

## Comic readings of Flaubert's *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*

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### Abstract

*This essay examines the *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* as a humorous text which, whatever Flaubert's stated intentions, invites a variety of responses from its reader, this more particularly for being unpublished and probably unfinished. Alongside the author's broadside satiric attack on bourgeois stupidity, which in itself cannot be seen as uniquely value-based, one notes the scapegoating of various clans, including the petite bourgeoisie, the incitement of a humour of recognition, whereby even the author himself may have identified with various bêtises he included, the use of a childlike or adolescent approach to knowledge which involves endearing half-truths, imprecisions and improprieties, plus some outright nonsense which one reads entirely as one chooses. The result is a text the pleasure of which is analogous to that of other comic compendia of today, and whose range moves well beyond the confines of Flaubert's self-advertized cynicism.*

**Keywords:** Flaubert, satire, stupidity, simplicity, nonsense.

### Introduction

Flaubert's last composition, the novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, remained famously incomplete at his death. Of the ten chapters that survive only the last is unfinished, but it is clear that an entire second volume was intended and which would include a project he had formulated long before starting the novel proper, namely the compiling, now handed to his two protagonists, of a *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, that is an alphabetically listed series of notions commonplace in society. Composed after a series of failures endured by his two eponymous, culturally ambitious but intellectually inept copy-clerks, it would seemingly have been an act of vengeance undertaken by his protagonists, plus himself as their latterly sympathetic creator, on the bourgeois society which he hated and which had throughout their previous ventures shunned and alienated them.

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## Discussion

Despite these contexts it should be noted in advance that Flaubert had scarcely invented the project of a repertory of errors and stupid ideas, or indeed of a comic dictionary. In the first connexion one may note Voltaire's *Sottisier*, emulated in spirit by Flaubert in his manuscripts,<sup>1</sup> and more specifically the edifying treatise by Jean Barthélémy Salgues entitled *Des Erreurs et des préjugés répandus dans la société* and which he had clearly read.<sup>2</sup> Otherwise Philibert-Joseph Leroux's *Dictionnaire comique, satyrique, burlesque, libre et proverbial* enjoyed several editions throughout what students of the eighteenth century have declared to be the 'âge d'or des dictionnaires.'<sup>3</sup> Thus one even has notice of a *Dictionnaire des dictionnaires*,<sup>4</sup> and as Voltaire used his *Dictionnaire philosophique* to attack the ideological power of the Church, so Flaubert intended his final literary enterprise to undermine the Enlightenment's pretence at encyclopaedic wisdom and its legacy within the culture of his own period.

Accordingly his correspondence describes the purpose of both novel and dictionary as highly negative, the latter being planned as an 'apologie de la canaillerie humaine', with a preface that should disorientate the reader as, 'arrangée de telle manière que le lecteur ne sache pas si on se fout de lui on non.'<sup>5</sup> In due course that preface would clearly have comprised the entire first volume of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Flaubert again envisaging his novel in exclusively satiric terms: he declared in 1872 that it would be a means to 'exhaler mon ressentiment, vomir ma haine, expectorer mon fiel, éjaculer ma colère, déterger mon indignation,' etc. (*Correspondance*, IV: 583).

These comments notwithstanding, Flaubertians, beginning with Maupassant, who reviewed the unfinished material,<sup>6</sup> remain unanimous in declaring that one cannot know what exact form he would have imposed on the eventual work. From the author's sketched plans Cento concludes that, rather than pursuing further investigations, his two *cloportes* would spend the latter chapters of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* copying material up, one of their eventual products being the *Dictionnaire*.<sup>7</sup> However it is futile to speculate how precisely the work would have been presented to the reader: 'Ce qu'aurait été en définitive le deuxième volume [de *Bouvard et Pécuchet*], Dieu seul le sait, et les mânes de Flaubert.'<sup>8</sup>

Moreover this gap in our knowledge permits an unusual degree of freedom of approach concerning the *Dictionnaire*, three random entries being already sufficient to indicate how flexible the text remains:

BAISER: Dire embrasser ... plus décent

CHACAL: Singulier de shakos

IMBÉCILES: Ceux qui ne pensent pas comme nous.

In no way is one obliged to take Flaubert's or indeed any author's descriptions as prescriptions on how their work is to be read, and that more specifically an unpublished work. Within certain parameters one reads, and indeed one laughs, as one chooses, hence my intention in this article is to indicate a variety of reader strategies, all of which the *Dictionnaire* facilitates without rendering any of them definitive.

The first such strategy, coincident with Flaubert's hostility towards the bourgeoisie, is the value-based satire aiming to reinforce one's respect of a quality of life and culture which he saw as all but lost in his period: the banality and shallowness of what passed for contemporary received wisdom is evident in a huge number of *Dictionnaire* entries, witness 'LIBERTÉ: nous avons toutes celles qui nous sont nécessaires' (311);<sup>9</sup> the attack on political complacency could hardly be clearer. Parallel to this response, moreover, comes the clan-based satire whereby those stupid enough to uphold such received wisdom are pilloried by author and reader alike, who, even while over-simplifying the issues, may content themselves as belonging to a clan of aesthetes and intellectuals irrevocably superior to their targets. An example might be 'LACONISME: Langue qu'on ne parle plus' (311): it is sufficient to imagine that there exists a clan of people ignorant enough to make this mistake for one to be reassured that one does not belong to it.

Satire, however, is not the only pattern available to the reader. Rather than engendering contempt, simple homespun wisdom whereby, for instance, damp is the cause of all sickness ('HUMIDITÉ: Cause de toutes les maladies': 310), can endear one to its upholders: how often have we smiled at our Gallic cousins as they warned us of the dangers of 'des courants d'air'?<sup>10</sup> In this connexion Flaubert himself commented on the naiveté of Bouvard and Pécuchet, but found them more and more agreeable as his writing progressed, and the appeal of this naïve parody of appropriate and informed reflection, apparent ever and again in children, may lie in one's regret that

life cannot, alas, be approached in such an unsophisticated way: the French may not, after all, be 'le premier peuple de l'Univers' (308), but for the simple-minded it is perhaps an agreeable comfort that they might be.

Alongside this naïve parody, however, lies a pattern whereby, rather than being ignored, as one ignores the value of intelligent enquiry by acknowledging that flamingos come from Flanders, one consciously defies accepted standards by writing or indulging manifest nonsense (e.g. that Mackintosh was a Scottish philosopher who invented India rubber), or by conjuring up offensive statements or obscene connotations: thus 'HÉMORROÏDES: Vient de s'asseoir sur les poêles et sur les bancs de pierre' (309), or 'PÉDÉRASTIE: Maladie dont tous les hommes sont affectés à un certain âge' (312). Flaubert's taste for scurrilous and outrageous postures dates back to his childhood, witness his creation, along with a schoolfellow, of the comically ambiguous scamp they called *Le Garçon*, already a caricature of Enlightenment thought, but also a wellspring of Rabelaisian smut and Sadean immorality.<sup>11</sup> To indulge the humour expressed by an entry such as 'GOMME (ÉLASTIQUE): Est faite avec le scrotum du cheval' (309) is thus to invert normal standards and celebrate the humorist for allowing us this freedom.

These different comic strategies I have already applied to the humour of Rabelais, an author whom Flaubert greatly admired,<sup>12</sup> and, without claiming that they exhaust the subject of mirthful response, I do believe that they help to explore and explain the vitality of successful comic writing. After all, if an attack on French 19<sup>th</sup> century received opinion was the unique strategy yielded by the *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, its appeal would be far more limited than has proved to be the case.

Given that Flaubert viewed the *Dictionnaire* for some years as an independent work,<sup>13</sup> throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond we have enjoyed a series of editions, several of which present the *Dictionnaire* on its own, a trend set in 1913 and continued up to 2011.<sup>14</sup> The resultant effect again enhances the freedom of the reader. For instance, while Salgues may spend pages refuting the old wives' tale holding comets to be portents of disaster,<sup>15</sup> Flaubert merely makes the following admonition: 'COMETES. Rire des gens qui en avaient peur'(306). Can this not amount to sound advice rather than merely reinforcing those attacks on the smug scientism of his period that so dominate the satiric agenda of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*?

Nevertheless one can scarcely deny his avowed aim of denouncing that *bêtise* which some commentators see as exerting a moral force within Flaubert's psyche: Sartre even envisions Flaubert as a self-imposed scapegoat in this capacity.<sup>16</sup> As such, good judgment can be taken as the basic value which his satire intends to promote as it derides anyone who believes with incongruous idiocy that beer induces colds, or who cannot define the words *fugue* or *fulminer* (while admitting that the latter is a 'joli verbe': 309), or who is happy to repeat in any circumstance 'C'est drôle' (*Dictionnaire*, 1979: 509). Again, in his correspondence he averred that he was writing *Bouvard et Pécuchet* 'à l'intention de quelques raffinés' and not for the public at large (*Correspondance*, V: 767).

That public at large he came to despise to an almost neurotic extent, a point attested not merely in his letters but also in accounts by his friends and associates, some of whom even found it laughable in itself,<sup>17</sup> and the pathological sources of this near-obsession are intriguing. However my subject is comic strategy not literary psychoanalysis, hence in this connexion one notes how the over-simplification of an issue, for instance the silliness of the bourgeoisie, can simply enhance the alternative tactic available to the satirist, whereby instead of seeking to prosecute a value, and perhaps (*mirabile dictu*) reform a target figure, one uses a comical incongruity to sharpen out the clan-based opposition of (here) sophisticates vs. uncultured in order to boost the morale of those who share the identity and mentality of Flaubert and his 'quelques raffinés'.

Seen thus, the clan-based satirist can often be quite crude in his approach, simply yah-boosing the opponent to the immediate or eventual satisfaction of his own supporters. Consequently it is to an extent insignificant that one could hardly be so stupid as to believe that all bachelors are debauched egoists (something arguably true, be it said, of Flaubert) or that all *confiseurs* come from Rouen (something, no doubt, of an in-joke for his co-provincials); the comical bonus is secured by a reaffirmation of tribal identity. We at least would never profess such nonsense, and one of Bergson's many oversimplifications is certainly relevant here: 'le rire est toujours le rire d'un groupe.'<sup>18</sup>

However it is interesting to note that clan-based satire is not merely an implicit pattern within the *Dictionnaire* but an explicit one as well, as deriving from various clichés there represented, some of which indeed survive. It is, for instance, astonishing that *les Anglaises* can produce such pretty offspring: the associated

prejudice holding all Englishwomen to be ugly remains extant in France today. Meanwhile, though all Italians are musical, all Italians are also treacherous: any victim of short-changing in a Neapolitan restaurant will likely respond. In addition, and despite their military prowess, the Germans are a 'peuple de rêveurs' (304).

This particular entry Flaubert characterized as 'vieux', indicating no doubt that it was a worn-out cliché, even if his own attachment to German romanticism remains traceable.<sup>19</sup> Placed in the context of the 1870s, however, it gains a political dimension which is reinforced in one manuscript by his adding, 'Ce n'est pas étonnant qu'ils nous aient battus, nous n'étions pas prêts!' (*Dictionnaire*, 1979: 487), so complicating the satire by imposing other values on it. The facile excuse for defeat in 1871 indicates that same complacency targeted ever and again in Flaubert's anti-bourgeois diatribes, while the original allusion to a 'peuple de rêveurs' raises the stock charge of superficial thinking that might be seen as the whole basis to the *Dictionnaire* enterprise, were it not for the fact that the shaft is to an extent self-directed.

For in a letter of 1853 he exclaimed to Louise Colet 'Au fond, je suis Allemand!' (*Correspondance*, II: 362) and his association of high literature with politico-military strength is raised in a curious passage from his *Lettre à la Municipalité de Rouen*: 'Il me semble que le rêveur Fichte a réorganisé l'armée prussienne après Iéna, et que le poète Kœrner a poussé contre nous quelques uhlands vers 1813?'<sup>20</sup> So one notes that the half-truths contained in an *idée reçue* can mitigate its satiric import, not least by inciting what one might call a humour of recognition, of which more anon. Surely, as here, Flaubert saw his own thought-patterns reflected in various entries he compiled, and not necessarily to negative effect. Examples might include 'OPTIMISTE, Equivalent d'imbécille' (sic), 'EGOÏSME: Se plaindre de celui des autres et ne pas s'apercevoir du sien' (another salutary warning), and perhaps supremely, 'ÉPOQUE, la nôtre: Tonner contre elle' (312, 311, 308).

Otherwise, more straightforward entries such as 'BRETONS: Tous braves gens, mais entêtés' (305) fit the pattern of ethnic humour identified and theorized by Christie Davies for whom it involves the targeting of an outsider national or sub-national clan with the proviso that they be near neighbours, not distant foreigners.<sup>21</sup> Thus, rather than heading too far outside their cultural orbit, today's Frenchmen choose the Belgians to be their stupid cousins, as the English do the Irish (and the Irish the Kerymen). Accordingly we notice that Flaubert's outsider clans here include the Marseillais ('tous gens d'esprit': 311 – a claim written, one assumes, in irony),

and, interestingly, the Normans, with whom he might after all have claimed solidarity: his co-provincials are said to deform French pronunciation and to all wear cotton bonnets.<sup>22</sup>

Using the 'voix impérieuse du groupe'<sup>23</sup> to secure an imagined superiority over those unlike one is thus a common satiric strategy even as one concedes mentally that the generalisation is unfair. The value-based approach would be to target one's enmity at those stupid enough to generalize national or provincial characteristics so radically, but it is a clear matter of choice how one reads an entry such as 'COSAQUES: Mangent de la chandelle.' (306) Moreover the outsider clans represented are not merely determined by ethnicity, as Flaubert includes two of the groups most habitually targeted in French if not international humour, and the mocking of whom, rife throughout the Middle Ages, remains current.

Firstly one notes the religious orders: hence 'CHARTREUX: Passent leur temps à faire de la chartreuse, à creuser leur tombe et à dire "Frère, il faut mourir □ ' (305), and 'PRÊTRES: Couchent avec leurs bonnes, et ont des enfants qu'ils appellent leurs "neveux " ' (313). Whether Flaubert shared it or not, the hostility implied derives from the laity's traditional fear of a once powerful group, highly visible in society but circumscribed by its own clear identity and rules. The other clan comprises women, still more numerous, and indeed powerful as being the irreplaceable source of all life.

In this connexion it is an *idée reçue* that blondes are more sensual than brunettes; but there is a converse *idée* whereby brunettes are more sensual than blondes; as for redheads, the indication is: see under 'blondes, brunes, blanches, et négresses' (313), the latter being described as 'plus chaudes que les blanches' (312). Regrettably or not, *les blanches* are in fact spared an entry of their own, but the implied insult whereby womanhood is reducible to a set of categories determined by their degree of sexual responsiveness has been grist to the mill of feminism for many decades.<sup>24</sup>

It is not clear how severely Flaubert is arraigning those who uphold these prejudices,<sup>25</sup> nor how much he may himself have been tempted to entertain them. However there is at least one further strategy available here, and one more appealing to me, whereby the pleasure in these jokes derives less from one's targeting the supporters of a stupid notion, than from one's momentarily identifying with them, and so suspending one's genuine personality in order to create a further incongruity, a moment of comic theatre whereby one dons the mask, say, of an anti-Parisian or an

anti-feminist, and pretends, mockingly, to support the idea that Paris is 'La grande prostituée [...] Paradis des femmes' (*Dictionnaire*, 1979: 545).

The risk is that one will give offence and be taken as genuinely supporting a prejudice adopted only in fun, but it is worth recalling how much Jewish humour is self-directed, and, by tradition, how much women's humour mocks not male, but female stereotypes. Again, in generating this type of comedy, one steps momentarily outside a clan to which one nevertheless belongs, and to combine the two patterns I am reminded of Mrs Mordecai being complimented by Mrs Rabinovitz on her two infant boys. 'So how old are they now?' she asks. 'Well the doctor is two, and the lawyer, tomorrow is his first birthday.'<sup>26</sup>

What underlies this reaction is the complexity of human identity whereby the loyalties and characteristics that we seek consciously to embody may have very shallow roots, and in this context one notes the frequency with which scholars have traced in Flaubert's personality the same bourgeois characteristics for which he excoriated his contemporaries.<sup>27</sup> His attempt to stand outside that group and lambast it was not conducted in entire good faith. However, if the *Dictionnaire* in fact involves a number of sly winks at his reader on those occasions when, rather than arraigning the prejudices of his professed enemies, it represents the author's own, this is all to the good in that it enriches the humorous patterning of a text whose value-based satire can become too linear and predictable, but whose clan-based satire generates various effects and side-effects, of many of which Flaubert was fully aware.

It is noteworthy, for instance, that some of the *idées* reappear in the text of the novel, but without consistently being voiced by his protagonists. Admittedly the pair do fear draughts, as the *Dictionnaire* advises,<sup>28</sup> also sharing its conviction that letter-writing is the preserve of women,<sup>29</sup> and Pécuchet, for one scholar 'l'homme des clichés',<sup>30</sup> does hold that music softens 'les mœurs'.<sup>31</sup> However, verbatim quotation of its contents tends to be left to the villagers, who as the novel progresses become more and more the antagonists of his protagonists. Hence when Pécuchet is defending freedom in a discussion on politics, Foureau, the local mayor, asserts that 'La France veut être gouvernée par un bras de fer',<sup>32</sup> while in an earlier conversation with the resident abbé on the age of the earth (at the time a theological issue), it is the village aristocrat who asserts that 'un peu de science en éloigne [sc. de la religion], beaucoup y ramène'.<sup>33</sup> The abbé is also targeted when, in a sentence of *style indirect libre*, Flaubert has him claim, in like spirit, that the study of geology gives confirmation of

the Flood,<sup>34</sup> and it is striking that on the one occasion when the phrase *idées reçues* is used in the novel, it is associated with Church doctrine: 'tout cela [the theories of Lamarck and Saint-Hilaire] contrariait les idées reçues, l'autorité de l'Eglise.'<sup>35</sup>

Such instances can be built into the satire opposing Bouvard and Pécuchet to the inhabitants of their locality, but not so easily into that opposing Flaubert to his own chosen heroes, and here one need scarcely recite the commonplace of Flaubert criticism whereby, while certainly ridiculing those heroes in many ways, he identified partially with them, witness how his own researches in preparation for the book mirrored their desperate attempts to acquire certain and reliable knowledge; hence his admission in a letter of 1875 to Edma Roger des Genettes: 'Leur bêtise est mienne et j'en crève.'<sup>36</sup> (*Correspondance*, IV: 920)

This comical incongruity is a curious one, moreover, and need not, I insist, be regarded as hostile. Self-directed humour can be intentionally critical and value-based,<sup>36</sup> but it can also be in a curious way salutary, involving what Flaubert clearly experienced more and more, namely a kind of humour of recognition whereby he saw his satire mitigated by a counter-pattern. This counter-pattern is germane if not identical to the category of naïve parody described above, so resembling the humour generated by an infant, a child or an uninitiate of some other kind, whereby their attempts to speak, reason or (in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*) advance in knowledge are inhibited by their own lack of an adult perspective, qualities which attract rather than repel.<sup>37</sup> In this instance Flaubert's putative title 'les deux cloportes' is significant: though ugly and unappealing, woodlice are harmless, blind and odourless little creatures who live obscure lives, albeit to no apparent purpose, and if they ever invade one's house, only do so because they are lost.<sup>38</sup>

So where does the analogous pattern emerge within the *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*? Well firstly, not at all, if one so chooses. Nobody has the right tell anyone what to laugh at, nor indeed how to laugh at it, so if one fails to enjoy this humour of recognition within *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (as contrast Flaubert's wry admission, 'Je suis devenu eux!': *Correspondance*, IV: 920), then far be it from any theorist to insist on such a reaction. However again and again in reading the *Dictionnaire* one surely encounters associations and responses that one has oneself experienced, the effect being less one of self-deprecation than of increased security: thus Dord-Croulé's appropriate comment on Bouvard et Pécuchet's repeated failures:

Dans chaque épisode [...] on revit de l'intérieur un désir qui est celui de chacun d'entre nous: comprendre et maîtriser le monde par le savoir. On éprouve alors la jouissance ambiguë de le voir constamment échapper à Bouvard et Pécuchet dans la fiction comme il nous échappe dans la réalité. Plaisir de reconnaissance donc.<sup>39</sup>

Examples are potentially legion, but can only be identified subjectively. One suggested instance could come, however, in the very first entry: 'ABÉLARD: Inutile d'avoir la moindre idée de sa philosophie, ni même de connaître le titre de ses ouvrages' (303). One wonders how shameful it might be to indeed have no idea of Abelard's philosophy even to the extent of not recognizing the title of any of his works. A further example: 'CHAMEAU: a deux bosses et le dromadaire une seul – Ou bien: le chameau a une bosse et le dromadaire une seule (sic) [...] on s'y embrouille' (305); so indeed, but the prepster know-all who consistently displays useless information of this kind is scarcely the most appealing role-model. Can we not take comfort from within our own nescient state? Hence 'DIX (LE CONSEIL DES): on ne sait pas ce que c'était' (*Dictionnaire*, 1979: 508): of how of many of us readers is this true until we turn, be it in embarrassment or irritation, to the reference books?<sup>40</sup>

The incongruity in this type of humour resides in one finding oneself to be the target of a charge of ignorance and then being unconcerned, the satire rebounding on an aggressor seeking to raise irrelevant expectations. However the response can go much further, as one suddenly, and unworthily, associates with the glib half-truth that Racine was a mere 'polisson' (313), or even with untruths such as the claim that the *langouste* really is the female of the *homard* (311) or *chacal* the singular of *shakos* (*Dictionnaire*, 1979: 497). At such points the reading experience becomes an association game,<sup>41</sup> as such references invite in their turn further misconnexions from one's own experience (as my three-year-old daughter insisted that there was a type of bird called *nowl* and a kind of fruit called *napple*), whereupon the satire is entirely lost. In making such links one is reverting, momentarily and nostalgically, to a simpler level of understanding which one remembers having enjoyed perhaps in adolescence, when we all thought we knew everything, or childhood when we all made appealing errors of the *chacal/shakos* kind; compare therefore Lewis Carroll's comments on Jabberwocky whereby *toto* is said to be the ablative of *tumtum*.

So indeed Flaubert uses the *Dictionnaire* to confront his readers with their imperfect knowledge, blank ignorance or susceptibility to cliché, but we are not

compelled to endure dismay as a result. His entry on Descartes ('*Cogito, ergo sum*': 306, his italics) perhaps exhausts most of today's readers' awareness of the Cartesian system, but need it shame them into reading the *Discours de la méthode*? Meanwhile such mentions as 'Renverser une salière porte malheur' (*Dictionnaire*, 1979: 551) instance a particularly recurrent pattern of Old Wives' Tales which include the persistent tradition of blessing sneezers (which did after all intrigue Montaigne),<sup>42</sup> the attractive falsehood whereby swans sing before dying (one that can be traced back to Aeschylus), or the tradition that has Henry IV spend a night in every castle in France: one compares the dubiously frequent sightings of Oliver Cromwell in English taverns,<sup>43</sup> but notes the positive significance that such legends possess creating folk heroes.

So when Flaubert opines that 'Une maxime n'est jamais neuve, mais elle est toujours consolante' (*Dictionnaire*, 1979: 539), he is making a perceptive statement about his own text. *Idées reçues* must by definition be old saws, but their consolatory function is connected with a further humorous trend. To be sure Flaubert genuinely favoured originality and cultural enterprise, hence the entry 'Original' is particularly bitter in its implications: 'Rire de tout ce qui est original, le haïr, le bafouer, et l'exterminer, si l'on peut' (312); but the counter-pattern whereby one is satisfied to exchange stock phrases, crack jokes or rehearse pat arguments is one which has its advantages too, given the right circumstances. The glib maxim may indeed short-circuit 'la réflexion',<sup>44</sup> but language is not always reflective as intended to convey meanings or search for truths. It can also be used to entertain one's interlocutors with preposterous half-truths or to reassure them that their little knowledge, far from being a dangerous thing, is quite sufficient for their purposes.

This makes of the *Dictionnaire* something which Flaubert also intended, though with more than a grain of satire, namely a bluffer's guide; hence the entry on Descartes quoted above, or 'ACHILLE: Ajouter "aux pieds légers": cela donne à croire qu'on a lu Homère' (*Dictionnaire*, 1979: 486), or again 'Jockey-club: Dire simplement "Le Jockey", très chic, donne à croire qu'on en fait partie' (310). In the same 'apologie de la canaillerie' letter of 1852 he sketches the pattern as follows: 'On y trouverait [...] par ordre alphabétique, sur tous les sujets possibles, *tout ce qu'il faut dire en société pour être un homme convenable et aimable*' (*Correspondance* II: 208, Flaubert's italics). However, resisting his stated purpose, one may legitimately wish to appear that same 'homme convenable et aimable' and employ the book accordingly.

Nor is his satiric aim, targeting the bourgeoisie in their social gatherings, consistently fulfilled. In some cases he is giving us salutary warnings (e.g. 'CLASSIQUES (LES): on est censé les connaître': 305), at others in effect rehearsing his own genuine attitudes (as in the *époque, la nôtre* entry recorded above). Sometimes the comments are accurate (for instance 'GAUCHERS: Plus adroits que ceux qui se servent de la main droite' (309): he mentions fencing, but tennis professionals of today and yesterday spring to mind); sometimes they are misleading or patently nonsensical, but still to useful comic effect. Two examples might be 'BALLON: Avec les ballons, on finira par aller dans la Lune' (304) and 'GULF-STREAM: Ville célèbre de Norvège nouvellement découverte' (309). To pass off such evident drivel as genuine information would be to cooperate in Flaubert's satiric agenda by guying one's audience, but an *homme convenable* would need to choose his moment and his company carefully before going that far.

Otherwise, and in the context of those petit bourgeois receptions so frequent in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, he might apply the entries as effective tools in breaking the ice or raising a smile: for example, 'HOMO: [dire] *Ecce homo!* en voyant entrer l'individu qu'on attend', 'MOINEAU: Ne jamais manquer d'ajouter: fils de moine', or, if ill-luck would have it that there are thirteen guests, indeed say, 'Qu'est-ce que ça fait, je mangerai pour deux' (*Dictionnaire*, 1979: 528, 541 and 553). Hence while Jacquet sees this as an 'œuvre violente', she goes on to recognize that it comprises a 'parfait manuel de conversation'.<sup>45</sup>

Seen thus, Flaubert is less denouncing the social animal than equipping us to be one, so, and as Sartre observed, mixing the narrator's voices to valuable effect: thus 'Nous ne savons jamais *qui* parle.'<sup>46</sup> The procedure is no less discernible in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*,<sup>47</sup> and such flexibility, being all but pre-required of a successful comic script or text, entirely pre-empts the author's own supposition about the *Dictionnaire*'s ultimate effect. Perhaps in the Bouilhet letter of 1850 he was merely striking an attitude,<sup>48</sup> as in his stated purpose to vomit his *dégoût* on the public at large, perhaps (what seems unlikely) the version which he had in hand at this early point was far different from those left at his death, but certainly he is being far too reductive in his comments, and above all making the crucial error, committed also by some of his students, of confusing reader with narratee.<sup>49</sup>

He may seek to disorientate the latter by configuring one so doltish as to accept, like Hussonnet in *L'Education sentimentale*, that the St Bartholomew's Day

Massacre was a mere 'vieille blague' (313),<sup>50</sup> or one so pretentious as, like Emma Bovary, to see *rinse-bouche* as lending cachet to one's household,<sup>51</sup> but at such obvious points no reader will surely be mystified or intimidated in the way he anticipates for a victim narratee.<sup>52</sup> In another somewhat extravagant passage of correspondence Flaubert asserted that 'Il faudrait [...] qu'une fois qu'on l'aurait lu on n'osât plus parler, de peur de dire naturellement une des phrases qui s'y trouvent' (*Correspondance*, II: 208-9), but the text makes so many other reader strategies available that the statement can safely be discounted as another piece of authorial braggadocio. So if for Herschberg Pierrot 'La difficulté pour le lecteur est de savoir quel rôle de destinataire jouer',<sup>53</sup> the issue can be reconstrued as dependent on a range of possibilities among which one chooses the role most appropriate to a particular instance or to one's own particular personality: not a difficulty at all, but an opportunity.

In fact despite, or perhaps in part because of the frequent instances of the humour of recognition, the reader is far oftener Flaubert's accomplice than his victim, appreciating his irony, sharing his satiric stance, taking his hints, indulging not only his nonsense (e.g., for me at least: 'MÉTALLURGIE: très chic': 311) but also his (sometimes muted) indecency,<sup>54</sup> another adolescent quirk traceable, via the Garçon, to his, if not our own, boyhood years. In this connexion one notes 'ÉRECTION: Ne se dit qu'en parlant des monuments' (308), 'CONGRÉGANISTE: Chevalier d'Onan' or 'GARDE-CÔTE: Ne jamais employer cette expression au pluriel en parlant des seins d'une femme' (*Dictionnaire*, 1979: 501 and 522). One may wonder how often that connexion had been made in the first place, but at all events such references do usher in the final strategy outlined above.

Alongside the value-based satire attacking self-satisfied and self-congratulating mediocrities, the clan-based satire attacking the petit bourgeois (and other groups) in whatever distorted form, and the parody represented in the attitudes of innocents, simpletons and ignoramuses to whom the clichés and half-truths he lists grant emotional solace in reactions of the type: 'My God, that's just what I've always thought!', we find that comic procedure whereby, rather than reverting to a simpler mode of thinking and behaviour, as when like a child one concludes that Omega really is the second letter of the Greek alphabet, one deliberately inverts one's normal standards and becomes, as in the above vulgarities, one's own clowning opposite;

hence someone who might fit into society, but only as a closet jester who amuses by defying its standards, rather than an *homme convenable* who seeks to enhance them.

The pattern emerges in Flaubert's flippant indecencies, readable as a sad reflection of the spirit of that Rabelais whom he professed to admire. Otherwise we have references such as 'CIGARES: Les seuls bons viennent par contrebande' (305), which superficially supports crime; 'DEVOIRS: Les autres en ont envers nous, mais on n'en a pas envers eux' (306) – a cheeky but alluring justification of irresponsibility reflected in the orphans in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*; or 'DIPLÔME: Signe de science – Ne prouve rien' (307), which ushers in the kind of cynicism motivating much of Flaubert's humour elsewhere, but is a statement no-one could seriously uphold. Alternatively, and to me regrettably, he is forced back to trite improprieties such as 'Toute femme doit faire son mari cocu' (305) or 'FEMMES DE CHAMBRE: Toujours déshonorées par le fils de la maison' (308), which merely reflect how sexual allusions may enhance a humorous incongruity even if their taboo-rupturing function is so predictable as to often prove tiresome, particularly in adult or female company.

So what does one conclude? Firstly that while some claim along with the author, that *Bouvard et Pécuchet* was to express his 'dégoût de la vie',<sup>55</sup> there is no need to see this attitude as the well-spring of his humour. Nor need the anti-bourgeois satire be seen as his unique strategy: Sartre perhaps rightly said that the work suffered from its author's ideological confusion,<sup>56</sup> but that criticism, as referring specifically to value-based satire, is only relevant to one type of humour, while *Dictionnaire* entries like 'Mon gendre! tout est rompu!' (*Dictionnaire*, 1979: 522), or 'GROG: Pas comme il faut' (309) palpably defy any ideological purpose.<sup>57</sup> One can only concur with Herschberg Pierrot when she avows that in some *énoncés* 'le ridicule est moins clair',<sup>58</sup> and while it may go too far to claim with Bollème that 'toutes les gammes du comique' are undertaken here, she does enough to prove that her earlier assertion whereby his aim is to 'rire pour détruire' remains extremely partial.<sup>59</sup>

Destructive ridicule is far from being the only pattern, and after all it is not Flaubert who is to laugh or be amused, but hopefully ourselves, and that, as is our right, on our own terms. Thus we may find echoes of the *Dictionnaire* in the nonsense texts of today, where the *Meaning of Liff* matches his 'BAGNOLET: Pays célèbre par ses aveugles' (304) with nuggets like 'Skegness: nose excreta of a malleable consistency', or 'Peebles: Small, carefully rolled pellets of Skegness.'<sup>60</sup> Alternatively that modern *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, the *Brèves de comptoir*, counters his petty

bourgeois idiocies with a compendium of mainly asinine things said by plebeian habitués of Parisian bars: for example, 'le saumon fumé, c'est bourré de nicotine'; 'Napoléon est tout petit, c'est Bonaparte qui est plus grand'; or my personal favourite: 'Le monde est tellement con. On dirait que c'est moi qui fais tout.'<sup>61</sup> *La bêtise*, well-spring of such *conneries*, may for Flaubert have reflected a moral value, but it in reality is merely an intellectual one. So while inviting one to assail those imbecilic enough to opine that spontaneous generation is a left-wing concept, he cannot prevent us bonding innocently with those ignoramuses for whom we yet believe that all dictionaries are intended.<sup>62</sup>

In conclusion, and concerning the theoretical approach outlined above, I would claim for it two specific advantages. One is its suppleness: I have sought already to apply it to both Rabelais and Marguerite de Navarre,<sup>63</sup> and would envisage further experiments of the same kind. Secondly it facilitates the combining of three standard positions concerning humour whereby it depends (a) on incongruity, fundamental to both the stupidity, nonsense and naivety that Flaubert's entries reflect, (b) on aggression, witness his attacks on the outsider clans who are his intended targets, and (c) relief, as enhanced by the parodies of mature inquiry and responsible behaviour contained in the *Dictionnaire*. No ideas emerge ex nihilo, and I acknowledge a debt to incongruity theorists such as Oring and indeed Koestler, the latter of whom retains at least historical significance.<sup>64</sup> Where I differ from Koestler is in his insistence that humour is by nature aggressive, an assumption perhaps deriving from his own aggressive personality and one extended more recently by theorists such as Gruner.<sup>65</sup>

## Conclusion

One cannot, to be sure, deny that Flaubert's perhaps exaggerated feelings of hostility enhance the emotional charge of his satire, but it may be more salutary to argue positively, emphasising that loyalty to aestheticism is the value basis to that satire, while the intended morale boost to his co-thinkers expresses a clan loyalty that one can admire irrespective of any ideological triumphalism: in both connexions, i.e. satire as value-based or clan-based, it can be seen as constructive rather than merely combative. Concerning relief theories, discernible historically in Freud and in modern times in, for instance, Latta,<sup>66</sup> the notion of naïve parody is relevant in that it implies

relief from the complexities of informed and mature thinking: thus an effort of inquiry is short-circuited by those who intuit simplistically that incognito is what princes wear when on their travels.<sup>67</sup> Still incongruous in their caricatural view of the world, children, primitives uninitiates, mental defectives and ourselves at our weaker moments stimulate a humour which it may be delightful, albeit in the end tedious, to explore and entertain.

Ditto the incongruous attitudes and behaviour of the roguish anti-heroes explored with unmatched perceptiveness by Torrance,<sup>68</sup> and advertised sporadically by Flaubert himself, where the relief is more emotional than intellectual. To denounce all ideals and all methodology as futile,<sup>69</sup> or to claim that the police 'a toujours tort' (313) is to adopt, temporarily and for fun, a posture (hopefully) inconsistent with our genuine personality. The points need to be modified with mature reflection, but to do so ruin the humour: far better to invert the rewards of reading by concurring with the thought that any book (or indeed article) is by definition too long.<sup>70</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Q.v. G. Bollème, *Le Second Volume de Bouvard et Pécuchet* (Paris: Denoël, 1966), pp. 67 ff, where we in fact note a scathing reference to Voltaire himself as dismissing the 'niais' Shakespeare (p.105).

<sup>2</sup> On the relation of the Salgues text to Flaubert's *Dictionnaire*, see A. Green, "Flaubert, Salgues et le 'Dictionnaire des idées reçues' □, *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 80 (1980), 773-7.

<sup>3</sup> Q.v. C. Mervaud, ed. *The Complete Works of Voltaire*, vol. 35 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1994), Introduction.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> G. Flaubert, *Correspondance*, vol. 2, p. 208 and vol. 1, p. 679. These and future bracketed references to the *Correspondance* are from the Bruneau edition (Paris: Pléiade, 1973 (I), 1980 (II), 1998 (IV) and 2007 (V)).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. his letter to Caroline Commanville of 30 July 1881 in *Flaubert - Guy de Maupassant Correspondance*, ed. Y. Leclerc (Paris: Flammarion, 1993), pp. 261-2.

<sup>7</sup> Q.v. Flaubert's note quoted by A. Herschberg Pierrot, *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* (Paris: Classiques de Poche, 2009), Introduction, p. 10: 'Insérer dans leur copie: *Le Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues, L'Album de la Marquise*.'

<sup>8</sup> A. Cento, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (Paris: Nizet, 1963), p. L. In particular one might note that the *Dictionnaire* does not attribute its entries, which tend to reflect an oral rather than a written culture. Hence though it may be sourced in 'cornets de tabac, vieux journaux', etc. (q.v. C. Mouchard and J. Neefs, "Vers le second volume: *Bouvard et Pécuchet* □, in R. Debray-Mallet et al. *Flaubert à l'œuvre* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980), pp. 169-217 (p. 212), the *Dictionnaire* proper cannot be seen as a work which will 'immoler [...] les grands hommes' (*Correspondance*, II: 208).

<sup>9</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all future bracketed references to the *Dictionnaire* are from volume 2 of the Seuil/Intégrale edition of Flaubert's *Œuvres complètes*, ed. B. Masson (Paris, 1964), which, however, reproduces only Flaubert's autograph MS. Other entries are cited as indicated from the Herschberg Pierrot edition (q.v. *supra*, n. 7), which uses the same MS but includes corrections and errata, or the Gothot-Mersch edition (Paris: Gallimard-Folio 1979), which incorporates material from all three surviving MSS.

- <sup>10</sup> Cf. Intégrale edition, p. 304. The adulterated MS entry reads "AIR: Toujours s'en se méfier des courants d'air"; q.v. *Dictionnaire* 2009, p. 48.
- <sup>11</sup> Cf. J. Bruneau, *Les Débuts littéraires de Gustave Flaubert* (Paris: Colin, 1962), pp. 151 ff.
- <sup>12</sup> Q.v. J. Parkin, "The Polygelastic Rabelais", *Etudes rabelaisiennes*, 44 (2006), 44-62.
- <sup>13</sup> Cf. R. Descharmes, "Le 'Dictionnaire des idées reçues' dans l'œuvre de Gustave Flaubert", *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 21 (1914), 280-308 and 618-64 (p. 297). Herschberg Pierrot, "Dictionnaire et fiction. Le Dictionnaire des idées reçues de Flaubert", *Lexique*, 12/13 (1995), 345-355, strikes a somewhat different note whereby, 'contrairement à l'image qu'on se fait souvent de cette œuvre, le *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* n'est pas un texte isolé.' (p. 347)
- <sup>14</sup> Q.v. the Conard publication edited by E. L. Ferrère and the recent Glyphe edition.
- <sup>15</sup> Cf. J. B. Barthélémy Salgues, *Des erreurs et des préjugés répandus dans la société* (Paris: Buisson, 1810), p. 74.
- <sup>16</sup> S. Schvalberg, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (Rosny: Bréal, 1999), p. 13, quotes as one of Flaubert's *axiomes* that 'la haine du Bourgeois est le commencement de la vertu.' Cf. J. - P. Sartre, *L'Idiot de la famille*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 631.
- <sup>17</sup> Cf. A. Raitt, *Gustavus Flaubertus Bourgeoisophobus* (Oxford: Lang, 2005), pp. 91-2 and 169 ff.
- <sup>18</sup> H. Bergson, *Le Rire* (Paris: PUF, 1940), p. 5.
- <sup>19</sup> Q.v. A. Herschberg Pierrot *Dictionnaire*, 2009, 148.
- <sup>20</sup> Q.v. Flaubert, *Œuvres complètes* (Intégrale edition), vol. 2, p. 768.
- <sup>21</sup> Cf. C. Davies, *Ethnic Humor around the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), ch. 3.
- <sup>22</sup> 'Croire qu'ils prononcent des hâvesâcs, et les blaguer sur le bonnet de coton' (312). The MS entry had them all condemned as *filous* but, intriguingly, this detail was struck out (q.v. *Dictionnaire*, 2009, 108).
- <sup>23</sup> Cf. Herschberg Pierrot, Introduction to *Dictionnaire*, 2009, p. 23.
- <sup>24</sup> See the seminal attack on Henry Miller contained in K. Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970).
- <sup>25</sup> Herschberg Pierrot notes (*Dictionnaire*, 2009, p. 158) that the higher sexual drive of 'les femmes brunes' is confirmed in *Madame Bovary* by the loathsome Homais.
- <sup>26</sup> L. Rosten, *Leo Rosten's Book of Laughter* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986), p. 197: adapted.
- <sup>27</sup> Cf. Raitt, 2005, p. 158, on the purgative nature of *Bouvard et Pécuchet's* anti-bourgeois tirades.
- <sup>28</sup> Cf. *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, in Flaubert, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, p. 224.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296 cf. *Dictionnaire*: 309.
- <sup>30</sup> A. Herschberg Pierrot, "Du cliché à l'idée reçue", *La Licorne*, 59 (2001), 227-237 (p.231).
- <sup>31</sup> Flaubert, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, p. 296, cf. *Dictionnaire*: 312.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256, cf. *Dictionnaire*: 305.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231, cf. *Dictionnaire*, 1979: 551.
- <sup>34</sup> Cf. Flaubert, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, pp. 227 and 308.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.
- <sup>36</sup> Q.v. R. A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2007), p. 278 on the negative implications of the self-defeating humorist's 'attempts to amuse others by doing or saying funny things at [his] own expense.'
- <sup>37</sup> Thus in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, ed. C. Gothot-Mersch, p. 26, the editor's analogy of the characters with Candide.
- <sup>38</sup> The reasons why Flaubert dropped this nickname title in fact reveal a softening of his attitude towards the characters; q.v. Cento, 1963, p. xxiii.
- <sup>39</sup> *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, ed. A. Dord-Croulé (Paris: Garner-Flammarion, 1999), p. 15.
- <sup>40</sup> In fact this entry reads differently in the MSS, hence Intégrale, p. 307: 'C'était formidable. Délibéraient masqués. – En trembler encore!', Flaubert adding the cited rider into a later version.
- <sup>41</sup> Cf. Herschberg Pierrot, *Dictionnaire*, 2009, pp. 34-5: 'La lecture s'offre comme un jeu, allègre.'
- <sup>42</sup> Q.v. *Essais* 3.6, *Des cochés*.
- <sup>43</sup> Google quickly unearths The Lygon Arms in Broadway, Hazelrigg House in Northampton and The Bell in Salisbury, to name but three.
- <sup>44</sup> P. Moret, *Tradition et modernité de l'aphorisme* (Geneva: Droz, 1997), p. 176.
- <sup>45</sup> M. – T. Jacquet, *Les Mots de l'absence ou du 'Dictionnaire des idées reçues' de Flaubert* (Bari: Schena, 1987), pp. 33 and 91.
- <sup>46</sup> Sartre, 1971, p. 634 on the *Dictionnaire* (n.b. his italics, and arguably an overstatement).
- <sup>47</sup> Cf. Raitt, 2005, pp. 159-60, on *Bouvard et Pécuchet*: 'Sometimes [...] he speaks in his own voice; sometimes [...] he adopts the voice of the two "bonshommes", whether their utterance is foolish or sensible; sometimes, the voice is that of the intellectual doxa.'

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *supra*, n. 4

<sup>49</sup> In this connexion note Herschberg Pierrot, *Dictionnaire*, 2009, p. 22: 'L'ambition de Flaubert est tout autre que le divertissement de son lecteur', in which case his ambition has surely been frustrated times without number and in countless readings!

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *L'Education sentimentale* in Flaubert, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, p. 59.

<sup>51</sup> Q.v. *Dictionnaire*: 313 and *Madame Bovary* in Flaubert, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 588.

<sup>52</sup> Contrast Herschberg Pierrot, 1995, p. 350 on the 'écœurement salutaire du lecteur' that the text may precipitate, and P. Dufour, "L'auditeur subjugué", in T. Logé and M.- F. Renard, eds., *Flaubert et la théorie littéraire* (Brussels: Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis), pp. 113-130, on the 'auditeur [...] dupe ou victime' of the Flaubertian dialogue (p. 130).

<sup>53</sup> A. Herschberg Pierrot, *Le Dictionnaire des idées reçues de Flaubert* (Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1988), p. 125.

<sup>54</sup> Herschberg Pierrot thus notes (*Dictionnaire*, 2009, p. 29) his pleasure in 'blagues scabreuses' which could be reined in, as when he deleted the following *Dictionnaire* entry: 'ALOËS: Fleurit ton bassin de nuit avec un bruit de canon' (*ibid.*, p. 40).

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Auguste Sabatier as quoted in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, ed. S. Dord-Croulé, p. 444.

<sup>56</sup> Sartre, 1971, p. 637: 'Gustave n'est pas entièrement lucide [...] La vérité c'est qu'il "n'a pas d'idées" et qu'il en est conscient.'

<sup>57</sup> The first is a famous line from Labiche's comedy *Un Chapeau de paille d'Italie*.

<sup>58</sup> *Dictionnaire*, 2009, p. 27.

<sup>59</sup> Bollème, 1966, pp. 37 and 14.

<sup>60</sup> D. Adams and J. Lloyd, *The Meaning of Liff* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), pp. 124 and 107.

<sup>61</sup> J. – M. Gourio, *Brèves de comptoir. L'anniversaire* (Paris: Laffont, 2007), pp. 35, 185 and 28.

<sup>62</sup> Q.v. 'GENERATION SPONTANEE: Idée de socialiste' (309), and 'DICTIONNAIRE: En dire: N'est fait que pour les ignorants' (307).

<sup>63</sup> Cf. *supra*, n. 12 and J. Parkin, *The Humor of Marguerite de Navarre in the Heptaméron* (Lewiston: Mellen, 2008).

<sup>64</sup> Cf. E. Oring, *Engaging Humor* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), and A. Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Hutchinson, 1976).

<sup>65</sup> Q.v. C. R. Gruner, *The Game of Humor* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1997).

<sup>66</sup> S. Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, tr. J. Strachey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), and D. Latta, *The Basic Humor Process* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter 1999).

<sup>67</sup> Cf. INCOGNITO: Costume des Princes en voyage (310).

<sup>68</sup> Q.v. R. M. Torrance, *The Comic Hero* (London: Harvard U.P., 1978).

<sup>69</sup> IDEAL: Tout à fait inutile (310); METHODE: ne sert à rien (312).

<sup>70</sup> LIVRE: Quel qu'il soit, toujours trop long! (311)