

Body of Wood | Pierre Michon, translated by Erik Noonan

Friday the sixteenth of July, 1852. Sunrise. The end of the night. Big slate clouds trundle across the sky. Flaubert has not slept. He goes out into the garden at Croisset: lime trees, then poplars, then the Seine. An outbuilding on a bank beside some water. He has finished Part One of *Madame Bovary*.

On Sunday he wrote Louise Colet how at dawn that Friday he'd felt strong, serene, blest in sense and in purpose.

The dawn wind does him good. He's got a handsome fat tired face. A handsome fat relaxed face. He loves writing. He loves the world.

“Deprived of a personal life, home, country, party, etc., he made writing his only reason to live, and it grips one's heart how seriously he takes the written world.” These words of Pasolini's pertain to Gombrowicz. But they might just as well be applied to Flaubert, and one's heart would not be gripped any less, maybe more. For, if Flaubert had a personal life (like Gombrowicz did after all, and anyway Pasolini always goes too far), he feigned not to have one; just as he feigned to have no home, country, freedom, mother named Caroline, orphaned niece also named Caroline, Seine at the end of the path, rolling on before his eyes, sharecroppers' hillside groves, heaps of disciples and flatterers, well-meaning interns, hard at work on his behalf in the corridors of Paris journals and salons: all things Gombrowicz truly did not have, that he, Flaubert, had. Flaubert feigned to have none of all that, that which he had, and for him this feint turned into a reality; he patched together a mask which comprised his skin, and with which he wrote his books; skin and mask had been so well glued that when he wished to retire it, he found nothing more in his hand than an indissoluble mixture of flesh and cardboard under the thick clown moustache. Perhaps it wasn't really the clown he played, so much as the monk; not just to the stands either, but in his own eyes and to himself: he was not a defrocked friar only with the guys and on the street, he donned the silk babouches when he went home too. He dispossessed himself of the Seine that rolled on before his eyes; the small girl who lived on her feet, whom he puts to death in all his books, he hardly saw her; the loveliest girls of his epoch, the finest too, for sure, who wanted him, so that he happened to come – he dispossessed himself of them, whether he came or opted to come no more, which amounted to the same thing; no apples from Norman orchards, no trees deep in the woods, no unlaced Louise Colet, no lilies, no young laughter, no Louise Colet weeping at his door, he kissed it all off, laughed over it and kissed it off, cried about it and kissed it off, he was not there. In fact he had nothing, he was deprived of everything, since *it was in his head*.

Unshod, Le Carme knows why he kicked off his stockings. He knows why he passes bootlessly through this life: he is not from here, the true life is elsewhere, he knows for sure that naked feet warm up under God's breath, cadavers and icy souls warm up. We pass, God does not. Le Carme takes his God very seriously. This seriousness isn't conducive to laughter. It pours the heart full. The Mask of Croisset, Flaubert, also knows why, long ago, he surreptitiously kicked off the silk babouches that he nonetheless still wore on his feet; he had a sort of god before whose eyes he passed barefoot: the god of the fat barefoot friar in silk babouches on the Seine's banks was *art*.

We pass, art does not stay. It scarcely warms at all. The air of time breathes it. In this life and in the other, it alone gives us that mixture of flesh and cardboard which we find at our fingertips, vaguely sated, terrified, this disgusting mixture we caress and get a feel for, whenever it occurs to us to make sure we've still got a face left, somewhere behind that long moustache. Flaubert took art very seriously. This seriousness is conducive to laughter. It makes the heart ache. This heartache which conduces to laughter is what we experience in the presence of misery.

Flaubert is our father in misery.

We are all children of this misery. It has no doubt existed more or less ever since humankind has written, but he gave it a fleabite, and because of him it has become pat and laughable. He discovered the mask the way the Neapolitans discovered Pantaloon and Polichinella, the way the unknown versifier of the *Romance of Alexander* discovered the French alexandrine in 1120, the way a good fellow named Féréol Dedieu discovered the garter belt in 1878. He made us a mask. We're all children of his misery, whether it be put on by – and no less true in – Mallarmé, Bataille, Proust, Genet, Leiris, Duras, and Beckett; or be it so well put on that it becomes more than true – because real, truly true – in Verlaine and Artaud. In Rimbaud we don't know. We don't know, and we don't worry except halfway, whether the misery is true or put on in Céard, Barbusse, Bove, Chardonne, Guérin, Guibert, Gary: in all those miniscule bird names one hardly reads anymore. Maybe, once again, this misery might come to be feared, and get locked up: so far denied as to return, late in the day, a direct hit in the gullet, like it did for Sartre by way of Flaubert.

The seriousness with which we take writing makes the heart ache.

A few weeks after his *Meditation Upon the Death of Mary*, with delight, Maurice de Guérin imagined himself metamorphosed into a tree: “To expatiate with a vigor freely chosen among the elements, to envelop oneself, to appear powerfully rooted before men, grandly indifferent, not to render anything unto chance except vague deep sounds, like those of dense boughs that imitate sea-murmurs: this station of life strikes me as worth the effort, fit to be set up against men and the fortunes of the day.”

That leaf is not a mask. It's not misery.

We can't truly say that it's serious, either.

Yet it's a serious aim. It's a station of life that strikes me as worth the effort. To write *Madame Bovary* and *Saint Julien*, not to render anything unto chance except vague deep sounds, to become a tree that the wind clutches and rocks, is a goal one can push oneself onward towards, by that most human of means: words. To have left humanity, to proffer the sounds of leaves, a gong, avalanches; to have left humanity, to submerge it, cover it over with one's shadow, cover it over with one's noise, conceal it with one's foliage, that is worth the effort.

The foliage is the book. The body is wood.

The priest in *Bouvard and Pécuchet* claims that the Tibetan Grand Lama splits open his own guts to prophesy. Now that's serious!

In fact giving prophecies is really the only thing that can make us write. What we call prophecy is an utterance above those of mortals that by being spoken in mortal terms positions itself to call upon the gods.

To call upon the gods with their own parlance seriously, the mask has to be sewn on full-face without anesthetic.

Huet, the bishop of Avranches, brother-enemy of Boileau, precocious brother to Bouvard and Pécuchet, read the Holy Scriptures, in Hebrew, twenty-four times; every April he reread Theocritus, every autumn the *Georgics*. On this subject, the abbot of Olivet made a few calculations, whose result was that, of all men who had existed until then, it was this monseigneur of Avranches who had read the most. Mysteriously, this reader, this madman, this impotent, in a mask of cardboard and chagrin, Huet, wrote (no doubt on a day when he was trying in vain to tear the mask off): “Gallantry, sharp wit, philosophy, even theology itself, are all nothing but a savvy subtle game that men have invented in order to fill up and enliven this very short yet rather long lifetime. But it doesn’t look too much like a game to them!”

Before Flaubert, Joseph Joubert thought of the *style book*, an unanswerable text that’s meanwhile been cobbled together as a stance, the mask of wood stitched even to the very flesh – as Pascal, Rousseau and Chateaubriand had thought of it earlier, though they left a bit of play between mask and skin. Of perfection, bizarrely considered as a geographical entity, Joseph Joubert writes: “I mean to write nothing else except in the dialect of this place.” It’s a perilous place. It’s a rotten place, on the Seine’s banks, behind the poplars, the lime trees, where Seine and poplars vanish. It’s a place where one speaks – between oneself and one’s hat – the ineffable, Olympian, calm, mad dialect of rage, beneath a wooden mask, behind a clown moustache.

In the posthumous book by Daniel Oster, I read: “One sometimes ends up no longer understanding what something means in the system of writing. What is it? What’s it saying? What’s its subject? What brought it about? Whatever can all this do for us?”

For that bewildered enquiry, that disorientation – possibly for the death of Daniel Oster – Flaubert is to blame. Finished, the subtle savvy games. We now require the text absolute, *truth in writing*, the text that kills, perfect prose, all proffered from behind a mask of wood. Writing that’s necessary to it, the way death and work and tears are. Constraining ourselves to this, by what right? We won’t write. We won’t ever work. We no longer know how to cry. Die is what we really want to do.

That there is no “good” writing – which one might posit as in opposition to another, “bad” kind – is suggested in *Madame Bovary*. Homais asserts that in fact bad writing does exist. And one knows that everything Homais says supports mass opinion, stupidity, whatever is not the case. Here: “‘Certainly,’ Homais continued, ‘there is bad writing, just as there is bad pharmacology, etc.’” From which one might abstract this axiom: Whosoever postulates that there is bad writing, and likes the idea, will never write good writing.

From Palestine, Flaubert writes Bouilhet that at the spot where John baptized Christ, the Jordan is about the width of the Touques at Pont-L'Évêque. The desert is bitter without the voice of John the Baptist. The desert is vaguely ridiculous. The Cross is a body of wood. The apple trees of Normandy are wooden. The world is a dead woods. Where is the foliage, where is the Word, where have the vague deep sounds fled, that give sensibility unto men and leafy speech unto boughs? Where? To a perfect sentence? To a sentence that thirsts?

Polyte, the little valet at the Golden Lion Inn, is the clubfoot ineptly operated on by Bovary under Homais' iron rule, who gains from this surgery, amid great wails, an amputation at the thigh, and a wooden leg. This guileless hardworking creature bravely gambols about on the wooden leg, just as he had done before on the clubfoot. Oftentimes, with their summary rhythms, the lame, the gimp, the tramp will chant perfect artworks: Melville's Ahab, Stevenson's Long John Silver, the *Death on the Installment Plan* narrator's mother. It seems to me there's also a crazy hoof in *Remembrance*, maybe Charlus. One hears this laughable rhythm that nonetheless grips the heart, one hears it addressed by perfect sentences, one hears it itself bungle the perfect sentence, all as a sweetness: in the vaticinations of Ahab, in Flaubert's grand imperfect tense, the great trinities, the catnap where the style turns like a tower, one suddenly hears these castanets in two time signatures, which is an end to human flesh grafted onto dead wood. One bursts out laughing.

The step of a tramp chants *Madame Bovary*. With this step, style flees, the body appears.

Du Camp, on Flaubert young: "He pretended he suffered a heart palpitation when he caught sight of the 'g' in 'Victor Hugo' on the yellow cover of a book." In all likelihood these were the golden-yellow volumes edited by Charpentier and Fasquelle. The hearts of these young people thump. The great "g" of glory is right there, in the heart of a name, in their future. It's the "g" in the French word *sang* meaning "blood," the "g" in "gentleman," in "gallop." The bookstore window display went out the door under the trees. Sun rays play upon the yellow book. Gold amid leaves trembles upon the gold of a name. The young people tremble, tomorrow is going to be beautiful, women, books, lime trees, the gold of their own proper name. Flaubert takes Du Camp's arm, they lean down over the "g" in "Victor Hugo." It is the "g" in "gullet," in the Elizabethan English word "springe," meaning "trap."

I posit a likely man. I make him born at Rouen, I name him Gustave Flaubert. I allot him a good family, bearded preoccupied father, accessible mother. I make it so that his parents give him love and so that he gives unto all things curiosity, heart, joy, dynamism, ingenuity. I give him the body of a colossus, a giant. And, in his young years, a blond irresistible beauty – quickly withered away: but you can't have it all. I offer him the power and energy to please his own likes, men and women, to give of himself and to receive of them in return, to make them laugh and cry, to loosen – without numbering – his heartstrings. To this trove I add plenty of pride, vanity, boasting, sloth, cupidity, a sprig of hysteria. I give him, from infancy, a passion shared widely enough: a taste for

Letters. I am also obliged to give him – since it's in the same parcel, or envelope – the will to triumph in this world by means of Letters.

Here I complicate the game. Onto his legs, I tie a millstone: someone whom they have all aimed at, an impossible father, who drove everybody from Lamartine to Bloy into a jealous rage. Victor Hugo. This monster, who found a way to live as four and write as ten, a hundred, at once: who manned the oven at the mill, who stood at God's right hand in the legions of Satan, in verse and prose, with the girls and at Guernsey; who integrated by his verses all that one could write before, and adapted it to his own way, who, in his own manner, surpassed it, without batting an eyelid. To this Leviathan, the writers of his time were pilot fish, whom he treated, consequently, with grand patience, mansuetude and indifference.

Between the bait of Letters and the incommensurable obstacle Victor Hugo, I set a trap.

I hang other less epic millstones on him. With the collusion of his bearded father I make him study Law, a discipline he secretly repudiates, as earlier he had repudiated every other one. I look for a gentle way for him to get out of it, for sure without beardedly rumpling his face, but also without swearing to himself that he'll be forced to write: that is, to become Leviathan, the supreme instance, or else nothing. Much less than a lawyer! A man of letters! A cow-bird, a lackey, a whore in the public eye. I find him this plan of escape, and then I send him a massive atrophy: flight, in the form of a nervous breakdown, in a carriage at the Pont L'Évêque bridgehead by night, a breakdown that puts an end to his studies, with bearded blessings, that is, free to say: Fuck it.

Still more millstones – or wings, I don't know. Into the hopper I put the Pays d'Auge, love and contempt for the Pays d'Auge intermixed, the hollow between Caen and Falaise, its poor, its half-rich, its cows; the savor of the Orient and the ancient; at Trouville, fishing village, in a Marseille hotel, an Egyptian brothel, at the Parisian sculptor Pradier's house, I mete out to his imagination or to his sensorium four Jocastas, exasperated, veiled, victualled, untouchably saintly, obsessed, hot: whom I name Elisa, Eulalie, Kuchuk, Louise. Whether he comes or not, I dole out to him the faculty of interminably coming in thought, regret, choler, in masturbation manual and mental, as with a Jocasta, habitually, one comes.

I find a millstone rarer still. I encumber him with a bizarre passion, or phobia: stupidity. A cranky hobby horse that raises stupidity to the level of a form, an essence. But I can't keep this highest of negative hypostatized essences from redounding back upon him somewhat, so that it renders him a little stupid, bovine, sluggish, Flaubertian. And to top off the kit, I fix him up with a saucepan: encyclopedism. Fanatical erudition, bibliomania, a huge mishmash of the bladders of this world, along with its lanterns, the casual gripsack crammed with Shakespeare's personality, the colors of Mozambique's flag, Cheops, the biscuits of Saxony, the Gospel according to John and the precise attribution of every Neapolitan masque.

I permit him, weighed down with all these gentilities, to write: that is, to scrawl day in, day out in comp books, rising to the occasion of the Great Writer in miniature. This, over five years, ten years. I am so indulgent as to allow him to end the endless jumble that is the first version of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. I give him leave to learnedly hope, doubt, triumph, puff himself up, tremble, amid this hodgepodge that's going to make a Victor Hugo of him. At last, it's time. I put a stop to all that. One autumn evening, in the voice of his friends Bouilhet and Du Camp, I tell him it's nil.

This life was likely.

This fate, for at least two centuries, has fallen to a thousand men a generation, and counting.

Then, the Unlikely happens (to it, I am as nothing). He becomes what we call Flaubert. He shuts himself away, stops up the gaps. In one and the same motion, he fabricates a book and that mask which goes along with it.

He kept ingenuity and strength. He added something else.

In May, 1882, Leon Guiral explores the Tiki region of the Congo, over which King Makoko reigns. Like Brazza before him, he is astonished with pleasure to discover that Makoko puffs with the whistle of a quartermaster. The sailors laugh a lot. Makoko, in all seriousness, bellows, runs up to the woods and puffs, turns toward the huts and puffs, turns his head around and puffs at the sky. Guiral grins. Neither the sailors nor Guiral know that Makoko is master of the spirits, that he is the only one with the power to communicate with them by sharp whistles. Art is the puff of a Makoko.

To Louise Colet, in February, 1852: “Here is why I love art. In it one fulfills all, one does all, one is at the same time a king and his people, active and passive, victim and priest.” One is God’s prose and His scorn, perfection and its collapse, book and counterbook, fucker and fucked, calf and soothsayer. Naught shall come and take thee back. One is as abstract and intangible as absolute prose. One is wood.

Of the isolate writer, inside written abstractions – the man amidst forces of the age, who loses his life to grammatical chicanery, to feeble literary judgments, painstaking pettiness, and triumphs of self-love – Chateaubriand writes: “That’s all hardly worthy of a man! Isn’t it hard enough to serve for nothing, in an age for which one could serve as everything?” Serve is what we want to do. But where is the war, where is God, where is the seraglio of ninety-nine wives, where the realms, the prerogatives? Where is the redeemed suffering humanity, where the revolutions, the passion for charity? Where is Jean Valjean? Come on! There’s nothing left but prose, the text that inflicts a wound and gets off on the pain, the text that kills.

In *Madame Bovary*, the carriage service between Rouen and Yonville is called *L’hirondelle*, “The Swallow.” Its coachman’s name is *Hiver*, “Winter.” One swallow makes a winter. The sun brings night, waters flow toward their source, clearsightedness strikes us blind. We’re in the Apocalypse, are we not, since it must be that this world is about to croak, since *it is in his head*. Since it is in ours.

In this apocalyptic coach Emma arrives at the place of torment, Yonville-l’Abbaye. Writing drives the coach. It’s there, within a pretty brown-haired woman, whom we are going to cause to suffer unto death. We are all present at the coach door. We glimpse her ankle as she descends.

Where is the Jean Valjean to this Cosette?

Once, at the Loiret Chamber of Commerce and Industry, on one of only a few occasions in my life, I did some work. I taught Composition, a prerequisite of who knows what, for who knows what charity cases, decked out at the sickly-sweet hands of Captial. Examples of usage had to be sought, and among others I found some in Flaubert. In one section of the course, there was a charming young woman: blonde, dreamy, troubled, hardworking. Sometimes I would talk about *Madame Bovary*. At the end of the section, these young people invited me to a party. It was April, there were lilies, I danced with the pretty blonde. She told me that, of all the lovely things I'd shown them, she preferred *Madame Beaumari*. "Mrs Finehusband."

What's making her suffer, today, unto death? What fine husband, what well-beloved?

Madame Bovary is all women. She's my mother. She's the weeping of women, terrible frustration, which will always overflow. Always overflows. Leroi-Gourhan writes that in cave art a wound and the feminine sign are interchangeable: to signify the same idea, the Paleolithic artist, thinker, *writer*; indifferently depicted vulva, a transpierced cow, the blood that spurts because of an arrow. The vulva, the scam, the beast under the soothsayer, the blood, are synonyms. One might call this sign Emma Bovary. It is a belly slit mixed up with weeping. *Mulier dolorosa*.

"They asked for wine, meat, gold. They cried out to have women. They raved in a hundred languages." Such are the Barbarians, the good simple Barbarians of *Salammbô*. They ask for the only things one can reasonably ask for in this world. Their face is bare and eager, they have no mask. They don't ask for paper to write a book with.

Our abilities exceed our aim, and the disproportion overwhelms us. At La Haye in 1790 Benjamin Constant meets a Piedmontese man, Revel, Sardinian diplomat. This chevalier is afflicted with a most spiritual madness: "He supposes that God – which is to say, the Author of us and our environs – died before finishing his work; that He possessed the vastest most beautiful projects in the world, and the greatest means by which to achieve them; that He had already put several such schemes into motion, just as one erects scaffolding in order to build; and that, in the middle of His work, He died; that now, everything stands revealed as having been created in order to serve an end that no longer exists; and that we, in particular, feel ourselves destined for something of which we can form not the least idea; that we are like watches in which there are no dials, whose workings, endowed with intellect, revolve until they are spent, without knowing why, and saying all the while: 'I turn, therefore I have purpose.'"

The young Flaubert is full of strength. The workings revolve flawlessly. How might we bang together a dial where all this will be visible: energy fit to move mountains, violent rhythms, enough desires to fill an Etna, Homeric ravings? That will be the book, the arbitrary blind little dial, patterned after Homer. In the middle, we stick the Victor Hugo "g," and around it we set the wounded slit, cows, wooden legs, and abandoned little girls, all turning. We put stupidity, refusal, and a wooden mask in it. We put an oracular tree in it. We're manufacturing Great Writer.

We wear out fast. We die a sudden death, halfway through the job, just like God the Father.

At the Carnavalet museum, you can see a secluded basement room, where visitors seldom stop. It's the room of the last referent of all, where the nearest replicas of Great Writers' bodies sleep: those that they glued onto their skin for good. It's the Death Mask Room. These are made of plaster. They're tossed every which way, heaped up, in cases and on shelves, from Pascal all the way up to the ones from just before '14 (the last time this rather burlesque practice had any currency). Some – who knows why? – take on a bit of value, eye-catching, or propped upright, Chevreul or Jean-Claude de Saint-Martin, Rousseau. Flaubert with his clown moustache. Nietzsche's isn't bad either. The feather duster rarely passes over them, which doesn't concern anybody, a cleaning lady ought to feel as if there are limits. It smells like dust in there, rancid baby bottles, and death. It's the posterity room. We're a long way from the great trees.

There exists a way to save Flaubert – to save Flaubert's life, his prose doesn't need me. It's to suppose he was lying, that he never played the monk at Croisset, nor the convict, with his ten fingers, most of the time; that he enjoyed the Seine, the wind in the poplars, his little niece eating candy, big cows in the fields, *mugitusque boum*, grand women from time to time, the debauch of reading, the luxury of knowledge; that he joyfully set Phoenician nomenclatures marching in his head; and that here and there, chic, in order to mark the time, shock the Parisians, and put his flatterers in Paris to work, he would climb up into his crawl space all the same, and write a few perfect sentences that would quite naturally just come to him. As for myself, were he to return, were he to unwind his great moustache in front of me, I would like it if he said what, Lamartine said, late in the day: "The good public believes that I have spent thirty years of my life lining up rhymes and contemplating the stars. I have not spent thirty months at it, and poetry has not meant to me what prayer has."

There is perhaps but one possible test of the excellence of a work, one way to pulverize the mask once and for all, one supernatural ratification of the omnipotence of writing. That would be: to die for the joy one takes in it. The perfect artist dies of the beauty in his song. This artist, perfectly justified and ratified, exists in *Madame Bovary*, in the deadpan scene where Emma and Léon, exasperated, mad for each other's bodies, are swept along on a guided tour of the Rouen Cathedral, tripped up by the beadle's speech: "'Here,' he proclaimed majestically, 'you see the outer casing of the lovely bell of Amboise. It weighed twenty thousand pounds. There was not its like in all Europe. The workman who cast it died of joy.'"

This ten-ton bell, fallen from out of the sky, which its author catches in the gullet, is the text that kills.

16 July, 1852. During the night, he has finished Part One of *Madame Bovary*: "Friday morning, as day came on, I took a turn around the garden. It had rained, the birds began

to sing, huge slate clouds trundled across the sky. I enjoyed a few moments of strength and an immense serenity.”

What the birds sing about is that, for the moment, the book is finished, the book hangs in suspense. Recourse to grace is accepted, no, all the same, one still can't take the mask off, it holds tight. But one can forget it exists, and feel a dawn breeze enter in at the seams. One is not made of wood, one enjoys trees. The world across the Seine is made of golden stubble, radiant bundles, distant beech woods where the heart thumps. In dairies on the farms, small girls dip their fingers in milk, skimming it; under a man's gaze a girl laughs, shortly to be spoiled. Human monsters forget they are monsters. The world goes on in prose.