

THE THREE FUTURES OF WORLD LITERATURE

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La multiplication des lecteurs, c'est la multiplication des pains. Le jour où le Christ a trouvé ce symbole, il a entrevu l'imprimerie.... Dans Christ faisant éclore les pains, il y a Gutenberg faisant éclore les livres.
—Victor Hugo, *William Shakespeare*

Cela représentait la République, ou le Progrès, ou la Civilisation, sous la figure de Jésus-Christ conduisant une locomotive, laquelle traversait une forêt vierge.
—Gustave Flaubert, *L'Éducation sentimentale*

Comme les exilés, ridicule et sublime...
—Charles Baudelaire, "Le Cygne"

1. "ÉT QUAND LA TERRE SERA USÉE..."

It must be a distressing thing to have been scooped by Bouvard and Pécuchet. One might happily acknowledge being anticipated by Flaubert, the supreme literary artist and practitioner of strategic irony, but his two copyists, those hapless incarnations of petit-bourgeois ignorance and literalism, are a different matter.

At the end of Flaubert's unfinished novel, the two copyists have seen their various plans for maximizing the benefits of modern education and cheap printing come to ruin. Their chemical lab has exploded, their garden's yield is inedible, and the abandoned children they try to raise are ungrateful. The duo are unsuccessful churchgoers, soft-headed materialists, incapable even of educating themselves. Nonetheless, they persist. They attempt to summarize everything they have learned in a lecture given to the notables of Chavignolles, at the inn of the Golden Cross. The result is a disaster.

Interrupted by their enemy Foureau, the mayor, who reads to the assembly a petition they once submitted advocating the opening of a bordello in their village, they are chased away by the outraged crowd. Meanwhile, Foureau has denounced them to the Sub-Prefect, who will send the police to arrest them next morning. But Bouvard and Pécuchet do not know that yet as they review the events in the next scene, never written out in full by Flaubert yet subsisting as an outline:

Le lendemain, au déjeuner, ils reparlent de la conférence.

Pécuchet voit l'avenir de l'humanité en noir:

L'homme moderne est amoindri et devenu une machine.

Anarchie finale du genre humain... Impossibilité de la paix.

Barbarie par l'excès de l'individualisme et le délire de la science.... Il n'y aura plus d'idéal, de religion, de moralité.

L'Amérique aura conquis la terre.

Avenir de la littérature.

Pignouflisme universel. Tout ne sera plus qu'une vaste ribote d'ouvriers.

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Fin du monde par la cessation du calorique.

Bouvard voit l'avenir de l'humanité en beau. L'Homme moderne est en progrès.

L'Europe sera régénérée par l'Asie. La loi historique étant que la civilisation aille d'Orient en Occident,—le rôle de la Chine,—les deux humanités enfin seront fondues.

Inventions futures: manières de voyager. Ballons.—Bateaux sous-marins avec vitres, par un calme constant, l'agitation de la mer n'étant qu'à la surface.—On verra passer les poissons et les paysages au fond de l'océan.—Animaux domptés.—Toutes les cultures.

Avenir de la littérature (contre-partie de la littérature industrielle). Sciences futures. Régler la force magnétique.

Paris deviendra un jardin d'hiver;—espaliers à fruits sur le boulevard. La Seine filtrée et chaude,—abondance de pierres précieuses factices,—prodigalité de la dorure,—éclairage des maisons—on emmagasinerà la lumière, car il y a des corps qui ont cette propriété, comme le sucre, la chair de certains mollusques et le phosphore de Bologne. On sera tenu de faire badigeonner les façades des maisons avec la substance phosphorescente, et leur radiation éclairera les rues.

Disparition du mal par la disparition du besoin. La philosophie sera une religion.

Communion de tous les peuples. Fêtes publiques.

On ira dans les astres,—et quand la terre sera usée, l'Humanité déménagera vers les étoiles. (Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* 985-86)¹

In the last decade or so, we have seen prophecies of wonder and ruin stimulated by the two words: "world literature." Bouvard and Pécuchet, of course, had their word to say about it, as about everything else, and Flaubert saved it for the last act: two figures of world literature attempting to calculate its future; two flies with theories about fly-bottles. They are enclosed in the fly-bottles of their own personalities, first. Bouvard, as everyone knows, is generous, optimistic, and impulsive; Pécuchet is miserly and expects the worst. Bouvard awaits a glorious future, and Pécuchet sees everything going downhill. Their joint bookish experiments prove that the more you listen to Bouvard, the more often Pécuchet is right.

Secondly, they are enclosed in the fly-bottle of literature; world literature, if you will. And the futures they predict for world literature are part and parcel of the

futures for the “world” that the two compères see looming in the distance. That the one world literature lies in the future—that much is not in dispute; and they agree too in reading off the character of that future literature from future social conditions. It is the conditions that differ.

For Pécuchet, whose dismal forecast involves the erasure of all distinctions in a cosmic “heat dissipation,” the future will see the abolition of aristocracy, merit, religion, and virtues, leaving humanity an undifferentiated mass of “workers” perpetually on a spree.² Being a man of his class and time, Pécuchet cannot imagine the dictatorship of the proletariat otherwise than as a drunken free-for-all. Maxime du Camp tells us that during the Commune, the central Paris police station was known as “le campement de la ribote,” or Camp Partytime (Du Camp 3.54). Man and machine fuse, science conclusively disenchant every ideal, and the individualistic barbarism of “America,” that classless realm of industry and profit, spreads to cover the globe.³ It is hard to imagine any future for literature in a milieu of such universal “pignouflisme” (self-satisfied stupidity).

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For Bouvard, it is quite the opposite, so precisely the opposite that it is not much different except for the rosy colour: “Modern man is progressing.” We can bank on the future technological transformation of our world.⁴ Houses will be covered in phosphorescent paint, making a midnight stroll down the boulevard a safe and pleasant exercise. This and other chemical means of storing light will make night the equivalent of day—erasing an important cosmic distinction, as in Pécuchet’s prophecy, but in glowing terms. Travel beneath the sea will be like a train trip to Honfleur, except that rather than cows, the passengers will observe whales and octopi through the glass. All animals will be tamed. All crops will be grown everywhere (including at the bottom of the sea?). The Seine, filtered and warm, will have become hospitable to human needs, no longer the murky stuff that sickens the drinker or the chill fluid that paralyzes the suicide. Streets will be planted with fruit trees: the ultimate expression of the “free lunch.” Thanks to sciences yet to be discovered that will achieve the “regulation of magnetic force,” the natural world will bend to human wishes. With gold and precious stones lying about for the taking, no one will lack for anything, and so no one will have to rob, steal, kill or perjure: the “disappearance of evil” will be another proof of progress. It will be as if the laws of physics and of morals alike had been reformed from top to bottom, obliterating suffering and wickedness and leaving only the good things to be shared by all, like the light emanating from the Parisian housefronts: Bouvard again predicts the happy erasure of a distinction. “Europe will be regenerated by Asia”; not that one knows anything about Asia, or about China, except that it is the “other” humanity, the ancient one, and predestined to melt into one with Europe, its successor. The role of China; what role? What does it matter? It’s China, so it arrests analysis. Of the future of literature, Flaubert’s notes say only that Bouvard’s imagination will yield the “contre-partie” (opposite and counterpart) of the uniform stupidity Pécuchet fears in a world composed only of workers. World literature for Bouvard will be as warm and pure as the reformed Seine, expressing

the “communion of all peoples” and participating in “public festivities.” After this: the stars.

What these two futures have in common is that they are both narratives based on technology. Technology may warp man into becoming a machine, or it may transform nature into the shape of human desires. Individualistic, mechanistic technology will make the world “American”; impassioned, visionary technology will enable the “regeneration of Europe by Asia.” And literature, for both Bouvard and Pécuchet, is simply the shadow of the kind of technology the people of the future will wield. As engineering changes the material and immaterial worlds, literature records those changes. What technology makes possible in the future world (be it the extinction of morality or the disappearance of evil) will be registered by the tenor of literature (be it its monotonous stupidity or joyous communal hymns).

400 Today’s phantasm of “world literature” likewise authorizes Pécuchet-like and Bouvard-like dreams. For some, the circulation of literary works in an expanding cosmopolitan sphere of merit, a literary economy where the works “gain in translation,” allows us to envision a communion of all peoples and cultures (see Damrosch).⁵ For others, “world literature” is just the benevolent mask of a plot to “Americanize” or neoliberalize the literary curriculum (see Apter). Still others, attentive to the plumbing and distribution networks of the literary field, track the careers of the authors who seek maximum visibility and the works that are their bids for fame (see Casanova). Other forms of “world literature,” like that of the socialist bloc, survive in memory and in some practices (see Dobrenko; Boym; Starosta). “Asia,” and indeed “China,” remain as a horizon of cultural desire, as if their participation were indeed the test of humanity’s oneness (see Hayot and Takahashi). On the other hand, “Asia” under globalization is now as much a profiteering “America” as America ever was. Now that Paris is indeed a greenhouse, perhaps it is time to say that Bouvard was right—to the extent that Pécuchet was right.

So: is there nothing new under the sun, except for the permutations?

One cannot help applying Bouvard and Pécuchet’s shared model (literature as reflection of society, society as reflection of technology) back to the novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet* and thus seeing in the book’s recurrent, farcical failures the outlined history of France from 1789 to 1880: revolution; empire; restoration; empire; restoration; revolution; republic; empire; republic. The duo’s citation and misapplication of doctrines delivered by *Le Moniteur* or *Le Constitutionnel* on a daily basis to one’s rural mailbox, their flipping from this or that dogma to its dialectical opposite, their conversation drawn from a dictionary of oft-repeated idiocies, are all too recognizable as the enlarged biography of the nineteenth-century bourgeois, shaped and led by mass communications, that Flaubert was and hated.—*That he was?* Were it not for literature, yes. Conceiving of literature as the dependent variable in humanity’s future is, for Flaubert, the mark of *bêtise* that condemns our two copyists.

2. VICTOR HUGO, HÉLAS

The futures imagined by Bouvard and Pécuchet leave literature with nothing to say for itself. What literature is able to say is determined by external causes (technology, society). The stupidity and credulity of the two copyists, when it comes to the literary domain, amounts to imagining no possible autonomous role for literature. Indeed, in this they are only acting out the rules of that novel's little world. Like the *Dictionary of Received Ideas* that preceded it, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* boils down vast quantities of non-literary documentation: newspapers, speeches, treatises on pomology, gynecology, law, psychiatry, and so on. It is a crushing archive of self-confident nonsense, condensed, filtered, and given voice through the two title characters. The only initiative left to literature in that work lies with the narrative voice, a voice that makes itself known through implicitness and irony alone. It calls attention to stupidity without ever contrasting it with an example of intelligence. All it can do, under the rules observed by Flaubert, is to perform, through the telling of the tale, the negation of the negation. That is the place left to literature under conditions of stringently reduced autonomy. Everybody who cared about writing would have known what those conditions were. In Flaubert's France, the antagonists were many: a dictatorial régime, a meddling Church, the primacy of commerce, the dreams of utopian propagandists, the newspapers, "the immense nausea of billboards" as Baudelaire called it.

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How to escape *bêtise*? That is the question. Pierre Bourdieu answered it by matching Flaubert's "point of view" to his out-of-placeness as "a bourgeois who was vehemently antibourgeois and completely devoid of any illusions about the 'people'" (362). Yet, just as Flaubert is said to have admitted, "Madame Bovary, c'est moi," so too he confessed that "Bouvard et Pécuchet m'emplissent à tel point, que je suis devenu eux! leur bêtise est la mienne, et j'en crève!" (Flaubert, *Correspondance* 4. 920).⁶ The odd syntax of "je suis devenu eux" calls for attention. Flaubert became not one or the other, but both-in-one. The combination of the two, the fat man and the thin man, the straight man and the clown, the good cop and the bad cop, the dry and the wet, those polar opposites conspiring on impossible tasks, the self-defeating duo, their interminable dialogue, their joint failure, their decision to go back to copying: these make up the shadow that follows the ironic chronicler wherever he goes, threatening his very life. Flaubert's prognosis for his own demise was accurate: *obit* 8 May 1880. If the composition of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* is a struggle between two fools and the non-fool charged with representing their folly, it ends badly. The future of world literature, whichever of the two paths it follows, is the extinction of Flaubertian literature.

But there is more; there is another way. The origin of Flaubertian literature, and of its mournful theory of the future of world literature, lies in the impossibility, after the coup d'état of December 2, 1851, of being Victor Hugo without being, precisely, Victor Hugo. As Paul Valéry observed:

Plaçons-nous dans la situation d'un jeune homme qui arrive en 1840 à l'âge d'écrire. Il est

nourri de ceux que son existence lui commande impérieusement d'abolir. Son existence littéraire [...] est nécessairement suspendue à la négation, au renversement, au remplacement de ces hommes [...] Le problème de Baudelaire pouvait donc—devait donc—se poser ainsi: “être un grand poète, mais n’être ni Lamartine, ni Hugo, ni Musset.” (Valéry 599-600)⁷

Hugo's departure for Guernsey left him to develop in relative isolation as a character from the world before 1848, stubbornly insisting that a poet's voice could shout down an emperor and all his censors. Flaubert, Baudelaire, Gautier, and their generation, guided by their multiple forms of disgust, worked out a disenchanting ideology of letters in constant polemical exchange with “stupidity.” As to that wherein consisted stupidity, the 1857 obscenity trials of *Madame Bovary* and *Les Fleurs du Mal* furnish an indicative dossier. The two forms of the literary future, according to Bouvard and Pécuchet, express well enough the writer's fear of definitive marginalization in the victory of stupidity.

- 402 To see the autonomy of letters declaring itself without hesitation, one has to go to the exiled Hugo, outlining in *William Shakespeare* (1864) a theory of world literature as the succession of world-historical geniuses:

La pensée humaine atteint dans certains hommes sa complète intensité. [...] dans la région supérieure de la poésie et de la pensée, il y a Homère, Job, Eschyle, Isaïe, Ezechiel, Lucrèce, Juvénal, Tacite, Jean de Pathmos, Paul de Damas, Dante, Rabelais, Cervantes, Shakespeare.

Ces suprêmes génies ne sont point une série fermée. L'auteur de *Tout* y ajoute un nom quand les besoins du progrès l'exigent. (Hugo 55, 74)⁸

World literature, as Hugo imagines it, is a series of landmarks—peaks—attained by “two or three geniuses in every century” whose mission it is to advance the progress of the human race, under the beneficent guidance of “the Author of All.” Compared to Goethe's intuition of *Weltliteratur*, Hugo's account requires several more postulates. Where Goethe stressed international communication and translation, supported by global bourgeois commerce (as, indeed, many early translations from Chinese and Sanskrit into European languages were products of the British East India Company's interpreter-training schools), Hugo looks beyond all such this-worldly scaffoldings. Here, literature shapes its world. The genius “maketh all things new”:

Shakespeare est, avant tout, une imagination. Or, c'est là une vérité que nous avons indiquée déjà et que les penseurs savent, l'imagination est profondeur. Aucune faculté de l'esprit ne s'enfoncé et ne creuse plus que l'imagination; c'est la grande plongeuse... Le poète philosophe parce qu'il imagine. (160)⁹

Human history is charted, punctuated, directed by the poets, taking this term largely to designate those who imagine new possibilities, new ways of being human:

De temps en temps il vient sur ce globe un de ces esprits. Leur passage, nous l'avons dit, renouvelle l'art, la science, la philosophie ou la société.

Ils emplissent un siècle, puis disparaissent. Alors ce n'est plus un siècle seulement que leur clarté illumine; c'est l'humanité d'un bout à l'autre des temps, et l'on s'aperçoit que

chacun de ces hommes était l'esprit humain lui-même contenu tout entier dans un cerveau, et venant, à un instant donné, faire sur la terre acte de progrès. (173)¹⁰

Thus, the history of humanity is above all imaginative, a series of geniuses linked by providential intent. Table-turning interrogations of the world-mind fill Hugo's Guernsey exile:

On voit les grandes âmes comme on voit les grandes montagnes. Donc, elles sont. Mais ici l'interrogation insiste; l'interrogation, c'est l'anxiété; d'où viennent-elles? que sont-elles? qui sont-elles? y a-t-il des atomes plus divins que d'autres? Cet atome, par exemple, qui sera doué d'irradiation ici-bas, celui-ci qui sera Thalès, celui-ci qui sera Eschyle, celui-ci qui sera Platon [...] celui-ci qui sera Piranèse, celui-ci qui sera Washington, celui-ci qui sera Beethoven, celui-ci qui sera Garibaldi, celui-ci qui sera John Brown, tous ces atomes, âmes en fonction sublime parmi les hommes, ont-ils vu d'autres univers et en apportent-ils l'essence sur la terre? Les esprits chefs, les intelligences guides, qui les envoie? qui détermine leur apparition? qui est juge du besoin actuel de l'humanité? qui choisit les âmes? qui fait l'appel des atomes? qui ordonne les départs? qui prémédite les arrivées? (142)¹¹

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Genius, progress, and God are the three necessary prerequisites of Hugo's idea of a self-determining world literature: ingredients in his version of the "egotistical sublime," but concepts axiomatically denied to the literary ideologies of a Baudelaire or a Flaubert. Hugo's spiritualistic *bêtise* (or profundity, as it may be) opposes the twofold technocentric *bêtise* of Bouvard and Pécuchet, but none of these histories aligns with the anticipation of a future readership in Baudelaire's programmatic "Au lecteur" or Flaubert's gestures of narrative indifference. It might be that a bow to "genius" and "progress" is the price to pay in order to maintain the belief in literature as the dominant, not the dominated, force in human affairs. For many of us, it is simply too high a price, entailing numerous other commitments. Let us review some of the costs. Progress has often been a euphemism for genocide; the cult of the great man is profitable mainly to a few would-be great men; if irony vanquishes enthusiasm, it is not only because the rosy utopias did not work out.

Current world-literature discussions are located far from Hugo's place on the spectrum, and far from Baudelaire's and Flaubert's too. In their attention to measurable proxies of success and influence, they waver between the "American" and "rosy" alternatives set forth by Bouvard and Pécuchet. If the debate about world literature, whether as fact or as value, seems to be a recycled motif from the stockpile of nineteenth-century cultural anxieties, perhaps what it needs is more "structure," to echo Bourdieu again: an avowal of its fatedness, repetitiveness, and overdetermination. That might better distinguish world-literature research from "the deceptive satisfactions offered by the false philistine humanism of the sellers of illusion" (Bourdieu 362). The question has never been "What Is World Literature?" but "Whence comes this fantasy, and what is the hold it still has on us?"

NOTES

1. The next morning, at breakfast, they talk the lecture over once more.

Pécuchet is pessimistic about the future of humanity:

Modern man is reduced to the state of a machine.

Final anarchy of the human race... Impossibility of peace.

Barbarism through excessive individualism and the frenzy of scientific knowledge.... There will be no more ideals, no religion, no morality.

America will have conquered the world.

Future of literature. Universal conceited stupidity. Everything will turn into a vast debauchery of workers.

End of the world through heat dissipation.

Bouvard is optimistic about the future of humanity. Modern man is progressing.

Europe will be regenerated by Asia. The law of history being that civilization moves from Orient to Occident—the role of China—the two humanities will ultimately fuse into one.

Future inventions: means of travel. Balloons.—Underwater ships with portholes, moving in a constant calm, as the agitation of the sea is only on the surface.—You can see the fish and the landscapes at the bottom of the ocean.—Animals tamed.—All kinds of crops.

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Future of literature (opposite of industrial literature). Future sciences.—Regulation of magnetic force.

Paris will become a greenhouse;—fruit espaliers along the boulevards. The Seine, filtered and warm,—abundance of artificial precious stones—gilding used everywhere,—houses lit—we will stock up light, for there are substances having this capacity, such as sugar, the flesh of certain molluscs and the phosphorus of Bologna. The law will require every owner to paint the house-fronts with this phosphorescent substance, and their glow will fill the streets with light.

Disappearance of evil through the disappearance of need. Philosophy will be a religion.

Communion of all peoples. Public festivities.

Man will go to the stars,—and when the earth is used up, Humanity will relocate to the stars. (My translation.)

Images of Flaubert's early drafts and notes for this passage can be seen at flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/jet/public/trans.php?corpus=pecuchet&id=8994 (accessed August 28, 2016.)

2. On the thermodynamic plot of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, see Donato. The heat death of the universe was first theorized by William Thomson in 1852 following the propositions of Sadi Carnot.
3. On the meanings of “America” in nineteenth- and twentieth-century France, see Roger.
4. Almost all of Bouvard's predictions are excerpted from Flaubert's copious reading in journalism and ephemera of the time. Faith in the transformation of the human spirit and environment by technology was the core belief of the Saint-Simonians. Many of these cheerfully made the transition from communal ownership to capitalist investment in the years after 1848, taking the lead in, among other things, the construction of the Suez Canal, a venture both cosmic and practical in shortening the path from East to West. On the confluence of utopia and engineering particular to pre-1848 Paris, see Tresch. Moreover, the appearance of the police in response to Bouvard and Pécuchet's lecture echoes the frequent disruption of Saint-Simonian public events by the law (Charl ty 202-08).
5. Damrosch takes his hints from Goethe's remarks to Eckermann.
6. Bouvard and Pécuchet are saturating me to such a point that I have become them! Their stupidity is mine, and it's killing me! (My translation.) Letter to Edma Roger des Genettes, 15(?) April 1875. As Albert Thibaudet observed (218), closely followed by Raymond Queneau, Flaubert's irony does not preclude empathetic identification, however painful.
7. Let us put ourselves in the position of a young writer who has just begun, in 1840, to reach maturity. He has been fed on the writers whom his existence constrains him imperiously to abolish. His literary existence [...] necessarily hangs on the negation, the reversal, the replacement of those men [...]

Baudelaire's problem could—could only—be posed thus: “to be a great poet, without being Lamar-tine, Hugo or Musset.” (My translation.)

8. Human thought attains its perfect intensity in certain men. [...] In the highest region of poetry and thought, there are Homer, Job, Aeschylus, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Lucretius, Juvenal, Tacitus, John of Patmos, Paul of Damascus, Dante, Rabelais, Cervantes, Shakespeare.
These supreme geniuses are no closed series. The Author of All adds a name when the needs of progress demand it. (My translation.)
9. Shakespeare is, first of all, an imagination. Now imagination is depth: a truth that we indicated previously and of which thinkers are aware. No faculty of the mind digs deeper or digs itself in more securely than imagination, the deep diver [...] The poet philosophizes because he imagines. (My translation.)
10. From time to time one of these spirits comes to this globe. Their passage, as we said, renews art, science, philosophy, or society.
They fill a century, then disappear. At that moment their light no longer fills a single century, but rather humanity from one the beginning to the end of time, and we discover that each of these men was the human spirit itself entirely contained in a single brain, and coming at a particular moment to declare a stage of progress on the earth. (My translation.)
11. Great souls are visible like great mountains. Therefore, they exist. But here a questioning will not be dismissed (questioning is anxiety): where do they come from, what are they, who are they? Are some atoms more godlike than others? This atom, for example, which will here receive the power of casting its light abroad, this one which will be Thales, this one which will be Aeschylus, this one which will be Plato... this one which will be Piranesi, this one which will be Washington, this one which will be Beethoven, this one which will be Garibaldi, this one which will be John Brown, all these atoms, souls charged with a sublime mission among humankind, have they seen other universes and do they bring the memory of them with them to the earth? These leader-spirits, these guiding intelligences: who sends them? Who decides when they are to appear? Who judges the present needs of humanity? Who chooses the souls? Who musters up the atoms? Who decides their departures? Who plans their arrivals? (My translation.)

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