

FLAUBERT'S POSTMODERNISM AND ITS LEGACY

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Abstract: *The study presents a critical interpretation of the ethical imagination affirmed by Gustave Flaubert and Michel Houellebecq. Houellebecq's heroes move in a twilight world where all moral conflicts, all the anarchy of norms and all the energy of crisis accumulated in the two centuries of modernity explode paroxysmically. Bruno, the transformed copy of Bouvard, is a prisoner in the labyrinth of hedonistic consumerism and ends up in madness. Through his eyes, postmodern humanity appears deformed and naive, a schizoid victim of its own inability to ensure the flow of correspondences between mind and reality. Hedonistic ethics leads Bruno towards a universe that is equally anarchic and apocalyptic. Michel, the possible copy of Pécuchet, marks the maximum distance of the (post)modern's alienation from itself, from its own human origin and from a moral ideal. The scientist Michel invents the method of replacing the human species – perpetually unhappy and bankrupt in its counterproductive ethical mediocrity – with a new species of self-sufficient robotic beings, perfectly reproducible by cloning the “particular elements” of the human genome... The (post)modern world therefore appears in Michel's eyes as a hideous creature whose irreversible autism leads it towards programmed self-annihilation. The anti-utopia projected by Houellebecq, especially in Michel's story, is falsely legitimized by Kantian ethics, betrayed, however, and manipulated by an anti-human mind. But Michel's ethical absolute is the absolute of matter, which acts implacably against the human being. The bankruptcy of humanist-rationalist ethics and of scientific ethics is for postmodernists like Houellebecq a reality that will hasten the catastrophe and not the ethical alternative.*

Keywords: *postmodernism, Flaubert, Houellebecq, ethical imaginary.*

Introduction

Bouvard and Pécuchet, Flaubert's last book, left unfinished but published posthumously between 1880-1881, is the tragicomic epic of (post)modern man, as the French writer reads and anticipates it towards the end of the 19th century, in the fabric of cultural and social phenomenology. It is known how much Flaubert loved this last work of his, what a passionate relationship he had with it, how much perseverance he put into documentation and how many real sacrifices he made in his fight to finish it. Such an

involvement gives the story of Bouvard and Pécuchet the dimension of an extremely carefully elaborated message by Flaubert, launched to us – those of us who come after him, from the 20th century – but precisely for that reason all the more difficult to translate into an interpretation of our own without hesitation.

The writer himself, not at all innocent, premeditates the melting into the linearity of the narrative thread of several hypotheses on how the very capacious stomach of the modern community, with the mechanisms, ideas and customs that take clear forms since his time, can or cannot digest individual existences. Meditating on what can happen to the world and man in the new era called modern, Flaubert takes a distance from modernity, a distance of skeptical gaze, but, during the very evocation, his mind studies modernity at the same time – with a magnifying glass, one could say, in order to invent the lives of two heroes, Bouvard and Pécuchet, placed in his strict contemporaneity. And Flaubert's magnifying glass is one of the utmost skeptical curiosities, armed with the irony of analytical vigilance, but also with an affectionate meticulousness and restlessness for the fate of his heroes.

Thus, in the particular dynamics of the story of the adventures of the two, he reinvents the dominant languages and projections of almost all the territories in which modernity had already operated the structural mutation that it brings, as a new civilization: the economy, with the fresh, at that time, exploitation of the land imposed by modern agriculture, religion, medicine, with the fascination for pharmacology and genetics, the sciences and opportunities opened up by technology, politics, education, linguistics, the arts... The question is for what purpose does the writer make this huge effort. And the answer can only be found in the unique imprint that the existence of Flaubert's heroes leaves in this entire concentrated picture of modernity.

The Mapping of Modernity

The opposition between the critical-ironic skepticism in the mapping of modernity – achieved by marking the existential routes of Bouvard and Pécuchet, with all the samples and levels of disconcerting stupidity they reach – and Flaubert's restrained but continuous affection for the mediocre humanity of his heroes, produces an effect of strangeness that implicitly speaks of the strange, barely perceptible monstrosity of modernity, behind the march of progress. The new acts, in Flaubert's understanding, like a drug on the human being, making him permanently sick with the intoxication of the transformation of the world towards an objective impossible to define with clarity.

The stupidity capable of incredible sisyphean energies, which Bouvard and Pécuchet demonstrate, does not belong to their primary nature, however mediocre. Their stupidity is not accidental; on the other hand, it would belong to the entire modern world. In a pre-modern world, Flaubert's heroes would have been simply ordinary individuals, integrated into a reassuring rhythm of customs and values that would have protected them, and would not have exposed them to the potential for (self-)destructive stupidity that can arise in any human nature exposed to its own limits. Pre-modern society would have taught them to enjoy the peace and advantages of old age, and would not have seduced them with the mirage of knowledge, towards which Bouvard and Pécuchet launch themselves, as in a naive-grotesque race of self-forgetfulness and self-deception. Consequently, the stupidity of Flaubert's heroes is stimulated, maintained, to the point of being produced by the fatal mechanism of modernization, which insistently offers them a veritable feast of interesting information, spectacular theories, hypotheses and fascinating experiments.

Bouvard and Pécuchet cannot truly be despised. Flaubert challenges us to admit that there is a Bouvard and a Pécuchet in each of us, more or less active. In today's postmodernity, especially in the world of media culture and the Internet, it is downright impossible to completely avoid Bouvard and Pécuchet-type behavior. We can therefore contemplate them with amusement, we can laugh at them, we can pity them, but we cannot deny them with aggression or cynicism because their story concerns any inhabitant of modernity, in the sense that any modern man can succumb to his own stupidity, regardless of his degree of intelligence or culture, if he violates his own limits and allows himself more freedom than he can control. It is about the freedom of reason. Flaubert's warning is clear: no one is immune to suicidal stupidity, hallucination, and self-hypnotic flight toward a ghostly horizon of ultimate understanding of things, if and only if he lives in modernity and adopts its values. It is important to remember that in 1870-1880, Flaubert and the Western European world were still living in a joyful modernity. Almost a hundred years after the French Revolution, the civilization proposed by modernity inspired Western humanity with unreserved optimism, blind trust in the scientific spirit, an immeasurable pride of the Self, the arrogance of reason that establishes its own freedoms and limits. Flaubert, however, is clearly at odds with the power-hungry joy of Western-bourgeois modernity in the second half of the 20th century. In *The Canon of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant says as early as 1781, a hundred years before Flaubert's novel, in a Western Europe that was confidently entering modernity:

“It is humiliating for human reason that its pure use achieves nothing, and that it even needs discipline to curb its excesses and prevent the illusions that come from it.”
(Kant, 1994: 567)

Kant is the prophet of trust in human reason and in freedom of will. But it is precisely he, the one who investigated the possibilities of reason to control reality and especially its own nature, who understands the inescapable disjunction between the enormous capacity of human reason to formulate questions and the insignificant capacity of the same reason to give true answers:

“Human reason has in a kind of its knowledge the particular fate of being overwhelmed by questions that it cannot avoid, because they are imposed on it by the nature of reason itself, to which it cannot answer, because they exceed the entire capacity of human reason” (Kant, 1994: 21).

Kant

These are the lines with which the legitimizing philosopher of modernity opens the Preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant's statement is disconcerting not because it does not prove its axiomatic truth, but because its truth belongs to the cultural-philosophical and religious mentality of pre-modern man, who restricts his interrogative territory to those questions whose answers he can control. Kant's thinking does not belong to the pre-modern world, it speaks to modernity, while constructing it at the same time. And the sense of trust in reason that Kant cultivates is not that of de-limitation, of a freedom without borders and without obstacles. Kant does not advise modern man to ask all the questions that his reason perceives and to prove all the possible answers. For Kant, this is not the path to freedom, but the path leads that to the certain loss of the freedom of reason. He openly recognizes the excesses and illusions

to which reason can expose itself when it does not have or does not follow a strict discipline of managing its own limits:

“The greatest and perhaps the only use of any philosophy of pure reason is only negative, for it does not serve as an organon for the expansion of knowledge, but as a discipline for determining limits, and instead of discovering the truth, it has only the modest merit of preventing errors.” (Kant, 1994: 568).

The freedom of reason is therefore confused, for Kant, with its power to restrain its spirit in order to want to know what it can know. Certainly, Flaubert's heroes do not follow a discipline of reason in knowledge; they imagine that they live the passion, even the ecstasy of knowledge. They do not question the limits of reason, they do not know the determination of limits and they do not understand their necessity. Moreover, they taste the pleasure of defying their own limits, they engage in all attempts to practice the theories proposed by modern sciences without asking themselves whether there is really truth there and especially whether such a struggle will make them happy. Bouvard and Pécuchet experience a full-blown phenomenon of transfer: their consciousness moves into the mental realities described and proposed by modern sciences. The substitution of their own mental reality with the succession of mental realities borrowed from the books of scientists, analysts and theorists of all kinds leads to a transfer of identity, based on mimetic knowledge. However, the transfer of identity stops every time halfway, the mimetic substitution of mental realities fails.

Bouvard and Pécuchet do not become scientists, analysts, theorists, or great practitioners of modern science. And their failure produces an identity void, with worrying consequences: who is Bouvard and who is Pécuchet at the end of these failed experiments? The easy explanation would be that the fault lies solely with Bouvard and Pécuchet, and the cause of the failure would be only their insurmountable stupidity. And yet! Without abruptly denying such an interpretation, Flaubert weaves the narrative discourse in such a way that we seriously doubt such a simplistic explanation, which would also clearly diminish the stakes of the novel. Flaubert convinces us to ask ourselves whether Bouvard and Pécuchet, before being victims of their own stupidity, are not victims of the lack of discipline of reason on which all modern science is based. Is not the truth of the books that Bouvard and Pécuchet avidly study merely an excess or illusion of reason, a perfect trap for the mediocre naivety of Flaubert's confident heroes?

Enlightenment Thinking

Does not every man, stupid or brilliant, live between excess and illusion when he finally settles into the social and mental space of modernity, because, in total contradiction to Kant's disturbing advice, he confuses the power of de-limitation with freedom and the recognition of limits with the shameful impotence of the spirit? The project of modernity, as Kant legitimizes it in the Critique of Pure Reason, gives rise, paradoxically or not, to an opposite modernity, in which its ethics becomes unrecognizable and which we can call without mistake anti-modern, if we follow the meaning given by Kant to trust in reason. And if we cannot bear such a change in direction of the concept of modernity, we are forced to admit that Kant's thinking, the legitimizer, is, in fact, anti-modern, and the project he built for modernity is also one... anti-modern, because it is opposed to the historical-real modernity of Flaubert's century and the centuries that followed. Flaubert

speaks about this problematic modernity. Its negative content would come from the fact that it structurally betrays the original legitimizations on which it is based, those founded by Enlightenment thinking, such as Kant's. Scientific and theoretical modernity asks all the questions it can imagine and aspires to experiment with all the possible answers, without admitting any canon for pure reason and for practical reason, as Kant proposes, but especially without admitting an ethics of balance between limit and freedom.

The dramatic question that Flaubert raises through the tragicomic story of Bouvard and Pécuchet is, ultimately, the following: do modern scientists, philosophers and theorists of modernity, the tutelary spirits of this new civilization know how to determine and control limits? Or, in other words, in Kantian terms, do they have a discipline of reason, does their reason know how to avoid excesses and illusions? And yet: can we still believe that the legitimizers of modernity, such as Immanuel Kant, are also guarantors of an ethics of modern reason, based on the Kantian principle: "do what makes you worthy of being happy"? (Kant, 1994: 575)

In essence, Kant's principle does nothing more than reunite in a secular language the Christian moral laws: Love your God and love your neighbor as yourself. After a century of modernity, Flaubert thus goes further with the critique of reason than Kant himself. And he is forced to do so. From the space of real humanity of cheerful modernity, the writer cuts out two possible individual consciousnesses. Bouvard and Pécuchet are copyist clerks in Paris. Both are on the verge of retirement and both are alone. They meet each other by chance and like each other so much that they decide to spend the rest of their lives together, like two soul mates. Before leaving Paris to settle together on a farm in the provinces, which they will buy after retirement, here is what Flaubert's heroes do:

"They shared their opinions on fashionable plays, on the government, on the high cost of food, on frauds in trade. ... they also tried to better understand the causes of the Revolution. They wandered through the second-hand shops. They visited the Conservatory of Arts and Crafts, the church of Saint-Denis, the Tapestry Factory, the Palace of the Invalides, as well as all the public collections. When their papers were asked for, they pretended to have lost them, giving themselves as two foreigners, two Englishmen. At the museum of natural sciences, they passed in utter amazement by the stuffed quadrupeds ...; in front of the fossils, they sank into a sweet reverie, but the shells bored them to death. [...] At the Louvre, they tried to get excited about Raphael's paintings. He would have liked to know the exact number of volumes in the great public library. Once, they went to attend an Arabic class at the Collège de France, and the professor was astonished to see these two strangers struggling to take notes. Thanks to Barberou, they got behind the scenes of a small theater. Dumouchel got them tickets to a meeting of the Academy. They inquired about various discoveries, read all kinds of prospectuses, and, thanks to this curiosity, their intelligence became sharper every day. Somewhere, far away, farther and farther away, they glimpsed a number of things as vague as they were wonderful. While admiring an old piece of furniture, they regretted not having lived at a time when people had used it, although they knew nothing about that time. Meeting certain names of lands, and they imagined them all the more beautiful, since they were unable to say anything about them. It seemed to them that the works whose titles were incomprehensible contained a mystery." (Flaubert, 1984: 20-21).

Tourism of Knowledge

Flaubert's heroes indulge in a kind of tourism of knowledge of the entire space that modern civilization produces, which we could easily fit into forms of pseudo-

knowledge. And once they arrive at the farm in Chavignolles, Bouvard and Pécuchet begin to research and experiment with tireless frenzy what the sciences and theories of the era could make available to them. They set about farming according to the latest scientific discoveries and recommendations and fail. Not at all resigned, they continue with all kinds of other experiments, from medicine to education. And they fail every time, because Flaubert's heroes, in all their ridiculousness, beyond their self-taught or semi-educated attitude, beyond their inconsistency and impotence, actually tend towards absolute success, towards truth and towards gaining happiness through knowledge. And such a goal seems to be not at all accessible. Flaubert's fools do not lack the ideal, on the contrary. And their stupidity often resembles intelligence. However, Flaubert, in the most subtle way possible, without any thesis approach, appealing only to the magic of the story, tries to tell us that stupidity is not the primary cause of Bouvard and Pécuchet's failure, but their ethics. The two retired former copyists in Paris, who have become rentiers in the province, do not have as their rule of life "do what makes you worthy of being happy".

Their rule of life could be formulated as follows: do everything you want to be happy. There is another version of it, equally revealing for the ethics of Bouvard and Pécuchet: do everything that comes to your mind to be happy. Such a rule of life could only lead to excess and illusion. Not to happiness at all. Kant had warned us. Bouvard and Pécuchet finally give up all their experiments and searches. Resigned, they return to their old occupation:

"...the dust and powder are collected from everything they have tried. Nothing in life interests them anymore. In secret, each one has a thought. And they hide it from each other. – Sometimes, they smile, remembering it, – then they tell it to each other, at the same time. Let them start copying like before. They make themselves a desk with two desks. – (They address a carpenter, Gorju, who has heard talk of their invention, and suggests that he make it for them...) They buy registers and the necessary tools, sandarac, paper scrapers, etc. And they get to work." (Flaubert, 1984: 264)

What is impressive is that, despite the total failure, Flaubert's heroes do not separate, do not collapse, they stay together. Friendship and solidarity in failure, as an ethical rule, save them from suicide and madness. These are the extreme evils that other heroes who come after them and who resemble them will not be able to avoid, for example Bruno and Michel from *Elementary Particles*, by Michel Houellebecq. If we return to Kant's interpretation, it is not truth that offers itself to modern reason, but primarily consciousness and mastery of limits. However, Kant himself recognizes that the aspiration towards another kind of horizon in knowledge, one of fulfilled certainties, is impossible to eliminate from human nature itself:

"Nevertheless, there must exist somewhere a source of positive knowledge which belongs to the domain of pure reason and which, perhaps, due to a mere misunderstanding, is an occasion for errors, but which in reality constitutes the goal towards which reason strives. For otherwise to what cause should be attributed the insatiable desire to put a firm footing somewhere beyond the limits of experience at all costs? It suspects objects which for it have a great interest. It steps on the path of mere speculation, in order to approach them; but these flee from it. Perhaps, one can hope for more success on the only path that remains to it, namely that of practical use." (Kant, 1994: 568).

The Quixotic Modernity

Bouvard and Pécuchet, the little men covered with the enthusiasm of pure ridicule and candid stupidity, seek precisely that source of positive knowledge. In this sense, their search is no different from that of the geniuses who have produced the significant number of scientific theories, laws and rules, procedures and hypotheses, information and novelties with which they occupy their minds and consume their existence in the last years of their lives, instead of enjoying retirement in peace. Their quixotic personality is the best revealer of the colossal stupidity that results from modern genius when it is not guided by an ethics of limits that ensures controlled freedom of the will and the dignity of happiness, in the secular Kantian sense and in the religious Christian sense.

In the plan published posthumously alongside the first part of the unfinished novel and summarizing an apotheotic conference of his heroes, Flaubert brilliantly anticipates the two great contradictory visions of postmodernity. Pécuchet is the prophet of nihilism. He depicts the understanding of modernity as a failed project due to lack of coherence and legitimizing ethical construction:

“Pécuchet sees the future of Humanity in black: Modern man is no longer what he was: he has become a machine. The final anarchy of humanity... The impossibility of peace... Barbarism from an excess of individualism and scientific delirium. Three hypotheses: 1) pantheistic radicalism will break any connection with the past, and an inhuman despotism will follow; 2) if theistic absolutism triumphs, the liberalism that has permeated humanity since the Reformation succumbs, and everything is overturned; 3) if those convulsions that have existed since ‘89 continue endlessly, oscillating between the two solutions, these oscillations will destroy us by their very force. There will be no more ideal, no religion, no morality. America will have conquered the Earth... Universal Pignuflism. Everything will be nothing more than a huge party worker. The end of the world through cooling” (Flaubert, 1984: 261).

It is not difficult to recognize the radically critical discourse on modernity, outlined only by Flaubert, but which the greatest postmodern thinkers develop, as if hypnotically, with the most disarming arguments. The voice of Cioran or the voice of Deleuze often echoes in our minds:

“The modern world is the world of simulacra, in which man does not survive God, the identity of the subject does not survive the identity of the substance. All identities are only simulated...” (Flaubert, 1984: 8)

Bouvard is the prophet of triumphalist ethics. He almost accurately imagines the current discourses of cultural policies, but also the position of philosophical theories such as that expressed, for example, by David Bohm, in *The Fullness of the World and Its Order*, being the voice of utopian confidence in the continuity of the modernity project and in its ethical performance, ensured by the total victory of human knowledge:

“Bouvard sees the future of Humanity in rosy light. Modern man is in full progress. Europe will be regenerated by Asia. The historical law requiring the propagation of civilization from the East to the West – the role of China – the two humanities will finally merge. Future inventions: different ways of traveling. Balloons. – Submarines... [...] The sciences of the future. – The magnetic force will be controllable. [...] The

disappearance of evil through the disappearance of necessity. Philosophy will be a religion. The community of peoples. Public celebrations. People will reach other stars – and when the earth is too worn out, Humanity will move to the stars.” (Bohm, 1995: 261-262).

Two Versions on the Future of the Modern World

Reading the two versions on the future of the modern world, the natural question would be: what is Flaubert's ethics, after all? The author of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, one of the first authentic postmodernists, resolutely retreats behind his fictional voices and confronts the reader with an open, confusing ethics, whose ordering principles are ambiguity, duplicity, multiplication of identity perspectives, contradiction and the obscuring of any horizon of clear and unifying solutions.

A little over a century later, Michel Houellebecq creates in *Elementary Particles* (1998) a pair of heroes who resume the sisyphian adventure of knowledge begun by *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. Whether willingly or not, Houellebecq hypostasizes in the heart of postmodernity, somewhere towards the not probable, but ultimate exit to another world, the human prototype designed by Flaubert. Bruno and Michel are copies of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, as they are supposed to feel and think, act and speak towards the abrupt end of modernity. Flaubert's heroes, irresponsible, hyperactive and for a long time enthusiastic, are images of the ethical mentality specific to the first modernity, the one confident, victorious and fueled by positive utopia. But their resigned return to the monotonous killing of time in the rhythm of ritualized copying prefigures the tragic destiny of Bruno and Michel, which would describe, in fact, the last episode of the historical cycle along which the prototype – modern man – evolves.

Houellebecq's heroes move in a twilight world where all moral conflicts, all the anarchy of norms and all the energy of crisis accumulated in the two centuries of modernity explode paroxysmically. Bruno, the transformed copy of *Bouvard*, is a prisoner in the labyrinth of hedonistic consumerism and ends up in madness. Through his eyes, postmodern humanity appears deformed and naive, a schizoid victim of its own inability to ensure the flow of correspondences between mind and reality. Hedonistic ethics leads Bruno towards a universe equally anarchic and apocalyptic. Michel, the possible copy of *Pécuchet*, marks the maximum distance of the (post)modern's alienation from itself, from its own human origin and from a moral ideal. The scientist Michel invents the method of replacing the human species – perpetually unhappy and bankrupt in its counterproductive ethical mediocrity – with a new species, of self-sufficient robotic beings, perfectly reproducible by cloning the “particular elements” of the human genome... The (post)modern world therefore appears in Michel's eyes as a hideous creature whose irreversible autism leads it towards programmed self-annihilation. The anti-utopia projected by Houellebecq, especially in Michel's story, is falsely legitimized by Kantian ethics, betrayed, however, and manipulated by an anti-human mind:

“Michel became increasingly aware of this [Kantian] ethics and would remain definitively marked by it. Nietzsche only caused him a brief irritation, and Kant only confirmed what he already knew. Pure morality is unique and universal. It suffers neither degradation nor addition over time. It does not depend on any historical, economic, sociological or cultural factor: it does not depend on anything at all. Undetermined, it determines. Unconditioned, it conditions. In other words, it is an absolute.” (Houellebecq, 2006: 40).

But Michel's ethical absolute is the absolute of matter, which acts implacably against the human being. The bankruptcy of humanist-rationalist ethics and scientific ethics is, for postmodernists like Houellebecq, a reality that will precipitate catastrophe and not the ethical alternative.

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