

Olmsted on Brooks (2017)

Brooks, Peter. *Flaubert in the Ruins of Paris: The Story of a Friendship, a Novel, and a Terrible Year*. Basic Books, 2017, pp. 228, ISBN 978-0-465-09602-2

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The subtitle of this intriguing work unpacks the main title's mysterious promise to focus on Gustave Flaubert's brief visit to the post-Commune Paris of 1871. The story that Brooks proposes to tell is neither a conventional biography nor a literary-historical reprise of Victor Hugo's collection of poems (*L'Année terrible*) on the Franco-Prussian War, the Commune, and its annihilation by the French Army during the "Bloody Week." What unfolds, rather, is a complex weave of related narrative threads that take up the political events, the visual record (in copious illustrations) of the "Terrible Year" and its aftermath, the correspondence between Flaubert and George Sand, Flaubert's slow political transformation toward something like Republicanism and, chiefly for Brooks, the relevance of *L'Éducation sentimentale* for "the novelization of history" (204).

Brooks sets his narrative in terms of a problem initially posed by Flaubert: would a proper reading of *L'Éducation sentimentale* have saved France from "war, civil war, and self-immolation" (xxiii)? In pursuit of this question, Brooks begins by tracing Flaubert's path from the scandal of *Madame Bovary* to respectability (Legion of Honor in 1866), his budding friendship with George Sand, and the "generally baffled or savage" reception of *L'Éducation sentimentale* in 1869 (20). Chapter two then describes the events of the "Terrible Year" with special emphasis on the correspondence between two friends that, despite the gulf between Flaubert's hatred of democracy and Sand's "humanitarian socialism" (44), expressed great mutual sympathy. In chapter three the story segues to a photographic history of the ruins of Paris. Here a rich trove of illustrations benefits from shrewd observations about the paradox of images of destruction sold in luxury bindings (77) and the deceptions created by retouched photos and fake photomontages (79). Chapter four offers the kind of reading of *L'Éducation sentimentale* that Flaubert felt might have avoided the Commune and its aftermath. Flaubert specialists may be disappointed by the extended summary of the novel and the somewhat slight engagement with critical issues. Nevertheless, the chapter includes deep insights concerning the novel's "ominous lesson" (110) that the class warfare of 1848 held for 1871.

Brooks here poses the heart of the problem entailed in Flaubert's claim that *L'Éducation sentimentale* ought to have been a cautionary tale: "How are idiots [Flaubert's protagonists and, by extension, his generation] supposed to profit from the lessons of history" (111)? Postponing an answer, Brooks devotes chapter five to the aftermath, in both political and literary terms, of the "Terrible Year." The story relates the building of the Sacré-Coeur basilica, "the symbol of allegiance to the monarchy and the Church and rejection of the republic" (122), the revival of the cult of Joan of Arc, and Hugo's *Quatrevingt-treize*—the latter seen by Brooks as an ultimately ineffectual effort to achieve "peace and reconciliation" between political antagonists (144–45). Chapter six narrates Flaubert's writing of "Un cœur simple" for George Sand, a work that Brooks envisions as one of the "milestones along Flaubert's path to republicanism" (148). Brooks rightly cautions readers against assuming that Flaubert's customary irony is at work in the story of Félicité and her parrot, treating the tale instead as "a radical dissent" (163) from bourgeois commonplaces. Chapter seven, "The Historical Imagination," inserts *Salammô* and Flaubert's late writings (the unfinished *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, the projected novel *Sous Napoléon III*) into a brief but perceptive essay on what distinguishes *L'Éducation sentimentale* from other nineteenth-century historical fiction. The latter, unlike Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830) or Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869), provides the reader with "a radical form of historical consciousness that can never reach total understanding" (186). Brooks calls attention, however, to the fact that Flaubert's last word on the matter of 1848 occurs in chapter six of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, when "the two nerds" unexpectedly prove to be "informed and likeable commentators" on the Second Republic's demise at the hands of Napoléon III (192). The "Epilogue" links the story of "the unexpected meeting of Flaubert and the Commune" (200) amid the ruins of Paris to the events Brooks himself experienced in May 1968, an insurgency whose gestures were informed by those of the 1871 Communards.

Although *Flaubert in the Ruins of Paris* is aimed at an audience more interested in history and biography than literary criticism, even specialists will benefit from this book's generous and lucid reading of Flaubert's texts. Brooks offers us a clear-eyed judgment of the reasons *L'Éducation sentimentale* could not have prevented the "Terrible Year," *pace* Flaubert, while remaining "a remarkable attempt at understanding [...] what is at stake for the individual among the forces of history" (204).

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