

A MERE LABYRINTH OF LETTERS"/FLAUBERT AND THE QUEST FOR FICTION/A MONTAGE. BY E. DONATO

For MICHEL SERRES

*In the Affendämmerung, or twilight of the apes  
what is more fitting than that man should for reas-  
surance turn to japes?*

Ogden Nash

I

*The universe (which others call the Library) . . .*  
Borges

*Je crèverai entre deux périodes.*

Flaubert

Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Mind* and *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, Novalis' *Encyclopedia*, Mallarmé's *Book*, and Borges' *Library of Babel* name the different moments under barely differing metaphors of the certitude, nostalgia or nightmare of the same concept of a unified, self-generated, total discourse joining in a circular movement the absolute Origin and End of a linear order. The concept of a Unified global knowledge not simply as an indiscriminate accumulation, no matter how total in scope, such as for example in Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, but as a *Total order* which accounts for all past, present, future, artistic, philosophic, religious endeavours, belongs to Hegel. Hegel's *Phenomenology* was to mark the advent of the Totalizing End of History, the revelation to itself in Absolute Knowledge of *Geist*, the true authorial Voice of the *Encyclopedia*. Such a History is of course above all rational: "The only idea that

*De Rabelais à Joyce par Leibniz et toute une chaîne, projeter, appliquer partie d'une bibliothèque possible sur un livre. Un mot le dit, bibliographie, tout un ensemble défini sur un élément. Il y a toujours, chez eux, des livres dans le livre.*

Serres

*Think of the Bible: it is not a book it is a library.*

Borges

*Fort embarrassés [Bouvard et Pecuchet] parfois de savoir si tel livre 'était vraiment un livre de bibliothèque'.*

Flaubert

Philosophy brings is the simple idea of Reason, that Reason governs the world and therefore universal History is rational."

Novalis also entertained the dream of a self-generated *Encyclopedia*. Novalis' project runs parallel to Hegel's but is exemplary in as much as it remains incomplete and fragmentary for intrinsic and not accidental reasons. For Novalis:

"Everything must be encyclopedied . . ."

"It must be possible to put into tables any possible history of *literature*, of art and of the *world*."

"My book must become a scientific bible — a model real and ideal — and the seed for all books."

"All sciences constitute a *single book*."

"Properly speaking, the description of the bible is my enterprise — or, to state it even better, the theory of the bible — art and theory of the bible. (Manner of elevating a book to the level of the bible.) Fully complete, the bible is a *perfect library* — well-ordered. The schema of the bible is at the same time the schema of the library — the authentic schema — indicating at the same time its own genesis — its own use, etc."<sup>1</sup>

Novalis' project not only shows the theological nature of the enterprise but connects it directly with the Bible on the one hand and the idea of an ideal Library on the other. Such an ideal Library, the concretisation of the Ideal Encyclopedia, would not simply be the random depository of as many books as possible, but would display them in such a way that their spacing would manifest a totally rational order. As such the library is an institution that attempts to generate a lay equivalent of the divine Book. In the 19th century the 'Encyclopedia-Libraries' came to be conceived as the primary conceptual tool by means of which men were to decipher the world, yet the decipherment itself has a pre-ordained place in the library. The 'Book-

Encyclopedia-Library' then becomes what Borges was to describe ironically, in another context, as "the inconceivable museum of platonic archetypes, intelligible essences and universals."

Yet, as Derrida has shown in his analysis of Novalis' *Encyclopedia*, the latter is inscribed in a system of representation which it does not master and hence Novalis' project of totalization is doomed to remain a project.<sup>2</sup> For our purposes let us take the fragmentary nature of the *Encyclopedia* as emblematic of a cleft in the plenitude of Hegel.

Mallarmé's *Book* in many respects echoes Hegel's *Encyclopedia*: "The Book where the spirit lives satisfied, unpersonified, the volume, inasmuch as one separates oneself from it as author, does not require any approach by the reader. As such, among human accessories, it exists by itself: made yet already there (il a lieu tout seul: fait étant). The buried meaning moves of its own accord, disposing the pages in chorus."<sup>3</sup> Yet, like Novalis' *Encyclopedia*, Mallarmé's *Book* remains in fragments.<sup>4</sup> His often quoted "... everything in the world exists to end in a book"<sup>5</sup> marks perhaps the reason for the necessary failure of both enterprises within the text as representation. The 'world' as 'thing', 'meaning' or 'signified' logically and temporally pre-dates its metaphoric transcription in the *Book*, and the *Book* as totalization is always on the horizon as a never present future. The temporal inscription of a text never speaks of presence but always of an unrecoverable loss or an impossible future. As Derrida has so convincingly argued, the time of the text is the time of a continuous *preface* which is always written after that which the text represents in a book yet to come. The temporality that Derrida ascribes to the text, in this respect, is similar to that which for Kermode characterizes fiction. In Kermode's words: "Men, like poets, rush 'into the midst', in *media res*, where they also die in *mediis rebus*" and of course since "men die because they cannot join

*Une préface . . . énoncerait  
au futur ("vous allez lire ceci")  
le sens ou le contenu concep-  
tuels . . . de ce qui aurait déjà  
été écrit.*

Derrida

*Le temps est le temps de la pré-  
face, l'espace — dont le temps  
aura été la vérité — est  
l'espace de la préface. Celle-ci  
occuperait donc en totalité le  
lieu et la durée du livre.*

Derrida

*Le livre ne commence ni ne  
finit, tout au plus il en fait  
semblant.*

Mallarmé

*Commencer et finir sont des  
actes décisifs et dérisoires.*

Barthes

the beginning and the end" they invent fictions: "to make sense of their span they need fiction concords with origins and ends such as giving meaning to lives and to poems."<sup>6</sup>

Fiction then as Kermode would have it is nothing but the imposing of artificial absolute origins and ends on that which is by definition without beginning and end. Hegel then believed in a supreme and absolute fiction whereas Mallarmé at the opposite extreme did not think any such absolute fiction possible. Between these two extremes fictions remain the representations of texts which never quite coincide with them.

Some fictions, of course, with the summoning of a monstrous imagination, will attempt to join opposites, to juxtapose fiction with the impossibility of fiction. Take, for example, Borges' *Library of Babel*. Its halls, which contain: "... everything: the minutely detailed history of the future, the archangels' autobiographies, the faithful catalogue of the Library, thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of those catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of the true catalogue, the Gnostic Gospel of Basilides, the commentary on that gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death, the translation of every book in all languages, the interpolations of every book in all books"<sup>7</sup> . . . are nothing but the fictional nightmare of the Hegelian *Logos*.

It is against such a background of absolute or impossible fictions, and of their teratogenic mixture that we might best try to understand Flaubert's own fictional enterprise.

## II

*Je lis des catalogues de livres que  
j'annote.* Flaubert

*Je suis un homme-plume. Je sens par elle, à cause  
d'elle, par rapport à elle et beaucoup plus avec elle.*  
Flaubert

*Avant-hier, dans la forêt de  
Touques, un charmant endroit*

It has been said repeatedly that Flaubert's fictional enterprise, despite its esthetics and

*près d'une fontaine, j'ai trouvé des bouts de cigares éteints avec des bribes de pâtés. On avait été là — en partie! J'ai écrit cela dans Novembre, il y a onze ans! C'était alors purement imaginé, et l'autre jour ça a été éprouvé. Tant ce qu'on invente est vrai, sois-en sûre . . . Ma pauvre Bovary sans doute, souffre et pleure dans vingt villages de France à la fois, à cette heure même.*

Flaubert

metaphysics, is sustained by an ambivalent relation to the concept of *Book*, *Encyclopedia*, and *Library*. For Kenner, Flaubert "is the great student of cultural feedback, writing books about what books do to the readers of books" and "Emma Bovary herself would have been impossible without books, quantities of books, books of the very sort that *Madame Bovary* itself approximates . . ."<sup>8</sup>

For Foucault *The Temptation of St. Anthony* is "the book of books: it composes in one 'volume' a series of the elements of language which have been constituted from already written books and which are by their rigorously documented character the repetition of that which has already been said."<sup>9</sup> *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, which for Kenner is emblematic of "the incompetence of fiction itself which is endlessly *arranging* things," represents for Foucault a case where "the Library is visible, catalogued, named and analyzed. . . . It possesses its powers by virtue of its very existence — of the proliferation of printed paper . . . the Bible has been transformed into a bookstore."

Flaubert's quest for fiction will thus coincide minimally with a quest for the form of the Book. Its requirement is simple: to find a finite condensed narrative conforming to its subject matter. Its simple requirements are stated by Bouvard and Pécuchet when they decide to write a historical book: "one can take a subject, exhaust the sources, analyze it well, then condense it into a narrative, which would be a summary of facts, reflecting the entire truth."<sup>10</sup> Yet such a task quickly turns out to be intrinsically impossible. This impossibility exists on two levels; on the one hand the 'reality' quickly fragments itself into an infinity of disconnected and contradictory events; on the other hand the written representation is incapable of acceding to a completed form.

For Flaubert, who described it metaphorically as "a complicated organism"<sup>11</sup> (798), a "heavy machine" (342), a *Book* exists as a privileged

form, distinct and independent from any of its possible semantic representations. The first property of form is its unity: "beautiful fragments are nothing. Unity, unity, everything is there" (158). A *Book* then "is a totality where each part concurs in the whole and not an assemblage of sentences which no matter how well made are of value only if individually isolated."<sup>12</sup> In a letter to Georges Sand Flaubert compares the *Book* to a wall of the Acropolis: "I ask myself if a book, independently of what it says, cannot produce the same effect. In the precision of its assembly, the rarity of its elements, the gloss of its surface, the harmony of its whole, is there not an intrinsic virtue, a kind of divine force, something eternal like a principle?" (1573). This form or principle is in fact deceptively simple and is nothing but that of a straight line like a wall: "Prose must stand straight, from beginning to end, like a wall carrying its ornamentation all the way to its foundations, and in its perspective it should form a long, unified line" (405). There is, however, a major difference: whereas the beginnings and ends of walls are clearly demarcated, the line which constitutes the architectonic of prose and of the *Book* can never be temporally or spatially terminated: "prose is a dog-gone thing! It is never finished!" (335), "This is what is diabolical about prose, it is never finished" (404). The incompleteness is intrinsic: there cannot be any privileged end point. The belief that an author can conclude is a fool's belief: "*ineptitude consists in wanting to conclude . . . yes, stupidity consists in wanting to conclude. We are but a thread and we want to know the web.*" (267)

The capacity to reach an end point does not belong to prose or literature. If literature could conclude it would conform to reality and be able to postulate a truth value. It cannot do so, however, hence the contradictory requirement of the novelist who must on the one hand reach for an impossible realism, on the other pursue a futile estheticism — "Art in the last analysis cannot be more serious than a game of skittles" (292

*Je ne crois seulement qu'à  
l'éternité d'une chose, c'est à  
celle de l'illusion, qui est la  
vraie vérité.*

Flaubert

*O no, there is no end; the end is  
death and madness!*

Kidd

*... balivernes que j'aligne très  
sérieusement sur du beau  
papier blanc*

Flaubert

*Le langage en tant que forme  
est devenu la passion de  
l'écrivain*

Barthes

— which knows by its inevitable cleavage from the reality that it pretends to portray its essential inability to attain to any representational identity: "The first quality and end of art is illusion." (426)

God concludes, artists pretend to, while knowing all along that fictions are fictions precisely because they are unable to conclude: "One always falsifies reality when one wishes to bring it to a conclusion that belongs to God alone. And then, it is with fictions that one can manage to discover truth . . . the frenzy to conclude is one of the most fatal and sterile manias peculiar to humanity." (765)

*Bouvard and Pécuchet* is the emblematic literary landmark of fiction's necessary incapacity to raise the description of reality to intelligibility, to find within representation an order which might somehow adequately correspond to what by contrast remains a world of human events submitted to chance — . . . suppose the flight of the King [King XVI] unhindered, Robespierre escaping or Bonaparte assassinated — chances which depend on a less scrupulous inkeeper, an open door, a sleeping sentry — and the course of the world was changed" — of dubious genealogies — "they even wished to learn Hebrew, which is the mother-language of Celtic, unless it is derived from it!" — of uncertain logic — "what is cause, what is effect" — of the earth's unfathomable depths — "Geology is too restricted! . . . As for the rest, and the oceanbeds, we shall always be ignorant." A century later Bouvard and Pécuchet would have no doubt found solace in Borges' discovery of a "Samoyedic Lithuanian dialect of Guarani, with classical Arabian inflections".

The failure of prose to reach an end point and the concomitant failure of fiction to accede to a privileged form, is, in one respect, nothing but the consequence of the incapacity of language to sustain a proper representation of the world. This incapacity of language is inscribed in each of its signifying modes. Language fails to sustain

*Strings of letters and empty spaces, like a code that I've lost the key to.*

Barth

*Si les signes vous faschent, ô quant vous fascheront les choses signifiées*

Rabelais

*... l'on meurt presque toujours dans l'incertitude de son propre nom, à moins d'être un sot*

Flaubert

*Gardens were before Gardeners, and but some hours after the Earth.*

Browne

*La "nature" est un produit du Néolithique*

Pouillon

*Je soutiens qu'il n'y a qu'un géomètre et un sot qui puissent parler sans figures*

J.-J. Rousseau

a stable semiology, a coherent rhetoric, a true philological history or a structured grammar.

After their failure at agronomy and arboriculture, Bouvard and Pécuchet continue their 'natural' quest following an arbitrary alphabetical sequence and move on to landscape architecture. What the two protagonists never realize, never recognize, is that their 'natural' mistakes are above all linguistic mistakes. Bouvard tries to grow 'proper' nominal species of melons and plants. The seeds being planted too close to each other, by metonymic contamination they produce monstrous metaphors: "Actually, as he had grown different species next to one another, the sweet variety got mixed with the bitter, the big Portuguese with the Great Mongolian, and the presence of tomatos completing the anarchy, there resulted abominable hybrids of a pumpkin flavor." 'Proper' names are no more natural than 'proper' species; they are both the result of artificial differentiating grids. The failure of these adventures in arboriculture is in fact due to the failure of taxonomic nomenclature, that is to say, a failure to match correspondingly plants and names: "They looked in their books for plants to buy, and, having chosen names which to them seemed wonderful, they wrote to a market-gardener at Falaise, who eagerly undertook to send them three hundred saplings for which he had no market." Garden architecture, in turn, leads them to a rhetorical disaster, for "the author of *The Garden Architect* divides gardens into an infinity of styles. There is, in the first place, the Melancholy or Romantic, which is distinguished by everlasting, ruins, tombs, and an 'ex-voto to the Virgin, indicating the spot where a cavalier has fallen under an assassin's dagger.' The Terrible is constructed with overhanging rocks, shattered trees and burnt-out cabins; the Exotic, by planting Peruvian torch-thistles to bring back memories to a settler or traveller. The Pensive must provide, like Ermenonville, a temple to philosophy, etc. . . . etc. . . ." Since our gardeners fail to recognize the



*What therefore is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphism; in short a sum of human relations which became poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage seems to a nation fixed, canonic, and binding; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions, worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses; coins which have their obverse effaced, and now are no longer of account as coins, but merely as metal.*

Nietzsche

*Let it be as if. Let's make a philosophy of that as if.*

Sterne

artificial distinction of codes they end up producing a new monstrosity: "In the half-light it was somehow terrible. The rock, like a mountain, took up the lawn, the tomb made a cube in the midst of the spinach, the Venetian bridge a circumflex accent over the kidney beans — and the cabin beyond, a great black smudge, for they had fired the thatched roof to make it more poetical."

The ironic quest of Bouvard and Pécuchet stems from their incapacity to recognize that language is incapable of grasping the nature of things. After failing in their botanical endeavour, they pass on to science and then to history, always convinced that the web of language will be sufficient to help them come to terms with the world. In the same manner that in their gardening they ended up creating metaphoric monsters, their attempts to organize the world of events into a representational order culminate in a metaphoric breakdown of the semiological mechanism of signification; signifiers and signified become indistinguishable and the sign *qua* sign collapses: ". . . the world became a symbol. They sought, on the walls, a quantity of things that were not there, and ended up by seeing them."

And thus they had to reach the conclusion that "syntax is a fantasy and grammar an illusion."

### III

*What confusion in greater THEATRES from words of little meaning.*

Sterne

Flaubert's characters are in search of an absolute and their quest is mediated by the written word; literature for Emma Bovary, the Bible for Anthony, the Library for Bouvard and Pécuchet. Their ironic mistake is to believe in the absolutes implied by their enterprises. Art, Truth, and Knowledge are only teleological mirages. Take the Bible, Anthony's only and supreme book: it is not certain that it is unique,

that it does not exist like the treatises of Bouvard and Pécuchet in many a different and contradictory version. When Anthony wants to dispel the ghosts of the heretics

"they all at once brandish in the air their rolls of papyrus, tablets of wood, scrolls of leather, rolls of woven stuff bearing inscriptions; and elbowing and pushing each other, they all shout to Anthony:

THE CERINTHIANS.	'Behold the Gospel of the Hebrews!'
THE MARCIONITES.	'Behold the Gospel of the Lord!'
THE MARCOSIANS.	'The Gospel of Eve!'
THE EUCRATITES.	'The Gospel of Thomas!'
THE CAINITES.	'The Gospel of Judas!'
BASILIDES.	'The Treatise upon the Destiny of the Soul!'
MANES.	'The Prophecy of Barkouf!'

If one took for granted the singularity of the Bible the problem of interpreting it would not be very different from that encountered by Bouvard and Pécuchet when they attempt to interpret History:

"ANTHONY.	'It matters little! We must believe the Scriptures.'
HILARION.	'Saint Paul, Origen, and many others did not understand the Scriptures in a literal sense: yet if Holy Writ be explained by allegories it becomes the portion of a small numer, and the evidence of the truth disappears. What must we do?'

Emma Bovary, Anthony, Bouvard and Pécuchet are the shadows projected by the virtual end point of theology. If their reality dissolves in the labyrinths of the Library it is because they are the creations of the author's original wandering in it. When Bouvard and Pécuchet decide that History is nothing but a bundle of contradictions, what follows belongs to characters and author alike: "What should one conclude? One must undertake an infinite quest, it is frightening, to know the truth one must exhaust *all* documents — is it possible?"

Impossible as it may seem, the task is as inevitable as it is necessary. Bouvard and Pécuchet, in

*Words, displaced and mutilated words, words of others*

...

Borges

*... if he is a man of the least spirit, he will have fifty devia-*

tions from a straight line to make with this or that party as he goes along, which he can no way avoid . . . he will moreover have various  
 Accounts to reconcile:  
 Anecdotes to pick up:  
 Inscriptions to make out:  
 Stories to weave in:  
 Traditions to sift:  
 Personages to call upon:  
 Panegyrics to paste up at this door:  
 . . . To sum up all; there are archives at every stage to be look'd into, and rolls, records, documents, and endless genealogies . . . In short, there is no end of it.

Sterne

*Il n'y en a plus, de ces artistes comme autrefois, de ceux dont la vie et l'esprit étaient l'instrument aveugle de l'appétit du Beau, organes de Dieu, par lesquels il se prouvait à lui-même. Pour ceux-là le monde n'était pas.*

attempting to totalize the Library, end up copying

“ . . . everything that came into their hands . . . long enumerations . . . Notes on authors already read, old papers bought by weight from the nearby paper factory.

But they felt the need to classify . . . they then copied again in a big commercial register. Pleasure to be found in the act of copying over.

Examples of all styles: agricultural, medical, theological, classical, romantic, circumlocutions.

‘What shall we do?’ ‘One should not reflect! . . . Let us copy! The page must be filled, let the ‘monument’ complete itself. Equality in everything, good, evil, the beautiful and the ugly, the insignificant and the characteristic!’ ”<sup>13</sup>

Bouvard and Pécuchet’s wandering in the maze of the written word is a mirror image of Flaubert’s undertaking, in which, to write *Bouvard and Pécuchet* — but the same would be true of *The Temptation of St. Anthony* or *Salammbô* — he has to start where his characters end: “I am accumulating note upon note, book upon book” (551), “Do you know the number of volumes that I have had to absorb for my two fellows? More than 1500! My file is eight inches high” (1935), “As for myself, I have an indigestion of books. I belching *in-folios*.” Flaubert is lost in the web of the written word like his to anti-heroes: “when I say soon, it is only by way of speaking, for the subject extends itself considerably, with each new reading a thousand others come forth! I, sir, am in a labyrinth!” (550) . . . “reading is an abyss; one never gets out of it.” (397)<sup>14</sup>

*Bouvard and Pécuchet* remains an unfinished book which tells of the impossibility of finishing books. One should not think that literature in any way provides an esthetic alternative to the failure of metaphysics. The act of writing fiction is intrinsically isomorphic to totalizing the *Encyclopedia* or the Library: “To write one would have to know everything. As long as we remain

*... ils regardaient la vie humaine avec un regard étonné, comme nous contemplons des fourmilières.*

Flaubert

petty scribblers (*écrivassiers*), we have a monstrous ignorance. . . . The books from which entire literatures derived, like Homer and Rabelais, are encyclopedias of their times. Those good men knew everything, we know nothing." (466)

#### IV

*Solvitur ambulando*

*La storia che volevo raccontare dunque è impossibile non solo raccontarla ma innanzitutto viverla*

Calvino

*Peut-être qu'il n'y a pas de but*

Flaubert

*Quand je lis Shakespeare. . . . il me semble que je suis sur une haute montagne; tout disparaît et tout apparaît. On n'est plus homme, on est oeil.*

Flaubert

Before trying to answer the question as to why the modern author's failure is inevitable, let us briefly explore his strategy. As we said, to write a successful fiction, that is to say one that representationally has access to truth, hence 'Beauty', one must be able to conclude; but only God has that privilege, for only God can grasp form in its totality, since he alone perceives absolute Origins and Ends and the Order that they sustain. For our purposes Borges' definition is as good as any: "What is a divine mind? . . . There is not a theologian who does not define it. I prefer an example. The steps a man takes from the day of his birth until that of his death trace in time an inconceivable figure. The Divine Mind intuitively grasps that form immediately." The modern author, on the other hand, condemned to the infinite mediation of fragmentary texts, has to have recourse to a topographical strategy in order to see the form. Since the problem of seeing can be translated into a spatial metaphor of perspective, the act of writing can be described as a climb and a search for elevation. The task of the author is to climb high enough to see:

"Is not the artist's life or rather the work of art to be achieved like a big mountain to be

*Il me semble que je vais m'embarquer pour un très grand voyage, vers des régions inconnues, et que je n'en reviendrai pas.*

Flaubert

*Le seul moyen de vivre en paix, c'est de se placer tout d'un bond au-dessus de l'humanité entière et de n'avoir avec elle rien de commun, qu'un rapport d'oeil.*

Flaubert

*Depuis le temps où j'écrivais en demandant à ma bonne les lettres qu'il fallait employer pour faire les mots des phrases que j'inventais, jusqu'à ce soir où l'encre sèche sur les ratures de mes pages, j'ai suivi une ligne droite, incessamment prolongée et tirée au cordeau à travers tout. J'ai toujours vu le but se reculer devant moi, d'années en années, de progrès en progrès. Que de fois je suis tombé à plat ventre au moment où il me semblait le toucher.*

Flaubert

*We climb by the most dangerous paths, our eyes open, impervious to risk, on the rooftops, on the cliffs, on the towers of fantasy, without the slightest vertigo, born as we are to climb — we sleepwalkers of the day! We artists! We dissimulators of nature! We lunatics and seekers of God! We travellers in the silence of death, tireless*

climbed? . . . First one glimpses from below a high peak. In the sky it sparkles with purity; its height is frightening yet it beckons you for that very reason. One departs. But with each leveling of the path the summit grows bigger, the horizon recedes, one goes through precipices, vertigo and discouragements . . . The earth is lost forever, and the end no doubt will never be reached. . . . One has only an indomitable wish to climb higher, to finish, to die. Sometimes however a blast of the winds from heaven arrives and unveils to your dazzled eyes innumerable, infinite and marvelous perspectives! One can make out men twenty thousand feet below, an Olympian air fills your giant lungs and one sees oneself as a colossus having the whole world as a pedestal. Then the fog descends again, and one continues, fumblingly, gropingly, tearing one's nails against the rock-face and crying in one's solitude. It matters little! Let us die in the snow, let us perish in the white agony of our desire in the murmur of the torrents of the Spirit (*l'Esprit*), and our face turned towards the sun!" (426)

The space of the act of writing is permeated with fog which blocks sight, hides direction, and changes the journey into endless and aimless wandering. It transforms the altitude of the mountains, which for the nineteenth century were a privileged place of health and permanence, into one of bleeding and death which is now coextensive with writing itself; it reduces the Voice of Hegel's *Geist* to a murmur and hides the Nietzschean sun, preventing it from defining a direction towards the End.

Nietzsche later will have his Zarathustra climb to the summit, look into the noon sun and return. Having reached the End, in a movement opposed to that of Flaubert, and after reinscribing 'Truth' into a 'Fable', that is to say into a fiction, Nietzsche will be able to reinstate origins: "Incipit Zarathustra". Flaubert's nihilism is perhaps more radical: the writer is doomed to remain in the fog of undifferentiation, in a middle ground which subverts aim, direction and

travellers on heights . . .

Nietzsche

*Mais le sol tremble sous nous. Où prendre notre point d'appui, en admettant même que nous ayons le levier . . . ce qui nous manque c'est le principe intrinsèque . . . c'est . . . l'idée même du sujet. Nous prenons des notes, nous faisons des voyages; misère! nous devenons savants!*

Flaubert

*Like all men of the Library, I have traveled in my youth; I have wandered in search of a book, perhaps the Catalogue of catalogues; now that my eyes can hardly decipher what I write, I am preparing to die just a few leagues from the hexagon in which I was born.*

Borges

*BLAGUE, sb. [Fr.] Pretentious falsehood, 'humbug'. 1837. Carlyle — Fr. Rev . . . The largest, most inspiring piece of blague manufactured, for some centuries. 1886. Huxley — Pall Mall G. . . It believes in shibboleths and sentimental blague.*

Oxford English Dictionary

*Un philosophe à l'écoute des sciences entend, aujourd'hui . . . une parole de mort . . . Cette mort que notre savoir et nos pratiques portent dans le flanc depuis quatre siècles a peu près, qui en est, depuis hier, a son abominable gesine. Pas un savant qui ne le crie dans le desert . . .*

Serres

ultimately life. Not surprisingly then, Flaubert, unable to have access to a supreme fiction, alone without Origin or End, will write: "literally speaking I don't know where I am." (270) Given the symmetry between Flaubert and his characters it is not surprising to find Anthony perched on an elevation in the middle of the desert, another directionless, boundless, flattened, undifferentiated space. To the metaphor of writing corresponds that of crossing the desert: "I have undertaken an insane book. . . I expect nothing more out of life than a string of papers to daub in black. It seems to me that I am crossing a solitude without end, to go I do not know where. And it is I who am, all at once, the desert, the traveller and the camel." (1530)

Incapable of having access to the plenitude that only eschatology can provide, the writer can only play at generating pseudo-fictions which pretend to describe events from a divinely elevated standpoint when in fact he has no elevation. His question "When will facts be written about from the point of view of a superior blague, that is to say, the way the good Lord sees them — from above?" has to remain a rhetorical one.

Yet phrasing the problem in this way, one begs the real question, which is: why is modern written prose denied a privileged position to which others had access in the past? For Flaubert, literature seems to be something of the past, perhaps of the future, but not available to his present.

The answer resides perhaps in the fact that for Flaubert, as later for Nietzsche, God — God as Origin, Order and End, God as Reason, in a word God as Grammar — is dead.

For Nietzsche this does not mean that God is not, but that he once was and now is no more. Pseudo-fictions now tell about the time of an ambiguous crepuscular agony of a *Götterdämmerung*, in between the by-gone time of literature and the future science to come.

## V

... Voilà des mondes qui disparaissent . . . Si le nôtre, à son tour, faisait la cabriole, les citoyens des étoiles ne seraient pas plus émus que nous ne le sommes maintenant.

Flaubert

*The Temptation of St. Anthony* with its three versions which span Flaubert's entire literary career occupies a privileged position in the Flaubertian canon. The author himself more than once underscored the significance of the work: "St. Anthony is my lifetime's work" (1304) — and identified with its character: "I am in the place of St. Anthony . . . the *Temptation* has been for myself and not for the reader." In a letter to George Sand, Flaubert himself underscored the importance of the episode of the death of the Gods, he wrote: "I am having the Gods speak in their death-throes; the sub-title of my book could be: *The Height of insanity*." (1204)

*L'Art, comme le Dieu des Juifs, se repaît d'holocaustes. Allons! d'échire-toi, flagelle-toi, roule-toi dans la cendre, avilis la matière, crache sur ton corps, arrache ton coeur! Tu seras seul, tes pieds saigneront, un dégoût infernal accompagnera tout ton voyage . . .*

Flaubert

*L'équilibre final à la Fourier, à la Boltzmann, implique l'oubli des conditions initiales de la durée. Quelle que soit l'origine de l'histoire, sa fin est univoque, déterminée, identique partout, nécessaire. Equilibre universel, distribution monotomne, entropie maximale . . . Fatal, le monde boltzmannien est sans mémoire distinguée, il gomme, à mesure, les stocks et les différences . . . soumis à cette loi unique linéaire assignant pour fin de l'histoire le peuplement du lieu sans classe. Et qu'importe la longueur du temps, il suffit d'attendre et quoi qu'un fasse . . .*

Serres

*The equalization of European man is today the great irreversible process.*

Nietzsche

When Pécuchet, during his geological quest for origins, is threatened by an avalanche of pebbles after a conversation with Bouvard about volcanic catastrophies, he shouts in a gesture of stupid optimism: "Stop, stop! The period hasn't run its course yet" . . . he made enormous bounds with his alpenstock, bellowing, "The period hasn't run its course yet!" But for Flaubert's nihilistic (the word is his) pessimism the period is in fact achieved: "The great period is achieved! Men, animals, the gods, the bamboos, the oceans, the mountains, the sand-grains of the Ganges, together with the myriad myriads of the stars, — all shall die. . ."

This achievement of the period coincides of course with the death of the Gods — "We knew these things! — we knew them! There must come an end even for the Gods" — a willed death since Gods and men cannot cohabit together. The chosen disappearance of the former is in

*... le monde va devenir bougrement bête. D'ici à long-temps ce sera bien ennuyeux. Nous faisons bien de vivre maintenant. Tu ne croirais pas que nous causons beaucoup de l'avenir de la société. Il est pour moi presque certain qu'elle sera, dans un temps plus ou moins éloigné, régie comme un collège. Les pions feront la loi. Tout sera en uniforme.*

Flaubert

*Les mots Dieu, Sport, Académie, Intégrité nationale, etc. . . . sont dans le même caca que le mot Poésie.*

Magritte

*Qu'est-ce que ça fout à la masse, l'Art, la poésie, le style? Elle n'a pas besoin de tout ça. Faites-lui des vau-devilles, des traités sur le travail des prisons, sur les cités ouvrières et les intérêts matériels du moment, encore. Il y a conjuration per-*

fact a rejection of the latter. In the words of an agonizing Jupiter: "I no longer desire to receive those [the souls] of men. Let the Earth keep them, and let them move upon the level of its baseness. Their hearts are now the hearts of slaves; they forget injuries, forget their ancestors, forget their oaths; and everywhere the stupidity of crowds, the mediocrity of individuals, the hideousness of races hold sway!" Jupiter's words find an echo in those of Flaubert who, in a letter to Louise Colet, writes: "But mediocrity is infiltrating everything, even the stones are becoming stupid. . . . Should we perish by it (and we shall perish, though it matters little) we must be all means stem the flood of dung that is invading us. . . . We are all jokers and charlatans. Pose, pose and blague everywhere! . . . Our century is a century of whores and the least prostituted of all up till now are the prostitutes themselves." (456) (*Mais la médiocrité s'infiltré partout, les pierres même deviennent bêtes. . . . Dussions-nous y périr (et nous y périrons, n'importe), il faut par tous les moyens faire barre au flot de merde qui nous envahit. . . . Nous sommes tous des farceurs et des charlatans. Pose, pose et blague partout! La crinoline a dévoré les fesses, notre siècle est un siècle de putains, et ce qu'il y a de moins prostitué, jusqu'à présent, ce sont les prostituées.*)

We shall see later the function of prostitution. For the moment let us note that Flaubert takes upon himself Jupiter's evaluation of humans. We come late in time, in an epoch when men have hearts of slaves, that is to say, when mastery and the differentiating elements between mastery and slavery have disappeared; when men live in forgetfulness of ethical values, that is to say when the distinction between God and Evil has been erased; when ancestors are forgotten, that is to say when genealogical hierarchies are minimized; differences between individuals are abolished in favor of crowds, in favor of the mediocre similarity of the individual members of hideous races which have lost their form.



*manente contre l'original,  
voilà ce qu'il faut se fourrer  
dans la cervelle.*

Flaubert

*Duration, identity with itself,  
being are inherent neither in  
that which is called subject nor  
in that which is called object.  
They are complexes of events  
apparently durable in com-  
parison with other complexes  
— e.g., through the difference  
in tempo of the event (rest-  
motion, firm-loose): opposites  
that do not exist in themselves  
and that actually express only  
variations in degree that from  
a certain perspective appear to  
be opposites. There are no op-  
posites . . .*

Nietzsche

*Je suis seul comme en plein dé-  
sert*

Flaubert

**MEDIOCRE** A. adj. of middling quality; neither bad nor good; indifferent. Said chiefly of literary or artistic works, ability or knowledge, and hence of persons considered with reference to their mental power or skill.

B. sb. Only pl. Mediocre persons.

**MEDIOCRITY** 1. The quality or condition of being indeterminate between two extremes . . . Also something (a quality, position, etc.) equally removed from two opposite extremes; a mean . . .

2. A middle course in action; measured conduct or

It should be evident by now that for Flaubert, the death of the Gods is nothing more and nothing less than the abolishment of differences and their general dissolution in the quicksands of similarity.

We understand better now the failure of the writer to reach the summit of the mountain. The mountain represents topographically the greatest possible distance, that is, the maximum difference i.e. form. If the maximum difference is denied, the whole central part flattens out into a desert. The same can be said of the climatic conditions present in each topography. The mountain is cold and preserves each individual in its form; hence it preserves the differences between forms. Deserts, on the other hand, through their fiery heat — the ideal analyzer — decompose forms in order to reduce them to the undifferentiated similarity of their components.

Mediocrity, the sign of our times, which conditions the author's endeavours, is nothing but the property of being in the middle away from the ends; the indifference of middling qualities.

No doubt humanity does not stand up well against the state of undifferentiation to which it is doomed; it will try to recreate gods, religions and Art. In the desert it will be reduced to worshipping idols. "The time is not far off when universal languors, beliefs in the end of the world and in the coming of a Messiah will return. But since the theological basis will be missing, where will this enthusiasm, unconscious of its own existence, find its foothold! Some will look for it in the flesh, others in ancient religions, others in Art; and humanity, like the Jewish tribe in the desert, will adore all sorts of idols." (341)

*behaviour; moderation, temperance.*

3. *The position of possessing attributes in a medium or moderate degree; moderate degree or rate, average quality or amount . . .*

5. *The quality of being mediocre . . .*

6. *A person of mediocre talents or ability.*  
Oxford English Dictionary

*L'égalité c'est l'escalavage. Voilà pourquoi j'aime l'Art. C'est que là, au moins, tout est liberté dans le monde des fictions. On y assouvit tout, on y fait tout, on est à la fois son roi et son peuple, actif et passif, victime et prêtre.*

Flaubert

*Si les sciences morales avaient, comme les mathématiques, deux ou trois lois primordiales à leur disposition, elles pourraient marcher de l'avant. Mais elles tâtonnent dans les ténèbres . . . le mot, l'âme, a fait dire presque autant de bêtises qu'il y a d'âmes! Quelle découverte ce serait qu'un axiome comme celui-ci: tel peuple étant donné, la vertu y est à la force comme trois est à quatre . . . Autre loi mathématique à découvrir: combien faut-il connaître d'imbeciles au monde pour vous donner envie de se casser la gueule?*

Flaubert

The dilemma of the writer is evident; he can strive with nostalgia for forms forbidden to him or renounce art in favor of a science still to come, since, for Flaubert, science thrives on the very non-differentiation which torments art. In the words of his character Hilarion: "My kingdom is vast as the universe; and my desire knows no limits. I go on forever, — freeing minds, weighing worlds, — without hatred, without fear, without pity, without love, and without God. Men call me SCIENCE!"

Art and Science, then, are the two impossible limit points between which Flaubert's ironic, cloven text will oscillate.

## VI

*J'ai joué avec la démence et le fantastique comme  
Mithridate avec les poisons*

Flaubert

When the narrator of Borges' *The Immortal* reaches the city of the immortals he finds a place so monstrous, so unstructured by differences that it cannot even be linguistically represented: "I do not want to describe it; a chaos of heterogeneous words, the body of a tiger or bull in which teeth, organs and heads monstrously pullulate in mutual conjunction and hatred can (perhaps) be approximate images."<sup>15</sup> His reaction to this discovery goes through three distinct moments: " 'This palace is a fabrication of the gods,' I thought at the beginning. I explored the uninhabited interiors and corrected myself: 'The gods who built it have died.' I noted its peculiarities and said: 'The gods who built it were mad.' "

Madness is the necessary limit experience of radical nihilism. Nietzsche is, of course, exemplary here. Flaubert too is haunted by the experience of madness and like Borges at one point in *The Temptation* has one of the characters exclaim: "The world is the work of a God in delirium!" The notion of a world created or dominated by a demented God does not ordinarily follow the proclamation of the death of God. The death of God has its own temporality, quite different from that implied by the eternal madness of God.

The particular temporal mode of the death of God as something accomplished and yet to be accomplished is best illustrated by its most famous version, namely in Aphorism 125 of the third part of *The Joyful Wisdom*. The aphorism is appropriately entitled *The Madman* and the burden of madness is shifted from God to man. The madman appears at noon holding a light, looking for God; meeting an assembly of persons many of whom are unbelievers, the madman answers their laughter with the narrative of God's death: "Whither is God . . . I shall tell you.

*... There is no help, The bitter  
disposition of the time  
Will have it so.*

Shakespeare

*On croit un peu trop  
généralement que le soleil n'a  
d'autre but ici-bas que de faire  
pousser les choux. Il faut rem-  
placer de temps à autres le bon  
Dieu sur son piédestal. Aussi se  
charge-t-il de nous le rappeler  
en nous envoyant par-ci par-là  
quelque peste, choléra,  
bouleversement inattendu et  
autres manifestations de la  
règle, à savoir le Mal —  
contingent qui n'est peut-être  
pas le Bien — Nécessaire, mais  
qui est l'Être enfin: chose que  
les hommes voués au néant  
comprennent peu.*

Flaubert

*Nature threw away the key;  
and woe to the fateful curiosity  
which might be able for a mo-  
ment to look out and down  
through a crevice in the  
chamber of consciousness and  
discover that man, indifferent  
to his own ignorance, is resting  
on the pitiless, the greedy, the  
insatiable, the murderous,  
and, as it were, hanging in  
dreams on the back of a tiger.*

Nietzsche

*We have killed him* — you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained the earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backwards, sidwards, forwards, in all directions? Is there any up or down-left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?"

We can easily see how Nietzsche's text is isotopic with Flaubert's. In Nietzsche, too, we have the death of God as an impossible narrative told in conjunction with an experience of madness, from a 'desert' which has neither up nor down, through the 'foggy' darkness of a world which is now detached from its sun. To accentuate the correspondence we may recall the devil's words to Anthony: "Ascend skyward for ever and for ever yet thou will not attain the summit. Descend below the earth for billions of billions of centuries: never wilt thou reach the bottom. For there is no summit, there is no bottom; there is no Above, no Below — nor height nor depth as signified by the terms of human utterance." Anthony's answer is also echoed in the words of the Madman: "A hideous cold freezes me, even to the depths of my soul! This is beyond the extreme of pain! It is like a death that is deeper than death!"

But let us return to the aphorism and to the problem of the temporality of God's death: "I come too early he said then; my time has not come yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering — it has not yet reached the ears of man . . . deeds require time even after they are done before they can be seen and heard." The narration of the event is never temporally co-extensive with the event itself which is before and after but not now. More precisely, as event it is always before whereas the representational reading of the event is always yet to come.

The forms of fiction are then the useless

*The story I wanted to tell is the encounter of two individuals who don't exist, since they are definable only with regard to a past or a future, a past and future whose reality is reciprocally doubled. Or else it's a story that cannot be separated from the story of all the rest of what exists, and therefore from the story of what doesn't exist and, not existing, causes what does exist to exist.*

Calvino

*This doctrinal item observed that the lottery is an interpolation of chance in the order of the world and that to accept errors is not to contradict chance — it is to corroborate it.*

Borges

*Ainsi le monde comme il est, le monde comme il va, le monde comme il vit, le monde absent des formalités abstraites, est il d'un coup, cette bibliothèque de Babel ou les livres dispersés, disjoints, adoptent des formes reconnaissables, classables, et réglées: ce qui est écrit dans ces tomes, c'est la pure multiplicité. Le secret, des choses, c'est qu'il n'y a pas de secret.*

Serres

epigones of a past event necessarily pre-dating its conceptual representation, that is to say, the reintegration of the absence of the event, for, as Derrida has reminded us, the body of the king is absent from the sarcophagus in the pyramid, or, in the words of the Madman: "What are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?"

In other words, the death of God marks the temporal/spatial moment of the oscillation of the limits of the Form of fiction, through which fiction attempts and fails to accede to the metaphysics of 'Truth' and 'Beauty'.

It should be evident by now that, at least to my way of thinking, the world as governed or generated by a mad God does not belong to the same epistemological space as the death of God. God's madness is discontinuous with the diacritical 'concepts' of Past/Future, Absence/Presence which govern the limits of representation and fiction. God's madness points to reality as non-representable such as in the city of the immortals, as non-accountable such as the world of chance in *The Lottery of Babylon*. In the case of Flaubert it is the explosion of fictional representation into the chaotic linguistic labyrinth of the end of *Bouvard and Pécuchet* and the passage from the quest for narrative to the act of *copying*. The eternal reduplication of events unredeemable by form. At that conjecture madness, of course, spills over into the act of inscribing madness. The undertaking as well as the result is demented. If, as Flaubert says, in art and metaphysics one always navigates in madness, then the writing of 'mad' texts such as *The Temptation* or *Bouvard and Pécuchet* is equally demented: "One must be a madman and frenzied three times over to undertake that sort of book!" (1318)

## VII

*Le Saint-Esprit est féminin*

Flaubert

*Palabras Neighbour Verges*

Shakespeare

For Flaubert, as well as for his character Anthony, madness is an experience closely associated with eroticism. "Madness and lust are two things which I have so well fathomed, where I have so well navigated by my will that I shall never become (I hope) a madman nor a Sade." (406) It should follow, then, that if the experience of madness is closely related to narrative's quest for fiction, eroticism under the various guises of prostitution, lust or the Queen of Sheba must of necessity be related to the same experience. At some point in his delirium Anthony sees Nebuchadnezzar who "dreams of rebuilding the tower of Babel, and dethroning God". For an instant the Saint identifies with the character in the vision: "Anthony, from afar, reads all these thoughts upon his brow. They penetrate his own brain, and he becomes Nebuchadnezzar. Immediately he is cloyed with orgiastic excesses". After regaining his consciousness he asks the question, "Why these things?" and answers, "They come from the rebellion of the flesh."

This relation has a converse, that is to say, to the phantasmagoria of fiction generated by the desires of the flesh correspond the fantasies of desire generated by fiction. In fact, between *Madame Bovary* read as fiction which stages literature as a disease of desire, and Bouvard and Pécuchet, the two asexual bachelors reduced to fantasizing phalluses everywhere, it is the second alternative which seems to be the more common.

Bouvard and Pécuchet's obsession is interesting in as much as it shows how close sexuality is to words: "Thus the tumulus signifies the female, as the upright stone is the male organ. . . . At one time towers, pyramids, candles, mile-posts, and

*La Tentation de (saint)*  
Flaubert

Valéry

*The Saint in whom God takes  
pleasure is the ideal castrate*

Nietzsche

*COIT, COPULATION —*  
*Mots à éviter. Dire: "Ils av-*  
*aient des rapports"*

Flaubert

*Le texte suspend le désir, nul  
n'a jamais écrit qu'en atten-*  
*dant de faire l'amour, et parce*  
*qu'il ne peut pas toujours faire*  
*l'amour*

Serres .

even trees had the significance of phalluses — and for Bouvard and Pécuchet everything became a phallus." In fact, then, sexuality is related to language by the very nature of the latter since sexuality can stand in a relation of sign, simile or metaphor to words and things alike.

This leads to a contradictory exigency, for on the one hand language and fiction have to distance themselves from sexuality, yet sexuality cannot be done away with since it has to be postulated as origin or end. For Flaubert the unresolvable alternative is between writing and a life associated with desire. "When I do not hold a book or dream of writing one I am overtaken by such boredom that I want to scream. Life seems to me tolerable only if one can conjure it away (*La vie ne me semble tolérable que si on l'escamote*). Otherwise one would have to surrender oneself to disorderly pleasures" (1385), for "Desire makes one live" (1716) and "so as not to live, I immerse myself in Art as if mad. I intoxicate myself with ink as others do with wine." (629)

This ascetic quest will not dispel the creatures of desire who will haunt Flaubert/Anthony under various guises in the desert/library. Their names are well-known: Annonaria, who returns three times to torment the hermit, "that black child who appeared to me in the midst of the sands, who was very beautiful, and who told me that he was called the Spirit of Lust", Maximilla, Priscilla, who left her husband to follow a eunuch in the desert, the last of the prophetesses after whom "the end of the world shall come". The two most important ones remain the Queen of Sheba and Helen-Ennoia.

The Queen of Sheba, in fact, contains all of the possible creatures generated by desire's imagination; she is the world invested by the totality of desire; more precisely, she is desire made flesh. "All the woman thou hast ever met — from the leman of the cross-roads, singing under the light of her lantern, even to the patrician lady scattering rose-petals abroad from her litter, — all the forms thou hast ever obtained glimpses of

— all the imaginations of thy desire — thou hast only to ask for them! I am not a woman: I am a world!"

Not surprisingly she is a source for fiction: "I know a host of merry tales to tell, each more diverting than the other"; through her bird Simorg-Anka she is desire's totalization of all events recast in fictional representation — in a word, the writer's impossible dream of a total text: "He flies swiftly as Desire! He circles the world in his flight. At eve he returns; he perches at the foot of my couch and tells me all he has seen — the seas that have passed far beneath him with all their fishes and ships, the great void deserts he has contemplated from the heights of the sky, the harvests that were bowing in the valleys, and the plants that were growing upon the walls of cities abandoned." In a letter to Bouilhet Flaubert defined the form of *The Temptation* as that of a whirlwind, since the Queen of Sheba's imperative invitation to the saint to "inhale the perfume of my bosom, madden thyself with the beauty of my limbs; and thus consumed by the fire of my eyes, clasped within my arms as in a whirlwind" is nothing less than an invitation to possess the very form, that is to say, possess the very fiction in which the Author/Saint is a character.

*Caïus César Caligula en est  
devenu amoureux, puisqu'il  
voulait coucher avec la Lune!*  
Flaubert

*No, the Moon is a desert, that  
was the answer of the poet.  
From that arid spaces origi-  
nates every tale, poem and  
every journey.*  
Calvino

*Je n'ai jamais pu voir passer  
aux feux du gaz une de ces  
femmes décolletées, sous la  
pluie, sans un battement de  
coeur, de même que les robes*

Helen also "discourses of marvellous things" and personifies the totality of desire but in the form of unfulfilling availability: "She was that Helen of Troy, whose memory was cursed by the poet Stesichorus. She was Lucretia, the patrician woman violated by a king. She was Delilah, by whom Samson's locks were shorn. . . . She has loved adultery, idolatry, lying and foolishness. She has prostituted herself to all nations. She has sung at the corners of all crossroads. She has kissed the faces of all men."

We may now understand better Flaubert's reference to prostitution that I quoted earlier. Prostitution is the availability of desire and if desire is available then the form of fiction is available; unfortunately they both belong to a



*des moines avec leur cordelière à noeuds me chatouillent l'âme en je ne sais quels coins ascétiques et profonds. Il se trouve, en cette idée de la prostitution, un point d'intersection si complexe, luxe, amertume, néant des rapports humains, frénésie du muscle et sonnement d'or, qu'en y regardant au fond le vertige vient, et on apprend là tant de choses!*

Flaubert

*Ah! quels vices j'aurais si je n'écrivais!*

Flaubert

*. . . renonçant à la jouissance, il [l'écrivain de plaisir] a le droit et le pouvoir de la dire: la lettre est son plaisir, il est obsédé, comme le sont tous ceux qui aiment le langage . . . tous les logophiles, écrivains, épistoliers, linguistes . . . la critique porte toujours sur des textes de plaisir, jamais sur des textes de jouissance . . . Avec l'écrivain de jouissance (et son lecteur) commence le texte intenable, le texte impossible . . .*

Barthes

*ERECTION. — Ne se dit qu'en parlant des monuments.*

Flaubert

by-gone age; they are both myths of doomed practices: "I like prostitution . . . in my first years in Paris during very warm evenings I used to sit down in front of Tortoni; and looking at the sun setting I used to watch the public girls go by. There I used to think of Isaiah and of 'fornication in high places' . . . I have only one reproach to make to prostitution, it is that it is a myth. The courtesan does not exist any more than the saint does. . . ." (394)

The writer will have to remain for ever in a state of suspended and unfulfilled desire. Satisfaction — which Flaubert calls "Fouterie" — is "projection into infinity". (312) Meanwhile, the impotent writer continues, knowing full well his incapacity to reach a satisfactory end: "I apply myself to it, not because I am inspired in the least, but because I would like to see this. It is a sort of curiosity which one might qualify as a lustful desire without erection — (*un désir lubrique sans érection*)." (547)

The best emblem Flaubert finds for his doomed activity is that of an incurable venereal disease: "Yes, literature bores me to a supreme degree! but it is not my fault; it has become with me a constitutional pox of which I am unable to rid myself." (551) And this, with its connotations of infection, violence, organic malady and madness is perhaps as good an emblem as any of fiction's hopeless quest for its ontology.

*I'm all for Daniel. In this age penumbral,  
Let the timbrel resound in the tumbrel.*

Ogden Nash

<sup>1</sup> Novalis, *L'Encyclopédie* (Paris, 1966). Fragments 1, 8, 11, 12 in the edition and translation of M. de Gandillac which I follow for my translation. Italics are in the original.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Hors livre", *La dissémination* (Paris, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> S. Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1945), p. 372.

<sup>4</sup> See J. Scherer, (ed.), *Le 'livre' de Mallarmé* (Paris, 1952).

<sup>5</sup> S. Mallarmé *op cit.*, p. 378.

<sup>6</sup> All references to Kermode are to his *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford, 1966).

<sup>7</sup> J. L. Borges, "The Library of Babel", *Labyrinths* (New York, 1964).

<sup>8</sup> H. Kenner, *The Stoic Comedians* (Boston, 1962).

<sup>9</sup> M. Foucault, "La bibliothèque fantastique", Introduction to G. Flaubert, *La tentation de Saint Antoine*, ed. by Henri Ronse (Paris, 1967).

<sup>10</sup> All references to *Bouvard and Pécuchet* are to the English translation by Earp and Stonier (New York, 1954).

<sup>11</sup> All references followed by a number refer to G. Bollème's remarkable anthology of Flaubert's correspondence published under the title *Préface à la vie d'écrivain* (Paris, 1963). As the title so suggestively indicates, Flaubert's correspondence constitutes a parallel text to the novels in which Flaubert stages their genetic inscription.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted by Henri Ronse in his edition of *La tentation de Saint Antoine* (Paris, 1971). All quotations from *The temptation of St. Anthony* are from the translation by Lafcadio Hearn (New York, 1930).

<sup>13</sup> From the "Résumé sommaire" published in the Club de l'Honnête Homme edition of Flaubert, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1972), Vol. 6, pp. 759-761.

<sup>14</sup> See also 584. The reader, in fact, is also caught in a movement similar to that of the author and the characters. As Seznec aptly put it: "Pour comprendre Flaubert le travailleur . . . il faut se perdre avec lui dans le dédale des bibliothèques . . . il faut se faire ascète avec lui" (Jean Seznec, *Nouvelles études sur la tentation de Saint Antoine*). In this Author/Reader symmetry it would not be difficult to find a problematic isomorphic to that elaborated by Borges in "Pierre Ménard, Author of the *Quixote*".

<sup>15</sup> J. L. Borges, "The Immortal", *Labyrinths* (New York, 1964).