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Too Much Information: Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pecuchet*



Frances Ferguson

Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pecuchet* is a Tendenz-Roman without a clear proposition to espouse,¹ or, as Jacques Neefs has said, a comedy of ideas.² Its characters repeatedly endeavor to learn how to perform various actions—from handling grain that has just been harvested to finding items for a geological collection—and repeatedly fail. They are committed to self-improvement and to improvement in all things. Because they frequently consult some of the sources that aim to offer the latest, most up-to-date views, it would be easy to imagine that the novel's chief target is progressive modernity. Yet Bouvard and Pecuchet's failures could equally be seen as problems that are uniquely theirs. Since they fail at everything they try, perhaps, we might think, the problem is not with their sources but with them.

Neither of these views—that we should blame the message, that we should blame the messengers—captures the book's peculiar charm and seriousness. *Bouvard et Pecuchet* is, from the moment Flaubert plants “several volumes of Roret's *Encyclopaedia*”³ (“plusieurs volumes

¹I would like to thank Suzanne Roos for her assistance in the preparation of this essay. The translations of the entries in the Anne Herschberg Pierot edition of the *Dictionnaire* are hers.

²Jacques Neefs, “Flaubert, le comique des idées,” *Nouvelles lectures de Flaubert: Recherches allemandes*, ed. Jeanne Bem, Uwe Detloff (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2006) 1. Neefs cites Judith Schlanger's treatment of this notion in her book *Le Comique des idées* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977).

³Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pecuchet with the Dictionary of Received Ideas*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Books, 1976) 24–25. All further references to this edition will appear in parentheses in the body of the text preceding the French quotation.

de l'Encyclopedie Roret" 33)⁴ and *The Magnetist's Manual* in Pecuchet's apartment, a novel that assigns starring roles to the encyclopedia, the dictionary, and the how-to book. These are Enlightenment institutions that are not merely storehouses for knowledge but shrines to writing. They collect information, ideas, and objects and arrange them. Moreover, as Flaubert's *Dictionary of Received Ideas* clearly records, their fame precedes them. And the things that people say about the writing that speaks to them are as catty as the conversations of teenaged girls are reputed to be:

DICTIONARY: Laugh about it—made only for the ignorant.

RHYMING DICTIONARY: To use one? Shameful!

DICTIONNAIRE: En rire—n'est fait que pour les ignorants.

DICTIONNAIRE DE RIMES: S'en servir? Honteux!⁵

ENCYCLOPEDIA (THE): Laugh at it in pity ~~and even thunder against it~~ as a rococo work.

ENCYCLOPEDIE (L'): En rire de pitié, ~~et même tonner contre~~ comme étant un ouvrage rococo. (Flaubert, *Dictionnaire* 75)

These entries do not define, if to define means to describe what something is or give synonyms for it. They are not what Saussure termed a synchronic law, a simple descriptive equivalence that would enable us to say that one tablespoon measures the same quantity as three teaspoons do, or to demonstrate with a diagram what a quincunx is (Saussure's example of a synchronic law).⁶ Flaubert instead moves well past such definitions to draw out the prescriptivism that hovers in all but the most descriptive accounts, to present a conduct book and to give instructions for use. One entry takes up yet another modern scriptural form and treats it as a central player in a small drama of daily social life:

NEWSPAPERS: Not be able to do without them—but thunder against them.

⁴Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pecuchet*, ed. Pierre-Marc de Biasi (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1999) 33. All further references to this edition will appear in parentheses in the body of the text following the French quotation.

⁵Gustave Flaubert, *Le Dictionnaire des idées reçues, suivi du Catalogue des idées chic*, ed. Anne Herschberg Pierrot (Paris: Livre de poche classique) 69.

⁶Ferdinand de Saussure, *A Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye with the collaboration of Albert Riedlinger, tr. Roy Harris (Chicago: Open Court, 1986) 91.

JOURNAUX: Ne pouvoir s'en passer—mais tonner contre. (Flaubert, *Dictionnaire* 97)

In one edition of the *Dictionnaire*, the description of what newspapers and journals are is overwhelmed with directions on how they might become props. The entry for newspapers and journals continues:

Play an important part in modern society: e.g., the *Figaro*, Serious Journals: the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, *L'Economiste*, the *Journal des Debats*. You must leave them lying about on your drawing-room table, taking care to cut the pages beforehand. Marking a few passages in red pencil is also impressive. In the morning, read an article in one of these grave and serious journals; in the evening, in company, bring the conversation round to the subject you have studied in order to shine. (318)⁷

All these forms—the dictionary, the encyclopedia, the newspaper—employ one rigorous organizational system or another so as to bring some order to knowledge and information. The dictionary and the encyclopedia mobilize the alphabet and allow it to multi-task. The alphabet does not, under their influence, merely serve as a system for representing speech and opening it to transcription. It also saturates knowledge with a filing technique. The museum likewise finds a dual approach to chronological time. It collects individual artistic works into the œuvres of individual artists, and assembles those artists as parts of schools, even as it establishes a regular schedule of opening and closing hours for the public.

All of these forms aim at universality; they address themselves to an anonymous and impersonal audience, which is to say that they do not present themselves as if they were adjusting their statements to their readers in the way that speakers almost automatically do when talking to a variety of different people. Yet while dictionaries and encyclopedias bring out new editions and museums develop new exhibitions, the newspaper is something like the paradigmatic Enlightenment form. With its publicity (its address to a public rather than a coterie), its periodicity (its appearing on a regular schedule), its currency (its aim to capture the recent and immediate past, and to identify the past only in relation to that present), and its universality (its aim to go anywhere), the newspaper aims to take the outside world into every home, to make external events and observations part of the domestic round. In the process it not only conveys information, it also, and most emphatically, introduces correction into daily life.

⁷Krailsheimer presents the translation of Robert Baldick, but does not indicate which French edition Baldick relied on. Kraisheimer, 289.

For the newspaper, as Niklas Luhmann has observed in his *Reality of the Mass Media*, does not achieve its credibility simply by drawing on the trust and credulity of readers and the honesty and impartiality of reporters.⁸ Rather, it builds the correction—its own emendation of its own previous statements—into its very fabric. What the correction contributes to the news system is, in the first place, the appearance that the newspaper is not so wedded to its previous statements as to be unwilling to repudiate them. Its very air of impartiality depends on its having less to defend in its own statements than an individual would have. Thus, on any day, the *New York Times* will publish any number of emendations of its recent statements. It says that it misspelled the name of the subject of one article, that it misidentified one of the principals in a photograph accompanying another story, that its reporting on the war in Iraq too willingly rehearsed the information that the government had passed along in confiding tones.

This practice of self-correction in its turn validates the way any given newspaper will describe itself as correcting other reports (those that are “out there”). Moreover, correcting those reports can become the occasion for spreading a patina of novelty over tales it has told at least twice. Even as a newspaper recycles stories that appear in the sections devoted to topics such as business, science, health, and food, it renovates these stories—makes them appear as news—by imagining an older, mistaken view to which they are the response and on which they are an improvement. The articles in the newspapers slough off their sense of familiarity—their having already been read—in being presented as informed statements that cast everything they address as an urban legend, the modern version of folk superstition. Thus, in a series called “Really?” the *Times* can ask every year or two if mosquitoes are more attracted to some people than to others and can package “the claim” as if it were archaic or traditional knowledge to be rejected or substantiated in the light of current knowledge.⁹ The elements appear in a carefully and instantaneously recognizable format: “The Claim . . .” “Really?” “Actually . . .” It is a sequence that blocks one’s consciousness that the newspaper has already reported this story, and legitimates what would be a curious lapse in source memory for a speaker or another form of writing: the newspaper never seems to say, “Have we already told you . . . ?”

⁸Niklas Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, tr. Kathleen Cross (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996) 26–27.

⁹The *New York Times* appears to have launched this particular column on September 7, 2004.

In *Bouvard et Pecuchet* Flaubert notices two related and particularly noteworthy aspects of the circulation of dictionaries, encyclopedias, and newspapers. They are, in the first place published twice—when their printed pages appear, then again when their statements are picked up and repeated by individuals. As the conversational directions of the *Dictionary of Received Ideas* suggest, the information of the dictionary, the encyclopedia, the newspaper, forms only a part—perhaps the smaller part—of their effect. In their role as a collection of statements about an actual world, they also become a quarry for conversation—with individuals repeating authoritative statements without themselves having any direct authority for making them. (Two persons may meet in an elevator and discuss the weather without leaving the building to test it for themselves.)

Moreover, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and newspapers have the look of authoritativeness not merely because they project a sense of their own commitment to accuracy in the course of their self-correction. Nor do they simply represent an implicit standard of proper usage. Rather, they participate in a culture of correction, in which conversation is less likely to take place in the mode of agreement than as a revision of what someone else has just said, a report on differing reports: “I heard that it’s going to be 95 today.” “I heard it’ll be 97”; or, “the paper said it would be rainy, but there isn’t a cloud in the sky.” Newspapers correct themselves serially, and refer back to their earlier mistakes. Or they report the story that is true by contrast with the urban myth that another newspaper put into circulation. Yet they also imagine that contradictory views should appear on the same pages, that economic analysts who are optimistic should be quoted alongside analysts who are pessimistic and that the words of political commentators opposed to a particular government policy should appear next to those of its advocates. And they introduce into the mouths of their readers both their stories and shards of information—“Did you read that . . . ?”—and a conversational style that involves every speaker in throwing in yet another bit of informing, and qualifying, data.

In *Bouvard et Pecuchet* Flaubert enlists his main characters to publish in conversation the things they have read, but he also frequently has them publish as if they were themselves speaking as newspapers or dictionaries or encyclopedias that churned out the entire list of possible views and variants. Leo Bersani has observed how this process works in the section of the novel in which Bouvard and Pecuchet discuss “the science of aesthetics” as they start thinking about writing a play:

The passage on esthetic theory . . . condenses a mass of quite different theories into a single page of theoretical pronouncements with no attributions whatsoever. And yet stylistically that page could be a direct quote from a single author. . . . It is . . . as if esthetic theory were speaking directly—not a particular theorist of esthetics, but the sourceless theory itself.¹⁰

In drawing on an enormous number of books that he treated as source texts for his novel and casting various different views as if they all appeared with equal force to the same speaker, Flaubert here eliminates both the distinctiveness of differences among texts and our ability to distinguish between his speakers in this passage. As Bouvard and Pecuchet exchange accepted conclusions and questions in this parody of Socratic dialogue, it becomes impossible to differentiate their statements from the full range of their sources, and one can only make out Bouvard's voice from Pecuchet's by imagining that they must be taking turns with each other in the dialogue that is quoted—even though that dialogue regularly slips into something that Bersani rightly calls "this version of free indirect speech" (141)—as if to mark its distance from the most familiar version. While free indirect style generally plays with the notion of aspect so as to make a character's seeing (an internal process) feel as available to us as a character's looking (an externally observable act), Flaubert so radically toys with aspect here as to eliminate the sense that there is any moment in which the internal should be privileged. The external views—indeed, external views *en masse* speak with the mouths of Bouvard and Pecuchet, as Schelling, Reid, Jouffroy, de Maistre, and Père André's thought on the aesthetic (143) are fused into a kind of bolus. It is as if the text were aping the impossible possibility of actually seeing the Kantian *Ding an sich*.

First of all, what is the Beautiful?

For Schelling it is the infinite expressing itself in the finite; for Reid, an occult quality; for Jouffroy an indestructible fact; for de Maistre what is agreeable to virtue; for Père André what conforms to reason.

And there are several kinds of Beautiful; a beautiful in the sciences, geometry is beautiful; a beautiful in ethics, Socrates' death is undeniably beautiful. A beautiful in the animal kingdom. A dog's beauty consists in its sense of smell. A pig could not be beautiful, given its filthy habits, nor a serpent, for it evokes ideas of baseness. (143)

¹⁰Leo Bersani, "Flaubert's Encyclopedism," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 21.2/3 (Winter-Spring, 1988): 140–46; 141. Further references to Bersani's essay will appear in parentheses.

D'abord qu'est-ce que le Beau?

Pour Schelling c'est l'infini s'exprimant par le fini, pour Reid une qualité occulte, pour Jouffroy un trait indécomposable, pour de Maistre ce qui plaît à la vertu; pour le P. André, ce qui convient à la Raison.

Et il existe plusieurs sortes de Beau: un beau dans les sciences, la géométrie est belle, un beau dans les mœurs, on ne peut nier que la mort de Socrate ne soit belle. Un beau dans le règne animal. La Beauté du chien consiste dans son odorat. Un cochon ne saurait être beau, vu ses habitudes immondes; un serpent non plus, car il éveille en nous des idées de bassesse. (208–09)

Bouvard and Pecuchet send away for authoritative texts—everything from practical handbooks on agricultural methods to theological treatises and works on hermeneutics. Then, discovering that the experts contradict one another, they end by reporting them all, as if the registration of all competing views were more important than the choice of any one. Theirs is what John Stuart Mill taught us to call the “marketplace of ideas.” In distinction to the model he posited, however, ideas never reach the point of sale. Rather, Bouvard and Pecuchet continue to push their intellectual shopping cart through aisle after aisle, emptying it after they lose interest in a particular topic, and filling it again with yet another dizzying array of different positions and recommendations.

What becomes increasingly conspicuous as the episodes of the novel accumulate, however, is that their search for knowledge is not dispassionate. Nor is it a passionate love of knowledge in itself. Rather, the two men intuitively embrace the notion that any view they encounter from the persons around them should be counterbalanced with an opposing view. Thus, early in the novel they solicit and receive instruction from Monsieur de Faverges, a neighboring landholder, and his steward; feel “an almost religious awe for the bounty of the land” (Krailsheimer 42; “. . . se sentaient pris d’une vénération presque religieuse pour l’opulence de la terre”; Biasi 58); set themselves to reading “the four volumes of the *Country Household*” and ordering Gasparin’s course and a “subscription to an agricultural journal” (Krailsheimer 43; “Dès le soir, ils tirèrent de leur bibliothèque les quatre volumes de la *Maison Rustique*, se firent expédier le cours de Gasparin, et s’abonnèrent à un journal d’agriculture”; Biasi 59–60). They shore up their credentials by never missing “an agricultural show” (Krailsheimer 44; “. . . ne manquaient pas d’assister à tous les comices agricoles”; Biasi 60), but even before they have tried their hands at farming, they deploy their knowledge as a weapon against the farmer Gouy, on whom they

shower “their advice, mainly deploring his system of leaving fields fallow” (Krailsheimer 44; “Bientôt, ils fatiguèrent maître Gouy de leurs conseils, déplorant principalement son système de jachères”; Biasi 60). Pecuchet “even made it a point of honour to avoid saying Charlemagne, instead of Karl the Great” (Krailsheimer 118; “Il se serait cru déshonoré s’il avait dit: Charlemagne et non Karl le Grand . . .” Biasi 173) so as to insist on importing a conspicuously exotic pronunciation into the vernacular of rural France. Later, Pecuchet, once a man extremely solicitous lest he and Bouvard might make lewd remarks within the hearing of a priest whom they pass on the streets of Paris, does not merely doubt religion and the Church. He and Bouvard insist upon taking the battle directly to the person of their acquaintance least likely to be sympathetic to their views, the curé, Monsieur Jeufroy. While Bouvard and Pecuchet have gone through a spiritual phase in which they have regularly attended mass and consulted the curé, their religious learning has taken them straight into questions that are more skeptical than pious. The curé can persist for a time in treating their questions as part of catechetical knowledge: “The six days of *Genesis* mean six great ages. The Jews’ theft of the precious vessels from the Egyptians must be interpreted as intellectual riches, the arts whose secret they had stolen . . .” (Krailsheimer 237; “Genèse veulent dire six grandes époques. Le rapt des vases précieux fait par les juifs aux Egyptiens doit s’entendre des richesses intellectuelles, les Arts, dont ils avaient dérobé le secret”; Biasi 349). Yet he rightly starts hoping to avoid them—even before Pecuchet begins a long discourse about common misinterpretations of the Bible, insisting that Origen says that there were not as many as twenty million martyrs (Krailsheimer 239; “Leur nombre n’est pas si grand, dit Origène”; Biasi 351), that the Roman emperors “had been the victims of calumny” (Krailsheimer 239; “Suivant Pecuchet, on les avait calomnies” Biasi 352) and that the numbers of martyrs had been radically overstated when the name of St. Ursula’s companion Undecemilla was “mistaken for a number” and the legend that St. Ursula and eleven thousand virgins had been martyred was launched (Krailsheimer 239–40; “. . . et les onze mille vierges de saint Ursule, dont une compagne s’appelait Undecemilla, un nom pris pour un chiffre . . .”; Biasi 352).

While the anonymity of the reading public supposedly frees newspapers, dictionaries, and encyclopedias to avoid the polite evasions of direct address, Bouvard and Pecuchet absorb the information and authority of these impersonal writing institutions and in turn direct it to actual persons. In the process they relay a strangely impersonal form

of gossip to its objects. Gouy's private conduct may never be in question, but Bouvard and Pecuchet want him to know that the world says that there are ways of doing things different from his own. They think that the curé must be told that his being a good curé—in the sense of fulfilling his duties as a representative of the Catholic Church—is the kind of thing that many people consider impossible. What they continually bring to their new neighbors is word that “some say” that their life worlds are mistaken in more or less fundamental ways.

And the world reciprocates with a defensive announcement that Bouvard and Pecuchet have overstepped, that they have trespassed on ways of living that are as territorialized as if they were private property. The doctor Vaucorbeil threatens to bring charges against Pecuchet for practicing medicine without a license when Pecuchet tries to apply what he has gleaned from his readings on the farmer Gouy (Krailsheimer 81); a customs officer brings a halt to their excavations when they search for fossils (Krailsheimer 91); and “their financial embarrassment” puts many people in the position of being able to see them as being in the wrong. They owe “Beljambe for three casks of wine, Langlois for twelve kilos of sugar, 120 francs to the tailor, sixty to the cobbler” (Krailsheimer 209; “Ils devaient trois barriques de vin à Beljambe, douze kilogrammes de sucre à Langlois, cent vingt francs au tailleur, soixante au cordonnier”; Biasi 309) and the Justice of the Peace finds for the farmer Gouy when he asks for a reduction in rent (Krailsheimer 212; “On soumit le cas au juge de paix, et il conclut pour le fermier”; Biasi 313).

On the level of beliefs about the world, *Bouvard et Pecuchet* captures a liberal public sphere that ends by being tolerant of various beliefs from impotence rather than broad-mindedness. Differences stand, ultimately, because Bouvard and Pecuchet never become characters in the way the realist novel has taught us to expect characters to be. The opening pages describe the two men and their meeting in a spare and almost mechanical way. In one line set off in isolation to stand as an independent paragraph, Flaubert announces that “two men appeared” (Krailsheimer 21; “Deux hommes parurent”; Biasi 28). The two men come from different directions (one from the Bastille, one from the Jardin des Plantes); one is taller, the other shorter, but their decision to sit on the same bench is so synchronized as to have the look of a choreographed performance: “What they came to the middle of the boulevard they both sat down at the same moment on the same seat” (Krailsheimer 21; “Quand ils furent arrivés au milieu du boulevard, ils s’assirent à la même minute, sur le même banc”; Biasi 28).

In a standard realist novel, the introduction of characters involves beginning to answer the question: "Where were they from?" Later, as if to supply at least an abbreviated answer to this question, Flaubert will dole out bits of recognizably conventional information about the characters' backgrounds. At the outset, however, he frustrates the question, or rather, establishes it from an observer's position rather than any history drawn from the interior depths of the characters' memories. When we first encounter them, they come from the Bastille and the Jardin des Plantes, as any observer could see for himself. Pecuchet's biography involves only glancing reference to his father, a "small tradesman" (Krailsheimer 26; "un petit marchand"; Biasi 36) and to the mother who died so young that he never knew her. Bouvard's "oldest memories took him back to the banks of the Loire, to a farmyard," (Krailsheimer 26; "Les plus vieux souvenirs de Bouvard le reportaient sur les bords de la Loire dans une cour de ferme"; Biasi 36). In addition, as the scene develops, it turns out that the two men are, from a sociological standpoint, the same person. Their names and their physical features may differ from one another (with Bouvard being shorter and blue-eyed, Pecuchet being taller and dark-haired), but they are, for many of the world's intents and purposes, effectively identical. They both write their names in their hats. And they write their names in their hats for the same reason—that they both work in an office, where they want to be able to identify their things as theirs rather than their co-workers'. Indeed, they both work as copy-clerks. They are both forty-seven. Even their differences are presented as virtually indiscernible: "though Bouvard was possibly the more liberal," their political "views were the same" (Krailsheimer 22; "Leurs opinions étaient les mêmes, bien que Bouvard fut peut-être plus libéral"; Biasi 29). Bouvard is a widower without children, while Pecuchet has never married. These facts of their personal histories are recounted with such speed and with so little elaboration that we scarcely notice the differences in their paths to the sociological category they share: "single (middle-aged) adult male." It is as if fate—or a novelist—had decided to anticipate the techniques of a computer dating service and were to bring together two strangers whom it wanted to introduce to one another—or as if the world were playing its own game of matching likes with likes.

Indeed, the sociological rubric that makes Bouvard and Pecuchet look as recognizably the same as two different specimens of *quercus rubra* makes their instantaneous attraction to one another look as though it were an expression of species being, a mutual recognition at the

level of DNA: “their words flowed on inexhaustibly, remarks following anecdotes, philosophical insights following individual considerations. . . . Each as he listened to the other rediscovered forgotten parts of himself” (Krailsheimer 23; “Leurs paroles coulaient intarissablement, les remarques succédant aux anecdotes, les aperçus philosophiques aux considérations individuelles. . . . Chacun en écoutant l’autre retrouvait des parties de lui-même oubliées . . .” Biasi 30). “They had become attached to each other by secret fibres” (Krailsheimer 27; “Ils s’étaient, tout de suite, accrochés par des fibres secrètes”; Biasi 36–37). With their very different gaits, they manage to walk together as gracefully as if they were dancing partners: “Bouvard walked with long strides, while Pecuchet, with short, quick step, his frock-coat catching on his heels, seemed to glide on casters. Similarly their personal tastes were in harmony” (Krailsheimer 27; “Bouvard marchait à grandes enjambées, tandis que Pecuchet multipliant les pas, avec sa redingote qui lui battait les talons semblait glisser sur des roulettes. De même leurs goûts particuliers s’harmonisaient”; Biasi 37). Over and over, the two men are described as an odd couple—the one, Bouvard, short and stout; the other, Pecuchet, tall and thin, with his prominent and low-hung nose making “his whole face look like a profile” (Krailsheimer 22; “Sa figure semblait tout en profil, à cause du nez qui descendait très bas”; Biasi 29). Their differences in appearance are continually iterated, only to yield the conclusion that they were perfectly suited to one another.

A paradigmatic homosocial pair, Bouvard and Pecuchet have their words mutually calibrated by affection. Their very speech is redundant, because they both think the same thought. When Bouvard proposes that they have dinner together, Pecuchet replies that the idea had occurred to him (though he had been reluctant to suggest it). Finally, and most crucially, the near identity is even more intensely marked when Bouvard gives advice and Pecuchet accepts it. Bouvard, seeing Pecuchet pant in the heat that the roof tiles have concentrated in his garret apartment, says that he’d take off his flannel waistcoat if he were Pecuchet (“Bouvard lui dit: —A votre place, j’ôterais ma flanelle!”; Biasi 34). Though Pecuchet initially resists going without his “health waistcoat” (“son gilet de santé”; Biasi 34), their new friendship is cemented by Pecuchet’s showing up at Bouvard’s workplace the next day and announcing triumphantly that he isn’t wearing his waistcoat and he isn’t ill. He has acted in the way that Bouvard would act, and in the process abandoned a doctrinal insistence that there is a causal relationship between his wearing the waistcoat and being healthy.

Pecuchet's leaving off his waistcoat is an act that functions as a love token, and his report to Pecuchet is that of a someone who has surprised himself by having suddenly mastered some new thought or axiom and who wants to pay tribute to the person who helped him to it. Yet the peculiar effect of their new-found confidence in one another is not, as many love songs would have it, to see the entire world enchanted but to be filled with mistrust of everyone except the two of them. Bouvard's unanticipated inheritance from his natural father and soi-disant uncle represents the beginning of the end of any harmony with the world. Every document—from the letter from the notary informing Bouvard of “a most important provision in [his] favour” (Krailsheimer 30; “Ce testament contient en votre faveur une disposition très importante”; Biasi 41)—comes to be an occasion for wondering about the reality of the documentation itself and hesitating in the thought that the notice might be a practical joke.

In this natural history of the couple form, Flaubert depicts the two men's friendship as opening them to activities to which neither had apparently been previously included. They attend lectures on Arabic at the Collège de France, they go to the Louvre to look at the Raphaels, and they roam in the countryside. At the same time, this friendship sours them on much that had made up the lives they had lived before they met. Neither one much likes the friend to whom the other introduces him, and those old friends quickly assume the roles of old furniture, neither cherished nor cast off, but simply moved from a drawing room to an out-of-the-way space. The jobs that had once seemed merely to limit the time they had for various interests begin to seem to impose terrible constraints: “The monotony of the office became odious” (Krailsheimer 29; “La monotonie du bureau leur devenait odieuse”; Biasi 40).

Flaubert reports: “They stimulated and spoilt each other” (Krailsheimer 29, “—et ils se renforçaient dans ce dégoût, s'exaltaient mutuellement, se gâtaient”; Biasi 40). The statement may sound wildly exaggerated if we compare their behavior with the demoralizations of *Madame Bovary* (Rodolphe's effect on Emma, Emma's from beyond the grave on Charles) or *L'Éducation sentimentale* (Deslauriers' conviction that he ought to be living Frédéric's life, which leads him to profess love to Madame Arnoux as if he had already himself lived Frédéric's long-standing infatuation with her and to think of applying for the job that Dambreuse had offered Frédéric). Yet the two do not merely encourage one another in their enthusiasms; they do not merely develop a solidarity with one another that makes them impatient with other people.

They also go from thinking of themselves as flouting convention (as when Bouvard urges Pecuchet to take off his coat (Krailsheimer 22; “Bouvard l’engagea à mettre bas sa redingote. Lui, il se moquait du qu’en dira-t’on!”; Biasi 29) to misrepresenting themselves. As if they were imitating the Rousseau of the *Confessions* who tries to pass himself off as English when he finds himself in an awkward spot in Italy, they pretend to be Englishmen: “When asked for their passports they pretended to have lost them, making out that they were foreigners, Englishmen” (Krailsheimer 28; “Quand on demandait leur passeport, ils faisaient mine de l’avoir perdu, se donnant pour deux étrangers, deux Anglais”; Biasi 38). Bouvard, who mistakenly gets on the coach to Rouen rather than the one to Caen, whiles away his time waiting for a seat on the proper coach by going to the theater, smiling “at his neighbours, saying that he had retired from business and had recently acquired an estate in the neighbourhood” (Krailsheimer 35; “ne sachant que faire, il alla au Théâtre des Arts, et il souriait à ses voisins, disant qu’il était retiré du négoce et nouvellement acquéreur d’un domaine aux alentours”; Biasi 49). His statement is true if retiring as a copy-clerk is retiring from business and if the 100 kilometers that separate Rouen from Caen do not stretch the notion of a neighbourhood past recognition.

Flaubert puts only a few deliberate misstatements in Bouvard and Pecuchet’s mouths, and he does not tempt us to accuse them of violating the Kantian categorical imperative and our obligation to other people when he reports them. Instead, their declaring themselves to be English (“we’re not from here”) and Bouvard’s saying he has bought a place near Rouen (“I live around here”) start looking like early signs of their placeless speech, their channeling an impersonal world of sources as if they had no sense of where they were, and no consciousness of whom they were talking to—except when they are together in the same place and talking to one another. Directionally challenged when apart, Bouvard takes the coach to Caen, and Pecuchet spends nine days getting to Chavignolles, only to think himself hopelessly lost until Bouvard shows up in a gig (Krailsheimer 35–36; Biasi 49).

Their reunion at Chavignolles—“Well, here we are! Aren’t we lucky!” (Krailsheimer 36; “Nous y voilà donc! Quel bonheur!”; Biasi 50) is an arrival at a destination, but it also bespeaks the extent to which their relationship is itself a destination and point of orientation. Bouvard’s inheritance and Pecuchet’s contribution have enabled them to move to the country and to explore in freedom all the things which they thought they wanted to know when they were copy-clerks in Paris.

Yet while they furnish their new household just as many couples do, Bouvard and Pecuchet create their home as a kind of laboratory, an expansive test kitchen in which to try out various different bodies of practical and abstract knowledge. Their relationship shapes their world so thoroughly that they see things, ideas, and people failing them, and do not castigate themselves or lament their mistakes.

No more self-accusatory than Don Quixote, and as supportive of one another as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Bouvard and Pecuchet never achieve any success. They cannot follow the simplest recipe to a productive conclusion, a fact that might lead us to indulge in sweeping wonder at the notion that we ever think of knowledge as transmissible. Yet it is also worth observing that Bouvard and Pecuchet never manage to get away from one another once they set up household. Emma Bovary was actually capable of having secrets, of conducting a life that her husband Charles never suspected. Bouvard and Pecuchet mainly work together in their various studies, but even the private plans they develop turn out to be two versions of the same plan. Pecuchet surprises Bouvard with a vision of two yews turned into topiary peacocks, at just the same time as Bouvard presents him with a view of the art work he has created by covering the field gate "with a layer of plaster, on which was drawn up a fine array of 500 pipe bowls, representing Abd-el-Kader, negroes, naked women, horses' hooves and snails" (Krailsheimer 59; "*La porte des champs était recouverte d'une couche de plâtre, sur laquelle s'alignaient en bel ordre cinq cents fourneaux de pipes, représentant des Abd-el-Kader, des nègres, des turcos, des femmes nues, des pieds de cheval, et des têtes de mort!*"; Biasi 83). They are, that is, simultaneously closeted artists; and they simultaneously reveal their work as artist to artist. Similarly, the two men hide their erotic lives from one another, which turns out to mean only that they have not discussed their amorous adventures and do not themselves realize that Pecuchet's infatuation with the servant girl Mélie is perfectly synchronized with Bouvard's courting the widow Madame Bordin (Krailsheimer 179). Even when they are so irritable with one another from hunger and alcohol as to declare themselves ready to choose death over life, the "spirit of imitation" overcomes them (Krailsheimer 220; "*l'esprit d'imitation*"; Biasi 324). Suicide will not be an escape from one another. It is, rather, a decision in which they seem to be engaged in a process of reciprocal copying—as is their sudden recognition that they must not kill themselves because they have not yet drawn up wills.

Flaubert recounts the two men's withdrawal from the apparent

brink as straightforwardly as possible. They must, they both think, prepare wills that will dispose of the property they have all but lost to the kin they seem not to have. This absurdity follows on many others, and it has many successors in the novel. But it, in combination with all those others, should make us wonder why Bouvard and Pecuchet seem determined, as if by fate, to die and live together, even when one complains that the other has made life intolerable (by committing such a heinous crime as accidentally breaking a teacup). A. J. Krailsheimer, in his introduction to his English translation of the novel, attempts to seize some hope for readers by presenting a rosy picture of Bouvard and Pecuchet as close companions, “friends, inseparable, but bound by voluntary ties of choice and loyalty, not compulsion” (Krailsheimer 15). He even commends the characters for having “a natural kindness and decency which nothing can shake” and for making indefatigable efforts “for something better” (Krailsheimer 15).

For Krailsheimer the novel focuses on the characters as such, and on the degree of identification we might feel with them. This emphasis is plausible in light of the way the episodic quality of the narrative feels like a recurrent blockage of the notion of plot. Yet we might supplement such an account along the lines that Pierre Bourdieu provides in his discussion of *L'Éducation sentimentale* in *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*.¹¹ There Bourdieu depicts Flaubert as locked in a relationship of identification and disidentification with his protagonist Frédéric, in which he can take up as a vocation the project of depicting Frédéric as permanent outsider to two opposed and recognizable social games, those of art and those of money that are alternative versions of the habitus. Flaubert, on Bourdieu's account, not only records these social worlds realistically, he also provides an objective description that enables us to see that Frédéric “is situated in a zone of social weightlessness in which the forces which will carry him in one direction or another are provisionally balanced and cancelled” (Bourdieu 12).

Bourdieu sums up the significance of Frédéric's inability “to invest himself in one or another of the games of art or money that the social world proposes” by saying that “novelistic adolescences, such as those of Frédéric or Emma, who, like Flaubert himself, take fiction seriously because they do not manage to take the real seriously, remind us that the “reality” against which we measure all fictions is only the universally

¹¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, tr. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996) 3–43.

guaranteed referent of a collective illusion" (Bourdieu 13). It is a formulation that captures important movements in *Madame Bovary* and *L'Éducation sentimentale* and that may help us to notice how much *Bouvard et Pecuchet* is a development from and a repudiation of the novelistic project that Flaubert had pursued earlier.

For Bourdieu quite rightly sees the various love objects of *Madame Bovary* and *L'Éducation sentimentale* as emanations of different versions of the habitus, the set of dispositions that "enable us to sense or to comprehend the conduct of people familiar to us" (Bourdieu 13). Emma's husband Charles and her lovers Rodolphe and Leon are not merely themselves. They are also, and even primarily, representatives of ways of living. While Emma's affairs look like—and are—betrayals of Charles, they are also ways of choosing against the objective world of the social field in which she finds herself. (So that Charles might take some comfort, as specialists in marriage and divorce say, in thinking that it was not his fault that Emma betrayed him.) In *L'Éducation sentimentale*, the contradictory ways of seeing a love partner as a life world are particularly strongly marked: Frederic on the one hand thinks of Rosanette and of how for a time he had thought of his contentment as "so inseparably linked with this woman" ("tant son bonheur lui paraissait naturel, inhérent à sa vie et à la personne de cette femme");¹² on the other, he treats her desire to marry him after she bears his child as both entirely palpable and infuriating ("Frédéric was furious"; Flaubert, *Sentimental Education*, 422; "Frédéric en fut exaspéré"; Flaubert, *L'Éducation sentimentale*, 410). He knows what she is thinking (of marriage), and he is enraged by the conversation he can carry on fully inside his own head—and with all the insight of a lover. He is frequently humiliated in the novel—but not so much by signs of disrespect as by other people's suppositions that he is involved with Madame Arnoux or Rosanette or Madame Dambreuse or Louise—with all of whom he actually is involved. What he cannot accept is love's "understandings" and the understanding that the outside world has of them—the sense that any one of these women might share a habitus with him, might have practical intuitions in perfect alignment with his, and might "comprehend his conduct" (Bourdieu 13). And any show of public confidence that it has understood such understandings particularly galls him.

¹²Gustave Flaubert, *Sentimental Education*, tr. Robert Baldick (New York: Penguin Books, 2004) 353; *L'Éducation sentimentale: L'histoire d'un jeune homme* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1969) 349.

While Bourdieu treats various different characters in *L'Éducation sentimentale* as elements of social games, his analysis of that novel helps to lead us to a perhaps surprising view of the central relationship in *Bouvard et Pecuchet*—namely, that Flaubert quite deliberately set out to create a pairing that would deflect and distort all social and intellectual games, would make the relationship itself look like the outermost boundary of their habitus. Theirs is a *folie à deux* that puts them more thoroughly at odds with their neighbors than one can appreciate if one simply describes them as Parisians who have suddenly taken up active leisure in the country, or as amateurs throwing themselves at various forms of expertise.

The novel as a genre has historically stressed the love relationship and the marriage plot, has created an opening for readerly identification by supplying a character to love and understand another character and, in the process, to justify our love. In the hands of a novelist like Jane Austen, the entire plot tracks the development of the two principals' mutual understanding, and the liberal use of free indirect style puts readers in the position of seeing the very thoughts of characters as "that special someone" in the novel will come to see them later. Flaubert's entire career involves a progressively intense attack on that mode, as his experiments in the language of folk tales in *Madame Bovary* may serve to indicate. Against the romantic tale of Charles Bovary's infatuation with Emma, he sets the intense impersonality of the editorial narrative—the folk tale as the tale that could be told by anyone and that could be applied without benefit of private understandings. From the folk tales that he read and cribbed from assiduously, he drew declarations like that of Emma's father: "'If he asks for her,' he said to himself, 'I'll let him have her.'" ¹³ ("S'il me la demande, se dit-il, je la lui donne.") ¹⁴ It is a formulation that seems to render the differences between German and French negligible in capturing the rhythms and ascriptions of thought that almost echo the Grimms' tale known as "The Robber Bridegroom"). ¹⁵

Emma's father is intensely external and matter-of-fact, and he does not spend time wondering about Emma's—or Charles'—interior thoughts. Not for him the love plot that would vindicate the rise of

¹³ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, ed. Paul de Man (New York: W.W. Norton, 1965) 17.

¹⁴ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary, Œuvres*, ed. A. Thibaudet et R. Dumesnil (Paris: Gallimard, 1951) 1:313.

¹⁵ *Grimm's Tales for Young and Old*, tr. Ralph Manheim (New York: Doubleday, 1977) 146–49.

the freely chosen marriage and romantic love, not for him the celebration of companionate marriage. Thus, Flaubert particularly favors humiliating mutual understandings by consigning them to different time frames or setting an early expiration date for the commitment of one of the lovers. Charles Bovary sees his late wife's affection only when she is no longer alive: "She had loved him after all." Rodolphe's cool expression of the necessity of violating Emma's understanding of him is only a presage of the sense of horror that Frederic will attach to being seen in and by a love relationship. *Bouvard and Pecuchet* replays such moments when Gorgu dismisses as nothing the life world that Madame Castillon has taken their affair to be. He actually spurns her as she tries to remind him of their love: "she was no longer a human being, but a ruined thing" (Krailsheimer 175; ". . . n'étant plus un être, mais une chose en ruines"; Biasi 262).

The terrible joke of the brutal ending of Gorgu's relationship with Madame Castillon is that Pecuchet is positively enflamed with desire for love on seeing it in ruins. Meanwhile, Bouvard, as if by some deep gift for imitation of the unacknowledged, also decides to seduce Madame Bordin. These affairs end quickly and badly, because Pecuchet has mistaken Mélie for an innocent, and Bordin has failed to register Madame Bordin's interest in his property. Yet the importance of the episode lies not just in its disparagement of the notion that love unites two minds, but in two distinct but related developments: its criticism of the notion that novelists can rely on the love plot to establish the conviction that characters understand one another (and that the reader can understand their understandings) and its alignment of that love plot with the various fables of expertise that the novel features in its various different segments. Pecuchet's romance may fail because there's someone else (Gorgu), Bouvard's, because there's something else (Bouvard's property rather than Bouvard "himself").

The accomplishment of the novel, unfinished though it may be, is to have made all forms of understanding—from the most practical to the most abstract to the most emotional and artistic—look as though they follow this same pattern. To every expert statement, the novel says, "there's someone else, there's something else." Bersani identifies this aspect of the novel—its developing material that its characters cannot control even as they generate much of it through their reading—as "a kind of crazy mobility which may, had Flaubert completed the novel, have allowed them to escape their countrymen's wrath and enjoy the ambiguous freedom of harmless madmen" (Bersani 145). Yet for all that is persuasive about this view, it understates the radicality of

Flaubert's project in *Bouvard et Pecuchet*, which was nothing less than to eliminate the privilege of speech (in the mouth of the lover, in the mouth of the expert, in the mouth of the novelist).

Thus, while Bersani suggests that *Bouvard et Pecuchet* proposes "the esthetic as a strategy for eluding definitions and identifications" and as "*a salutary de-acceleration of the processing of knowledge as power*" (emphasis his, Bersani 145), the aesthetic draws its force here by showing how little knowledge is processed as power—in the actual and in the fictional worlds. *Bouvard et Pecuchet* represents a massive askesis of whatever remnants of a will to novelistic power Flaubert ever had, as his practice here implicitly criticizes both the novelistic tradition and his own past work in his search for a novel of pure description. In *Madame Bovary* he could not resist bringing to his readers the news that Homais the pharmacist would never restore the blind man's sight with the ointment he had so optimistically developed: "what he doesn't know is that his blindness is incurable." In *L'Éducation sentimentale* he had routinely depicted characters performing acts of social translation, with "he said" always being trailed by "which meant . . ."

Both of these strategies—the obtrusion of the long-concealed narrator to cast doubt on Homais' aims like a small-town historian eager to see an unpleasant person get his comeuppance, the sense of psychological attunement that makes the novel (as a tradition, and in *L'Éducation sentimentale* itself) look like a matter of becoming increasingly adept at reading character and adapting oneself to the habitus of which particular characters are a part—disappear from *Bouvard et Pecuchet*. As Anne Herschberg Pierrot, Claude Mouchard, and Jacques Neefs observe in their essay "Les Bibliothèques de Flaubert," Flaubert's practice as a reader and researcher steadily increased over the course of his career, and culminated in the dossiers of *Bouvard et Pecuchet*.¹⁶ We can see the traces of the research he did in his depiction of the surgery that Charles Bovary performs on Hippolyte's club foot, but that research is what we might call the background or source for the scene that Flaubert actually writes. In *Bouvard et Pecuchet*, however, the "library research that the author has done is mirrored in the practice of the characters."

¹⁶Anne Herschberg Pierrot, Claude Mouchard, Jacques Neefs, "Les Bibliothèques de Flaubert," *Bibliothèque d'écrivains*, ed. Paolo d'Lorio and Daniel Ferrer (Paris: Editions CNRS, 2004) 121–44. "Par l'œuvre—sous la loi de l'œuvre—, une sorte d'égalité s'instaure entre auteur et lecteur"; "Mais c'est un des traits de l'œuvre au sens flaubertien que de rendre la réalité de l'auteur presque aussi problématique que celle du lecteur" (139).

In presenting both the assemblage of the archive and its reception, Pierrot, Mouchard, and Neefs note that Flaubert establishes a kind of “equality between author and reader” and renders “the reality of the author almost as problematic as that of the reader.” For in the projected ending—in which Bouvard and Pecuchet simply sit at a common desk copying out a host of different kinds of materials—Flaubert aims at a literature that is so purely descriptive as to amount only to the mere publication of what already exists. This would be a literature that never corrects its protagonists, never brings them news from afar to qualify the things that those characters think they know here. It would be a literature as pure as the folktales of the oral tradition are pure—not in being authentic but in being available to a host of different speakers in positions of absolute equality and equivalence with one another.

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