



*The
Enlightened
Physician*

ACHILLE-
CLEOPHAS
FLAUBERT,
1784-1846

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Preface: Children of Napoleon

WHAT DID IT MEAN to be an enlightened physician, in the very early years of the nineteenth century? This book offers one kind of answer to that question. It takes the form of a narrative of the life of one eminently enlightened physician, in an age when science and religion had not yet settled into their current mode of irritable coexistence. This book is also, along the way, an informal group portrait of a generation of the medical profession, caught at the time just before the various discoveries that have made treatment both effective and enduring. Any list of those discoveries would include at least anesthetic, antiseptic, scientific pharmacology and the germ theory of infection.

The enlightened physician of my title is Achille-Cléophas Flaubert. In the eyes of his contemporaries, he was almost a great man. It would have distressed him profoundly, had he been told that he would only be remembered as the father of that scandalous bourgeois-baiting scribbler, his younger son, Gustave Flaubert. The physician of his generation was acclaimed, from within the profession and without, as the priest of humanity. He was a man of vision and energy, a man with a purity of purpose who had renounced the destructive political passions that led the men of 1789 to disaster in the name of their ideals. In his more grandiose moments, the enlightened physician might claim to be that elusive, necessary individual, the bourgeois hero.

That is certainly the message of the following eloquent testimonial to the ideal, written by Achille-Cléophas's friend and colleague. I quote from the manuscript notebook in which that colleague recorded his general moral reflections on a lifetime of medical practice.

A truly enlightened physician, dedicated to and worthy of the lofty mission which he pursues in this world, such a man will not blindly follow the fashion of the hour or espouse those political passions which so divide our society. The physician sees his fellow creatures on their bed of pain, far from the scenes of the fashionable world. The most afflicted and the most wretched, they are those that interest him the most. The physical and moral infirmities of the human race are perpetually before his gaze. Leaving the palatial dwelling of the rich, he enters the damp hovel of the poor, and there in both places he finds the same suffering creature, begging for his help. To their well-being he has consecrated his whole life. In his intimate contact with every class of society, he is ideally placed to observe, to know and to judge the human race, and to value it at its true worth. It does not in general present its most appealing side to him. He studies it from too close by; and though he may shed some pleasant illusions in the process, he can at least see the object as it really is. Calm in the midst of the chaos all around him, he simply deplores the unhappy consequences for the losers, moderates the anger or the self-importance of the victorious, laments subsequent misfortunes and disasters and endeavours to remedy them as far as it lies within his power. Minister of peace and unity between men who have confided in him all that they hold most dear, their lives and often their honour, he must simply console or cure them of their ailments, and if it is given to him to have any influence over them he will use it to moderate their passions, to guide them towards reason, justice and tolerance, towards all that he believes will be most useful for them and best for the country. As for the physician himself, his only legitimate ambition is to excel by virtue of his altruism, by the self-abnegation he displays in the midst of those epidemics that devastate whole cities, by his devotion and his courage in picking up or succouring the wounded on the field of battle; by his charity, by his severity in judging vice and his indulgence in judging the weaknesses of the human race. Such should be, in my opinion, the character, the duty and the veritable patriotism of the physician.¹

It will be amusing and instructive, along the way, to recall this high vision of saintly benevolence as it unravels, in the medium of biographical narrative time, under the action of all the miscellaneous tragicomic forces that shape a life.

Where does a biography begin? Is it with an idealised array of ancestors? With the material realities of childhood? Or with adult memories of

the early years? Researching my earlier biography of Gustave Flaubert in 1998, I soon renounced the idea of finding that elusively singular beginning. I strayed from the path, drawn back in time, down into ever-earlier layers of Flaubert family history. In particular, I was intrigued by a story from the 1860s that dealt with an episode from the childhood of Gustave's father in the 1790s. I found the story recorded in that compendium of nineteenth-century Parisian salon gossip, the Goncourts' *Journal*.

Here it is, as told to them by their forty-two-year-old dinner guest Gustave Flaubert. It forms part of the journal entry for 26 January 1863.

Flaubert told me, one evening recently, that his paternal grandfather, a doctor of the old school, having wept in an inn while reading in a newspaper of the execution of Louis XIV, arrested and about to be sent to the Revolutionary Tribunal in Paris, was saved by his own son, then aged seven, to whom his mother had taught a pathetic speech, which he delivered with great success to the Société populaire in Nogent-sur-Seine.²

It caught my eye, that climactic scene, with the child delivering his 'pathetic speech'. Here was a thing that might define a life, permeating the subsequent family history, encapsulating their painful collective memory of the revolution. In the face of oppression, it testified to the individual redemptive powers of language. Here was my elusive biographical beginning.

Even so, there was something odd about this episode. The story was simply too good to be true. So why had that story survived? What was it saying about the mid-century memory of the Revolution? Fortuitously preserved, this precious piece of oral tradition exists only in this meagre version. There is no mention of it in the official twenty-page obituary memoir of Flaubert's father, published in 1847. This was a significant silence, a minor family secret, asking to be gently unfolded.

Whatever else it might be, this was a compelling, diminutive life-or-death story. It had all the ingredients of popular romantic fiction: the injustice, the mortal distress, the child-hero, the surprise happy ending. I wondered why it had been kept quiet. I was keen to establish which bits were true. I promised myself that I would one day try to answer these questions. After Gustave, I would write the life of his father.

This book, a narrative biography of the life of Achille-Cléophas Flaubert, has emerged from the compacted historical memory that is preserved in the Goncourt *Journal*. This book is also the culmination of

a larger Flaubert project that began in 1986, the year that I embarked on my translation of *Madame Bovary*. My translation of that novel led to a further translation, a selection of Flaubert's letters, published in 1996. That translation in turn led to a biography of Gustave Flaubert, published in 2001. These four books, two translations and two biographies, are linked by the conviction that literary translation and biography are complementary modes of knowledge.

Though mothers and wives, sisters and daughters will all play their part, this book is primarily a story of fathers and sons. The life of Achille-Cléophas unfolds from 1784 to 1846. Around that central panel we follow the history of three Flaubert generations. This is a history that spans a hundred years, from the 1760s to the 1860s, from the Ancien Régime to the railway age, a biography gleefully stretched across time and space. In that adventurous spirit, there will be several well-organised excursions along the way. Suitably clad and equipped, we shall visit cesspools, convents, dissection rooms, textile factories, shopping arcades, mortuaries, courtrooms, prison yards, museums, botanical gardens, hospital wards and country houses. We shall linger instructively over some of the major novelties of the age, the guillotine, the gaslight, the spinning jenny and the steam engine, devices that changed the very fabric of everyday life. Our subject, Achille-Cléophas, lived through interesting times. The strange things happening all around him will figure prominently. And because he witnesses much more than he can properly understand, he will be the focal point for an ironic narrative of a tumultuous modernity.

I shall argue, along the way, that even the most insolently aspiring and triumphantly self-made modern individual remains a creature of history, enacting their idiosyncratic version of the larger collective history of their class, their generation, and their gender. Idiosyncratic: that emphasis is vital. It points to that trans-historical 'family plot', according to which individual protagonists assert their own peculiar place in a line of succession defined by a shared family name. To carry that family name, to be a Flaubert, that was a serious task. To also become yourself, to do it better or to do it differently, that was a task even more demanding. This tangled play of freedom and necessity, this double history, must be the proper territory of the biographer.

Achille-Cléophas survived Robespierre and the Terror; he thrived under Napoleon. Then, in spite of his cumbersome political opinions, his imprudent atheism and his relative youth, he was appointed to high

professional office in the very month that the House of Bourbon was restored to the throne of France. To write such a life is to explore the curiously complicated moral history of that insurgent, de-Christianised generation that came of age in the years between Austerlitz and Waterloo. The children of Voltaire and Napoleon, they had grown up as the citizens of a republic that mutated into an empire. Consequently, they had much to ponder in the late summer of 1815, finding themselves, so unexpectedly, the reluctant subjects of an aggressively conservative monarchy that was intent on imposing the curious fiction that the Revolution had not happened.