

Flaubert on the Internet

It is with a sense of unease that I have read the many (many!) discussions of the imminent information superhighway. It seems that virtually all of the articles are positive, some are just plain corporate boosterism, and they sing the praises of technology and the benefits which it will certainly bestow upon us. To be fair, many people express a keen awareness that the development of the superhighway is approaching a critical phase that could determine whether it is dominated by closed corporate interests that are bent on offering us 500 channels of pabulum or a more open, democratic, and it is hoped, constructive alternative. Nevertheless, outside of the vast money-making possibilities it poses, is the superhighway really something to be so excited about? Is the Internet really the harbinger of a new age of wonderful cyber-communities that many see in it? Is all of this . . . progress? I find myself thinking again and again of that solitary, stoic romantic artist, Gustave Flaubert, creator of *Madame Bovary*. In his *Dictionary of Received Ideas* he railed against, to use a favorite phrase of his, all sorts of similar enthusiasms. What would he have made of it all?

In Flaubert's nineteenth century, when technological progress was deemed synonymous with progress itself, the analog to our revolutionizing computer technologies was the railroad. What miracles would this new mode of transport bring about, and did it not epitomize in its very action the hurtling progress of western civilization itself? Some were not so sanguine. Flaubert, with his ear so painfully and exquisitely attuned to the cadences of intellectual clichés, wrote in his *Dictionary*:

Railroads. If Napoleon had them he would have been invincible. Talk about them ecstatically, saying: "I, my dear sir, who am speaking to you now—this morning I was at X; I had taken the X train, I transacted my business there, and by X o'clock I was back here."

He followed with:

Railroad Stations. Gape with admiration; cite them as architectural wonders.

Clearly, Flaubert was not impressed. His controlled ridicule concealed a suppressed rage. To him, the idolatry of the railroad was just another popular delusion. I hear echoes of his sarcastic definitions when I read how computers, and now the information superhighway, are transforming all of our lives—for the better it is claimed. Always the emphasis is on the great increases in productivity, i.e., *business* productivity, and personal convenience which we may expect, and on the intrinsically wonderful nature of the change the technology will bring. The paperless office, video phones, telecommuting, virtual reality, virtual amusements, and on and on!

As Flaubert remarked in his letters, technological progress without moral progress yields barbarism, and the Franco-Prussian War only confirmed him in his views. Certainly, he would have cited World War I as conclusive proof, had he lived to see it instead of merely predicting it. In his stoical, romantic—and many thought—cynical view, people were swept up in fads, bedazzled by mere technology, technique and machines, that is, without asking about the consequences of such new opportunities. In other words, the short-term view looked marvelous, but who worried about suburban sprawl, air pollution, train wrecks, or simply the effect of a faster pace on the quality of everyday life itself. Who worried about the destruction of the world that made the innocent piety of the characters in his *Three Tales* possible?

I suspect that the positive effects of our new information/communication technology are not all that certain either, since people have difficulty in evaluating change in its context. Word processors and desk-top publishing, for example, have certainly removed much drudgery from office work. But the standards for commercial texts, business proposals, reports, etc. are now higher. I have compared engineering reports from 25 years ago to contemporary examples and found that the recent ones are slicker, much bigger, and have more varied graphics, but I would hesitate to judge them any better. Change we will certainly have, dizzying change, in fact. Although the information superhighway will certainly get some important data to people who desperately need it, I suspect that its main effect on most people in their everyday lives will be to ratchet even higher the standard for what it means to be informed, competitive, up-to-date, in touch, and *au courant*. No real progress here! As Flaubert remarked, often ordinary Parisians were convinced that the sophistication of the great me-

tropolis reflected *their* individual cosmopolitanism, when in fact they were usually urban provincials. Inundated by cataracts of information, we may deceive ourselves into believing that we actually know something.

Now, Flaubert had a rather unpleasant view of life, and he was wont to dwell on the negative and on the frequent displays of human stupidity which always tormented him. Certainly the coming of the railroads was not going to be held up, just as some form of information superhighway will be here soon, and so it should be. Given the nature of our economy and our culture, it is a necessity. But is it *good*? That is what gnawed at Flaubert, for he felt the changes he observed were not. They merely *were*, and society would go on being what it was; brutal, corrupt and philistine. We all know that it is too much to blame technology for not making us all virtuous, but we rarely refrain from praising new tech-

nology as though it will bring out the best in humanity. Perhaps it's time for a bit of stoical and deadpan appreciation of our new marvel. May I suggest:

Information Superhighway. Large bandwidth communications network facilitating rapid and high-volume transfer of digitally encoded information.

Otherwise, some contemporary Flaubert may write in his dictionary:

Information Superhighway Shake one's head in wonder and say, "*I can't believe what computers can do today! Why just ten years ago . . .*" Sure to change the world, a whole new realm of communities. Speak ecstatically, saying, "*Just this morning I downloaded 10,000 pages of business data from across the world—I have so much data I can't even look at it!*"