
success in industry rather than subsidies for those in trouble, incentives for individual mobility, geographical and otherwise."

Arts & Letters

**THE LETTERS OF
GUSTAV FLAUBERT**

edited by Francis
Steegmüller
Harvard, 1980
250 pp. \$12.50

"May I die like a dog rather than hurry by a single sentence that isn't ripe!" Not only sentences obsessed French novelist Gustav Flaubert (1821-80). Words were his passion. The author of *Madame Bovary* did not believe in synonyms; he would anguish for hours searching for "*le seul mot juste*," the only right word. Most of the letters collected in this first of two volumes are opinionated discourses on art and writing. The majority were addressed to Louise Colet, a minor poet and Flaubert's ever-nagging Parisian mistress. He steadfastly refused to marry the woman, preferring instead to live in the country and write. His goal: prose as "rhythmic as verse, precise as the language of the sciences, undulant, deep-voiced as a cello, tipped with flame." Flaubert is often described by critics as the father of the modern realistic novel. "An author in his book must be like God in his universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere," he proclaimed. Yet, he professed to being "a rabid old Romantic," who found literature's "most beautiful works . . . motionless as cliffs, stormy as the ocean, leafy, green and murmurous as forests, forlorn as the desert, blue as the sky." He corresponded at night; by day, he was himself creating just such works of literature.

**PART OF NATURE, PART
OF US: Modern American
Poets**

by Helen Vendler
Harvard, 1980
376 pp. \$15

Wallace Stevens said of the poet: *As part of nature he is part of us. / His rarities are ours: may they be fit, / And reconcile us to ourselves in those / True reconcilings, dark, pacific words.* In some 30 crisp essays that originally appeared in publications ranging from the *Southern Review* and *Parnassus* to the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*, Vendler, a Harvard pro-

fessor of English, is concerned with modern poets' "naturalness." "To anyone brought up on Shakespeare, Keats, and Tennyson," she writes, "the accommodation to the modern . . . must be sometimes painful pleasure." Eschewing esoteric theories of aesthetics, she searches for—and values most highly—the true voice that describes life's ordinary experiences in the works of poets as disparate as W. H. Auden and Marianne Moore, Allen Ginsberg and Elizabeth Bishop. Vendler can be wholehearted in her praise (A. R. Ammons' "conversations with mountains are the friendliest and most colloquial conversations with the inanimate since Herbert talked to his shooting stars") and wittily scathing in her condemnations. Her least charitable remarks are reserved for E. E. Cummings, for his "great and aborted talent" and "devaluation of intellect," and W. S. Merwin: "one has a relentless social-worker urge to ask him to eat something, anything, to cure him of his anemia."

ADULTERY IN THE NOVEL: Contract and Transgression

by Tony Tanner
Johns Hopkins, 1980
383 pp. \$18.50



Woman Taken into Adultery by William Blake. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Marriage occupies center stage in most 18th- and 19th-century European novels about the middle class. But adultery, suggests Tanner, a British literary scholar, gets the limelight. Concentrating on Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Julie, or the New Eloise*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, and Gustav Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*—but ranging widely over Western literature to the present, Tanner considers this obsession with infidelity. Marriage reconciles the designs of love with those of economics, he muses; as such, it is the "all-subsuming, all-organizing contract . . . the structure that maintains the Structure" in modern middle-class society. In the novel, adultery became a device to test the limitations of decorum and of institutions such as marriage, the family, and the state. And, as authors came to view life as mired in arbitrary "contracts" that could be "transgressed," they began to ask whether society could be based on something other than marriage and novels constructed from something