on a need to find the in-between, the minute, the everyday, not the grandiose. A criticism of literature before the realist movement was that it was so broad it lacked detail, and as a result, the significance of everyday life:

> It is impossible for literature to go beyond a certain limit in painting the facts of war [referring to a novel by Eugene Sue]. To depict the Cevennes mountains, the plains between them, the flat expanse of Languedoc, and troop manoeuvres covering this entire area—that is something Walter Scott and Cooper felt to be beyond their powers…They confined themselves to small encounters, revealing through them the spirit of the two contending masses, (Lukacs 43).

Flaubert is not only aware of the sweeping panorama of life but understands the "small encounters" and the minutiae of day to day life better than most.

Flaubert was aware of the significance of Prussian occupation, the Second Empire government, his relationship with his mother who ultimately suffered a "Mental and physical dissolution" (*Madame Bovary* xix) and subsequently left the family home to her niece, the legends and tales of goblins and witches, the realities of a mental illness and seizures (even if he refused to name it), and sexual ambiguity and uncertainty—driving him to consider self-castration early in life. This mix of emotions, experiences, and ailments lead him to look at life not through the lens of the 'average' person, but through multifocality. His focus was on the great events and mass experiences as well as the mundane because he experienced it all. "How can we represent the dispossessed, the illiterate and the powerless? Yes, we give them a voice. But whose voice is it to be? Their voice, or our version of their voice?" (xx). Flaubert's flirts with madness allow him to speak with many voices, and this in turn leaves him best equipped to speak for the silent voices of the nameless heroes.

Flaubert himself expressed his understanding of the breadth of human experience through his writing process and idea generation:

> I possess memories that go back to the Pharaohs. I can see myself very clearly at different moments in history, following different trades, according to my luck. My present self is the outcome of all my extinct selves. I was a boatman on the Nile, a pimp in Rome at the time of the Punic wars, then a Greek orator in Suburra where I was devoured by bed-bugs. I died during the Crusades from eating too many grapes on a

> beach in Syria. I have been a pirate and a monk an acrobat and a coachman. Emperor of the Orient too perhaps? (xiv).

If the ability to create realism is the ability to understand the individual encounter in the "Mass experience," (Lukacs, 23), Flaubert's multiple lives and mad history allow him to live and experience both the mass experience and individual role at once. "Flaubert accumulated a vast leisurely adult erudition on the subject of saints, heretics and goddesses. The supernatural was his second home, though he arrived there through a door marked science," (*Three Tales*, xvi). Nothing was off-limits or too difficult to express, for he had lived and experienced it all, even at a young age.

Flaubert was, crucially, equally aware of both his past lives as well as the reality in which his corporeal-self existed:

> The novel [Madame Bovary] is full of markers of the culture of Flaubert's time that we in our time may not recognize such as: La Chaumiere dance hall in Paris; Pompadour clocks and statuettes; the poet Beranger; the novelist Walter Scott; fireworks; tourist attractions in Italy; a plethora of English importations…Flaubert is holding up a mirror to the middle and lower middle class world…with all its little habits, fashions, fads, (Madame Bovary, xii).

It wasn't just a perception of the surreal or the madness of his desires that Flaubert capitalized on, but a keen awareness of everyday life. It was through both an acute perception and the ability to transcend the ordinary that he creates the ultimate historical reality.

Just because Flaubert had the mass experience of countless lives and memories at his fingertips did not mean he understood or accepted them all. "Yet he is never perfectly at home in any of these worlds. He is always divided between the imagined and the real, flitting between the ramparts of ancient Carthage and the boulevards of industrial Rouen," (xiii).

It is precisely this lack of home, this sense of chronological estrangement, this mental ambiguity that allows him insight into the relationship between the individual and the masses and allows him to meander and mingle with the legendary and the local, the ancient and the contemporary. He is a vagabond of space and time, an objective observer—his passport through time is madness. “Fear of madness had preyed upon Flaubert’s mind,” (xvii). This fear of madness was the impetus for his creation and the reason he is best poised to relate the real and give voice to his unnamed malady. Madness, in his case, meant experiences beyond the average. And through that surreal experience, he was able to articulate the very mundane so poetically.

Unlike Cooper, author of *Last of the Mohicans*, Flaubert never sought to turn his madness into the great realist novel. From the module 2 video lecture comes a quote from Reverend Smith. He states dryly, “In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?” His statement articulates the generalized feelings towards America, that they (Americans) had not yet produced anything great. But, as the video lecture continues and we read earlier, Cooper set out specifically to counter that argument and “Change all that.” While that is an American novel versus a French novel, the principle applies. Cooper, perhaps a bit arrogantly and allowing some of his precocious youthful tendencies to get the better of him, led him to write the great American novel. “It seems that it [his time in the Navy and voyage to Europe in 1826] was chance that made him a novelist…One day he laid aside an English novel he was reading with the idle remark that he could write a better one himself,” (Cooper, vi). Flaubert, on the other hand, wanted to “Push at the legal limits of realism,” (*Three Tales*, xvi). Intentionally seeking to create a great piece of art is basically marketing. Whereas becoming a

servant to the art, letting the impulses and inertia force your hand is how to capture the real. While that is a *bit* hyperbolic, it does show the distinction in motivation and results—Cooper tried to create the next great novel but wound up creating a great tale with hardly a message or moral stance to be found, while Flaubert struggled to define his reality, and as a result, left the window open to *our* reality by literally writing about a stained glass window.

Consider the contrast in content between Cooper and Flaubert. Cooper wanted to specifically create the next great (or first great, if you listen to Reverend Smith) American novel and picked the most sweeping mass experience available to him—the formation of America and the slow death of the Native American tribes. Conversely, Flaubert wrote about a window. A stained glass window.

As mentioned before, Lukacs states that the "real" of the historical novel is found in the everyday, the unique experiences of the individual that make up the mass experience. Cooper was, perhaps, too focused on creating the epic real to realize this point. Though his content focused on the "small encounters", it was very much about the sweeping change of the mass experience during the birth of the American people and the destruction of the indigenous. "The great writers of the eighteenth century…knew quite well that it was not the completeness of description that mattered—the enumeration of an object's constituents or of a sequence of events forming a persons' life, but the working-out of essential human and social determinants," (Lukacs, 41). *A Simple Heart* is anything but a complete description of a human life and the social circumstances of its time (in this case, Felicite). Instead, it captures the poetic events of a single life, giving the perspective of history in so doing. "What matters therefore in the historical novel is not the re-telling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of

the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel, and act just as they did in historical reality," (42).

A "Fear of madness had preyed upon Flaubert's mind," (*Three Tales*, xvii). But he also refused to name his condition which led to these bouts of madness (which go beyond the seizures themselves). While some means of help for his condition was sought (which included regular bloodletting and forced abstinence from just about everything), his treatment was in exploring his mind, his past lives, the world. Through this exploration as a means of understanding and treating his maladies, we find poetic awakening of Flaubert himself, which in turn provides the raw materials for poetic awakening in each of his characters and stories. "I am the obscure, tenacious pearl-diver who explores the lower depths and surfaces empty-handed, his face turning blue. A fatal attraction pulls me towards the dark places of the mind, down into the inner deep, so perpetually enticing to the stout-hearted," (xi).

This is precisely why this madness places Flaubert in the best position to write about reality. He does not view life from the typical constraints of an individual who is reserved, hides their deepest desires and fears, and follows the prescribed path through life (such as becoming a lawyer, as Flaubert was pushed towards but quickly rejected). Instead, he knows of his malady, he knows both the limits and the limitless expanse of his mind. But most importantly, he is willing to *explore* those depths and uncover anything and everything that might be found there. This, in some ways, is madness—to give life and light to every desire and thought instead of steady repression or temperance. He was willing to go where the average person cannot, to see the limits of human experience, and ask what happens beyond. And by traveling to the

depths of the past, present, and future, to soar into the heights of the unknown, he can fully capture the essence of reality and portray that in his *Three Tales* and other works.

Much like Flaubert himself, Felicite, in *Three Tales*, is tortured throughout her life by an unknown or unnamed ailment. In Felicite's case, it is a compulsion and obsession to serve. She worked herself quite literally to death, dismissing any suggestions or prescriptions for help. "After the Poles had left, she turned her attention to an old man by the name of Colmiche…When the tumor burst, she changed his dressing every single day…He died and Felicite had a mass said for the repose of his soul," (28). She also cared for those with cholera. Her obsession ruled her life and perspective on the natural order, "Felicite wept for her [Madame Aubain] in a way that servants rarely weep for their masters. That Madame should die before her disturbed her whole way of thinking; it seemed to go against the natural order of things; it was something unacceptable and unreal," (36). Felicite's death was as surreal and dramatic as her unhealthy and difficult life. "With her dying breath she imagined she saw a huge parrot hovering above her head as the heavens parted to receive her," (40).

Felicite experienced blindness, deafness, trauma (from a horse and carriage), what might be considered seizures like Flaubert himself, and all the traits of Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder. She struggled to understand her life amidst her problems and focused all her time on serving. Through Felicite, we see Flaubert exploring his madness. He gives voice to the mixed desires, thoughts, and feelings that accompany his madness. In Felicite, we see a very tangible expression of abstract concepts or mental anguish. Perhaps Flaubert did indeed name his malady—he named it Felicite, Julian Hospitator, Herodias, Madame Bovary, and more.

In a stained glass window, Flaubert finds a story, a life, a tale, a reality, and a legend. Where the average individual would see only light creating a display of colors, Flaubert sees light *and* life. He understands the reality contained within the glass and the reality *around* the glass and can capture that through exploring the lives the simple window touches. “And that is the story of Saint Julian Hospitator almost exactly as you will find it told in a stained-glass window in a church near to where I was born,” (70). That final sentence of the story perfectly captures the essence of Flaubert’s historical realism and madness combined: Here is a man who sees the average as any other churchgoer would and creates his mental image around it, just as any other individual who gazed up at the window might. And unlike the average person, he is beyond reality enough to explore the utmost limits of his imagination, his world, his reality, his past-present-future, and the humanity that a single-window represents. He tells a tale based solely on observing a window.

Observing a window is a mass experience, but Flaubert captures the experience in a singular tale. And his breadth and depth of experience provide the window through which he can look at the whole of humanity and create the poetic realism that defines the Historical novel.

Works Cited

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