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From the corruption of French to the  
cultural distinctiveness of German:  
the controversy over Prémontval's  
*Préservatif* (1759)<sup>1</sup>

IN the midst of the Seven Years War, the Prussian minister Karl Ludolf von Danckelmann (1699-1764), president of the Privy Council of Justice and supreme curator of Prussian universities, found a periodical publication in Berlin significant enough to merit his active involvement. On 12 July 1759 Danckelmann issued an official edict, reprimanding the publishers Grynäus and Decker for neglecting their duty to submit the first instalment of the periodical to state censorship. The Privy Council was recommended to summon the publishers for investigation and the courts of the French Colony in Berlin were informed of the alarming publication since the author belonged to their constituency. Considering the threat of occupation and the effects of a continuous war straining Prussia's resources to their very end, it seems rather remarkable that the publication at stake was a treatise about the French language, *Préservatif contre la corruption de la langue française* by the mathematician and philosopher André Pierre Le Guay de Prémontval (1716-1764), a member of the Berlin Academy since 1752.<sup>2</sup>

The Berlin Academy was a major locus of cultural transfer after its reform by Frederick II and its French president, Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis (1698-1759). The Prussian king lured significant scientists and philosophers of the European Republic of Letters to his capital. The prominence of French thought at Frederick's court did not, however, exclude German authors from participation in the Academy's activities.

1. Earlier versions of this article were read at the Enlightenment Workshop and the language and history seminar at the Faculty of History, University of Oxford. I am grateful to those who attended my presentations for their valuable insights. David Cram, Sean Gaston, Cordula Neis, John Robertson, Masatake Wasa and an anonymous reviewer all contributed helpful remarks on various aspects of this essay.

2. André Pierre Le Guay de Prémontval, *Préservatif contre la corruption de la langue française en France, & dans les pays où elle est le plus en usage, tels que l'Allemagne, la Suisse, & la Hollande* (Berlin, Georg Ludwig Winter and Grynäus & Decker, 1759-1763). On Danckelmann, see Jean Henri Samuel Formey's 'Eloge de M. le Baron de Danckelmann', in *Histoire de l'Académie Royale des Sciences et Belles-Lettres de l'année 1765* (Berlin, Haude & Spener, 1767), p.541-54.

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The Academy was an important centre of Prussian intellectual life, and the tension embedded within that institution initiated several debates which touched upon fundamental themes of the local *Aufklärung*. First and foremost among these issues was the status of Leibnizian–Wolffian philosophy. Christian Wolff (1679–1754), who popularised Leibniz’s philosophy in both Latin and German by moulding it into thematic treatises, was one of the doyens of the early German Enlightenment (*Frühauflklärung*), advocating the possible and desirable reconciliation of revelation with reason.<sup>3</sup> Although most of Prussia’s university professors, like Wolff himself, regarded the Academy as a stronghold of foreign intellectual influence, they participated in its annual prize contests and helped to generate public debates regarding its policies, decisions and scientific endeavours.

Both the Wolffian–Newtonian debate and the aversion of German universities to the Berlin Academy were revealed between 1746 and 1747, in the controversy surrounding the prize contest on the concept of monads. The ensuing König affair from 1751 to 1753 (a debate over the authenticity of Maupertuis’s ‘principle of least action’, involving Frederick II and Voltaire) further exacerbated the social and intellectual animosities within the local public sphere. The hostility between university professors and the Berlin academicians may also have been affected by the tension between the traditional *érudits* of the Republic of Letters and the *philosophes*, a conflict discernible in various centres of Enlightenment Europe.

The background for most of the discussions at the Academy in the 1740s and the 1750s was the ongoing debate over the principles of Leibnizian philosophy. At stake were not only the concepts of monads, theodicy and ‘the best of all possible worlds’, but also significant issues in epistemology and the philosophy of science. Papers read at the Academy and submitted for its prize contests concerned the nature of physical action (Newtonian forces versus Cartesian mechanics), the conservation of motion and power (from small-scale collisions to the entire cosmos), teleology and natural theology. Discussions of language were not conducted independently of these philosophical debates. Locke’s and Leibniz’s conceptions of language were part of more general theories of the mind, nature and representation; this was also the case with Prémontval, Formey, Michaelis, Mendelssohn and Herder.<sup>4</sup>

3. Wolff’s expulsion from Prussia in 1723 for the alleged determinism of his philosophy made him a local champion of the Enlightenment. His restoration to the Prussian University of Halle in 1740 by Frederick II further enhanced his reputation.

4. For the close correspondence between epistemology and language in a debate between Turgot and the Academy’s president Maupertuis, see Avi S. Lifschitz, ‘Language as the key to the epistemological labyrinth: Turgot’s changing view of human perception’, *Historiographia linguistica* 31 (2004), p.345–65. On the Berlin debates on language, see Hans Aarsleff, ‘The tradition of Condillac: the problem of the origin of language in the eighteenth century and the debate in the Berlin Academy before Herder’, in *From Locke to Saussure* (London, 1982), p.146–209. On the wider philosophical issues, see Gerda Haßler, *Sprachtheorien der Aufklärung zur Rolle der Sprache im Erkenntnisprozess* (Berlin, 1984).

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In the *Préservatif contre la corruption de la langue française* Prémontval wished to draw attention to common mistakes in speech and writing, to eradicate practices influenced by inappropriate models and finally to provide his readers with the principles of eloquence. This apparently innocent enterprise attracted the attention of Prussian officials only five days after its publication. The ensuing threat to ban its publication became the subject of a lengthy affair, involving some of the most significant academic figures of the time. The personal animosity between the *Préservatif's* author, Prémontval, and the perpetual secretary of the Berlin Academy, Jean Henri Samuel Formey (1711-1797), was amply demonstrated over the pages of the *Préservatif*, offering a rare insight into the complex web of tensions in mid-eighteenth-century Berlin and its Academy of Sciences and Belles-Lettres.<sup>5</sup> The *Préservatif* affair was not confined to linguistic and theoretical matters but had much to do with the social status and philosophical outlook of local Huguenots, in contrast to that of French philosophers persecuted in France and granted asylum in Prussia by Frederick II. The debate also concerned several other issues: academic freedom in an absolutist regime, the material production and distribution of texts, conduct and etiquette in the Republic of Letters, the questions of determinism and free will, and the formation of group identities in eighteenth-century Germany.<sup>6</sup>

### i. The nominal merits of languages

Born in 1716 in Charenton, Prémontval was educated in Paris, where he experienced an intellectual crisis upon his initial introduction to philosophy. As recounted in his *Mémoires* (published in 1749, when Prémontval was only thirty-three), at a very young age he became a Pyrrhonist and an atheist. In the following years, however, Prémontval modified his views into a version of deism. Denying most of the central dogmas of Christianity, he still believed in a God creator that was essentially good and just.<sup>7</sup> It was when Prémontval decided to challenge traditional forms

5. On Formey, see Jens Häsel, 'Samuel Formey, pasteur huguenot entre Lumières françaises et Aufklärung', *Dix-huitième siècle* 34 (2002), p.239-47; Werner Krauss, 'Ein Akademiesekretär vor 200 Jahren: Samuel Formey', in his *Studien zur deutschen und französischen Aufklärung* (Berlin, 1963), p.53-62; Ann Thomson, 'Formey, Jean Henri (1711-1797)', in *Dictionnaire des journalistes 1600-1789*, ed. Jean Sgard (Oxford, 1999), p.402-406.

6. Though it involved important figures at the Berlin Academy, the controversy is mentioned only in a footnote in the longest account of this institution's history: Carl Gustav Adolf von Harnack, *Geschichte der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, 3 vols in 4 (Berlin, 1900), vol.1.1, p.314. Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d'Argens (1704-1771), head of the class of belles-lettres at the Academy, regarded it as one of the most famous quarrels in Berlin; see *Histoire de l'esprit humain, ou Mémoires secrets et universels de la république des lettres*, 14 vols (Berlin, 1765-1768), vol.8 (1767), p.559-66.

7. *Mémoires d'André Pierre Le Guay de Prémontval, Prof. en mathématiques et belles-lettres* (The Hague, 1749). See also Prémontval's 'Profession de foi' in his *Le Diogène de D'Alembert, ou Diogène décent* (Berlin, aux dépens de la Compagnie, 1754), where he subscribed to most

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of education by giving free public lessons in mathematics that he met Denis Diderot (1713-1784). Diderot, who was probably one of Prémontval's students, shared his passion for mathematics. Perhaps the most famous reference to the now-forgotten Prémontval was made by Diderot in *Jacques le fataliste*, whose main theme resembles Prémontval's preoccupation in the mid-1750s with the problem of free will.<sup>8</sup> There is no evidence, however, that Diderot ever read any of the works Prémontval published in Berlin; he may have only relied on early memories when writing *Jacques le fataliste* at the end of the 1770s.<sup>9</sup>

Following disputes with both the Jesuits and some professors of mathematics, Prémontval and his future wife fled France in 1744 to spend several years in Holland and Switzerland, where they married and converted to Protestantism (1746). Prémontval's arrival in Berlin (1752) prompted a detailed study of Leibniz and Wolff, which forced him to reassess his views on providence and determinism in a series of publications: *Pensées sur la liberté* and *Le Diogène de D'Alembert, ou Diogène décent* (1754), *Du hasard sous l'empire de la providence, pour servir de préservatif contre la doctrine du fatalisme moderne* (1755) and *Vues philosophiques* (1757). In these works Prémontval unleashed a fierce attack on Leibniz and Wolff, whom he saw as enemies of free will and advocates of fatalism (a word he was apparently the first to coin in its modern meaning).<sup>10</sup> As a prolific member of the class of speculative philosophy at the Berlin Academy, Prémontval sat on the jury of the 1755 prize contest on Pope's optimism and the 1763 prize contest on certainty in metaphysics. He also proposed the subject for the 1759 competition, the reciprocal influence of language and opinions.<sup>11</sup> When Prémontval announced the publication of his *Préservatif contre la corruption de la langue française* in January 1759, it was interpreted by contemporaries as a change of course. He appeared to have moved from a controversial critique of the most popular system in German academic circles to a more prosaic, practically orientated project.

of the tenets of contemporary natural theology: God's existence, providence and revealed religion 'which is pure Christianity mediated by God, belonging to no sect' (p.114-15).

8. 'Avez-vous entendu parler d'un certain Prémontval qui donnait à Paris des leçons publiques de mathématiques? [...] Mlle Pigeon allait là tous les matins [...]. Un des professeurs, Prémontval, devint amoureux de son écolière, et tout à travers des propositions sur les solides incrits à la sphere, il y eut un enfant de fait' (Denis Diderot, *Œuvres*, ed. Laurent Versini, 5 vols, Paris, 1994, vol.2, p.759). On Prémontval in Paris see Georges Dulac, 'Louis-Jacques Goussier, encyclopédiste et... "original sans principes"', in *Recherches nouvelles sur quelques écrivains des Lumières*, ed. Jacques Proust (Geneva, 1972), p.63-110 (73-77) and Elisabeth Badinter, *Les Passions intellectuelles*, vol.1: *Désirs de gloire (1735-1751)* (Paris, 1999), p.220-21.

9. Franco Venturi, *Jeunesse de Diderot (1713-1753)* (Paris, 1939), p.33-36.

10. Georges May, 'Le fatalisme et *Jacques le fataliste*', in *Thèmes et figures du siècle des Lumières – mélanges offerts à Roland Mortier*, ed. Raymond Trousson (Geneva, 1980), p.162-74; Christophe Paillard, 'Le problème du fatalisme au siècle des Lumières', doctoral dissertation, Jean Moulin University, Lyon III, 2000 (see chapter entitled 'Prémontval ou la dénonciation du "fatalisme leibnizien"').

11. On Prémontval and the 1759 contest, see Formey's *Lettres sur l'état présent des sciences et des mœurs* (Berlin, Haude & Spener, 1760), 2 October 1759, p.224.

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But these expectations were proven to be misplaced when the first issue of the work appeared in July 1759. Prémontval applied his philosophical rigour to the use of French in Germany in a provocative manner, directing his critique at both Huguenot scholars and German adherents of Leibniz.

Despite the purist associations the title evokes, in the *Préservatif* Prémontval presented an innovative conception of linguistic uniqueness and genius. In the prospectus for subscribers, Prémontval claimed that if French were to change significantly outside France, it would lose its status as the common language of merchants, aristocrats and men of letters across Europe. French would thus become a common language only nominally, due to the widening gap between its local dialects and a literary 'high French' that would be taught and learned in the same manner as Latin. This ominous vision concerning the future of French was the main motive for Prémontval's linguistic preservative. The entire work is grounded in a desire to maintain a universal tool of communication rather than in an endorsement of any inherent qualities in the French language. In fact Prémontval argued that this common language of Europe was quite poor compared to others. Less sweet than Italian, less majestic than Spanish, less concise than English and certainly less energetic than German, it owed its primacy to an arbitrary combination of all these properties, to what Prémontval called 'a certain temperament of mediocre qualities'.<sup>12</sup>

The same opinion about the relative merits of French was reiterated a year later in the fourth part of the *Préservatif*, in an essay against the 'gallicomania' of the Germans that has led them to neglect their own language in favour of French.<sup>13</sup> Prémontval notes there that he knows Germans who are acquainted with a single German dialect in its simplest form, entirely ignorant of contemporary German literature and proud to read only French. They were surprised to hear that Prémontval, a Frenchman in Prussia, thought highly of their mother tongue and several German authors, particularly Albrecht von Haller (1708-1777). Such a state of affairs, according to Prémontval, was extremely detrimental to both languages. French was being distorted and abused in Germany, as its speakers emulated the most superficial Parisian fashion. Locals used 'germanised' French words for numerous terms, though there existed three or four better names for the same objects in German. They thus discouraged potential authors of German works and delayed the desired development of classic literature in German. Prémontval contrasted this situation with the relationship between France and England, a healthy and enriching literary rivalry since the English – unlike the Germans – did not suffer from an excessive passion for French and did not subjugate

12. Prémontval, *Préservatif*, p.iii-iv.

13. Based on a lecture Prémontval gave at the Academy on 22 November 1759 (*Die Registres der Berliner Akademie der Wissenschaften 1746-1766. Dokumente für das Wirken Leonhard Eulers in Berlin*, ed. Eduard Winter, Berlin, 1957, p.253).

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themselves to a foreign culture while abandoning their own. Eventually, Prémontval wrote, most Germans are ‘making themselves doubly barbaric in their own country’, mastering neither German nor French.<sup>14</sup> Several essays in the *Préservatif* included exhortations to the Germans to cultivate their own language and culture (*Préservatif*, p.242 and p.295-96):

C'est cette supériorité [du français], ALLEMANS, ANGLOIS, DANOIS, RUSSES-mêmes, que je vous conseille de disputer; & vous le pouvez avec succès, si vous vous y prenez comme il convient. [...]

L'Allemand montrera autant de délicatesse que le François, autant de profondeur & d'élévation que l'Anglois, quand il sera dans la vraie route; mais il n'y est point. J'impute à la passion excessive qu'il a pour notre Langue, & peut-être pour toute les Langues excepté la sienne; j'impute, dis-je, à ce travers les écarts où il a donné, et je ne les impute qu'à cela. Sa langue se prête à tout; que ne la cultive-t-il comme il devoit?

Prémontval's fierce critique of the flawed use of French in Germany was not meant to denigrate the German nation. In a footnote to the first issue of the *Préservatif*, Prémontval wished to distinguish between the speakers and their linguistic habits: ‘Quand il est question de Langue Française, toute nuance *germanique* est très vicieuse. Mais s'il agissoit de la bonté et de la solidité du caractere, à cet égard nos François feroient bien de songer à se *germaniser*; & je travaille moi-même à me *germaniser* autant que je puis’ (*Préservatif*, p.92, emphasis in the original).

The view that each language possesses its own merit, incommensurable with that of another language and immeasurable by foreign standards, was accompanied by Prémontval's noteworthy account of the inner workings of languages. The relativity of differences between languages was compared to the way certain manners of speech become standardised, or where and how *bon usage* originates. While various contemporaries argued for the genius of particular languages (using, for example, the assertion that French syntax corresponds to the natural order of thought), Prémontval distinguished between nominal and real features of language. In his opinion linguistic signification is arbitrary and language is purely conventional. It is usage more than any intrinsic attributes that bestows ‘beauty’ or ‘propriety’ on certain expressions. Prémontval took as an example the French numerical system: it might be deemed ‘absolutely better’ to say *septante*, *huitante* and *nonante* instead of *soixante-dix*, *quatre-vingts* and *quatre-vingt-dix*, but once usage had accepted the latter manner of counting, it is conventionally crowned *bon usage*.

Due to its arbitrary character, language requires general conventions, common usage over a wide territory and a single authority or cultural

14. *Préservatif*, p.293-94. In other works Prémontval asserted that the Germans are more profound than the French since they are occupied with the nature of things, whereas the French are merely masters of specious language and style (Prémontval, *Diogène décent*, p.42-43; *Du hazard sous l'empire de la providence, pour servir de préservatif contre la doctrine du fatalisme moderne*, Berlin, J. C. Kluter, 1755, p.iii-iv).

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centre to function as its arbiter. This was, as Prémontval suggested, Germany's misfortune: though superior to French in various respects, the German language was not codified in widely accepted dictionaries, nor moulded into exemplary forms by classic authors, a process French had undergone in the seventeenth century. Moreover, the political fragmentation of the Holy Roman Empire had prevented the development of a single cultural capital, expanding the reign of French in the different courts of the Empire.<sup>15</sup>

Prémontval supplied his readers with little practical advice (such as the correct way to date a letter in French) while dedicating most of his *Préservatif* to severe attacks on the propagators of bad style in Germany, the 'demi-françois' or 'soi-disant françois'. Behind the façade of an introduction into the secrets of pure (or at least well-regulated) French, Prémontval was drawing the dividing line between native speakers in the literal sense – French speakers who were born and bred in France – and foreigners, or native speakers who were brought up abroad and exposed only to a corrupt style. In several of his remarks, Prémontval explicitly addressed the 'Colonists' – members of the large Huguenot community in Berlin.<sup>16</sup> Asserting his authority as the only French-speaking member of the Berlin Academy who was actually French, Prémontval further distinguished himself from the Huguenots, the most noticeably bilingual community in Berlin.<sup>17</sup> Unlike most of the French figures in the king's entourage, the Huguenots respected the German language and used it as a vehicle for integration into Prussian society and administration. Prémontval's sharp critique of the Franco-German linguistic *mélange* was therefore aimed not only at young German aristocrats and bourgeois who wished to fashion themselves as *gens du monde*, but at the literary style of the Huguenots. Bad style was allegedly epitomised by Formey, whom Prémontval saw as one of the chief causes of the corruption of the French language in Germany.

The first issue of the *Préservatif* is interspersed with barely concealed references to Formey, though the secretary of the Academy is never explicitly named. Prémontval talks, for example, of 'a certain author who, since the deaths of Beausobre and Lenfant, enjoys the reputation of these

15. Prémontval, *Préservatif*, p.238-53.

16. Driven out of France by Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, the Huguenots were lured to Prussia by the Great Elector Frederick William (1620-1688), who offered them various privileges. The Huguenot community in Berlin was the largest in Prussia, amounting in 1700 to a fifth of the city's population. See *Hugenotten in Berlin*, ed. Gottfried Bregulla (Berlin, 1988), p.476-77; Jürgen Wilke, 'Die französische Kolonie in Berlin', in *Berlin 1650-1800: Sozialgeschichte einer Residenz*, ed. Helga Schultz, 2nd edn (Berlin, 1992), p.352-430.

17. Prémontval's account is inaccurate. Several other Frenchmen (apart from the president Maupertuis) had been members of the Academy (for example La Mettrie, who died in 1751). The marquis d'Argens was director of the class of belles-lettres from 1750 until his death in 1771.

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great men'.<sup>18</sup> It might have been expected that Prémontval, a vigilant opponent of Leibniz and Wolff, would attack the philosophical content of works by Formey, who devoted considerable efforts to the dissemination of Wolffian philosophy. But whenever Formey is concerned, the critique deals almost exclusively with his style, which Prémontval likened to the frivolity and superficiality of the leading *philosophes*. With a somewhat missionary zeal, Prémontval attacked the light, quasi-aristocratic conversational style (*Préservatif*, p.52):

Il n'est plus possible à qui que ce soit d'ouvrir la bouche: les discours les plus graves, de même que les plus indifférens, sont une perpétuelle matière d'insipides Bouffonneries; & ce qui est le pire, d'Obscénités infames. Ni les jeunes Personnes, ni les Femmes respectables, ne sont épargnées. Et qui sont celles après tout qui veulent qu'on les épargne? en est-il beaucoup? Ne les voit-on pas briller elles-mêmes en ce genre, & faire assaut de fine & délicate plaisanterie avec le Bel-esprit du cercle? Si elles ne peuvent lui tenir tête, ce qui est rare! du moins leurs applaudissements ne lui manquent pas. Rien n'établit mieux la réputation d'un Homme dans les Sociétés choisies.

Wondering whether French was being corrupted in France itself, Prémontval distinguished between the grammatical and stylistic aspects. Vaugelas and other prescriptive linguists had brought about a 'grammatical revolution', aided by the publication of several good dictionaries and codified in the works of Corneille, Molière and La Fontaine. Style, however, was an entirely different issue. France's problem was not that its writers lacked *esprit*, but that they had too much of it. Contemporary French authors tended to express themselves in a light style, full of witticisms and specious brilliance. It should also be noted that when Prémontval refrains from assuming the role of reformator in France, he assigns this task to the *philosophes'* enemy, the literary critic Elie Fréron (1718-1776, editor of the journal *L'Année littéraire*).

Prémontval denounces the local taste for *pagnoteries*, which he defines by binding together all the impertinent expressions, quips, jibes and verbal mischief he encountered in France, capping them with obscenity. This fashion was allegedly promoted by men of letters who, while presenting themselves as transmitters of philosophical truths, 'prostitute themselves in lowly works and obscene style', turning scholarly journals into a 'detestable genre of *bel-esprit*' (*Préservatif*, p.58, 61). Prémontval's examples were all taken from works by Formey, where the Academy's secretary had tried to infuse theological and philosophical treatises with lively references to women and the relations between the sexes. Formey modelled his serial introduction to Wolffian philosophy, *La Belle Wolfienne* (1741-1753), on Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (the conversations in Formey's work centred around Espérance, an aristocratic lady strolling

18. Prémontval, *Préservatif*, p.3. Isaac de Beausobre (1659-1738) and Jacques Lenfant (1661-1728) were prominent scholars in the Berlin *Refuge*.



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along the Spree and the gardens of Charlottenburg). In *Lettres sur la prédication* of 1753, Formey (also a Calvinist priest) humorously proposed the formation of a public institution that would free the clergy from the burden of husbandry while 'satisfying their natural needs'. In his *Mélanges philosophiques* (1754) Formey explained the concepts of attraction and force in Wolffian philosophy by reference to the self-restraint required not to respond to the charms of a beautiful woman.<sup>19</sup> Rather than seeing these instances as harmless attempts at the popularisation of complex philosophical theories, Prémontval deemed them a coarse debasement of the fine and delicate style codified in Louis XIV's *grand siècle*.

ii. Academic manners and frictions

This unusual attack by a member of the Academy on its perpetual secretary did not go unnoticed, as attested by Danckelmann's prompt warning to the publishers and the threat of legal procedures against Prémontval. The edict declared that Prémontval's attack on Formey was 'most indecent and punishable', further noting that individual academicians did not enjoy in their private capacity the privileges accorded to the Academy in its official publications:

Das von Premontual wider dem Professor Formey höchstunanständiges und strafbares Verfahren betreffend, geben Wir Euch zur gnädigen Resolution: daß da von der ordentlichen Censur nur diejenigen Bücher ausgenommen, welche die Academie der Wissenschaften in corpore und unter ihrem Nahmen drucken lässet; die Membra derselben aber sich dergleichen Freyheit zu nehmen nicht befugt sind, ihr der fordersahmsten die Drucker der Premontualschen Schrift Grindus [Grynäus] und Decker, vor euch zu fordern und zu vernehmen habt, ob und was sie zu ihrer Entschuldigung bey zu bringen vermeynen, und demnächst darüber gutachtlich etc. zu berichten.<sup>20</sup>

It is difficult, however, to learn from the only existing copy of the edict whether Formey was playing any role behind the scenes.

Censorship in Frederick II's Prussia was decentralised and exercised by a number of officials and institutions who were responsible for different sorts of publications. Contrary to the king's self-propagated image of an

19. More references and quotes are given in part 3 of the *Préservatif* (p.131-33 and 151-54).

20. 'Concerning the most indecent and punishable proceedings by Prémontval against the Professor Formey, we present you with this merciful resolution: since only books published by the Academy of Sciences itself and under its name are exempt from ordinary censorship, whereas its members do not enjoy the same freedom, you should summon the printers of Prémontval's work Grynäus and Decker and examine if and what they intend to call upon for their justification, and afterwards report about it in writing', Codex Michaelis 324 (Briefwechsel, vol.5, Göttingen, Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek), f.243r. Danckelmann issued the edict on 12 July 1759 as a reply to an enquiry from the Privy Council, dated 6 July. The court of the French Colony duly found Prémontval guilty of libel and personal affront (Wilke, 'Die französische Kolonie', p.429).

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enlightened monarch, defender of truth and reason against the Catholic Counter-Enlightenment, freedom of the press was not unlimited in Prussia. This may be demonstrated by an epistolary exchange between Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) and Friedrich Nicolai (1733-1811) in 1769. While Lessing argued that freedom of expression in Prussia amounted to the unfettered abomination of religion, a liberty which a decent man should be ashamed to use, Nicolai claimed that Prussian censorship was much more tolerant than its Austrian counterpart, particularly concerning scholarly publications.<sup>21</sup>

Though the king issued a relatively strict order concerning censorship in 1749, it was never completely implemented, depending on the various censors (most of them officials who fulfilled their part-time duties as censors quite leniently). The authorities regarded political newspapers as potentially more dangerous than books, but learned journals were usually not meticulously censored, if at all.<sup>22</sup> Nicolai, for example, recounted that in 1759 the censor for philosophical affairs was surprised to receive the manuscripts of his *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*, for it had been apparently a long time since anyone bothered to submit a learned journal for censorship.<sup>23</sup>

Control of works authored by members of the Academy was a different issue, since the Academy as a whole was exempt from state censorship and supposed to censor its own publications. As Danckelmann's edict demonstrates, however, Academy members did not enjoy this privilege when writing in a private capacity. Prémontval was well aware of this rule, as attested by the disclaimers to his critiques of Wolffian philosophy between 1754 and 1755 (*Diogène décent*, p.80; *Du hazard*, p.x-xi, original spelling and emphasis):

Je declare ce qui suit: I. Que quoique cette piece ait fait le sujet de trois lectures à l'Académie royale des Siences, cela ne compromet en rien l'illustre corps dont j'ai l'honneur d'être membre, *come on semble l'apréhender*. Il est à observer, que je n'ai point pris la qualité d'académicien au titre de l'ouvrage: c'est une marque, selon nos statuts, que l'Académie n'en point garante.

Academy members recruited by Prussian officials as censors for various affairs were usually either Huguenots or Wolffian associates of Formey, like Louis de Beausobre (1730-1783), Johann Georg Sulzer (1720-1779)

21. Bodo Plachta, *Damnatur Toleratur Admittitur: Studien und Dokumente zur literarischen Zensur im 18. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen, 1994), p.102-103.

22. On the decentralised nature of Prussian censorship compared to parallel practices in Austria, see Ulrike Schömig, 'Politik und Öffentlichkeit in Preußen: Entwicklung der Zensur- und Pressepolitik zwischen 1740 und 1819', doctoral dissertation, Julius Maximilian Universität, Würzburg, 1988, p.102-45; Edoardo Tortarolo, 'Censorship and the conception of the public in late eighteenth-century Germany', in *Shifting the boundaries: transformations of the languages of public and private in the eighteenth century*, ed. Dario Castiglione and Lesley Sharpe (Exeter, 1995), p.131-50.

23. Quoted in Schömig, 'Politik und Öffentlichkeit', p.124.

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and Johann Peter Süssmilch (1707-1767). It is thus not surprising that, although Prémontval volunteered in December 1758 to fill the place of a recently deceased academician as censor of historical works, the appointment was eventually turned down.<sup>24</sup>

As Maupertuis had been absent from Berlin since the beginning of the Seven Years War (he died in July 1759 in Basel), Leonhard Euler (1707-1783, director of the class of mathematics) and Formey became the most senior figures at the Academy for all practical purposes (bar its curators, who were not scholars). It may have been that Prussian administrators saw any personal assault on Formey, particularly under these circumstances, as an insult to the entire Academy and to the king, its protector. More generally, Prémontval's vehement attack on Formey was regarded by various scholars – native Frenchmen as well as Huguenots – as an intolerable violation of academic sociability, exposing publicly the inner tensions within the Academy.<sup>25</sup>

Recognising how well-connected and powerful his enemy was, Prémontval opted for a strategy of defiance and an appeal to public opinion, representing himself as a victim of crude censorship and a champion of the freedom of speech, so cherished (at least theoretically) by the Prussian king. In October 1759 he published the second issue of the *Préservatif* as a two-page engraving, which technically did not qualify as a printed work (see Illustration 16). A shrewd way to evade the publishers' prosecution and an imminent ban, this mode of publication might have also been planned to amplify Prémontval's image as a maltreated defender of the freedom of expression.

The engraved leaflet included a bold personal critique of Formey: having re-quoted the perpetual secretary's stylistic mistakes, Prémontval noted that Formey 'had been authorised to pursue him' and promised a firm retaliation (*Préservatif*, p.117, emphasis in the original):

On a pris la partie de gêner la liberté de la Presse, dont mes confreres les Académiciens ont joui jusqu'à présent, *même en Matieres plus graves*; car il n'est ici question *que de Style*, rien de plus. Le malheur est que la Bassesse et l'indécence sont le caractere des Ecrits contre lesquels je m'élève, et qui trouvent de si zélés Défenseurs. Cette Inquisition litteraire sans doute ne durera pas; ne fut-ce qu'à cause de l'inutilité parfaite dont elle seroit, *tant qu'il y aura des Presses, en lieu où les Epîtres dédicatoires de M. FORMEY ayent moins de credit.*

Asserting his victimisation by 'a literary inquisition' and referring to the freedom of the press, Prémontval also tried to present his periodical as dealing with nothing but methods of writing. As shown above, however,

24. Euler to Maupertuis, 16 December 1758, in Leonhard Euler, *Correspondance de Leonhard Euler avec P.-L. M. de Maupertuis et Frédéric II*, ed. Pierre Costabel, Eduard Winter, Ašot T. Grigorijan and Adolf P. Juškevič (Basel, 1986), p.249; Euler to Frederick II, 21 December 1758, in Berlin, Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Rep 9 AV, F 2a. Fasz. 12, f.134r.

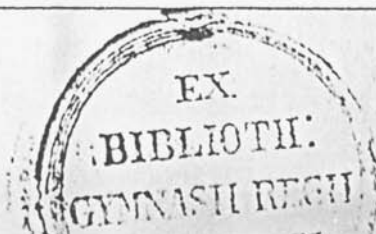
25. See d'Argens's account in *Histoire de l'esprit humain*, vol.8, p.559-66.

bien de m'en empêcher. Au lieu d'une Procédure si irrégulière, on a pris le parti de gêner la liberté de la Presse, dont mes Confrères les Académiciens ont joui jusqu'à présent, même en Matières plus graves; car il n'est ici question que de Style, rien de plus. Le malheur est que la Bassesse et l'indécence sont le caractère des Ecrits contre les quels je m'élève, et qui trouvent de si zélés Défenseurs. Cette Inquisition littéraire sans doute ne durera pas; ne fut-ce qu'à cause de l'inutilité parfaite dont elle seroit, tant qu'il y aura des Presses, en lieu où les Epîtres dédicatoires de M. FORMEY aient moins de crédit. Je prie mes Souscrivans de prendre patience, de relire en attendant ma 1<sup>e</sup> Partie avec toute l'attention possible, et d'être persuadés que de façon, ou d'autre le Public n'y perdra rien.

A. Berlin, le 1. Octobre, 1759.

de Prémontval

P. S. Les Personnes qui demeurent à Berlin, et qui seroient curieuses de connoître l'importance et la légitimité de ma Critique dans cette 2<sup>e</sup> Partie, sont priées de se trouver chez moi tous les jeudis après midi, depuis trois heures jusqu'à quatre. Elles pourront d'ailleurs se convaincre, qu'il n'est pas vrai que mon Ouvrage, ainsi qu'on le veut faire croire, ne roule absolument que sur M. Formey.  
L'Adresse, dans la Bâhrenstrass au coin de la Charlottenstrass.



16. The end of the second instalment of Prémontval's *Préservatif* (October 1759), copper-engraved in order to evade the official threat to ban its printing. Courtesy of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz

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there was more to the *Préservatif* than matters of style and Formey had been personally criticised in its first issue. The personal aspect of the quarrel was highlighted by the marquis d'Argens, who saw the *Préservatif* as Prémontval's personal vendetta against Formey. D'Argens noted in 1767 that Prémontval had told him he simply needed an illustrious victim to enhance the appeal of his writings. Having heard Prémontval accusing Formey of depriving him of a royal pension, d'Argens suggested that he transfer his own academic pension to Prémontval until the matter was sorted out. Prémontval, however, chose to decline this generous offer:

Les lecteurs ne s'attendent pas sans doute à la réponse que fit Prémontval: la voici mot à mot, syllabe pour syllabe. *Monsieur je suis infiniment sensible à votre bonne volonté: mais j'ai besoin d'une victime illustre, que je puisse immoler dans mes écrits. Mr Formey est en relation avec des Cardinaux, il dédie des livres à des Rois, & c'est un pareil sujet que je veux attaquer, & non pas un auteur ordinaire.*<sup>26</sup>

D'Argens also recalled the official reaction to Prémontval's copper-engraved pamphlet in which he presented Formey as a danger to the freedom of speech:

Prémontval ayant imprimé deux parties du libelle, qu'il debitoit tous les trois mois contre Mr Formey, les Magistrats lui defendirent de faire imprimer la continuation de son ouvrage. Il s'avisa d'un expedient qui l'eût fait mettre à Bicêtre à Paris: il fit graver la troisième partie de son livre, & lorsque les Juges le citerent pour avoir désobéi, il répondit avec un air moqueur, qu'il n'avoit point fait imprimer son ouvrage. Tant d'extravagance fit prendre le parti aux Magistrats de punir sévèrement un homme aussi déraisonnable.<sup>27</sup>

The following issue of the *Préservatif* (early 1760) was printed outside Prussia, as Prémontval disclosed in the *avertissement*, lamenting his inability to check the last proofs personally.<sup>28</sup> Though Prémontval denied that the *Préservatif* was a satire against Formey and called it 'a serious critique', he maintained a sarcastic tone throughout. In this issue, the anonymous references to Formey's works were replaced by direct assaults on the Academy's secretary, while Formey's influence on the local intellectual scene was depicted as despotic control. Moreover, Prémontval implied that the legal procedures against him were contrary to Frederick II's inclinations, a serious allegation in contemporary Prussia (*Préservatif*, p.181-82, emphasis in the original):

Jamais, de notoriété publique, jamais la liberté de la Presse n'a été si grande en France qu'elle l'a été, & qu'elle l'est même encore à Berlin. N'y aura-t-il qu'en matieres de Grammaire qu'elle sera proscrire, & en faveur des admirables Ouvrages de M. Formey? *Louis XIV* étoit un Prince sans comparaison moins

26. D'Argens, *Histoire de l'esprit humain*, vol.8, p.564, emphasis in the original.

27. D'Argens, *Histoire de l'esprit humain*, vol.8, p.562-63. The engraved pamphlet was actually the second issue of the *Préservatif*; the two former publications might have been the prospectus and the first instalment.

28. Prémontval, *Préservatif*, p.117-18.

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éclairé que celui sous lequel j'ai le bonheur d'écrire. Croirai-je que *Frédéric* approuve, qu'il faille imprimer hors de ses Etats, une Pièce comme celle-ci par exemple, qu'on imprimeroit partout sans opposition?

Accusations of censorship and oppression were reiterated even in the errata to the volume encompassing the first four issues of the *Préservatif*. Prémontval claimed that the printing of his *Préservatif* was conditional upon the suppression of certain references to Formey as well as to Voltaire and D'Alembert, favourites of the Prussian king (see Illustration 17).

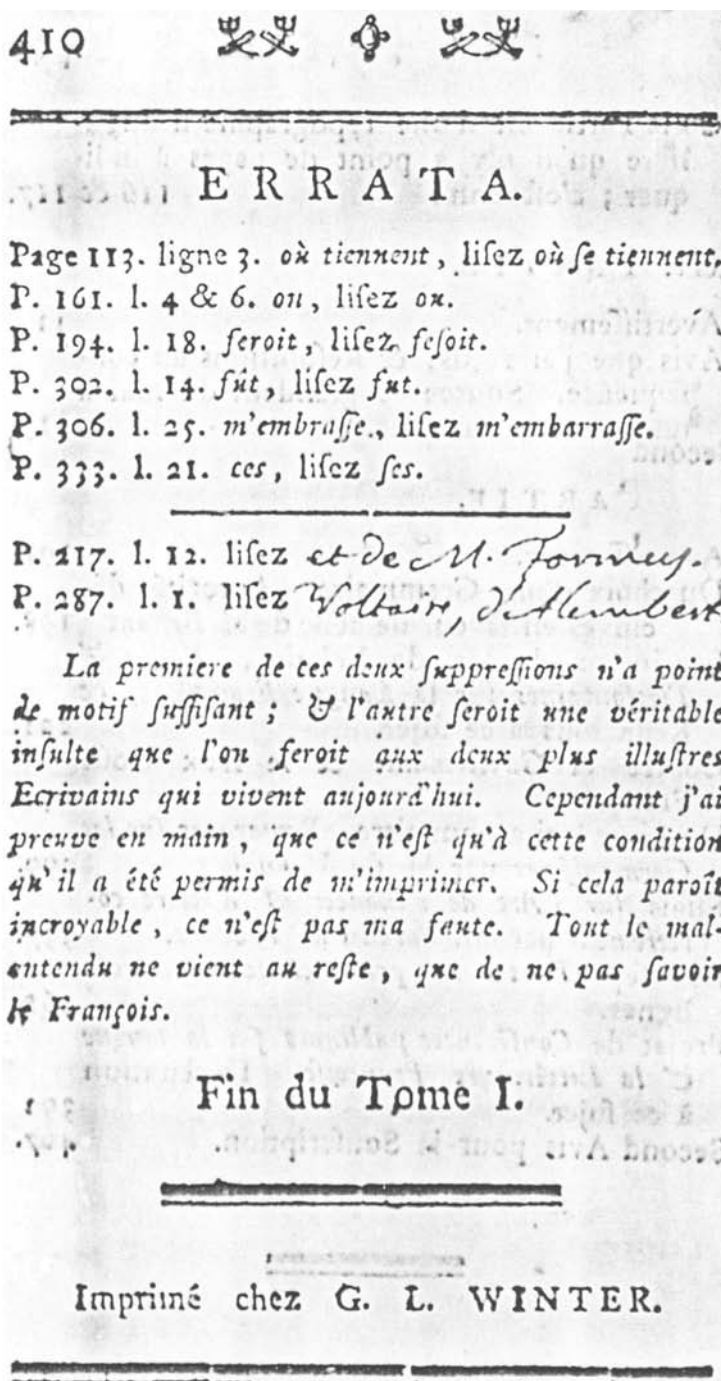
Having repeated his assertion that Formey's reputation owed more to connections and academic politics than to literary or philosophical merit, Prémontval eventually challenged the Academy's secretary directly (*Préservatif*, p.164-65, emphasis in the original):

Que M. Formey, dis-je, parvienne à ce que je vais avoir l'honneur de lui proposer. C'est d'engager un seul homme de lettres, mais de grande réputation en France, un d'Alembert, un Condillac, un Batteux, un Abbé Trublet son Ami, à déclarer *devant Dieu & devant les hommes*, qu'ayant lu avec application une douzaine des meilleurs Ouvrages de M. Formey, & mes Remarques à leur sujet, il a trouvé que je n'étois pas fondé. [...] C'est assez dire que de tous nos Illustres de France avec qui M. Formey est en relation, & dont il produit des Lettres remplies de ses éloges & de l'admiration *de sa belle Ame*, aucun n'a certainement lu ses Ouvrages, ou n'a pu les louer sérieusement.

Formey, however, was too astute to fall into Prémontval's trap. Apart from a very short reference to the *Préservatif* in his journal *Lettres sur l'état présent des sciences* (1759-1760), the Academy's secretary displayed a consistent indifference to the attack of a fellow scholar of an inferior rank at his own institution and in the Republic of Letters. Having edited two well-known journals, *Nouvelle Bibliothèque germanique* (1746-1759) and *Bibliothèque impartiale* (1751-1758), Formey maintained a wide web of correspondents in order to update his readers with the latest events in the scholarly world. The Academy's secretary could have probably capitalised on these contacts, as well as on his superior experience in co-editing and contributing to numerous other publications. But he chose to remain publicly silent, as if to declare that his rival did not merit a serious counter-attack or indeed any reference at all.

By implying that wrestling with Prémontval in the public sphere was beneath his worth, Formey might have also sought to emphasise the differences in style between them or to turn Prémontval's allegations upside down. Whereas Prémontval attacked him in an acrimonious manner, Formey retained his equanimity. The perpetual secretary's refusal to enter his rival's arena and play by his rules may thus be interpreted as the combination of a forced stance, prompted by Prémontval's self-presentation as a victim of academic tyranny, with a conscious choice to protect his reputation by not replying to his rival's attacks.

Formey's approach becomes clearer in his reaction to a short review of the engraved pamphlet in the *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen*.



17. The errata of the first volume of the *Préservatif* (1761). Left as blank spaces but later filled in with a pen are the names Prémontval claims he was forced to suppress: Formey, Voltaire and D'Alembert. Courtesy of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz

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Edited by Johann David Michaelis (1717-1791), secretary of the Göttingen Royal Society and a distinguished orientalist, this journal was one of the most significant scholarly publications in Germany. Having proposed the topic for the 1759 prize contest at the Berlin Academy, Prémontval kept in close contact with Michaelis, who won the competition. Prémontval was working together with the Academy's deputy secretary Jean-Bernard Merian (1723-1807) on the translation of the prize essay into French in collaboration with Michaelis himself.

In the *Göttingische Anzeigen* of 3 November 1759, Michaelis reported to his readers on the engraved pamphlet, assuming it concluded the publication of the *Préservatif*. Though retaining close contact with Prémontval, Michaelis was cautious about the diatribe against Formey. He claimed he would be relieved if Formey provided another reason for the official edict concerning the *Préservatif*, something different from a personal insult. If Prémontval were forced to continue the publication in the foreign press, Michaelis argued, the Prussian sanction would only draw the attention of many more readers.<sup>29</sup> Though Michaelis tried to maintain a neutral stance, Formey saw his review of the polemical engraving at least as a violation of the unwritten rules governing scholarly journals, if not as a wholesale mobilisation to Prémontval's cause. In an emotional letter to Michaelis, Formey revealed the strategy he had pursued concerning Prémontval's attack:

Je n'ai donc pû, Monsieur, voir sans surprise, et même sans douleur, qu'un savant tel que vous, dont j'estime infiniment les lumieres et le mérite, et auquel j'ai rendu la justice qui lui est due dans toutes les occasions qui s'en sont présentées, [a ainsi pu] non seulement faire mention d'un morceau tel que la petite Feuille que M de P a fait graver, où tout respire l'emportement le plus furieux, et porte les caractères décidés du Libelle; mais encore que Vous m'ayiez en quelque sorte provoqué publiquement à contredire & à combattre un morceau de cette nature. Quoique je n'aye pas l'honneur d'être connu personnellement de vous, il me semble que je me suis assez dépeint dans mes Ecrits, et que ma réputation est assez bien établie, pour que vous ayiez pû avoir une idée de mes principes & de mes sentimens propre à Vous empêcher de me mettre en parallèle avec un Adversaire tel que le mien.<sup>30</sup>

Apart from drawing on his reputation and a vast cadre of publications, Formey's reference to having rendered Michaelis 'la justice qui lui est due' is probably an allusion to the prize bestowed on him by the Berlin Academy. In a gesture of magnanimity, Formey declared he was not alienated by Michaelis's 'expressions peu favorables'; he was ready to explain patiently Prémontval's perfidy and ingratitude.

29. *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen* 132 (1759), p.1150. In the 1770s Michaelis admitted he shared an 'assiduous friendship' with Prémontval, whom he appreciated as a man of 'excellent character' and an 'invincible lover of truth'. Johann David Michaelis, *Mosaïsches Recht*, 6 vols, 3rd edn (Frankfurt am Main, 1793), vol.2, p.178-79.

30. Formey to Michaelis (undated, probably November/December 1759), Codex Michaelis 324 (Briefwechsel, vol.5), f.241r.



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Formey wrote that, since Prémontval and his wife arrived in Berlin at the beginning of the 1750s, he had assisted them in every possible way. Prémontval's works published in 1754 (*Diogène décent* and *Pensées sur la liberté*) embarrassed Formey for containing 'suspect' or even 'manifestly dangerous' opinions. Trying to maintain their good relations, Formey informed Prémontval that he refrained from reviewing these works in his journals, since otherwise he would have been obliged to refute them. As an editor, Formey claimed he had declined a review by a certain critic of Prémontval and refused to recommend this critic to local publishers. In short, Formey concluded, 'had M. de Prémontval been my oldest and most loyal friend, even my own brother, I could not have acted differently.' The 'laws of honour', according to Formey, prohibited an academician to ask for such favours if his intentions were injurious.<sup>31</sup> Inadvertently, however, Formey revealed in this letter how influential he was in the Berlin intellectual scene. The control of local and foreign journals, connections across Europe and a senior academic position turned Formey into a literary arbiter, being able to determine the fate of future publications by recommending them to local *libraires*.

As to Prémontval's allegations of academic oppression, Formey assumed an innocent stance:

Vous verrez 1. que je n'ai point été partie contre lui, 2. qu'il est faux qu'on lui ait défendu de continuer son Ouvrage; mais qu'on lui a seulement imposé l'obligation de la Censure, déjà établie par les [Edits], et qu'une conduite telle que la sienne obligeoit de renouveler à son égard, 3. enfin, que ce n'a point été, comme il l'avance dans sa Feuille gravée, une *procédure étouffée*, puisqu'elle a été très complète. [...] Il est donc manifeste, que, s'il a cessé d'écrire, c'est parce qu'il l'a bien voulu, & non parce qu'on le lui a défendu; or plutôt il est encore plus manifeste qu'il n'écrivoit que pour m'injurier; & qu'il ne cesse d'écrire que parce qu'on lui a défendu de continuer sur ce ton.<sup>32</sup>

Formey ends here with a contradiction. On the one hand, he claims that if his adversary gave up writing, it was his own decision; on the other, he concludes that if Prémontval stopped publishing, it is only because he had been forbidden to write 'in such a tone'.

This letter, which Formey pleaded with Michaelis to keep private, reveals much about the code of conduct in contemporary academia. Institutions (the Berlin Academy and the Göttingen Royal Society) tended to become personalised and identified with their presidents or secretaries. By the same token, newspapers and journals (in the case of Formey, Michaelis or Prémontval) were employed by their editors-authors for the promotion of their own favourite theories, scholars and causes in literary and philosophical debates. This was so common that, even when editors of review journals assumed the cloak of neutral spectators (like Michaelis

31. Formey to Michaelis, Codex Michaelis 324 (Briefwechsel, vol.5), f.242r.

32. Formey to Michaelis, Codex Michaelis 324 (Briefwechsel, vol.5), f.241r, emphasis in the original.

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in the *Göttingische Anzeigen*), they were nevertheless suspected by the quarrelling parties of taking sides.<sup>33</sup>

The publication of the *Préservatif* ceased in 1763. Apart from the lack of interest among potential readers, who might have expected linguistic instruction and instead found themselves in the maelstrom of an academic quarrel, Prémontval apparently could not resist the combined pressure of his allies at the Academy and even his wife. Prémontval's spouse, Anne-Marie Victoire (née Pigeon d'Osangis, 1724-1765), a reader to Prince Henry's consort, expressed her reservations before and after her husband's death. In 1757 she wrote to Formey that 'had everyone thought of you the way I do, you surely would have had nothing to complain about.'<sup>34</sup> The Academy's deputy secretary, Merian, confessed his discontent with Prémontval's campaign in a letter to Formey. He was considerably embarrassed by the lavish praise Prémontval bestowed on him in the *Préservatif*, suggesting that Merian was worthier of the secretary's position than Formey.<sup>35</sup>

Under such pressure, Prémontval tried to modify the tone of his *Préservatif*. The first four issues were titled *Préservatif contre la corruption de la langue française en Allemagne*, whereas the title of further issues was changed to *Préservatif contre la corruption de la langue française en France, & dans les pays où elle est le plus en usage, tels que l'Allemagne, la Suisse, & la Hollande*. The final reconciliation occurred in 1763, when Prémontval beseeched Formey for forgiveness, promising a thorough review and even self-censorship of the *Préservatif*'s forthcoming second edition:

Je voudrais, Monsieur, anéantir le malheureux Ouvrage Monument de nos Divisions. [...] J'acheverai l'Ouvrage, puis qu'il le faut, mais de façon, Monsieur, à ne point vous compromettre; et je vous donne ma Parole d'honneur qu'autant de fois que ce qui précède me passera par les mains, ce sera pour moi autant de Coups sensibles, qui vous en feront une sorte de satisfaction. Si ces Dispositions ne vous sont point désagréables, je vole dans vos bras résolu de ne m'en séparer de ma Vie.<sup>36</sup>

The last word in the affair was Formey's. Since eulogising deceased academicians was one of the perpetual secretary's tasks, Formey delivered

33. For an attempt at the reconstruction of the norms governing the Republic of Letters until the middle of the eighteenth century, see Anne Goldgar, *Impolite learning: conduct and community in the Republic of Letters* (New Haven, CT, 1995).

34. Kraków, Biblioteka Jagiellońska, Varnhagen von Ense collection, Mme de Prémontval to Formey, 2 November 1757. Having examined Formey's obituary of her husband before its public presentation in 1765, she wrote to the Academy's secretary: 'Telle a toujours été ma façon de penser, mon cher Professeur, bien opposée à celle de feu mon cher Mari. Il aimoit l'éclat et à faire du bruit; moi j'avois désiré d'être tout à fait ignorée; mais je n'étois pas la maîtresse, vous le savez' (Mme de Prémontval to Formey, 9 January 1765, emphasis in the original).

35. Kraków, Biblioteka Jagiellońska, Varnhagen von Ense collection, Merian to Formey, 27 August 1760.

36. Kraków, Biblioteka Jagiellońska, Varnhagen von Ense collection, Prémontval to Formey, 25 November 1763.

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Prémontval's obituary to the Academy in 1765. This was the first occasion in which Formey explicitly referred to the *Préservatif* controversy, vindicating his own self-control in the face of hostile critique. In an interesting reversal of roles, Formey presented himself in the *Eloge* as the suffering victim of an unjust attack:

J'ai toujours été dans l'idée que je n'avois, ni assez de célébrité pour qu'on dût se borner à instruire le public à mes dépens, ni assez de défauts pour être immolé comme victime à la Critique. Mais j'en dis plus en ce moment que je n'en ai dit pendant toute la publication du *Préservatif*, où je me suis imposé la loi du plus parfait silence, & où mon cœur lui-même, quoiqu'il dût sembler ulcéré, s'est tû, puisque je n'ai jamais cessé d'estimer non seulement dans M. de Prémontval l'Ecrivain, mais même d'aimer l'homme. A la fin j'ai eu la satisfaction de l'en voir convaincu, & de le serrer dans mes bras aussi cordialement qu'il s'y est jetté.<sup>37</sup>

Concerning the *Préservatif's* main claim, Formey referred his readers to France. If one took seriously the incessant critiques of the French language by French authors, the source of its corruption should be sought in Paris. But the *Eloge* was not a detailed scholarly reply to the *Préservatif*, since Formey infused it with references to Prémontval's tempestuous character. Prémontval always believed he was hated and that people were conspiring against him, Formey told his academic audience, whereas 'we have always been disposed only to love and cherish him.'<sup>38</sup>

### iii. Fatalism and chance, content and form

In the same *Eloge* Formey mentioned several times Prémontval's 'emotional aversion' to Leibniz and Wolff, thus demonstrating that the *Préservatif* affair was not only about literary style and academic conduct but also part of the wider philosophical debates of the day. Prémontval's publications before the *Préservatif* controversy had addressed the question of free will and criticised both Leibniz and Wolff as fatalists. In *Pensées sur la liberté* (1754) Prémontval claimed that Leibniz subjugated freedom to both a pre-established harmony and the principle of sufficient reason. According to Prémontval, human freedom is inextricably linked to arbitrariness, the absolute liberty to act as one chooses, even without a cause – just as his theory of linguistic signification emphasised arbitrariness in contrast to some of Leibniz's views on language. Though Prémontval's works on fatalism did not receive much attention in France, they followed the contours of French attitudes towards Leibniz and Wolff.<sup>39</sup>

37. Formey, 'Eloge de M. de Prémontval', in *Histoire de l'Académie Royale des Sciences et Belles-Lettres de l'année 1765*, p.526-40 (539), emphasis in the original.

38. Formey, 'Eloge de M. de Prémontval', p.540.

39. *Pensées sur la liberté* and *Du hazard* were not referred to by any Parisian journal. *Du hazard* was reviewed only in the Amsterdam edition of the *Journal des savants* in 1755, as was *Vues philosophiques* in 1757. See W. H. Barber, *Leibniz in France from Arnauld to Voltaire* (Oxford, 1955), p.168.

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Echoing Pierre Bayle's critique of Leibniz's *Theodicy*, French critics had identified freedom with the ability to choose between alternatives without motives, unbound by any causal chain of events.<sup>40</sup> Leibniz, on the contrary, saw liberty as the freedom to become oneself, the ability to follow without restraint one's own prescribed course of action (unconsciously, since the 'entire concept' of each individual may only be perceived by God). Leibniz abhorred 'freedom of indifference' or 'choice out of equilibrium', meaning that one could choose among absolutely equal options with no cause or reason. According to Leibniz, we are never indifferent in regard to the simplest alternatives (turning right or left, putting forward this or that foot): even such choices or actions are determined by a confluence of dispositions and perceptions.<sup>41</sup> As Prémontval observed, Leibniz's concept of freedom is closer to Spinoza than to Descartes. While Descartes distinguished between human and divine actions, asserting that only God's will may be indifferent (undetermined by any cause), Leibniz and Spinoza ascribed to man and God the same sort of freedom. They both saw 'indifferent freedom' or pure arbitrariness as illusory: nothing in this universe is exempt from entanglement in a great chain of causes. However, Leibniz did not accept Spinoza's theory of necessity, according to which all truths are necessary.

In his *Du hazard sous l'empire de la providence* (1755) Prémontval defined chance as a cause whose action is contingent and not determined by design (at least not by design relative to its effect).<sup>42</sup> He divided all philosophers into two classes: those who strictly denied chance ('rigorous fatalists' such as Spinoza and Leibniz) and thinkers who recognised some arbitrariness either in God's or in man's actions, but rejected the name or label of chance (like various adherents of the doctrine of predestination, ascribing arbitrary action to God but not to his creatures). Prémontval tried to present the latter as close to his own views, once they admitted the possibility of real contingency. Their main difference, according to Prémontval, was the extent to which human action is directed by God and if God could be regarded as the source of evil.

Replying to accusations by German theologians who identified every rejection of both predestination and pre-established harmony with materialism, Prémontval undertook the difficult task of reconciling arbitrariness with a belief in providence. Like the Epicureans, he admitted an

40. Barber, *Leibniz in France*, p.164-73.

41. 'PHILALETHES: *La liberté est la puissance qu'un homme a de faire ou de ne pas faire quelque action conformément à ce qu'il veut.* / THEOPHILUS: Si les hommes n'entendoient que cela par la liberté, lorsqu'ils demandent si la volonté ou l'arbitre est libre, leur question seroit véritablement absurde. [...] C'est à dire qu'ils ayent la liberté de vouloir contre toutes les impressions qui peuvent venir de l'entendement', Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, 'Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain', in *Philosophische Schriften* (series 6, vol.6 of *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, Berlin, 1990), book 2, chapter 21, paragraph 15, p.179-80, emphasis in the original.

42. Prémontval, *Du hazard*, p.5.

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open and unpredictable future, subject to the interaction of chance and necessity; but he simultaneously recognised the existence of an omnipotent, wise and good creator, who maintains providence and distributes grace. God, according to Prémontval, does not determine *a priori* the course of things to come, but intervenes *a posteriori* in order to minimise evil without recourse to miracles. The source of evil is in man, who acts indifferently with no real knowledge of things: 'Nos actions criminelles, & même toutes nos actions proprement dites, en général, *ne dépendent infailliblement*, de rien de tel, s'il est un Dieu bon, juste & saint. *Donc s'il y a un Dieu, il y a un hazard; s'il n'y a point de hazard, il n'y a point de Dieu*' (*Du hazard*, p.122, emphasis in the original). While sharing with other philosophers the belief that God does not act arbitrarily, Prémontval relegates all chance and arbitrariness to the human sphere. It is a mistake, he argues, to regard God's omnipotence as the capricious or even tyrannical capacity to do anything that crosses his mind. This would be an anthropocentric transference of man's irrational tendency to act on random impulses without a cause. With God, omnipotence is the least significant of qualities (arbitrary injustice is balanced by infinite justice, possible contradictions by infinite wisdom and so on). Divine omnipotence should not be seen as the source of chance, but as a mere 'administrator' of God's other attributes and actions.<sup>43</sup>

Prémontval's theory of free will may sound more commonsensical than Leibniz's, but it is not unproblematic. If various things in the universe have no cause, as Prémontval asserts, it seems that God acted arbitrarily in creating them – an assumption Prémontval denied, since he consigned all chance and arbitrariness to the human domain. More generally, the question of God's responsibility for his creation was not addressed at all by Prémontval. Even if we suppose God is exonerated of all charges of arbitrary action, it is not clear what the source of man's arbitrariness is and why God could not have created him without the propensity for committing evil deeds. Prémontval might have retorted that this is an immature belief in God's omnipotence which is balanced by his other attributes; but it is difficult to imagine why infinite justice, wisdom and benevolence should modify or limit God when he is about to banish evil from his universe.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, Prémontval's theory of freedom was fairly unique in contemporary philosophy. Unlike some of the *philosophes*, he denounced determinism, but contrary to the Wolffians, this was done in order to vindicate chance and arbitrariness in the human arena.<sup>44</sup> The curious espousal of (human) chance and arbitrariness together with (divine) providence and natural religion proved indeed difficult to digest.

43. Prémontval, *Diogène décent*, p.44-46

44. Compare Diderot, Prémontval's erstwhile associate, whose material and arbitrary world had no room for providence in the *Lettre sur les aveugles* of 1749 (Denis Diderot, *Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient, Lettre sur les sourds et muets à l'usage de ceux qui entendent et qui parlent*, ed. Marian Hobson and Simon Harvey, Paris, 2000, p.62-63).

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As attested by most of the *avertissements* and introductions to the works Prémontval published in 1754 and 1755, he was misinterpreted by both 'impious philosophers' and 'zealous theologians'.<sup>45</sup> These philosophical debates only deepened his sense of intellectual isolation and persecution in Berlin, a few years before the official edict against the *Préservatif*.

The common misunderstanding of Prémontval's writings had to do not only with their philosophical content. While Prémontval disagreed with Formey and his Wolffian peers on various philosophical issues, he seems to have shared their critique of the *philosophes*. This is a rare and perplexing stance for a mid-eighteenth-century philosopher: most contemporary thinkers aligned themselves either with the *philosophes* or with their critics, conservative or otherwise. The key to this difficulty may be found in a distinction between philosophical *content* and *form*. Formey and other Wolffians were alarmed by Prémontval's disparaging remarks on the Leibnizian concepts of freedom and pre-established harmony. In this respect, Prémontval seems almost one of the *philosophes*. In matters of form, however, Formey successfully adapted himself to the latest fashions in the publishing market, both materially (journals, abridged versions, translations and reviews) and stylistically (a light and playful prose peppered with references to sexual attraction). Prémontval, in contrast, seems to have been stuck in the seventeenth century, clinging to a rigid ideal of classicism and a literary canon rooted in the style of its great authors (Molière, Racine) and prescriptive grammarians (Vaugelas). Prémontval's critique of the *philosophes* concerned their allegedly superficial style much more than the content of their works, while Formey's concern with materialists and sceptics was content-orientated rather than stylistically minded.

It thus seems that neither Formey nor Prémontval suits the common images of eighteenth-century men of letters. Formey moulded his enlightened conservatism and Wolffian philosophy into the most fashionable literary devices; Prémontval rejected Leibniz and Wolff along with the *philosophes*, but despite their theoretical affinity he stood firmly against the *littérateurs mondains*, much closer to the *érudits* of the seventeenth century.

#### iv. Language and cultural identity

Prémontval's vigorous critique of the Huguenots' language illustrates that he was apparently unaware of the significant role French played as one of the main constituents of their group identity. Throughout the eighteenth

45. 'Pourquoi n'obtiens-je que des railleries & des marques de mépris pour toute réponse? Et c'est un pirrhonien que ce M. de Prémontval! C'est un home [*sic*] qui ne cherche qu'à tout détruire! C'est le plus dangereux incrédule qui fut jamais; dix \*\*\* sous un extérieur de religion et de décence!' (Prémontval, *Du hazard*, p.147). In a letter of 21 February 1754 to Baculard d'Arnaud in Paris, Prémontval asked his friend to find Parisian publishers for his *Diogène décent*, as he faced some difficulties in publishing this work and 'the more important' *Du hazard* in Berlin (Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Darmstädter collection, H 1754, 2).

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century the percentage of German speakers in the French colony in Berlin soared due to social and commercial integration, but the privileges concerning French religious services, education in French and self-administration were closely guarded by local Huguenots. The pace of linguistic assimilation corresponded to the social stratification within the French colony. Because the court and the aristocracy enthusiastically adopted French culture, the higher ranks of the *réfugiés*, as well as scholars in the first generations of the *Refuge*, found it convenient to use their mother tongue in Prussia. The middle and lower classes were, however, forced to integrate more quickly into the local commercial and social life, thus acquiring German relatively early. German was taught, for example, in Huguenot charity schools, whereas students at the prestigious *Collège français* were instructed only in French and classical languages.<sup>46</sup>

The dialectic relation between the quick pace of social integration and the efforts to maintain a unique cultural identity came to the fore in the 1770s and 1780s, when Prémontval's concern with the corruption of a language away from its homeland was shared by Huguenots and foreign observers alike. It was only in 1774 that Huguenot pastors suggested that the language of instruction and certain services be changed into German, but already in the 1750s Voltaire perceived a certain *style réfugié*, an outdated French interspersed with provincial expressions. Mme de Staël (1766-1817), writing after the revocation of the Huguenots' privileges in Prussia, echoed some of these observations.<sup>47</sup>

Outside the Huguenot community, authors were tackling similar questions concerning French and German. Johann David Michaelis echoed Prémontval's complaints about the exaggerated influence of French in Germany, blaming mainly French-speaking German monarchs. In his review of parts 4 and 5 of Prémontval's *Préservatif*, Michaelis criticised Frederick II implicitly though sharply:

Die Ursachen sind lesenswert, und man möchte noch die hinzusetzen: es ist noch nicht gewöhnlich genug, bey der Erziehung im Deutschen Unterricht zu geben, unsere claßische Schriftsteller und Dichter mit der Jugend zu lesen, und sie im Schreiben des Deutschen zu üben. Dieser Fehler der Erziehung, der nach und nach bey Personen vom Mittelstande gebeßert wird, hat in den Palasten geherrscht: wenn der Prinz aber so sehr blos die Sprache des Pöbels weiß, daß er nichts gut geschriebenes im Deutschen, keinen erhabenen Dichter, keinen Haller lesen kann: so wird er seine Muttersprache, in der er nur das schlechte, und

46. Wilke, 'Die französische Kolonie', p.426-28.

47. Voltaire's observation is in the entry on Jacques Saurin in the preface to *Du siècle de Louis XIV* (M, vol.14, p.133). See also Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, ed. Simone Balayé, 2 vols, Paris, 1968, vol.1, p.135; Frédéric Hartweg, 'Les huguenots en Allemagne: une minorité entre deux cultures', in *Le Refuge Huguenot*, ed. Michelle Magdelaine and Rudolf von Thadden (Paris, 1985), p.191-211; and Manuela Böhm, 'Berliner Sprach-Querelen: ein Ausschnitt aus der Debatte über den *style réfugié* im 18. Jahrhundert', in *Ein grofs vnnnd narhaftt haffen: Festschrift für Joachim Gessinger*, ed. Elisabeth Berner, Manuela Böhm and Anja Voeste (Potsdam, 2005), p.103-15.

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höchstens die \*\*\*sche [*sic*] Muse des Gegenparnaß kennet, verachten, und sein Beyspiel wird am Hofe und im Kriegesheer ansteckend seyn.<sup>48</sup>

In his prize essay on the reciprocal influence of language and opinions, Michaelis emphasised several points shared with Prémontval. These included the arbitrariness of language which is always governed by common usage, the important role ascribed to classic authors in the codification of language and the significance of German and its cultivation.<sup>49</sup>

Similar ideas are perceptible in Moses Mendelssohn's (1729-1786) review of the *Préservatif* in the Berlin journal *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*. Mendelssohn noted that Prémontval preached against the neglect of the vernacular among aristocrats and men of letters 'with real German diligence'. However, he was offended by Prémontval's assertion that no regional dialect had been acknowledged by Germans as their literary language. Mendelssohn identified High German exclusively with the language of Saxony and Brandenburg-Prussia, and argued that excellent literature in the vernacular is more important than a national capital.<sup>50</sup> The abbé Denina (1731-1813), challenging French influence in late-eighteenth-century Prussia, regarded the *Préservatif* as Prémontval's best work.<sup>51</sup>

These reviews of the *Préservatif* reveal that Prémontval's quarrelsome periodical exerted, in a somewhat serendipitous manner, a significant influence upon thinkers who were concerned with the establishment of German as a literary language. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) was certainly one of these, and he was indeed well acquainted with Prémontval's works. Already in the first collection of his early fragments on German literature (1767), Herder quoted Prémontval's 'not unjust' verdict on the relative merits of French.<sup>52</sup> Contemplating in 1769 his own contribution to the prize contest on the origin of language at the Berlin

48. *Göttingische Anzeigen* (1761-1762), vol.1, p.510 (22 May 1762): 'The reasons are worth reading, and one would like to add that it is not yet sufficiently customary to teach German as part of our education, to read our classic authors and poets with the young, and to practice with them the writing of German. This flaw of education, which is gradually being improved among the middle classes, dominates the palaces. When the prince knows only the language of the crowd, when he cannot read anything well-written in German, no sublime poet, no Haller; then he will despise his mother tongue, in which he recognises only the deficient, and at the most only the \*\*\* [*sic*] Muse of the Counter-Parnassus, and his example will be contagious in court and in the army.'

49. Johann David Michaelis, *De l'influence des opinions sur le langage et du langage sur les opinions*, translated by Jean Bernard Merian and André Pierre Le Guay de Prémontval (Bremen, George Louis Förster, 1762).

50. Moses Mendelssohn, *Rezensionsartikel in Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend* (1759-1765), ed. Eva J. Engel (Stuttgart, 1991), p.262-63. On the metaphysical front, however, Mendelssohn avidly defended Leibniz and Wolff against Prémontval's critique.

51. Charles Jean Marie [Carlo] Denina, *La Prusse littéraire sous Frédéric II*, 3 vols (Berlin, H. A. Rottman, 1790-1791), vol.3, p.172.

52. 'Über die neuere deutsche Literatur', in Johann Gottfried Herder, *Frühe Schriften 1764-1772*, ed. Ulrich Gaier (Frankfurt am Main, 1985), p.256.



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Academy, Herder fiercely attacked Frederick II and his academicians. Though generally not impressed by the Berliners, he showed profound knowledge of their works. The only ones to prove somewhat useful, according to Herder, were the essays on language by Prémontval and Michaelis:

Seine Maupertuis, Premontvals, Formeis, d'Argens was für Philosophen? was haben sie für Schriften gekrönt? den Leibniz und Wolf nicht verstanden, und den Hazard eines Premontval, die Monadologie eines Justi,<sup>53</sup> den freien Willen eines Reinhardts,<sup>54</sup> die Moralphilosophie und Kosmologie eines Maupertuis, den Styl eines Formei ausgebrüet. Was ist dieser gegen Fontenelle? was sind die Philosophen auch selbst mit ihrer schönen Schreibart gegen die Locke und Leibnitz? – Ueber die Sprachen sind sie nützlicher geworden. Michaelis, Premontval und die jetzige Aufgabe; aber doch Nichts grosses an Anstalt, und für ewige Ausführung.<sup>55</sup>

Categorically condemned by Herder, the Berlin Academy eventually bestowed its prestigious prize on the essay he wrote the next year. Even if they were 'not to serve as an eternal model', it is noteworthy that the theories of language propounded by Prémontval and Michaelis exerted a long-lasting influence upon Herder's views on German language and culture.<sup>56</sup> In his *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität* (1784), Herder translated a large section of Prémontval's essay *Contre la gallicomanie* (part of the *Préservatif*). Having introduced Prémontval as a French witness corroborating his own views of cultural domination, Herder concluded his translation of the *Préservatif* with a tribute: 'Eine viel tiefere Wunde hat uns die Gallikomanie (*Franzosen-Sucht* müßte sie Deutsch heißen) geschlagen, als der gute *Prémontval* angibt. An seinem Ort konnte er nicht mehr sagen, und hatte gewiß schon zu viel gesagt.'<sup>57</sup>

53. The prize essay of the 1747 contest on monadology.

54. The prize essay of the 1755 contest on Pope's (and implicitly on Leibniz's) optimism. A full list of the Academy's prize questions and the winners of its annual contests under Frederick II is available in Harnack, *Geschichte*, vol.2, p.305-309.

55. Herder, *Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769; Pädagogische Schriften*, ed. Rainer Wisbert (Frankfurt am Main, 1997), p.71: 'What sort of philosophers are his [Frederick II's] Maupertuis, Prémontvals, Formeys, d'Argens? What have they crowned as [prize-]essays? They did not understand Leibniz and Wolff and fostered the style of the Hazard by a Prémontval, the Monadology by a Justi, the Free Will by a Reinhard, the ethics and cosmology of a Maupertuis, and the style of a Formey. What is he [Formey] against Fontenelle? What are the *philosophes* themselves with their agreeable style against the Lockes and Leibniz? – On languages they turned out to be more useful. Michaelis, Prémontval, and the current task [on the origin of language]; but still nothing of great measure and to serve as an eternal model.'

56. On Herder's adoption of elements of French theories in his prize essay on the origin of language, see Cordula Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts: die Berliner Preisfrage nach dem Ursprung der Sprache (1771)* (Berlin and New York, 2003).

57. 'The Gallicomania (it should be called 'French addiction' in German) has wounded us much more deeply than the good Prémontval indicates. In his position he could say no more, and he had surely already said too much', 'Prémontval gegen die Gallikomanie und den falsch-französischen Geschmack', in *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität*, ed. Hans

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## v. Conclusion

Endorsing Prémontval's critique of the 'shallow' use of French in Prussia, Mendelssohn, Michaelis and Herder evoked his pluralistic philosophy of language when writing on linguistic and cultural identity. What might have been deemed a forgotten literary squabble can thus throw a new light not only on issues of censorship and academic codes of conduct, but also reveal an unexpected contribution to the emergence of German aesthetic and linguistic concepts. The *Préservatif* affair, along with Michaelis's prize essay of 1759 on language and opinions, may constitute a significant milestone in the reception and transformation of French theories of language in Germany.

The reconstruction of the *Préservatif* affair is another facet in the lively intellectual turmoil caused by the reform of the Berlin Academy under Maupertuis and Frederick II. The debate over the use of French in Berlin may be associated with a long chain of discussions at the Academy involving French *émigrés*, local Huguenot scholars and German men of letters. From the middle of the 1740s onwards, such controversies – over monads and theodicy, on language and mind, on certainty in metaphysics and the natural sciences – all emphasised the intercultural dialogue promoted by the Berlin Academy.

Prémontval's condemnation of the Huguenots' language might have stemmed from his own part-time occupation as a teacher, but the wide-ranging resonance of the *Préservatif* among German authors testifies to a genuine receptivity for this sort of discourse.<sup>58</sup> The profound interest in the *Préservatif*, as well as other contemporary debates at the Berlin Academy, calls for a reassessment of the traditional view of this institution as a stronghold of Newtonianism and materialism, inimical to German philosophy. By openly challenging Wolffian philosophy while frequently recognising the originality of its adherents and crowning them with its prizes, the Berlin Academy proved a unique centre of intellectual regeneration in Prussia and beyond its frontiers.

Dietrich Irmscher (Frankfurt am Main, 1991), p.597. Prémontval and Herder's views on culture were not similar, yet it is significant that Herder used Prémontval's works – even if sometimes instrumentally (see Olav Krämer, '“Welcher Gestalt man denen Frantzosen nachahmen solle”: Stationen einer Jahrhundertdebatte', in *Gallophobie im 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. Jens Häselser and Albert Meier with the co-operation of Olaf Koch, Berlin, 2005, p.61-88).

58. Following his *Préservatif*, Prémontval planned to tour Germany and lecture about 'proper' French education (Prémontval, *Projet de conférences publiques sur l'éducation et sur l'éducation française en particulier*, Berlin, C. M. Vogel, 1763). Prémontval's private education activities had involved him in a legal struggle against a French orphanage in Berlin earlier in the 1750s (see his apologetic *Cause bizarre, ou Pièces d'un procès ecclésiastico-civil*, Berlin, J. C. Kluter, 1755). On the saturated market of French instructors and tutors in Germany, see Henri Durantou, '“Un métier de chien”: précepteurs, demoiselles de compagnie et bohème littéraire dans le refuge allemand', *Dix-huitième siècle* 17 (1985), p.297-315.