

‘Une soif de carnage’: Flaubert’s writing of violence in

La Tentation de saint Antoine

La Colère takes the form of a crude allegory ‘cuirassé de fer et ruisselant de sang’ in the 1849 and 1856 version of *La Tentation de saint Antoine* but in the 1874 text this sin receives extended and more sophisticated development through Antoine's vision of Alexandria during which he participates in the brutal massacre of the heretical Arians ([1](#)). Analysis of the ‘avant-textes’ of these episodes exposes the diverse forces that shape Flaubert's writing of violence: an intricate and dynamic intertextual relationship between the depiction of Colère across the three versions of *La Tentation*, an uncertain, vacillating association of violence and sexual pleasure in the drafts of the 1874 version of *La Tentation* and finally an intertextual network that extends to sociohistorical documents and discourse.

Genetic analysis presents a fluid text in the act of its ‘coming into being’ and reveals the diverse forces that contribute to its creation ([2](#)). The plurality of the ‘avant-textes’ requires in turn a plural interpretation: no single ‘reading’ satisfactorily embraces their multiplicity. This article will embrace intertextual, psychoanalytical and sociohistorical approaches each, in its reading of the nascent text, offering important insights into the complexity of Flaubert's writing of violence ([3](#)).

In the first scenario for the first version of *La Tentation* Flaubert lists those sins that are to feature in his text. All are given their traditional appellation with the notable exception of Anger who is listed as ‘Cruauté’ ([4](#)). By the second scenario (f° 89 v°) the sin is definitively ‘Colère’ but the drafts demonstrate Flaubert's continual struggle to illustrate this ‘sin’. Each of the sins is illustrated through the appearance and discourse of the allegory itself, and, more powerfully, through a series of visions. As Flaubert develops these visions the presentation of Colère becomes increasingly dissipated. Anger is from the second scenario associated with war, the personified sin, for example, suggesting to the saint that he might have been better off as a soldier (f° 89 v°). On the same scenario the author decides upon a vision of war featuring Xerxes, this is however almost immediately abandoned in favour of the presentation of an orgy dominated by the megalomaniac Nabuchodonosor, forcing Flaubert to seek another means to illustrate La Colère. Two incidents finally give expression to this sin: the first describing the temptation to perpetrate violence on others and the second describing the experience of violence perpetrated on the self. In an episode that lacks the vivid power of the rest of the sequence of visions, Antoine sees a dagger that the Devil in person encourages him to use ([5](#)). Following this exchange what the scenarios describe as a ‘besoin de battre qq chose – nervosité cruelle’ (f° 212 v°) overcomes the saint who directs this need into self-flagellation. The experience is clearly a sexual one which ultimately leads to an encounter with three representatives of Luxure ([6](#)). As we shall see, the subsequent development of Colère will lie in the fusion of these two incidents.

Elsewhere in the 1849 version three brief interjections by Colère recuperate the violence of war referred to in the early scenarios. Colère’s discourse gives initial expression to three motifs that will also, as we shall see, shape the presentation of Anger in the different versions of this work. The sin describes the glories of violence to Antoine in an attempt to lure him from the clutches of the Virtues, first presenting a vivid image of invasion and brutality, given its keenest expression in the drafts (f° 49 v°) ([7](#)):

on monte les escaliers on
s'accroche aux rampes – on se d6bat
on crie on hurle on mord –
on prend les petits enfants par le
pied et on les lance contre les
murs –

He goes on to tantalise the saint with an image of spilt blood that haunts the drafts, Flaubert seeking again and again to insert it into his text: ‘Le sang vous jaillit aux yeux, il éclabousse les visages, il coule sur les lambris, des plafonds il tombe goutte à goutte’ (I, p. 425). Earlier, in extolling the glories of

violence to his six partners in crime, Colère voices the sexual pleasure of homicide: 'C'est là le moment que j'aime, quand je lève le bras pour frapper et que mon être tout entier passe dans ma force déployée et se lasse avec elle' (I, p. 414). In this first version of the text these vivid images are dislocated, static statements on the human appetite for violence: in 1874 they will be reworked with renewed force and will motivate a new dramatic sequence.

The 1849 work is thus marked by a curious failure to develop a focused presentation of violence within the panoply of human 'appetites' explored. The text pulls back from any expansive development of this theme and in doing so stands in marked contrast to the violent events of 1848 that surrounded its composition. Such reserve is consistent with Sartre's suggestion of Flaubert's suppression of the profound effect that 1848 had on him. Sartre argues that contrary to the apparent absence of any reaction, the political events of that year had a profound effect, 'cassant la vie de Flaubert en deux' (8). Flaubert, he notes, 'y rêvera pendant le long silence de l'Empire' and *L'Education sentimentale* will emerge from this longue rumination' (9). Flaubert himself offers artistic explanations for a delay in the transformation of experience into art, writing to Louise Colet of his need for a period of reflection: 'il faut attendre, et que je sois loin de ces impressions-là pour pouvoir me les donner facticement, idéalement et dès lors sans danger pour moi ni pour l'œuvre!' (10). By 1874 reticence will be replaced with excess, and the text will give extravagant expression to violence.

A new dynamism shapes the presentation of anger in the final version of *La Tentation*. Flaubert significantly altered the structure of this version of *La Tentation*. As he rewrote this work, he pursued a constant concern for a more realistic psychology for his saint, removing the allegories and translating the Sins into purely psychological terms. He ensures that Antoine's opening monologue exposes the 'weakness' of the saint and that the subsequent 'visions' are closely linked to the saint's life experience. In his opening monologue Antoine refers to his disputes with the heretical Arians and reads the account of a massacre from the book of Esther (11). A new vision then gives extravagant expression to the sin of Anger. The saint finds a knife, which he drops as he falls into a trance-like state; he then appears to be in Alexandria which is described in all its splendour. Suddenly the massed forces of the desert monks appear and Antoine joins them as they attack the city in order to massacre the inhabitants who support the teachings of Arius.

The images of cruelty, of a bloodstained environment and of sexual excitement evoked by Colère in 1849 shape the development of the scene: as the vision evolves the balance between these three strands shifts constantly. Antoine is no longer the passive audience to Colère's rhetoric: in this restructured version of the text he is implicated in an extravagant tableau of brutal massacre. The static and dislocated discourse of 1849 is reworked within a dramatic tableau.

Antoine's 'besoin de frapper' and the vision of the knife from the 1849 version are reworked within a new single vision. The key to the initial conception of the scene is a passionate desire to do violence, and the pleasure and sexual stimulation that lies in its achievement, as the 'grand plan' for this version of the work shows (f° 91):

Car c'est un péché mortel il a peur de mourir
dans cet état
a besoin de frapper
quelqu'un

cherche à frapper de droite &
de gauche mais
tout l'entourage
illis.

Stupefaction, puis fureur contre lui-même, il se bat, prend un couteau, rugit de colère

(Colère)

disparait est remplacé par Alexandrie (le couteau est tombé des mains du saint qui reste accoté au

il voit (ou plutôt il a conscience de) Alex. à vol d'oiseau
mur de sa cabane, immobile, cataleptique) – il se voit à la tête des solitaires d'Egypte vêtus de peaux
de bête et armés de gourdins, entrant dans Alexandrie & saccageant tout, frappant sur les Ariens –
plaisir de tuer de se livrer à l'expansion de son ressentiment. volupté de la victoire

The association of sexuality and violence is a recurring theme in Flaubert's fiction, his notebooks and his correspondence; his enduring fascination with Sade has long been noted by critics ([12](#)). Close study of the genesis of the vision reveals a fluctuating development of the sexual associations so clearly present at the earliest stages of the conception of the vision: Flaubert expands these images until the mid-point of the genesis of the massacre only to subsequently eradicate any such allusions. However, in a highly unusual step, as we shall see, he makes further substantial changes after the return of the manuscript from the copyist.

Across the early drafts interlinear additions and marginal notes posit and develop a vivid, sexually charged violence and images of blood serve to intensify these associations. The drafts describe both individualised and group violence. Antoine feels a 'volupté <délirante> indicible' and is filled with 'allégresse', 'force'. The group are 'tous <mouillés> trempés a <rouge de la tête aux talons éprouvant> fatigue délicate'; 'jusqu'au profond d'eux-mêmes / une indicible volupté / les titillations d'une volupté délirante' ([13](#)). Images multiply in the margins and between the lines of 'avant-texte', the author's delighted development of the scene is all but tangible.

Over the following drafts, however, any such suggestion of erotic stimulation is carefully and systematically removed at first from the description of the saint and then from the entire group of 'solitaires'. The details are once more externalised, the drafts focus on material destruction. All analysis of the 'psychology' of the attackers is erased: the focus is once more purely visual and external. A more complex, explicit exploration of behaviour is abandoned in favour of the depiction of a tableau of bloody conflict. Direct engagement with sensation gives way to the presentation of the events and spectacle that give rise to it: the text hesitates to explore the more sinister and threatening connotations of violence.

As the sexual associations disintegrate the focus shifts to the two other groups of images, of blood and brutality already developed in the 1849 version of *La Tentation*. The bloody imagery of Colère's discourse in 1849 is here integrated into Antoine's vision: 'autour de lui des jets de sang s'élancent, montent jusqu'au plafond / coulent sur les lambris [sur les peintures]' (f° 61). Flaubert also simultaneously inserts an account of cruelty done to the inhabitants, picking up on the images of war put forward by Colère in the first version of the text. The baton wielding monks, for example, 'trainent les vieillards par / la barbe, écrasent les / enfants - [massacrent] tuent tout' (f° 56).

The 'mise au net' prepared for the copyist thus presents a much muted text in comparison to the drafts. Usually once Flaubert's manuscript was copied by the copyist little or no further alterations were made ([14](#)). In the case of this scene, however, significant changes take place at the eleventh hour. In a letter written to George Sand in May 1873 Flaubert notes that 'Quand [...] j'aurai renforcé le massacre à Alexandrie [...] *Saint Antoine* sera irrévocablement fini' ([15](#)). He both restructures the vision and inserts two passages, one reinforcing the horror of the scene, the second reinstating something of Antoine's explicit sexual pleasure.

Instead of the scene ending with a pause taken by the attackers this moment serves to launch further destruction, extending the scope and duration of the massacre. The author fills the margins of the copyist's work and expands the bloody imagery (16): 'le sang jaillit jusqu'aux plafonds, retombe en nappes le long des murs, ruisselle du tronc des cadavres décapités, emplit les aqueducs, fait par terre de larges flaques rouges' (17). He then goes on to describe the saint himself, reinstating through suggestive imagery something of the explicit sexuality that marked earlier drafts: '[Antoine] en hume les gouttelettes sur ses lèvres, et tressaille de joie à le sentir contres ses membres, sous sa tunique de poils, qui en est trempée' (18). The explicit exploration of a sensual response to violence of the early drafts is replaced by provocative sensual imagery.

Reticent in its very expression of violence in 1849, in 1874 the text hesitates only to give expression to its more menacing implications. The suggestion of a sensual response to violence appears to be subject to a vacillating auto-censorship. It is clearly suppressed only to be re-expressed in muted form: having removed the vivid carnality that marks the violence in the drafts, three years later Flaubert gives it equivocal and suggestive expression. This movement between the suppression and the overt expression of the sexual nature of Antoine's vision invites a psychoanalytical interpretation. The early drafts may be said to give free rein to fantasy which is subsequently 'repressed' within the deliberations of the genetic process only to reemerge in condensed form. The relationship between genetic criticism and psychoanalysis is complex, the interplay of unconscious and consciously shaped material being subject to debate (19). Julia Kristeva proposes that the drafts mark a crossroads between 'les états de rêverie où l'affaiblissement de la censure consciente donne un accès fulgurante à l'Inconscient, au senti, à l'Etre' and 'la mise en forme finale' (20). Any 'unconscious' material is clearly subject to conscious, deliberate shaping forces (21). In the case of this episode the physical appearance of the drafts is consistent with the interaction of 'spontaneous' and more calculated movements: it is in the margins that these suggestions emerge, to be suppressed once they are absorbed within the main body of the text. The 'avant-textes' expose the play of diverse structuring elements: contradiction and conflict mark the creative process and shape the development of the text.

Jeanne Bem remarks, with reference to *Salammbô* that 'les fantasmes sadiques répondent à la violence historique' (22). The renewed force given to the expression of violence here is, I would argue, profoundly linked to the events that surrounded its creation thus marking a dramatic reversal of the curious suppression of violence in the 1849 work in the face of contemporary bloody revolutionary upheaval. Detailed analysis of this scene exposes an intertextual network embracing sociohistoric documents and discourse. Flaubert began work on this version of *La Tentation* on 9 July 1870, ten days before war was declared on Prussia and he struggles to carry on writing over the Summer and Autumn (23). By December he was forced to hide all documentation pertaining to the text and to leave Croisset which was occupied by Prussians (24). Close reading of the correspondence confirms that Flaubert worked on this vision in the Autumn of 1870.

Flaubert's letters up to this time contain relatively little direct reference to contemporary events, but are suddenly filled with virulent comments on the upheavals taking place. Initially he repeatedly expresses his disgust 'à voir l'irréparable sauvagerie de l'Humanité' (25). As events deteriorate the author becomes increasingly concerned, by the middle of August he is working as a nurse in Rouen and early in September joins the National Guard (26). His letters begin to give expression to an ardent desire to fight: to Edmond de Goncourt, for example he writes: 'J'ai une envie, un *prurit* de me battre. Est-ce que le sang de mes aïeux, les Natchez, qui repaît?' (27); to George Sand: 'j'ai sérieusement, bêtement, animalement *envie de me battre*' (28); and to Claudius Popelin he describes his 'soif de carnage' (29). Such letters are contemporaneous with the drafts of the massacre and their vivid evocations of the brutal violence of the saint in his 'besoin de frapper', to 'se livrer à l'expansion de son ressentiment' (30). Flaubert's thirst for bloodshed would appear to seek some measure of satisfaction in the realm of the imagination – the vision of Alexandria with its evocation of bloody conflict.

The drafts offer further precise evidence of this wider intertextual network. Details of the account of contemporary events that Flaubert gives to friends and family directly anticipate the vision of the

massacre. In letters written throughout the Autumn of 1870 he describes his fear of the destruction of Paris and recounts what he has learned of the destruction already carried out by the Prussians: 'Les Prussiens veulent détruire Paris. C'est leur rêve' ([31](#)); 'comme ils nous envient ces cannibales-là! Savez-vous qu'ils prennent plaisir à détruire les œuvres d'art, les objets de luxe, quand ils en rencontrent. Leur rêve est d'anéantir Paris, parce que Paris est beau' ([32](#)).

Such fears seem to be directly absorbed within the 'avant-textes'. In the margin of the early drafts Flaubert notes that the 'solitaires' experience the 'plaisir d'abîmer de belles choses / des délicatesses dont ils ne savent pas l'usage – déchirent des livres' (f° 59 v°). On subsequent folios he elaborates a motivation born of envy and ignorance: 'tous ceux qui ne savent / pas lire déchirent les / livres'; 'dans les maisons des riches / on se venge du luxe'; 'mille délicatesses dont on ne sait pas / l'usage <a à cause de cela les irrite>' (f° 60). Any notion of religious fervour on the part of the monks is lost in a wave of malicious vengeance reminiscent of that ascribed to the Prussians.

There is clear evidence of '[un] jeu d'emprunts, de tensions et de transformations par lequel l'auteur se confronte au discours de son temps' ([33](#)). The interplay of contemporary discourse emerges as yet another component of the dynamic that shapes the genetic process. As Henri Mitterand notes 'tout avant-texte condense, déplace, transforme et accommode du discours social, dans des conditions telles qu'il est possible de reconstituer (hypothétiquement) les bases et le procès sociocritique du travail de préécriture. Impossible de s'enfermer dans le seul tête-à-tête avec le manuscrit. Celui-ci vous renvoie inévitablement à l'imprimé auquel il fait écho, et qui est à l'inverse son écho' ([34](#)).

Flaubert writes that there is 'rien de plus *poétique* que le vice et le crime' ([35](#)). The description of the enthusiasm with which he writes the final version of *La Tentation* suggests that the violence around him has an almost contagious effect and stimulates creativity. The metaphor of violence, on occasion filled with sexual connotations, is applied to the process of writing: 'je me suis remis à saint Antoine, et je travaille, violemment' ([36](#)); 'avec suite et vigueur' ([37](#)); 'avec furie' ([38](#)); 'je me suis jeté en furieux dans *saint Antoine*, et je suis arrivé à jouir d'une *exaltation effrayante*' ([39](#)). If writing itself offers an experience of violence, the depiction of violence becomes a reflection on the creative process: the text embraces the dynamic play of avant - , inter - , intra and meta - textual forces.

Mary Neiland
King's College London

NOTES

1. Flaubert, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Bernard Masson, 2 vols (Paris: Seuil, 1964), I, p. 389. Further references to Flaubert's works are to this edition and they are given after quotations in the text.
2. Louis Hay notes that genetic criticism confronts the researcher with 'un texte en mouvement; les données diverses qui le travaillent - idées, représentations, fantasmes aussi bien que structures formelles, rythmes, contraintes linguistiques - réa-gissent les unes sur les autres dans le mouvement qui porte le texte en avant. Et les transformations qui le font passer d'un état à un autre se manifestent comme une totalité'. 'La Critique génétique: origines et perspectives', in *Essais de critique génétique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), pp. 227-36 (p. 233).
3. 'Si la phase de constitution du dossier génétique est relativement homogène, celle de son interprétation est multiple'. Almuth Grésillon, *Éléments de critique génétique* (Paris: PUF, 1994), p. 175.
4. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Nouvelles acquisitions françaises, 23671, f° 87. Subsequent references to this collection will use the abbreviation 'Nafr.'. Subsequent references to this dossier (Nafr. 23671) will be given after transcriptions in the main text. For longer transcriptions of the manuscripts a 'diplomatic' system of transcription has been observed, retaining, as far as possible, the layout of the original folio: those passages crossed through by the author are crossed through in the text; additions are

reproduced in a smaller font for clarity and are placed in the same position as in the folio; 'illis.', indicates a word that I have been unable to decipher; the spelling of the author has been retained, but accents have been added as necessary for ease of reading. In short transcriptions included within the body of my text the following signs are used: '/' indicates the end of a line; '[...]' indicates lines that have been crossed out; '< ... >' indicates interlinear additions.

5. The Devil tempts Antoine with the idea of killing a group of passing travellers: 'tu ramasseras le poignard, tu prendras ton élan; de la main gauche t'accrochant à la queue du chameau, tu sauteras sur sa croupe, et de la droite, sous l'omoplate, un seul coup [...]' (I, p. 427).

6. 'Quels supplices! quelles délices! je n'en peux plus, mon être se fond de plaisir, je meurs!' (I, p. 428).

7. In the final text Colère notes that 'on monte les escaliers, on se débat, on tue, les épées dans l'air font des cercles rouges' (I, p. 424).

8. *L'Idiot de la famille: Gustave Flaubert de 1821 à 1857*, 3 vols (Paris: Callimard, 1972), III, p. 448.

9. *L'Idiot de la famille*, III, p. 452.

10. Flaubert, *Correspondance*, ed. by Jean Bruneau, (Paris: Gallimard, 'Pléiade' 1973-), II (1980), p. 290 (to Lousie Colet, 31 March 1853). All further references to Flaubert's correspondence are to this edition.

11. *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, ed. by Claudine Gothot-Mersch (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), pp. 54, 58. References to the 1874 version of *La Tentation* will be to this edition and will be given after quotations in the text.

12. 'Une intelligence hantée par M. de Sade auquel il revient toujours'. Edmond et Jules De Goncourt, *Journal: mémoires de la vie littéraire*, ed. by Robert Ricatte, 3 vols (Paris: Fasquelle et Flammarion, 1956), I, p. 553. See also I, pp. 695-6; Claire-Lise Tondeur, 'Flaubert et Sade, ou la fascination de l'excès', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 10 (1981-82), 75-84; Claude Duchet, 'Sade dans Flaubert', *Le Magazine littéraire*, 250 (1988), 38-40.

13. Nafr. 23668, f° 60. Subsequent references to this dossier will be given after transcriptions in the text.

14. Almuth Grésillon defines the 'copie au net' as the 'état manuscrit d'un texte qui ne comporte en principe plus de ratures'. *Eléments de critique génétique*, p. 242.

15. *Corr.* (Brun.), IV, p. 669 (to George Sand, 31 May 1873).

16. Nafr. 23667, f° 26.

17. *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, 1983, p. 72.

18. *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, 1983, p. 72.

19. 'La théorie de l'inconscient présente un intérêt réel en matière d'écriture - même si les traces figées que révèle le manuscrit ne nous diront jamais si elles sont le produit pur de l'inconscient ou, au contraire, le résultat d'une longue élaboration consciente'. Grésillon, *Eléments de critique génétique*, p. 171.

20. Julia Kristeva, 'Brouillon d'Inconscient ou l'Inconscient brouillé', *Genesis*, 8 (1995), 23-5 (p. 25). In the 'Présentation' of this volume of *Genesis* devoted to psychoanalysis, Daniel Ferrer and Jean Michel Rabaté remark that 'l'insistance sur une structuration en cours, en devenir, devrait écarter le spectre d'un retour à l'identique d'une théorie monolithique qui aurait tout pensé, tout pesé, tout calculé d'avance' (p. 13).

21. Raymonde Debray-Genette proposes 'une thématique première, fantasmatique' and 'une thématique secondaire, structurale'. Raymonde Debray-Genette, 'Génétique et poétique: le cas Flaubert', in *Essais de critique génétique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), pp. 23-67 (p. 42). Michel Collot notes that 'la génétique doit donc être particulièrement attentive à l'évolution de ces thèmes situés à mi-chemin entre esthétique et fantasmatique, qui sont comme des lieux de rencontre entre les différentes forces, conscientes, préconscientes et inconscientes, qui concourent à l'élaboration du texte'. Michel Collot, 'Génétique et thématique: *Gravitations* de Supervielle', *Etudes françaises*, 28 (1992), 91-107 (p. 106).
22. Jeanne Bem, 'Modernité de Salammbô', *Littérature*, 40 (1980), 18-31 (p. 21).
23. *Corr.* (Brun.), IV, p. 207 (to Caroline, 8 July 1870). See, for example, IV, pp. 226, 247-8, 254.
24. *Corr.* (Brun.), IV, p. 265 (to Caroline, 18 December 1870); p. 269 (to Caroline, 16 January 1871).
25. *Corr.* (Brun.), IV, p. 212 (to Jeanne de Tourbey, 22 July 1870).
26. *Corr.* (Brun.), IV, p. 222 (to George Sand, 17 August 1870); IV, p. 229 (to Caroline, 31 August 1870).
27. *Corr.* (Brun.), IV, p. 227 (to Edmond de Concourt, 29 August 1870).
28. *Corr.* (Brun.), IV, p. 232 (to George Sand, 7 September 1870).
29. *Corr.* (Brun.), IV, p. 231 (to Claudius Popelin, 7 September 1870).
30. Nafr. 23671, f° 91.
31. *Corr.* (Brun.), IV, pp. 232-3 (to George Sand, 10 September 1870).
32. *Corr.* (Brun.), IV, p. 252 (to Princesse Mathilde, 23 October 1870).
33. Grésillon, *Eléments de critique génétique*, p. 174.
34. Henri Mitterand, 'Programme et préconstruit génétiques: le dossier de *L'Assommoir*' in *Essais de critique génétique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), pp. 193-226 (p. 214).
35. *Carnets de travail*, ed. by Pierre-Marc de Biasi (Paris: Balland, 1988), pp. 214-5 (my emphasis). 4
36. *Corr.* (Brun.), IV, p. 309 (to George Sand, 24 April 1871).
37. *Corr.* (Brun.), IV, p. 309 (to George Sand, 24 April 1871).
38. *Corr.* (Brun.), IV, p. 311 (to Mme Roger des Genettes, 27 April 1871).
39. *Corr.* (Brun.), IV, p. 313 (to George Sand, 30 April 1871). *Corr.* (Brun.), IV, p. 383 (to Mme Roger des Genettes, 6 October 1871).