

Stafford on Bem (2016)

Bem, Jeanne. *Flaubert, un regard contemporain*. Éditions Universitaires de Dijon, 2016, pp. 132, ISBN 978-2-36441-196-8

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In *Flaubert, un regard contemporain*, Jeanne Bem posits Gustave Flaubert as an author whose technique was “ahead of its time.” Indeed, Flaubert’s “modernité inépuisable” still inspires literary scholars, who continue to find new ways of reading his texts through contemporary lenses. Bem shifts her focus to the reason behind this inspiration and questions whether the possibly clairvoyant nineteenth-century author was, in fact, writing for future readers: “Était-ce de façon délibérée et consciente qu’il regardait au loin?” (11) Citing several “moments visuels” from Flaubert’s manuscripts, she asks readers to imagine how Flaubert’s written perspective can be translated into contemporary art forms through a conversion of the *lisible* to the *visible* (11).

Bem starts this investigation by announcing that the organization of her work is deliberately anachronistic (8). Throughout the book, she transports readers between biographical snapshots from Flaubert’s childhood, snippets of personal correspondence documenting his laborious writing process, and examples of other significant artistic developments between “then” and “now.” The book is divided into four main chapters, all but one with several sub-sections. The essay begins with a substantial introductory chapter, which outlines Flaubert’s relationship with the visual. At the heart of Bem’s literary analysis are two main chapters: one examining Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Pécuchet* and another discussing *Madame Bovary*. Between these two sections, Bem inserts a mini-chapter in which she reads a passage from Flaubert’s personal correspondence as an example of performance art.

The author examines Flaubert’s writing from the perspective of a genetic critic, drawing most of her textual examples from original manuscript drafts that did not make it into the final published versions. Her choice to use deleted passages supports her claim that Flaubert anticipated a future generation of visual arts, preemptively realizing that these episodes were too progressive for his contemporary readership. Although the examples are few, they are skillfully chosen. Bem’s use of eliminated episodes from *Madame Bovary*, such as “le poseur de lampions” (70–71) and “les verres de couleur” (105–06), makes an especially strong case in favor of her argument. Her exhaustive analysis of these two scenes as textual representations of performance art is both provocative and convincing, leaving the reader asking the same question as Bem: why, and how, did Flaubert imagine these episodes? (68)

Bem’s discussion of Flaubert’s posthumously published and unfinished *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, however, lacks the innovation of her analysis of *Madame Bovary*. Although she claims to be revisiting *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (29), the chapter quickly turns into a history of the book as object, questioning the fate of the physical book in our modern era of e-readers (40–41). Once arrived at an excerpt from Flaubert’s final novel, the example consists of a proposed scenario for the unfinished ending of the work’s first part. Her vision of Flaubert’s “double pupitre” as a form of artistic installation is enticing, but such analysis reaches far beyond the traces left by the author and thus enters the realm of pure speculation.

There is no doubt that Bem’s “approche anachronique” (8) affords her the mobility to draw provocative conclusions linking Gustave Flaubert’s poetic ingenuity to the contemporary visual art forms noted above. It is also important to note that this slim volume clearly falls into the category of “essai,” which explains some of its organizational idiosyncrasies. The sub-sections between the two novels she chooses to revisit, however, occasionally distract the reader from her more convincing arguments. The section on “Une performance dans un tombeau,” for example, lacks cohesion (55). While Bem articulates an important distinction between two temporal dimensions of writing, that is, between the “traces,” or physical texts, which are evidence of a continual “process” of writing (61), this discussion is somewhat lost among questions of authorial intent and the many examples of contemporary performance art.

Another somewhat clouded analysis occurs during a discussion of Flaubert’s use of sound in *Madame Bovary*. This section comprises a sizable portion of the chapter, yet is focused largely on the works of other authors (Diderot, Balzac, Mallarmé) and works (*Le livre de la jungle*), thus diminishing Flaubert’s own inventiveness. Readers may question the significance of this example of Flaubert as a sentinel of the future when Bem herself admits “Flaubert n’est ni le seul ni le premier romancier à faire de l’expérimentation formelle sur du dialogue” (96).

The reader will nonetheless appreciate the anecdotal references to Flaubert’s life peppered throughout the text. For example, the section on “Flaubert et l’obsession de la main,” albeit brief and lacking a clear transition to the next section on *Bouvard et*

Pécuchet, retells intriguing episodes from Flaubert's youth. His admiration for Victor Hugo's hand (26) and the story of his father accidentally pouring boiling water on his son's hand (27) reveal another dimension of Flaubert's relationship with the visual and its relationship to his writing.

In closing, this exploration of Gustave Flaubert's possible foreshadowing of modern forms of visual art will appeal to a variety of audiences. While some of Bem's claims lack the substantiation that more extensive textual analysis could provide, her ideas are provocative and will stimulate further academic interest in exploring the relationship between Flaubert's writing style and contemporary visual arts. The casual reader will also appreciate the colorful anecdotal references that reaffirm why Gustave Flaubert remains a pillar of French literary history.

Volume: 46.1–2

Year:

- 2017