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Stéphanie Dord-Crouslé

Putting an Unfinished Novel Back into Motion: A Digital Tool to Create Possible “Second Volumes” of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*

Abstract: As Flaubert feared, death interrupted the writing process of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. But does this incompleteness express the structural impossibility of completing an encyclopedic novel that was to include, in its unwritten second volume, something like the totality of the world’s discourses? Without denying the interest that regards this novel as the precursor of our modernity, the Bouvard project (<https://www.dossiers-flaubert.fr>) wanted to consider its incompleteness as essentially undergone and situational. By using digital media, it started again from the documentary materials gathered by Flaubert — these papers constitute only a work in progress that was brutally immobilized by the author’s death — and gave new life to the specific composition process of the second volume, which is based on an arrangement of textual fragments. There can then emerge a plurality of possible “second volumes”, which, far from remedying the effective incompleteness of the work, takes account of it and makes the mobility of its fragments a constitutive dimension of this unfinished work.

Flaubert was concerned with perfection. He was a writer who polished his sentences at length and constructed his works with the precision of an architect. But the time required to satisfy this irrepressible aspiration came into conflict with the novelist’s often expressed desire to finish each novel promptly. For him, the tension was always extreme between the infinite work necessary to achieve the ideal (“That’s what’s diabolical about prose — it’s never finished”)¹ and the immediate desire to finish the work in progress (Flaubert was always “in a hurry to finish [his] damned book”).²

It was no different for his final novel, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. This “encyclopedia of modern foolishness”³ tells the story of two copyists who leave Paris for a

1 Flaubert 2017. Letter from Flaubert to Louise Colet, June 28, 1853. (All translations are mine.) This article has received financial support from the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme Lyon Saint-Étienne.

2 Flaubert 2017. Letter from Flaubert to Olympe Bonenfant, November 28, 1855.

3 Flaubert 2017. Letter from Flaubert to Adèle Perrot, October 17, 1872.

house in Normandy “on a stupid plateau between Caen and Falaise”,⁴ where they will put to the test all the branches of knowledge of their time (agriculture as well as calisthenics and philosophy) before finally returning, disappointed, to their original activity as copyists, but this time applied to the works they have previously read.

However, this “kind of critical encyclopedia in farce”⁵ has two specificities. The first is that the work was never finished because Flaubert literally died on the job; the second is that several critical readings of the novel assert that this incompleteness is a defining characteristic of the work. In order to examine this singular situation, we must first consider to what extent the novel was unfinished and the reasons why it could be argued that it was unfinishable — that Flaubert’s unexpected death was paradoxically the only conceivable way out. Then, without denying the interest in considering this novel a precursor of modernism, we will explain why those of us working on the Bouvard project have chosen to consider this incompleteness as essentially imposed and accidental, not to provide an “end” to the novel, but on the contrary to take a dynamic approach to a fragmentary work and allow for the emergence of an infinite number of possible “second volumes,” rediscovering in another way the novel’s element of incompleteness.

1 *Bouvard et Pécuchet*: an unfinished novel

1.1 The novel as testament

Flaubert never found writing easy. As a young man (when he was working on *Madame Bovary*), he felt the “torments of art” so acutely that they made him “want to die”.⁶ As his health deteriorated, he was concerned that his writing anxiety would make him unable to complete his works. A month before his death, he wrote to Tourgueneff:

4 Flaubert 2017. Letter from Flaubert to Caroline Commanville, June 24, 1874.

5 Flaubert 2017. Letter from Flaubert to Edma Roger des Genettes, August 19, 1872.

6 Flaubert 2017. Letter from Flaubert to Louise Colet, January 12, 1853.

When Pradier [the sculptor of Napoleon's tomb] was working at the Invalides in 1848, he used to keep saying: "The Emperor's tomb will be mine," so tired was he of his work. As for me, I can say: "It is time for the end of my book, otherwise it will be my own end."⁷

The development of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* was like a race against time to determine which would be finished first: the writer or the novel. In 1879, Flaubert, under pressure to publish, exclaimed:

My two gentlemen [i.e. Bouvard and Pécuchet] *are nowhere near being finished!* The first volume will be done this summer, but when? & the second will take me another six months, if I haven't been finished off myself before the book!⁸

Yet the writer hoped to see his novel through to the end: "I would like to visit the dark shores only after *I have vomited the bile that is suffocating me*: that is to say, not before I have written the book I am preparing",⁹ he stated in 1873. For he saw this novel as a sort of a testament, as he confided to George Sand: "The difficulties of such a book frighten me. And yet I would not like to die before I have accomplished it, for in the end, it is my testament".¹⁰ It was inconceivable for the novelist not to complete a text intended to contain the ultimate expression of his thought, indeed the presentation of the essential principles of his art.

1.2 A structure planned, but unfinished

But that is what happened on May 8, 1880, the ill-fated day when Flaubert suddenly died, leaving his last novel unfinished. It is certain that the work was to have two volumes. The first — which Flaubert wrote almost entirely — consists of ten chapters organized around the various subjects that Bouvard and Pécuchet successively study once they have left Paris and their job as copyists: agriculture, science, history, etc. The only thing missing is the final scene of the tenth chapter. However, the second volume, although Flaubert stated in January 1880 that it was "three-quarters done",¹¹ exists only as an outline and as a collection of gathered documents. It should have included two chapters. The

7 Flaubert 2017. Letter from Flaubert to Ivan Tourgueneff, April 7, 1880.

8 Flaubert 2017. Letter from Flaubert to Juliette Adam, December 2, 1879.

9 Flaubert 2017. Letter from Flaubert to Edma Roger des Genettes, February 22, 1873.

10 Flaubert 2017. Letter from Flaubert to George Sand, February 18, 1876. Auguste Sabatier also reported that Flaubert confided to him: "This philosophical novel [...] is my testament, the summary of my experiences and my judgment on man and man's works" (Flaubert 2011, 457).

11 Flaubert 2017. Letter from Flaubert to Edma Roger des Genettes, January 24, 1880.

first (the eleventh chapter) was planned to be highly developed and would have presented the “copy” that the two characters had written, sometimes referred to as their *sottisier* (a collection of foolish comments), i.e. a catalogue categorized by headings of all the nonsense they found during the readings done for the experiments they conducted in the first volume. Finally, a twelfth and last chapter would have been the novel’s “conclusion in three or four pages”.¹²

Flaubert’s death halted the work on the second volume. The unfinished work was then posthumously published by the writer’s niece only a few months after his death. She herself prepared the text for the first ten chapters and had to resign herself to leaving out the material for the second volume after Maupassant’s unwillingness to provide a publishable version. Flaubert’s “disciple” chose to “recognize the impossibility of completing what [he had] undertaken:”

I have just spent three months compiling and trying to arrange the notes of our poor dead man, in order to extract from them the book he wanted to produce, and I now believe the task is unachievable.¹³

Yet Maupassant’s work was not in vain since successive editions of the novel soon included an appendix with an overview of the material that this mysterious “second volume” would have contained. From the 1950s onwards, a few editions even attempted extensive speculative reconstructions of this *sottisier*.

1.3 A providential incompleteness?

Maupassant was right to be worried about the lack of understanding that would inevitably arise from “this heap of documents in the midst of which his own [Flaubert’s] thought would no longer shed any light.” But the “disciple” was absolutely convinced that the project conceived by the hermit of Croisset would ultimately have been finished and would have been a success. Many critics did not share this opinion, Émile Faguet among them:

It was not unwise of Flaubert to die before the publication of *Bouvard*, first as the work gained success because the author was dead; second because, published during his lifetime, the book would have flopped; and third because Flaubert himself, whose eyes were

¹² Flaubert 2017. Letter from Flaubert to Edma Roger des Genettes, April 7, 1879.

¹³ Flaubert/Maupassant 1993, 261–262. Letter from Maupassant to Caroline Commanville, July 30, 1881.

opened to his works when they were printed, would have found it below his expectations and would have suffered, given the enormous effort he had put into it.¹⁴

So was death a happy accident for a tired, worn-out writer whose work would have missed its target if the author had been able to finish it? Other critics go even further, claiming that the author's unexpected death was a blessing for the work, which at its core was impossible to complete, as maintained by Claudine Gothot-Mersch:

One cannot help but think that fate settled things even better than the author could have done; that Flaubert's death before the completion of his work was in accordance with the logic of the project, and that this was a providential event for *Bouvard*, definitively and radically removing the question of the ending of this novel, which I have tried to show was by its very nature interminable.¹⁵

But why would the unfinished novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet* have been “by its very nature” unfinishable?

2 *Bouvard et Pécuchet*: an unfinishable novel?

2.1 Structural incompleteness: circularity

First of all, there are thematic causes: the encyclopedic research of the two characters is in essence infinite, and the stupidity they reveal is bottomless. But we won't dwell on this here as there is, above all, a structural basis for the novel's unfinished character. In fact, it is based on a “remarkable formal circularity: the story keeps repeating the same path, it keeps going back over its own tracks”.¹⁶ In the first chapter, when the two characters meet in Paris, they discuss their interests and comment on what is happening in front of them, already making an initial round of the knowledge they will later experiment with in

¹⁴ Faguet 1899, 137. This critic also wrote: “*Bouvard et Pécuchet* should not be judged too severely, since it is a posthumous and unfinished work, and one may believe, given Flaubert's obstinacy in correcting himself, that he would have profoundly reworked it” (127). The same severe judgement can be found in Albert Thibaudet: “*Bouvard et Pécuchet* is the very report card, the sanction of this old age, this decadence, this dissolution; it is the base level, the zero altitude that the river reaches at the moment when it is going to disappear” (Thibaudet 1935, 177–178).

¹⁵ Gothot-Mersch 1981, 22.

¹⁶ Gothot-Mersch 1981, 9.

chapters two to nine, the second time around. Then chapter ten, which deals with pedagogy, brings back to the foreground much of the knowledge that must be taught to Victor and Victorine, the children taken in by Bouvard and Pécuchet. According to the plans left by Flaubert, the next chapter was meant to be the two men's "copy", consisting of extracts from the previously read works (fourth round), presented as an anthology. Finally, the novelist seemed to have envisaged "two last turns of the spiral",¹⁷ which would have consisted first of Bouvard and Pécuchet's discovery of a letter from the doctor at Chavignolles placing them in the category of harmless lunatics, which would have "had to be the reader's critique of the novel"¹⁸ (fifth round) and then, in the final round, the insertion of "the copy *in extenso* crowning the whole."¹⁹ The novel's diegetic mainspring thus approaches eternal recommencement; as Claudine Gothot-Mersch remarks, "it seems [that Flaubert] never resigns himself to putting the finishing touches on his novel".²⁰

2.2 Aesthetic incompleteness: modernism

This structural circularity, certainly intended by Flaubert but whose effect is muddled by the unexpected interruption of the work, has paved the way for the famous analyses that have made *Bouvard et Pécuchet* one of the works at the source of modernism, given that incompleteness, according to Barthes, is one of the four constituent traits of the concept.²¹ We need only recall a few lines from Michel Foucault's inspired interpretation, who, when asked what the two characters are copying at the end of the novel, offers this fascinating answer:

Books, their books, all books, and this book, no doubt, which is *Bouvard et Pécuchet*: for to copy is to do nothing; it is to be the books that are copied, it is to be this infinitesimal distension of language that redoubles itself, it is to be the fold of discourse on itself, it is to be this invisible existence that transforms the passing word into the infinity of rumor.

And then concludes:

¹⁷ Gothot-Mersch 1981, 22.

¹⁸ Flaubert 2013. Ms. gg 10, folio 67.

¹⁹ Gothot-Mersch 1981, 22. This hypothesis, put forward by Demorest and supported by Claudine Gothot-Mersch, seems, however, unlikely. In our view, chapter eleven would have presented the copy and chapter twelve the conclusion "in three or four pages."

²⁰ Gothot-Mersch 1981, 22.

²¹ See Barthes, 1976.

Bouvard and Pécuchet triumph over all that is foreign to the book and resist it, by becoming themselves the continuous movement of the Book. The book opened by Saint Anthony and from which all temptations have flown away, the two men will prolong it without term, without illusion, without greed, without sin, without desire.²²

Clearly, it is the distinctive nature of the second volume that allows the emergence and development of these reflections and gives them their speculative and suggestive scope. Flaubert's last scenario ends with this gloss on the copy the characters are engaged in: "The page must be filled, everything is equal: the good and the evil, the beautiful and the ugly, the farcical and the sublime, the insignificant and the characteristic. There are only phenomena".²³ The text no longer seems to have a defined boundary or limit — the inside and the outside blend indistinctly.²⁴

This levelling of everything might seem to be in line with Flaubert's vehement denunciation of conclusions that has often been considered his trademark: "*Ineptitude consists of the desire to conclude*",²⁵ he asserted as early as 1850. He went on to stress in 1863: "The urge to want to conclude is one of the most fatal and fruitless manias of humanity".²⁶ Would writing the impossibility of its completion into the text itself be the magic formula, the ultimate solution, preventing it from being subjected to the idiocy of concluding? Did Flaubert deliberately forge a "fundamentally and systematically unfinishable work"?²⁷ We argue that this conception in fact reflects an incomplete and biased understanding of the novelist's refusal of the conclusion that he so often expressed.

2.3 Textual incompleteness: the "non finito"

The conclusion that Flaubert rejected is not to be found at the end of a novel. It is found in the patient work that produces each sentence, gradually building up the impossibility for the reader to settle on the meaning of the work and thus the disappearance of any conclusive character. The author does not avoid this by refraining from writing the end of a novel. Nothing is more complete than *L'Éducation sentimentale*, a novel that has in fact two successive concluding

²² Foucault 1983, 122.

²³ Flaubert 2011, 401.

²⁴ See Mouchard/Neefs 1980, 171–217.

²⁵ Flaubert 2017. Letter from Flaubert to Louis Bouilhet, September 4, 1850.

²⁶ Flaubert 2017. Letter from Flaubert to Marie-Sophie Leroyer de Chantepie, October 23, 1863.

²⁷ De Biasi 1986, 45.

chapters, and which Flaubert loudly rejoiced at having finished on “Sunday morning,” May 16, 1869, at “exactly 4:56”: “Finished, my friend! Yes, my book is finished!”²⁸ And yet there is nothing less conclusive than this novel whose meaning endlessly eludes us because the novelist has worked to make it indeterminate ... Flaubert achieves this effect by pushing to the extreme a concerted aesthetic approach that leaves gaps in the textual process, preventing the meaning from being arrested. The effect is “non finito”, the paradoxical result of neither renunciation nor abandonment, but conversely of “an obsession with mastered form, [with] the definitive, [with] completion and perfection”.²⁹ In this way, the incompleteness that is integral to Flaubert’s writing process aims to preclude any conclusion regarding the meaning while at the same time perfecting the form.

This poetics of the non finito does not only concern *Bouvard et Pécuchet* — it is not specific to this unfinished work. The mechanics on which it is based were built up progressively and their effects are visible in all the novelist’s works. Flaubert’s refusal to conclude is not equivalent to the impossibility of bringing a text to an end, as is evident in the writer’s correspondence, the essentially classic novelistic aesthetics of his last novel, and his outline. While the effect of eternal recommencement due to the structure of the work is obviously deliberate and the poetics of the novel are the bearer of this singular and characteristic non finito, the fact remains that the incompleteness of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* is fundamentally imposed and accidental, caused by the unforeseen death of the author. It is this incompleteness that we can try to remedy — not, of course, by writing the continuation and the end of the adventures of the two copyists in Flaubert’s place, but by trying to understand what configurations (with an emphasis on the plural) might have been adopted in the second and final volume the writer planned for his novel.

²⁸ Flaubert 2017. Letter from Flaubert to Jules Duplan, May 16, 1869.

²⁹ De Biasi 1986, 48.

3 “Finishing” *Bouvard et Pécuchet*: creating a plurality of possible “second volumes”

3.1 Unfinished business: a frozen corpus of manuscripts

Imagining the potential content of the second volume of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* would require a review of all the preparatory manuscripts collected by the novelist to write his last novel; these were preserved after his death, and are found today mainly in Rouen’s municipal library. But our purpose here is not to provide an exhaustive inventory,³⁰ rather to explain why the printed editions proposing speculative reconstructions, based on the archives in Rouen, are unsatisfactory, leading us to develop an alternative editorial project: the Bouvard project. This takes advantage of the digital medium, allowing a different, reformulated response to the problems raised by the novel’s incompleteness.

Although the printed editions of the “second volume” have considerable merit, they suffer from unavoidable bias insofar as they have to make selections and classification choices from the documentary materials gathered by Flaubert, while at the time of the author’s death, these materials were only a work in progress. By establishing a list of closed categories and dividing the citations present in the known files between these categories, these printed editions artificially freeze a work in progress in which certain items are missing (some, kept in private collections, are still unknown) and, above all, in which the copying process had not yet been completed. Flaubert worked by successively copying the same textual fragments onto different types of documents: reading notes, summary pages and finally pages he was preparing for the second volume.³¹ Each text had to pass through all these successive stages before it could appear in the second volume. But the novelist did not have enough time to copy many of them, although they were marked “for copying” in the margin of the reading notes. And even those that were, Flaubert may have decided not to include in the end. Thus, in any editorial reconstruction of the work, everything should remain fluid.

Moreover, the annotations made by the writer, which indicate the probable place of each citation’s classification, are often multiple. Even in the case of the

³⁰ For an inventory, see Dord-Crouslé 2014, 25–46; for regular updates of this inventory and more on the Bouvard project, see Dord-Crouslé 2008.

³¹ See Dord-Crouslé/Morlock-Gerstenkorn/Tournoy 2011, 123–145, Dord-Crouslé 2012; and 2016, 115–137.

citations that seem most in keeping with what Flaubert may have been aiming for, the categories of classification intended by the writer for his “second volume” prove to be unstable. For example, in folio 14, volume 7, the top fragment is linked to three classification categories. One is crossed out (“Medical style”), but the other two (“Rococo” and “The dangers of chocolate”) coexist without any clear distinction.³² This fundamental instability compels us to preserve a mobility for the textual fragments that is necessarily defeated by the fixity of a printed edition. Taking advantage of the possibilities offered by digital technology, the ongoing Bouvard project, which received funding from the French National Research Agency (ANR) from 2008 to 2012, seeks to correct this bias and restore the mobility of the corpus by allowing the production of “second volumes” on demand.

3.2 The methodological conditions for reworking the corpus

The Bouvard project has two intrinsically linked goals: one is to make a complex corpus accessible in the form of an online edition; the other is to allow any Internet user to produce configurations of citations extracted from the corpus. These textual arrangements are possible “second volumes” based on various hypotheses regarding the selection and classification of the textual fragments. The link between the two parts of the project is based on the use of XML-TEI as a pivot format: the integral encoding of the corpus allows for both visualizing and cutting the textual fragments, and then organizing them via a computer tool (named the “Arranger”) developed during the project to permit the production of “second volumes.” This tool allows the textual fragments constituting the corpus to be ordered following different hypotheses to give rise to an infinite number of possible “second volumes”.³³

A methodological clarification is nevertheless necessary. We should emphasize that we do not in any way presume that any production resulting from the Arranger and available in the website files of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* can legitimately claim the title — even the cautious title — of “conjectural reconstitution of the second volume of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*”. Flaubert himself points out to us, his future academic editors, the limits that should not be crossed by drawing attention to a quotation from Claude de Loynes d’Autroche, who translated the

³² Flaubert 2012. Ms g226 (7), folio 14. See https://www.dossiers-flaubert.fr/cote-g226_7_f_014_r____-trd [accessed on 08/08/2023].

³³ A video available online shows how the tool works. See Dord-Crouslé/Dury 2016.

Aeneid into French verse in 1804. An extract from the preface that this obscure literary scholar wrote for his work is quoted in the entry devoted to him in a supplement to Michaud’s famous *Biographie universelle*, a biography of notable individuals:

“Besides the translation of the *Aeneid* as it exists, I would have proposed,” he says in his preface, “a new edition such as I suppose Virgil might have composed if a longer life had allowed him to put the finishing touches to his work. *I would therefore have removed the weak or useless things ... and, preserving all that was beautiful, I would have tried to add that which he would have included WITH CERTAINTY*”.³⁴

Flaubert took note of part of this quotation,³⁵ which serves as a repellent. He stored the recopied fragment in a file entitled “Corrected classics” that includes editorial practices that he clearly felt were the height of folly!

Naturally, the primary ambition of our editorial enterprise was not to incur Flaubert’s posthumous wrath. Our intention was not to make “weak or useless things” disappear or add “beautiful things” of our own, but to make all the existing documentary material available in order to generate dynamic, non-conclusive, open, potential second volumes of the unfinished novel.

3.3 The Arranger, a tool for dynamic incompleteness

The Arranger is a computer tool that allows the fragments of the corpus to be organized. It can be compared to a kaleidoscope in that it is made up of a finite number of elements contained in a space that is itself finite, but allows an indefinite number of combinations of its elements. A kaleidoscope has the characteristic of creating something new simply by rearranging what already exists. A finite number of elements can thus produce an infinite number of different patterns. The totality is not the elements themselves, but the form that they take when combined. Like a kaleidoscope, the Arranger allows us to experience that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. While the Arranger is a reading tool and a distribution tool for a work published in digital format, it is also a tool for composing and structuring that work. As a result, it extends the field of critical editing to fragmentary textual content.³⁶

³⁴ Villenave 1834, 583. Italics and small caps are in the source text.

³⁵ Flaubert 2012. Ms g226 (2), folio 17. See https://www.dossiers-flaubert.fr/cote-g226_2_f_017_r____-trn [accessed on 08/08/2023].

³⁶ See Dord-Crouslé/Morlock-Gerstenkorn 2011, 169–183.

By making it possible to create as many second volumes of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* as desired, the Arranger allows all conceivable hypotheses to be tested, while considering each work a conjecture, with none taking precedence over the others, even if some necessarily have more verisimilitude and relevance than others. These reconstructions make sense both through the particular arrangement that each provides and through the co-presence of all the arrangements that they generate. An illustration of this principle can be found in an article where we proposed an experimentation of the digital tool on a small but very interesting part of the “second volume”, the one that was to appear in the category entitled “Agricultural style”. The different reconstructions proposed and allowed by the Arranger are presented.³⁷

The editorial undertaking carried out in the framework of the Bouvard project is at the origin of a perennial and valuable destabilization of the second volume of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*: it clearly demonstrates the unfinished status of this novel, whereas all the conjectural reconstitutions in print freeze a chimerical state of the text and, quite simply, wrongly constitute it as “a text”. In contrast, the digital interface for arranging the citations places each reader at the center of the process by allowing him/her to engage in the logic that may have guided Flaubert. By appropriating the compositional process to a greater or lesser extent, the reader becomes aware of its complexities and plunges into the forever-interrupted making of this second volume. He/she is put in a context that allows first-hand experience of the strengths and weaknesses of editorial mechanisms; he/she can grasp the automatisms that pace the novel’s development (the serialization of phenomena; a repetitive genetic pattern: reading notes / summary pages / pages prepared for the second volume; etc.), he/she even has the opportunity to discern the failures that lurk in the enterprise, the gaps through which the errors or even the bad faith of the novelist can be guessed at, and the bias these result in.

The Arranger computer tool thus allows a recomposition of the work as fundamentally a “non-work”, which the reader can experiment with on the project website. By varying the potential second volumes, by reorganizing fixed resources, the reader experiences from the inside the plastic virtuality of the arrangements he/she produces. He/she puts the critical power of the novelist’s project to the test, while appreciating the irreducible distance that separates him/her forever from the completion of the enterprise.

³⁷ See Dord-Crouslé 2019.

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