

Gustave Flaubert

**MEMOIRES D'UN FOU
MEMOIRS OF A MADMAN**

Parallel translation and critical edition by

Timothy Unwin

**Liverpool Online Series
Critical Editions of French Texts**

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Mémoires d'un fou
Memoirs of a Madman

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INTRODUCTION

The text in which the young Flaubert evokes the searing experience of love was once described by Jean Bruneau as ‘le document le plus précieux qui nous soit parvenu de l’adolescence de Flaubert’ [‘the most valuable document from Flaubert’s youth to have passed down to us’].¹ Yet the work might never have found its way into the corpus. Produced in the latter stages of 1838, the manuscript was offered to Flaubert’s friend Le Poittevin as a New Year’s gift on 4 January 1839. It was never again mentioned by Flaubert himself, nor did it figure in the list of the early writings drawn up by his niece for the Quantin *Œuvres complètes* of 1886. When Le Poittevin died in 1848, the manuscript passed into the hands of his son Louis. It subsequently became the property of Pierre Dauze who published the text some two decades after Flaubert’s death, first in *La Revue Blanche* in four instalments between December 1900 and February 1901, and then as a volume.² Its entry into the corpus certainly seems to have been by the back door, contrary to the intentions either of Flaubert himself (who had clear views about what should and what should not see the light of day) or of his niece (who may not have known of the manuscript’s existence).

On Pierre Dauze’s death in 1914, the manuscript found its way into an anonymous private collection and disappeared – definitively, scholars thought – from circulation. The last scholar to have sighted it was René Descharmes, whose full and authoritative descriptions can be found in the Fonds René Descharmes at the Bibliothèque nationale de France.³ However, in a dramatic recent development, Claudine Gothot-Mersch was able to determine the whereabouts of the manuscript and to gain permission from its current owner to use it for her Folio/Pléiade editions.⁴ The text established by Gothot-Mersch, containing two important additions, as well as the text of a letter to Le Poittevin which accompanied the manuscript,⁵ forms the basis of our own text and translation in this volume. Disappointingly, Gothot-Mersch provides only the most cursory description of the

¹ Jean Bruneau, *Les Débuts littéraires de Gustave Flaubert* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1962), p. 248.

² Gustave Flaubert, *Mémoires d’un fou*, ed. by Pierre Dauze (Paris: Floury, 1901).

³ NAF 23839 folios 141-48.

⁴ Gustave Flaubert, *Les Mémoires d’un fou. Novembre. Pyrénées-Corse. Voyage en Italie*, ed. by Claudine Gothot-Mersch (Paris: Gallimard, Collection ‘Folio Classique’, 2001). The edition is replicated in Gustave Flaubert, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2001).

⁵ See notes 1, 5 and 12 in the Notes on the Text at the end of this edition.

manuscript and the handwriting, and the most authoritative account of it in print remains that of Jean Bruneau, on the basis of René Descharmes's notes. Gothot-Mersch does, it is true, underline the point that the text is a fair copy. This being so, it may not have the same intrinsic interest for scholars as some of the famous drafts of the mature novels – though clearly, there are changes or deletions that need to be properly accounted for, since Gothot-Mersch describes the passages given in her notes as earlier versions of the text. No doubt all scholars interested in Flaubert's juvenilia will hope that one day a facsimile edition of the *Mémoires* can be made available, and especially that the manuscript will find its way into a public archive, enabling further investigation of the genesis of this fascinating and crucial text.

It is, then, precisely a century since that first publication of *Mémoires d'un fou*. Its significance no longer needs any special pleading, even though its stylistic richness continues, perhaps, to be undervalued. The text has been successfully re-edited on a number of occasions in recent years, notably by Yvan Leclerc for Flammarion in 1991, then no less than twice in 2001, with the edition by Claudine Gothot-Mersch already referred to, and a further edition by Pierre-Louis Rey (see the Bibliography for full details). The present edition and translation is therefore offered not in order to uncover unedited documents or provide a new text in the original – for that task has now been almost completed – but above all to contribute to the growing debate about the profundity and complexity of this work, and to do so in a form accessible to scholars and interested readers of Flaubert in the English-speaking world. For it might well be argued that *Mémoires d'un fou* is the key early text in the Flaubertian canon – not so much because of its autobiographical revelations, important though these are, but rather because in it Flaubert develops for the first time a truly self-conscious mode of writing, a style which works intensely and overtly upon itself and its own processes.

A key purpose of our edition will be to provide an accurate and up-to-date translation of the *Mémoires* for the English-speaking reader. The only previous translation of the text into English, published in 1991,⁶ is workmanlike and has the merit of making available a number of additional early texts to the anglophone reader. However, it contains some quite serious errors, and does not take the form of a critical edition. In the centenary year of the first publication of Flaubert's novel, it is high time that a new translation was produced, taking account of the variants established by Gothot-Mersch, and complete with the critical apparatus that the work deserves. With a view to facilitating matters for the English-speaker, the present edition offers the text in parallel versions. This enables quick and easy cross-referencing between the original and its translation, and vice versa.

⁶ In Gustave Flaubert, *Early Writings*, translated and with an introduction by Robert Griffin (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991).

Footnotes are given on the translated text, but can easily be linked to the facing section of the original. All material quoted in the notes is also translated.⁷

Although *Mémoires d'un fou* has long been recognised as a key autobiographical text (Gérard-Gailly was the first to point out the extent to which the figure of Elisa Schlésinger was a source of inspiration for this and other works by Flaubert)⁸ it is perhaps the treatment and the handling of the 'autobiographical contract' which most interests the modern-day reader. Bruneau pointed out that this text properly belonged to the cycle of autobiographical works, after the historical and philosophical cycles of Flaubert's youth. Yet he stressed that this is a particular form of autobiography which strives for general and philosophical truths extracted from individual lived experience (*Les Débuts littéraires*, p. 252) – a blend of the personal and the philosophical, such as Flaubert had attempted earlier in 1838 with the unfinished *Agonies*. Certainly, the biographical facts of the central love episode are themselves simple and well known. In the summer of 1836, the Flaubert family goes to Trouville where the fourteen-year-old Gustave sets eyes on Elisa Schlésinger, a woman some ten years his senior with a husband and a young child. He falls in love with her, and the encounter will remain as one of the significant moments of his life. When Flaubert writes the second version of *L'Education sentimentale* in the 1860s, the portrayal of Madame Arnoux will, according to most biographers, owe more than a little to the figure of Elisa Schlésinger. In recent decades, it is true, some commentators have sought to downplay the biographical significance of Elisa Schlésinger. Jacques-Louis Douchin has argued, somewhat mischievously and not a little perversely, that *Mémoires d'un fou* is a work of pure imagination, owing nothing whatsoever to lived experience.⁹ He stresses a point that has fascinated many critics of this early novel, namely that the evocation of Elisa Schlésinger, alias Maria in the text, is carried out at a distance of two years, and he underlines the assertion made by the

⁷ In the introduction and notes to this edition, Flaubert's text will be referred to throughout as *Mémoires d'un fou*, or as the abbreviated *Mémoires*. Following the usual convention, we shall not attach a definite article to the title, though we note that one or two distinguished commentators of this text refer to it consistently as *Les Mémoires d'un fou*.

⁸ His findings, written up in a number of books, are summarised in *Le Grand Amour de Flaubert* (Paris: Aubier, 1944).

⁹ Jacques-Louis Douchin, 'Les *Mémoires d'un fou* de Flaubert: réalité ou fabulation?', *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, 83 (1983), 403-11, and *La Vie érotique de Flaubert* (Paris: Carrère, 1984), pp. 22-32.

narrator in the closing stages of the text that his love is a retrospective invention.¹⁰ As Flaubert writes: ‘Comment aurait-elle pu en effet voir que je l’aimais, car je ne l’aimais pas alors, et en tout ce que je vous ai dit, j’ai menti ; c’était maintenant que je l’aimais, que je la désirais’ [‘Indeed, how could she have seen that I loved her, for I did not love her then, and I have lied in everything I have told you. It was now that I loved and desired her’]. And in any case, as Claudine Gothot-Mersch points out, in 1836 the young Flaubert was probably still preoccupied with the elder of the two English sisters evoked in Chapter XV of the *Mémoires*. As for the episode where the young narrator removes Maria’s cloak from the oncoming tide – an episode which, duly transformed, will also be central to the encounter of Frédéric and Madame Arnoux in the 1869 *Education sentimentale* – it is, Gothot-Mersch claims, based on an 1838 event, not the 1836 encounter with Elisa Schlésinger (*Mémoires d’un fou*, ed. by Gothot-Mersch, p. 15).

To add to this current of scepticism about the real impact of Elisa Schlésinger, we should observe that there is relatively little evidence elsewhere in the writings of the period to suggest that the young author was overwhelmed by the encounter at Trouville – though an episode from the 1837 short story ‘Quidquid volueris’ might be seen as a prototype for the scene in which the narrator of the *Mémoires* goes out in a rowing boat one evening with Maria and her husband.¹¹ Yet whatever the precise facts of the Trouville encounter may be, Flaubert’s lifelong attachment to Elisa Schlésinger is itself beyond doubt.¹² Enough is known about the biographical background for us to deduce that in *Mémoires d’un fou* he is at the very least exploring and problematising the limits between autobiography and fiction, and discovering that the relationship between them is a two-way dynamic. In the dedication to Le Poittevin he stresses this tension between the words on the page and the emotions that gave rise to or flow from them, suggesting that the link is far from simple and the result far from even: ‘Si le mot paraît souvent surpasser le sentiment qu’il exprime, c’est que, ailleurs, il

¹⁰ Thibaudet offers one of the first and most elegant formulations of this phenomenon when he talks of the evocation of Maria as a ‘transmutation par la solitude’ (Albert Thibaudet, *Gustave Flaubert* (Paris: Gallimard, 1935), p. 20).

¹¹ ‘Quidquid volueris’ (*Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), pp. 102-13) is the story of an inarticulate hero, Djalioh, who is half-human, half-ape. In many ways he can be seen as the forerunner to the madman of *Mémoires d’un fou*, notably in a passage where he plays a violin and produces a series of disjointed and fragmented sounds, a music which has no sense or form for anyone but himself. In the scene of the boating trip, he contemplates the woman of his dreams and her materialistic and cynical husband as he rows them across a lake: ‘L’eau du lac était limpide et calme, mais la tempête était dans son cœur ; plusieurs fois il crut devenir fou...’ [‘The waters of the lake were clear and calm, but there was a storm in his heart; several times, he thought he was going mad’] (p. 110). Future references to the Seuil edition are given in parenthesis as OC I and OC II.

¹² See the useful series of points made by Claudine Gothot-Mersch (*Mémoires d’un fou*, ed. by Gothot-Mersch, p. 13).

a fléchi sous le poids du cœur' ['If it should frequently seem that words go beyond the feelings they express, it is because elsewhere they were overburdened by the weight of the heart']. Writing is not only an attempt to recapture or recreate a pre-existing reality (though it is perhaps that as well), it is a means of reworking reality, of producing the truth of lived experience in a new dimension. Flaubert struggles uneasily with this concept of 'realism' and, interestingly, builds into his text the realisation that he has failed to achieve it. Certainly, his attempts are erratic, and his style sometimes exaggeratedly mannered – a failing he will subsequently chastise himself for in *Novembre*, where a second narrator concludes the text with an indictment of the stylistic excesses of the first.¹³ He is capable both of intensely personal incursions into the narrative (most notably the lament of Chapter XXII in which he bids an emotional farewell to his imagined Maria) and of studied literary rhetoric which has a self-conscious pose about it (as in the list of poetic and beautiful aspects of life that he gives in the early paragraphs of Chapter VIII). Yet he shows that the two extremes of life and literature can sometimes overlap, that sincerity is as much a problem of writing as of feeling, and that true style and vision consist in articulating the 'mad' thoughts of the writing subject. As Balzac had famously noted in the preface to *La Peau de chagrin* in 1831, writers 'inventent le vrai par analogie' ['invent truth by analogy'].¹⁴ Flaubert is now working on his own version of this belief, and to that extent *Mémoires d'un fou* becomes something of a writer's workshop.

The interpolation of the episode of the English sisters in Chapter XV, another part of the text which has a tantalisingly autobiographical dimension, has often been considered a sign of the breakdown of Flaubert's narrative and an easy recourse in the face of failure. Yet there too, the uses made of autobiography are deeply revealing, for there are clear attempts to stylise 'fact' and to give a literary feel to the narrative. Bruneau comments on the artificial style of this episode, and notes its difference of tone by comparison with the Maria episode (*Les Débuts littéraires*, p. 256). Be that as it may, the original contents here have been subject to as much speculation as that of the Trouville episode. It was long believed that the 'sœurs anglaises' were the Collier sisters, mentioned by Flaubert's niece Caroline in her *Souvenirs intimes*. Then in the 1950s two English scholars, Philip Spencer and C.B. West, were able to demonstrate that the Flauberts did not meet the Collier family until later than 1835 when the episode appears to be set – for

¹³ '...si quelqu'un, ayant passé, pour arriver jusqu'à cette page, à travers toutes les métaphores, hyperboles et autres figures qui remplissent les précédentes, désire y trouver une fin, qu'il continue: nous allons la lui donner' ['...if, to get to this page, having passed through all the metaphors, hyperbole and other figures of speech that fill up the preceding ones, someone should wish for a conclusion, let him continue: we shall provide it'] (OC I, p. 272).

¹⁴ Balzac, preface to *La Peau de chagrin*, in *La Comédie humaine*, ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex, 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1976-81), vol. X, p. 52.

Spencer it was 1837 at the earliest, and for West 1842.¹⁵ Either way, this means that the sisters described in *Mémoires d'un fou* cannot be the Colliers. Bruneau suggests, moreover, that the internal evidence of the chapter is itself enough to confirm this conclusion (*Les Débuts littéraires*, pp. 244-45). In fact, biographers have identified the elder English sister of the *Mémoires* as Caroline Anne Heuland, who on 20 January 1838 married an artist in Rouen by the name of Robert Evrard.¹⁶ This is important, for it confirms that Flaubert's text is based largely on fact, even to the point of retaining the name Caroline in his text. For Bruneau, the chronology and dating of the biographical material raises important questions, and gives equally important answers, about Flaubert's literary ambitions. The likely chronology, he suggests, is that Flaubert first meets Caroline in 1835, pursues his dalliance with her into the following year when he writes about it, then meets Elisa Schlésinger. But the love for Elisa will not be immediate, and it is only on writing the *Mémoires* in 1838 that he experiences its full impact.¹⁷ Challenging Spencer's view that chronology has been inverted in an ingenious piece of literary construction by the young author,¹⁸ Bruneau suggests that Flaubert is simply being true to life. 'Il ne faut donc pas chercher aux *Mémoires d'un fou* une composition savante et calculée', he asserts ['One should not look for a careful and calculated structure in the *Mémoires*'] (*Les Débuts littéraires*, p. 253). Yet without going as far as Spencer and claiming that the construction of the *Mémoires* is pure artifice, involving licence with the facts, we should note that the text shows an obvious opposition between 'narrated time' (first the encounter with Caroline, then the love for Maria), and 'narrating time' (first the Maria episode, then that of the English sisters). The narrator himself uses this narrative disjunction to point to a higher poetic and emotional truth, when he writes: 'Est-il

¹⁵ Philip Spencer, 'New Light on Flaubert's Youth', *French Studies*, 8 (1954), 97-108; C.B. West, 'Gustave Flaubert et Harriet Collier : première rencontre à Trouville', *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France*, 57 (1957), 1-9.

¹⁶ See Lucien Andrieu, 'Caroline Anne Heuland, l'Anglaise probable des *Mémoires d'un fou*', *Les Amis de Flaubert*, 23 (1963), 27-29.

¹⁷ As Gothot-Mersch in turn puts it: 'Lorsque Flaubert fait la connaissance d'Elisa Schlésinger à Trouville, durant l'été de 1836, il est fort occupé de Caroline Heuland. Da là sans doute le fait qu'il ne donne pas immédiatement toute son importance à la nouvelle rencontre ; il ne le fera que lorsque Caroline sortira de sa vie' ['When Flaubert meets Elisa Schlésinger in Trouville during the summer of 1836, he is still preoccupied by Caroline Heuland. This no doubt explains why he does not immediately see the full significance of his new encounter. This will only happen when Caroline is out of his life'] (*Mémoires d'un fou*, ed. by Gothot-Mersch, p. 15).

¹⁸ 'Is it not most probable that Flaubert tampered with the dates; that he transposed the two encounters; that he sought to enhance his love for Elisa by pretending that he had met her *after* the Colliers instead of before; that he gave a deliberate note of immaturity to his portrait of Gertrude; and that *Mémoires d'un fou* has a far more ingenious and calculated structure than anyone has hitherto supposed?' (Spencer, 'New Light on Flaubert's Youth', p. 102).

besoin de dire que cela avait été à l'amour ce que le crépuscule est au grand jour, et que le regard de Maria fit évanouir le souvenir de cette pâle enfant ?' ['Need I say that it was to love what the dawn is to broad daylight, and that Maria's gaze made the memory of this pale child vanish into thin air?'] It seems important to give due attention to his reordering of events in the narrative chronology, for it tells us that biographical fact is most certainly at some level being exploited for literary effect. We do not have to believe, in order to accept this argument, in the notion of an 'ingenious and calculated structure' in the text, but nor should we simplistically conclude that artifice is therefore absent. Surely the truth is somewhere between these extremes. Neither total artifice, nor mere literal truth, the *Mémoires* work in an area between them and explore the immensely complicated relationship between 'literature' and 'life'.

In that exploration lies much of the interest of this text, for at the age of almost seventeen Flaubert already finds himself writing about writing, both implicitly and explicitly. The sense of how writing might either distort or indeed enhance lived experience is present throughout his text. On the one hand the writer tries to wrest his words free from the particulars of his own life, yet on the other hand he rediscovers the qualities of that life through writing itself. The writer is seen as a being who lives and experiences reality on a level different from that of other men. This puts him outside or beyond the scope of 'normal' human interchange, and he is seen as an outcast – typically, in the descriptions of school life in Chapter V where he is mocked and ridiculed. Madness itself is, of course, the first and central metaphor of his text, yet it is clear that we are a long way from the inarticulate rantings that we might wish to associate with folly. Madness is, rather, the alienation associated with that turbulent and sometimes violent inner life of poetry and sensation experienced by the adolescent author. That Flaubert should have got so far in articulating this condition is itself a sign of the precocious power of his talent. Sartre waspishly observes: 'Cette éloquence ne connaît aucune des difficultés qui feront la grandeur et l'austérité de *Madame Bovary*, elle coule de source. Et pourtant, à quoi sert-elle? A écrire qu'il ne faut pas écrire' ['This eloquence does not encounter any of the difficulties that will make *Madame Bovary* such a great and austere novel – it flows freely. And yet, what is its purpose? – to write that one should not write'].¹⁹ It is true, certainly, that the young writer sees his so-called madness as a sign of his superiority. In his descriptions of the classroom, the real fools are in his view the teacher and pupils, while he is the misunderstood poet and budding genius: 'Les imbéciles ! eux, rire de moi ! eux, si faibles, si communs, au cerveau si étroit ; moi, dont l'esprit se noyait sur les limites de la création, qui étais perdu dans tous les mondes de la

¹⁹ Sartre, *L'Idiot de la famille*, 3 vols. (Paris : Gallimard, 1971-72), vol. I, p. 39.

poésie' ['What fools they were to laugh at me, feeble and vulgar as they were, in all their narrow-mindedness. And there I was, my mind drifting to the very limits of creation, lost in worlds of poetry']. That the 'poetry' of his inner life should be referred to at one remove, rather than represented directly, is moreover of great interest, for the author is implying that there is something which cannot be straightforwardly or directly transcribed here. Rather, poetry is as complex and as unfathomable as madness. It can only be snatched momentarily, but it is the glimpse of it in and through the written word that conveys its fragmented richness. It might, then, be argued that, far from writing that one should not write, as Sartre claims, Flaubert is beginning to open up the suggestive possibilities of the understated or the indirectly mentioned, exploring the potential of words to evoke through their very ordinariness or simplicity the richness that lies beyond language. For many readers of Flaubert, this tension between the complex realms of the imagination and the almost deceptive simplicity of language remains one of the enduring fascinations of his style.

The place of *Mémoires d'un fou* as the first 'novel', sustained or not, in the Flaubertian canon has long been recognised. The 1964 Seuil edition breaks the chronology of Flaubert's early output and places *Mémoires d'un fou* immediately before *Novembre* and the *Education sentimentale* of 1845, by way of demonstrating its status as one of the three 'premiers romans'. *Mémoires d'un fou* indeed shares with those two later texts a preoccupation with the notion of writing which gives a fascinating glimpse of what is to come in the mature work. Like them, it dramatises the quest to break beyond the limits and constraints of language, and to find plenitude in artistic expression. 'Si j'ai éprouvé des moments d'enthousiasme,' writes Flaubert in a statement that could just as easily have appeared in *Novembre*, 'c'est à l'art que je les dois ; et cependant quelle vanité que l'art ! vouloir peindre l'homme dans un bloc de pierre ou l'âme dans des mots, les sentiments par des sons et la nature sur une toile vernie' ['If I have felt any moments of enthusiasm, it is to art that I owe them. And yet, what vanity there is in art! It tries to depict man in a block of stone, the soul in words, feelings in sounds, or nature on a varnished canvas']. At the same time, the *Mémoires* show Flaubert beginning to adopt the conventions of realism as he evokes the follies and the foibles of contemporary society – most notably in his descriptions of the early tourists in Trouville, but also in the descriptions of life in the classroom or in the interpolated episode of the English sisters – sometimes showing a burgeoning fascination with clichés and *idées reçues*. The episode in Chapter XII where the narrator reports the conversations at Trouville is a sure sign that Flaubert already has an eye for the platitudes and banalities of conversation. It also offers an early example of the use of free indirect style in his writing, where the inverted commas are dropped (in the second paragraph of the extract quoted below) and the introductory verb or phrase is omitted. The huge importance of this technique in Flaubert's writing has been amply documented, yet here we see it at its very

inception, in a typically ‘Flaubertian’ context where the author’s preoccupation with *bêtise* is abundantly obvious:

On se récrie sur l’inconfort des logements, sur le détestable de la cuisine d’auberge. Ce dernier trait surtout est du meilleur ton possible : «Oh ! le linge est-il sale ! C’est trop poivré ; c’est trop épicé ! Ah ! l’horreur ! ma chère.»

Va-t-on ensemble à la promenade, c’est à qui s’extasiera davantage sur la beauté du paysage. Que c’est beau ! que la mer est belle !

[People complain about the discomfort of the accommodation, and the appalling conditions in which they must eat. This latter subject, above all, is considered very chic. ‘Oh! isn’t the table-linen dirty! There is too much pepper; it is too spicy! Oh! my dear! how terrible it is!’

If one should go out on a walk, there is rivalry about who will wax more enthusiastic over the beauty of the countryside. Oh, how beautiful it is! how beautiful the sea is.]

The passage continues with a devastating and grimly comic debunking of the attitudes and poses that seaside tourists strike up, and shows that even at this early stage Flaubert is collecting observations worthy of inclusion in his *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*. *Mémoires d’un fou* is thus not only a novel about the impossibility of a meaningful inner life or about the quest for poetic and spiritual satisfaction (though it is certainly those things as well). It is a laboratory of language and writing, in which the young writer hones his observational skills and perfects his descriptive and stylistic techniques. The ‘metaphysical’ preoccupation with the question of writing that we find throughout the text thus extends also to the idea of writing as a specialist craft, requiring a range of techniques and skills with which the budding author must experiment. The deliberate, and slightly mannered deployment of such skills is apparent throughout the novel. The episode of the English sisters in Chapter XV is, almost throughout, an overt attempt to turn ‘reality’, or lived experience, into ‘style’, as in the following somewhat self-conscious lines:

Puis elles se mirent à courir, et leurs manteaux, que le vent levait derrière elles, flottaient en ondulant comme un flot qui descend ; elles s’arrêtèrent essouffées. Je me rappelle encore leurs haleines qui bruissaient à mes oreilles et qui portaient d’entre leurs dents blanches en vaporeuse fumée.

[Then they began to run, and their coats, billowing behind them in the wind, floated and undulated like breaking waves. They paused, all out of breath. I can still remember their breath, with its wheezing sound, coming out through their white teeth and making steam in the air.]

While Jean Bruneau maintains that this very artificiality of the ‘sœurs anglaises’ episode sets it apart from the rest of the text which is intensely personal in tone (*Les Débuts littéraires*, p. 255), the difference is in fact much less clear-cut than it

might initially seem. There are many similar passages of description in *Mémoires d'un fou*, some of the best known being the evocations of Maria in the Trouville episode, where Flaubert's growing confidence in his descriptive powers is becoming apparent. Similarly, the first description of Trouville itself shows prowess and craftsmanship, as the author evokes this charming seaside town, 'avec ses maisons entassées les unes sur les autres, noires, grises, rouges, blanches, tournées de tous côtés, sans alignement et sans symétrie, comme un tas de coquilles et de cailloux que la vague a poussés sur la côte' ['with its higgledy-piggledy houses, black, grey, red or white, pointing in every direction, with neither alignment nor symmetry, like a heap of shells and pebbles which the wave has brought onto the shore']. Though not all his descriptions are as successful as this – for Flaubert clearly does not yet take the care that will later be his hallmark as a writer – what they all have in common is a high degree of stylistic awareness and a desire to experiment with different ranges and resonances. This concern with style is what knits together the text as a whole, and it could be maintained that the English sisters episode, far from sitting at odds with the rest of the text, is an integral part of its overall experimental approach.

Various different registers are employed by Flaubert, and his style ranges from the heights of loftiness to the depths of the deadpan. One technique that is immediately recognisable to readers of the mature novels is the juxtaposition of short and simple phrases without any overt causal link, usually in passages of narrative rather than passages of description, such as the following moment in the episode of the English sisters: 'Elle avait un livre à la main ; c'était des vers, je crois ; elle le laissa tomber. Notre promenade continua' ['She had a book in her hand. I think it was poetry. She dropped it, and we continued our walk']. Or a similar moment a chapter earlier when Maria departs from Trouville: 'Il fallut partir ; nous nous séparâmes sans pouvoir lui dire adieu. Elle quitta les bains le même jour que nous. C'était un dimanche. Elle partit le matin, nous le soir' ['We had to leave. Maria and I parted without being able to say goodbye. She left the resort on the same day as we did. It was a Sunday. She left in the morning, we in the evening]. These passages, of such characteristically 'Flaubertian' resonance, suggest that the young author is beginning to exploit the possibilities of the unspoken and the unwritten, leaving it between the lines, to tantalising effect. As he will write to Louise Colet on 25 October 1853: 'Il y a tant de pensée entre une ligne et l'autre ! et ce que l'on sent le mieux reste flottant sur le blanc du papier' ['There is so much thought between one line and another! And what we feel most remains floating on the white of the paper'].²⁰

Lurking between the lines, too, is a brooding dissatisfaction, as Flaubert becomes aware of, and articulates, the huge gap between the 'poetry' he dreams of and the reality of his words. The second chapter of the novel describing the

²⁰ *Correspondance*, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1973-98), vol. II, p. 456. Future references to the correspondence will be given in parenthesis as *Cor.* followed by the volume and page number.

narrator's childhood sensations is one of the first major stages in the recognition of this gap. Yet, importantly, there is also the sense that 'style', if properly deployed and properly felt, can give a glimpse of the infinite richness of poetic sensation, and can therefore convey something of the essence of that ephemeral yet vital inner reality. There are numerous passages, as there will be in *Novembre*, describing the narrator's sense of the richness of the world and evoking the intuition of a poetic infinite, such as the following:

Je courais sur les rochers, je prenais le sable de l'océan que je laissais s'écouler au vent entre mes doigts, je mouillais des varechs et j'aspirais à pleine poitrine cet air salé et frais de l'océan, qui vous pénètre l'âme de tant d'énergie, de poétiques et larges pensées ; je regardais l'immensité, l'espace, l'infini, et mon âme s'abîmait devant cet horizon sans bornes.

[I would run on the rocks, take the sand from the ocean and let it slip through my fingers into the wind, then I would moisten the seaweed and fill my lungs with the fresh, salty sea air which brings so much energy into your soul, and inspires grand and poetic thoughts. I would look out upon the immensity, into space, into the infinite, and my soul would be overwhelmed by this unlimited horizon.]

Crucial to this process of rediscovering and revitalising reality through words is the notion of memory. Memory with its Proustian power to take us back beyond the surface banalities of existence is a central part of the *Mémoires*. Deployed in conjunction with words, it has a mystical force which renders the past more intense, indeed more 'real'. Flaubert will write to Ernest Chevalier on 15 March 1842: 'C'est une belle chose qu'un souvenir, c'est presque un désir, qu'on regrette' ['A memory is a beautiful thing, it is almost a desire, one that we regret'] (*Cor.* I, p. 99). In the *Mémoires* he shows us on more than one occasion that memories thus activated take on a vibrancy and a life of their own, and this process is a further point of similarity between the passages evoking Maria and the episode of the English sisters. Just as Maria comes to life in the writer's imagination, so too do the English sisters acquire some intense reality through words. The author observes of Caroline: 'Il me semble la voir encore à travers les vitres de ma chambre, qui courait dans le jardin avec d'autres camarades ; je vois encore leur robe de soie onduler brusquement sur leurs talons en bruissant, et leurs pieds se relever pour courir sur les allées sablées du jardin' ['I feel as though I can still see her through the windows of my bedroom, as she ran about in the garden with other friends. I can still see their silk dresses riffing and rustling on their heels, and their feet stepping out across the sand pathways in the garden']. This is every bit as significant as the 'hallucination' that the author describes in his retrospective visions of Maria at the end of the text, where he imagines her walking beside him in a field, for it shows him framing his vision of real people or events ('il me semble la voir...') with his present reconstruction of it. Thus he deliberately builds into his evocation of 'reality' a comment on the processes of writing and recall, and a suggestion at least that it is the moment of writing that confers truth.

Of his last vision of Maria, the narrator tells us: ‘Je savais bien que c’était une hallucination que j’animais moi-même...’ [‘I knew perfectly well that it was a hallucination that I was staging for myself...’]. The lesson is perhaps that it is not the living, but the restaging of life that gives us the ability to see and understand events (we should remember too that Flaubert’s first creative impulse was dramatic, in the form of small scenes that he acted out in the billiard room at his parents’ home). Writing itself may be a falsification, but with typically Flaubertian logic – a logic that was nourished by Flaubert’s first and most abiding literary fascination, *Don Quixote* – falsehood may itself open up the path to truth. ‘Un fou est un homme sage et un sage est un fou’ [‘A madman is wise and the wise man is mad’]: the statement had already been made in ‘Loys XI’, the drama written by Flaubert earlier in 1838 (OC I, p. 132). Writing may be the road to madness, but that, in the Flaubertian world, is the inevitable price of truth.

For all its richness and its experimental qualities, *Mémoires d’un fou* has often been given short shrift and dismissed as a flawed text which is unable to sustain its own narrative. It is true, as critics like Ginsburg have pointed out,²¹ that the young Flaubert has difficulty generating his story and maintaining its momentum, and there are obvious attempts to relaunch the narrative which are flagged up as such – most notably the interpolated episode of the English sisters. Correspondingly, there are the moments of crisis and breakdown, such as the three-week pause that precedes Chapter XX, and frequent switches of style, from the realistic to the philosophical, the concrete to the abstract, the particular to the general. There is no single story-line – but nor will there be in *Novembre* or *L’Education sentimentale* of 1845 – and the novelist states clearly, from the outset, that the original idea of the novel broke down as the writing progressed: ‘L’impression personnelle perça à travers la fable, l’âme remua la plume et l’écrasa’ [‘Personal feeling took over the story. The soul stirred the pen and overwhelmed it’]. But a major part of the interest of this text is surely that its author is so candid about his failure. The young Flaubert writes failure into his text: not only the failure of his own life, but also the failure of writing even as it tries to write about another, lived failure.

But the failure of writing – its awareness of its own contradictions, its sense of its own ultimate impotence – will be one of the great Flaubertian themes. And paradoxically, beyond the conspicuous and even self-inflicted flaws of this text there is an unexpected cohesion about it, for Flaubert consistently distances himself from his own writing and integrates a reflexive stance into it. His narrative is full of questions about art, poetry and writing, and about the relationship of these to the philosophical understanding of the world. Art is seen as central to the

²¹ Michal Peled Ginsburg, *Flaubert Writing: A Study in Narrative Strategies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), pp. 16-24.

notion of truth. The author writes in Chapter XVIII: ‘S’il y a sur la terre et parmi tous les néants une croyance qu’on adore, s’il est quelque chose de saint, de pur, de sublime, quelque chose qui aille à ce désir immodéré de l’infini et du vague que nous appelons âme, c’est l’art’ [‘If there is a single hallowed belief on the face of the earth and in the midst of all the nothingness, if there is something holy, pure and sublime, something which complements the immoderate desire for the infinite and the vagueness that we call the soul, it is art’]. Art is indeed the one principle whose truth and whose value are never questioned here – though the narrator may, and frequently does, question his own ability to convey and express that truth.

Thus writing, for Flaubert, is necessarily metaphysical in scope. It asks questions about reality, and about our understanding and ‘writing’ of that reality. Most especially, it underlines the huge discrepancy between the vastness of human aspiration and the poverty of language. At every turn of the text we find an echo of its central questions about the link between language and lived experience, and about the sublimely difficult nature of conveying this in writing: ‘Par quels échelons descendre de l’infini au positif ? par quelle gradation la poésie s’abaisse-t-elle sans se briser ? comment rapetisser ce géant qui embrasse l’infini ?’ [‘By what steps can we return from the infinite to the concrete? By what processes can poetry bow down without allowing itself to be broken? How can we shrink the giant who embraces the infinite?’] Elsewhere, Flaubert reflects on the irony of human language which is sometimes unable to express the most obvious or the most banal of pleasures – an irony that is delightfully expressed at the end of Chapter XXI:

Pauvre faiblesse humaine ! avec tes mots, tes langues, tes sons, tu parles et tu balbuties ; tu définis Dieu, le ciel et la terre, la chimie et la philosophie, et tu ne peux exprimer, avec ta langue, toute la joie que te cause une femme nue... ou un plum-pudding !

[‘Poor human frailty! With your words, your languages, your sounds, you speak and stammer. You define God, the sky, the earth, chemistry and philosophy, and yet with your language you cannot even express the joy you feel at the sight of a naked woman... or a plum pudding!’]

It is in passages like this that we begin to glimpse the modernity of Flaubert’s concept of language and literature, for he undermines the foundations of literary realism even as he submits to its necessities, and this makes *Mémoires d’un fou* an almost ideal opening into his work.

It is also abundantly apparent that the young author of the *Mémoires* is a voracious and a highly eclectic reader. He weaves a variety of influences, unevenly it is true, into the patchwork of his emerging style, giving a glimpse of the ways in which the mature Flaubert will write his way through the intertexts of literary history. As Bruneau points out, it is a time when Flaubert’s reading has started to

become more and more diverse (*Les Débuts littéraires*, pp. 230-35) and an integral part of his writing technique. In addition to his admiration for Rabelais, Montaigne and Shakespeare, there are the vitally important combined influences of Rousseau and of Byron on this text,²² as well as obvious signs of the style of Lamennais, for example in the apocalyptic visions of Chapters VII and XIX in which maxims about the state of the world are accompanied by micro-narratives or predictive sequences to illustrate the philosophical points that the author is making. Obvious allusions in the text range from Marot to Molière, from Goethe to Musset to Dumas *père*, and show a developing literary culture that sees the body of world literature as an archive to be plundered, exploited, reflected upon and, most importantly, to be re-read and rewritten. Thus does the Hamlet theme, suitably reworked in its nineteenth-century context, run throughout this text, and the world-weariness of the author accompanies the constant sense of surprise at the infinite follies of man: ‘Que de folies dans un homme ! Oh ! sans contredit, l’habit d’un arlequin n’est pas plus varié dans ses nuances que l’esprit humain ne l’est dans ses folies’ [‘What madness there is in man! For in truth, the harlequin’s outfit is not more varied in its nuances than the human mind in its madness’].²³ By using literary references and by reworking familiar literary resonances, Flaubert indeed builds a sense of critical awareness into his style, which already suggests that his technique is far from ‘innocent’ and that he is a long way from the naive belief in the power of words simply to represent some pre-existing reality. On the contrary, part of the reality with which he works is the body of literature which both frames and is framed by his own text.

His reflexive approach to the literary is accompanied by a philosophical turn of mind which is similarly constructed around a programme of reading and reflection. The business of writing is also the business of working out ideas, of constructing a view of the cosmos. Certainly, that view is often grimly pessimistic and usually more apocalyptic than truly philosophical in tone, but the *Mémoires* nonetheless offer a sustained meditation on man’s place in the world and in the universe. The apocalyptic passage of Chapter VII sets the tone for much of what follows later, as the author, steeped in his reading of Lamennais and the Bible, reflects: ‘Car il faudra bien que tout finisse et que la terre s’use à force d’être foulée ; car l’immensité doit être lasse enfin de ce grain de poussière qui fait tant de bruit et trouble la majesté du néant’ [‘For everything will have to end, and the earth will be worn by constant trampling. The cosmos must finally become weary of this grain of dust that makes such noise and disturbs the majesty of nothingness’]. Yet much of the time, too, he finds himself reflecting on how a metaphysics might better be expressed through poetics and style than through

²² The Notes on the Text at the end of this edition contain specific remarks about the literary influences and allusions in *Mémoires d’un fou*. See in particular notes 2, 9, 11, 16, 24, 28, 29, 30.

²³ See note 30 in the Notes on the Text for a comment on traces of *Hamlet* in the text of the *Mémoires*.

formal philosophical demonstration or affirmation. Poetry and the infinite are seen to be linked, and this belief is itself demonstrated by the author's programme of reading and research – further proof, as if it were needed, of the way in which the literary process is explicitly integrated into the novel:

J'ai lu, j'ai travaillé dans l'ardeur de l'enthousiasme, j'ai écrit. Oh ! comme j'étais heureux alors ! comme ma pensée dans son délire s'envolait haut, dans ces régions inconnues aux hommes, où il n'y a ni mondes, ni planètes, ni soleils ! J'avais un infini plus immense, s'il est possible, que l'infini de Dieu, où la poésie se berçait et déployait ses ailes dans une atmosphère d'amour et d'extase.

[I have read, I have worked with passion and enthusiasm, and I have written. And how happy I was! It was as if my thoughts, in a state of delirium, were able to fly higher, into realms unknown to mortals, where there are neither worlds nor planets nor suns! I possessed within me an infinite which was greater, if that is possible, than the infinite of God, where poetry soared and unfurled its wings in an atmosphere of love and ecstasy.]

There is, here, a clear anticipation of the stance of Jules at the end of the 1845 *Education sentimentale*, where the value of study and reflection as part of the writing process is emphatically affirmed. Thus the young Flaubert's 'philosophy' passes through the mill of the literary, and literature becomes the natural home of the philosophical. As early as Chapter II of the novel, the narrator makes it apparent that 'poetry', in its widest sense, is itself the essential mode of philosophy. Yet the author accepts that the study of literature has to be supplemented, at times, by readings of pure philosophical texts: 'Lassé de la poésie, je me lançai dans le champ de la méditation. Je fus épris d'abord de cette étude imposante qui se propose l'homme pour but, et qui veut se l'expliquer...' ['Weary of poetry, I then delved into philosophy. I became fascinated by that impressive discipline whose subject is man and which attempts to explain him...'] While he ultimately rejects systematic philosophy as vain and soulless, he understands the need to work with and through it.²⁴ Study, reading and documentation begin even at this stage to be an integral part of the Flaubertian method, as he attempts to homogenise his readings into a style which will itself be, according to the celebrated statement made in a letter of 16 January 1852 to Louise

²⁴ On 22 September 1846 Flaubert will make this interesting comment about philosophers and philosophy in a letter to Louise Colet: 'Le Philosophe d'ordinaire est une espèce d'être bâtard entre le Savant et le Poète et qui porte envie à l'un et à l'autre. La métaphysique vous met beaucoup d'acreté dans le sang. – C'est très curieux et très amusant. J'y ai travaillé avec assez d'ardeur pendant deux ans, mais c'est un temps perdu que je regrette' ['The philosopher is usually a creature of mixed-race somewhere between the scientist and the poet, envying each of them. Metaphysics puts a great deal of sharpness in your blood. It is very curious and very interesting. I studied it quite intensely for two years, but it is time I regret having wasted'] (*Cor.* I, p. 359).

Colet, ‘une manière absolue de voir les choses’ [‘an absolute manner of looking at things’] (*Cor.* II, p. 31). But the point is precisely that: style is ultimately much more than a matter of telling stories in an agreeable and eloquent manner, it is a vision of things, a quest to feel and to sense the infinite complexity of the real, or indeed to intuit the essence of all things. The young Flaubert speaks at length of this quest, and constantly stresses the link between his literature and his metaphysics. As he reads Byron, for example, he senses the delights of an entirely new poetic tone, and reflects that it draws him into the unfathomable depths of the infinite: ‘Tous ces échos inconnus à la somptueuse dignité des littératures classiques avaient pour moi un parfum de nouveauté, un attrait qui m’attirait sans cesse vers cette poésie géante, qui vous donne le vertige et vous fait tomber dans le gouffre sans fond de l’infini’ [‘Resonances which had never been heard in the sumptuous dignity of classical literatures had the fragrance of novelty for me, an allure which constantly drew me to this poetry of the giants. It sends us into a vertigo and makes us fall into the bottomless pit of the infinite’].

Clearly, though, for an author who has such a grand vision of what style might achieve, the stakes are ominously high. The sense of gloom and doom emerges as the corollary of the narrator’s immense hopes and ambitions, and indeed it appears that the reality of failure is a necessary framework for that unrealisable vision of the infinite. The unutterable complexity of things leaves the author in a void of doubt about himself and the world, a feeling that he expresses in the opening paragraph of Chapter XIX where he speaks of the infinite as an immense gulf or chasm which swallows us up and leaves us helpless and lost in the vastness of creation. As he attempts to perceive and to express the totality of all things, he finds himself on the verge of emptiness and nothingness – a problem he will similarly struggle with in *Smarh*, a ‘mystère’ written immediately after *Mémoires d’un fou*. In the face of the poetic richness he had hoped to express, the narrator of the *Mémoires* is thus thrown back on the banalities of language and the *bêtise* of human behaviour. Yet the banal realities of life, easily observable and depressingly ‘real’ though they may be, are sometimes construed into a kind of Cartesian logic by the young Flaubert. The very imperfection of the world he perceives is for him proof that he has the idea (if not the precise knowledge) of perfection, and that the perfection he intuits must therefore in some manner exist. Unlike Descartes, of course, he does not deduce the existence of God from this notion of perfection. Rather, he sees his very despair as the sign of the authenticity of his mystical quest. If he feels so degraded by the misery of self-doubt and the triviality of social mores, ‘dans ce monde où il faut que chacun aille prendre sa part du gâteau’ [‘in this world where everyone must go and claim his slice of the cake’], he believes that it is because of the inner purity of his aspirations. This type of logic will remain when Flaubert evokes the trials and tribulations of Saint Antoine in 1849, who seems in the end to achieve sainthood because he has failed so miserably to experience pure faith. In various forms it will reappear throughout Flaubert’s work. Yet, in 1838, Flaubert is clearly frustrated by his awareness of a

discrepancy between the ideal and the real, and his mood of gloom and despair extends to every aspect of his life. It is not only love that fails, it is the entire framework of his poetic and spiritual quest. The sense of failure sometimes acquires pathological proportions, for example in the violent and death-ridden dream sequences that are related in Chapter IV of the novel and which have lent themselves so readily to psychoanalytical readings.²⁵ The sense of failure extends, above all, to writing itself, as the opening lines of the work – which must surely have been written or revised when part of the novel had already been completed – amply demonstrate.

Despite the pervasive mood of failure in the work, Flaubert finds himself both struggling to break out of the straitjacket of language and accepting its constraints. This is what makes *Mémoires d'un fou* such a richly creative piece. And there are signs, as we have seen, that the young author is finding new techniques and new ways of dealing with his perception of the complex relationship between language and the world it purports to represent. While it is true that *Mémoires d'un fou* is at times an almost embarrassingly emotional work in which the intensity and rawness of feeling might catch us by surprise, there is also, oddly, a sense of detachment and distance from which the author surveys his subject a little more coldly and decides on the techniques and rhetorical devices that are appropriate. It has often been said that the 1845 *Education sentimentale* is the starting place for the famous principle of 'impassibilité' ['impassivity'], yet if we look closely at *Mémoires d'un fou* (and, indeed, at *Novembre*) we will find early traces of it there too. At the outset of the English sisters episode, the author remarks: 'A l'évocation d'un nom tous les personnages reviennent, avec leurs costumes et leur langage, jouer leur rôle comme ils le jouèrent dans ma vie, et je les vois agir devant moi comme un Dieu qui s'amuserait à regarder ses mondes créés' ['At the evocation of a name all the characters return, with their costumes and their speech, to play the same role that they played in my life. I watch them acting before me, like some god amusing himself by beholding the worlds he has created']. Here he sees himself already as the artistic God in his literary creation, detached from and even somewhat taken aback by the inventions of his own imagination, yet enjoying the sensation of being able to survey his universe from some cosmic vantage point.

But 'impassibilité' in the Flaubertian context is not only about a lack of emotion, it is also about the variation of points of view which enables the author to see every emotion from multiple perspectives. And one facet of the *Mémoires*

²⁵ A summary of the various interpretations of these two dreams by Theodor Reik (*Flaubert und seine Versuchung des heiligen Antonius* (Minden: Bruns, 1912)), by Jean-Paul Sartre (*L'Idiot de la famille*, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1971-72)) and by Marthe Robert (*En haine du roman* (Paris: Balland, 1982)) is given by Claudine Gothot-Mersch (*Mémoires d'un fou*, pp. 403-04).

which must be immediately apparent to any reader is the relentless changing of perspective. The young author sees his own condition both from within and from without, waxing lyrical about his sojourns in the realms of the poetic infinite, then standing back and condemning his own excess or folly. He is at once a poet and a madman, a dreamer and a fool, a sublime romantic and a ridiculous victim of fantasy. In the section dealing with Maria, the dithyrambic episode of the outing in the boat is followed by the nightmare of jealousy as the adolescent imagines this woman in the arms of her cheap, ridiculous and yet triumphant husband. And then the Maria episode itself is followed by the English sisters episode, which in turn alters the perspective, offering yet another take on what has preceded, and bringing out the full complexity of the truth. It is clear that, even at this early stage, Flaubert is using variation of point of view to illustrate an essential philosophical point, and a point that traditional 'philosophical' discourse (perhaps restricted by the requirement for coherent and unified development of central axioms) cannot make. The polymorphous character of the real demands, for Flaubert, that the writer offer multiple versions of it. Truth is no longer seen as single and monolithic, and the real difficulty is to convey its infinite possibilities without fragmenting the text or rendering it incoherent. The great challenge of Flaubert's writing is now laid down, and although one cannot by any stretch of the imagination claim that *Mémoires d'un fou* has the strange coherence or the mysterious unity of a text like *Madame Bovary* or *L'Education sentimentale*, the quest for some unified and totalising vision is clearly there throughout.

Surprisingly, in a text which makes such play of its own disjointedness, one way in which a sense of coherence is imposed is through the appeal to positivistic principles. Causality and determinism make various appearances in this most unlinear of texts. Yet the apparent paradox can be resolved, for they are in many ways the corollary to the emerging principle of 'impassibilité', in which the author strives to perceive the ultimate concatenations of things from his higher perspective. Clearly, Flaubert believes even at this stage that the workings of reality are infinitely complex, and that part of the writer's task is to piece together something of the patterns of causation that make up our world and our representations of it – even if he has to admit that his task is ultimately impossible. His attempts may on occasions look like defiance of 'normal' reason, since the piecing together of the cosmic jigsaw puzzle produces some unexpected juxtapositions of cause and effect. But just as Jules at the end of the 1845 *Education sentimentale* will discover that reality is not what he had simplistically imagined it to be, and so undertakes to study the complex ramifications of every idea about it, so too the narrator of the *Mémoires* demonstrates that there can be no facile appeal to simplistic lines of reasoning. Rarely can anything be reduced to an obvious cause or explanation. The writer is both mad and sublime, his world is both coherent yet disjointed. Yet the belief that a positivistic framework might, if properly and cautiously applied, provide some of the answers is nowhere more apparent than in Chapter XX. There, the author condemns the vanity of human

aspiration in Pascalian terms, even suggesting – in a reworking of Pascal’s famous comment about Cleopatra – that the size of a man’s nose might forever determine your feelings about him. Yet the view of human folly is situated resolutely within a context of cause and effect. Flaubert underlines that the reasons for many of man’s absurd actions are not always perceived, for the workings of causality are labyrinthine and mysterious. Man, the young Flaubert maintains emphatically, is not free. His moods and his feelings are determined by a host of outside influences which he often does not understand and over which he has no control: ‘Et de tous ces faits découlent ou s’enchaînent, aussi fatalement, d’autres séries de faits, d’où d’autres dérivent à leur tour’ [‘And from all of these facts inevitably ensue, in a chain of cause and effect, other series of facts, and then others again in their turn’]. So ultimately, there are reasons for everything, and beyond those reasons, there are further reasons, in an infinite chain of regression extending back towards the realm of the long-lost origins. The writer’s quest is for total understanding, though he knows that this can never ultimately be achieved. Thus does Flaubert leave his reader with a text which is deliberately and ostentatiously fractured, challenging us to join the pieces together, to discover the half-suggested truths between the lines, beyond the pages, within and through the writing.

Mémoires d’un fou could at first sight seem a frustrating text. It might appear incoherent and crisis-ridden, for it puts its own codes and strategies into question throughout. Yet therein lie its qualities and its interest, for the apparent failure of art is itself problematised throughout this early novel. The text largely becomes its own subject, and beyond the surface fragmentation of discourse, a more distant unity hovers tantalisingly, announcing the great novels of Flaubert’s mature years. The departure from coherence – the ‘madness’ of the text – is indeed itself an essential part of the epistemology which the young Flaubert is constructing. Thus we would argue both that there is more unity in this text than has hitherto been claimed, and that there are very clear signs here of the future directions that Flaubert’s writing will take. As we have attempted to show, some of the episodes of the novel which seem initially to represent a clear break from its narrative lines end up being reintegrated into the narrator’s enquiries about the world, art, love, reality, philosophy and writing. Episodes such as the chapter relating the encounter with the English sisters may at first appear as ‘artificial’ interpolations, yet they relate fundamentally to the young Flaubert’s emerging view of what writing is and should be, as he adds layer upon layer to his representation of the subjective and the objective realities of his world.

Exploiting the possibilities of multiple points of view, pursuing its poetic and metaphysical enquiries almost – but not quite – to the point of self-destruction, *Mémoires d’un fou* is a brilliant demonstration of the difficulties and complexities inherent in writing about the world. That the author should have used the word

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'mémoires' in his title, rather than the more private 'journal', suggests moreover that he writes for an implied public readership, even though he may not actually have destined his text for anyone other than Le Poittevin. We have maintained this distinction in the present translation, where 'memoirs' is used in preference to either 'journal' or 'diary'. Indeed, the reader occasionally hears in this text the voice of a writer who is, slowly but surely, preparing himself for the world's literary stage. Yet Flaubert will bide his time, resolutely refusing to publish anything before bursting dramatically onto the scene with *Madame Bovary* in 1856. For the scholar and the interested reader of Flaubert, the early works give vital clues about how his ideas and his style develop, and none more so than *Mémoires d'un fou*. The present edition will, it is hoped, be a small recognition of the importance, the centrality and the sheer readability of Flaubert's 1838 text.

Note on the text and translation

The text of the present edition has been established on the basis of the 1901 Floury edition, incorporating the small corrections and modifications of subsequent editions such as Conard and Seuil. The textual variants included in the recent edition by Claudine Gothot-Mersch, based on a new sighting of the manuscript, have also been taken into account. Occasional discrepancies between different editions are pointed out in the notes. The translation here aims to be as accurate as possible, but in cases where this would have produced wooden or stilted English we have moved away from a strictly literal rendering and attempted to find an acceptable equivalent to the modern ear. Where it has seemed appropriate and more in line with current conventions, punctuation has been modernised. Thus, full-stops replace semi-colons or dashes where these are used excessively in the original, and the frequency of paragraph breaks is reduced. The aim throughout has been to produce a translation which conveys as far as possible the flavour and tone of a highly stylised 1838 text, without compromising its coherence or readability for a modern audience.

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Mémoires d'un fou
Memoirs of a Madman

A TOI MON CHER ALFRED,
CES PAGES SONT DÉDIÉES ET DONNÉES

Elles renferment une âme toute entière. Est-ce la mienne ? est-ce celle d'un autre ? J'avais d'abord voulu faire un roman intime, où le scepticisme serait poussé jusqu'aux dernières bornes du désespoir ; mais peu à peu, en écrivant, l'impression personnelle perça à travers la fable, l'âme remua la plume et l'écrasa.

J'aime donc mieux laisser cela dans le mystère des conjectures ; pour toi, tu n'en feras pas.

Seulement, tu croiras peut-être, en bien des endroits, que l'expression est forcée et le tableau assombri à plaisir ; rappelle-toi que c'est un fou qui a écrit ces pages, et, si le mot paraît souvent surpasser le sentiment qu'il exprime, c'est que, ailleurs, il a fléchi sous le poids du cœur.

Adieu, pense à moi et pour moi.

I

Pourquoi écrire ces pages ? A quoi sont-elles bonnes ? – Qu'en sais-je moi-même ? Cela est assez sot, à mon gré, d'aller demander aux hommes le motif de leurs actions et de leurs écrits – Savez-vous vous-même pourquoi vous avez ouvert les misérables feuilles que la main d'un fou va tracer ?

Un fou ! cela fait horreur. Qu'êtes-vous, vous, lecteur ? Dans quelle catégorie te ranges-tu ? dans celle des sots ou celle des fous ? – Si l'on te donnait à choisir, ta vanité préférerait encore la dernière condition. Oui, encore une fois, à quoi est-il bon, je le demande en vérité, un livre qui n'est ni instructif, ni amusant, ni chimique, ni philosophique, ni agricole, ni élégiaque, un livre qui ne donne aucune recette ni pour les moutons ni pour les puces, qui ne parle ni des chemins de fer, ni de la Bourse, ni des replis intimes du cœur humain, ni des habits moyen âge, ni de Dieu, ni du diable, mais qui parle d'un fou, c'est-à-dire le monde, ce grand idiot, qui tourne depuis tant de siècles dans l'espace sans faire un pas, et qui hurle, et qui bave, et qui se déchire lui-même ?

Je ne sais pas plus que vous ce que vous allez lire, car ce n'est point un roman ni un drame avec un plan fixe, ou une seule idée préméditée, avec des jalons pour faire serpenter la pensée dans des allées tirées au cordeau.

TO YOU, MY DEAR ALFRED,¹
THESE PAGES ARE GIVEN AND DEDICATED

They contain a soul in its entirety. Is it my own, or is it the soul of someone else? At first I had wanted to write an introspective novel in which scepticism would be pushed to the final limits of despair. But gradually, as I wrote, personal feeling took over the story. The soul stirred the pen and overwhelmed it.

I prefer to leave all that in the realm of mystery and conjecture. For your part, you will draw no conclusions.

And yet in many places you will believe, perhaps, that the language is forced and the picture wilfully darkened. But remember, it is a madman who has written these pages, and if it should frequently seem that words go beyond the feelings they express, it is because elsewhere they were overburdened by the weight of the heart.

Farewell. May your thoughts be with me and for me.

I

Why write this book? What is its use? Do I even know that myself? But I think it is foolish to go asking people the reason for their actions or their writings. Do you yourself know why you opened these miserable pages that are to be covered with the scribblings of a madman?

A madman! How horrifying. And what, reader, are you? In which category do you place yourself? That of the fools, or that of the madmen? If you had to choose, your vanity would make you prefer the second of these states. So yes, I ask once again, what is the use of a book that is neither instructive, nor amusing, nor chemical, nor philosophical, nor agricultural, nor elegiac, a book which gives no formula for sheep or for fleas, which does not speak of the railways, of the stock exchange, of the intimate recesses of the human heart, of dress in the Middle Ages, of God or of the Devil – but which instead speaks of a madman, in other words of the world itself, that great fool who has been turning around in space for so many centuries, without moving an inch, who howls and dribbles and rips himself apart?

I know no more than you of what you are going to read, for this is not a novel or a drama with a fixed plan or a single premeditated idea, or with signposts to show your thoughts the way along neatly set out pathways.

Seulement, je vais mettre sur le papier tout ce qui me viendra à la tête, mes idées avec mes souvenirs, mes impressions, mes rêves, mes caprices, tout ce qui passe dans la pensée et dans l'âme ; du rire et des pleurs, du blanc et du noir, des sanglots partis d'abord du cœur et étalées comme de la pâte dans des périodes sonores, et des larmes délayées dans des métaphores romantiques. Il me pèse cependant à penser que je vais écraser le bec à un paquet de plumes, que je vais user une bouteille d'encre, que je vais ennuyer le lecteur et m'ennuyer moi-même ; j'ai tellement pris l'habitude du rire et du scepticisme, qu'on y trouvera, depuis le commencement jusqu'à la fin, une plaisanterie perpétuelle, et les gens qui aiment à rire pourront à la fin rire de l'auteur et d'eux-mêmes.

On y verra comment il y faut croire au plan de l'univers, aux devoirs moraux de l'homme, à la vertu et la philanthropie, – mot que j'ai envie de faire inscrire sur mes bottes, quand j'en aurai, afin que tout le monde le lise et l'apprenne par cœur, même les vues les plus basses, les corps les plus petits, les plus rampants, les plus près du ruisseau.

On aurait tort de voir dans ceci autre chose que les récréations d'un pauvre fou ! Un fou !

Et vous, lecteur, vous venez peut-être de vous marier ou de payer vos dettes ?

II

Je vais donc écrire l'histoire de ma vie. – Quelle vie ! Mais ai-je vécu ? je suis jeune, j'ai le visage sans ride et le cœur sans passion. – Oh ! comme elle fut calme, comme elle paraît douce et heureuse, tranquille et pure ! Oh ! oui, paisible et silencieuse, comme un tombeau dont l'âme serait le cadavre.

A peine ai-je vécu : je n'ai point connu le monde, c'est-à-dire je n'ai point de maîtresses, de flatteurs, de domestiques, d'équipages ; je ne suis pas entré (comme on dit) dans la société, car elle m'a paru toujours fausse et sonore, et couverte de clinquant, ennuyeuse et guindée.

Or, ma vie, ce ne sont pas des faits ; ma vie, c'est ma pensée.

Quelle est donc cette pensée qui m'amène maintenant, à l'âge où tout le monde sourit, se trouve heureux, où l'on se marie, où l'on aime, à l'âge où tant d'autres s'enivrent de toutes les amours et de toutes les gloires, alors que tant de lumières brillent et que les verres sont remplis au festin, à me trouver seul et nu, froid à toute inspiration, à toute poésie, me sentant mourir et riant cruellement de ma lente agonie, – comme cet épicurien qui se fit ouvrir les veines, se baigna dans un bain parfumé, et mourut en riant, comme un homme qui sort ivre d'une orgie qui l'a fatigué ?

All that I shall do is put on paper whatever enters my head – my ideas and my memories, my impressions, my dreams, my follies, everything that may pass through my thoughts and through my soul, from laughter to tears and from white to black, the sobbing that begins in the heart and is spread like paste through sonorous sentences, the tears that are diluted into romantic metaphors. It weighs on me, however, to think that I shall wear out a whole packet of quills, use an entire bottle of ink, bore the reader and bore myself. I have made such a habit of mockery and scepticism that you will find, from start to finish, a constant sense of irony, and those who like to laugh will in the end be able to do so both at their own and at the author's expense.²

And yet, in this book you will see how we have to believe in the order of the universe, in the moral duties of man, and in the ideas of virtue and philanthropy – the latter being a word I should like to have inscribed on my boots (when I get some) so that all people may read and learn it by heart, even those with the lowliest vision, the smallest and most crawling of bodies, the nearest to the gutter.

It would, then, be wrong to see in this anything other than the distractions of a poor madman! A madman!

And what about you, reader? Have you just married, or paid off your debts?

II

So I am going to write the story of my life. But what life? Have I even lived? I am young, my face is without wrinkles and my heart without passion. Oh, how calm my life was, how gentle and happy it seems, how tranquil and untouched! Yes, peaceful and silent, like a grave whose soul is the corpse within it.³

I have scarcely lived. I have not known life, meaning that I have no mistresses, no flatterers, no servants, no retinue. I have not, as they say, made my entrance into society, because society has always struck me as false and sonorous, covered in tinsel, boring, hidebound.

My life has not been built on events. My life is in my thoughts.

And what, then, are these thoughts which now lead me – at an age when everyone smiles happily, when people get married and fall in love, when so many others are thrilled by the loves and honours of life, when brilliant lights sparkle and glasses are filled at the feast – to feel alone and denuded, bereft of inspiration and poetry, sensing myself dying and yet laughing cruelly at my own slow agony, like the Epicurean who had his veins opened up, got into a perfumed bath, and died laughing, or like a man in a drunken state leaving the orgy which has worn him out?

Oh ! comme elle fut longue cette pensée ! Comme une hydre, elle me dévora sous toutes ses faces. Pensée de deuil et d'amertume, pensée de bouffon qui pleure, pensée de philosophe qui médite...

Oh ! oui ! combien d'heures se sont écoulées dans ma vie, longues et monotones, à penser, à douter ! Combien de journées d'hiver, la tête baissée devant mes tisons blanchis aux pâles reflets du soleil couchant, combien de soirées d'été, par les champs, au crépuscule, à regarder les nuages s'enfuir et se déployer, les blés se plier sous la brise, entendre les bois frémir et écouter la nature qui soupire dans les nuits !

Oh ! comme mon enfance fut rêveuse ! Comme j'étais un pauvre fou sans idées fixes, sans opinions positives ! Je regardais l'eau couler entre les massifs d'arbres qui penchent leurs chevelures de feuilles et laissent tomber des fleurs, je contemplais de dedans mon berceau la lune sur son fond d'azur qui éclairait ma chambre et dessinait des formes étranges sur les murailles ; j'avais des extases devant un beau soleil ou une matinée de printemps, avec son brouillard blanc, ses arbres fleuris, ses marguerites en fleurs.

J'aimais aussi, – et c'est un de mes plus tendres et délicieux souvenirs, – à regarder la mer, les vagues mousser l'une sur l'autre, la lame se briser en écume, s'étendre sur la plage et crier en se retirant sur les cailloux et les coquilles.

Je courais sur les rochers, je prenais le sable de l'océan que je laissais s'écouler au vent entre mes doigts, je mouillais des varechs et j'aspirais à pleine poitrine cet air salé et frais de l'océan, qui vous pénètre l'âme de tant d'énergie, de poétiques et larges pensées ; je regardais l'immensité, l'espace, l'infini, et mon âme s'abîmait devant cet horizon sans bornes.

Oh ! mais ce n'est pas là qu'est l'horizon sans bornes, le gouffre immense. Oh ! non, un plus large et plus profond abîme s'ouvrit devant moi. Ce gouffre-là n'a point de tempête ; s'il y avait une tempête, il serait plein – et il est vide !

J'étais gai et riant, aimant la vie, et ma mère. Pauvre mère !

Je me rappelle encore mes petites joies à voir les chevaux courir sur la route, à voir la fumée de leur haleine, et la sueur inonder leurs harnais ; j'aimais le trot monotone et cadencé qui fait osciller les soupentes ; et puis, quand on s'arrêtait, tout se taisait dans les champs. On voyait la fumée sortir de leurs naseaux, la voiture ébranlée se raffermissait sur ses ressorts, le vent sifflait sur les vitres, et c'était tout...

Oh ! comme j'ouvrais aussi de grands yeux sur la foule en habits de fête, joyeuse, tumultueuse, avec des cris, mer d'hommes orageuse, plus colère encore que la tempête et plus sottée que sa furie.

J'aimais les chars, les chevaux, les armées, les costumes de guerre, les tambours battants, le bruit, la poudre, et les canons roulant sur le pavé des villes.

Enfant, j'aimais ce qui se voit ; adolescent, ce qui se sent ; homme, je n'aime plus rien.

How long and drawn out those thoughts were! Like the Hydra, they devoured me with each different face they showed. Thoughts of grief and bitterness, thoughts of the clown who weeps, thoughts of the philosopher who meditates...

Indeed, how many hours have passed in my life, long and monotonous hours during which I have thought and have doubted! How many winter days, my head bowed before the fire where the embers had whitened in the pale glow of the setting sun!⁴ How many summer evenings in the fields, at the twilight hour, as I watched the clouds flee and unfurl, the wheat bend in the breeze, the woods tremble, and nature sigh in the night!

How full of dreams was my childhood! What a wretched mad thing I was, with no fixed ideas, no clear opinions! I would watch the water flowing between groups of trees trailing their thick foliage and dropping their blossoms. From my cradle I would contemplate the moon against its background of deep blue as it brightened my room and cast strange forms upon the walls. I would be in ecstasy at the beauty of the sun, or at the sight of a spring morning with its white mist, its trees in blossom, its daisies in full bloom.

I also loved – and this is one of my most tender and delightful memories – to watch the sea, when the waves frothed over one another, when the breakers turned to foam as they spread out onto the beach, then screeched as they drew back over the pebbles and the shells.

I would run on the rocks, take the sand from the ocean and let it slip through my fingers into the wind, then I would moisten the seaweed and fill my lungs with the fresh, salty sea air which brings so much energy into your soul, and inspires grand and poetic thoughts. I would look out upon the immensity, into space, into the infinite, and my soul would be overwhelmed by this unlimited horizon.

But no, the horizon without limits, the unfathomable abyss, is not there! Oh no! A greater and yet deeper abyss opened up before me. In that abyss there is no storm. If there were a storm in it, it would be filled – but it is a void!

I was happy, full of laughter, loving life and my mother. Poor mother!⁵

I still recall passing joys as I watched horses run along the road and saw the steam on their breath, the sweat pouring over their harness. I loved the monotonous, rhythmical trotting which makes the harness straps sway. And then, when the horses drew to a halt, everything fell silent in the fields. You could see the steam coming from their nostrils. The shaken coach settled down again on its springs, the wind blew against the glass, and that was all...⁶

And how I stared as well at the crowd in its festival clothes, full of joy and movement, with its shouts, like a stormy sea of men, angrier than the tempest and more stupid than all its fury.

I loved chariots, horses, armies, war costumes, the sound of the beating drum, the noise, the gunpowder, and the cannons that rolled along the streets of towns.

As a child, I loved all that is visible; as a youth, all that can be sensed; as a man, I no longer love anything.

Et cependant, combien de choses j'ai dans l'âme, combien de forces intimes et combien d'océans de colère et d'amours se heurtent, se brisent dans ce cœur si faible, si débile, si tombé, si lassé, si épuisé !

On me dit de reprendre à la vie, de me mêler à la foule!... Et comment la branche cassée peut-elle porter des fruits ? Comment la feuille arrachée par les vents et traînée dans la poussière peut-elle reverdir ? Et pourquoi, si jeune, tant d'amertume ? Que sais-je ? il était peut-être dans ma destinée de vivre ainsi, lassé avant d'avoir porté le fardeau, haletant avant d'avoir couru...

J'ai lu, j'ai travaillé dans l'ardeur de l'enthousiasme, j'ai écrit. Oh ! comme j'étais heureux alors ! comme ma pensée dans son délire s'envolait haut, dans ces régions inconnues aux hommes, où il n'y a ni mondes, ni planètes, ni soleils ! J'avais un infini plus immense, s'il est possible, que l'infini de Dieu, où la poésie se berçait et déployait ses ailes dans une atmosphère d'amour et d'extase ; et puis il fallait redescendre de ces régions sublimes vers les mots, – et comment rendre par la parole cette harmonie qui s'élève dans le cœur du poète, et les pensées de géant qui font ployer les phrases, comme une main forte et gonflée fait crever le gant qui la couvre ?

Là encore, la déception ; car nous touchons à la terre, à cette terre de glace, où tout feu meurt, où toute énergie faiblit ! Par quels échelons descendre de l'infini au positif ? par quelle gradation la poésie s'abaisse-t-elle sans se briser ? comment rapetisser ce géant qui embrasse l'infini ?

Alors j'avais des moments de tristesse et de désespoir, je sentais ma force qui me brisait et cette faiblesse dont j'avais honte, car la parole n'est qu'un écho lointain et affaibli de la pensée ; je maudissais mes rêves les plus chers et mes heures silencieuses passées sur la limite de la création ; je sentais quelque chose de vide et d'insatiable qui me dévorait.

Lassé de la poésie, je me lançai dans le champ de la méditation.

Je fus épris d'abord de cette étude imposante qui se propose l'homme pour but, et qui veut se l'expliquer, qui va jusqu'à disséquer les hypothèses et à discuter sur les suppositions les plus abstraites et à peser géométriquement les mots les plus vides.

L'homme, grain de sable jeté dans l'infini par une main inconnue, pauvre insecte aux faibles pattes qui veut se retenir, sur le bord du gouffre, à toutes les branches, qui se rattache à la vertu, à l'amour, à l'égoïsme, à l'ambition, et qui fait des vertus de tout cela pour mieux s'y tenir, qui se cramponne à Dieu, et qui faiblit toujours, lâche les mains et tombe...

Homme qui veut comprendre ce qui n'est pas, et faire une science du néant ; homme, âme faite à l'image de Dieu, et dont le génie sublime s'arrête à un brin d'herbe et ne peut franchir le problème d'un grain de poussière !

And yet, how much there is within my soul, how many intimate forces, how many oceans of anger and love collide and destroy one another in this heart so feeble, so debilitated, so degraded, so weary, so exhausted!

I was told to get involved again in life, to join in with the crowd... But how does a broken branch bear fruit? How can the leaf that has been ripped by the wind and dragged through the dust grow green again? Why so much bitterness at such a young age? How can I know? – perhaps it was my destiny to live like this, weary before I had even carried my burden, breathless before I had started to run...

I have read, I have worked with passion and enthusiasm, and I have written. And how happy I was! It was as if my thoughts, in a state of delirium, were able to fly higher, into realms unknown to mortals, where there are neither worlds nor planets nor suns! I possessed within me an infinite which was greater, if that is possible, than the infinite of God, where poetry soared and unfurled its wings in an atmosphere of love and ecstasy. And then I had to return from these realms, back to words. But how is it possible to convey through language the harmony which arises in the heart of the poet, or the thoughts of giants that cause sentences to buckle beneath their weight, like a strong and swollen hand that bursts the glove around it?

There too, there was nothing but disappointment; for we return to earth, this icy earth where all fires die, all energy fades! By what steps can we return from the infinite to the concrete? By what processes can poetry bow down without allowing itself to be broken? How can we shrink the giant who embraces the infinite?

So I had moments of sadness and despair; moments when I felt that my strength was destroying me, when I felt a weakness of which I was ashamed; for language is but a distant and faded echo of thought. I cursed my most precious dreams and my silent hours spent at the limits of creation. I had a feeling of void, the sense that something insatiable was devouring me.

Weary of poetry, I then delved into philosophy.

I became fascinated by that impressive discipline whose subject is man and which attempts to explain him, going to the point of dissecting hypotheses and discussing the most abstract propositions, then measuring the emptiest of words with geometrical precision.

Man is but a grain of sand thrown into the infinite by an unknown hand, a pathetic, weak-legged insect that tries to hold on at the edge of the abyss, grasping at every branch, clinging to morality, love, selfishness, ambition. He makes a virtue of all these things in order the better to hang on. He holds fast to the idea of God, and yet progressively weakens, loses his grip, then falls...

Man, who tries to understand that which does not exist, to make a science of nothingness! Man, whose soul is made in the image of God but whose sublime genius stops short at a blade of grass and cannot overcome the obstacle of a speck of dust!

Et la lassitude me prit ; je vins à douter de tout. Jeune, j'étais vieux ; mon cœur avait des rides, et en voyant des vieillards encore vifs, pleins d'enthousiasme et de croyances, je riais amèrement sur moi-même, si jeune, si désabusé de la vie, de l'amour, de la gloire, de Dieu, de tout ce qui est, de tout ce qui peut être. J'eus cependant une horreur naturelle avant d'embrasser cette foi au néant ; au bord du gouffre, je fermai les yeux ; – j'y tombai.

Je fus content, je n'avais plus de chute à faire. J'étais froid et calme comme la pierre d'un tombeau. Je croyais trouver le bonheur dans le doute ; insensé que j'étais ! on y roule dans un vide incommensurable. Ce vide-là est immense et fait dresser les cheveux d'horreur quand on s'approche du bord.

Du doute de Dieu, j'en vins au doute de la vertu, fragile idée que chaque siècle a dressée comme il a pu sur l'échafaudage des lois, plus vacillant encore.

Je vous conterai plus tard toutes les phases de cette vie morne et méditative, passée au coin du feu, les bras croisées avec un éternel bâillement d'ennui, seul pendant tout un jour, et tournant de temps en temps mes regards sur la neige des toits voisins, sur le soleil couchant avec ses jets de pâle lumière, sur le pavé de ma chambre, ou sur une tête de mort, jaune, édentée, et grimaçant sans cesse sur ma cheminée, – symbole de la vie et, comme elle, froide et railleuse.

Plus tard, vous lirez peut-être toutes les angoisses de ce cœur si battu, si navré d'amertume. Vous saurez les aventures de cette vie si paisible et si banale, si remplie de sentiments, si vide de faits.

Et vous me direz ensuite si tout n'est pas une dérision et une moquerie, si tout ce qu'on chante dans les écoles, tout ce qu'on délaye dans les livres, tout ce qui se voit, se sent, se parle, si tout ce qui existe... Je n'achève pas tant j'ai d'amertume à le dire. Eh bien ! si tout cela, enfin, n'est pas de la pitié, de la fumée, du néant !

III

Je fus au collège dès l'âge de dix ans et j'y contractai de bonne heure une profonde aversion pour les hommes. Cette société d'enfants est aussi cruelle pour ses victimes que l'autre petite société, celle des hommes.

Même injustice de la foule, même tyrannie des préjugés et de la force, même égoïsme, quoi qu'on en ait dit sur le désintéressement et la fidélité de la jeunesse. Jeunesse ! âge de folie et de rêves, de poésie et de bêtise, synonymes dans la bouche des gens qui jugent le monde *sainement*. J'y fus froissé dans tous mes goûts : dans la classe, pour mes idées ; aux récréations, pour mes penchants de sauvagerie solitaire. Dès lors, j'étais un fou.

Then weariness took hold of me, and I came to doubt everything. As a young man, I was already old; my heart had wrinkles within it, and, seeing elderly people who were still full of life, holding to their enthusiasm and their beliefs, I laughed with bitterness at myself, so young, so disenchanted with life and love, with glory, with God, with everything that does or might exist.

And yet, I had a natural sense of horror before taking this leap of faith into the void. On the very edge of the abyss I closed my eyes – then I fell.

I was happy, for I could fall no more. I was as cold and calm as the tombstone. I believed I could find happiness in doubt. What a fool I was! It surrounds you in an unfathomable void, a void so all-embracing that it causes your hair to stand on end when you come near to it.

From doubt in God, I then came to doubt morality, that frail idea which every century has set up, as best it can, on the precarious framework of its laws.

I shall tell you later about the different phases of this dreary meditative life that I spent by the fireside, my arms folded, with a permanent yawn of boredom, alone for a day at a time, casting occasional glances at the snow on neighbouring rooftops, at the setting sun with its pale rays of light, at the stone floor of my room, or at a yellow, toothless, grimacing skull on my mantelpiece – a symbol of life, and, like life itself, cold and mocking.

Later, you will perhaps read more about the anxieties of this beaten heart, overburdened with bitterness. You will learn more of the adventures of a life so peaceful and ordinary, so full of feeling but devoid of concrete fact.⁷

And later, you will tell me whether it is all derision and mockery, if all that is sung aloud in schools, developed in books, all that is seen, felt and spoken, all that exists – I can scarcely finish, for I feel such bitterness saying it – if all of that, in the end, is not a pathetic smokescreen beyond which lies nothing!

III

I was in college from the age of ten, and there I soon developed a profound aversion for humanity. The society of children is just as cruel to its victims as is that other petty society, the society of men.

Whatever may have been said about the lack of self-interest and the loyalty of youth, you find the same mob injustice, the same tyranny of prejudice and strength, the same selfishness. Youth! that age of folly and of dreams, of poetry and stupidity – synonyms in the eyes of those who judge the world ‘sensibly’. I was thwarted in all my inclinations – victimised in the classroom for my ideas, and in the playground for my unsociable and solitary behaviour. From then onwards, I became a madman.

J'y vécu donc seul et ennuyé, tracassé par mes maîtres et raillé par mes camarades. J'avais l'humeur railleuse et indépendante, et ma mordante et cynique ironie n'épargnait pas plus le caprice d'un seul que le despotisme de tous.

Je me vois encore, assis sur les bancs de la classe, absorbé dans mes rêves d'avenir, pensant à ce que l'imagination d'un enfant peut rêver de plus sublime, tandis que le pédagogue se moquait de mes vers latins, que mes camarades me regardaient en ricanant. Les imbéciles ! eux, rire de moi ! eux, si faibles, si communs, au cerveau si étroit ; moi, dont l'esprit se noyait sur les limites de la création, qui étais perdu dans tous les mondes de la poésie, qui me sentais plus grand qu'eux tous, qui recevais des jouissances infinies et qui avais des extases célestes devant toutes les révélations intimes de mon âme !

Moi qui me sentais grand comme le monde et qu'une seule de mes pensées, si elle eût été de feu comme la foudre, eût pu réduire en poussière, pauvre fou !

Je me voyais jeune, à vingt ans, entouré de gloire ; je rêvais de lointains voyages dans les contrées du Sud ; je voyais l'Orient et ses sables immenses, ses palais que foulent les chameaux avec leurs clochettes d'airain ; je voyais les cauales bondir vers l'horizon rougi par le soleil ; je voyais des vagues bleues, un ciel pur, un sable d'argent ; je sentais le parfum de ces océans tièdes du Midi ; et puis, près de moi, sous une tente, à l'ombre d'un aloès aux larges feuilles, quelque femme à la peau brune, au regard ardent, qui m'entourait de ses deux bras et me parlait la langue des houris.

Le soleil s'abaissait dans le sable, les chamelles et les juments dormaient, l'insecte bourdonnait à leurs mamelles, le vent du soir passait près de nous.

Et la nuit venue, quand cette lune d'argent jetait ses regards pâles sur le désert, que les étoiles brillaient sur le ciel d'azur, alors, dans le silence de cette nuit chaude et embaumée, je rêvais des joies infinies, des voluptés qui sont du ciel.

Et c'était encore la gloire, avec ses bruits de mains, ses fanfares vers le ciel, ses lauriers, sa poussière d'or jetée aux vents ; c'était un brillant théâtre avec des femmes parées, des diamants aux lumières, un air lourd, des poitrines haletantes ; puis un recueillement religieux, des paroles dévorantes comme l'incendie, des pleurs, du rire, des sanglots, l'enivrement de la gloire, des cris d'enthousiasme, le trépignement de la foule, quoi ! – de la vanité, du bruit, du néant.

Enfant, j'ai rêvé l'amour ; jeune homme, la gloire ; homme, la tombe, – ce dernier amour de ceux qui n'en ont plus.

Je percevais aussi l'antique époque des siècles qui ne sont plus et des races couchées sous l'herbe ; je voyais la bande de pèlerins et de guerriers marcher vers le Calvaire, s'arrêter dans le désert, mourant de faim, implorant ce Dieu qu'ils allaient chercher et, lassée de ses blasphèmes, marcher toujours vers cet horizon sans bornes ; puis, lasse, haletante, arriver enfin au but de son voyage, désespérée et vieille, pour embrasser quelques pierres arides, hommage du monde entier.

So I lived a lonely and bored existence. I was pestered by my teachers, mocked by my peers. I was of an independent and cynical disposition, and my sharp and flailing irony spared neither the stupidity of an individual nor the despotism of the group.

I can still see myself sitting on the classroom bench, absorbed in dreams about my future, thinking the most sublime thoughts that a child's imagination can dream up, while the teacher made fun of my Latin verses and my classmates looked on with derision. What fools they were to laugh at me, feeble and vulgar as they were, in all their narrow-mindedness. And there I was, my mind drifting to the very limits of creation, lost in worlds of poetry, sensing that I was greater than all of them together, feeling infinite delight, and lost in celestial trances at the intimate revelations of my soul!

And I felt that I was as great as the world itself, which a single one of my thoughts, had it been made of fire and thunderbolts, could have reduced to dust. Poor madman that I was!

I imagined myself crowned with glory at the tender age of twenty; I dreamed of distant voyages to southern lands. I saw the Orient with its immense sand dunes, and its palaces trodden by camels with their bronze bells. I saw thoroughbred mares galloping towards the horizon reddened by the setting sun. I saw blue waves, a pure sky, silver sands. I felt the fragrance of warm Mediterranean seas. And then, by my side in a tent, in the shade of a broad-leafed aloe, a sallow-skinned woman with burning eyes embraced me and spoke the language of the hours.

The sun was setting over the sand dunes, the camels and the mares were asleep, insects buzzing at their teats, and the evening breeze passed near us. When night fell, when the silvery moon cast its pale rays upon the desert and the stars shone in the dark blue sky, then, in the silence of this warm and fragrant night I dreamed of infinite joys, and of delights pertaining to a heavenly realm.

And once again it was glory, with its clapping of hands, its fanfares to the heavens, its laurels, and its gold dust scattered in the wind. It was a glittering theatre with adorned women, diamonds in the lights, a heavy atmosphere, panting breasts; then a sense of religious contemplation, words that devour you like fire, tears, laughter, sobbing, the intoxication of success, cries of enthusiasm, the trampling crowd – sheer vanity, noise, nothingness!

As a child I dreamed of love; as a young man I dreamed of glory; as an adult, I dream of the grave – the final love of those who have no love left.

I also glimpsed the ancient past of centuries that have disappeared and races that lie beneath the grass. I watched the group of pilgrims and warriors as they marched towards Calvary. Dying of hunger, they stopped in the desert and implored the God they were seeking. Then, tired of blasphemy, they marched on towards the endless horizon. Weary and breathless, they finally reached their journey's end, to bestow their kisses on a few barren stones. This was the entire world's homage.

Je voyais les chevaliers courir sur les chevaux couverts de fer comme eux ; et les coups de lances dans les tournois ; et le pont de bois s'abaissant pour recevoir le seigneur suzerain qui revient avec son épée rougie et des captifs sur la croupe de ses chevaux ; la nuit encore, dans la sombre cathédrale, toute la nef ornée d'une guirlande de peuples qui montent vers la voûte, dans les galeries, avec des chants ; des lumières qui resplendissent sur les vitraux et, dans la nuit de Noël, toute la vieille ville, avec ses toits aigus couverts de neige, s'illuminer et chanter.

Mais c'était Rome que j'aimais, la Rome impériale, cette belle reine se roulant dans l'orgie, salissant ses nobles vêtements du vin de la débauche, plus fière de ses vices qu'elle ne l'était de ses vertus. Néron ! Néron, avec ses chars de diamant volant dans l'arène, ses mille voitures, ses amours de tigre et ses festins de géant. Loin des classiques leçons, je me reportais vers tes immenses voluptés, tes illuminations sanglantes, tes divertissements qui brûlent, Rome.

Et, bercé dans ces vagues rêveries, ces songes sur l'avenir, emporté par cette pensée aventureuse échappée comme une cavale sans frein, qui franchit les torrents, escalade les monts et vole dans l'espace, je restais des heures entières, la tête dans mes mains, à regarder le plancher de mon étude, ou une araignée jeter sa toile sur la chaire de notre maître. Et quand je me réveillais, avec un grand œil béant, on riait de moi, le plus paresseux de tous, qui jamais n'aurais une idée positive, qui ne montrais aucun penchant pour aucune profession, qui serais inutile dans ce monde où il faut que chacun aille prendre sa part du gâteau, et qui enfin ne serais jamais bon à rien, – tout au plus à faire un bouffon, un montreur d'animaux, ou un faiseur de livres.

(Quoique d'une excellente santé, mon genre d'esprit, perpétuellement froissé par l'existence que je menais et par le contact des autres, avait occasionné en moi une irritation nerveuse qui me rendait véhément et emporté, comme le taureau malade de la piqûre des insectes. J'avais des rêves, des cauchemars affreux.)

Oh !... la triste et maussade époque. Je me vois encore errant, seul, dans les longs corridors blanchis de mon collège, à regarder les hiboux et les corneilles s'envoler des combles de la chapelle, ou bien couché dans ces mornes dortoirs éclairés par la lampe, dont l'huile se gelait. Dans les nuits, j'écoutais longtemps le vent qui soufflait lugubrement dans les longs appartements vides, et qui sifflait dans les serrures en faisant trembler les vitres dans leurs châssis ; j'entendais les pas de l'homme de ronde qui marchait lentement avec sa lanterne, et, quand il venait près de moi, je faisais semblant d'être endormi et je m'endormais en effet, moitié dans les rêves, moitié dans les pleurs.

I saw knights riding on their chargers covered, like them, in armour. I saw the thrust of the spear in the jousting tournaments, the wooden drawbridge being lowered to receive the liege lord as he returned, his sword red with blood, and captives sitting on the rear of his horses. Again at night, in the darkened cathedral, its nave decorated with a garland of people rising towards the vault and chanting in the galleries, lights would shine through stained-glass windows; and on Christmas night, all of the old town with its pointed roofs covered in snow would light up and sing.

But it was Rome that I loved, Imperial Rome, that beautiful queen wallowing in the orgy, dirtying her fine clothes with wine and debauchery, showing greater pride in her vices than she had ever done in her virtues. Nero! Nero, with his chariots of diamond flying through the arena, his thousand carriages, his loves like those of a tiger, and his feasts for giants. Far away from the classical teachings, I lost myself in Rome's overwhelming pleasures, its bloody illuminations, its searing distractions.

Drifting in vague reveries and dreams about the future, carried away by adventurous thoughts which, like an unbridled mare, had escaped and leaped over torrents, climbed mountains, flew through space, I could remain for hours with my head in my hands, looking at the floor of my study or at a spider casting its web on the teacher's chair. And when I awoke, with my eyes wide and empty, they all laughed at me, the laziest one in the class. For I would never have a positive idea, and I showed no inclination for any profession. I would be useless in this world where everyone must go and claim his slice of the cake. In fact, I would never be any good at all, and would perhaps make it as far as being a joker, a showman with performing animals, or a writer of books.

(Although I was of healthy constitution, my cast of mind constantly led to my feeling hurt by the life I lived and by my contacts with others. This caused nervous stress which made me angry and excessive, like a bull which has been infected by insect bites. I had dreams and terrible nightmares.)

Oh, what sad and dreary times! I can still see myself wandering alone through the long whitened corridors of my college, watching the owls and the crows fly out from under the eaves of the chapel. Or I would be in bed in one of those drab dormitories lit by a lamp whose oil was beginning to freeze. At night, I would listen at length to the wind blowing eerily through the long empty apartments, or whistling through the keyholes and rattling the window-panes in their casing. I would hear the footsteps of the watchman as he walked slowly by with his lantern. When he came close to me, I would pretend to be asleep, and then I really would fall asleep, half dreaming, half tearful.

IV

C'étaient d'effroyables visions, à rendre fou de terreur.

J'étais couché dans la maison de mon père ; tous les meubles étaient conservés, mais tout ce qui m'entourait cependant avait une teinte noire. C'était une nuit d'hiver et la neige jetait une clarté blanche dans ma chambre. Tout à coup, la neige se fondit et les herbes et les arbres prirent une teinte rousse et brûlée, comme si un incendie eût éclairé mes fenêtres ; j'entendis des bruits de pas, on montait l'escalier ; un air chaud, une vapeur fétide monta jusqu'à moi. Ma porte s'ouvrit d'elle-même, on entra. Ils étaient beaucoup, peut-être sept à huit, je n'eus pas le temps de les compter. Ils étaient petits ou grands, couverts de barbes noires et rudes, sans armes, mais tous avaient une lame d'acier entre les dents, et comme ils s'approchèrent en cercle autour de mon berceau, leurs dents vinrent à claquer et ce fut horrible.

Ils écartèrent mes rideaux blancs, et chaque doigt laissait une trace de sang ; ils me regardèrent avec de grands yeux fixes et sans paupières ; je les regardai aussi, je ne pouvais faire aucun mouvement, je voulus crier.

Il me sembla alors que la maison se levait de ses fondements, comme si un levier l'eût soulevée.

Ils me regardèrent ainsi longtemps, puis ils s'écartèrent, et je vis que tous avaient un côté du visage sans peau et qui saignait lentement. Ils soulevèrent tous mes vêtements, et tous avaient du sang. Ils se mirent à manger, et le pain qu'ils rompirent laissait échapper du sang qui tombait goutte à goutte ; et ils se mirent à rire comme le râle d'un mourant.

Puis, quand ils n'y furent plus, tout ce qu'ils avaient touché, les lambris, l'escalier, le plancher, tout cela était rougi par eux.

J'avais un goût d'amertume dans le cœur, il me sembla que j'avais mangé de la chair, et j'entendis un cri prolongé, rauque, aigu, et les fenêtres et les portes s'ouvrirent lentement, et le vent les faisait battre et crier, comme une chanson bizarre dont chaque sifflement me déchirait la poitrine avec un stylet.

Ailleurs, c'était dans une campagne verte et émaillée de fleurs, le long d'un fleuve ; – j'étais avec ma mère qui marchait du côté de la rive ; elle tomba. Je vis l'eau écumer, des cercles s'agrandir et disparaître tout à coup. – L'eau reprit son cours, et puis je n'entendis plus que le bruit de l'eau qui passait entre les joncs et faisait ployer les roseaux.

Tout à coup, ma mère m'appela : «Au secours !... au secours ! ô mon pauvre enfant, au secours ! à moi !»

Je me penchai à plat ventre sur l'herbe pour regarder, je ne vis rien ; les cris continuaient.

IV

I had fearful visions, enough to make me mad with terror.⁸

I was asleep in my father's house. All the furniture was in its original state, yet everything around me was tinged with black. It was a winter's night, and the snow threw a whitish pallor into my bedroom. All of a sudden the snow melted and the grass and trees took on a reddened, burnished tinge, as if a fire had cast its light on my windows. I heard footsteps coming up the stairs. Warm air reached me, a fetid vapour. My door opened of its own accord, and they came in. There were a number of them, maybe seven or eight, I had no time to count. There were tall ones and short ones, and their faces were covered with rough black beards. They did not carry arms, but each of them had a steel blade between his teeth, and as they gathered around my bed in a circle, their teeth began to clatter and it was horrible.

They drew back my white curtains, each finger leaving a trace of blood. They looked at me with large, staring, lidless eyes. I looked back at them. I was unable to make any movement. I wanted to cry out.

It then seemed to me that the house was raised off its foundations, as if it had been hoisted by a lever.

They watched me like this for a long while, then they drew back and I saw that each of them had had the skin pulled off one side of his face, and that it was bleeding slowly. They picked up my clothes, which were all covered in blood. They began to eat, and the bread that they broke dripped blood. They laughed, and their laugh was like the death rattle.

Then, when they were no longer there, everything that they had touched – the panelling, the staircase, the floor – everything was reddened with their blood.

I had a bitter taste in the pit of my stomach. I felt as though I had eaten flesh, and I heard a prolonged cry, hoarse and shrill. Then the windows and doors slowly opened. The wind made them bang and creek, as if it were some bizarre song in which every sound ripped at my chest with a dagger.

Somewhere else, in the countryside, green and decked with flowers, along a river, I was with my mother who was walking on the bank. She fell. I saw the water swirl out in widening circles that suddenly disappeared. The flow of the river continued as before, and then I all heard was the splashing of the water as it passed through the bullrushes and forced the reeds to bend.

All of a sudden my mother called me. 'Help! Help! Oh my poor child, help! Come to me!'

I lay face downwards on the grass to look into the water, but I could see nothing. The shouts continued.

Une force invincible m'attachait sur la terre, et j'entendais les cris : «Je me noie ! je me noie ! à mon secours !»

L'eau coulait, coulait limpide, et cette voix que j'entendais du fond du fleuve m'abîmait de désespoir et de rage...

V

Voilà donc comme j'étais, rêveur, insouciant, avec l'humeur indépendante et railleuse, me bâtissant une destinée et rêvant à toute la poésie d'une existence pleine d'amour, vivant aussi sur mes souvenirs, autant qu'à seize ans on peut en avoir.

Le collègue m'était antipathique. Ce serait une curieuse étude que ce profond dégoût des âmes nobles et élevées, manifesté de suite par le contact et le froissement des hommes. Je n'ai jamais aimé une vie réglée, des heures fixes, une existence d'horloge, où il faut que la pensée s'arrête avec la cloche, où tout est remonté d'avance, pour des siècles et des générations. Cette régularité, sans doute, peut convenir au plus grand nombre, mais pour le pauvre enfant qui se nourrit de poésie, de rêves et de chimères, qui pense à l'amour et à toutes les balivernes, c'est l'éveiller sans cesse de ce songe sublime, c'est ne pas lui laisser un moment de repos, c'est l'étouffer en le ramenant dans notre atmosphère de matérialisme et de bon sens, dont il a horreur et dégoût.

J'allais à l'écart, avec un livre de vers, un roman, de la poésie, quelque chose qui fasse tressaillir ce cœur de jeune homme, vierge de sensations et si désireux d'en avoir.

Je me rappelle avec quelle volupté je dévorais alors les pages de Byron et de *Werther* ; avec quels transports je lus *Hamlet*, *Roméo*, et les ouvrages les plus brûlants de notre époque, toutes ces œuvres enfin qui fondent l'âme en délices ou la brûlent d'enthousiasme.

Je me nourris donc de cette poésie âpre du Nord, qui retentit si bien comme les vagues de la mer, dans les œuvres de Byron. Souvent j'en retenais, à la première lecture, des fragments entiers, et je me les répétais à moi-même, comme une chanson qui vous a charmé et dont la mélodie vous poursuit toujours.

Combien de fois n'ai-je pas dit le commencement du «*Giaour*» : *Pas un souffle d'air*, ou bien dans «*Childe-Harolde*» : *Jadis dans l'antique Albion*, et : *O mer ! je t'ai toujours aimée*. La platitude de la traduction française disparaissait devant les pensées seules, comme si elles eussent eu un style à elles sans les mots eux-mêmes.

An invincible force held me to the ground as I heard the shouts. ‘I am drowning! I am drowning! Help me!’

The water flowed, clear and calm, and the voice that I heard from the depths of the river filled me with despair and with rage...

V

So that is how I was, dreamy and detached, with an independent and mocking spirit, shaping a destiny for myself and dreaming of all the poetry contained in a life filled with love, but also living in my memories, as far as one can do so at the age of sixteen.

I detested college. It would be interesting to study that profound sense of disgust that is found in noble and lofty souls, and is then made manifest by the bruising contact with humanity. I have never liked having a regulated life with fixed hours, a clockwork existence in which thought is required to stop when the bell rings, in which everything is prepared in advance, for centuries and generations to come. No doubt this order suits most people, but for the poor child who is nourished by poetry, dreams and fantasies, and who thinks of love and all these foolish things, it awakens him from his sublime imaginings, it leaves him not a moment of respite, it stifles him by bringing him back to the world of materialism and common sense which horrifies and appals him.

I would go off on my own with a book of verse, a novel, poetry, or whatever might bring a tremble to the heart of a young man who was still a virgin to the world of sensations and yet so keen to encounter it.

I remember the pleasure with which I would devour pages of Byron⁹ or of *Werther*, the excitement with which I read *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet* and the most ardent works of our time, all the works in fact which send the soul drifting away in delight or sear it with enthusiasm.

And so I fed on that hardy verse of Northern latitudes, which resounds like the waves of the sea, in the work of Byron. Often at the first reading I would remember entire fragments of it, and would recite them to myself, like a song which casts its spell on you and which continues to pursue you.

How often I recited the beginning of *Giaour* – ‘Not a breath of air’ – or the lines from *Childe Harolde*: ‘Whilome in Albion’s isle’ and ‘I have loved thee, Ocean!’ The emptiness of the French translation vanished at the thoughts themselves, as though these had a style all of their own without the need for words.¹⁰

Ce caractère de passion brûlante, joint à une si profonde ironie, devait agir fortement sur une nature ardente et vierge. Tous ces échos inconnus à la somptueuse dignité des littératures classiques avaient pour moi un parfum de nouveauté, un attrait qui m'attirait sans cesse vers cette poésie géante, qui vous donne le vertige et vous fait tomber dans le gouffre sans fond de l'infini.

Je m'étais donc faussé le goût et le cœur, comme disaient mes professeurs, et parmi tant d'êtres aux penchants si ignobles, mon indépendance d'esprit m'avait fait estimer le plus dépravé de tous ; j'étais ravalé au plus bas rang par la supériorité même. A peine si on me cédait l'imagination, c'est-à-dire, selon eux, une exaltation de cerveau voisine de la folie.

Voilà quelle fut mon entrée dans la société, et l'estime que je m'y attirai.

VI

Si l'on calomniait mon esprit et mes principes, on n'attaquait pas mon cœur, car j'étais bon alors, et les misères d'autrui m'arrachaient des larmes.

Je me souviens que, tout enfant, j'aimais à vider mes poches dans celles du pauvre. De quel sourire ils accueillaienent mon passage et quel plaisir aussi j'avais à leur faire du bien !

C'est une volupté qui m'est depuis longtemps inconnue, car maintenant j'ai le cœur sec, les larmes se sont séchées. Mais malheur aux hommes qui m'ont rendu corrompu et méchant, de bon et de pur que j'étais ! Malheur à cette aridité de la civilisation qui dessèche et étiole tout ce qui s'élève au soleil de la poésie et du cœur ! Cette vieille société corrompue, qui a tout séduit et tout usé, ce vieux juif cupide mourra de marasme et d'épuisement sur ces tas de fumier qu'il appelle ses trésors, sans poète pour chanter sa mort, sans prêtre pour lui fermer les yeux, sans or pour son mausolée, car il aura tout usé pour ses vices.

VII

Quand donc finira cette société abâtardie par toutes les débauches, débauches d'esprit, de corps et d'âme ?

This mood of searing passion, which went hand in hand with a deep sense of irony, must have had a profound effect on a virginal but ardent soul. Resonances which had never been heard in the sumptuous dignity of classical literatures had the fragrance of novelty for me, an allure which constantly drew me to this poetry of the giants. It sends us into a vertigo and makes us fall into the bottomless pit of the infinite.

So I had, as my teachers put it, falsified my taste and my feelings, and among all these people of ignoble inclinations, my independent spirit caused me to be considered the most depraved of all. I was, by my very superiority, pulled down to the lowliest rank. At best, I was considered to have some imagination. In other words, and as far as they were concerned, I had an over-active brain which put me close to being mad.

That was how I made my entrance into society, and such was the esteem I earned.

VI

If my mind and my principles were vilified, nobody put my feelings into question, for I was kind at that time, and the unhappiness of others could bring me to tears.

I remember that, as a small child, I liked to empty my pockets into those of the poor. What a smile they would have when I passed by, and what delight I felt in being able to do them good!

It is a pleasure which has been long lost to me, for now my heart is arid and the tears have run dry. But woe betide the men who made me corrupt and evil, for I was once good and pure! Woe betide that heartless society which dries up and withers all that rises up towards the light of poetry and the heart. That corrupt and aged society that has seduced and used up everything, that greedy old Jew, will die of depression and exhaustion on these piles of dung he calls his treasures. No poet will sing his death, no priest will close his eyes, no gold will adorn his mausoleum, for he will have used it all towards his vices.

VII

So when will this society, bastardised by every debauchery of mind, body and soul, finally come to an end?

Alors, il y aura sans doute une joie sur la terre, quand ce vampire menteur et hypocrite qu'on appelle civilisation viendra à mourir ; on quittera le manteau royal, le sceptre, les diamants, le palais qui s'écroule, la ville qui tombe, pour aller rejoindre la cavale et la louve. Après avoir passé sa vie dans les palais et usé ses pieds sur les dalles des grandes villes, l'homme ira mourir dans les bois.

La terre sera séchée par les incendies qui l'ont brûlée, et toute pleine de la poussière des combats ; le souffle de désolation qui a passé sur les hommes aura passé sur elle, et elle ne donnera plus que des fruits amers et des roses d'épines, et les races s'éteindront au berceau, comme les plantes battues par les vents qui meurent avant d'avoir fleuri.

Car il faudra bien que tout finisse et que la terre s'use à force d'être foulée ; car l'immensité doit être lasse enfin de ce grain de poussière qui fait tant de bruit et trouble la majesté du néant. Il faudra que l'or s'épuise à force de passer dans les mains et de corrompre ; il faudra bien que cette vapeur de sang s'apaise, que le palais s'écroule sous le poids des richesses qu'il recèle, que l'orgie finisse et qu'on se réveille.

Alors, il y aura un rire immense de désespoir, quand les hommes verront ce vide, quand il faudra quitter la vie pour la mort, pour la mort qui mange, qui a faim toujours. Et tout craquera pour s'écrouler dans le néant, et l'homme vertueux maudira sa vertu et le vice battra des mains.

Quelques hommes encore errants dans une terre aride s'appelleront mutuellement ; ils iront les uns vers les autres, et ils reculeront d'horreur, effrayés d'eux-mêmes, et ils mourront. Que sera l'homme alors, lui qui est déjà plus féroce que les bêtes fauves, et plus vil que les reptiles ? Adieu pour jamais, chars éclatants, fanfares et renommées ; adieu au monde, à ces palais, à ces mausolées, aux voluptés du crime, et aux joies de la corruption ! La pierre tombera tout à coup, écrasée par elle-même, et l'herbe poussera dessus. Et les palais, les temples, les pyramides, les colonnes, mausolée du roi, cercueil du pauvre, charogne du chien, tout cela sera à la même hauteur, sous le gazon de la terre.

Alors, la mer sans digues battra en repos sur les rivages et ira baigner ses flots sur la cendre encore fumante des cités ; les arbres pousseront, verdiron, sans une main pour les casser et les briser ; les fleuves couleront dans des prairies émaillées, la nature sera libre, sans homme pour la contraindre, et cette race sera éteinte, car elle était maudite dès son enfance.

Triste et bizarre époque que la nôtre ! Vers quel océan ce torrent d'iniquités coule-t-il ? Où allons-nous dans une nuit si profonde ? Ceux qui veulent palper ce monde malade se retirent vite, effrayés de la corruption qui s'agite dans ses entrailles.

Doubtless, there will then be joy on earth at the death of this mendacious and hypocritical vampire we call civilisation. People will abandon the royal mantle, the sceptre, the diamonds, the crumbling palaces and collapsing cities, to go out and join the wild mare and the wolf. Having spent his life in palaces and worn his feet on the stones of the cities, man will go off to die in the woods.

The earth will be dried by the fires which have burned it, and it will be full of the dust of combat. The breath of desolation which passed over mankind will also have passed over the earth, and it will give forth nothing but bitter fruits and thorny roses. Races will die out in the cradle, like plants that wither, beaten by the wind before they have flowered.

For everything will have an end, and the earth will be worn by constant trampling. The cosmos must finally become weary of this grain of dust that makes such noise and disturbs the majesty of nothingness. Gold must exhaust itself by passing through so many hands and spreading corruption. The bloody haze must eventually calm down, palaces crumble under the weight of the riches they contain. The orgy must end and be followed by an awakening.

Then there will be a huge laugh of despair, when men see this emptiness, when they have to leave life for death, the death that eats and remains forever hungry. And everything will collapse and disappear into nothingness. The virtuous will curse their own virtue, and vice will clap its hands.

A few men still roaming around some arid region will call out to each other; they will approach each other, then recoil in horror, terrified at themselves, and they will die. So what will man be then, man who is already more ferocious than wild beasts, more vile than the reptiles? Farewell forever, splendid chariots, fanfares and fame! Farewell to the world, to those palaces and mausoleums, to the delights of crime and the joys of corruption! The stone will suddenly fall, crushed by itself, and grass will grow over it. Palaces, temples, pyramids and columns, the king's mausoleum and the pauper's coffin, the carcass of a dog – everything will be at the same level beneath the grassy earth.

Then the sea without walls will peacefully beat upon the shores and bathe the smouldering embers of cities with its waves. Trees will grow and blossom without any hand to break or destroy them. Rivers will flow in flower-studded fields, nature will be free, without the constraints of man, and this race will become extinct, for it was cursed from its infancy.

What sad and strange times we live in! To what ocean of iniquity does the torrent flow? Where do we go in such deep darkness? Those who wish to touch this sick world withdraw quickly from it, horrified by the corruption that seethes in its entrails.

Quand Rome se sentit à son agonie, elle avait au moins un espoir, elle entrevoyait derrière le linceul la Croix radieuse, brillant sur l'éternité. Cette religion a duré deux mille ans et voilà qu'elle s'épuise, qu'elle ne suffit plus, et qu'on s'en moque ; voilà ses églises qui tombent, ses cimetières tassés de morts et qui regorgent.

Et nous, quelle religion aurons-nous ? Etre si vieux que nous le sommes, et marcher encore dans le désert comme les Hébreux, qui fuyaient d'Égypte.

Où sera la Terre promise ?

Nous avons essayé de tout et nous renions tout sans espoir ; et puis une étrange cupidité nous a pris dans l'âme et l'humanité, il y a une inquiétude immense qui nous ronge, il y a un vide dans notre foule ; nous sentons autour de nous un froid de sépulcre.

L'humanité s'est prise à tourner des machines, et voyant l'or qui en ruisselait, elle s'est écriée : «C'est Dieu !» Et ce Dieu-là, elle le mange. Il y a – c'est que tout est fini, adieu ! adieu ! – du vin avant de mourir ! Chacun se rue où le pousse son instinct, le monde fourmille comme les insectes sur un cadavre, les poètes passent sans avoir le temps de sculpter leurs pensées, à peine s'ils les jettent sur des feuilles et les feuilles volent ; tout brille et tout retentit dans cette mascarade, sous ses royautés d'un jour et ses sceptres de carton ; l'or roule, le vin ruisselle, la débauche froide lève sa robe et remue... horreur ! horreur !

Et puis, il y a sur tout cela un voile dont chacun prend sa part et se cache le plus qu'il peut.

Dérision ! horreur ! horreur !

VIII

Et il y a des jours où j'ai une lassitude immense, et un sombre ennui m'enveloppe comme un linceul partout où je vais ; ses plis m'embarrassent et me gênent, la vie me pèse comme un remords. Si jeune et si lassé de tout, quand il y en a qui sont vieux et encore pleins d'enthousiasme ! et moi, je suis si tombé, si désenchanté ! Que faire ? La nuit, regarder la lune qui jette sur mes lambris ses clartés tremblantes comme un large feuillage, et, le jour, le soleil dorant les toits voisins ? Est-ce là vivre ? non, c'est la mort, moins le repos du sépulcre.

Et j'ai des petites joies à moi seul, des réminiscences enfantines qui viennent encore me réchauffer dans mon isolement, comme des reflets de soleil couchant par les barreaux d'une prison : un rien, la moindre circonstance, un jour pluvieux, un grand soleil, une fleur, un vieux meuble, me rappellent une série de souvenirs

When Rome sensed the onset of its death agony, it at least had some hope, for it glimpsed the radiant cross behind the shroud, shining upon eternity. This religion has lasted two thousand years and now it is exhausted; it no longer suffices and people mock at it. Churches fall, and the cemeteries piled with the dead are brimming over.

And what will our own religion be? As old as we are, we are still marching through the desert like the Hebrews who fled from Egypt.

Where will the promised land be?

We have tried everything, and we have renounced everything without hope. A strange greed has taken hold of our soul and our humanity, a great sense of anxiety gnaws at us, there is emptiness in our multitude and we feel the chill of the grave about us.¹¹

Humanity has taken to making machines turn, and, seeing the gold which flowed, has exclaimed: 'It is God!' Humanity devours that God! But there is – for everything is now over, farewell! farewell! – wine for the dying. Everyone rushes where his instinct sends him, the world seethes like insects on a corpse, poets pass without having time to sculpt their thoughts, scarcely having the chance to throw them onto the pages before those pages fly away. Everything gleams and resonates in this masquerade, with its one-day kingdoms and its sceptres of cardboard. Gold rolls, wine flows, cold debauchery lifts its gown and stirs... horror! horror!

And then over all of this there is a veil which everyone seizes, to hide themselves as best they can.

Derision! horror! horror!

VIII

There are days when I feel immense weariness, when sombre tedium envelops me like a shroud wherever I go; its folds irk and annoy me, life weighs down on me like remorse. So young and yet so weary of everything, when there are elderly people who are still so full of enthusiasm! I have fallen so low, into such disenchantment! What can be done? Should I watch the moon at night, casting its rays which tremble like leaves on my wooden panels, or watch the sun during the day as it gilds the neighbouring rooftops? Is that what living is? No, it is death, without the rest that the tomb affords us.

And I have small joys which are mine alone, childish reminiscences which return to bring me warmth in my isolation, like the rays of the setting sun through the bars of a prison. The smallest thing, the slightest circumstance, a rainy day, bright sunshine, a flower, an old piece of furniture, bring back memories which

qui passent tous confus, effacés comme des ombres. Jeux d'enfants sur l'herbe au milieu des marguerites dans les prés, derrière la haie fleurie, le long de la vigne aux grappes dorées, sur la mousse brune et verte, sous les larges feuilles, les frais ombrages ; souvenirs calmes et riants comme un souvenir du premier âge, vous passez près de moi comme des roses flétries.

La jeunesse, ses bouillants transports, ses instincts confus du monde et du cœur, ses palpitations d'amour, ses larmes, ses cris ! Amours du jeune homme, ironies de l'âge mûr. Oh ! vous, revenez souvent avec vos couleurs sombres ou ternes, fuyant poussées les unes par les autres, comme les ombres qui passent en courant sur les murs, dans les nuits d'hiver. Et je tombe souvent en extase devant le souvenir de quelque bonne journée passée depuis bien longtemps, journée folle et joyeuse avec des éclats et des rires qui vibrent encore à mes oreilles, et qui palpitent encore de gaieté, et qui me font sourire d'amertume. C'était quelque course sur un cheval bondissant et couvert d'écume, quelque promenade bien rêveuse sous une large allée couverte d'ombre, à regarder l'eau couler sur les cailloux ; ou une contemplation d'un beau soleil resplendissant, avec ses gerbes de feu et ses auréoles rouges. Et j'entends encore le galop du cheval, ses naseaux qui fument ; j'entends l'eau qui glisse, la feuille qui tremble, le vent qui courbe les blés comme une mer.

D'autres sont mornes et froids comme des journées pluvieuses ; des souvenirs amers et cruels qui reviennent aussi ; des heures de calvaire passées à pleurer sans espoir, et puis à rire forcément pour chasser les larmes qui cachent les yeux, les sanglots qui couvrent la voix.

J'ai resté bien des jours, bien des ans, assis à ne penser à rien, ou à tout, abîmé dans l'infini que je voulais embrasser, et qui me dévorait ! J'entendais la pluie tomber dans les gouttières, les cloches sonner en pleurant ; je voyais le soleil se coucher lentement et la nuit venir, la nuit dormeuse qui vous apaise, et puis le jour reparaisait, toujours le même, avec ses ennuis, son même nombre d'heures à vivre, et que je voyais mourir avec joie.

Je rêvais la mer, les lointains voyages, les amours, les triomphes, toutes choses avortées dans mon existence, – cadavre avant d'avoir vécu.

Hélas ! tout cela n'était donc pas fait pour moi ? Je n'envie pas les autres, car chacun se plaint du fardeau dont la fatalité l'accable ; les uns le jettent avant l'existence finie, d'autres le portent jusqu'au bout. Et moi, le porterai-je ?

A peine ai-je vu la vie, qu'il y a eu un immense dégoût dans mon âme ; j'ai porté à ma bouche tous les fruits, ils m'ont semblé amers, je les ai repoussés et voilà que je meurs de faim. Mourir si jeune, sans espoir dans la tombe, sans être sûr d'y dormir, sans savoir si sa paix est inviolable ! Se jeter dans les bras du néant et douter s'il vous recevra !

Oui, je meurs, car est-ce vivre de voir son passé comme l'eau écoulée dans la mer, le présent comme une cage, l'avenir comme un linceul ?

pass in confusion, as insubstantial as shadows. Children playing on the grass in the midst of the daisies in the fields, behind the hedge in bloom, alongside the vineyard with its golden bunches of grapes, on the brown and green moss, beneath large leaves and fresh shade. Oh, calm and happy memories, like the memory of early childhood, passing close to me like faded roses.

The younger generation with its heated passions, its confused sense of the world and the human heart, its palpitations of love, its tears, its cries! Loves of the young man, ironies of the mature, come back often with your dark or dull colours, fleeing before one another like shadows running along walls on winter nights. And I often fall into trances at the memory of a good day spent a long while ago, a mad and joyful day whose sparkle and whose laughter still resonate in my ears, still palpitating with mirth, making me smile with bitterness. It might have been some race on a galloping horse lashed by the spray of its nostrils; a dreamy walk through a wide and shady alley, watching the water flow over the pebbles; or the contemplation of a beautiful, resplendent sun with its rays of fire and its red halo. I can still hear the gallop of the horse, with its steaming breath; I can hear the water flowing, leaves trembling, the wind which bends the corn and gives it the aspect of a sea.

Other memories are as dull and cold as rainy days. Bitter, cruel memories return as well, hours of sheer misery spent weeping without hope, then forcing out a laugh in order to chase away the tears which hide the eyes and the sobs which disguise the voice.

I have spent many days, even many years, sitting and thinking of nothing at all, or of everything, lost in the infinite which I wished to embrace but which devoured me! I would hear the rain falling in the gutters, the bells weeping as they toll. I would see the sun set slowly and the night fall, the sleepy night which calms. Then the day would dawn again, the same as ever, with all its monotony and always the same number of hours to live through. I was glad to see it come to an end.

I dreamed of the sea and of distant voyages, of loves and triumphs, of all the aborted things of my existence – a corpse even before I lived.

Alas! Was this not all for me, then? I do not envy others, for everyone complains of the burden which destiny loads upon them; some throw it off before the end of life, others carry it right through to the end. As for me, shall I carry it?

Scarcely had I seen life when an immense sense of disgust took hold of me. Every fruit that I took to my lips had a bitter taste. I threw it away and now I am dying of starvation. To die so young, with no hope for the grave, without even being sure of sleeping there, without even knowing whether its peace is inviolate! To throw yourself into the arms of nothingness and to doubt whether it will receive you!

Yes, I am dying. Is it life to see your past flowing away like water into the sea, your present as a cage, your future as a shroud?

IX

Il y a des choses insignifiantes qui m'ont frappé fortement et que je garderai toujours comme l'empreinte d'un fer rouge, quoiqu'elles soient banales et niaises.

Je me rappellerai toujours une espèce de château non loin de ma ville, et que nous allions voir souvent. C'était une de ces vieilles femmes du siècle dernier qui l'habitait. Tout chez elle avait conservé le souvenir pastoral ; je vois encore les portraits poudrés, les habits bleu ciel des hommes, et les roses et les œillets jetés sur les lambris avec des bergères et des troupeaux. Tout avait un aspect vieux et sombre ; les meubles, presque tous de soie brodée, étaient spacieux et doux ; la maison était vieille ; d'anciens fossés, alors plantés de pommiers, l'entouraient, et les pierres qui se détachaient de temps en temps des anciens créneaux allaient rouler jusqu'au fond.

Non loin était le parc, planté de grands arbres, avec des allées sombres, des bancs de pierre couverts de mousse, à demi brisés, entre les branchages et les ronces. Une chèvre paissait, et quand on ouvrait la grille de fer, elle se sauvait dans le feuillage.

Dans les beaux jours, il y avait des rayons de soleil qui passaient entre les branches et doraient la mousse, ça et là.

C'était triste, le vent s'engouffrait dans ces larges cheminées de briques et me faisait peur, quand, le soir surtout, les hiboux poussaient leurs cris dans les vastes greniers.

Nous prolongions souvent nos visites assez tard le soir, réunis autour de la vieille maîtresse, dans une grande salle couverte de dalles blanches, devant une vaste cheminée en marbre. Je vois encore sa tabatière d'or pleine du meilleur tabac d'Espagne, son carlin aux longs poils blancs, et son petit pied mignon, enveloppé dans un joli soulier à haut talon orné d'une rose noire.

Qu'il y a longtemps de tout cela ! La maîtresse est morte, ses carlins aussi, sa tabatière est dans la poche du notaire ; le château sert de fabrique, et le pauvre soulier a été jeté à la rivière.

APRÈS TROIS SEMAINES D'ARRET

...Je suis si lassé que j'ai un profond dégoût à continuer, ayant relu ce qui précède.
Les œuvres d'un homme ennuyé peuvent-elles amuser le public ?
Je vais cependant m'efforcer de divertir davantage l'un et l'autre.
Ici comment vraiment les *Mémoires*...

IX

There are insignificant things that have had a striking effect on me. I shall keep them forever, like a mark made by a firebrand, even though they may be banal and pointless.

I shall always remember a kind of chateau not far from my town, which we often went to visit. It was inhabited by one of those elderly women from the last century. Everything there had retained a pastoral memory. I can still see the dusty portraits, the sky-blue coats of the men, and the roses and carnations painted on the panelling with shepherdesses and flocks of sheep. Everything seemed old and sombre. The furniture, almost all with embroidered silk, was spacious and soft. The house was old. Old trenches, now planted with apple trees, surrounded it; and the stones which from time to time fell from the old parapet walls would roll down into them.

Not far away was the park, planted with large trees, with sombre walkways and stone benches covered in moss, half broken, between the branches and the brambles. A goat would pass and, when you opened the wrought-iron gate, would run away into the foliage.

On fine days, shafts of sunlight passed between the branches and gilded the moss here and there.

It was forlorn. The wind would whistle down the large brick chimneys and make me afraid, especially when in the evening owls hooted in the vast lofts.

Often we would prolong our visits until late in the evening, gathered around the elderly chatelaine, in a large hall with white flagstones, in front of the huge marble fireplace. I can still see her gold snuff box filled with the best Spanish tobacco, her pug dog with its straggling white hair, and her dainty foot inside a pretty shoe, the high heel of which was decorated with a black rose.

How long ago all that was! The mistress of the house is dead, as are her pugs, and her snuff box is in the lawyer's pocket. The chateau is now a factory, and that poor shoe has been thrown into the river.

AFTER A THREE-WEEK PAUSE

...I am so weary that the thought of continuing fills me with disgust, for I have re-read what precedes.

Can the work of a bored man be of interest to the public?

Nonetheless, I shall make an effort to be more amusing.

This is where the *Memoirs* truly begin.

X

Ici sont mes souvenirs les plus tendres et les plus pénibles à la fois, et je les aborde avec une émotion toute religieuse. Ils sont vivants à ma mémoire et presque chauds encore pour mon âme, tant cette passion l'a fait saigner. C'est une large cicatrice au cœur qui durera toujours, mais, au moment de retracer cette page de ma vie, mon cœur bat comme si j'allais remuer des ruines chéries.

Elles sont déjà vieilles, ces ruines; en marchant dans la vie, l'horizon s'est écarté par derrière, et que de choses depuis lors ! car les jours semblent longs, un à un, depuis le matin jusqu'au soir. Mais le passé paraît rapide, tant l'oubli rétrécit le cadre qui l'a contenu.

Pour moi, tout semble vivre encore. J'entends et je vois le frémissement des feuilles, je vois jusqu'au moindre pli de sa robe ; j'entends le timbre de sa voix, comme si un ange chantait près de moi, – voix douce et pure, qui vous enivre et qui vous fait mourir d'amour, voix qui a un corps, tant elle est belle, et qui séduit, comme s'il y avait un charme à ses mots.

Vous dire l'année précise me serait impossible ; mais alors j'étais fort jeune, j'avais, je crois, quinze ans ; nous allâmes cette année aux bains de mer de ..., village de Picardie, charmant avec ses maisons entassées les unes sur les autres, noires, grises, rouges, blanches, tournées de tous côtés, sans alignement et sans symétrie, comme un tas de coquilles et de cailloux que la vague a poussés sur la côte.

Il y a quelques années, personne n'y venait, malgré sa plage d'une demi-lieue de grandeur et sa charmante position ; mais, depuis peu, la vogue s'y est tournée. La dernière fois que j'y fus, je vis quantité de gants jaunes et de livrées ; on proposait même d'y construire une salle de spectacle.

Alors, tout était simple et sauvage ; il n'y avait guère que des artistes et des gens du pays. Le rivage était désert et, à marée basse, on voyait une plage immense avec un sable gris et argenté qui scintillait au soleil, tout humide encore de la vague. A gauche, des rochers où la mer battait paresseusement, dans ses jours de sommeil, les parois noircies de varech ; puis, au loin, l'océan bleu sous un soleil ardent, et mugissant sourdement comme un géant qui pleure.

Et quand on rentrait dans le village, c'était le plus pittoresque et le plus chaud spectacle. Des filets noirs et rongés par l'eau étendus aux portes, partout les enfants à moitié nus marchant sur un galet gris, seul pavage du lieu, des marins avec leurs vêtements rouges et bleus ; et tout cela simple dans sa grâce, naïf et robuste, tout cela empreint d'un caractère de vigueur et d'énergie.

J'allais souvent seul me promener sur la grève. Un jour, le hasard me fit aller vers l'endroit où l'on se baignait. C'était une place, non loin des dernières maisons

X

Here are my most intimate and my most painful memories. I approach them with an entirely religious emotion. They are still alive in my mind and still almost warm in my soul, such is the extent to which this passion made it bleed. It is a large scar on the heart that will remain forever, yet, as I am about to retrace this chapter of my life, my heart beats as if I were going to stir up cherished ruins.¹²

These ruins are already old. As I have walked through life, the horizon has opened up behind me, and how many things have happened since then! For the days, taken one at a time, seem long from the morning until the evening. Yet the past seems swift, such does our forgetfulness reduce the frame within which it was contained.

For me, everything still seems to live. I hear and I see the trembling of the leaves, I see the slightest fold of her dress. I hear the timbre of her voice, as though an angel were singing next to me, – a gentle and pure voice which elates you and makes you die of love, a voice so beautiful that it has a body and seduces you, as if its words had a spell.

It would be impossible to tell you the precise year,¹³ but I was very young then, I think I must have been fifteen. That year we went to the seaside resort of ..., a village in Picardy that was charming with its higgledy-piggledy houses, black, grey, red or white, pointing in every direction, with neither alignment nor symmetry, like a heap of shells and pebbles which the wave has brought onto the shore.

A few years ago nobody went there, despite the mile-long beach and the excellent location. But, more recently, fashions have changed, and the last time I was there I saw many yellow gloves and liveries. There was even talk of building a theatre.

At the time, everything was simple and unsophisticated. There was hardly anyone except artists and local people. The shore was deserted and, at low tide, you could see an immense beach with silver-grey sand shining in the sunlight and still wet from the waves. To the left there were rocks darkened with seaweed upon which, on sleepy days, the sea would slap lazily. Then, in the distance, you could see the blue ocean under the burning sun, moaning gently like a weeping giant.

And when you returned to the village, it was the most warming and picturesque spectacle. At the doors were dark nets corroded by the salt water; everywhere half-clothed children walked on the grey pebbles which were the nearest thing to paving in the area; and there were sailors with their red and blue clothes. Everything was simple, with straightforward and robust grace; everything bore a character of vigour and energy.

I would often go on my own to walk on the beach. One day, by chance, I wandered towards the place where people bathed. It was a place not far from the

du village, fréquentée plus spécialement pour cet usage ; hommes et femmes nageaient ensemble, on se déshabillait sur le rivage ou dans sa maison, et on laissait son manteau sur le sable.

Ce jour-là, une charmante pelisse rouge avec des raies noires était restée sur le rivage. La marée montait, le rivage était festonné d'écume ; déjà un flot plus fort avait mouillé les franges de soie de ce manteau. Je l'ôtai pour le placer au loin ; l'étoffe en était moelleuse et légère, c'était un manteau de femme.

Apparemment, on m'avait vu, car le jour même, au repas de midi, et comme tout le monde mangeait dans une salle commune, à l'auberge où nous étions logés, j'entendis quelqu'un qui me disait :

– Monsieur, je vous remercie bien de votre galanterie.

Je me retournai ; c'était une jeune femme assise avec son mari à la table voisine.

– Quoi donc ? lui demandai-je, préoccupé.

– D'avoir ramassé mon manteau ; n'est-ce pas vous ?

– Oui, Madame, repris-je embarrassé.

Elle me regarda.

Je baissai les yeux et rougis. Quel regard, en effet ! comme elle était belle, cette femme ! je vois encore cette prunelle ardente sous un sourcil noir se fixer sur moi comme un soleil.

Elle était grande, brune, avec de magnifiques cheveux noirs qui lui tombaient en tresses sur les épaules ; son nez était grec, ses yeux brûlants, ses sourcils hauts et admirablement arqués, sa peau était ardente et comme veloutée avec de l'or, elle était mince et fine, on voyait des veines d'azur serpenter sur cette gorge brune et pourprée. Joignez à cela un duvet fin qui brunissait sa lèvre supérieure et donnait à sa figure une expression mâle et énergique à faire pâlir les beautés blondes. On aurait pu lui reprocher trop d'embonpoint ou plutôt un négligé artistique. Aussi les femmes en général la trouvaient-elles de mauvais ton. Elle parlait lentement ; c'était une voix modulée, musicale et douce...

Elle avait une robe fine, de mousseline blanche, qui laissait voir les contours moelleux de son bras.

Quand elle se leva pour partir, elle mit une capote blanche avec un seul nœud rose ; elle la noua d'une main fine et potelée, une de ces mains dont on rêve longtemps et qu'on brûlerait de baisers.

Chaque matin j'allais la voir se baigner ; je la contemplais de loin sous l'eau, j'enviais la vague molle et paisible qui battait sur ses flancs et couvrait d'écume cette poitrine haletante, je voyais le contour de ses membres sous les vêtements mouillés qui la couvraient, je voyais son cœur battre, sa poitrine se gonfler ; je contemplais machinalement son pied se poser sur le sable, et mon regard restait fixé sur la trace de ses pas, et j'aurais pleuré presque en voyant le flot les effacer lentement.

last houses in the village, frequented mainly for this use. Men and women would swim together, changing either on the beach or at home, and they would leave their robes on the sand.

That day, a charming red cloak with black stripes had been left on the shore. The tide was coming in and the beach was covered in foam. One of the bigger waves had already dampened the silk fringes of this shawl. I picked it up and moved it farther back. The material was velvety and light. It was a woman's garment.¹⁴

Apparently I had been seen, for on the same day, at lunchtime, when everyone was gathered in the large dining room at the inn where we were staying, I heard someone say to me:

'Sir, I thank you for your kind action.'

I turned around. There was a young woman sitting with her husband at the table next door.

'Excuse me?' I asked, preoccupied.

'For picking up my coat. It was you, was it not?'

'Yes, Madam,' I replied with embarrassment.

She looked at me.

I lowered my eyes and blushed. What a gaze! How beautiful this woman was! I can still see those burning eyes under the dark eyebrows, staring at me like the sun.

She was tall and dark, with magnificent black hair that fell curling onto her shoulders. She had a Greek nose, burning eyes, high and wonderfully arched eyebrows. Her skin was warm and like golden velvet. She was slender and delicate, and you could see the bluish veins across her dark crimson breast. Add to that a gentle down which shaded her upper lip and gave her face a masculine, energetic look that would make blonde beauties fade in comparison. It might have been pointed out that she had slightly too full a figure or a casual artistic style, so in general women found her to be of poor taste. She spoke slowly. She had a modulated, musical, gentle voice...¹⁵

She had a delicate dress of white muslin through which you could see the soft contours of her arms.

When she got up to leave, she put on a white coat with a single pink bow that she tied with a delicate, fleshy hand, one of those hands which one dreams of at length and would smother with burning kisses.

Every morning I would go and watch her bathe. From a distance I would contemplate her in the water, envying the peaceful, gentle waves which splashed upon her sides and covered her panting breast with foam. I saw the outline of her limbs beneath the wet clothes that covered her, I saw her heart beat, her breast heave. Distractedly I watched her foot sink upon the sand. My gaze remained fixed on her footprints, and I would almost have wept to see the waves slowly wipe them away.

Et puis, quand elle revenait et qu'elle passait près de moi, que j'entendais l'eau tomber de ses habits et le frôlement de sa marche, mon cœur battait avec violence ; je baissais les yeux, le sang me montait à la tête, j'étouffais. Je sentais ce corps de femme à moitié nu passer près de moi avec le parfum de la vague. Sourd et aveugle, j'aurais deviné sa présence, car il y avait en moi quelque chose d'intime et de doux, qui se noyait en extases et en gracieuses pensées, quand elle passait ainsi.

Je crois voir encore la place où j'étais fixé sur le rivage ; je vois les vagues accourir de toutes parts, se briser, s'étendre ; je vois la plage festonnée d'écume, j'entends le bruit des voix confuses des baigneurs parlant entre eux, j'entends le bruit de ses pas, j'entends son haleine quand elle passait près de moi.

J'étais immobile de stupeur, comme si la Vénus fût descendue de son piédestal et s'était mise à marcher. C'est que, pour la première fois alors je sentais mon cœur, je sentais quelque chose de mystique, d'étrange comme un sens nouveau. J'étais baigné de sentiments infinis, tendres ; j'étais bercé d'images vaporeuses, vagues ; j'étais plus grand et plus fier tout à la fois.

J'aimais.

Aimer, se sentir jeune et plein d'amour, sentir la nature et ses harmonies palpiter en vous, avoir besoin de cette rêverie, de cette action du cœur et s'en sentir heureux ! Oh ! les premiers battements du cœur de l'homme, ses premières palpitations d'amour ! qu'elles sont douces et étranges ! Et plus tard, comme elles paraissent niasses et sottement ridicules ! Chose bizarre ! il y a tout ensemble du tourment et de la joie dans cette insomnie. Est-ce par vanité encore ? Ah ! l'amour ne serait-il que de l'orgueil ? faut-il nier ce que les plus impies respectent ? faudrait-il rire du cœur ? – Hélas ! hélas ! La vague a effacé les pas de Maria.

Ce fut d'abord un singulier état de surprise et d'admiration, une sensation toute mystique en quelque sorte, toute idée de volupté à part. Ce ne fut que plus tard que je ressentis cette ardeur frénétique et sombre de la chair et de l'âme, et qui dévore l'une et l'autre.

J'étais dans l'étonnement du cœur qui sent sa première pulsation. J'étais comme le premier homme quand il eut connu toutes ses facultés.

A quoi je rêvais, serait fort impossible à dire ; je me sentais nouveau et tout étranger à moi-même ; une voix m'était venue dans l'âme. Un rien, un pli de sa robe, un sourire, son pied, le moindre mot insignifiant m'impressionnaient comme des choses surnaturelles, et j'avais pour tout un jour à en rêver. Je suivais sa trace à l'angle d'un long mur, et le frôlement de ses vêtements me faisait palpiter d'aise. Quand j'entendais ses pas, les nuits qu'elle marchait ou qu'elle avançait vers moi... Non, je ne saurais vous dire combien il y a de douces sensations, d'enivrement du cœur, de béatitude et de folie dans l'amour.

Et maintenant, si rieur sur tout, si amèrement persuadé du grotesque de l'existence, je sens encore que l'amour, cet amour comme je l'ai rêvé au collège

And then, when she returned and passed in front of me, as I heard the water dripping from her clothes and listened to the rustling of her walk, my heart would beat violently. I lowered my gaze, my blood rushed to my head, I had difficulty breathing. I sensed this half-naked female body walking before me, with the scent of the sea. Were I deaf and blind I would have sensed her presence, for there was within me something intimate and gentle that was overwhelmed by ecstasy and delicate thoughts as she passed by.

I can still almost see the spot where I stood on the shore; I see the waves coming in from all directions, breaking, then spreading outwards; I see the beach festooned with spray, I hear the mingled voices of the bathers as they speak with one another, and I hear the sound of her footsteps, the sound of her breath as she walks past.

I was transfixed with stupor, as if Venus had stepped down and walked off her pedestal. It was because, for the first time, I felt my heart stir, I felt something mystical and strange, like another sense. I was bathed in infinite and tender sentiments, lulled by fleeting and hazy images. I felt both greater and prouder.

I was in love.

What it is to love, to feel young and full of tenderness, to feel the harmonies of nature palpitating within you, to need this reverie and this action of the heart, to feel happy on account of it! Oh! those first beatings of a man's heart, his first palpitations of love! How strange and gentle they are! And later, how trite, how stupid and ridiculous they seem! What a strange thing! There is at once both torment and joy in this sleeplessness. Is it also vanity? Ah! is love nothing but pride? Must we deny that which the most impious of people respect? Must we laugh at the human heart? Alas! Alas! Maria's footprints have been wiped away by the sea.

At first it was an extraordinary state of surprise and admiration, a quite mystical kind of sensation, devoid of all physical passion. It was only later that I sensed that dark and frenzied ardour of the body and the soul, where both are consumed.

I experienced the surprise of the heart when it first beats. I felt like the first man when he became aware of all his powers.

It would be impossible to say what I dreamed of. I felt renewed, unlike myself. A voice had entered my soul. A trifle – a fold in her dress, a smile, her foot, or the slightest and most insignificant word – impressed themselves upon me like supernatural things, and I could spend the whole day dreaming of them. I would watch out for her from the corner of a long wall, and the rustle of her clothes would make me palpitate with delight. When I heard her steps, on those evenings when she advanced towards me... no, I cannot tell you what delicate emotions, what rapture of the heart, what blessedness and folly there is in love.

And now, so cynical about everything, so bitterly convinced of the grotesque quality of existence, I still have the feeling that love – love as I dreamed of it at

sans l'avoir et que j'ai ressenti plus tard, qui m'a tant fait pleurer et dont j'ai tant ri, combien je crois encore que ce serait tout à la fois la plus sublime des choses, ou la plus bouffonne des bêtises !

Deux êtres jetés sur la terre par un hasard, quelque chose, et qui se rencontrent, s'aiment, parce que l'un est femme et l'autre homme ! Les voilà haletants l'un pour l'autre, se promenant ensemble la nuit et se mouillant à la rosée, regardant le clair de lune et le trouvant diaphane, admirant les étoiles, et disant sur tous les tons : je t'aime, tu m'aimes, il m'aime, nous nous aimons, et répétant cela avec des soupirs, des baisers ; et puis ils rentrent, poussés tous les deux par une ardeur sans pareille, car ces deux âmes ont leurs organes violemment échauffés, et les voilà bientôt grotesquement accouplés, avec des rugissements et des soupirs, soucieux l'un et l'autre pour reproduire un imbécile de plus sur la terre, un malheureux qui les imitera ! Contemplez-les, plus bêtes en ce moment que les chiens et les mouches, s'évanouissant, et cachant soigneusement aux yeux des hommes leur jouissance solitaire, – pensant peut-être que le bonheur est un crime et la volupté une honte.

On me pardonnera, je pense, de ne pas parler de l'amour platonique, cet amour exalté comme celui d'une statue ou d'une cathédrale, qui repousse toute idée de jalousie et de possession, et qui devrait se trouver entre les hommes mutuellement, mais que j'ai rarement eu l'occasion d'apercevoir. Amour sublime s'il existait, mais qui n'est qu'un rêve, comme tout ce qu'il y a de beau en ce monde.

Je m'arrête ici, car la moquerie du vieillard ne doit pas ternir la virginité des sentiments du jeune homme ; je me serais indigné autant que vous, lecteur, si on m'eût alors tenu un langage aussi cruel. Je croyais qu'une femme était un ange... Oh ! que Molière a eu raison de la comparer à un potage !

XI

Maria avait un enfant ; c'était une petite fille ; on l'aimait, on l'embrassait, on l'ennuyait de caresses et de baisers. Comme j'aurais recueilli un seul de ces baisers jetés, comme des perles, avec profusion, sur la tête de cette enfant au maillot !

Maria l'allaitait elle-même, et un jour je la vis découvrir sa gorge et lui présenter son sein.

C'était une gorge grasse et ronde, avec une peau brune et des veines d'azur qu'on voyait sous cette chair ardente. Jamais je n'avais vu de femme nue alors. Oh ! la singulière extase où me plongeait la vue de ce sein ; comme je le dévorais des yeux, comme j'aurais voulu seulement toucher cette poitrine ! il me semblait que

school without knowing it, love as I experienced it later, love which made me cry so much and over which I have laughed so often – I still have the feeling that it could be either the most sublime of things, or the most idiotic of follies!

Two beings thrown into this life, by chance or whatever else, meet each other and fall in love, because one is a woman and the other a man! There they are gasping for each other, walking together in the night and getting wet in the dew, watching the sunset and finding it diaphanous, admiring the stars, and saying in every possible way: ‘I love you, you love me, he loves me, we love each other,’ and repeating this with sighs and kisses; and then they return, each of them driven by an ardour without equal, for these two souls’ organs are violently aroused; and in due course, they are grotesquely conjoined, with grunts and sighs, each of them preoccupied with producing yet another imbecile on the face of the earth, another unhappy creature who will imitate them! Consider them, more stupid at this moment than the dogs or the flies, swooning and hiding their secret gratification from the eyes of the world – for they think, perhaps, that happiness is a crime and sexual fulfilment a cause for shame.

I assume that I shall be forgiven for not speaking of Platonic love, that exalted form of love like the love of a statue or a cathedral, repelling all ideas of jealousy or possession, the love that should be mutual between all men but which I have rarely had occasion to come across. It would be a sublime form of love if it existed, but it is no more than a dream, like everything that is beautiful in this world.

I shall stop here, for the old man’s mockery must not tarnish the virginity of the young man’s feelings. I should have felt the same outrage as you, dear reader, if at the time I had been faced with such cruel remarks. I believed that a woman was an angel... Oh! how right Molière was to compare her to soup!¹⁶

XI

Maria had a child, a baby daughter. People found her adorable, they hugged and wearied her with caresses and kisses. How I wished I could have gathered a single one of those kisses that were cast like pearls, with profusion, upon the head of this child in its swaddling clothes!¹⁷

Maria was breast-feeding the girl herself. One day I saw her uncover her breast and present it to her. It was full and round, with sallow skin and azure veins showing beneath the ardent flesh. Until then, I had never seen a naked woman. What singular ecstasy the view of that bosom plunged me into! I devoured it with my eyes. How I would have wished simply to touch it! It seemed to me that if I

si j'eusse posé mes lèvres, mes dents l'auraient mordue de rage ; et mon cœur se fondait en délices en pensant aux voluptés que donnerait ce baiser.

Oh ! comme je l'ai revue longtemps, cette gorge palpitante, ce long cou gracieux et cette tête penchée, avec ses cheveux noirs en papillotes, vers cette enfant qui tétait, et qu'elle berçait lentement, sur ses genoux, en fredonnant un air italien !

XII

Nous fîmes bientôt une connaissance plus intime : je dis *nous*, car pour moi personnellement je me serais bien hasardé de lui adresser une parole, en l'état où sa vue m'avait plongé.

Son mari tenait le milieu entre l'artiste et le commis voyageur ; il était orné de moustaches ; il fumait intrépidement, était vif, bon garçon, amical ; il ne méprisait point la table, et je le vis une fois faire trois lieues à pied pour aller chercher un melon à la ville la plus voisine ; il était venu dans sa chaise de poste avec son chien, sa femme, son enfant et vingt-cinq bouteilles de vin du Rhin.

Aux bains de mer, à la campagne ou en voyage, on se parle plus facilement, on désire se connaître ; un rien suffit pour la conversation, la pluie et le beau temps bien plus qu'ailleurs y tiennent place ; on se récrie sur l'incommodité des logements, sur le détestable de la cuisine d'auberge. Ce dernier trait surtout est du meilleur ton possible : « Oh ! le linge est-il sale ! C'est trop poivré ; c'est trop épice ! Ah ! l'horreur ! ma chère. »

Va-t-on ensemble à la promenade, c'est à qui s'extasiera davantage sur la beauté du paysage. Que c'est beau ! que la mer est belle ! Joignez à cela quelques mots poétiques et boursoufflés, deux ou trois réflexions philosophiques entrelardées de soupirs et d'aspirations du nez plus ou moins fortes ; si vous savez dessiner, tirez votre album en maroquin, ou, ce qui est mieux, enfoncez votre casquette sur les yeux, croisez-vous les bras et dormez pour faire semblant de penser.

Il y a des femmes que j'ai flairées *bel-esprit* à un quart de lieue loin, seulement à la manière dont elles regardaient la vague.

Il faudra vous plaindre des hommes, manger peu et vous passionner pour un rocher, admirer un pré et vous mourir d'amour pour la mer. Ah ! vous serez délicieux alors, on dira : « Le charmant jeune homme ! quelle jolie blouse il a ! comme ses bottes sont fines ! quelle grâce ! la belle âme ! » C'est un besoin de parler, cet instinct d'aller en troupeau où les plus hardis marchent en tête, qui a fait dans l'origine les sociétés et qui de nos jours forme les réunions.

had placed my lips upon it, my teeth would have bitten into it with frenzy; and my heart melted away in delight as I thought of the thrill that such a kiss would bring.

Oh, how often I have remembered that palpitating breast, that long and graceful neck, that head, with its dark and curling hair, inclining towards the child that suckled, as she rocked it gently on her knees, humming an Italian air.

XII

In due course we became more closely acquainted. I say *we*, but for my own part, I would not have ventured to address a word to her, given the state in which I found myself.

Her husband was something between the artist and the travelling salesman. His face was adorned with a moustache; he smoked constantly, he was lively, good company among men, and urbane. He did not disdain the pleasures of the table, and I once saw him make an eight-mile journey¹⁸ on foot to buy a melon in the next town. He had come in his post-chaise¹⁹ with his dog, his wife, his child, and twenty-five bottles of Rhine wine.

In seaside resorts, in the country and on journeys, conversations are struck up more easily, for people wish to get to know one another. The slightest circumstance can lead to an exchange, and the weather seems to assume much greater importance than usual. People complain about the discomfort of the accommodation, and the appalling conditions in which they must eat. This latter subject, above all, is considered very chic. 'Oh! isn't the table-linen dirty! There is too much pepper; it is too spicy! Oh! my dear! how terrible it is!'²⁰

If one should go out on a walk, there is rivalry about who will wax more enthusiastic over the beauty of the countryside. Oh, how beautiful it is! how beautiful the sea is! Add to that a few poetic and sonorous words, and two or three philosophical reflections interspersed with sighs, as you breathe in more or less deeply through your nose. Or, if you are able to draw, take out your leather album. Better still, pull your hat down over your eyes, fold your arms and sleep, to give the impression that you are thinking.

There are women of intellectual pretensions whom I would spot half a mile off, merely by the way they looked at the surf.

You have to complain about mankind, eat little and get excited about a rock, or admire a field and die in adoration of the sea. Then you will be just delightful, and people will say: 'What a charming young man! What a smart jacket he has! How fine his boots are! What style! What a fine soul!' It is a need to speak, an instinct to join the herd where the boldest take the lead, that created human societies in the first place and nowadays brings people together in gatherings.

Ce fut sans doute un pareil motif qui nous fit causer pour la première fois. C'était l'après-midi, il faisait chaud et le soleil dardait dans la salle, malgré les auvents. Nous étions restés, quelques peintres, Maria et son mari et moi, étendus sur des chaises à fumer en buvant du grog.

Maria fumait, ou du moins, si un reste de sottise féminine l'en empêchait, elle aimait l'odeur du tabac (monstruosité !); elle me donna même des cigarettes ! On causa littérature, sujet inépuisable avec les femmes ; j'y pris ma part, je parlai longuement et avec feu ; Maria et moi nous étions parfaitement du même sentiment en fait d'art. Je n'ai jamais entendu personne le sentir avec plus de naïveté et avec moins de prétention ; elle avait des mots simples et expressifs qui partaient en relief, et surtout avec tant de négligé et de grâce, tant d'abandon, de nonchalance, vous auriez dit qu'elle chantait.

Un soir, son mari nous proposa une partie de barque. Il faisait le plus beau temps du monde, nous acceptâmes.

XIII

Comment rendre par des mots ces choses pour lesquelles il n'y a pas de langage, ces impressions du cœur, ces mystères de l'âme inconnus à elle-même ? Comment vous dirai-je tout ce que j'ai ressenti, tout ce que j'ai pensé, toutes les choses dont j'ai joui cette soirée-là ?

C'était une belle nuit d'été ; vers neuf heures, nous montâmes sur la chaloupe, on rangea les avirons, nous partîmes. Le temps était calme, la lune se reflétait sur la surface unie de l'eau, et le sillon de la barque faisait vaciller son image sur les flots. La marée se mit à remonter et nous sentîmes les premières vagues bercer lentement la chaloupe. On se taisait, Maria se mit à parler. Je ne sais ce qu'elle dit, je me laissais enchanter par le son de ses paroles comme je me laissais bercer par la mer. Elle était près de moi, je sentais le contour de son épaule et le contact de sa robe ; elle levait son regard vers le ciel, pur, étoilé, resplendissant de diamants et se mirant dans les vagues bleues. C'était un ange, à la voir ainsi la tête levée avec ce regard céleste.

J'étais enivré d'amour, j'écoutais les deux rames se lever en cadence, les flots battre les flancs de la barque ; je me laissais toucher par tout cela, et j'écoutais la voix de Maria, douce et vibrante.

Est-ce que je pourrai jamais vous dire toutes les mélodies de sa voix, toutes les grâces de son sourire, toutes les beautés de son regard ? Vous dirai-je jamais comme c'était quelque chose à faire mourir d'amour que cette nuit pleine du parfum de la mer, avec ses vagues transparentes, son sable argenté par la lune,

No doubt it was some similar reason that one day caused us to talk for the first time. It was the afternoon, it was hot and the sun's rays were shining straight into the room, despite the shutters. A number of us had remained there – some painters, Maria, her husband, and I – stretched out on the chairs, smoking and drinking punch.

Maria smoked, or at least, if some vestige of silly femininity prevented her from doing so, she enjoyed the smell of tobacco (how monstrous!) She even gave me some cigarettes. The conversation turned on literature, an inexhaustible subject with women. I took a part in it, and spoke at length and with enthusiasm. Maria and I were in perfect agreement about art. I have never heard anyone sense it with greater simplicity and less pretentiousness. She had simple and expressive words for it that stood out sharply, and above all with such ease and grace, such abandon, such nonchalance, that it was as though she were singing.²¹

One evening her husband suggested that we go out in a boat. The weather was absolutely beautiful, and we accepted.

XIII

How does one render in words those things for which there is no language, those impressions of the heart, those mysteries of the soul of which the soul itself has no knowledge? How can I tell you all that I felt, all that I thought, all the things in which I delighted that evening?

It was a fine summer's night. At about nine o' clock we boarded the launch, the oars were put in place, and we departed. The weather was calm, the moon was reflected on the smooth surface of the water, and the wake of the boat made its image shimmer behind us. The tide began to rise again and we felt the first waves slapping gently against the side of the launch. We fell silent, then Maria began to talk. I do not know what she said, I simply allowed myself to be enchanted by the sound of her words, as the sea rocked me. She was near to me, I could feel the curve of her shoulder and the contact of her dress. She raised her eyes towards the pure, starred sky, resplendent with its diamonds and mirrored in the blue waves. Seen thus, her head raised with a celestial gaze, she was an angel.

I was intoxicated with love. I listened to the two oars moving in time, and to the waves beating against the sides of the boat. I was touched by it all, and I listened to Maria's gentle, resonating voice.

Could I ever begin to describe all the melodies of her voice to you, all the grace of her smile, all the beauty of her gaze? Will I ever be able to describe to you how I might have died of love on that night so full of the sea air, with its translucent waves and its sand silvered by the moonlight, with this beautiful and calm swell,

cette onde belle et calme, ce ciel resplendissant, et puis, près de moi, cette femme ! toutes les joies de la terre, toutes ses voluptés, ce qu'il y a de plus doux, de plus enivrant ? C'était tout le charme d'un rêve avec toutes les jouissances du vrai. Je me laissais entraîner par toutes ces émotions, je m'y avançais plus avant avec une joie insatiable, je m'enivrais à plaisir de ce calme plein de voluptés, de ce regard de femme, de cette voix ; je me plongeais dans mon cœur et j'y trouvais des voluptés infinies. Comme j'étais heureux ! bonheur du crépuscule qui tombe dans la nuit, bonheur qui passe comme la vague expirée, comme le rivage...

On revint ; on descendit, je conduisis Maria jusque chez elle, je ne lui dis pas un mot, j'étais timide ; je la suivais, je rêvais d'elle, du bruit de sa marche et, quand elle fut entrée, je regardai longtemps le mur de sa maison éclairé par les rayons de la lune ; je vis sa lumière briller à travers les vitres, et je la regardais de temps en temps, en retournant par la grève ; puis, quand cette lumière eut disparu : – Elle dort, me dis-je. Et puis, tout à coup, une pensée vint m'assaillir, pensée de rage et de jalousie : – Oh ! non, elle ne dort pas ; – et j'eus dans l'âme toutes les tortures d'un damné.

Je pensais à son mari, à cet homme vulgaire et jovial, et les images les plus hideuses vinrent s'offrir devant moi. J'étais comme ces gens qu'on fait mourir de faim dans des cages et entourés des mets les plus exquis.

J'étais seul sur la grève. Seul. Elle ne pensait pas à moi. En regardant cette solitude immense devant moi et cette autre solitude, plus terrible encore, je me mis à pleurer comme un enfant, car près de moi, à quelques pas, elle était là, belle et nue, avec toutes les voluptés de la nuit, toutes les grâces de l'amour, toutes les chastetés de l'hymen. Cet homme n'avait qu'à ouvrir les bras et elle venait sans efforts, sans attendre, elle venait à lui, et ils s'aimaient, ils s'embrassaient. A lui toutes les joies, toutes ses délices à lui ; mon amour sous ses pieds ; à lui cette femme toute entière, sa tête, sa gorge, ses seins, son corps, son âme, ses sourires, ses deux bras qui l'entourent, ses paroles d'amour ; à lui tout, à moi rien.

Je me mis à rire, car la jalousie m'inspira des pensées obscènes et grotesques ; alors je les souillai tous les deux, j'amassai sur eux les ridicules les plus amers, et ces images qui m'avaient fait pleurer d'envie, je m'efforçai d'en rire de pitié.

La marée commençait à redescendre, et de place en place on voyait de grands trous pleins d'eau argentée par la lune, des places de sable encore mouillé couvertes de varech, ça et là quelques rochers à fleur d'eau ou, se dressant plus haut, noirs et blancs ; des filets dressés et déchirés par la mer, qui se retirait en grondant.

Il faisait chaud, j'étouffais. Je rentrai dans la chambre de mon auberge, je voulus dormir. J'entendais toujours les flots aux côtés du canot, j'entendais la rame tomber, j'entendais la voix de Maria qui parlait ; j'avais du feu dans les veines, tout cela repassait devant moi, et la promenade du soir, et celle de la nuit sur le rivage ; je voyais Maria couchée, et je m'arrêtais là, car le reste me faisait frémir. J'avais de la lave dans l'âme ; j'étais harassé de tout cela et, couché sur le

this brilliant sky, and next to me this woman! Will I describe all the joys of the earth, all its delights, all that is most tender and inebriating? It was the magic of a dream with all the pleasures of reality. I was swept away by these emotions, I went further into them with an insatiable joy, I was carried away by this calm so full of pleasure, by this woman's gaze, by this voice. I delved into my own heart and found infinite delight there. How happy I was! It was the happiness of dusk turning to night, the happiness that passes like the spent wave, like the shore...

We returned and disembarked. I escorted Maria home, saying not a word in my timidity. I followed her, dreamed of her, dreamed of the sound of her footsteps; and when she had gone in, I spent a long time looking at the wall of her house, brightened by the rays of the moon. I saw its light shining through the windowpanes, and, as I walked back along the sea shore I looked back at it from time to time. Then, when the light had disappeared, I said to myself: 'She is asleep'. But a sudden thought jolted me, a thought full of rage and jealousy. 'Oh no! she is not asleep!' And my mind was filled with all the tortures of the damned.

I thought of her husband, that vulgar and jovial man, and the most hideous images appeared before me. I was like those people who are starved to death in cages, surrounded by the most exquisite foods.²²

I was alone on the shore, all alone. She was no longer thinking of me. As I contemplated this solitude stretching before me, and that other, more terrible solitude, I began to weep like a child, for nearby, only a few steps away, she was there, beautiful and naked, with all the pleasures of the night, all the charms of love, all the sanctity of marriage. That man needed merely to open his arms and she would come effortlessly to him, without further ado, then they would kiss and make love. All joys and all delights were his, and his alone. My love was trampled underfoot. This woman was his, her head, her breasts, her body, her soul, her smiles, her embracing arms, her words of love. He had everything, I had nothing.

I burst out laughing, for jealousy inspired obscene and grotesque thoughts in me. I then defiled them both, heaping foul ridicule upon them, and I tried to sneer with pity at those images that had made me weep with envy.

The tide was beginning to go out again; from time to time you could see large hollows full of water glistening in the moonlight; there were places where the wet sand was covered in seaweed, and, here and there, a few dark or light rocks at or above surface level; and there were nets set for the catch, ripped by the sea in its noisy retreat.

It was hot, I felt oppressed. I went back to my bedroom at the inn and tried to sleep. I could still hear the waves on the sides of the boat, I could hear the slap of the oar on the water, I could hear Maria's voice as she spoke. I felt fire in my veins, and everything passed again before my mind's eye: the evening excursion, the subsequent walk along the shore. I saw Maria sleeping, and I stopped there, for the rest made me tremble. I felt lava in my soul, I was troubled by all that had

dos, je regardais ma chandelle brûler et son disque trembler au plafond ; c'était avec un hébétement stupide que je voyais le suif couler autour du flambeau de cuivre et la flammèche noire s'allonger dans la flamme.

Enfin le jour vint à paraître, je m'endormis.

XIV

Il fallut partir ; nous nous séparâmes sans pouvoir lui dire adieu. Elle quitta les bains le même jour que nous. C'était un dimanche. Elle partit le matin, nous le soir.

Elle partit, et je ne la revis plus. Adieu pour toujours ! Elle partit comme la poussière de la route qui s'envola derrière ses pas. Comme j'y ai pensé depuis ! combien d'heures, confondu devant le souvenir de son regard, ou l'intonation de ses paroles !

Enfoncé dans la voiture, je reportais mon cœur plus avant dans la route que nous avions parcourue, je me remplaçais dans le passé qui ne reviendrait plus ; je pensais à la mer, à ses vagues, à son rivage, à tout ce que je venais de voir, tout ce que j'avais senti ; les paroles dites, les gestes, les actions, la moindre chose, tout cela palpait et vivait. C'était dans mon cœur un chaos, un bourdonnement immense, une folie.

Tout était passé comme un rêve. Adieu pour toujours à ces belles fleurs de la jeunesse si vite fanées et vers lesquelles plus tard on se reporte de temps en temps avec amertume et plaisir à la fois ! Enfin, je vis les maisons de ma ville, je rentrai chez moi, tout m'y parut désert et lugubre, vide et creux ; je me mis à vivre, à boire, à manger, à dormir.

L'hiver vint et je rentrai au collège.

XV

Si je vous disais que j'ai aimé d'autres femmes, je mentirais comme un infâme. Je l'ai cru cependant, je me suis efforcé d'attacher mon cœur à d'autres passions, il y a glissé dessus comme sur la glace.

Quand on est enfant, on a tant lu de choses sur l'amour, on trouve ce mot-là si mélodieux, on le rêve tant, on souhaite si fort d'avoir ce sentiment qui vous fait palpiter à la lecture des romans et des drames, qu'à chaque femme qu'on voit on se dit : n'est-ce pas là l'amour ? on s'efforce d'aimer pour se faire homme.

happened, and as I lay on my back, I watched my candle burn, its circle of light shimmering on the ceiling. In a senseless stupor, I watched the wax flow down over the brass candlestick, and the black wick grow longer inside the flame.

At last daylight came, and I fell asleep.

XIV

We had to leave. Maria and I parted without being able to say goodbye. She left the resort on the same day as we did. It was a Sunday. She left in the morning, we in the evening.

She left, and I did not see her again. Farewell forever! She disappeared like the dust that flew away behind her footsteps in the road. How I have thought about it all since then! So many hours spent, confounded by the memory of her gaze or the intonation of her words!

Huddled inside the coach, I took my heart farther down the road we had covered together, and projected myself back into the past which was never to return. I thought of the sea, the waves, the shore, everything I had recently seen, everything I had felt – the words uttered, the gestures and actions, the slightest thing, and these memories took on vibrancy and life. Within my heart there was chaos, the vast murmur of folly.

Everything had passed like a dream. Farewell forever to the beautiful flowers of youth that fade so fast, whose memory one recalls from time to time with a mixture of bitterness and pleasure! At length, I saw the houses of my town, I returned into my home, where everything seemed deserted, lugubrious, empty, hollow. I set about living, drinking, eating, sleeping.

Winter came and I returned to school.

XV

If I were to tell you I had loved other women, it would be an infamous lie. Yet I believed it to be the case, and I tried to bind my heart to other passions. It skated over them as if over ice.

As a child, we read so much about love, we find that word so melodious, we dream so much of it, we wish so much to experience that feeling which causes the pulse to quicken on reading novels and dramas, that each time we behold a woman we say to ourselves: is this not love? And we try to love in order to become men.²³

Je n'ai pas été exempt plus qu'aucun autre de cette faiblesse d'enfant, j'ai soupiré comme un poète élégiaque, et, après bien des efforts, j'étais tout étonné de me trouver quelquefois quinze jours sans avoir pensé à celle que j'avais choisie pour rêver. Toute cette vanité d'enfant s'effaça devant Maria.

Mais je dois remonter plus haut ; c'est un serment que j'ai fait de tout dire ; le fragment qu'on va lire avait été composé en partie en décembre dernier, avant que j'eusse eu l'idée de faire les *Mémoires d'un fou*. Comme il devait être isolé, je l'avais mis dans le cadre qui suit.

Le voici tel qu'il était :

Parmi tous les rêves du passé, les souvenirs d'autrefois et mes réminiscences de jeunesse, j'en ai conservé un bien petit nombre, avec quoi je m'amuse aux heures d'ennui. A l'évocation d'un nom tous les personnages reviennent, avec leurs costumes et leur langage, jouer leur rôle comme ils le jouèrent dans ma vie, et je les vois agir devant moi comme un Dieu qui s'amuserait à regarder ses mondes créés. Un surtout, le premier amour, qui ne fut jamais violent ni passionné, effacé depuis par d'autres désirs, mais qui reste encore au fond de mon cœur comme une antique voie romaine qu'on aurait traversée par l'ignoble wagon d'un chemin de fer ; c'est le récit de ces premiers battements du cœur, de ces commencements des voluptés indéfinies et vagues, de toutes les vaporeuses choses qui se passent dans l'âme d'un enfant à la vue des seins d'une femme, de ses yeux, à l'audition de ses chants et de ses paroles ; c'est ce salmigondis de sentiment et de rêverie que je devais étaler comme un cadavre devant un cercle d'amis, qui vinrent un jour, dans l'hiver, en décembre, pour se chauffer et me faire causer paisiblement au coin du feu, tout en fumant une pipe dont on arrose l'âcreté par un liquide quelconque.

Après que tous furent venus, que chacun se fut assis, qu'on eut bourré sa pipe et empli son verre, après que nous fûmes en cercle autour du feu, l'un avec les pincettes en main, l'autre soufflant, un troisième remuant les cendres avec sa canne, et que chacun eut une occupation, je commençai :

– Mes chers amis, leur dis-je, vous passerez bien quelque chose, quelque mot de vanité qui se glissera dans le récit.

(Une adhésion de toutes les têtes m'engagea à commencer.)

– Je me rappelle que c'était un jeudi, vers le mois de novembre, il y a deux ans – j'étais, je crois, en cinquième. La première fois que je la vis, elle déjeunait chez ma mère, quand j'entrai d'un pas précipité, comme un écolier qui a flairé toute la semaine le repas du jeudi. Elle se détourna ; à peine si je la saluai, car j'étais alors si niais et si enfant que je ne pouvais voir une femme, de celles du moins qui ne m'appelaient pas un enfant comme les dames, ou un ami, comme les petites filles, sans rougir ou plutôt sans rien faire et sans rien dire.

I was no more exempt from this childish weakness than anyone else. I sighed like an elegiac poet and after much effort I was sometimes surprised to discover that I had spent a fortnight without thinking of the one I had chosen for my dreams. All of this childish vanity disappeared with Maria.

But I must go back further into the past, for I have made a pledge to tell everything.²⁴ The fragment that follows was composed in part last December, before I had had the idea of writing *Memoirs of a Madman*. As it was intended to form a separate piece, I had placed it in the following framework.

Here it is, just as it was written:

Of all the dreams of the past, the memories of former times and childhood reminiscences, the number I have held onto is very small, and in my hours of tedium I amuse myself by thinking of these. At the evocation of a name all the characters return, with their costumes and their speech, to play the same role that they played in my life. I watch them acting before me, like some God amusing himself by beholding the worlds he has created.²⁵ There is above all one memory for me, that of the first love. It was neither violent nor passionate, and has since been effaced by other desires, yet it remains deep in my heart, like an old Roman road traversed by a vulgar railway carriage. It is the story of those first beatings of the heart, those nascent sensual pleasures which remain vague and imprecise, and of all those hazy things that occur in the soul of a child at the sight of a woman's breasts or of her eyes, or upon hearing her song or her words. One winter's day, in December, I was to display that mixture of sentiment and reverie to a circle of friends who came to warm themselves by the fire and to hear me speaking painfully, while smoking a pipe and drinking some kind of liquid to dilute the bitterness of the tobacco.

When they had all arrived and sat down, when the pipes were packed and the glasses filled, when we had all placed ourselves in a circle around the fire, one with the tongs, one with the bellows, another turning the embers with his walking stick, and when everyone had something to do, then I began:

'Dear friends,' I said, 'I ask for your forbearance, should anything pretentious slip into this story.'

(A general nodding of heads signalled that I could begin.)

'I remember that it was a Thursday, in about November, two years ago. I believe I was in the fifth form. The first time I saw her, she was eating at my mother's house when I entered hurriedly, like a schoolboy who all through the week has been thinking ahead to Thursday's meal. She turned away. I scarcely acknowledged her, for at that stage I was so clumsy and immature that I could not look upon a woman – apart from the ladies who called me a child, or the young girls who called me a friend – without blushing, or else doing nothing and remaining silent.

Mais grâce à Dieu, j'ai gagné depuis en vanité et en effronterie tout ce que j'ai perdu en innocence et en candeur.

Elles étaient deux jeunes filles, des sœurs, des camarades de la mienne, de pauvres Anglaises qu'on avait fait sortir de leur pension pour les mener au grand air dans la campagne, pour les promener en voiture, les faire courir dans le jardin et les amuser enfin, sans l'œil d'une surveillante qui jette de la tiédeur et de la retenue dans les ébats de l'enfance. La plus âgée avait quinze ans, la seconde douze à peine ; celle-ci était petite et mince, ses yeux étaient plus vifs, plus grands et plus beaux que ceux de sa sœur aînée, mais celle-ci avait une tête si ronde et si gracieuse, sa peau était si fraîche, si rosée, ses dents courtes si blanches sous ses lèvres rosées, et tout cela était si bien encadré par des bandeaux de jolis cheveux châtons, qu'on ne pouvait s'empêcher de lui donner la préférence. Elle était petite et peut-être un peu grosse, c'était son défaut le plus visible ; mais ce qui me charmait le plus en elle, c'était une grâce enfantine sans prétention, un parfum de jeunesse qui embaumait autour d'elle. Il y avait tant de naïveté et de candeur que les plus impies même ne pouvaient s'empêcher d'admirer.

Il me semble la voir encore à travers les vitres de ma chambre, qui courait dans le jardin avec d'autres camarades ; je vois encore leur robe de soie onduler brusquement sur leurs talons en bruissant, et leurs pieds se relever pour courir sur les allées sablées du jardin, puis s'arrêter haletantes, se prendre réciproquement par la taille, et se promener gravement en causant, sans doute, de fêtes, de danses, de plaisirs et d'amours, – les pauvres filles !

L'intimité exista bientôt entre nous tous ; au bout de quatre mois je l'embrassais comme ma sœur, nous nous tutoyions tous. J'aimais tant à causer avec elle ! son accent étranger avait quelque chose de fin et de délicat qui rendait sa voix fraîche comme ses joues.

D'ailleurs, il y a dans les mœurs anglaises un négligé naturel et un abandon de toutes nos convenances qu'on pourrait prendre pour une coquetterie raffinée, mais qui n'est qu'un charme qui attire, comme ces feux follets qui fuient sans cesse. Souvent nous faisons des promenades en famille, et je me souviens qu'un jour, dans l'hiver, nous allâmes voir une vieille dame qui demeurait sur une côte qui domine la ville.

Pour arriver chez elle, il fallait traverser des vergers plantés de pommiers, où l'herbe était haute et mouillée ; un brouillard ensevelissait la ville et, du haut de notre colline, nous voyions les toits entassés et rapprochés couverts de neige, et puis le silence de la campagne, et au loin le bruit éloigné des pas d'une vache ou d'un cheval, dont le pied s'enfonce dans les ornières.

En passant par une barrière peinte en blanc, son manteau s'accrocha aux épines de la haie ; j'allai le détacher, elle me dit : merci, avec tant de grâce et de laisser aller que j'en rêvai tout le jour.

But thank goodness, I have since then acquired in terms of vanity and effrontery all that I have lost in innocence and candour.

There were two sisters, friends of my own sister, poor English girls who had been removed from their boarding school to be transported to the fresh air of the countryside, taken on excursions and allowed to run about in the garden. They were to enjoy themselves under the watchful eye of a governess who imposed sobriety and restraint on the exuberance of childhood. The elder one was fifteen, the younger one barely twelve. The younger one was small and slim, and her eyes were brighter, bigger and more beautiful than those of her elder sister. But the elder girl had such a round and graceful head, her skin was so fresh and pink, her little teeth were so white between her red lips, and it was all so nicely framed by her pretty auburn hair parted in the middle, that it was impossible not to prefer her. She was short and perhaps a little chubby; that, at least, was her most visible defect. But what delighted me most about her was her childish and unpretentious grace, that fragrance of youth that surrounded her. There was such innocence and candour about her that even the most cynical of observers could not restrain a feeling of admiration.

I feel as though I can still see her through the windows of my bedroom, as she ran about in the garden with other friends. I can still see their silk dresses ruffling and rustling on their heels, and their feet stepping out across the sand pathways in the garden. Then they stop, breathless, and take one another by the waist, walk solemnly and talk together, doubtless about soirées, dances, joys and loves, – poor girls!

Soon we all became very close. Within four months I was kissing her as though she were my sister, and we all used the familiar mode of address. I enjoyed talking with her so much! Her foreign accent had something elegant and delicate about it that made her voice as fresh as her cheeks.

There is, moreover, about the English, a naturally casual manner and a complete disregard of our conventions. This might be mistaken for artful flirtation, but it is merely an attractive trait, as fleeting as the will-o'-the-wisp. Often we would go out on family walks together, and I remember that one winter's day we went to see an elderly woman who lived on a hill overlooking the town.

To get to her house we had to pass through apple orchards, where the grass was tall and wet. Fog shrouded the town and, from the vantage of our hill we could see the tight jumble of rooftops covered in snow, then beyond them the silent countryside, with the distant sounds of the steps of a cow or a horse as its hoof sank into the furrow.

As she was passing through a white fence, her coat became entangled on the thorns of the hedge. I went to free it, and she said "Thank you" in such a charming and casual manner that it left me dreaming for the rest of the day.

Puis elles se mirent à courir, et leurs manteaux, que le vent levait derrière elles, flottaient en ondulant comme un flot qui descend ; elles s'arrêtèrent essoufflées. Je me rappelle encore leurs haleines qui bruissaient à mes oreilles et qui partaient d'entre leurs dents blanches en vaporeuse fumée.

Pauvre fille ! elle était si bonne et m'embrassait avec tant de naïveté !

II

Les vacances de Pâques arrivèrent, nous allâmes les passer à la campagne. Je me rappelle un jour... il faisait chaud, sa ceinture était égarée, sa robe était sans taille ; nous nous promenâmes ensemble, foulant la rosée des herbes et des fleurs d'avril. Elle avait un livre à la main ; c'était des vers, je crois ; elle le laissa tomber. Notre promenade continua.

Elle avait couru, je l'embrassai sur le cou, mes lèvres restèrent collées sur cette peau satinée et mouillée d'une sueur embaumante.

Je ne sais de quoi nous parlâmes, des premières choses venues.

– Voilà que tu vas devenir bête, dit un des auditeurs en m'interrompant.

– D'accord, mon cher, le cœur est stupide.

L'après-midi, j'avais le cœur rempli d'une joie douce et vague ; je rêvais délicieusement, en pensant à ses cheveux papillotés qui encadraient ses yeux vifs, et à sa gorge déjà formée que j'embrassais toujours aussi bas qu'un *fichu rigoriste* me le permettait. Je montai dans les champs, j'allai dans les bois, je m'assis dans un fossé, et je pensai à elle.

J'étais couché à plat ventre, j'arrachais les brins d'herbe, les marguerites d'avril, et, quand je levais la tête, le ciel blanc, bleu et mat formait sur moi un dôme d'azur qui s'enfonçait à l'horizon, derrière les prés verdoyants ; par hasard, j'avais du papier et un crayon, je fis des vers...

(Tout le monde se mit à rire.)

...les seuls que j'aie jamais faits de ma vie ; il y en avait peut-être trente ; à peine fus-je une demi-heure, car j'eus toujours une admirable facilité d'improvisation pour les bêtises de toute sorte ; mais ces vers, pour la plupart, étaient faux comme des protestations d'amour, boiteux comme le bien. Je me rappelle qu'il y avait :

.....quand le soir
Fatigué du jeu et de la balançoire

Then they began to run, and their coats, billowing behind them in the wind, floated and undulated like breaking waves. They paused, all out of breath. I can still remember their breath, with its wheezing sound, coming out through their white teeth and making steam in the air.

Poor girl! She was so kind, and she kissed me so simply!

II²⁶

The Easter holiday came, and we went to spend it in the countryside. I remember one day... it was hot, she had lost her sash and her dress was no longer fastened at the waist; we walked together, trampling the dew on the grass and the spring flowers. She had a book in her hand. I think it was poetry. She dropped it, and we continued our walk.

She had been running. I kissed her on the neck, and my lips remained fixed on her satiny skin perfumed with a layer of perspiration. I do not know what we talked of – probably the first things that came to mind.’

‘Now you are going to start getting silly,’ interrupted one of my listeners.

‘Yes, I probably am, my friend, but the heart is stupid.’

‘That afternoon, my heart was filled with a vague and gentle joy. I was dreaming deliciously, thinking of the curling hair that framed her alert eyes, and of her already mature bosom that I always kissed as far down as the puritanical scarf permitted. I went out into the fields and into the woods, I sat down in a ditch and I thought of her.

I was lying down flat on my stomach, pulling out blades of grass and April daisies. When I raised my head, the dull blue and white sky made an azure dome over me which reached down to the horizon behind the green fields. By chance, I had some paper and a pencil with me, so I wrote some poetry...’

(At this point everyone burst out laughing.)

‘...the only verse I have ever written. There were maybe thirty lines, which took me half an hour at the most, for I always had a remarkable facility when it came to improvising silly things. But those lines were, for the most part, as false as any assurance of love and as shaky as the notion of good. I remember that there was:

.....end of the day
Weary of swings and children’s play²⁷

Je me battais les flancs pour peindre une chaleur que je n'avais vue que dans les livres ; puis, à propos de rien, je passais à une mélancolie sombre et digne d'Antony, quoique réellement j'eusse l'âme imbibée de candeur et d'un tendre sentiment mêlé de niaiserie, de réminiscences suaves et de parfums du cœur, et je disais à propos de rien:

Ma douleur est amère, ma tristesse profonde,
Et j'y suis enseveli comme un homme en la tombe.

Les vers n'étaient même pas des vers, mais j'eus le sens de les brûler, manie qui devrait tenailler la plupart des poètes.

Je rentraï à la maison et la retrouvai qui jouait sur le rond de gazon. La chambre où elles couchèrent était voisine de la mienne ; je les entendis rire et causer longtemps, tandis que moi... Je m'endormis bientôt comme elles, malgré tous les efforts que je fis pour veiller le plus possible. Car vous avez fait sans doute comme moi à quinze ans, et avez cru une fois aimer de cet amour brûlant et frénétique, comme vous en avez vu dans les livres, tandis que vous n'aviez sur l'épiderme du cœur qu'une légère égratignure de cette griffe de fer qu'on nomme la passion, et vous souffliez de toutes les forces de votre imagination sur ce modeste feu qui brûlait à peine.

Il y a tant d'amours dans la vie pour l'homme ! A quatre ans, amour des chevaux, du soleil, des fleurs, des armes qui brillent, des livrées de soldat ; à dix, amour de la petite fille qui joue avec vous ; à treize, amour d'une grande femme à la gorge replète, car je me rappelle que ce que les adolescents adorent à la folie, c'est une poitrine de femme, blanche et mate, et comme dit Marot:

Tetin refaict plus blanc qu'un œuf,
Tetin de satin blanc tout neuf.

Je faillis me trouver mal la première fois que je vis tout nus les deux seins d'une femme. Enfin, à quatorze ou quinze ans, amour d'une jeune fille qui vient chez vous, un peu plus qu'une sœur, moins qu'une amante ; puis à seize ans, amour d'une autre femme jusqu'à vingt-cinq ; puis on aime peut-être la femme avec qui on se mariera.

Cinq ans plus tard, on aime la danseuse qui fait sauter sa robe de gaze sur ses cuisses charnues ; enfin, à trente-six, amour de la députation, de la spéculation, des honneurs ; à cinquante, amour du dîner du ministre ou de celui du maire ; à soixante, amour de la fille de joie qui vous appelle à travers les vitres et vers laquelle on jette un regard d'impuissance, un regret vers le passé. Tout cela n'est-il pas vrai ? car moi j'ai subi tous ces amours ; pas tous cependant, car je n'ai pas vécu toutes mes années, et chaque année, dans la vie de bien des hommes, est marquée par une passion nouvelle, celle des femmes, celle du jeu, des chevaux,

I beat myself into a frenzy to try to convey the warmth I had only read of in books; and then, for no obvious reason, I switched to a mood of sombre melancholy worthy of Antony.²⁸ This was despite the fact that ingenuousness and a tenderness veering towards stupidity were the dominant feelings within me, along with delicate memories and sentimental aromas. Out of the blue I said:

My pain is so deep, my soul is in gloom,
I am shrouded within, like a man in his tomb.

My verses were not even verse. However, I had the sense to burn them, a habit which ought to take a hold of most poets.

I went back to the house and found her playing on the circular lawn. The room where they slept was next door to mine. I heard them laughing and talking for a long time, whereas I... I went to sleep in due course, as they did, despite my best efforts to remain awake as long as possible. For at fifteen you were probably the same as I was, and you once believed that you loved with that ardent and frenzied love that you read about in books. But in reality the steel claw called passion had only lightly scratched the surface of your heart, as you blew with all the power of your imagination on this small fire that was scarcely burning.

There are so many loves in the life of a man! At the age of four, there is the love of horses, of the sun, of flowers, gleaming weapons, soldiers' uniforms; at the age of ten, there is the love of the girl who plays with you; at thirteen, the love of a grown woman with an abundant breast. (I remember indeed that what adolescents truly adore is a woman's breast, with its dull white skin, for as Marot says:

Bosom, round as an egg and as white,
Bosom of satin, as clean and as bright.²⁹

I was almost ill the first time I saw the two fully naked breasts of a woman.) And then, at the age of fourteen or fifteen, there is the love of a young girl who visits the household, a little more than a sister, and a little less than a lover; and at the age of sixteen, there is the love of another woman until we reach the age of twenty-five; after which, perhaps, we love the woman we will marry.

Five years later, we love the dancer whose gauze dress bounces up to reveal a fleshy pair of thighs; then, at thirty-six, we love of the idea of becoming a member of parliament, and we love speculation and honours; at fifty, we love the minister's or mayor's dinners; at sixty, we love the prostitute who calls to us through glass windows, as we return an impotent gaze, with a regret for the past. Is that not all true? I, for my part have been through all these loves – or perhaps not quite all, for I have yet to live all my years, and in the lives of many men, every year is marked by a new passion, be it the passion for women, for gambling,

des bottes fines, des cannes, des lunettes, des voitures, des places. Que de folies dans un homme ! Oh ! sans contredit, l'habit d'un arlequin n'est pas plus varié dans ses nuances que l'esprit humain ne l'est dans ses folies, et tous deux arrivent au même résultat, celui de se râper l'un et l'autre et de faire rire quelque temps : le public pour son argent, le philosophe pour sa science.

– Au récit ! demanda un des auditeurs impassible jusque-là, et qui ne quitta sa pipe que pour jeter sur ma digression, qui montait en fumée, la salive de son reproche.

– Je ne sais guère que dire ensuite, car il y a une lacune dans l'histoire, un vers de moins dans l'élégie. Plusieurs temps se passèrent donc de la sorte. Au mois de mai, la mère de ces jeunes filles vint en France conduire leur frère. C'était un charmant garçon, blond comme elles, et pétillant de gaminerie et d'orgueil britannique.

Leur mère était une femme pâle, maigre et nonchalante. Elle était vêtue de noir ; ses manières et ses paroles, sa tenue avaient un air nonchalant, un peu mollasse, il est vrai, mais qui ressemblait au *farniente* italien. Tout cela cependant était parfumé de bon goût, reluisant d'un vernis aristocratique. Elle resta un mois en France.

Puis elle repartit et nous vécûmes ainsi comme si tous étaients de la famille, allant toujours ensemble dans nos promenades, nos vacances, nos congés. Nous étions tous frères et sœurs.

Il y avait dans nos rapports de chaque jour tant de grâce et d'effusion, d'intimité et de laisser aller, que cela peut-être dégénéra en amour, de sa part du moins, et j'en eus des preuves évidentes.

Pour moi, je peux me donner le rôle d'un homme moral, car je n'avais point de passion. Je l'aurais bien voulu.

Souvent, elle venait vers moi, me prenait autour de la taille ; elle me regardait, elle causait. La charmante petite fille ! Elle me demandait des livres, des pièces de théâtre dont elle ne m'a rendu qu'un fort petit nombre ; elle montait dans ma chambre, j'étais assez embarrassé. Pouvais-je supposer tant d'audace dans une femme, ou tant de naïveté ? Un jour, elle se coucha sur mon canapé dans une position très équivoque ; j'étais assis près d'elle, sans rien dire.

Certes, le moment était critique, je n'en profitai pas, je la laissai partir.

D'autres fois, elle m'embrassait en pleurant. Je ne pouvais croire qu'elle m'aimait réellement. Ernest en était persuadé, il me le faisait remarquer, me traitait d'imbécile, – tandis que, vraiment, j'étais tout à la fois timide et nonchalant.

C'était quelque chose de doux, d'enfantin, qu'aucune idée de possession ne ternissait, mais qui, par cela même, manquait d'énergie ; c'était trop niais cependant pour être du platonisme.

for horses, for smart boots, walking-sticks, glasses, carriages, high office. What madness there is in man! For in truth, the harlequin's outfit is not more varied in its nuances than the human mind in its madness. And both produce the same result, which is to get worn out and provoke a little laughter, either in the public which pays, or the philosophers who exercise their knowledge.'³⁰

'Get on with the story!' demanded one of my listeners who had remained silent to that point. He had removed his pipe from his mouth only to spit the saliva of his reproach upon my digression, which was spiralling away like smoke.

'I scarcely know what to say next, for there is a gap in the story, a missing line in the elegy. There were several similar times. In May, the mother of these girls arrived in France, bringing their brother. He was a charming boy, as blond as they were, bristling with mischief and British pride.

Their mother was a pale, thin and casual woman. She dressed in black. Her manners and her words, and her style of dress, gave her in truth a casual and somewhat weary look, but redolent of Italian *farniente*. And yet, the whole effect had an aura of good taste and a veneer of aristocratic style. She remained in France for a month.

Then she left, and we carried on as though they were all part of the family, always going out together for walks, and going together on holidays and breaks. We were like brothers and sisters.

In our daily relationship there was such refinement, such strength of feeling, such closeness and freedom, that it may have degenerated into love, at least as far as she was concerned, and I received clear proof of it.

For my part, I can certainly take the moral high road, for I was not in love. I wish I had been.

Often she would come towards me and put her arm around my waist. She would look at me and talk. What a charming little girl! She would ask me for books and plays, only very few of which she ever returned to me. She would come up into my bedroom, which made me rather embarrassed. Could I suppose that a woman had such audacity or such naïveté? One day, she lay down on my sofa in an obviously compromising position. I was next to her, and had fallen silent.

In truth, the moment was critical. But I did not take advantage of it, and allowed her to leave.

On other occasions, she kissed me tearfully. I could not believe that she was truly in love with me. Ernest³¹ was convinced of it, and pointed it out to me, telling me what a fool I was – whereas, in reality, I was both timid and casual about it.

It was something gentle and childish, unblemished by any idea of possession, but which for that very reason lacked energy. And yet it was too ingenuous to be Platonic.

Au bout d'un an, leur mère vint habiter en France ; puis au bout d'un mois elle repartit pour l'Angleterre. Ses filles avaient été retirées de pension et logeaient avec leur mère dans une rue déserte, au second étage.

Pendant son voyage, je les voyais souvent aux fenêtres. Un jour, que je passais, Caroline m'appela, je montai. Elle était seule, elle se jeta dans mes bras et m'embrassa avec effusion ; ce fut la dernière fois, car depuis elle se maria.

Son maître de dessin lui avait fait des visites fréquentes ; on projeta un mariage, il fut noué et dénoué cent fois. Sa mère revint d'Angleterre sans son mari, dont on n'a jamais entendu parler ; Caroline se maria au mois de janvier. Un jour je la rencontrai avec son mari. A peine si elle me salua.

Sa mère a changé de logement et de manières, elle reçoit maintenant chez elle des garçons tailleurs et des étudiants, elle va aux bals masqués et y mène sa jeune fille.

Il y a dix-huit mois que nous ne les avons vues.

Voilà comment finit cette liaison, qui promettait peut-être une passion avec l'âge, mais qui se dénoua d'elle-même.

Est-il besoin de dire que cela avait été à l'amour ce que le crépuscule est au grand jour, et que le regard de Maria fit évanouir le souvenir de cette pâle enfant ?

C'est un petit feu qui n'est plus que de la cendre froide.

XVI

Cette page est courte, je voudrais qu'elle le fût davantage. Voici le fait.

La vanité me poussa à l'amour, non, à la volupté; pas même à cela, à la chair.

On me raillait de ma chasteté, j'en rougissais, elle me faisait honte, elle me pesait comme si elle eût été de la corruption.

Une femme se présenta à moi, je la pris ; et je sortis de ses bras plein de dégoût et d'amertume. Mais alors, je pouvais faire le Lovelace d'estaminet, dire autant d'obscénités qu'un autre autour d'un bol de punch ; j'étais un homme alors, j'avais été, comme à un devoir, faire du vice, et puis je m'en étais vanté. J'avais quinze ans, je parlais de femmes et de maîtresses.

Cette femme, je la pris en haine ; elle venait à moi, je la laissais ; elle faisait des frais de sourire qui me dégoûtaient comme une grimace hideuse.

J'eus des remords, comme si l'amour de Maria eût été une religion que j'eusse profanée.

A year later their mother came to live in France, and then, after a month, she departed for England. Her daughters had been taken out of boarding and lodged at their mother's house on the second floor in an empty street.

While she was away, I often saw them at the windows. One day when I was passing by, Caroline called me and I went up. She was alone. She threw herself into my arms and kissed me effusively. That was the last time, for after that she got married.

Her drawing tutor had visited her frequently. A marriage was planned; it was on, then off, a hundred times over. Her mother came back from England without her husband, who was never mentioned. Caroline got married in January. One day I saw her with her husband. She hardly even acknowledged me.

Her mother has changed both her place of abode and her style of living. Now she invites apprentice tailors and students to her house. She goes to masked balls and takes her younger daughter with her.

We have not seen them these last eighteen months.'

And that is how this relationship ended, a relationship that might have developed over time into passion, but which petered out of its own accord. Need I say that it was to love what the dawn is to broad daylight, and that Maria's gaze made the memory of this pale child vanish into thin air?

It was a small fire which is now no more than cold ashes.

XVI

This page is brief. I wish it were briefer still. Here is what happened.

Vanity pushed me, not into love, but to pleasure; no, not even to that, but to flesh.

I was mocked for my chastity and was embarrassed about it. It made me feel ashamed, and weighed upon me as if it were a form of corruption.

A woman offered herself to me, and I took her. I left her arms, filled with disgust and bitterness. But then at least, I could play the role of Lovelace in the tavern, uttering as many obscenities around a bowl of punch as the next man. I had become a man, for I had taken to vice as if in the performance of a duty, and then I bragged of it. At the age of fifteen, I spoke of women and mistresses.

I began to hate that woman. She came to me, and I left her. She lavished smiles upon me that disgusted me, as though they were some hideous grimace.

I had a feeling of remorse, as though my love for Maria had been a religion that I had defiled.

XVII

Je me demandais si c'était bien là les délices que j'avais rêvées, ces transports de feu que je m'étais imaginées dans la virginité de ce cœur tendre et enfant.

Est-ce là tout ? est-ce qu'après cette froide jouissance, il ne doit pas y en avoir une autre, plus sublime, plus large, quelque chose de divin et qui fasse tomber en extase ? Oh ! non, tout était fini, j'avais été éteindre dans la boue ce feu sacré de mon âme. Oh ! Maria, j'avais été traîner dans la fange l'amour que ton regard avait créé, je l'avais gaspillé à plaisir, à la première femme venu, sans amour, sans désir, poussé par une vanité d'enfant, par un calcul d'orgueil, pour ne plus rougir à la licence, pour faire une bonne contenance dans une orgie. Pauvre Maria !

J'étais lassé, un dégoût me prit à l'âme, j'eus en pitié ces joies d'un moment, et ces convulsions de la chair. Il fallait que je fusse bien misérable, moi qui étais si fier de cet amour si haut, de cette passion sublime et qui regardais mon cœur comme plus large et plus beau que ceux des autres hommes ; moi, aller comme eux !... oh !... non, pas un d'eux peut-être ne l'a fait pour les mêmes motifs ; presque tous y ont été poussés par les sens, ils ont obéi comme le chien à l'instinct de la nature ; mais il y avait bien plus de dégradation à en faire un calcul, à s'exciter à la corruption, à aller se jeter dans les bras d'une femme, à manier sa chair, à se vautrer dans le ruisseau pour se relever et montrer ses souillures.

Et puis j'en eus honte comme d'une lâche profanation ; j'aurais voulu cacher à mes propres yeux l'ignominie dont je m'étais vanté.

Je me reportais vers ces temps où la chair pour moi n'avait rien d'ignoble et où la perspective du désir me montrait des formes vagues et des voluptés que mon cœur me créait. Non, jamais on ne pourra dire tous les mystères de l'âme vierge, toutes les choses qu'elle sent, tous les mondes qu'elle enfante. Comme ses rêves sont délicieux ! comme ses pensées sont vaporeuses et tendres ! comme sa déception est amère et cruelle !... Avoir aimé, avoir rêvé le ciel, avoir vu tout ce que l'âme a de plus pur, de plus sublime, et s'enchaîner ensuite dans toutes les lourdeurs de la chair, toute la langueur du corps ! Avoir rêvé le ciel et tomber dans la boue !

Qui me rendra, maintenant, toutes les choses que j'ai perdues, ma virginité, mes rêves, mes illusions, toutes choses fanées, – pauvres fleurs que la gelée a tuées avant d'être épanouies.

XVII

I wondered if indeed those were the pleasures I had dreamed of, those fiery raptures I had imagined in the virginity of my tender, childish heart.

Was that all there was to it? After that cold pleasure, is there not some other experience, greater and more sublime, something divine that fills you with ecstasy? But no, it was all over, I had extinguished the sacred fire of my soul in the mud. Oh, Maria! I had taken the love that your glance created, and dragged it into the filth. I had wantonly squandered it on the first woman I found, without love or desire, urged on by childish vanity. I had made a deliberate calculation, in order to blush no longer at sexual excess and to be able to keep face at an orgy. Poor Maria!

I was weary, a profound sense of disgust took hold of me. I felt a sense of pity for those joys of a moment, those convulsions of the flesh. I must have been in a truly wretched state, proud as I was of my lofty and sublime passion, in my conviction that my heart was greater and finer than the hearts of other men. *I*, carry on like *them*! Oh, no... for probably not one of them did this for the same reasons. Almost all were drawn into it by their senses, and obeyed like the dog following its natural instinct. Yet there was greater degradation in acting through calculation, in working oneself up to corruption, in throwing oneself into the arms of a woman and using her flesh, wallowing in the gutter just to be able to get up out of it and display the filth.

And then I felt ashamed, as though I had committed a cowardly profanation. I would have preferred to conceal from my own eyes the ignominy of which I had bragged.

I thought back to the times when human flesh held no shame for me, when the anticipation of desire conjured up vague forms and sensual pleasures in my heart.³² No, never will it be possible to speak of all the mysteries of the virgin heart, of all that it senses, of all the worlds it produces. How delicious are its dreams! How fleeting and tender are its thoughts! How cruel and bitter are its disappointments! To have loved, to have dreamed of the heavens, to have seen the purest and most sublime offerings of the human soul, and then to chain oneself to the heavy weight of human flesh and the dreariness of the body! To have dreamed of the heavens and to have fallen into the mud!

Who can now return to me all that I have lost, my virginity, my dreams, my illusions – withered objects, poor flowers killed by a frost before they bloomed?

XVIII

Si j'ai éprouvé des moments d'enthousiasme, c'est à l'art que je les dois ; et cependant quelle vanité que l'art ! vouloir peindre l'homme dans un bloc de pierre ou l'âme dans des mots, les sentiments par des sons et la nature sur une toile vernie...

Je ne sais quelle puissance magique possède la musique ; j'ai rêvé des semaines entières au rythme cadencé d'un air ou aux larges contours d'un chœur majestueux ; il y a des sons qui m'entrent dans l'âme et des voix qui me fondent en délices. J'aimais l'orchestre grondant, avec ses flots d'harmonie, ses vibrations sonores et cette vigueur immense qui semble avoir des muscles et qui meurt au bout de l'archet ; mon âme suivait la mélodie déployant ses ailes vers l'infini et montant en spirales, pure et lente, comme un parfum vers le ciel. J'aimais le bruit, les diamants qui brillent aux lumières, toutes ces mains de femmes gantées et applaudissant avec des fleurs ; je regardais le ballet sautillant, les robes roses ondoyantes ; j'écoutais les pas tomber en cadence, je regardais les genoux se détacher mollement avec les tailles penchées.

D'autres fois, recueilli devant les œuvres du génie, saisi par les chaînes avec lesquelles il vous attache, alors, au murmure de ces voix, au glapissement flatteur, à ce bourdonnement plein de charmes, j'ambitionnais la destinée de ces hommes forts qui manient la foule comme du plomb, qui la font pleurer, gémir, trépigner d'enthousiasme. Comme leur cœur doit être large, à ceux-là qui y font entrer le monde, et comme tout est avorté dans ma nature ! Convaincu de mon impuissance et de ma stérilité, je me suis pris d'une haine jalouse ; je me disais que cela n'était rien, que le hasard seul avait dicté ces mots. Je jetais de la boue sur les choses les plus hautes, que j'enviais.

Je m'étais moqué de Dieu, je pouvais bien rire des hommes.

Cependant cette sombre humeur n'était que passagère, et j'éprouvais un vrai plaisir à contempler le génie resplendissant au foyer de l'art, comme une large fleur qui ouvre une rosace de parfum à un soleil d'été.

L'art ! l'art ! quelle belle chose que cette vanité !

S'il y a sur la terre et parmi tous les néants une croyance qu'on adore, s'il est quelque chose de saint, de pur, de sublime, quelque chose qui aille à ce désir immodéré de l'infini et du vague que nous appelons âme, c'est l'art. Et quelle petitesse ! une pierre, un mot, un son, la disposition de tout cela que nous appelons le sublime. Je voudrais quelque chose qui n'eût pas besoin d'expression ni de forme, quelque chose de pur comme un parfum, de fort comme la pierre, d'insaisissable comme un chant, que ce fût à la fois tout cela et rien d'aucune de ces choses. Tout me semble borné, rétréci, avorté dans la nature.

L'homme, avec son génie et son art, n'est qu'un misérable singe de quelque chose de plus élevé.

Je voudrais le beau dans l'infini et je n'y trouve que le doute.

XVIII

If I have felt any moments of enthusiasm, it is to art that I owe them. And yet, what vanity there is in art! It tries to depict man in a block of stone, the soul in words, feelings in sounds, or nature on a varnished canvas...

I do not know what magical power there is in music. I have dreamed for weeks on end about the rhythmic cadence of a melody or of the majestic sweep of a chorus. There are sounds that enter into my soul and voices that make me melt with delight. I loved the booming orchestra with its waves of harmony, its sonorous vibrations and the immense, seemingly muscular power that dies away at the tip of the violin's bow. My soul followed the melody as it spread its wings towards the infinite, rising in a pure, slow, spiralling motion like some fragrance drifting towards the heavens. I loved the sounds, the diamonds sparkling under the lights, the gloved hands of women casting flowers by way of applause. I would watch the skipping ballet and the swirling pink dresses, I would listen to the steps falling in rhythm, and I would watch the softly contoured knee-joints as the dancers leaned forward.

At other times, in silent contemplation of works of genius, and held by the chains with which they bind you, I listened to the murmur of these voices, to their seductive call or to their enticing hum. I imagined myself living out the destiny of those powerful men who ply the crowd as though it were lead, making it weep, groan or stir with enthusiasm. How big is the heart of one who invites the whole world into it, and how puny is everything in my own nature! Convinced of my own impotence and sterility, I began to feel jealous hatred, and told myself that these words were as nothing, that they had been dictated by chance alone. I threw mud at the highest things that I envied.

I had mocked God, so I could certainly laugh at men.

And yet this dark mood was only temporary, and I felt true pleasure in the contemplation of the genius resplendent in art, for it is like a broad flower that opens up a rose-window of fragrances to the summer sun!

Art! Art! What beauty there is in this vanity!

If there is a single hallowed belief on the face of the earth and in the midst of all the nothingness, if there is something holy, pure and sublime, something which complements the immoderate desire for the infinite and the vagueness that we call the soul, it is art. And what triviality! A stone, a word, a sound: it is the arrangement of these things that we call sublime. I would like something which has no need either of expression or form, something as pure as perfume, as strong as stone and as elusive as a song, something which is each of these things and yet none of them.³³ To me everything seems limited, shrunken and aborted in nature.

With all his genius and his art, man is no more than the miserable ape of something higher.

I seek beauty in the infinite, and I find only doubt.

XIX

Oh ! l'infini ! l'infini, gouffre immense, spirale qui monte des abîmes aux plus hautes régions de l'inconnu, vieille idée dans laquelle nous tournons tous, pris par le vertige, abîme que chacun a dans le cœur, abîme incommensurable, abîme sans fond ! Nous aurons beau, pendant bien des jours, bien des nuits, nous demander dans notre angoisse : « Qu'est-ce que ces mots : Dieu, Éternité, Infini ? » nous tournons là-dedans emportés par un vent de la mort, comme la feuille roulée par l'ouragan. On dirait que l'infini prend alors plaisir à nous bercer nous-mêmes dans cette immensité du doute.

Nous nous disons toujours cependant : « Après bien des siècles, des milliers d'ans, quand tout sera usé, il faudra bien qu'une borne soit là. » – Hélas ! l'éternité se dresse devant nous et nous en avons peur, – peur de cette chose qui doit durer si longtemps, nous qui durons si peu.

Si longtemps !

Sans doute, quand le monde ne sera plus, – que je voudrais vivre alors, vivre sans nature, sans hommes, quelle grandeur que ce vide-là ! – sans doute alors, il y aura des ténèbres, un peu de cendre brûlée qui aura été la terre, et peut-être quelques gouttes d'eau, la mer. – Ciel ! plus rien, du vide,... que le néant étalé dans l'immensité comme un linceul.

Éternité ! Éternité ! cela durera-t-il toujours ? toujours, sans fin ?

Mais cependant ce qui restera, la moindre parcelle des débris du monde, le dernier souffle d'une création mourante, le vide lui-même devra être las d'exister ; tout appellera une destruction totale. Cette idée de quelque chose sans fin nous fait pâlir, hélas ! et nous serons là-dedans, nous autres qui vivons maintenant, et cette immensité nous roulera tous. Que serons-nous ? Un rien, pas même un souffle.

J'ai longtemps pensé aux morts dans les cercueils, aux longs siècles qu'ils passent ainsi sous la terre pleine de bruits, de rumeurs, de cris, eux si calmes, dans leurs planches pourries dont le morne silence est interrompu parfois, soit par un cheveu qui tombe, ou par un ver qui glisse sur un peu de chair. Comme ils dorment là, couchés, sans bruit, sous la terre, sous le gazon fleuri !

Cependant, l'hiver, ils doivent avoir froid, sous la neige.

Oh ! s'ils se réveillaient alors, s'ils venaient à revivre et qu'ils vissent toutes les larmes dont on a paré leur drap de mort taries, tous ces sanglots étouffés, toutes les grimaces finies, ils auraient horreur de cette vie qu'ils ont pleurée en la quittant, et ils retourneraient vite dans le néant, si calme et si vrai.

Certes, on peut vivre, et mourir même, sans s'être demandé une seule fois ce que c'est que la vie et que la mort ; mais pour celui qui regarde les feuilles trembler au souffle du vent, les rivières serpenter dans les prés, la vie se tourmenter et tourbillonner dans les choses, les hommes vivre, faire le bien et le mal, la mer

XIX

Oh! the infinite! the infinite, that immense gulf, that vortex that rises from the abyss and reaches up to the highest regions of the unknown. It is an old idea in which we all turn around in a state of vertigo, an abyss that we each have within our hearts, an immeasurable, bottomless chasm! It is pointless for us to wonder in our anguish, for days and nights on end: ‘What do these words mean: God, Eternity, the Infinite?’ – for we turn around within them, carried away by the winds of death, like a leaf tossed in a tempest. It then seems as though the infinite takes pleasure in maintaining us in this immensity of doubt.

And yet we always tell ourselves: ‘After so many centuries and thousands of years, when everything has been used up, there will have to be a limit.’ Alas, eternity rises up before us and we fear it. We fear this thing that is to last for so long, when we ourselves last for such a short time.

So long!

Doubtless, when the world is no longer (how I would like to live then, to live without nature, without the human race! what grandeur in that emptiness!) doubtless there will then be darkness and a small quantity of burnt ash that was once the earth, and maybe a few drops of water, the sea. Heavens! nothing else, just emptiness, only nothingness, spread out across the immensity like a shroud.

Eternity! Eternity! Will it last forever and ever without end?

And yet in what remains – in the tiniest debris of the world, the last breath of a dying creation – even emptiness itself must become weary of its own existence. Everything will call for total destruction. The idea of something without end makes us all pale with fear, alas, and yet we who live now will be part of it, and the immensity will carry us all along with it. What will we be? Nothing, not so much as a breath.

I have often thought of the dead in their coffins and of the long centuries that they spend beneath the earth, with all its noise and sounds and cries. They are so calm inside their rotten boards, whose dreary silence is occasionally interrupted by a hair that falls or by a worm slithering across a piece of flesh. What sleep they have there, as they lie in silence beneath the soil and the flowering field!

And yet, in winter they must feel the cold beneath the snow.

Oh, if they then awoke, if they came back to life and saw that the tears that had been shed over their shroud had dried, and if they saw that the sobs had died away and the grimaces ended, they would be horrified at the life they had left with such sorrow, and they would swiftly return to the calm truth of nothingness.

Of course, it is possible to live and even to die without ever having wondered what life and death are. But for whosoever should contemplate leaves trembling in a breeze, rivers winding through meadows, life swirling and turning around and about, men living and doing good or evil, the sea bearing its waves and the sky

rouler ses flots et le ciel dérouler ses lumières, et qui se demande : « Pourquoi ces feuilles ? pourquoi l'eau coule-t-elle ? pourquoi la vie elle-même est-elle un torrent si terrible et qui va se perdre dans l'océan sans bornes de la mort ? pourquoi les hommes marchent-ils, travaillent-ils comme des fourmis ? pourquoi la tempête ? pourquoi le ciel si pur et la terre si infâme ? » – ces questions mènent à des ténèbres d'où l'on ne sort pas.

Et le doute vient après ; c'est quelque chose qui ne se dit pas, mais qui se sent. L'homme alors est comme ce voyageur perdu dans les sables, qui cherche partout une route pour le conduire à l'oasis, et qui ne voit que le désert. Le doute, c'est la vie. L'action, la parole, la nature, la mort, doute dans tout cela !

Le doute, c'est la mort pour les âmes ; c'est une lèpre qui prend les races usées, c'est une maladie qui vient de la science et qui conduit à la folie. La folie est le doute de la raison ; c'est peut-être la raison elle-même !

Qui le prouve ?

XX

Il est des poètes qui ont l'âme toute pleine de parfums et de fleurs, qui regardent la vie comme l'aurore du ciel ; d'autres qui n'ont rien que de sombre, rien que de l'amertume et de la colère ; il y a des peintres qui voient tout en bleu, d'autres tout en jaune et tout en noir. Chacun de nous a un prisme à travers lequel il aperçoit le monde ; heureux celui qui y distingue des couleurs riantes et des choses gaies. Il y a des hommes qui ne voient dans le monde qu'un titre, que des femmes, que la banque, qu'un nom, qu'une destinée ; folies ! J'en connais qui n'y voient que chemins de fer, marchés ou bestiaux ; les uns y découvrent un plan sublime, les autres une farce obscène.

Et ceux-là vous demanderaient bien ce que c'est que l'*obscène* ? question embarrassante à résoudre, comme les questions.

J'aimerais autant donner la définition géométrique d'une belle paire de bottes ou d'une belle femme, deux choses importantes. Les gens qui voient notre globe comme un gros ou un petit tas de boue, sont de singulières gens ou difficiles à prendre.

Vous venez de parler avec un de ces gens infâmes, gens qui ne s'intitulent pas philanthropes, et qui sans craindre qu'on les appelle carlistes, ne votent pas pour la démolition des cathédrales ; mais bientôt vous vous arrêtez tout court ou vous vous avouez vaincu, car ceux-là sont des gens sans principes qui regardent la vertu comme un mot, le monde comme une bouffonnerie. De là ils partent pour tout considérer sous un point de vue ignoble ; ils sourient aux plus belles choses, et

unveiling its light – and for whosoever should ask: ‘ why those leaves? why does water flow? why is life itself such a terrible torrent, losing itself in the boundless ocean of death? why do men walk, why do they work like ants? why the storm? why is the sky so pure and the earth so squalid?’ – for such a person, these questions lead to darkness from which there is no escape.

And after that comes doubt. It is something which cannot be spoken, but which is sensed. Man then becomes like the traveller lost in the sands, seeking on all sides some path that will lead him to the oasis, and seeing nothing but the desert. Doubt is life. Actions, words, nature, death – there is doubt in all of those!

Doubt is the death of the soul. It is a leprosy that takes hold of worn down races, an illness that comes from knowledge and leads to folly. Folly is the doubting of reason. It is perhaps the final act of reason!

Who can prove it?

XX

There are poets whose soul is filled with fragrances and flowers, and who regard life as the dawning of heaven. Others can see only what is sombre, and find nothing but bitterness and anger. There are painters who see everything in blue, others who see everything in yellow or in black.³⁴ Each of us has a prism through which he sees the world. Lucky is the man who sees in it the colours of laughter and who finds happy things. There are men who see the world as nothing other than the acquisition of a title, women, a bank, a name, a destiny. What folly! I know men who see only railways, markets or livestock. Some see a sublime design in the world, others an obscene farce.

And the former would ask you what *obscene* means? It is a tricky question, as questions can be.

I would just as much like to give a geometrical definition of a fine pair of boots or of a beautiful woman, both important things. People who see our globe as either a large or a small pile of mud are strange folk, difficult to take.

You have just spoken with one of these low characters, these people who do not label themselves philanthropists, and who without fearing that they might be labelled reactionaries,³⁵ do not vote for the demolition of cathedrals. But in due course, you stop in your tracks or you admit that you are defeated, for these people are without principles and regard virtue as a word, the world as a joke. From there they go on to consider everything from the most cynical point of view; they sneer at the finest things, and when you speak to them of philanthropy they

quand vous leur parlez de philanthropie, ils haussent les épaules et vous disent que la philanthropie s'exerce par une souscription pour les pauvres. La belle chose qu'une liste de noms dans un journal !

Chose étrange que cette diversité d'opinions, de systèmes, de croyances et de folies ! Quand vous parlez à certains gens, ils s'arrêtent tout à coup effrayés et vous demandent : « Comment ! vous nierez cela ? vous douteriez de cela ? peut-on révoquer le plan de l'univers et les devoirs de l'homme ? » Et si, malheureusement, votre regard a laissé deviner un rêve de l'âme, ils s'arrêtent tout à coup et finissent là leur victoire logique, comme ces enfants effrayés d'un fantôme imaginaire et qui se ferment les yeux sans oser regarder.

Ouvre-les, homme faible et plein d'orgueil, pauvre fourmi qui rampe avec peine sur ton grain de poussière ; tu te dis libre et grand, tu te respectes toi-même, si vil pendant ta vie, et, par dérision sans doute, tu salues ton corps pourri qui passe. Et puis tu penses qu'une si belle vie, agitée ainsi entre un peu d'orgueil que tu appelles grandeur et cet intérêt bas qui est l'essence de ta Société, sera couronnée par une immortalité. De l'immortalité pour toi, plus lascif qu'un singe, et plus méchant qu'un tigre, et plus rampant qu'un serpent ? Allons donc ! faites-moi un paradis pour le singe, le tigre et le serpent, pour la luxure, la cruauté, la bassesse, un paradis pour l'égoïsme, une éternité pour cette poussière, de l'immortalité pour ce néant. Tu te vantes d'être libre, de pouvoir faire ce que tu appelles le bien et le mal ? Sans doute pour qu'on te condamne plus vite, car que saurais-tu faire de bon ? y a-t-il un seul de tes gestes qui ne soit stimulé par l'orgueil ou calculé par l'intérêt ?

Toi, libre ! Dès ta naissance, tu es soumis à toutes les infirmités paternelles ; tu reçois, avec le jour, la semence de tous tes vices, de ta stupidité même, de tout ce qui te fera juger le monde, toi-même, tout ce qui t'entoure, d'après ce terme de comparaison, cette mesure que tu as en toi. Tu es né avec un petit esprit étroit, avec des idées faites, ou qu'on te fera, sur le bien ou sur le mal. On te dira qu'on doit aimer son père et le soigner dans sa vieillesse : tu feras l'un et l'autre, et tu n'avais pas besoin qu'on te l'apprît, n'est-ce pas ? cela est une vertu innée comme le besoin de manger ; tandis que, derrière la montagne où tu es né, on enseignera à ton frère à tuer son père devenu vieux, et il le tuera, car cela, pense-t-il, est naturel, et il n'était pas nécessaire qu'on le lui apprît. On t'élèvera en te disant qu'il faut se garder d'aimer d'un amour charnel ta sœur ou ta mère, tandis que tu descends, comme tous les hommes, d'un inceste, car le premier homme et la première femme, eux et leurs enfants, étaient frères et sœurs ; tandis que le soleil se couche sur d'autres peuples qui regardent l'inceste comme une vertu et le fratricide comme un devoir. Es-tu déjà libre des principes d'après lesquels tu gouverneras ta conduite ? Est-ce toi qui présides à ton éducation ? Est-ce toi qui as voulu naître avec un caractère heureux ou triste, phtisique ou robuste, doux ou méchant, moral ou vicieux ?

shrug their shoulders and tell you that philanthropy is exercised by a subscription to charity. What a fine thing is a list of names in a newspaper!

How strange is this diversity of opinions, systems, beliefs and obsessions! When you speak to certain people, they suddenly stop in alarm and ask you: ‘What? Would you deny that? Would you doubt that? Is it possible to question the harmony of the universe or the duties of man?’ And if, by misfortune, your eyes have betrayed some deep-held dream, they stop short in the middle of their triumphant logic, like some child fearing an imaginary ghost, who covers its eyes and does not dare look.

Open them, weak yet proud man, pitiful ant that struggles to crawl over its speck of dust! You declare yourself free and great, and for all the wretchedness of your life you hold yourself in high esteem, celebrating – no doubt in a spirit of derision – your rotten and transient flesh. And then you imagine that this beautiful life, lived out between a little pride that you call greatness, and that base self-interest which is at the heart of your society, will be rewarded by some form of immortality. Immortality for *you* – more lascivious than the monkey, more evil than the tiger, more crawling than the serpent? Come on! Show me a paradise for the monkey, the tiger, the snake, a paradise of lust, of cruelty and baseness, a paradise of selfishness – eternity for this dust, immortality for this nothingness. You boast of being free and of being able to do what you call good and evil? Doubtless so that you can be denounced more rapidly, for what good can you possibly do? Is a single one of your gestures produced by anything other than pride or self-interest?

You, free? From the moment you are born, you are subjected to every inherited weakness. With your life, you receive the germ of every vice, of your very own stupidity, of everything that will cause you to judge the world and yourself and all that surrounds you, by the measure and terms of comparison of what you carry within you. You are born with a small and narrow mind, with ready-made ideas, or ideas which will be made for you, about good or evil. You will be told that you must love your father and look after him in his old age, so you will do both. There was no need for you to be taught that, was there? It is an innate virtue like the need to eat. And yet, beyond the mountain where you were born, your fellow creature will be taught to kill his elderly father, and he will kill him, for he considers this to be natural, and there was no need to be taught such a thing. You will be brought up in the belief that you must not harbour sentiments of carnal love for your sister or your mother. And yet, like all men, you are the descendant of an act of incest, for the first man and the first woman, and their children, were brothers and sisters. And meanwhile the sun sets on other peoples who consider incest a virtue and fratricide a duty. Are you already free of the principles by which you will govern your behaviour? Is it you who controls your upbringing? Is it you who wished to be born with a happy or sad constitution – or a robust or consumptive one, or kind or cruel, moral or vicious?

Mais d'abord, pourquoi es-tu né ? est-ce toi qui l'as voulu ? t'a-t-on conseillé là-dessus ? tu es donc né fatalement, parce que ton père un jour sera revenu d'une orgie, échauffé par le vin et des propos de débauche, et que ta mère en aura profité, qu'elle aura mis en jeu toutes les ruses de femme poussée par ses instincts de chair et de bestialité que lui a donnés la nature en faisant une âme, et qu'elle sera parvenue à animer cet homme que les fêtes publiques ont fatigué dès l'adolescence. Quelque grand que tu sois, tu as d'abord été quelque chose d'aussi sale que la salive et de plus fétide que de l'urine ; puis tu as subi des métamorphoses comme un ver, et enfin tu es venu au monde, presque sans vie, pleurant, criant et fermant les yeux, comme par haine pour ce soleil que tu as appelé tant de fois. On te donne à manger, tu grandis, tu pousses comme la feuille ; c'est bien hasard si le vent ne t'emporte pas de bonne heure, car à combien de choses es-tu soumis ? à l'air, au feu, à la lumière, au jour, à la nuit, au froid, au chaud, à tout ce qui t'entoure, tout ce qui est. Tout cela te maîtrise, te passionne ; tu aimes la verdure, les fleurs, et tu es triste quand elles se fanent ; tu aimes ton chien, tu pleures quand il meurt ; une araignée arrive vers toi, tu recules de frayeur ; tu frissonnes quelquefois en regardant ton ombre, et lorsque la pensée elle-même s'enfonce dans les mystères du néant, tu es effrayé et tu as peur du doute.

Tu te dis libre, et chaque jour tu agis poussé par mille choses. Tu vois une femme et tu l'aimes, tu en meurs d'amour ; es-tu libre d'apaiser ce sang qui bat, de calmer cette tête brûlante, de comprimer ce cœur, d'apaiser ces ardeurs qui te dévorent ? Es-tu libre de ta pensée ? mille chaînes te retiennent, mille aiguillons te poussent, mille entraves t'arrêtent. Tu vois un homme pour la première fois, un de ses traits te choque, et durant ta vie tu as de l'aversion pour cet homme, que tu aurais peut-être chéri s'il avait eu le nez moins gros. Tu as un mauvais estomac, et tu es brutal envers celui que tu aurais accueilli avec bienveillance. Et de tous ces faits découlent ou s'enchaînent, aussi fatalement, d'autres séries de faits, d'où d'autres dérivent à leur tour. Es-tu le créateur de ta constitution physique et morale ? Non, tu ne pourrais la diriger entièrement que si tu l'avais faite et modelée à ta guise. Tu te dis libre parce que tu as une âme ? D'abord, c'est toi qui as fait cette découverte que tu ne saurais définir. Une voix intime te dit que oui ; d'abord, tu mens, une voix te dit que tu es faible, et tu sens en toi un immense vide que tu voudrais combler par toutes les choses que tu y jettes. Quand même tu croirais que oui, en es-tu sûr ? qui te le dit ? Quand, longtemps combattu par deux sentiments opposés, après avoir bien hésité, bien douté, tu penches vers un sentiment, tu crois avoir été le maître de ta décision ; mais, pour être maître, il faudrait n'avoir aucun penchant. Es-tu maître de faire le bien, si tu as le goût du mal enraciné dans le cœur, si tu es né avec de mauvais penchants développés par ton éducation ? Et si tu es vertueux, si tu as horreur du crime, pourras-tu le faire ?

But first and foremost, why were you born? Was it you who willed it? Were you consulted about it? So, you were born by fate, for one day your father returned from an orgy, fuelled by wine and debauched conversation, and your mother took advantage. She deployed all the wiles of a woman driven by the impulses of the flesh and the animal instincts bestowed on her by nature when it gave her a soul, and she managed to arouse this man, wearied by public festivities since his adolescence. As great as you might be, you were at the outset something as dirty as saliva and as fetid as urine. Then you underwent changes, like a worm, and finally you came into the world, almost without life, crying and closing your eyes, as if out of hatred of the sun to which you have so often appealed. You are fed, you get bigger, you grow like a leaf; and it is indeed by chance that the wind does not carry you away prematurely, for how many forces prey upon you? – air, fire, light, day, night, cold, warmth, everything that surrounds you, everything that exists. Everything dominates you, excites you. You love the greenery, the flowers, and you are sad when they wither. You love your dog, and you weep when it dies. If a spider should come towards you, you recoil in terror. Sometimes you shiver as you behold your shadow, and when thought itself delves into the mysteries of nothingness, you become alarmed and you fear doubt.

You claim to be free, and yet every day you act under the impulse of a thousand different things. You see a woman and you love her, you simply die of love. Are you free to quell the flow of your blood, to calm your burning thoughts, to rein in your heart and dampen the ardour that devours you? Are you free in thought? A thousand chains hold you back, a thousand stimuli drive you on, a thousand obstacles hinder you. You see a man for the first time, and are shocked by one of his features, so for the rest of your life you feel an aversion for this man whom you might well have cherished had his nose been smaller. You have a bad stomach, and therefore behave brutally towards someone you might have received with kindness. And from all of these facts inevitably ensue, in a chain of cause and effect, other series of facts, and then others again in their turn. Are you the creator of your physical and moral constitution? No, you could be in total control of it only if you had made and modelled it in your own manner. You claim to be free because you have a soul? Well, it is you who have made this discovery which you are incapable of defining. An inner voice tells you so. But you lie, and a voice tells you that you are weak, and you feel within yourself an immense emptiness that you would like to be able to fill with all the things that you throw in there. And even if you did believe in it, are you sure? Who told you so? When, after a long struggle between two opposing feelings, and long hesitation and doubt, you lean towards one of them, you believe that you are the master of your own decision. But, to be master, it would be necessary to feel no leaning at all. Are you master of your good actions when you have the taste of evil deep in your heart, and when you have been born with unpleasant dispositions that your upbringing has fostered? And if you are virtuous, if you are horrified of crime, could you carry

Es-tu libre de faire le bien ou le mal ? puisque c'est le sentiment du bien qui te dirige toujours, tu ne peux faire le mal.

Ce combat est la lutte de ces deux penchants, et si tu fais le mal, c'est que tu es plus vicieux que vertueux et que la fièvre la plus forte a eu le dessus. Quand deux hommes se battent, il est certain que le plus faible, le moins adroit, le moins souple sera vaincu par le plus fort, le plus adroit, le plus souple ; quelque longtemps que puisse durer la lutte, il y en aura toujours un de vaincu. Il en est de même de ta nature intérieure : quand même ce que tu sens être bon l'emporte, la victoire est-elle toujours la justice ? ce que tu juges le bien est-il le bien absolu, immuable, éternel ?

Tout n'est donc que ténèbres autour de l'homme ; tout est vide, et il voudrait quelque chose de fixe ; il roule lui-même dans cette immensité du vague où il voudrait s'arrêter, il se cramponne à tout et tout lui manque ; patrie, liberté, croyance, Dieu, vertu, il a pris tout cela et tout cela lui est tombé des mains ; il est comme un fou qui laisse tomber un verre de cristal et qui rit de tous les morceaux qu'il a faits.

Mais l'homme a une âme immortelle et faite à l'image de Dieu ; deux idées pour lesquelles il a versé son sang, deux idées qu'il ne comprend pas ; une âme, un Dieu, – mais dont il est convaincu.

Cette âme est une essence autour de laquelle notre être physique tourne comme la terre autour du soleil ; cette âme est noble, car étant un principe spirituel, n'étant point terrestre, elle ne saurait rien avoir de bas, de vil. Cependant, n'est-ce pas elle qui anime notre chair ? L'esprit serait-il le principe du mal, et le corps l'agent ?

Voyons comme cette âme, comme cette conscience est élastique, flexible, comme elle est molle et maniable, comme elle se ploie facilement sous le corps qui pèse sur elle ou qui appuie sur le corps qui s'incline, comme cette âme est vénale et basse, comme elle rampe, comme elle flatte, comme elle ment, comme elle trompe ! C'est elle qui vend le corps, la main, la tête et la langue ; c'est elle qui veut du sang et qui demande de l'or, toujours insatiable et cupide de tout dans son infini ; elle est au milieu de nous comme une soif, une ardeur quelconque, un feu qui nous dévore, un pivot qui nous fait tourner sur lui.

Tu es grand, homme ! non par le corps sans doute, mais par cet esprit qui t'a fait, dis-tu, le roi de la nature ; tu es grand, maître et fort.

Chaque jour, en effet, tu bouleverses la terre, tu creuses des canaux, tu bâtis des palais, tu enfermes les fleuves entre des pierres, tu cueilles l'herbe, tu la pétris et tu la manges ; tu remues l'océan avec la quille de tes vaisseaux et tu crois tout cela beau ; tu te crois meilleur que la bête fauve que tu manges, plus libre que la feuille emportée par les vents, plus grand que l'aigle qui plane sur les tours, plus fort que la terre dont tu tires ton pain et tes diamants, et que l'océan sur lequel tu cours. Mais, hélas ! la terre, que tu remues, revient, renaît d'elle-même, les canaux se

one out? Are you free to do either good or evil?³⁶ For if you are permanently guided by the feeling of virtue, you cannot commit an evil action.

This struggle is one between two different inclinations, and if you commit evil, it is because you are more vicious than virtuous and that the stronger fever has won through. When two men fight, it is certain that the weaker, the less skilful and the less fit one will succumb to the stronger, the more skilful and the fitter; and however long the struggle lasts, there will always be a loser. It is the same with your inner character: even if what you feel to be good wins through, is victory always justice? And is what you judge to be good an absolute, immutable, eternal good?

So all is darkness around man. Everything is empty, and he looks for something firm. He turns around in this immensity of vagueness in which he would like to be able to stand still, and he latches on to anything, yet everything fails him. Fatherland, liberty, belief, God, virtue, he has taken all of that and it has all slipped through his fingers. He is like a madman who drops a crystal glass and laughs at all the fragments he has created.

But man has an immortal soul, made in the image of God. These are two ideas for which he has shed his blood, two ideas which he does not comprehend – a soul, a God – and of which he nonetheless remains convinced.

The soul is an essence around which our physical being turns, like the earth around the sun. The soul is noble for, in so far as it is a spiritual principle, with nothing terrestrial, it can have nothing low and base about it. And yet, is it not what animates our flesh? Is it possible for the mind to be the principle of evil, and the body its agent?

Let us observe how this soul, this conscience, is elastic and flexible, how it is docile and malleable, bending easily under the body that weighs upon it, or influencing the body that submits to it. How venal and base is this soul, how it crawls and flatters, how it lies and deceives! It is the soul that sells out the body, the hand, the head, the tongue. It is the soul that demands blood and gold, forever insatiable, harbouring infinite greed for everything. It remains in our midst like some thirst or desire, a fire that consumes us, a pivot that sends us spinning.

Oh man, how great you are! Not so much in body, but through the mind that has made you – so you say – the king of nature. You are great, you are strong, you are the master.

Indeed, every day you overturn the world, you dig canals, you build palaces, you encase rivers between stones, you harvest cereals, you work them and consume them. You stir the ocean with the keel of your craft, and you believe all this to be beautiful. You believe yourself better than the wild beast that you eat, freer than the leaf carried away by the wind, greater than the eagle that soars over the tower-tops, stronger than the earth from which you draw your bread and your diamonds, stronger than the ocean on which you race. Alas! The earth that you turn over returns and is reborn of its own accord, the canals are destroyed, the

détruisent, les fleuves envahissent tes champs et tes villes, les pierres de tes palais se disjoignent et tombent d'elles-mêmes, les fourmis courent sur tes couronnes et sur tes trônes, toutes tes flottes ne sauraient marquer plus de traces de leur passage sur la surface de l'océan qu'une goutte de pluie ou le battement d'aile de l'oiseau. Et toi-même, tu passes sur cet océan des âges sans laisser plus de traces de toi-même que ton navire n'en laisse sur les flots. Tu te crois grand parce que tu travailles sans relâche, mais ce travail est une preuve de ta faiblesse. Tu étais donc condamné à apprendre toutes ces choses inutiles au prix de tes sueurs ; tu étais esclave avant d'être né et malheureux avant de vivre. Tu regardes les astres avec un sourire d'orgueil parce que tu leur as donné des noms, que tu as calculé leur distance, comme si tu voulais mesurer l'infini et enfermer l'espace dans les bornes de ton esprit. Mais tu te trompes ! Qui te dit que, derrière ces mondes de lumières, il n'y en a pas d'autres, infinis encore, et toujours ainsi ? Peut-être que tes calculs s'arrêtent à quelques pieds de hauteur, et que là commence une échelle nouvelle de faits ? Comprends-tu toi-même la valeur des mots dont tu te sers,... étendue, espace ? Ils sont plus vastes que toi et tout ton globe.

Tu es grand et tu meurs, comme le chien et la fourmi, avec plus de regret qu'eux ; et puis, tu pourris ; et je te le demande, quand les vers t'ont mangé, quand ton corps s'est dissous dans l'humidité de la tombe et que ta poussière n'est plus, où es-tu, homme ? où est même ton âme ? cette âme qui était le moteur de tes actions, qui livrait ton cœur à la haine, à l'envie, à toutes les passions, cette âme qui te vendait et qui te faisait faire tant de bassesses, où est-elle ? est-il un lieu assez saint pour la recevoir ? Tu te respectes et tu t'honores comme un Dieu, tu as inventé l'idée de dignité de l'homme, idée que rien dans la nature ne pourrait avoir en te voyant ; tu veux qu'on t'honore et tu t'honores toi-même, tu veux même que le corps, si vil pendant sa vie, soit honoré quand il n'est plus. Tu veux qu'on se découvre devant ta charogne humaine, qui se pourrit de corruption, quoique plus pure encore que toi quand tu vivais. C'est là ta grandeur ? – Grandeur de poussière ! majesté de néant !

XXI

J'y revins deux ans plus tard ; vous pensez où... ; elle n'y était pas.

Son mari était seul, venu avec une autre femme, et il en était parti deux jours avant mon arrivée.

Je retournai sur le rivage ; comme il était vide ! De là, je pouvais voir le mur gris de la maison de Maria ; quel isolement !

Je revins donc dans cette même salle dont je vous ai parlé ; elle était pleine, mais aucun des visages n'y était plus, les tables étaient prises par des gens que je

rivers flood your fields and towns, the stones of your palaces are dislodged and fall apart, ants scurry across your crowns and your thrones, and all your sailing fleets will leave no greater trace of their passage than a drop of rain or the beat of a bird's wing on the surface of the ocean. And as for you, you pass across this ocean of the ages without leaving any more trace of yourself than does the ship that passes over the waves. You believe yourself great because you work without cease, yet this work is proof of your weakness. You were, then, condemned to learn all these useless things at the price of your own sweat. You were a slave before even being born, and miserable before you even lived. You contemplate the stars with a grin of pride, for you gave them names and calculate their distance, as if you wished to measure the infinite and enclose space within the confines of your mind. But you deceive yourself! Who can say if, beyond these worlds of light, there are not others, just as infinite, and so on forever? Maybe your calculations stop only a few feet from the ground, and at that point there is a different scale of facts? Do you even understand the value of the words you use – expanse, space? They are greater than either you or your globe.

You are great, yet you die like the dog or the ant, and with more regret than they. And then you rot, and I must ask you this: when the worms have eaten you up and your body is dispersed into the humidity of the grave, and when your dust is no longer, where are you then, man? Where, indeed, is your soul? – the soul that was the impulse for your actions, that gave up your heart to hatred, to envy, to all the passions, the soul that prostituted you and forced you to commit so many base actions. Where is that soul? Is there a place holy enough to receive it? You respect and honour yourself like a God, you have invented the idea of man's dignity, an idea inconceivable to anything in nature that sees you. You wish to be honoured, you honour yourself, and you even want your body, vile as it was during your lifetime, to be honoured when it exists no longer. You want men to raise their hats before your human carcass, rotting in its corruption – though perhaps still purer than you were when you lived. Is this your greatness? – The greatness of dust! The majesty of nothingness!

XXI

I returned two years later (you know where...) She was no longer there.

Her husband had been without her. He had come there with another woman, but left two days before my arrival.

I returned to the beach. How empty it was! From there I could see the grey wall of Maria's house. What loneliness!

And so I went back into that room I have talked of to you. It was full of people, but none of the familiar faces were there and the tables were taken by people I had

n'avais jamais vus ; celle de Maria était occupée par une vieille femme, qui s'appuyait à cette même place où, si souvent, son coude s'était posé.

Je restai ainsi quinze jours ; il fit quelques jours de mauvais temps et de pluie que je passai dans ma chambre, où j'entendais la pluie tomber sur les ardoises, le bruit lointain de la mer, et, de temps en temps, quelques cris de marins sur le quai ; je repensai à toutes ces vieilles choses que le spectacle des mêmes lieux faisait revivre.

Je revoyais le même océan avec ses mêmes vagues, toujours immense, triste et mugissant sur ses rochers ; ce même village avec ses tas de boue, ses coquilles qu'on foule, et ses maisons en étage. Mais tout ce que j'avais aimé, tout ce qui entourait Maria, ce beau soleil qui passait à travers les auvents et qui dorait sa peau, l'air qui l'entourait, le monde qui passait près d'elle, tout cela était parti sans retour. Oh ! que je voudrais seulement un seul de ces jours sans pareil ! entrer sans y rien changer !

Quoi ! rien de tout cela ne reviendra ? Je sens comme mon cœur est vide, car tous ces hommes qui m'entourent me font un désert où je meurs. Je me rappelai ces longues et chaudes après-midi d'été où je lui parlais sans qu'elle se doutât que je l'aimais, et où son regard indifférent m'entraînait comme un rayon d'amour jusqu'au fond de mon cœur. Comment aurait-elle pu en effet voir que je l'aimais, car je ne l'aimais pas alors, et en tout ce que je vous ai dit, j'ai menti ; c'était maintenant que je l'aimais, que je la désirais ; que, seul sur le rivage, dans les bois ou dans les champs, je me la créais là, marchant à côté de moi, me parlant, me regardant. Quand je me couchais sur l'herbe, et que je regardais les herbes ployer sous le vent et la vague battre le sable, je pensais à elle, et je reconstruisais dans mon cœur toutes les scènes où elle avait agi, parlé. Ces souvenirs étaient une passion.

Si je me rappelais l'avoir vue marcher sur un endroit, j'y marchais ; j'ai voulu retrouver le timbre de sa voix pour m'enchanter moi-même, cela était impossible. Que de fois j'ai passé devant sa maison et j'ai regardé à sa fenêtre !

Je passai donc ces quinze jours dans une contemplation amoureuse, rêvant à elle. Je me rappelle des choses navrantes. Un jour je revenais, vers le crépuscule, je marchais à travers les pâturages couverts de bœufs, je marchais vite, je n'entendais que le bruit de ma marche qui froissait l'herbe ; j'avais la tête baissée et je regardais la terre ; ce mouvement régulier m'endormit pour ainsi dire, je crus entendre Maria marcher près de moi ; elle me tenait le bras et tournait la tête pour me voir, c'était elle qui marchait dans les herbes. Je savais bien que c'était une hallucination que j'animais moi-même, mais je ne pouvais me défendre d'en sourire et je me sentais heureux. Je levai la tête, le temps était sombre, devant moi, à l'horizon, un magnifique soleil se couchait sous les vagues, on voyait une gerbe de feu s'élever en réseaux, disparaître sous de gros nuages noirs qui roulaient péniblement sur eux, et puis un reflet de ce soleil couchant reparaître plus loin derrière moi, dans un coin du ciel limpide et bleu.

never seen. Maria's was occupied by an elderly woman who was leaning on the very spot where, so often, her elbow had rested.

I stayed for a fortnight. There were a few days of bad weather and rain, which I spent in my room, listening to the rain beating on the tiles, the distant sea, and from time to time, the cries of sailors on the wharf. I thought of all the things that the sight of these familiar places brought back to me.

I saw the same ocean with the same waves, immense as ever, sad, roaring as it struck the rocks. I saw the same village with its piles of mud, the shells that people trampled upon, its tiered houses. Yet everything I had loved, everything that surrounded Maria, the beautiful sunlight that passed through the shutters and gilded her skin, the air that surrounded her, the world that passed before her, all of that had gone, never to return. How I wish for a single one of those incomparable days, and to enter back into it without changing anything!³⁷

What? Will none of that return? I feel the emptiness of my heart, and the human world around me becomes a desert in which I die. I remembered those long, hot summer afternoons when I spoke to her without her suspecting that I loved her, when her indifferent gaze pierced through my heart, like a ray of love. Indeed, how could she have seen that I loved her, for I did not love her then, and I have lied in everything I have told you. It was now that I loved and desired her; now that, alone on the seashore, or in the woods or fields, I conjured up her presence and saw her walking beside me, speaking to me, looking at me. When I lay down on the ground and watched the grass bending in the wind or the wave beating against the sand, I would think of her, and would recreate in my heart all those scenes in which she had acted or spoken. These memories were a passion.³⁸

If I remembered having seen her walking at a particular spot, I would walk there myself. I tried to recapture the very timbre of her voice, but it was impossible. How many times I passed before her house and looked up at her window!

And so I passed that fortnight in amorous contemplation, dreaming of her. I recall heart-rending things. One day, I was returning at around dusk, and walking through fields full of bulls. I was walking rapidly, and heard only the sound of my own footsteps through the grass. My head was bowed and I was looking downwards. This regular movement made me somewhat drowsy, and I believed I heard Maria walking next to me. She held my arm and turned her head towards me. It was she who was walking through the grass. I knew perfectly well that it was a hallucination that I was staging for myself, yet I could not help smiling and feeling happy at it. I raised my head. The weather was dull, and ahead of me, on the horizon, there was a magnificent sunset over the waves. A sheaf of fire spread its rays outwards, and they disappeared under the great dark clouds that rolled heavily towards them. Then I saw the reflection of the setting sun reappear farther behind me, in a clear blue corner of the sky.

Quand je découvris la mer, il avait presque disparu ; son disque était à moitié enfoncé sous l'eau et une légère teinte de rose allait toujours s'élargissant et s'affaiblissant vers le ciel.

Une autre fois, je revenais à cheval en longeant la grève, je regardais machinalement les vagues dont la mousse mouillait les pieds de ma jument, je regardais les cailloux qu'elle faisait jaillir en marchant et ses pieds s'enfoncer dans le sable ; le soleil venait de disparaître tout à coup et il y avait sur les vagues une couleur sombre, comme si quelque chose de noir eût plané sur elles. A ma droite étaient des rochers entre lesquels l'écume s'agitait au souffle du vent comme une mer de neige, les mouettes passaient sur ma tête et je voyais leurs ailes blanches s'approcher tout près de cette eau sombre et terne. Rien ne pourra dire tout ce que cela avait de beau, cette mer, ce rivage, avec son sable parsemé de coquilles, avec ses rochers couverts de varechs humides d'eau, et l'écume blanche qui se balançait sur eux au souffle de la brise.

Je vous dirais bien d'autres choses, bien plus belles et plus douces, si je pouvais dire tout ce que je ressentis d'amour, d'extase, de regrets. Pouvez-vous dire par des mots le battement du cœur ? pouvez-vous dire une larme et peindre son cristal humide qui baigne l'œil d'une amoureuse langueur ? pouvez-vous dire tout ce que vous ressentez en un jour ?

Pauvre faiblesse humaine ! avec tes mots, tes langues, tes sons, tu parles et tu balbuties ; tu définis Dieu, le ciel et la terre, la chimie et la philosophie, et tu ne peux exprimer, avec ta langue, toute la joie que te cause une femme nue... ou un plum-pudding !

XXII

Ô Maria ! Maria, cher ange de ma jeunesse, toi que j'ai vue dans la fraîcheur de mes sentiments, toi que j'ai aimée d'un amour si doux, si plein de parfum, de tendres rêveries, adieu !

Adieu ! d'autres passions viendront, je t'oublierai peut-être, mais tu resteras toujours au fond de mon cœur, car le cœur est une terre où chaque passion bouleverse, remue et laboure sur les ruines des autres. Adieu !

Adieu ! et cependant, comme je t'aurais aimée, comme je t'aurais embrassée, serrée dans mes bras ! Ah ! mon âme se fond en délices à toutes les folies que mon amour invente. Adieu !

Adieu ! et cependant je penserai toujours à toi ; je vais être jeté dans le tourbillon du monde, j'y mourrai peut-être, écrasé sous les pieds de la foule, déchiré en lambeaux. Où vais-je ? que serai-je ? je voudrais être vieux, avoir les cheveux blancs ; non, je voudrais être beau comme les anges, avoir de la gloire, du

When I looked back towards the sea, the sun was almost gone. Its sphere had half disappeared beyond the water, and a slight trace of pink was spreading outwards, weakening as it rose into the sky.

On another occasion, I was returning on horseback along the shore. I was mechanically looking at the waves as they frothed over the hooves of my mare, and watching the pebbles that she kicked up as she sank into the sand. The sun had suddenly disappeared, and a sombre hue had spread over the waves, as though something dark had passed over them. On my right were rocks, between which the spray was whipped up by the breeze into a sea of froth. The seagulls passed overhead, and I watched their white wings dipping down almost to the level of the dark, dull sea. Nothing could describe the beauty of all this: the sea, the sandy beach strewn with shells, the rocks covered in wet seaweed topped with a spray brought in by the breeze.

I would add many fine and delicate touches to what I have told you already, if only I could describe the love, the ecstasy and the regret that I felt. Is it possible to translate the beating of a heart into words? Or to express a human tear and describe the way its crystalline humidity bathes the eye in amorous languor? Is it possible to express everything you feel in a single day?

Poor human frailty! With your words, your languages, your sounds, you speak and stammer. You define God, the sky, the earth, chemistry and philosophy, and yet with your language you cannot even express the joy you feel at the sight of a naked woman... or a plum pudding!

XXII

Oh Maria, Maria! Dear angel of my youth, whom I beheld in the freshness of my feelings, whom I loved with such tender love, so full of fragrant and gentle reveries, farewell!

Farewell! Other passions will come, and perhaps I shall forget you. But you will remain deep in my heart, for the heart is a pasture in which every passion overturns, stirs and ploughs its furrow over the ruins of all the others. Farewell!

Farewell! And yet how I could have loved you, how I could have kissed you and held you in my arms! Oh! My soul melts away in delight at the follies that my love invents. Farewell!

Farewell! And yet I shall always think of you. I am about to plunge into the tumult of life, perhaps I shall die in its midst, crushed underfoot by the crowd, torn to shreds. Where am I going? What shall I become? I should like to be old and have white hair. But no! I should like to be as beautiful as the angels, to have glory

génie, et tout déposer à tes pieds pour que tu marches sur tout cela ; et je n'ai rien de tout cela et tu m'as regardé aussi froidement qu'un laquais ou qu'un mendiant.

Et moi, sais-tu que je n'ai pas passé une nuit, pas un jour, pas une heure, sans penser à toi, sans te revoir sortant de dessous la vague, avec tes cheveux noirs sur tes épaules, ta peau brune avec ses perles d'eau salée, tes vêtements ruisselants et ton pied blanc aux ongles roses qui s'enfonçait dans le sable, et que cette vision est toujours présente, et que cela murmure toujours à mon cœur ? Oh ! non, tout est vide.

Adieu ! et pourtant, quand je te vis, si j'avais été plus âgé de quatre à cinq ans, plus hardi... Peut-être ? Oh ! non, je rougissais à chacun de tes regards. Adieu !

XXIII

Quand j'entends les cloches sonner et le glas frapper en gémissant, j'ai dans l'âme une vague tristesse, quelque chose d'indéfinissable et de rêveur, comme des vibrations mourantes. Une série de pensées s'ouvre au tintement lugubre de la cloche des morts ; il me semble voir le monde dans ses plus beaux jours de fête, avec des cris de triomphe, des chars et des couronnes et, par-dessus tout cela, un éternel silence et une éternelle majesté.

Mon âme s'envole vers l'éternité et l'infini et plane dans l'océan du doute, au son de cette voix qui annonce la mort.

Voix régulière et froide comme les tombeaux, et qui cependant sonne à toutes les fêtes, pleure à tous les deuils, j'aime à me laisser étourdir par ton harmonie qui étouffe le bruit des villes ; j'aime, dans les champs, sur les collines dorées de blés mûrs, à entendre les sons frêles de la cloche du village qui chante au milieu de la campagne, tandis que l'insecte siffle sous l'herbe et que l'oiseau murmure sous le feuillage.

Je suis longtemps resté, dans l'hiver, dans ces jours sans soleil, éclairés d'une lumière morne et blafarde, à écouter toutes les cloches sonner les offices. De toutes parts sortaient les voix qui montaient vers le ciel en réseau d'harmonie, et je condensais ma pensée sur ce gigantesque instrument. Elle était grande, infinie ; je ressentais en moi des sons, des mélodies, des échos d'un autre monde, des choses immenses qui mouraient aussi.

Ô cloches ! vous sonnerez donc aussi sur ma mort et une minute après pour un baptême ; vous êtes donc une dérision comme le reste et un mensonge comme la vie, dont vous annoncez toutes les phases : le baptême, le mariage, la mort. Pauvre airain, perdu et caché au milieu des airs, et qui servirait si bien en lave ardente sur un champ de bataille, ou à ferrer les chevaux !

and genius and be able to lay it at your feet so that you can walk over it. And yet, I have none of that, and you looked upon me as coldly as if I were a servant or a beggar.

As for me, do you know that I have not spent a day or a night, nor even a single hour without thinking of you, without seeing you emerging from the water with your dark hair over your shoulders, your sallow skin covered with drops of salt water, your dripping clothes and your white foot with its pink toenails sinking into the sand. Do you know that this vision is ever present, that it whispers constantly in my heart? Oh no, it is completely empty.

Farewell! And yet, when I beheld you, if I had been four or five years older, slightly braver... who knows? Oh no, I blushed every time you looked upon me. Farewell!

XXIII

When I hear the bells ring, when the death-knell groans out, I have a vague feeling of sadness in my soul, something indefinable and dreamy, like a dying reverberation. A series of thoughts opens up as I listen to the eerie chiming of the bell of death, and it seems to me that I see the world on its finest festive days, with its cries of triumph, its chariots and crowns. And over all of this there reigns a sense of eternal silence and majesty.

My soul drifts away towards eternity and the infinite, soaring over the ocean of doubt at the sound of that voice announcing death. It is a voice as cold and as implacable as the graves, and yet it sounds out at every festivity, weeps at every occasion for mourning. I love to be soothed by its harmony, which stifles the noise of the city. And, when in the fields or on the hills gilded with ripe wheat, I like to listen to the frail sounds of the village bell as it chimes out through the countryside, when the insect whispers under the grass and the bird warbles in the foliage.

On those sunless winter days when the light is gloomy and pale, I have spent many hours listening to the church bells ringing the services. Voices from everywhere rose towards the heavens in collective harmony, and I focussed my thoughts on this gigantic instrument. It was great, it was infinite. Within myself I sensed sounds and melodies, echoes of another world, immense things that died in their turn.

As for the bells, they will ring out as well at my death, and then a minute later they will ring again for a baptism. They are a mockery like everything else, a lie like life itself, whose different phases they announce: baptism, marriage, death. Feeble brass objects, whose sound fades and disappears in the air, and which would be better as molten liquid on a battlefield, or recast as horseshoes!

Notes on the text

¹ Alfred Le Poittevin, five years Flaubert's senior and author of *Une promenade de Béliar*, ed. by René Descharmes (Paris: Les Presses Françaises, 1924) died in April 1848. Flaubert claimed that much of his early philosophical education was Le Poittevin's doing. When Le Poittevin died, Flaubert watched over the body of his friend, reading Creuzer's *Les Religions de l'antiquité* and Hugo's *Feuilles d'automne*. Le Poittevin, he claims, had read Spinoza until it became impossible for him to read any more (see Flaubert's letter to Maxime Du Camp, 7 April 1848, *Cor.* I, pp. 493-95). Le Poittevin's sister, Laure, later became the mother of Guy de Maupassant. An attractive but entirely discredited legend has it that Flaubert himself was Maupassant's father.

Claudine Gothot-Mersch includes the following text of the accompanying letter to Le Poittevin (not included in the Dauze or any other edition) prior to the dedication:

A cette époque où on a coutume de se faire des cadeaux, on se donne de l'or et des poignées de main. – Mais moi je te donne mes pensées; triste cadeau! Accepte-les – elles sont à toi comme mon cœur.

Gve Flaubert
4 janvier 1839

[At this time of year when the custom is to give gifts, people exchange gold and handshakes. For my part I give you my thoughts, a sad gift! Accept them, they are for you as is my heart.

Gve Flaubert
4 January 1839]

(Gustave Flaubert, *Les Mémoires d'un fou. Novembre. Pyrénées-Corse. Voyage en Italie*, ed. by Claudine Gothot-Mersch, p. 46)

² Flaubert appears to envisage at this point, if still rather unclearly, the double-edged irony of later works which both exposes the clichéd expectations of the reader and undermines the authority of the narrator. Yet there is savagery in his view of the world, and his notion of the writer's power to deflate is reinforced by his literary admirations of the period. On 13 September 1838 he writes to his friend Ernest Chevalier: 'Vraiment je n'estime profondément que deux hommes: Rabelais et Byron les deux seuls qui aient écrit dans l'intention de nuire au genre humain et de lui rire à la face' ['In truth I have a profound admiration of only two men, Rabelais and Byron, the only two to have written with the aim of harming the human race and of laughing in its face'] (*Cor.* I, p. 28).

³ The 1836 story *Rage et impuissance* (OC I, pp. 83-87) offers an earlier but somewhat different version of the image of entombment, when its main character, Dr Ohmlin, awakes from an opium-induced dream to find himself buried alive. In *Mémoires d'un fou*, the image acquires interiority, for the soul itself is seen as buried within the confines of the writer's life.

⁴ The evocation of *ennui* will return, often in similar terms, with the description of Emma's depression at the end of Part One of *Madame Bovary*, where we read, for example, that '...elle restait à faire rougir les pincettes, ou regardant la pluie tomber' ['...she would sit there watching the tongs redden as she held them in the fire, or watching the rain fall'] (OC I, p. 596).

⁵ In her recent edition Claudine Gothot-Mersch points out that the words 'Pauvre mère!' in Flaubert's text were originally followed by this addendum: 'qui as versé tant de larmes sur [ma] fragile existence, qui veillas tant de nuits et avec tant d'amour au chevet de ton enfant... quel monde que le cœur d'une mère, quels élans d'amour en sortent, combien de douces choses! l'âme en est baignée d'une mysticité de tendresse qui est quelque chose des cieux' ['Poor mother, who shed so many tears over my fragile existence, who spent so many nights watching with such love at the bedside of your child... What a world the heart of a mother is, what love emerges from it, what number of sweet things! It bathes one's soul in a mystical tenderness which has something of heaven about it'] (Gustave Flaubert, *Mémoires d'un fou*, ed. by Claudine Gothot-Mersch, p. 402).

⁶ This typically Flaubertian sense of finality will return, with the same words but a significant shift from imperfect to past historic, in the last line of the penultimate chapter of *L'Education sentimentale* where, as Madame Arnoux's cab disappears, we read: 'Et ce fut tout' ['And that was all'] (OC II, p. 161).

⁷ The apparent dichotomy between the exterior calm of the writer's life and its interior richness or turbulence or suffering will often return in Flaubert's work. On 14 January 1857, shortly after the very real turbulence provoked by the first publication of *Madame Bovary* in the *Revue de Paris*, he writes in a letter to Elisa Schlésinger: 'Je vais donc reprendre ma pauvre vie si plate et tranquille, où les phrases sont des aventures et où je ne recueille d'autres fleurs que des métaphores' ['I am going back to my dull and tranquil life in which sentences are adventures and the only flowers I gather are metaphors'] (*Cor.* II, p. 665).

⁸ See note 25 in the introduction for a remark about the various interpretations of these dreams.

⁹ As Bruneau indicates, at the time of writing *Mémoires d'un fou*, Flaubert's reading has begun to diversify enormously (see *Les Débuts littéraires*, p. 231). Apart from Shakespeare and Byron, mentioned in this passage, it includes Montaigne, Rousseau, Goethe and Musset. In addition to *Childe Harold*, Byron's *Cain* is also an important influence here, and Max Milner points out

numerous echoes of it in Flaubert's text (Max Milner, *Le Diable dans la littérature française* (Paris: Corti, 1960), pp. 219-20). *Cain* will figure even more prominently during the writing of *Smarh*, a 'mystère' which Flaubert writes after completing *Mémoires d'un fou*.

¹⁰ This is an important early formulation of the idea that 'le style [est] à lui tout seul une manière absolue de voir les choses' ['style is, in itself, an absolute manner of looking at things'] (*Cor.* II, p. 31). The young Flaubert suggests that style has to be understood as more than the craftsmanship of words themselves, that rather it is a quality of vision and form which rises above the particulars of the text. Also of interest in this passage is the emphasis on reading aloud. In terms of Flaubert's own writing technique, this will result in the famous 'gueuloir' ['yelling place'] – the avenue of lime trees at the bottom of the garden in Croisset where the novelist paced up and down, reading his sentences aloud to put them through the test of sound.

¹¹ The preceding passage, mourning the death of civilisation and the passing of the Christian religion, conveys a well-known mood of Romantic scepticism. The mood is powerfully expressed in the writings of Musset, whose *Rolla* (1833) will, according to a number of critics, be a major influence on *Novembre* (see Bruneau, *Les Débuts littéraires*, p. 324). But in 1838 Flaubert is already entirely attuned to Musset's famous assertion in Part I of *Rolla*: 'Je suis venu trop tard dans un monde trop vieux' ['I have come too late to a world too old']. In a letter to Louise Colet of 25 September 1852, Flaubert admits that, contrary to his mature contempt for the poet, 'Musset m'a excessivement enthousiasmé autrefois' ['I used to have an excessive enthusiasm for Musset'] (*Cor.* II, p. 164).

¹² The second of the two major variants given in the Gothot-Mersch edition of the *Mémoires* is an earlier version of this opening paragraph to Chapter X: 'Au moment de retracer cette page de ma vie, mon cœur bat comme un vieux soldat qui va rejoindre sa chaumière. Il la distingue de loin sur la colline, il voit son toit de paille couvert de mousse – il voit le banc de bois sur la porte où son père l'embrassa en pleurant, – là sa mère détourna la tête et la baissa dans ses mains. Il tremble, car la pelouse de gazon est solitaire, la niche du chien est vide. Il fond en sanglots, tout est vide. Et moi aussi tout est vide – vide comme cette chaumière du pauvre où la famille n'est plus' ['On the point of going back over this page of my life, my heart beats like that of an old soldier returning to his cottage. He spots it from afar on the hilltop, he sees its thatched roof covered in moss, and he sees the wooden bench where his father wept as he kissed him farewell, and his mother turned away and buried her head in her hands. He trembles, for the lawn is empty and the dog's kennel uninhabited. He breaks down in tears, for everything is empty. For me too, everything is empty, as empty as the poor man's cottage where there is no longer a family'] (Gustave Flaubert, *Mémoires d'un fou*, ed. by Claudine Gothot-Mersch, p. 404).

¹³ Despite the narrator's wilful imprecision in this passage, Flaubert's biographers concur overwhelmingly that the encounter with Elisa Schlésinger, on which this episode is based, took place in the summer of 1836 (see Bruneau, *Les Débuts littéraires*, p. 242). A lone voice in favour of 1837 is that of Sartre (*L'Idiot de la famille*, vol. II, p. 1518).

¹⁴ The incident with the cloak, duly subjected to the processes of literary transmutation, will also be the starting point of the 1869 version of *L'Education sentimentale*. Frédéric, the hero of the novel, is travelling on a steamer from Paris to Nogent when he meets Madame Arnoux and falls in love with her. We read:

Un long châle à bandes violettes était placé derrière son dos, sur le bordage de cuivre. Elle avait dû, bien des fois, au milieu de la mer, durant les soirs humides, en envelopper sa taille, s'en couvrir les pieds, dormir dedans! Mais, entraîné par les franges, il glissant peu à peu, il allait tomber dans l'eau. Frédéric fit un bond et le rattrapa. Elle lui dit :
– Je vous remercie, monsieur. (OC II, p. 10)

[A long stole with purple stripes was behind her back, on the brass railing. She must, on many occasions out at sea, on damp evenings, have wrapped it round her body, covered her feet with it, slept in it! But, drawn by its fringe, it was steadily sliding and was about to fall into the water. Frédéric leapt forward and caught it. She said: 'Thank you, sir.']

¹⁵ The quality and power of this description, which heralds some of the great physical descriptions of Flaubert's mature works, should not blind us to its experimental nature. Flaubert refers on more than one occasion here to the high, arched eyebrows, the burning gaze and the sallow skin of Maria, whom he describes also at one moment as 'mince et fine' ['slender and delicate'], then as having 'un peu trop d'embonpoint' ['slightly too full a figure']. We might suspect that the passage was reworked and that the manuscript might show various signs of this. However, Claudine Gothot-Mersch makes no mention of any particularities at this point of the manuscript, and her transcription of the passage is identical to the one given here, except for punctuation (modernised in our text in order to eliminate the dashes used to excess by Flaubert in his early manuscripts.) On the significance of the voice in Flaubert's descriptions of Maria, see also note 21.

¹⁶ A reference to Act II, scene 3 of *L'Ecole des femmes* (first performed in 1662). The servants Alain and Georgette are discussing the jealous and obsessive behaviour of their master Arnolphe. Alain says :

La femme est en effet le potage de l'homme ;
Et quand un homme voit d'autres hommes parfois
Qui veulent dans sa soupe aller tremper leurs doigts,
Il en montre aussitôt une colère extrême.

(*L'Ecole des femmes*, lines 436-39)

Bruneau (*Les Débuts littéraires*, pp. 241-42), points out that this reference to *L'Ecole des femmes* is also made in a letter written by Flaubert to his friend Ernest

Chevalier on 11 October 1838 ('Ô que Molière a eu raison de comparer la femme à un potage, mon cher Ernest' ['How right Molière was to compare woman to a soup, my dear Ernest'], *Cor.* I, p. 29). For Bruneau, this is a further confirmation that *Mémoires d'un fou* was written in the closing months of 1838.

¹⁷ There is, not for the first time, evidence of some carelessness in the writing here (see also note 15 above). The kisses referred to in the previous sentence are those of the people who shower attention on Maria's baby. The narrator's wish to gather up one of those kisses is no doubt meant to refer to the kisses Maria herself bestows on the child.

¹⁸ Although a metric system of measurement had been adopted in France soon after the Revolution, it was common practice throughout the nineteenth century to give distances in leagues, as Flaubert does here. On land, one league is, in popular usage, the equivalent of four kilometres. However, the 'lieue de terre' is, technically speaking, one twenty-fifth of a degree and converts to 4.445 kilometres. Conversely, a nautical league, or 'lieue marine', is one twentieth of a degree and converts to 5.556 kilometres.

¹⁹ A 'chaise de poste', or post-chaise, was a carriage which could be hired complete with horses to travel from one station to another, or for which horses could be hired separately along the different stations of a route. Since the possessive adjective is used here ('sa chaise de poste'/'his post-chaise'), it can be deduced that Maria's husband was himself the owner of the carriage and that he hired the horses along the way. The remark about how the vehicle was occupied and loaded up seems to add plausibility to this interpretation, and clearly situates Maria's husband as a *petit bourgeois* aspiring to possessions and ownership in the early era of seaside tourism.

²⁰ Soon after completing *Mémoires d'un fou*, Flaubert makes a promise to his friend Ernest Chevalier in a letter of 24 February 1839: 'Si jamais je prends une part active au monde, ce sera comme penseur et comme démoralisateur' ['If ever I take an active role in the world it will be as a thinker and a debunker'] (*Cor.* I, p. 37). Certainly, Flaubert's famous taste for castigating cliché and platitude is here being indulged in one of the first significant passages of its type. Later, when Flaubert compiles the *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, the goal will be to reduce people to silence, for fear of uttering one of the expressions they have stumbled across in his book, written 'de telle manière que le lecteur ne sache pas si on se fout de lui, oui ou non' ['in such a way that the reader does not know whether he is being made fun of or it'] (*Cor.* I 679). Like many of the early texts, *Mémoires d'un fou* heralds the later fascination with *bêtise* and platitude.

²¹ Maria's 'modulated, musical, gentle voice' has already been referred to in the narrator's earlier description (see note 15). The fascination of the voice, and its power to captivate and enchant, will return both in the figure of Emma Bovary,

who sings to Léon, and in the descriptions of Madame Arnoux, often considered by Flaubert's biographers to have been modelled on Elisa Schlésinger. The passage describing Madame Arnoux singing is particularly noteworthy: 'Sa voix de contralto prenait dans les cordes basses une intonation lugubre qui glaçait, et alors sa belle tête, aux grands sourcils, s'inclinait sur son épaule; sa poitrine se gonflait, ses bras s'écartaient, son cou d'où s'échappaient des roulades se renversait mollement comme sous des baisers aériens; elle lança trois notes aiguës, redescendit, en jeta une plus haute encore, et , après un silence, termina par un point d'orgue' ['In the lower notes her contralto voice took on a lugubrious intonation which froze you; then her beautiful head with its arched eyebrows tilted on her shoulder, her breast swelled up, she opened her arms, and her neck, through which rose a rolling series of notes, inclined gently backwards as if covered in ethereal kisses. She hit three high notes, went back down, went back to an even higher one and, after a silence, finished on a single, long note'] (OC II, p. 26).

²² The theme of temptation is here making an early appearance in the work of Flaubert, heralding the writing of *La Tentation de saint Antoine* in 1848-49. One can certainly discern the presence in this and the following passage of two of the capital sins that will return in the *Tentation* – Gluttony, and Lust. Significantly, temptation in Flaubert is allied with frustration and deprivation. Soon after the writing of *Mémoires d'un fou*, the idea of deprivation will start to become a positive aesthetic principle for him. The narrator of *Novembre* (1843) is better able to imagine the rich complexities of the world because he is cut off from them, and in the latter stages of the first *Education sentimentale* (1845), the hero Jules achieves artistic detachment precisely because he cultivates a state of deprivation – allowing himself the luxury of every temptation in the process: 'Il vit dans la sobriété et dans la chasteté, rêvant l'amour, la volupté et l'orgie' ['He lives in a state of sobriety and chastity, dreaming of love, sensual pleasure and orgies'] (OC I, p. 369).

²³ This highly significant link between love and reading heralds the notion of love that Flaubert will develop and portray to such effect in *Madame Bovary*. Clearly, even at this early stage, Flaubert is making the point that love conceived through literature is likely to be an illusion. The theme is of course not new (c.f. La Rochefoucauld's maxim 136: 'Il y a des gens qui n'auraient jamais été amoureux, s'ils n'avaient jamais entendu parler de l'amour' ['There are those who would never have fallen in love, had they never heard about love']), but Flaubert will manage to exploit to the full its bitter resonances.

²⁴ Flaubert is clearly situating his writing in the confessional and autobiographical mode, following the long tradition from Montaigne to Rousseau and beyond. Since both Montaigne and Rousseau are central influences on the writing of *Mémoires d'un fou* (see Bruneau, *Les Débuts littéraires*, pp. 228-30) it is perhaps

as well to recall the famous liminary statements in their respective works which are echoed by Flaubert in this passage. Montaigne, in 'Au Lecteur', writes: 'Je veux qu'on m'y voie en ma façon simple, naturelle et ordinaire, sans contention et artifice: car c'est moy que je peins' ['I want to be seen here in my simple, natural and ordinary way, without effort or artifice: for it is I whom I portray']; and Rousseau states in the opening paragraph of the *Confessions*: 'Je veux montrer à mes semblables un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature' ['I wish to show to my peers a man in all the truth of nature']. The first mention of Rousseau in Flaubert's correspondence (in a letter to Ernest Chevalier of 11 October 1838) suggests that he was reading the *Confessions* while working on *Mémoires d'un fou*: 'Je suis à moitié des *Confessions* de J.-J. Rousseau, c'est admirable. Voilà la vraie école de style' ['I am half way through Rousseau's *Confessions*, which are admirable. That is the true school of style'] (*Cor.* I, p. 29). Flaubert's first mention of Montaigne dates back to 1836, when he cites him at the end of the short story 'Un Parfum à sentir'. Both Montaigne and Rousseau will be mentioned, in interesting company, in the *Souvenirs, notes et pensées intimes*, written in 1840-41: 'On aurait voulu vivre comme César, Montaigne, Molière, Rousseau' ['On would have liked to live like Caesar, Montaigne, Molière, Rousseau'] (*Cahier intime de jeunesse*, p. 9).

²⁵ The theatrical image is significant. Flaubert's fascination with theatre goes back to his early childhood when he staged plays for the family in the billiard room at the Hôtel-Dieu in Rouen. The importance of these early theatrical experiences will be strikingly expressed in a letter to Louise Colet in August 1846, when he writes: 'Le fond de ma nature est, quoi qu'en en dise, le saltimbanque. J'ai eu dans mon enfance et ma jeunesse un amour effréné des planches. J'aurais été peut-être un grand acteur si le ciel m'a[vait] fait naître plus pauvre' ['The basis of my character is, whatever else one might say, that of the performing artist. In my childhood and youth I adored strutting the planks. Perhaps I would have been a great actor had I been born poor'] (*Cor.* I, p. 278). The theatrical side of Flaubert's imagination is clearly underlined in this passage of *Mémoires d'un fou*, and it is linked interestingly – presciently perhaps – with the notion of the author-God who surveys and controls his own creation. Some excellent comments on the links between Flaubert's writing and his love of acting will be found in Sartre, *L'Idiot de la famille*, vol. I, pp. 854-90. For Sartre, who asserts that 'l'écrivain se ressentira toujours d'être né de l'acteur' (p. 854), the theatrical dimension of Flaubert's work is crucial to our understanding of it.

²⁶ This division of the fragment relating to the English sisters into two halves, with the second half preceded by the figure II, is re-established by Claudine Gothot-Mersch in her edition of the text. It does not figure in the Conard or Seuil editions. Pierre Dauze's text simply has a one-line gap at this point.

²⁷ The widely-used Seuil edition of *Mémoires d'un fou* (*Œuvres complètes* (Paris, Seuil, 1964), vol. I, p. 241) inverts the order of these two lines of verse. Both Pierre Dauze and Claudine Gothot-Mersch, whose transcriptions are based on a direct manuscript sighting, put the lines in the order we have used here, and so indeed does the Conard version (vol. 1 of *Appendice aux Œuvres complètes de Gustave Flaubert. Œuvres de jeunesse inédites* (Paris: Conard, 1910)). It seems that the Seuil inversion is simply an error of transcription. It has, unfortunately, been perpetuated in the Club de l'Honnête Homme edition (*Œuvres complètes de Gustave Flaubert* (Paris: Club de l'Honnête Homme, 1973), vol. XI, p. 500).

²⁸ The eponymous hero of Alexandre Dumas *père*'s play, first performed at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin on 3 May 1831. Flaubert had written to Ernest Chevalier on 18 June 1835 that he had just purchased a copy of the play (*Cor.* I, p. 17).

²⁹ 'Tétin refect, plus blanc qu'un œuf, / Tétin de satin blanc tout neuf' (Clément Marot, *Epigrammes*, ed. C.A. Mayer (London : Athlone, 1970), p. 156).

³⁰ Echoes of Hamlet's world-weariness are present throughout *Mémoires d'un fou*, but this evocation of the colourful variety and ultimate emptiness of human folly is a clear reminder of Hamlet's description of man as, on the one hand, a godlike and complex creature ('How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty!'), and on the other hand a mere speck ('quintessence of dust') in a universe which is no more than a 'foul and pestilent congregation of vapours' (*Hamlet*, Act II, scene 2). It will be remembered that earlier the narrator of *Mémoires d'un fou* had mentioned *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* by name, establishing that Shakespeare was, along with Montaigne, Rousseau, Byron and Goethe, among the principal literary influences on his work (see note 9).

³¹ Ernest Chevalier, Flaubert's boyhood friend to whom much of the correspondence of this period is addressed (see notes 2, 16, 20, 24 and 28 above). The mention of Chevalier by name here might be seen as confirmation that the episode retains biographical fact. By 1845 Chevalier will, somewhat to Flaubert's horror, be making his way respectably in the legal profession. The ultimate failure of the friendship between Jules and Henry in the first *Education sentimentale*, completed that year, has been seen as owing something to this separation of paths in real life.

³² The yearning for a lost time of innocent anticipation will subsequently become a major theme in the work of Flaubert. It makes a celebrated reappearance at the end of *L'Education sentimentale* (1869) when Frédéric and Deslauriers, referring back to a moment prior to the story's commencement, affirm: 'C'est là ce que nous avons eu de meilleur'. On this, see Victor Brombert, *The Novels of Flaubert* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 150-54.

³³ The wish for a pure artistic experience which has no need of formal or expressive constraints situates Flaubert in a mystical tradition, and will return frequently in his work. The culmination of his dream of formless art will be in the famous letter to Louise Colet of 16 January 1852 when he dreams of writing a book about nothing: 'Ce qui me semble beau, ce que je voudrais faire, c'est un livre sur rien, un livre sans attache extérieure, qui se tiendrait de lui-même par la force interne de son style, comme la terre sans être soutenue se tient en l'air, un livre qui n'aurait presque pas de sujet ou du moins où le sujet serait presque invisible, si cela se peut' ['What appeals to me, what I would like to be able to do, would be to write a book about nothing, a book with no external reference, which would simply sustain itself by the internal force of its style – just as the earth, without being held, sustains itself in the air – a book which would have practically no subject or at least where the subject would be almost invisible, if that were possible'] (*Cor.*, II, p. 31).

³⁴ The comment will, interestingly, be echoed some thirty years later in the figure of Pellerin, the failed painter of *L'Education sentimentale*, who expresses his contempt for reality and stresses that each person sees reality in his own colours. '– Laissez-moi tranquille avec votre hideuse réalité! Qu'est-ce que cela veut dire, la réalité? Les uns voient noir, d'autres bleu, la multitude voit bête' ['Leave me alone with your hideous reality! What does it mean – reality? Some see black, others blue, and the masses see stupid'] (OC II, p. 25).

³⁵ The French word 'carlistes' means, literally, supporters of King Don Carlos of Spain (1788-1855). The term 'carlisme' was widely used to designate support for an absolutist and reactionary brand of politics, as practised by Don Carlos.

³⁶ The relevance of these questions asked by Flaubert in the 1830s becomes apparent later in the century when writers like Dostoevsky begin to question the motives behind apparently 'criminal' actions. Gide's questioning of the 'acte gratuit' will be a further development in this debate.

³⁷ The sense that the external world does not change or match the world of man's inner emotions is fundamental to Flaubert's developing concept of irony. This will be formulated emphatically in the first *Education sentimentale* when Jules discovers that nature remains indifferent to his sad plight. Jules reflects that 'la nature extérieure a une ironie sans pareille: les cieux ne se couvrent pas de nuages, quand notre cœur est gros; les fleurs parfument l'air, quand nous le remplissons de nos cris; les oiseaux gazouillent et font l'amour dans les cyprès sous lesquels nous enterrons nos plus tendrement aimés' ['external nature has a unique irony about it: the sky does not fill with clouds when we are sad; the scent of flowers fills the air when we fill it with our cries; birds twitter and make love in the cypress trees beneath which we bury those whom we have loved most tenderly'] (OC I, p. 320).

³⁸ It is evident that Flaubert is, in this passage, giving a privileged insight into the processes of literary creation. The importance of the passage of time is obvious, as the writer finds the means to idealise retrospectively, fully acknowledging that what he feels now is different and more intense. The link between the emotions and writing only becomes fully explicit, however, in the penultimate sentence of the paragraph, where the author evokes Maria's presence in theatrical terms, seeing himself as the creator of scenes. Once again, the centrality of theatre in Flaubert's writing technique becomes apparent (see also note 25).