Gustave Flaubert

THE DICTIONARY OF ACCEPTED IDEAS

Translated, with introduction & notes, by Jacques Barzun

A New Directions Paperbook
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INTRODUCTION

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For some sixty years now, French readers of Flaubert’s last novel, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, have been entertained by browsing through its supplement, the *Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues*, to which is sometimes added the *Catalogue des Idées Chic*. Half a dozen editions of this appended matter have come out in France, and for the first time as a separate work in 1951. The Dictionary is of course known by reputation in England and America, better known perhaps than *Bouvard* itself; but despite some fragments rather carelessly translated in the magazine *Gentry* (Summer 1952), the little work cannot be said to have entered our literature as have Flaubert’s letters and novels.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the character of the Dictionary is frequently misunderstood, for it cannot be guessed at from mere description or random quotation. Indeed, the use and effect of the substance he has left us were probably not entirely clear to Flaubert himself. The Dictionary and the dialogue of *Bouvard* show many parallels, and Flaubert may have intended that after his two disappointed heroes have given up active endeavors and started “copying” again they should in fact collect and copy the materials of the Dictionary, together with the quotations of the so-called Album or anthology of absurdities. Both works exhibit specimens of the same conventional stupidity. But the alphabetful of definitions we have here is compiled from a mass of notes, duplicates and variants that were never even sorted, much less proportioned and polished by the author. We therefore do him an injustice in calling these flying sheets a “work”. More than one of them would very likely have been discarded as his intention grew clearer in the task of revision.

What is perfectly clear is Flaubert’s attitude towards the objects of his satire. We know his state of mind from *Bouvard*, from the letters, from innumerable anecdotes. Travelling by train during the time he was composing the novel, he was accosted by a stranger: “Don’t you come from So-and-so and aren’t you a traveller in oil?” “No,” said Flaubert, “in vinegar.” From infancy, we are told, he refused to suffer fools gladly; he would note down the inanities uttered by an old lady who used to visit his parents, and by his twentieth year he already had in mind making a dictionary of such remarks. And of course, like nearly every French artist since the Romantic period, he loathed the bourgeois, whom he once for all defined as “a being whose mode of feeling is low”. From the early 1850’s, Flaubert kept writing and talking to his friends about this handbook, this Dictionary, as his beloved work, his great contribution to moral realism. The project was for him charged with a personal emotion, not simply an intellectual one: “To dissect,” he wrote to George Sand, “is a form of revenge.”

Before its adaptation to the requirements of *Bouvard*, the separate Dictionary was to
mystify as well as goad the ox: “Such a book, with a good preface in which the motive would be stated to be the desire to bring the nation back to Tradition, Order and Sound Conventions—all this so phrased that the reader would not know whether or not his leg was being pulled—such a book would certainly be unusual, even likely to succeed, because it would be entirely up to the minute” (to Bouilhet, 4th September 1850). The same animus against the philistine public, which hardly lets up for an instant throughout Flaubert’s letters, was to find overt expression in the Dictionary, and with impunity: “No law could attack me, though I should attack everything. It would be the justification of Whatever is is right. I should sacrifice the great men to all the nitwits, the martyrs to all the executioners, and do it in a style carried to the wildest pitch—fireworks... After reading the book, one would be afraid to talk, for fear of using one of the phrases in it” (to Louise Colet, 17th December 1852).

All this may be called Theme I of the Dictionary: the castigation of the cliché. This purpose was not new with Flaubert, though it arose in him from native impulse. The captions of Daumier’s drawings, the sayings of M. Joseph Monnier’s fictional Memoirs of that character (1857), as well as a number of other less enduring works, testify to the nineteenth century’s growing awareness of mass production in word and thought. In the one year 1879, two contemporaries of Flaubert’s, the celebrated horn player and wit Eugène Vivier and the obscure L’Epine, both published brochures having the same tendency as the projected Dictionary. Flaubert read them at once and was relieved: “Nothing to fear—asinine.” In spite of this summary dismissal, Vivier’s Un peu de ce qui se dit tous les jours was quite superior to L’Epine’s Parfait Causeur and it certainly anticipated the tone of the Flaubertian cliché: “They quarrel all day long, but really adore each other.”—“With me, it’s just the opposite: if I didn’t drink any, I wouldn’t sleep all night.”

The cliché, as its name indicates, is the metal plate that clicks and reproduces the same image mechanically without end. This is what distinguishes it from an idiom or a proverb. The Dictionary of Clichés published some years ago by Mr. Eric Partridge straddles several species of set phrases and hence bears no likeness to Flaubert’s: it makes no point. The true nature of the thing Flaubert was out to capture and alphabetize was first discussed by an American in our century and endowed by him with a new name which has passed into the language: Gelett Burgess’s “Are you a Bromide?” appeared as a magazine article in 1906. In book form it lists forty-eight genuine clichés (including the archetypal: “It isn’t the money, it’s the principle of the thing”) and it makes the fundamental point that “it is not merely because this remark is trite that it is bromidic; it is because with the Bromide the remark is inevitable.”

In reading Flaubert’s Dictionary, this principle has to be borne in mind, for some of the utterances pilloried are manifestly true; they have to be said at certain times, being in themselves neither fatuous nor tautological. What dams them is the fact that they are the only thing ever said on the subject by the middling sensual man. As in the works of our modern lexicographer—Mr. Frank Sullivan’s Arbuthnot, the cliché expert—the form, imagery and intention of the remarks are immediately recognized as approved, accepted, inescapable, reçues before they begin. In Flaubert’s entourage these expressions recurred, more frequent and regular than the tides, and drove him frantic. For we should remember that he passed much of his life at Croisset, on the right bank of the Seine below Rouen, and was forced to listen there to much
conversation that was not simply bourgeois and philistine, but invincibly repetitious and provincial. Traces of this aggravation are abundant in the Dictionary (e.g. COFFEE, COTTON, CLOTH), and one may surmise that in the finished work these local allusions would have been either eliminated or signalized as home variants of cosmic bromidism.

At any rate, to Flaubert these repetitions proved more than signs of dullness, they were philosophic clues from which he inferred the transformation of the human being under machine capitalism. This he took as a personal affront. Representing Mind, he fought the encroachment of matter and mechanism into the empty places that should have been minds. He kept seeking ways of rendering what he saw, and in addition to Bouvard and the Dictionary, he got as far as writing and circulating—no one would produce it—a sort of Expressionist play called The Castle of Hearts, of which the effect was to be “comic and sinister”. The chief scene would show, through the glass walls of identical houses along a Paris street, identical bourgeois families eating identical meals and exchanging identical words to identical gestures. This of course is akin to the scheme of Zola’s Pot-Bouille (Restless House) and many another attempt at literary Unanimism since: the device was in the air with the hum of machinery.

But while giving the nineteenth century its share in the formation of the bourgeois and bromide, one must not overlook a second influence at work in shaping Flaubert’s material. The Dictionary frequently derides the specially French as against the European or world outlook; the stay-at-home timidity and love of the familiar which, although a universal trait, is reinforced in France by a tradition of complacency that dates back to Louis XIV. This is what Flaubert had in mind when he spoke of his work bringing back the nation to Tradition, Order and Sound Conventions. (See the comment upon the architectural orders and all the references to the causes of the Revolution.) The reception of Salammbô by the Paris critics, and particularly by Sainte-Beuve, illustrated for him the same self-centeredness.

To this one must add that the French language, despite its marvellous power of combining force and subtlety, is traditionally a language of clichés. Readymade expressions abound and are to be preferred; indeed it is not licit to break them up, it is “extravagant”. The seventeenth-century aesthete Père Bouhours has an anecdote on this point which has become famous—almost a cliché: a piece of writing having been shown to an “illustrious personage”, this arbiter of taste smiled and said: “These words must be greatly astonished to find themselves together, for assuredly they had never met before.”

It is but a few steps from this to Flaubert’s “always preceded (or followed) by” and his other set devices. They all indicate a fixity, which on reflection is seen to go beyond forms of speech or lack of ideas or aimless parroting. Social in origin, it is lust for order through convention. Take, for example, Flaubert’s great negative: “Thunder against” (tonner contre). The injunction succinctly represents the agreed-upon necessity to defend the family, property, religion—the famous “bases” of society—against attack. Nor is this a French trait exclusively. One thinks at once of Trollope’s Jupiter and Thunderer newspapers thundering on the same subjects and of Mr. Podsnap leaning on his mantelpiece while he lectures about the British constitution to (it so happens) a Frenchman. Almost every social critic of the nineteenth century was persuaded that more light shone beyond the frontier, and Dickens and Flaubert are at
one about the ubiquitous Podsnap underfoot.

The affirmative counterpart of “Thunder against” is “Very swank” (très chic or bien porté). This designates words and acts which deviate from the norm without undermining the “bases”; here is variety which will not bring on revolution. For revolution is the bugbear behind much of the thundering, and no reader of history can question the reality of the threat. In English-speaking countries one tends to imagine that the Continent was then freer in mind than England, precisely because it indulged in frequent uprisings. Flaubert’s Dictionary should suffice to show that France had its Victorianism too. The connection between sexual and political conformity is well-known, and sexual matters, it is clear, occupy in Flaubert’s definitions a place that would be disproportionate if it were not so unmistakably a cultural sign. Some of the items under this head sound fantastic to us, others quite up-to-date. Other entries, which are free from either sex or politics, remind us that democratic jealousy and competition were already strong and therefore repressed, therefore guilty and aggressive in the small ways we know so well—for example, giving your neighbor the benefit of your superior knowledge: “The only good X comes from Y.”

To the extent that some of the remarks “date,” the Dictionary is an admirable document. A good many sayings are inspired by the Franco-Prussian war which, as we know from Gobineau’s searching essay on the débâcle, let loose an unprecedented amount of nonsense. In such circumstances the cliché becomes a shield against hard truth, humiliation and despair. And that is the moment seized by the satirist to avenge himself, like a reborn Cassandra, by dissecting the present: “All our trouble,” writes Flaubert to George Sand in the wretched year 1871, “comes from our gigantic ignorance… When shall we get over empty speculation and accepted ideas? What should be studied is believed without discussion. Instead of examining, people pontificate.”

In so saying, Flaubert states Theme 2 of the Dictionary—the attack on misinformation, prejudice and incoherence as regards matters of fact. Flaubert has an infaillible ear for the contradictions that everybody absent-mindedly repeats: “ABSINTHE—Violent poison: one glass and you’re dead. Newspapermen drink it as they write their copy.” He plumbs with equal sureness the depths of well-bred ignorance—or rather his eye takes in at a glance the shoals of common knowledge: people know only two things about Archimedes, not three. Here too, in culture, art, history, science and social thought, some things are to be thundered against, others are very swank. The bourgeois mind in this department of life is a compound of error, pedantry, misplaced scorn, fatuous levity and ignorance of its ignorance.

As before in language, so again in opinion, the French tradition works towards a conventional narrowing. French textbooks repeat the same views, offer the same extracts and, lest the student should rashly venture on a perception of his own, guide him with footnotes to the correct criticism of the text: the child reads and repeats apropos of a verse or a turn of phrase: “métaphore hardie,” “pléonasme vicieux,” and the like. In working at Bouvard Flaubert consulted—or had helpers abstract for him—over a thousand works of reference or instruction, from which he culled the enormities that enliven the pages of that novel and that were also to fill out its documentary sequel. The Dictionary appears as a vestibule between two storerooms.

But the systematic hunt for howlers became dangerous to the hunter and to his plan.
It is not simply that the two clerks, whose lives were first to be chronicled as *Memoirs of Two Cockroaches*, turned into subtle and ingenious spokesmen for their creator (e.g. Chapters IV and V on literature and history) but that Flaubert himself became something of a pedant. In the Dictionary he grows schoolmarmish over common expressions that are justifiable and useful, such as that which marks the contrast between warmed air in a sheltered spot and the open air which is cooler. (See *Air* and also *Accident, Earth, Lilac.*) Elsewhere he shows off minute knowledge acquired in tracking down gross errors; he grows ungenerous (*Write*); and in recording the many superstitions about health and hygiene, he surely confuses old peasant notions with the more reprehensible (because “educated”) prejudices that have replaced the first.

He was fully aware of his danger: “The book I am working on could have as subtitle, Encyclopaedia of Human Stupidity. The undertaking gets me down and my subject becomes part of me…” To this immersion we may perhaps attribute a slip he would certainly have ridiculed in another writer: “SCAFFOLD—When upon it, manage to say a few eloquent words before dying.” I underscore the words rather than Flaubert’s carelessness, for he was ready to make fun of himself under the same rubric as the bourgeois. The comment on *FULMINATE* (a favorite verb of his) is surely directed at himself, and we know from a note in the Catalogue that he planned to include among its blunders a sentence from *Madame Bovary*.

In collecting spoken and printed nonsense Flaubert had even more predecessors than in recording clichés. The *sottisier* is an old French genre, which in our day is represented by Curnonsky’s *Le Musée des Erreurs* and George Jean Nathan’s *Great American Credo*, as well as *The New Yorker*’s vigilant scanning of the daily press. But since Flaubert did not live to write the preface to his Dictionary, the analysis of Theme 2 is lacking. For a clue comparable to Gelett Burgess’s one must go to a chapter in George Campbell’s *Philosophy of Rhetoric*: “Why is it Nonsense so often escapes both reader and writer?” The answer is: we think by signs, and the connectedness they have acquired as signs makes us believe in the connection of the things they stand for. Thus in the Dictionary: “ANTICHRIST—Voltaire, Renan…” or “LYNX—Animal famous for its eye.”

Nascent specialization in Flaubert’s day obviously encouraged the sin of affirming without examining and he found brilliant ways of showing this. One is the recurrent “Meaning unknown” (*on ne sait pas ce que c’est*), with its variant: “Nobody is expected to know.” The other is a device that deserves to be called Flaubertismus. It consists in plucking out of all possible usages the two unrelated ones that are truly common and exclusive, thus “GROUP—Suitable for a mantelpiece and in politics.” (See also *Prospects* and *Unleash.*).

But like stupidity and pedantry, specialization is catching. Stendhal had pointed out long before Flaubert that “an idiot who knows a date can disconcert the Wittiest man” At times Flaubert did not quite know with whom to side, the wit or the man with a date. He seems to be, as we say in our jargon, a realist. He derides angels, wings, poetry and lakes—which looks like throwing Romanticism to the dogs. But he is full of Romanticism and will not let it be wantonly attacked by anybody but himself. By reverse sarcasm he defends dreamers, poets, ideals, great men against fools, and martyrs against realists. In the end he does not take sides but knows what he thinks.
About literature, politics and religion he quotes the current cant of both parties and berates it with bad puns, double entendres and forgotten jokes. What he steadily denounces, then, is not the bourgeois as such—since the poor creature cannot please him by saying either white or black—but the bourgeois “style” in the Nietzschean sense, that is to say, lack of style. The bourgeois as an historic phenomenon and a live obnoxious neighbor is lost in a frontal assault on what has been the enemy all along—lack of passion and imagination.

Though all these are large targets and strong hatreds, their presence is conveyed for the most part by irony and innuendo and in the most laconic French imaginable. The task of the translator can thence be inferred as more than usually arduous. To give anything like the impression of the original, he must be just as natural and fully as quick. Yet he must jump the language barrier from cliché to cliché while carrying from one culture and background to their counterparts what “everybody knows”—or doesn’t know. He is continually beset by dilemmas, tempted by lesser advantages, threatened by ambiguities. Whether to take the obvious but factually different equivalent; whether to make clear what the English requires if any meaning is to emerge, even though the French is content with a vagueness that is wholly intelligible; whether to say “you” for “on”—the pronoun which Flaubert would have had to invent had it not already existed: on dit, on ne sait pas; whether to render identical expressions identically throughout, at the cost of one misfit out of three; whether to omit or re-invent—these and a multitude of other questions arise at every turn, sometimes two or three abreast in one definition.

I shall not argue here for the points of method I have followed, but simply list some of the compromises I have made, mentioning at the same time that the notes marked “Fr” give the significant French word wherever a wide leap of denotation was taken for the sake of indispensable immedicacy of understanding. I have used quotation marks much more freely than Flaubert, to stress the thing said as against the mere belief; I have used analogies from English and American life, tags from English and American authors, just like changes in denotation, for immediacy; I have felt similarly free in mixing tones, using our century’s colloquialisms side by side with such expressions as “Thunder against” and “Wax indignant,” which I felt were Flaubert’s just levy on his contemporaries’ idiom.

Finally, I have combined certain entries under one head, for convenience, or perhaps when there was but one English word for two French synonyms that Flaubert had treated separately (FEU, INCENDIE). The twenty-one items of the Catalogue des Idées Chic were left out as being too fragmentary and often too parochial. The notes upon it would have taken more room than the list itself, and the impression of so much semi-recondite matter would have spoiled whatever unity of effect had been achieved in rendering the Dictionary. It also, one cannot too frequently repeat, is but a mass of notes out of a folder. Would that all our scattered papers held half so insidious an appeal to later minds!

2 Vivier, *op. cit.*, pp. 3 and 99.

3 Readers interested in problems of translation will find my views stated at some length in an article published in *Partisan Review* for November-December 1953.
ABELARD. No need to have any notion of his philosophy, nor even to know the titles of
his works. Just refer discreetly to his mutilation by Fulbert. The grave of Abelard
and Heloise: if someone tells you it is apocryphal, exclaim: “You rob me of my
illusions!”

ABSALOM. If he had worn a wig, Joab could not have murdered him. Facetious name
for a bald friend.

ABSINTHE. Extra-violent poison: one glass and you’re dead. Newspapermen drink it as
they write their copy. Has killed more soldiers than the Bedouin.

ACADEMY, FRENCH. Run it down, but try to belong to it if you can.

ACCIDENT. Always “regrettable” or “unlucky”—as if a mishap might sometimes be a
cause for rejoicing.

ACHILLES. Add “fleet of foot”: people will think you’ve read Homer.

ACTRESSES. The ruin of young men of good family. Are fearfully lascivious; engage in
“nameless orgies”; run through fortunes; end in the poorhouse. “I beg to differ, sir:
some are excellent mothers!”

ADMIRAL. Always brave. Invariable swear-word: “Shiver my timbers!”

ADVERTISING. Large fortunes are made by it.

AFFAIRS (BUSINESS). Come first. A woman must not refer to hers. The most important
thing in life. Be-all and end-all.

AGRICULTURE. One of the two nourishing breasts of the state (the state is masculine,
but never mind). Should be encouraged. Short of hands.

AIR. Beware of drafts of air. The depths of the air are invariably unlike the surface. If
the former are warm, the latter is cold, and vice versa.

ALABASTER. Its use is to describe the most beautiful parts of a woman’s body.

ALBION. Always preceded by white, perfidious or Positivist. Napoleon only failed by
a hair’s breadth to conquer it. Praise it: “freedom-loving England.”

ALCIBIADES. Famous for his dog’s tail. Typical debauchee. Consorted with Aspasia.

ALCOHOLISM. Cause of all modern diseases. (See ABSINTHE and TOBACCO.)

AMBITION. Always preceded by “mad,” unless it be “noble.”

AMERICA. Famous examples of injustice: Columbus discovered it and it is named after
Amerigo Vespucci. If it weren’t for the discovery of America, we should not be
suffering from syphilis and phylloxera. Exalt it all the same, especially if you’ve
never been there. Lecture people on self-government.

AMPHITHEATER. You will know of only one, that of the Beaux-Arts School.

ANDROCLES. Mention him and his lion when someone speaks of animal tamers.

ANGEL. Eminently suitable for love and literature.
ANGER. Stirs the blood: healthful to yield to it now and then.

ANIMALS. “If only dumb animals could speak! So often more intelligent than men.”

ANT. Model to cite in front of a spendthrift. Suggested the idea of savings banks.

ANTICHRIST. Voltaire, Renan…

ANTIQUES. Always modern fakes.

ANTIQUITY (AND EVERYTHING CONNECTED WITH IT). Out of date, an awful bore.

APARTMENT (BACHELOR’S). Always in a mess, with feminine garments strewn about.

Stale cigarette smoke. A search would reveal amazing things.

APLOMB. Always “perfect” or “diabolical.”

APRICOTS. “None to be had again this year.”

ARCHIMedes. On hearing his name, shout “Eureka!” Or else: “Give me a fulcrum and I will move the world” There is also Archimedes’ screw, but you are not expected to know what it is.

ARCHITECTS. All idiots: they always forget to put in the stairs.

ARCHITECTURE. There are but four architectural orders. Forgetting, of course, the Egyptian, Cyclopean, Assyrian, Hindoo, Chinese, Gothic, Romanesque, etc.

ARISTOCRACY. Despise and envy it.

ARMY. The bulwark of society.

ARSENIC. Found in everything. Bring up Mme. Lafarge. And yet certain peoples eat it.

ART. Shortest path to the poorhouse. What use is it since machinery can make things better and quicker?

ARTISTS. All charlatans. Praise their disinterestedness (old-fashioned). Express surprise that they dress like everyone else (old-fashioned). They earn huge sums and squander them. Often asked to dine out. Woman artist necessarily a whore. What artists do cannot be called work.

ASP. Animal known through Cleopatra’s basket of figs.

ASSASSIN. Always a coward, even when he acted with daring and courage. Yet less reprehensible than a firebug.

ASTRONOMY. Delightful science. Of use only to sailors. In speaking of it, make fun of astrology.

ATHETISTS. “A nation of atheists cannot survive.”

AUTHORS. One should “know a few,” never mind their names.

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1 Allusion to Samuel II, 18.
2 Allusion to the French conquest of Algeria.
3 Fr: “Mille sabords!”
Because of the white cliffs of Dover.

Disease of the grape. In point of fact, when phylloxera nearly killed off the French vines in 1896, they were restored by grafting American plants.

Marie-Fortunée Lafarge (1816–1852), principal in a famous murder case (1840), in which the detection of arsenic led to a miscarriage of justice.
B

B.A. DEGREE. Thunder against.\(^1\)

BACHELORS. All self-centered, all rakes. Should be taxed. Headed for a lonely old age.

BACK. A slap on the back can start tuberculosis.

BAGNOLET.\(^2\) Town that is famous for its blind people.

Baldness. Always “premature,” caused by youthful excesses—or by the hatching of great thoughts.

BALLOONS. Thanks to them, man will one day reach the moon. “But it will be many a day before you can steer them.”

BALLS. Use this word only as a swear word, and possibly not even then. (See DOCTOR).

BANDITS. Always “fierce.”

BANKERS. All millionaires. Levantines. Wolves.

BARBER. “To go to the tonsorial artist”; “to patronize Figaro.” Louis XI’s barber.\(^3\)

Formerly surgeons, used to bleed you.

BASSES (OF SOCIETY). I.e. property, the family, religion, respect for authority. Show anger if these are impugned.

BASILICA. Grandiose synonym for church. Always: “an impressive basilica.”

BASQUES. The people who turn out the best runners.

BATTLE. Always “bloody.” There are always two sets of victors: those who won and those who lost.

BAYADÈRE. Word that stirs the fancy. All oriental women are bayadères. (See ODALISQUES.)

BEAR. Generally named Bruin.\(^4\) Tell the story of the invalid who, seeing that a watch had fallen into the bear pit, went down and was eaten alive.

BEARD. Sign of strength. Grown too thick, will cause baldness. Helps protect neckcloth.

BEDROOM. In an old chateau, Henry IV always spent one night there.

BEER. DO not drink beer if you wish to avoid colds.

BEETHOVEN. DO not pronounce Beathoven. Be sure to gush when one of his works is being played.

BELLOWS. Never use them.

BELLY. Say “abdomen” in the presence of ladies.

BIBLE. The oldest book in the world.

BILL. Always too large.

BILLIARDS. A noble game. Indispensable in the country.
BIRD. Aspire to become one, saying with a sigh: “Oh, for a pair of wings! Wings!”—it shows a poetic soul.

BLACK AS. Follow invariably with “your hat” or “pitch”. As for “jet black,” what is jet?²

BLONDES. Hotter than brunettes. (See BRUNETTES.)

BLOOD-LETTING. Have yourself bled in the Spring.

BLUESTOCKING. Term of contempt applied to women with intellectual interests. Quote Molière in support: “When the compass of her mind she stretches…”⁶

BOARDING SCHOOL. Say this in English when it is for girls.

BODY. If we knew how our body is made, we wouldn’t dare move.

BOILED DINNER. Healthful. Inseparable from “broth and—.”⁷

BOILS. See PIMPLES.

BOOK. Always too long, regardless of subject.

BOOTS. In summer heat, never omit allusions to policemen’s boots or postmen’s shoes (permissible only in the country, in the open). Boots are the only elegant footgear.

BREAD. No one knows what filth goes into it.

BREASTWORKS. Never use to refer to a woman.⁸

BREATH. To have a strong breath is a sign of distinction. Fend off remarks about killing flies. Refer it to the stomach.

BRETONS. All good souls, but stubborn.

BRONZE. Metal of the classic centuries.

BRUNETTES. Hotter than blondes. (See BLONDES.)

BUDDHISM. “False religion of India.” (Definition in Bouillet’s Dictionary, first edition.)⁹

BUDGET. Never balanced.

BUFFON. Put on lace cuffs before writing.

BULL. Father of the calf; the ox is only the uncle.

BUREAUCRAT. Inspires awe, no matter what bureau he works in.

BURIAL. Too often premature. Tell stories of corpses that had eaten an arm off from hunger.

BUTCHERS. Appalling in times of revolution.

BUYING AND SELLING. The goal of life.

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¹ Because of the competitive oral examination, thought to be haphazard and unfair.
² Small town near Paris where one of the earliest homes for the blind was established.
³ Olivier le Daim, who became a favored adviser of the king’s. After his master’s death he became so
ostentatious with his riches that he was imprisoned and hanged.

4 Fr: “Martin.”
5 The original points out a confusion between homonyms: geai, a bluebird, mistakenly thought to be a black bird, and jais, jet.
6 “When the compass of her mind she stretches
   To tell a waistcoat from a pair of breeches.”
This is the upper limit assigned to woman’s intellect by Chrysale in Les Femmes Savantes, Act. n, Sc. VII.

7 Fr: “La soupe et le bouilli,” i.e. boiled beef and the soup made from the water in which the meat was cooked.
8 Fr: “garde côte,” a pun on “coast guard” and “rib protector.”
9 Marie-Nicolas Bouillet was a prolific compiler of handbooks. His Dictionnaire classique de l’antiquité sacrée et profane first appeared in two volumes in 1826 and was re-issued dozens of times.
CABINET MAKER. Craftsman who works mostly in mahogany.

CAMARILLA. Wax indignant on hearing this word.

CAMEL. Has two humps and the dromedary one; or the camel has one and the dromedary two—it is confusing.

CANDOR. Always “disarming”. One is either full of it or wholly without.

CANNONADE. Affects the weather.

CANNONBALL. The air current it creates causes blindness.

CAP (SKULL). Indispensable to the man of letters. Gives dignity to the face.

CARBUNCLE. See PIMPLES.

CARRIAGE. It’s better to rent than to own one—you’re spared the bother about grooms and horses, who are always getting sick.

CARthusians. Spend their time making chartreuse, digging their own graves and saying to one another, “Brother, thou too must die.”

CASTLE. Has invariably withstood a great siege under Philip Augustus.

CATHOLICISM. Has had a good influence on art.

CATS. Are treacherous. Call them “the tiger in the house.” Cut off their tails to prevent vertigo.

CATSPAW. Grave insult, but in the grand style, to fling at a political opponent: “Sir, you are but a catspaw of the Presidential clique.” Used only from the rostrum of the Chamber.

CAVALRY. Nobler than the infantry.

CAVERNS. Usual residence of robbers. Always full of snakes.

CEDAR (OF LEBANON). The huge one at the Botanical Garden was brought over in a man’s hat.

CELEBRITIES. Concern yourself about the least details of their private lives, so that you can run them down.

CELL. Always horrible. The straw is always damp. None has ever been found attractive.

CENSORSHIP. “Say what you will, it’s a good thing.”

CERUMEN. Human wax. Should not be removed: it keeps insects from entering the ear.

CHAMBERMAIDS. Prettier than their mistresses. Know all their secrets and betray them. Always undone by the son of the house.

CHAMPAGNE. The sign of a ceremonial dinner. Pretend to despise it, saying: “It’s really not a wine.” Arouses the enthusiasm of petty folk. Russia drinks more of it than
France. Has been the medium for spreading French ideas throughout Europe. During the Regency people did nothing but drink champagne. But technically one doesn’t drink it, one “samples” it.

Chateaubriand. Best known for the cut of meat that bears his name.

Cheating (the customs). Is not dishonest; rather a proof of cleverness and political independence.

Cheese. Quote Brillat-Savarin’s maxim: “Dessert without cheese is like a beauty with only one eye.”

Chess. Symbol of military tactics. All great generals good at chess. Too serious as a game, too pointless as a science.

Chestnut. Female of the horse-chestnut.

Chieftain. Meaning unknown.

Chilblains. Sign of health. Come from having warmed oneself after being cold.

Children. Give signs of a passionate attachment to all children when others are looking on.

Chimney. Always smokes. Center of discussion about heating systems.

Chimney sweep. “Winter’s black swallow.”

Cholera. You catch it from eating melons. The cure is lots of tea with rum in it.

Christianity. Freed the slaves.

Christmas. Wouldn’t be Christmas without the pudding.

Cider. Spoils the teeth.

Cigars. Those sold under government monopoly always “a foul smoke”; the only good ones are smuggled in.

Circus trainers. Use obscene practices.

City fathers. Thunder against apropos of street paving: “What can our city father be thinking of!”

Clarinet. Playing it causes blindness: all blind men play the clarinet.

Classics. You are supposed to know all about them.

Cloth. All from Elbeuf.

Clown. His joints were made so in infancy.

Club. One should always belong to a club.

Club (political). Rouses ire of conservatives. Confusion and argument about the right pronunciation of the word.

Cock. A thin man must invariably say: “Fighting cocks are never fat!”

Coffee. Induces wit. Good only if it comes through Havre. After a big dinner party, is taken standing up. Take it without sugar—very swank: gives the impression you’ve lived in the East.

COITUS, COPULATION. Words to avoid. Say: “They had relations…”
COKE. Inseparable from Littleton. Nobody knows what they did, but say to every law student: “You must be deep in your Coke upon Littleton.”
COLD. Healthier than heat.
COLONIES (OUR). Register sadness in speaking of them.
COMB (THICK). Makes the hair fall out.
COMEDY. In verse, no longer suited to our times. Still, high comedy commands respect — castigat ridendo mores.
COMETS. Make fun of our ancestors who feared them.
COMFORT. The most valuable discovery of modern times.
COMMUNION. One’s first communion—the greatest day of one’s life.
COMPETITION. The soul of trade.
COMPOSITION. At school, a good composition shows application, whereas translation shows intelligence. Out in the world, scoff at those who were good at composition.
COMPROMISE. Always recommend it, even when the alternatives are irreconcilable.
CONCERT. Respectable way to kill time.
CONCESSIONS. Never make any: they ruined Louis XVI.
CONCUPISCENCE. Priest’s word for carnal desire.
CONFECTIONERS. All the inhabitants of Rouen are confectioners.
CONFINEMENT. Avoid the word; replace by “event”: “When is the event expected?”
CONGRATULATIONS. Always “hearty,” “sincere,” etc.
CONSERVATIVE. Politician with pot belly. “A limited, conservative mind? Certainly! Limits keep fools from falling down wells.”
CONSERVATOIRE. It is imperative to subscribe to its concerts.
CONSPIRATORS. They feel a compulsion to write down their names on a list.
CONSTIPATION. All literary men are constipated. This affects their politics.
CONSTITUTIONAL (RULES). Are stifling us—under them it is impossible to govern.
CONSTITUTIONAL (WALK). Always take one after dinner: aids digestion.
CONTRALTO. Meaning unknown.
CONVERSATION. Politics and religion must be kept out of it.
CONVICTS. Always look it. All clever with their hands. Our penitentiaries number many a man of genius.
COOKING. In restaurants, always bad for the system; at home, always wholesome; in the South, too much spice, or oil.
COPAIBA BALSAM. Pretend not to know what it is for.
CORNMS. Better than a barometer. Extremely dangerous if badly cut. Cite dreadful examples of fatal consequences.
CORSET. Prevents childbearing.