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Flaubert, Imperfect

Jonathan Raban

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Reviewed:

Madame Bovary
by Gustave Flaubert, translated from the French and with an introduction and notes by Lydia Davis
Viking, 342 pp., $27.95

This Issue
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In August this year, when *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*[1] was published in the UK, London papers sent interviewers to the town of Hudson, New York, where Davis lives. In the two interviews I've read, the talk drifts between Davis's stories and her translations of Proust's *Swann's Way* and, now, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*—a novel that she candidly disparages. To Erica Wagner, the American-born novelist and literary editor of *The Times*, Davis described it as a "great book—so-called":

> I find what [Flaubert] does with the language really interesting; but I wouldn't say that I warm to it as a book. I know a lot about his attitude too; he despised everybody in the book, and he despised their way of life and he had a horrible time writing it, because it wasn't the kind of book he wanted to write. And I like a heroine who thinks and feels...well, I don't find Emma Bovary admirable or likable —but Flaubert didn't either.

Should love for the work in hand be a necessary qualification for translating it? Like surgery, translation requires judgment, precision, and experience; the surgeon's personal affection for the patient is likely to be as much a liability as an asset, and Davis's cool, detached, and linguistically exact English version of *Madame Bovary* recalls Achille Lemot's famous 1869 cartoon of Flaubert himself, in hospital scrubs, dissecting Emma's corpse. Magnifying glass in his right hand, with his left he holds aloft her bleeding heart impaled on his scalpel. Both the magnifier and the scalpel figure prominently among the instruments in Lydia Davis's tool kit.

I should say at the outset that my own French is lousy: I dropped the language at the end of the English equivalent of tenth grade, and have made little progress in it since. But I'm addicted to Flaubert, at least to *Madame Bovary*, *Sentimental Education*, and *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. My first introduction to *Madame Bovary* was Alan Russell's Penguin Classics translation (1950). Last summer, out of pleasure and obsession, not for work, I reread the novel in four more English translations, by Eleanor Marx (1892), Francis Steegmuller (1957), Geoffrey Wall (1992), and Margaret Mauldon (2004), frequently checking passages in the French text, as best I could, on a Kindle. (The Kindle was later given away, because this exercise in flicking back and forth between pages finally proved to me the vast technological superiority of the printed book over the electronic gadget.)

We readers of *Madame Bovary* in English know that we'll never hear in our own ears the niceties of pitch, tone, inflection, and nuance in Flaubert's infinitely supple narrative voice as we can hear them in, say, Jane Austen's. We also know that no novelist has placed so much stress on these qualities as Flaubert, whose painstakingly constructed sentences are as much the "subject" of the novel as Emma herself. In addition, we're aware that Flaubert works like a collagist, building an utterly original and perfectly proportioned composition out of worn scraps of language—a language we cannot properly read.

One of the many ways in which Flaubert remains a very modern novelist is his recreation of an entire society that is saturated in the media of its time: the regional daily paper; Parisian fashion magazines; medical and pharmaceutical trade journals; Catholic liturgy and sermons (though the Church has lost its grip as the original media giant, it still has its adherents); books of romantic fiction and poetry (most of it by Béranger), and popular philosophy, owned (by Homais) or borrowed (by Emma) from the subscription library to which she owes money when she dies. The heads of Flaubert's characters buzz with other people's ideas, often registered at third or fifth hand; with the nonce words of the day; with garbled science, literature, and politics. They think, talk, and act in clichés.

For a microcosmic example of the problems with any English *Madame Bovary*, one might look at Flaubert's habit of sprinkling the text with italicized phrases, designed to remind the reader that *this* is the sort of thing so-and-so thinks and says. When the caddish (and grandly self-styled) Rodolphe Boulanger de la Huchette first enters Emma's life, he's accompanying a nameless farmworker in his employ who wants to be bled by Charles Bovary because he's experiencing, in italics, *des fourmis le long du corps*. In Marx's translation, this is rendered as "a tingling all over"; in Steegmuller's, "prickly all over"; in Wall's, "pins and needles everywhere"; and in Mauldon's, "pins and needles all over." All four take the same tack, finding a suitably stale English phrase to approximate Flaubert's original. Davis, true to the words of her author, has "ants all up and down his body," which, to an Anglophone ear, sounds rather too lively a description of the *paysan's* complaint. Which is more "accurate": fidelity to the text, or fidelity to the shopworn character (as I take it to be) of the expression? Variations on this question recur again and again when reading Davis's translation.

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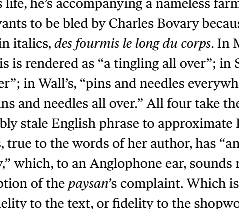

Only a very good writer indeed could have written it. Francis Steegmuller published a good deal of fiction (his stories appeared in *The New Yorker* and elsewhere), but he was not a bold original, as Davis is. In her own work, she's concerned with the smallest tonal effects of language, at the level of the word, the phrase, and the sentence, and this absorption in verbal and grammatical minutiae carries through into her translations. She has a finer ear for the natural cadences of English, in narrative and dialogue, than any of her predecessors, and there are many moments in her *Madame Bovary* when one pauses to admire how clean and spare a sentence seems by comparison with its earlier translated versions.

But she can be a pedant, and nowhere more so than in her scolding insistence on the importance of the *imparfait* tense in Flaubert's original. In her introduction, she quotes Proust: "'This [use of the] imperfect, so new in literature,' he said, 'completely changes the aspect of things and people.'" So, too, Nabokov, whom Davis doesn't quote, attacked Eleanor Marx for rendering the entire novel into the simple past tense. He irritably retranslated Marx: "She would begin [*not "began"*].... She would find [*not "found"*].... Her thoughts, aimless at first, would wander [*not "wandered"*] at random...." One certain fact about Davis's translation is that it uses more "woulds" than any previous one.

Every modern translator has been alert to how well the *imparfait* conveys the numbing repetitiousness of life in *Madame Bovary*: it is (among several other shades of meaning and implication) the tense of the daily round and the routine action, the tense of provincial boredom. It also tends to be cumbersome and obtrusive in its English form, working best when used sparingly and in short passages, as Davis does in the best rendition yet of the newly married Emma observing the clockwork habits of her husband in the evenings:

> He would tell her one by one all the people he had met, the villages where he had been, the prescriptions he had written, and, satisifed with himself, he would eat the remains of the beef hash with onions, cut the rind off his cheese, munch an apple, empty his carafe, then go off to bed, sleep on his back, and snore.

This nimbly matches the pace of Flaubert's rapid succession of imperfect verbs, "*disait...mangeait...épluchait...croquait...vidait... allait...couchait...ronflait*," in a way that is as natural in English as in French.

Against that one must set long sections of the book in which the "would"-plus-infinitive construction becomes a maddening affectation. When Emma sets up fictitious piano lessons for herself in Rouen, so that she can spend every Thursday in a hotel bedroom with Léon, the law clerk, the repeated pattern of her days (days of romantic bliss, not boredom) is described by Davis in an epic parade of *woulds*, at least 123 of them in just seven pages. "Léon would continue on down the sidewalk. She would follow him to the hotel; he would go up, he would open the door, he would go in..." And so on, ad infinitum. Mauldon, Wall, and Steegmuller, all equally aware of the *imparfait* when it matters, translate the same pages with a relatively modest expenditure of *w*-words: Mauldon, by my rough count, scores twenty-one, Wall, twenty-five, and Steegmuller, thirty-four. Davis's version may be unfaultable in its accuracy to the tense of Flaubert's verbs, but it turns Emma's precious Thursdays into something like the plight of Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*.

Yet Davis daringly meddles with the original when she translates what is perhaps the most-often-cited passage in the book, where Flaubert writes of human speech as a cracked kettle (its only rival in the Famous Quotes department is the extraordinary description of Emma's first orgasm with Rodolphe, called by Flaubert "The Big Fuck"). The cracked-kettle paragraph follows a speech by Emma to Rodolphe in which she declares her feelings for him in a string of amorous clichés: "I'm your servant and your concubine! You're my king, my idol! You're good! You're handsome! You're intelligent! You're strong!" Here's how Davis renders what follows:

> He had heard these things said to him so often that for him there was nothing original about them. Emma was like all other mistresses; and the charm of novelty, slipping off gradually like a piece of clothing, revealed in its nakedness the eternal monotony of passion, which always assumes the same forms and uses the same language. He could not perceive—this man of such broad experience —the difference in feelings that might underlie similarities of expression. Because licentious or venal lips had murmured the same words to him, he had little faith in their truthfulness; one had to discount, he thought, exaggerated speeches that concealed mediocre affections; as if the fullness of the soul did not sometimes overflow in the emptiest of metaphors, since none of us can ever express the exact measure of our needs, or our ideas, or our sorrows, and human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, when we long to move the stars to pity.

I think this the most shapely and eloquent English version that I've read, though purists might cavil at the liberties taken by Davis in the last four clauses of the long final sentence. In his first draft of the novel, Flaubert cast his thoughts on language in the indefinite third person. Then he tried out a single "we" (in "we beat out tunes..."), crossed it out, but later restored it,[2] so that it now sits as a tiny first-person atoll in the paragraph. Most of his translators have been faithful to his lonely "we," though Steegmuller, who freely added to and subtracted from the original text, strengthened the sense of the first person, but stopped well short of Davis's "our needs...our ideas...our sorrows."

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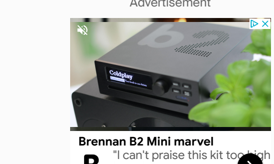

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Flaubert, as he kept on telling Louise Colet in his letters, was striving to create an "objective" and "impersonal" novel, in which the author would be absent from the page, existing only inside the heads of his characters. Looking at his multiple revisions of this passage, one sees Flaubert's anxiety as he dickers over whether or not to commit himself to "we" for almost the first time since the opening pages of Chapter 1, which begins as an apparent memoir, in which Flaubert installs the doltish new boy, Charles Bovary, in the same room in the Collège Royal de Rouen that he had once sat in himself (according to Geoffrey Wall's biography, he described the school at the time as this "shit-awful god-awful madhouse of a college"[3]). "We," of course, is the novel's first word.

That opening has perplexed some readers, who fail to see its obvious point. By beginning in the form of a memoir, Flaubert claims the whole terrain of *Madame Bovary* as his own native ground. He was not a supercilious Parisian writing a satire on the benighted lives of provincial country folk, he was himself a Norman through and through. Writing from his big, second-floor room in his mother's house at Croisset, now part of Rouen's industrial suburbia but then a detached rural hamlet on the Seine, he could look out the window and see, across the river, villages and small market towns very much like Tostes (now spelled Tôtes) and Yonville-l'Abbaye. His novel is importantly saturated in autobiography, and Flaubert's pose of objectivity and impersonality is always accompanied by the sense that he, too, is deeply implicated in the landscape, history, fashions, and manners of the small but lavishly furnished world he conjures on the page.

So it's a signal event when, just over halfway through the book, the novelist suddenly breaks cover, to defend Emma from Rodolphe's disdainful response to the debased coinage of her words of love, and I think it makes good sense for Lydia Davis to put unprecedented stress on the reappearance of the first-person pronoun here. The passage both echoes and distills Flaubert's many lamentations to Louise Colet about the "agony" and "torture" that he endured, working with "mediocre" and "commonplace" language, to prove his great point that the town of Yvetot[4] was as fit a subject for Art (a word he usually capitalized) as Constantinople. Whether or not he actually told Amélie Bosquet that, as she was said to have reported, "*Madame Bovary c'est moi, d'après moi!*," this is the moment in the novel when the author steps forward, removes his mask, and announces that he and she are one in their struggle to make music on the cracked kettle, and so are we.

Davis's small but constructive alterations of the French text in this passage are the more surprising because they're made by someone who thinks that Flaubert "despised everybody in the book," or as she put it to another interviewer, from the *Financial Times*, "despised his characters, despised their thinking and their way of being in the world." It's true that Flaubert, for all his claims to objectivity, never sheds the mantle of an haut bourgeois writing, for the most part, about members of the petite bourgeoisie. Class fascinated him, and *Madame Bovary* is full of minute distinctions on matters of rank, status, and class usage (distinctions to which American translators, notably Margaret Mauldon, whose translation is otherwise graceful and sensitive, have sometimes been jarringly deaf). His own status, as a privileged artist born to an admired professional family in Rouen, is an unavoidable facet of his style. But he does not see his characters as despicable.

When the Bovarys are invited to the Marquis d'Andervilliers's annual ball at the Château de la Vaubyessard, and Emma is dazzled by her brief appearance amid the splendors of aristocratic life, Flaubert is just as dazzled as his heroine. The episode recreates his own visit, as a fifteen-year-old, to a grand ball thrown by the Marquis de Pomereu at the Château du Héron,[5] where he was an enthralled observer of the sumptuous luxuries of high society, to which the Flauberts, grand in their way as they were, couldn't begin to aspire. As Emma looks out from a ballroom window and sees the crowd of villagers raptly staring at the gilded celebrities within, she's delirious with happiness: "her past life, so distinct until now, was vanishing altogether, and she almost doubted that she had ever lived it." The farmer's daughter, separated from the peasantry by one generation, and the young Flaubert are inhabiting the same skin.

Even when he's looking downward socially, Flaubert's attitude toward his characters is far more complicated than Davis makes out. It's too easy to read back into the novel the rage he expressed in his private letters at the "stupidity" and vulgarity of "the bourgeois." In *Madame Bovary*, rage is supplanted by relish and fascination, explored by Flaubert in a style that allows satire and empathy to coexist in the same sentence. One need look no further than the book's most obvious target, Homais the pharmacist, that irrepressible fountain of midcentury "progressive" platitudes and crazes, and the natural parent of the two clerks, Bouvard and Pécuchet, in Flaubert's final novel. (In his plans for *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert wrote, "Homais comes from Homo = mankind.")

The hyperactive, never-sleeping Homais, speechifying in the Lion d'Or, experimenting in his laboratory, penning his weekly column for the *Fanal de Rouen*, hosting intimate dinners for the Bovarys, acting as tour guide to the local sites, presiding over Yonville's jam-making festival, reading everything, engaging everybody in debate, with his eye always on the prize of the Légion d'Honneur, is a life force who seems to mesmerize his sedentary creator, who boasted that, on a good writing day, he never moved further than the end of the terrace beneath his window at Croisset. Of course Homais is an egotistical buffoon, but Flaubert so loves and indulges him as a character that he sometimes threatens to run away with the novel. When, in the last sentence, Homais at last wins the honor he has so craved, the reader may well feel that this is only just recompense for the comic vitality that the garrulous pharmacist and amateur polymath has brought to the story.

In 1852, still struggling with the first chapter of Part 2, Flaubert wrote to Colet: "Irony takes nothing away from pathos; on the contrary, it exaggerates it. In my 3rd part, which will be full of farcical things, I want one to weep." That thought underpins the whole novel, but when, two years later, he reached Part 3, having made, as he put it, "the *imperceptible* transition from psychology to drama," he piled on the laughter and the pity to an almost unendurable degree. In its final third, the action of the novel speeds up to that of farce, even as it takes on the shape of certain tragedy. Emma herself is in constant, frantic motion, first in pursuit of love, as she shuttles between Yonville and Rouen in the Hirondelle, the rattletrap coach belonging to the Lion d'Or, and then, as the promissory notes she's signed to the dry-goods merchant and loan shark, Monsieur L'Heureux (Mr. Happy), swarm back to her, and ruin yawns, in despairing pursuit of money.

It's in these thrillingly fast-moving pages (though they moved as slowly and painfully as ever for their author) that the essential character of Davis's translation comes most clearly into focus. One sees how she clings as tightly as she can to Flaubert's grammar, working clause by clause, and relies on her instinctive ear for English prosody to save the sentences from sounding unpalatably odd. Where Flaubert uses Latinate words, she follows suit, resisting the temptation to substitute more informal, and more vivid, Anglo-Saxon alternatives. The bones of the original French show clearly through her English, and the rawness of her translation is, on the whole, invigorating. It's written in a deliberately post- modernist spirit, exposing its own means like the pipes and ducts in a converted loft, and Davis's unusual willingness to talk about her alienation from the novel is in keeping with that spirit.

Yet I can't rid myself of a lingering sense of annoyance with this translation. Davis is severe on the efforts of her predecessors in the field: in her introduction she writes that "there is even [one translation] complete with the involuntary repetitions that [Flaubert] so disliked," as if her own were faultless in this respect, which it is not. One example, among dozens that I spotted, occurs in the important paragraph, near the end of the book, in which Binet the tax collector is seen in his attic, nostrils distended, lost to the world, as he works on his treadle lathe, his worthless masterpiece (a wooden imitation of an abstract and fantastic Dieppe ivory) within sight of completion, just as *Madame Bovary* itself is at that moment.

No translation that I know quite manages to catch Flaubert's tone of ironic self-mockery in this heavily rewritten paragraph, and Davis's is no better than most. She also introduces a clanging repetition of the word "nothing" (Binet's composition is "useful for nothing," then, ninety words later, such an artistic achievement will leave "nothing further to aspire to"). Curiously, Flaubert nearly made the same mistake, but deleted the second *rien* in his final revision. "Nothing" tends to pronounce itself in one's head as a spondee, with stress falling almost equally on both syllables, and its two unrelated uses here set up an unnecessary and distracting reverberation. From a translator who prides herself on her linguistic strictness, this kind of thing seems oddly careless.

Davis's *Madame Bovary* is, by her account, the twentieth translation of the book into English; like most of its forebears, it opens some fresh windows into the novel while leaving others shuttered. It's likely to be remembered as the version in which the translator tried to out-Flaubert Flaubert in her coolness toward her raw material. Flaubert, writing to Colet, said that what he most admired in his pantheon of artistic heroes—Homer, Rabelais, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Goethe—was their "pitilessness," and it might be said of Davis's translation that it's a bit too *impitoyable* for its own good.

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