

Labours Left Unfinished

Like a fond memory, the cliché is something to which we return. It is endlessly reproducible, and, it is applicable in different situations. The cliché is a moment of rest — the administering of a verbal sedative — in the course of conversation. It is also static, having arrived at a point of suspension from which it does not gain or lose clarity.

We can approach it as something that does not gain or lose character. Instead, as the cliché hovers in the air, it falls into a vacuum — that free space between the pointed remark and the arbitrary comment. We can read Paul Cullen's *Gravity / Model for a Hypothetical Space* as a work which addresses clichés and achieves a similar state of ambiguity. It is also a work that is feverish with possibilities.

In the 1850's the French writer Gustave Flaubert constructed an accompaniment to his novel *Bouvard and Pecuchet*.

This was his *Dictionnaire des Idées Rescues (Dictionary of Accepted Ideas)*. I came to be reading this dictionary because Paul Cullen had made several references to the influence of *Bouvard and Pecuchet* on his own thinking. *The Dictionary Of Accepted Ideas* is Flaubert's caustic protest at having to listen, on numerous occasions, to the trite conversations of the French bourgeoisie.

Flaubert, a passionate defender of the possibilities of the human mind, uses a kind of inverse wit to spit his objections at the encroachment of the cliché into the French language.

For Flaubert, the cliché brought banality, dullness and narrowness into the minds of his compatriots. In a letter to a friend he writes "When shall we get over our empty speculation and accepted ideas?...Instead of examining, people pontificate"¹.

Using a kind of reverse, or inverted sarcasm, Flaubert defends the tenets of Romanticism. His dictionary entry for 'Poet' is

"Pompous synonym for fool, dreamer". A similar kind of dry wit and a conceptual, as well as physical, inversion is also present in the work of Paul Cullen. He has spoken about the abrupt language structure and sharp observations employed by Flaubert as an influence on his own considerations of form and material — that is, on the growth of his own visual language.

Within *Gravity/Model for a Hypothetical Space* there is evidence of the cliché and of inversion. Paul Cullen has based this "model space" on his Auckland kitchen. Due to the nature of transportation, it becomes a phenomenological experience, rather than a mathematically accurate rendering. It is a simple assemblage, a work of kitset parts. Like a tent it could be posited wherever it was needed. In this way it also operates like the space of the model (or demonstration) home. Like the interior designer for a show home, Cullen has made stylistic choices that are aesthetically generic. These choices (the lino, the paint colour, the table and the tin bucket) give us certain indications of "kitchen". Like the cliché, such choices lull us in to a sense of the familiar, the tried and true. They sedate our senses. Carefully inserted into this familiarity is an illogic, of a most contrary nature, which presents us with elements of novelty and farce. Entering the gallery we are at odds with a chequer-board floor, and a small table, rotated through 90 degrees so that they are vertical. On the other side of this floor is a wall, the way we know it to be: the right way up, the floor at our feet. Beyond this, there is nothing except the walls and floor of the gallery. The gallery corners take on the qualities of something at a distance. This is a view of emptiness and also of homeliness. *Gravity / Model for a Hypothetical Space* deftly puts me in relation to this emptiness while it defines for me a position within a domestic space.

If we can think of this "hypothetical model" as a version, or part of, a home we can embellish it with a particularly common element in a model home — a set of encyclopedias.

At this point, let us go back to Flaubert. In his

Dictionary of Accepted Ideas, Flaubert defined 'Encyclopédie' thus: "Laugh at it pityingly for being quaint and old-fashioned; even so: thunder against"² Paul Cullen has repeatedly used encyclopedic volumes in his work. They appear, once again, in *Gravity / Model for a Hypothetical Space* as an inverted cliché. In a certain light, it is both a deliberately casual act, and a spiteful act, to use one's encyclopedias as a jamb for a length of 4 x 2. This action points to one of the strongest and most discussed metaphors in Cullen's work. This is a perceivable objection to defined systems of knowledge, and the foundation of scientific, rational analysis usually attributed to René Descartes. While *Gravity / Model for a Hypothetical Space* makes gestures at the delusions of such theoretical models, it also works to remind us of the melancholy we have for systems of order, indexing, processes of consultation, and knowable truths.

Encyclopedias are a part of fond memories of school projects and the need to look for pictures of Pharaohs and Pygmies, Louis Pasteur and Marie Curie. Let us suppose that here is the first in a myriad of contradictions.

Flaubert also wrote of himself "Every contradiction, every absurdity, every folly — I harbour them all"³. This notion of folly, very much at the heart of *Bouvard and Pecuchet*, is also interesting to consider in relation to *Gravity / Model for a Hypothetical Space*. One of the given definitions of folly is a building that is built in the form of a castle, or a temple, in order to satisfy one's fancy or conceit⁴. (A man's house is his castle).

As an archaic term, a conceit can be labelled a witty expression. This in itself is an inversion.

After purchasing a small country estate, *Bouvard and Pecuchet* set about leaving Paris for a new life as rural dilettantes. Their folly (and thus their conceit) is to embark on a series of misinformed agricultural disasters. However the pinnacle of these follies is the creation of a

"themed garden" which, despite following textbook examples, is the result of a dreadful mishmash of influences and their own peculiar tastes and humour. Upon viewing the finished garden, none of the invited guests know what to say.

Bouvard and Pecuchet's witty expression is lost to all but themselves.

In *Gravity / Model for a Hypothetical Space* there is certainly wit at work. But it is difficult to decide what is funny and, like *Bouvard and Pecuchet's* garden, it bears the strange fruit of personal experiment. Let us suppose that here is another contradiction — one that is concocted in the space between the generic material appearance of the work and the devious configurations of a scientific discontent.

I will return to the view of *Gravity / Model for a Hypothetical Space* as a point of suspension — an unnerving stasis — between cliché and novelty, generality and oddity, implacability and the generosity of ideas. We might also view it as a monument to foolishness, or, to imagination. It is certain that it is self-contained and intent on carrying out its own examinations. It does not require you to bear witness to its efforts, but it propels you to think. Flaubert might say that this, in itself, is satisfaction. The last word goes to him:

"I exalt myself and I humble myself, so that I am never at my true level."⁵

1. *Flaubert's Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*. London. 1954. 9.

2. *ibid.* 35.

3. Flaubert, Gustave. *Intimate Notebook, 1840–1841*. London. 1967. 15.

4. *Collins Concise English Dictionary*. Third Edition. Glasgow. 1992.

5. Flaubert, Gustave. *Intimate Notebook, 1840–1841*. London. 1967.43.