

# Rivista di Letterature moderne e comparate

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ESTRATTO DAL VOLUME LII - FASCICOLO 2 - 1999

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RECENSIONI

  
PACINI EDITORE

CORRADA BIAZZO CURRY, *Description and Meaning in Three Novels by Gustave Flaubert*, New York, Peter Lang, 1997, pp. xii-198.

The first reaction of any *serious* reader after finishing this book is one of deep astonishment: what were the series editors thinking of when they accepted the manuscript? Indeed, this study represents in many respects the perfect synthesis of what should be avoided, at all cost, in academic research.

First of all, it is obvious that the proofs of the volume have either not been read or were read by someone who has no knowledge whatsoever of the French language. Misprints and misspelled words abound and can be found on every single page. There is apparently a serious problem with French accents: they are added arbitrarily<sup>1</sup>, placed inappropriately<sup>2</sup>, or are often ignored completely<sup>3</sup>. The most disturbing is that this occurs in the middle of citations, since the book is in English. However, the continuous mistaking of accents is nothing compared with the misspellings that threaten the understanding of citations: "le nécessité" (p. 14), "chevalures" (p. 23, for *chevelures*), "recuillir" (p. 25), "le sense" (p. 35), "fauteil" (pp. 36, 139, 162); "entrecelés" (p. 37, for *entrelacés*), "l'exemple" (p. 55), "les plaines abandonnés" (p. 75), "des aisles" (p. 82), "poudroiment" (p. 65), "introduction" (p. 168), "piédistaux" (p. 88) or "piédistal" (p. 169), "tout sales" (p. 90), "parce-qu'ils" (p. 110), "fétishisme" (p. 110); "négligement" (p. 111); "tu le fera" (p. 113), "aux mouvement" (p. 113), "haute fenêtres" (p. 139), "les ténèbres [...] descendait" (p. 120), "baionettes" (pp. 137, 149), "amouusement" (p. 157), "de toutes espèce" (p. 145), "tourneures figés" (p. 152), "la coscience" (p. 183), "interxtualité" (pp. 171, 186). These errors sometimes even give the Flaubertian text a delicious surrealist taste: "le out d'un pied nu" (p. 172).

Names are deformed in the same way. *Eschmoûn* is spelled on page 65 "Eschmoun" (with no accent) and "Eschoumoun"; *Deslauriers* becomes "Deslaurier" (p. 133); *Mâtho* is repeatedly spelled "Mathô" (pp. 64, 66, 68, 112, etc.). The publisher *Larousse*, widely known for their dictionaries (for those who use them) becomes "La Rousse" (pp. 15, 181, 166); *Corti* becomes "Seuil" (pp. 54, 59, 189, for Rousset's book); *Cerisy* is spelled "Céricy" (pp. 55, 184) and *Tallahassee* "Tallahassie" (p. 181).

Also irritating to the reader is the fact that the names of critics found in the notes and the bibliography are constantly transformed. According to the

author, who certainly has a special problem with first names, *Antoine Albalat* is "Albert Albalat" (p. 15), *Mieke Bal* is "Miekie Bal" (pp. 33, 55, 179); *Lionel Bottineau* is "Louis Bottineau" (pp. 63, 67, 70, 106) but becomes "Lionel" again on page 180, one can only wonder why; *Philippe Bonnefis* is consistently named "Pierre Bonnefis" (pp. 129, 167, 180) and *Christopher Prendergast* is called "Christopher" on page 171 but "Charles" a few pages before (p. 167) although it is the same reference. *Dällenbach* is spelled "Dellembach" (p. 182)<sup>4</sup>, *Dominick LaCapra* is spelled in three different ways but never correctly, since he is "Dominique La Capra" (p. 15), "Dominick La Capra" (pp. 16, 186) and "Dominck La Capra" (p. 171). I am myself at time Eric Calvez (p. 171) and at others Eric Le Calvez (p. 186). As for *Genette*, he is always granted an accent ("Génette": pp. 14, 15, 115, 184, etc.) and *Raymonde Debray Genette* (pp. 39, 97) is sometimes "Raymonde Debray-Génette" (pp. 35, 54, 56, 182). I am simply quoting the most obvious mistakes that any Flaubertist or narratologist should be able to correct at first sight without having to check any bibliography.

Unfortunately, the same applies for titles. J. Gleize's article, "Le défaut de ligne droite", is named here "Le défaut de la ligne droite" (p. 184); P. Imbert's article on description cannot be called "La description chez Balzac, Flaubert and Zola" (p. 185); Raymonde Debray Genette did not publish an article in *Revue de Théorie et d'Analyse Littéraires* (p. 182), since this is the subtitle for *Poétique*. It is also very surprising to learn that Balzac wrote *Les illusions perdues* (p. 131), that Sainte-Beuve published *Nouveau Luwdis* (p. 107) and that Flaubert himself seems to confuse English and French for, if one believes the author, he wrote *La temptation de Saint Antoine* (p. 58)! This is simply unbearable.

Citations from Flaubert and critics should have been checked and corrected. They are often wrong and sometimes incomprehensible for someone who knows French. Here are some examples. The description of Hamilcar's palace in *Salammbô* contains several mistakes (pp. 68-69): "sur des [*sic*, for *de*] larges assises"; "en haut des [*sic*, for *ses*] ouvertures"; "aussi solennel et impénétrable comme le visage d'Hamilcar", which is simply agrammatical (one should obviously read here "*que* le visage d'Hamilcar"). As for the description of the temple of Tanit (p. 71) we read "la cour" (instead of *tour*), "capiteaux" (for *chapiteaux*), and the beginning of the paragraph is not even indicated. In *L'Éducation sentimentale*, "les voitures ne stationnaient pas sur les places que pour y mener plus vite" (p. 129), which does not make any sense in French ("les voitures ne stationnaient sur les places que pour y mener plus vite")<sup>5</sup>; "que bordent de droite à gauche" (p. 133) instead of "de droite et de gauche"; "quatre quinquets raccrochés" (p. 140) instead of *accrochés*; "et cinq luminaires" (p. 141) instead of "et ces cinq luminaires" in the description of Daussardier's attic, where the mark of enunciation at the clausula disappears: "le visage de Béranger" (for "de Béranger!"). Obviously, I did not waste my time verifying all citations; these are simply basic examples of sentences that I have known by heart for years.

Moreover, Barthes never wrote (p. 37):

Supprimé de l'énonciation réaliste à titre de signifié de dénotation, le réel y revient à

titre de signifié de connotation. Dans le moment même où ces détails sont réputés dénoter directement le réel, ils ne font rien d'autre que le signifier,

but he did write:

Supprimé de l'énonciation réaliste à titre de signifié de dénotation, le réel y revient à titre de signifié de connotation; *car, dans* le moment même où ces détails sont réputés dénoter directement le réel, ils ne font rien d'autre, *sans le dire*, que le signifier, (my emphasis).

In the same way, Genette (not Génette) never said (p. 55):

"Plus souvent la description se développe pour elle-même. L'abondance des descriptions ne répond pas seulement chez lui, comme chez Balzac, à des nécessités d'ordre dramatique, mais d'abord à ce qu'il nomme lui-même l'amour de la contemplation".

but he made the following comment <sup>6</sup>:

"L'abondance des descriptions ne répond donc pas seulement chez lui, comme chez Balzac par exemple, à des nécessités d'ordre dramatique, mais d'abord à ce qu'il nomme lui-même *l'amour de la contemplation* [...]. Plus souvent la description se développe pour elle-même, aux dépens de l'action qu'elle éclaire bien moins qu'elle ne cherche, dirait-on, à la suspendre et à l'éloigner".

This denotes a complete lack of professionalism for literary research. Therefore, the reader cannot possibly anticipate anything substantial as far as the general argument of the study is concerned. Indeed, the whole book is based on such a great misunderstanding of Flaubert's style as well as of how description functions as a literary device, that I should not have to elaborate on the subject. Nevertheless, how is it possible, at the end of the twentieth century, to write comments such as: "on the one hand [...], adequate signs offer a basis for mimetic or symbolic interpretation; on the other hand, a critical reading identifies the presence of stylistic elements that disrupt a thematic or mimetic integration" (p. xi) and, moreover, to repeat them throughout the book with no progression at all <sup>7</sup> and without even noticing that this is an aporia merely leading to the traditional separation of form and content, a dichotomy that irritated Flaubert so much? Even more so, the so-called "symbolic interpretation" fixes the meaning of the Flaubertian text in an exaggerated (if not ridiculous) way. Here are some examples of this: "the metaphor of the *chevalures vertes abandonnées* emphasizes Emma's libidinal desire" (p. 23); "in general, the color blue is associated with Emma's romantic *rêveries*" (p. 24); "the prairie connotes, with *bourrelet*, a backward stretch of the head" (p. 31); "in this beautiful description of Carthage the details emphasize Mathô's sexual desire for Salammbô (*les sinuosités blanches*) and his melancholy represented by *la pâleur de l'aube, les rues désertes*, etc." (p. 64). On Frédéric's return to Paris in *L'Éducation sentimentale*: "the description is a metaphor of Frédéric's disordered vision" (p. 122); on one of the descriptions of Nogent: "the first part of the description connotes Louise's fresh and

innocent feelings of love [...]. These fresh sensations contrast with the second part of the passage that reflects Frédéric's mixed up and confused emotions" (pp. 132-133). *On croit rêver!*

Many other comments are purely unacceptable, since they deeply falsify the letter of the text. I will take the example of the analysis concerning the *coach scene* in *Madame Bovary* (pp. 34-35). This passage is very well-known and has been cited many times by critics. However, it has never been written, after a quotation containing seven verbs, that "in this passage there are no verbs" or even that "the indeterminacy of point of view blurs the scene that is viewed by the omniscient narrator" (p. 35), which simply shows a total misunderstanding of narratological concepts. First of all, the narrator does not *view* scenes but *recounts* them<sup>8</sup>. Secondly, in this particular passage, the narrator is *not* omniscient, since the scene is presented in external focalization. As for the author's conclusion, I leave it to the reader's appreciation: "this convulsive description shows how Flaubert's obsession for *le mot juste* and the beauty of style as a synthesis of form and thought may acquire a value independent of the content and the characters' feeling" (p. 35)!

This example of interpretive inaccuracy, however, is not isolated in the book. For instance, most references to Balzac are inappropriate in the context of focalized descriptions (pp. 22, 138). Furthermore, how is it possible to say, on this extract from *Madame Bovary* ("La lune, toute ronde et couleur de pourpre, se levait à ras de terre, au fond de la prairie. Elle montait vite entre les branches des peupliers [...]. Puis elle parut, éclatante de blancheur, dans le ciel vide qu'elle éclairait"), that "the insistence on the image of the moon expresses a sense of immobility and absence" (pp. 24-25)? Or to say that "the church is likened to a bedroom" (p. 25) when the text compares it with a *boudoir*? Or to make comments such as these: "this image of Paris, in which Frédéric wanders alone while constantly thinking of Madame Arnoux, is open to interpretation because the details are not disordered" (p. 130); "the passage [return from the Champs-Élysées] exhibits an unnecessary accumulation of strange names [...] indicating a desire for displacement, which leads nowhere" (p. 137); "the readability of the passage is underlined by the symbolic notation of the narrator" (p. 138; this is about the description of Madame Arnoux's *boudoir*, focalized on Frédéric who *interprets* the space); and "one may view this other description of the Dambreuse's *salons* as a parody of language itself" (p. 169), whereas Flaubert describes here Madame Dambreuse's *boudoir* with no parody at all. It will also be learned, with a somewhat amused consternation, that "Flaubert perceives the danger of his exaggerated style" (p. 102), that numerous descriptions display "excessive literariness" (p. 45), that "the author's virtuosity is nullified" (p. 149) or even that Flaubert's difficulty in describing a feminine costume is evident in the description of the project of Rosanette's painting that Frédéric decides to order from Pellerin" (p. 163)!

If it is not for the mere pleasure or out of cruelty that I devoted so much of my time to criticize a book that is not even worth mentioning. After all, the author acknowledges herself that "this analysis neither claims to state a new truth about Flaubert's texts, nor outlines a definite reading pattern" (p. 173); indeed! What is most important here is to emphasize a situation that has been noticeable for a while now in the scholarly world and that is no longer

tolerable: basic rules of professionalism as well as intellectual integrity seem to go more often than not ignored. If one does not pay close attention to this problem by denouncing it when it occurs, it will soon become possible to summarize this sort of literary research with a new and synthetic formula: *publish and perish*.

ÉRIC LE CALVEZ

<sup>1</sup> "mènace" (p. 29), "vâche" (p. 53), "éméraude" (pp. 68, 79), "crévasses" (p. 74), "inèxplicables" (p. 113), "lèxicographique" (p. 142), "sécondaire" (p. 168), "coefficient" (p. 168), "pièrre" (p. 82), etc.

<sup>2</sup> "machoïres" (p. 44), "chateâu" (pp. 53, 74), "paraissent" (p. 172), "fôret" (p. 186), etc.

<sup>3</sup> "ça" (instead of çà, pp. 75, 77), "symptome" (pp. 152, 170), "stereotypes" (p. 170), etc.

<sup>4</sup> I should also mention, even if the list is not exhaustive, "Agulhan" (p. 179) for *Agulhon*, "Dusmenil" (p. 183) for *Dumesnil*, "Galliard" (p. 184) instead of *Gaillard*, "Mikal Ginsburg" (p. 184) instead of *Michal*, "Joyce Lowric" (p. 186) for *Lowrie* and "Neef" (p. 111) for *Neefs*.

<sup>5</sup> The same sort of nonsense is found in this passage quoting the description of Pellerin's studio: "il était même possible d'y rien comprendre" (p. 164), instead of *impossible*.

<sup>6</sup> I should also mention the quotations from Proust (p. 57), Danger (p. 63), Barthes again (p. 142) and Levaillant (p. 169), which are transformed among many others.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance pages 30, 44, 45, 52, 70, 73, 75, 119, 128, 142, etc.

<sup>8</sup> Should I refer here to *Figures III*, published by Genette (not Génette) in 1972?