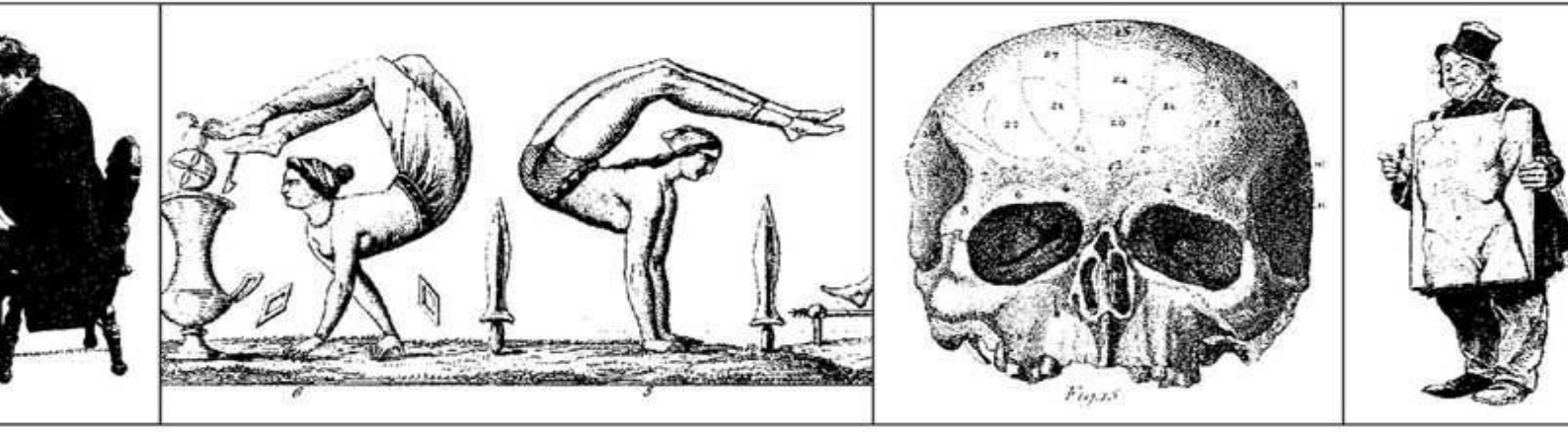


cohol, lit the fire, and waited. Meanwhile, Pécuchet, annoyed by the mishap with the Malaga, took the tins from the armoire, opened the lid of the first, then a second, then a third. He tossed them aside in a rage and called Bouvard over. Bouvard shut the spout of the coil and hurried toward

Bouvard and Pécuchet



reserves. Their disappointment was complete. The sliced meat looked like boiled shoe soles. A murky liquid replaced the lobster. The fish stew was beyond recognition. Mushrooms were growing on the soup. And the entire laboratory reeked with an intolerable stench.

Suddenly, with the sound of a grenade, the still exploded into twenty pieces that flew as high as the ceiling, puncturing the pots, flattening the skimmers, shattering the glassware. The coal scattered in all directions, the oven was a wreck. The next day Germaine found a spatula in the barnyard.

The pressure from the steam had blown the instrument apart, especially since the head of the cucurbit had been sealed shut.

the last novel of
GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Pécuchet had immediately ducked behind the vat. Bouvard had flattened on a stool. For ten solid minutes they remained that way, not daring to make the slightest movement.

“Flaubert, the writer’s writer par excellence, the saint and martyr of literature, the perfector of realism, the creator of the modern novel with *Madame Bovary*, and then, a quarter of a century later, the assistant creator of the modernist novel with *Bouvard and Pécuchet*.”

—Julian Barnes

“Among all the works of this brilliant writer, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* is definitely the deepest, the most thorough, the broadest... It is the Tower of Babel of the sciences, where all the diverse and opposing, and absolute doctrines—each having its own language—demonstrate the powerlessness of effort, the vanity of affirmation, and the ever eternal ‘misery of everything.’”

—Guy de Maupassant

“The man who, with *Madame Bovary*, forged the realist novel was also the first to shatter it.”

—Jorge Luis Borges

“[*Bouvard and Pécuchet*] can be regarded as the inauguration of a new form which has no precedents.”

—Ezra Pound

“[*Bouvard and Pécuchet*] are the ancestors of the many unattractive heroes of modern fiction. Bloom in *Ulysses* by James Joyce, Samuel Beckett’s heroes in all his novels and plays. They are the beginning of the anti-hero in modern fiction.”

—Enid Starkie

“He will use fiction itself to vanquish fiction; he will arrange, and maneuver, and contrive, to succeed with a bland effect that no one will ever afterward be quite sure where contrivance began and serendipity left off. He will use with cunning every device of the merely facile novelist; and the result will be such a compendium of unreality that it will seem real.”

—Hugh Kenner

“Flaubert inspires in me an affection that I don’t feel for any other writer.”

—Jean Echenoz

FICTION

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November
Salammbô
Sentimental Education
The Temptation of Saint Anthony
Three Tales

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The Letters of Gustave Flaubert: 1830–1880
Selected Letters of Gustave Flaubert

Bouvard and Pécuchet

the last novel of
GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

in new translation from the French & with an introduction by
MARK POLIZZOTTI

followed by the
Dictionary of Accepted Ideas
and the
Catalogue of Fashionable Ideas

and featuring a preface by
RAYMOND QUENEAU



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Originally published in French as *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, “Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues,” and
“Catalogue des Idées Chic.”

First Dalkey Archive edition, 2005
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Partially funded by grants from the Lannan Foundation and the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency

Dalkey Archive Press is a nonprofit organization located at Milner Library (Illinois State University
and distributed in the UK by Turnaround Publishers Services Ltd. (London).

ISBN: 978-1-564-78393-6

www.dalkeyarchive.com

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IN THE SUMMER OF 1872, the fifty-year-old Flaubert wrote to the literary salonist Edma Roger des Genettes, “I’m contemplating something in which I’ll vent all my anger. Yes, at last I shall rid myself of what is stifling me. I shall vomit back onto my contemporaries the disgust they inspire in me, even if it means ripping my chest open.”

Originally titled “The Story of Two Nobodies,” this was to be an encyclopedic panorama of human stupidity, the project for which had occupied him for decades, and which finally reached near fruition as his last, unfinished novel. Contemplation not being the same as execution, it was a full two years after the letter to Mme. des Genettes that he announced to his Russian colleague Turgenev, “On Saturday, August 1, I shall at last begin *Bouvard and Pécuchet*! There will be no turning back. Beware such terror! It is as though I were embarking on an immensely long voyage, toward unknown regions, and that I shall never return.” He never did, for six years later Flaubert was abruptly carried off by cerebral hemorrhage, and his long voyage was still incomplete.

It was not from lack of trying. Despite his relatively modest bibliography (especially when compared with his contemporaries Balzac, Hugo, and Zola), Flaubert was a highly dedicated and hard-working writer. Each of his novels required vast amounts of research, whether in the field or on the printed page: for *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, he famously read some fifteen hundred volumes, much like the protagonists themselves—and not without their litany of complaints. “I’m going to have to study a host of things I know nothing about,” he told Mme. des Genettes. “One would have to be insane, completely deranged, to take on such a book!” The enterprise appears even more insane when you consider that a huge portion of his research ended up on the cutting room floor, and that entire months of perusing specialized works sometimes yielded only a paragraph or two of text.

In addition, Flaubert labored over every word, every sentence, in a seemingly quixotic search for perfection. Crafting his prose (or so legend has it) at the excruciating rate of five words per hour, he could not compete with his more prolific colleagues—though he appears to have compensated for his painstaking approach to fiction with torrents of correspondence. “A good prose sentence should be like a good line of poetry—*unchangeable*,” he wrote to his sometime lover Louise Colet. “No one has ever conceived a more perfect type of prose than I.” And to his niece Caroline Commanville, announcing the end of the novel’s penultimate chapter, the last he would complete: “Each time I read it over, I discover new flaws! It has to be *perfect*.” Of the various commonplaces that have attached themselves to Flaubert’s name, one of the most tenacious, and with good reason, is his relentless pursuit of the *mot juste*.*

Nor was *Bouvard and Pécuchet* written in a continual sweep. Discouraged in part by the scope and ambition of what he had undertaken (his biographer Francis Steegmuller calls this “the most devastating of his books in conception and most grindingly difficult in execution”) and in part by his misfortunes in his own life, Flaubert abandoned the novel midway through chapter 3 to write the less taxing *Three Tales*. No doubt the most devastating of his misfortunes was the financial ruin of his beloved niece Caroline in 1875, which led Flaubert to sell his farm in Deauville and expend nearly all his capital—more than one million francs, a considerable sum—in an attempt to rescue Caroline and her husband, thereby condemning himself in his final years to a “permanent state of uncertainty.” It is little wonder that penury and debt become increasing concerns for our heroes as the novel wears on, that Flaubert spent the years 1875–76 in a state of deep depression.

As it happened, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* was begun under the sign of personal tragedy as well. April 1872, a mere four months before his annuciatory letter to Mme. des Genettes, Flaubert's cherished mother, with whom he had lived most of his adult life, succumbed to a prolonged illness. "I have realized during the past fortnight that my poor dear mother was the human being I loved the most," he wrote to George Sand. "It's as though a part of my entrails were torn away." But the passing seems also to have acted as a kind of liberation, a removal of constraints that were quite likely self-imposed: "I shall at last vent my resentment, vomit my hatred, spit out my bile, ejaculate my rage, cleanse my indignation," he told his friend Léonie Brainne in August, in terms remarkably similar to the ones he used with des Genettes in that same period (the image of "vomiting" in fact recurs fairly frequently in his correspondence on the subject).

Flaubert had plenty of resentment to vent. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and the ensuing revolts—during which he'd served as a local drill sergeant, an episode caricatured in *Bouvard and Pécuchet* under the guise of the Revolution of 1848—had left him "nauseated, heartbroken at the stupidity of [his] fellow countrymen [and] the incorrigible barbarism of the human race." (In fact, the whole of chapter 6 is a very direct satire of French political thought under the Second Empire.) Some thirteen years before that, the famous obscenity trial over *Madame Bovary*, though ultimately resolved in his favor, demoralized him to the point of wishing "to return, once and for all, to the solitude and the silence from which I emerged; I should like to publish nothing, and never again have myself talked about."* And as late as 1879, a sinecure as a library curator that he was forced to pursue after Caroline's financial debacle, humiliating enough in itself, was then lost to a rival's maneuvering. Overall, the blackness that suffuses this comedy from start to finish, and that deepens as the story nears what would have been its end, can largely be seen as a litmus test of Flaubert's own state of mind in his twilight years.

At its core, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* is a classic tale of human aspiration: the age-old desire to know more than oneself, to reach fulfillment, to find happiness. Products of a time and culture that believed increasingly in the beneficence of scientific progress and the imperatives of conformity, Flaubert's protagonists struggle to come to terms with the onslaught of new knowledge confronting them, and with the societal attitudes that accompany it, by living out a veritable encyclopedia of modern pursuits. Pushed by their mutual shame at the limits of their education, as well as by their shared hunger for public recognition ("like all artists, they craved applause"), they set out to master discipline after discipline at an impossibly accelerated rhythm. Their quest takes them through the foreign lands of agriculture, chemistry and medicine, history and archeology, literature and aesthetic politics, love (a very foreign land), spiritualism and religion, athletics and pedagogy—all the great fields of human endeavor as Western culture understood them at the time, and each approached with a bullish faith in their own abilities that more or less guarantees disaster.

True believers in search of beliefs, tourists of life, they sample the smorgasbord of human occupation, each time convinced they have found their just desserts and never once considering that their eyes might be bigger than their stomachs. The further they delve, the more our hapless autodidacts are flummoxed by tides of contradictory information, competing theories, new findings and unverifiable assertions. The comedy, of course, stems from the disparity between their self-image as undiscovered geniuses, the unassailable gravity with which they go about their endeavors, and the hopeless inadequacy of their actual talents. In fact, the only talent they are able to maintain throughout the book is their devotion to each other—for this is also a tale of a remarkable and enduring friendship.

It is worth lingering for a moment on the notion of friendship, for it is the emotional anchor that keeps *Bouvard and Pécuchet* from being mere satire, and the kernel around which the novel's moments of genuine pathos crystallize. Flaubert is known to have suffered from epilepsy, a common

characteristic of which is lowered sex drive. A devotee of prostitutes (from whom he caught several doses of syphilis, inflicted in the novel on poor Pécuchet), hermitic by nature, he invested far more emotional energy in his platonic friendships with a few intimates, mostly men, than in any of his frustrated female lovers. “As for sharing my life with a woman—marrying, as you advise—I find the prospect fantastic,” he admonished the maternally solicitous George Sand. “Woman has never fitted into my existence.” Can we read Bouvard’s fumbling and desultory attempts to woo Mme. Bordin as a version of the author’s own less-than-arduous affair with Louise Colet (who shared more than a few character traits with the apple of Bouvard’s eye), or of his idealized and unrequited affection for Elise Schlésinger (the Mme. Arnoux of *Sentimental Education*)? And might we see in Bouvard and Pécuchet’s self-sufficient duo a reflection of Flaubert’s own devoted relations with Alfred Le Poittevin or Louis Bouilhet, both dead by the time he began writing the book?

More than anything, however, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* stages Flaubert’s legendary intolerance for stupidity and the rigid bourgeois mentality; for the commonplaces, clichés, and biases that regulate society. (Such a statement has itself become a commonplace.) The roots of the novel, and its impetus, stretch back much farther than its actual composition. At the age of nine, Flaubert was already telling a boyhood companion, “If you’d like us to work together at writing, I’ll write comedies and you can write your dreams. And since there’s a lady who comes to see papa and always says stupid things, I’ll write them too.” In his youth, he and his friends devised a fictitious persona, “Le Garçon” (“the boy”) which they took turns playing in order to mouth the most improbable absurdities to unsuspecting interlocutors, for the muffled amusement of those in on the joke. And detailed discussions of the “Dictionary of Accepted Ideas”—a lexicon of the clichés that held sway in Flaubert’s time, included at the end of this volume—appeared as early as 1850.*

Flaubert’s letters to friends and intimates, meanwhile, provide copious expressions of his loathing of stupidity. To Louise Colet, ca. 1852: “Saint Polycarp used to stuff up his ears, flee from wherever he was, and cry: ‘In what times, O Lord, hast thou caused me to be born!’ I am becoming like Saint Polycarp.” To George Sand, 1867: “Stupidity and injustice make me roar. And in my corner I grumble against many things that are ‘none of my business.’” To Ivan Turgenev, 1872: “Never have things of the mind counted for less. Never have hatred of all greatness, scorn of Beauty, and execration of literature been so outspoken.” To Léonie Brainne, same year: “The immense stupidity of modern times enrages me.” To Edma des Genettes, 1875: “Human stupidity is a bottomless abyss, and the ocean I see from my window seems to me quite small in comparison”... The list goes on, and on.

In *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, stupidity takes many forms, from the protagonists’ hopeless pursuit of instant knowledge to the moronic (and ever-changing) social policies that crop up throughout. The most trenchant satire, however, is reserved for the mental laziness that leads us to have others do our thinking for us, that resists critical judgment, whether seen in the priest’s knee-jerk denial of any viewpoint outside Church dogma or in Pécuchet’s attempt to learn agriculture—a true gem—by aping the gardener’s pose in the frontispiece of his manual. Just as it is seen, in our own time and place, those who cannot imagine raising their children without reference to Spock or Brazelton, who don’t see a film without a nod from Roger Ebert, or who genuinely believe that a “writer’s workshop” can teach them talent.

But caveat lector: the game is more perverse than you think. Our heroes are no mere sponges; rather, they constantly attempt to weigh, critique, and second-guess the authorities they adopt and discard with dizzying speed. And yet all their attempts at critical thinking, which more often than not leave them dazed and demoralized (“They gave up”—a perpetual refrain), seem only to confirm the horrible truth: that the world turns not on originality but on the self-lubricating machinery of stereotype.

In fact, this novel is constructed almost entirely on clichés, whether the seemingly endless stream

of platitudes voiced by the characters, the dead-pan bromides encountered in the many works of heroes reference (many of which later reappear in the “Dictionary”), or the assumptions governing their choices of occupation. The book makes its intentions clear as of the opening sentence: “As the temperature that day had risen to ninety-two degrees, Boulevard Bourdon was completely deserted”—what could be more banal than the weather?*

It is no accident that the protagonists are copy-clerks and the novel’s planned resolution, which finds them returning to their profession after having tried everything else under the sun, is telegraphed well in advance: in fact, Bouvard and Pécuchet have never stopped being copyists, and their constant absorption and regurgitation of discipline after discipline is just so much acting out of that mechanically reproductive act.

As Flaubert was well aware, he had set himself a considerable challenge in writing this book. To Léonie Brainne, even while confessing that his “secret goal” was “to so dumbfound the reader that he goes mad,” he predicted that he would not succeed “for the simple reason that the reader won’t read me—the book will put him to sleep from the start.” And to Emile Zola: “There are no quotable excerpts, no brilliant scenes, just the same situation over and over... I’m scared it might bore people to death.” A not unreasonable fear: even as the novel was being written, the critic Hippolyte Taine complained to the same Zola that “you see two snails trying to climb Mont Blanc. The first time the fall is amusing; the tenth is unbearable”—a sentiment that many reviewers echoed after its publication.

But boring it’s not, once we’ve accepted the ground rules. And though the book does adopt from early on a notably repetitive structure and conceit, we might even pinpoint that very repetitiveness as a huge part of its comic effect. Think of the Three Stooges’ head bonks and nose tweaks, or Laurel and Hardy’s fine messes: the more we expect them, the funnier they become. When Bouvard and Pécuchet set out to create the liqueur to end all liqueurs, we know that the still they’ve constructed without the slightest notion of what they’re doing is going to explode into a hundred pieces; and we can see, with black-and-white cinematic clarity, our two would-be savants cowering behind the furniture, faces smudged and terrified, as the last bits of their harebrained contraption rain down around them.

Despite his hesitations, what Flaubert wittingly lampoons in *Bouvard and Pécuchet* is not only the positivistic and progress-oriented zeitgeist he deplored, but also the accepted conventions of storytelling itself: Structural conventions, which dictate that the hero’s adventures be varied enough to maintain the reader’s interest—whereas here each chapter follows its stubbornly uniform path, in an unvarying series of calamities; psychological conventions, which require the protagonist to undergo some form of evolution—whereas Bouvard and Pécuchet emerge at the other end of their long journey remarkably close to where they started; and perhaps most of all, fictional conventions, which insist that the characters and their actions stay in the frame of their story—whereas here, with the “Dictionary of Accepted Ideas,” the “Catalogue of Fashionable Ideas,” and other addenda that Flaubert never finished assembling, the novel effectively becomes its own process of composition.

In this sense, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* is not only a great precursor of Modernism—it has rightly been placed alongside the avant-garde masterpieces of the twentieth century—but also, arguably, the first postmodern novel. This epic of ordinary life, as its author called it, this comic panorama in which nothing happens, anticipates not only Joyce and Musil but also the amusing non-plots of films like Jim Jarmusch’s *Stranger than Paradise* or TV shows like *Seinfeld*. Unappreciated in its time, Flaubert’s “comedy of ideas,” which he felt he was the first to attempt, had to wait for the age to produce such figures as Borges, Calvino, and Perec before gaining acceptance. *Bouvard and Pécuchet* is not Flaubert’s most famous book, and it is hardly the first to critique an author’s times and society. But in its ability to create the *illusion* of humdrum everyday life (and keep it engaging), its self-devouring structure, and its humor that progressively corrodes the reader’s every acquired certainty, it might well be the most forward-looking novel of the nineteenth century.

Perhaps more forward-looking than even its author realized. As Flaubert told a correspondent the time, “The book’s subtitle would be, ‘On the Lack of Method in the Sciences.’ In short, my goal nothing less than to conduct a review of all modern thinking.” To the majority who clung to the belief that science and industry were all to the good, Flaubert countered with the absurd sight of his two characters chasing after a hunk of knowledge, swallowing it whole, and having nothing to show for it but indigestion. But more than this, he unearthed a darker truth of scientific progress, one as yet largely unsuspected, and in our century all too familiar: that experimental dispassion so easily shades into depraved indifference. Through nineteenth-century eyes, the novel’s most horrific moment is no doubt when the child Victor boils his pet cat just to see what will happen, a scene that still elicits revulsion only partly tempered by the boy’s youth and background. But the years have added their own patina to the story: for if the image of Bouvard and Pécuchet similarly experimenting on their patients, human and animal, with little regard for their well-being once suggested a portrait of laughable ineptitude, what it now can’t help calling to mind is the ghoulish profile of a Josef Mengele, a Harold Shipman, or the “torture doctor” H. H. Holmes. From a perceived lack of method, our science has been proven to have far too much method, especially when turned against us.

Still, it would be a disservice to the author to make of his heroes simple clowns, comic or even just as it would be inaccurate to portray Flaubert as a distant intelligence sitting in judgment on the inanity of his times. As he knew all too well, stupidity belongs to no age or place; it is a universal human trait, one to which he himself was far from immune. “Stupidity does not sit on one side and Intelligence on the other,” he wrote to Louis Bouilhet in 1855. “They’re like Vice and Virtue—it takes an awfully shrewd mind to tell them apart.” When all is said and done, Flaubert’s two “nobodies” with their blindness and insight, their pettiness and nobility, their generosity and callousness, their buffoonery and despair, are none other than you and I.

Because Flaubert’s sudden death left *Bouvard and Pécuchet* unfinished, there remain a number of unresolved questions as to the author’s intent. The first edition of the book, published in March 1880, was based on some four thousand manuscript pages, as interpreted (and sometimes rewritten, expurgated, or added to) by Flaubert’s niece Caroline, his literary executrix and one of the great villains of Flaubert scholarship. Modern research has undone much of her editorializing, which means that while the first nine chapters can still be considered relatively finished, portions of chapter 10, as well as the two concluding chapters and the other materials Flaubert meant to append to the novel (except for the “Dictionary of Accepted Ideas”), clearly remain in draft form. I have preferred to leave them as such, and not “smooth them out” as some previous editors, and some previous translators, have taken it upon themselves to do. Similarly, I have chosen not to belabor the text with notes to the many references and allusions it contains, preferring instead to let the novel be what its author meant it to be—an entertainment.

The present translation is based on the Garnier-Flammarion critical edition of 1999 (ed. Stéphanie Dord-Crouslé) and the annotated Livre de Poche edition of that same year (ed. Pierre-Michel de Biasi). Edited with reference to Flaubert’s manuscripts, they correct a number of details that have crept into earlier editions (the name Gorgu erroneously spelled “Gorju,” obvious oversights on Flaubert’s part, Caroline’s unauthorized insertions, and so on). The “Dictionary of Accepted Ideas” comes from the Garnier-Flammarion edition of 1966 (ed. Jacques Suffel). I am indebted to all three volumes for some of the background information in this foreword, as well as to Francis Steegmüller’s edition of *The Selected Letters of Gustave Flaubert* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1953) and Jean-Paul Santerre’s *Leçon littéraire sur Bouvard et Pécuchet de Gustave Flaubert* (Paris: PUF, 1999).

and Lionel Trilling's formidable introduction to the New Directions edition of *Bouvard and Pécuchet* (1954). My thanks as well to Mario Polizzotti for his careful reading.

This translation is for Sadi Ranson-Polizzotti and Jean-Louis Bouttes.

MP, August 200

Preface

by Raymond Queneau

IN 1942, I WROTE AN INTRODUCTION for a Belgian edition of *Bouvard and Pécuchet* that never appeared—an introduction that was eventually published in *Fontaine* 31, out of Algiers. These were naïve pages for I wasn't yet acquainted with the “bibliography” of the subject—the “literature” on the subject, they say—and in all innocence I believed that the ideas (parallels, or points of view) I had strewn around my text were original and new. Since then, with a view toward writing the present preface, I read the necessary works on the question, and soon established (for this feat it was enough to be “tolerably lucid,” a quality that Flaubert does not deny his “mediocre and simple” minds, Bouvard and Pécuchet) that everything I'd said had already been said before, and more than once at that. I must admit this didn't surprise me very much: I shouldn't exaggerate (firstly) my naïveté any more than (secondly) my originality. And besides, I'd taken precautions. Didn't the article in question begin like this?

The posthumous works of Flaubert include a “Dictionary of Accepted Ideas,” the acknowledged goal of which was that “once someone has read it he will no longer dare open his mouth, for fear of coming out with one of the statements it contains.” While it has not been proven that what Bouvard and Pécuchet are copying, at the end of the unfinished book that bears their name, is in fact this “Dictionary” (it seems more likely to have been a *sottisier* [a collection of stupid utterances] called the “Album,” which was no less formidable), it's still true that what we know of *this* book, as it has come to us, already produces the effect intended for the “Dictionary”: after having read it, and reread it, one no longer dares formulate any judgment on one's own account for fear of putting one's foot in one's mouth, using one of the same stupidities that would have enriched Bouvard and Pécuchet's anthology.

And didn't it end (after an unbearable allusion to the work of “one of our contemporaries”) with an invocation to “the *sottisier* that would have put an end to the novel, and in which pride of place would surely have been reserved—with allowances for chronology—for the very preface we have just completed”?

The idea must have struck me as good (a stupid satisfaction), for I began my new preface thus:

Writing an introduction to *Bouvard and Pécuchet* belongs to the genre of presumptuous enterprises before which one must fall on one's face; for there is no doubt that such a fragment of literature contains, in essence, such an abundance of blunders, commonplaces, howlers, fooleries, stupidities, imbecilities, accepted ideas, and nonsense, that the text should not figure at the head of the work, but instead, in all justice, in the fundamental chapter in which Flaubert meant to dispense the riches of his *sottisier*.

Well, this kind of cunning isn't new. It has been perpetrated before. I found it in Thibaudet *Flaubert*—a passage that (I'm sorry to say) had escaped me:

When faced with *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, the critics throw up their hands, chastising Flaubert as a gifted young man who went wrong. While on the other hand (a purely Flaubertian gesture) they remain united about [Huysmans's character] Mr. Folantin in the back room of a sinister delicatessen, at the same time they hail *Bouvard* as the gospel of naturalistic copy-clerks and a masterwork of the human spirit. These judgments, contradictory as they are, already seem present in the atmosphere of the unfinished novel: they give it a kind of ending, and are incorporated in the virtual second volume (as precious as the first, real one)...the "Dictionary of Accepted Ideas" the "Great *Sottisier*," and the "Judgments on *Bouvard and Pécuchet*." One cannot speak of *Bouvard* without saying something that might appear in the "Dictionary" or the "*Sottisier*." Let us resign ourselves to this condition, or rather accept it as a glorious necessity—as proof of the flexibility and vitality of the book.

But, naturally, since it's Thibaudet talking, I no longer agree. This subterfuge strikes me as too easy. Clearly, if according to Flaubert himself there could never be *one* single masterwork of the human spirit, this doesn't prevent *Bouvard and Pécuchet* from being one of the masterpieces of Western literature—an opinion which, I am persuaded, would not have appeared in the *sottisier*. And then—a very simple remark, but one that Thibaudet doesn't dare to make—not *everything* appears in the *sottisier*. There is hope.

As for the "virtual" second volume of which Thibaudet speaks (in rather whimsical fashion) what I said about it myself in my first introduction is extremely rudimentary, and at once manifestly my ignorance in Flaubertology. While I was familiar with René Descharmes's work *Autoportrait de Bouvard et Pécuchet, Etudes documentaires et critiques* (Paris, 1921), I had missed D. Demorest's book *A travers les plans, manuscrits et dossiers de Bouvard et Pécuchet* (Paris, 1931). In chapter 8 of his book, Descharmes "proved" that the "Dictionary of Accepted Ideas" could absolutely not have figured among the texts copied by Bouvard and Pécuchet: how, really, could these two puppets be the authors of a work that presumes its author to have—at the very least—a good dose of critical spirit? But Demorest published some of Flaubert's unpublished plans, and the "Dictionary" mentioned in them. Therefore the two copy-clerks hoist themselves up here, raise themselves to Flaubert's own level.

In my first introduction, neglecting to use the oratorical precautions that I denounced a moment ago, I continued in kind, imagining myself to be killing off some vile product of critical drivel:

Thus, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, which has been and remains for some a unique work—the Book reigns by a sort of Terror that is eminently salubrious. For if we see in Flaubert's last work a picture of human stupidity, we can't be long in perceiving that, like sheep, we are following a very great commonplace; and that to repeat that these two heroes are only "imbeciles from top to bottom," as one of the most obtuse critics of the nineteenth century wrote, is to fall into the most vulgar and superficial interpretation, formally contradicted by Flaubert himself. "They learned about discoveries, read prospectuses, and their newfound curiosity caused their intelligence to bloom." Again: "Their superiority was painfully obvious." And again this passage, where the author reveals himself—and he was no imbecile, top or bottom: "Then their minds developed

piteous faculty, that of perceiving stupidity and being unable to tolerate it. Insignificant things saddened them: newspaper advertisements, a burgher's profile, an inane comment overheard by chance. And reflecting on what was said in their village, and on the fact that one could find other Coulons, other Marescots, other Foureaus stretching to the ends of the earth, they felt upon their shoulders the weight of the entire world."

But this is a commonplace of Bouvard-and-Pécuchetian exegesis (cf. Descharmes, chapter 9, and Demorest, pp. 24ff). Or again, Edouard Maynial, in his preface to the Garnier edition: "Contrary to a commonly accepted idea—another accepted idea—Bouvard and Pécuchet are not imbeciles; they are by far the most sympathetic specimens in the book..." Moreover, this is just the impression Flaubert intended to give: "To show how and why each of the secondary characters execrates the Sciences, the True, the Beautiful, the Just: 1) by instinct, 2) out of self-interest" (Demorest, p. 35).

Demorest likewise published the following note by Flaubert, taken from his initial outline: "They are not two imbeciles, precisely; they have many sentiments and the embryos of many ideas which they have trouble expressing." Elsewhere he says of them that they are "two rather lucid, mediocre and simple souls." In another plan, he writes, "Through the sole fact of their friendship, they develop intellectually." Demorest picked up all the passages from chapter 1 that show this development, at the same time as their hankering after learning and their contempt for mediocrity. What is more, they have courage. From the first pages, Pécuchet shows it by taking off his flannel undershirt—which is audacious and full of risk. They have the courage of their convictions; they are not afraid of being scandalous, even to the Count de Faverges. When they become "reformers," they are threatened with prison by Foureau, but declare that they don't give a damn about the sub-prefect, the prefect, "or even the Council of State." They do not shrink from any paradox, and do not hesitate to indulge in the most dangerous experiments, even if the danger is to their own persons. If they are interested in magic, they seek to raise the devil; if in hypnotism, they practice it. Nothing is more concrete than their proceedings; their research is not solely in books. They have barely picked up any notion or bit of information before they seek to verify it. And when the local policeman comes to harass them because of their anatomical mannequin, they aspire to "suffer for science." Doubtless they lack humor. When Pécuchet tries to imitate the hissing of the asp in Marmontel's *Cleopatra* and blows the effect, it makes them laugh "well into the evening." And at the beginning of their friendship, "when asked for their identification papers, they pretended to have lost them, claiming to be two foreigners, two Englishmen." This is more or less like "Le Garçon," that mythical character of Flaubertian folklore, but at bottom hardly corresponds to their characters. They seldom laugh, and never "have fun." As for the novel itself, there is nothing lighthearted about it. "I want to produce such an impression of lassitude and ennui," said Flaubert to Maxime Du Camp, "that in reading this book one could believe it had been composed by a cretin." Meanwhile, Flaubert had the "pretension" to write a "comical book, but elsewhere, he speaks of a "thing," his new work, which would be "serious and even frightening." "No one has yet attempted the comedy of ideas," he remarks, but he writes elsewhere "Their [Bouvard and Pécuchet's] grotesqueness is chiefly in their speeches and in their manners, more than in their ideas." "To create laughter with the theory of innate ideas: do you see the program?" (Cf. the quotes collected by Demorest, pp. 72ff.)

The fact that the two copyists are finally ready to establish not only the "Album" but also the "Dictionary" shows, on the other hand, that they have to a certain degree become Flaubert's mouthpieces—especially Bouvard, whose meditations on philosophy and society, critiques of religion and philosophical attitudes are clearly those of Flaubert himself.

When Bouvard declares, “Science is based on data supplied by a small corpus of knowledge. Perhaps it doesn’t apply to all the rest that we don’t know about, which is much more vast, and which we can never understand,” it comes from Flaubert—or almost. When, with Pécuchet, he has reservations about the work of Walter Scott, George Sand, or Balzac, that too is Flaubert—or almost.

Just as Cervantes at first presents Don Quixote as a ridiculous madman and then, in chapter 1, has him utter a beautiful tirade that expresses Cervantes’s own thoughts, never ceasing afterwards to attend him with sympathy, thus Flaubert’s opinion of his two “*bonshommes*,” [fellows, characters] and even of the import of the book in general, changed as it developed—though there is always, at least throughout the first part (the part that seems almost entirely finished), ambiguity in Flaubert’s attitude toward them. In “they considered themselves very serious individuals, occupied with useful pursuits” there is more irony, but as much benevolence, as in “their minds expanded. They were proud to reflect on such grand topics.” They express commonplaces (noted by Demorest, p. 122)—and Flaubert formally attributes some of these to them, after their double defeat in love (“they repeated all the clichés to which women had given rise”)—even while being shocked by the commonplaces of others, as when they invite the town notables or are invited in turn by the Count de Faverges. Then they explode, “What idiots! What baseness!”—just like Flaubert.

In the beginning, it was clearly his wish to strike a telling blow against human stupidity, skinning alive of the catoblepas. “I hope to spit into it the gall that chokes me—that is, to speak some truths. By this means I hope to purge myself...this spewing-forth will take me several years... I would rather not go and see the dark shores until after having vomited the gall that chokes me...stupidity now crushes me so hard that I feel like a fly with the Himalayas on its back! No matter! I will try to vomit my venom into my book. This hope soothes me!” (Descharnes, pp. 265ff).

If one is to believe René Descharnes (chapter 2), it was on Monday, August 19, 1872, in a letter to Mme. Roger des Genettes, that Flaubert, for the first time, made a precise allusion to his new work: “I am about to begin a book that will occupy me for several years.” It is, he says, “the farcical story of those two characters who copy a kind of critical encyclopedia.” He had finished *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* on June 20 (Descharnes, p. 49). And it was on August 1, 1874, that he wrote the first sentence: “As the temperature that day had risen to ninety-two degrees, Boulevard Bourdon was completely deserted.” (In the Charpentier and Conard editions, the temperature appears as a number, but in the manuscript (whose first page is reproduced in the Conard edition, p. 412), it is spelled out—*quatre-vingt-douze*—which doesn’t convey the same impression as the use of figures).

Noting the parallel between *Bouvard and Pécuchet* and *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* obligatory—provoked by Flaubert himself, who, after having finished the *Temptation*, writes in one of his letters: “This summer I will begin another book of the same kind, after which I will return to the novel pure and simple,” which shows moreover that *Bouvard and Pécuchet* is not a “pure and simple” novel. In fact it is an “encyclopedic” novel, as the *Temptation* is a “pantheonic” novel. Moreover, these are works that are parallel to Flaubert’s own life. Just as the *Temptation*—inspired in 1845 by the sight of Bruegel’s *Temptation of Saint Anthony* at the Museum of Genoa, written in one year and revised several times—was not definitively completed until 1872, so the idea for *Bouvard and Pécuchet* goes back to a piece written in Flaubert’s youth, almost in childhood, “A Lesson in Natural History,” which appeared in the magazine *Le Colibri* in 1837. Maxime Du Camp claims that from 1843 on Flaubert was thinking of “the story of two clerks,” and Maupassant claims that he spent half his life “meditating on that book.”

As for the scenario itself of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, it was borrowed, consciously or not, from a story by Barthélemy Maurice entitled “Les deux Greffiers” [The Two Court-Clerks], which had appeared on April 14, 1841, in the *Gazette des Tribunaux*, was reprinted in the *Journal des Journaux* and published a third time on February 7, 1858, in *Audience*, a periodical edited by Flaubert’s friend

Eugene Delattre (Descharmes, p. 90). There we find two clerks, Andreas and Robert, who retire on pension. They look in the classified ads for a house to rent: “That’s too high. That’s too far north—wretched area—that’s too close...that’s too far from Paris.” They envision going to the banks of the Loire—and talk just like Bouvard and Pécuchet. “We will see the steamboats pass—we’ll be ruined by smoke.” “We’ll raise rabbits—that’ll wreck everything.” One would almost think one was reading the “Dictionary of Accepted Ideas”: Steamboats: “fun to watch go by, but ruin everything with the smoke.” Rabbits: “wreck everything.” Finally they go set up in the country.

Robert goes hunting; and kills his dog. (At the beginning of chapter 7 of *Bouvard and Pécuchet* after their first series of experiments—“Progress—what a joke! And politics is a fine mess”—they go through days that are “filled with gloom.” Then “Pécuchet borrowed Langlois’s punt gun to hunt meadowlarks; the explosion from the first shot nearly killed him”). Andreas goes fishing, and falls in the water. Then they decide to devote themselves to horticulture: “the day before, they read in secret one the *Good Gardener*, the other the *Loiret Almanac* and Mathieu Laensberg’s guidebook.” But the gardener opposes their activity, which would make “their garden into a little Sologne.” (Demorest, 52, has shown how the title of the dossier entitled *Notes for M. Gustave Flaubert. Mistakes That Can Be Made by Two Parisians Who Want to Take up Agriculture* singularly clarifies the meaning of the failures of chapter 2. The hard times of Andreas and Robert are clearly those of two “Parisians.”)

Then comes winter. What to do? Games bore them. So they go to copying. “Thus their last pleasure, their true, their sole pleasure was to resume, albeit fictitiously, that arid task which, for thirty-eight years, had been the occupation—and perhaps, without their knowledge, the happiness—their lives.”

In the original scenario (analyzed by Demorest, chapter 4), Bouvard and Pécuchet devote themselves to the fine arts. They study drawing and photography, and Pécuchet poses nude. In the version, the *Odyssey* of the sciences does not begin until chapter 14; meanwhile Bouvard and Pécuchet go to Paris, where they frequent artists and admire the work of Haussmann, get tired of the different games and activities offered to the idle, etc. They are presented as people who’ve become bored rather than as adventurers in search of knowledge. In short, we are still quite close to Maurice’s story.

Bouvard and Pécuchet are at first called Dubolard and Pécuchet, then Bolard and Maniche before reaching their definitive baptism. (The novel itself was at first called “The Story of Two Nobodies [*cloportes*],” then “The Story of Two Characters [*bonshommes*].”) The resemblance between the names *Bouvard* and *Bovary* is curiously accentuated by the fact that Flaubert had obtained “Bovary” by “distorting the name Bouvaret.” Another connection to make between the “The Story of Two Nobodies” and *Madame Bovary* is Flaubert’s *mot*, reported in the Goncourts’ diaries, that in *Madame Bovary* he had wanted to write a book with “the color of those moldy cornices that harbor woodlice.”*

As for the heroine, who is certainly less intelligent than Bouvard and his friend Pécuchet, she rushes into diverse enterprises—adultery, devoutness, and Italian grammar—with the same disregard of method and the same elementary offhandedness that, at first blush, we attribute to the two “nobodies.”

If *Madame Bovary* is Flaubert, according to his own exclamation (fie! what an ugly commonplace!), it’s no less obvious that he is also both Bouvard and Pécuchet. The necessity of his going with them through their encyclopedic *Odyssey* (Flaubert read, he says, *more than fifteen hundred volumes* toward this end) can only confirm this identification. Demorest picks up the following sentences from Flaubert’s *Correspondence* (that I can do no better than pillage: see Demorest, p. 37): “Bouvard and Pécuchet have filled me up to such a point that I’ve become them. Their stupidity is my own and I am bursting with it.” “I live as much as I can in my two fellows.” “I am too full of my subject...the stupidity of my two characters has invaded me.” (Compare with the

sentence toward the end of chapter 8: “Then their minds developed a piteous faculty, that of perceiving stupidity and being unable to tolerate it.”)

This *Odyssey* is punctuated by the following sentences:

“Maybe we just don’t know enough about chemistry.”

“Six months later they had become archeologists.”

“Let’s send for some historical novels.”

“Mark my words, there’s going to be havoc.”

“Pécuchet, watching her, felt something utterly new, a charm, an infinite pleasure.”

“Pleased with their regimen, they decided to improve their constitutions with gymnastics.”

“And they felt something like daybreak rising in their souls.”

“They procured several books about education.”

“And with great excitement they set out across the village.”

“They set to it.”

Each of these sentences introduces a new theme, and each chapter has a clearly determined subject—even though, according to a note published by Demorest (p. 45), we see that Flaubert had thought momentarily of preventing the succession of studies and failures from being punctuated to mechanically by the chapter breaks. Nevertheless, in the novel as it has come to us, there is a homogeneity within each division: chapter 2 is Agriculture; 3, the Natural Sciences; 4, Archeology and History; 5, Literature; 6, Politics; 7, Love; 8, Philosophy (and at first, Gymnastics); 9, Religion; 10, Pedagogy and Social Reforms; 11, Copying—chapters 4, 9, and 10 being announced in the preceding chapters, in conformity with the above-mentioned note, by, respectively: Gorgu’s chest, the Christmas Mass, and Victor and Victorine.

It is curious to note that, among the sciences Bouvard and Pécuchet undertake to study, mathematics is almost the only one not to appear. Yet one can very well see them trying to demonstrate Fermat’s theorem, stupefied by the assertion that a straight line is a curve, and finally scandalized by the distribution of prime numbers. In the infernal mythology of the classroom, the logarithmic table is considered the most dreadful of all monsters. This phobia testifies to a certain affectation: one can use the book without antipathy. It incites one to daydreaming far less than the railway timetable, the *Catalogue of the Saint-Etienne Arms and Bicycle Manufacture*, the *Annuaire*

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