Flaubert: Remembering, Forgetting, Creating

Anne Green

Nineteenth-Century French Studies, Volume 39, Number 1 & 2, Fall-Winter 2010-2011, pp. 119-130 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ncf/summary/v039/39.1-2.green.html
The characters in Flaubert’s novels do a lot of remembering. Occasionally their memories are sweet—Emma’s sensual reminiscences about Leon in the early days of their relationship is one such example (Œuvres 1: 608)—but far more often they are represented as painful and problematic. The same could be said of the memories that surface in Flaubert’s own correspondence; they, too, are almost always anguished rather than tender, and the agonising process of mental recall is a subject to which he returns surprisingly frequently. The aim of this article is to expose an underlying pattern in the ways in which Flaubert writes about memory, and to offer a possible explanation for its curiously pervasive and problematic presence in his work.

Near the beginning of Flaubert’s Novembre, the narrator tells of pausing on a cold, autumnal walk to shelter from the wind. As he rests, his whole life suddenly passes before his eyes in a “tourmente lamentable”:

Je ne sais pourquoi, comme j’étais là, assis par terre, ne pensant à rien et regardant au loin la fumée qui sortait des chaumes, ma vie entière s’est placée devant moi comme un fantôme, et l’amer parfum des jours qui ne sont plus m’est revenu, avec l’odeur de l’herbe séchée et des bois morts; mes pauvres années ont repassé devant moi, comme emportées par l’hiver dans une tourmente lamentable; quelque chose de terrible les roulait dans mon souvenir, avec plus de furie que la brise ne faisait courir les feuilles dans les sentiers paisibles; une ironie étrange les frôlait et les retournait pour mon spectacle, et puis toutes s’envolaient ensemble et se perdaient dans un ciel morne.

This violent surge of involuntary memory is immediately followed by a calmer period of reflection as the narrator surveys the elements of his past. Despite his sense of detachment from that past, he finds the sheer volume of his memories overwhelming and incommensurate with the brevity of his life, and in graphic terms he describes the experience of revisiting his former self:
[...] J’ai savouré longuement ma vie perdue; je me suis dit avec joie que ma jeunesse était passée, car c’est une joie de sentir le froid vous venir au cœur, et de pouvoir dire, le tâtant de la main comme un foyer qui fume encore: il ne brûle plus. J’ai repassé lentement dans toutes les choses de ma vie, idées, passions, jours d’emportements, jours de deuil, battements d’espoir, déchirements d’angoisse. J’ai tout revu, comme un homme qui visite les catacombes et qui regarde lentement, des deux côtés, des morts rangés après des morts. A compter les années cependant, il n’y a pas longtemps que je suis né, mais j’ai à moi des souvenirs nombreux dont je me sens accablé, comme le sont les vieillards de tous les jours qu’ils ont vécus; il me semble quelquefois que j’ai duré pendant des siècles et que mon être renferme les débris de mille existences passées. (Œuvres 1: 248)

Although the passage is heavily indebted to Romantic stereotypes, it marks a clear divergence from the way in which memory was conceived of by Romantic writers. As Suzanne Nalbantian has shown, for the Romantics memory was a voluntary operation, actively summoned “as a constant support system for the human identity” (Nalbantian 42). For them the process of recall was natural and unproblematic, and focussed particularly on the emotions. Instead, in this episode of Novembre memories erupt involuntarily, in a violent onslaught, and even when recollected in a calmer moment they remain disturbing. Although Flaubert was only twenty when he wrote this, he already reveals a preoccupation with memory and an attempt to conceptualise its complex workings in new ways. Both were to persist, in varying forms, throughout his life.

Flaubert seems acutely aware that memories are not only being laid down all the time, but that they endure. He prides himself on his memory (which his niece Caroline confirmed was indeed exceptional), and claims he never forgets: “Je suis comme toi, je n’oublie rien,” he writes to his mother in 1851 (Corr. 1: 740). It is a point to which his correspondence often returns. “[Q]uand je regarde mes années disparues, j’y retrouve tout. Je n’ai rien arraché, rien perdu. [...] je me souviens toujours. C’est la complexion de mon esprit dont l’écorce est dure,” he tells Louise Colet (Corr. 2: 58), asking her: “[E]st-ce qu’on oublié quelque chose, [...] est-ce qu’on peut se détacher de quoi que ce soit?” If they thought about it for a moment, he adds, even the flightiest creature would be astonished at how much of their past they had retained (Corr. 2: 57). Flaubert conceives of memory in concrete terms, as something we can locate and touch, and the subterranean image of catacombs used in Novembre to convey the repository of “toutes les choses de [s]a vie” recurs in various forms. Telling Colet our past lives are stored deep in our minds as if hidden in underground chambers, he insists that if we dig down we will rediscover them. With effort, we can disinter what seems to have been lost: “ – Il y a des constructions sou-
terraines à tout. – Ce n’est qu’une question de surface et de profondeur. Son-
dez et vous trouverez” (Corr. 2: 57). Yet the catacomb metaphor in Novembre
—and in this letter—is itself a memory of a visit Flaubert paid in 1840 to the
“fameux caveau courroyeur” in Bordeaux, which he described in his Voyage
aux Pyrénées et en Corse. Surrounded there by layers of mummified corpses
seventeen feet deep, or possibly much deeper, Flaubert was particularly struck
by the hardness of their skin: “ingénieux caveau qui […] fait de peaux de chré-
tiens des peaux d’ânes, car j’atteste qu’elles sont toutes dures, brunes, coriaces
et retentissantes.” Behind the representation of his retentive mind as an “esprit
dont l’écorce est dur” surely lies the enduring memory of these extraordinarily
preserved “cuirs racornis” (Œuvres 2: 428). It is an image that resurfaces in an-
other letter to Colet where indelibly preserved memories are again likened to
mummified bodies, this time with staring eyes: “tout reste, n’est-ce pas? tout.
Les momies que l’on a dans le cœur 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” (Corr. 2: 32).

Insisting on the physicality of memory, and perhaps conscious of Plato’s
metaphor of memory as an impression made on the wax tablet of the mind,
(Plato 67, 71) Flaubert claims in a letter to Amélie Bosquet that he is as sen-
sitive as soft clay to new impressions. But whereas Plato’s wax tablet was mal-
leable and subject to erasure, Flaubert depicts his own memory as impervious
to modification. The soft impression is transformed into enduring solidity as
he asserts that he preserves his memories forever: “Je suis d’argile pour rece-
voir les impressions et de bronze pour les garder. Chez moi rien n[e s’]efface;
tout s’accumule” (Corr. 3: 517).

Nevertheless, pride in his ability to capture his impressions and preserve
them for ever as if mumified or cast in bronze alternates in his writing with
a very different image. Instead of celebrating his memory as wonderfully re-
tentive, solid and durable, at times he shows such a build-up of memories to
have a terrifying, even life-threatening quality. Visiting Trouville in 1853, for
example, Flaubert records that he felt himself engulfed by an avalanche of past
memories. The Novembre image of a terrible force rolling his past life through
his memory at furious speed has now become more specific: “Les souvenirs
que je rencontre ici à chaque pas sont comme des cailloux qui déboulent […]
vers un grand gouffre d’amertume que je porte en moi.” Stirring up the sludge
of his mind, this mental landslide prompts unwelcome, melancholy thoughts
which he describes as rising to the surface like toads whose sleep has been
disturbed (Corr. 2: 390). Far removed from the Romantic notion of memory
as the tranquil recollection of emotional states, this hail of unbidden images is
represented as perturbing and violent.

Memory starts to persecute him, and in 1859, using another striking meta-
phor, he writes: “Je trouve, moi, que c’est le passé qui nous dévore” (Corr. 2:
The image of being devoured by memory recurs again and again in his correspondence. “[J]e me sens mortellement atteint,” he writes in 1875, for example; “le Passé me dévore” (Corr. 4: 969)—a phrase he repeats a few days later, tormented by dreams of old friends who have died (Corr. 4: 974). And if not devoured, he feels violated in other ways—crushed, invaded, assailed, or overwhelmed by waves of memory that threaten to engulf him. “[L]e passé m’envahit. Je roule dans les souvenirs et je m’y perds,” he writes (Corr. 4: 525); or again, “L’océan des souvenirs me submerge. Je m’y noie” (Corr. 5: 610). Repeatedly, the onslaught of memories is conceived of in terms of suffocation as he represents himself as buried beneath their weight or drowned by their volume. From catacombs and mummified corpses to death by crushing, devouring, stifling or drowning, Flaubert’s articulation of memory is thus woven round a lexis of mortality.

But perhaps the most graphic and enduring image comes in his reply to Hippolyte Taine, who had asked him to reflect, as a creative writer, on the workings of memory and the imagination. In an extension of his imagery of liquidity and death, Flaubert describes the agonising hallucinatory moment when the floodgates of memory open in what he calls an “irruption instan-
née de la mémoire” to release a pent-up torrent of images that gush forth like blood from a mortal wound.

C’est une maladie de la mémoire, un relâchement de ce qu’elle recèle. On sent les images s’échapper de vous comme des flots de sang. Il vous semble que tout ce qu’on a dans la tête éclate à la fois comme les mille pièces d’un feu d’artifice, et on n’a pas le temps de regarder ces images internes qui défilent avec furie. (Corr. 3: 572)

The traumatic and uncontrollable outpouring of recollections described here shows Flaubert playing a new variation on the theme of memory’s terrifying, involuntary and destructive power. While the metaphor still focuses on the sense of being overwhelmed by a furious eruption of internal images, gushing blood replaces the crushing landslide or the engulfing ocean, while exploding fireworks convey its force. This configuration was clearly of special significance to Flaubert, for it repeatedly finds its way into his fiction. He has Emma Bovary undergo a similar outpouring of memory, couched in similar terms, shortly before she takes the arsenic:

Tout ce qu’il y avait dans sa tête de réminiscences, d’idées, s’échappait à la fois, d’un seul bond, comme les mille pièces d’un feu d’artifice. Elle vit son père, le cabi-
net de Lheureux, leur chambre là-bas, un autre paysage. ... [Elle] sentait son âme l’abandonner par ce souvenir, comme les blessés, en agonisant, sentent l’existence qui s’en va par leur plaie qui saigne. (Œuvres 1: 680)
Although a belief that one’s past life flashes before one’s eyes at the moment of death had long been widespread (Zaleski 128–29), Flaubert’s version deftly sidesteps the commonplace by having the sudden, unstoppable release of past memories take place before Emma poisons herself. Yet the imagery—again associated with exploding fireworks and the gush of blood from a fatal wound—clearly anticipates her demise.

A similar configuration of images is repeated near the end of Salammbô, where Mâtho is overwhelmed by a flood of vivid memories of the opening feast as his lifeblood flows away—literally, this time:

ce souvenir [. . .] lui apportait une tristesse écrasante. Des ombres passaient devant ses yeux; la ville tourbillonnait dans sa tête, son sang ruisselait par une blessure de sa hanche, il se sentait mourir. (Œuvres 1: 796)

Years later, the persistent pattern of blood, lights and the sense of being crushed or stifled by an all-engulfing tidal wave of memory recurs in Un cœur simple as the injured Félicité recovers consciousness after her accident:

Le sang coulait. [. . .] elle aperçut les lumières d’Honfleur qui scintillaient dans la nuit comme une quantité d’étoiles [. . .] et la misère de son enfance, la déception du premier amour, le départ de son neveu, la mort de Virginie, comme les flots d’une marée, revinrent à la fois, et, lui montant à la gorge, l’étouffaient. (Œuvres 2: 175)

If Flaubert presents such an onslaught of involuntary memories as physically overwhelming, even fatal, he portrays the opposite situation as no less problematic. Despite his assurance to Louise Colet that we can always dig beneath the surface to rediscover lost memories, in his fiction he repeatedly depicts the failure of memory to surface when wanted. Whether trying to recall emotions, experiences or facts, again and again characters are unable to coerce their memories into action: Emma strains, every Wednesday, to conjure up images of the ball at La Vaubyessard, only to find that the faces, dance-tunes and décor have faded from her mind, leaving only a sense of regret (Œuvres 1: 593). Similarly, Charles Bovary struggles unsuccessfully to recall the different types of fracture he is supposed to know (Œuvres 1: 578); Rodolphe cannot remember the women who sent him love-letters which, paradoxically, he has kept as mementos (Œuvres 1: 642); and Victor in Bouvard et Pécuchet is incapable of memorising the names of the kings of France or the countries of Europe (Œuvres 2: 292). Emblematic of such attempts to force the memory to perform against the grain is Bouvard et Pécuchet’s Dumouchel, the author of a slim “mnémotechnie” proposing a system of artificial recall which proves singularly unhelpful.
Between these two extremes—the fatal, uncontrollable avalanche of memory on the one hand, and the frustrating inability to remember on the other—Flaubert’s treatment of memory remains curiously tormented. Repeatedly, the memories experienced by characters in his novels are associated with an undefined anguish. In *Salammbô*, for example, when Hamilcar returns to Carthage, “toujours il avait fait, tout ce qu’il avait vu, se déroula dans sa mémoire [. . .] ses souvenirs bourdonnaient dans sa tête, encore étourdie par le tangage du vaisseau; une angoisse l’accablait” (*Œuvres* 1: 728). Even the Barbarians are “gênés par de vieux souvenirs” (*Œuvres* 1: 765). The association recurs in *L’Education sentimentale* where Cisy’s “souvenirs renforçaient son angoisse” (*Œuvres* 2: 91) as do Frédéric’s: his return to Nogent “le reporta dans de vieux souvenirs; et il éprouvait une sorte d’angoisse” (*Œuvres* 2: 96).

In *La Légende de saint Julien l’hospitalier*, similarly, Julien’s memories are described as a heavy burden. Indeed their psychological weight seems to spill over into the physical world around him. Rocks and memories are conflated so that the oppressive load, together with the swirling waters and treacherous mud that are regular features of Flaubert’s memory passages, come to operate on both a literal and a metaphorical level:

Ainsi, portant le poids de son souvenir, il [. . .] arriva près d’un fleuve dont la traversée était dangereuse, à cause de sa violence et parce qu’il y avait sur les rives une grande étendue de vase. Personne depuis longtemps n’osait plus le passer. [. . .] et il se brisait les ongles à remuer les pierres énormes, les appuyait contre son ventre pour les transporter, glissait dans la vase, y enfonçait, manqua périr plusieurs fois (*Œuvres* 2: 186).

Shortly after this, a series of Julien’s pleasant memories is disrupted by images of death: “toujours, les deux cadavres étaient là. [. . .] les visions funèbres continuaient.” Written more than thirty years after *Novembre*, this short section of the tale confirms the extraordinarily enduring nature of the terms in which Flaubert conceived of the processes of memory. Many of the elements from the *Novembre* passage quoted at the beginning of this article are found clustered here again. *Novembre*’s “odeur [. . .] des bois morts” recurs as the earth’s “odeur de pourriture”; the metaphorical “furie [de] la brise” of *Novembre* reappears as the “vent désordonné,” “tourbillons” and “ouragan furieux”; in *Novembre*, the image of being bowed down by memory like an ancient man burdened by years is completed by the narrator’s sense of having “duré pendant des siècles et que [s]on être renferme les débris de mille existences passées” – an image that has its counterpart in this section of *La Légende* when Julien’s identity merges with that of his father in an enactment of memory: stooping over a fountain, he sees the reflection of “un vieillard tout décharné, à barbe blanche et d’un aspect si lamentable qu’il lui fut impossible de retenir
ses pleurs.” And Novembre’s reference to memory in terms of the ranks of the dead in the catacombs finds an echo in the uncanny appearance of the Leper, “la figure pareille à un masque de plâtre et les deux yeux plus rouges que des charbons.” [ ... ] Tel qu’un squelette, il avait un trou à la place du nez” (Œuvres 2: 186–87).

How might one account for such constant emphasis on the painful and problematic aspects of remembering? An episode in Bouvard et Pécuchet perhaps offers a clue. Deciding to try to write a novel, the two clerks judge themselves capable of doing so because “ils avaient senti et croyaient avoir observé.” Their first step towards the novel is to search their memories: “Pour en faire un, ils cherchèrent dans leurs souvenirs,” and for a while they delve into their store of memories, trying to prune or expand them as they struggle to devise a plot based on recollections of former acquaintances: “Il s’agissait de relier à ces conceptions incertaines des choses fournies par leur mémoire, retrans-chaient, ajoutaient” (Œuvres, 2: 247–48). Although Bouvard and Pécuchet’s novel gets nowhere – they are sidetracked by questions of Beauty and Truth – this vignette of them unsuccessfully adding and subtracting memories in an attempt to produce a work of literature is significant: while unpicking the clerks’ naive assumption that the mere fact of being able to remember sights and sensations qualifies them to produce a novel, Flaubert draws attention to the fundamental role of memory in literary production.

All literature is, of course, in some sense based on memories—of experiences, thoughts, sensations, or language—but on memories that have subsequently been transformed by the writer’s creative imagination. Flaubert wrote of his “désir cuisant de transformer par l’Art tout ce qui est ‘de moi,’ tout ce que j’ai senti” (Corr. 2: 411–2). Bouvard and Pécuchet, however, fail to bring about that artistic transformation. Similarly, Pellerin in L’Éducation sentimentale fails to produce a work of art because he is unable to progress beyond his mental store of Old Master images to create an original vision: “Il passa en revue dans sa mémoire tous les portraits de maître qu’il connaissait, et se décida finalement pour un Titien, lequel serait rehaussé d’ornements à la Véronèse” (Œuvres 2: 62).

For Flaubert, however, the creative process of wrestling with his material—going over it repeatedly, suppressing here,9 struggling to evoke there—has all the painful hallmarks of remembering and forgetting that he ascribes to his characters. Moreover, the analogy between the torments of writing and the anguish of memory is underscored by the fact that in his correspondence he uses strikingly similar vocabulary and images to describe both. In his letters, the creative process is often described in terms of liquid: he visualises his writing as emerging in a trickle or a torrent,10 and he talks of drowning in the ocean that is his inkwell (Corr. 2: 714) just as he complains of drowning in an ocean of memories. While uncontrollable memories are likened to a haemorrhag-
ing wound, his need to write is similarly described as a terrible gash; he refers to “cette incurable plaie qui me ronge” (Corr. 2: 752), and his literary style is “l’écoulement d’une douleur plus profonde” (Corr. 2: 431). Like memory, writing is torture – “un supplice,” “pénible”; it fills him with “angoisses”; like memory, it “invades” him; he is “dévoré,” “broyé,” “écrasé,” and he fears the process of writing will kill him: “Je suis capable d’y crever à la peine” (Corr. 4: 847). For Flaubert, then, it seems clear that the struggle to write was also a constant battle to bring memory under control—to escape its landslides, invasions and floods, and to prevent the flow drying up altogether.

Acutely aware of the complex and constantly shifting relation between past and present and of the way in which memories are reshaped as we try to make sense of the past, Flaubert repeatedly depicts his characters failing to win that struggle—failing to integrate memory into a coherent story. At the ball at La Vaubyessard Emma suddenly remembers the farm where she grew up, seeing it in all its detail of apple-trees and muddy pond and bowls of cream, before these unbidden memories vanish, blotted out by the present: “. . . aux fulgurations de l’heure présente, sa vie passée, si nette jusqu’alors, s’évanouissait tout entière, et elle doutait presque de l’avoir vécue. Elle était là; puis, autour du bal, il n’y avait plus que de l’ombre, étalée sur tout le reste” (Œuvres 1: 592). This is only one of several instances where Emma’s memories are shown as fleeting and fragmentary. In the famous opening scene of that novel, the narrator had already drawn our attention to the ease with which the past can be forgotten by noting that it would now be impossible for anyone to remember anything at all about Charles Bovary. Emma suffers from a similar amnesia: unable—or unwilling—to weave the elements of her past into a consistent pattern, she blanks out swathes of memory in her repeated but unsuccessful attempts to construct new stories about herself.

In L’Education sentimentale, Frédéric’s reaction to Rosanette’s outpourings when she discloses her life-story to him is equally unproductive. He is incapable of moulding her flood of memories into any kind of shape, for they flow out “sans transitions, et il ne pouvait reconstruire un ensemble” (Œuvres 2: 127). This impotence in the face of an amorphous mass of detail is echoed by Frédéric’s response to the flux of events taking place in Paris, where his difficulty in making sense of what is going on around him takes on wider significance. Presenting the reader with history in the making, in L’Éducation sentimentale Flaubert portrays a confusion of events not yet reshaped into a meaningful form. Frédéric’s attempts to understand his experiences are analogous to our own as we seek shape and meaning in this superficially shapeless (though in fact perfectly controlled) novel, which ends with Frédéric and Deslauriers returning to old memories, retelling them, revising them—and when they have finished, relishing them:

“Ils se [les] contèrent prolixement, chacun complétant les souvenirs de l’autre; et, quand ils eurent fini:
That closing sentence may be read as referring not only to the two friends’ youthful visit to the brothel, but to the pleasure they derive from remembering and retelling those moments of their shared personal history, successfully reshaped into a story at last.

The crucial role of memory and its relationship to the writing of history and fiction is particularly evident in Flaubert’s notes for Sous Napoléon iii, the unwritten novel he planned towards the end of his life, which was to have looked back over the Second Empire.13 Like Bouvard and Pécuchet, Flaubert had felt and seen his intended subject-matter—Second Empire society. These notes show that like them, he delves into his store of memories as he struggles to come up with a plot based on recollections of former acquaintances, adding or discarding material and trying out different ways of recasting his remembered experience of Second Empire values. His characters were all to be based on people known to him, and they still bear their own names in the manuscript notes. The settings were places he knew well—Trouville, Paris, the lac d’Enghien, Vichy, the Tuileries, Compiègne. The worlds in which the events take place—Parisian literary and theatrical circles, those of journalists and politicians, and the world of business—were also familiar to him, as were the key scenes—the funeral of a great man, a visit to the Exposition universelle, a society wedding, a failed play at the Odéon, the beach at Trouville. But each must have conjured up innumerable memories for Flaubert. (Memories of the beach at Trouville had, after all, featured in his Mémoires d’un fou, written when he was only 16, and it was his return to the same place in 1853 that had triggered the metaphor of memories cascading like pebbles). The Sous Napoléon iii plans, composed at intervals over a period of about seven years, offer a perfect example of the long and painful process of transforming memories into fiction. They show Flaubert circling round his subject, going back over the same material, and starting to supplement or strip away details as he experiments with different frameworks that might enable him to bring his recollections under control, wrestle them into a satisfactory shape, and distil into literary form his feelings about what society had become under the Second Empire.

The notes remain in fragmentary form, recording flashes of visual detail such as a servant in white silk stockings dusting the leaves of a camellia, or the freshly curled moustache of Charles Chilly weeping at his daughter’s funeral. But such memories needed to mature for a long time before they could be successfully turned into literature. As Flaubert had confided to Louise Colet many years earlier, if ever he introduced passages describing things he had just seen into his writings, he always had to delete them later: “Ce n’est pas une bonne méthode que de voir ainsi tout de suite, pour écrire immédiatement après. On
se préoccupe trop des détails, de la couleur, et pas assez de son esprit, car la couleur dans la nature a un esprit, une sorte de vapeur subtile qui se dégage d’elle, et c’est cela qui doit animer en dessous le style.” And using the image of flowing blood yet again, he added: “La couleur, comme les aliments, doit être digérée et mêlée au sang des pensées” (Corr. 2: 372). In the case of Sous Napoléon III there was not enough time for memories to enter the bloodstream, fully digested; Flaubert died before the novel could be written.

Throughout his life, however, memory and writing remain inextricably linked. Associated with anguish both for himself and for his characters, they are always described in the same, recurrent, terms and images. It is thus clear that the torments of remembering, forgetting and writing were of supreme, indeed obsessive, importance to Flaubert, despite the suffering they caused him. Memory, for Flaubert, was as far removed as possible from the stereotype of imaginative impoverishment he lists under mémoire in the Dictionnaire des idées recues: “Se plaindre de la sienne, et même se vanter de n’en pas avoir” (Œuvres 2: 311). However painful the workings of memory might be, Flaubert saw them as a fundamental and necessary component of the struggle to write. If we recognise his recurrent use of overlapping imagery associated with memory and creativity, we may often detect the existence of an unexpected subtext in Flaubert’s writing as his anxieties show through. Thus, for example, a familiar cluster of vocabulary near the end of La Légende de saint Julien l’hospitalier alerts us to the presence of his obsession: the description of Julien being inexorably drawn to a mysterious calling, his venturing into the “ouragan furieux,” his struggle with “l’eau, plus noire que de l’encre, [qui] courait avec furie,” and his overwhelming sense of being stifled combine to suggest that, beneath the surface of the plot and projected onto the figure of Julien, Flaubert is once again rehearsing the agonies of writing. Like Flaubert, Julien almost abandons his struggle, but, “comprenant qu’il s’agissait d’une chose considérable, d’un ordre auquel il ne fallait pas désobéir,” he perseveres, watched all the while by strange, burning eyes. The effort involved is a long one – “Et cela dura longtemps, très longtemps!”—until the struggle finally reaches the redemptive reward of its conclusion. For if writing, like memory, threatened to overwhelm Flaubert, the artistic struggle nevertheless had its own dangerous allure. As he had explained to Louise Colet in 1853: “L’encre est mon élément naturel. Beau liquide, du reste, que ce liquide sombre! Et dangereux! Comme on s’y noie! Comme il attire!” (Corr. 2: 395).

Anne Green
Department of French
King’s College London
1 Cf. also “Le passé nous mange trop” (Corr. 2: 413).
2 For example, “Je suis assailli par des souvenirs tristes. Et tout m’apparaît, comme enveloppé d’un voile noir” (Corr. 3: 443); “les souvenirs d’enfance m’assaillaient” (Corr. 4: 817); or Corr. 5: 410, where Flaubert refers to “la quantité de souvenirs qui m’assaillent.”
4 Critics have often commented on this letter, but have tended to focus on it as an account of hallucination rather than of memory. See Lapp, for example.
5 Note that in his letter to Taine Flaubert describes experiencing “une angoisse indéfinie, un malaise vague” before being overwhelmed by a sudden onslaught of memories (Corr. 3: 572).
6 The image here is reminiscent of a line from Baudelaire’s poem “Le Cygne”: “Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs” (Les Fleurs du Mal, Œuvres complètes: 97).
7 The Leper’s eyes, staring from his skeletal face, are reminiscent of the open, watchful eyes of the mummies which Flaubert uses as a metaphor for the permanence of memory. See above and Corr.
8 Flaubert is conscious that an element of this transformative process is inherent in any memory. In his reply to Taine’s questions about memory and imagination, he draws a clear distinction between mental recollection and photographic reproduction in order to reflect on the nature of perception itself: “Je crois que généralement (et quoi qu’en dise), le souvenir idéalise, c’est à dire choisit? Mais peut-être l’œil idéalise-t-il aussi? Observez notre étonnement devant une épreuve photographique. Ce n’est jamais ça qu’on a vu” (Corr. 3: 562). See Green for further discussion of this aspect of Flaubert’s writing.
9 E.g. he tells of the “torture” of whittling down the Comices episode in Madame Bovary, adding: “Je fais des sacrifices de détails qui me font pleurer” (Corr. 2: 461–62).
10 He describes himself as being “comme les vieux aqueducs. Il y a tant de détritus aux bords de ma pensée qu’elle circule lentement, et ne tombe que goutte à goutte du bout de ma plume” (Corr. 2: 469). Although he dismissively refers to Lamartine as “un robinet” (Corr. 2: 432), he admires the way George Sand’s ideas flow “largement, incessamment, comme un fleuve. Chez moi c’est un mince filet d’eau. Il me faut de grands travaux d’art avant d’obtenir une cascade” Corr. 3: 566).
11 E.g. “La littérature, d’ailleurs, n’est plus pour moi qu’un supplice” (Corr. 2: 746); “atroces tortures où mon travail me condamne. [. . .] cet art devient pour moi un supplice” (Corr. 2: 772–73); “mon travail [. . .] m’est pénible sous le côté du cœur” (Corr. 4: 194); “Un livre n’a jamais été pour moi qu’une manière de vivre dans un milieu
quelconque. Voilà ce qui explique mes hésitations, mes angoisses et ma lenteur” (Corr. 2: 846); “Ce livre est diabolique! [. . .] la bêtise de mes deux bonshommes m’envahit” (Corr. 4: 852–53); “je continue, mais dévoré d’inquiétudes et de doutes” (Corr. 3: 95); “Bouvard et Pécuchet [. . .] me rongent” (Corr. 4: 854); “je suis broyé d’écrire” (Corr. 5: 344); “Je suis écrasé par les difficultés de mon livre” (Corr. 3: 410); “je me sens vidé et écrasé. Quel bouquin!” (Corr. 3: 801).

12 The massive body of research notes that Flaubert normally accumulated before embarking on a novel may be seen as analogous to the build-up of memories.

13 Most of the notes for Sous Napoléon iii are to be found in his Carnets de travail, in Carnets 17, 18bis and 20. (See de Biasi.)

14 Cf. Corr. 5: 410 where he notes that it is the anniversary of the July Days of the 1848 revolution “que je me rappelle parfaitement. – C’était un autre monde – et si distant de celui d’aujourd’hui qu’il m’apparaît maintenant non comme une chose vue mais comme une chose imaginée.”

WORKS CITED


130  Anne Green