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## **Idea-making and Crises: Contradictions between the Presentation, Argumentation and Form of Ideas in Selected Works of Descartes and Voltaire**

*Lauren Clark, University of Sunderland*

Readers of Descartes and Voltaire may wish to join me in wallowing in the theoretical mire of distinction between what makes French literature stylistically dissimilar from French philosophical discourse. For the French there is no such predicament. While an autochthon may have difficulty with the content of a text, the literary form is their own; the *discours*, *essai*, *lettre*, *traité* and the less esteemed *roman*. This is not to say that utter comprehension and stylistic clarity is instilled in French heritage, but rather that the artificial constructs within which words are placed are something subliminally à la française, something instinctive. For example, if a person of Anglo-Saxon orientation attends university in France and finds him or herself failing to meet satisfactory requirements à l'écriture, being incapable of composing a brief, yet concise *compte rendu* or writing an unordered *discours* which aspires to verbosity rather than structure, it would not be through lack of basic textual comprehension, but rather a result of unfamiliarity with literary constructs. As such, obeying a literary dogma which is unfamiliar or foreign to one's own, not only overhauls all preconceived structural and stylistic notions held as doctrine: it also evokes crisis. Further, when it comes to translation, it seems like a literary treason.

Voltaire acknowledges this most markedly in his attempted translation of The Earl of Rochester's *Satire on Man* in *Lettres Philosophiques*, whereby he makes known his grievances of translating the “free renderings” (Voltaire 2005, 103) of English poets into a firm French vernacular:

Voici à peu près comme s'exprime le comte de Rochester, dans sa satire sur l'homme; mais il faut que le lecteur se ressouvienne toujours que ce sont ici des traductions libres de poètes

anglais, et que la gêne de notre versification et les bienséances délicates de notre langue ne peuvent donner l'équivalent de la licence impétueuse du style anglais. (Voltaire 2005, 79)

The problem of reproducing English poetic hotheadedness in a foreign tongue is much like fitting a jigsaw piece into the wrong place. Voltaire cuts off the edges of the jigsaw piece to position it in a new whole. In this creative rather than emulative process, the aim is to evade crisis by renovating poetic form and defying French stylistic propriety in one fell swoop. When addressing texts which are philosophical-literary hybrids, therefore, the sheer stylistic intimidation encountered by readers, translators and authors alike call for a deeper investigation into their composition: “Only an intrepid, wildly courageous and probably doomed philosopher would launch herself with an essay on philosophic methodology” (Rorty 1983, 547).

Taking the examples of *Les Passions de l'âme* (1649) and the *Discours de la méthode* (1637) by René Descartes and Voltaire's *Lettres Philosophiques* (1728) and *Le Philosophe ignorant* (1766), an analysis of the varying manipulations of the complications and crises of presentation, argumentation and form within these texts will be portrayed. Far from regurgitating textual analyses, the aim is to expose, expound and explore varying power struggles, verging on crisis between form and content in these texts. Instances of contradictory authorial intent may be regarded as detrimental, conducive to or quite apart from the original thesis of the text. The manipulation of mimicry, evasion, abstraction and rhetoric in these texts can be seen to both divest the reader of trust, all the while placing him or her as pawns in a grander scheme of narrative. It is only through an analysis of the voices and masks adopted by Descartes and Voltaire in their writings that their structural evasion and formal deceptiveness can be appreciated. In this manner, both Descartes and Voltaire can be viewed as prime movers in instigating an overturning of accepted philosophical enquiry to enrich development of French thought in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and beyond. Aside from their rebellious experimentations in form, narrative and genre, it is thanks to a

distaste of aristocratic values concerning the noble soul and inherited noble jurisdiction on philosophical matters that both philosophers appeased crises in the run up to the Enlightenment to entail philosophical development. Offering up the fundamental separation of moral relativity from philosophy and importing Lockean models respectively, it is essential to consider Descartes and Voltaire as literary rhetoricians as well as pragmatic and schismatic *penseurs*.

To begin with, a comparative analysis of *Le Philosophe ignorant* and the *Discours de la méthode* will be given so as to explore the phenomenon of textual construction through editing and publication. It will be considered whether or not the assimilation of texts and their layout is indicative of a sense of authorship or further frameworks of meaning given the seventeenth and eighteenth century context in which they were written, considering censorship laws and the threat of auto-da-fé. Secondly, in order to comprehend the *Discours*, its style, narrative and rhetoric must be examined. Descartes indebtedness to Montaigne and different theories as to how the *méthode* came to be a subject of his other works can be regarded in this instance also. Finally, the crisis of textual classification and French philosophical thought will be considered. This arises most prominently in *Lettres Philosophiques* which can be digested as travel writing, satire and an experiment in epistolary narrative. In examining these literary modes in the context of Restoration England and the French Enlightenment, it can be argued that this piece was more aligned with satire than any other literary genre.

### **I. The assembly line: composition, editing and publication**

While Voltaire and Descartes can be likened for literary preoccupations with disguise, the impact that their philosophical writings brought to bear upon the history of French thought cannot be understated. In the early seventeenth century, the lingering influence of the Scholastics and classical philosophy in French pedagogy offered little in the way of philosophical development for Descartes

who had undergone an unsatisfying education at La Flèche. Descartes' permissiveness not only to use doubt as a methodological process of reasoned enquiry but also to enlist this postulation using first person narrative in the *Discours* could not possibly sit well with traditionalists of the school of Aristotle. The "new philosophy" of the *Discours* was published in Leiden in 1637 and was circulated quite safely amidst a Dutch readership familiar with the printed circulation of unorthodox philosophical ideas.

As far as blasphemy and the offensive are concerned, the respective readerships of Descartes and Voltaire were neither disaffected nor naive. Events surrounding the incarceration of the latter in the Bastille from 1716-1717 make this patently evident and provoked him adopt the *nom de plume* Voltaire. However, whether or not these parties were conscious of the research behind and construction of Voltaire's *Le Philosophe ignorant* and Descartes' *Discours de la méthode* before the texts arrived at the printers remains to be seen. What is apparent is that if the true composition of each of these texts was made public at the time of their issue, much of the bafflement and blind appreciation initially evoked would be critically reassessed.

If we are to believe Gilbert Gadoffre's analysis, the *Discours de la méthode* is far from a chronological construct but one written piecemeal, assimilated from various works the author was writing pre-1637. This explains to some extent why the content may be found in part contradictory and the style and presentation lacking in cohesion, bordering on disorganisation. Gadoffre asserts that parts III and VI (the *morale provisoire* and an introduction to Descartes' later works respectively) are the only original parts within the entire six part schema. Parts I, IV and V had been taken from earlier works;

La première partie va sur les traces de l'Histoire de mon Esprit de 1628 [...]

La IVe partie reprend les arguments au début de son séjour en Hollande [...]

La Ve partie est un résumé du *Monde*. (Gadoffre 1941, 26)

What is shocking here is not the prospect that readers have been duped into believing the work was composed amidst the stream of consciousness which Descartes' first person narration dictates; rather, it is that the *Discours* was partly a public relations enterprise to test public appeal before releasing *Des Météores* and *La Dioptrique* for publication. If the latter is true, Descartes' rhetoric of persuasion and the ambivalence in genre seem all the more tactful and revealing of a suspicious psyche intent on guaranteeing his own success. The haphazard addition of one of his genuine articles, part III, at the printing office speaks volumes as regards his approach to editing, which is at least mildly hesitant and at most frenetic. There is a distinctive contradiction between presenting an example of printed, premeditated thought and the manner in which articles were interchanged *à la dernière minute*. There is nevertheless no attempt made by the author to disguise the fact that inspiration, planning and the articulation of ideas is a meticulous process which cannot be rushed. Having moved to Germany to live in self-imposed exile, Descartes sheds some light onto the duration and pace of his enquiries,

Toutefois ces neuf ans s'écoulèrent avant que j'eusse encore pris aucun parti touchant les difficultés qui ont coutume d'être disputées entre les doctes [...] et il y a justement huit ans que ce désir me fit résoudre à m'éloigner de tous les lieux où je pouvais avoir des connaissances, et à me retirer ici [...] j'ai pu vivre aussi solitaire et retiré que dans les déserts les plus écartés. (Descartes 2005, 33-34)

When he discusses the abandonment of friends, academic literature, cohorts and others who may distract him from his pursuit of truth, the implication is that he will follow reasoned enquiry to ultimate truth in a somewhat routine manner. Empty surroundings allow the philosopher to channel his thoughts more coherently towards his end goal. Given that he encourages man to doubt all, the

quest for Descartes aims as much for psychological betterment as for philosophical discovery. Amidst circumspection of our thoughts, the notion of time becomes an irrelevant entity as it had taken the philosopher eight years to quit France: concrete timeframes are used to confine menial human activities while philosophical introspection has no stopwatch. As such, it is perfectly imaginable that Descartes took a similar approach to the formulation of the *Discours*, taking a great time to translate a carefully constructed mind-method into something crude and readily understandable on the page. One would think that a little catharsis may be in store for the philosopher after having undergone the painstaking transcription of an eight year culmination of ideas. Descartes was nevertheless persecuted by the Sorbonne who enacted an auto-de-fé of his literature and accused him of holding atheistic beliefs contrary to both Catholic and Protestant tenets. Surprisingly, as the Cartesian school progressed after Descartes' death in 1650, fear of censorship increased with the outlawing of the teaching of Cartesian philosophy in European institutions beginning with the University of Louvain in 1662. It made it quite clear that when it comes to publishing, great care should be taken to avoid upsetting censors, because writing of extreme positions may lead to a Galilean fate. Fearing such, after publication of the *Discours* Descartes personally burned a number of his books. In this manner, through upholding nonconformist philosophical enquiry, Descartes predicates and admits the need for his premeditated composition and its diverse derivations.

Or il y a maintenant trois ans que j'étais parvenu à la fin du traité [. . .] et que je commençais à le revoir afin de le mettre entre les mains d'un imprimeur lorsque j'appris que des personnes à qui je défère [. . .] avaient désapprouvé une opinion de physique publiée un peu auparavant [. . .] et cela me fit craindre qu'il ne s'en trouvât tout de même quelque'une entre les miennes en laquelle je me fusse mépris. (Descartes 2005, 63)

However, the motives behind Descartes' composition of the *Discours* need not be viewed in an entirely negative light. It would be unfair and condescending to refer to Descartes as the *malin génie* who consciously and cruelly leaves out suppositions in mathematical equations. Instead, he can be considered as an exponent of his own method in theory to the very point of its publication. Perhaps the author wished to portray his active involvement with his work by putting into action phases three and four of his method, just before publication: the synthesis stage—“*conduire par ordre mes pensées*” (Descartes 2005, 23)—and the listing and linking stage—“*faire partout des dénombrements*” (Descartes 2005, 24). In this way, Descartes makes apparent the pedagogical and didactic nature of his work, it being infectious enough to be employed by the author himself.

Although one hundred and seventeen years separate the works, composition of the *Philosophe Ignorant* and *Les Passions de l'âme* can be likened, initially, on the very superficial basis that they were both the products of greying philosophers who wrote in secluded locations. The former remains one of the lesser known works of Voltaire but was nevertheless one of the most controversial, and was claimed to be his own *Discours de la method* as it decries Descartes, Gassendi and his unenlightened predecessors as atheists (Carr 1965, 10). Despite the relative scope for mid-life crisis, Voltaire appears here to be at his most sceptical, dissecting and deconstructing several schools of thought: the matters of moral relativity, universal causation and freedom. Nonetheless, Voltaire also alleges that he is at his most ignorant at this point.

The line of enquiry in this work is not the ordered analyses intended with the *Discours*, but an outpouring of fifty six *doutes*, each of which stands as an independent unit of thought. Voltaire too approved of editing to some extent, for a few of the *doutes* are updated with information deemed crucial to his argument in newly composed units. Taking, for example, doubt XIX, *Dépendence entier de l'homme* and doubt XXI, *Encore un mot de la dépendance de l'homme*, one can see that Voltaire begins by proposing that human creation may be partially explained in teleological terms whilst he simultaneously debunks technical metaphysical enquiry:



Tout est moyen et fins dans mon corps; tout y est ressort, poulie, force mouvante, machine hydraulique, équilibre de liqueurs, laboratoire de chimie. (Voltaire 2000, 20)

Voltaire seems to suggest here that despite the logical deductions which are carried out in a chemistry laboratory, “*laboratoire de chimie*”, individual theorising about the makeup of mankind cannot be tested or proven in such conditions. This concurs with and expands upon Descartes’ contention in *Les Passions de l’âme* that the human soul is not noble born and that physicality can be attached to the expression each of the six primitive passions.

In terms of form and structure, in doubt XXI the author does not simply update that which he has already written concerning man’s guidance by a divine creator; rather, he asserts that his thoughts too are divine gifts, for human beings know not how to think. Furthermore, to illustrate human attempts at understanding divine creation Voltaire then gives the example of two differing theories: the fabrication of everything from a godly or universal form or that of godly omniscience and intervention in life. The contrast is provided with Mallebranche on the one hand—“Qui osait prétendre que nous voyons tout dans Dieu même”—and the Stoics’ conviction that “c’est dieu qui agit en nous et que nous possédons un rayon de sa substance” on the other. The fact that there may be a middle way between these two schools of thought and hence a possible resolution of the universal quandary is enough to necessitate another doubt. By dint of the change in subject matter, Voltaire seems to have felt it necessary to make his new reflections distinct stylistically to evade crisis by his creation of part XXI. Indeed, even the conclusion is to self-reference and lapse into his proclaimed ignorance, “Je retombe (nomb.II) dans l’ignorance” (Voltaire 2000, 22).

For Voltaire, therefore, second-guessing and reconfiguration constitute key motions of his unbridled ponderings as an allegedly ignorant philosopher. Descartes is less accepting of such

structural and logical disarray opting for the alleged documentation of an autobiographical struggle culminating in his method as opposed to Voltaire's satirical act of deconstruction.

On the other hand, rigidity and certitude are two elements which bind the 212 articles constituting Descartes' *Les Passions de l'âme*. The articles here are arranged in a tripartite structure. In part one, a theory of what the passions of the soul are and of their function in physiological terms is explained in general. In part two, Descartes commences the arduous task of listing and '*le dénombrement*' of the passions and the demarcation of six primitive passions, « à savoir l'admiration, l'amour, la haine, le désir, la joie et la tristesse » (Descartes 1988, 196). It is in part three that all other non-primitive passions which derive from one of the six primitive passions are elucidated. How the composition of *Les Passions* differs from the other texts is that it begins in an epistolary manner with a series of four letters between the author and an unknown friend encouraging the publication of his new work. The friends are contemporaries Claude Clerselier and Father Claude Picot according to Descartes' biographer Adrien Baillet (1649-1706). Nonetheless, contemporary critics seem to agree that the letters were fashioned by Descartes, if not written by him. Stephen H. Voss argues in his introduction to the work that

The style of the first and third letters, by the friend, is more stilted than Descartes' usual style, but that proves very little: in my view they were at least written under Descartes' direction and were probably written by the philosopher himself. (Voss 1989, 1)

Peter France advances this argument to claim that such is Descartes' anxiety "not only to be right, but to be seen to be right" (France 1972, 55) and, thus, that his letters are polemical self-advertising designed to arouse a favourable reception of his new works. But isn't this all a bit cynical? Surely painting himself as an author so willing to appease *le grand public* and make his work a spectacle denies the very strong-willed and controlled schema that he markets. It may be more helpful here to

view the introduction to *Les Passions de l'âme* more as an experiment in genre. whereby the literary and philosophical Descartes sought to introduce one of his most physiological and definitive works in clear terms. In so doing, his readership may adhere to their roles as readers of physics and not concern themselves with the gossip mongering which features in personal correspondence: « Qu'il fear connaître que mon dessein n'a pas été d'expliquer les passions en orateur, ni même en philosophe moral, mais seulement en physicien » (Descartes 1988, 151).

In the varying approaches to publication and composition one can gain insight into the ulterior stylistic motives which pervaded each text, namely Descartes' practicing of *la méthode* in his ordering of the content of subsequent publications. It has been noted by James M. Edie that Descartes sought "a philosophy not of the logical resolution of conflicting texts, but of discovery" (Edie 1969, 95), and thus sought to break from his past in abandoning former learning from the ancients and scholastics to embrace newer forms of philosophical introspection and expression. Moreover, Edie's analysis can be sensibly applied to sum up Descartes' attitude towards his own texts: examples of unresolved works in progress, at a crossroads between crisis and circumspection but copiously documented.

## II Narratives, Rhetoric and Style

While various ideas pre-exist the *Discours*, and editing may have brought the text to its neat assembly, it is possible for the reader to be duped by the narrative of progressive discovery and the tone of gradual enlightenment employed in this text. Descartes begins part I with the Lockean notion of *tabula rasa*, "d'y représenter ma vie comme en tableau" and in disposing of all preconceived ideas he proceeds to document an autobiographical, self-referential and seemingly modest process of Enlightenment. The reader is taken through a scathing account of Descartes' childhood and adult education. By encouraging students, philosophers and his elders to reject their

academic influences on the micro and macro level, the author returns to his initial suggestion, "Le bon sens est la chose du monde la plus partagée" (Descartes 2005, 9). Voltaire agrees somewhat that common knowledge has been commonly distributed: "J'ai pensé que la nature a donné à chaque être la portion qui lui convient" (Descartes 2005, 7). However, it may be suggested that from school age, the thirst for learning lies in a desire to unveil the human composition and not solely to discover universal truths.

Yet this temporal and chronological course of discovery is far from logical and appears contradictory. It is only in synthesis that one can reformulate discovery, from an initial position of doubt, without the time element. Having established this necessity for there to be doubt in Part I of the *Discours*, Part II introduces the *méthode* and Parts IV and V show and application of the *méthode*. Despite his surety, this process of methodological doubt must not be imitated, as it would risk evoking civic unrest and would perhaps be a maddening process to adhere to. Aprioristic conjecture will invite readers living unordered lives to admire the author's self-dismemberment and hereby, his attainment of the reasoned existence. While *Le Philosophe ignorant* makes apparent Voltaire's capacity for the unbridled deconstruction of philosophy, Descartes opts for an indirect introduction to his *Discours*. In the employment of an abstract building metaphor for man's reasoned existence, Descartes detracts from the more pressing matter of the deconstruction of his own methodology.

Ainsi ces anciennes cités qui, n'ayant été que commencement que des bourgades, sont devenues par succession de temps de grandes villes[...]à voir comme ils sont arrangés, ici un grand, là un petit, et comme ils rendent les rues courbées et inégales, on dirait que c'est plutôt la fortune que la volonté de quelques hommes usant de raison que les ai disposés.  
(Descartes 2005, 17-18)

While an orderly and neatly aligned town planning model may appeal aesthetically and suggest that reasoned living is a better alternative, does this mean that the quest for truth is a logical ordered one or rather that Descartes is offering a prelude to his own method that he must have had a vested interest in? Given that the philosopher emerged somewhat reconstructed from the embroilments of his own doubt, surely he could offer something a little clearer than intellectual parables in order to demystify what lead to his discovery of the method. Stylistically the quotation from part II above represents a unit of reasoned thought. Long, complex sentences become entangled as the author writes his way to the truth and as such, analogies and images are used in order to offer a visualisation of the path to truth:

qu'il est beaucoup meilleur de les suivre que d'entreprendre d'aller plus droit, en grim pant au-dessus des rochers, et descendant jusques au bas de précipices. (Descartes 2005, 20)

Such analogies are far more effective than the abstract images evoked to convey passions in *Les Passions de l'âme*, for example:

Mais la tristesse de cette pitié n'est pas amère; et comme celle que causent les actions funestes qu'on voit représenter sur un théâtre, elle est plus dans l'extérieur et dans le sens, que dans l'intérieur de l'âme. (Descartes 2005, 264)

Descartes has thus chosen emotive and descriptive vocabulary very carefully indeed so that each of his arguments is met with the appropriate imagery fitting to the framework of genre within which his text functions. Considering that *Les Passions de l'âme* does little to present itself as an autobiographical account in the manner in which the *Discours* does, this might seem unsurprising. Recent contemplations about the nature of narrative discourse as it pertains to philosophical texts

suggests that the genre of Descartes' work might be preordained by dint of the very title attached to it:

The major didactic prose works of classical antiquity, works of philosophy or rhetoric [...] likewise respect the rule of restraint [...] It is the middle ages that inaugurate the use of thematic titles [...] The same type of title appears in Descartes. (Genette 1997, 362)

Furthermore, if Gérard Genette's description of the restraining titles of didactic texts holds true, Descartes' *Discours* can be considered a didactical example of deconstruction of both philosophical heritage and literary genres. Nevertheless, the image of reconstruction and building upon solid foundations is a recurrent one in the *Discours*. Before introducing *le Morale Provisoire* in Part III, Descartes again asserts that the search for truth must begin with destruction—"Avant de commencer à rebâtir le logis où on demeure" (Descartes 2005, 27)—and proceeds to give a series of four maxims which the sceptical philosopher must follow to avoid censorship, to escape the 'forêt' of doubt and to control our desires.

The reader becomes bound by these maxims in their indisputably logical format of a hypothesis, then the elimination of objections, then restated hypothesis and delayed conclusions. Pierre-Alain Cahné analyses use of the verb "conduire" in "conduire par ordre les pensées" (rule three of the method) to illustrate this phenomenon.

Donc, d'un côté nous avons l'image du jugement *précipité et subi*, et de l'autre celle d'un jugement concerté et voulu: d'où notre conclusion, où nous voudrions simplement suggérer que « conduire par ordre » équivaut à qui interviendrait ici, dans son constant souci de mettre en valeur *l'attention* qu'il ne faut jamais cesser de développer, pour garder le droit fil du chemin de la pure méthode, toujours guetté par la tentation du labyrinthe, d'où:

« conduire par ordre »: conduire de manière volontaire, où *par ordre* renforce le sens même de *conduire*. (Cahné 1980, 160)

Supposing that all of this is preconceived, that each tense choice, encapsulation, conjunction and adverb has been premeditated to bully the reader into submission, what then is the difference between Descartes' rhetoric and reality? How will the reader know if the truth is beyond the efforts made to convince us? Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, in a somewhat hasty analysis, positions Descartes in the centre of a self-inflicted dichotomy in which he "seems torn between the demands of truth and those of persuasion, between his inheritance of traditional genres and his new directions" (Rorty 1983, 548). The crisis that exists between the quest for reason and the implications of literary rhetoric does appear a modern phenomenon and not one that would be considered a constituent part of the exponent of Cartesian dualism.

Cruder still, it could be said that such manners of reasoning have become so much of a game to Descartes that they are overriding his innate common sense or capacity for clear expression. This structure could equally be perceived as a deliberate attempt by the author to meddle with the boundaries of what makes non-fiction, not fiction. To say the jury is out on this matter is to make an ignorant assumption, but what is clear is that the *Discours* is contradictory in style. It establishes a system of thinking by destroying a pre-existent one and uses rhetoric while condemning it. The impact of Descartes' syntax is unquestionable but there are loopholes in the overall argument which lead to a state of crisis of authorial intent, encouraging the very scepticism Descartes decries.

### III Satire and external influences

I have waited until now to refer to *Lettres Philosophiques* in detail because enquiry into the critical work's genre has brought exceptionally mixed responses and has proved problematic in terms of

categorisation. Beeson and Cronk are keen to probe the ambivalence of Voltaire's standpoint when comparing the definitive examples in his *Philosophical Dictionary* with the *Lettres Philosophiques*: "Is he an original philosophical thinker? Or is he simply a vulgariser and publicist for the thought of others?" (Beeson & Cronk 2009, 27). The point is not that the categorisation of *Lettres Philosophiques* as philosophical is essential or even helpful, but the fact that its genre is still debated in critics' circles has certainly helped immortalise what R.Pomea has called '*ce manifeste des lumières*' (Voltaire 1992, 60). Where Pomea understands *Lettres Philosophiques* as being representative of the age of Enlightenment and opts for historical categorisation, Beeson and Cronk contest the 'thematic title' of the text and the didactic philosophical discussion which Voltaire purports to offer.

Eighteenth century French Enlightenment saw the questioning of long accepted values, fostering enquiry on all fronts and with a greater sense of relativity replacing the spirit of absolutism. Voltaire's name is intimately linked to the age of the Enlightenment, yet much of *Les Lettres Philisophiques* appears to guise itself as fictional.

In 1726, a dispute with Le chevalier de Rohan lead to Voltaire's departure for England where, from a safe distance, he would shine the spotlight of reason upon a variety of topics: religious denominations (letters 1-7); government (letters 8 and 9); social issues (letters 10 and 11); great thinkers (letters 12,13,14); Newtonian theories (letters 15,16,17); cultural issues (letters 18-24) and finally metaphysical questions. It is clear from the narrator's sarcasm and the criticisms made of the French system by English comparison that this text was to be far more than a simple travelogue. Thanks to his subtle undercutting of the *ancien régime*, the literary mode<sup>3</sup> of satire may be the category best fitting for classifying *Lettres Philosophiques*. Although there is no real doctrine as to the derivation of the term satire, two polarised historic suggestions have prevailed. To justify

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<sup>3</sup> I mean as opposed to the somewhat static nature of the travelogue, a genre non-fictional travel writing is often cornered into.



my choice of considering the *Lettres Philosophiques* as satire a brief note on satirical categories seems fitting.

The first historic definition is *satyr*, a mythical beast, half man half goat, wild, lawless, rule-breaking creatures and bringers of disorder. These qualities are hence transferred to denote the work of a satirist as being transgressive, obscene and potentially dangerous. Secondly we have *lanx satura*, which was in fact a dish of mixed ingredients served after a Roman meal. This idea of miscellaneous content is transferred to satire as is a sense of intrigue—the dish or literature is food for thought. Over the centuries, writers and critics have opted for one definition or the other and they have subsequently preferred one type of analysis. This analysis was usually rooted with either Horace or Juvenal. The form of *lanx satura* in satire has been viewed as civilised, obeying and polished—much like the Roman Banquet—whilst the *satyr* remains hard-hitting, direct, passionate and launching attacks on society.

The gap which lies between judging the *Lettres Philosophiques* as either *satyr* or *lanx satura* very much depends upon whether the narrator is considered to be Voltaire himself or a ridiculous archetype of a Frenchman. In the first letter, for example, we see an overly courteous Frenchman bowing, scraping and insisting on using the “vous” form in what is his first encounter with a Quaker. If Voltaire was not enough of a parody by his physical actions in this instance, he is then advised quite plainly by the Quaker that “Les gens de ton pays [. . .] font trop de compliments de reverences” (Voltaire 1992, 1). This subtle parody of the ridiculous Frenchman disappears in letter five, with its vehement attack upon the hypocrisy of religion on both sides of La Manche. His highly subversive claims about Catholicism being beyond the pale in England and the activities of Protestants in France “des jeunes connus par leurs débauches et élevés à la prélature par des intrigues de femmes” (Voltaire 1992, 17) verges on harangue. The author's final statement in this letter, which can be read as an humorous aside, serves its purpose and diffuses the vehemence

formerly evoked: “Mais ce sont des vilains hérétiques à brûler à tous les diables, comme dit maître François Rabelais; c'est pourquoi je ne me mêle pas de leurs affaires” (Voltaire 1992, 17).

It is this crafty turn of phrase which leaves an impression that the author's tongue is firmly in cheek, diffusing the former sensation he whipped up only a few statements previously. In his awareness of the extent to which he can be critical of his own regime, one might argue that he shows a broader distinction between history and polemic, between that which is oratory and risqué and that which is witty rhetoric.

Two important further factors lead me to maintain that *Lettres Philosophiques* is much more of a satirical sneer than a jovial poke in the ribs. Firstly, the author uses this satire in utmost seriousness to scorn his contemporaries. Descartes is on the receiving end of this heavy criticism in letter fourteen:

Je ne nierai pas que tous les autres ouvrages de M.Descartes fourmillent d'erreurs [. . .]  
Alors sa philosophie eut plus qu'un roman ingénieux et tout au plus vraisemblable pour les ignorants. (Voltaire 1992, 49)

Secondly, and perhaps less likely, is the reason that he embraced the literary movement of the English Restoration period, associating with comedic dramatists and satirists such as Jonathan Swift, William Wycherley and the irrepressible Earl of Rochester. When the *Lettres Philosophiques* are regarded in this context, Voltaire, like Swift, refutes satire's supposed moral basis. Although the satiric mode can attack individuals, encourage shunning of vice on a public level and therefore profess to be morally enriching, the extent to which satire could fully reform an individual or problem is debateable. The mechanisms which Voltaire has at work here are therefore more complicated than those as prescribed in the *lanx satura/ satyr* model. However, the means of attack,

through personal slighting and witticisms, show a certain familiarity with this literary *mode* at his time of writing.

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Having come to an appreciation of Voltaire's *Le Philosophe ignorant* and *Lettres Philosophiques* and Descartes' *Discours de la méthode* and *Les Passions de l'âme* through sustained analysis of the presentation, form and argumentation methods employed by each author, several concluding points can be deduced. Primarily, the physical presentation of a text presents much more of an insight into a philosophical author's methodology than is often supposed. Through Descartes' stylistic technique, the method he wishes to promote becomes something intangible and unconsciously practiced. Critics have described their uncontrollable emulation of Descartes' style in writing, which on the one hand makes for rather confused research, but on the other pleasantly preserves the crisis of the *Discours* itself.

That the French philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries attested to deconstruction in the formulation of narratives, rhetoric and style, ensured a hard-sell of philosophical constructs which would otherwise lack context. This is not to say that Voltaire, the arch-satirist, displayed any indebtedness to his predecessors in *Lettres Philosophiques*, nor did he hold sacred the metaphysical constructs Descartes professed in his later work *Le Philosophe ignorant*. Apparent crises between the autobiographical, academic, confessional and didactic forms in Descartes are more representative of an unreadiness to distinguish the quest for truth from the rhetoric employed than they are ordered accounts of his mind-method. To term Descartes' *Discours* 'noncommittal' would be a vulgarisation of the complex forms employed, and yet casting Voltaire's *Lettres Philosophiques* as anything less than a satirical sneer would overturn the delicate axes of rhetoric upon which both texts rest.

Writing amidst crisis therefore does not necessarily preclude escape. In fact, Descartes and Voltaire are shown to be similarly perplexed by the very constructs they create to divest French

thought of unrest. This effect is rendered cyclical when the best known of contemporary French philosophers Alain Badiou, in a paper entitled 'le désir de philosophie' (1999), vouched for a Voltairian iconoclastic approach to renewing philosophy by employing Cartesian foundation-setting:

My position is to break with these frameworks of thought, to find another philosophical style, a style other than that of interpretation, of logical grammarian analysis, or of polyvalence and language games-that is, to rediscover a foundational style, a decided style, a style in the school of a Descartes for example. (Badiou 2005, 37)

Thus, in terms of idea making, the contradictions between the presentation, argumentation and form of ideas communicated in Descartes and Voltaire invite analysis as to how French philosophy can survive or be spurned by crises of thought. For Descartes, resolution was sought in creating the *Discours* from a point of introspection and publishing safely in the Netherlands. For Voltaire, evolution of French Enlightenment thought was a matter initially inspired *outré-Manche* in that perfidious "best of all possible worlds."

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