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Form and force of the sacred: A semiotic study of the temptations of Saint Anthony¹

Forse un mattino andando in un'aria di vetro,
arida, rivolgendomi, vedrò compirsi il miracolo:
il nulla alle mie spalle, il vuoto dietro
di me, con un terrore da ubriaco.²
(Eugenio Montale, 1925. Ossi di Seppia)

1 Introduction

“The sacred” has been at the core of reflection in most disciplines dealing with religion (Leone 2014). Semiotics must know this literature but cannot merely rely on pre-existing definitions. Its aim consists, instead, in reconceptualizing the sacred in terms of language. The article that follows understands the sacred as a force that, in language, is paradoxical; on the one hand, it is the origin of every religious expression: words, images and other signs are shaped in order to signify the telluric energy that underlies the human access to language; on the other hand, however, as this force is expressed by the forms of language and communicated by them, it is also somehow betrayed, compressed, frustrated. The sacred, in religious discourse, remains always as shadow of what it could not be possibly said, as echo of the unfathomable, as an aura of unexpressed potentiality. Sacrifice, therefore, that is, literally, “the making of the sacred,” is also simultaneously an act of renouncing, a production of residues, a movement of nostalgia.

The article that follows explores such nostalgia of the sacred through the study of a complex intertextual network, at whose center lies one of the most enigmatic literary works of modernity, that is, Gustave Flaubert's *La tentation de Saint Antoine*. This work represents a series of temptations but it also meta-represents the temptations of the sacred, the paradoxical interplay between the force of creativity and the form of creation.

The essay deals, in particular, with four types of ‘temptation’: first, the temptation represented by Gustave Flaubert in the opera *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*

¹ An earlier version of the present essay, in Italian, was published as Leone (2012).

² “Perhaps one morning walking in dry glassy air, / I will turn, I will see the miracle complete: / nothingness at my shoulder, the void behind / me, with a drunkard's terror”; translation mine.

(*The Temptation of Saint Anthony*), whose last edition in life of the author dates back to 1874; second, the way in which the story of this first temptation echoes those of Flaubert with respect to writing; third, the way in which the first and second temptations, the textual one and the authorial temptation, evoke the reader's temptations with respect to the text; and fourth, the way in which the first three levels of temptation trigger a reflection on the existential meaning of what can be tentatively called as the tension between the "temptation of the force" and the "resistance of the form."

The essay examines these four types of temptation through six sections. In the first, "The Roots of the Temptation: Jerusalem and Athens," it considers the visual and verbal sources of Flaubert's *Tentation*; in the second, "The Contagion of Temptation: from Cézanne to Ernst," it describes the inter-media adaptations of the *Tentation*, in particular the pictorial ones; in the third, "The Biographies of Temptation: Foucault, Valéry, Borges, Barthes," it analyzes the philosophical transfers originating from the *Tentation*; in the fourth, "Majesty of the Temptation: Nietzsche," it deals with the counter-transfer operated by Nietzsche with respect to the writing of Flaubert; in the fifth, "Theatricality of the Temptation: Marionettes," it traces the passage from the medieval mystery plays to the puppet theater and from this to the Flaubertian imagination; finally, in the sixth and final part, "Scenographies of the Temptation: Callot," it focuses on the intersemiotic translation from the scenography to the graphic arts, from these to literature and from literature to cinema.

2 The roots of temptation: Jerusalem and Athens

The traditional historical approach to literature transfers to the study of creative verbal discourse the ontological patterns through which biological creativity is usually understood: the author creates the text, which is like a creature existing in time and space with a punctual identity and precise temporal and spatial limits. Semiotics, on the contrary, encourages a deconstruction of such patterns, not only through undermining the author's ontological relevance (as it was already suggested by Barthes with his formula on "the death of the author") but also by suggesting that every text is in fact the coagulation of a complex network of cultural forces, which converge in time, space and within a specific natural language so as to manifest a certain system of values. Flaubert's work, from this point of view, cannot be simply read as the literary output of a genial writer, but as a new way at determining the point of equilibrium between opposite cultural agencies (the "force" and the "form") usually conceived as separated, con-

tradictory and antagonistic by both the Judeo-Christian and the Graeco-Roman cultures.

From this perspective, the narrative of the temptations of Saint Anthony is at the center of a vast intertextual network composed of fictional texts in various media as well as of critical and philosophical essays. In this network, Flaubert is a crucial knot, exemplifying how texts of different kinds influence each other in the genesis of representation. In a letter to Alfred Le Poittevin, written in Milan on May 13, 1845, the French writer recalls the genesis of his literary inspiration:

I have seen a painting by Brueghel representing the Temptation of St. Anthony, which made me think of arranging for the theater the Temptation of St. Anthony; but that would require another, more valiant, fellow than me. I would give all the *Moniteur*'s³ collection, if I had it, and 100,000 Francs with it, to buy this painting, which is considered as bad by most people who examine it.⁴

The painting mentioned by Flaubert—attributed to Brueghel the Younger⁵ and kept, at that time, in the *Balbi* collection in Genoa—was the visual prompt to the French author's work but was also itself part of a longer intertextual tradition. Bruegel the Younger was an imitator of his father, Pieter Bruegel the Elder.⁶ Max J. Friedländer⁷ points it out in his monograph on Dutch painting: "The second Pieter Bruegel was nothing but an imitator and copyist who lived on his father's heritage" (Friedländer 1956, 135). The picture Flaubert admired in Genoa, therefore, was certainly a copy of a representation of Bruegel the

3 *Le Moniteur universel* is a French newspaper founded on 24 November 1789 in Paris by Charles-Joseph Panckouke (Lille, 26 November 1736–Paris, 19 December 1798) and active until 30 June 1901.

4 "J'ai vu un tableau de Bruegel représentant la Tentation de Saint-Antoine, qui m'a fait penser à arranger pour le théâtre la Tentation de saint Antoine ; mais cela demanderait un autre gailard que moi. Je donnerais bien toute la collection du *Moniteur* si je l'avais, et 100.000 francs avec, pour acheter ce tableau-là, que la plupart des personnages qui l'examinent regardent assurément comme mauvais" (Flaubert 1976, 173; translation mine).

5 Brussels, 1564–Antwerp, 10 October 1638.

6 Breda or nearby, Duchy of Brabant, Habsburg Netherlands (modern-day Netherlands), c.1525–1530–Brussels, Duchy of Brabant, Habsburg Netherlands (modern-day Belgium), 9 September 1569.

7 Max Jakob Friedländer; Berlin, 5 July 1867–Amsterdam, 11 October 1958.

Elder, well exemplified by *The Temptation* now kept in the Samuel H. Kren Collection in the Washington National Gallery of Art.⁸

Bruegel the Elder, in turn, was inspired by Hieronymus Bosch's works, which he perfectly knew also through the engravings of Hieronymus Cock. A long tradition in art history, indeed, defines Pieter Brueghel (the Elder) as "the second Bosch." Humanist and artist Domenicus Lampsonius started this tradition, which continues until present day art history. Walter S. Gibson, for example, in his monograph on Bruegel, points out the differences between the two painters, but still names Bruegel "a second Hieronymus Bosch" (Gibson 1977, 44). The visual source of Bruegel's painting, then, was probably one of the many representations Bosch devoted to the topic. The most famous of them is the triptych *Temptation of Saint Anthony*,⁹ currently at the Lisbon Museum of Art (Aymès and Clément 1975). Hieronymus Bosch was particularly fond of this iconographic theme. Walter S. Gibson points it out in his monograph on the painter:

St. Anthony is a recurrent figure in Bosch's work. In addition to the left wing of the Hermit Saints triptych, his figure appears several times in a drawing in the Louvre. A small panel in the Prado, showing the saint meditating in a sunny landscape, is also generally attributed to him although many details deviate from his usual style. (Gibson 1973, 138)

In conceiving the first idea of his *Tentation*, then, Flaubert was inspired by a painting (Bruegel the Younger), which was a copy of another painting (Bruegel the Elder), which, through the reproduction of an engraving (Hieronymus Cock), imitated a third painting (Hieronymus Bosch). But in Bosch the intertextual relation is reversed, for, in conceiving his own *Temptations of Saint Anthony*, the Dutch painter was probably inspired by verbal sources of two kinds: on the one hand, old Dutch proverbs, riddles and jokes (Bax 1948, 1956); on the other hand, medieval hagiographies: "[T]he Lysbon triptych remains his most comprehensive statement of the theme, the particulars of which he drew from the *Lives of the Fathers* and the *Golden Legend*, both of which were available in contemporary Dutch translation" (Gibson 1973, 138).

The *Legenda Aurea* (*Golden Legend*), written between 1228 and 1230 by Jacobus da Varagine, the archbishop of Genoa, is a central source of Christian iconography. It contains, inter alia, a hagiographic narrative of the life of Saint An-

⁸ Currently attributed to a Follower of Pieter Brueghel the Elder. 1550–1575. *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. Oil on canvas. 58,5 x 85,7 cm. Washington: National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection.

⁹ Hieronymus Bosch. c. 1500. *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. Central panel. 131,5 x 119 cm; side panel w. 53 cm. Lisbon: Museo Nacional de Arte Antiga.

thony in the desert (Jacobus da Varagine 1969, 99–103); this is based, in turn, on earlier patristic texts. The first Christian author to ever give an account of Saint Anthony's temptations was Athanasius, Patriarch of Alexandria, who in 356, just after the hermit's death in 355, composed in Greek the text known as "*Vita Antonii*."

Athanasius himself was inspired by previous sources, although researchers do not always agree in identifying them. Certainly, the New Testament was one of them. Robert C. Gregg points it out in his introduction to the English translation of Athanasius's hagiography of Anthony: "A number of suggestions have been advanced by those scholars keen on underlining the connection between the *Vita Antonii* and certain 'classic' biblical themes and motifs. It is argued that the basic structure of the work derives from the temptation story in the Gospels" (Athanasius 1980, 4). Other scholars have stressed the influence of classic Greek literature. Robert C. Gregg himself lists some probable sources: "Evidence was marshalled to indicate Athanasius's familiarity with and dependence on such works as the *Life of Pythagoras*, Philostratus's *Life of Apollinios of Tyana*, Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* and the *Life of King Agesilaus* by Xenophon" (5). Hence, the roots of the genealogical tree of Flaubert's *Tentation* stretch back to the threshold between Jerusalem and Athens (Seznec 1945, 1949).

3 The contagion of temptation: From Cézanne to Ernst

As it will be increasingly clear through the unfolding of the present essay, grasping the essence of the temptation Flaubert dealt with means coming to terms with the semiotic nucleus of ritual. It is through repetition of forms through time, indeed, that the force of creativity, with its potential for disruption and madness, can be tamed. That emerges quite starkly if one considers how the relation between media is often seen by artists as an occasion to realize the insufficiency of the form but also as a stimulus to recuperate the force of creativity in the intertextual exercise, as if inspiration coming from other media were an exorcism aimed at reconciling the ebullient subjectivity of creation with the necessary constraints of language. Along this line, less bodily arts like poetry and literature look at the temptation of painting, and even more—as shall be seen—at that of theater, yet such gaze is reciprocated by that through which the fine arts see in Flaubert's *Tentation*, a sublime literary way of trapping the chaos of human imagination into a crystalline form. Ritual, then, at its semiotic core, is

linguistic form patterning the pre-linguistic force of the body, of the pre-social body.

Indeed, if one reverses the temporal direction of the series explored above, the net of intertextual influences becomes even more complicated. Athanasius's *Vita Antonii* is quoted in many patristic works, such as Jerome's *De viribus illustribus*,¹⁰ for instance. Its rhetorical structure becomes a sort of hagiographic archetype for any further saint's biography. The iconography that stemmed from the countless versions of Anthony's life between the 4th and the 12th century is equally abundant (Ferrari 1956). The echo of Bosch's *Temptations* in literature, then, especially in Spanish works from the 16th to the 17th century (Heidenreich 1970), is extensive. Spanish writer Baltasar Gracián, for example, quotes the painting in his *Criticón*:¹¹ "Take into account—said Chiron—that you are day-dreaming. Oh, how well Bosch painted! Now I understand his capriciousness. You shall see incredible things [...]."¹²

In 1577, Tintoretto invented a new iconography of the Temptations, which then exerted a vast influence on Baroque Italian painters. An alternative depiction was elaborated by Matthias Grünewald in his *Saint Anthony's Temptation* on the left wing of the second opening of the Issenheim altar painting.¹³ Joris-Karl Huysmans, fascinated by this representation, described it and commented on it in his work *Grünewald of Colmar's Museum* (1904). Huysmans' aesthetics and writing were both deeply affected by this painting.

Flaubert knew most of the tradition of previous texts representing the Temptations of Saint Anthony, both in words and in images. He had read the relevant patristic texts in Migne's *Patrologia*; he had seen Bruegel the Younger's painting; he had hanged in his study a reproduction of it, engraved by Callot (Daniel 1974). But Flaubert's narrative synthesis of this monumental intertextual network was itself the point of departure of further versions of the story, inter-semiotically translating Flaubert's work through sundry expressive means. In music, for example, between 1935 and 1937, Cecil Gray composed a *Saint Anthony Temptation*, adapted from Flaubert, for twelve soloists, choir and orchestra. In the "Analytical and Explanatory Notes" to the musical work, the Scottish composer wrote:

10 *On Illustrious Men*; a collection of short biographies of 135 authors, written in Latin, completed at Bethlehem in 392–3.

11 Published in three stages, in 1651, 1653 and 1657.

12 "Haced cuenta—dijo el Quirón—que soñáis despiertos. ¡Oh qué bien pintaba el Bosco!, ahora entiendo su capricho. Cosas veréis increíbles [...]" (Gracián y Morales 1971, 1, crisis VI: 79; translation mine).

13 Matthias Grünewald. C. 1506–15. *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. Second opening, left side panel. Oil on canvas. Colmar, Alsace (France): Musée d'Unterlinden.

“Saint Anthony is one of those conceptions realizable in any art. Flaubert was inspired by a picture of Breaghal [sic]. I was inspired by Flaubert. This is one of the many embodiments of the romantic conception” (Gray 1954, 1).

Cecil Gray also stressed, in the same introduction, that “the present work is primarily conceived for some form of visual presentation, whether of stage, cinema or television” (1). Flaubert’s *Temptation*, indeed, attracted especially painters. Cézanne executed three versions of the *Temptation of Saint Anthony* (Cachin *et al.* 1996, 157–58), the most accomplished and famous of which between 1875 and 1877.¹⁴ In 1878, Félicien Rops executed his scandalous *Temptation of Saint Anthony*,¹⁵ replacing Jesus with a crucified woman; the painting is also known as *The Woman on the Cross*. Rops wrote about it in humorous words to his friend, the painter Jean Francois Taelemans:

All this is basically only an excuse to paint from life a pretty girl who, a year ago already, cooked us some eggs and tripe à la mode de Touraine and who, for the first time, and after much persuasion, agreed to sit for her old Fély as Princess Borghese sat for Canova. I only changed the hairstyle. (Arwas 1972, introduction)

In 1884, Fernand Knoppf exposed a *Temptation of Saint Anthony following Flaubert*¹⁶ (1883) at the first exposition of Belgian symbolists. Four years later, James Ensor composed another monumental representation of the subject,¹⁷ where Anthony is exposed to all sorts of modern bourgeois temptations, including popular street food. Odilon Redon first read Flaubert’s *Tentation* in 1882 and, also influenced by its enormous popularity among the Belgian symbolists, devoted to it three lithographic albums, in 1888,¹⁸ 1889 and 1896.¹⁹ Huysmans described and commented on one of these versions, in an article on “the monster” (Huys-

14 Paul Cézanne. c. 1875–77. *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. 47 x 56 cm. Oil on canvas. Paris: Musée d’Orsay.

15 Félicien Rops. 1890. *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. Brussels: Belgian Royal Library, Cabinet of Prints.

16 Brussels: Private collection.

17 James Sidney Ensor. 1887. *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. 17,95 × 15,47 cm. Colored pencils and scraping, with graphite, charcoal, conté crayon and additions in colored chalk and watercolor, selectively fixed, with cut and pasted elements, on 51 sheets of ivory wove paper (discolored to cream), joined and formerly laid down on canvas. Chicago, IL: Chicago Art Institute.

18 See, for instance, Odilon Redon. 1888. *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. 27,5 x 17 cm. Lithography. London: British Museum.

19 See Hobbes (1977); Gamboni (1989); Eisenman (1992).

mans 1889). Max Ernst, inspired by Grünewald's altar painting in Issenheim, created another remarkable *Saint Anthony Temptation* in 1945.²⁰

4 The biographies of temptation: Foucault, Valéry, Borges, Barthes

The semiotic perspective is the most apt at seizing the deep anthropological value of the intertextual maze of Flaubert's *Tentation*, for it understands it not in theological terms, as the struggle between a superior spiritual imperative and the opposite impulses of "the down below," of an inferior realm of existence, but in terms of language. In relation to the sphere of meaning and semiosis, indeed, temptation essentially consists in aiming at an impossible return to a pre-linguistic, pre-social, "natural" stage of unbridled force of the body, in cultivating the utopia of an art that can be such without the filter of the form. As it shall be seen later, the likeliest outcome of this utopia is violent madness, yet repressing the wild call of the force through cultivating literature as a stereotypical cage is not a solution. One has to come to terms with the seductive power of disruption, as Flaubert did, inventing a new literary exorcism, a ritual of liberation.

This section will now attempt at exploring the reasons for this power of seduction, for the way in which Flaubert's *Tentation* was able to inspire painters, writers and philosophers. Moreover—in relation to the broader topic of Saint Anthony's temptations—the section will also seek to understand why, in this cultural tradition, writers were so much attracted by paintings and painters so much enticed by verbal narratives. The abundant literary and philosophical criticism spurred by Flaubert's book complicates the picture even further. Valéry, Borges, Sartre, Foucault, Barthes and others were all seduced by Flaubert's text. The section, therefore, will try to account also for this further level of seduction, the one exerted by *La Tentation* on thinkers and philosophers.

Flaubert was devoted to the cult of form. Here the term "form" is conceived as Danish semiotician Louis T. Hjelmslev did, that is, as a systemic organization concerning both the expressive and the semantic plane of language (Hjelmslev 1943). As regards the expressive organization, Flaubert was obsessed with "*labor limae*" (literally, "file work"); as a craftsman he would constantly strive to improve his sentences until they sounded perfect. As regards content compo-

²⁰ Max Ernst. 1945. *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. 108 x 128 cm. Oil on canvas. Duisburg: Wilhelm-Lehmbruck-Museum.

sition, the French writer was a maniac of methodic reading, of the patient accumulation of detailed knowledge. Flaubert's monumental correspondence is replete with references to his obsession for precise structures; in every page, his literary works witness to the persistence of this effort, which is also unmistakably underlined by critics in their analysis. Such an obsession for precise forms had several consequences in Flaubert's literary technique: his writing was characteristically slow. He would constantly erase words and change them, then he would delete again those that he had chosen and change them again, and so on and so forth through an extenuating process. The definition of content was slow too. Before and while writing, Flaubert would read, write notes, fill notecards, accumulate a vast and detailed bibliography.

As a consequence, Flaubert's lifestyle was often characterized by isolation and immobility. In the same letter where he mentioned for the first time his desire to write *La Tentation*, he described his conception of an artist's life:

The only way not to be unfortunate is to shut yourself up in art and to count for nothing all the rest; [...] I told practical life an irrevocable goodbye. For long, I won't ask for anything but five or six hours of tranquility in my room, a big fire in winter and two candles every night to enlighten me.²¹

In a letter to Ernest Chevalier completed on 13 August 1845, Flaubert then wrote:

What I dread being passion, movement, I believe, if happiness is somewhere, it is in stagnation; ponds do not have storms. My habit of life is by now chosen, I live in a regulated, calm, regular manner, occupying myself exclusively with literature and history.²²

Then, again, just one week before unpacking the engraving by Callot that he had bought in Italy—the one representing Breughel's *Temptations of Saint Anthony*—Flaubert wrote to Louise Colet: “One only achieves style through atrocious labor, through fanatic and devoted obstinacy.”²³ Such solemn statements about the ar-

21 “Le seul moyen de n'être pas malheureux c'est de t'enfermer dans l'Art et de compter pour rien tout le reste; [...] J'ai dit à la vie pratique un irrévocable adieu. Je ne demande d'ici à longtemps que cinq ou six heures de tranquillité dans ma chambre, un grand feu l'hiver, et deux bougies chaque soir pour m'éclairer” (Flaubert 1976, 16, 172; translation mine).

22 “Ce que je redoute étant la passion, le mouvement, je crois, si le bonheur est quelque part, qu'il est dans la stagnation ; les étangs n'ont pas des tempêtes. Mon pli est à peu près pris, je vis d'une façon réglée, calme, régulière, m'occupant exclusivement de littérature et d'histoire” (Flaubert 1963, 33; translation mine).

23 “On n'arrive au style qu'avec un labeur atroce, avec une opiniâtreté fanatique et dévouée” (14–15 August 1846; Flaubert 1963, 39; translation mine).

tist's inevitable stylistic toil were often accompanied by parallel exclamations about the mounting feeling of depression before the exhausting slowness of writing:

A superhuman willpower is necessary for writing and I am just a man. Sometimes it seems to me that I need to sleep six months without interruption. Ah! By how desperate a gaze I look at them, at the peaks of those mountains that my desire would like to climb! Do you know how many pages shall I have written after my return home? Twenty. Twenty pages in one month and working every day at least seven hours!²⁴

In a letter well known to specialists, Flaubert crucially suggested a comparison between, on the one hand, the writer's efforts, attainments and discouragements and, on the other hand, the hermit's pains, victories and losses:

I do not know how sometimes my arms do not fall from my body, out of fatigue, and how my head does not turn into a pulp. I lead a harsh life, deserted from all outward joy, and where I have nothing to support me but a kind of permanent rage, which sometimes cries of impotence, but which is continual. I love my work with frenzied and perverted love, like an ascetic the hairshirt that scratches his belly. Sometimes, when I find myself empty, when the expression refuses itself, when, after having scribbled long pages, I discover I have not made a sentence, I fall on my couch and I remain dazed in an interior marsh of boredom.²⁵

On the basis of this comparison, many interpreters have proposed an identification between Flaubert and his literary alter ego Anthony, since both live an isolated existence, both are sometimes touched by grace and both are at times discouraged (Séginger 1997). A long list of passages in Flaubert's correspondence corroborates this self-styled image of him as a writer devoted to the cult of the expressive form. Such list should be complemented by the numerous texts in

24 "Il faut une volonté surhumaine pour écrire, et je ne suis qu'un homme. Il me semble quelquefois que j'ai besoin de dormir pendant six mois de suite. Ah ! De quel œil désespéré je le regarde, les sommets de ces montagnes où mon désir voudrais monter ! Sais-tu dans huit jours combien j'aurai fait de pages depuis mon retour de pays ? Vingt. Vingt pages en un mois et en travaillant chaque jour au moins sept heures !" (Letter to Louise Colet, 3rd of April 1852; 68; translation mine).

25 "Je ne sais pas comment quelquefois les bras ne me tombent pas du corps, de fatigue, et comment ma tête ne s'en va pas en bouillie. Je mène une vie âpre, déserte de toute joie extérieure et où je n'ai rien pour me soutenir qu'une espèce de rage permanente, qui pleure quelquefois d'impuissance, mais qui est continuelle. J'aime mon travail d'un amour frénétique et perversi, comme un ascète le cilice qui lui gratte le ventre. Quelquefois, quand je me trouve vide, quand l'expression se refuse, quand, après [avoir] griffonné de longues pages, je découvre n'avoir pas faite une phrase, je tombe sur mon divan et j'y reste hébété dans un marais intérieur d'ennui" (Letter to Louise Colet, 24 April 1852; 69; translation mine).

which Flaubert inventories his readings, his achievements and defeats as a researcher. This parallel self-image of Flaubert as a writer of content organization has attracted especially the attention of scholars and philosophers. Here follows what Michel Foucault wrote in a subtle passage of his *Bibliothèque fantastique* about Flaubert's *Tentation*:

Now, in fact of dreams and deliriums, we now know that the *Temptation* is a monument of meticulous knowledge. For the scene of the heresiarchs, [Flaubert] perused the Tillemont's *Ecclesiastical Memoirs*, read Matter's four volumes on the history of Gnosticism, consulted the *History of Manichea* by Beausobre, Reuss' *Christian Theology*; to which one must add Saint Augustine, of course, and the *Patrology* of Migne (Athanasius, Jerome, Epiphanius). As for the gods, Flaubert went to rediscover them in Burnouf, Anquetil-Duperron, Herbelot and Hottinger, in the volumes of the *Picturesque Universe*, in the works of the English Layard, and especially in the translation of Creutzer, *The Religions of Antiquity. The Teratological Traditions* by Xivrey, the *Physiologus* that Cahier and Martin had republished, the prodigious *Histories* of Boaistrau and Duret's treatise on plants and their "admirable history" gave information on monsters. Spinoza had inspired the metaphysical meditation on the extended substance [...].²⁶

Paul Valéry, in a brief article dedicated to *The Temptation*, criticized Flaubert's method: "Nothing is more painful to me than imagining the amount of work spent on building a tale on the illusory foundation of an erudition that is always more futile than any fantasy."²⁷ Jorge Louis Borges, who was a mighty reader and, albeit with a different style, transfused such erudition into his writings, praised, on the contrary, Flaubert's effort: "[Flaubert] was the first Adam of a new species: that of the man of letters as a priest, as an ascetic and almost as

26 "Or, en fait de rêves et de délires, on sait maintenant que la *Tentation* est un monument de savoir méticuleux. Pour la scène des hérésiarques, dépouillement de *Mémoires ecclésiastiques* de Tillemont, lecture de quatre volumes de Matter sur l'Histoire du gnosticisme, consultation de l'Histoire de Manichée par Beausobre, de la Théologie chrétienne de Reuss ; à quoi il faut ajouter saint Augustin bien sûr, et la Patrologie de Migne (Athanasie, Jérôme, Épiphane). Les dieux, Flaubert est allé les redécouvrir chez Burnouf, Anquetil-Duperron, Herbelot et Hottinger, dans les volumes de l'Univers pittoresque, dans les travaux de l'Anglais Layard, et surtout dans la traduction de Creutzer, les Religions de l'Antiquité. Les Traditions tératologiques de Xivrey, le Physiologus que Cahier et Martin avaient réédité, les Histoires prodigieuses de Boaistrau, le Duret consacré aux plantes et à leur "histoire admirable" ont donné des renseignements sur les monstres. Spinoza avait inspiré la méditation métaphysique sur la substance étendue[...]" (Foucault 1995, 8; translation mine).

27 "Rien ne m'est plus pénible que de me figurer la quantité de travail dépensée à bâtir un conte sur le fondement illusoire d'une érudition toujours plus vaine que toute fantaisie" (Valéry 1957, 1, 613; translation mine).

a martyr.”²⁸ Roland Barthes, then, deeply passionate about Flaubert’s works, and one of his most gifted analysts—especially as regards form and style matters—in an interview with André Bourin affirmed:

Flaubert experienced a drama of writing, a drama of what was and is still called style. But it goes much further than that. You know all of Flaubert’s absolutely poignant phrases about working with form. They show that, indeed, he lived with anguish the separation, the secession, the weaning, if I can say, of literary writing, far, precisely, from good conscience.²⁹

Again, in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, Barthes mentions “the uncertainty of the phrase,” which “made Flaubert very unhappy.”³⁰ Moreover, in an article written in honor of French linguist André Martinet, “Flaubert et la phrase,” Barthes returned to dwell at length on Flaubert’s slowness in writing:

Long before Flaubert, writers had felt—and expressed—the hard work of style, the fatigue of incessant corrections, the sad necessity of long hours to achieve a miniscule output. Yet in Flaubert, the dimension of this pain is quite different; in him, the work of style entails indescribable suffering (even if he often writes about it), an almost expiatory pain, to which he does not attribute any compensation of magic (that is to say, random) order, as it might have been, for many writers, the feeling of inspiration: Flaubert’s style is absolute pain, infinite pain, useless pain. Writing is disproportionately slow (“four pages in a week,” “five days for a page” “two days searching for two lines”); it demands an “irrevocable goodbye to life,” a pitiless sequestration.³¹

28 “[Flaubert] fue el primer Adán de una especie nueva: la del hombre de letras como sacerdote, como asceta y casi como mártir” (Borges 1964, 1 145; translation mine).

29 “Flaubert a vécu un drame de l’écriture, un drame de ce qu’on appelait et ce qu’on appelle encore maintenant le style. Mais cela va beaucoup plus loin que le style. Vous connaissez toutes les phrases absolument poignantes de Flaubert sur le travail de la forme. Elles montrent qu’effectivement, il vivait avec déchirement la séparation, la sécession, le sevrage, si je puis dire, de l’écriture littéraire, loin, précisément, de la bonne conscience” (Barthes [1970] 1994, 3, 638; translation mine).

30 “[...] l’incertitude de la phrase [qui] rendait Flaubert très malheureux” (Barthes [1970] 1994, 2, 1134; translation mine).

31 “Bien avant Flaubert, l’écrivain a ressenti—et exprimé—le dur travail du style, la fatigue des corrections incessantes, la triste nécessité d’horaires démesurés pour aboutir à un rendement infime. Pourtant chez Flaubert, la dimension de cette peine est toute autre ; le travail du style est chez lui une souffrance indicible (même s’il la dit souvent), quasi expiatoire, à laquelle il ne reconnaît aucune compensation d’ordre magique (c’est-à-dire aléatoire), comme pouvait l’être chez bien des écrivains le sentiment de l’inspiration : le style, pour Flaubert, c’est la douleur absolue, la douleur infinie, la douleur inutile. La rédaction est démesurément lente (« quatre pages dans la semaine », « cinq jours pour une page », « deux jours pour la recherche de deux lignes ») ; elle exige un « irrévocable adieu à la vie », une séquestration impitoyable” (Barthes 1968, 48 ; translation mine).

In the categories of classical rhetoric, Flaubert cultivates *inventio* (“invention,” the finding of subjects) through the meticulous accumulation of contents; he perfects *dispositio* and *compositio* (the subtle “arrangement” of topics and the scrupulous “structuring” of sentences; he masters *elocutio* (the “refinement” of style); his obsession for notes and cards, furthermore, manifest his dedication to *memoria* (“memory”). On the contrary, *actio*, “action,” is absent twice in Flaubert’s writing: first, within the text, in its *mise en œuvre* (“work creation”), since modern prose—unlike classical rhetoric—occults any reference to the corporal dimension of language; second, outside the text and in its *mise en place* (“emplacement”), as Flaubert’s writing itself excludes movement, action, dynamism and includes stagnation, slowness, patience. Flaubert was a writer of passion, in the etymological meaning of the word, rather than a writer of action.

5 The majesty of the temptation: Nietzsche

Precisely because of this lack of action, Nietzsche hated Flaubert. In *Nietzsche contra Wagner*,³² the German philosopher writes:

Flaubert, a new edition of Pascal, but as an artist with this instinctive belief at heart: “*Flaubert est toujours haïssable, l’homme n’est rien, l’œuvre est tout.*” [...] He tortured himself when he wrote, just as Pascal tortured himself when he thought—the feelings of both were inclined to be “non-egoistic”...“Disinterestedness.”³³

Then again, in *Der Wille zur Macht* (1884–1888) Nietzsche considered Flaubert as an example of the dissolution of the French “spirit”:

That characteristic transformation of which G. Flaubert is the most striking example among Frenchmen, and Richard Wagner among Germans, shows how the romantic belief in love and the future changes into a longing for nonentity in the period 1830–1850.³⁴

32 It was written in his last year of lucidity (1888–1889) and published by C.G. Naumann in Leipzig in 1889.

33 “Flaubert, eine Neueausgabe Pascal’s, aber als Artist, mit dem Instinkt-Urtheil aus dem Grunde: “*Flaubert est toujours haïssable, l’homme n’est rien, l’oeuvre est tout*”... Er torturirte sich, wenn er dichtete, ganz wie Pascal sich torturirte, wenn er dachte—sie empfanden beide unegoistisch ... “Selbstlosigkeit”” (Nietzsche 1969a, 3:424; English translation Nietzsche [1911] 1909–13, 8: 67).

34 “[J]ene typische Verwandlung, für die unter Franzosen G. Flaubert, unter Deutschen Richard Wagner das deutlichste Beispiel ist, wie der romantische Glaube an die Liebe und die Zukunft in das Verlangen zum Nichts sich verwandelt, 1830 in 1850” (Nietzsche 1959: 79; English translation Nietzsche 1909–13, 14 (1909–10): 88–89).

The philosopher was deeply influenced by Paul Bourget, who, in his collection *Essai de psychologie contemporaine* (1883) had entitled a part of the chapter devoted to Flaubert “Du nihilisme de Gustave Flaubert.” The first paragraph of it reads as follows:

It is through his destiny that Flaubert saw the destiny of other existences—and, indeed, the cause of the misfortune of all his characters is, as with him, a disproportion. Generalizing this remark, he even seems to recognize that this disproportion is not an accident. In his eyes it is a constant law that human effort results in an abortion, first because external circumstances are contrary to the dream, then because the very favor of circumstances would not prevent the soul from devouring itself in full satisfaction of its chimera.³⁵

Inspired by Bourget, Nietzsche wrote—in aphorism 34 of *Götzen-Dämmerung*—his most famous sentence on Flaubert:

On ne peut penser et écrire qu'assis (G. Flaubert).—Now I've got you, you nihilist! Sitting still is precisely the *sin* against the holy ghost. Only thoughts which come from walking have any value.³⁶

The philosopher had found this quotation in Guy de Maupassant's preface to the *Lettres de Gustave Flaubert à George Sand* (Flaubert 1884). Nietzsche blamed the French writer exactly for his disinclination to action. The image of a static writing—of a writing written while sitting—precisely expressed the epitome of this lack. Nietzsche hated those who would write while sitting, in the stagnation of thoughts. In the *Gaia Scienza* he wrote:

But why, then, do you Write?—A: I do not belong to those who *think* with the wet pen in hand; and still less to those who yield themselves entirely to their passions before the open ink-bottle, sitting on their chair and staring at the paper.³⁷

35 “C'est à travers son destin que Flaubert a vu le destin des autres existences—et, en effet, la cause du malheur de tous ses personnages est, comme chez lui, une disproportion. Même, généralisant cette remarque, il semble reconnaître que cette disproportion n'est pas un accident. C'est à ses yeux une loi constante que l'effort humain aboutisse à un avortement, d'abord parce que les circonstances extérieures sont contraires au rêve, ensuite parce que la faveur même des circonstances n'empêcherait pas l'âme de se dévorer en plein assouvissement de sa chimère” (Bourget [1883] 1917, 148; translation mine).

36 “*On ne peut penser et écrire qu'assis* (G. Flaubert).—Damit habe ich dich, Nihilist! Das Sitzfleisch ist gerade die Sünde wider den heiligen Geist. Nur die ergangenen Gedanken haben Werth” (Nietzsche 1969, 3: 58; English translation Nietzsche 1998, 9).

37 “Aber warum schreibst denn du?—A.: Ich gehöre nicht zu Denen, welche mit der nassen Feder in der Hand denken; und noch weniger zu Jenen, die sich gar vor dem offenen Tintenfasse

But Nietzsche was, on the opposite, fond of a second image, that of a writing while dancing. In *Götzendämmerung* he famously wrote:

For you cannot subtract every form of *dancing* from *noble education*, the ability to dance with the feet, with concepts, with words; do I still need to say that you must also be able to dance with the *pen*—that you must learn to write?”³⁸

Nietzsche tried to recover the action that writing denies, the force that the form rejects. Writing while walking, writing while dancing, but also the “writing while bleeding” of *Also sprach Zarathustra*—“Of all that is written, I love only what a man has written with his blood. Write with blood, and you will experience that blood is spirit”³⁹—are attempts to find a perfect harmony between the body and its spiritual expressions, between life and text.

6 The theatricality of the temptation: Marionettes

Flaubert too, the vestal of the literary form, was nevertheless tempted by the allure of force. Through Breughel’s painting, body and action penetrated into his writing. Nevertheless, painting was just the channel of this transfusion, since representations of force and life are a simulacrum in painting as they are in literature. Through Breughel’s painting, indeed, and especially through Callot’s engraving, Flaubert could grasp the theatrical dimension of the Temptations of Saint Anthony. In Flaubert, theatre plays the same role that dance does in Nietzsche’s philosophy: it brings body and its representations to the fore.

Yet Flaubert was not dominated, as Nietzsche and, later, Antonin Artaud were, by this temptation of force, body and theatre. Rather, the French writer used *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* in order to convey such temptation and cry-

ihren Leidenschaften überlassen, auf ihrem Stuhle sitzend und auf’s Papier starrend” (Nietzsche 1973, 2: 124; English translation Nietzsche 1909–13, 10: 127).

38 “Man kann nämlich das Tanzen in jeder Form nicht von der vornehmen Erziehung abrechnen, Tanzen-können mit den Füßen, mit den Begriffen, mit den Worten; habe ich noch zu sagen, dass man auch mit der Feder können muss—dass man schreiben lernen muss?” (Nietzsche 1969b, 3:104; English translation Nietzsche 1909–13, 10:127).

39 “Von allem Geschriebenen liebe ich nur Das, was einer mit seinem Blute schreibt. Schreibe mit Blut: und du wirst erfahren, daß Blut Geist ist” (Nietzsche 1950: 41; English translation Nietzsche 1909–13 (11 (1909) *Thus spake Zarathustra*, English translation Thomas Common; seventh speech, “On Reading and Writing,” 152).

tallize it into a text. In other terms, the writing of *La Tentation* would prepare those of all Flaubert's important works; the French writer was haunted by the topic of the Temptation all his writing life through. He wrote three versions of it: in 1849, in 1856 and in 1872.

When, in 1872, the French writer completed the third and definitive edition of the work, he wrote to mademoiselle Leroyer de Chantepie a letter in which he described the long effort of this literary creation. At the same time, he mentioned, for the second and last time in his correspondence, the picture of Brueghel that had inspired his imagination at the beginning of the creative process. The circle of references from word to image was, then, perfectly closed: painting had appeared in Flaubert's correspondence at the beginning of writing and, almost thirty years after, it manifested itself a second and last time, in order to mark the achievement of literary composition (Seginger 1997):

In the midst of my sorrows, I finish my Saint Antoine. It is the work of my whole life, since the first idea came to me in 1845, in Genoa, in front of a painting by Breughel, and since that time I have not stopped thinking about it and making related readings.⁴⁰

Michel Foucault was the best interpreter of this cyclical return of *La Tentation* during Flaubert's literary career. As the philosopher pointed out, the desire of writing the story of the saintly hermit introduced and accompanied the creation of Flaubert's most celebrated works: "Three times, Flaubert wrote, rewrote *La Tentation*: in 1849—it was before *Madame Bovary*—, in 1856, before *Salammbô*, in 1872, when writing *Bouvard and Pécuchet*."⁴¹ Foucault's explanation for this recurring literary effort is convincing:

One has the feeling that *La Tentation* is, for Flaubert, the dream of his writing: what he would have liked it to be, but also what he had to stop being so as to receive its final form. *La Tentation* existed before all Flaubert's books [...]; and it was repeated—ritual, exercise, rejected "temptation"?—before each of them. Overhanging the work, it surpasses it with its talkative excesses, its overabundance of wasteland, its bestiary population; and in retreat from all the texts, it offers, with the negative of their writing, the dark, murmuring

⁴⁰ "Au milieu de mes chagrins, j'achève mon Saint Antoine. C'est l'œuvre de toute ma vie, puisque la première idée m'en est venue en 1845, à Gênes, devant un tableau de Breughel et depuis ce temps-là je n'ai cessé d'y songer et de faire des lectures afférentes" (Flaubert 1976, 385; translation mine).

⁴¹ "Trois fois, Flaubert a écrit, réécrit *La tentation*: en 1849—c'était avant *Madame Bovary*—, en 1856, avant *Salammbô*, en 1872, au moment de rédiger *Bouvard et Pecuchet*" (Foucault 1995, 5; translation mine).

prose which they had to repress and gradually lead back to silence to come themselves to the light.⁴²

Valéry, in his brief article about Flaubert's *Tentation*, had quoted Goethe's statement in Johann Peter Eckermann's *Gespräche mit Goethe* (1836), about the scene of the *Walpurgisnacht* in the first part of *Faust*: "An infinite number of mythological figures throng to enter into it; but I take care of myself. And I only accept those who present to the eyes the images that I seek."⁴³ Then, the French poet subtly reproached Flaubert his not being able to exert the same control. He wrote: "This wisdom does not appear in *La Tentation*."⁴⁴ According to Foucault's interpretation, on the contrary, *La Tentation* precisely was such an exercise of wisdom, an exercise that was an exorcism. In both cases, whether one agrees with Valéry or with Foucault, such temptation—accepted or refused might it be—was related to theater.

Indeed, as Flaubert contemplated for the first time Brueghel's picture, his initial creative impulse was to compose not a novel but a theatrical adaptation of it: "I have seen a painting by Brueghel representing the Temptation of St. Anthony, which made me think of arranging for the theater the Temptation of St. Anthony [...]."⁴⁵ In addition, several scholars have stressed the importance, for Flaubert's imagination, of the way in which popular and parish theatre would represent the Temptation. Michel Foucault mentioned it in his interpretation: "Flaubert, as a child, had often seen the Mystery of Saint Anthony staged by Father Lagrain in his puppet theater; later he took George Sand there."⁴⁶ Foucault had found the information in French literary critic and musicologist René Du-

42 "On a le sentiment que *La Tentation*, c'est pour Flaubert le rêve de son écriture : ce qu'il aurait voulu qu'il fût, mais aussi ce qu'il devait cesser d'être pour recevoir sa forme terminale. *La Tentation* a existé avant tous les livres de Flaubert [...] ; et elle a été répétée—rituel, exercice, «tentation» repoussée ?—avant chacun d'eux. En surplomb au-dessus de l'œuvre, elle la dépasse de ses excès bavards, de sa surabondance en friche, de sa population de bestiaire ; et en retrait de tous les textes, elle offre, avec le négatif de leur écriture, la prose sombre, murmurante qu'il leur a fallu refouler et peu à peu reconduire au silence pour venir eux-mêmes à la lumière" (Foucault 1995, 5; translation mine).

43 "Un nombre infini de figures mythologiques se pressent pour y entrer ; mais je prends garde à moi. Et je n'accepte que celles qui présentent aux yeux les images que je cherche" (Valéry 1957, 617; translation mine).

44 "Cette sagesse n'apparaît pas dans *La Tentation*" (Valéry 1957, 617; translation mine).

45 "J'ai vu un tableau de Bruegel représentant la Tentation de Saint-Antoine, qui m'a fait penser à arranger pour le théâtre la Tentation de saint Antoine " (Flaubert 1976, 173; translation mine).

46 "Flaubert, enfant, avait vu souvent le Mystère de saint Antoine que donnait le père Lagrain dans son théâtre de poupées ; plus tard, il y conduisit George Sand" (Foucault 1995, 15).

mesnil's essay on Flaubert, entirely devoted to Flaubert's works and life; it contains an accurate description of Legrain's theatre:

In Flaubert's time—and many years after his death—a puppet theater attracted a crowd of children. He was held by a good man, Father Legrain, and his name was *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*. The verve of the figurine-shower was inexhaustible, and its pattern perpetuated, in its naive and drunken form, old traditions dating back to the mysteries of the Middle Ages.⁴⁷

After a brief summary of the main contents of the puppet show, Dumesnil comments:

Flaubert was a regular at the shows given in the fairground booth. We know with what fidelity he always remained attached to the memories of his youth: every year, in October, when Father Legrain mounted his stage, Flaubert returned to see the *Temptation*. He took there Turgenev, Feydeau, George Sand [...]. One day, as he was sitting with her at the back of the barrack, someone warned Father Legrain. The latter—before that the curtain would rise on the decor of the hermitage—advanced to the banister and, after having made the three salutes in the manner of the *Comédie Française*, pronounced these words: “Ladies and Gentlemen, the author is in the room and he honors us with attending the performance of his work!” Flaubert was never so happy!⁴⁸

The origin of this play for puppet theatre goes back in history. Polish scholar Henryk Jurkowsky, in his monumental *Écrivains et marionnettes*, does not mention Flaubert's interest in the rendition of the *Temptation* for puppet theater but, nevertheless, quotes Legrain once:

The theme of the *Temptation of Saint Anthony* was very popular in France and Belgium. The text has been published by Gaston Baty. The puppeteer Louis Levergeois, who had it from a

47 “Au temps de Flaubert—et bien des années après sa mort—un théâtre de marionnettes attirait la foule des enfants. Il était tenu par un brave homme, le père Legrain, et il avait pour enseigne *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*. La verve du montreur de figurines était intarissable et son boniment perpétuait, dans sa forme naïve et drue, de vieilles traditions remontant aux mystères de moyen âge” (Dumesnil 1962, 81–2; translation mine).

48 “Flaubert fut un habitué des spectacles donnés dans la baraque foraine. On sait avec quelle fidélité il demeurait toujours attaché aux souvenirs de sa jeunesse : tous les ans, en octobre, lorsque le père Legrain montait ses tréteaux, Flaubert retournait voir la *Tentation*. Il y emmena Tourgueniev, Feydeau, George Sand[...]. Un jour qu'il avait pris place avec elle au fond de la baraque, quelqu'un avertit le père Legrain. Celui-ci, avant que le rideau se levât sur le décor de l'ermitage, s'avança à la rampe et, après avoir fait les trois saluts comme à la *Comédie Française*, prononça ces mots : « Mesdames, Messieurs, l'auteur est dans la salle et nous fait l'honneur d'assister à la représentation de son œuvre ! ». Jamais Flaubert ne fut si heureux !” (Dumesnil 1962, 83; translation mine).

certain Legrain, wrote it from memory in 1875. The piece is very simple. It draws from the text its naive dramatic force. Whenever a character performs an action, he warns of his intentions. It is a hagiographic piece with moralizing intentions.⁴⁹

Unfortunately, the texts of puppet theater are rarely preserved, so that it is impossible to precisely determine the origin of the play. In any case, Legrain's staging of the *Temptation* of Saint Anthony probably had its remote origins in the theatrical plays that the Discalced Augustinians of Rouen (both Flaubert's and father Legrain's hometown) had been putting on stage until 1667. In 1678, indeed, an anonymous writer published in Orleans a poem, whose title was *Seducerunt populum meum in mendacio suo* ("they seduced my people with their fraud"). The author complains about the use of puppets during the Passion and describes a play that could be, indeed, a *Temptation of Saint Anthony* (Chesnais 1980, 103). The relation between such puppet shows and the medieval mystery plays is certain. In his *Histoire générale des marionnettes*, Jacques Chesnais writes: "The participation of puppets in the Mysteries is undisputed."⁵⁰

Although the precise text of the mystery play representing the Temptation of Saint Anthony cannot be identified, it is well known that the Gospel episode of the Temptation of Christ—after which Athanasius's *Vita Antonii* was modeled—is one of the main scenes of religious drama: Byzantine manuscripts from before the iconoclasm attest its central role in Greek sermon-dramas. The same subject was often represented also in the Middle Ages, through the impressive diffusion of the *Meditationes vitae Christi* (attributed to Saint Bonaventure). Lybette R. Muir describes the structure of the Temptation of Christ in her classic study on the topic, *The Biblical Drama of Medieval Europe* (1995):

Found only in the synoptic gospels but typologically important because it echoes and reverses the Temptation of Adam and Eve, this story occurs in almost all the cycles and cyclic plays as well as a few separate ones. Some plays begin with a council of the devils, who boast of their skill as tempters. The tempter of Jesus is normally Satan [...]. Many plays follow *Meditationes* 122 in emphasizing that the triple Temptation is to gluttony, vainglory and avarice: the three sins of Adam. The devil explains he needs to know whether Jesus is God or Man but at the end he is still bewildered. Several authors stress Jesus' humility in allow-

49 "Le thème de la *Tentation de saint Antoine* était très populaire en France et en Belgique. Le texte en a été publié par Gaston Baty. Le marionnettiste Louis Leverageois, qui le tenait d'un certain Legrain, le rédigea de mémoire en 1875. La pièce est très simple. Elle tient du texte sa force dramatique naïve. Chaque fois qu'un personnage accomplit une action, il prévient de ses intentions. C'est une pièce hagiographique à caractère de moralité" (Jurkowski 1991: 95–6 ; translation mine).

50 "La participation des marionnettes aux Mystères est incontestée" (Chesnais 1980, 81; translation mine).

ing the devil to touch him, even carry him on his shoulders to the top of the pinnacle or the mountain. [...] In several plays, Satan disguises himself: as a hypocrite, and then theologian, hermit, doctor and king in turn. (Muir 1995, 115)

One can certainly recognize, in such a description, some key features of the Temptation of Saint Anthony. The relation between the puppet theatre that inspired Flaubert and the medieval mystery plays should not be overlooked. To this regard, Dumesnil quotes Édouard Maynal's statement about Flaubert's *Temptation*:

The influence of popular theater, Edouard Maynal quite rightly remarked, was all the more profound on Flaubert as the fable imagined by Father Legrain was more naive, more respectful of the old mystery from which it was inspired: it is in this sense that it has been said, with reason, that the *Tentation*, like Goethe's *Faust*, emerged from the medieval drama.⁵¹

The same theatrical source influenced, then, both the literary and the pictorial archetype of the subject. The connection between scene painting in mystery plays and Bosch's imagination is, indeed, incontestable (Meredith and Tailby 1983, 103; Crabtree and Beudert 1998, 236–37). Both the *Golden Legend* and the *Meditationes* influenced Bosch through Dutch translations, as well as through the countless pictorial representations of Jacobus da Varagine and Bonaventure (Twycross 1983, 70). These are further fascinating intertextual relations. Bonaventure would describe gestures by words but use, at the same time, a very precise figurative language, leading to theatrical and pictorial translations. As Meg Twycross stresses in her study (1983): “Bonaventure has visualized completely the gestures of the characters and their spatial relation to each other, so that the scene could be transferred onto the stage almost intact. It does indeed appear in painting, as for example in a fifteenth-century Netherlandish panel [...]” Bonaventure's text was, therefore, a sort of scenario, as Flaubert's *Temptation* ultimately is. As regards the cultural role of mystery plays in Bosch's time, Muir writes: “Plays were particularly common along the border areas between France and the Holy Roman Empire which dominated the areas east of the Rhine. By the end of the fifteenth century, the map shows concentrations

51 “L'influence du spectacle populaire, remarque fort justement Édouard Maynial, fut d'autant plus profonde sur Flaubert que l'affabulation imaginée par le père Legrain était plus naïve, plus respectueuse du vieux mystère dont elle était inspirée : c'est en ce sens, on l'a dit avec raison, que la *Tentation*, comme le *Faust* de Goethe, est sortie du drame médiéval” (Dumesnil 1962, 83–4).

of drama records in the trading centers of the Netherlands, Dutch-speaking Antwerp and Brussels [...]” (Muir 1995, 7).

The cultural geography of the Temptation of Saint Anthony shows, then, a strong concentration around Belgium and the Netherlands. Both Flaubert and Bosch were seduced by the same theatrical source: medieval mystery plays. The painter was a direct spectator of them. The writer perceived an echo of them in puppet theatre.⁵² A third theatrical source, however, influenced Flaubert. Although the French writer’s first creative impulse sparkled from a contemplation of Bruegel’s picture, the writing of the *Temptation* benefited, then, from the contemplation of Callot’s reproduction of the painting. The French engraver produced two different versions of the Temptation, the first dating from around 1617 and the second around 1635, towards the end of the artist’s life. Callot knew both Bruegel’s and Bosch’s works through the engravings of Hieronymus Cock, but Callot’s *Temptations* have their origin, once again, in a theatrical source (Choné 1992, 415–29).

7 Scenographies of the temptation: Callot

In the same period as Callot was active in Florence, between the end of the 16th century and the first forty years of the 17th, the Medici’s court would put on stage, on the occasion of noble weddings or to honor official visitors, some majestic theatrical shows (Nagler 1964). They would usually represent mythological *libretti*, in whose intricate plots numerous gods and goddesses would seek to disentangle their complicated love affairs. Giulio Parigi and his son Alfonso were the uncontested masters of scenography and scenery painting. Between 1624 and 1625, after Cosimo II’s death and as the prince inheritor was only ten years old, the Grande Duchesse Christina of Lorraine and Maria Maddalena of Austria ran the regency. During this period, the theatrical repertory of the court knew a great religious fervor and *sacre rappresentazioni* were predominant. Callot often engraved the Parigis’ scenographies,⁵³ and his engraving of the

52 There would be much to write about what puppets represent in relation to the theme of temptation: in short, a formidable evocation of the individual’s dependence on the forces that dominate him/her and which he/she cannot control but from which he/she is, instead, controlled, even without noticing it. Reflection on this aspect of puppet theater has a long tradition, from Heinrich von Kleist (*Über das Marionettentheater*, 1810) to Goethe (*Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, 1821) up to the concept of “super puppet” in Edward Gordon Craig [Craig [1911] 2008; Walton 1983].

53 See Mancini (1966); Marotti (1974); Schnapper (1982); Viale Ferrero (1988); Carini Motta, Carapecchia, and Tamburini (1994); for a survey, Ferrone (1997, 1062–1087).

Temptation of Saint Anthony features, indeed, their characteristic theatrical perspective as well as their taste for the multiplication of characters within the scene. At the end of the 17th century, his engraving even provided the model for the construction of a toy-theatre—now in the Museum of Theater in Stockholm, Sweden—whose stage is occupied by a *Temptation of Saint Anthony*.⁵⁴

Through the contemplation of Callot's engraving, then, Flaubert elaborated a new version of Medici's court spectacle. Indeed, the paratextual structure of the *Tentation* is that of a theatrical scenario. In the same way, the plethora of characters and the multiplicity of both enunciative levels and points of view imitate the perspective of Callot's reproduction. Foucault noticed such topological analogy in his analysis:

Between the reader and the ultimate visions that fascinate the fantastic apparitions, the distance is immense: regimes of language subordinate to each other, as well as relay-characters looking at each other push back, in the depths of this "text-representation," a whole population teeming with chimeras.⁵⁵

Flaubert condensed, then, in the structure of his literary work, the space, the time and the pattern of action of a theatrical play. At the same time, this condensation was, once again, the point of departure for a further intertextual passage in the opposite direction. In 1898, for example, Georges Méliès, pioneer of fictional cinema, directed a *Temptation of Saint Anthony* inspired by Flaubert (Hammond 1974, 110). The director himself played the role of Saint Anthony and one of the last sequences of the short movie shows a crucified woman, exactly as in Rops's pictorial rendition of the subject. Yet the main source of Méliès' imagination was, again, popular theatre: the *Fantasmagorie* of Robertson, presented in Paris in 1874, includes in its repertory also a *Temptation of Saint Anthony*. Méliès' cinema, indeed, was closely reminiscent of the impromptu stages of these *fantasmagories*. In 1962, then, another master of world cinema, Federico Fellini, filmed *Le tentazioni del dottor Antonio* (*The Temptations of Dr. Anthony*), a short movie that modernizes and parodies the tradition of Saint Anthony's Temptations in order to stress the narrow-mindedness of the Italian Catholic moral. One of

⁵⁴ French anonymous (end of the 17th century). Miniature theatre with scenographies and characters cut out in copper and painted, 115 x 182 x 124 cm. Stockholm: Drottningholm Teatermuseum.

⁵⁵ "Entre le lecteur et les ultimes visions qui fascinent les apparitions fantastiques, la distance est immense : des régimes de langage subordonnés les uns aux autres, des personnages-relais regardant les uns par-dessus les autres repoussent, au plus profond de ce «texte-représentation», tout un peuple foisonnant de chimères" (Foucault 1995, 18; translation mine).

the characters is a colossal puppet impersonated by Anita Ekberg, provoking the bigotry of prudish Peppino de Filippo, a modern personification of the hermit.⁵⁶

The inversion of influences between verbal and theatrical texts came to completion thanks to the shadow theatre of the *Chat Noir*. In 1887, Henri Rivière, who certainly did not know Flaubert's theatrical source but must have perceived its dramatic potential notwithstanding, brought on stage a *Temptation of Saint Anthony*, a show in two acts and forty pictures, with music by Albert Tinchant and George Fragerolle (Chesnais 1980, 212; Segel 1995, 67).

Eventually, Michel de Ghelderode, "the Flemish Shakespeare," whose position in the history of theatre is between Alfred Jerry and Antonin Artaud, a precursor of Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett and André Genet, adapted for puppet theatre a *Temptation of Saint Anthony* (Jurkowski 1991, 331–33). Puppets as a supreme metaphor of the human condition are indeed central in Ghelderode's philosophy of theatre, which anticipates that of Artaud. Whereas Flaubert had conveyed—through a narrative topology simulating a theatrical space—the temptation that, through Breughel's picture and Callot's engraving, provoked in him the crisis of form and raised the suspicion of the deficiency of the *significant*, Artaud yielded to such temptation and, like Nietzsche, embraced it down into the abyss of unreasoning. Indeed, whilst one can act while standing and actually must dance while standing, writing is an action performed by those who sit.

In *Le Théâtre et son double* (*The Theater and Its Double*), one of his densest theoretical texts, Artaud mentions Bosch's *Temptation of Saint Anthony* as the epitome of what, in painting, constitutes the nature of theatre: the fact of overtaking form, the verbal discourse and words written on paper. The passage is so central that it deserves a long quotation:

It would be quite singular if the person who rules a domain closer to life than the author's, i. e., the director, had on every occasion to yield precedence to the author, who by definition works in the abstract, i. e., on paper. Even if the *mise en scene* did not have to its credit the language of gestures which equals and surpasses that of words, any mute *mise en scene*, with its movement, its many characters, lighting and set, should rival all that is most profound in paintings such as van den Leyden's "Daughters of Lot," certain "Sabbaths" of Goya, certain "Resurrections" and "Transfigurations" of Greco, the "Temptation of Saint Anthony" by Hieronymus Bosch and the disquieting and mysterious "Dulle Griet" by the elder Breughel, in which a torrential red light, though localized in certain parts of the canvas, seems to surge up from all sides and, through some unknown technical process, glue the spectator's staring eyes while still yards away from the canvas: the theater swarms in all directions. The turmoil of life, confined by a ring of white light, runs suddenly aground on

56 On the "architecture of temptation" in Méliès and Fellini, see Penz and Thomas (1997).

nameless shallows. A screeching, livid noise rises from this bacchanal of grubs of which even the bruises on human skin can never approach the color. Real life is moving and white; the hidden life is livid and fixed, possessing every possible attitude of incalculable immobility. This is mute theater, but one that tells more than if it had received a language in which to express itself. Each of these paintings has a double sense and beyond its purely pictorial qualities discloses a message and reveals mysterious or terrible aspects of nature and mind alike.

But happily for the theater, the *mise en scene* is much more than that. For besides creating a performance with palpable material means, the pure *mise en scene* contains, in gestures, facial expressions and mobile attitudes, through a concrete use of music, everything that speech contains and has speech at its disposal as well. Rhythmic repetitions of syllables and particular modulations of the voice, swathing the precise sense of words, arouse swarms of images in the brain, producing a more or less hallucinatory state and impelling the sensibility and mind alike to a kind of organic alteration which helps to strip from the written poetry the gratuitousness that commonly characterizes it. And it is around this gratuitousness that the whole problem of theater is centered.⁵⁷

Roland Barthes perceived very subtly, although in a non-systematic way, the intertextual and inter-semiotic relations connecting Flaubert, Artaud and Nietzsche. On the one hand, Flaubert was the hero and even the martyr of

57 "Il serait tout de même singulier que dans un domaine plus près de la vie que l'autre, celui qui est maître dans ce domaine, c'est-à-dire le metteur en scène, doive en toute occasion céder le pas à l'auteur qui par essence travaille dans l'abstrait, c'est-à-dire sur le papier. Même s'il n'y avait pas à l'actif de la mise en scène le langage des gestes qui égale et surpasse celui de mots, n'importe quelle mise en scène muette devrait avec son mouvement, ses personnages multiples, ses éclairages, ses décors, rivaliser avec ce qu'il y a de plus profond dans les peintures comme Les filles de Loth de Lucas de Leyde, comme certains Sabbats de Goya, certaines Résurrections et Transfigurations du Greco, comme la Tentation de saint Antoine de Jérôme Bosch, et l'inquiétante et mystérieuse Dulle Griet de Breughel le Vieux où une lueur torrentielle et rouge, bien que localisée dans certaines parties de la toile, semble sourdre de tous les côtés, et par je ne sais quel procédé technique bloquer à un mètre de la toile l'œil médusé du spectateur. Et de toutes parts le théâtre y grouille. Une agitation de vie arrêtée par un cerne de lumière blanche vient tout à coup buter sur des bas-fonds innommés. Un bruit livide et grinçant s'élève de cette bacchanale de larves où des meurtrissures de peau humaine ne rendent jamais la même couleur. La vraie vie est mouvante et blanche ; la vie cachée est livide et fixe, elle possède toutes les attitudes possibles d'une innombrables immobilité. C'est du théâtre muet mais qui parle beaucoup plus que s'il avait reçu un langage pour s'exprimer. Toutes ces peintures sont à double sens, et en dehors de leur côté purement pictural elles comportent un enseignement et révèlent des aspects mystérieux ou terribles de la nature et de l'esprit.

Mais heureusement pour le théâtre, la mise en scène est beaucoup plus que cela. Car en dehors d'une représentation avec des moyens matériels et épais, la mise en scène pure contient par des gestes, par des jeux de physionomie et des attitudes mobiles, par une utilisation concrète de la musique, tout ce que contient la parole, et en plus elle dispose aussi de la parole[...] (Artaud [1938] 1964, 4: 145; English translation Artaud 1958, 120).

form. He was its martyr since, differently from Nietzsche, he did not write aphorisms; and, differently from Artaud, he did not yield to his *flumen orationis*. Nietzsche, on the opposite, as Barthes wrote, “burns the rules of intellectual exposition.”⁵⁸ In France, continues the semiotician, “there was no Nietzsche to dare speaking from burst to burst, from abyss to abyss.”⁵⁹ Following Nietzsche, Barthes must admit that “[...] we are not subtle enough to perceive the probably absolute flow of becoming; the permanent exists only thanks to our gross organs which summarize and bring things back to common plans, whereas nothing exists in this form. The tree is at every moment a new thing; we affirm the form because we do not grasp the subtlety of an absolute movement.”⁶⁰ According to Barthes’ interpretation, Artaud precisely cultivated that *actio* that was neglected by Flaubert: “If it were possible to imagine an aesthetics of textual pleasure, it would include: writing aloud. We do not practice this vocal writing (which is not the word at all), but it is probably what Artaud recommended and Sollers asks for.”⁶¹ In another passage, unpublished during Barthes’ life, the opposition between Artaud and Flaubert was even more explicitly presented:

Happy is the one who knows Artaud only in his broken, disseminated, Heraclitean form (the “rubbish of writing” is perhaps only its continuum, this *flumen orationis* that ancient rhetoric held as the supreme value of the style and that Flaubert, for his greater good, could never accomplish.⁶²

Also, Jacques Derrida, in *L’écriture et la différence (Writing and Difference)* (1967), implicitly builds a parallel between Nietzsche and Artaud. Both do not accept a

58 “Brûle les règles de l’exposé intellectuel” (Barthes [1966] 1994, 2: 36; translation mine).

59 “Il n’y a pas eu de Nietzsche pour oser discourir d’éclat en éclat, d’abîme en abîme” (Barthes [1970] 1994, 2: 1007; translation mine).

60 “[...] nous ne sommes pas assez subtils pour apercevoir l’écoulement probablement absolu du devenir ; le permanent n’existe que grâce à nos organes grossiers qui résument et ramènent les choses à des plans communs, alors que rien n’existe sous cette forme. L’arbre est à chaque instant une chose neuve ; nous affirmons la forme parce que nous ne saisissons pas la subtilité d’un mouvement absolu” (Barthes [1973] 1994, 2: 1525; translation mine).

61 “S’il était possible d’imaginer une esthétique du plaisir textuel, il faudrait y inclure : l’écriture à haute voix. Cette écriture vocale (qui n’est pas du tout la parole), on ne la pratique pas, mais c’est sans doute elle que recommandait Artaud et que demande Sollers” (Barthes 1994, 1528; translation mine).

62 “Heureux celui qui ne connaîtrait Artaud que sous sa forme cassée, disséminée, héraclitéenne (“la «cochonnerie de l’écriture» n’est peut-être que son continu, ce *flumen orationis* dont l’ancienne rhétorique faisait la valeur suprême du style et que Flaubert, pour son plus grand bien, n’a jamais pu accomplir” (Barthes 1994, 1186).

‘writing while sitting’ and both wish for a ‘writing through the body’, a ‘writing while bleeding’:

Although the rigorous system of this emancipation is found only in *The Theater and its Double*, protest against theater had always been Artaud’s primary concern. Protest against the dead letter which absents itself far from breath and flesh. Artaud initially dreamed of a graphism which would not begin as deviation, of a nonseparated inscription: an incarnation of the letter and a bloody tattoo.⁶³

At the end of the chapter of *L’écriture et la différence* entitled “Force et signification,” then, Derrida summarized the opposition between Nietzsche and Flaubert, proposing a convincing interpretation of it:

Nietzsche was certain, but Zarathustra was positive: “Here do I sit and wait, old broken tables around me and also new half tables. When cometh mine hour?—The hour of my descent, of my down-going.” “*Die Stunde meines Niederganges, Unterganges.*” It will be necessary to descend, to work, to bend in order to engrave and carry the new Tables to the valleys, in order to read them and have them read. Writing is the outlet as the descent of meaning outside itself within itself: metaphor-for-others-aimed-at-others-here-and-now, metaphor as the possibility of others here-and-now, metaphor as metaphysics in which Being must hide itself if the other is to appear.⁶⁴

Also by virtue of this interpretation, the questions at stake at the beginning of the present essay can now be reformulated. Writers are attracted by painting and, specifically, by pictorial representations of the *Temptation of Saint Anthony* for, in general, painting allows writers to approach the meaningful force which is

63 “La première urgence d’un théâtre inorganique, c’est l’émancipation à l’égard du texte. Bien qu’on en trouve le rigoureux système que dans le Théâtre et son Double, la protestation contre la lettre avait été depuis toujours le premier souci d’Artaud. Protestation contre la lettre morte qui s’absente loin du souffle et de la chair. Artaud avait d’abord rêvé d’une graphie qui ne partît point à la dérive, d’une inscription non séparée : incarnation de la lettre et tatouage sanglant” (Derrida 1967, 281 ; English translation Derrida 1978, 87).

64 “Mais Nietzsche se doutait bien que l’écrivain ne serait jamais debout ; que l’écriture est d’abord et à jamais quelque chose sur quoi l’on se penche. Mieux encore quand les lettres ne sont plus des chiffres de feu dans le ciel.

Nietzsche s’en doutait bien mais Zarathoustra en était sûr : “Me voici entouré de tables brisées et d’autres à demi gravées seulement. Je suis là dans l’attente. Quand viendra mon heure, l’heure de redescendre et de périr... ‘*Die Stunde meines Niederganges, Unterganges.*’ Il faudra descendre, travailler, se pencher pour graver et porter la Table nouvelle aux vallées, la lire et la faire lire. L’écriture est l’issue comme descente hors de soi en soi du sens : métaphore-pour-autrui-en-vue-d’autrui-ici-bas, métaphore comme possibilité d’autrui ici-bas, métaphore comme métaphysique où l’être doit se cacher si l’on veut que l’autre apparaisse” (Derrida 1967, 49; English translation Derrida 1978, 28).

compressed in ‘writing while sitting’. Specifically, writers are seduced, as painters are, by the theatrical nature of the Temptation. In order to thoroughly understand the essential nature of such theatrical force, the origin of this narrative tradition must be retraced more in-depth. Athanasius, the author of the *Vita Antonii*, was not merely a hagiographer but a subtle theologian, who struggled all his life long against the Arian heresy. Anthony’s hagiography constitutes, thus, the narrative and fictional coat of a precise theological thesis: Christ is the unique source of salvation. Arius had written (according to historian Philostorgius, abridged by Photios) some popular songs, in order to attract people to his own doctrine.⁶⁵ Athanasius reproached him this ruse but understood its persuasive efficacy. He countered it, then, with analogous means, through composing himself the dramas known under the name of Ἀντι-θάλεια. Giorgio La Piana describes them as follows:

Of the Ἀντι-θάλεια, which is thought as opposed by the Orthodox to the work of Arius, nothing, as it has been said, is known; however, it is easy to speculate that, if it ever existed, it had to be composed on the same model of the work to which it was opposed.⁶⁶

In the same way, the *Vita Antonii* features a theatrical, straightforward narrative structure. Its effects are remarkable: the clear theological opposition between Good and Evil easily translate into the theatrical composition, then transmogrify into the pictorial imagination. The force of content sparkles with all its brilliance and attracts writers with the aura of an exact word, of a perfect form.

8 Conclusions: Literary exercise and ritual exorcism

Flaubert’s *La tentation de Saint Antoine* tells a story, that of a pious man in the desert, besieged by tempting visions, struggling against them, seeking to stay firm in a storm of alluring images. It tells, however, also a meta-story, that of the writer sitting at his desk, perfecting his sentences, structuring the figments of his imagination, while his persona is painfully in the midst of another storm, that of words, images and, above all, thoughts that flow into the mind without any rule, uncontrolled and undisciplined, sprouting from an invisible,

⁶⁵ See Migne’s *Patrologia Graeca*, LXV, 455.

⁶⁶ “Dell’ Ἀντι-θάλεια, che si afferma opposta dagli ortodossi all’opera di Ario, nulla, come si è detto, si sa ; è facile però congetturare, che, se pure esistette, dovette esser composta sullo stesso modello dell’opera a cui si contrapponeva” (La Piana 1912, 28).

mysterious source. The paradox is even deeper, for the writer continuously senses that this source does not lie in precise words, careful sentences and orderly ideas, but has its roots in the body itself, in that same body that the effort of creativity requires to be sitting, immobile, struggling to channel its force into the form of language. That is why the writer is tempted by painting, whose execution more freely yields to the force underneath language—to the action of the body—but he is tempted even more by theater, the ultimate equilibrium between the force of the sacred and the form of sacrifice; the equivalent, in art, of ritual.

Yet Flaubert himself could never be appeased, since he constantly perceived the humiliation of language, the deceptiveness of the form; even theater, moreover, did not completely liberate the human imagination from its necessary abode in language. Those philosophers who wished to “write while dancing,” to “write through dancing,” or even to “write while bleeding” (Nietzsche), as well as those dramatists that longed for a theater beyond language (Artaud) had to pay their ambition by a fall into the abyss of the sacred, into the disruption that awaits those who mystically try to attain the source itself of the sacred force.

As Barthes, Foucault and Derrida suggested with their critical commentaries, Flaubert’s choice was, therefore, the only one that allows the human creator to reach an equilibrium between force and form, between the unbridled eruption of the sacred and its inevitable concretion into language. Flaubert’s solution ultimately consisted in ritual, in the exorcism of exercise: he wrote and rewrote the *Tentation*, so that his other writing might go on. But isn’t that the way in which human beings try to cope with the sacred? “Managing” its disruptive force into rituals and liturgies, taming the force by the form? Most religious people content themselves with that; other dishevel it into madness; and yet others seek to constantly juggle between the two poles of language and madness. Perhaps, they are those who, like Flaubert, are doomed to be tempted and suffer more.

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