Kapoor on Murphy (2018)


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A simple story intended to move readers to tears (“Je veux apitoyer, faire pleurer les âmes sensibles” wrote Flaubert in a letter dated 19 June 1876), Flaubert’s short story Un cœur simple has elicited complex responses from author-readers. These range from Roland Barthes’s famous structuralist essay, L’Effet de réel (1968), on the barometer in Mme Aubain’s room, to Julian Barnes’s novel Flaubert’s Parrot (1984), where a doctor’s fascination with Flaubert’s writing results in his researching a stuffed parrot Flaubert borrowed from the Museum of Rouen which, in turn, reveals appalling truths about his own life. Raymonde Debray Genette’s 1988 book Métamorphoses du récit: autour de Flaubert, drew attention to a mass of detail in the rough drafts of the story, missing from the final version, thus signaling the importance of reading the avant-texte in order to understand the finished text.

The starting point of Steve Murphy’s book, however, is his dissatisfaction with simplistic readings of Un cœur simple based on authorial intention because they can lead to a misunderstanding of the text. Instead of this author-centered approach, Murphy favors a reader-centered methodology where, instead of working his way through a given meaning, the reader is responsible for uncovering the several complex layers embedded in the text, whether historical, political, sociological, or psychological. Also opposed to a purely stylistic reading of the text, which he feels neglects meaning, Murphy proposes a two-pronged approach: delving deep into the semantic layers hidden in the text as well as filling up its stylistic omissions by a painstaking reading of the rough drafts or brouillons.

There are fourteen chapters in Murphy’s book, in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. While the first two chapters, “L’Histoire souterraine” and “Questions de classe,” directly address the complex reasons behind the historical, social, and economic decline of Mme Aubain from an aristocrat to a bourgeoisie, chapters eight, nine, and twelve through fourteen evoke different aspects of the personality and life of Félicité. For example, they explore the protagonist’s likeness to a “femme en bois”: unlike Mme Aubain who is depressed by the loss of dear ones and the change of fortunes in her life, Félicité escapes from sadness in her own life by mechanical physical exertion. These chapters also examine her ability to create freedom for herself without aligning herself to any political ideology; the possibility of her dying from psittacism, a contagious disease she may have contracted from her sick parrot, Loulou; the way her servant’s room filled with heterogeneous things resembles the multi-faceted interiors of the rest of her mistress’s house; the feminine altar she creates in her own room in contrast to other patriarchal constructions; and her ability to see visions even as her sense of hearing diminishes.

In chapters three through six plus ten and eleven, the reader gets a chance to delve into the lives of the numerous figures who crowd the short story and with whom the destinies of Mme Aubain and her servant are closely intertwined: characters like Théodore, Paul, Virginie, Victor, Bourais, and Loulou, each of whom contributes a complex dimension to the story of a “ceur simple.” While Murphy uses the brouillons to establish that the villainous Théodore seduces Félicité because he is really in love with her, he also employs the rough drafts where Paul is shown revolting against Mme Aubain, his mother, to bring out the Republican connotations of his portrait. Paul’s rebellion against the haughtiness and aristocratic values of his mother is also contrasted with the self-negating obedience of his sister, Virginie, who, silent in the finished story, is depicted in the brouillons as just saying “Oui, maman” (123). In the chapter devoted to Félicité’s nephew Victor, Murphy contests the criticism that this character is insensitive, and directs our attention instead to the small gifts he brings Félicité from his travels before his tragic death: “une boîte en coquillages, une tasse de café, un grand bonhomme en pain d’épice” (134). The chapter on Bourais, on the other hand, analyses his laughter at Félicité’s query about finding Victor’s house on a map, underlining this as proof that Bourais’s insensitivity arises from an inability to go beyond pedantic learning limited to longitudes and latitudes. This fact is suggested by a subtle textual detail: the ruffle on Bourais’s shirt, “le jabot de sa chemise.” In his drafts Flaubert associates the ruffle to the pride of Loulou the parrot, “qui se dandinait le jabot en avant fier” (171). Among other things, two chapters on Loulou conjure a parallel between the bird in its cage and the negro slave in Mme de Larsonnière’s household, highlighting two kinds of slavery. Depicted in the brouillons as evincing strong interest in the parrot, the slave is behind the bird being passed on to Mme Aubain’s servant, Félicité. In chapter seven, “Le Baromètre existentiel,” Murphy, unlike Barthes, explores the barometer’s role in revealing the psychological states of Mme Aubain and other inhabitants of her house.

Books on individual stories of the Trois contes are rare. Murphy’s thorough treatment of Un cœur simple shows that a short
story can be as full as a novel (cross-references to *Madame Bovary* and *Eugénie Grandet* prove this point) and is worthy of meticulous reading. However, the absence of cross-references to other semantically rich, layered stories in the *Trois contes* is odd, especially since they are united by a common hermeneutic thread like sainthood. Murphy ironically concedes the success of Flaubert’s artistic aim to move readers emotionally with his story in his conclusion that “Félicité a beaucoup souffert” (379). However, he is vindicated in claiming to offer a deep understanding of the adversities of life which Félicité resists.

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