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Robin Howells

# Playing Simplicity

Polemical Stupidity in the Writing  
of the French Enlightenment



PETER LANG

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## Introduction

‘Stupidity (incomprehension) in the novel is always polemical’, affirms Bakhtin.<sup>1</sup> From this characteristically sweeping and suggestive proposition by the Russian theorist I derive my central concept. Polemical stupidity might be defined as the strategic refusal to understand. The gloss is implicit in Bakhtin’s expansion of his initial assertion:

Stupidity [...] interacts dialogically with an intelligence (a lofty pseudo-intelligence) with which it polemicizes and whose mask it tears away. Stupidity, like gay deception and other novelistic categories, is a dialogic category [...]. For this reason stupidity (incomprehension) in the novel is always implicated in language, in the word: at its heart always lies a polemical failure to understand [...] generally accepted, canonised, inveterately false languages with their lofty labels for things and events [...]

By failing to understand, polemical stupidity queries, or invites us to query, what has previously been accepted as authorised. It opens up received discourses by engaging them in various ways. It brings down the ‘lofty pseudo-intelligence’ or unmasks the ‘inveterately false language’. We note that polemical stupidity is a subcategory of the dialogic, that most central of concepts in Bakhtin.

When embodied in a human type, stupidity is particularly the domain of the Fool. The Fool’s failure to understand is genuine. The Fool is surprised, puzzled or perhaps shocked by what he encounters in the world. He may even question it. (An obvious example from French Enlightenment writing would be *Candide*.) At the other extreme is the Rogue, who is perfectly familiar with how the world works. The Rogue deliberately adopts received discourses in order to

1 ‘Discourse in the novel’ in *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp.259–422 (p.403). The French version, ‘Du Discours romanesque’, may be found in *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, tr. Daria Olivier (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), pp.83–233.

exploit those who believe them. (Diderot's Neveu de Rameau presents himself in these terms.) Between these two roles is that of the Clown, who plays the fool with some degree of awareness. (Arlequin, in Marivaux if not in the *Théâtre italien* of the period more generally, comes close.)<sup>2</sup> 'Gay deception' is the domain of the Rogue. But all three types introduce play into the received order. All three, naively or cynically, quote or pastiche or parody the languages they encounter. This is a mode of what Bakhtin calls 'second-voicing'. All three function, by their signifying difference, to pluralise and break down the monologic claims of established discourses.

Polemical stupidity is to be found widely in Western writing. Turning to philosophy – without entirely leaving folk-types – we find it in Socrates. In many of Plato's *Dialogues* Socrates plays the fool. Much of what is known as the Socratic Method consists in asking questions of others, using simplicity in order to prompt and to examine received wisdom. When his interlocutor tells him that he is clever, Socrates protests:

I only wish that were true, my dear Ion. But clever! *You* are the clever ones, [...]: all I can do is tell the truth, as any plain man can do. Just look at my question: how plain and simple it is. (*Ion*, 532d, e)<sup>3</sup>

Insofar as Socrates is aware that his simplicity is a masquerade (that is, that he is using a mask consciously) such claims might be classified as 'Socratic irony'. The *ieron* is a dissembler, and Socrates was seen in similar terms. Thrasymachos exclaims irritably, 'By heaven, here's the famous irony of Socrates! I knew it, and I told these gentlemen all along – you will never answer, only play

2 On these three types in Bakhtin, see most fully §6 of 'Forms of time and chronotope in the novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination*. Neither the English nor the French terms ('le sot, le fripon, le bouffon') are entirely satisfactory. It is important to note that the court fool becomes within this typology a version of the Clown, not of the Fool. The court fool in English is also the jester, which implies the subversive role of jokes and play. In French he is 'le fou', which serves to remind us of the fundamental link in European culture between foolishness and folly.

3 Quotations are from the translation by W. H. D. Rouse, *Great Dialogues of Plato* (New York: Mentor, 1956).

simplicity [...]' (*Republic*, 337a). His role is ludic. But even in the *Apology* Socrates takes the stance of naïvety. Addressing the court, he says:

If you hear me using to defend myself here the same words which I speak with generally, in the market or at the banker's counter, where many of you have heard me, and elsewhere, do not be surprised [...]. I am simply quite strange to the style of this place. If I were really a stranger, a foreigner, I suppose you would not be hard on me. (*Apology*, 17c, d)

The attention to language here is notable. Socrates points out that his language differs from that which is normal in a law court, thus marking his difference and the dialogic relation. It is perhaps implicit that his 'ordinary' language will function to open up the closed system, to demystify the prestige of a specialist language. He affirms that he uses the words of the market – a very suggestive synecdoche of everyday exchange. The device of 'making strange', which he employs as his philosophical method, is then adopted for his defence. He suggests that his situation if not also his utterance will be like that of 'a stranger, a foreigner'.

The stranger is a paradigmatic role in Enlightenment writing, but scarcely less so in the twentieth century. It is announced in the title of Camus's *L'Étranger*. The first paragraph of this novel is famous:

Aujourd'hui, maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas. J'ai reçu un télégramme de l'asile: 'Mère décédée. Enterrement demain. Sentiments distingués.' Cela ne veut rien dire.

In the first sentence the *énonciateur* informs us of his mother's death. In the second he says that he does not know on which day the event occurred. The factual notation, the oral style, the abruptness of the statements, the brevity of the two sentences and the lack of any expression of emotion, all give the appearance of indifference. The *énonciateur*, that is, 'fails to understand' that received norms require discursive solemnity for such a topic. This dislocation promptly reappears in the telegram. Its text – quoted directly – consists of three minimal utterances. In 'Mère décédée' we have formal then pompous registers. This elevated diction is juxtaposed with the neutral and

practical datum ‘Enterrement demain’. Both are succeeded by the fatuously conventional ‘Sentiments distingués’. While the telegram functions as a *mise-en-abyme* of Meursault’s own laconism, it also restores authenticity to his utterance. ‘Mère décédée’ contrasts with the simplicity, and points up the humanity, of ‘maman est morte’. In the final sentence Meursault’s own reaction to the official message articulates polemical stupidity in its purest form: ‘Cela ne veut rien dire’. For failing to understand or sufficiently adopt the discourses of the world, Meursault like Socrates will be put to death.

Bakhtin identifies three levels at which polemical stupidity can operate in prose fiction:

Either the prose writer represents a world through the words of a *narrator* who does not understand this world, does not acknowledge its poetic, scholarly or otherwise lofty and significant labels; or else the prose writer introduces a *character* who does not understand; or, finally, the direct *style* of the author himself involves a deliberate (polemical) failure to understand the habitual way of conceiving the world [...]. It is possible, of course, to make simultaneous use of all three levels of such failures to understand, such prosaic forms of stupidity. (*ibid.*, p.402)

In *L’Étranger* Camus does all three. We have already noted some of the stylistic features. These contribute to the effect of dislocation (which Sartre in *Situations I* identified so well). In this piece of fiction all three levels are in fact united, due to Camus’s choice of a mode of fictional autobiography. Meursault is the narrator, the character and the stylist. For Bakhtin – as indicated by his references to ‘novelistic categories’ or ‘prosaic forms’ – the novel itself through its imbrication of multiple discourses is innately dialogic. We might therefore add a fourth level, that of genre, though it must be extended to cover such obvious forms as parody, and low or fragmented genres generally.<sup>4</sup> Treating a philosophical problem through a simple man’s story is a generic form of polemical stupidity. The author’s refusal to understand the discursive conventions is also a basic form of irony.

4 ‘Para-odia’ means ‘alongside-singing’ (compare Bakhtin’s broader concept of ‘second-voicing’). Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern* (Cambridge University Press, 1993) offers a very good theoretical and historical account (despite deprecating eighteenth-century practice).

This invites us to note an important distinction. Misunderstanding by the author we usually take to be intentional, even – or especially – when the author claims innocence. At other levels it is often presented as involuntary. But at all levels misunderstanding *functions* polemically.<sup>5</sup>

\* \* \*

It might be argued, however, that Meursault’s version of reality is not only polemical but also true. In our first quotation from Plato, Socrates claimed to tell the truth. The Fool has traditionally been seen as possessing a superior kind of knowledge. The word of the Holy Fool, in both primitive and religious traditions, is privileged. Its relation to the world may indeed be seen not as dialogic but as self-complete. In the latter case there is no room for play or difference. ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness’ is ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’ (Mark, i, 3). Traditionally, religious discourse is exclusive (‘the Bible’ signifies ‘*the book*’). It is self-consistent and self-confirming – ‘As it is written in the prophets’ (Mark, i, 2). Speaker, utterance and written text render truth unmediated: ‘This is the disciple that testifieth of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his testimony is true’ (John, xxi, 24). The metaphysics of presence, like the myth of origins, declare this to be the Divine word: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’ (John, i, 1).

On the other hand, the Son of God sometimes dealt in verbal play. Christ uses the provocation of riddles (‘Render unto Caesar [...]’), and apparently founds His Church upon a pun (‘Tu es Pierre

5 Much of this argument is present in the following observation, which links the polemical stupidity of the stranger, the conscious ironist (writer and perhaps narrator) and the Fool. ‘En définitive, il y a peu de différence entre l’étranger qui ignore tout de nos habitudes, l’ironiste qui feint de les ignorer [...] et le naïf qui ne les comprend pas. L’essentiel, c’est toujours de supprimer les explications, pour faire en sorte que nos actes ou nos paroles habituels deviennent autant de gestes dépourvus de sens: nous sommes alors obligés de les redéfinir ou même de nous redéfinir’ (David Ball, ‘La Définition ironique’, *Revue de Littérature comparée* 50 (1976), pp.213–36 (pp.215–6)). This excellent article draws on a wide range of examples, but focuses on Swift and Voltaire – the eighteenth century.

[...]’). Christ plays the fool. This role goes far beyond the verbal. Set up as a mock King of the Jews, He is assigned a parodic relation to the structures of worldly power. As a recipient of the world’s violence, He too suffers the fate of the fool. But his folly is Divine not human. The paradox is theorised by St Paul. ‘If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise’ (Cor.I, iii, 18). It reposes on a fundamental opposition. ‘The natural man receiveth not the things of the spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him’ (Cor. I, ii, 14). The Divine and the natural are opposed.

The fool of Christian revelation will be taken back into the world. In the medieval period the bearer of Divine truth will become engaged (again) with popular traditions of the fool. This imbrication is evident in its institutionalised version, the court fool.<sup>6</sup> Folly assumes peculiar importance in the late medieval *imaginaire*. It is a major theme in some of the greatest humanist literature of the Northern Renaissance.<sup>7</sup> Renaissance humanism however still rejoices in the vast written inheritance of the past. To begin the modern narrative of the Enlightenment we need a more radical break. We must start where most modern stories start: with Descartes or with *Don Quixote*.

Descartes quite consciously begins again. He declares for systematic doubt – a philosophical form of stupidity.<sup>8</sup> With extraordinary daring, he allows it to clear the ground completely. All authority and all supposed knowledge is put in doubt and thus swept

6 On the history of the Fool, still very good are the classic studies by Barbara Swain, *Fools and Folly during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (1932; reprint Folcroft PA: Folcroft, 1973), and more broadly Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (1935; reprint Gloucester Mass.: P. Smith, 1966), William Willeford, *The Fool and his Sceptre* (London: Arnold, 1969) which takes in such modern versions as the Clown in cinema.

7 See especially Walter Kaiser, *Praisers of Folly. Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare* (London: Gollancz, 1964).

8 Henri Gouhier calls Descartes’s approach ‘une “idiotie” philosophique’, likening it to the Socratic method: *Les Méditations métaphysiques de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Paris: Vrin, 1970), p.63. See too Jonathan Rée, *Philosophical Tales* (London: Methuen, 1987), which traces from Descartes ‘the ironic literary method of the philosophers’ (p.4).

away. Of course this leads to a ground of certainty – constituted by the fact that he himself doubts, and thus thinks. Moreover, vast areas have been prudently excluded from doubt – the religious, political and social domains. Nevertheless the modern era begins with this contingent rejection of all collective and consecrated authority, by one individual, in the name of critical and human reason. Despite its *a priori* bent and its abstraction, the *Discours de la méthode* also affirms (in Part vi) the importance of ‘les expériences’. To that extent it declares for empirical verification and the new inductive science. Thirdly, and no less importantly, it is written in the vernacular and in non-technical terms. It addresses itself deliberately to the wider audience – who possess that ‘bon sens’ or ‘raison naturelle’ which the work posits at the start as universal and opposes at the end to the errors of the proponents of received discourses (‘précepteurs’). The new criterion of validity, the ‘clair et distinct’, applies in all three domains, offering a vast purchase for polemical stupidity.<sup>9</sup> Empiricism, and the appeal from received culture to a natural judgement, will both be central to our investigation.

Alongside the founding text of modern thought is that of modern literature. The work of Descartes in the 1630s is considerably antedated by *Don Quixote* (1605–15). Cervantes creates perhaps the greatest of all fictional fools.<sup>10</sup> Quixote is a *lay* fool, who clashes with the world because it contradicts not Christianity but chivalric romance. Cervantes clearly presents him as mistaken and mad on this issue. (The tendency to identify with him rather than with the world dates largely from Romanticism.) But the power of the type is such that it transcends the negative intention. Similarly in the writing we now emphasise less the satire on romance than the subversion of all

9 Bishop Bossuet identifies very well the radical danger in this principle: ‘Sous prétexte qu’il ne faut admettre que ce qu’on entend clairement [...] chacun se donne la liberté de dire: “j’entends ceci, et je n’entends pas cela”, et sur ce seul fondement on approuve, et on rejette, tout ce qu’on veut’ [my emphasis] (*Correspondance* (21 mai 1687), cited in Paul Hazard, *La Crise de la conscience européenne 1680–1715* (1935; Paris: Fayard, 1961) II, iv, p.195).

10 See the Epilogue, ‘The last Fool: *Don Quixote*’, in Kaiser, *op.cit.*; and prospectively, Arturo Serrano-Plaja, ‘*Magic Realism in Cervantes: ‘Don Quixote’ as seen through ‘Tom Sawyer’ and ‘The Idiot’* (1967; tr. Robert S. Rudder; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

truth-claims. The pretences of translation, unreliable informants and fragmented sources, are all forms of metaliterary play. The self-deprecatory Prologue stupidly undermines the claims of other works. The effect of this foregrounding of the conventions is to deconstruct the literary enterprise itself. More radically, the device of having various persons in the story discuss *Don Quixote*, and the whole phenomenon of a narrative about a man who believes in false narratives, implies the lack of any ontological ground. Whether Cervantes intended these readings of his work by later generations is doubtful. The word of Descartes was re-opened more quickly. The Enlightenment will take up both.

For much of Part II, Quixote and Sancho are retained at a ducal court. This recalls the tradition of the court fool, who played the dangerous game of aping those in power and telling the court its truths. But little of that is left here, apart from the semi-independent episode of Sancho's governorship. Knight and squire may surprise the court by their wisdom, but they do not disturb it. The fool is losing his special status, and his dialogic relation with the world. We may add that the corporeal level of this relation, physical violence, becomes similarly one-sided. In Part I of the *Quixote*, the fool and the world repeatedly exchange blows, but at the ducal court he submits to assault. On neither level is the fool now a threat. He is being reduced to a source of social amusement.<sup>11</sup>

This reduction of the fool in the first half of the seventeenth century is evident in French literature. It can be traced most neatly, perhaps, through the three comic novels of Charles Sorel. In *Francion* (1623) both Collinet the madman and Francion himself take the role of the 'fou'. They deal in play, parody, aggression and truth. Sorel's next comic novel has folly at its centre, but no longer as a significantly dialogic principle. As its title indicates, *Le Berger*

11 On the declining status of folly in the period 1450 to 1650, see the remarkable ch.1, 'Stultifera navis', of Michel Foucault, *Folie et déraison. Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961). Foucault's story of course is that of increasingly secular ideological circumscription, domestication and institutional control. In a word, 'la Nef [de la folie] n'ira plus d'un au-deça du monde à un au-delà, dans son étrange passage [...]. La voilà amarrée, solidement, au milieu des choses et des gens. Retenue et maintenue. Non plus barque mais hôpital' (p.51).

*extravagant* (1627–8) is indebted to *Don Quixote*. The protagonist's pastoral delusions are mockingly enacted around him by a privileged group, for whom the fool is only a diversion. In Sorel's third comic novel, *Polyandre* (1648), the protagonist has no illusion. Circulating in respectable Parisian society, he is one of 'les honnêtes gens'. Delusion is principally distributed among a number of secondary roles – a poet, an alchemist, a pedant and an 'amoureux universel' – who provide society and the reader with intermittent entertainment. Dangerous folly has been reduced to a moral and social 'travers'.<sup>12</sup>

Sociability is becoming a central cultural concern. By the mid-century, theatre is the dominant genre. It will remain so for the next fifty to a hundred years – the extended span of French classicism. This must be partly because theatre, and stage comedy in particular, are in every sense sociable. Plays deal in a group action, enacted for a larger group. Group mores are central in classical comedy. Non-conformism and irrationality are subjected to mockery on the stage and laughter from the audience. Social norms are affirmed through civilised pleasure. Political norms too are easily enforced on this collective and public genre. Royal patronage contributes to its success. But so does the paying public, a new and increasingly important social force. With the expansion of wealth and leisure this 'honnête' public grows. It will gradually displace the power of patronage by the power of the market; it will provide a widening readership for 'prosaic' genres, enabling notably the rise of the novel; and it will allow the writer in any genre to appeal from institutional authority to a nascent public opinion. These are Enlightenment phenomena, but their beginnings can be located in Pascal's *Lettres provinciales* of 1656–7, as my first chapter will show.<sup>13</sup> The French

12 See my *Carnival to Classicism: the Comic Novels of Charles Sorel* (Paris–Seattle–Tübingen: Biblio 17, 1989), especially pp.146–8. The one genuinely disturbing figure in *Polyandre*, Guerinette the 'folle', is literally confined.

13 The now-classic argument of Jurgen Habermas that 'the public sphere' is established in England in the eighteenth century has been subject to some debate. A case for its emergence in France from the 1690s is made by J.A.W. Gunn, *Queen of the World: Opinion in the Public Life of France from the Renaissance to the Revolution* (Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century 328 (1995)), (see especially Ch.3). See too the latter part of Michael Moriarty's *Taste and Ideology in Seventeenth-century France* (Cambridge UP, 1988). On the



Enlightenment as a movement can be said to start in the 1680s, though as a period it must wait for the turn of the century or the death of Louis XIV in 1715.

Molière's high classical comedy presents 'folie' as an obsession, located in a central character, which is manifested in a concrete social situation. The protagonist – 'l'avare' or 'le malade imaginaire', or even 'le misanthrope' – is the butt of social ridicule. However Molière can also point towards the new way of the Enlightenment. The fool becomes once more positively valorised, as the *naïf* speaking a new kind of truth which is 'natural'. The play is *L'École des femmes* (1662). When the authoritarian Arnolphe accuses the simple Agnès of having received a young man, she readily confirms it. As he himself notes, 'Cet aveu qu'elle fait avec sincérité / Me marque pour le moins son ingénuité' (ll.477–8). Her 'âme innocente' (l.543) allows her to speak without cultural inhibition of the pleasure that she still feels. 'La douceur me chatouille et là-dedans remue / Certain je ne sais quoi dont je suis toute émue' (ll.563–4). Arnolphe – who represents received 'Christian' norms – exclaims that this is sinful. At such behaviour, he says, 'le Ciel est courroucé'. Agnès's reply exhibits polemical stupidity in a strong form: 'Courroucé! Mais pourquoi faut-il qu'il s'en courrouce? / C'est une chose, hélas, si plaisante et si douce' (ll.602–4). The mind's failure to understand allows the body to speak its truth. Later, with a little more awareness, she declines to deny that she loves Horace: 'S'il est vrai, ne le dirais-je pas?'. Taking the world at its word, she misunderstands still, while pointing out that she did not understand at all what she felt then: 'Je n'y songeais pas lorsque se fit la chose' (ll.1522, 1525).

Agnès serves to voice what might be called a 'morale naturelle'. However her own demand, and implicitly that of the play, is for cultural education. Certainly the play's title implies that love itself does the job. As Horace duly affirms, 'L'amour est un grand maître'. But he then opposes love to nature: 'De la nature, en nous, il force les obstacles' (ll.900, 904). And the play's title and action are morally ambivalent. The neo-Platonic and 'courtois' traditions say that love

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development of social and discursive networks of communication, see Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: a Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994).

elevates us. But the tradition of 'gauloiserie' and misogyny says that it teaches women to deceive – as we find in Act III that Agnès does. Molière offers us a set of ironies within a comic action. Polemical stupidity is not used systematically to ideological ends as the Enlightenment will use it.

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I shall argue that polemical stupidity is the characteristic discursive mode of the French Enlightenment. Why historically should this be so? The first answer must be, in a word, nature. The new philosophy of nature embraces both the Scientific Revolution and a new approach to human nature. Both are drawn not from received authority but from the empirical investigation of a concrete reality. Not only do they reject 'systems'. The new ideology of empirical science refuses to understand anything beyond the observable data. Its most famous formulation, Newton's *Hypotheses non fingo* – 'I do not make hypotheses' – is a kind of polemical stupidity.<sup>14</sup> The motto of the Royal Society, established in 1662, was *Nullius in verba*. This meant 'facts not words'; 'natural phenomena must be allowed to speak for themselves'.<sup>15</sup> Or as Sprat puts it in his *History* (1667), the goal of the Society's members is 'to make faithful Records of all the works of Nature, or Art, which can come within their reach'.<sup>16</sup> Neither in language nor in ambition should we go beyond the observable phenomena. Locke's approval goes to 'He that will suffer himself to be informed by observation and experience, and not make his own

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14 The affirmation appears in the 'General Scholium' of the second edition of the *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687, 1713). Of course no investigation is possible without some form of preliminary 'hypothesis'; but this underlines the dialogic character of the affirmation in its period. For a review of discussion of Newton's sense, see 'Hypotheses in science', in the Introduction to Voltaire, *Éléments de la philosophie de Newton* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1992), ed. Robert L. Walters and W. H. Barber, pp.22–28.

15 Larry Stewart, *The Rise of Public Science: Rhetoric, Technology and Natural Philosophy in Newtonian Britain, 1660–1750* (Cambridge UP, 1992), p.3.

16 Thomas Sprat, *History of the Royal Society for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge*, quoted in John Yolton, *A Locke Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p.73.

hypothesis the rule of nature'.<sup>17</sup> The nearest thing to an equivalent principle in French is what we might call, with both Bayle and Fontenelle, 'la vérité des faits'.<sup>18</sup> There occurs for many domains of enquiry a paradigmatic shift, which Paul Hazard summarized as 'ce passage du transcendant au positif'.<sup>19</sup> But we must make the link with forms of writing.

The style of the *Modernes* is atomic. Causal conjunctions, in particular, are rare with them, and their prose has not the highly articulated architectural quality of their seventeenth century predecessors. They do not construct chains of reasoning. They lay out observed 'facts' and leave it to the reader to evaluate them and put them together.<sup>20</sup>

On the larger scale, this refusal to construct or conclude implies fragmented literary forms: journalism and dictionaries, dialogues and 'ana', memoirs and letter-novels.<sup>21</sup> In prose fiction the shift to the first person has major implications. What Henri Coulet calls 'le remplacement du point de vue omniscient du créateur par le point de vue expérimental du narrateur', also results in 'la ruine des procédés de composition harmonieuse'.<sup>22</sup> The effects include greater informality,

17 *Essay on Human Understanding*, Bk II, ch.1, sec.21.

18 It is futile, says Bayle, to 'opposer des raisonnemens métaphysiques à une vérité de fait': *Pensées sur la Comète* (1682–3), §145. 'La plupart des Gens', says Fontenelle, 'courent naturellement à la cause, et passent par dessus la vérité du fait': *Histoire des oracles* (1686), ch.4. The 'naturellement' implies a pessimism about man, shared by Bayle, which opposes the French to the English thinkers. But the determinist view is readily compatible with science.

19 *La Crise de la conscience européenne*, III, vi, p.295. Peter Burke refers to "the rise of literal-mindedness" or more exactly of an increasing awareness of a difference between literal and symbolic meanings' in late seventeenth century French iconography, and a shift from qualitative to quantitative thinking. The latter is to be linked with the new concern of a William Petty, a Colbert or a Vauban with statistics. See *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), pp.128–32.

20 Lionel Gossman, 'Literature and society in the early Enlightenment: the case of Marivaux', *Modern Language Notes* 82 (1967), pp.306–33 (p.308).

21 All these can be seen as what Lyotard has taught us to call 'petits récits', refusing the Grand Narrative – as Thomas O. Beebe observes of the letter-form in *Epistolary Fiction in Europe 1500–1850* (Cambridge UP, 1999), p.6.

22 *Le Roman jusqu'à la Révolution* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1967), p.321.

immediacy and imbrication of the human in the world of objects and time.

A good case can be made then for a new approach to *human* nature, based similarly on observation, experiment and analysis. Locke in the *Essay on Human Understanding* is of course the great exemplar.<sup>23</sup> Ideologically at least, Descartes is there first.<sup>24</sup> The Classical analysis of man is characterised by an 'Augustinian naturalism'.<sup>25</sup> The *moralistes* are in an important sense descriptive, deliberately leaving aside the *a priori* of the received Christian account. La Rochefoucauld famously eliminates Christian reference in the *Maximes*; Pascal attempts an argument for religion which begins with man. They address the 'mondains', who are – as adumbrated once more by Descartes – to judge the validity of the assertions made.<sup>26</sup> From the heroic side comes the *précieux* movement

23 Voltaire admirably draws the parallel. '[Locke] s'aide partout du flambeau de la physique, il ose quelquefois parler affirmativement, mais il ose aussi douter; au lieu de définir tout d'un coup ce que nous ne connaissons pas, il examine par degrés ce que nous voulons connaître. Il prend un enfant au moment de sa naissance, il suit pas à pas les progrès de son entendement, [...]': *Lettres philosophiques* (1734), xiii. We may be reminded of Locke's own affirmation of stupidity: 'I pretend not to teach, but to enquire' (*Essay*, II, xi, 17).

24 'Mon dessein n'a pas été d'expliquer les passions en orateur, ni même en philosophe moral, mais seulement en physicien' (*Traité des passions de l'âme* (1649), Preface). Descartes repeats the gesture of 'idiotie' by affirming at the start of the work that the Ancients are so full of error that 'je serai obligé d'écrire en même façon que si je traitais d'une matière que jamais personne avant moi n'eût touché'. *Les Passions de l'âme*, ed. J.-M. Monnoyer (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp.151, 155.

25 See especially Bernard Tocanne, *L'Idée de nature en France dans la seconde moitié du xvii<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1978), Pt.II, 'La Nature Humaine'. Tocanne begins this section by affirming that the scientific 'révolution' does not have an equivalent in the domain of 'la connaissance de l'homme' (p.139). His account however concludes that 'l'augustinisme nourrit [...] un naturalisme de fait' (p.281). More broadly, it can be claimed that in this period 'the advances in mathematics and celestial mechanics held out the hope that laws of motion might be discovered for men's actions'; 'a scientific, positive approach' might establish 'man "as he really is"': Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests* (1977; Princeton UP, 1997) pp.12–13.

26 'Les mondains testèrent la validité des hypothèses des penseurs [...], adoptant [...] ce qui avait subi victorieusement l'épreuve de leur savoir souple et

and its attention to love. Both traditions contribute to the close attention to the passions which is central to high Classicism.

From the 1670s we encounter attempts to depict sentiment more directly through fictional letters and apparently authentic voices – usually female. ‘Nature’ is thus caught ‘sur le fait’, speaking for itself. Looking outwards at the new urban civilisation, *moralistes* gradually become spectators and embryo sociologists, satirists and novelists. From around 1700 an increasing critical distance is manifested through figures of an innocent or exotic ‘Other’. Stylised in their difference, they tend to be savages, foreigners, provincials, adolescents or women. These are brought into new environments or exposed to experience. Surprised, they offer witness naively. Speaking for a nature that is now legitimated, they utter truths. Focus upon the subject may reveal the bodily imperatives of pleasure and desire; focus upon the world often reveals its incoherence. The standpoint becomes increasingly that of a simple and universalising ‘sentiment’ or a ‘bon sens’. Criticism of the established order, innocently uttered, is treated as factual data to be innocently reported. Polemical stupidity is practised both by the author-experimenter (who must not interpret or evaluate) and the experiencing subject (who cannot interpret or evaluate).

But of course play is also an essential motivation for such writing.<sup>27</sup> (The distinctively French contributions to Enlightenment discourse are perhaps ideological stylisation, dissent through fictional forms, and play.)<sup>28</sup> In a highly sociable culture, writer and reader can

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“expérimental”. “Vérificateurs” autant que médiateurs [...]”: Louis van Delft, *Le Moraliste classique* (Geneva: Droz, 1982), p.152.

27 An account of this writing in terms of play is in effect the undertaking of Georges May, *La Perruque de Don Juan, ou Du bon usage des énigmes dans la littérature de l’âge classique* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1995). Much germane material between 1660 and 1760 is reviewed, followed by a consideration of characteristic strategies, but the whole is executed very rapidly. The cultural mode of ‘persiflage’, which might be defined as mocking verbal play, is examined in Élisabeth Bourguinat, *Le Siècle du persiflage 1734–1789* (Paris: PUF, 1998). Her study constructs a sociological reading upon a very solid and informative lexicographical basis.

28 Among much recent valuable American work, see particularly Dena Goodman, *Criticism in action* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989). Still suggestive is the attempt to

each assume that the other knows the conventions and – therefore – the infractions. *Esprit* is a mutual pleasure. New points of view range from spaceman to sophia, but they are forms of witty indirection, not of alienation. Fantasy (notably fairy-, oriental or licentious tales) is self-ironic; infantilism is for adults.<sup>29</sup> Fictions are presented as authentic to fool the reader, and as innocent to fool the censor, but this is also a game. Critique is masked, but the artifice is partially revealed.<sup>30</sup> Invited to join in the naïve questioning, but also to enjoy the wit, the reader is flattered into a double collusion.<sup>31</sup> Satire is dangerous, but it is also characteristically ludic. Anonymous, pseudonymous or foreign publication was often necessary, but these procedures develop their own codes. Burlesque points to new material realities, parody demystifies, fragmentation is empirical and generic hybridity is experimental, but they are also playful. The absence of the customary knowledge or the received inhibition exposes truths, but it is also funny.<sup>32</sup> ‘Ironical false naïvety’ constitutes ‘a genuine instrument of objectivity and relativism’, but at the same time ‘cette contradiction, parce qu’elle est incongrue, provoque le rire’.<sup>33</sup> The

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integrate period style and philosophy by Roger Laufer, *Style rococo, style des ‘Lumières’* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1963). See too my ‘Rococo and carnival’, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 308 (1993), pp.185–221.

29 Jean Starobinski refers to the ‘the climate of deliberately cultivated childishness’ of the early eighteenth century: *The Invention of Liberty*, (1964; Eng. tr. Bernard C. Swift (New York: Rizzoli, 1987)), p.23.

30 On the period effect of ‘papillotage’ – moving between illusion and demystification – see especially Marian Hobson, *The Object of Art: the Theory of Illusion in Eighteenth Century France* (Cambridge UP, 1982).

31 Voltaire’s article ‘Esprit’ in the *Encyclopédie* observes that ‘on s’exprime spirituellement [...] en laissant deviner sans peine une partie de sa pensée, [...] et cette manière est d’autant plus agréable, qu’elle exerce et qu’elle fait valoir l’esprit des autres’: Voltaire, *OC 33. Œuvres alphabétiques I* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1987), ed. Jerom Vercruyse, p.53.

32 The comedy of the ‘Naïve’ illustrates exceptionally clearly the regressive character of all humour: see Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, §7.

33 The three phrases are from, successively, M. H. Waddicor, *Montesquieu: Lettres persanes* (London: Arnold, 1977), p.29; Robert Shackleton, *Montesquieu. A Critical Biography* (London: OUP, 1961), p.45; and Jean Sareil, ‘Voltaire polémiste ou l’art dans la mauvaise foi’, *Dix-huitième Siècle* 15 (1983), pp.345–56 (p.348).

disorder of the rococo is framed. Enlightenment writing will increasingly crack the frame, and reach a less privileged readership. Polemical stupidity will eventually take itself seriously.<sup>34</sup> With Rousseau, and more generally in the last decades of the century, it loses its own doubleness. But characteristically until then it is in dialogic relation with a culture of extreme sophistication, the norms of the readership, and the repressive powers of religious and political authority, as well as with itself.

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34 That the Enlightenment eventually erected into absolutes what it had developed as strategic weapons against the Ancien Regime is the thesis of Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (1959; Eng. tr. [anon.] (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1988)).