

## *Félicité and the Holy Parrot*

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TO BE SIMPLE of heart is not necessarily to be simpleminded. A case in point is Félicité, the heroine of Flaubert's late tale, *A Simple Heart* (*Un coeur simple*, 1877), whose intelligence has been greatly undervalued, in my view, by readers who take her to be confusing the Holy Spirit with a parrot, when in fact she distinguishes quite clearly between them, and chooses the parrot. Flaubert wrote the story with a stuffed parrot sitting on his desk the entire time: that its ascendancy is no surrogate was his whole point.

Félicité, to begin at the beginning of the story, is the servant of a certain Madame Aubain, a widow with two children. Before coming to work for Mme Aubain, Félicité had first a difficult childhood, then a disappointing love affair. Her life as a servant has not been easy either: "For a hundred francs a year, she did the cooking and cleaning, sewed, did the laundry, ironed, knew how to bridle a horse, fatten fowl, churn butter, and remained loyal to her mistress—who, however, was not a pleasant person" (translation by Charlotte Mandell).

Félicité is loyal to her mistress and devoted to the children, Virginie and Paul. She lavishes her spinster's hopes and meager savings on her nephew, Victor, but he dies young on a distant shore. Virginie, always a worry because of her weak chest, also dies; Paul grows up good only at accumulating debts and is no comfort. Mme Aubain sighs a great deal as she sits at her sewing. Félicité works and mourns her dead, and is so deprived of life she hardly ages.

Then a wonderful thing happens: a departing neighbor leaves behind a South American parrot named Loulou. Mme Aubain gives the resplendent bird, green, pink, blue, and gold, to Félicité and it becomes for her "almost a son, a lover." Eventually, however, one cold winter dawn, Loulou is found dead; Félicité is inconsolable and Mme Aubain, finally losing patience, tells her to just get the parrot

stuffed. Thereafter, installed on a shelf in her room, Loulou greets her every morning, "gorgeous, erect on a tree branch, which was screwed down on a mahogany pedestal, one foot in the air, his head tilted to the side, chewing on a nut, which the taxidermist, out of a love of the grandiose, had gilded."

In due course, Mme Aubain succumbing to a congestive ailment, Félicité is left alone with the stuffed bird. Years pass, Félicité's right to remain in the house is precarious, and, afraid to ask for repairs, she spends a winter under a leaky roof. At Easter, she coughs up blood and the doctor says it is pneumonia. As she lies on her deathbed, the procession of the Feast of the Blessed Sacrament passes by and pauses at an altar below her window that is one of its stations. Earlier, Félicité, being already too weak to make an offering for display on the altar, had lent Loulou instead. He is there now, part of an overflowing cornucopia.

Green garlands hung on the altar, which was decorated with a frill of English lace. In the middle there was a little box that held relics, two orange trees in the corners, and, all along it, silver candles and porcelain vases, from which sprung sunflowers, lilies, peonies, foxglove, clusters of hydrangeas. This heap of brilliant colors slanted down, from the first tier to the rug spread on the pavement; and rare things attracted the eye. A silver gilt sugar-bowl had a crown of violets, pendants made of precious Alençon stones sparkled on moss, two Chinese screens showed their landscapes. Loulou, hidden beneath some roses, let only his blue face be seen, like a plaque of lapis lazuli.

Loulou is the proper finish for this description of material bounty: while his forehead is still radiant, there is a reason the rest of him is hidden under roses. A little before, when one of the old ladies attending Félicité's deathbed brought her Loulou so she could say goodbye to him, we learned that, with the advancing years, worms have been eating at him and that rotting straw protrudes from his belly. But if, in her decomposing Loulou, Félicité has reached the outer edge of this material world, nothing indicates she is going

anywhere beyond. She kisses Loulou one last time; below her window, the priests swing their censers, scattering incense.

An azure vapor rose up into Félicité's bedroom. She widened her nostrils, breathing it in with a mystical sensuality; then closed her eyes. Her lips smiled. The movements of her heart slowed down little by little, more uncertain, more gentle each time, the way a fountain runs dry, the way an echo disappears; and when she exhaled her last breath, she thought she saw, as the skies parted, a giant parrot, hovering above her head.

Even for Flaubert, who knew his way around irony, this paragraph is a masterstroke. The ostensible content is Félicité's pious vision of the heavens opening to receive her; that is the paragraph's plot and what the women at the deathbed believe they are watching. An unwary reader, moved to sentiment if not sentimentality, might take this to be Félicité's own understanding, so that she has muddled Loulou with the Holy Spirit. But nothing in the paragraph supports this reading, quite the contrary. From the incense rising not to the skies but into the dying woman's room, to her nostrils widening to receive it with "mystical sensuality" (no contradiction indicated), to her closing eyes, her smiling lips, her slowing heartbeats coming fewer and fewer like a fountain running out, to her vision of a great parrot as she breathes her last breath, *nothing* of religion occurs, only things of the earth: a bedroom, incense, a nose, lips, a heart, and, to top it all off, a vision of a real parrot. The paragraph is composed wholly of terrestrial situations and objects, and the joke of the parrot's substitution for the spirit of God is on religion rather than on Félicité.

To the end, her epiphanies are all of this world. When her delirium abates with the approach of death, she visualizes the procession passing outside as an entirely worldly event.

All the school-children, all the choir and the firemen walked on the sidewalks, while in the middle of the street proceeded: first the verger armed with his halberd, the beadle with a large cross,

the schoolteacher watching over the children, the nun anxious about her little girls; three of the prettiest, curly-haired like angels, were throwing rose petals in the air; the deacon, his arms spread apart, conducted the music; and two thurifers at each step turned toward the Blessed Sacrament, which was being carried, under a canopy of dark red velvet held up by four churchwardens, by the priest in his beautiful chasuble. A flood of people brought up the rear, between the white cloths that covered the walls of houses; and they arrived at the bottom of the hill.

The narrative insists, improbably but explicitly, that Félicité is picturing all this herself: "Thinking about the procession, she could see it, as if she were following it." It is supposedly Félicité who imagines it all getting along like a circus parade, with everyone stepping smartly, the firemen on the sidewalk, the Swiss guard and the nuns in the middle of the street, the pirouettes of the censer-bearers, the three little girls prettily throwing rose petals while the priest advances in vested dignity. This is in fact much the way Flaubert would have described a religious procession in his own voice, except that for Félicité the description carries no implied judgment.

No judgment either for or against: her piety has represented the letter of belief, no more, no less, except where it has been able to annex her genuine feeling for the natural world. While accompanying Virginie in the preparations for her first communion, Félicité had discovered Christianity's agrarian lore. She recognized all the references in the Bible from her own experience; "Sowings, harvests, wine presses, all those familiar things the Gospel speaks of, existed in her life; the passage of God had sanctified them; and she loved lambs more tenderly for love of the Lamb, doves because of the Holy Ghost." She embraced evangelical iconography as concrete truth. That the Lamb be a lamb posed no problem; she could readily imagine Christ looking like a lamb, since she saw lambs all the time. As for the Holy Spirit being a dove, that too she could see. But she was puzzled as to how It could be simultaneously also fire and breath:

She found it difficult to imagine his appearance; for he was not only a bird, but also a fire, and other times a breath. It might be his light that flutters about at night on the edges of swamps, his breathing that pushes the clouds, his voice that makes bells harmonious; and she remained in adoration, taking pleasure in the coolness of the walls and the tranquility of the church.

Félicité's speculations, in the first clause of the second sentence, as to whether it might be the Holy Spirit flitting like a light in the swamp, pushing the clouds along in the sky, and lending harmony to the church bells, are all in the present tense. The preceding sentence is in the past tense, as is the second clause of this sentence, after the semi-colon. (The distinction is perhaps starker in French than in English: "*Elle avait peine à imaginer sa personne; car il n'était pas seulement oiseau, mais encore un feu, et d'autres fois un souffle. C'est peut-être sa lumière qui voltige la nuit aux bords des marécages, son haleine qui pousse les nuées, sa voix qui rend les cloches harmonieuses; et elle demeurait dans une adoration, jouissant de la fraîcheur des murs et la tranquillité de l'église.*") The present tense offset on both sides by the past seems to be quoting Félicité directly, not only the content of her speculations but their form or their kind: the world is for her simply present, here, in the material forms of light flitting in a swamp, clouds moving across the sky, bells ringing. Other kinds of existence need to be explained in the terms of this presence.

Her simplicity is a calm, boundless literalism, and she has no difficulty making of crucifixes and statues of the Virgin items of mundane knowledge. Her final vision, enthroning the stuffed rotting parrot instead of the insubstantial Holy Spirit, makes Loulou an apotheosis, but not an incarnation. In his own, once magnificent, now shredding self, he is the final destination of Félicité's love, not a stand-in. The sentence describing her vision of Loulou in the sky implies no mistake on her part: "she thought she saw, as the skies parted, a giant parrot, hovering above her head." This does not say that she thought she saw the Holy Spirit in the form of a parrot, but that she thought she saw a parrot; the Holy Spirit is nowhere to be

seen. She is not seeing the Holy Spirit in the guise of Loulou, nor mistaking Loulou for the Holy Spirit: she simply sees, as the skies open, her own Loulou.

Of course, she is quite unconscious of the sacrilege. Like Mark Twain's Huck Finn (whose first-person narration is reliable only as description, and often wrong as interpretation), she does not know that she knows what she knows, but she does know it, and would not have told her story differently had she understood it. So that while she has no intellectual authority, she *sees true*. Unaware even of the possibility of interpretation, she knows reality as brute fact, and this, in Flaubert's rendering, is the most penetrating knowledge possible. For to know brute fact is to know the truth of persons and of situations in both their substance and their form. Flaubert defined form as the material essence of material things, and wrote to Louise Colet that, without a love of form, he would have been a great mystic. Félicité is no mystic either; her knowledge, her world, is an assembly of informed facts.

Once, crossing a field with Mme Aubain and the two children, they encounter a bull. Mme Aubain wants to run but Félicité tells her "No! No! Don't move so fast!" (In the original, the injunction is more exactly calibrated: "*Non! non! moins vite!*": not "so fast" (which would be "*si vite*") but "*moins vite*," "less fast.") They therefore walk as fast as they can, but before they reach the edge of the field, the bull is upon them. "Félicité steadily retreated in front of the bull, and kept throwing lumps of turf that blinded him, while she shouted: 'Hurry! Hurry!'" The original of this sentence depicts the arrival of the bull and Félicité's reaction as a more precise event by having her, rather than steadily retreat, turn around to face the bull. In addition, the verb tense of her turning around is the *passé simple*, denoting a single-time occurrence. The sentence then continues in the *imparfait*, which describes an ongoing action. "*Félicité se retourna* [turned herself around], *et elle arrachait* [and she was tearing out] *à deux mains des plaques de terre qu'elle lui jetait dans les yeux.*" The act of turning around, its urgency underlined by the exceptional tense, lends Félicité a masterful agency. She is brave but she also

knows what she is doing; she understands the nature of bulls and commands the situation. The story of the bull has a happy ending and the village talks about it for years, with Félicité as the heroine.

*A Simple Heart* has already announced her competence in the first sentence, "For half a century, the housewives of Pont-l'Évêque envied Mme Aubain her servant, Félicité." But everything in that sentence—the lapse of time, the village wives, her mistress—comes before Félicité, and although we understand that she is the point to which the sentence tends, its grammar suggests her importance could lie in her being a passive object. Still, the next sentence, which I have already cited ("For a hundred francs a year, she did the cooking and cleaning, sewed, did the laundry, ironed, knew how to bridle a horse, fatten fowl, churn butter, and remained loyal to her mistress. . ."), reveals her to be exceedingly active, though since it is in the performance of classic servant tasks, she remains personally in abeyance. Four paragraphs later, she begins to emerge in her own right: "No one, in bargaining, showed more stubbornness. When it came to cleanliness, the gleam of her pots made other servants despair. Thrifty, she ate slowly, and with her finger on the table gathered together the crumbs from her bread—a loaf that weighed twelve pounds, baked specially for her, which lasted for twenty days."

Finally, saving Mme Aubain and the children from the enraged bull, Félicité reveals herself to have not only competence but authority, an authority arising from a kind of knowledge with which the other villagers seem less gifted, a knowledge of things in themselves, an immanent knowledge that never reduces to abstraction. She would be unable, if asked, to explain her knowledge—of fattening fowl, churning butter, teaching parrots to speak—having no theory about any of it. On the contrary, her consciousness is inseparable from its object, which is the way of knowing that Flaubert sought for himself, the goal of the countless revisions of his writing that were finally to merge form and content.

Flaubert often described his way of writing as a way of knowing. An unconscious adept of his aesthetic epistemology, and seeking to know love and beauty, Félicité nurtures and hones her Loulou into

the *beau idéal* of a parrot. She teaches him to speak: "Pretty boy! Your servant, Monsieur! Hail Mary full of grace!" So burnished, Loulou shines: "As if to amuse her, he would mimic the click-clack of the roasting spit, the shrill cry of a fish vendor, the saw of the carpenter who lived across the way; and, at the sound of the doorbell, imitated Mme Aubain: 'Félicité! The door! The door!'" They have conversations as she works in the kitchen: alive, he is for her art-in-life, dead, he will be life-in-art, until at her last moment, he is art-in-death.

Félicité's last comfort does not come from religion but from art; from things wrought of matter, and never transcendent. That the being she yearns toward on her deathbed has been a very messy bird and is now a very rotten relic is all part of his glory as he soars aloft in her imagination, the imagination of an instinctive poet who has always understood the objective correlative. The stuffed Loulou tops a pyramid of meaningful objects. The bedroom into which she takes him when he arrives from the embalmer's "resembled both a chapel and a bazaar, so many religious objects and miscellaneous things did it contain."

A big wardrobe made it difficult to open the door. Opposite the window overlooking the garden, a bull's-eye window looked out on the courtyard; a table, next to the trestle bed, held a water jug, two combs, and a cube of blue soap in a chipped dish. One saw on the walls: rosaries, medals, several pretty Virgins, a holy water stoup made of coconut shell; on the chest of drawers, covered with a sheet like an altar, the shell box Victor had given her; then a watering can and a ball, penmanship notebooks, the illustrated geography book, a pair of girl's boots; and on the mirror stud, hooked on by its ribbons, the little plush hat! [It had been Virginie's.] Félicité carried this sort of respect so far that she kept one of Monsieur's [M. Aubain's] frock coats. All the old things that Madame Aubain didn't want, she took for her room. That is why there were artificial flowers on the edge of the dresser, and the portrait of the Comte d'Artois in the recess of the dormer window.

The wit in this passage turns on Félicité's lack of discrimination, which mocks the dignity of exalted objects by lumping them in with mean ones. Religious objects reveal earthly materials and modes: a holy water stoup is made of coconut shell like the box Victor sent his doting aunt from some southern island; the Holy Virgin is a picture in multiple copies. Félicité's capacity for veneration embraces her dead master's old coat as fervently as it does rosaries and medals. In her room, it comes down to things being things, and it is as things that Félicité reveres all those she has collected. What consecrates the religious things in this conglomeration of objects is Félicité's having assembled them; in no way is it the reverse, that the religious things consecrate her collection. The situation is the same with the social things, like M. Aubain's frock coat: in Félicité's room, the transcendental, including the transcendental social order, are stripped of their auras. For her part, what she feels for them—Flaubert calls it "a sort of respect"—is without special content, and her feeling imparts no meaning to them beyond the conventional meaning she has not thought to question. She has taken the world as given and collected mementos like a traveler in a strange land buying anointed souvenirs.

Probably on the ground of her unquestioning acceptance, the portrait of Félicité has often been linked to that of Catherine Leroux, the old servant in *Madame Bovary* who receives a medal during the country fair. But Catherine Leroux's relation to that medal—learning that it is worth twenty-five francs, she immediately plans to give it to the priest to say masses for her—is the opposite of Félicité's to her cherished objects, and in particular to Loulou. In teaching Loulou to speak, Félicité implements reality, fulfills it actively. Catherine has been beaten by life into utter passivity, and the narrator's sympathy for her can only be condescending. There is no condescension but rather a happy complicity in his description of Félicité's final, triumphant iconoclasm.

Not that in honoring Loulou, Félicité has any intention of dishonoring the Holy Spirit. Her idolatry is not blasphemous. The stuffed parrot is her creation with which she is well pleased, but not only gods and devils create—so do artists. The stuffed parrot is like

all art, a full-fledged member of the fraternity of intractable, untranscendental, irreducible, real things that make up this world.

In other words, Félicité's Loulou in the sky brings a message from Flaubert that the word in the beginning of literature is already embodied in the stuff of the real world, in the sounds, rhythms, images, that make language substantial in itself, so that meaning is inextricable from its expression. Literature in *A Simple Heart* is like Loulou, once and forever, a matter of this world. Félicité's stuffed parrot—"gorgeous, erect on a tree branch, which was screwed down on a mahogany pedestal, one foot in the air, his head tilted to the side, chewing on a nut, which the taxidermist, out of a love of the grandiose, had gilded"—existed first in the flesh and passed directly into a material representation. The narrator explains carefully that worms were eating Loulou "[e]ven though it was not a corpse." It is no part of the divine plan for Loulou to be eaten by worms, to return to the dust while his spirit ascends. He will soon be tossed into the dustbin, his spirit having survived only materially and only as long as the mortal woman who loved his rotting body.

Félicité's deathbed vision preempts the Holy Spirit: art and religion are ontologically incompatible. The azure vapor that drifts into the room from censers waved below is no more the breath of the Holy Spirit than Loulou is the Dove. Félicité could never visualize the Holy Spirit—bird? fire? breath?—and, reading her tale, neither can we. But Loulou, we see clear as day.

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