

Rice-DeFosse on Poyet (2017)

Poyet, Thierry. *La Gens Flaubert: la fabrique de l'écrivain entre postures, amitiés et théories littéraires*. Classiques Garnier, "Lettres Modernes Minard," 2017, pp. 618, ISBN 978-2-406-05742-0

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In this ambitious study, Thierry Poyet challenges the myth that Gustave Flaubert was the "hermit of Croisset" who sacrificed his life for art's sake. Instead, Poyet sets out to establish the writer's sociability as a key component in "the making of the master," as Enid Starkie put it. He reinscribes Flaubert into the multiple social networks in which he circulated to trace the path that led to the construction of "le romancier flaubertien," not an individual, but rather a new model of the writer that persists even today. Poyet's work is informed by Bourdieu's formulation that what constitutes Flaubert's radical originality and creative force is his inscription into *le champ littéraire* of his time and the ways he dealt with its contradictions, difficulties, and problems. Poyet studies Flaubert's practices of sociability: behaviors, stances, and interactions that shaped the writer, what Poyet terms "la fabrique de l'écrivain." Poyet takes Edmond de Goncourt's term "une gens Zola," used to belittle Zola and his sycophantic circle, and recasts it more positively as "la gens Flaubert."

Poyet divides his study into three parts that focus on the domains that, he argues, were key to "la fabrique de l'écrivain." The first emphasizes Flaubert's circulation within social networks of friends and other artists over the course of his lifetime; the second examines Flaubert's responses, largely in his correspondence, to the novels of his contemporaries; and the last moves from Flaubert's literary postures to theoretical reflection, and the writer's legacy. Each part contains a useful introduction and conclusion, as does the volume as a whole. A preface by Éric Le Calvez also orients the reader to Poyet's project.

The volume's great strength is the author's knowledge of Flaubert's development, esthetics, and sociability, as well as his more general expertise in nineteenth-century literary studies. It synthesizes a number of previous studies, not only those on Flaubert, but also work by scholars such as José-Luis Diaz or Marc Fumaroli on the literary context and on other writers and figures who also inhabited nineteenth-century circles of sociability. Poyet demonstrates that Flaubert surrounded himself with people with whom he exchanged ideas and before whom he performed his own identity. He traces the writer's connections as they coalesce over time: a first group of friends like Alfred Le Poittevin, Ernest Chevalier, Maxime Du Camp, Louis de Cormenin, and Louis Bouilhet evolved in part into the group that formed *La Revue de Paris*. Poyet delineates the dynamics within and the rivalries among a number of salons and *cénacles*, many hosted by women, including those of Louise Colet, Aglaé Sabatière or *la Présidente*, Jeanne de Tourbey comtesse de Loynes, and Princess Mathilde. He addresses Flaubert's own Sunday cenacle on the boulevard du Temple, the Magny dinners, as well as other cafés and restaurants where *la gens Flaubert* engaged with one another, exchanged esthetic ideas, collaborated, and competed.

In the study's second part, Poyet turns to Flaubert as a reader of his contemporaries' works. Much of this part of the book is informed by the work of other scholars, such as Martine Reid's *Flaubert correspondant* or Yvan Leclerc's study of Flaubert's correspondence with Guy de Maupassant. Poyet's knowledge of Flaubert's responses to his contemporaries is impressive. He examines, for example, his disdain for successful contemporaries like Du Camp, Ernest Feydeau, or Alphonse Daudet whose ambition led them to please the public rather than seek an artistic ideal. Poyet's focus on Flaubert's reactions over time is revealing, as is his attention to detail. If Flaubert praises some works as entertaining or finds certain passages well written, he is nonetheless critical of works written in haste and without attention to form. This second part includes synopses of the plots of many lesser-known novels, which, while certainly valuable, make for tedious reading.

Poyet also studies Flaubert's attitude toward the undeniable "majores": writers like Victor Hugo, George Sand, Jules and Edmond Goncourt, and Zola whose works have, like Flaubert's, endured. Flaubert's appreciation of these masterful contemporaries, his deference to them, and his difference from them are the most salient features in this section. There is also a section dedicated to writers who can be considered Flaubert's heirs, Maupassant chief among them, but also "petits naturalistes" like J.-K. Huysmans and Paul Alexis. Poyet pays considerable attention to a disparate group of women writers: Louise Colet, Marie-Sophie Leroyer de Chantepie, and Amélie Bosquet. Acknowledging Flaubert's misogyny, Poyet underscores the writer's rejection of any literature used toward social or feminist ends. Poyet himself is particularly harsh in his judgment of Louise Colet, reducing two of her narrative works to transparent confessional pieces in which Flaubert is a thinly disguised target for revenge.

The third section of Poyet's study is devoted to the theoretical issues that emerge in the study of Flaubert's sociability and that form his literary modernity. The author once again takes up Flaubert's choice to distance himself from his contemporaries in a

“réception du refus.” Flaubert also refuses to articulate a theory or to consider himself the leader of a literary movement. The man of many contradictions nevertheless becomes “le romancier flaubertien,” embodying a new conception of the writer and his *autorictas*.

Except for one play by Maupassant, the study’s exclusive focus on novels is somewhat limiting. Poet Louis Bouilhet’s influence on Flaubert’s esthetics is certainly acknowledged, especially in the volume’s third part, yet scholars have also shown that Colet’s poetry, the genre in which she excelled, can be read as an ideological and esthetic response to Flaubert. There are also several nods in this volume to Baudelaire as a worthy contemporary, but the focus on the novel limits any comparison. Nonetheless, Poyet undeniably succeeds in situating Flaubert within a vast *champ littéraire*.

The one friend who seems to endure, for better or worse, is Du Camp. Poyet portrays him sympathetically as someone who illustrates a key tension at the heart of any discussion of Flaubert’s social and cultural identity, for even Du Camp is eclipsed by the “Maître.” In the end, Flaubert always defines himself over and against la *gens* Flaubert. Despite his very real sociability, he remains singular in his talent and legacy.

Volume: 47.3–4

Year:

- 2019