

# Marek Pokorný: And Again G. F.

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While most of Gustave Flaubert's contemporaries saw period social, political and ideological conflicts and regresses as difficulties accompanying the fulfilment of the promises of modernity, the writer himself was already digging, in full consciousness, into its ruins.

When Flaubert's protégé and friend Guy de Maupassant wrote in his Study on Gustav Flaubert, published as a preface to the 1885 edition of *Bouvard and Pécuchet* (the first, posthumous edition is from 1881), that "the real characters [in the book] are the systems, not people" and ideas "move, unite, fight each other and destroy each other just like people",<sup>1</sup> he expressed exactly Flaubert's grotesque settling of accounts with the false hopes of modernism. Indeed, Flaubert's late, unfinished book is a kind of travesty of the largest enterprise of the French Enlightenment, the twenty-eight volumes of the *Encyclopedia, or a Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts*. A polyphony of conflicting theories, facts, and methods murmur their apodictic "sic!", articulated alternately by actors usually repeating platitudes that freely circulate in public space and refer to authorities that – as the author intended to prove by his *Dictionary of Received Ideas*, conceived in parallel with *Bouvard and Pécuchet* and also unfinished – themselves have skeletons in their cupboards. But Flaubert's malice, redeemed by the daily toil of writing, is a metaphysically ironic sigh rather than a nihilistic credo.

Two persons, two individuals to whom the modern era seems to attribute the status of an active entity, are the projection screen for the mumbling of a jammed crowd of competing scientific systems, instructions and methods concerning the parts of social and individual life parcelled out by civilization (agriculture, politics, hygiene, etc.). Ironically, Flaubert points out that the opposite is true: The subjects are subject to systems, ideologies and opinions,

let themselves be dragged by them, even though they had assumed them to be instruments of their own practice, their self-realization. *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, a book far more open than Flaubert's previous novels, demonstrates the absence of a fixed point or hierarchy that would provide the world with a meaning. Pierre Bourdieu writes in connection with the literary composition of *Sentimental Education*: "As Manet will do later, Flaubert abandons the unifying perspective taken from a fixed and central point of view in favour of what one could call, with Panofsky, an 'aggregated space', meaning a space made of juxtaposed pieces and without a privileged, hierarchical point of view."<sup>2</sup>

Through formally brilliant transformations and radical compositional approaches,<sup>3</sup> *Sentimental Education* modelled the social space of the narrative as a field of social relations, establishing at the same time Flaubert's position, i.e. the possibility not to take part, to guarantee one's autonomy through a creative action. The unfinished novel *Bouvard and Pécuchet* offers merely cycled sequences of vanity and the concept of the author as a worker rearranging the sand of thoughts and words from one pile to another.<sup>4</sup> Which is the last attempt to keep one's distance from everything. What Bourdieu writes about *Sentimental Education* is even more true of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*: "It is a text without transcendence."<sup>5</sup>

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1. Guy de Maupassant: Study on Gustave Flaubert. In Guy de Maupassant: Petr a Jan, studie, črty a korespondence [Peter and John, Studies, Drafts and Correspondence], Praha 1957, p. 261. ↩
  2. Pierre Bourdieu: Pravidla umění. Vznik a struktura literárního pole [The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field], Brno 2010, p. 155. ↩
  3. See Carlo Ginzburg: What Is Hidden in a White Spot, In: Carlo Ginzburg: Mocenské vztahy. Historie, rétorika, důkaz [Power Relations. History, Rhetoric, Proof], Prague 2013, pp. 101–118. ↩
  4. "I roam the combinations of my second chapter, the one on sciences, taking again notes on physiology and therapeutics, from a comic point of view – and that is not a small thing. Then I have to give them (my heroes) clarity and vividness. I do not think that anyone has tried to express the comic of ideas yet. It is possible that I get drowned in there, but if I get out of it, the earth will not deserve the honour of my stepping on it." From Gustave Flaubert's letter to Madame Roger des Genettes, 2 April 1877. In Gustav Flaubert: Dopisy [Letters], Prague 1970, p. 341. ↩
  5. See note 2. ↩

