Where should we look for the origins of the modern novel? There is a way of answering which isolates particular national traditions, so that *Dead Souls* inaugurates the Russian novel and *Robinson Crusoe* or *Pamela* initiates the English. But there is a more capacious reply to the question too, one that seeks some common fount from which a larger and more comparative idea of modern fiction springs. And to that wider question there is one answer that recurs more than any other.

“The novels of Flaubert appear to us today to mark a turning point in the history of the novel,” wrote Peter Brooks a generation ago. Flaubert “is the novelist,” James Wood wrote at the turn of this century, “from whom the Modern, with all its narrow freedoms, flows” (several years later Wood added: “Novelists should thank Gustave Flaubert the way poets thank spring: it begins again with him”). “The First Modern Novel” is the title for the culminating chapter of Mario Vargas Llosa’s study of Flaubert and *Madame Bovary*. These terms – history of the novel, modern – are used capaciously. For Anglo-American critics Flaubert can be a progenitor of James and Wharton, an ancestor of Joyce and Beckett. The French have meanwhile understood him as something more than a French writer, rather as one of their principal offerings to the world republic of letters. When Sartre wrote that “Flaubert, creator of the ‘modern’ novel, stands at the crossroads of all our literary problems today,” he did not mean the problems facing only France.¹

We might well ask what we mean when we say that Flaubert initiated the modern novel. Usually *Madame Bovary* serves as the principal exhibit: the narrator is detached and the milieu is ordinary; the tone is cold and the detail is fastidious. The ironies are stifling. An impression of order and control is compulsory. Here the *Correspondance* is brought in too, for if *Madame Bovary* is the prototype then Flaubert’s letters are the manual. They explain how the modern novelist came to write his modern books.
Style is not ecstasy but labor. Writing prose is a torture like wearing a hair shirt that scratches, or weights on one’s knuckles that slow down composition, as Flaubert himself testified. Such discipline serves always to venerate art: the sanctity of the aesthetic demands unconditional fealty and obedience. The reader is imagined not in popular but in exclusive terms; indeed the best thing to do with one’s supreme, unadulterated novels may be not to publish them at all.

I am among those readers who value the *Correspondance* as an achievement equal in value, originality, and force to any of Flaubert’s novels. (André Gide was an early advocate of this view.) But often discussion of Flaubert’s letters is reduced to their scenes of the writer’s labor, or his fetish of prose style. The shape of a sentence or the direction for how to approach one’s own work as a serious craftsman are ancillary concerns, and they keep biography unnecessarily cordoned off from criticism. There are more trenchant questions to ask about a modern artist’s letters, especially if they offer a kind of theory of the novel, as Flaubert’s do. What is the writer’s temperament or constitution, seething like magma under the crust of prose? And namely: what can a temper vented in epistolary form tell us about attitudes expressed more obliquely in the novels?

If it is the astringency, the austerity, and the distillation of Flaubert that mark him as the forerunner of twentieth-century writers like Beckett or Robbe-Grillet, such qualities must be understood as constitutional long before they are stylistic. The pronouncements about art in the *Correspondance* arise from dispositions and prejudices which then get resolved in literary form. Here the context of those pronouncements, the situations from which Flaubert’s views on the novel sprang forth, are essential. Let us take one example: the famous December 9, 1852 letter to Louise Colet, which has often stood as the preeminent apologia for the modern narrator’s necessary invisibility and non-interference. Flaubert scolds Balzac for his irritating penchant for giving opinion and commentary. Instead, he explains, “The author, in his work, must be like God in the universe, everywhere present and nowhere visible. Art being a second nature, the creator of this nature must act according to similar processes: one must sense in every atom, in all aspects, a hidden and infinite impassibility.”

This crystalline axiom is always cited on its own, presented as a self-contained utterance of genius, and understandably so. But what was going on in the background? In these same weeks of December 1852 Louise Colet told Flaubert that her period was late. The novelist, absorbed in writing *Madame Bovary*, was horrified that he might become a father.
Eventually she let him know that the danger had passed. Here is his next letter, from two days later:

I begin by devouring you with kisses, such is my joy. Your letter from this morning has lifted a terrible weight from my heart. It was time. Yesterday I couldn’t work all day. . . . For three weeks I have suffered horribly from apprehension: I thought about you every minute, but in a disagreeable way. Oh! yes, this thought tortured me. . . . It would take a whole book to develop, in a comprehensible way, my feeling in this regard. The idea of giving life to someone fills me with horror. I would curse myself if I became a father. A son of my own, oh no, no, no! may my flesh perish completely, and may I never transmit to anyone the nuisance and the indignity of existence. My entire soul rebels against it . . . In any case, praise God, there is nothing to fear.²

The fervor with which Flaubert expresses both his terror and his relief might come, for some readers, as a surprise: this seems very far from the detachment for which he is commonly celebrated. But this is an entirely typical passage. His antipathy toward procreation carries some of the same passion as his hostility to the garrulous Balzacian narrator. Indeed these two concerns from early December 1852 resemble one another in a telling way. They both involve Flaubert’s wish – or need – for some entity to be absent: the interfering narrator, the unwanted child. The author who appears conspicuously and speaks volubly in the work does not belong. Neither does the imagined offspring: the perpetuation of existence produces a similar disgust, since it marks another misapplication, a mistaken extension of oneself further into the realm of indignity. These two sentiments, or convictions, were coincident in Flaubert’s imagination and recorded at the same time. Yet it would seem, from the long history of reading Flaubert’s letters for their inexhaustible wisdom, that one kind of aversion is deemed literary while the other is ignored, presumably because it falls into the realm of the merely personal.

In fact these two aversions are equally native to the Flaubertian imagination – and they are equally foundational for the development of the modern novel. The narrator who is like God in the universe: this is an article of faith that we will find explicitly in Joyce. The novelist who is haunted by a fear of bringing new life into the world: this is a profile we will see in Hardy, Lawrence, Woolf, Lessing. They are both part of the history of the novel since the middle of the nineteenth century, and they both come mostly from Flaubert.

*
There are other kinds of refusal that we associate with Flaubert, of course. The antipathy to having a child is impossible to detach from other objections and predilections which are rooted deeply in both his life and his work, and which have themselves become characteristic of our image of the modern writer. That writer will disdain the bourgeois, live isolated from commerce and distraction, and (if at all possible) avoid marriage and other entanglements. Order must be maintained at all costs. An early letter, written at age 25, makes it clear that for Flaubert these were interlocking desiderata from the beginning: he advises a friend to “stay always as you are, don’t marry, don’t have kids, have as few attachments as possible, give as little room to the enemy as you can” (1, 261).

A common designation for Flaubert, in light of this attitude, is that he was a “monk.” The word suggests self-removal, self-discipline, and (not least) celibacy. Flaubert was “afraid of life,” Henry James noted more than once, following a confession Flaubert once made. The solution was to retreat from the degraded arena of the world into a sanctum of art – his house at Croisset would do – where he could be untouched and unsullied. The simplest reading of this wish emphasizes its practicality: having children interferes with work. The serious writer should not have to tolerate such an overwhelming burden of distraction. For many people this is the first thing that comes to mind when asked why an artist might have hostile feelings toward procreation. It is a coherent concern, and a persistent one, and it will surface later in this book, especially in the chapter on Virginia Woolf. Cyril Connolly’s maxim – “There is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall” – is the best-known formulation of this idea.

The autonomy of the modern artwork depends in no small part on the autonomy of the modern artist. That freedom can take many forms – freedom from the demands of the marketplace, freedom from political affiliation – and certainly we would be naïve to underestimate freedom from domestic responsibility. Connolly’s proverb is a very modern one: its premise about good art takes for granted a certain professionalization in the making of that art, and therefore it supposes that this serious purpose might have something like an enemy in the first place. It is not something we can imagine Montaigne saying. (But nor does its contemporary familiarity mean that it can’t be contested by a modern writer. J. G. Ballard, in his autobiography Miracles of Life – the title of which honors his own children – had no use for Connolly’s aphorism: “My children were at the centre of my life, circled at a distance by my writing . . . My greatest ally was the pram in the hall.”)
It is difficult to think of a writer who guarded his quarantine, his shelter from interruption, more jealously than Flaubert. Indeed it would not be grandiose to say that this need for withdrawal is intertwined with his doctrine of authorial impersonality, itself a means of avoiding commitment and affiliation. But this is not the only (or even the primary) basis for his particular aversion. His hostility toward reproduction stems not only from how it may interfere with something else but from what it is in itself. From an early age Flaubert was disturbed by the prospect of adding new things to the world, of participating in any enlargement of it. Inconveniently, this is what a writer is supposed to do; and yet even the bringing forth of new books, to be published and circulated, was for Flaubert the source of significant ambivalence and anxiety. A similar trepidation concerning new life arises throughout the Correspondance. An early instance appears in 1846, when he was 25: he was absorbed in a first affair with Louise Colet, and as in the episode six years later, she thought she might be pregnant. She raises the idea of a child together. He insists he would love that child but also calls her wish “terrible for my happiness”; he would rather jump into the Seine to prevent bringing such an idea to fruition (1, 311–12).

Gradually the attitude gains an expression that seems not merely personal but theoretical. A somewhat conventional male panic at the prospect of fatherhood deepens into a more capacious anti-natalist position. The next month he writes to Colet, who seems in these weeks to have been considering getting an abortion: “All the better if I have no posterity! My humble name will die away with me and the world will continue . . . The idea of absolute nothingness pleases me.” A month later: “I would not have been a bad father. But what is the point of bringing forth from nothingness something that stays sleeping there?” Two months after that, near the end of 1846, he writes again to Colet: “I have always argued against the idea of having a child. What a sad being I would create! He would want only to speak, and would ask to die before being born” (1, 342, 375, 410).

These are passages just from the first volume of the Correspondance. A similar thread runs through many of the later letters too. In his twenties Flaubert seemed already determined by a tendency we will see soon again in Hardy: a kind of terror of addition or multiplication. This can take the form of an ambivalence toward literary expression (as with the Hardy who “resolves to say no more”), a paradoxical condition for a writer but a characteristic one for twentieth-century figures like Beckett; and it can take the related form of a deep misgiving toward the addition of new existence through procreation, which Hardy will also share. In Flaubert’s morbid
imagination of a hypothetical child who would ask for death before birth we can detect a prefiguration of Father Time. This may seem like a logical attitude for Flaubert, a novelist who wrote each day only to pare what he had drafted back to nearly zero. His fixation on order and restraint demanded consistent omission and exclusion: he was more comfortable in subtraction than addition, more sculptor than painter. Expansion of the world of matter brings with it the threat of dishevelment, even entropy. Reproduction, on the Flaubertian view, might in fact be worse than addition, for it is more like perpetuation, the extension or copying of something that already exists, and so resembles his ultimate bugbear: cliché. We can say that procreation resembles both poeisis and mimesis, and that for Flaubert each one was a mistake. It is clear from the early letters that he chafed at the idea of creating new life in part because he resisted the idea of extending his own self.

According to Sartre this is a lesson not only of the early letters but of Flaubert’s earliest works of fiction too. The first volume of L’Idiot de la famille, his enormous study of Flaubert, is devoted mostly to the Flaubert family drama that Sartre divines from these sources, and in juvenilia like Quidquid volueris and Rêve d’enfer Sartre sees a recurring pattern of “Gustave’s horror of fecundity.” What so offends Flaubert, Sartre writes convincingly, is not the randomness or arbitrariness of existence but rather its deliberativeness.

Gustave’s basic grievance against his parents does not have to do with the accident of his birth. Certainly he feels the accident – it is the factitiousness, the singular flavor of experience as it expresses in its irreducible but “indescribable” originality the uncontrolled violence of a copulation, the spouses abandoned to the filthy kitchens of nature. But it is not so much this brief folly that he despises; quite the contrary, it is the premeditation. No, the anthropoid is not the product of chance: he has been sought for a long time and sought precisely as he is. Achille-Cléophas had decided that he would engender Gustave, and it is indeed Gustave that he engendered. (206)

“Gustave’s rancor,” Sartre claims, “is so tenacious it leaves him all his life with a radical disgust for procreation.” Sartre goes further: this rancor may represent the very motivation for the adversarial nature of Flaubert’s writing, the craving for reprisal that, as we so often sense, underlies nearly all his work. Sartre writes of the young Flaubert’s need for “obliging the adults to recognize that they are the ones, through their cruel and stupid designs, who bear the entire responsibility . . . Gustave at fifteen years old – at thirteen too, we shall soon see – wrote in order to be understood and to be avenged” (207–11).
That this raw theory has the ring of truth is a testament to both Sartre’s brilliance and Flaubert’s consistency. If the writer feels existence to be a burden then he must seek to hold to account those responsible for it. The haphazardness of procreation is something we will see in Jude the Obscure: Father Time is enraged at Jude and Sue because they participate in an action, the sex which he does not understand, without stopping to consider its implications. The different scenario of Sartre’s Flaubert, where it is not the randomness but the calculation that so incenses, is closer to the logic of a different writer I will consider in the following pages. In Erewhon, Samuel Butler imagines a world where parents seem somewhat more alert to what they are doing through procreation, and they are so organized in their guilty feeling that they have conspired to make their children take responsibility for their existence. Butler’s story of resentment and reprisal, developed across both Erewhon and The Way of All Flesh, is similar to Sartre’s chronicle of Flaubert: the child has not asked to be born, holds a grudge against his parents for it, and eventually seeks to take revenge through the only path he knows – literature.

Biographers are now more likely than they used to be to note Flaubert’s antipathy toward the prospect of having children. In these accounts, though, Flaubert’s anxiety about Louise Colet’s late periods tends to be an idiosyncrasy of character that trembles in the background, while in the foreground the master writes his novels. But there is a theory of the novel in these epistolary complaints about procreation. For Flaubert this kind of prejudice or distaste could be seen, to begin with, as a precondition for the aridity of so much of the fiction: the aura of sterility that looms over Salammbô, for example, or the recurring protestations against fecundity in La Tentation de saint Antoine. These landscapes of barrenness and privation hold an unmistakable appeal to Flaubert; we can nearly hear his 1846 paean to “the idea of absolute nothingness,” and understand his valuation of such a concept as much more than the ode to style (the famous “book about nothing” that he aspired to write) that it’s usually taken for.

It is in the three major novels – Madame Bovary, L’Éducation sentimentale, Bouvard et Pécuchet – that we can see how the deep misgivings concerning procreation, expressed so volubly and repeatedly in the Correspondance, take complex representational form. Madame Bovary is the novel Flaubert was writing in 1852, when Louise Colet’s apparent pregnancy moved him
to say that “It would take a whole book to develop, in a comprehensible way, my feeling” about “the idea of giving life.” Is Madame Bovary that book? On the one hand it seems to say very little on the subject. Most critical accounts of Emma Bovary’s experience of marriage and adultery neglect altogether the facts of her pregnancy and her daughter. But viewed from a certain angle this is Flaubert’s first significant effort to work through the problem.

It begins with the final line of Part 1, a one-sentence paragraph that marks the Bovarys’ relocation from Tostes to Yonville-l’Abbaye: “When they left Tostes, in the month of March, Madame Bovary was pregnant.” Then there is a vacant white space. Part 11 begins on the following page. This moment recalls the chapter break near the end of L’Éducation sentimentale that Proust preferred to anything else in that novel, due to its masterful pacing and marking of time: “In my opinion the most beautiful thing in L’Éducation sentimentale is not a sentence, but a blank.” The lacuna that follows the acknowledgment of Emma’s pregnancy produces a similar effect: a vacuity of time, even a void suggesting that there is something that defeats speech. Nothing more is said about Emma’s pregnancy in those opening chapters about life in Yonville, which are instead given over to the description of the mediocre landscape, the introduction of Homais, and the flirtation with Léon.

Does the novelist’s silence on this subject mean that it’s not quite narratable, or simply not worth narrating? (Again a tendency in Flaubert seems quintessentially, prototypically modern: Gérard Genette calls such silences Flaubert’s “project of saying nothing, this refusal of expression that inaugurates the modern literary experience.”) Flaubert says nothing about the pregnancy until it is nearly time for Emma to give birth. But here the experience of pregnancy is circumscribed by an oppressive irony: seen less through Emma than through her dim husband. Charles gazes at her, wants to touch her and call her little mommy. “The idea of having impregnated her was delectable to him,” Flaubert writes, “Finally he lacked nothing. He knew everything about human existence, and he sat with serenity, both elbows on the table” (405). Here a gender division from the Correspondance has been reversed: the woman is ambivalent, and the man is not an austere anti-natalist but a fool whose uxoriousness is second only to his self-satisfaction and mistaken pride. Charles’s delight at his fertility seems dubious enough; his serene confidence about knowing life is more ominous yet.
For her part Emma wants a son: “the idea of having a male child was like having a hoped-for revenge for all her past powerlessness.” This means of course that Flaubert will give her a daughter:

She gave birth one Sunday, at around 6:00 in the morning, as the sun came up.
— It’s a girl! said Charles.
She turned away and passed out.

Flaubert’s terseness, here as everywhere, creates a particular disquiet. The void opened up by Emma’s unconsciousness is filled in the most alarming way: the repellent bourgeois Homais arrives, pronounces the baby to be in good shape, and before long is suggesting names. Soon he is designated the godfather to the baby, now called Berthe. Before the birth Flaubert had written that Emma “first felt a great astonishment” at being pregnant and “wanted to know what it was like to be a mother,” but that she mostly experienced the frustration at not being able to spend much money on cradles and baby clothes. Once Berthe arrives things turn even worse, with the newborn child sucked into a postnatal sphere of inanity and mediocrity.

Flaubert’s reticence on Emma’s sentiments about having a child is consistent with the general inscrutability of her character in the novel’s early chapters. Madame Bovary’s expressions of ambivalence toward procreation are deflected onto the existing child once it appears. Outwardly Emma makes a point of her affection for the child: “She declared that she adored children; it was her consolation, her joy, her craze, and she paired her caresses with lyrical effusions” (422). This sounds a lot like the entry for “Enfants” in the Dictionnaire des idées reçues: “Affect a lyrical tenderness for them, when there are people around.”13 In less public moments a different kind of mother appears. In a scene only a few pages later, little Berthe tries to touch Emma but is turned away repeatedly, the mother pleading with the infant daughter to leave her alone; Berthe ends up falling on a chest of drawers and injuring herself. Emma, contemplating her child, is startled by how ugly she finds her. Later, in one of the few scenes where Berthe appears, Flaubert gives us a long passage of Emma contemplating her misery, written in the style indirect libre: “But then who made her so unhappy? Where was the extraordinary catastrophe that had overwhelmed her? And she lifted her head, looking around her, as if to find the cause of what made her suffer” (483). Flaubert provides no answer to this ineluctable question, but the first thing Emma hears is her child laughing. Again
Emma insists on her love for Berthe; again we are left with an acrid sense of her underlying distaste.

In Emma’s motherhood Rachel Cusk sees an inevitable contradiction: Emma’s urge is to be subject and center, and this cannot be confined by the parameters of a child.

To love her baby in turn would be to proclaim the limit of herself . . . Motherhood for Emma Bovary is an alias, an identity she occasionally assumes in her career as an adulterer. She is the essence of the bad mother: the woman who persists in wanting to be the centre of attention."

On this view the very existence of a child poses a problem for a certain kind of novelistic protagonist, indeed for a certain kind of novel. The individual moral adventure of the hero, especially the quixotic hero, and perhaps especially the female Quixote, cannot compete with the rival demands of a dependent person. The logic of the novel is centripetal, with all forces converging on the self-consumed protagonist at the center, while the logic of children is centrifugal, as attention and energy — and love, as Cusk notes — flows away from us to our offspring. This means that Berthe is doomed from the start, and that no amount of charm or beauty (which she is shown to lack) could save her from Emma’s solipsism. It is the idea of the child rather than the identity of the child that poses such an insuperable challenge for the novel.

Certainly this way of reading Madame Bovary helps to account for Berthe’s marginality: the girl seems always on the periphery of the action, brought in only when on a whim Emma asks to see her. After Emma’s death Berthe is raised by Charles, but after he dies, on the novel’s last page, she is foisted first on her grandmother, then on her aunt, and finally sent to work at a cotton mill. The end of Flaubert’s novel needs to reckon with the problem of what to do with a child who was never much wanted in the first place — not by her mother, to be sure, but nor perhaps by the novel itself, which has little use for her. Berthe, for Madame Bovary, is not so much a discernible character as the residue of the novelist’s dilemma, which is how to manage the procreative consequences of sex in a book that is not, finally, very interested in the adult experience of raising small children. Behind this indifference we cannot help sensing that greater Flaubertian antipathy to reproduction — to providing the origins for somebody else — tout court.

Some of the writers I discuss in the following chapters will face a similar problem. But I am most interested in the way that an attitude in the novels that may begin as an aversion deepens and expands into a much more
complicated ambivalent representation, something that reveals contradictory sentiments, as Flaubert’s later work will. In *Madame Bovary* in particular the animosity seems unleavened by any charity: Emma’s rare expressions of parental sentiment are trapped in a suffocating irony. This novel is far less expansive, in its portrait of the speculative and the real feeling toward the idea of children, than one to which it is often compared: *Anna Karenina*. Tolstoy too is interested in ambivalence. When Levin and Kitty’s son Dmitri is born, the father is overcome by a kind of repugnance: “Levin gazed at this tiny, pitiful being and made vain efforts to find in his heart some signs of fatherly feeling toward it. All he felt for it was revulsion.” But then he sees the baby’s hands and feet, and “such pity for the little creature came upon him” that the initial disgust blurs into a more difficult emotion.

Smiling and barely restraining tears of emotion, Levin kissed his wife and left the darkened room. What he had experienced for this little being was not at all what he had anticipated. There was no cheer or joy in this feeling: on the contrary, it was a new and agonizing terror: the awareness of a new sphere of vulnerability. And this awareness was so agonizing at first, the fear that this helpless being might suffer was so powerful, that because of it, the strange feeling of senseless joy and even pride which he had experienced when the baby sneezed had gone unnoticed.\

In comparing this scene to the birth of Emma’s daughter in *Madame Bovary* we can see an entire gulf between the Flaubertian and the Tolstoyan imaginations. Flaubert seems, in this early novel at least, unable to admit that revulsion may share space with forces like pity and fellow feeling, or even a joy that is initially obscured by that first aversion and fear. The corresponding scene in *Anna Karenina* encloses a generosity that exists beyond cold irony, and which sets up the magnificent last two chapters of the novel, where Levin comes to understand how he loves his son. In this Tolstoy is less like Flaubert than like D. H. Lawrence, himself riven by incompatible attitudes toward the prospect of creating new life, and who in novels like *Sons and Lovers* and *The Rainbow* wrote birth and newborn scenes of an excruciating complexity, where love and pity, terror and rapture, are merged as if they posed no contradiction to one another. Flaubert was not that kind of novelist, was not in possession of that kind of vision.

* Yet “the idea of giving life,” the problem he had said would take him a whole book to address, did not cease to vex Flaubert after *Madame Bovary.*
It would be fairer to say that it took an entire career, and that his third published novel, *L’Éducation sentimentale*, marks his most extensive effort to figure out how he might integrate it into his work. Flaubert does not attempt this in any obvious way. His arid epic of disillusion and failure, defined by what Lukács called the “unmitigated desolation of its matter,” seems ordained to push away any sense of fecundity, indeed any actual consummation. But Flaubert has oblique designs, and the novel is wily on the subject of reproduction.

This starts with the opening scene. *L’Éducation sentimentale* begins with Frédéric Moreau’s first sight of Madame Arnoux: in Flaubert’s famous phrase, “It was like an apparition.” The glare seems to blind Frédéric to anything besides this woman, her black hair and dark skin, “the fineness of her fingers as the light passed through them.” But the vision expands to include something else too: Madame Arnoux’s daughter Marthe, accompanied by a servant. If this opening scene contains so much of the subsequent novel in microcosm, this portrait of mother and child is consistent with that meticulous patterning. In Frédéric’s first visit to the Arnoux house, Marthe arrives before her mother; in his carriage ride with Madame Arnoux, Marthe lies on her lap with her head resting on Frédéric; the next time he sees her, years later, Madame Arnoux has another child, a three-year-old son, sitting on her lap.

In nearly every encounter for the rest of the novel this object of Frédéric’s obsessive love is flanked by her children. In the great scene of Part II where he comes closest to confessing his love, he is stymied by the arrival of the son, then the daughter, who become like miniature sentinels: “And she stood there, at the threshold of her room, with her two children at her sides. He bowed without saying a word.” And what is it that prevents their anticipated rendezvous later in the novel, when she stands him up as the February 1848 rioting breaks out? It is her son’s illness, which Madame Arnoux takes as a divine warning to stay away from Frédéric.

Madame Arnoux is not just a wife but a mother: this was true of Emma Bovary too, though here Flaubert seems keener to keep the children present at all times, whether as an obstacle or perhaps as a kind of enticement for Frédéric, whose fixation depends on the object’s unattainability. An adulterous affair cannot take place with kids in the room. But perhaps their constant presence makes the mother even more desirable. As with Berthe in the earlier novel, the Arnoux children do not quite register as distinct beings: they are shrouded in a kind of unreal haze. Again we get the impression that Flaubert cannot really write about children, doesn’t...
quite know how to include them in any significant action. We may be
unlikely to notice this at first, since we are conditioned by his writing not
to expect substantive exchange between adults and their offspring. The
novel according to Flaubert is a theater for adult activity, and even if that
activity includes sex leading to children, the novel will not follow the
thread into that potentially sentimental zone. That is not the sentimental
education that Flaubert, focused on ambition, romantic love, and failure,
wants to submit to unrelenting scrutiny. And so children are present but
not fully existent.

In the scene in the carriage, Frédéric cannot reach Madame Arnoux:
Marthe is in the way, though he feels “that he could communicate with her
entire being through the child’s body stretched out between them.”
Frédéric kisses the sleeping girl on the forehead; when he is praised for
being good by Madame Arnoux and asks why, she replies: “Because you
love children” (117). Frédéric protests – “Not all children!” – and indeed
we cannot help thinking that she has missed the point: the kiss is planted
cyнича on the child’s forehead so that he may gain traction with
the mother.

Madame Arnoux’s remark is suggestive nonetheless. Is it possible that
Frédéric, or any Flaubertian protagonist, could love children? In his letters
Flaubert’s hostility toward procreation was aimed specifically at the pros-
ppect of hypothetical children, though in Madame Bovary the case of Emma
and Berthe suggested that love of actual existing children failed to register
above the din of adultery and other adult blandishments. In L’Éducation
sentimentale Flaubert again wants to put this idea to the test. As with so
much else in this novel, he insists on going about this in the most indirect
way. The idea of a child with Madame Arnoux is refracted, displaced. In
the novel’s third and final part, she and Frédéric find themselves in another
scene of mutual amorous confession, and they are again interrupted: this
time not by a child but by Rosanette (known as “la Maréchale”), who is
the mistress of both Madame Arnoux’s husband and Frédéric himself.
Frédéric is enraged at Rosanette for her interference, and for insulting the
other woman whom he continues to revere. When they are alone she tells
him that she is pregnant with his child.

This event was a calamity, since it first postponed their breakup and then
upset all his plans. The idea of being a father, in any case, seemed to him
grotesque, unacceptable. But why? If, instead of la Maréchale . . . And he
became so engrossed in his reverie that he had a sort of hallucination. He
saw, there on the carpet, in front of the fireplace, a little girl. She looked like
Madame Arnoux and like him, a little bit;—dark-haired and pale, with
black eyes, very thick eyebrows, a pink ribbon in her curly hair! (Oh! how he would have loved her!) And he seemed to hear her voice: “Papa! Papa!” (390)

This is one of the densest, most complex, and most perverse passages in all of Flaubert’s fiction. It begins with a familiar Flaubertian sentiment: that becoming a father is a source of terror, “grotesque, inadmissible.” Here the language seems broad and theoretical, for “l’idée d’être père” is not qualified by any context. It is left to resonate with an anti-natalist echo, recognizable from the Correspondance. But then the prose seems to catch itself. Frédéric’s “Mais pourquoi?” leads to a devastating thought: is the idea of paternity in itself grotesque, or only when the mother is Rosanette instead of Madame Arnoux? The ellipsis that stands in for this distinction suggests that the alternative does not even need to be named, and in the hallucination that follows we are given a fantasy that might surprise us in a Flaubert novel: the hero imagines an offspring that he in fact wants. It is conveyed in characteristic Flaubertian detail; the girl wears a pink ribbon in her curls.

Is Frédéric’s “Mais pourquoi?” also Flaubert’s? We might detect in the parenthetical lament (“Oh! comme il l’aurait aimée!”), with its counterfactual conditional, a genuine melancholy for a child that will not come to exist. This wish now seems not discordant with desire but a part of it; the regret seems authentic; and the strange result is a small reprieve from the harsh ironies with which the novel regards its frequently meager protagonist. Still, it is the grotesque specter of a child with Rosanette which enables the fantasy hallucination of a child with Madame Arnoux. A familiar Flaubertian logic: a degraded reality shows an ideal that is adjacent but unattainable. This produces an effect that many readers have noticed in L’Éducation sentimentale: its habit of substitution, by which something replaces another thing which should by right be present. Rosanette’s pregnancy supplanting Madame Arnoux’s is one such substitution. But something else has been altered too: the expected anti-procreative drive has been suspended, briefly, for a procreative wish.

The fantasy is short-lived, though, for it is indeed Rosanette who bears Frédéric’s child. In the following chapter he is summoned to a maternity home, where she has just given birth. It is a boy, not the girl of his earlier hallucination; as in Madame Bovary the new parent does not get the desired result, even if the sexes have been reversed. Rosanette directs Frédéric to the cradle:
He drew the curtains to the side and saw, among the linens, something yellowish-red, extremely wrinkled, which smelled bad and was wailing.
—Kiss him!
He answered, to hide his repugnance:
—But I’m afraid of hurting him.
—No! no!
And so, with the tip of his lips, he kissed his child.
—He looks so much like you!
And with her weak arms she hugged him around the neck, with an outpouring of emotion that he had never seen. (416)

The entire scene transforms joy into repulsiveness, but nowhere more than in Rosanette’s last line (“Comme il te ressemble!”). In the earlier fantasy Frédéric had imagined some paternal resemblance to his daughter with Madame Arnoux: “She looked like Madame Arnoux and like him, a little bit.” But here the fact of resemblance arrives like a curse. We are reminded of the antipathy toward any kind of inheritance that Flaubert had voiced in the Correspondance: “A son of my own, oh no, no, no! may all my flesh perish, and may I not transmit to anyone the nuisance and the indignity of existence.” Transmission of existence, perpetuation of oneself through reproduction, provision of origins: for some imaginations – like Shakespeare’s in the “procreation sonnets,” where the addressee is encouraged to marry and have children who will resemble him – these might be ideas to prize. But for Flaubert they seem to be sources of loathing, eventualities to be avoided at all costs.

Frédéric’s horror in this moment, as he is made to recognize himself in his offspring, is an instance of something we might call the procreative grotesque. It is familiar from satire, as I will suggest about Gulliver’s Travels in the following chapter. Flaubert shares Swift’s conviction that perpetuation of oneself through reproduction always risks extending some kind of innate folly. A few pages later Frédéric looks at his son and falls into another reverie: “He imagined him as a young man, he would make him his companion; but maybe he would be a fool, and for sure a disappointment. His illegitimate birth would always oppress him; it would have been better if he had never been born” (418).

When the child dies a short time later, Flaubert pushes the grotesquerie further still. Rosanette wants the corpse embalmed; Frédéric prefers a portrait, and the painter, comparing his task to Raphael painting the Madonna with child, goes about his task. The finished work is an abomination: “Red, yellow, green, and indigo clashed violently in spots, creating a hideous, nearly laughable thing” (437). Next to the portrait, the actual
corpse is described in similar terms: purple lips, pallid skin, and thin nostrils that recall Emma on her deathbed in *Madame Bovary*, though the better comparison may be to the infanticide in *Jude the Obscure*. Flaubert’s grotesque differs from Hardy’s only in being somehow less Gothic, and more angular. The greatest irony comes just after, when Rosanette weeps for the child, and Frédéric, sitting next to her, dreams longingly of Madame Arnoux, whom he thinks he will never see again. When he too starts to cry, Rosanette assumes he is sharing in her grief; instead his thoughts are directed at the same subject that has consumed him since the opening scene.

This coarse irony contains in miniature the enduring problem. Can a novel in the Flaubertian mode include, without too much difficulty and in a significant way, a sincere and tender attitude toward children and the having of children? Or is it fated always to be shifting its attention to other concerns? Frédéric can barely focus on the misery before him, and though this may be rooted in his hostility to having an illegitimate child with Rosanette (a child with Madame Arnoux would have been illegitimate too) it also reveals the novel’s own priorities. Whatever the main action of *L’Éducation sentimentale*, a novel in which an incapable and obstructed hero makes the very idea of novelistic action into an enigma, it is certainly not the action of generating new life. This is not only to say that procreation in Flaubert’s imagination is a failure, since everything in the book – politics, love, career – is failure. Rather I mean that even in a novel where achievement and fulfillment are shown to be impossible, the kind of self-actualization that might be achieved through reproduction is kept on the margins of the merely imaginable.

Flaubert’s ambition with *L’Éducation sentimentale* was to write “the moral history of the men of my generation” (*Correspondance*, 111, 409). Mary Orr makes an interesting point about this well-known and often-cited phrase: it contains a double implication, for “génération” can have both a historical and a procreative meaning. The men of the generation of 1848 seem as unlikely to engender new life as they are incapable of creating a new political order. Frédéric is a delegate for both failures. The only ambiguity left over is the one that resonates from his counterfactual fantasy of a child with Madame Arnoux – that is, whether under different circumstances, in a world more hospitable to the attainment of one’s wishes, a scenario like that might be somewhat less implausible.

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*L’Éducation sentimentale* was published in 1869; a little more than a decade remained in Flaubert’s life and career. He was a novelist in his late forties. The years that followed were difficult ones: Flaubert was shaken by the death of his mother and of some of his closest friends, and he was dejected by France’s capitulation to Prussia in 1870–1871. This period was also marked by financial worry, due to his extensive support of his niece Caroline Commanville and her husband, who had fallen into great debt and whose reliance on Flaubert’s largesse came close to bankrupting him too.

A different tone sometimes creeps into the *Correspondance* in these later years. Certainly Flaubert’s letters had always contained stretches of gloom: vexation by the toil of writing, struggle with boredom and atomization, howls of rage at the eternal bourgeois. But in the 1870s his letters are more likely to resonate with regret. This is not to say that the spirited and incandescent misanthropy is absent, only that certain sentiments that were once articles of faith now begin to admit, even invite, some doubt.

If the most revealing letters of the early 1850s were those written to Louise Colet, then the most illuminating of this later period are those to George Sand. As with the earlier letters, these are sometimes devoted to questions of craft and purpose: in Sand, Flaubert had a correspondent whom he held as a literary equal. But their discussion of literature never strays far from their present experience as older people with most of their lives and careers behind them. They write about family just as often as about books, even despite their quite different situations: Sand the mother and grandmother, Flaubert the aging bachelor. Flaubert frequently asks after her son Maurice and her two granddaughters. In one February 1874 letter Sand admits that there is nothing more important to her than her granddaughter Aurore: “She’s my life and my ideal . . . All my past, all that I’ve ever been able to learn or make, is only of any value to me for how it may help her.” Sand then addresses Flaubert, who she knows can use some encouragement:

> You don’t have any children. So be a writer, an artist, a master. It’s only natural, for it’s your compensation, your happiness, and your strength. Reassure us that you’re pressing on. It’s clear that it’s so essential to your life. (iv, 769)

This produces a starting response from Flaubert two weeks later:

> What you said to me (in your last letter) about your dear granddaughters moved me very deeply! Why don’t I have *that*? I was born with so much
tenderness. But one doesn’t make one’s own destiny. One submits to it! I was cowardly in my youth. *I was afraid of Life!* It all comes around in the end. (iv, 773)

What is Flaubert saying in this small confession? He describes the lack, and the void, as something both within him and beyond him. On the one hand he admits to a fear of life (a revelation which would so intrigue Henry James) that seems to have produced a condition of childlessness. On the other hand he suggests that this is less a choice, something one might control, than a circumstance to which one is doomed: one doesn’t make one’s own destiny. Later that year he wrote in similar terms to Sand, again about her son and granddaughters:

There’s one man I envy above all others. It’s your son. Why didn’t I arrange my life like his? Ah! if I only had two such darling little girls, what sustenance that would be! But one is not master of one’s destiny. Things push you gently without your suspecting it, and then, one day, you find yourself alone in a hole.—While awaiting the ultimate hole. (iv, 894)

Again it is the amalgam of regret and submission that is so striking. It seems a paradox, for a writer who had always been so certain of his constitution, and therefore so unlikely to rhapsodize a life that he did not (could not) lead, to have such counterfactual fantasies. We are very far from the rants to Louise Colet against procreation and transmission; the certainty of young adulthood has dissolved into the doubt of later years. This is not an uncommon alteration, to be sure, but Flaubert had always seemed an extreme case.

This mood and this subject recur throughout the last decade of Flaubert’s life. A characteristic letter of 1879 finds him reassuring a different friend, who assumed the novelist didn’t want to hear details about her child: “I adore children and was born to be an excellent dad; but fate and literature decided otherwise. It’s one of the sadnesses of my old age not to have a little being to love and hold” (v, 547). The consistency in these admissions indicates that we would be mistaken to take them only as generalized expressions of despair in the face of imminent death. They suggest something more specific: that lurking beneath all the broadsides against procreation, all the anti-natalist conviction, had always been some competing attitude. An earlier fixation on order and abstinence has now thawed, somewhat, into a more capacious view.

For Flaubert’s life, seen in its complexity and totality, routinely complicates the easy profile, unsettles any caricature of a man who disliked children and did everything he could to avoid them. A claim that might
seem far-fetched – “I adore children and was born to be an excellent dad” – is in fact supported by the evidence. His close relationship with his niece Caroline was, for decades, similar to that of a parent: her mother (his sister) died from complications following childbirth, and along with her grandmother he effectively raised Caroline. When she was young he played the most significant role in her education – he oversaw her daily lessons – and he remained perhaps the most important figure in her early adulthood, as confidant and benefactor despite his own limited means. This was not parenthood, exactly, but it was a guardianship that much resembled it, and in its adjacency we can see clearly the tenderness and responsibility that in his earlier years he had professed to abjure, but which he would defend persuasively in the later correspondence. Some readers of Flaubert have seen this relation as a kind of fatherhood. Michel Butor identifies it as the obstacle to any other paternity: “From the moment that he practically adopts Caroline, there is no more question of having any other child.”

In a later chapter I will identify something similar in the life of Woolf, herself a devoted aunt, whose simultaneous proximity to motherhood (in the form of her sister Vanessa) and separation from it determined so much of her novels’ representation of both parenthood and childlessness. Like Woolf, Flaubert knew and loved a younger relation without being a biological parent. He also became a kind of patriarch for a younger circle of writers, and so in his letters we often find him enjoying the idea of a figurative paternity, especially in relation to the loyal Maupassant.

So it is fitting that Caroline provides us the testimony that can stand as the final word on the recalculation that Flaubert seems to have made, late in life, of his earlier certitudes. In 1887, seven years after his death, she published Souvenirs intimes, her memoirs of her childhood and famous uncle. Caroline describes Flaubert’s devotion to her education, the painstaking lessons in history and geography, his munificence, his intimacy in confiding in her the struggles he endured as a writer. In the final pages she attempts one last reckoning with this contradictory figure, devoted so zealously to his work but carrying with him such doubt. He sacrificed everything to literature, she writes, and asks: “In his last years did he regret not having taken the common path?”

Some moving words that he spoke one day, as we walked together along the Seine, make me think so. We had been visiting one of my friends: she was in the midst of her charming children. “Ils sont dans le vrai,” he said to me, referring to the core of this honest and good family. “Yes,” he repeated to himself gravely. I didn’t disturb his thoughts and stayed silent by his side. That walk was one of his last.
The phrase in question is difficult to translate, but the best rendering might be “They live truly,” or perhaps “They are in the right.” This scene made a profound impression on Kafka, according to Max Brod: “I shall never forget the deep emotion with which Kafka read to me the last paragraph of Souvenirs intimes by Flaubert’s niece ... Kafka often quoted this sentence [“Ils sont dans le vrai”]. Art alone then had not been enough for him on which to build a proper life.” Kafka, another archetype of the modern writer, an alienated intellectual who remained a childless bachelor, and who once told Felice Bauer that reading L’Éducation sentimentale always made him feel “as though I were the author’s spiritual son, albeit a weak and awkward one,” consistently identified with Flaubert. In taking Caroline’s anecdote as a kind of proverb, Kafka made it into the estranged writer’s reality: family life is an existence that is at once true and impossible.

Flaubert shared this belief, but perhaps only to a point. To read his late work especially is to wonder if that path of truth was to him rather more perceptible than it would ever be to Kafka. It is difficult to imagine Kafka, had he lived longer, producing something like Un cœur simple. This late masterpiece, one of the Trois contes, was written by Flaubert in part to prove to George Sand that he could push past some of his misanthropic habits. The servant Félicité, who lives the life of a saint and martyr, and whose humility and fidelity stand in stark contrast to the cruelty and indifference of much of the world around her, performs no more significant and extensive service than taking care of her employer’s two children. I have argued before that late works like Un cœur simple show Flaubert transcending some of the more stable ironies of his earlier writings. We are forced to ask whether he now understood a human activity like raising children, with all its attendant sacrifice and self-effacement, as precisely the kind of existence that could garner the astringent novelist’s admiration and mercy.

Bouvard et Pécuchet, his unfinished last work, is the summa of this highly ambiguous mode. It is usually read as Flaubert’s purest satire, and not without reason: its Menippean encyclopedism can recall Rabelais or Swift, and its author’s stated motivation in spending decades collecting inanities – “I will vomit back on my contemporaries the disgust they inspire in me” – makes no secret of the project’s basis in bile (iv, 583). But Bouvard et Pécuchet, even if it sprang from such origins, became something more complicated. The title figures are not only fools, as some critics (like René Dumesnil and Lionel Trilling) have long pointed out. Bouvard and Pécuchet’s quest is at once ludicrous...
and valiant, and their efforts can attract both our ridicule and our consideration. This incongruity extends to their investigations into sex, reproduction, and children. Mostly their experiments expose them as buffoons. In the early chapter on science, one of the first topics Bouvard wants to tackle is procreation, but this leads immediately to the revelation that Pécuchet, still a virgin at fifty-two, knows nothing of the subject. Their research gets sidetracked, until later they try breeding different species with one another. Flaubert endows Bouvard and Pécuchet with knowledge of a basic truth—that the word *species* “designates a group of organisms whose descendants can reproduce”—but no more than that, as their “abnormal alliances” between animals lead nowhere. The chapter on love and sex seems no more auspicious, as Bouvard’s courtship of the widow Madame Bordin falls apart and Pécuchet, losing his virginity at last to the maid girl Mélie, gets a venereal disease.

It is in the late chapter on education that the novel returns obliquely to these interlocking themes. It seems only logical that Flaubert would choose this as one of the culminating subjects for Bouvard and Pécuchet: all along they have been immersed in their own encyclopedic study, and so when they turn this effort outward, onto the education of the young, Flaubert’s design reveals an ominous inevitability. Their charges, Victor and Victorine, are poor; the mother is dead and the father is in jail. Bouvard and Pécuchet’s program goes predictably off the rails: lessons in literature, phrenology, and sexuality all fail to civilize the young brutes.

And yet we cannot read this chapter without noticing the residue of Flaubert’s letters from the period, the mark of a lingering affection for children. In one scene Bouvard and Madame Bordin are sitting together on the grass: he feels a return of his amorous feelings for the woman who had earlier spurned marriage to him. Then they see Victorine picking flowers.

—Isn’t she lovely? said Bouvard.
—Yes! Little girls are lovely!
And the widow let out a sigh which seemed to express the long sorrow of an entire life.
—You could have had one.
She lowered her head.
—What do you mean?
He gave her such a look that she blushed, as if she were feeling a rough caress; but right away, fanning herself with her handkerchief:
—You missed the boat, my dear.
—I don’t understand. And without getting up, he came closer. She looked at him up and down for a long time; then, smiling and with teary eyes:
—It’s your fault. (965–6)

It is easy to imagine this scene, taken out of context and dropped into a different kind of novel, producing a decidedly un-Flaubertian effect. The regret and sadness of childlessness will be a recurring theme in later chapters of this book, especially in sections on Woolf and contemporary fiction. Here, in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, it seems discordant, and too mordant to evoke despair. But why must this be? Certainly irony is a culprit; and sure enough the dialogue between Bouvard and Madame Bordin is interrupted by a gust of wind and the sight of two peacocks copulating. The subject of human procreation is displaced by the actual consummation of birds, and the mating ritual that succeeds makes all the more ridiculous the one that fails. But this is not the only effect produced by this scene. The mode here is not caustic, exactly, certainly not in the manner of Emma passing out upon her daughter’s birth, or Frédéric wincing at his wrinkled, smelly newborn son. Late works like *Un cœur simple* and *Bouvard et Pécuchet* have an unusual capacity to transform angular irony into warmer comedy, and the exposure of futility does not preclude the coexistence of some more generous feeling. We are not mistaken to hear, in Bouvard’s moment of bewilderment, an echo of Flaubert himself, reevaluating his hostility to the question of having children.

This scene was one of the last things Flaubert ever wrote. From it there seeps some of the unexpected ambiguity, part of his satire but not beholden to it, that courses through his final work. *Bouvard et Pécuchet* can seem hostile to all human endeavors, and in its emphasis on copying (the title figures are copyists, and return to this parroting work at the end of the unfinished manuscript) and cliché (along with the *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* the aim was to create a work built entirely on the inane words of others) it can suggest that reproduction of any kind is the elemental human folly. But in Flaubert’s writing one hand is always holding the scourge, while the other offers an oblique gesture of clemency.

That is one reason I have begun this book with Flaubert. The double tendency so characteristic of this writer also characterizes many novelists who came after him. Literature can both punish us for our errors and consent to forgive us. The interpenetrating satiric judgment and novelistic clemency merge to create an essential tension in the novelists I am studying here. For if Flaubert, Hardy, Lawrence, Lessing make us question our procreative habits, our assumptions about the morality and desirability of
creating new life, and if they seem frequently to conclude that we should be chary of it, then we must acknowledge that they just as often extend us some portion of mercy too. Flaubert, who in *Bouvard et Pécuchet* undertook a giant effort to expose the folly of human ambition and replication, was aware that there are reasons we might seek these things, and that they might resist even his derision.

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If Flaubert was the initiator of the modern novel, then the modern novel is something ironic, self-aware, difficult, refined, scrupulous, disillusioned, pure, erudite, detached, fastidious, and deeply skeptical about procreation. This last quality is not supplementary or ancillary to the others but actually inherent in them. For it cannot be excluded from the kind of scrutiny that the modern novel has directed, since the middle of the nineteenth century, at every human wish and activity. The novel no less than poetry is a criticism of life, and the question of giving life is included in the category of life. The dilemma of procreation vibrates at the core of the ironic-existential mode that Flaubert mastered, and which had such a decisive influence on the novelists who followed.

But the originator of the modern novel, this writer skeptical of origins, has not had a uniform posterity. Flaubert’s legacy is not only complex but contradictory. Writers in his wake can seem at odds with one another, like dissimilar and argumentative siblings. In the French nineteenth century Flaubert gave birth on one side to the Zola of doctrinaire naturalism and on the other to the Huysmans who broke so categorically from naturalism in *À rebours*. Both writers recognized him as a progenitor. It is difficult to imagine Des Esseintes, herald of Decadence and resolutely anti-generative figure (he is the last of his hereditary line), without Flaubert behind him. In one scene Des Esseintes watches some boys fighting and wonders if “it would have been better for them if their mothers had never given birth to them,” given that human existence is such a sequence of indignities:

Indeed from the earliest years it was just impetigo, colic and fever, measles and insults; boot kicks and stultifying labor at around thirteen years of age; deception from women, disease, and cuckoldry in adulthood; and then, when old age came, infirmity and agony, in a workhouse or a hospice.

This looks like *A Harlot’s Progress* or *A Rake’s Progress*, though somehow Huysmans is even more economical than Hogarth. Given such a view of life, it is no wonder that Des Esseintes reaches his anti-natalist
conclusion: “What folly to have children! ... If ever, in the name of pity, useless procreation should be abolished, it was now!”

But then in the same years there was Zola, also writing in the penumbra of Flaubert, but who always had a rather suppler attitude toward procreation. His stark scenes of childbirth (in *Pot-Bouille* and *La Joie de vivre*), his dark stories about progeny (in *Nana* and *L’Œuvre*), and his insistence throughout the *Rougon-Macquart* on the poisons of inheritance all suggest a skeptic in the Flaubertian mode. And yet Zola’s faith in many forms of social and biological germination (in *Germinal* especially) consistently defies that association, as does the closing scene of the entire cycle, in *Le Docteur Pascal*, where a new baby promises rebirth and renewal. One of the last books that Zola published, after all, was *Fécondité*, the first of his planned series *Les Quatre Évangiles*, which was as forceful an evangelism for pro-natalism as French literature has ever produced.

English-language literature too shows the contradictory legacy bequeathed by Flaubert. To take only the lineage made famous by Hugh Kenner, we can see Joyce and Beckett as deviating inheritors. In *Ulysses* Joyce would set an entire chapter at the National Maternity Hospital, and would make the birth of Mrs. Purefoy’s child the vessel for other kinds of gestation and emergence: the evolutionary history of the human species, the fruition of the English language. In this respect “Oxen of the Sun” is typical of *Ulysses*, an epic interested in every kind of parenthood (biological, figurative, literary, national), and which treats that subject with a warmth and sympathy that would seem to have little use for Flaubert’s usual hostility.

But then there is Beckett, who for all his apprenticeship at the feet of Joyce betrayed a rather greater resemblance to Flaubert in his literary attitude toward procreation. From the sterility of *More Pricks than Kicks* to the childlessness and anti-breeding idiom of *All That Fall* (“Nip some young doom in the bud”) to the anti-generative ending of *Endgame*, Beckett’s work abjures the comic fecundity of Joyce for a bleaker and terser comedy whose dominant mode is barrenness instead. Beckett’s celebrated discovery about the way he would break free from Joyce – the path would pass through subtraction rather than addition – is consistent with this sensibility. In Beckett, as in Flaubert, we sense an affinity between a pared-down mode and a distaste for accumulation of any kind, including the addition of human numbers.

This book is not about Huysmans or Zola, Joyce or Beckett. But it is a history of the novel in the years of their careers, and beyond them to the present. We must think seriously about the novel’s moral trouble with
procreation if we are to understand that history. If my focus is on the English novel rather than the French or the Irish, and if this takes in some of the most significant novelists since the middle of the nineteenth century, this only shows the reach of the contradictions that Flaubert’s work lays bare. The “idea of giving life,” as Flaubert showed, is a problem that has never ceased to occupy the novel’s attention.