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Michel Winock, *Flaubert*. Translated by Nicholas Elliott. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016. viii + 549 pp. Bibliography, illustrations, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-6747-3795-2

Review by Mary Orr, University of St Andrews.

To come to Michel Winock's *Flaubert* in 2017 is to sit in the admiring company of his many previous reviewers, who are for the most part avid and informed readers and scholars of Flaubert. Their appraisals of both the original French text (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2013) and this *hénaurme* English translation by Nicholas Elliott also sit in the important cross-currents of the dedicated conference to Winock's (French) *Flaubert* in Rouen (March 29, 2014), hosted by the *Amis de Flaubert et de Maupassant*: "Journée autour du *Flaubert* de Michel Winock." The event launched with his position paper: "Comment j'ai écrit la biographie de Flaubert." Interlocutors in the same session examined Winock's biographical project as a "plaisir" (Alain Ferry), a "possibilité" (Yvan Leclerc), and a "traitement de l'intime" (Joëlle Robert). If the presence, person, and reputation of the flesh-and-blood writer in the room therefore immediately challenge critical and textual theories concerning the death, impersonality, and subject of the author or, indeed, the biographer, they color for potential readers the likely weightiness of the text behind the name/image on the cover. Most critics to date of Winock's *Flaubert* (in French and in English versions) negotiate in his terms the answer he gave to the opening rhetorical question of his preface: "Why write yet another biography of Flaubert?" (p. vii). For Winock, the answer lies in the importance of "depicting the life of a man in his century...a historian's biography" (p. vii). Winock's extensive knowledge of Flaubert's France thus makes his *Flaubert* a towering new biography precisely for its engagements with the writing of nineteenth-century French history, and how the subjects of history and its making emerge variously in Flaubert's writing in both his fiction and voluminous correspondence. Winock's credentials and authority are simply not in doubt, as all his Flaubert scholar reviewers amply acknowledge and endorse.

The more important question, however, that Winock's new biography of Flaubert implicitly poses—and that his reviewers overlook—is a fundamentally Flaubertian one: Who are the intended readers? Such a question is more interestingly amplified in Nicholas Elliott's American English translation of Winock's *Flaubert* for wider Anglophone readerships, especially given the success of the no less herculean, elegant, and capacious *Flaubert: A Biography* by Frederick Brown (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 2006) in the U.S. In terms of the pleasure of the text, Brown's delivers the livelier, page-turning narrative in its direction of reader curiosity concerning what made, and continues to make, an author such as Flaubert a Writer, and hence explains his appeal to generations of readers. Brown's negotiation of a life of writerly works thus allows the biographer to negotiate "Flaubert" the person, persona, and masks of the endlessly intriguing *homme-plume*. Similarly, Geoffrey Wall's *Flaubert: A Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001) enjoys enduring appreciation by British English general readers and students new to Flaubert in its draw upon their understanding and sympathy for a not always likable, yet intriguing, figure.

In his preface Winock anticipates, perhaps too contrastingly, rather different orientations for his *Flaubert*. He presumes his target audience to be culturally informed general readers, for whom biography as an endlessly variegated study of Interesting Lives is their leisure reading genre of preference: “it has not been my intention to compete with, much less join, those cohorts of qualified Flaubert specialists in France and abroad” (p. vii). The historian’s eye view, and hence Winock’s approach to his *Flaubert*, then come more clearly into their own in his strictly chronological account of Flaubert’s life and writings. Despite the complex periods of historical change in the writer’s lifetime (1821-1880), such as during the Franco-Prussian War and its aftermath, there is never a problem with orientation for Winock’s reader, Francophone or Anglophone. As previous reviewers who are specialists of Flaubert’s works have noted, Winock’s knowledge and expertise as a historian of the Commune therefore make his exploration of the last ten years of Flaubert’s life one of the major highlights of this biography. For Anglophone readers less familiar with such major reference points in the history of nineteenth-century France, it may take greater resilience to appreciate this view after negotiating the twenty-one chapters leading up to it.

However, Winock’s fulsome account, his assured historian-biographer’s overview and narrative stances, as well as his full command of his materials leave such readers in no doubt as to his comfortable authority to forge his narrative from multiple historiographical sources. His *Flaubert* frequently draws its evidence from the writer’s works and vast correspondence, corroborated by references to French newspapers of the period and the correspondence and writings of Flaubert’s contemporaries. For the veteran consumer of biographies as Interesting Lives, the fact that the sum of Flaubert’s is interesting if disappointing—chapter twenty-nine, “Post Mortem”; chapter thirty, “Sketches for a Portrait”—pales beside the consummate craft of Winock as historian and biographer to keep such a conclusion under wraps. He leaves it to his reader to arrive there with an open mind, as does Flaubert in the endings of his fictional works, after due consideration of the intervening evidence and likely cultural, if not also reading engagement with Flaubert’s best-known work, *Madame Bovary*, in (translated) text and multiple film versions.

The first thirteen chapters of Winock’s *Flaubert* are therefore likely to determine its larger success for Anglophone readers of biography who are not specialists of Flaubert’s *œuvre* and its literary-cultural merits. Flaubert railed against trite, unthinking recapitulations of *idées reçues*. Yet Winock unreflectively re-narrates the many clichés about Flaubert’s experiences as young man and young writer, particularly his alleged love life: the unrequited “first” love Élisabeth Schlésinger; the “first” sexual encounter with Eulalie Foucaud/Foucault; the passionate, stormy and troubled relations with Louise Colet, and his “sex tourism” (p. 121) in Egypt. Despite Winock’s caveats regarding Flaubert’s problematic attitudes to relationships—for example “[c]ontempt for women is expressed shamelessly; misogyny was a matter of course.... The code of virility, shared by most writers of the time, situates Flaubert’s crudity in the masculine mores of an era dominated, in historian Alain Corbin’s words, by the ‘necessary manifestation of sexual energy’” (pp. 121-22)—Anglophone readers (male and female) may rightly castigate in these regurgitations the biographer’s own unreflecting attitudes.

For Anglophone readers with strong awareness of and interest in questions of gender, Winock’s *Flaubert* may then suddenly unravel as a rather biased “history,” particularly if it was Flaubert’s apocryphal “*Madame Bovary, c’est moi*” that led them to this biography in the first place. The gender-sensitive reader of Interesting Lives and their reconstruction may then see in the wealth of Winock’s secondary-critical references a strangely slight attention to those by women. Why is the wealth (in French, let alone English) of women’s history of the period, and of leading literary-critical study of Flaubert’s writing by women experts so marginal, uncited, ignored? Their extensive attention to questions of gender in Flaubert’s *œuvre* and correspondence precisely for his ambiguous, nuanced, and historically situated explorations of contemporary nineteenth-century attitudes to male and female sexuality potentially undermines the very rationale of Winock’s project as a “historian’s” biography. It is especially in instances such as those illustrated in the quotation above—but there are many others in

this biography—that Nicholas Elliott’s translation does such a fine job of unmasking the unhistorical biases of the biographer in its faithfulness to Winock’s language, phrasing, rhetorical moves, and not a little pomposity of style and viewpoint in the French edition of *Flaubert*.

Specialist reviewers fluent in French and English have been rightly large on praise of Winock’s contribution as a major French historian to the corpus of scholarship on Flaubert’s biography, but coy in their criticism precisely because of his authority in his fields. Publication of this fine American-English translation of *Flaubert* for a wide, but gender-politicized *Anglophone* readership thus offers a richly valuable addition and resource precisely for its historical considerations. More importantly, perhaps, Nicholas Elliott’s sustained handling of language in the Anglophone translation also provokes greater critical reappraisal for readers of the how to (better, best) reread and reconsider the life and works of important figures such as Flaubert who stand the tests of time and reader fickleness because their literary outputs and published correspondence speak beyond national and temporal frames of reference. Winock’s *Flaubert* in both French and English editions therefore challenges historians of biography, as well as biographers of “writer historians” such as Flaubert to re-engage with diverse approaches to writing Important Lives, especially in cases where such already exist as a further rich documentary resource. In this regard, Winock’s further interesting blind-spot as a historian-biographer is his self-positioning through his *Flaubert*. In joining an illustrious rank of biographers who also treat his subject in an unusually rich range of situated optics, Winock chooses to engage only cursorily with probably the most French among them in terms of their intellectual training: Sartre and Pierre-Marc de Biasi. How can Winock fail to mention the latter’s prize-winning *Gustave Flaubert: une manière spéciale de vivre* (Paris: Grasset, 2009)?

Winock’s *Flaubert*, then, especially in this *hénaurme* translation, deserves much greater comparative attention alongside both twenty-first-century re-readings and re-evaluations of Flaubert by, for example, de Biasi, Brown, and Wall, and equally compendious twentieth-century biographies: *inter alia* Enid Starkie’s *Flaubert: the Making of the Master* (New York: Atheneum, 1967) and *Flaubert the Master* (New York: Atheneum, 1971); Sartre’s three-volume *Idiot de la Famille: Gustave Flaubert de 1821 à 1857* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971) and Herbert Lottman’s *Flaubert: a Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989). In adding to this roster, Winock simply nails the truth that there is always room for further biographies of Flaubert as critical prisms on the life of/for their readers’ times. Winock’s *Flaubert* (2013 and 2016) perhaps then packs its biggest punch for the informed reader of biography, as well as the specialist of Flaubert. It is a monument to professional (French) historiography as itself a nineteenth-century phenomenon and shaper—thanks to Michelet, Renan, and others among Flaubert’s friends—of the vagaries and legacies of historically informed taste for the writing, and re-reading, of Important Lives.

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