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Anne Green, *Gustave Flaubert*. London: Reaktion Books, 2017. vi + 192 pp. Notes, bibliography, illustrations. £11.99/\$19.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-78023-820-3.

Review by Marshall C. Olds, Michigan State University.

Anne Green is well known among Flaubert scholars for her *Flaubert and the Historical Novel: "Salammbô" Reassessed*, which appeared in 1982 (not 2010, per the back cover of the book under review). The study was groundbreaking in bringing to light important parallels between Flaubert's reconstruction of ancient Carthage and France's bourgeois society of the mid-nineteenth century. With *Gustave Flaubert*, Green has turned her attention to writing the biography of the author behind the works, an author she knows well and with whom she shows a certain affinity. In so doing, she has no thesis to prove or axes to grind. In short, this is not a scholarly study meant for a readership of specialists. Rather, it is a well-written presentation of Flaubert's life (1821-1880) and his enduring presence in Western literature and the other arts, as well as in contemporary global culture. It can be read with profit by general readers, by students being introduced to Flaubert, and by those readers already familiar with the *œuvre* who enjoy being in the company of a specialist presenting her subject free of academic discourse and in a manner both informed and insightful.

Green follows what has become the inevitable format of Flaubert biographies: the author's life prior to *Madame Bovary*, the years of that novel's composition and then publication, and then similar chapters under the aegis of each succeeding major work: *Salammbô*, *L'Éducation sentimentale*, *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, the *Trois contes* and the unfinished *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. She does nuance considerably the formative pre-*Bovary* period (1821-1851), dividing it into four chapters: "The Early Years," "Coming of Age," "Deaths and Desires," and "The Orient." This convenient approach allows her to show the self-paced apprenticeship of the writer whose first published novel would be a masterful and surprisingly innovative work of art.

At 192 pages, the pace is brisk (recent examples having the same subject are in the range of 300-600 pages). Green has been able to economize on space by dispensing with a long introductory preamble, often devoted to Flaubert family history or to the history and culture of Rouen and Normandy, though she weaves some of that material into her narrative as needed.

Green has also chosen to forgo any extensive literary analysis of the works beyond discussing them as episodes in Flaubert's life. As for the thorny question of the incorporation of the novelist's own experience into his characters' lives, Green proceeds with caution, never suggesting an interpretative model for the fiction based on the author's life. Flaubert himself eschewed the autobiographical. Green sees Flaubert treating incidents from his own life as forms of documentation on a par with information derived from his vast reading or the extensive questioning of friends and specialists in order to research a particular feature of the narrative at hand.

To acquaint readers with the unique character of Flaubert's inner life, Green's approach is to weave clear and admirably succinct summaries of the works into the life narrative. This is notably the case in her discussion of what she calls "disturbing images" (p. 119), the presence throughout the *œuvre* of scenes portraying corporal violence and decay. It perhaps is not surprising that a specialist of *Salammbô* should draw our attention to this aspect of Flaubert's literary imagination. That novel showcases violence and bodily decay on a scale and of a nature and brutality barely conceivable were it not for Flaubert's numerous historical sources.

Anne Green indicates how early experience and reading helped form and develop the novelist's imagination. Green starts right in with her very first paragraph: "I was born in a hospital and I lived there for a quarter of a century." This is how Gustave Flaubert described his early life in Normandy to the historian Jules Michelet many years later. The laconic tone, however, belies the complex reality of an often troubled childhood and youth, and a series of disturbing early experiences that left a deep and lasting mark on the future writer" (p. 9). Indeed, raised in the home attached to his father's hospital, the young Gustave was exposed to, and was fascinated by, the ways in which the human body responded to disease, death, dissection, and decomposition. Green is particularly effective in suggesting how this experience came together with Flaubert's early epilepsy and hallucinations, as well as the traumatic losses of his sister, father, and closest childhood friend, to enhance his early contact with a Romantic literature fueled by disturbing images, such as E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Tales* (p. 13). Green shows Flaubert beginning to work with this troublesome material in his youthful writings, and then throughout his career. She provides a convincing early example with *Un parfum à sentir* (p. 25).

While Dr. Flaubert and medical practice were always influential presences hovering over the boy's and the man's life, Green rightly emphasizes the importance of matriarchal history in Gustave's life (p. 9). Madame Flaubert was a generous constant. Gustave lived with her in the Croisset house, on the Seine downstream from Rouen, until her death in 1872, and would stay on there until his own eight years later in 1880. She always kept him in funds despite tightening circumstances so that it never seriously became a question of returning to the studies and career path he had abandoned when he fell ill. This mercifully freed him from having to pursue any profession, and gave him the freedom to read and write for his entire life. Green does not suggest anything unhealthy in this relationship between son and mother and points to touching expressions of filial tenderness that appear in letters home during his travels (pp. 73-74).

Professor Green points correctly to the five volumes of Flaubert's correspondence, published in French, as a valuable source. Most of this material has not been reliably translated, however. For her own purposes, she has herself deftly translated the many passages from the letters that she quotes, all the better to bring forward a portrait of the novelist that is uniquely her own. She has of course, and with accuracy and insight, reported on the formative and otherwise important events in his life, his family ties, the decisive romantic and erotic episodes, his deep and abiding friendships with both men and women, his travels. But more than this, professor Green has succeeded in conveying a *tone*, the one that undoubtedly resonates with her as it may well do with readers who have spent time in the company of Gustave Flaubert. Even the initiate may come away from *Gustave Flaubert* with more than a passing familiarity with the novelist's unique acuity, his sense of the profound irony and grotesque humor that pervade much of life.

Circumstances became increasingly grim during the author's last years, and any biographer of Flaubert might be tempted to close on a sad note, swayed perhaps by his many expressions of despair over the loss of dear friends and relations, the financial worries that also strained his relationship with his beloved niece Caroline and her husband, and his poor health. Not so Green, who would have us focus on the man who had always turned to his work. "Work is the only thing that gives me pleasure now," he wrote to his niece (p. 159). With completion of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* in sight, Flaubert looked to future projects: short stories, a novel on the Second Empire and, particularly, to a historical subject that had tempted him for years, the Battle of Thermopylae.

Green concludes her life of Flaubert with an appropriate sort of affirmation. One tinged with irony. He spent what were to be his last weeks in a positive frame of mind. Through the discreet intervention of friends, he received a modest government pension that alleviated the most acute of his financial difficulties. Also, he met on two decidedly joyous occasions with literary friends. Then, as it were in mid-stride, he died suddenly one morning in May. To frame her understanding of Flaubert's end, Green turns to the Goncourt *Journal* in which Flaubert is quoted as having explained, not long before his death, his attraction to the ancient Greek project. Green sees in this explanation a reflection of Flaubert's attitude towards his own life. Recalling the small band of Spartans readying themselves for battle with the vast army of Xerxes, he related to Edmond de Goncourt: "In these Greek warriors I see a troop of men devoted to death, going forward to meet it with irony and good cheer" (p. 159).

To echo throughout a particularly Flaubertian sense of cheer and irony, Green begins her book and then each chapter with an apposite quotation from the *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, Flaubert's archly ironic compendium of hackneyed expressions meant both to characterize and ridicule the dull mentality that he associated with the middle class. He had been collecting these gems since his youth and destined them for inclusion in the projected second volume of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. In her own book, Green inserts the first of these, nearly hidden from view, on the copyright page: "BOOK. Always too long, whatever it is," then, more prominently, "INTRODUCTION. Obscene word," and so on, until the closing chapter on the author's posthumous legacy, "GLORY. Is but a wisp of smoke" (pp. iv, 7, 165). In this way, Professor Green would have her book not only exhibit Flaubert's "incisive irony" (p. 152), but also be complicit with him in it. And again, having related the author's death in May, her final paragraph devoted to the novelist's life is redolent of his ironic juxtapositions: "That December, three days after what would have been Flaubert's 59<sup>th</sup> birthday, the *Nouvelle revue* published the first installment of the still unfinished *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. By then, the old house at Croisset had been sold to industrialists and demolished to make way for a distillery" (p. 164).

Biographers of Flaubert typically conclude with a chapter on his considerable afterlife, given generally as literary. Professor Green does, too, only to go further. To begin, her choice of literary examples is rich, from Proust to Perec. Her chapter then moves on to include the other arts where Flaubert has been and continues to be present: theater, music, film, painting, the significant and often overlooked genre of the graphic novel, and then beyond into the global cultural space of computer games, postage stamps, and coinage.[1] As Green concludes, Flaubert's art has indeed left its echo (p. 173).

#### NOTE

[1] A minor caveat: To direct the interested reader, it would have been helpful to include in the otherwise solid bibliography a sampling of the critical literature devoted to these topics, such as Mary Donaldson-Evans's *Madame Bovary at the Movies* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009). This oversight is minor and should not be viewed as mitigating the quality of this useful and agreeable book.

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