

ANTJE WEITZEL

Garden of Twisted Paths

“It is a matter of being able to give chance free rein. It is the gesture of turning pages. When we let the pages of a book leaf through our fingers, we do so in anticipation of happening on something, a loose end from which to wind up the threads spun in the book. There is something labyrinthine about this quest for the end of Ariadne’s thread (...).”¹

The oeuvre of Rémy Markowitsch is bibliophilic. It is steeped in the exploration of the universe of books. Numerous series and works by the artist rest on encounters and involvement with books, from the prolific series *After Nature* (since 1991), the series *Voltaire & Co.* (1994–95) and *Signatures* (1995), to *Finger in the Book* (1995–96), the *Readings* (1996), the *Illuminations* (2000–01) and the carpets, such as *Blood* and *Skin* (2000). The artist’s interest is focussed primarily on visual archives of knowledge, picture archives, the pictorial worlds pressed into books, and further, the treatment of images, their arrangement on the

1 Vilém Flusser, *Die Schrift. Hat Schreiben Zukunft?* (Göttingen: European Photography, 1992).

page, their sequencing, their printing techniques. How are pictures constituted? How is the treatment of images changing through and in relation to the current pictorial world? And what is the relationship between text and picture – the subject of semi-otic and linguistic investigation since the proclamation of the “pictorial turn”. Things that seem to be different at first sight prove to permeate each other. A text makes mental images visible; a picture is read with and as language.

In addition to other picture supports or containers, Markowitsch collects books of diverse provenance and on diverse fields. Collecting, leafing through books, finding and selecting are among his main activities. He probes the most eclectic areas of study – everyday culture, sciences, architecture, art, eating and gastronomy, botany and esoterics – and then distils them in his artistic, investigative praxis into complex, labyrinthine works.

Justin Hoffmann fittingly compares Rémy Markowitsch to “the handicraft enthusiast that Claude Lévy-Strauss juxtaposes with the engineer in *Das Wilde Denken (The Savage Mind)*. The handicraft enthusiast takes his resources from his immediate surroundings and is thus dependent upon them. His tools and materials are the chance result of all the opportunities that present themselves for renewing the stock of earlier constructions and deconstructions. ... Things that are found and compiled – a mixture of ready-mades – always retain something of the expressive value they possessed in the original context.”² For the series *After Nature*, Markowitsch leafs through his collection of books to find pages with pictures printed on them both front and back.

² Cf. Justin Hoffmann, “Lighting up and turning pale” in: *Finger im Buch* published by Kunstmuseum Luzern (Ostfildern: Cantz, 1996), page 16.



BLUMENSTÜCK I, 1996, *Finger im Buch*, Kunstmuseum Luzern (R. M.)

These he cuts out and has them photographed, transilluminated as it were, by a professional photographer so that both pictures become visible, like a double exposure or a hybrid generated by superimposition. The series is divided into several categories: *L* for landscape, *M* for people (German = *Menschen*), *P* for plant and *T* for animals (German = *Tiere*), with the works numbered consecutively; *Flower Piece*, in allusion to art historical terminology; *On the Journey*, travel portraits of various regions; and *Bonsai*, *Ikebana*, *Illuminations*, which each designate their subject matter. The artistic method of producing the pictures remains constant. What changes is the vantage point in relation to the depicted object, so that viewers find themselves confronting the most varied works in highly differentiated contexts.

Other projects focus on the book as a medium of communication, as in the series, *Signatures*, consisting of facsimiles of largely hand-written inscriptions and intimate notes jotted in books, which transform a mass-produced means of communication into a unique item. The *Readings* also probe the medial properties of the book in the field of tension between private and public worlds. The title, *Readings*, speaks for itself: videos show portraits of the artist's friends or acquaintances reading a book of their choice in a place of their choice.

The *Bibliotherapy* project is a seamless continuation, in condensed form, of aspects and theoretical concerns addressed in the artist's earlier work.

In *A History of Reading* Alberto Manguel writes, "Among the books I haven't written – among the books I haven't read but would like to read – is *The History of Reading*. (...) Here is the curious science of Bibliotherapy (Chapter Twenty-one), defined by Webster's as 'the use of selected reading materials as therapeutic adjuvants in medicine and psychiatry', by which certain doctors claim they can heal the sick in body and spirit with *The Wind in the Willows* and *Bouvard and Pécuchet*."³

Today the therapeutic practice of bibliotherapy is applied primarily in the treatment of children. Historically, Aristotle may be considered its predecessor. Among the first to ascribe therapeutic qualities – mental/spiritual cleansing and purification – to the material of literature, he declared in his *Poetics* that catharsis, the purification of the emotions, is the function of tragedy. Marc-Alain Ouaknin, philosopher, rabbi and scholar, has devoted an entire book to the subject: *Bibliothérapie. Lire*,

3 Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (London: Flamingo, 1997), pages 309, 318.

c'est guérir.⁴ The core of his reflections rests on bibliotherapy's "linguistic encounter of two words, one Greek, the other Hebrew, both of which signify 'healing', the 'remedy' and the 'therapy', **θεραπεία** and **תרופה**, two almost homophonic words which may perhaps teach us the fundamental idea that healing is to translate, to be open to another dimension, to escape all dogmatic, theological, philosophical, artistic, ... confinement."⁵

For his *Bibliotherapy* project, Rémy Markowitsch invited 25 people to read *Bowvard and Pécuchet* aloud, section by section. The readings took place in both Paris, where the narrative begins, and Normandy, the main geographical setting of the novel. The artist recorded the readings with a digital video camera. The resulting videos, which portray the readers as if in a photograph extended through time, are an essential constituent of the project's varying forms of presentation.

The choice of reading material is motivated not only by Alberto Manguel's above-mentioned reference, but also by the artist's long-time affinity with Flaubert's unfinished novel *Bowvard and Pécuchet*.

Like the novel's two protagonists, Markowitsch's artistic research leads him into the "domain of things already said"⁶ and into that of things already seen or shown, that is, the texts in the archives of knowledge: "they try everything, they touch and are drawn to everything; they put everything to the test of their marginal industry ... with constant recourse to their extensive

4 In English: "Reading Means Curing", or simply, "Reading Cures".

5 Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *Bibliothérapie. Lire, c'est guérir* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1994), page 27.

6 Michel Foucault, "Afterward to *The Temptation of St. Anthony*", transl. by Donald F. Brouchard and Sherry Simon in: Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. by James Faubion (London: Penguin, 1998), page 119.

reading, all the seriousness of science and the most solemnly printed truths.”⁷ But unlike Bouvard and Pécuchet, Markowitsch is hardly a naïve believer; he is a probing layman whose complex experimental trials might in fact be assigned to the “gay sciences”, for his successes do not rest on the quest for truth but rather on the enr(u)ptured hybrid otherness of his bizarre and at times disturbing findings. An otherness indebted to sameness, twice over, the sameness of provenance and production, to the copy, to the reproduction and thus, in a certain sense, also to the quotation and the reference.

Bouvard and Pécuchet are finally “made to abandon the performance of those actions they had undertaken to become what they were initially. They can now be purely and simply themselves: they commission the construction of a large double desk to re-establish the link to their essential nature, to begin anew the activity which had occupied them for over ten years, to begin their copying. They will occupy themselves by copying books, copying their own books, copying every book; and unquestionably they will copy Bouvard and Pécuchet. Because to copy is to do nothing; it is to be the books being copied. It is to be this tiny protrusion of redoubled language, of discourse folded upon itself; this invisible existence transforms fleeting words into an enduring and distant murmur.”⁸

Bouvard and Pécuchet is a disastrous journey through all the book knowledge of the day, via the encyclopaedia – to hint at the weightiest formal predecessor of the work. Bouvard and Pécuchet’s library list, that is, the works that Flaubert has his protagonists cite, is enormous; it is Flaubert’s own library of

⁷ *Ibid.*, page 119.

⁸ *Ibid.*, page 121.



BIBLIOTHERAPY, 2001, Villa Merkel, Galerien der Stadt Esslingen am Neckar (R. M.)

some 1500 publications, preserved in the town hall of Canteleu, inventoried by Yvan Leclerc and the team at the *Centre Flaubert de l'Université de Rouen*, and reproduced in written form in this publication.

The enterprise of Flaubert's (anti-)heroes, as they trace the historical development of the sciences and the humanities, serves to illustrate that throughout the evolution and history of scholarly observation, the question of the fragile, ephemeral and relative nature of its truth inevitably rises to the surface.

“With *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, Flaubert has chosen to write an anti-novel, whose anti-heroes, paragons of stupidity, devote themselves to a quest for truth, beginning over and over again and ending each time in catastrophe. He has chosen to trace a course through the encyclopaedia of sciences, which under-

scores the faults and failures of scholars, and in the act of writing to trace a course that explodes the very forms of literature itself.”⁹

Michel Serres, known for his studies on the philosophy of science and epistemology, writes: “Aesthetics adheres to the open side of language; it lives on the garden side.”¹⁰

The motif of the garden variously plays an essential role in the *Bibliotherapy* project. The garden, or rather the architecture of the garden after Boitard, cultivated by Bouvard and Pécuchet after vain attempts at growing crops, fruit and flowers, is perhaps among the most abstruse outgrowths of the pair’s endeavours.

Faced with this horizon of marvels Bouvard and Pécuchet felt quite dazzled. ... They had sacrificed the asparagus to build in its place an Etruscan tomb, that is, a black plaster quadrilateral, six foot high, resembling a dog kennel. Four dwarf firs flanked this monument at its corners, and it was to be surmounted by an urn and embellished with an inscription.

In the other part of the kitchen garden a sort of Rialto straddled a pool, whose edges were decorated with encrusted mussel shells. The earth absorbed the water, no matter! A clay bottom would form and keep the water in.

The hut had been transformed into a rustic cabin, with the help of stained glass.

At the top of the vine-clad mound, six squared trees supported a tin hat with turned up points, and the whole thing represented a Chinese pagoda.

⁹ Claudine Cohen, “Bouvard et Pécuchet réécrivent les sciences” in *Alliage*, numéro 37–38, 1998.

¹⁰ Michel Serres, *Les cinq sens. Philosophie des corps mêlée* (Paris: Grasset, 1991), page 368.

*They had been down to the banks of the Orne to select pieces of granite, had broken them up, numbered them, brought them back themselves in a cart, then joined the bits together with cement, piling one on top of another; and in the middle of the lawn rose a rock like a gigantic potato.*¹¹

This passage in the novel, along with the American website and online shop, *The Art of the Bonsai Potato Kit: Zen — Without the Wait*,¹² are among the most important sources of Rémy Markowitsch's sculpture *BonsaiPotato*. But bonsai, ikebana and flora in general have long been constituents of the artist's ongoing series *After Nature* (since 1991). These set pieces of nature allude – not without irony – to the excrescences of post-modern, landscaped interiors. The potted rubber plants of the fifties and sixties have now given way to the bonsai, indoor fountains and salt crystal lamps: domesticated exoticism.

A possible relative of the *BonsaiPotato* might be found in the readymade or objet trouvé, *Aqua per Poschiavo* (2000), a commercially manufactured indoor fountain kit, on view that same year as part of the exhibition, *Fatto a mano*, at Galleria Periferia in Poschiavo, Switzerland. The object oscillates between the history of the location quoted in the title (the town was ravaged by floods in 1987), its shape reminiscent of the surrounding mountains, and the original, therapeutic function and goal of the readymade, the soothing sound of bubbling water. A microphone suspended above the object apparently transmits the sound of the fountain or spring. But appearances are deceptive: it is not

11 Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* (with the *Dictionary of Received Ideas*), transl. Alban J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), pages 57–58.

12 URL: <http://www.bonsaipotato.com>.

hooked up. The sounds coming out of the speakers in the room are recordings of the sound of bubbling water: a reproduction. By interweaving and superimposing complex layers and strands of meaning, the artist again does what he has done so often: he leads his recipients on detours through the garden of twisted paths,¹³ where ample room for contrary growth undermines straightforward, unambiguous readings.

One of these growths is the positively monstrous *BonsaiPotato*, measuring 4.5 m in length, 3 m in width and 4.95 m in height. The sculpture functions as a seating landscape where exhibition visitors can take as much time as they please to watch the bibliotherapeutic readings and browse through the books at hand, in the light of the brightly illuminated potato. Formally its structure is a table, a basin, a plant and/or a stone, comparable to the structure or arrangement of the indoor fountain, already brought into play with *Aqua per Poschiavo*. The stone has now given way to the potato, which is like a boulder – at least in its monumentality. Unlike the *Bonsai Potato Kit* from the Internet, it is not a real potato whose care and cultivation is geared towards creating a bonsai-like sprout, but rather a lamp-like hollow body, similar to salt crystal lamps.

BonsaiPotato is a humorous, pseudo-scientific, quasi-therapeutic experiment, in which ideas of light, energy and nutrition meet, interlock and undergo revision. The inner illumination, the glow of the *BonsaiPotato* evokes memories of electric fireplaces,

13 From 1998 to 2000, *Kein Babel* (Staalplaat) hosted a monthly event, *Garten der Verschlungenen Pfade* (*Garden of Twisted Paths*) at the *nbi* club in Berlin where they “offered the deviant flowers of sonic extravaganzas a place to blossom.” Cf. Jorge Luis Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths” in Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths; Selected Stories and Other Writings* (WW. Norton & Company, 1988), pages 19–29.

often found in English homes. *BonsaiPotato* radiates warmth and energy. As a vastly enlarged cast of a “Euronorm” potato, a dietary staple so widespread that European cooking is inconceivable without it, *BonsaiPotato* represents energy in its most unadulterated form. The potato owes its triumphant march of victory from the gardens of South America to the kitchens of Europe not only to its neutral taste, achieved by breeding, which has turned it into the ultimate culinary complement, but also to the ease of cultivation and its ability to fill stomachs. It acquired a reputation as a “stupefying vegetable” because it was long known as the “nourishment of the poor and the soldier”. Today it has become more ‘intelligent’: genes built into it have lent it the incredible ability to communicate its needs. Modern techniques of reproduction have made these achievements possible. Thanks to genetic laboratories, bizarre potato-plant creations have been bred that light up when they are thirsty.¹⁴ In view of such developments, crossbreeding a bonsai and a potato has moved into the realm of feasibility, although one does wonder what the point is of combining a useful plant, bred for maximum yield, with a decorative one, whose miniature artistry is indebted to stringent pruning and suppression of growth.

The “double exposure” of bonsai and potato blurs the contradictory images that these two objects evoke.

“The imaginary now resides between the book and the lamp ... it derives from words spoken in the past, exact recensions, the amassing of minute facts, monuments reduced to infinitesimal fragments, and the reproductions of reproductions. In the modern experience, these elements contain the power of the

¹⁴ “Tod der Schmetterlinge” in *Der Spiegel*, 4/2001;
URL: <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/0,1518,114452,00.html>.

impossible. Only the assiduous clamour created by repetition can transmit to us what only happened once. The imaginary is not formed in opposition to reality as its denial or compensation; it grows among signs, from book to book, in the interstice of repetitions and commentaries; it is born and takes shape in the interval between books. It is a phenomenon of the library.”¹⁵

“Light” as subject matter is intrinsic to Rémy Markowitsch’s oeuvre. Light is essential to the photographic process, especially in Markowitsch’s reduced photographic practice and in his transilluminations, which culminate in the “multi-tautological”¹⁶ light-box transparencies, *Illuminations* (2000–01). The *Illuminations* unite all levels of the use of “light”: lamps are the subject matter; transillumination is the process of photographic pictorial production, as well as the concrete form and function of the representations; lamps are the source material for the transilluminated pages taken from the book *Leuchten* ’73.¹⁷

For the eponymous exhibition at the Urs Meile Gallery in Lucerne (2001), the artist designed an interior consisting of the lamps, a carpet onto which Frank Zappa’s hand-written lyrics for *Cosmik Debris* have been printed and, on a television monitor, a scrolling list, like film credits, of esoteric titles on light taken from books in print, accompanied by the tinny mp3 sound of Zappa’s song, indicative of its mechanical or rather digital reproduction.

For the exhibition in Esslingen, the artist has again linked the lamps with a carpet. This latest carpet piece shows the vastly

15 Michel Foucault (see note 6), page 106.

16 Cf. Christoph Doswald, press release for the exhibition *Leuchten*, Galerie Urs Meile, Lucerne, 2001.

17 *Leuchten* ’73, published by WB Elektrische Konsumgüter, no place or date.



LEUCHTEN, 2001, Galerie Urs Meile, Luzern (R.M.)

enlarged cover of the French paperback edition of Jacques Prévert's *Histoires*. The cover design, the collaborative work of Jacques Prévert and Brassäi, shows a reading donkey against a background of scribbled graffiti. Not only the lettering of the title but also the donkey, as the ultimate *Büchernarr* (book fool), lead back along various paths to *Bouvard and Pécuchet* and to the infinite space of the library, to the monument and the spiral, as Yvan Leclerc aptly titled his book on *Bouvard and Pécuchet*.

In the fourth chapter of this book, *Reproduction*, in reference to the original and the series, Leclerc writes, "Bouvard and Pécuchet realise them through imitation after a model, drawing or description, usually provided by the books." And due to the almost complete impossibility of exact imitation *Bouvard and Pécuchet* "introduce us to the world of the surrogate, of the artefact, the 'acting-like', the semblance, the as-if. (...) *Bouvard*, a book

about nothing, brings about the duplicate without the original, the shadow without the body, the simulacrum without the idea of the thing, the resemblance without a model. (...) If imitation is necessary, it is because Bouvard and Pécuchet do not exist outside the round of models. (...) Their body would ideally be a plastic body, artificial, fake, which could be remodelled to match each imitated figure, whose description would change with every chapter just as it changes for the copy: a typographical body, a rewritten body, outcome of quotations and the library.”¹⁸

Reproduction is a key concern not only in the work of Rémy Markowitsch but also in that of Michael Ming Hong Lin, whom he invited to collaborate with him on the *Bibliotherapy* project. Markowitsch made the acquaintance of Lin in Hong-kong last year, where they designed a room together for the exhibition *Cities in Amnesia* (2000).

Quite like Flaubert’s protagonists – “‘Well, well,’ he said, ‘we both had the same idea, writing our names inside our headgear.’”¹⁹ – elective affinities emerged out of this chance encounter. Like Rémy Markowitsch, Michael Ming Hong Lin works with found visual structures of industrial origins, namely, traditional Taiwanese floral textile patterns. With skilled craftsmanship and precision, he copies, transfers, repeats and paints them, greatly enlarged, onto wood panels. These he arranges in the form of large-scale architectural interventions, covering entire walls, most recently in the Taiwanese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2001), or as floor pieces, as in the Villa Merkel and in the Haga Eirene at the Istanbul Biennial (2001). The stylised beauty of the blossoms, foliage and vines underscores

¹⁸ Yvan Leclerc, *La Spirale et le Monument* (Paris: Sedes, 1988), pages 110, 111, 115, 116.

¹⁹ Gustave Flaubert (see note 11), page 21.



YOU ARE HERE (R.M.), meets TAMAR SITE (M.L.), 2000, Hong Kong

their ornamentality, recalling Markowitsch's *Flower Piece*. *Flower Piece I* (1994), a sequence of tall format photographs sandwiched between acrylic glass, shows superimposed layers of magnificent floral arrangements whose opulent, excessive, artificial play of forms and colours rubs shoulders with kitsch. In reference to Michael Lin's patterned landscapes, "Made in Taiwan", Hou Hanru speaks of the transformation of the "connotation of 'kitsch' that has been historically imposed on them. ... It is by no means that kind of tension that an exotic object may cause in contrast to Western norms of perception. Instead, it implies a clear attitude of resistance against the hegemonic 'aesthetic' criteria and the values that they embody."²⁰

²⁰ Hou Hanru, "What about sleeping in a show? – Michael Lin's artistic intervention" in *ARS 01*, Maria Hirvi. Ed., for the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki, 2001.

Michael Ming Hong Lin's choice of floral patterns immerses us in the history of his native Taiwan, testifying to its complex, hybrid cultural composition. Strictly speaking, "classical" would mean Chinese, but the patterns show Japanese influence, especially as regards their industrial mode of production. Michael Ming Hong Lin's own story is even more diffuse. Born in Tokyo, he first lived in Taiwan and later in the United States, where he studied. Some years ago he returned to Taiwan with his European wife. The (supposedly) original and distinct cultural identity of the artist and his native Taiwan is now linked with other cultures that have taken root domestically, become satellites, and brought about a mutually intertwined blend. This hybrid identity is unstable, in flux; it is a construct.

For the exhibition *Back From Home* at the Bamboo Curtain Studio in Taiwan (1998), Lin painted the entire wall surface of the exhibition space, a former factory bay. The contours of the total area resembled the stylised shape of a house. Painted with a decorative floral pattern typical of Lin, the surfaces looked like wall-papered living rooms. These patterns, ordinarily used for textiles processed into products such as linens, turned the artist's piece into a kind of 'interior'. The work oscillates between the spheres of private and public and thus addresses the concepts of "home" and "native home". The elusive concept of "native home" is already brought into play in the title of the exhibition, which goes back to a line from a poem of the Ming Dynasty whose basic mood evokes the melancholy yearning for one's home and one's native land.

Home is where the heart is: Markowitsch quotes Frank Zappa for the title of this installation mounted in 1999 at the Berlin Galerie EIGEN+ART, in which he, too, focuses on the con-

cepts of “home” and “native home”. The artist created a complex interior, whose centrepiece is a wooden object consisting of raised wooden floorboards painted oxblood red, reminiscent of the conventional flooring in Berlin flats. In the space between the floorboards and the floor of the gallery, he installed three monitors showing video loops made while looking at flats and walking through their empty rooms and corridors. At one end of the oxblood floorboards, in front of the gallery’s showcase window, he placed three so-called *Schaschlik Lights*, floorlamps made of Japanese Akari lamps skewered onto a vertical rod. Centred on the wall behind the floorboards in the light of the lamps, there hung a large-format photograph of a bonsai, one of the artist’s ‘x-rayed’ book pages. This is post-modern interior design par excellence, consisting of fragments borrowed from an array of cultures: all a question of fashion. Markowitsch dislocates the traditionally stationary homeland and sends it out into the world with its own personal history.

Identity is investigated as something that is at our disposal, a lifelong process imbedded in social, psychological and political realities and also in dreams, unfathomable and irrational, beyond any accumulation of social, cultural, political and economic factors.

In view of the “Kulturkampf” rhetoric that has enjoyed renewed strength in the wake of September 11, with its preaching of outworn dualities that divide the world into good and evil, civilised and barbaric, human and inhuman, it is increasingly important to hone our awareness of far more complex narratives. These reveal the consequences of modern colonialism – the tension between self-fulfilment and the power politics of the West’s democratic states, the interaction between structures of

dominance, value systems and economic systems – and do not reduce identity to the “other”.²¹

As Michel Foucault points out in his *Archaeology of Knowledge*: “(...) where anthropological thought once questioned man’s being or subjectivity, it now bursts open the other, and the outside. In this sense, the diagnosis does not establish the fact of our identity by the play of distinctions. It establishes that we are difference, that our reason is the difference of discourses, our history the difference of times, our selves the difference of masks. That difference, far from being the forgotten and recovered origin, is this dispersion that we are and make.”²²

The *Bibliotherapy* project revolves around the conditions and constitution of knowledge and meanings, the principles underlying their construction and the ways in which they function and, thus, around the conditions of art production itself. It is a marginal phenomenon, which intentionally occupies spaces in between, in between literature and therapy, light and food, bonsai and potato, Bouvard and Pécuchet, Markowitsch and Lin, etc. The in-between is concept through and through, artistic practice which eludes unequivocal placement in space and engages experimental agendas in order to investigate and test patterns of thought and perception. Rémy Markowitsch’s compact assemblages, constructs of visual and extra-visual structures, vague chance encounters, vicinities and familiarities are always plural. And that gives *Bibliotherapy* the feel of a work in progress, continuously modified and reshaped depending on venue and cultural context.

21 Cf. Homi Bhabha, “Democracy De-Realised”, unpublished lecture, *Platform 1, Documenta 11*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, October 9, 2001.

22 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, transl. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), page 131.



LESEN ZU HAUSE, 2001, *Bibliotherapy*, Villa Merkel, Esslingen (R.M./M.L.)

For the Liverpool Biennale 2002, Markowitsch is planning to have Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* read out loud in Great Britain. This novel, deeply rooted in the country's heritage, is not only a timeless story of adventure but also one of the world's most famous blueprints for Utopia. The book has been translated into every conceivable language and has inspired countless imitations from Japan to Switzerland to current media variations, like *Big Brother* and BBC's *Robinson Experiment*.

The island motif is a paradox, both sanctuary and threat. The contradiction inherent in Robinson's situation – civilisation meets the wild – becomes obvious as he fluctuates between the role of the civilised middle-class businessman and the primitive lover of nature. The dream of the lonely island ranges from com-

plete freedom from social constraints and responsibilities to total control, autocracy and omnipotence. Robinson tries to transform the island into a European world, a doppelganger of the great island of his origins.

A direct reference to bibliotherapy is found in Robinson's use of the Bible. He creates his own universe with the help of a few utensils rescued from civilisation: tobacco and paper, a gun and a Bible. As Alberto Manguel observes, Robinson was "the founder – the reluctant founder – of a new society. And Daniel Defoe, his author, thought it necessary that at the beginning of a new society there should be books."²³

Having guaranteed his "mere" survival, the lost hero places the Bible at the core of the new society. The Bible gives him moral support, advice and sustenance. He reads it to relieve his physical and spiritual suffering. Robinson's library was not just guidance and support, it was an essential tool of the new society, as Alberto Manguel remarks, underscoring the significance and impact of the human ability to read.

Defoe did not invent the character of Robinson or the basic features of island living,²⁴ any more than Flaubert invented *Bouvard and Pécuchet*²⁵: the timeless best-seller, *Robinson Crusoe*, with its untold sequels and rewrites meets up with the unfinished, unfathomable sampler, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, in the liter-

23 Alberto Manguel, "The Library of Robinson Crusoe", see page 19 in this publication.

24 Cf. Fernanda Durão Ferreira, *The Portuguese Origins of Robinson Crusoe*, (London, Miami, Delhi, Sydney: Minerva Press, 2000), page 79–80. Durão Ferreira examines the sources of Defoe's *Crusoe* and its similarities to other literary works, and analyses the references and models that can be gleaned from the text.

25 "A scandal: the only thing that had the least chance of being a bit original, in a book whose entire contents have been imported, was not even 'invented' by Flaubert. In a final (or first) perverse and ironic reversal, the two copyists were copied!" Leclerc (see note 18), page 142.

ary universe, in the infinite space of the library in which they are incorporated.

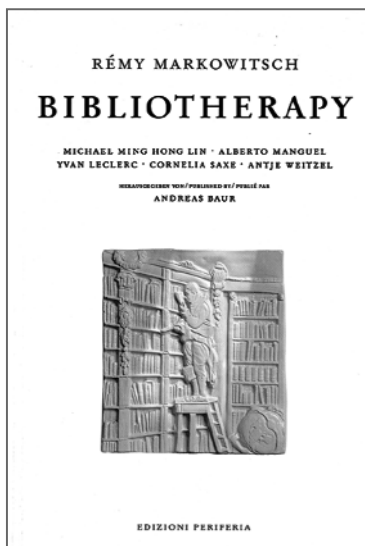
And they meet in the figure of the parrot, the animal that possesses the faculty of imitating human speech, of babbling and reiterating without understanding, like Bouvard and Pécuchet. The parrot keeps cropping up in Flaubert's oeuvre. In fact, *Flaubert's Parrot* is the title of Julian Barnes's perceptive remarks on literature and reading, in which he gives us backdoor access to Flaubert's life and work.²⁶ And there is hardly any version of Robinson without a parrot, usually found perched on the shoulder of the lonely protagonist, a colourful, iridescent echo and imitative surrogate. Tellingly, Markowitsch calls his most recent photographic x-ray pictures of parrots *Loulou*, after the parrot in Flaubert's *Un Coeur simple*. But the name is more than mere quotation: onomatopoeia and linguistic structure turn the word itself into its own repetition, reproduction and serial structure. "The repetition of expressions, often exclamations, (...) frequently deals with disyllabic structures, which square duality, or reflect the phenomenon of repetition through bipartition within microstructures (the parrot Loulou in *Un Cœur simple*). (...) *Bouvard and Pécuchet* would be this comprehensive anamnesis of discourse, through return to and through the copy, this grandiose and ridiculous attempt to reconstruct the book of books, 1500, an encyclopaedic totality; not in order to bring an origin of discourse to light or to recover a memory beyond forgetting, or a name behind anonymity, but in order to (re)produce the wording [of the texts] even in the wake of a loss of origin, ownership or name (...). The question of origin dissolves in the

26 Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984).

copy, both initial and final, since there is no original copy but only the copy of an original that is always lost, the split product of unary origin according to the fantasising and hallucinating logic of the chain of substitutions which launches the quest for truth and condemns it to failure. The first word is missing...²⁷

TRANSLATED BY CATHERINE SCHELBERT

²⁷ Leclerc (see note 18), pages 117, 130.



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