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“All that they saw was the message itself”: Textual Calamities in Flaubert and De Mille

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Critical evaluations of Flaubert’s final, yet incomplete text of *Bouvard and Pécuchet* vary as radically as those of his more evidently recognized masterpiece, *Madame Bovary*. For some, the story of two scribes attempting to textualize the whole world represents an awkward, barely comprehensible freak produced by a mind that stands beyond the zenith of its competence; for others it is “the most important novel of the whole nineteenth century”.

A similar claim has been made about a work emerging from a distant cultural context, but with comparable characteristics: James De Mille’s *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder*. This work, published in Canada only seven years after Flaubert’s last piece, has been read either as a fantastic travel book, or as a fine example of the author’s early postmodernistic foresight. More importantly, it poses an identical problem: how to express a narrative event in language while arriving at its theoretical, if not scientific understanding. This paper proposes to compare the two texts in order to address the issues linking them, such as the ironic aspect of textuality in late nineteenth-century realism, and verbal discovery of the world in general, as well as to identify the reasons for their functioning also as textual precursors of postmodernity.

The calamitousness proposed in the paper’s title is inspired by the variety of disasters and failures represented and analysed in, as well as performed by, two texts seemingly distant in focus and style but which, surprisingly, share conspicuous, indeed, “calamitous,” characteristics: *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, Gustave Flaubert’s last published work, which expresses some of the author’s ambiguous approach towards the genre of the novel, a work which resigns upon telling a story of the world but, instead, renders the two protagonists’ fatally failed attempt at acquiring, summarizing, and applying the knowledge of that world; and *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* by a Canadian James De Mille,

likewise a subversive philosophical tale about the limits of knowledge and exegesis, cross-dressed as a fantastic, adventurous travelogue.

Similar features appear already in view of the circumstances in which both the texts emerged, and in the milieu of thought to which they contributed: Flaubert's last piece was published posthumously in 1881; the publication of De Mille's *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* followed in 1888 – that means eight years after the author's death (both writers died in the same year, in 1880), which suggests that both texts might well have been composed concurrently. Furthermore, they both display the quality of – either factual or fictional – incompleteness – they abstain from the realization of narrative closure, and, rather, decidedly point out its ontological impossibility.

More importantly, however, the two texts are comparable upon the grounds of their – admitted or not – critical, if not overtly satirical intention; both point out the – primarily intellectual – inadequacy displayed generously in prototypical human representatives. In his introduction to the English translation of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, A. J. Krailsheimer mentions the “shattering effect the book was intended to produce” (Krailsheimer 1976: 7), identifies its theme as “human stupidity in general, and bourgeois stupidity in particular” (Krailsheimer 1976: 7), a theme which fascinated Flaubert all his life, and contends with a firm conviction that:

[...] if death had not forever obscured Flaubert's intentions, it would now figure in the canon of his famous masterpieces [...] Masterpiece it certainly is, but hardly one calculated to become a popular favourite, and in its final form (whatever that might have been) it could hardly have failed to offend the susceptibilities of its clearly designated victims [...] The book may be a puzzle, but it is emphatically not a bore. (Krailsheimer 1976: 7)

And the description of James De Mille's literary career in the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* echoes the issues applied above for the famous Frenchman, while even using some identical expressions. It claims that De Mille's books:

[...] reflected his own delight in linguistic puzzles and puns and his hatred of sham and humbug [...] His ‘potboilers’ (as he called them) were often parodies of Victorian fictional realism through the use of narrative techniques now associated with postmodernist novels. (Toye 1997: 287)

Before venturing into analysis of what is, arguably, the most decisive point of contact between the two texts, a brief outline of their respective plots may be instructive; *Bouvard and Pécuchet* renders the story of two ageing Parisian clerks, painfully bored with their professions, and with city life as such, who unexpectedly inherit a decent sum of money, and decide to spend it on buying a country estate, and on study and self-improvement. Their initial inspiration is the realization of their ignorance of country life and work – this realization is symptomatically ignited by the explosion of their distilling machine during their hopelessly amateur experiment to produce spirits. (Certainly a whole abundance of symbolic meanings, as well as early warnings for the clumsy protagonists, might be ascribed to the idea of producing spirits, and to the inevitable failure of the attempt.)

When techniques of experiment do not work, and the method of trial and error is drastically reduced to that of error only, and error with capital E, the two friends admit their ignorance of principles, and engage in the explorations of theory. With touching enthusiasm they consecutively delve in disciplines such as chemistry, medicine, archaeology, geology, history, anatomy, literature, politics, and religion, only to gradually fail in finding any sense

or use in any of them. As has been observed, the text of *Bouvard and Pécuchet* remained unfinished, but Flaubert left a draft plan for its further continuation, which is now appended to the modern editions, and which ends with the silent, interpretively fragile scene of Bouvard and Pécuchet purchasing a massive double-sided writing desk, and returning to their former occupations of copying endless papers covered with someone else’s words.

James De Mille’s *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* basically toys with the old idea of a text within a text: its framing pattern is provided by the characters of four gentlemen currently on a leisure yacht cruise, who get becalmed on the sea. Their deliverance from boredom, equally painful as that suffered by Flaubert’s Parisian scribes, arrives in the form of a copper cylinder floating unexpectedly on the waves, which they eagerly pick up and dissect with the true fascination of Victorian scientific enthusiasts. Its content is to them a surprising revelation – eventually of themselves. Instead of the “meat” the four friends expect to find, the cylinder contains a strange manuscript, reportedly composed by a somewhat simple-minded English sailor of the name Adam More, who tells in it of his experience of an arduous voyage to the land inhabited by the bizarre people called the Kosekin, whose system of social values forms an inverted mirror image of the European ones: the highest blessing among the Kosekin is death; the most respected citizens are recruited from the caste of the paupers; wealth and well-being (in the European sense) are abhorred; the lowest social class is that of the rulers and of the rich and healthy; lovers never marry, but, instead, celebrate their separation by a joyous ritual, etc. Approximately two thirds of De Mille’s novel consist of the four friends taking turns in reading “aloud” from Adam More’s manuscript on board their yacht, and one third of their discussions of its various aspects and possible interpretations.

From what has thus been outlined it becomes apparent that Bouvard and Pécuchet’s embarrassment at encountering newly verbalized realities, and the four readers’ of the *Strange Manuscript* irreconcilable disagreements about its authenticity and meaning, indicate another common ground for the two novels: it is their aspect of *unreliability of the interpretive medium*. Students of literature are familiar with the notion of *unreliable narrator*; Flaubert and De Mille extend the idea further, and introduce an *unreliable protagonist*, and *unreliable reader*, respectively. None of the six main characters in the two texts are to be taken by their words easily, since they are placed off the map of appropriate exegesis, and constantly take wrong directions in trying to get there. During his gardening phase, for example, Pécuchet even experiences a quixotic desire for self-textualization:

Sometimes Pécuchet pulled his manual out of his pocket, and studied a paragraph, standing with his spade beside him in the same pose as the gardener adorning the frontispiece of the book. He even felt very flattered by the resemblance, which raised the author in his esteem [...] He was thinking that, if fate had been kind, he would now belong to an agricultural society, shine at exhibitions and be quoted in the press. (Flaubert 1976 [1881]: 54-5)

In the same line, some of the keen readers of the “strange manuscript” become so impressed by it that they include its content into the space of the real, and even begin to complement it with what, in their view, is missing in it – which is the lexis of science. Doctor Congreve’s readily offered piece of exegesis runs, for example, the following line:

‘More,’ continued the doctor, ‘is too general in his descriptions. He has not a scientific mind, and he gives but few data; yet I can bring before myself very easily all the scenes which he describes, particularly that one in which the megalosaurus approaches, and he rushes to mount the dinornis so as to escape. I see that river, with

its trees and shrubs, all unknown now except in museums – the vegetation of the Coal Period – the lepidodendron, the lepidostrobus, the pecopteris, the neuropteris, the lonchopteris, the odontopteris, the sphenopteris, the cyclopteris, the sigillaria veniformis, the sphenophyllum, the calamities –’ (De Mille 1969 [1888]: 148)

The only possible escape from this “calamity” of exegesis is provided by the line of common sense, voiced, surprisingly perhaps, by Otto Melick, a character qualified as “a littérateur from London,” who exclaims at this point:

‘There, there! Hold hard, doctor. Talking of calamities what greater calamity can there be than such a torrent of unknown words? Talk English, doctor, and we shall be able to appreciate you but to make your jokes, your conundrums, and your brilliant witticisms in a foreign language isn’t fair to us, and does no credit to either to your head or your heart.’ (De Mille 1969 [1888]: 148)

Nonetheless, Melick’s “voice of reason” remains isolated and ungrounded amongst the general interpretive excitement of his counterparts, which thus leads inevitably towards inconclusiveness and exegetic resignation. Lord Featherstone, who describes himself as an “infernally bad reader” (De Mille 1969 [1888]: 79), and who has the last turn reading, suddenly stops, declares that he has had enough, and announces that it is time for dinner – the solution of the book’s narrative is thus “saved” by an almost classic mechanical device.

In addressing the problem of a text and its mechanical consumption, what is likewise proposed in both Flaubert and De Mille is the necessity of the correct focussing of the reader’s gaze; the quote which serves as the motto of this paper comes from the first chapter of *A Strange Manuscript*, and refers to the moment of its discovery: the four friends opened the cylinder, unfolded the papyrus leaves on which it was written, and “All that they saw was the message itself [...]” (De Mille 1969 [1888]: 25); a statement which, arguably, prompts a question: What else were they supposed to see? Were they supposed to see anything more? Did they, therefore, see too little? Does “message” here refer to the content or its form? It appears that no “conclusive” answer is provided by the text itself, unless the reader accepts Melick’s restrained judgment that there is not very much to see at all; when asked, Melick replies: “Why, any one can see that it’s a transparent hoax, that’s all” (De Mille 1969 [1888]: 71). His statement thus very early shifts the interpretive reading of the whole novel onto a level of authorial self-irony.

Bouvard and Pécuchet, conversely, are troubled by the feeling of obligation to see as much as possible – which represents, likewise, a mistake of quantity and selection from it. During one of their many moments of disappointment that their desire for knowledge has in store for them they arrive at the following, markedly perturbing realization:

As regards the men and events of the period, they no longer had a single solid idea. To judge impartially they would have had to read all the histories, all the memoirs, all the journals, and all the manuscript documents, for the slightest omission may cause an error which will lead to others ad infinitum. They gave up.
(Flaubert 1976 [1881]: 121)

In view of the above mentioned characteristics linking somehow Flaubert’s and De Mille’s texts, it is hardly surprising that both have been placed in the context of the aesthetic and literary postmodern – and that has happened, more importantly, in spite of the early dates of their first publication. In line with Linda Hutcheon’s identification of the “postmodern urge to trouble, to question, to make both problematic and provisional any such desire for order or

truth through the powers of the human imagination” (Hutcheon 1988: 2), Carole Gerson points to the self-reflexive strategies of *A Strange Manuscript*, and notes that:

this book contains ironic commentary on both the kind of sensational adventure fiction that De Mille himself wrote and the pretentious literary critics who belittled it, thereby allowing the author the delicious experience of having his cake and eating it too. (Gerson 1989: 55)

M. G. Parks similarly comments that:

[...] De Mille has kept his own point of view so completely behind the scenes that he runs the risk of mystifying the reader or leading the critic into irresponsible interpretation. In both cases an appeal outside the literary work to the nature of the creator is the likeliest means of keeping one’s feet in the slippery mazes of ironies and counter-ironies. (Parks 1976: 76)

In the prominent *A History of Canadian Literature*, William New defines *A Strange Manuscript* as an “anti-Utopian novel which combines an attack on an unadulterated view of progress with a satiric send-up of academic discussion” (New 1989: 104), and notes that “the author’s focus shifts from the narrative itself to the processes of constructing narrative, and the equally problematic processes of interpretation” (New 1989: 104).

As regards *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, Flaubert’s obscure farewell to the world of letters, Raymond Queneau, for example, unhesitatingly identified it as the most important novel of the whole nineteenth century. Much less surprisingly, Jorge Luis Borges, to whom the infinity of its structure (as well as of its ideological setup) must have especially appealed, wrote an essay called “A Defence of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*,” where he relates it to such masterpieces of the Western tradition as *Candide*, *Don Quijote*, and *Gulliver’s Travels*, recognizes Flaubert’s desire to write “an epic of human idiocy” (Borges 1999: 386), and calls the duo of the characters, Bouvard and Pécuchet, “a two-headed Faust” (Borges 1999: 389), variegating thus Emile Faguet’s keen remark that “*Bouvard and Pécuchet* is the story of a Faust who was also an idiot” (qtd. in Borges 1999: 387).

In spite of his perpetual “trouble with conclusions,” Borges concludes his homage to *Bouvard and Pécuchet* with an accurate observation that: “If universal history is the history of Bouvard and Pécuchet, everything it consists of is ridiculous and insignificant” (Borges 1999: 389). This observation conspicuously resembles in tone a desperate sigh by Flaubert himself expressed in one of his letters, which may well serve in lieu of the conclusion of this paper, formulating its author’s equally desperate attempt to resist Flaubert’s other remark made elsewhere that: “The frenzy for reaching a conclusion is the most sterile and disastrous of manias” (qtd. in Borges 1999: 388). In a letter to Luise Colet in May 1852 Flaubert wrote: “How much do we have to study to liberate ourselves from books, and how many do we have to read! What is left to us is to drink the whole oceans, and urinate them back again” (*Dopisy* 1971: 221, translation mine).

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