

FLAUBERT AND THE DEVIL.

BY MAXIMILIAN RUDWIN

NO greater proof of the permanence and persistence of the Devil as a character in literature can be adduced than the fact that Gustave Flaubert, a realist of realists, also showed deep interest in the Tempter of St. Anthony. But, as a matter of fact, Flaubert showed in this as in other respects that he always remained at heart a Romanticist. It is generally believed that Flaubert represents in himself the transition from Romanticism to Realism, with the year 1845 as the point of division. Certain critics have attempted to show us the process by which the wild Romanticist later reached in his development a point at which he ridiculed the extravagant sentiments of his youth in *Madame Bovary* (1857) and his adolescent ambitions and aspirations in *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (published posthumously in 1881). But it must not be inferred from this fact that Flaubert ever rid himself of the Romantic virus which he had imbibed in his youth. The fact that he later pilloried the excesses of Romantic sensibility is in no way a proof that he had himself been cured of it. In fact, Flaubert vainly fought against the Romantic traits of his character from which he could not rid himself to the end of his days.

Flaubert was a Romantic by the natural bent of his character, by the lyric and exotic traits of his temperament. His early training and first reading inclined him still further toward Romanticism. "His beginnings," says M. Ernest Seillière, "were of such an interesting Romanticism that he remained, on the whole, faithful to the dispositions of his youth, notwithstanding the 'realistic' pretensions of his art." Flaubert was a Romantic by his tastes and tendencies. He represents marvelously well the qualities and eccentricities of Romanticism; he was sad and proud like Vigny, enjoyed piquant pleasantries like the elder Dumas, wore his hair long like Gautier

and dreamed of glory like Victor Hugo. Flaubert showed, furthermore, his Romanticism by his despair and disgust of life, which he expressed in his youthful works and which he avowed also in his maturer years, by his hatred of the bourgeois, by his contempt of contemporary civilization, by his penchant for the prodigious and by his interest in history and archaeology, in mysticism and metaphysics. His melancholy and misanthropy, his pessimism and "nihilism," his doubts and disillusionments, all link him, moreover, to the Satanic set of the Romantic School.

The fact of the matter is that Flaubert was a *homo duplex*. He had two selves—a Romantic and a Realistic. He was both in almost equal proportions, but this duality was welded into a perfect unity in his art.

Flaubert had a mythical and mystical mind and showed from the start a fondness for the fantastic. "What is natural to me," he confessed in 1853, "is the non-natural for others, the extraordinary, the fantastic, the clarion-voice of metaphysics and mythology." He was born and brought up in a country which marvelous legends peopled with apparitions and phantoms. "Do you know Normandy," Flaubert asks, . . . "Normandy so full of old legends and fantastic tales, of popular traditions, all connected with some shred of our history during the Middle Ages?" His childish imagination was nourished with fairy-tales and medieval legends. Flaubert was no less a champion of the fantastic than Charles Nodier, who fathered the fantastic in French fiction. He maintained that the fantastic had its place in art "as a development of the inner essence of our souls, as an overflow of the moral element."

What most interested Flaubert in the world of fantasy was the personality of the Devil. Flaubert, profoundly pagan though he was, had a strong liking for Lucifer. We meet Diabolus already in almost all of Flaubert's *juvenilia*. The Devil first appears in the *Voyage en Enfer*, a curious vision of human iniquity and misery, which is perhaps the first of his compositions and which will be found in *Art et Progress*, a journal in manuscript form which Flaubert edited for himself at school, in 1835, when he was only fourteen years old. This *Voyage to Hell* opens with the following words: "And I was on the top of Mount Athos, and from it I looked in contemplation upon the world. . . . And Satan appeared to me, and

Satan said: Come with me, look, see; and thou shalt behold my kingdom.'"

The Devil appears likewise in the *Rêve d'Enfer* written by Flaubert likewise on the school-bench two years later. In this long prose poem Satan tempts a proud young alchemist with the love of the fair shepherdess, Julietta. The school-composition *Agonies: pensées sceptiques*, written the following year and dedicated to a friend, ends in the Vision of Sin shown by Satan to the watcher on Mount Athos already mentioned. In *la Danse des Morts* written the same year the Devil appears in the company of Death.

In this *Dance of the Dead*, "Satan renews with Christ the debate begun upon the Mount of Olives; and to show Him that His triumph is vanity, he reveals a huge cosmic vision. The corruption of Earth is proven by the spectacle of Alexander the Great sunk in debauch; then the tempter and his victim begin a mad course through the heavens on a shooting star. They meet a throng of souls on their endless journey to Heaven; they hear the choir of the Elect; and they return to earth, in a country churchyard filled with flowers and silvered by the moonlight. There is a moment of elegiac poetry, but the neighing of horses nearby opens a vision of war, a plain all white with human bones and lighted by the flames of burning cities.

'Then . . . the tombs open and give up their dead. Satan summons a chorus of young girls, he invokes nations, kings, men and women long since gone from earth; Death is seen on his Pale Horse, intoning a lyrical monody. . . : 'But I must begin again, resume my everlasting course through worlds and space; 'tis I who pass by carrying off creeds and glory, loves and crimes, all things. . . . O God, when shall I sleep in my turn? when wilt thou cease to create? when can I fall asleep on my tombs like a digger of graves? . . . and set my courser free . . . to trample the dust of crumbled empires? . . .

"Satan would console the Reaper by reminding him of his dreadful power; he, too, eager to devour the world in his burning bosom, cries out for the trumpet of the Lord. Then Death in his shroud rises to his gruesome height, holds out his bony arms over the boundless red plain and evokes the skeletons of the dead. . . . First come the kings: Alexander calls for his armies and makes plans

to conquer the world again. The Reaper thrusts him back into the tomb; then Nero, dreaming of love and pleasure mingled with blood; next, the aged Pope; then the courtesans; then a pair of lovers still dreaming of love in their grave. . . .

"Then comes History, bearing on her shoulders the marks of Satan's never-ending clutch, and likewise longing for annihilation. But Death only summons his courser, and while the weeping Christ seeks the bosom of his Father, Satan, with a horrible laugh of joy and pride, falls upon the earth and covers it with his wings outspread like a sable shroud."¹

The Devil appears again as tempter in Flaubert's *Smarh* (1839) written at the age of eighteen years. The "Old Mystery Play" is a sketch for *The Temptation of St. Anthony*. Smarh, another hermit tempted by Satan, foreshadows the father of the anchorites. Its contents may be judged from the following scenario, which the author sketched in a letter to his friend Ernest Chevalier:²

"Satan takes a man (Smarh) into the infinite, they both rise to immense heights in the air. Then at discovering so many things, Smarh is full of pride. He thinks that all the mysteries of creation and of the infinite are revealed to him, but Satan takes him still higher. Then he is afraid, he trembles, all that abyss seems to be devouring him, he is weak before the void. They come down again to the earth. That is his element, he says that he was made to live there and that everything in nature is subjected to him. Then comes a tempest, the sea is about to swallow him up. Again he confesses his weakness and his nothingness. Satan proceeds to take him among men: 1. The savage sings of his happiness, his wandering life, but suddenly a desire to go toward the city seizes him, he cannot resist it, he sets out. There you have the barbarous races becoming civilized. 2. They go into the city, to the palace of the king, weighed down with pains, a victim of the seven capital sins, to the poor man's house, to homes of the married, into the church deserted by everyone. All the parts of the building assume a voice in order to pity him, from the nave to the flagstones, everything speaks and curses God. Then the church, having become impious, falls in ruins. In all of this there is a character who takes part

¹ This summary of Flaubert's *Dance of the Dead* has been taken in abridged form, from Professor Lewis Piaget Shank's excellent book *Flaubert's Youth* published last year by the Johns Hopkins Press.

² The translation is by Professor Shanks. A good résumé of the play will be found in his book (pp. 79-83).

in all the events and turns them all to farce. He is Yuk, the god of the grotesque. Thus, in the first scene while Satan was corrupting Smarh through pride, Yuk was urging a married woman to give herself to every comer indiscriminately. There is laughter along with tears and anguish, mud alongside of blood. So Smarh is disgusted with the world, he would like it all to end, but Satan on the contrary is going to make him experience all the passions and all the forms of wretchedness he has seen. He takes him on winged horses to the banks of the Ganges. There, monstrous and fantastic orgies, pleasures as great as I can conceive, but pleasure tires him. So he feels ambition, too. He becomes a poet; with his lost illusions, his despair becomes immense, heaven's cause is about to be lost. Then a woman appears, . . . a woman . . . He loves her, he had regained his beauty, but Satan falls in love with her, too. Each courts her in his own way. Who'll win the victory? Satan, you're thinking? No, Yuk, the grotesque. That woman is Truth and the whole thing ends with a monstrous *accomplément* . . ."

All these youthful efforts lead up to Flaubert's great work of fantasy.

The Temptation of St. Anthony is with *Madame Bovary* the great French novelist's most important achievement. Flaubert himself preferred the former to the latter work. He called it "the work of all my life." It was, indeed, the fundamental work of Flaubert. Just as Faust occupied Goethe almost all his life, so Flaubert was haunted for many years by the vision of Anthony. The Frenchman represented himself in Anthony just as the German poet did in Faust. Between Flaubert and Anthony there was a certain more or less distant affinity that could not help impressing the French novelist most vividly. The saint of art, as a certain critic has remarked, was attracted to the saint of religion. But Flaubert's interest in Satan was greater than in the saint.

The Temptation of St. Anthony has been called an epical phantasmagoria. It is a work of imagination, of erudition and of diction. It is a slow growth through many years and underwent several revisions. We have it in the versions of 1849, 1856 and 1872.³ This work is derived directly from the medieval drama.

³ *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, in its final version, has been repeatedly translated into English. Lafcadio Hearn's excellent version was reprinted in the *Modern Library*. The translation by René Francis, which appeared in 1915 under the title *The First Temptation of St. Anthony*, is in reality the English version of the manuscript of 1856. Flaubert's first version dating from 1849 has, as far as could be ascertained, never been translated into English. The Devil's rôle was decreased by Flaubert in each successive version of his work.

The puppet-show given annually at Rouen at the fair of St. Romain under the name of *Father St. Anthony*, which continued the tradition of the medieval mystery-plays, deeply impressed the boy Flaubert and offered him the inspiration for his work. A painting by Breughel, seen in the Palazzo Balbi at Genoa in 1845, revived in Flaubert's mind the inspiration of the old mystery-play. Among Flaubert's masters and models for this work, Goethe occupies the first place.⁴ Indeed, *The Temptation of St. Anthony* recalls *Faust* in many respects. The analogy between the two heroes is sufficiently striking. St. Anthony is a Faust, but a Faust who rejects Mephistopheles. Flaubert has especially drawn on the Second Part of *Faust* for his great work of fantasy and mystery.

The story of St. Anthony tried by so many combats against hell has furnished a subject to many poets and painters. It is well known that the Devil tempted St. Anthony with the most licentious representations and voluptuous enticements, and if the Devil, we might remark, dared to act so with a saint, whose equal was not to be found in the calendar, what should prevent him from playing off his pranks with a mere mortal? The trouble is, as some one has remarked, that God failed to make man and the Devil of equal strength. Flaubert lifted the old legend into originality by putting the emphasis upon the metaphysical temptations of the Egyptian monk. In its original version, the legend of the temptation of St. Anthony is no other thing than the story of a saint tempted *in his flesh* by the Devil, with the help of every artifice that the Devil can dispose of. The Great St. Anthony, in the mind of his first historians, is simply a second Adam seduced by woman under Satan's inspiration. Flaubert retains this part of the legend, knowing full well that all successful treatment of the diabolical in literature must be made to correspond as much as possible with the truth of popular tradition, and employs this part of the legend to attack Catholic asceticism. He shows how all the natural and necessary inclinations that St. Anthony wished to uproot and destroy within himself revolt against him and persecute him. But, in addition to the physical enticements of the legend, he subjects the saint to metaphysical temptations. In Flaubert's mind, the temptation of St. Anthony

⁴ Flaubert discovered *Faust* at the age of sixteen and was enthusiastic over the poem. His niece tells us how he devoured its pages while walking in a park across the Seine, and heard the Easter church-bells of Rouen chiming as he read the poetry of Goethe—an impression which left his head whirling and his feet "no longer conscious of the earth beneath them."

becomes the story of a man, or rather of Man, mentally tempted by all the illusions of thought and of imagination. All the temptations of the flesh, the heart and the mind which for a period of twenty years besieged the monk of the Thebaid are concentrated in Flaubert's novel in the period between dusk and dawn. Anthony is tempted by the lust of carnal delights, by the lust of money, by the lust of power, by the lust of the imagination; he is shown all the variations of his own creed, the creeds of other peoples, the charm of the superstitions of Italy; at last he is confronted by Science, which bids him humble himself before the futility of all religions. Flaubert seems to wish to identify Science with the Devil. In his impersonal way, he depicts humanity as having waded until that hour of its history, up to its ankles in blunders and in blood, and points to Science—which is as much shunned and dreaded as the Devil—as the only salvation. This vision of Science as the saviour of mankind was, in the opinion of Georg Brandes, the poet's own vision. We will present a brief summary of the action of this epic fantasy:⁵

Sunset in the desert. St. Anthony is seated on the ground of his cabin cross-legged, and is occupied in weaving mats. Enfeebled by prolonged fasting, the hermit cannot fix his mind upon holy things. His thoughts wander; memories of youth call forth regrets, and his fancy leads him upon dangerous ground. His head is in a whirl, and he finally falls upon his mat. Then there appears upon the earth a vast shadow, subtler than other shadows, with uncertain edges; it is the Devil leaning on the roof of the hut with huge bat-wings outspread under which nestle the Seven Deadly Sins. The Queen of Sheba herself comes to tempt the saint with the deadliest of temptations. The saint remains firm. The Seven Deadly Sins depart from him.

Not having succeeded in leading St. Anthony into temptation, the Devil borrows the form of St. Hilarion, the saint's former pupil, who, pretending to seek instruction, endeavors to shake the faith of his master and to poison his mind with hatred of the fathers of the church. Hilarion acts as usher to the various elements composing the Temptation-Pageant. Anthony beholds a vision of dying religions: all modes of life and thought and belief, all the gods

⁵ The reader will find, at the head of Lafcadio Hearn's translation, a full résumé of the book in the form of an "argument." A few passages from our summary have been taken from that translation.

from remotest antiquity to the modern divinity, Science, all the mystic or heretical or erotic cults of Christianity pass in review before the half-dazed hermit, truly a mad procession. The little withered Hilarion grows and grows until he becomes transfigured, beautiful as an archangel, radiant as the sun and so tall that Anthony is compelled to throw back his head in order to behold his face.

"Who art thou?"

Hilarion replies: "My kingdom is as vast as the world; and my desire knows no bounds. I am always marching forward, freeing minds and weighing worlds,—without hatred, without fear, without pity, without love, and without God. They call me SCIENCE."

Anthony recoils in horror. "Thou art, rather, the Devil."

"Wouldst thou behold him?"

The saint, struck with curiosity, consents; and the Devil, obtaining by this consent some power over him, flings him upon his horns and bears him through space, through the heavens of modern science, wherein the planets are as abundant as grains of sand. And the firmament expands with the thoughts of Anthony. "Higher, higher," the saint exclaims. Infinity reveals itself to his gaze. Then the Devil teaches the saint the truths of natural philosophy and offers him pantheistic explanations of natural phenomena. Timidly Anthony inquires of the Devil for God, who answers him with new queries, new doubts. "Suppose there should be no God?"—"Adore me, then!" suddenly exclaims the Devil, "and curse the phantom thou callst God!" Anthony refuses to follow the Devil's arguments to their logical conclusion. He lifts his eyes with a last effort of hope. The Devil abandons him. The saint finds himself lying on his back on the brink of his rock near his hut.

Then the Tempter returns under his traditional two-fold aspect: as the Spirit of Lust and as the Spirit of Destruction. A phantasmagoria of monsters passes before the saint's eyes. Next he beholds the metamorphosis of all elements and feels a strong wish to be united with the Spirit of Universal Being. The vision vanishes. The sun rises. The face of Christ is revealed. The temptation has passed; Anthony kneels in prayer.