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MARSHALL C. OLDS

Value and Social Mobility in Flaubert

L' *Education sentimentale* may be construed as an historical novel at least insofar as it addresses questions of social change and enduring value as they are related to those of history and individual memory. As in Balzac and later in Proust, what is true for the individual applies to society. There is an especially Flaubertian understanding of movement in society and movement across time that remains tied more to demands of diegetic coherence than to laws of historical necessity, however. Singulative narration as it appears in the novel is a kind of smoke screen hiding a more pervasive iteration whereby the recounting of events and perception of events spring from an identical understanding of time.¹ Yet, there is more to it than purely narratological concerns. Neither historical nor psychological (as that term might be understood, as in Proust, to describe a dynamism), time for Flaubert is an affective by-product of events filtered through conscious memory. To be sure, time as an external agent of change does exist; Mme Arnoux's hair will turn grey, after all. What matters more than this, though, is the sense of time *generated by the accumulation of events*. To better understand this relationship, we will focus on Flaubert's representation of social dynamism that has as its backdrop and point of comparison the social dynamism portrayed in *La Comédie humaine* and particularly the works of the early to mid-1830s. Flaubert, of course, is explicit in this, and it has often been pointed out that, with *Le Père Goriot* especially,

¹ The shifting registers in the opening nine paragraphs of the novel demonstrate this point. As Altonso de Toro has shown (see note 2), in *L'Education sentimentale*, Flaubert is on the threshold of first-person narration.

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Balzac provides one of the principal intertexts for *L'Éducation sentimentale*. Notwithstanding the excellent critical studies already devoted to the topic of Flaubert and, Balzac, the backdrop remains an instructive one, not only for the purposes of dramatic irony, characterization and narrative voice, but because Balzac's understanding of value in modern society as tied to social expression does not hold in narrative time, at least not as understood by Flaubert.² We will first have a look at Flaubert's early use of Balzac in a context of parody, and then sketch out how parody develops into the deeper thematic concern of repetition as cliché and its translation into an idiom of time, memory and affect.

All readers of *L'Éducation sentimentale* recall that cold evening when Frédéric and Deslauriers dream their provincial dreams of taking the capital by storm. Deslauriers advises his friend to become the lover of Mme Dambreuse, the wealthy banker's wife.

Frédéric se récriait.
—Mais je te dis là des choses classiques, il me semble? Rappelle-toi Rastignac dans *La Comédie humaine*! Tu réussiras, j'en suis sûr!³

Choses classiques, indeed: Flaubert's characters had been reading Balzac for some thirty years. In the 1837 short story, "Quidquid volueris," the reference comes at a choice moment. Unbeknownst to her, the story's young and beautiful heroine is soon to be raped and bludgeoned to death by the half man, half orangutan, Djalioh. She is enjoying life's final moments in her salon in the

² For a partial list of studies on Flaubert and Balzac that touch on the present topic, see Maurice Bardèche, "Balzac et Flaubert," *L'Année Balzacienne* (1976), pp. 9–29; Michel Crouzet, "Flaubert a-t-il démarqué Balzac?" *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* (oct.–déc. 1955), pp. 499–500; Graham Falconer, "Travail de 'débalzacienisation' dans la rédaction de *Madame Bovary*." *Flaubert 3. Mythes et Religions*, éd. Bernard Masson, Paris: Lettres Modernes, Minard, 1988, pp. 123–56; Guy Sagne, "De Balzac à Flaubert," *Littératures 2* (automne 1980), pp. 17–32; and "Tentations balzaciennes," *Année Balzacienne*, nouvelle série, 2 (1981), pp. 53–64; Alfonso de Toro, Flaubert précurseur du roman moderne, ou la relève du système balzacien," *Flaubert. Procédés narratifs et fondements épistémologiques*, éd. A. De Toro, Tübingen: Narr, 1987), pp. 9–29.

³ Gustave Flaubert. *L'Éducation sentimentale*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols., ed. Bernard Masson (Paris: Seuil, 1964), vol. II, p. 14. All subsequent references to Flaubert's published writings, excluding the correspondence, will be taken from this edition, citing volume and page number.

faubourg Saint-Germain, "[où elle s'était retirée] pour y terminer bien vite, avant l'heure du bain, du déjeuner et de la promenade, un roman de Balzac" (I, 111). As Djalioh enters quietly, "il n'entendit que le bruit des feuillettes que retournait la main blanche d'Adèle" (I, 112). The "main blanche" is shared of course with Balzac's incredulous reader in the opening pages of *Le Père Goriot*, published just two years earlier: "vous qui tenez ce livre d'une main blanche... Ah! sachez-le: ce drame n'est ni une fiction, ni un roman. *All is true*...."⁴, the young Gustave seems to be saying, at least not in the way that Balzac has laid it out: fiction and fictitiousness have their demands, too. Even by the standards of the juvenilia, this story, which is playfully subtitled "Étude psychologique," is full of ironic reversals, pastiche and parody.⁵ In a broader sense, the laws governing both Balzac's social universe and its representation are subject to reversal and "aping," and they form part of a necessary and ironic landscape against which Flaubert will elaborate something quite different.

There are, as Graham Falconer has shown, important Balzacian echoes and excisions in *Madame Bovary*, but it is not really until the *Education* of 1869 that Flaubert seems to confront Balzac on his own turf: the *roman d'initiation* set in the modern France and Paris of great change. Yet, as we know, not much happens in *L'Éducation sentimentale*, at least not in a Balzacian sort of way. The hero does nothing with his life, learns nothing, and the great event that provides the historical backdrop for the novel, the 1848 revolution, goes flat. Neither did the July 1830 revolution change anything, really, for Balzac, but there is an obvious difference between impotent exhaustion and the bleak though powerful confirmation of the laws of social and historical dynamism that had been put in motion in 1789. For Balzac, everything and everyone is in motion, as loyalties shift, influential people are courted or seduced, fortunes are made or lost, names change, class boundaries are crossed. As with individuals, so of course with the house façades in *Eugénie Grandet* and the furniture

⁴ Honoré de Balzac, *Le Père Goriot*. Ed. P.-G. Castex. (Paris: Garnier Freres, 1963), p. 6.

⁵ The story's plot is based on the conceit used by Balzac in both *Goriot* and especially *Eugénie Grandet* of the triumphant return to France from America of a young man who has become rich on the slave trade. The styles imitated run the gamut from *busingot* and *lycanthrope* to the sentimentally romantic to journalistic satire.

in *Goriot*, all metonymically tied to their owners and expressive of their manufacture on the forge of history.

In *L'Education sentimentale*, the *topoi* may resemble Balzac's turf, but the ground has shifted and with it the diegetical horizon. There still seem to be influential people to court, but the courtships fizzle out. Money remains an ingredient (Frédéric's limited independence would be impossible without it), but it doesn't bend wills or incite suicide and murder. Fortunes are no longer made and lost; rather, they are stumbled across more by accident than anything else and then dissipated. Moreover, the wealth of M. Roque or Mme Dambreuse, even the immense fortune of M. Dambreuse, would have had little impact on Frédéric had he come into any of it.

This absence of a Balzacian-like energy finds its confirmation in a number of parodic moments that show just how much the ground has moved. We will have a brief look at two of these. The first is in the opening pages of what Flaubert referred to as *mon roman parisien* where we see the young hero, defying the laws of social and historical gravity, on his way *out* of Paris. It's a kind of cliché in reverse. Our portrait of the hero as a young romantic—"Un jeune homme de dix-huit ans, à longs cheveux et qui tenait un album sous le bras" (II, 8)—already a mediated stereotype by Balzac's day,⁶ stares out at a city that awakens no excitement or curiosity: "A travers le brouillard, il contemplait des clochers, des édifices dont il ne savait pas les noms..., Paris disparaissant, il poussa un grand soupir" (*ibid*). An inertia has set in and, by the time Deslauriers suggests reenacting the Balzacian enterprise, we have our doubts. Even as early as 1845 and the first *Education*, the horizon had changed and a detour taken around history and society. The novel opens with Henry having followed Rastignac to Paris, as it were, only to fall in love with his teacher's wife and run away to New York.

The second parodic moment I will mention occurs toward the end of the novel and completes the pair of bookends with the opening passage in that it evokes the very close of *Le Père Goriot*. This is the burial of M. Dambreuse, whose cause of death one sometimes feels is principally tied to the dramatic necessity of a visit to the Père Lachaise cemetery, that very place where Rastignac

⁶ Charles Grandet affects a Byronic pose when he first arrives in Saumur.

"ensevelit sa dernière larme de jeune homme" (p. 308) and then uttered his unforgettable and perhaps therefore unrepeatable challenge to the city below. Flaubert's treatment of a similar scene is embedded in a context of citation and cliché, where the simple *non-dit* of "A nous deux!" becomes a kind of reversed *redit*:

La fosse de M. Dambreuse était dans le voisinage de Manuel et de Benjamin Constant. Le terrain dévale, en cet endroit, par une pente abrupte. On a sous les pieds dessommets d'arbres verts; plus loin, des cheminées de pompes à feu, puis toute la grande ville. (II, 147)

We hold our breath for what is to follow; Frédéric is now after all the lover of Mme Dambreuse, but our hero either hasn't read the book, or what is more likely, simply doesn't make the connection. "Frédéric put admirer le paysage pendant qu'on prononçait les discours" (and what *discours!* rising from the pages of the *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*):

tous profiterent de l'occasion pour tonner contre le socialisme, dont M. Dambreuse était mort victime...avec tous les mots qu'il faut dire: «fin prématurée, – regrets éternels, – l'autre patrie, – adieu, ou plutôt non au revoir!»

Frédéric, fatigué, rentra chez lui. (*ibid*)

Something more important is at stake here than an oblique declaration of independence from Balzacian characterization (anemia versus energy) and even from the more weighty concern of the aesthetic of Balzacian narrative (narrative omniscience and presence versus its obverse). Balzac's presuppositions are gone. As the Fontainebleau episode makes clear, historical dynamism is rejected as a principle governing the lives of societies as well as of individuals. Frédéric and Rosanette have fled the cataclysmic events in Paris marking the next phase in the history of "la France révolutionnée"—had not Deslauriers predicted in 1840 that "un nouveau 89 se prépare!"? (II, 14)—but they have fled these events only to walk into the living diorama of French history itself. Instead of Balzac's dynamism, they find a principle by which, at a certain affective level, there is only the illusion of movement through time: nothing disappears by giving way to something else but, rather, all remains. In their visit of the *salle des fêtes* in the château, Frédéric's attention is drawn to the allegorical portraits of Diane de Poitiers,

qui s'était fait peindre...sous la figure de Diane Chasseresse, et même Diane Infernale, sans doute pour marquer sa puissance jusque par delà le tombeau. Tous ces symboles confirment sa gloire; et il reste quelque chose d'elle, une voix indistincte, un rayonnement qui se prolonge.

Frédéric fut pris par une concupiscence rétrospective et inexprimable. (II, 125)

"Retrospective lust" is a powerful formulation for the affective response to the past. Frédéric seems aware of its meaning, and senses that history can, perhaps always does, repeat itself by seeking new incarnations of types.

Afin de distraire son désir, il se mit à considérer tendrement Rosanette, en lui demandant si elle n'aurait pas voulu être cette femme.

– Quelle femme? ...

– Diane de Poitiers, la maîtresse d'Henri II (ibid).

Frédéric repeatedly encounters this historical contemporaneity or simultaneity during the stay at Fontainebleau: in the château itself for the period of the early monarchy to the present, in the forest where the couple enters a mythic past, to the quarries and the rocks and the prehistoric moment of the animation of matter. All coexists, nothing is lost. Sometimes the sense of it is exhilarating, as during a walk in the gardens: "Il songeait à tous les personnages qui avaient hanté ces murs, Charles-Quint, les Valois, Henri IV, Pierre le Grand, Jean-Jacques Rousseau ..., Voltaire, Napoléon, Pie VII, Louis-Philippe; il se sentait environné, coudoyé par ces morts tumultueux ..." (II, 125). Lest there be any misunderstanding concerning the meaning of history, the silent eloquence of the décor and furnishings is there to remind him of an essential changelessness: "Les résidences royales ont en elles une mélancolie particulière, qui tient sans doute à leurs dimensions trop considérables pour le petit nombre de leurs hôtes, au silence qu'on est surpris d'y trouver après tant de fanfares, à leur luxe immobile prouvant par sa vieillesse la fugacité des dynasties, l'éternelle misère de tout" (II, 125).

What is true for the nation is true for individuals, as French history gives way to Frédéric's *histoires de cul*, Diane de Poitiers to Rosanette who gives her story of what it is to become a "femme entretenue." It is a tale so appallingly sordid that Frédéric feels compelled to lie in order to convince Rosanette that he is somehow different from all the others (II, 128).

He isn't, of course, and in the chain of Rosanette's *oncles* (Frédéric, Arnoux, Delmar, Oudry) going back to that initial one, we glimpse the image of movement in *L'Education sentimentale*: succession emphasizing circulation and repetition rather than change and renewal. This shifting or sliding exchange is forever in time, but never through it or across it, thereby establishing a chronology, and Proust's remark about the sense one has in Flaubert of lives being lived in the imperfect tense holds for the lives of societies as well in that the aesthetic of the novel is founded precisely on an understanding of time that is affective.⁷ And this is the point: that the laws governing movement are not historical (despite the novel's setting) but broadly *sentimental*, that is to say, erotic. Everything is in a state of libidinal flux, such that, along with mistresses and lovers are exchanged the tell-tale trinkets that travel from household to household (chandeliers, china plates, ivory-handled umbrellas, cashmere shawls, bracelets ...) creating a trail and a kind of coherence. With the same gliding motion of lexical slippage, names change (Rose-Annette Bron, Rosanette; August Delamare, Anténor Dellamarre, Delmas, Belmar, Delmar), class identities (Dambreuse with and without the *particule*), political affiliations, addresses and professional occupations. The motion is not at all chaotic but is predicated on the change and exchange that is associated with the free-wheeling, mix and match eroticism of prostitution.⁸ After all, the *femmes entretenues* and their various partners are they who stimulate so much of the social movement in the novel and who provide the model for the exchange that occurs. Rosanette's boudoir is the "centre moral" of her household (II, 55), and Flaubert is explicit in drawing the parallel between her and the *grande bourgeoisie* not merely in terms of their amorous turnovers but in the social structure that these are given. Mme Dambreuse's boudoir also replaces the salon as the moral center of her household. As Frédéric enters that intimate room

⁷ Marcel Proust, "Ce que signifie le style de Flaubert," reprinted in: *L'Education sentimentale*, (Paris: Gallimard, coll. Folio, 1965), pp. 469–72.

⁸ Prostitution is a term that, as Charles Bernheimer suggests, should be understood in the very broadest sense to include here in its extended meaning, for example, the acting and legal careers of Delmar and Deslauriers as well as nearly everything concerning Amoux. See Bernheimer, Charles, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989).

for the first time, on an evening when it is filled with women guests, we are given a typically fragmented description of the flash of diamonds, glimpses of hair, feathers, bare shoulders, red lips and sparkling teeth: “ce rassemblement de femmes demi-nues faisait songer à un intérieur de harem; il vint à l’esprit du jeune homme une comparaison plus grossière” (II, 66). The novel rarely leaves the moral atmosphere of the brothel where salon and boudoir really serve the same function. The narrator tells us, in fact, that 1851 saw the rise in importance of salons like Rosanette’s (salon here in its mundane sense) as a forum for political discussion where all persuasions were welcome: “Les salons des filles (c’est de ce temps-là que date leur importance) étaient un terrain neutre, où les réactionnaires de bords différents se rencontraient” (II, 150). The orgiastic sack of the Louvre offers a mock allegorical apotheosis as a whore seems to proclaim the new government: “debout sur un tas de vêtements, se tenait une fille publique, en statue de la Liberté” (II, 114). The scene is echoed in more muted tones at Fontainebleau where Rosanette primps in the mirrors of queens; but, then, so had Diane de Poitiers. Rosanette’s assessment of the revolution appears to confirm this social model: “Elle est entretenue, ta République!” (II, 121) she cries to Frédéric.

In one sense, attempted resistance to this free-wheeling exchange is the subject of the novel. The one secondary character who is true blue, Dussardier, loves the Republic with the same touching and uncomplicated tenacity with which he loves his friends and would love a woman: “Eh bien, fit-il en rougissant, moi, je voudrais aimer la même, toujours!” (II, 29) He is of course killed by that political chameleon, Sénécal. Mme Arnoux will fare somewhat better over time, despite her grey hair. Her image remains nonetheless changeless in Frédéric’s eyes due to his having kept it beyond the “éternelle misère de tout.” As at Fontainebleau, as from the very moment he sets eyes on her, objects are the important metonyms for existence, especially Mme Arnoux’s *things*. Many of these possessions are non-descript, and some items will be put in circulation by her husband, who is definitely “in the loop.” In spite of the mobility of some of the *mobilier*, her things retain the sense of the moral center of her household (a private one), because *she* is withheld from circulation. The inevitable sale, dispersal and recirculation of these furnishings offer a heightened moment in the novel precisely because they had been valorized by their re-

moval from the social sphere. Mme Dambreuse cynically tries to crush this value under the formidable weight of class and money, but Frédéric simply will not accord the social sphere that much significance. Unlike Balzac’s semiotically over-determined universe, for Flaubert, objects and characters acquire value only *after* they have been denied such meaning.

Memory may distill and purify existence, but it has the capacity to retain everything, such that, like the generations of residents at Fontainebleau, all experience remains, if not forever present then in a past that is contemporaneous with the present. The successiveness of history, whether social or personal, does not produce change but accretion. “Et, exhumant leur jeunesse, à chaque phrase, ils se disaient: – Te rappelles-tu?” (II, 162). History lasts on, either as the rubble outside of Bouvard and Pécuchet’s window or as the careful accumulation in Félicité’s room. Delauriers’s observations concerning repetition within the context of personal history (Frédéric as Rastignac) tied to that of national history (‘48 as ‘89) lays the ground for this point at the outset of the novel, although, as is often the case with Flaubert, the irony in the passage is perceptible only in retrospect. This is an axiom with Flaubert: to repeat knowingly an action or an idea as if it were original, or as if it would carry the weight of the original, is to fall into the trap of the cliché and the *idée reçue*. Emma offers a prime example, as in a much different way does Félicité. Flaubert is himself instructive in this matter; he is, after all, repeating Balzac. A case in point is his understanding of M. Dambreuse, the rapacious banker modeled on Nucingen.⁹ Ennobled during the Empire, the Alsatian (perhaps Jewish) baron de Nucingen is thus a part of the period’s upward social movement. Flaubert’s comte d’Ambreouse also crosses class lines, but in reverse and downwards, becoming the bourgeois Monsieur Dambreuse.¹⁰

⁹ In his earliest figuration in the 1863 play, *Le Château des coeurs*, Dambreuse bears the germanic (“foreign”) name of Kloecker. See *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II, p. 330, et passim.

¹⁰ It is true that he does this in order to make more money, but it would be a mistake to see this as an example of dynamism. Dambreuse’s name-change is part of the pattern of individual shifting alliances, not unlike Sénécal’s in the political sphere, and the theme of prostitution. The d’Ambreouse coat of arms confirms this: a clenched fist and the motto *Par toutes les voies* (II, 146).

A refusal of historical dynamism pervades much of Flaubert's writing, even in the early work and letters. The young Jules of the first *Education* writes:

Je n'ai pas la force de me moquer de ma dernière phrase. Pourquoi l'homme de vingt ans se raillerait-il de celui de quinze, comme plus tard celui-ci sera nié et bafoué par l'homme de quarante? ... Je respecte encore les joujoux cassés, que j'avais quand j'étais enfant.¹¹

Again, seven years later (January 16, 1852), Gustave will write to Louise Colet:

Sonde-toi bien: y a-t-il un sentiment que tu aies eu qui soit disparu? Non, tout reste, n'est-ce pas? tout. Les momies que l'on a dans le coeur ne tombent jamais en poussière et, quand on penche la tête par le soupirail, on les voit en bas, qui vous regardent avec leurs yeux ouverts, immobiles.¹²

History (time filtered through memory), at least as it can be circumscribed by a diegesis *that perforce is iterative*, resists what impulse there is for forward movement; it arrests and valorizes. That other movement, the atemporal cross-sliding of social experience, diffuses and confuses with the ambiguity of repetition. The best memories, "ce que nous avons eu de meilleur" (II, 162)—referring to a non-event having occurred, significantly, in a brothel—are perhaps those where that confusion has been forestalled.

¹¹ Gustave Flaubert, *L'Education sentimentale* (version de 1845), vol. I, p. 228.

¹² Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*. Ed. Jean Bruneau. 3 volumes published, (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1973–), vol. II, p. 32.

