HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, PhD

The Temptation of Saint Antony (1874)

Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880)

Flaubert's Aesthetic of Fiction: Three Stages

1 M*adame Bovary*

Idolaters of Flaubert's M*adame Bovary* are likely to be stunned by Flaubert's view of his first two deeply successful novels*, Mme. Bovary* and *The Temptation of Saint Antony*. The former of the two texts was far the more widely appreciated, in its time and yet Flaubert decried this evaluation, which to him, who in any case felt great contempt for bourgeois values and tastes, reflected the shallowness of his time. It was, Flaubert realized, appropriate to share the values of M*me Bovary*, the morals implicit in that novel. And yet, those were easy values to espouse. There was, after all, a lot of common good sense at stake in the morality of the text of *Bovary.* The author, after all, is simply calling on his listener to follow the precepts of good sense. Here there was nothing that Montaigne would have rejected. It was the simple availability of the moral precepts of *Bovary*—avoid adultery, live and think modestly, be honest in your relations with others—that made them favorites of the bourgeoisie. Yet in having made that point Flaubert felt pinched by the secular in the Christian. He was, if not an orthodox Christian—he often accepted the term 'mystical atheist'--always a 'believer' when it came to the finest practices of art, which seemed to him a pathway to the holy ; and which, as in the purity of art, was the surest stepping stone between man and god.

2 *Salammbo*

The evolution of Flaubert's moral world continued to challenge him throughout the construction of his second novel, *Salammbo.* In some ways he holds, there, to his belief that the beautiful is the true and the good. (That rich Platonic platitude had been circulated through the thought world of Flaubert's time by the popular lectures of the French philosopher Victor Cousin, who in his Sorbonne lectures of the 1820's and 30's had effectively popularized this Platonic triad, at the same time undegirding many versions of the Platonic view of beauty as divine.) Salammbo herself is a kind of abstract representative of ideal beauty, and such is the power of that beauty that it alone is in the end of sufficient power to pacify the mercenaries who swarm around Hamilcar's palace. We need hardly remind ourselves how much less strident was the view of beauty in *Bovary*, where Madame Bovary's dreams drive the most powerful intentions. We also know the beauty we see driving the human machine, in The *Temptation of St Antony,* is both a transcendent and a diabolic beauty.

3 *St Antony and his temptations*

For thirty five years, the heart of his writing life, Flaubert spent most of his time in his father's house in the small hamlet of Croisset, on the outskirts of Rouen. During that period the writer remained in relative isolation, and learned to deepen many of the creative practices that underlay his finest work. As we know from *Salammbo,* Flaubert's second major novel, he was a master of verbalizing the visual. (One need only recall the verbal depiction of crowds of mercenaries in the gardens of the Palace of Hamilcar at Carthage. The internalized and verbalized 'vision' of the throbbing exhausted fighters, the crowds of milling figures interspersed through lush tracts of landscape, all this display of internalized vision reaches the summit of vigor in the word pictures of Flaubert. We can grasp more of this avenue of writerly genius, when we consider the reproduction of a painting of Saint Antony in the desert, a painting long attributed to Peter Breughel the Elder, a copy of Breughel Flaubert saw at the Balbi Palace in Genoa in 1845. It was that painting copy that through the decades soaked itself into the interior imagination Flaubert was creating, for himself; the imagery crowding his words, as he attempts to do justice to the meaning of the picture forming in his depths. The mystery of this transformative process is just that, a mystery in consciousness. The static figure of the saint unfolds from within itself a novel that is the entire penitential life of the saint in the *Temptation of Saint Antony.*

The narration of this novel lies in the out folding stages of the outflowering experiences packed into the tale the picture of Flaubert's world embodies. Flaubert lives the tale of the temptations of St. Antony, and has many rough spots, and tough patches ahead to confront him in the text he is writing and being written by. The narrator of the tale will undergo assaults by monsters and dragons, will be trapped by jackals, and put to the tests imposed by every kind of beauty in its most seductive and actually diabolical forms. Along with the saint we will ourselves see gorgeous women whipped, will walk through the desert with bars of bronze hanging from our waist, will sleep naked with scorpions nipping our flesh. Tempted by seductive beauty, ravished by the desires of fruit and drink, deeply passionate for the God who is the source of our Agony, we will be forced to crawl the crawl, through hot pits of ordure, into the ear wax of diabolic monsters and the testicles of river bats.

The account 0f Flaubert's novel, *The Temptation of Saint Antony,* is an account of Flaubert's thirty year envisaging or unpackaging of the experience of a reproduction hanging on the wall of his house in Croisset, near Rouen. *The Temptation of Saint Antony*, is Flaubert's record of discovery within the depth of the human experience outfolded in a great painting.

Flaubert's hardy readiness, to take on the temptations embodied in Breughel's painting, is at its most virile when Flaubert works through the often harrowing challenges presented by grotesque monsters, ravening sluts and tiny creatures , tucked into the earwax of a dwarf, the fantasmagoria of figures and spirits regimented to distract Antony from the contemplation of God. We are at every moment conscious, not only of the perils of the desert, the loneliness and isolation on which it insists, but on the searing beauty of the desert, which in all its manifestations—ferocious, whimsical, massive and overpowering—is the direct face of God. We will in this realization understand how richly the concept of beauty has evolved, in these first three Flaubert novels, *Mme Bovary, Salammbo,* and *The Temptation of St. Antony.* The beauty that pervades *Mme, Bovary* is dreamy, though frighteningly (and dangerously) down to earth, though its bearer is likely to be the dreams and fantasies of a middle aged housewife. The beauty pervading *Salammbo* the secular divine. is of cult power, riveting the attention of all on the radiance of the divine. The beauty of *The Temptation of St. Antony* is a volatile force, like that of lightening whicl suddenly illuminates the desert, throwing every sand dune an*d* every foothill into an articulate divine brilliance.

The three stage aesthetic tracked above finds its creative grounding in a practice to which Flaubert made it habitual to submit—at regular intervals—all new writing projects to which he committed himself. Both along his favored patio , and in a quiet nook of his Croisset house, Flaubert would read the text of the moment aloud to himself, calculating cadences, pause-lengths, and in general the tonality that made for the character in question. By careful practice of this oral vetting method, Flaubert believed, he was able to restore the natural balances of the spoken language to their rightful place.