

A Sentimental Reeducation: Flaubert and the Job Market

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WHEN I agreed to write what I thought would be an advice column on finding a tenure-track job in French, various clichés came to mind: Be yourself. Stay optimistic. Look for the best possible fit. Remember to soak your rat-bone amulet in virgin blood at midnight before your first interview. But it quickly dawned on me that I really had no surefire tips for playing the market. I wanted most to reassure new candidates, but rattling off bogus strategies would do no such thing. At the same time, looking back to when I was actively seeking a job, I now recognize one source of the graduate students' desire for such strategies. Graduate school and the job market constantly barrage the student with contradictory messages. In my case, overcoming the debilitating psychological effects of these messages was (besides gainful employment of course) the most positive outcome of my search. If I could not supply the arms for defeating the market, I could at least write about one job candidate's sentimental education.

So I opened up Flaubert's great novel of 1869, *A Sentimental Education*. I did so keeping in mind the almost total disillusionment that Frédéric Moreau would experience by the end of the narrative. But before so many illusions fade, I wanted to remember his exuberant anticipation and how it echoed my own at the beginning of graduate studies in French at Yale. The book opens with Frédéric in dreamy contemplation as he looks over the city from a steamboat: "Frédéric was thinking of the room he'd be living in Paris, of an idea for a play, of subjects for a painting, of his future passionate affairs of the heart" (4). Graduate school created in me and in many of my colleagues a similarly buoyant expectancy, of future accomplishments, of the freedom that comes from a humanist education, but also of place, of our own room in the city of academia.

Frédéric's feelings encompass many interests, but they lack a concrete object, as is underlined by the

shifting perspective that comes from his standing on the moving steamboat. That is, until Frédéric, surrounded by dirty workers on that steamboat deck, glimpses, "like a vision from another world," the embodiment of all his longings: Mme Arnoux, the woman with whose image he falls immediately and irredeemably in love (6). It may sound a bit vulgar, but the good tenure-track job has something of Mme Arnoux in it: for it too is the anticipated validation of many years of work, a face to put on success. But like Parisian success and Mme Arnoux, it is exceedingly difficult to obtain. Ironically, Frédéric's steamboat is heading not *in to* Paris but *out of* Paris—away from the capital of the nineteenth century and toward the boring provincial life he was born into. Flaubert constantly distances his hero from the object of his desire. When, later back in Paris, he entertains the idea of approaching Mme Arnoux for the first time—through writing a letter—he never sends it because he is immobilized by the first thought of failure. Instead of pursuing his dreams, he spends his youth buffeted from disappointment to disappointment, following the advice of others, and unable to act. Frédéric's problem with both women and work is that he seeks something so perfect that it doesn't exist.

His incapacity is not genetic but the symptom of his encounter with a society that economizes everything. Frédéric's relation to his mother illustrates this economization of human relations. Born to a noble family, Mme Moreau must tend to financial affairs when her bourgeois husband dies—she

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is contaminated by the money that she must deal with and that she ends up losing. Out of concern for her son she forgoes maternal tenderness, accepts the role of the father, and pushes him toward “*une place*” defined here as a law office and a rich wife—certainly not what Frédéric was dreaming about on that steamboat. As a natural response to his relation with his mother, Frédéric’s desire for Mme Arnoux is socially determined: an idealization, sacred and priceless, she is a spiritualized replacement of the mother he has lost to money. This idealization is demanding too much of Mme Arnoux, who remains throughout an unsubstantial apparition: his perception of her is too elevated, and Frédéric necessarily loves her most from afar. Turning his desires to the unattainable is his way of refusing his social place: as a result he sits around waiting for things to happen.

Graduate school is also beset by a contradictory logic that combines the liberating promise of the humanities with the constraints of a market system. Louis Menand points to what he calls the “obscene” length of time to degree for most graduate students in the humanities: a direct result of the scarcity of jobs (12). His figure of 9.8 years refers to English graduates, but similar numbers reflect what is happening in languages. Menand’s answer to why so many graduate students are encouraged to persevere in such an uncomfortable space is revealing. Though the number of undergraduate majors in English (and in languages) has declined or leveled, composition and beginning to intermediate languages—the “*Bonjour, ça va*” classes—are still among the most taught courses at the university. Whether administrations acknowledge the fact or not, graduate students often sense that they are a source of cheap labor rather than respected researchers. Striving for the profession after graduation can seem like a silly game if your perceived role ends with the general education requirement. It is easy to find work in academia; it is harder to find place.

For many graduate students, even in the best schools, the daily experience of time is symptomatic of these contradictory messages. On the one hand, preparing for classes and meeting students and, on the other, dealing with routine bear a remarkable resemblance to Frédéric’s activities: hanging around in cafés, endlessly discussing art and politics, flirting with possible romantic interests, acting the flaneur, or worrying about the future. And mostly, like Frédéric, who constantly tries to

se rendre intéressant, students try to “make themselves interesting.” One recent job candidate was heard bemoaning graduate studies as “long periods of boredom punctuated by [despair]” (McGeeveran and Traister). It only took eight years for Frédéric to be fed up enough with this combination of passivity and uncertainty to split Paris forever; in some ways graduate students are more enduring. Now I am aware that I am painting a bleak and (at least in my case) somewhat exaggerated picture of the scenario, a scenario that the faculty and administration at Yale were combating while I was there but one that most graduate students will readily recognize.

Flaubert himself was confronted with a socio-economic field—literary production—in which he saw no place for his authentic self. But with a considerable willfulness, he created his own place through writing. By simply making his social world visible in a narrative form, he was able to understand and master it. I can assure you that I did not want to be like Frédéric when I ventured out on the job market for the first time in 2002. At that moment, after six years of graduate school, I wasn’t exactly ready. My dissertation was still far from finished and was advancing at a snail’s pace. Personal reasons spurred me toward the market: after starting graduate school a bit late in life, I had a child in August 2002. It is a wonder what a mouth to feed will do for your search for dependable income: even Frédéric decided, if only for a moment, to get serious when his mistress informed him that she was pregnant. Writing the boilerplate letter and doing mock interviews with my adviser and colleagues came as a revelation, because they forced me to think in a way that would have repercussions. I mention these personal reasons only because it seems clear to me that graduate schools themselves will not provide the map leading to a position; the impetus must come from within.

So without having finished my dissertation, I managed to nail down a visiting position at Tulane (2003–04). That year had a wonderful effect on my productivity. After moving to New Orleans, I taught three new classes a semester, including one graduate course; directed an independent study with another graduate student; and gave a talk in the department. Over the year I wrote two chapters of my dissertation plus the conclusion and revised the entire thing. I also sent out several application dossiers during my first semester. I had three on-campus interviews and accepted my present tenure-track position. I didn’t get much sleep in New Orleans, and it was not because I

spent my nights cavorting in jazz clubs. Instead something amazing was occurring: all that time I spent running to class or tapping away at my computer actually mattered. I enjoyed the professional aspects of the job, teaching, getting to know the faculty members and students, reading senior theses, and so on. My advice to anyone passively weighing the choice between a visiting position and another year in school is to take the job; it will hurt, but—as long as you are sure you can survive it—you will gain a sense of relevance and urgency. Perhaps most important, I realized where the lie about graduate school was located: not in the desire to learn and share with students, but in the false impression of pure functionality that the market uses to hide your real value.

At one point in *L'éducation sentimentale*, Frédéric somewhat comically challenges to a duel an old man who has vaguely insulted Mme Arnoux's honor. On the surface, my present tenure-track position at Clemson University is not exactly the type of job that inspires such heroic sacrifice. Instead it involves compromise and realism. Clemson is a large research university, emphasizing science and technology, which has set out on a quest to achieve top-twenty status among public universities—a laudable goal, but one that does not necessarily include humanities research as its number one priority. But it is the realism of this position that makes it most instructive for me. I do teach a certain number of general education classes. But I also work with interesting colleagues and motivated students. I have a considerable amount of responsibility and flexibility; for example, I teach French language and culture in languages and film in English, and I have been involved in hiring and served on curriculum committees. Even the push to top twenty is forcing the administration to take the humanities more seriously. Most important, because of the creativity of deans and department heads, I have found some time for research and writing. The university may not specifically value the humanities, but it is filled with people who do and who have been able to stake out a space for research and teaching. The world of compromise and negotiation isn't all that bad once you've learned to be self-motivated. In other words, I am seeing light at the end of the tunnel, even if that light isn't quite as intense as I may have dreamed.

So after this short period of time—two and a half years—since I stopped graduate school (one and a half years since I submitted my dissertation), I see

myself reproducing, in an incomplete sort of way, Frédéric's reminiscence near the end of *A Sentimental Education*. He and his oldest friend, Charles Deslauriers, meet again after many years and recall an adventure from their adolescence, when they attempted to free themselves of their virginity in the most economic way possible, by entering “one of those houses . . . where young women in white bed-jackets with rouged cheeks and long earrings would tap on the windowpane as men went by” (463). Unfortunately for their escapade, Frédéric loses his head at the sight of so many available female bodies and flees. The ever-broke Deslauriers has no choice but to follow. Even at this young age, Frédéric preferred the idea of sex to its realization. But most interesting, it is that moment of flight that, according to both of them, was the “best thing they ever did” (421; “C'est là ce que nous avons eu de meilleur!”—the oft-quoted last sentence of the original text in French).

Perhaps this is the culmination of a sentimental education, to realize that the best thing is not to sell out, not to compromise one's feelings by sully-ing them in the real world. And yet 450 pages of frustration to arrive at this somewhat paltry desert seems a bit long to me. Pure as he claims to be (Flaubert doesn't seem so sure), Frédéric is starting to smell a bit like a wet, beaten dog. This effect reminds me of the most important lesson of my own sentimental reeducation: if we accept the market's message that there is a contradiction between place and desire, then we will have to resort to the comfort of failures. For some this lesson might sound like I am suggesting that Frédéric go with the prostitutes, completely annihilating his idealism. But that idea would be to confuse Flaubert's time and society with ours. For as Flaubert wrote in 1864, the point of *L'éducation sentimentale* was to show that authentic feelings really had no place whatsoever in contemporary society: “I want to write the moral history of the men of my generation—though ‘sentimental’ would be a more accurate word. It's a book about love, about passion; but passion such as can exist today: that is to say, *inactive*” (qtd. in Maynial i; my trans.). On the other end of the job search, I have found out that I do not live in an analogous situation. Our desires can be active if we manage to avoid Frédéric's debilitating model. The graduate student's feeling of incapacity is as much a mere psychological illusion as it is the reality of a nasty economy. Despite the moral problems of academia, positions are still available for those who do not

demand the comforts of velvet upholstery and fine china that never really satisfied Frédéric anyway.

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