Evenings at Croisset: The Gustave Flaubert Letters

by Kevin Anthony Brown (August 2024)

The Temptation of Saint Anthony [after Gustave Flaubert] (Lovis Corinth, 1908)

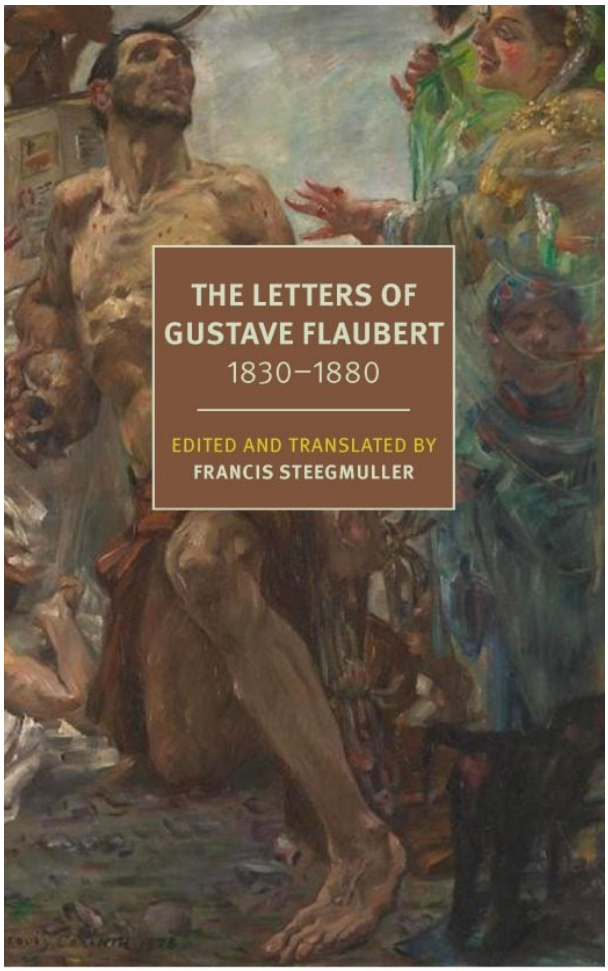
By night, Flaubert did some of his best writing, to "crown the day's work." Flaubert's correspondence sheds as much light on his creative process as it does on 19th-century French art, literature and politics.

Chronologically, Flaubert's letters divide in two. Volume one chronicles his life and work until the publication of *Bovary*.

1. The Making of a Master: *Bovary* and Everything Before

The Hôtel-Dieu

Flaubert's mortuary eye for close observation developed early. Born in the hospital where his father was director and chief surgeon, Gustave tags along as Dr. Flaubert makes rounds. Flies swarm cadavers awaiting autopsy on morgue slabs. Doctors amputate surviving patients' extremities. "Blessed be he who invented chloroform."



The Letters of Gustave Flaubert
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The French have a long epistolary tradition. Flaubert mentions Mme. Sévigné, Voltaire, Berlioz, Octave Mirbeau, others. "Flaubert's genius as a correspondent" rests on a bedrock foundation. English celebrates a parallel tradition of great letter-writers—Byron, Chesterfield, Cowper, Keats, D.H. Lawrence, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Shaw—most being better known for work in other genres, like drama, poetry and travelogues of the Grand Tour.

Virginia Woolf, a student of letter-writers like Flaubert, was both precocious and ambitious. At four or five, she began scribbling letters to her father and his famous friends, Ambassador to the Court of St James, her god papa James Russell Lowell, for instance. “MY DEAR FATHER: WE HAVENT BATHED YET WE ARE GOING TO TOMORROW WE SANG IN THE TRAIN YOUR LOVING VIRGINIA.” Gustave was slow learning to read. His correspondence dates from age eight or nine. Dr. Flaubert is perceptive, but can’t understand his youngest son’s mania for “harmonious, well-turned, singing sentences.” By age 11, Flaubert’s planning histories of Henry IV, Louis XIII and Louis Quatorze. “I must get to work.”

Juvenilia

His teen letters are crude, as you might expect. “the reader will hereafter be spared,” Steegmuller writes, the boyish horseplay Flaubert overdoes: fart jokes; bad puns. Steegmuller includes them because, even then, “Flaubert’s tendency to be obscene, profane, and scatological,” something he never entirely outgrew, demonstrates from the very beginning that he was “linguistically inventive.”

“I have a confused feeling of something stirring within me,” says a Flaubert who is already becoming Flaubert, that “I am in a period of transition, curious to see what the result will be, how I’ll come out of it: I am moulting . . . .”

On Being Ill

Flaubert

The profession of writer is inferior to that of physician, in Dr. Flaubert’s view. So, Gustave takes and passes his university-entrance exams in August, then heads off to the Sorbonne. He sits daydreaming, puffing his pipe, watching the rain. Law school seems a good way to buy time; figure out what he wants out of life or what to do for a living. Arguing some notorious criminal case at trial—embezzlement, forgery—holds a certain romantic appeal.

He hates law school so much it literally gives him fits. Living near the Luxembourg Gardens, young Flaubert invents every excuse not to study. Goes hungry because he’s blown two or three times the amount of money his father had given him to live on. “I was hideously depressed; I contemplated suicide.” Flaubert decides against jumping into the Seine with a 36-pound cannonball chained around his ankle.

Between Christmas and New Year’s—lucky to be riding late one night in a coach with his older brother, also a doctor—he has a seizure, the first of several to come. An eye-witness describes Flaubert foaming at the mouth, bruising her arm during the involuntary clenching of his fist. In a letter to Hippolyte Taine, Flaubert later describes as if in a coroner’s report the epileptic auras and hallucinations he experiences under attack, “what looks like a tangle of filaments, or a

burst of fireworks, passing before my eyes."

"I am convinced I died several times." Dr. Flaubert the elder was an atheist. Whereas, Steegmuller calls "pantheistic" Gustave's sense of the world as work of art, his interest in the paranormal up to and including Kabbalah, his curiosity about where the body ends and the soul begins.

The prognosis is what Flaubert already suspects: he's unfit to practice law. Problem solved. While they don't disappear, these fits lessen in frequency and severity following his father's death due to "complications from a surgical procedure."

Mario Vargas Llosa, in *The Perpetual Orgy: Flaubert and Madame Bovary*, says that "as regards his sources, an author generally knows less than his critics." The psychic benefits of his diversion from a legal career have been exhaustively studied. The stylistic benefit to Flaubert's clarity, rigor and macroscopic detail of studying in Latin that codification of Roman law decreed by emperor Justinian, the *Institutes*, is worth looking into. Stendhal reports that while writing *The Charterhouse of Parma* he read a few pages every morning from the Napoleonic Code.

A Convenient Outlet

Prominent Flaubertian traits include attraction to older women. Schoolboys frequented brothels in in their lycée uniforms. Card-carrying prostitutes were licensed as such. Flaubert happily relinquishes his virginity. Now 20-something, he hasn't engaged in "regular copulation" for two years. Then he meets poet, playwright, novelist and journalist Louise Colet, posing nude as a sculptor's model. She's eleven years older than Flaubert.

Another trait emerges. Flaubert's an author of inflexibly

regular habits. Normally, he's up at 0800. Dressed in a white Gulf-States robe worn over long trousers, he sits at the round, oak writing table. His study windows overlook a primrose garden overlooking poplar trees below the terrace. Bookshelves peer over his shoulders. Flaubert dips a goose-quill pen into the inkwell; scratches almost illegible lines over blue rag-paper. All that interrupts his labors, between 1900 and 2100 hours, is dinner. Which he shares with his mother. (Flaubert still lives at home.) The meal's prepared by Julie, a servant who's been in the family since his childhood. Blind, near-deaf, half-lame, she will remain in the household until her death. Flaubert will immortalize her in what remains, after *Bovary*, his most popular and critically acclaimed long-form story, "A Simple Heart."

"Back to work." Flaubert continues writing, to the play of moths in flickering candlelight, the warmth of crackling firewood, the sound of huntsmen's horns in the forest far away, the tik-tock of the mantle timepiece. He sometimes writes as many as ten or twelve hours per day, seven days a week. So predictable is this routine that crab-fishers navigate by the beacon of his windows as reliably as others would a lighthouse. Usually, Flaubert knocks off at 2300, blows out his candle, and promises himself a deep sleep. On a manic day, he's up till 0400, and sleeps till noon. Sound familiar?

So why does Flaubert's output, these 716 pages of extant correspondence notwithstanding, run to half a dozen books—two of them posthumously published—while Victor Hugo published more works than any one person can possibly read in a single lifetime? The unlikely explanation is that Flaubert's affair with Colet consumed ten years of his life. The first installment of the Affair Colet lasts only two years. The more likely culprit is yet another trait.

Flaubert fears he's becoming too fastidious. By his own admission, he's produced excellent pages but no sustained,

much less published, work. Not that he's at a loss for words. On the contrary, his condition is an odd combination of logorrhea and writer's block. The actual malady his case study presents is debatable. But it symptoms are unmistakable. An otherwise world-class competitor in baseball, cricket, darts or golf may report to a sports-medicine specialist with a set of neurological or performance-anxiety-related tics known, unscientifically, as the yips. Her wrists will twitch uncontrollably, causing her to miss that putt. A catcher pats the ball repeatedly into his glove, but cannot bring himself to throw it back to the pitcher waiting impatiently on the mound.

Publish already! Colet urges.

As a boy, Flaubert could bang out a five-act stage play in three days, declaiming it from atop the family billiard table. At 25, Flaubert still drafts quickly, but revises endlessly. He spends entire days agonizing over a single paragraph or less, fretting that he's only done five pages in four days. Spends a small fortune on stationery. Once momentum is gained, however, Flaubert works himself sick. He just finds it hard to get himself in gear. "I am continually afraid to write—afraid of botching," Flaubert admits, "so I put off doing anything".

If writing is Flaubert's refuge from Life, research is his refuge from writing. Flaubert seems to cower before the grind of composition. Each book he reads is more esoteric than the last. He takes ceaseless notes. How can he write *Salammbô* if he doesn't steep himself in archeology, the chemical composition of ointments and perfumes, study Greek in order to read Polybius' history of the Punic Wars, or bone up on the mating habits of peacocks?

(Flaubert's second published book is an historical novel set near Tunis. The book was a popular success. George Sand gave it a good review. It sold well. Flaubert both admired and was on the receiving end of admiring letters from Berlioz. Years

before *Salammbô* appeared, Berlioz had already composed *Les Troyens*. Berlioz sees in *Salammbô* "a series of poetic moments." Maupassant called it "a kind of opera in prose." Thanks to Steegmuller, we know the exact day and time Flaubert completed the manuscript. Know how long corrections were expected to take. What we'd rather know is whether the book's worth reading. Vargas Llosa, passionate Flaubertiste, finds it dated.)

How can Flaubert write Part II, Chapter 4 of *Sentimental Education* if he doesn't know the timetables for the Fontainebleau train? Which hot stocks, precisely, were traded on the market from May to August of 1847? A single scene from *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* might require rereading or consulting at least sixty scholarly works. Which cuts into his writing time. Which hamstrings his productivity.

Flaubert's no eunuch. He does feel that tightening of the testicles, those butterflies in the stomach, the dry-mouth that characterize the physiology of lust. That pair of panties rumored to be stashed in his drawer for temporary relief in case of emergency seems about as kinky as it got between them. Sometimes, Colet and Flaubert even fuck. Truth is, they get together relatively few times face to face. Mostly they fuss and fight via mail.

"I will see you every two months."

Means and opportunity we've already established. Motive we simply can't know. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, did M. Flaubert, like Julien Sorel, feel "no love at all"? Or was "impassioned love," for Flaubert as for Mathilde de la Mole, "a model to be imitated rather than a real state of being"? In one letter, he writes:

"Evening is falling. I have spent my afternoon writing to you. When I was eighteen," Flaubert confesses to Colet, "I wrote similar letters for six months to a woman I didn't love. I did

it to force myself to love her, to play a role with conviction. Now it is the exact opposite; the antithesis is complete." But 200 pages of love letters like that would've been "untrue to my system, to my heart, perhaps to my nature."

In another letter, cruel but not unusual, Flaubert writes: "You are a diversion"—*un déversoir commode*—in other words, "a convenient outlet." Which is one probable reason the affair lasted as long as it did.

Orientalism

Stifling though it was, law school resulted in two good things. Flaubert met his boyhood literary hero Hugo. They spoke a great deal. He also made a friend, likewise the son of a noted doctor. The Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce sends them on an 18-month fact-finding junket to the Middle East. Which landscape casts deep shadows over both Flaubert's work and the complicated history of France in the Arab world.

Flaubert's letters from Egypt, Greece, Lebanon, Palestine, Tunisia and Turkey are crammed with thick description. It's 86° in the shade. Like desert highways, large swaths of sand are paved over with sun-dried camel piss. With two pricks of his spurs, Flaubert's horse is off and running. He whistles; horse stops short. Her two sail-bellies distended as she glides downriver from Alexandria to Cairo, a barge attracts birds that wheel and swoop, fishing bits of bread out of the water. A donkey goes braying down to the riverbank, and drinks from the Nile. Caravans from Mecca unload sandalwood incense and spices. Flaubert et Cie get the pasha treatment, with "ten slaves to serve me and one to chase away the flies." He shaves his head, except for a ponytail "at the occiput." Lost in chibouk-smoke, Flaubert gives himself up to sensory pleasures: "violent colors"; the sight of belly-dancers with antimony-eyes; the touch of skins perfumed with rosewater; other

indulgences of which “I gulped down a whole bellyful,” Flaubert says, “like a donkey filling himself with hay.”

Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction

Louise Colet

Bovary isn’t a *roman à clé*. Emma and Louise aren’t interchangeable, though Colet sometimes thought so. His travels in the Middle East separated Flaubert from her. On his return to France, they saw each other intermittently. Their physical distance works to the reader’s advantage. Wallace Stevens’ “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” is a poem about the writing of poetry. Flaubert’s letters to Colet are a poetics of the art of prose. But the letters that seem to interest her most are those work-shopping her poems and plays. When he goes off topic, Colet complains he’s analyzing everything to death. Flaubert’s auto-analysis, both psychological and aesthetic, is precisely what makes his correspondence immortal.

“In his letters, Gustave never speaks to me of anything except art—or himself.”

“So, what the devil do you want me to talk to you about?” Flaubert snaps, exasperated.

Flaubert knows perfectly well he's writing "a masterpiece." He's also past 30, the age by which his father would have expected him to be an established attorney, and to have assumed his place in society. Many of Flaubert's old acquaintances have either graduated law school, married, moved away, been elected to seats in the Chamber or the Academy, died of after-dinner card games, syphilis, or simply changed beyond the possibility of friendship. Yet Flaubert still hasn't published, he tells himself, anything of note. A year into his magnum opus, he still has no idea when he'll finish. By the time he's 33, *Bovary*'s end's in sight.

Colet demands, at the very least, a letter every morning. And, in fact, Flaubert wrote Colet hundreds of letters, at least twice a week, sometimes every other day. But the distance between them was greater than just the miles from Normandy to the Île-de-France—greater, even, that of the "abyss represented by the word 'love'." Flaubert realizes he can seem "cold, arid, selfish." Is he being stingy? Or just husbanding his talent? One way to look at the very lopsided Flaubert-Colet correspondence is that it helps Flaubert explain himself to himself. Another view is that his letters are less self-absorbed than they seem.

Casual readers dipping into these pages at under-representative spots may find Flaubert sourly misanthropic. But he longed for letters. Devoted untold hours toward mid-wifing others' work-in-progress. In the mid-19th century, French post offices closed at 2 p.m. on Sundays but delivered mail seven days a week. Flaubert takes time out from his writing, goes down to the quay, where the Seine flows south from the English Channel toward Rouen and thence southward through Croisset in front of his mother's house. Skimming stones upon the river, he smokes his pipe, anxiously awaiting the postman's tell-tale red collar. His hands tremble as he opens envelopes. What thanks does he get from Colet? She lashes out— *lâche, couard et canaille*— "cowardly, spineless,

shady.” You make me gag!

In fairness to Colet, we never hear her side of the story. Steegmuller omits almost all her shop talk and tirades, the occasional diary entry aside. To label Flaubert as controlling or sexist also misses the point of this peculiar relationship-dynamic. Some of Flaubert’s most affectionate work is written to or about women. That said, for many writers, female or male, art and marriage don’t always mix. Elizabeth Hardwick never saw “coupledom” as life’s highest aim, even—or especially—when she was married to Robert Lowell. Compared to the relatively abstemious Flaubert, Sand was rapacious. Had as many lovers as she does biographers. Is known to have gobbled up composers, writers, male secretaries the way Baroness de La Berche washes down a dozen escargot with cheap white wine. Sand wasn’t about to let some man get in the way of her Work.

Flaubert has Colet’s number. Or so he thinks: “you are jealous.” Be that as it may, Colet is *insanely* jealous, of many things, real and imaginary. A written exchange between lovers turns out to be nothing more than a draft passage from *Sentimental Education*. She accuses Flaubert’s friends of turning him against her. Causes scenes, in public and at other people’s homes. Perhaps in an attempt to make Flaubert jealous, Colet flirts with Alfred de Musset, whom Sand has already dumped. Musset tells Colet off in no uncertain terms. With varying degrees of tactlessness, Flaubert says Colet’s making herself ridiculous. If jealousy it was, what seems to motivate Colet’s jealousy, on the surface, is anything or anybody threatening to become the center of Flaubert’s attention. “Don’t be jealous,” he tells her.

When Flaubert gives her something, it’s typical of Colet to complain he isn’t giving more. She complains he never sends her flowers. Flaubert sends her flowers. (In so doing, is he also sending mixed messages? Or is Flaubert the one who’s all mixed up?) So, if you’re such a big spender, why can’t you send me money? When do I meet your mother? “When the time is

ripe," Flaubert stalls, and the "occasion presents itself." Why should his male friend spend a month with Flaubert if she cannot?

Admittedly, some of Flaubert's letters to Colet are unendearingly harsh. Whereas, some of his most tender-loving letters are written to male friends—Alfred LePoittevin, for example. What Colet's possessiveness demands is beyond Flaubert's power to give. The only mistress Flaubert's faithful to is Art—who is, infinitely, more jealous than Colet will ever be. Flaubert never loses himself in Colet the way he's lost in Emma. The more Colet demands, the further she alienates Flaubert. The Affair Colet does not—cannot—last.

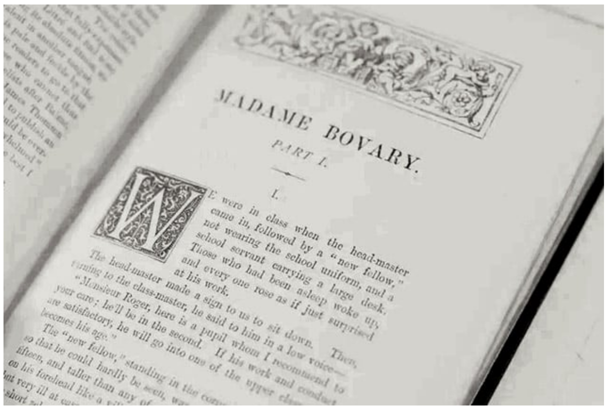
Flaubert's replies become "tipped with an insensitivity amounting to sadism." Whatever else she was, Colet wasn't stupid. She rightly suspects Flaubert is about to dump her. On a brief visit to Paris, he snubs her. Which goads Colet to write him a letter "teeming with reproaches, guaranteed to antagonize." The final break occurs just before publication of *Bovary*, which marks the end of volume one. Heartless as it sounds, he no longer *needs* her. When it comes, the final break leaves Colet feeling hurt, humiliated, contemplating murder. It wouldn't be the first time she'd tried to stab somebody. *Ouf!*

2. The Master: *Bovary* and Everything After

Volume two chronicles Flaubert's life from the aftermath of *Bovary* until his death. He's reached the age by which Bryon had already died, 36. Flaubert awakes to find himself famous, and the history of fiction forever changed. Once *Bovary* appears, Flaubert's correspondence widens and deepens. On any given day, he's overwhelmed by fan mail, hate mail from religious fanatics, locks of hair, telegrams (sometimes three a day), and God knows what else from readers and reviewers the

world over.

“It’s true that I am being showered with honors. I have been attacked and commended, vilified and extolled,” Flaubert comments on the novel’s critical success and *succès de scandale*. “But I wouldn’t mind having made a little cash.”



Friends say, move away from there! Croisset’s a provincial backwater. You should be in Paris, living the life of a literary intellectual, like everyone else in the 19th century. Set in his ways, Flaubert doesn’t really change the rhythms of his life much. He’d long rented a Paris apartment, but spends most evenings in the country. Continues living with his mother, in her 17th-century Norman house. The voyage to Tunisia in search of *Salammbô* is the exception to Flaubert’s stay-at-home rule. Had he frittered away precious hours living a socialite existence in the capital, Flaubert would doubtless have written fewer letters.

“Paris,” he grumbles, “is beginning to get on my nerves.”

Edmond de Goncourt thought it apt Flaubert should live in a country house occupied by Benedictine monks during the 18th century. But writers’ inner lives are never as arid as outward austerity makes them seem. Is Flaubert’s reputation for reclusiveness as overemphasized as his style? It’s half-truth that he preferred the company of dead writers to living persons. Flaubert had a few close friends, for whom he held at-homes on Sundays, at Croisset or in Paris. But he had a wide circle of acquaintances, as courtiers at palace balls were shocked to learn. Flaubert spends an hour here with Lamartine, three days there with Lemaître. Travels to Brussels by train with Alexandre Dumas the Younger. Belly-laughs while

reading Maupassant's short stories.

Everything was grist for Flaubert's mill. A government Minister informs him, the Emperor and Empress request the pleasure of your company on Wednesday at 2100 hours: "don't let me down." In his youth, Flaubert had seen royalty only at a distance. A duchess is chauffeured slowly through Rouen in her barouche. Now, at the height of his fame, Flaubert an honored guest, sits in the imperial box of the prince and ambassador, attends the Opera Ball. Stays up till 0500. Weekends at Louis XV's summer palace, Château de Compiègne.

From Stendhal to Proust, censorship "took various forms" in France. Battles over freedom of the press raged throughout Flaubert's lifetime. Presidential elections were suspended between the publication of *Bovary* and *Sentimental Education*. Charles-Louis Napoléon Bonaparte, now Emperor, wielded absolute power. Citizens petitioned to have *Candide*, Rousseau's *Confessions* or all of Balzac's and Sand's novels banned from public libraries. Soft power wielded by the Princesse in her salon was real, not decorative. It gently mollified or ruthlessly suppressed opposition. Writers as or more famous than Flaubert were fined or sentenced to hard time in icy prisons like Mont-Saint-Michel for works deemed critical of the regime. Flaubert's classmate was convicted of circulating Hugo's *Napoléon le Petit*. You had to be careful what you wrote.

With "Madame et Princesse," Flaubert's tone is bowing and flourishing. But he doesn't want to come off as "fawning." Social rank and hierarchy "isn't," Flaubert—known for speaking his mind bluntly—tells Mathilde Laetitia Wilhelmine Bonaparte, niece of Napoleon, "the subject of my dreams." Flaubert is outwardly unfazed, but isn't above corresponding with palace courtiers from whom he solicits mundane details about the imperial household the way Saint-Simon pumped chamber-maids for information. The court never became a major theme of his fiction. His flirtation with the regime was necessarily brief,

due to the Empire's collapse a decade or so after *Bovary*, and its ouster by the Third Republic.

Dinner Chez Magny

Flaubert gourmandized once or twice a month with artists, intellectuals, journalists and other others at Restaurant Magny on the Left Bank. These dinners are immortalized in French literary history.

"I intend to get you all drunk."

Who's you all?

There's Alphonse Daudet. V.S. Pritchett calls him "one of the small, fine superficial masters whose touch is quick and perfect within the undisturbing limits in which they work."

There's Gautier, "an absolutely unknown writer," Flaubert jests. "But then, so is Pierre Corneille."

There are the brothers Goncourt. They tell anyone who'll listen that they've been keeping a collaborative diary. Which they're writing with posterity in mind. Which means Flaubert knows perfectly well any juicy tidbits leaked to the them are fair game, and could end up in their published *Journal*. Which means the idea of Flaubert writing for Art's sake but not for money is, well, manure.

There's young Guy de Maupassant— "with," Edmond de Goncourt sneers, "his big behind."

There's George ("listen to me!") Sand, who can talk you under the table from dusk till dawn.

And then there's Charles-Augustin de Sainte-Beuve, who pronounces Flaubert the best novelist of his generation: "*he has style*."

"*Monsieur et cher maître*," Flaubert bows, "*merci*."

If he's away in Germany or London, Sand declares, "we miss Turgenev, who is graced with real simplicity and charming goodness of heart." They "clink their champagne glasses" and drink a toast in absentia—*à toi*—to the good health of the Russian giant.

The menu? Dozens of Ostend oysters, bottles of iced champagne, Russian caviar, slices of roast beef, truffle salad, coffee and liqueurs.

"Salmon for gourmets," roars Flaubert, "and cod for the poor."

How'd it work? Maupassant's mother introduces him to Flaubert. Flaubert introduces Maupassant to Zola. Gautier introduces Flaubert to Sainte-Beuve. Flaubert tries introducing to Turgenev the prose of Chateaubriand, who leaves Turgenev cold. Turgenev persuades Flaubert to read Tolstoy. *War and Peace* causes Flaubert to enthuse "he has *balls!"* Now properly introduced, Sand and Flaubert put their heads together: "let's chat."

And on it went, for ten years.

The Sand-Flaubert Letters

Flaubert's niece burned most of Colet's letters whereas hundreds of Flaubert's letters to Colet survive because her daughter sold them. French literature celebrates the Sand-Flaubert letters, which chronicle the years of *A Sentimental Education*, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, the unfinished *Bouvard and Pécuchet* and *Three Tales*.

In Sand, Flaubert meets his match in a way he hadn't with Colet. Flaubert respects Sand for many reasons. She's easier-going than he is. But she stands up to his bullying, tones down his raillery, and flat out tells him when he's wrong.

Scolds his over-reliance on well-turned phrases, which aren't *everything*: "it isn't the whole of art, it isn't even half of it." Each gets on the other's nerves. Flaubert complains to the Princess that Sand's optimism sets his teeth on edge. Sand confides to her diary that Flaubert's ceaseless invective grows tiresome; has only increased; is causing a strain on their relationship. He is "a source of grief and serious worry to me."

In naggingly maternal, even hectoring tones, she fusses over him. He's "becoming such a savage, so at odds with life." During his teens, Flaubert's blond hair flowed to his shoulders. By 30, he was already balding, with that ruddy complexion and Lanny McDonald walrus moustache bristling beneath his bulbous nose, was knock-kneed and so paunchy the tailor had to let out his trousers. Others also worry about Flaubert's mental and physical health. Hard work is all well and good, but don't overdo it. Sand says, and Turgenev agrees, that Gustave should lose weight. Get some exercise. Snap out of it! Get a dog.

Flaubert gets a dog, which grows on him, as dogs will. Julio pulls Flaubert out for a sniff down the shade-tree lane. They lie down together, between the chintz or green leather sofas in his study, on the white bearskin rug, "sufficient unto ourselves, far from the world and from the bourgeois, holed up like bears, growling under our layers of fur." And then what happens? Rat traps he'd set in the attack accidentally poison his big dog.

The Flaubert-Sand letters continue until she begins to suffer stomach cramps. The diagnosis? Cancer. Sand tells Flaubert she's "done for," and dies while he's composing some of his most luminous writing, "A Simple Heart."

A Patriot in Spite of Himself

“Rouen,” said Flaubert during his early 20s, “could be invaded by foreign troops, pillaged and sacked, without my shedding a tear.” As he neared 50, Germans shelling Strasbourg changed that tune. French defeat by Prussia under Bismarck preceded the short-lived collective known as the Paris Commune. The capital starves. Germans look on. French slaughter French by the tens of thousands during Communard riots. Unceremonious Prussians commandeer his house. Demand the key to his study. Rummage through his books, scattering them around, helter-skelter. Burn up his firewood. Flaubert wonders which is worse: Prussian marching bands beneath the Arc de Triomphe; or French people burning City Hall.

The Last of Flaubert

When old Théo dies, Flaubert’s tone is bereft of “jollifications.” He stops by Sainte-Beuve’s house one afternoon, only to learn his sparring partner had died. “Another gone!” One Saturday afternoon, Maupassant receives a telegram from Flaubert’s niece. The master won’t live long. On his way from Paris to Croisset, Maupassant receives another telegram: Flaubert is dead.

“I myself have wrapped [family and friends] in their shrouds,” Flaubert told a correspondent 30 years earlier, “sat through many a wake.” Now, it’s Maupassant who wraps Flaubert’s decomposing body. Flaubert’s hand is stiff from rigor mortis. Speculation varies as to the cause of death. Was it a cerebral hemorrhage? Complications from late-stage venereal disease? An epileptic fit? Maupassant, in a letter to Turgenev, describes Flaubert’s last day on earth. He’d planned to visit Paris on Sunday. Had spent Friday evening reciting Corneille to his doctor. Unlike innocent Félicité, whom choirs of angels no one else could see or hear carried home and sang to rest, Flaubert remained lucid until the end. Promised himself a good night’s

sleep so he could write well, and read his mail next day. Flaubert died in spring, aged 58.

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Steegmuller's edition of the *Letters of Gustave Flaubert* has aged beautifully. But this correspondence may not be the best place for non-specialists to start. Short letters take up only a third of a page but may disorient readers dipping into them at random. At the other extreme, 35 fine-print footnotes append Flaubert's 14-page response to Sainte-Beuve's criticisms of *Salammbô.*

Some say French fiction peaked during the 19th century, that Flaubert was its apotheosis. Others say its apogee was the Belle Époque. Either way, *Madame Bovary* and *Swann's Way*, two first-novels, forever changed the way imaginative prose is conceived and written.

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Kevin Anthony Brown is author of the forthcoming *Countée Cullen's Harlem Renaissance: A Personal History*, an essay-cycle themed around his maternal great-grandmother's marriage to that poet. Kevin A. Brown's articles, essays, interviews and reviews on literature in translation have appeared in *Afterimage*, *Asymptote*, *The Brooklyn Rail, Delaware Review of Latin American Studies, Hayden's Ferry Review, Metamorphoses, Rain Taxi* and *The Threepenny Review*, among others.

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