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Tales of Impostors: Exposing Belief in Fiction from the Baroque to the Early Enlightenment (Cyrano de Bergerac, Montfaucon de Villars, Tyssot de Patot)

Worden, Daniel James

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TALES OF IMPOSTORS:
EXPOSING BELIEF IN FICTION
FROM THE BAROQUE TO THE EARLY ENLIGHTENMENT
(CYRANO DE BERGERAC, MONTFAUCON DE VILLARS, TYSSOT DE PATOT)

Daniel James Worden

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I examine the relationship between fiction, imposture, and the representation of human societies in French literature between 1640 and 1720. The project attempts to reconstitute a neglected literary genealogy, effectively bridging the ostensible gap between, on the one hand, the vertiginous play of mirrors which haunts Baroque literary and artistic representation, and on the other, the subversive and erudite logic of early Enlightenment philosophical tales. The three authors at the center of the inquiry – Cyrano de Bergerac, Montfaucon de Villars, and Tyssot de Patot – represented seemingly trustworthy characters as impostors, thereby experimenting within their stories, manipulating readers' willingness to suspend disbelief, and subtly exposing purported religious and political 'truths' as 'fictions' that should be doubted. As they ironically collapsed the distinctions that separated characters from real people, narrators from authors, and fiction from history, they destabilized their readers' sense of control over perception, and reminded them that perspectives on religious, political and aesthetic questions were always mediated through mechanisms of representation. Furthermore, they suggested, these imposed apparatuses emanated from a happenstance confluence of traditions and institutions, and the powerful individuals who had shaped both, possibly through deliberate deceit. In more modern terminology, these writers used fictions and figures of "impostures" to carry out thought experiments with theories of society proper to the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Cyrano, Villars and Tyssot made the

writing of fiction into a practice through which they created model after model of social phenomena and cosmic order, using the imagination to test out each one. As each author built upon the precedents set by previous storytellers, they blurred the distinctions between true stories and hoaxes until a mere shift of perspective could make one seem like the other.

For Kristin,

sine qua non

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Parts of this dissertation have previously been presented as conference papers and some passages are forthcoming in print. Chapter I includes material that will appear in 2015 under the title “Astronomy, Prophecy and Imposture in Tyssot de Patot’s *Voyages et aventures de Jaques Massé*” in *New Worlds in Literary Contexts: From Copernicus to Herschel*, edited by Judy Hayden and being published in New York at Palgrave Macmillan. I presented parts of Chapter II at the Society for French Studies conference in Nottingham, England in July 2013, under the title “Demons, Sylphs, or Delusions? The

Interpretive Labyrinth of *Le Comte de Gabalis* (1670).” Chapter III includes work originally written in French and presented at the meeting of the *Société d’analyse de la topique romanesque* in Paris in June 2013. The original title was “Imposteurs et mécaniques d’illusion dans *Les Amours et les aventures d’Arcan et de Bélize* (1714) de Tyssot de Patot.” This material will appear in revised form in a forthcoming book, *Fictions de l’imposture et impostures de la fiction*, edited by Nathalie Kremer et als., and forthcoming from Hermann in Paris in 2015. Other parts of the chapter on Tyssot de Patot will appear in the book being edited by Judy Hayden and were presented at the annual meeting of the American Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies in San Antonio, Texas in March of 2012. Finally, some material from the third chapter was presented at the conference of the Society for Utopian Studies in State College, Pennsylvania in October of 2011. The title of that paper was “Arctic Archives and the Fiction of History in Tyssot de Patot’s *Voyage de Groenland*.”

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Introduction:
Tales of Impostors in Early Modern France

In the French fiction of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, impostors appear with astounding frequency. Authors of the age recounted the trickery of con men and quacks, manipulators and usurpers of political power, and false prophets and scheming hypocrites within religious traditions. From Sorel's Francion to Molière's Tartuffe to Voltaire's cynical depiction of the prophet Muhammad, schemers and perpetrators of hoaxes populate much of early modern French literature.

The term *imposture* had come into French from the late Latin *impostūra*, a rare term attested in legal texts starting in the 3rd century C.E. In the sixth century C.E., the term appears in a compendium of Roman law compiled by Justinian I, the *Digesta seu Pandectae*, which was known throughout much of the Middle Ages and was printed during the Renaissance. The *Digesta* associates the word *impostūra* with any type of deceit which allowed someone to obtain money or power at another's expense, but which was not specifically described and forbidden by law (Justinian I 47.20.3).

Much more attested in Latin through the centuries is the verb *impōnere*, whose meanings were very diverse. Furetière's late-seventeenth-century definition of the French word *imposer* retains some of the key senses of the Latin term, which are noteworthy in this context. In a most general sense, *imposer* meant to place or foist

something upon a thing or a person, but in more specific terms, the famous lexicographer notes, *imposer* meant to force a person to submit to a punishment like a fine or forced labor. Nature imposes death upon us, and the king can impose silence upon his subject. Similarly, *imposer* could mean to accuse someone of a crime, to make him pay a tax or a tribute. *Imposture* was thus a vague use of force or intimidation that could obligate someone to act in a certain way or relinquish possessions. As Furetière enumerates possible meanings, he moves to another sense of the word that at first seems quite distinct from the others. *Imposer* also meant to deceive (*tromper*); in the way that a lawyer disguises the truth, a person's passions can distort his perceptions of the world, and both poetry and the use of artificial perspective in painting can mislead us into perceiving art falsely. The art of poets and painters, Furetière writes, is a great *imposteur*; the words of a lawyer can be *impostures*; the king imposes taxes and laws; and Muhammad the prophet was an *imposteur*. Thus, *imposture* alludes to all many types of creation and manipulation of the arts of illusion, from the most innocent to the most abject, allowing deceivers to obtain some combination of money, power or authority. It appears that in Furetière's view, the art of imposture hides at the heart of law, politics, painting and literature, just as it is at the source of Islam. Furetière does not hesitate to link Muhammad with imposture, but more subversive authors went further, at least from a Christian point of view, and targeted Jesus Christ and his followers. It was clear to many thinkers of the time that imposture could also be applied to Christianity, and especially to its official versions of history.

In this dissertation, I examine the relationship between fiction, imposture, and the representation of human society in French literature between 1640 and 1720. The project attempts to reconstitute a neglected literary genealogy, effectively bridging the ostensible gap between, on the one hand, the vertiginous play of mirrors which haunts Baroque literary and artistic representation, and on the other, the subversive and erudite logic of early Enlightenment philosophical tales. The three authors at the center of the inquiry—Cyrano de Bergerac, Montfaucon de Villars, and Tyssot de Patot—represented seemingly trustworthy characters as impostors, thereby experimenting within their stories, manipulating readers’ willingness to suspend disbelief, and subtly exposing purported religious and political ‘truths’ as ‘fictions’ that should be doubted. My major intention in this study is to reevaluate the role of ‘illusion’ as a core concern of seventeenth-century thought and to offer a new perspective on early Enlightenment critiques of superstition and credulity.

From a literary-historical point of view, the fiction of Cyrano, Villars and Tyssot emerges from literary experimentation at the intersection of two major influences, one ancient, and one modern—Lucian of Samosata and Gabriel Naudé. In this section I would like to pose some foundations that I will refer to as I analyze the primary authors in detail.

Lucian of Samosata had written in Greek in the second century of the common era. By the sixteenth century, his dialogues had taken on a new interest for European authors, particularly after Desiderius Erasmus’ translations from Greek into Latin and François Rabelais’ extensive borrowing from the Syrian in his tales of Pantagruel and

Gargantua. For the Humanists of the Renaissance and their disciples, Lucian came to represent a profoundly inspiring model for a successful blend of the genres of Comedy and Philosophy. This notion came from a metaphor used by the ancient rhetorician himself, in a dialogue that can be translated as “So you think I’m the Prometheus of the Literary World?” (5). The text appears as an extemporaneous speech given by “Lucian” in response to an interlocutor who compared him to Prometheus. He first calls attention to the surprising ambiguity that emerges in interpreting such an appellation; it could very well be taken as a compliment or an insult, depending upon one’s point of view, so what does the interlocutor actually mean? In a remarkable feat of metatextuality, Lucian first displays the promethean ability he has to bend a label toward any interpretation he wants, before finally settling in on the perspective upon it as a compliment; in other terms, the very rhetoric that he uses to question whether he deserves the comparison to the titan demonstrates the legitimacy of the parallel. In a passage that strongly marked the Renaissance Humanists, Lucian fears that his compositions are like a hideous camel with a beautiful bit and saddle, in that he fuses the hilarity of Comedy with the seriousness of a dialogue in Philosophy, but that the combination appears ridiculous (7). Perhaps his work is as grotesque as a Centaur, which is composed of two elements, a man and a horse, each of which is beautiful on its own, as are Comedy and Philosophy, but when combined they created a disagreeable beast. But putting this aesthetic judgment aside, he speculates that he might be most like Prometheus in that his textual blends are deceitful; they feature silly jokes veiled under a shroud of heady seriousness:

Maybe it’s that I’ve deceived my audiences by giving them a feast of bones covered in fat, I mean, comic laughter hidden under philosophy’s solemnity. (8)

Throughout the early modern period, this series of metaphors and their textual framing inspired an approach to writing that would be widely imitated. Nicolas Corréard has usefully designated this method as ‘lucianizing’—a form of satire that can be performed on nearly any serious subject, particularly of philosophical, scientific or religious nature. ‘Lucianizing’ often adapts common genres of fiction (including conventions of the novel) for its own ends, but it is not tied to any specific literary form. Corréard argues:

Lucianiser, c’est adopter cette posture à mi-chemin entre la philosophie et la comédie, qui, à l’origine, n’a que peu de choses à voir avec le roman, même si elle passe volontiers par l’usage de genres fictionnels. Plutôt qu’une forme littéraire spécifique, il s’agit bien d’une posture caractérisée par l’incrédulité psychologique et poétique, par la revendication de la *parrhesia* (libre-parole, qui est aussi libre-pensée), et par l’usage récurrent de la parodie satirique des discours « sérieux » tenus par les autres, qu’ils soient philosophiques, savants, ou religieux. (Corréard, *Rire et douter* 9)

Indeed, lucianizing means targeting a discourse that others hold up as particularly trustworthy, and which is commonly interpreted without irony, and confronting it with one’s own cold and sustained disbelief. While contemplating the discourse in this light, the lucianist uses the ancient Cynic ideal of utterly frank, uncensored speech (*parrhesia*) as a motor to generate a fiction that caricatures the serious beliefs of others and mocks their most extravagant features, wielding various forms of irony.

Alongside Lucian, the works of Gabriel Naudé exercised a strong influence over the writing of Cyrano, Villars and Tyssot. Naudé was an early seventeenth-century Parisian intellectual who quietly worked as an aid to an ecclesiastical official at the Vatican while intensely studying the censored and forbidden material collected in the

archives there, and who later assembled the book collection that would become the *Bibliothèque mazarine*. This thinker carefully avoided frontal assaults on the precepts and accounts of events favored by the Counter-Reformation, and instead heavily criticized pagan ‘fables’ of gods, heroes and monsters for their lack of historical likelihood. Part of his strategy involved exposing the astounding variety of ways in which many pagans had invented, imposed and instituted new religions over the centuries to serve their political interests. Yet he prudently left the task of drawing analogies with Christianity to adept readers, who could imagine that this dominant European religion of his time might itself be a great fable (or ‘imposture’) designed to maintain order and assure obedience to a sovereign who supposedly ruled by ‘Divine Right’. Given the political climate, such measures of discursive self-protection were imperative for his career and well-being. As a young man of 18, Naudé had probably learned of the torture and execution of the purportedly atheistic philosopher Giulio-Cesare Vanini by the *parlement* of Toulouse. The foreign skeptic had had his tongue torn out and been burnt at the stake for allegedly promoting impious and atheistic ideas and behaviors. Naudé no doubt knew that he might one day meet such a fate if he did not carefully disguise his rational analysis of common Christian beliefs; yet it must have been extremely unclear exactly how much dissent or even constructive critique would be tolerated, since, as Galileo Galilei would soon learn, the results of trials for crimes like heresy and impiety often greatly depended on the influence, if not the personal grudges, of particular accusers, witnesses and judges. Thus, with great care, the Parisian researcher subtly prompted readers to question their theological assumptions by implying analogies with pagan beliefs and traditions that could be denigrated with impunity.

By the time he published *Apologie pour tous les grands personnages qui ont été faussement soupçonnés de magie* (1625), when he was 25 years old, he had already perfected his methodology of veiled critique. In that text, Naudé overtly claims that he intends to attack misconceptions about magic, demonology and witchcraft that the ignorant commonly promote, yet his arguments have the secondary effect of undermining belief in practically all supernatural phenomena, including the miracles recounted in Holy Scripture. He argues that, in the works of countless recent writers, erroneous superstitions have unfairly blackened the reputations of many figures of the past. These figures are wrongly believed to have practiced magic. In fact, in most cases, these people did not need to resort to any supernatural spells at all. Far from being wizards, many of them were merely fine politicians and shrewd impostors. On one level, they resorted to sleight of hand and contrived, theatrical deceit that tricked eyewitnesses into believing that they summoned demons and conferred with gods. On another, they expertly manipulated propaganda, which successive generations have since interpreted with a childlike and foolish literalism (Naudé 164-167).

The philosopher argues that literalist reading practices in turn fused with profoundly flawed historical writing methodologies, and these two factors generated a vicious cycle of further errors that grew in magnitude through the ages. He acknowledges that valid historical narratives can be divided into three categories: civil, ecclesiastical, and natural, but that many respected historians, with diverse intentions and degrees of awareness, have mixed material from the realm of fable into their accounts. He implores modern readers to sharpen their judgment so that they can not only classify diverse narratives into their respective types, and interpret them accordingly, but also

identify and cull out ‘fabulous’ passages inserted in accounts by credulous, unscrupulous, or completely dishonest historians. Naudé’s readers must learn to approach any narrative with careful discernment, since it potentially contains multiple adulterations borrowed from fable, which a series of previous readers and writers have slipped in among its more presumably reliable reports. In other terms, a reader seeking to uncover ‘truths’ in a tale must realize that he is reaching for them in a medium that has always been a mixture of *histoire* and *fable*, and is now buried under many further layers of problematic mediation.

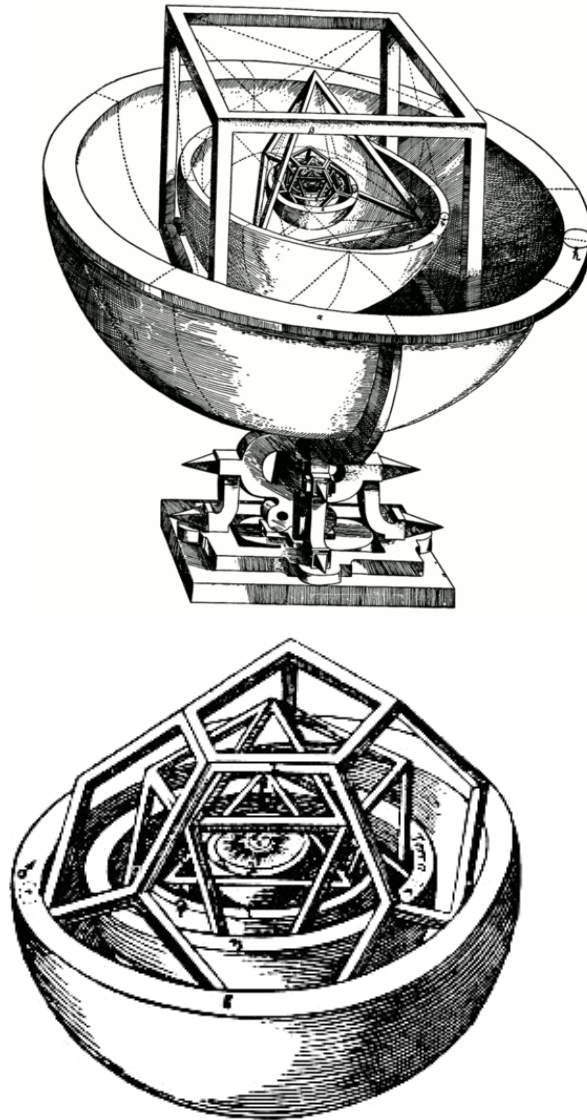
In differing ways, we shall see how Cyrano, Villars and Tyssot use tales of impostors to submit serious subjects like philosophy, religion and reason of state to amusing, lucianizing treatments; at the same time, they imitate Naudé’s impulse to demystify the blends of fable and history that pass for truth.

From a more theoretical perspective, in subsequent chapters, I am interested in examining how Cyrano, Villars and Tyssot use fiction to perform sleight of hand at the threshold between their readers’ internal experience and interfaces with the outside world. The extended analogy of the “maison baroque,” which Gilles Deleuze elaborated from writings by John Locke and Gottfried Leibniz, is useful here. In this abstract model of human cognition, the higher, reasoning portion of the ‘soul’ is like a room on the first floor of a house with no windows or doors, and therefore devoid of light from outside, but whose walls are covered over with wrinkling and folding tapestries. On the ground floor, which represents the lower, sensing part of the ‘soul,’ five windows or doors (the senses) open to the outside world, and through these apertures in the structure, ropes pass, connecting the external world with the reverse side of the tapestries upstairs. Each

perception is like a tug or vibration on one of these lines, which folds, wrinkles or otherwise distorts the shape of the tapestries hanging on the inside of the pitch-black room (Deleuze 6). To elaborate further upon this metaphor, one might say that the primary authors I am considering experimented with myriad ways of surreptitiously stretching, tangling, crossing and tying the ropes, or even tearing them out and replacing them with new ones, such that readers would perceive the world differently. This opens the way for a remarkable paradox: while this form of imposture, this interference in others' perception, might at first seem like a way of blinding, deafening and stupefying their readers, in fact they seek to inspire an opening of the eyes and mind and a more profound awakening of the body and the intellect. It is striking to imagine that imposture, an act that we would normally liken to blinding a person, could be used to better sensitize them to their world, but in this case, the challenge is to use techniques of illusionism to break through the illusions that other impostors have already foisted upon their readers. To use an alternative set of metaphors, it is as though these authors somehow reworked hoods and wigs—these common articles of headwear of their day, which did a great deal to help construct and perform fraudulent identities—into devices that could be used to uncover the countenances of the hoodwinked and remove the wool that others had pulled over their eyes.

It becomes rather challenging to understand these processes once we consider the degree of complexity that they were able to concoct, and the potentially limitless layers of representation (and imposture) that they tended to superpose. Just as though we were exploring Kepler's model of the solar system (illustrated in his *Mysterium*

Cosmographicum of 1596)¹, their techniques of superposition are most understandable if we begin at the innermost layer, where the sun rests, and work outward.



To begin our extended analogy, then, at the center of these novels and dialogues—corresponding to the sun in Kepler’s model—we find impostor characters. The writers offer grotesque portraits of self-proclaimed sovereigns, including kings, clergymen and supposed alchemists and witches, who further their power in the narrated

¹ This image can be viewed at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kepler-solar-system-1.png>.

world by claiming to have been literally endorsed by God, the gods or other supernatural entities. The authors then use plot events or narrative voices gleefully to expose these fictional autocrats as all too human deceivers whose main gifts are, on the one hand, uncanny skills at deceit, dissimulation and manipulation and on the other, the availability of masses of superstitious fools eager to believe whatever they are told.

Moving to the next layer outward (which, we might say, corresponds to the orbit of the planet Mercury in the solar system model), we see first-person narrators (like Cyrano's Dyrcona, Villars' skeptical flatterer and Tyssot's Jaques Massé) resort to impostures of many kinds as they recount the unmasking of charlatans, hypocrites and swindlers in their fictions, and this calls into question their reliability vis-à-vis the reader. Since they often seem to trick most people they come across, this casts their own words under suspicion as well.

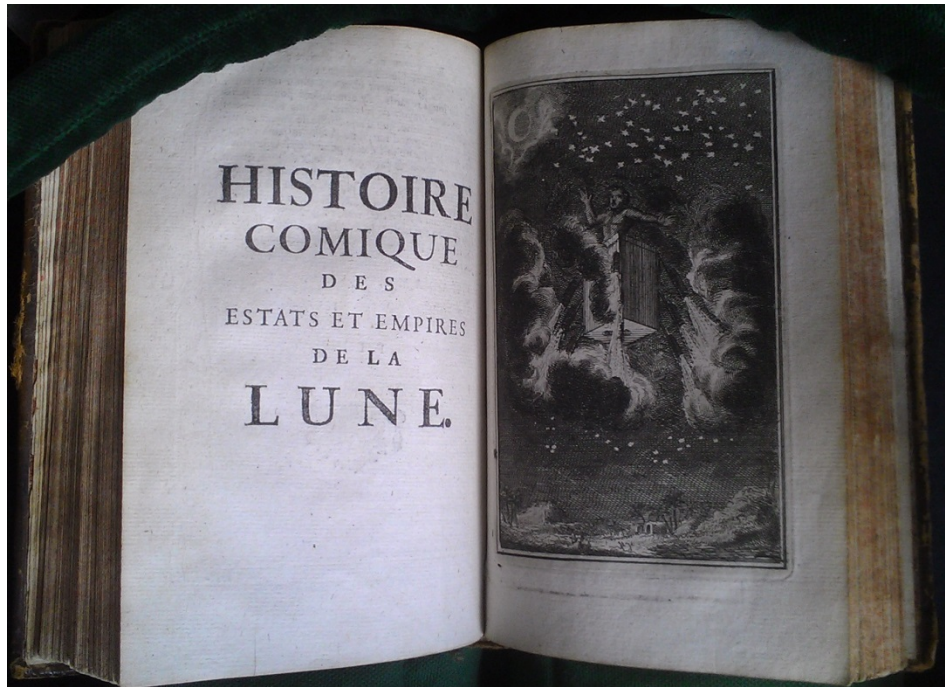
Continuing our journey through the layers of imposture, we next arrive at the writings' paratextual apparatuses. This layer might correspond to the orbit of the planet Venus. It is a realm of countless supposed editors, translators and copyists who append notes to the reader, introductions, postscripts and frame narratives to explain the purported origin of the text proper. Their trustworthiness is generally quite suspect, and their situation with respect to fiction versus reality is problematic to say the least—in some cases, it is difficult to say if they are fictitious characters or real people somehow involved in producing an edition or manuscript copy of the text in question. This ambiguity could be quite deliberate, as it could serve as a measure of protection against powerful critics of the day. It functioned as a mask or veil, misleading many who might seek out the real creators of the text. Authors and publishers feared that if they could be

identified, personal enemies with vendettas might persecute them for diffusing putatively obscene or sacrilegious ideas. This could ruin their careers, if not cause still greater troubles. Such fears seem to have been quite justified in some cases. For example, in the spring of 1671, after Villars was identified as the author of *Le Comte de Gabalis*, he was prohibited from giving sermons (which was his main profession); the Archdeacon of Paris, Guillaume du Plessis de la Brunetière, banned his book and Antoine Arnauld used his influence to drive the author from the house where he was staying with a protector (Kahn in Villars 24). Similarly, in 1727, even though Tyssot was living in the city of Deventer, in the relatively tolerant Dutch Republic, his writings led to his firing from his teaching position, and his being ostracized from his French Protestant community. He published a retraction, arguing that he had been falsely accused of heresy and heterodoxy, but this seems to have done little to remedy matters (Rosenberg, *Tyssot de Patot* 11-12). He abandoned the city with his family soon afterward, and wrote bitterly about his enemies there some ten years later (12).

As we leave the orbit of the paratexts, we next enter the zone that corresponds to the planet Earth, which is that of the material book. There are three major means by which these physical objects made of paper, ink and thread (to which buyers would sometimes add covers of vellum, leather, or even gold leaf) were designed to mislead onlookers and handlers. The simplest of these techniques was to produce an edition in an extremely small format that could be easily hidden in a pocket, and circulated or sold without attracting undue attention. Indeed, early editions of many of the works on my corpus are only about 2/3 the size of today's *Livre de poche*, *Garnier Flammarion* or

Folio paperbacks, and seem to have been smuggled as contraband, notably from the Dutch Republic into France.

A related, somewhat more sophisticated strategy of imposture is the misleading inclusion of illustrations. For example, if an early modern reader unfamiliar with Cyrano picked up an edition of *Les Œuvres diverses de monsieur de Cyrano Bergerac* published by Desbordes in Amsterdam in 1710 (*cote* Z-20099 at the Bibliothèque nationale de France), he or she might flip through its pages and notice several remarkable engravings. These illustrations depict such diverse scenes as the author at his writing desk and a farcical scene from one of his plays. However, there would be little to indicate the degree of subversion of theologico-political ideas of which he was capable; the illustration for his *Etats et empires de la Lune* shows a startled man standing in a box adorned with an array of sputtering firecrackers, rising upward toward the stars. While this certainly represents an important scene in the novel, it elides the piercing satirical attacks being carried out against the society of the author's day. The title on the facing page presents the novel as a mere "Histoire Comique" to be taken in jest, suggesting that this may be a silly tale of a fool experimenting with explosives.



Only through a more in-depth reading of the text (perhaps after purchasing a copy of the edition) could the early-eighteenth-century reader have learned the extent of Cyrano's manipulation of fiction to ideological ends.

Finally, the most complex form of imposture that we see in the physical structure of these books is the manipulation of readers' expectations for the title page. This feature of an edition, which might often have been the first thing a potential book buyer would see (since newly printed books were generally sold without covers), typically contained four key pieces of information: the title, the name of the author, and the location and year of printing. However, authors and publishers frequently and unpredictably falsified these three elements. Books would be attributed to fictitious characters (like Jaques Massé), or published under pseudonyms (such as "Le Chevalier de P." for Tyssot). Likewise, printing locations might simply be false (like "Cologne" instead of Paris) or take the form of blatant provocations aimed at censors who would seek to apprehend clandestine

publishers; for instance, the imprint “Chez Jacques l’Aveugle” appears in some editions of Tyssot’s novel of *Jaques Massé*. Finally, some printers even put false dates in order to further mislead investigators seeking the origin of book. For this reason, even for modern scholars, it has not been possible to date the original edition of *Jaques Massé* with accuracy.

If we now move away from these material questions, we encounter the world of those early modern readers who had economic means and literacy to appreciate the primary works of interest, but did not wield a large degree of temporal or spiritual authority. We can equate their level metaphorically with the orbit of the planet Mars. Forms of imposture at this level include performances and pamphleteering by authors seeking to persuade readers to adopt specific interpretations of texts that are already in circulation. For example, as *Jaques Massé* took on a negative reputation in the public eye, Tyssot seems to have felt obliged to intervene, possibly to prevent sales from declining as religious leaders discouraged their communities from reading it. He needed to defend the book against claims that it fostered impiety, while at the same time avoiding an open admission of authorship. As a result, the author seems to have resorted to imposture in order to defend a book which itself was a hoax in a sense. In an ostensible letter to a friend (published in 1726), Tyssot claims that the most subversive component of the novel, a bold fable of politico-religious imposture, had been inserted into the printed book by a scheming editor, against the wishes of the author, Massé, who is in fact the first-person narrator (Rosenberg, *Tyssot de Patot* 20).

We are now moving toward the outer reaches of the solar system (as it was modeled in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries). I am reserving the zone of

the planet Jupiter for spiritual and political leaders in the early modern world who used their power to interfere, in potentially deceptive ways, with modest readers' access to and interpretations of works of my primary corpus. To this level, we relegate authors' vocal and active critics, like the Archdeacon of Paris for Villars and certain members of the Consistory of Deventer for Tyssot.

The half-sphere forming the outermost layer of Kepler's planetary model was dedicated to the planet Saturn. As we continue our imaginary travels into this layer of imposture, we might consider this seventh orbit to be the realm of supernatural (although not omnipotent) beings, including angels and demons, as well as such entities as Cyrano's Solarians and Villars' sylphs, nymphs, undines and gnomes. Such beings may or may not exist, but if they do they are privy to divine secrets beyond the ken of mere mortals, including religious leaders. According to the worldviews ironically suggested by my primary authors, such beings may be watching human beings and at times possessing and deceiving them or even copulating with them, while resorting to a wide variety of supernatural impostures.

Finally, we leave the planetary model entirely and find ourselves in a position analogous to that of the Christian God, who looks upon the system that He has created. He sees all; his gaze pierces through every mask and veil, and He is perfectly aware of any and all attempts to mislead that are taking place at any of the layers of imposture. He is immune to lies and knows the boundary between truth and fiction to the ultimate degree. While we may imagine ourselves analogously in his position with respect to Kepler's model and the early modern fictions of interest, however, the dynamics of imposture at work on many of the levels are opaque to us. We must not lose hope,

however, for in the chapters to follow we will seek to expose as many of these impostures as we can.

In order to come full circle with our analogical reasoning here, we must next attempt to shift our perspective with respect to the model one last time. We must imagine that we have just realized that we have been deceived; while we thought that we were standing over the three-dimensional ‘solar system’ and were separate from it, we now look up, glance at our surroundings and notice that in fact we ourselves are a mere planet, and the room we are standing in is yet another polyhedron that is itself part of the model. We might be going too far if we called this the orbit of Uranus, which does not appear in Kepler’s model. In any case, we can imagine having first thought that we had a relatively secure perspective, and control, so to speak, over our apprehension of the representation; but now, it seems to appear in a completely different light; everything that we thought we understood about it now looks false, and we have fallen into a state of profound ignorance and cognitive chaos. We thought that the model was separate from us but in fact we have been blinded to our profound fusion with it from the start. What is more, we must now ask ourselves whether there is yet another planet-viewer-zone looking down at us, and in turn whether another is looking down at that one, and so on, *ad infinitum*. Faced with this unfolding of infinite uncertainty, we have few options but to attempt to build a new understanding, as Descartes sought to do, as Pascal no doubt wished he could do, and as Leibniz perhaps believed (or at least hoped) that he did.

One of my main contentions in this dissertation is that the impression that this scenario inspires is quite similar to the experience that my authors seek to provoke in their readers through both their representations and their practices of imposture. Two

different but complementary conceptualizations of the Baroque can aid us here. Firstly, for William Egginton, two ideological and esthetic strategies can be said to define the Baroque, one ‘major’ and the other ‘minor’. For our purposes here, we might say that the authors who concern us expertly employ what Egginton calls the “minor strategy of the Baroque”. We can relate this to our extended analogy (of the solar system model built of levels of imposture) by imagining that the inventor of the object sought to put it to crafty and manipulative (but benevolent) purposes, involving waking up viewers from error. Speaking of how a viewer relates to a representation of reality (in fiction or drama for example), Egginton posits that the minor strategy:

nestles into the representation and refuses to refer it to some other reality, but instead affirms it, albeit ironically, as its only reality. This strategy, then, rather than accepting the presupposition of two opposing levels—a representation and a reality independent of that representation—undermines our ability to make this distinction in the first place. Not, however, in order to lead us further astray from “reality itself,” but rather to make us aware, to remind us that we are always, at any level, involved with mediation. (Egginton 6)

In a sense this is precisely what Cyrano, Villars and Tyssot are doing as they represent and enact impostures. As they ironically collapse the distinctions that separate characters from real people, narrators from authors, and fiction from history, for example, they destabilize their readers’ sense of control over perception, and remind them that their perspectives upon religious, political and aesthetic questions are always mediated through mechanisms of representation. Furthermore, they suggested, these imposed apparatuses emanated from a happenstance confluence of traditions and institutions, and the powerful individuals who had shaped both, possibly through deliberate deceit. In more modern terminology, these writers use fictions and figures of “impostures” to carry out thought

experiments with theories of society proper to the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

The second conceptualization of the Baroque of interest to us is Gilles Deleuze's notion of the infinite fold ("le pli infini"). For Deleuze, the Baroque can be theorized as a philosophical and esthetic regime in which thinkers and artists filled the liminal spaces between soul (which could reason) and matter (which could sense) as well as between superficial appearances and dark, enclosed spaces (of the body and of works of art), and the interior and exterior of artifacts and architectural structures:

[...] le pli infini sépare, ou passe entre la matière et l'âme, la façade et la pièce close, l'extérieur et l'intérieur. C'est que la ligne d'inflexion est une virtualité qui ne cesse de se différencier : elle s'actualise dans l'âme, mais elle se réalise dans la matière, les deux chacun de son côté. C'est le trait baroque : un extérieur toujours à l'extérieur, un intérieur toujours à l'intérieur. (Deleuze 49)

This set of metaphors can provide a second way of describing what the authors of my corpus do with tales of impostors. On one level, they take elements that belong inside their representation (narrators, characters, and fictitious events), and fold them outward (into the 'real' world of culture, religion and politics) such that the division between narrated deceit and lived awakening from illusion wrinkle into each other and fuse into a single, messy, disconcerting experience for the reader. Furthermore, this outward folding (which in a sense ricochets from the center of our metaphorical solar system model—the impostor characters—until it reaches the mind of the onlooker/reader) is like a contagion; it casts suspicions of imposture over everything and everyone that it touches. Once the reader has experienced the moment of suspicion that I have evoked, a conspiracy theory is born and it propagates itself, until the whole cosmos and all its reasoning inhabitants

appear as impostors and dupes with respect to each other. Here we find another example of a Deleuzian fold—the unstable, wildly fluctuating division between the fool inside and the trickster outside, the manipulative storyteller and the gullible listener, the cunning writer and the naïve reader.

In each of the three following chapters, I explore how an author experiments with tales of impostors as a way of inspiring his readers to imagine to what extent imposture might be omnipresent in human society.

In my first chapter, I show how Cyrano tempts the reader to believe in various narrative elements, but at the same time manipulates lucianesque humor and burlesque jokes that invite suspicion and announce fraud. Once the reader detects one fraudulent aspect of a story, Cyrano invites the reader to experience an oscillation between belief and disbelief that involves both the imagination and the intellect. Cyrano uses tales of impostors to lure readers into wondering whether the images that we use to conceive of the world around us might necessarily obstruct any perspective we could hope to cast on reality outside ourselves.

In my second chapter, on Villars' *Le Comte de Gabalis*, I argue that while the eponymous interlocutor claims to reveal long forgotten truths about the Devil and the elemental beings who supposedly inhabit the four elements composing the universe, we experience doubt as many aspects of his claims dissuade us from lending him credence. This impression grows as the narrator persuades us that the tales Gabalis tells are ravings at best, and blasphemous lies at worst. The work demonstrates the potential of

eroticizing and lucianizing history and religion. It invites readers to revel in the freedom afforded when they imagine the cosmos from a radically unorthodox point of view.

In my third chapter, I argue that Tyssot's technique of multiplying tales of impostors while modifying constituent elements is akin to imagining human societies in terms of a set of interrelated variables. The self-taught mathematician used fiction to imagine how society, politics and religion could be theorized in mathematical terms that would quantify the causes and effects of such phenomena as ecclesiastical corruption, popular superstition, and the devolution of history into myth over time.

As the works of all three authors are examined together, they offer remarkable insights into the role that fiction played as the early modern European world transitioned from the Baroque age to the early Enlightenment. Through the fiction of Cyrano, Villars and Tyssot, we see Montaigne's culture of uncertainty, chiaroscuro and the denunciation of human vanity giving way to Montesquieu's social landscape wherein lighthearted philosophers use fiction with confidence to skewer the shadows of superstition and despotism that they wanted to believe they could vanquish once and for all. In the tales that we are about to consider, each impostor exposed promises a glimmer of enlightenment.

Chapter I

Impostures in the Fiction of Cyrano de Bergerac

Prometheus, the Serpent and Original Imposture

The problem of imposture pervades the imaginary of early modern France. This nebulous notion, with its connotations of hoaxes and ruses, deceit and illusion, brings forth in its wake two attendants, the titan Prometheus and the notorious Serpent of Eden. These tricksters first enacted imposture in pagan Fable and Christian History and embodied it in fiction through metaphor and metonymy. In the seventeenth century, these original pranksters were bound to emerge in some guise in any thought experiment that questioned how human beings might succumb to illusion or disrupt it.

In *L'Autre monde, ou les états et empires de la lune* by Savinien Cyrano de Bergerac (1619-1655), the trickster titan occupies the thematic center of the novel and the Serpent of Eden in a sense inhabits his very body (Meurillon 185). In this radical rewriting of Lucian's *Icaromenippus*, a first person hero and narrator uses marvelous means to fly first to Canada and then to the moon, where he lands in the Garden of Eden, eats from the trees of Knowledge and Life, then lives in a city populated by giants who walk on all four legs. He finally returns home by hitching a ride through the ether with a great black demon who abducts a lunar blasphemer and flies him into Hell through the crater atop Mount Etna. At four key moments during this journey, the name of Prometheus appears, each time uttered by a different character (Meurillon 183). At the

beginning of the tale, the narrator mentions the mythical figure in an internal dialogue with himself (*Lune* 9). Later on, once he flies to the moon, he meets the prophet Elijah, who asserts that in fact the names Prometheus and Adam refer to the same historical figure, who visited the celestial body long ago (36). In a different context, the narrator meets a Spanish expatriate in the lunar city who invokes a metonymic association with the titan's name in the context of alchemy (87); through his theft of unadulterated fire from the Gods, Prometheus became the only figure within the Greek pantheon to have successfully isolated a pure element and thereby proven his mastery of the secrets of Nature (Alcover in *Lune* 87). Finally, and with great comic effect, near the end of the novel, a young atheist Selenite paradoxically praises the physical penis as 'every animal's very own Prometheus' since it endows its possessor with the power to impart life-generating sparks of heat energy through ejaculation and impregnation (143). This burlesque phallic symbolism links Prometheus back to the figure of the Edenic Snake. In the dialogue with Elijah, the prophet recounts that after he rode a magnetic chariot to the moon, he became immortal by eating fruit from the Tree of Life, which caused what he calls 'the snake' to leave his body in a puff of smoke: "Vous saurez [...] que je rencontraï [...] l'Arbre de Vie par le moyen duquel je m'empêchai de vieillir. Il consuma bientôt et fit exhaler le serpent en fumée" (43). This reference to the snake confuses the narrator, so he asks the patriarch to clarify what he means. In response, Elijah presents a very unorthodox account of what transpired after the Original Sin:

J'oubliais, ô mon fils, à vous découvrir un secret dont on ne peut pas vous voir instruit. Vous saurez donc qu'après qu'Ève et son mari eurent mangé de la pomme défendue, Dieu, pour punir le serpent qui les en avait tentés, le relégua dans le corps de l'homme. Il n'est point né depuis de créature humaine qui, en punition du crime de son

premier père, ne nourrisse un serpent dans son ventre, issu de ce premier. Vous le nommez les boyaux et vous les croyez nécessaires aux fonctions de la vie, mais apprenez que ce ne sont autre chose que des serpents pliés sur eux-mêmes en plusieurs doubles. Quand vous entendez vos entrailles crier, c'est le serpent qui siffle et qui, suivant ce naturel glouton dont jadis il incita le premier homme à trop manger, demande à manger aussi ; car Dieu qui, pour vous châtier, voulait vous rendre mortel comme les autres animaux, vous fit obséder par cet insatiable, afin que si vous lui donniez trop à manger, vous vous étouffassiez ; ou si, lorsqu'avec les dents invisibles dont cet affamé mord votre estomac, vous lui refusiez sa pitance, il criât, il tempêtât, il dégorgeât ce venin que vos docteurs appellent la bile, et vous échauffât tellement, par le poison qu'il inspire à vos artères, que vous en fussiez bientôt consumé. Enfin pour vous montrer que vos boyaux sont un serpent que vous avez dans le corps, souvenez-vous qu'on en trouva dans les tombeaux d'Esculape, de Scipion, d'Alexandre, de Charles Martel et d'Édouard d'Angleterre, qui se nourrissaient encore des cadavres de leurs hôtes. (43-44)

In this new version of the ancient story, the serpent endures a very different curse than the one God metes out in in the third chapter of *Genesis*. In the traditional narrative, God curses the serpent as punishment for trickery, commanding him to travel on his belly and eat dust. At the same time, Eve must suffer pain during childbirth and Adam must toil in the fields to cultivate food. But according to Cyrano's Elijah, the serpent does not travel on the ground at all, but has rather become the very bowels of humanity, demanding food, making noise and torturing human beings from the inside out. Furthermore, this reptilian parasite is the major cause of our mortality.

With a sudden interruption, the narrator shifts the tale's tone of high, respectable History into one of sexualized impishness:

En effet, lui dis-je en l'interrompant, j'ai remarqué que comme ce serpent essaie toujours à s'échapper du corps de l'homme, on lui voit la tête et le cou sortir au bas de nos

ventres. Mais aussi Dieu n'a pas permis que l'homme seul en fût tourmenté ; il a voulu qu'il se bandât contre la femme pour lui jeter son venin, et que l'enflure durât neuf mois après l'avoir piquée. Et pour vous montrer que je parle suivant la parole du Seigneur, c'est qu'il dit au serpent, pour le maudire, qu'il aurait beau faire trébucher la femme en se raidissant contre elle, qu'elle lui ferait enfin baisser la tête. (44-45)

The snake's venom has ceased to be bile and has become semen, and Man's penis is now its neck and head. Additionally, Elijah had left out a key aspect of the version from *Genesis* 3:15, according to which the woman's offspring would bruise the serpent's head and the animal would bruise his heel. However, here the narrator ironically reintegrates this component, distorting the image into that of an erect phallus, which the woman then causes to 'lower its head' as an erection ends after sex.

This blasphemous joke folds back into Cyrano's array of symbols connected to Prometheus, as the Titan and Adam become the same man, reproducing himself, along with the fire or soul within him, using a snake that has become part of his body. For Christian Meurillon, Cyrano's four mentions of the name Prometheus both convey respect for the rich body of mythic material that this could evoke in the mind of the reader, and also crystallize the essence of the myth, such that these references evoke a mere movement of elevation toward the heavens. Indeed, Cyrano presents salient but minimalist references to the Titan's name without recounting any version of the myth that would overtly include its darker aspects related to the shackles and the raptor (184-185). Meurillon contends that Cyrano's operation here implies a respect for the power of pagan Fable that does not extend to sacred History as retold by the character Elijah:

Ce mode implique donc un respect strict de la mythologie d'origine, trésor disponible d'histoires que le nom seul du héros doit évoquer dans la mémoire du lecteur. Il s'appuie

également sur une esthétique de la brièveté qui fait échapper Prométhée et son histoire aux risques du romanesque et du burlesque, et qui prend toute sa valeur dans son opposition à cette esthétique, toute d'exubérance amplificatoire (beaucoup de fables pour ce seul signifié : c'est de la fable), qui a prévalu pour discréditer l'univers mental d'Elie et de la Bible. D'ailleurs, l'un parle et exhibe ses niaiseries ; de l'autre, silencieux, l'on parle, et fort peu. (Meurillon 184)

While it is true that the mode of amplification and elaboration upon the Original Sin story tends to discredit it (or in my terms, expose it as imposture), Elijah overtly fuses this narrative with that of Prometheus when he argues that he and Adam were in fact the same individual. Thus, in my view Cyrano's technique of reframing this unified tale exposes both the Titan and the First Man to the same undermining effects. The author invites the reader to imagine the many ways in which error and the vagaries of oral and written transmission of both of these stories may have intervened over the centuries and transformed truth into imposture. After all, while both Elijah's version of the story and the narrator's burlesque mockery of it may seem absurd indeed, they nonetheless imply that whatever version of the story the reader may be familiar with may be equally untrue. To express this otherwise, Elijah and the hero offer mutually exclusive versions of a well-known story, both of which strike the reader as suspect and silly. As they do so, they inspire the reader to wonder if the version that he is familiar with may actually be just as dubious, and may in fact emerge from an age-old, tumor-like imposture at the heart of both pagan and Christian cultural memory. In essence, Cyrano dons the mask of fiction and storms the reader's imagination, then he removes the curse of Original Sin and installs the suspicion of Original Imposture in its place.

Cyrano made a brilliant use of the figures of Prometheus and the Serpent as he explored this suspicion of Original Imposture through his fiction. As part of this creative expedition, he seems to have wondered if human theories about the cosmos could ever be more than hoaxes, taking on monumental proportions in the imagination, clouding the lenses of the mind's eye and obfuscating visions of truth. Could it ever be possible to transcend belief in impostures in order to direct one's gaze toward true sights beyond the vain projects of the human psyche?

Recent readings of Cyrano's work have varied greatly in their approaches, but have tended not to emphasize the experimental, uncertain, wavering and destabilizing nature of his fiction and his profound fascination with the nature of imposture. For example, while Jacques Prévot has used Cyrano's fiction to represent its creator as a radical skeptic driven to refuse, dismiss and deride all creeds, this approach paradoxically shapes the author into a sort of indoctrinator of disbelief. Conversely, Alexandra Torero-Ibad's readings seem to presuppose that Cyrano arrived at the writing desk with an array of doctrines in mind that he took seriously (at least in a tentative way) and that he sought to impart to readers through fables and allegories. Other critics have generally taken a position between these two rather dialectically opposed perspectives, while highlighting one or several other facets of the author's work. Critics have emphasized such aspects as legal, political and ethical language (Isabelle Moreau), allusions to recent and ancient history and philosophy (Madeleine Alcover), and stylistics and narrative structures borrowed from preceding textual models (Nicolas Corr  ard). While all of these critics have brought valuable insight to the author's work, I would like to offer a complementary

approach that can examine the experimental nature of Cyrano's fiction writing to center stage while bringing his enthrallment with imposture into clearer focus.

I wish to argue that Cyrano's purpose in composing fiction was not so much to create a vehicle for transmitting philosophical teachings, or a capsule containing a cure against belief in purported falsehoods. Instead, his work took shape as an elaborate imaginary apparatus, which unfolded through sustained literary experimentation, and now invites the reader to question whether in fact it is even possible to cure oneself of the contagion of dubious beliefs and the facile, unexamined assumptions that sustain them. Cyrano's fictions challenge readers to wonder whether a human being might ever access true knowledge beyond what I am calling "imposture" and "representation." I am using these terms here in senses that Cyrano is likely to have been familiar with. We have already defined the first of these terms, but the second merits some explication.

Furetière notes five different uses of the word *représentation* in his dictionary, and in this dissertation the fourth (a rhetorical and literary sense) and the fifth (a legal sense) are pertinent. The lexicographer defines a *représentation* as the metaphorical painting of an event or story that one can create through words, whether it be as part of a political speech, in written literature, or through a dramatic performance:

REPRESENTATION, se dit aussi de la peinture qui se fait par le discours d'une action, ou d'une histoire vraie ou fausse. Les Deputez de la Province ont fait une belle *representation* de ses malheurs, de ses troubles, & de ses necessitez. Les Poëtes dans leurs Tragedies font de vives *representations* des incidens de l'Histoire, des passions des Heros. Ce Comedien entend bien la *representation*, fait bien la Comedie. Il y a déjà eu vingt *representations* de cet Opera.

Alongside this rhetorical and literary sense, Furetière observes how the word was used in the context of a legal case. When a prosecutor would call into question an exhibit in a trial, or bring a new exhibit into evidence, this was called a *représentation*:

REPRESENTATION, se dit au Palais de l'exhibition de quelque chose. Quand on s'inscrit en faux contre une piece, on ordonne qu'on en fera la *representation*. Quand on fait le procès à un accusé, on luy fait la *representation* des armes dont il s'est trouvé saisi, du corps morts de l'assassiné, de ses billets ou autres indices qui sont contre luy.

In Cyrano's work we find a series of 'representations' that operate in both of these ways at the same time. On one level, he uses a form of 'Poetry'—combining Lucianesque dialogue and frequent rhetorical conceits—to present new versions of older incidents from History, and to recount the deeds of Heroes known to his readers. His storytelling also features a performative aspect that recalls the way that an actor might tell a story in character on stage: “Mais écoute, Lecteur [...]” (*Lune* 7). Additionally, the voices of certain characters take on marked political overtones and recall the type of discursive depictions that a representative of a province might offer at a parliament, and the narrator paints pictures of lunar society as an envoy to Earth might do. On another level, the pseudo-legal trials narrated in the novels (the hero's nature being tried by the quadrupeds on the moon and by the birds on the sun) stand as synecdoches for the larger ensemble of 'representations' that compose the novels—in a sense the many episodes recounted serve to call into question the 'exhibits' offered by preceding politico-religious authorities and at the same time bring alternative exhibits into evidence against beliefs and assumptions being upheld by these same authorities. However, this 'representation' is by no means a unilateral attack on others' ideas, since Cyrano counters every claim that

he brings up himself by marshaling counterevidence in the form of a contradicting tale or story. It is through this repeated clashing of opposing ‘representations’ that Cyrano drives his reader to emulate this process on his own, opposing every new story that he hears with an alternative possible account. This process is designed to liberate the imagination.

In this chapter, we will consider one of Cyrano’s letters and both of his novels as we examine how Cyrano invokes early modern notions of imposture by confronting opposing ‘representations’ that burgeon throughout his fiction.

Impostures of the Senses and Interpretation:

Cyrano’s Letter “Des miracles de rivière”

Cyrano uses the term “imposture” in one of his letters. There, the term refers to a process that occurs during an act of perception, when an individual contemplates the world around him. Before we go further, some contextualization is useful here.

In addition to his novels, Cyrano created a small corpus of letters written in the first person, each between about one and four pages long, which addressed a diversity of topics. While some are unconventional love letters, others take the form of extended insults, and still others are elaborate poetic experiments, describing such traditional subjects as the four seasons with highly inventive metaphors and similes. As Jean-Charles Darmon has suggested, the imagery and descriptions in these texts recall the paintings of Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1526/1527-1593), which often represented assemblages of objects or animals that coalesced to form the portrait of a human being (*Lettres satiriques* 14). As we examine one particular letter, I would like to keep in mind

one painting by Arcimboldo, his allegory of water from 1566². In that image, the artist has cleverly arranged a vast variety of aquatic animals, including fish, crabs, mollusks and even a turtle, so as to compose a human head, chest and shoulders. If the viewer gazes at the image from far away, these various components resolve themselves into a simple human form, but the closer one approaches, the more the minute details of individual elements become visible. The man's eye is also the eye of a large fish, for example, and he shares a mouth with a shark.



The image appears to change depending upon the viewer's perspective. It is one example of the optical phenomenon called "anamorphosis." Like the more common

² This image can be viewed at http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giuseppe_Arcimboldo_-_Water_-_WGA00826.jpg.

term, metamorphosis, this refers to a seeming change in form. In this case, however, the prefix “*ana-*” evokes a movement, either upward or backward, like a book being flipped over, alternately displaying two different images. As Cyrano was growing up in the 1620s and 1630s, a number of artists developed highly advanced optical devices comprising polished metal cones, cylinders and oblique mirrors in order to reconstitute apparently disordered lines and colors into coherent, reflected images. In Paris in 1638, the Minim friar Jean-François Nicéron (1613-1646) published an illustrated study of such techniques, *La Perspective curieuse ou magie artificielle des effets merveilleux* (Baltrušaitis 56), and Cyrano may well have had this work or others like it in mind when writing his letter.

The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries witnessed an explosion of experimentation with this type of optical trickery. These artistic developments coincide with cultural movements that scholars retrospectively label mannerism and the baroque. Ongoing scholarly debates have emphasized the difficulty of defining these terms, and some critics have suggested abandoning the word “baroque” altogether. In 1979, however, Gregory de Rocher suggested defining baroque aesthetics by their use of techniques recalling the ‘anamorphic’ illusionism that we have evoked. He argued that the term is useful as a single trope that can function both as an abstract concept and as a concrete textual characteristic, capable of describing both an image and a text (88). As we shall see, Cyrano’s letter operates much like an anamorphic painting by an artist like Arcimboldo, and in so doing, presents penetrating insights into how discursive references to such techniques could be used to inspire reflections on the part of the reader.

Unlike Cyrano's novels, his letters were published during his lifetime, and manuscript versions have survived alongside the earliest editions. For this section, we will be citing Maurice Laugaa's edition of the *Lettres diverses*, which is based on a manuscript dating from 1651 (Laugaa 123).

In the manuscript is a letter appearing under the title "Des miracles de rivière." In this text, a first-person narrator revels in the illusions made possible when his imagination, senses, and body respond to refracted and reflected images on the surface of a river. Optical illusions lead the viewer-narrator to sensual euphoria while spontaneously producing fantastical narratives of heroic intrigue and wondrous monsters. In this short prose poem of sorts, a man lies on his belly beside a river at four o'clock in the morning, gazing through reflections of trees, sky and stars that partially obscure his view of the plants and animals on the riverbed. As he stares downward at the water, a bird perches in the branches above him and its reflection obscures the man's view of fish beneath the surface of the river. As the human onlooker's imagination influences his perception of the river's "miroir fluide" and "petit monde renversé" (161), a nightingale at once fish and bird gets lost in a forested utopia ruled by a tyrannical king, the pike (a type of fish), in a nation where everyone is mute (161). This nightingale finds himself in a strange world whose citizens gather around him in awe and puzzlement at his monstrous appearance. The pike, the monarch of the liquid element, cannot be sure whether the nightingale is another fish masquerading with feathers or the disembodied spirit of a bird:

[...] la perche, la dorade, et la truite qui le voient, ne savent si c'est un poisson vêtu de plumes, ou si c'est un oiseau dépouillé de son corps ; elles s'amassent autour de lui, le considèrent comme un monstre, et le brochet, ce tyran des

rivières, jaloux de rencontrer un étranger sur son trône, le cherche en le trouvant, le touche et ne le peut sentir, court après lui au milieu de lui-même, et s'étonne de l'avoir tant de fois traversé sans le blesser. (161-162)

Even as the boundaries between the letter-writer and his surroundings dissipate, collapsing water, earth and sky into one interwoven world, so the pike weaves in and out of the nightingale's immaterial body and any distinction between exterior and interior falls in upon itself. We thus have an effect of recursion, or a *mise-en-abyme*, in which this integrated image of the cosmos seems to repeat in miniature, while pressing the multiple elements of earth, water and air into an inscrutable fusion. A terrestrial human fades into an aquatic fish and an aerial bird. Much like a person standing between two mirrors and looking at his reflection, this collision of elements reenacts itself at both a macro-level and a micro-level, while implying an infinite extension in both directions. In a sense, the prostrate body of the human viewer gazing into the water becomes a macrocosm relative to the microcosm wherein the slippery fish slips through the image of the perching bird. Furthermore, we might well imagine that the fish and the bird themselves perceive a still smaller microcosm within their own. Conversely, if we take a step backward, and enter a higher degree of magnitude, then the point of view implied in the descriptions seems to position the reader behind or beside the downward-looking man, privy to the same sights but still relatively near him, since we are not offered a god's-eye view of the scene, and see the reflection of the nightingale instead of the bird itself (we therefore seem to be below the branches of the tree, like the narrator). Thus, the letter-writer is also a reflection of the reader, who himself is as though annexed and subsumed by the represented world. It is in this way that we can also understand the opening sentence of Cyrano's letter:

Le ventre couché sur le gazon d'une rivière, et le dos
étendu sous les branches d'un saule qui se mire dedans, je
vais³ renouveler aux arbres l'histoire de Narcisse [...]
(160).

Here, at the very beginning of the text, Cyrano sets the stage for the collapsing of earth, air, and water into one, and the blending of truth and myth. In their own way and at their own level of magnitude, every being in the description, from the letter-writer down to the pike, becomes a Narcissus, projecting his own reflection into his perceptions of the world around him, and the reader is invited to participate by investing an image of himself into the prose of the letter through an act of imaginative reading.

On one level, we have in this letter a model for how Cyrano may have understood human perception, and this vision aligns in some ways with the scenario I described in my introduction (in which I invoked Kepler's solar system model). In that imaginary scene, I posited viewers looking at the model made of nested polyhedrons, each of which corresponded to a layer of imposture. In this letter by Cyrano, a specific type of imposture takes place at each level of the *mise-en-abyme*. The letter-writer describes the extraordinary scene he has depicted as an "imposture des sens" (161). He exposes the illusion that he has produced in the imagination for what it is, as though he was piercing the disguise of an impostor. At the moment in which the pike passes through the body of the nightingale, and yet does not hurt the bird, the fish is first struck with confusion, and this contagious impression then infects the mind of the letter-writer himself; the absurdity of this occurrence mildly annoys him, and he decides to shatter the illusion:

³ Some early editions, and Jacques Prévot's 1977 one, read "je voy renouveler [...]" (Prévot *Œuvres complètes* 45).

[...] le brochet [...] s'étonne de l'avoir tant de fois traversé sans le blesser. Moi-même j'en demeure tellement consterné que je suis contraint de quitter ce tableau. (162)

This sequence recalls a dream in which a series of increasingly unlikely events succeed each other until at last something happens which startles the dreamer into realizing the unreality of his perceptions. However, it is as though the narrator has not been shocked into complete wakefulness, for the illusion immediately seduces him once more. He exclaims with great feeling that his senses (the 'lower soul') influence the workings of his mind (the 'upper soul') to an extraordinary degree. Even though he realizes that the seeming miracle he sees is a complete fiction, he cannot help but elaborate upon the story of the nightingale that fell onto the underwater, upside-down, forested firmament. He exclaims:

Mais admirez l'empire que la basse région de l'âme exerce sur la haute : après avoir découvert que tout ce miracle n'est qu'une imposture des sens, je ne puis encore empêcher ma vue de prendre au moins ce firmament imaginaire pour un grand lac sur qui la terre flotte ; le rossignol qui du haut d'une branche se regarde dedans, croit être tombé dans la rivière [...] (161)

Here Cyrano's narration recalls the illusions produced by anamorphic images, including Arcimboldo's allegory of water, and in so doing, offers a remarkable commentary on a set of key esthetic and ideological issues of his day. As Jeanne Goldin has argued, Cyrano's narration (here as elsewhere) displays two images at once, either in an anamorphic alternation or in a simultaneous fusion as in a cubist painting, and this confrontation is a striking, fundamental quality of his writing as a whole. She argues that the world he depicts is:

un monde renversé, semblable au nôtre et différent. Et les deux faces nous sont présentées, soit alternativement

comme dans certaines peintures reversibles d’Arcimboldo, soit simultanément comme dans cette étrange vision bilatérale de Cyrano étendu sur la berge, le « ventre couché sur le gazon d’une rivière, et dos estendu sous les branches d’un saule qui se mire dedans », rappelant les tableaux cubistes où le modèle se trouve à la fois de face et de profil. Dans un cas, comme dans l’autre, c’est leur confrontation qui mène à l’insolite. L’obsession du réversible est au cœur même de la vision cyranesque. (Goldin 157)

As the letter-writer gazes at the surface of the water, his eyesight continually plays tricks on him. Even though he is well aware that there are no trees inside the river, and that the earth around is not floating on a horizontal field of stars like a ship on the sea, his vision repeatedly conveys these notions to his mind, which together create their own cosmos, as if in dialogue.

While it may seem that Cyrano’s shifting back and forth between two perspectives was a mere literary device to inspire admiration and wonder, it was quite ideologically significant for his readers. In fact, as Jean-Vincent Blanchard has argued, anamorphosis in the early seventeenth century was often represented as much more than a mere commonplace visual and literary curiosity; it evolved into an original and striking way to evoke the common philosophical and theological themes of illusion and vanity (168). Anamorphosis symbolized how sacred knowledge, proper interpretations of life, text and art, and effective rhetoric could be cultivated through judgment and prudence (170). On the one hand, optical wonders could suggest that knowledge could only ever be attained through mediated perception; on the other, they could be interpreted to imply that a man embodied on Earth could legitimately hope to discover, through active and sustained contemplation, an elusive point of view in which the transcendental truths about nature would be visible in the cosmos itself (171-172). In the letter of interest here,

Cyrano conjures up a striking imaginary scene which calls into question the notion that any particular perspective could offer trustworthy insights into the workings of the universe. Could any point of view really be sufficient to reconstitute our wildly disparate visions into a coherent tableau, directing us toward transcendent truths? By staging the imaginative act of projecting stories onto our already unreliable perceptions of the cosmos, he subtly implies that in the end, claims about the nature of reality are little more than narcissistic projections of a person's own desires onto unstable images in the mind. This is one way of understanding the phrase "imposture des sens"—it is an act of imposing one dubious set of stories and images upon another. The letter writer renews the tale of Narcissus, notably seeing aquatic animals as warlike monarchs guarding their thrones; yet everything that he says about the fish seems to be a mere reflection (an imposing, or a placing-upon, an "im-posture" in an etymological sense) of his own desire for power and authority. In showcasing this, Cyrano prompts his reader to question whether other seventeenth-century thinkers' metaphorical references to anamorphic images, and their quests to find a hidden window through Nature into great truths, are not similar instances of "imposture" that we might call in more modern terms "narcissistic projection." Perhaps they posit that such a point of view might exist simply because they wish that such were the case, and they yearn for the power that would come to them should they discover it.

Additionally, by weaving a legal lexicon into the letter, Cyrano reinforces this attack on the "impostures" that grow out of human pretensions to uncover ultimate truth. For example, he describes his exploration of his otherworldly vision as "un procès des yeux et de la raison" (162); it is as though the act of composing the text were putting the

eyes and the mind on trial for fraud. At the same time, this “trial” offers a paradoxical thought experiment on (and experience with) the mind, the senses and the imagination that is carried out through writing. We can detect echoes of Montaigne’s notion of the “*essai*”—and his famous call to suspend judgment—here, and we can discern some of the anxieties about the reliability of observation and perception that would help shape debates on experimental methods in the decades after Cyrano’s death (such as the disagreements between Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes about the significance of air pump experiments). Immediately after the letter-writer rejects the trustworthiness of the vision he has depicted, he asks the reader not to “condemn” it or judge the vision too harshly, likening the letter itself to a written testimony: “Je vous prie de suspendre sa condamnation, puisqu’il est malaisé de juger d’une ombre [...]” (162). Thus the description of the fantastical sights witnessed becomes a statement in which observed events are knowingly misrepresented; the text itself is in a sense an “imposture”—a hoax of sorts.

This letter thus uses a form of *external*, textual imposture to stage a phenomenon of *internal* imposture, which arises between the senses and the ‘soul’ of a narrator. A key aspect of this dynamic is the way that human intention is portrayed. As the word *imposture* is used today in French, not only has it taken on a pejorative connotation, but it also seems to imply ill will on the part of a human agent largely in control of his own actions. Yet as we see in Cyrano’s letter, the “imposture des sens” emerges spontaneously and unpredictably in ways that are quite independent of what the narrator’s intentions may be.

Three Faces of Imposture in *L'Autre monde*:

Perception, Intimidation and Sophistry

Cyrano uses fiction as an impostor manipulates appearances, using his textual impostures as means of dismantling other forms of hoaxes and fraud. He mobilizes his fiction as a weapon against three major forms of *imposture* that were rampant in his society.

In order to understand how he accomplishes this, a brief summary of his novels should be helpful. In the two volumes that make up *L'Autre monde*, the boundlessly inventive yet often hapless hero experiences the most extraordinary and inimitable of travels. Thanks in part to technology, and in part to surprising, supernatural occurrences, he flies across the ocean to the wilderness of Québec, and then ascends to the moon, where he strolls in the Garden of Eden, partakes of the original Tree of Knowledge and encounters a strange civilization of four-footed giants. The traveler at last hitches a ride back to Earth, clinging to the feet of a fearsome, airborne Ethiopian delivering a miscreant to Hell, which the tale locates at the center of the Earth.

Along the way, the narrator encounters many unique and memorable interlocutors who attempt, with mitigated success, to fill him in on the secrets of the universe. He notably meets the governor of Québec, the Biblical prophets Elijah and Enoch, a fellow earthling from Spain who also happens to be the hero of an earlier lunar voyage novel, Francis Godwin's *The Man in the Moone* (1638, translated into French in 1648), diverse four-legged commoners, clergy and aristocrats, and perhaps most importantly, an ethereal being from the Sun who calls himself the Demon of Socrates. This last character is an age-old, immortal, ghost-like entity capable of possessing the material body of a human

being and invading a new host after its death. This wise spirit claims to have known many famous, unorthodox thinkers over the centuries, including Socrates, and he reveals that he was in fact one of two mysterious old men who visited an idiosyncratic Renaissance astrologer and inspired the narrative which in turn led to the travels of the main protagonist.

In *Les États et empires du Soleil*, the first-person narrator drifts and flies through a series of adventures that begin in the port of Toulon and end on the Sun by way of Toulouse. At the outset of the story, he meets an old friend near Toulouse, Monsieur de Colignac, who can scarcely believe he is not dead. This Count has heard rumors that the narrator was burned alive in Canada after jumping onto the wooden contraption that actually sent him to the moon. After the Count convinces him to write down his adventures, copies of the manuscript circulate clandestinely and spark rumors that the aristocrat is hosting a sorcerer in his castle. Soon a local priest believes that the narrator is in fact an incarnation of the beast of the Apocalypse, and undertakes a plan to drive him from the castle of Colignac. In the mean time, the narrator spends leisure time with two aristocrat friends and freely moves between their two estates. Unfortunately, a troupe of religious fanatics captures him en route, accuses him of witchcraft and imprisons him in a tower. Thanks to his great mastery of natural philosophy and friends who provide him with materials, however, he builds a spacecraft that is capable of sailing in sunlight. He uses this device to fly first to a sort of inhabited asteroid and then to the Sun, portrayed as an earth-like planet upon which one can walk. There, he converses with the philosopher Tommaso Campanella, who has died and whose soul has recently

transmigrated to the Sun. The unfinished novel halts abruptly as Dyrcona is about to speak to the soul of René Descartes.

Three main types of imposture can be distinguished in these novels. We have already seen how the relationship between an “imposture of the senses” and the interpretation of a text is represented in one of Cyrano’s letters, and this type of “internal” hoax or illusion takes place elsewhere in his work as well, and particularly at the beginning of *Lune*. In those pages, the narrator seems to be succumbing to this sort of seduction by the senses when he finds a book left open in his home. As in the letter, alcohol and fatigue are implied as catalysts in the process. Secondly, Cyrano represents a form of imposture that comes with power, notably in the lunar priests who blast the ears and mind with their trumpets. This is like forcing a mask onto another person, while frustrating their own attempts to mask themselves. Another example is a scene in the initial pages of *Soleil* in which a mob of superstitious commoners misinterpret the book by Descartes as evidence that the hero is a warlock. Finally, Cyrano presents a third form of imposture as a tool for liberation, and ironically, as an effective weapon against other types of fraud and deception; it is the power of sophistry, equivocal argumentation, and changing the terms of a debate, in order to dumbfound the weak-minded. The Demon of Socrates uses such tactics against the priests on the moon. This also relates obliquely to a scene in which the Demon gives the narrator two books as a gift. In the following sections, we will examine each of these scenes.

Impostures of the Senses and the Interpretation of Texts

The opening scene of *États et empires de la lune* provides a useful example of an “imposture of the senses” in relation to the interpretation of a book. The narrator returns home from a night out with friends, and discovers a mysterious tome by the sixteenth-century astrologer Girolamo Cardano lying open on his table. Strangely, he does not remember placing it there. As Anthony Grafton notes, Cardano had performed astrological services widely before being imprisoned and condemned for heresy; he struggled to clear his name in the eyes of the Inquisitor of Bologna, yet wrote a tale of his life in which he claims to have encountered spirits and performed supernatural feats (4). In Cyrano’s novel, this work lies open to a page upon which Cardano recounts an eerie visitation to his home by two old men who float through closed doors, claim to come from the moon, and then disappear into thin air (7-8).

Cyrano’s hero interprets the presence of the disconcerting tome in the most mystical terms; he finds it profoundly uncanny that the book would be open to this particular passage, given that he has just been mocked mercilessly by his companions for imagining that the lunar surface is inhabited by intelligent life. While it would seem logical to wonder if one of his comrades has not played a practical joke on him—perhaps sneaking into his home and leaving the book in this position for him to find—this does not occur to him even for a moment. Instead, he instantly assumes that the object has flown from the shelf of its own accord and represents a sign from the transcendent, a case of intervention by supernatural entities. In fact, the fervent seeker of miracles quickly makes another leap in interpretation, and speculates that those same two inhabitants of the lesser luminary must themselves be the ones who moved the book.

This scene stages the problematic nature of revelation through written accounts. Whatever the actual likelihood of Cardano's tale of visitation from extraterrestrials may be, Cyrano's narrator judges its truth-value not by the content of the astrologer's narrative, but rather by the authority conferred to it by the manner of the text's physical delivery. In other terms, it is not what is told on that page that leads the hero to believe in it, but rather the purported causes of its arrival and placement on the surface of his table. He hazards an unverifiable assumption about how the book made its way to its current location, without pausing to consider other possible explanations. However, any number of intervening agents could have brought about the state of affairs that the narrator discovers upon returning home. We are not told if he has servants, for example, or if his friends or members of his family could have gained entrance to his residence. It is also quite possible that he had simply been reading the book himself but forgot having done so (perhaps as a result of imbibing an excess of wine with his companions). In fact, his assertion that the lunar men passed through his dining area is little more than the most arbitrary and circumstantial of guesses, and yet the narrator's act of venturing it paradoxically invests the Italian's story with an extraordinary affective impact. This in turn elicits several more bursts of haphazard conjectures. Soon, the imagination of Cyrano's storyteller is ablaze with vivid wonders, and yet all of this energetic, mental reeling results from a single book which happened to be out of place after a night of drunken revelry. Such a tiny spark leads to great flames indeed.

This opening scene holds up a mirror to the early modern reader's experience of apprehending Cyrano's writing, and highlights the potential for "impostures of the senses," or mental illusions, to take hold as he does so. Cyrano depicts a dynamic vision

of how one relates to written accounts from various points of view in *L'Autre monde*, and when we compare these with what we know about the historical dissemination of his work, a picture emerges of how an early modern reader might have initially responded to the narrative in terms of belief and doubt.

In *Soleil*, Cyrano portrays the ways in which a written narrative could take on larger readerships while becoming the subject of divergent and even contradictory interpretations. He stages the writing and diffusion of a text with the same title as his first novel, *Etats et empires de la Lune*. This expanding popularity of the text moves forward in three stages. First, he writes down his narrative at the urging of a benefactor and host, then this protector shows the handwritten text to powerful acquaintances while praising its author. Next, engravers who have heard Monsieur de Colignac speak of the author take it upon themselves to create a portrait that they advertise and sell throughout Toulouse, which earns him still wider renown.

Je mis donc la plume à la main, et à mesure que j'achevais un cahier, impatient de ma gloire, qui lui démangeait plus que la sienne, il allait à Toulouse le prôner dans les plus belles assemblées. Comme on l'avait en réputation d'un des plus forts génies de son siècle, mes louanges, dont il semblait l'infatigable écho, me firent connaître à tout le monde. Déjà les graveurs, sans m'avoir vu, avaient buriné mon image ; et la ville retentissait, dans chaque carrefour, du gosier enroué des colporteurs qui criaient à tue-tête : « Voilà le portrait de l'auteur des *Etats et Empires de la Lune*. » (167)

Soon two opposing camps of interpretation emerge and the debate that ensues draws more attention to the text. While Colignac and some of his acquaintances both understand and admire the text, other readers react with puzzlement and confusion but

nonetheless praise the work as a way of veiling their ignorance and pretending that they understand:

Parmi les gens qui lurent mon livre, il se rencontra beaucoup d'ignorants qui le feuilletèrent. Pour contrefaire les esprits de grande volée, ils applaudirent comme les autres, jusqu'à battre des mains à chaque mot, de peur de se méprendre, et tout joyeux s'écrièrent : « Qu'il est bon ! » aux endroits qu'ils n'entendaient point. (167)

This latter group of readers soon changes position however, and begins dismissing the text as an amalgam of poorly-written fairy tales composed by a madman:

L'ouvrage dont ils avaient fait tant de cas, n'est plus qu'un pot-pourri de contes ridicules, un amas de lambeaux décousus, un répertoire de Peau-d'Ane à bercer les enfants ; et tel n'en connaît pas seulement la syntaxe qui condamne l'auteur à porter une bougie à Saint-Mathurin. Ce contraste d'opinions entre les habiles et les idiots augmenta son crédit. (168)

There is a certain variation among these former admirers turned critics. Those who understand slightly more of the story see it more like a infantile tale of magic (like Donkey-Skin) and those who understand it least believe that the author has lost his mind and therefore needs to pray to the patron saint of fools.

Finally, clandestine copies of the work are produced and sold, escaping the control of the author entirely:

Peu après, les copies en manuscrit se vendirent sous le manteau ; tout le monde, et ce qui est hors du monde, c'est-à-dire depuis le gentilhomme jusqu'au moine, acheta cette pièce ; les femmes mêmes prirent partie. Chaque famille se divisa, et les intérêts de cette querelle allèrent si loin, que la ville fut partagée en deux factions, la lunaire et l'antilunaire. (168)

On one level, as Isabelle Moreau has shown (197), these scenes open the way for an extended allusion to the condemnation and execution of Giulio Cesare Vanini, which

took place in Toulouse in 1619, the year of Cyrano's birth. On a different level, however, we find here a remarkable depiction that hints at how Cyrano's first novel may have been received during his lifetime. In fact, the author did not have *L'Autre monde* printed while he was alive. Today, three manuscript versions of *Lune* are attested. For this chapter, I am citing Madeleine Alcover's edition, which is based on the Paris manuscript of *Lune*⁴. According to Raymond Gaudriault's analysis of the watermarks, this copy was produced during the seventeenth century but it has not been possible to determine whether it was created while Cyrano was alive (Alcover CII); it is likely to have been written by a scribe with the intent to use it as a base for further diffusion, perhaps as additional manuscript copies, as depicted in the scene in *Soleil* (CV). As for the text of *Soleil* that I am citing here, we have a different state of affairs. Alcover's edition is based on the posthumous printed edition of 1662, which is not predated by any extant manuscripts (CXXVIII).

To come back to the scenes of interest to us, if we compare the opening scene of *Lune* (the narrator gazes into the Cardano's book) with the reaction of the people of Toulouse to Dyrcona's book in the first pages of *Soleil*, several parallels emerge. In both cases, a text has appeared and brings with it a fantastical backstory—the two men visited Cardano, and Dyrcona flew to the moon and hitched a ride back home with a demon. These tales are difficult to believe. Additionally, their degree of seriousness is hard to pinpoint, their use of irony is challenging to account for, and they use complex diction and a high-level lexicon that make them difficult to understand. These factors drive readers who do not understand everything to overcompensate for their uncertainty by jumping to wild, disorienting conclusions. Some readers come to believe not only that

⁴ The manuscript is located at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, under manuscript Fonds français catalogue number 4558.

the unlikely events in the narrative have truly occurred, but that these happenings have implicated them personally. Some of the readers represented in *Soleil* come to particularly radical conclusions. In addition to believing that the lunar journey has truly transpired, they make themselves part of the fiction in a sense when they come to believe that the author is a warlock who has made a pact with the Beast of the Apocalypse. After many of the inhabitants of Toulouse have read Dyrcona's manuscript or copies of it, a company of parliamentarians arrives at Colignac's doorstep making accusations of witchcraft:

[...] le sorcier que nous accusons est l'auteur des *Etats et empires de la Lune* ; il ne saurait nier qu'il ne soit le plus grand magicien de l'Europe, après ce qu'il avoue lui-même. Comment ! avoir monté à la lune ! Cela se peut-il sans l'entremise de... Je n'oserais nommer la Bête ; car enfin, dites-moi, qu'allait-il faire chez la lune ? (169)

In a way this represents narcissistic projection similar to that which we saw in the letter on the reflections in water. The men of parliament first interpret the written tale as a true account, place its narrated events on the same level as that of their own existence, then make themselves active players in the ongoing drama, projecting their own image onto the pages of the author's work.

Similarly, the narrator of *Lune* inserts himself into Cardano's tale when he comes to believe that the extraterrestrials have visited his home and touched his book. This leads him to presume that Cardano's book has been delivered to him, on the table, through extraordinary means and he therefore invests it with an authority that it would not otherwise deserve. Part of the irony here is that while the hero cannot explain how the book found its way off the bookshelf, he says nothing about how it got there in the first place. His words do not suggest that the book is new to him, which leads us to

imagine that he knows how the volume came into his possession. Perhaps he bought it at a book fair or a friend gave it to him, possibly even to set up this entire scenario as a practical joke. If he had never seen the tome before, the scene would seem all the more fantastical, and such a state of affairs would add weight to the hypothesis that extraterrestrials deposited it in plain sight. As the sequence of events is presented, however, Cyrano's ironic distance from his character emphasizes the latter's excessive eagerness to attribute mystical significance to events whose causes are not (or cannot be) known, but that may well result from the deeds of utterly mundane agents.

When the hero initially asks himself about how he might resolve his proliferating doubts and suspicions about who took the volume by Cardano from his shelf, his question markedly echoes that of the hero of Lucian's dialogue *Icaromenippus, or High Above the Clouds*. In this Greek dialogue from the Second Sophistic age, the hero Menippus tells a friend that he has just returned from heaven, where he spoke to Zeus himself. He had gone there with the hope of learning a pure truth about the cosmos for himself, once and for all. As he explains, before undertaking this journey:

Being utterly at a loss in all this, I despaired of learning any truth about these things while I was on earth, and I thought the only escape from all my difficulties would be somehow to acquire wings and go up to heaven. My eagerness chiefly gave me this hope, and also the fabulist Aesop, who opens up heaven to eagles and beetles, and sometimes even to camels. (49)

In this key model for the opening pages of *États et empires de la lune*, like Cyrano's narrator, Lucian's character Menippus decides that leaving the earth is the only way to discover universal truths, and he builds his hope to undertake such a voyage on an extremely problematic precedent that blurs the distinction between fable and history. The

ancient Greek voyager follows skewed logic according to which fables composed by the legendary figure Aesop might somehow provide reason to believe that, in history, animals have truly traveled to heaven. From this initial flawed reasoning, he then draws a dubious conclusion based on additional false logic: if insects, birds and beasts of burden can ascend to Olympus, he assumes, then so can people. Yet, part of the humor in this passage stems from the fact that Menippus himself actually inhabits fable and not history, and therefore ‘historical’ reasoning does not apply to the intradiegetic world. Indeed, within a fiction nothing prevents a character from traveling to any type of extraordinary place if a fabulist composing the text so wishes.

Cyrano makes a key alternation to his model here by replacing Lucian’s reference to Aesop with a mention of Prometheus. This mixes fable and history still further in his protagonist’s thinking, and at the same time, it opens the way for a series of reflections that lead the reader back to Lucian’s many treatments of the trickster-titan in his other dialogues. Aesop was a legendary Phrygian slave and composer of fables who, despite the myths built up around his image, may have existed in human history, but the Forethinker was a mythical titan whose literal, historical reality held little if any credence for Lucian or for early modern Europeans. On multiple levels, the distinction between fiction and truth fluctuates, and the two even appear to switch places unpredictably, like two perspectives in a painting by Arcimboldo, or the vision described by the writer of “Des miracles de rivière.”

Faced with this uncertain point of view, the hero wonders if he might be able to fly to the moon himself to investigate this fantastical happening: “Pourquoi non ?” he

asks himself, and asserts that a precedent for this type of journey already exists. Indeed, the ancient titan Prometheus once went to heaven to steal fire:

—Sans doute, continuais-je, les deux vieillards qui apparurent à ce grand homme sont ceux-là mêmes qui ont dérangé mon livre, et qui l'ont ouvert sur cette page, pour s'épargner la peine de me faire cette harangue qu'ils ont faite à Cardan. —Mais, ajoutai-je, je ne saurais m'éclaircir de ce doute, si je ne monte jusque-là ? —Et pourquoi non ? me répondais-je aussitôt. Prométhée fut bien autrefois au ciel dérober du feu. A ces boutades de fièvres chaudes, succéda l'espérance de faire réussir un si beau voyage. (Lune 8-9)

Within the world of Cyrano's narrative, the titan Prometheus is an odd foundation upon which to base a hope to complete an undertaking that seems impossible. While the narrator's spiritual views are clearly somewhat unorthodox, he nonetheless lives in a predominantly Christian society in which pagan *fable*, while potentially 'true' on an allegorical level, is not understood to relate literal *history* as Holy Writ purportedly can do. In this context, the hero's sudden optimism about the possibility of celestial flight grows out of a problematic mixture of disparate areas of knowledge: he takes the story of Prometheus as a sort of proof that his heavenly journey can take place, infusing a pagan myth with an authority that only a Christian narrative ought to confer as an argument in favor of a given belief. Furthermore, it is not as though no appropriate Biblical figure was available to suit the purpose; the dreamer might easily build his hopes upon the story of Elijah instead—a Hebrew prophet who was said to have flown to heaven in a fiery chariot, and whom the hero will later encounter directly. Yet, at the beginning of this tale, our soon-to-be adventurer leaves Elijah out of his thought process, supplanting the ostensibly legitimate, factual example of the respected prophet with the tale of Prometheus, a fiction purportedly invented by ignorant pagans. Thus, in this prelude to

celestial ascent in the *États et empires de la lune*, Prometheus becomes the narrator's primary predecessor, inspiration and mirror.

Imposing Impostures

As we noted at the outset, Cyrano represents how powerful characters impose their authority on the weak as a second form of imposture. This is particularly evident in the scene in which the lunar priests put the narrator-hero's humanity on trial on the moon. Leading up to that sequence, Cyrano's narrator describes the two languages that the 'Sélénites' speak on the moon. While the nobility and the clergy use musical notes to communicate, either by singing or by playing instruments, commoners use a complex set of gestures with their naked bodies to express themselves (65-66). When debates about the humanity or animality of the hero polarize the lunar city into two factions, the common people, spreading rumors through their silent gestures, tend to think that the hero is a man (as opposed to a parakeet, monkey or ostrich). The lunar clergy use their musical voices, which they enhance artificially with loud instruments, to impose their views on the people, bullying them into a silence that is without gestures as well as without voices. As the clergy make public decrees against believing that the hero is human, he learns to speak the musical language in a passage with significant choices of words:

[...] parmi les sonnettes dont les regardants me rompaient les oreilles, j'appris à parler comme eux. Quand je fus assez rompu dans l'idiome pour exprimer la plupart de mes conceptions, j'en contai des plus belles. (90)

He has broken into the language both as one might break into a house and as one might break in a pair of shoes, and now he is ready to use it as a tool as he sharpens his wit while preparing to argue on his own behalf. Unfortunately for him, an overwhelming instance of auditory intimidation once again reduces him to silence when he appears at trial, as a lunar pope uses a deafening trumpet to call for the hero's condemnation. The noise is so loud that it completely terrifies the hero, disrupts his very mind and senses and dumbfounds him, all the while agitating the audience to mob violence:

Le grand pontife prit la parole et plaïda contre moi. Je [ne] me souviens pas de sa harangue, à cause que j'étais trop épouvanté pour recevoir les espèces de la voix sans désordre, et parce aussi qu'il s'était servi, pour déclamer, d'un instrument dont le bruit m'étourdissait : c'était une trompette qu'il avait tout exprès choisie, afin que la violence de ce ton martial échauffât leurs esprits à ma mort, et afin d'empêcher par cette émotion que le raisonnement ne pût faire son office, comme il arrive dans nos armées où ce tintamarre empêche le soldat de réfléchir sur l'importance de sa vie. (98)

This scene evokes a debate in the early seventeenth century that revolved around the relative influence of reason and the imagination on a person's reaction to displays of authority. Cyrano is confronting the question of how much agency a person could wield when faced with physical intimidation. In so doing, he and his early readers no doubt had in mind a series of associations for which Montaigne had set a precedent in his *Essais*. More specifically, in the "Apologie de Raimond Sebond" (*Essais*, I:12), the philosopher of Bordeaux had examined the relationship between fear and reason in light of two main metaphors, one relating to hearing and the other to sight.

The sound of a voice, argues Montaigne, can affect how our mind functions, and a striking, loud, or strange voice can profoundly disturb our faculty of reason. The

philosopher cites Theophrastus, who described the ears as: “le plus dangereux instrument que nous ayons pour recevoir des impressions violentes à nous troubler et changer [...] Car ils ont tous cette puissance de commander notre discours et notre ame” (Montaigne 595). As a result, he continues, while some people are more vulnerable to this sort of influence than are others, certain individuals become enraged and hateful when they hear the sound of a file grinding upon iron, or a person chewing food, or speaking with congestion in their throat or nose:

[II] n'est guiere homme qui ne se trouble à ce bruit aigre et poignant que font les limes en raclant le fer ; comme à ouyr mascher prez de nous, ou ouyr parler quelqu'un qui ait le passage du gosier ou du nez empesché, plusieurs s'en esmeuvent jusques à la colère et la haine. (Montaigne 595)

As a final example of the phenomenon, Montaigne evokes a flute player in ancient Rome who worked for a man named Gracchus and accompanied his master's speeches with music to create a more powerful emotional impact on audiences' judgment:

Ce fleutteur protocole de Gracchus, qui amolissoit, roidissoit et contournoit la vois de son maistre lors qu'il haranguoit à Rome, à quoy servoit il, si le mouvement et qualité du son n'avoit force à esmouvoir et alterer le jugement des auditeurs ? (Montaigne 595)

In the scene from *Lune* that we have been examining, Cyrano seems to have this passage from the philosopher in mind. Like the ancient flutist, the lunar pontiff uses a musical instrument to manipulate listeners' emotions beyond the mere effect of rhetoric alone⁵. Cyrano may even be using his fiction to experiment with how the combination of music and speech might influence human judgment.

⁵ For a modern reader of science fiction, this image recalls a fictional character created by a famous twentieth-century reader of Cyrano and Montaigne, the science fiction novelist Isaac Asimov. In

This line of reasoning is comparable to the one that would later emerge in Pascal's *Pensées*. Like Cyrano, Pascal took up Montaigne's reflections on the power of sound to influence thinking and reflected further upon their political implications.

Le ton de voix impose aux plus sages et change un discours
et un poème de force. L'affection ou la haine changent la
justice de face. Et combien un avocat bien payé par avance
trouve-t-il plus juste la cause qu'il plaide ! Combien son
geste hardi la fait-il paraître meilleure aux juges dupés par
cette apparence ! Plaisante raison qu'un vent manie et à
tout sens ! (Pascal 857)

For Pascal, kings and princes have mastered the means of wielding this power that emotions and tone have to influence purportedly logical thinking; he describes the entourages of kings, formed of armed guards and players of trumpets and drums:

Ces troupes armées qui n'ont de mains et de force que pour
eux, les trompettes et les tambours qui marchent au-devant
et ces légions qui les environnent font trembler les plus
fermes. Ils n'ont pas l'habit seulement, ils ont la force. Il
faudrait avoir une raison bien épurée pour regarder comme
un autre homme le Grand Seigneur environné, dans son
superbe Sérail, de quarante mille janissaires. (Pascal 858)

Pascal opposes this "force," which is symbolized and mirrored through the musical instruments, and the impressive numbers of armed soldiers that surround the Grand Turk, and the "habit," the costumes that they wear, which may impose upon the imagination but do not connote a direct threat or danger. The sovereign's train combines appearances, sounds, and the power necessary to reinforce them both, and when these elements unite, they allow a man to exercise extraordinary influence over the emotions and the opinions of those who would stand in his way. It is just as though he could weaken and vanquish the very reason that would enable his adversaries to reflect upon how and why they

his novel *Foundation and Empire*, his memorable antihero, The Mule, uses a musical instrument along with telepathic manipulation of emotions to complete a striking coup d'état in the heart of a galactic empire.

would wish to resist him. Like Cyrano's pontiff on the moon, Pascal's Turkish sovereign uses sound and appearances to impose upon his enemies, both by intimidating them and confounding their capacity to use logic and imagine means of resistance. In this far-reaching, extended sense, both characters are *imposteurs*.

We mentioned earlier that Montaigne had also used a metaphor related specifically to how sight can influence one's capacity for clear reasoning. Indeed, the image used had come from Avicenna by way of Thomas Aquinas (Sellier in Pascal 856), and Pascal would later appropriate it in the same context as those passages of the *Pensées* that we have just considered. In the "Apologie de Raimond Sebond," Montaigne suggested that should the most rational philosopher walk a narrow beam bridging a great depth, vertigo and terror of heights would seize him and prevent him from using his reason. He imagines a beam linking the two towers of the cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris:

Qu'on jette une poutre entre ces deux tours, d'une grosseur telle qu'il nous la faut à nous promener dessus, il n'y a sagesse philosophique de si grande fermeté qui puisse nous donner du courage d'y marcher comme nous ferions, si elle estoit à terre. (594)

The essayist then describes having tested out this claim personally, and made a surprising observation about a phenomenon that he calls an "imposture de la veuë":

J'ay souvent essayé cela en nos montaignes de deçà (et si suis de ceux qui ne s'effrayent que mediocrement de telles choses) que je ne pouvoy souffrir la veuë de cette profondeur infinie sans horreur et trblement de jarrets et de cuisses, encores qu'il s'en fallut bien ma longueur que je ne fusse du tout au bord, et n'eusse sçeu choir si ne je me fusse porté à escient au danger. J'y remarquay aussi, quelque hauteur qu'il y eust, pourveu qu'en cette pente il s'y presentast un arbre ou bosse de rocher pour soustenir un peu la veuë et la diviser, que cela nous allège et donne

assurance, comme si c'estoit chose dequoy à la cheute nous peussions recevoir secours ; mais que les precipices coupez et uniz, nous ne les pouvons pas seulement regarder sans tournoyement de teste [...] ; qui est une evidente imposture de la veuë. (594-595)

Montaigne frames his description of this act of perception in similar terms to the letter by Cyrano that we discussed earlier; as in that text, the term “imposture” refers to an illusion that confounds the interaction between the senses and the mind. In this particular instance, the essayist evokes the irrational, emotional experiences that result from looking downward upon a mortally perilous depth. If a person sees tall trees or protruding rocks, the mind reacts as though such objects might somehow cushion one’s fall or offer an opportunity to save oneself by grasping onto them during an unexpected descent; they comfort the onlooker’s fear and reduce the sensation of vertigo. Yet, plummeting down upon such protruding features of the landscape would be just as lethal as any other impact in most cases. Thus despite the fact that there is no logical reason for which the sight of branches or boulders should reduce the physiological effects of fear and anxiety, they do so, at least for Montaigne. This argument serves to fortify the philosopher’s attack on human confidence in the trustworthiness of reason and logic, and Montaigne uses the term “imposture” to describe the underlying phenomenon. Pascal later takes up this argument in the *Pensées*, closely echoing Montaigne:

Le plus grand philosophe du monde sur une planche plus large qu’il ne faut, s’il y a au-dessous un précipice, quoique sa raison le convainque de sa sûreté, son imagination prévaudra. Plusieurs n’en sauraient soutenir la pensée sans pâlir et suer. (Pascal 856)

As for Cyrano, a similar conceptual link between the fear of heights, vertigo and the limits of human reason emerges in a scene of *Les États et empires du Soleil* that

mirrors the passage describing the pontiff with his trumpet. After Dyrcona arrives on the Sun, intelligent, talking birds capture him and condemn him to a most grisly execution. He is to be devoured alive by insects of every type; honeybees will eat his eyes out, bumblebees will destroy his ears, fleas will turn his shoulders into solid rashes of red, and so on, until he loses consciousness and dies (272). The punishment also takes the form of a dark parody of the early modern practice of “quartering” (*l’écartèlement*); as the swarm of insects tortures him to death, a heron subdues each of Dyrcona’s four limbs by wrapping its muscular neck around ankles and wrists like manacles. Of particular significance here is the location where this execution takes place; each of the four great marsh fowls actually perches at the top of a tree, suspending the condemned man far above the ground, adding fear of heights into the scene. However, at the very last possible moment, a kind canary intercedes on behalf of the hero. The herons instantly release their grip and he tumbles downward with his limbs outstretched:

[...] je sentis mes hérons relâcher les cercles de ces longs
cous qui m’entortillaient, et mon corps étendu en sautoir,
griller du faîte des quatre arbres jusqu’aux pieds de leurs
racines. Je n’attendais de ma chute que de briser à terre
contre quelque rocher, mais au bout de ma peur je fus bien
étonné de me trouver à mon séant sur une autruche blanche,
qui se mit au galop dès qu’elle me sentit sur son dos. (273)

Cyrano echoes the imagery of Montaigne’s example of the fear of heights; the hero plummets past the branches of the trees, but like those that the philosopher of Bordeaux had mentioned, they provided no aid, as he seemed to be falling to his death.

Furthermore, readers picture the body of the poor narrator broken to pieces upon rocks before he assures us that he has survived safe and sound. As was the case for Montaigne, as well as for Pascal’s imaginary philosopher walking the plank, the terror of falling

compromises Dyrcona's reasoning capacity, and the expression that he uses to explain this recycles the metaphor that the narrator of *Lune* had evoked in the scene with the pontiff. After the white ostrich delivers the human back to the dove, king of the birds, the sovereign shows him a parakeet and asks if he recognizes the former house pet:

Et il me semble, criai-je au roi, que je l'ai vu quelque part ;
mais la peur et la joie ont chez moi tellement brouillé les
espèces, que je ne puis encore marquer bien clairement où
ç'a été. (273)

The term *espèces* and its associated metaphor also appears in *Lune* as the narrator describes the pontiff's speech, signaling one of many effects of mirroring between the two novels: "[...] j'étais trop épouvanté pour recevoir les espèces de la voix sans désordre [...]" (98). As Bérengère Parmentier suggests, this term can refer to the images that remain imprinted upon the imagination or memory after they pass through vision, according to early modern notions of cognition (269). Indeed, when Darmon evokes the buildup and coalescing ("aimantation") of images in Cyrano's letters, he seems to be referencing the same notion (*Lettres satiriques* 21). Alternatively, these *espèces*, as our author uses the term, may be theoretical atoms, which are emitted by material objects and strike the senses of sight, hearing, and smell according to the ancient Roman poet Lucretius (Parmentier 269). In the passage from *Lune* that concerns us here, *espèces* are something that structures discourse and can be received by the ears, but must be welcomed and sorted into a meaningful message (Alcover in *Lune* 98). Since the blasts of the trumpet disturb how the hero's hearing functions, he is unable to perform this sorting and interpretation. Similarly, in the scene from *Soleil*, the agitation that has resulted from the hero's fear and subsequent joy at his deliverance has affected his memory. He has become incapable of sorting through his mental images in order

to find a match with the parakeet that he sees. Much like the examples in Montaigne and Pascal, this confounding of the *espèces* seems to result from a phenomenon of “imposture” in the sense of imposing fear and intimidation onto a person and preventing him from effectively using his own reason, imagination and memory in his best interest.

Elsewhere in *États et empires du Soleil*, we encounter a different manifestation of this form of imposture. Near the beginning of the novel, Dyrcona has departed on a trip on horseback, and he leads a mule who is carrying a library of books to the castle of the Marquis de Cussan. Without warning, a superstitious (and perhaps insane) local man leaps in his path, seizes his horse’s bridle and addresses him as Satan the Devil in Latin (179). This zealot has draped himself in a robe made up of pages of a liturgical songbook, and he wears a sort of mask with the first verses of the Gospel of John written on it in Latin:

[...] une longue robe tissue des feuillets d’un livre de plain-chant, le couvrait jusqu’aux ongles, et son visage était caché d’une carte où l’on avait écrit l’*In principio*. (178)

While the hero initially finds this absurd and guffaws uncontrollably, an unlucky twist of fate soon leads to his imprisonment.

The commoner is part of a horde of about fifty villagers being led by a local priest named Messire Jean. This choice of name is significant; it alludes to one of Cyrano’s letters, “Apothéose d’un ecclésiastique bouffon,” an epistolary diatribe against a corrupt priest of the same name, and thereby pushes the reader toward interpreting this character as an impostor and hypocrite. Messire Jean takes off his surplice and ties Dyrcona up with it, then the mob sews him up in a tablecloth with only his head visible (179). They

carry him off to Toulouse in this sorry state (180), then open the package of books on the mule's back and find a volume on physics by Descartes:

[...] ayant décousu le paquet, et au premier volume qu'ils ouvrirent s'étant rencontré la *Physique* de M. Descartes, quand ils aperçurent tous les cercles par lesquels ce philosophe a distingué le mouvement de chaque planète, tous d'une voix hurlèrent que c'étaient les cernes que je traçais pour appeler Belzébuth. Celui qui le tenait le laissa choir d'appréhension, et par malheur en tombant il s'ouvrit dans une page où sont expliquées les vertus de l'aimant ; je dis par malheur, pour ce qu'à l'endroit dont je parle il y a une figure de cette pierre métallique, où les petits corps qui se déprennent de sa masse pour accrocher le fer sont représentés comme des bras. À peine un de ces maraudeurs l'aperçut, que je l'entendis s'égosiller que c'était là le crapaud qu'on avait trouvé dans l'auge de l'écurie de son cousin Fiacre, quand ses chevaux moururent. A ce mot, ceux qui avaient paru les plus échauffés rengainèrent leurs mains dans leur sein, ou se regantèrent de leurs pochettes. Messire Jean de son côté criait, à gorge déployée, qu'on se gardât de toucher à rien, que tous ces livres-là étaient de francs grimoires, et le mulet un Satan. (180-184)

This priest holds great power within his mob of superstitious, fearful commoners. From the hero's point of view, the thoughts and intentions underlying this antagonist's actions are ambiguous. It is unclear to what extent the religious leader could be a lunatic, and whether the man truly believes that Dyrcona is a warlock. Alternatively, it could be that the narrator's arrival on the scene has simply provided an opportunity for an impostor-priest to consolidate his influence over the superstitious horde by designating a scapegoat to blame for the ills of the community.

These pages paint a scene of imposture. The priest appears to have primed the mob to do his bidding by inundating their imaginations with a terrifying array of diabolical imagery, such that they project these mental pictures onto almost everything that they see. In this sense, they perceive much as does the letter-writer of "Des miracles

de rivière,” in that their perception proceeds from an interaction between pre-conceived narratives in their imaginations and the images that newly enter their vision. However, instead of projecting tales of kings and knights, they perceive evil toads and signs of the Devil. Given that they only comment upon the illustrations of the Descartes book, and not on any of its texts, they seem to be illiterate. They project witchcraft into every image they see, so in their eyes, the solar system diagram becomes the circles needed to call forth the Devil, and a very abstract illustration of a magnetic phenomenon somehow takes on the appearance of a toad. As the priest’s followers elaborate stories upon the things that they perceive, this supposed toad seems to be the very same one that one of the peasants previously saw, and took for an evil omen, when some horses died. Based on this rather extreme misinterpretation of the image in the book, the entire group apparently presumes that Dyrcona had either sent the toad as part of an evil spell cast against the horses, or perhaps that he had transformed himself into the suspicious amphibian by means of dark magic. Thus, Messire Jean appears to be perpetrating an imposture on two levels. He both imposes fear upon the mob to inhibit their inability to reason, and takes advantage of their impaired state by conditioning them to project pictures of devilry and evil omens upon practically any new sight that they take in.

Sophistic Imposture

A third form of imposture that appears in Cyrano’s work is the manipulation of striking mental imagery for sophistic argumentation. Cyrano presents this strategy as a force dialectically opposing the second variety of imposture, which we have just examined. As with both “impostures of the senses” and “imposing impostures,” Cyrano

seems to present this type of trickery from an amoral perspective, recalling the attitudes evinced by Machiavelli and especially Naudé with regard to the relative effectiveness and usefulness of various types of *coups d'État* for a political leader. While Cyrano uses fiction to suggest how it can serve as a tool to liberate the imagination from illusion and the body from captivity and pain, it is also clear from the context that this discursive weapon can just as easily be taken up for extremely violent means. Just after the lunar pontiff turns his deafening trumpet on the hero, the Demon of Socrates jumps in and saves the accused from an unenviable fate:

[...] un homme, qui avait eu grande difficulté à traverser la foule, vint choir aux pieds du roi et se traîna longtemps sur le dos. Cette façon de faire ne me surprit pas, car je savais bien dès longtemps que c'était la posture où ils se mettaient quand ils voulaient discourir en public. (98)

This character then offers a speech that profoundly affects the judges and leads to the hero's release.

A key factor in his successful intervention is that the priests themselves do not seem to understand what is at stake at this tribunal, nor of what crime the hero is accused. On the one hand, the lunar society has broken into factions, with some arguing that the narrator is an animal, and others that he is a human being:

[...] le clergé fut contraint de faire publier un arrêt, par lequel on défendait de croire que j'eusse de la raison, avec un commandement très exprès à toutes les personnes de quelque qualité et condition qu'elles fussent, de s'imaginer, quoi que je pusse faire de spirituel, que c'était instinct qui me le faisait faire. Cependant la définition de ce que j'étais partagea la ville en deux factions. Le parti qui soutenait en ma faveur grossissait tous les jours. (90)

On the other hand, according to the lunar priests' questionable logic, since he has declared that he has come from our world, and this claim contradicts their belief that our

Earth is a mere uninhabited moon (and it appears as such from their point of view), he stands accused of atheism:

Les prêtres [...] furent avertis que j'avais osé dire que la lune était un monde dont je venais, et que leur monde n'était qu'une lune. Ils crurent que cela leur fournissait un prétexte assez juste pour me faire condamner à l'eau : c'était la façon d'exterminer les athées. Ils vont en corps à cette fin faire leur plainte au roi qui leur promet justice [...]. (98)

Two rather incompatible questions enter into the court case at hand. Is the hero a human or an animal? Is he an atheist?

The Demon of Socrates understands the problems inherent in the structure of the case, and responds accordingly. He articulates arguments aimed at excusing the narrator for his supposedly impious claims about the nature of the earth and moon, and assures that his assertions would be valid in each of the two legal contingencies—whether the priests categorize him as a man or an animal. Both of the justifications that the Demon gives are themselves logically suspect. If he is a man, begins the Demon, then he does not deserve punishment for saying that the moon is a world from whence he has come:

[...] car, s'il est homme [...], puisque tout homme est libre, ne lui est-il pas libre de s'imaginer ce qu'il voudra ? Quoi ! pouvez-vous le contraindre à n'avoir que vos visions ? Vous le forcerez bien à dire qu'il croit que la lune n'est pas un monde, mais il ne le croira pas pourtant ; car pour croire quelque chose, il faut qu'il se présente à son imagination certaines possibilités plus grandes au oui qu'au non de cette chose. Ainsi, à moins que vous lui fournissiez ce vraisemblable, ou qu'il [ne] vienne de soi-même l'offrir à son esprit, il vous dira bien qu'il croit, mais il ne croira pas pour cela. (99)

In this first part of the speech, the Demon offers a juridical argument combined with theological overtones. He begins by evoking the theological concept of man's free will

but then quickly changes register and touches upon an opposition between Imagination and Reason like the one that Pascal later describes in the *Pensées*, and finally the character moves on to a paradox that arises when a person believes in something outside of himself. The human imagination spawns pictures wildly and unpredictably, and while at times it may portray trustworthy representations of reality, it misleads and confounds human beings just as often, eluding reason's vain attempts to control it. Describing the imagination, Pascal writes:

Cette superbe puissance ennemie de la raison, qui se plaît à la contrôler et la dominer, pour montrer combien elle peut en toutes choses, a établi dans l'homme une seconde nature. [...] Elle fait croire, douter, nier la raison. (855)

As for belief, it depends upon a delicate and unstable relationship between two intellectual faculties which themselves are not to be trusted. Thus in a remarkable feat of lungpower (he is in fact singing), Cyrano's orator launches three intellectual projectiles: Imagination, Reason and Belief. The shrewd rhetorician and musical virtuoso spews out a triad of famously puzzling philosophical problems as a means of shutting down those very things in the minds of those who oppose him. Not only does the character announce Pascalian arguments; the fictional scene in which this takes place provides an illustration of another notion that would take shape in the *Pensées*, that of imposture as imposition, which we discussed earlier. In other terms, the Demon uses his overwhelming blast of complex terms to befuddle those listening to him, and as he stupefies them he effectively imposes his vision upon the tribunal. If the priests are too dumbfounded to formulate a rebuttal then he retains the upper hand.

Along with the sheer rhetorical impact of his references to these intimidating ideas, the Demon also puts forth a logical argument announcing Pascal. Since a

human being's imagination is uncontrollable and produces all manner of visions, he argues, it is impossible to force a person to adopt any specific view of things. Furthermore, in order for a person to believe in a given claim, the imagery that his imagination produces must make the claim appear likely. Cyrano's choice to have the Demon make this argument in this particular context is remarkably ironic thanks to its function as a meta-discursive commentary. In other terms, the hero's legal advocate uses words to conjure up the very type of visions that are capable of making a person believe something, while simultaneously explaining how this process works, and in so doing he effectively makes that person believe what he is saying. This represents yet another striking instance wherein Cyrano succeeds in folding multiple forms of *imposture* into a single dense passage. In a brilliant, recursive paradox, this first segment of the Demon's plea for the hero shows itself to be a simultaneous display of *imposture* as sophistic argumentation through imposing imagery (from the point of view of the Demon), an "imposture of the senses" (from the perspective of the priests) and an "imposing imposture" as seen through the eyes of the narrator and reader.

Next, just in case the priests declare that the hero is an animal, the Demon presents an alternative argument:

J'ai maintenant à vous prouver qu'il ne doit pas être condamné si vous le posez dans la catégorie des bêtes ; car supposez qu'il soit animal sans raison : quelle raison vous-même avez-vous de l'accuser d'avoir péché contre elle ? Il a dit que la lune était un monde ; or les brutes n'agissent que par un instinct de nature ; donc c'est la nature qui le dit et non pas lui. De croire maintenant que cette savante nature qui a fait la lune et ce monde-ci ne sache elle-même ce que c'est, et que vous autres, qui n'avez de connaissance que ce que vous en tenez d'elle, le sachiez plus certainement, cela serait bien ridicule. (99)

Here the pleading Solarian proffers an argument reminiscent of Descartes' claims about animal-machines in *Les Passions de l'âme* and presses its implications to the absurd. The Demon concedes that it is a sin to say that the moon is a world, but he questions whether the accused hero is responsible for committing it. For if the defendant is an animal, then all of his actions result from natural instincts, he is devoid of reason and he has no free will. If all this is true, contends the being from the Sun, then certainly Nature itself must be blamed for anything that the accused has said. He then wryly inserts a baroque conceit into his speech as an insult to his adversaries, even though it does not have direct relevance to the guilt or innocence of the accused. He suggests that Nature must know best what the moon is since she created it, and that in any case whatever knowledge the priests may have is a mere gift from Nature herself, so it would be best to trust the source of truth (the defendant speaking out of natural instinct) instead of its narrow-minded interpreters (the Selenite priests).

As if the preceding arguments were not sufficient, the Demon adds still another. In this instance, he alludes to a key theological issue at stake in the culture of Cyrano's day. It is that of the immense disproportion between a human being, the infinitely large cosmos and the infinitely small particles of matter that compose it. An image of these two infinities later appears explicitly in the novel, but in this passage Cyrano seems to be pointing to it obliquely, in a markedly Lucianesque style. To use Corrêard's term, the Demon "lucianizes" the topic. Lucian had deflated the sacred teachings of Ancient Greece by literalizing them and integrating grubby and incongruous details into them for comic effect (such as the grid-like contraption through which prayers rise up to Zeus in puffs of smoke in *Icaromenippus*). Similarly, Cyrano takes a sublime and highly abstract

theological idea and rewrites it while inserting concrete and potentially distasteful details that make it amusing. In this case, he vividly portrays the disproportion between man and the infinitesimal facets of nature through concrete imagery of insects, and at the same time takes it out of a theological context and amusingly adapts it for legal purposes. Instead of seeing a man reeling before infinitesimal space beyond comprehension, we see him peering intently upon an anthill:

Mais quand même, la passion vous faisant renoncer à vos premiers principes, vous supposeriez que la nature ne guidât point les brutes, rougisiez à tout le moins des inquiétudes que vous causent les cabrioles d'une bête. En vérité, Messieurs, si vous rencontriez un homme d'âge mûr qui veillât à la police d'une fourmilière, pour tantôt donner un soufflet à la fourmi qui aurait fait choir sa compagne, tantôt en emprisonner une qui aurait dérobé à sa voisine un grain de blé, tantôt mettre en justice une autre qui aurait abandonné ses œufs, ne l'estimeriez-vous pas insensé de vaquer à des choses trop au-dessous de lui, et de prétendre assujettir à la raison des animaux qui n'en ont pas l'usage ? Comment donc, vénérables pontifes, appellerez-vous l'intérêt que vous prenez aux cabrioles de ce petit animal ? Justes, j'ai dit. (99-100)

The Demon emphasizes the burlesque imbalance between the man and the ants, while at the same time anthropomorphizing the insects (by imagining that they might be capable of reason) and making the human being appear foolish and insane. He draws an analogy between these two entities and the priests and the accused, mocking the Selenite leaders for foolishly luxuriating in grimy minutiae of nature (such as animal behavior) and for mixing the categories of human and animal. Even if ants committed crimes as humans do, they are so insignificantly tiny that no person in his right mind would waste his time prosecuting them and punishing their transgressions. Similarly, if the hero of the novel is

equally minute in importance, he should no more be punished for his crimes than should an insect.

To what extent are the Demon's arguments "sophistic"? If we return briefly to Furetière's dictionary, we find that the terms "sophisme," and "sophistique" open up to a lexical field that overlaps with that of "imposture." Furetière defines the term "sophisme" as a "Raisonnement captieux qui induit en erreur, qui n'a que de l'apparence, & point de solidité" and the adjective "sophistique" (the noun does not appear in the entry) is listed as "Qui est captieux, trompeur. Il se dit sur tout des arguments qui ne sont pas bien en forme, ou qui sont fondez sur des equivoques comme, *Tu as tout ce que tu n'as point perdu : tu n'as point perdu de cornes : donc tu as des cornes.*" The lexicographer opposes an argument's appearance to its substance in the first definition, while he uses a vague architectural metaphor in the second to imply that a given claim may be composed of a foundation and a structure (or form) built up upon that base. Thus, in a general sense, we can identify a sophism by determining if it has one of at least two qualities. If the superficial form of an argument shrouds its logical basis to mislead, or if that foundation itself is made up of ambiguities (and especially words easily interpreted in two greatly opposing ways), then we have a sophistic argument. In the fallacious syllogism that Furetière offers as an example, the 'foundation' seems to equate to the first premise, which is extremely vague and subject to a great variety of interpretations: "You have everything that you have not lost." While this could be construed to mean "You have retained all that you acquired in the past but which you have not lost," which seems quite reasonable, it could just as well be taken to mean that "the only abilities that you do not possess are those which you have never had the

occasion to lose.” If one adopts the second interpretation, then an extravagant second premise can be added to lead to any number of conclusions just as unlikely as the one in the example. An alternative second premise might be, “You have never lost the faculty of omnipotence” which would lead one to conclude “Therefore, you are omnipotent.” In a most literal sense, this slippery quality of the first premise of a line of reasoning allows us to label it as “sophistique.”

With regard to the pleas that the Demon of Socrates puts forth, they certainly deserve this label in that the character builds his arguments upon slippery premises, while at the same time flooding the imaginations of his interlocutors with overwhelming concepts, too complex for them to grasp without time and concentration. In other terms, his arguments are sophistic both in that their foundations are ambiguous and in that their misleading appearances disguise the nature of these core premises. However, a remarkable irony in these pages is that the Demon is not responsible for the untrustworthiness of the cornerstones upon which he constructs his reasoning. Instead, these dubious premises are mere assumptions that certain members of the lunar priesthood seek to impose: animals lack reason and are totally driven by instinct; human beings hold moral superiority over animals. The Demon takes such questionable ideas that his adversaries proffer and elaborates reasoning upon them, as we have seen. Then, with a flourish, like a prestidigitator, he shrouds his claims with a veil of images that distract and confound. The hero’s advocate thus reverses the pontifications issued on the moon by extending them into sophisms they seem to invite, and in a sense contain as a seed. Here we have a clear example of how sophistry can be used to disarm “imposing

impostures” that authorities would seek to foist upon those who, like the hero of *Lune*, are subject to being classified and defined by others more powerful than themselves.

In what ways can we understand these sophisms as “impostures”? We should recall that in Furetière’s definition of *imposture*, the words of an attorney are one of several concrete examples. A lawyer’s arguments become *impostures* should they take the form of outright lies or false accusations. However by no means should we forget that in the seventeenth century, not all uses of the word carried with them the negative connotation that the term retains today, and an *imposture* was something distinct from a lie or calumny. As Furetière specifies, the term could designate a “*tromperie innocente*,” a harmless deception such as that which poetry or painting could impose upon a person’s imagination, or even any form of optical or intellectual illusion:

IMPOSTURE, se dit aussi en Morale d’une tromperie innocente. Ainsi Cerisi a dit dans sa Metamorphose en parlant d’une eau claire ; C’est là que l’oeuil souffrant de douces *impostures*, Confond tous les objets avecques leurs figures.

Here we return once again to the notion of “*imposture des sens*” that we considered at the outset of this chapter, as Furetière references reflections on the surface of clear water in his literary example. In fact, the Demon’s plea on behalf of the hero showcases how the various senses of the term can converge and overlap. The wily character counters the priest’s imposition of their power by wielding sophistries to create illusions in their minds. He fights fire with fire, or an imposture with his own impostures.

It is worth noting that the usage of this term has evolved in at least two major ways since Cyrano’s day. Evidently, the range of contexts in which it can be applied has dwindled considerably, and in modern French it no longer seems to be used in the general

sense of “illusion.” In addition however, it may be less obvious that the intentionality implied by the term has changed. For example, when one speaks of being drawn into optical illusions while gazing at the surface of water, such visual deceptions do not by any means require an intention on the part of the onlooker; quite to the contrary, images may generate themselves quite despite the viewers’ will. More plainly stated, the creation of an *imposture* in a seventeenth-century context may well be an unconscious act, and may not be a result of any desire to harm, whereas a modern usage of the term carries without it a more starkly pejorative connotation and seems necessarily to imply ill will on the part of an *imposteur*. In line with this limitation of the range of meaning and swing toward dark implications, the term *imposteur* itself can no longer logically be applied to an inanimate object (or to an art, like poetry), since using the term in this way would ascribe intentionality to something that cannot desire or think.

Elsewhere in *Lune*, we find examples of impostures involving sophistry that is quite unintentional. For example, we might consider the discussion with the governor of Québec. After the narrator has flown across the Atlantic by suspicious, if not overtly magical, means, he lands in North America. From his point of view as an aeronautical voyager, the earth has literally moved beneath his feet. Soon afterward, he attempts to explain Copernican cosmology to Monsieur de Montmagny. In fact, despite the narrator’s rather extraordinary first-hand, lived experience, his learned explanations stall, and his arguments for a heliocentric universe boil down to a series of simplistic and amusing analogies with foods and sex organs, appealing to “common sense (*sens commun*)” and proving nothing; the Sun is in the center of the universe, just as man’s genitals are at the center of his body, and seeds are at the center of an apple, and a germ is

at the center of an onion (16). It would be just as ridiculous, the narrator continues, to believe in a geocentric system as to think that an entire fireplace could be rotated around a partridge in order to roast it (17). This fictitious visitor to North America seems to ramble from one colorful analogy to another, without real mastery of his topic of discussion. From invoking human genitals to apple seeds to roasted birds, any comparison seems justified if it is easily accessible to the mind's eye of his interlocutor. As Isabelle Moreau suggests, following Jean-Charles Darmon, the argumentation in the passage functions through a non-rational deployment of mental images; this accomplishes a transition from *compréhension* to *figuration*, from vaguely acknowledging claims to envisaging them in distinct and vivid figures (Moreau 176, Darmon *Philosophie épicurienne* 215). Ironically however, and quite unlike the Demon's use of mental imagery, the hero's sophistic argument seems to confound his own imagination at least as much as it succeeds in convincing the governor to espouse a Copernican cosmological vision. It is as though the narrator loses control over the colorful analogies that he invents until they prevent him from seeing the logical foundations that underlie his discourse.

Thus far in this section, we have referenced sophisms expressed orally. In one very important scene, however, there is an example of sophistry that operates in a written form. In a scene toward the end of *Lune*, the narrator receives two books from the Demon as a gift. The Solarian announces that he intends to build a spacecraft capable of delivering the narrator back to his Earth (along with a young woman who would like to convert to Christianity), but since this will take time, he will give the hero two books to occupy his mind:

[...] je lui ai promis [à la fille] d'aider son dessein de toutes mes forces, et d'inventer pour cet effet une machine capable de tenir trois ou quatre personnes, dedans laquelle vous pourrez monter ensemble. Dès aujourd'hui, je vais m'appliquer sérieusement à l'exécution de cette entreprise : c'est pourquoi, afin de vous divertir pendant que je ne serai point avec vous, voici un livre que je vous laisse. Je l'apportai jadis de mon pays natal : il est intitulé *Les États et Empires du Soleil*. Je vous donne encore celui-ci que j'estime beaucoup davantage : c'est *Le Grand Œuvre des philosophes*, qu'un des plus forts esprits du soleil a composé. Il prouve là-dedans que toutes choses sont vraies, et déclare la façon d'unir physiquement les vérités de chaque contradictoire, comme par exemple que le blanc est noir et que le noir est blanc ; qu'on peut être et n'être pas en même temps ; qu'il peut y avoir une montagne sans vallée ; que le néant est quelque chose et que toutes les choses qui sont ne sont point. Mais remarquez qu'il prouve ces inouïs paradoxes sans aucune raison captieuse ni sophistique. (134-135)

This well-known passage contains some of the most dense and evocative lines in Cyrano's work. We might start here with the two titles of the books, which powerfully strike the readers' imagination. The first title, *Les États et Empires du Soleil*, is remarkable from the point of view of the modern reader since it happens to be the title of the continuation of the novel. Readers of the baroque age may not have understood it in quite this way, however; it is impossible to know whether Cyrano had already written the sequel, or for that matter, whether the first readers of *Lune* would have been aware of its existence. If so, then this scene with the Demon folds in upon itself recursively, and this effect of *mise-en-abyme* is perhaps greater than in any other of Cyrano's writings. It may also be that this title merely echoes that of the book that contains it (*États et empires de la lune*) much as that title itself parodies those of two well-known books from Cyrano's era. As Isabelle Moreau recalls, the title alludes to two works by Pierre Davity which expounded information about various geographical locations and their inhabitants around

the world: *Les Etats, Empires, Royaumes, et Principautez du Monde* (also known at the time as “*Etats et Empires*”) and *Le Monde ; ou la description générale de ses quatre parties, avec tous ces empires, royaumes, estats et republiques* (168). In any case, the choice of title for this first book given by the Demon prompts Cyrano’s reader to stop for a moment and remember that he is in a position quite analogous to that of the hero.

It can be helpful to describe what happens here in terms of our extended metaphor of Kepler’s cosmological model. In my introduction, I posited that Cyrano’s hero narrator occupied a layer of imposture equivalent to the orbit of Mercury, the planet closest to the Sun. Additionally, Solarians like the Demon of Socrates freely moved about the orbit of Saturn, just as easily as they migrate between human bodies and access divine secrets that mere humans never discover. In this scene from the novel, as the hero looks down into the sun the reader realizes that in fact that luminary itself contains a potentially infinite series of nested orbits of imposture within it. We have a clear effect of recursion. Furthermore, the book itself comes from a great writer among the Solarians, and is delivered by one of these beings who enjoys a particularly distanced perspective on the other layers of imposture that encompass the other orbits. Thus a being in the exterior zone of the model in a sense slips back and forth between the very center and the outermost layer, as though a wormhole of some kind could bridge multiple zones of space. In rhetorical terms, this is a remarkable example of how Cyrano uses a metalepsis to spark a change of perspective for the reader. We might also use Deleuze’s metaphor, since the various layers of representation overlap upon themselves and interweave to produce an infinite fold, wherein impostures upon impostures collapse inward and ripple outward in all directions.

The title of the second gift book, *Le Grand Oeuvre des philosophes*, and the Demon's brief introduction to it, are at least as significant as the first volume. Indeed, these lines have provoked much disagreement among Cyrano scholars. It is clear that the author is alluding to the alchemical tradition in his choice of title, which could refer to the legendary philosopher's stone or to that artifact's power to turn lead into gold. Exactly what Cyrano sought to do with this allusion is more difficult to determine. On another level, as Madeleine Alcover argues, Cyrano may be paying homage to Giordano Bruno with these lines. She suggests that the expression "unir physiquement les vérités de chaque contradictoire" indicates that the gift book discusses a key concept at the heart of Bruno's philosophical system, the *coincidentia oppositorum* (Alcover in *Lune* 135). This may indeed allude to the famous astrologer from Nola.

In a different vein, Alexandra Torero-Ibad mobilizes this passage as part of her project to outline a purportedly coherent philosophical system, which, she argues, emerges clearly from Cyrano's novels (91). In this light, she takes the Demon's comments about the book as an attack on the law of non-contradiction from classical logic, according to which contradictory statements cannot both be true in the same sense at the same time. The Demon's claims imply that the *Grand Oeuvre des philosophes* can disprove this law without itself falling into any contradictions.

[...] Cyrano attaque le principe de contradiction [...] : il suggère qu'il ne serait [sic] effectivement possible que le même appartienne *et* n'appartienne pas à quelque chose en même temps et sous le même rapport. Ainsi le personnage du Démon présente-t-il un livre, *Le Grand Œuvre des philosophes*, qui établit une telle possibilité. (91)

For Torero-Ibad, the Solarian considers his contradictory statements as truths, and therefore his views differ starkly from those of a skeptic who would doubt any claim to truth:

Ce n'est pas une affirmation sceptique : le Démon ne dit pas qu'on ne peut ni affirmer ni nier le principe de contradiction : chaque affirmation contradictoire est considérée comme une vérité. (91)

The lesson that Cyrano seeks to impart through this passage, she asserts, is that one must always be ready to move beyond assumptions about what seems possible or impossible (91). While this notion aligns well enough with the wider themes of the novels, and especially with the seeming injunction to use the expression “Pourquoi non ?” as a weapon against claims that certain undertakings (such as flying to the moon) are impossible, Torero-Ibad’s hermeneutical approach here can raise doubts. For example, she interprets the characters as mouthpieces through which Cyrano expounds his philosophical system, and chooses not to distinguish between claims made by diverse characters and the views of the author himself. If we understand the voices of the characters as expressing views at times quite different from those of the author, then it becomes difficult to extrapolate a coherent system of thought from them. In the passage of interest here, it could be the case that the Demon considers contradictory statements as truths, but even if readers had unmediated access to his inner beliefs, these would not necessarily be congruent with those of Cyrano. Torero-Ibad seems to suggest that Cyrano’s beliefs (especially about nature) were already systematized and that fiction provided him a sort of packaging in which he could convey them to readers in an expository manner; but yet she also presents fiction as a tool which Cyrano used to construct this philosophical system. When she does so, she implies that his apparatus of

ideas was open-ended and subject to revision. This desire to ascribe a clear and cohesive system of thought to Cyrano occasionally brings Torero-Ibad to paradoxes that can be difficult to untangle:

[...] en tant même que l'imagination produit des fictions, elle peut continuer pour Cyrano à contribuer à la constitution d'un discours sur la nature. Cyrano utilise ainsi tout autant des récits d'allure mythique que le dialogue philosophique pour *exposer* ses hypothèses de Physique. (96)

Here she seems to be arguing that while Cyrano enveloped diverse materialist hypotheses in different passages of his fiction, the acts of packaging and framing them through writing were part of a larger project to build a coherent discourse. In this way, she suggests:

Cyrano produit une critique de l'esprit de système, un discours non seulement systématique mais anti-systématique. (36)

In other terms, for Torero-Ibad, Cyrano structures a materialist discourse into a coherent system, in so doing attempts to criticize the mindset that leads to such undertakings, and at the same time attacks the systems of thought that other thinkers have proposed. As she brings her interpretative protocol to bear on the passage in which the Demon gives the narrator the books, she seems to overreach for evidence of Cyrano's purported adherence to a materialist philosophical system, or quest to establish one. In my view, it is difficult to justify such an exceedingly 'serious' hermeneutic strategy when it is applied to a text clearly written according to the conventions of a serio-comic genre, and in overt imitation of Lucian of Samosata.

It is likely that Jacques Prévot would agree, if one is to judge by the highly polemical argumentation that he directs at scholars who have labeled Cyrano a materialist or atheist. He writes:

On se gardera [...], comme de la peste, du contresens, si fréquent chez les exégètes, qui consiste à emprisonner la pensée de Cyrano sous des rubriques telles qu'athéisme et matérialisme, qui feraient un dogmatiste d'un incrédule dont le dessein dialectique rend douteuse et comique l'incrédulité même. Elles ne sont que l'écho des convictions personnelles de commentateurs qui prennent trop spontanément l'affirmation du Contre pour le simple verso d'un Pour. (*Cyrano de Bergerac* 268)

Prévot accuses Cyrano's recent interpreters of having projected their own atheist or materialist leanings onto an author whose ideological and esthetic concerns were quite different from their own. For Prévot, the novels of the moon and sun, as well as the letters, represent in part Cyrano's creative response to an age (and to personal experiences) shaken by multiple crises:

Homme dont la vie court de crise en crise, intelligence qui de crise en crise tout à la fois s'épuise et rebondit, Cyrano, écrivain d'une littérature de crise et d'une crise de la littérature, est un passeur, des temps révolus aux nouveaux temps. Il a tout vécu : crise de l'individu et crise de la famille ; crise de l'identité dans une société où le mérite de la naissance continue de faire obstacle à la naissance du mérite personnel ; crise du langage ; crise du pouvoir, crise politique, sociale et culturelle ; crise de l'autorité s'appuyant sur les formes vaines d'un savoir dépassé, cruel dans ses derniers soubresauts ; et, bien sûr, crise de la transmission d'un héritage. Il en est le plus acerbé, le plus acide narrateur. (*Cyrano de Bergerac* 274)

Prévot combines insights from psychoanalysis and historicism while emphasizing the rhetorical effects of Cyrano's prose. He does so, however at the cost of excluding the possibility that Cyrano either held or sought to create a coherent set of beliefs such as the

one that Torero-Ibad extrapolates from the author's work. In a sense, Prévot's interpretive stance reduces our vision of Cyrano's activities from that of a philosopher to that of a polemicist with an unstable psyche.

How then might we find a middle ground between Moreau's rhetoric-based hermeneutics, Alcover's historicism, Torero-Ibad's 'history of ideas' approach and Prévot's historicized psychoanalysis as we interpret the Demon's introduction to his gift book? In my view, Corréard, along with several science fiction critics, can bring useful perspectives that can enrich these other interpretive approaches.

First let us consider how Corréard's notion of lucianizing can be of use here. On one level, in the passage of interest, Cyrano uses language reminiscent of Lucian of Samosata's style, as he does throughout the novel. As the Demon claims that the *Grand Œuvre des philosophes* has the power to resolve any contradiction no matter how concrete it may be, to prove that absolutely everything is true and that nothing is false, that everything that exists actually does not exist, and to do so without resorting to sophistry, Cyrano offers a remarkable display of irony. It is as though he extracts the quintessence that all forms of sophistry share and presents it, as in a picture frame, at the heart of his novel, thereby suggesting once again that the entire text contains nothing but sophistries and fictions. This piling up of paradoxes and contradictions brings to mind passages of Lucian such as the first lines of *A True History*. As Lucian's narrator begins his account, he chides ancient writers for their tendency to exaggerate or deliberately fabricate stories that they nonetheless present as true. He announces that all of his own plot details "are an amusing and covert allusion" to specific authors whom the readers are expected to recognize (203). However, the narrator draws a major distinction between

himself and his satirical targets. Whereas they assert that their claims are true, Lucian's storyteller openly acknowledges that everything he is about to say is a lie:

[...] at least in one respect I shall be truthful, in admitting that I am lying. Thus I think that by freely admitting that nothing I say is true, I can avoid being accused of it by other people. So, I am writing about things I neither saw nor experienced nor heard about from others, which moreover don't exist, and in any case could not exist. My readers must therefore entirely disbelieve them. (204)

This announcement that his words are false alludes to the ancient paradox of the Cretan liar, who supposedly said 'All Cretans are liars. I am Cretan.'

The Demon's verbal introduction to the book also places the reader in a position of both laughing at and doubting what is stated, inspiring the distanced, amused intellectual stance that Nicolas Corr ard identifies with Lucianism (*Rire et douter* 9). Whether indeed this reference points primarily to the ancient notion of the coincidence of opposites (as Torero-Ibad would have it), or specifically to Giordano Bruno's treatment of this topic (as Alcover suggests) seems less important than the effect that these potential allusions achieve. Cyrano may just be evoking these ideas as little more than primary material upon which he can elaborate an exercise in lucianesque wit. Indeed, one need not even have Plato, Aristotle or Bruno in mind to achieve the type of metafictional, self-referential irony that Cyrano has put to work in this passage.

While the influence of lucianesque fictions appears to have contributed a great deal toward shaping the scene in the novel, we might also understand it in terms of science fiction. Corr ard would no doubt strongly object to such a reading, as he seems to indicate in his remarks about Cyrano's representation of technology in his novels:

Quant au statut de l'imaginaire technologique de Cyrano,
l' tat tr s dat  des connaissances et des exp rimentations

dont il s'inspire, les contradictions ou le manque de crédibilité de certaines données, l'absence d'anticipation rendent difficilement soutenable l'interprétation du livre en termes de « science-fiction ». [...] L'ironie lucianesque ne change-t-elle pas tout ce qu'elle touche en objet de ridicule ; discréditant le savoir sérieux au profit de l'invention fantastique ? (Corréard *Rire et douter* 669)

Corréard cites the narrator's flight to the moon with bone marrow and the moment in which the icosahedron breaks, and points out that the first scene appears to parody the flight of witches whereas the second evokes a supernatural power of human desire to lift one towards its object (*Soleil* 232, Corréard *Rire et douter* 669). Indeed, both of these scenes constitute products of fantastical invention, and they do discredit "serious" knowledge insofar as they ridicule the purported power of witches to fly and human pretensions to paranormal powers of the mind. However, while such knowledge as this would appear to be taken seriously by those who would claim to use it, others dismiss it as false, both in Cyrano's day and today. Corréard makes a valid point that applying a lucianesque, serio-comic approach to representing any form of knowledge makes it appear questionable if not absurd. Additionally, he is quite correct in suggesting that Cyrano's work lacks credible data ("données") and references observations in Natural Philosophy that were already quite dated when the novels were composed. However, science fiction need not, and in some ways cannot offer credible data to be taken seriously. A fiction does not need offer serious knowledge to a reader in order to be labeled "science fiction" or to be interpreted as such. To cite only a single example, Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* amply demonstrates that science fiction modalities function when taken in the direction of parody and deliberately founded upon sophistries embedded in fiction.

Furthermore, Cyrano's novels align well with Ursula K. Le Guin's definition of science fiction as a mode of describing reality through thought experiments in stories. In an introduction to her novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, she writes that her text, as well as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Philip K. Dick's *The Man in High Castle* among others, have been elaborated as thought experiments, which function not as predictions of future events but as means of describing current phenomena. She continues:

Let's say (says Mary Shelley) that a young doctor creates a human being in his laboratory ; let's say (says Philip K. Dick) that the Allies lost the second world war; let's say this or that is such and so, and see what happens.... In a story so conceived [...], thought and intuition can move freely within bounds set only by the terms of the experiment, which may be very large indeed. The purpose of a thought-experiment, as the term was used by Schrödinger and other physicists, is not to predict the future [...] but to describe reality, the present world. Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive. ("Introduction" n. pag.)

In the case of her own novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, she argues that she has elaborated such an experimental scenario as is present in the texts by Shelley and Dick. As she represents a planet inhabited by human beings who are "androgynous" in the sense that they alternately impregnate partners and give birth, she claims to be:

merely observing, in the peculiar, devious, and thought-experimental manner proper to science fiction, that if you look at us at certain odd times of day in certain weathers, we already are [androgynous]. I am not predicting, or prescribing. I am describing. I am describing certain aspects of psychological reality in the novelist's way, which is by inventing elaborately circumstantial lies. ("Introduction" n. pag.)

Like Lucian, Le Guin weaves a complex textual device out of lies, and uses it to reexamine an observation on the contemporary world. Cyrano's satirical, lucianesque style

can be seen as serving a similar purpose. This strategy does not involve predicting the future (*anticipation*), but it remains nonetheless a hallmark of science fiction.

Cyrano also he carried out this creative work in ways consistent with Gérard Klein's theory of "images of science" in science fiction. While there might be less risk of anachronism in saying that Cyrano's imagery emerged from "philosophie naturelle" and "physique" instead of "science" (since this term was used differently at the time), Klein's notion is nonetheless helpful for transcending the opposition that Corréard highlights between "savoir sérieux" and "invention fantastique" (*Rire et douter* 669). For Klein, any serious knowledge (*savoir sérieux*) necessarily spawns a plethora of fantastical inventions in its wake, and these acquire new functions in three major areas of culture: pseudosciences (like Ufology), some cultural theory and literary criticism, and science fiction, like Voltaire's *Micromégas* (Klein 122-126). In the scene of the gift book, not only does Cyrano's imagery recall the writing of Aristotle and Giordano Bruno, it also features images associated with some of the most advanced technologies of his day—gears, springs and other components of clockwork.

This is particularly noteworthy in the scene with the gift books. The Demon leaves just after offering these mechanical objects to the narrator, who then describes their remarkable design in detail for the reader:

A peine fut-il hors de présence que je me mis à considérer attentivement mes livres. Les boîtes, c'est-à-dire leurs couvertures, me semblèrent admirables pour leur richesse ; l'une était taillée d'un seul diamant, plus brillant sans comparaison que les nôtres ; la seconde ne paraissait plus qu'une monstrueuse perle fendue en deux. [...] A l'ouverture de la boîte, je trouvai dedans un je ne sais quoi de métal quasi tout semblable à nos horloges, plein d'un nombre infini de petits ressorts et de machines imperceptibles. C'est un livre à la vérité, mais c'est un livre

miraculeux qui n'a ni feuillets ni caractères ; enfin c'est un livre où, pour apprendre, les yeux sont inutiles ; on n'a besoin que d'oreilles. Quand quelqu'un donc souhaite lire, il bande, avec une grande quantité de toutes sortes de clefs, cette machine, puis il tourne l'aiguille sur le chapitre qu'il désire écouter, et au même temps il sort de cette noix comme de la bouche d'un homme, ou d'un instrument de musique, tous les sons distincts et différents qui servent, entre les Grands lunaires, à l'expression du langage. (136-137)

These remarkable books seem to function like a chiming clock, producing the language of musical notes spoken by the highborn inhabitants of the moon. Here Cyrano references one of the most highly advanced areas of baroque-age technology, or to use Klein's term, he evokes images of science. In addition, however, he also alludes to an ancient tradition, particularly in the following lines, as the narrator describes hanging these jewel-like books from his earlobes as he would earrings (137). As Alcover suggests, the use of the word "noix" points to a claim by Pliny the Elder that Cicero had seen a copy of Homer's *Iliad* that was the size of a walnut; Rabelais and Sorel also refer to this tale (Alcover in *Lune* 136-137). Cyrano's use of imagery in this scene blends a lucianesque reference to a known ancient trope with visual evocations of very modern technological designs. While the author does not appear to be referring to what Klein calls "scientific results," (123) this representation of the mechanical book has clearly emerged from series of images that surrounded cutting-edge questions of seventeenth-century "science" in the sense of "knowledge of nature and physical phenomena." In this sense, the scene presents a powerful example of a science-fictional aspect of Cyrano's novel.

Imposture, Baroque and Early Enlightenment in Cyrano

I hope to have shown in the preceding pages that Cyranian imposture is lucianesque, that it is science-fictional, and that the interplay of these two literary approaches creates a fundamental instability in how each scene asks the reader to interpret it. Any science or knowledge is not in the content of the letter and the novels but rather is the experience, the memory of having been deceived, and a heightened ability to notice when such imposture is operating. This is a sort of knowledge in a second degree, and it is a paradoxical lesson in doubting purported truth. Cyrano repeatedly attempts to draw the reader into a belief, or tempt him with it, then pull the rug out from under him with a smile. This is Cyranian imposture. With his choices of imagery, he lays out the borders around zones of risk, wherein one can be confounded and misled. He weaves impostor characters into literary impostures, inviting the reader to experience illusion and then to drop the scales from his eyes. Once the scales fall, there is not a truth, but merely a diamond filled with gears shrinking into imperceptible minutiae (like the Demon's gift books), a slow-moving river beneath a twilight sky (as in the letter), or a half-magical, half-scientific suspension between earth and moon, moon and earth (like the narrator's first voyage).

In the terms that I borrowed from Deleuze in my introduction, Cyranian imposture aims to disrupt the operation of the ropes that link the exterior of the baroque house with the tapestries that cover the walls of its upstairs room. When Cyrano tempts the reader to believe a given narrative element, it is as though he has stealthily woven a decoy rope in amongst the legitimate lines that run through the windows and doors of the structure. When the tugs on the ropes seem odd to the reader, they invite inspection.

When the reader examines the ropes, he finds little notes and messages in the fibers that announce fraud. These notes take the form of lucianesque humor and burlesque jokes. Once the reader detects at least one fraudulent cord winding through the house, it casts doubt about all of the others. This is one way of visualizing how Cyrano's work lures the reader into an experience of cognitive and imaginary oscillation between belief and disbelief. As it performs this function, it invites readers to question whether in fact it is even possible to cure oneself of the contagion of dubious beliefs and the facile, unexamined assumptions that sustain them, when after all we depend on beliefs even to determine which beliefs we might hold. This journey into doubt and disorientation leads us to ask ourselves if there is any hope for fable to open up a means of ascent, however metaphorical, to higher knowledge beyond representation. Cyrano uses fiction to make us suspect that human beliefs can never be more than mythical, narrative framings of Nature that crowd out the very object that they are supposed to display. Isabelle Moreau's description of the "démarche libertine" aptly characterizes the apparent goal underlying this tangling, twisting and switching of ropes:

Les publications libertines sont conçues comme autant d'antidotes à la crédulité ambiante et, comme toute médication, elles ne sont pas forcément du goût des malades. Car le remède consiste moins en l'établissement d'un savoir constitué sur le monde qu'en la mise à nu des chaînes de transmission de l'erreur. Tout en gardant les apparences d'une démarche savante, le libertin instrumentalise la matière érudite pour mieux révéler l'imposture. (Moreau 1116)

Moreau's argument is insightful where Cyrano is concerned. The author's works do not deliver an array of content knowledge that a reader can absorb. Instead, they exploit the reader's temptation to believe that ready-made systems of representation can function as

reliable tools for communicating truths. They then show how this behavior is fraught with error and is in fact a prime means through which illusion perpetuates itself. As a person facilely replicates wrongheaded and mistaken notions, and shares them with others, impostures assume titanic proportions and occupy imaginary and geographical spaces that skepticism might otherwise inhabit.

We have yet to discuss how Cyrano's work operates in light of our 'solar system of imposture' model. In the case of both "Des miracles de rivière" and the two novels of interplanetary voyages, we can describe the scenarios using the extended metaphor, but must bear in mind that imposture theoretically ripples inward from the level of the Sun down to the infinitesimal. We have already shown how the letter-writer can be seen as a macrocosm relative to the microcosms formed by pike and the nightingale, which themselves might look down upon minute shrimp shuffling along the riverbed or ants crawling along the willow branches. In other terms, the human describer of the scene occupies the orbit of Mercury in Kepler's model, and the impostor characters of the pike and nightingale occupy the space of the Sun. Furthermore, the viewer may well suspect that within that sphere a multitude of still smaller nested prisms swirl, and that they are occupied by such creatures as tadpoles and termites. These animalcules themselves may gaze upon still smaller beings, and so forth. With regard to the novels, many impostor characters occupy the Sun's orbit. Among the most notable are of these are the Demon of Socrates (an example of imposture used for good) and the village priest in *Soleil* (who is caught up in nefarious dealings and may be participating in imposture through his own delusion). The Demon looks upon countless Selenites and Earthlings who in a sense occupy an orbit of awareness inside of his own. Likewise, the priest looks upon his many

zealous but misguided disciples. Thus in both of the novels, and in the letter, the Sun orbit is not actually the innermost layer of imposture, but rather is one degree of delusion which contains potentially infinite layers within itself. Conversely, if we move backward through these layers toward the exterior of the model, we move past the narrator to the author, the editors, the reader and so on, with the same infinite rippling effect swelling to the edge of the cosmos and to God, with His omniscient perspective, which makes him immune to deceit.

Such a perspective has always seemed unattainable for mere humans, even though, as we mentioned in relation to anamorphosis, the transcendental approach to imposture in the seventeenth century cultivated a hope that the most holy sages might somehow approach it. As we read Cyrano's fiction, a suspicion grows that this elusive point of view has never existed. Yet we suspect that if one day we gazed upon any vision of cosmos with such divine insight, we would see deeply enough to unveil an imposture at its very origin. At the center of the sun, Prometheus and the Serpent are still performing their eternal charade. They are offering us glistening fruit and fat. We realize that, like Cyrano's hero, we have already partaken of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, and forgotten its deceptive exterior, assuring that we can never retain the ultimate Truth, the "philosophie universelle" (46) that we may think we once possessed:

[...] ma main tomba sur la pomme que j'avais cueillie à l'Arbre de Science et dont, par malheur, je n'avais pas dépouillé l'écorce. J'en avais à peine goûté qu'une épaisse nuit tomba sur mon âme. Je ne vis plus ma pomme, plus d'Élie auprès de moi, et mes yeux ne reconnurent pas en tout l'hémisphère une seule trace du Paradis Terrestre ; et avec tout cela je ne laissais pas de me souvenir de tout ce qui m'y était arrivé. Quand depuis j'ai fait réflexion sur ce miracle, je me suis figuré que cette écorce ne m'avait pas tout à fait abruti, à cause que mes dents la traversèrent et se

sentirent un peu du jus de dedans, dont l'énergie avait
dissipé les malignités de la pelure. (51)

Similarly, after we have read Cyrano's fiction, all the while hoping to uncover the great *science* and *philosophie universelle* that it promises, we keep only the mere memory and pleasure of coming to one's senses after daydreaming an adventure of imposture.

Chapter II

The Elementals of Imposture:

Le Comte de Gabalis, ou entretiens sur les sciences secrètes

By the late 1660s, an increasing number of Louis XIV's subjects came to see beliefs in the temporal power of demons as silly superstitions that invited ridicule (Kahn 44). It was in this context that the author Henri de Montfaucon de Villars crafted a witty parody of superstitious claims about the Devil, witches and magic, and entitled it *Le Comte de Gabalis, ou entretiens sur les sciences secrètes* (1670). In this series of amusing conversations, a purported aristocrat calling himself Gabalis hails from an unspecified land somewhere beyond the Rhine. He attempts to initiate a skeptical Frenchman in the secrets of supernatural peoples who supposedly live within the four elements. A portion of these dialogues take place, with deliberate symbolism, inside a labyrinth on a magnificent estate. From the narrator's point of view, the count's revelations are strange and often absurd, yet the gentleman unwaveringly insists in foreign-accented French that he believes every word of what he says, and that every last claim he makes is naught but the whole, unadulterated truth. Gabalis expounds a worldview partly inspired by the Renaissance alchemist Paracelsus. According to the accounts of Villars' hero, sylphs in the air, salamanders in fire, nymphs in water and gnomes in the Earth are responsible for countless phenomena that some Christians attribute to Lucifer and his hordes.

As we examine criticism on this text in light of our notions of imposture, we see that a central assumption has conditioned most recent readings. In essence, criticism of recent decades has approached the words of the character Gabalis as a static, systematized whole that expounds a coherent philosophical system. We can detect a parallel here with the many readings of Cyrano's work that assume a coherent system or philosophy is contained in the text, although we are now speaking of an impostor character instead of the author. When analogous approaches are applied to the Count's words, they lead to interpretations of the whole of the text as a carefully-planned, pre-conceived allegory expressing fully-developed claims.

Interpretations of Villars' text have been offered in recent decades by Roger Laufer, Philippe Sellier, Valérie C. Ferguson, and most recently by Didier Kahn. These critics have presented invaluable keys to understanding the several aspects of the text, including most notably its rich references to four main bodies of literature: the demonological tradition of Martín del Río and Johann Weyer, the paranormal cosmology of Paracelsus, Gabriel Naudé's libertine mode of historical critique, and the rhetorical and satirical style of Blaise Pascal. Seeing how these various models helped shape Villars' literary creation has helped them to decipher the tone and potential purpose of the work.

However, I contend that their diverse approaches share an impulse to draw a fully-constituted philosophical system out of the claims of the character Gabalis and the narrative presented by his inventor, Montfaucon de Villars. For Laufer, Villars' major achievement was the creation of a new mixed esthetic of fiction by bringing Paracelsian elementals into the magical and wondrous universe of French folklore and fairy tales. Sellier took this line of inquiry further and posited the insightful hypothesis that Villars

forged a new literary esthetic and a model for experiencing the pleasure of fiction through the marvelous. Ferguson takes a similar tack, albeit with a different emphasis, and examines how the category of the fantastic operates in *Gabalís*. Finally, Kahn shows how the various references and stylistic components of the text advocated for a vision of the universe in which the Devil has been stripped of his power. If we accept the central premises of these diverse perspectives and combine them, we would arrive at a revealing but incomplete reading of *Le Comte de Gabalis*. Taking cues from these critics, we might say for example that Villars successfully created a new literary esthetic, presented a new way of experiencing literature that appropriates the fantastic, the marvelous and Pascalian satire, and deployed these various tools in a libertine mode to attack fear of the Devil.

Once again, however, such a reading would retain a core assumption that I wish to call into question. It presupposes that Villars had a clear agenda that could be expressed through a work of fiction, through some form of allegory. More specifically, this approach would assume that Gabalis knows what he plans to say before he speaks with the narrator, and that his claims do not evolve through the dialogues, depending how the narrator responds to him. I am curious to explore how we might read *Gabalís* differently if we put this assumption aside and imagine Villars' composition of his text as an ongoing thought experiment in which Gabalis' layers of claims about elementals become the unfolding moves of a game of imaginative exploration.

Adopting this rather radical inversion in our point of view requires starting at the beginning of Villars' text and scrutinizing the dialogues and events described with both extreme skepticism and a certain degree of paranoia, as we imagine that imposture

might be afoot. Like many of our primary authors and their first readers, we can approach the work with the reflexes of a conspiracy theorist and the suspicion that any pretention to mysticism may be an attempt at deceit.

To Reveal a Secret is to Destroy it

In the first edition of *Le Comte de Gabalis*, and in nearly every subsequent edition, readers encounter an epigraph which appears immediately beneath the title, on the title page: “Quod tanto impendio absconditur, etiam solum-modo demonstrare, destruere est” [That which is hidden at so much expense, merely to show it is to destroy it]. This Latin inscription comes from Tertullian’s work *Against the Valentinians* (*Adversus Valentinianos*), in which the early Christian theologian mocked the elaborate cosmologies that Gnostics had put forth. When this citation is isolated from its original context, it prompts a remarkable reflection on the value of secrecy. If a thing requires great effort and cost to conceal, it seems as though its very existence depends upon its being shrouded from view. If its appearance is revealed, it is as though it no longer exists. When the thing in question happens to be secret knowledge of the supernatural, and we do not believe it to be trustworthy, we arrive at an arresting paradox; to display such information to the world is to destroy it, and yet for an unbeliever it cannot be done away with, for it never came into being in the first place. For Tertullian, the Gnostics’ secret knowledge of the cosmos is patently false, so to expose it devastates any value that its adherents might assign it as they go to great lengths to hide it from others. Likewise, the epigraph on the title page of the first edition of *Gabalis* also suggests that whatever secret knowledge (*Sciences secrètes*) are contained in the book will be demolished

through their being told. Thus Villars draws an implicit parallel between the ancient Gnostics as seen by Tertullian and the “Cabalistes” of the seventeenth century (Sellier, “Palimpseste” 249). Both base highly elaborate narratives and beliefs upon a foundation of commonly accepted Christian assumptions, and in both cases ideological opponents perceive them as madmen or impostors.

Philippe Sellier suggests that the use of Tertullian’s words offers Villars a way to defend his literary project pre-emptively against critics who might perceive his comic tone to be inappropriate for discussing secret, sacred truths. This defense operates through a system of allusions to works by Blaise Pascal. In fact, Villars appears to have borrowed the Tertullian citation from Pascal’s *Provinciales* (Sellier 248-249). In the eleventh of those letters, the writer responds to critics who have faulted him for treating theology with humor, which for them is out of place and betrays disrespect for sacred matters. The letter-writer justifies his mixture of mocking tone and a serious subject by claiming that excesses and exaggerations in theology are best countered by laughter, and that responding to wrongheaded arguments with a serious tone would inadvertently lend false ideas credence (Sellier 249). The writer of the *Provinciales* appropriates Tertullian’s aphorism about Gnostic beliefs as a means of garnering authority and establishing a highly respectable precedent for his argument. As Villars alludes to Pascal’s strategy and adopts the phrase by Tertullian, he tacitly defends his literary project against readers who might take issue with his mockeries of Cabalistic beliefs. One might well imagine readers of *Gabalès* (in the seventeenth century or today) who hold the cabal to be sacred. They might believe that depicting a “Cabaliste” in the format of satirical dialogues is an act of disrespect or sacrilege. Tertullian’s words in the

epigraph bring with them an implied, pre-emptive defense against such critiques. While the cabal, like the theological matters addressed by Pascal, might very well be worthy of respect, when wrongheaded individuals take such ideas too far and become extravagant, it is best to respond with humor. If one reacts to such people with open, serious and respectful dialogue, implies Villars, this will improperly dignify follies that have been mistakenly or deceitfully framed as astonishing secrets.

While the epigraph may well have made this point for readers very familiar with Tertullian or with the *Provinciales*, it also features rather troubling ambiguity as well. It simultaneously invites darker interpretations, particularly for those readers who read Latin but may not have recognized the source of the Tertullian quote, or made the connection with Pascal's previous use of it. On the title page of many early editions, *LE COMTE DE GABALIS* appears in the largest typeface, in Roman capitals, and the alternate title appears below, and offers a clear clue about what the reader should expect: "OU ENTRETIENS SUR LES SCIENCES SECRETES." It is beneath this, in italics, that we find the Tertullian quote. The reader understands then that this is a book of dialogues on secret knowledge, no doubt pertaining to such secret disciplines as magic, witchcraft, alchemy and astrology.

The juxtaposition of this title with the Tertullian quote sets up a dialectic between two opposing interpretations upon which Villars will elaborate throughout the text. A reader might understand the epigraph as an expression of regret, or as a sign of gloating over a victory in a debate. From one point of view, these words seem to announce that the following pages will expose extraordinary secrets but in so doing destroy them. It is as though the author were deciding to profit by selling out; there may be secrets that are

subject to use by the initiated, but once he reveals them, they will be of no use to anyone. All that will remain is the money that might be made through book sales. From an opposing perspective, we might read the epigraph as an announcement that the book shall expose previously hidden impostures. In this sense, we might imagine that the author's revelations shall be like the light of day that drives away deceit and illusions lurking in the dark spaces of secrecy. Amusingly, regardless of which way we interpret the epigraph, the end result is the same in that the secrets shall be destroyed. A similar dialectic will run throughout the dialogues; at any moment, the revelations might appear as precious secrets or ridiculous fictions, but in the end the distinction is irrelevant, since they have no tangible effect on reality.

Immediately after the title page, we learn about the count, and the narrator's depiction of the figure is as double-edged as the preceding epigraph. The narrator tells us that the count has died suddenly of apoplexy, an eminently natural and mundane way for a mortal to expire, and that he has learned of this from an unidentified correspondent (153). In the very next sentence, Villars invites the reader to expound conspiracy theories that might provide an alternative explanation for this quite banal death:

Devant Dieu soit l'âme de Monsieur le Comte de GABALIS, que l'on vient d'écrire, qui est mort d'apoplexie. Messieurs les curieux ne manqueront pas de dire que ce genre de mort est ordinaire à ceux qui ménagent mal les secrets des Sages, et que depuis que le bienheureux Raymond Lulle en a prononcé l'arrêt dans son testament, un Ange exécuter n'a jamais manqué de tordre promptement le col à tous ceux qui ont indiscretement révélé les Mystères philosophiques. (153)

The narrator predicts that some readers will suspect the story of apoplexy to be a mere fiction and suspect supernatural foul play, and he labels these men "curieux."

According to Furetière's dictionary, in the seventeenth century, this adjective was used in two ways that are useful for us here. The lexicographer's definitions make it seem as though it was used in a way similar to the modern English word "curious." Someone who was *curieux* might seek to gain knowledge about art and nature, and that this could range from a relatively moderate, reasoned hunger for knowledge to a sort of madness that could lead to inappropriate or dangerous meddling in the affairs of others. On the one hand, the term might be used in a positive sense to describe someone who pursues learning, beauty and marvels, who travels widely and reads many unusual books: "Curieux, se dit en bonne part de celui qui a desir d'apprendre, de voir les bonnes choses, les merveilles de l'art & de la nature" (Furetière). On the other, this desire for knowledge could become rather negative, turning to indiscretion and impertinence, as is the case when a person wants to learn absolutely everything, including the future, and other people's secrets. This might lead someone to read others' letters without their knowledge or probe into *arcana imperii*:

Celui qui veut tout sçavoir, & tout apprendre. Tous les hommes ont un desir curieux de sçavoir l'advenir. Il se prend quelquefois en mauvaise part. C'est un indiscret qui est *curieux* de sçavoir les secrets d'autrui, qui decachette les lettres. Il ne faut point être *curieux* d'apprendre les affaires des Princes, quand ils les cachent. Cervantes a écrit l'Histoire du *Curieux* impertinent, qui vouloit esprouver si sa femme luy étoit fidelle. (Furetière)

The object of one's curiosity determines in large part whether the term is being used negatively or positively. If desire attracts one to wonders and beauties that are available (in principle) to anyone through art, reading, or contact with nature, then curiosity is positive. However, if it draws one to knowledge that has been hidden either

through human efforts (as in private correspondence) or divine will (as is the case for the future), then it takes on a negative valence.

As for Villars' narrator, he seems to be using the expression in a somewhat negative way. If the Count's precise cause of death was in fact not natural (as the unnamed correspondent has claimed), then this has been veiled in secrecy through acts of imposture and fiction-creation. The cause of death thus represents a private secret. Probing into it would seem to represent indiscretion if not impertinence. This is all the more ironic since such impertinent, overly curious meddlers would themselves seek to reveal a punishment meted out upon the count for his own purported indiscretion. We have an effect of *mise-en-abyme* here, already in the very first lines of the text. Secrets nest within secrets, each one is the product of an imposture, and if curious desires are exposed they might bring about further covert assassinations. These acts could then be veiled in additional layers of impostures.

A fictional universe emerges here that is reminiscent of Naudé's *Apologie* and his *Considérations politiques sur les coups d'État*. Natural phenomena inspire magical explanations which in turn lead people to impute supernatural intentionality to mundane events, and this then fuels conspiracy theories. Paradoxically, politico-religious leaders manipulate such misperception to cover up their coups d'État, which involve great secrecy and do not require recourse to supernatural magic. They are nonetheless quite deadly and in the end they often resemble sorcery to anyone who is not complicit in the imposture. This contributes to a tense atmosphere that mixes suspicion of conspiracy with fears of sudden death and a wry feeling that all of this is ultimately a charade. At the same time, there is no reliable way to assure oneself that the claims are not true.

Within this context, the first of the Count's words that the narrator reports take on an ambiguous light:

Vous avez (m'a-t-il dit cent fois) Saturne dans un angle, dans sa maison, et rétrograde ; vous ne pouvez manquer d'être un jour aussi mélancolique qu'un Sage doit l'être ; car le plus sage de tous les hommes (comme nous le savons dans la Cabale) avait, comme vous, Jupiter dans l'ascendant ; cependant on ne trouve pas qu'il ait ri une seule fois en toute sa vie, tant l'impression de son Saturne était puissante ; quoiqu'il fût beaucoup plus faible que le vôtre. (154-155)

Gabalis draws a rather questionable parallel between the narrator and Jesus Christ. As Kahn suggests, Villars appears to have borrowed this reference to Saturn in retrograde from the horoscope of Christ that had been established by Girolamo Cardano, whom we mentioned in our previous chapter (155). As for the messiah, astral influences upon this skeptic have the effect of suppressing his laughter, or at the very least they will do so one day. However, Gabalis' claim that the narrator is inclined toward melancholia also has a double-edged comic effect, for melancholic people suffer from an excess of black bile and are prone to visions. By association, there also seems to be a potentially blasphemous message implying that Jesus Christ hallucinated, but the fact that a potential madman or impostor utters it mitigates its impact. At the opening of the text, the narrator had expressed doubt with regard to the visions of Saint John. Here, Villars uses a set of references to paint an ambiguous portrait of a sage and a disciple. While they might resemble Jesus and Saint John, if the reader's perspective changes they take on the appearance of a madman and a sarcastic heckler. At this juncture and throughout the dialogues, as is the case with the epigraph, at any given instant such opposing readings are possible. In a sense, the references and imagery evoked offer a textual analogue to an

anamorphic image. The count is either an impostor who died of apoplexy or a great sage assassinated by an angel, just as the epigraph is either an expression of regret or gloating. Whatever the case may be, any powers or knowledge that the count or the narrator may have once enjoyed seem moot after the process of revelation. Revealing their secrets destroys them.

Fools are Blind to the Truth

If we put aside the anamorphic aspect of the text for a moment, we can examine the count's argumentation and read his words seriously, as though we had no reason to doubt him. This is essential for arriving at a clear reading of the text as a whole. To begin, we see that one of the count's frequent refrains is that most people willfully and constantly blind themselves to the real truth of things. He offers an arresting series of accounts drawn from sacred, profane and ecclesiastical history, and argues that a plethora of weird events have resulted from interactions between humans and elemental beings. At the same time, the sage laments that he has come to expect various types of negative responses when he offers such circumstantial evidence for radical reinterpretations of these narratives. The hero suggests that his listeners' pre-conceived frameworks of belief fully determine how they interpret stories, and lead them to understand his accounts as proofs of what they already consider to be true. Rarely if ever does he succeed in rallying interlocutors behind his unorthodox claims. Instead, his listeners typically align with one of three points of view. Firstly, the *esprits forts*, those strong-willed, deist- or atheist-leaning skeptics of the supernatural, are apt to dismiss his narratives as 'fables,' understood as falsehoods with few if any redeeming qualities. Next come the

theologians, who tend to force their interpretations of paranormal happenings into one of only two narrow categories. For them, extraordinary occurrences must be either the result of divine intervention or of diabolical interference in human existence. In either case, their worldview excludes the possibility that elementals might have been involved. Finally, a third class of listeners prefers to mock his tales of wonder and ascribe strange phenomena to misperceptions fostered by human impostors or madmen. Although Gabalis does not say so directly, both the narrator and the reader might very well think of the hero himself in these terms.

The count lays out these categories when he references the pagan tale of the birth of Romulus. Libertine writers of the seventeenth century frequently used this myth as a cypher to mock the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, as Meurillon suggests with an example of writing from the Baron de Blot (Meurillon 177). Gabalis incorrectly cites Livy's *History of Rome*, claiming that the ancient writer had stated that Mars was the hero's father. In fact, in Book I, Livy speculates that Romulus' and Remus' mother, Rhea Silvia, was raped and that she ascribed their paternity to the god of war: "either because she really believed it, or because the fault might appear less heinous if a deity were the cause of it."⁶ Yet for Villars' cabalist hero, the purportedly superhuman paternity of Romulus becomes a pretext to accuse countless people of supposedly misinterpreting history. For this citation, note that the seventeenth-century expression "perdre ses gants" meant for a woman to lose her virginity (Kahn 230). Gabalis explains:

[...] on se ferme volontairement les yeux. On trouve, par exemple, dans Tite-Live, que Romulus était fils de Mars ; les esprits forts disent : C'est une fable ; les Théologiens : Il

⁶ <http://www.forumromanum.org/literature/livius/trans1.html>. Trans. Rev. Canon Roberts, 1912. Accessed June 7, 2013.

était fils d'un Diable incube ; les plaisants : Mademoiselle Sylvia avait perdu ses gants, et elle en voulut couvrir la honte, en disant qu'un Dieu les lui avait volés. (Villars 230)

The cabbalist divides readers of the myth of Rhea Silvia and her sons into three camps, according to the interpretation he expects from them; *esprits forts*, who dismiss the tale as a falsehood, *théologiens*, who explain it in demonological terms (and probably frighten themselves in the process) and *plaisants*, who share some aspects of their approach with the *esprits forts*, but adopt a somewhat different tone. Both the *plaisants* and the *esprits forts* critique history as disguised fables, and tend to impute inconsistencies in the narrative to deliberate human deception. However, the *plaisants* read history with an eye toward the erotic and the sexual, and in so doing, have a good laugh. In any case, Gabalis places himself in a separate category of enlightened humans (*philosophes*) who know about the secret truth behind the idiosyncrasies of the tale. In actuality, the father of Romulus was a fire-being, a salamander who lusted after the vestal virgin and merely masqueraded as the god Mars while he made her pregnant. Furthermore, the count concludes his new version of the myth by alluding to Romulus' legendary disappearance in a thick and violent thundercloud that enveloped him (Livy I.16). According to Gabalis, the shimmering salamander had returned several years later and whisked King Romulus off into the skies on a flaming chariot (230).

Along with such references to pagan Fable, Gabalis also subjects sacred, Biblical history to the same type of radical, alternative reading. He claims that generations of theologians have arrived at profound misinterpretations of various types of holy texts and events in their ignorance of the magnificent, invisible elemental peoples. For example, Adam and Eve did indeed commit a great fault but it was not of the specific kind that

most religious thinkers ascribe to them. When God commanded Adam not to touch Eve, argues Gabalis, he actually meant for each of the first two humans to mate with elemental beings. If the first human parents had only done this, they would have attained immortality, produced demigods, and averted much of the folly that has since befallen the visible people of the Earth, including above all the crime of populating the world with “enfants de péché” (219), which are offspring born of a man and woman “par la voie ordinaire” (219). Instead, the Creator:

[...] voulait bien autrement peupler le monde qu’il ne l’est. Si le misérable Adam n’eût pas désobéi grossièrement à l’ordre qu’il avait de Dieu de ne toucher point à Ève : et qu’il se fût contenté de tout le reste des fruits du Jardin de volupté, de toutes les beautés des Nymphes et des Sylphides ; le monde n’eût pas eu la honte de se voir rempli d’hommes si imparfaits, qu’ils peuvent passer pour des monstres auprès des enfants des Philosophes. (219-220)

If Adam had only touched females of the elemental peoples, then he could have populated the world with heroes endowed with superhuman strength and wisdom, which was what God secretly wanted all along (221).

Seize the Moment and Seduce

Alongside such reinterpretations of sacred narratives, Gabalis also represents elementals in relatively banal erotic dealings with humans. In one case, he recounts a story of a relationship between a sylph and a Spanish woman, claiming that the tale is widely known. The sylph supposedly impersonated a man whose advances a woman rejected. The elemental being then fathered two children with her. When a disgruntled cavalier had decided to go on a trip in order to clear his heart of his unrequited passion, the sylph swooped in to take advantage of the situation. He used his elemental powers in

order to take on the appearance of the absent man, then as a skilled impostor he employed every strategy of seduction that he knew to win over the woman (250).

Un Sylphe trouvant la belle à son gré fut d'avis de prendre ce temps, et s'armant de tout ce qu'un des nôtres lui apprit pour se défendre des traverses, que le Diable envieux de son bonheur eût pu lui susciter. Il va voir la Demoiselle sous la forme de l'amant éloigné, il se plaint, il soupire, il est rebuté. Il presse, il sollicite, il persévère : après plusieurs mois il touche, il se fait aimer, il persuade, et enfin il est heureux. Il naît de leur amour un fils dont la naissance est secrète, et ignorée des parents par l'adresse de l'amant aérien. L'amour continue, et il est béni d'une deuxième grossesse. (250)

These first sentences, which compose an initial movement of the story, evoke a relatively simple secret liaison narrative featuring births out of wedlock and containing only a very minimal supernatural element. Gabalis tells his interlocutor that the insistent admirer was a sylph, but the allusion to his special elemental powers remains extremely abstract. In fact, thus far a mundane human being could easily play the same role as the sylph, using mere natural means to disguise himself as the absent man. In the next step of the narrative, we find a topical return of the wandering lover whose place has been usurped.

Cependant le Cavalier guéri par l'absence revient à Séville, et impatient de revoir son inhumaine, va au plus vite lui dire, qu'enfin il est en état de ne plus lui déplaire, et qu'il vient lui annoncer qu'il ne l'aime plus. Imaginez, s'il vous plaît, l'étonnement de la fille, sa réponse, ses pleurs, ses reproches, et tout leur dialogue surprenant. Elle lui soutient qu'elle l'a rendu heureux ; il le nie ; que leur enfant commun est en tel lieu, qu'il est père d'un autre qu'elle porte. Il s'obstine à désavouer. Elle se désole, s'arrache les cheveux ; les parents accourent à ses cris, l'amante désespérée continue ses plaintes et ses invectives ; on vérifie que le Gentilhomme était absent depuis deux ans ; on cherche le premier enfant, on le trouve, et le second naquit en son terme. (250-251)

As in the first part of the story, nothing that occurs here requires a supernatural explanation, and aside from the claim that the father of the children was a sylph, no other aspects of the tale are marvelous in themselves.

What then is the place of this vaguely supernatural, neo-chivalric erotic tale alongside the reinterpretations of the Bible, and what purpose might it serve for Gabalis? On a simple level, the story is a tool to induce erotic excitement in the listener so that he will continue paying attention to Gabalis' unfolding verbal drama. It is a means of retaining attention and building interest. On a more intellectual level, the tale also provides circumstantial evidence that elementals are operative in everyday life as well as with larger-than-life mythic figures like Rhea Sylvia. In terms of its most basic structure, this seduction narrative has much in common with both the myth of the Roman matriarch and another famous story hiding between the lines throughout much of Villars' text, that of the Holy Incarnation. In all three cases, a spirit being fathers a child with a decidedly natural woman; in Gabalis' story and in that of Mary and Joseph, a mortal man discovers the woman's pregnancy and conflict ensues. In the Gospel of Mathew, the marriage between Mary and Joseph has not been consummated when he discovers his wife's pregnancy, so he plans to divorce her. Then, an angel reassures Joseph in a dream and tells him what name to give to the baby⁷. As Gabalis juxtaposes the sylph story overtly with that of Rhea Sylvia and implicitly with that of Mary, he presses his argument that elemental beings exist in a realm fully accessible to certain mortal people (once they have gleaned the required secret knowledge) as well as to the great participants in sacred

⁷ See *Mathew* chapter 1 verses 18-24.

history. This accessibility goes beyond mere verbal interactions and extends to physical intercourse and even procreation.

Vanquish Doubt and Make Stories seem like Proof

As the sage seeks to seduce his listener, he must vanquish doubts. One strategy that he uses is to reinterpret an episode of medieval French history that he calls a “preuve mémorable” of people’s refusal to believe in sylphs, even when the supposed truth of the matter stared them in the face (257). As a culmination of the five dialogues, the cabbalist recounts an extended narrative about an incident that recalls today’s tales of alien abduction. Villars takes inspiration from Naudé’s early seventeenth-century treatise against belief in witchcraft, *Apologie de tous les grands personnages faussement accusés de magie*. In that work, Naudé had mentioned a ninth-century account by a bishop of Lyon named Agobard, who had discouraged the common people from believing that wizards could create hail, wind and lightning in order to destroy crops. Naudé presents the superstitious masses of the time as having naively believed that sorcerers first unleashed storms on the farmlands, then sent airships to loot any crops that remained undamaged. At one point, an angry mob had accused three men and a woman of having fallen from these airships. Thankfully, Agobard interceded in time to argue for their innocence, saying that no such aerial fleets or storm conjurers existed, and he saved the unfortunate quartet from public execution (Naudé 190).

Whereas Naudé’s reference to the story presents the bishop of Lyon as a protagonist and a voice of reason among fools, Gabalis turns the preceding version of the tale on its head. For enlightened ones who are privy to the secrets lurking in the corridors

of history, he explains, the narrative has an altogether different significance. According to the purported sage's reinterpretation of this account, the airships were actually quite real, and were in fact the aeronautical fleet of the sylphs. Furthermore, this incident was the outcome of an elaborate plan hatched by a medieval cabbalist, Zédéchias, who had sought to reveal the existence of the sylphs to humanity at large.

L'expédient dont il s'avisa fut de conseiller aux Sylphes de se montrer en l'air à tout le monde ; ils le firent avec magnificence ; on voyait dans les airs ces créatures admirables en forme humaine, tantôt rangées en bataille, marchant en bon ordre, ou se tenant sous les armes, ou campées sous des pavillons superbes : tantôt sur des navires aériens d'une structure admirable, dont la flotte volante voguait au gré des zéphyrus. (257)

The sylphs had planned this phantasmagorical display with the cabbalist in order to showcase their glory and prove to common humans once and for all that they existed and that they were on the good side of the greater cosmic order. Yet the many superstitious Frenchmen who witnessed this spectacle simply mistook the air beings for sorcerers, interpreting what they saw as would the theologians that Gabalis criticizes when he evokes the birth of Romulus. Quite dissatisfied with this result, the elementals raised the stakes and decided to abduct humans from around the world. These abductees were supposed to serve as ambassadors for the sylphs:

Les Sylphes voyant le peuple, les pédants, et les têtes couronnées même se gendarmer ainsi contre eux, résolurent pour faire perdre cette mauvaise opinion qu'on avait de leur flotte innocente, d'enlever des hommes de toutes parts, de leur faire voir leurs belles femmes, leur république, et leur gouvernement, et puis les remettre à terre en divers endroits du monde. Ils le firent comme ils l'avaient projeté. Le peuple qui voyait descendre ces hommes y accourait de toutes parts, et prévenu que c'étaient des Sorciers qui se détachaient de leurs compagnons pour venir jeter des venins sur les fruits et dans les fontaines ; suivant la fureur

qu'inspirent de telles imaginations, entraînait ces innocents
au supplice. (259)

Through this very different version of the account, and thanks to Gabalis' insight about the secret causes behind a prodigious phenomenon, Villars once more denounces the preconceived ideas that guide our interpretations of what we see, hear and read. The common people succumb to the violent movements of their overactive imaginations, and they perceive the descent of the abductees as an instance of witchcraft. Agobard appears on the scene later, and therefore does not witness the ambassadors' landing himself. Quite ironically, he hears both the abductees' account of their experiences and the common people's opposing explanations, and like an *esprit fort*, interprets both the populace's accusations and the ambassadors' testimonies as groundless fables. Thus Villars highlights the authority that Agobard enjoys as a man of the Church, and shows that this prestige thoroughly overrules both personal experience and eyewitness accounts, offered both by direct and indirect participants in the event. It also calls into question the interpretations of the occurrence in written texts. Among the four categories of readers that Gabalis had posited, then, we see how *théologiens*, *esprits forts* and *philosophes* might interpret this account, but what about the *plaisants*? Villars leaves this space open for his narrator and his readers. He invites them to invest the actors in the scene with secret sexual motivations, while at the same time drawing parallels with officially sanctioned Christian understandings of the past. Perhaps the so-called ambassadors had merely snuck out into the fields for a sexual romp away from prying eyes. Like these abductees, countless saints and martyrs also testified about wondrous worlds beyond our own, and many of them were put to death by mobs not unlike this fearful crowd in medieval Lyon. Villars leads us to wonder if the saints crowded on the façades of French

cathedrals were really just victims of love affairs turned terribly sour, who then made up tales of encounters with angels to veil their dirty deeds.

Be Coherent without Contradiction

As Philippe Sellier has noted, while Villars' strange informer reinterprets much of Western and Christian history, he avoids contradicting established theological doctrines ("Invention" 251). Instead, he targets unknown background causes underlying texts and events. In some ways, this approach aligns with a wider literary trend that was taking shape around 1670, notably in works of authors like Villedieu, Saint-Réal and Lafayette. In the mode of texts like the "nouvelles historiques," the "Annales galantes" or the "histoires secrètes" these writers elaborated upon officially sanctioned records of past events, explaining the actions of princes and in terms of their private love lives and sexual desires. Similarly, Villars subverts orthodox, official accounts and eroticizes history, although he gives it a supernatural spin. Indeed, Gabalis claims that since scholars are unaware of the countless, omnipresent elemental beings active in the world, they have popularized extraordinarily skewed readings of records of the past.

Le héros de Villars évite de contredire la théologie, mais il en souligne les ignorances. Toute une part de la réalité est inconnue aux théologiens [...] Mais dès qu'on a découvert l'activité de ces êtres bienveillants, tout s'explique. (Sellier, "Invention" 251)

Gabalis' alternative explanation of reality also presents a striking logical consistency; as long as one accepts his central, primary claim (that the four elements are inhabited by intelligent creatures manipulating phenomena), the rest of his overly elaborate and unlikely explanations fall into place. In the case of Adam's fall, for

instance, Gabalis integrates the presence of elemental females into his retelling of the Eden story, but he does not contest the central theological tenet according to which humans have ceased to enjoy a state of perfection and have deteriorated into a state of sinful decadence. While the act of Original Sin was different from what most Christians might imagine, it nonetheless resulted in a humanity whose corruption is essentially the same as that of a traditional theological view; whatever Adam's precise fault may have been, his offspring remain "enfants de péché" (Villars 219).

Explore Flaws in the System

As the dialogues progress however, despite the apparent logical coherence of Gabalis' claims, his arguments display at least one apparent flaw. Recent critics have not entirely agreed with one another on the question of whether Gabalis actually contradicts himself. Sellier, for his part, emphasizes a perceived logical coherency throughout the sage's discourse. He describes this rational consistency within the fiction as key component of what he calls a "nouveau merveilleux," a new style of fantastical storytelling, invented by Villars. Sellier holds that *Le Comte de Gabalis* signals a major departure from previous, more conventional modes of working with Fable and History; Villars abandons the use of allegory, along with any attempt to glorify or dignify his material. At the same time he freely mixes references to Pagan and Christian stories with irreverent humor, and more significantly, with strict verisimilitude. In Villars' text:

Voici que se mêlent, que se fondent le sacré et le profane, la Bible et les oracles, les anges et les sylphes, Adam et Pan... Vesta trompe son mari Noé avec un amant salamandre, Oromasis (Ormuzd ?), et de leurs amours naîtra Zoroastre. La recherche de l'ennoblissement, le recours à l'allégorie ont disparu. La vraisemblance de ce

nouveau merveilleux résulte de la pure cohérence logique :
tout s'éclaire, dès lors qu'on a reconnu l'existence des
gnomes et des ondines. (Sellier, "Invention" 61)

On the other hand, Kahn (following Laufer) has noted an apparent contradiction in Gabalis' claims (Kahn 186). This fracture in Gabalis' otherwise coherent explanations appears as he explains what happens to human souls once their physical bodies expire, and how the elemental peoples can affect this phenomenon. The theme arises in the second dialogue, and later in the fifth, and an uneasy tension emerges between the cabbalist's two accounts of the same issue. On the first occasion, the would-be sage mentions in passing that some human souls are predestined for deliverance into heaven, whereas others are not (186). However, according to the count, sages like him enjoy special circumstances once they are married to a sylphide or nymph. He suggests that such a man need never fear eternal torment in Hell, for one of two things is bound to happen. Either he is predestined for Heaven, and he will go there upon his death accompanied by his elemental wife, or he is predestined for damnation, in which case his sexual union with the elemental will render his soul mortal, and it will therefore dissipate upon death instead of moving on to an afterlife of torment. Gabalis seems to be suggesting that sex between a mortal human and an elemental transforms the soul of both parties. The character explains:

De sorte que vous voyez que les Sages ne risquent rien pour l'éternité ; s'ils sont prédestinés, ils ont le plaisir de mener au Ciel (en quittant la prison de ce corps) la Sylphide ou la Nymphé qu'ils ont immortalisée ; et s'ils ne sont pas prédestinés, le commerce de la Sylphide rend leur âme mortelle, et les délivre des horreurs de la seconde mort. (186)

Thus every sylphide or nymph who makes love to a man will have her soul made immortal (at this juncture Gabalis does not mention male supernatural beings or female sages, nor do salamanders and gnomes come into the equation). For the man involved, the effect on his soul depends on where it is predestined to go after death. For a human predestined to be damned, it renders his soul incapable of going to Hell by modifying it such that it will die with the body. But for a sage whose soul is already set to go to Heaven, it essentially has no effect. In sum, by simply mating with the right being, a sage secures a win at Pascal's wager.

In the fourth dialogue, a problem arises. At that point, the purported sage is explaining to the narrator why the gnomes' attitudes are generally somewhat different from those of their cousins in air, water and fire. This difference stems in part from the fact that the Devil has a certain degree of sympathy for the elementals of earth that he does not extend to the others, whom he holds as mortal enemies:

[...] pour les Gnomes, il [le Diable] ne les hait pas si fort ; parce que, comme je crois vous avoir appris, ces Gnomes effrayés des hurlements des Diables qu'ils entendent dans le centre de la terre, aiment mieux demeurer mortels que courir risque d'être ainsi tourmentés, s'ils acquéraient l'immortalité. De là vient que ces Gnomes et les Démons leurs voisins ont assez de commerce. Ceux-ci persuadent aux Gnomes naturellement très amis de l'homme, que c'est lui rendre un fort grand service, et le délivrer d'un péril que de l'obliger de renoncer à son immortalité. Ils s'engagent pour cela de fournir à celui à qui ils peuvent persuader cette renonciation, tout l'argent qu'il demande ; de détourner les dangers qui pourraient menacer sa vie durant certain temps, ou telle autre condition qu'il plaît à celui qui fait ce malheureux pacte : ainsi le Diable, le méchant qu'il est, par l'entremise de ce Gnome fait devenir mortelle l'âme de cet homme et la prive du droit de la vie éternelle. (Villars 252-253)

Here we encounter a different relationship between humans and gnomes from the scenes in which sylphides and nymphs appear. It is no longer a question of a “mariage” (the term used by the narrator) or “alliance” (Gabalis’ own term) (215) but of some form of obligation under duress, leading to a “malheureux pacte” (253). The narrator alludes to the demonological sense of the word, questioning whether anyone who has drawn up a pact with a gnome has not merely been deceived by an impostor—the Devil in disguise: “Comment, Monsieur (m'écrai-je), ces pactes à votre avis, desquels les Démonographes racontent tant d'exemples, ne se font point avec le Démon ?” (253) To this question, Gabalis responds with assurances that while imposture has in fact taken place, its locus is different from what the narrator would assume. For him, the problem is not that the Devil disguises himself as a gnome, but rather that he plants fictions in the mind of the gnomes such that they will do his bidding, and while he then manipulates them, they bribe and coerce humans but do not do so under false pretenses, since—significantly—they do not lie. They make pacts and deliver on their end of the bargain. Gnomes persuade people to give up their immortality. More specifically, they offer promises of wealth and protection from physical dangers, along with whatever other conditions might satisfy a human in return for the chance to take away his immortal soul.

We should note here that while it may seem that the erotic component of the narrative has disappeared, instead it has merely been lightly veiled so as to be all the more titillating, and at the same time may be providing a distraction from the dubious and potentially contradictory argument that Gabalis is making. The cabbalist obliquely references homosexuality, a topic all the more unexpected in that it appears in the context of a purportedly saintly theological discourse. In fact, using a masculine singular

demonstrative pronoun, he states that a masculine gnome makes a man's soul become mortal. The reader is left to imagine what these conditions might be, and what this renunciation of immortality involves. The interactions between humans and the inhabitants of the other three elements seem to indicate that if salamanders and sylphs are often "suborneurs de demoiselles" (252) then gnomes, under the the Devil's sway, can become 'suborneurs de demoiseaux.'

However the various genders of elementals and humans may fit into Gabalis' worldview, his claims here contradict a theological argument that he made in the preceding passage we examined. At issue is the question of what happens to a human who becomes involved with an elemental, the exact nature of the involvement (Is it an *alliance* that God wants or a *malheureux pacte* that the Devil has inspired?), and whether the person is predestined for Heaven or Hell. This becomes rather convoluted, but it is useful to lay out Gabalis' claims clearly. On the one hand, any man who enters into a pact with a gnome has his immortal soul turned into one that will die with the body, so no one who colludes with an earth elemental at the request of the Devil will have an afterlife of any kind. In this case, it obviously does not matter what type of afterlife the person is predestined for. On the other hand, if a man is born predestined for Hell but then 'allies with' a sylphide or nymph, as God supposedly wishes, then the result is the same—he neither goes to Heaven nor to Hell, since his soul self-destructs at death. A final category of people rounds out all of the possible scenarios; a man predestined for Heaven will indeed go there as long as he does not 'enter a pact' with a gnome, whether or not he 'allies with' a sylphide or nymph. The same seems to be true of a woman who might have an 'alliance' with a salamander, sylph, or male nymph.

We can now make an observation. The question of whether Gabalis contradicts himself comes down to the readers' decision of how to interpret the terms "alliance" and "pacte." The first of these situations is supposedly aligned with God's plan while the second is a rather feeble outgrowth of the Devil's desire to harm humanity. Yet if we take intentionality out of the equation, then the cabbalist's claims once again appear at odds. Even then, we might try to rationalize away the inconsistency by speculating that perhaps it is the exact nature of the "embrassements" and "voluptés Philosophiques" (Villars 176) that determine the effects of an "alliance" or a "malheureux pacte" on one's soul.

Ultimately, however, Gabalis' possible inconsistency is too ambiguous and subject to interpretation to be used as proof that he is an impostor. But the text nonetheless inspires readers to reflect until they come to their own conclusions. It is in this way that Villars' dialogues work to engage the reader on a deeper level. Above and beyond their critique of belief in witchcraft, devilry and demonic intervention in the natural world, *Le Comte de Gabalis* inspires the reader to examine the dynamics that govern belief and disbelief both in the claims of cabbalist and the narrator, and in the trustworthiness of the text itself as a paradoxical medium of critique and false revelation. It prompts the reader to examine the habits that underlie decisions to believe and doubt. The textual mechanisms that engage readers in such self-reflection are to be found not in the philosophical, theological or cosmological 'system' put forth by the character Gabalis, but rather in the tactical interplay between the sage and the narrator.

Indeed the apparent coherence of the sage's worldview only emerges in retrospect, from the point of view of a reader who has progressed through all five of the

dialogues. Up until that point, it is unclear whether Gabalis will contradict himself, and in fact Villars maintains the conflict of the plot by leading his narrator to pose increasingly difficult questions as he explores two uncertainties. Firstly, how far is Gabalis willing to go? Secondly, will the narrator successfully stump him and force him to acknowledge a contradiction in his system? Each question that the narrator asks represents a snare that he holds out in an attempt to trip up his interlocutor. While it may be the case, as Sellier contends, that the foreign visitor does not contradict himself, Gabalis' responses to the skeptic's aggressive inquiry might well be interpreted as post-hoc rationalizations made up on the spot in order to avoid being caught in overzealous and suspicious fabulation.

In fact, it is quite possible to read the dialogues against the grain of Sellier's argument, and to interpret them as an extended, discursive sparring match between two foes in a philosophical debate, one a skeptic and the other a sophist. In this view, the narrator appears as an indignant and sadistic partisan of pure logic, seeking to trap his interlocutor in an exaggeration, contradiction or outright lie through any discursive means available to him. This perspective makes Gabalis seem like an agile-minded impostor who invents his system as he goes along, rationalizing away potential contradictions to his claims by making up new details, which he disguises as revelations of previously undisclosed truths. If we read the dialogues in this way, the narrator becomes an unwitting participant in an extended act of co-creation of Gabalis' purported beliefs, which begin to look like products of a negotiation of the boundaries of plausibility, carried out by Gabalis, who carefully articulates his fabulations to evade logical entrapment, even while the narrator continually fuels this elaboration by asking further

questions. Although the narrator does not believe Gabalis' claims, he nonetheless can be seen as a springboard upon which the supposed sage gains impetus, and unfolds layers of fiction in order to save the plausibility of his initial assumption.

Such an interpretation generally accounts well for Gabalis' response to objections that the narrator presents to his arguments. One example is the moment in which the two men are discussing the history of the Temptation of Saint Anthony. According to Gabalis, Anthony's famous sermon to the other desert hermits was actually an account of his conversation with a sylph. The narrator questions this version of the story on the basis of logic. Given Gabalis' account of history thus far, it would have made sense in this situation for a sylph to suggest that Anthony marry a sylphide. This would render the female being immortal and allow her to have superhuman children, as God supposedly intended. But this idea contradicts the traditional account according to which the desert father remained celibate in the face of violent and overwhelming temptation. As though grasping at straws, Gabalis explains the objection away on the grounds that Anthony's advanced age would have made a childbearing marriage inappropriate in the eyes of God.

— Mais pourquoi (repartis-je) ce Sylphe ne proposa-t-il pas
à saint Antoine ce que vous me proposez aujourd'hui ?
— Quoi (dit le Comte en riant), le mariage ? Ha ! C'eut été
bien à propos ?
— Il est vrai (repris-je) qu'apparemment le bon homme
n'eut pas accepté le parti.
— Non surement (dit le Comte), car c'eut été tenter Dieu de
se marier à cet âge-là, et de lui demander des enfants. (218)

On another occasion, in the fifth dialogue, Gabalis suggests that sylphs now rarely take on human form, since humans so often mistake them for demons. The narrator tries to trap the Count in a contradiction by asking a probing question: "Que deviennent donc

(lui dis-je) tous ces peuples volants, maintenant que les gens de bien sont si préoccupés contre eux ?” (246). Gabalis reacts by posing a dizzying series of non-sequitur questions that effectively confound the narrator. This helps the supposed cabbalist to stall and buy time while he formulates an effective tactic to counter the objection:

Dieu a permis à tous ces peuples, d’user de tous les innocents artifices dont ils peuvent s’aviser pour converser avec les hommes à leur insu.

—Que me dites-vous là, Monsieur ? (m’écriai-je).

— Je vous dis vrai (poursuivit-il).

— Croyez-vous qu’un chien puisse avoir des enfants d’une femme ?

— Non (répondis-je).

— Et un singe ? (ajouta-t-il).

— Non plus (répliquai-je).

— Et un ours ? (continua-t-il).

— Ni chien, ni ours, ni singe (lui dis-je), cela est impossible sans doute ; contre la Nature, contre la raison, et le sens commun. (246-247)

The narrator reacts to these random and unpredictable queries with a flat negative that he builds upon a triple justification; a woman cannot reproduce with a dog, bear, or ape because this would oppose Nature, reason and common sense. On these grounds, it must be impossible.

Gabalis then deftly redirects the narrator’s logical assertion and turns it on its head once again. He concurs that women cannot reproduce with animals, but then cites historical anecdotes claiming that this has happened in the past:

— Fort bien (dit le Comte), mais les Rois des Goths ne sont-ils pas nés d’un ours et d’une Princesse Suédoise ?

— Il est vrai (repartis-je) que l’Histoire le dit.

— Et les Pégusiens et Syoniens des Indes (répliqua-t-il) ne sont-ils pas nés d’un chien et d’une femme ?

— J’ai encore lu cela (lui dis-je).

— Et cette femme Portugaise (continua-t-il) qui étant exposée en une île déserte, eut des enfants d’un grand singe? (247)

When a rational person compares a logical impossibility and a tale from the ancient past or the distant present asserting the contrary, the most common response would be to conclude that the story is a fiction. Indeed the narrator does this implicitly. He acknowledges that the accounts exist and that he has read them, but offers no commentary on their truth-value. He also begins to cite a topical theological interpretation of these narratives before the Count impatiently cuts him off and chastises him. In essence, when Gabalis still fails to convince the narrator, he interrupts an objection and talks over him, repeating arguments that did not work the first time around with more insistence and emotion:

— Nos Théologiens (lui dis-je) répondent à cela, Monsieur, que le Diable prenant la figure de ces bêtes...
— Vous m’allez encore alléguer (interrompt le Comte) les sales imaginations de vos auteurs. Comprenez donc, une fois pour toutes, que les Sylphes, voyant qu’on les prend pour des Démons quand ils apparaissent en forme humaine; pour diminuer cette aversion qu’on a d’eux, prennent la figure de ces animaux, et s’accommodent ainsi à la bizarre faiblesse des femmes, qui auraient horreur d’un beau Sylphe, et qui n’en ont pas tant pour un chien ou pour un singe. (248)

The narrator’s truncated question recalls that accounts of bestiality could be explained as an imposture of the Devil and his demons, who allegedly took the shape of animals and seduced women into sin, or even impregnated them with monstrous offspring. For Gabalis as well, impersonators have been involved in the events that inspired these accounts, but it is not evil spirits but rather elementals who have materialized as animals in order have sex with (“converser avec⁸”) human beings without their full knowledge of

⁸ As Kahn notes, following Sellier, this expression was often used as an erotic euphemism for sexual relations (Kahn 171).

what is happening. In the sage's view, this is an ongoing phenomenon in which imposture combines with bestiality, even as God looks on in favor. When the narrator still does not accept this interpretation of History, Gabalis changes the subject with a promise to reveal yet another exciting secret:

Je pourrais vous conter plusieurs historiottes de ces petits chiens de Bologne avec certaines pucelles de par le monde : mais j'ai à vous apprendre un plus grand secret. (247-248)

To restate our interpretive approach here, we should recall that this extended exchange aligns well with a reading of the character Gabalis as a shrewd impostor. Evidently, we also acknowledge that it can make sense to understand Gabalis' words as the ravings of a madman. We have already emphasized the high degree of ambiguity in the construction of this character. However, if we choose to attribute an extremely high degree of lucidity to Gabalis, then this interaction takes shape as a skillful performance of imposture.

When viewed in this light, three features characterize this scene of imposture, and appear to extend throughout the dialogue in a repeating cycle with three stages. In a first movement, Gabalis elaborates narratives and statements about the elemental peoples until the narrator presents an objection, generally on the basis of logic. At that point, the supposed cabbalist casts out non-sequitur questions or remarks to buy time while he prepares the next stage. When he is ready, he presents what we might call in modern terms a 'just-so story,' which is to say that he rationalizes away resistance to his central hypothesis by arguing that there are actually further factors involved in the situation of which his interlocutor is not yet aware. Why did that sylph not suggest that Anthony marry a sylphide? Because God would have looked with disfavor upon this given the

hermit's old age (and, he implies, if the narrator had been more versed in matters of the elementals, he would surely have known this). If the sylphs fear incarnating as humans, then how do they now appear to us? asks the narrator, no doubt trying to lead Gabalis to say that they no longer appear at all, and therefore to call into question whether they exist. But the cabbalist takes the opportunity to inform him that elementals take on animal bodies as personas, and he insinuates that if the narrator were better informed, it would be no surprise that legends involving bestiality are actually true but previously misunderstood accounts of elemental-human couplings. Again and again, Gabalis supplies information supposedly left out of mainstream accounts due to the successful deceit of past manipulators of memory. Each time the narrator questions his central contention (that elementals have actually been involved in the world wherever people have historically inferred demonic activity), he supplies post-hoc rationalizations or just-so stories until he moves to a third stage, in which he swiftly changes the subject and moves on to something that is exciting but does follow logically from the context. The first stage of the cycle then repeats itself.

Become a Sorcerer's Apprentice

In my view, Villars modeled this cycle on a literary precedent set by Lucian of Samosata and his seventeenth-century French translator, Perrot d'Ablancourt. As Kahn has remarked, in the mid-1650s Perrot d'Ablancourt's translations of the ancient dialogues had brought them to French readers' attention. Thereafter, these texts offered models of flaunting rhetorical elegance and portraying skeptical and irreverent attitudes in dialogic form. Seventeenth-century readers' familiarity with these models may have

helped assure *Gabalís*' editorial success (Kahn in Villars 70). In more specific terms, I would argue that Lucian's dialogue between Philocles and Tychiades, diversely translated into English as "The Liar," "The Skeptic" or "Lovers of Lies" appears to have offered a key inspiration for Villars, as much in the setting and the content of the conversations as in the dynamic that underlies their progression.

Perrot d'Ablancourt's translation of the title of the dialogue, along with an added announcement just before the beginning of the text itself, lays out two tasks that his version of the text accomplishes. At the opening of Perrot's version of the text (in an edition from 1664), we read:

LE MENTEUR, OU L'INCRE'DULE.
DIALOGUE
DE PHILOCLE'S ET DE TYCHIADE.
*Il se moque de contes que l'on fait des aparitions des
esprits, & accuse la magie de fausseté & d'imposture.*
(192)

The announcement in italics below the title directs the reader to look for two main impulses in the text corresponding to two poles of the serio-comic genre. One is to seek a comical mockery of stories about the supernatural, as well as a relatively serious critique of magic as imposture. While this scheme may not be as explicit in Villars' text, we nonetheless find a similar attempt to merge a comical representation of the excesses of storytelling (*Gabalís*' florid tales of the exploits of the elementals) with a comparatively serious critique of beliefs in supernatural forces (including the Devil's ability to do harm to mortals).

Over the course of the dialogue, the narrator Tychiade blames both respected poets and historians of the past and comparatively ordinary storytellers of his day for his shock (*étonnement*) and irritation (*indignation*) (193). As the frame conversation begins,

he has just returned from a gathering in which many guests have shared accounts of experiences with the supernatural. Not only have their stories irritated him; he has also found many of the unlikely and lurid details of gods and monsters impossible to believe. He launches a diatribe against historians and poets who purportedly misrepresent “Fables” as truths (193). The disgruntled narrator balks at respected figures like Herodotus, who supposedly recorded lies as though they were truths, and tried to perpetuate these falsehoods through subsequent generations. Speaking of such condoners of untruth, Tychiade continues:

Plusieurs & de tres-grands personnages, qui ne se plaisent pas seulement à tromper les autres, mais à se tromper eux-mêmes ; ce qui me donne de l'étonnement, mêlé de quelque indignation. Car, pour ne rien dire des Poètes, n'auons-nous pas des Historiens, comme Ctésias & Hérodote qui non contents d'abuser ceux de leur siècle, ont voulu consigner leurs Fables à la posterité ? (Perrot 193)

Tychiade finds poets' and historians' use of such fantastical stories annoying since they cloud the truth of history at the very outset and plant seeds of inaccuracy that then get passed down and exaggerated over time. Like these ancient deceivers, Tychiade grumbles, many people, including mundane guests at his acquaintance's house, routinely tell lies that listeners eagerly believe. At the gathering from which he has just returned, he was not at all convinced by the diverse narrations of animate broomsticks and fearsome inhabitants of the underworld, and instead has become furious at so many apparent lies being disguised as true stories. He is particularly displeased with the host, Eucrate, whom he alternately views as a madman and an impostor:

Pour moy, ie le regardois entre deux yeux, comme s'il fût devenu fou ; & quelquefois ie le prenois pour un imposteur, & m'étonnois qu'il nous eût imposé si long-temps avec sa mine grave & severe. (Perrot 194)

Tychiade is astounded at the extent to which Eucrate's exceedingly serious facial expressions and bearing impress and convince the other listeners. As the dialogue continues, the narrator will recount the stories that he has heard to Philoclès, highlighting their unlikely details for comic effect. His retelling of these narratives culminates with that of a famous framed story known as "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," which has been adapted to many media over the centuries.

The narrative of the sorcerer's apprentice, Eucrate, bears similarity to his literary descendent, Gabalis. Like the count, he claims to have witnessed marvels firsthand that would convince anyone of the truth of his claims. After the other guests have told their tales of eerie and inexplicable happenings and failed to convince Tychiade of their truthfulness, Eucrate takes the floor, playing the role of a trustworthy "témoin oculaire" (207). Here, is the case with Gabalis, a self-described expert claims to have wielded supernatural powers in the past, but stops short of demonstrating such abilities in front of the narrator as a means of proving that he is telling the truth. In other terms, while he claims to be an eyewitness himself, he never brings about circumstances that might make the narrator into such a firsthand perceiver of marvels. According to Eucrate, he once eavesdropped on a magician in Egypt named Pancrate and learned a magical incantation against the sage's wishes. He then uttered these extraordinary words to bring a pestle (*pilon*) to life, and ordered it to fetch him a bucket of water. It did so, but unfortunately would not respond to his subsequent command to stop bringing him more and more liquid:

Mais comme il eut apporté un seau, & que ie luy eus commandé de s'arester, il n'en voulut rien faire, & se mit toujours à en tirer, iusques à ce qu'irité de sa

désobéissance, & craignant qu'il ne nous noyât, ie le coupay en deux d'un coup de coignée ; mais chaque piece commença à puiser separément ; ce qui me mit fort en peine, tant que le Magicien ariva qui défit l'enchantement, & puis disparut. (Perrot 209)

This narrative twist prompts the eager guest Dinomaque to ask immediately for a physical demonstration of this spell, which might prove that Eucrate has been truthful with regard to this core feature of his tale. The apprentice's excuse appears somewhat too convenient not to raise suspicion, however:

Sais-tu encore ce mot, qui put faire un si grand miracle ? interrompit Dinomaque. Oüy, dit Eucrate, mais si le fantôme se mettoit à tirer de l'eau, il faudroit abandonner la maison ; car ie ne le pourrois faire cesser. (209)

Should we choose to take Eucrate at his word, it is quite logical for him to refuse to pronounce the incantation that caused him so much trouble in the past. He could not control the magic before and there would be every reason to assume that he would not be able to do so in front of Tychiade, Dinomaque and the others. However, should we suspect Eucrate of imposture (as does the narrator, at least when he does not see him as a madman), then we wonder if the circumstantial details of his account might in fact have been deliberately designed so as to amaze his audience while obviating the need to provide proof. If one is to deceive others by telling a story of a remarkable feat one can supposedly perform, it is shrewd to suggest that demonstrating the exploit would put one's audience in danger. This tactic of imposture aggrandizes the storyteller while exciting fear in listeners and driving them to clamor for still more thrills. At the same time, it lays the groundwork for the impostor to provide plausible reasons not to replicate his extraordinary past deed.

In Villars' dialogues as well, the potential impostor or madman figure claims to be able to perform a supernatural marvel but does not actually complete the demonstration. Yet at one key moment Gabalis seems to be a hair's breadth away of physically demonstrating the reality of the elemental peoples. At that point in the text, great dramatic tension arises from the uncertainty about whether Gabalis will call upon his elemental friends. If the text represented him doing so, we would be considering an example of a very different genre—not an ambiguous account in which it is impossible to determine if the hero is an impostor, madman or unparalleled master of secret powers, but rather something more like a fairy tale recounted by a first-person narrator. But as Villars' work stands, it is precisely this moment of ambiguity in the dialogue, when anything could happen but in a sense nothing actually does, that invites the reader to doubt and reflect on the nature of physical proof and narrative as these things relate to belief.

In one key scene, the count is pressuring the narrator to definitively select one of the four elemental peoples among whom he will choose a wife:

Hé bien ! mon fils (me dit-il), pour quelle espèce de peuples invisibles Dieu vous donne-t-il plus de penchant, et quelle alliance aimerez-vous mieux, celle des Salamandres ou des Gnomes, des Nymphes ou des Sylphides ? (215)

The narrator asks to postpone this decision because he has a problem visualizing the elementals in his imagination; he states that he cannot bring himself to picture these beings as anything other than the monstrous devils and demons that he has presumably heard about and seen represented during his entire life: "Franchement, Monsieur (lui dis-je), je ne puis guérir mon imagination ; elle me représente toujours ces prétendus hôtes des éléments comme des tiercelets de Diabes" (215). Furthermore, even if he could

picture them as the count portrays them, this would not reassure the narrator that the elementals are allies of God and enemies of the Devil. He asks a rhetorical question, implying with oblique politeness that the purported elementals might very well be spawn of Satan disguised as beautiful, radiant beings. He imagines that God certainly might have created these creatures as Gabalis has claimed, yet he has a major doubt: “[...] mais supposé que Dieu ait pu le faire, quelle preuve solide y a-t-il qu’il l’a fait?” (216)

Gabalis responds to the narrator’s reference to ‘solid proof’ as though it was a provocation, and next follows an interaction analogous to Eucrates’ refusal to animate a pestle in Lucian’s text. Villars’ sage offers to conjure Sylphs immediately in order to persuade the narrator once and for all that his claims are true:

— Voulez-vous en être convaincu tout à l’heure (reprit-il) sans tant de façons ? Je m’en vas [sic] faire venir les Sylphes de Cardan ; vous entendrez de leur propre bouche ce qu’ils font, et ce que je vous en ai appris.
— Non pas cela, Monsieur, s’il vous plaît (m’écriai-je brusquement), différez, je vous en conjure, cette espèce de preuve, jusqu’à ce que je sois persuadé que ces gens-là ne sont pas ennemis de Dieu ; car jusque-là j’aimerais mieux mourir que de faire ce tort à ma conscience de ...
— Voilà, voilà l’ignorante et fausse piété de ces temps malheureux (interrompt le Comte d’un ton colère). (216)

In this allusion to the opening of Cyrano’s lunar voyage novel, Villars’ narrator expresses fright (whether real or feigned) that Gabalis has been misled and might accidentally conjure demons disguised as their elemental enemies, in this case the supernatural visitors who once contacted Cardano. Even though these demons might not be dangerous, the narrator still dreads condoning or unwittingly participating in the sin of sorcery, which for some of his contemporaries might be considered a gruesomely punishable crime to boot.

Similarly, at another point Gabalis offers to make himself invisible:

En cet endroit un laquais vint me dire qu'un jeune Seigneur venait me voir.

« Je ne veux pas qu'il me voie (dit le Comte).

— Je vous demande pardon, Monsieur (lui dis-je), vous jugez bien au nom de ce Seigneur, que je ne puis pas faire dire qu'on ne me voit point: prenez donc la peine d'entrer dans ce cabinet.

— Ce n'est pas la peine (dit-il), je vas [sic] me rendre invisible.

— Ha ! Monsieur (m'écriai-je), trêve de diablerie (s'il vous plaît), je n'entends pas raillerie là-dessus.

— Quelle ignorance (dit le Comte en riant et haussant les épaules) de ne savoir pas, que pour être invisible il ne faut que mettre devant soi le contraire de la lumière. » (239)

Faced with this new opportunity to witness proof of Gabalis' supposed powers, the narrator once again stubbornly attributes them to the power of devils and dissuades the Count from demonstrating them. At the same time, both of the sage's offers to prove his skills feature a puzzling ambiguity followed by awkward laughter. As Kahn notes:

Montfaucon de Villars a entretenu chez le narrateur une telle crainte de l'évocation des sylphes que l'on s'attend fort bien à voir le Comte accomplir une quelconque cérémonie, et qu'il n'est pas facile de décider s'il plaisante réellement ou s'il n'avait pas d'abord l'intention d'en accomplir une, avant de se raviser devant l'effroi du narrateur : n'était-il pas, au début même de ce Quatrième Entretien, à deux doigts d'évoquer les sylphes de Cardan ? (Kahn in Villars 239)

Gabalis' behavior is analogous to that of a modern amateur magician who spontaneously offers to perform a very dangerous stunt (such as chaining himself underwater) and then bursts out in laughter; it is extremely difficult to judge whether to take him seriously and dissuade him from taking a risk he may not be prepared for, or rather to take the entire comment as a joke and laugh about it. Villars' narrator expresses such a feeling of awkwardness in his parting comment, as he goes to meet the new visitor. He implies

either that he does not understand humor (*raillerie*) about devilry, that he does not want to hear any, or both.

In this scene, Villars operates some clear changes with respect to Perrot's version of Lucian's model. Firstly, whereas Eucrate had invoked his own fear of peril to avoid providing physical proof of his supernatural powers, in Villars' work it is the interlocutor's expression of caution that prevents the demonstration. This relates in large part to the types of characters that the two authors portray. There are parallels between the two works on this level but there are also important differences. For example, while both Tychiade and Villars' narrator evince skeptical attitudes vis-à-vis the would-be sages who share accounts of the supernatural with them, their reasons for disbelieving are rather different. Gabalis' interlocutor generally behaves as an *honnête homme* in the sense that he responds as would a *raisonneur* in a comedy by Molière, not unlike Philinte, maintaining a fairly even temperament while enjoying occasional humor. He gently but firmly critiques his interlocutor's extravagances with respect to sanctioned norms of behavior and belief. As a moderate, clear-thinking Christian man, Villars' narrator doubts Gabalis either on the basis of the man's departure from traditional, orthodox arguments, from logic, or both. By contrast, with regard to Tychiade, the closest type of character to him in a Molière play would be an Alceste. Lucian's narrator replicates the posture of ancient Democritus, taking a hardline cynical approach to the stories he is told and refusing to accept supernatural accounts of events. In fact, Tychiade directly compares himself to the famous cynic who never startled, despite others' elaborate attempts to frighten him.

Après que le Philosophe eut achevé ce recit, il n'y eut
personne dans la compagnie qui ne condannast mon

opiniastreté, si ie n'ajoûtois foy à un personnage si vénérable, & d'une si profonde doctrine. Mais sans craindre ni sa mine ni sa réputation, Qu'est cecy, dis-je, Arignote ? ie pensois avoir trouvé un trésor, comme dit le proverbe, & ce ne sont que des charbons. Tu trahis ainsi la verité, dont ie te prenois pour le défenseur. Le ne say pas qui tu croiras, répondit-il, puis que tu ne crois pas ceux-cy, non plus que moy. Le croiray Démocrite, lui dis-je, qui s'estant renfermé dans un sepulcre qui estoit hors de la ville, pour estre moins interrompu dans ses estudes, quelques jeunes gens vinrent la nuit sauter & dancer au tour de luy, après s'estre déguisez en fantômes, pour luy faire peur. Mais sans lever seulement les yeux de dessus son livre, tant il estoit persuadé que tout cela n'étoit que chimère : Ne cesserez-vous point, dit-il, de faire les fous ? (Perrot 207)

The interlocutors have chastised Tychiade for refusing to believe a tale on the basis of the storyteller's authority as a venerable sage, and this provides an opportunity for him to praise his idol Democritus. According to Tychiade, the philosopher had been so unafraid of ghosts that he gladly sought out a crypt as a quiet reading spot, and even an extremely elaborate imposture failed to deceive him in the slightest degree. When expressing doubts, Tychiade invokes Democritus (207), whereas Villars' narrator mentions contemporary theologians (248).

This difference is an indication of deeper dissimilarities between Lucian's (Perrot's) narrator and that of Villars. Tychiade appears to be guided by the Cynic value of *parrhesia* and therefore there is little distinction between his internal thoughts and external comments that he makes among the group of storytellers. There is a brutal frankness in his speech. In the case of Villars' narrator, by contrast, a veil of imposture separates his internal thoughts (which he occasionally shares with the reader) from the remarks that he chooses to make to Gabalis.

His internal reaction to the supposed sage is different from the mask he wears during the conversations as he feigns great curiosity about the secret sciences. In an aside to the reader, for example, he confides that he finds Gabalis' character and behavior profoundly puzzling:

J'étais surpris du caractère de cet homme, et je ne pouvais comprendre comme il pouvait être tout à la fois, si fort, et si faible : si admirable et si ridicule. (213)

Furthermore, the narrator explains at the outset that his conversations with Gabalis are actually part of a long con of sorts that he has been operating with various marginalized intellectuals from all over Europe. He states that common sense has always led him to suspect that most secret sciences contained a great deal of falsehood and little truth. Yet, he enjoys feigning great interest in the topic so that self-professed experts will tell him stories about such matters:

Le sens commun m'ayant toujours fait soupçonner qu'il y a beaucoup de vide en tout ce qu'on appelle Sciences secrètes, je n'ai jamais été tenté de perdre le temps à feuilleter les livres qui en traitent : mais aussi ne trouvant pas bien raisonnable de condamner sans savoir pourquoi, tous ceux qui s'y adonnent, qui souvent sont gens sages d'ailleurs, savants la plupart, et faisant figure dans la robe et dans l'épée ; je me suis avisé (pour éviter d'être injuste, et pour ne me point fatiguer d'une lecture ennuyeuse) de feindre d'être entêté de toutes ces Sciences, avec tous ceux que j'ai pu apprendre qui en sont touchés. (Villars 157)

The narrator's explanation here suggests that all of his interactions with these amateurs and experts of the secret sciences are based on false pretenses. He wants to avoid dismissing an entire field of endeavor without good reason, but he does not want to take the time to read about it in books. His solution to this quandary is a form of imposture; he writes of pretending to be fascinated with these matters as a means of both

entertaining himself and putting supposed arcane knowledge to a test of common sense. As Valérie C. Ferguson has noted, Villars' narrator's choice to lure self-proclaimed experts in secret sciences into sharing their stories with him suggests that the act of trickery is more important to him than the knowledge he might gain from such interactions:

Il lui aurait pourtant été plus simple de lire à ce sujet plutôt que de passer son temps auprès de ceux qu'il va tromper, ce qui peut laisser entendre que la tromperie est peut-être un objectif plus important que d'acquérir des connaissances sur un sujet qu'il a de toute façon déjà condamné. (Ferguson 41)

In any case, this behavior is distinct from that of Tychiade, who informs his interlocutors in no uncertain terms that he does not believe their accounts and indeed that he finds such lies shameful and annoying. However, at one moment at least, Villars' narrator comes close to this type of frankness, even though he still frames his criticism indirectly. In one scene, Gabalis has just painted a florid mental picture of a nymph queen, her astounding court, and a number of human sages who are living there, having children with the elementals. In a way, the cabbalist has invited an attack by offering this story as part of a hypothetical question to his interlocutor. He asks what the narrator would do if he were a theologian, and the great cabbalist Danhuzerus were to tell him this tale. Ironically, although the narrator may not be a theologian, he finds himself in an extremely similar situation. He nonetheless remains in the hypothetical framework, expressing how he would reply to the man:

Avec tout le respect que je vous dois, Seigneur Danhuzerus, vous êtes un peu fanatique ; ou bien votre vision est un enchantement ; vos enfants et votre maîtresse sont des Lutins ; vos Sages sont des fous, et je tiens votre conscience très cautérisée. (Villars 243)

If he were placed in such a situation, the narrator would exclude the possibility that Danhuzerus might be telling the truth, and instead would assume either that the sage was a madman or that he had been deceived by witchcraft. In either case, there would be something wrong with his mind. The description of the man as having a “conscience très cautérisée” is significant. Furetière notes in his dictionary that the verb *cautériser* described using a hot metal object or corrosive substance to burn the surface of the body for surgical purposes. He then highlights a figurative use of the term that Villars’ narrator is invoking here: “On dit figurément de la conscience d’un méchant homme, qu’elle est *cauterisée*, pour dire, que les crimes y ont fait plusieurs taches & endurcissements” (Furetière). Clearly, by some two decades after the first editions of Villars’ work, the expression had taken on fairly negative connotation, describing the hardening and desensitizing of one’s character that takes place as he commits crimes. In the mouth of Villars’ narrator, the expression suggests a similarly negative set of associations. For him, whatever Danhuzerus has seen or done, this has been so extreme that it has caused more than mere *impressions* on his mind; it is as though these imprints have been made by a branding iron and have become utterly indelible. While the narrator describes a third party in this way, it seems very likely that he understands Gabalis in these same terms. The sage either does not catch the irony here or refuses to acknowledge doing so. In any case, the hypothetical nature of the response assures the insult against Gabalis is veiled, but yet it is in a way more frank and direct than the majority of the narrator’s remarks. Thus he resembles Tychiade here for a moment, albeit in a very measured and limited way.

A related important departure from Lucian's model involves the way that the sages relate themselves to the stories that they tell. While Eucrate makes claims about his own past, Gabalis does not offer his own personal experiences but rather alternate interpretations of history supposedly passed down by others. This introduces a degree of distance with respect to the content of Gabalis' accounts that lends them a marginal veneer of credibility missing from the tale of the sorcerer's apprentice. The strategy also helps create a mask or shield that Villars' character can manipulate in order to deflect attacks on his credibility and redirect them toward others. In fact, the cabbalist performs a double deflection in the sense that he relays these attacks from the central characters of his narratives to those playing the roles of observers. He then holds up these supposedly deceived witnesses as objects of ridicule. In other terms, Gabalis redeems the misunderstood sages of history while at the same time railing against their persecutors and removing the spotlight from himself. Like a skilled stage magician, the cabbalist assures that his interlocutor's search for imposture takes his gaze away from himself—the person who is actually performing the sleight of hand.

Leave a Misleading Paper Trail

We can trace evidence of imposture at the level of Gabalis' storytelling and at that of the narrator's playacting, as we have seen. In addition, we find it in an important paratext that appears in the earliest editions of the dialogues. The last words of the narrator lead into this text thematically. As he closes the fifth dialogue, he refers back to a central interpretive challenge that the dialogues present.

Si je vois qu'on veuille laisser faire à mon livre le bien
qu'il est capable de produire ; et qu'on ne me fasse pas

l'injustice de me soupçonner de vouloir donner crédit aux Sciences secrètes, sous le prétexte de les tourner en ridicule ; je continuerai à me réjouir de Monsieur le Comte, et je pourrai donner bientôt un autre tome. (Villars 262)

The narrator's last words once more echo Lucian, who famously ended his *A True History* with a false promise to deliver additional stories of marvels. This vow to continue the tales represents the last lie of a long series. Neither Lucian nor Villars would produce sequels, although in the case of the seventeenth-century author, his untimely death may have played a role in this.

On a subtler but very significant level, this paragraph references the quandary emblemized by the Tertullian epigraph that we discussed earlier, and opens the way for a debate among readers about the interpretation of the five dialogues. In fact, such a debate takes shape in the paratext that immediately follows. This "Lettre à Monseigneur" then articulates two opposing interpretations in more detail.

The writer of this letter positions himself with respect to the author, whom he describes as his friend ("mon ami l'auteur" (263)), but someone with whom he has had a heated disagreement. Using this label accomplishes a double act of imposture. It first conflates the narrator and the author, then fractures the voices of the text into two separate entities (an "auteur" and a friend), both of which are fictitious but operate according to strict verisimilitude, perhaps to avoid raising undue suspicion. These two characters provide a false paper trail that discourages readers from discovering the whereabouts of the 'actual' author Villars, whose name does not appear anywhere in the earliest editions.

The friend of the narrator writes to a theologian for his advice regarding whether *Le Comte de Gabalis* is a morally acceptable text in its current form, or if it should be

revised instead to be more respectful of holy matters. At issue is the same question that the epigraph evokes. If one seeks to discredit impostures, should one attack them with serious argumentation, or rather mock them mercilessly without a more dignified form of critique? An attempt to undermine their rational basis through argument can have the paradoxical effect of lending them a degree of credibility that they do not deserve. In this particular case, the letter-writer states that he has criticized what he sees as an inappropriate combination of form and content. For him, studies of the cabal are serious insofar as they inflect one's understanding of such grave theological concerns as the will of God and the power of the Devil. At the same time, the comical form used by the author represents the cabal facetiously and lightheartedly. The letter-writer therefore argues that the form of the text needs to be completely transformed so as to better fit the weighty issues at stake:

J'ai voulu l'obliger à changer entièrement la forme de son ouvrage. Ce tour plaisant qu'il lui a donné ne me semble pas propre à son sujet. La Cabale (lui ai-je dit) est une Science sérieuse, que beaucoup de mes amis étudient sérieusement: il fallait la réfuter de même. (Villars 263)

Philippe Sellier has shown the relationship between this critique and Pascal's eleventh *Provinciale*⁹. However, an additional element that critics have not addressed is how this problem relates back in another way to Lucian. In fact, throughout much of the early modern period, criticism launched at the irreverent author of the *Dialogues of the Gods* tended to take shape in these terms. Lucian uses an unacceptably undignified format to stage characters discussing matters that no one should be laughing about, and this might be immoral or dangerous since it could condone an disrespectful attitude toward matters

⁹ See Sellier, "Palimpseste."

of faith. In a way, this is a side effect of what Lucian describes as one of his major accomplishments, which was to fuse comedy and philosophy. For the ancient author himself, this creative process risked producing something like an ugly camel adorned with beautiful tack and a stunning saddle. In Perrot's version, we read that this "union des deux contraires est plustost un monstre qu'un miracle" (I.8). Indeed, for few early modern theologians would questions of faith and God deserve to be discussed in a monstrous text.

To take up Corréard's term, we might say that the narrator has lucianized the secret sciences, and that the author of the letter considers this inappropriate. One of the major problems with this undertaking is that it has involved representing religious devotion, which is not something to be treated lightly. The letter-writer points out that satirizing the topic of "la Cabale" in this way is very risky, because fictions that a person produces on such topics can have strong effects on readers' religious devotion and faith:

Comme toutes [les] erreurs [de Gabalis] sont sur des choses divines, outre la difficulté qu'il y a de faire rire un honnête homme sur quelque sujet que ce soit : il est de plus très dangereux de railler en celui-ci, et il est fort à craindre que la dévotion ne semble y être intéressée. Il faut faire parler un Cabaliste comme un Saint, ou il joue très mal son rôle ; et s'il parle en Saint, il impose aux esprits faibles par cette Sainteté apparente, et il persuade plus ses visions que toute la plaisanterie qu'on peut en faire ne les réfute. (Villars 263-264)

The letter-writer argues that the text puts feeble-minded readers at risk of being taken in by the character Gabalis' impostures. His intense expressions of devotion, like Tartuffe's performance in church before the eyes of Orgon, can impress a person on a deep level and move him to belief. One problem is that the count believes in a long series of falsehoods to which readers might be drawn. A secondary issue arises from the very

paradoxical task that the letter-writer ascribes to this fictitious author, which is to portray a cabbalist whose claims and behaviors are verisimilar enough to allow for a suspension of disbelief. Yet, this character who believes himself a saint actually is not. In other terms, this portrait must be convincing enough to create a believable fiction without leading readers to think that the truth of his claims might exceed their fictional context.

According to the letter-writer, the ‘author’ ironically has not been persuaded by this idea. Instead, he cites Tertullian to make the claim that formulating any ‘serious’ arguments against the secret sciences might actually legitimize belief in them insofar as it would put such notions about the supernatural on the same level as proper theological and philosophical discourse:

La Cabale (dit-il) est du nombre de ces chimères qu'on autorise quand on les combat gravement, et qu'on ne doit entreprendre de détruire qu'en se jouant. Comme il sait assez bien les Pères, il m'a allégué là-dessus Tertullien. (Villars 264)

In these last words of the text, we come full circle and return to the philosophical problem raised much earlier in the epigraph.

Disappear into Thin Air

It is quite challenging to ascertain how the letter interacts with the five dialogues and how this might impact the beliefs of Villars’ implied reader, but if we step back for a moment and reconsider our cosmos model of imposture, we can more clearly lay out how this functions.

In our introduction, we posited that the sun in the model might represent the level of impostor characters, that the orbit of Mercury could stand for the zone in which first-

person narrators tell stories and deceive, and that the orbit of Venus could hold paratexts that enact impostures at their own level. According to this series of analogies, the character Gabalis would occupy the sun, the narrator dwells in the orbit of Mercury, and the voice writing the letter to Monseigneur operates in Venus' orbit. However, in the case of *Le Comte de Gabalis* this model does not account for the fact that the purported sage himself tells stories of impostor characters who deceive through their own fictions. As we have seen, salamanders impersonate pagan gods and absent mortal lovers, for example. The Devil and his demons manipulate gnomes under false pretenses so that they will lure humans into pacts. Demons whisper falsehoods and mislead the poor elementals into disbelieving the notion that mating with humans might lead to immortality. In this case the gnomes become impostors in spite of themselves as they proffer false narratives about the Devil that they wrongly believe to be true. Given these aspects, we might be able to keep our model for this text if we modify it slightly by breaking the sun into still smaller concentric solids; we could visualize Gabalis residing at the surface of the sun while the elementals occupy its mantle and the demons its core.

With this modification completed, if we now begin our journey of elevation at this very center of the heliocentric metaphor of imposture, we find the Devil and his demons, the innermost impostor characters whom no one else tricks. In the next zone moving outward, the mantle of the sun, we find salamanders, sylphs, undins and gnomes, who impose upon mortal humans in many ways. As we move further outward, reaching the surface of the Sun, we come to the realm of the self-described *philosophes*, including Gabalis, who claim to be aware of the trickery that the elementals perpetrate. As we then move into the orbit of Mercury, we find the narrator, and still further outward, in the orbit

of Venus, the writer of the *Lettre à Monseigneur* offers a new perspective on what has come before. Flying upward and outward into the zone of Earth, we find the author Villars, who consciously represents these dynamics and holds up to our gaze not only the dialogues, but also the letter, with an ambiguous wink and a nod.

We can discern a difference here in the structure and function of Villars' work with respect to that of his predecessor and notable inspiration, Cyrano. I argued in the previous chapter that Cyrano leads the reader to imagine that within the metaphorical zone of the sun (where nightingales and pikes, charismatic priests and wily Solarians impose upon others), imposture ripples down to the infinitesimal. It is as though there is a crucible at the center of Cyrano's fiction where representations and reflections of all elements and figures collapse and crystallize together. With *Le Comte de Gabalis*, by contrast, something stops the reader from plummeting and careening from the infinite to the infinitesimal and back again. Instead, the levels of imposture that we have posited as the Sun's core, mantle and surface seem more strictly separated. Gabalis claims to uncloak the Devil and the elementals, the narrator exposes the cabbalist to suspicion, the letter unmask the narrator and the existence of the printed book prompts us to suspect imposture by Villars as well. In the end, however, while we experience doubt as we move between each orbit of imposture, this suspicion is unidirectional in the sense that while many aspects discourage us from believing in anything we are told, nothing drives us to take the possibility of elementals seriously. In the end, Villars' various degrees of nested fiction and imposture reassure us that the tales told are silliness and folly, falsehoods proffered by a supposedly immortal sage who had claimed to have supernatural powers; yet he never offered a demonstration and he apparently died of a quite natural attack of

apoplexy. While the end of *États et empires de la lune* features a returned of the repressed doubts and fears in a sense—the great dark demon that whisks the atheist down to Hell—by the end of *Gabalès* the count's credibility has dissipated into thin air, like a sylph. By association, this prompts us to suspect that, as does the narrator early on in the text, there is nothing substantive about claims of secret knowledge of the cosmos. In reality, the florid accounts disclosed by adepts of secret knowledge boil down to a great deal of nothing at all.

In my view, this distinction between the works of the two authors reflects a difference of confidence in the face of a shared struggle against the impostures that flow from madness, superstition and fear. If Cyrano reacts to personal and cultural crises by exploring contradiction and paradox, then Villars jubilantly jokes as he celebrates a retreat of the shadows and illusions of melancholia. Villars writes in a culture and atmosphere where widespread credibility in demonology, witch trials and sorcery had been dealt mortal blows, and he heralds an era of greater confidence in the power of laughter and playful erotic fiction to dispel fear, madness and cosmic uncertainty.

Chapter III

Quantifying Imposture:

Thought Experiments in the Three Novels of Simon Tyssot de Patot

Simon Tyssot de Patot (1655-1738) is best known today as the author of a satirical travel narrative entitled *Voyages et aventures de Jaques Massé*, first published between 1714 and 1717. It is the first-person tale of a resourceful and curious adventurer of the mid-seventeenth century. He travels to a previously undiscovered southern continent, lives in a utopian kingdom, and encounters diverse interlocutors who propose heterodox and at times sarcastic critiques of politics and religion. Specialists are also familiar with his utopian novel published in 1720, *La Vie, les aventures et le voyage de Groenland du révérend père cordelier Pierre de Mésange*. This novel presents itself as the true first-person narrative of an unlucky French Franciscan friar who must flee his monastery after a series of mishaps. This narrator-hero escapes the authorities on a seafaring mission to the arctic, where he and his sailor comrades discover the hidden kingdom of Rufsal, a land without firearms where people dress in animal skins and live in rich, partially underground palaces. Up until the 1980s, a third novel had fallen into obscurity until Aubrey Rosenberg, author of a book-length study of Tyssot's work, uncovered a copy of *Les Amours et les aventures d'Arcan et de Bélize* and drew critical attention to the text through two brief articles. In this pastiche of novels by authors like Honoré d'Urfé and Madeleine de Scudéry, a third-person narrator tells of the travels and

adventures of two sets of siblings living in the Mediterranean world of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E.

Tyssot's three works of prose fiction offer a remarkable array of symmetry and correspondences. Narrative structure, events and characters present similarities across the triad. All three of the novels feature a central adventure tale with picaresque elements, burlesque and Lucianesque humor, and complex narrative framing structures. Each novel adopts a different emphasis but all three examine facets of the same core issues. The European and utopian societies that Tyssot represents struggle to maintain political equilibrium that forces of credulity, superstition, corruption and despotism repeatedly undermine. Beneath all of these pressures, there lurks a dual contagion that grows from the interaction between fiction, which Tyssot's less fortunate characters frequently mistake for fact, and imposture, the means by which his heroes disguise fiction as fact.

Michel Delon has argued (speaking of the stories of *Massé* and *Mésange*) that Tyssot's novels are best understood as the results of literary experiments with problems similar to those he explored in his more overtly philosophical writing (Delon 707). Delon refers here to Tyssot's discourses in natural philosophy and history, the first of which he published in 1694 (Rosenberg in *Massé* 10). This "Oraison ou dissertation" attempted to analyze human senses and perception by mathematical means. Another text appeared in 1722 and related Biblical chronology to observations of nature (Rosenberg in *Massé* 11). In the author's *Lettres choisies*, a collection of correspondence that he published in 1726 under his own name, he questioned literal readings of the Bible and pointed out passages where the sacred narrative appeared to contradict scientific

knowledge. In reference to the famous passage in *Joshua* in which the sun stands still during a battle (10:13), for example, Tyssot quips that one need only read Copernicus to know that the “témoignage” is untrue (*Lettres* 108).

Alongside these works, as the author subjected conceptual quandaries to imaginary tests in his novels, this “détour par la fiction” allowed him not only to deepen his critique of religion, but also to enrich it with a reflection on society and morality (Delon 709). All the while, inherently novelistic elements fostered diverse elaborations and transformations of his non-fictional concepts (709). Indeed, Tyssot’s fiction appears to have served as an imaginary crucible in which he investigated bold ways of thinking about nature and society that would emerge in different forms in his discourses and letters.

If we consider Tyssot’s novels in light of the reflection on imposture that we have followed through *Cyrano* and *Villars*, we can discern both continuity and major departures with regard to these models with which the exiled Huguenot author was likely familiar. The Lucianesque aspect remains present, as do the use of the early modern travel narrative genre (with its utopian aspects) and the influence of ‘libertine’ thought such as one finds in Naudé.

In this chapter, my contention is twofold. Firstly, I am arguing that Tyssot wrote his three novels as part of a practice of submitting his theories about society, politics and religion to thought experiments through fiction. Secondly, I hope to show how the motifs and structures of the tales of imposture that he created in this way point to a utopian hope to better understand such phenomena as social ascension, coups d’état, the creation and undermining of politico-religious authority and the contagions of popular error and

superstition. In my view, Tyssot's novels point toward a hope that mathematicians might one day define such social phenomena in quantitative terms, similar to the way in which Newton defined gravity in Tyssot's lifetime. The repeated motifs present throughout the three novels lead us to suspect that the author hoped to quantify and relate several factors, as though through an equation. Such variables as the charisma and charm of individual impostors, the degree of knowledge of natural philosophy possessed by a given person, the amount of superstition present in a given community, and the amount of time that has passed since a given foundational myth or origin story was first told all might determine the fate of human societies. In Tyssot's fiction, such would-be variables appear to relate to each other in ways that recall the way that Newton related force to mass and acceleration.

When Revelation and Imposture are Indistinguishable

In Tyssot's novel of 1720¹⁰ thinly disguised as the life story of a defrocked Franciscan friar, the narrator, Pierre de Mésange, finds himself in a previously undiscovered kingdom lost in the ice and snows of Greenland. King Bénédon, the sovereign of this land, tells him that there is a sacred story among his people that has been passed down by word of mouth for many generations. This tale is so sacred that the inhabitants are forbidden to change it even in the slightest degree. Bénédon insists upon this when Mésange questions some of the more fantastical aspects of this tale. Every last syllable must stay the same, and anyone who might dare to alter the narrative would be committing a crime:

¹⁰ Hereafter, this novel will be designated simply as *Mésange*.

Je vous raconte mot à mot ce qui en est, me répondit le Roi,
quand tous les habitants de Rufsäl vous en feroient le récit
chacun en particulier, ils ne différeroient pas d'une syllabe,
ce seroit un crime dont ils seroient responsables. (I.151)

According to the king, long ago a man named Raoul disappeared for months
during the coldest and darkest part of the winter, and the entire country thought him dead.
Yet he returned, and he told of a wondrous place that he had found deep underground
where humans who had died hibernated among flowers in vast caverns, and then were
reborn. In this new life, they flew and swam as tiny, humanoid creatures whose flapping
membranes recalled the bodies of jellyfish and the feet of geese. One of the little
creatures explained to Raoul:

Notre petit corps, léger, composé de parties poreuses et
délicates; nos mains déliées, nos pieds courts, larges & à
longs doigts, joints l'un à l'autre par une petite peau,
comme ceux des oyes; Ces membranes repliées en forme
de bourlet, que nous portons, l'une autour de la tête, l'autre
du corps, à l'endroit de la ceinture, la dernière à la cheville
du pié, & qui étant déployées, s'étendent jusqu'à un demi
pié, plus ou moins, à la ronde: l'air grossier que nous
respirons; tout cela nous met en état de marcher, de nager,
& de voler, avec une égale facilité. (I.153)

These beings never ate, but fluttered around playing music with lutes and making
garlands out of the flowers that adorned the floor of their caves (I.153-154). The most
significant of their activities involved venerating an enormous statue of their god,
Yomaha, a monument that straddled a subterranean pond and was carved of semi-
precious stones. Raoul describes this in great detail:

De bas en haut jusqu'à la ceinture, il étoit de jaspe, le reste
du corps jusqu'au dessus des épaules, étoit d'ambre gris, &
une émeraude seule en faisoit la tête. Cette énorme statue
tenoit entre ses bras un Pélican, proportionné à sa grandeur,
qui de son bec égu s'ouvroit la poitrine, afin de nourrir de
son propre sang ses petits, qui étoient au nombre de huit, &

dont chacun étoit apuyé sur l'un des doigts du Géant, qui les tenoit à une égale distance l'un de l'autre ; & ce qui étoit le plus admirable, c'est que le sang de cet oiseau sortoit de son sein avec tant d'impétuosité, & en si grande abondance, qu'après avoir mouté & pénétré bien avant dans les airs, il alloit à quelques miles de là, tomber en rosée, ou en des gouttes imperceptibles de pluie, où le Soleil, ou Globe de feu, formoit par la réfraction que ses rayons soufroient en les traversant, un triple Arc en Ciel dont les couleurs vives, avec toutes leurs nuances ne se pouvoient envisager sans en être entièrement ébloui. (I.174-175)

This remarkable tableau features an amalgam of a number of images taken from the imaginary of Christianity that are combined idiosyncratically. They form a polyvalent emblem of belief in a god who resurrects the dead. The colossus is composed of various types of stone as in Nebuchadnezzar's dream in the book of *Daniel*, the surrounding light and rainbows recall Noah's deliverance after the Deluge, and it holds in its hands a traditional symbol of the resurrection, the pelican that pierces its breast to feed its young, even as Christ shed his blood to offer his followers a second life. The glowing orb that illuminates the scene and the angel-like beings flying around the statue evoke the imagery of Heaven in a burlesque register.

Since the early twentieth century, critics have highlighted this scene within Tyssot's work as a prime example of the author's satirical attacks on Christianity in a general sense, which they have seen him as holding in contempt. For example, despite Geoffroy Atkinson's wholesale dismissal of the novel, he concedes that this "paradise incident" (106) represents the height of Tyssot's literary art and constitutes a "a carefully worked out satire of Christ's resurrection" (104). Whereas Atkinson goes no further than this in his interrogation of the episode, Michel Delon later presented a more probing

interpretation of Raoul's tale as a mise-en-abyme of the novel as a whole and a tool for highlighting the potentially fictitious aspects of the Bible:

[...] Raoul [...] aurait vécu dans un paradis souterrain et découvert la pure immanence de Dieu. L'histoire se donne avec son fatras de descriptions merveilleuses comme parodie des légendes, mais à travers la dénonciation passent des éléments positifs. C'est une mise en abyme du roman entier. Raoul séjourne au paradis comme Pierre de Mésange au royaume de Groenland. Les fictions sont métaphoriques les unes des autres et renvoient à la fiction majeure qu'est la Bible. Le problème est celui de la lecture. (Delon 712)

While I concur with Delon's reading for the most part, I would like to suggest an alternative perspective to his focus on the Bible and its interpretation as the primary focus of Tyssot's experimentation here. It is true that many details in this passage allude to stories in the Bible. However, in my view the principal concern at stake for Tyssot is not so much the unlikely facets of the stories themselves, or even the problem of how one should read them. Instead, these comical and potentially blasphemous references to the visions of the prophet Daniel, Noah and the Deluge, and symbols for the resurrection form part of a wider line of questioning through fiction, regarding the status of testimony and supposedly revealed truths. Raoul's unlikely tale explores how harrowing and traumatic experiences might engender wild hallucinations and florid imaginings that survivors then might tell, perhaps even believing what they say. The narrative of Raoul cautions Tyssot's readers about the risks involved in accepting implausible tales at face value, and at the same time show what a powerful impact fictions like this one can have on a society.

When the Buzzing outlasts the Bees

An earlier novel by Tyssot also features a framed narrative that launches a superficial attack on the doctrine of the resurrection, but here as with the story of Raoul, the focus of the experimentation is a related but distinct issue. The nested narrative called *La Fable des abeilles* is one of many passages in Tyssot's novels that explore how imposture and corruption within the Catholic church may have shaped the course of history. One of the many adventures that Jaques Massé recounts is the time that the Holy Inquisition imprisoned him in the Portuguese colony of Goa, on the Indian subcontinent. During this captivity, he spoke with another hapless French expatriate, an atheist from Gascony. Massé had little interest in what such an impious man had to say, but he writes that he was struck by a somewhat odd and tasteless fable the prisoner told, so he later wrote it down from memory.

Once upon a time, goes the tale, there was an island ruled by a great king. He lives there still, and countless bees fly among his exquisite flowers. Unfortunately, these docile insects are now completely under the sway of hordes of ruthless hornets, who tell them ridiculous stories that they mistake for absolute truth. The hornets can make the bees believe anything, no matter how absurd it is. These winged overlords tell their witless slaves that when they die, though their body may be destroyed, their buzzing can still be heard forever. The little honeybees must always work, so that the hornets can eat up all the honey they produce. If they do exactly what the hornets say then after death, their buzzing will go straight to the ears of the king and please him, but if they defy their dominators, then their disembodied noise will go deep underground, the cold will make it sound quite unpleasant, and it will suffer horrible torment for all eternity. With such

threats, the master insects can even convince the honeybees to go to war and attack other hives, commanded by rival hornets. Sometimes this leads to thousands of casualties on both sides, and the little victims fight just to uphold their own leaders' silly stories when those of a rival contradict them. The hornets further reinforce their control over the honeybees by asserting that others of their kind, centuries ago, received orders directly from the mouth of the king, and that they have carefully passed his words down, not only by the reports left by their predecessors, but also directly inscribed on pieces of beeswax.

C'est sur ce fondement que les Frêlons usurpent tant d'autorité sur les Abeilles par toute l'Isle (car il y a des frelons qui se sont fourrez dans presque toutes les Ruches) & qu'ils étendent leur tyrannie jusqu'à rendre ces pauvres Insectes tout à fait misérables. Ils leur défendent de sucer sur de certains jours des fleurs dont ils leur permettent l'usage en d'autres jours, & leur défendent de travailler à faire leur Cire, & Miel sur certains autres jours, à cause, disent-ils, que le Roi le veut ainsi (191–192).

This fable launches a scathing attack on the type of authority that can be built on politico-religious imposture. The hornets continually frighten the bees, and make them believe groundless fictions. As long as the bees lend credibility to these fantastic stories, they follow every whim of their masters. The hornets also have means of silencing those who doubt, assuring that their mastery over the bees' imagination is never compromised:

Et quand il se trouve des Abeilles, qui méprisant ces chimères s'appliquent à leur travail, & ne prêtent point l'oreille aux Frêlons, ils excitent les autres Abeilles contre celles-là, & les font souvent tuër, ou pour le moins chasser hors de leur Ruche comme dangereuses & séditeuses. (191)

The tale targets how belief in the afterlife can be manipulated and it gives a burlesque account of the doctrine of the Incarnation: Before the hornets came, the king had forbidden the bees from taking the nectar from one special corner of his garden, but since

they did so anyway, the monarch became furious and exterminated the vast majority of the poor honeybees. He then had second thoughts, and decided to try to console them. He did so by using magic to transform his own son into a lowly bee. In this new form, the son asked the bees to make amends with the king and follow his commandments, but they rejected him and stung him to death. He came back to the sovereign as a ghost and continues to intercede with his father on behalf of well-behaved insects.

This framed tale manipulates easily visualized mental images to spearhead a satirical attack on the use of narratives and dogmas to impose temporal political authority. Its imagery is a refined discursive instrument designed to sabotage ideological tools of domination. This fable attaches itself to common religious narratives like a parasite. The author hopes that after hearing it whenever one thinks of Heaven, Hell, the Incarnation, Holy War or any number of other nuclei in networks of imagery, this grotesque mockery will come to mind. Perhaps the next time that a priest threatens a parishioner with hellfire, he will chuckle as he imagines said clergyman in the form of a hornet that can be squashed underfoot.

When a Traveler Tells a Tale

Early on in Jaques Massé's adventures, before he sets sails for lands unknown, he is living in the seaport town of Dieppe as a young man, when he meets someone who claims to have been living for more than 1600 years. Jaques is working as an apprentice to the amusingly named Monsieur La Croix, who one day invites a mysterious traveler by the name of Michob for dinner at his home. Not unlike the Comte de Gabalis, Michob professes to know many secrets and to hold a special perspective on history. In fact, he

has become something of a wandering celebrity whom the credulous and superstitious commoners throughout Europe regularly host and support financially, despite the fact that legal authorities consider him a madman:

Comme les Magistrats le traitoient de Visionnaire, on se mettoit fort peu en peine de ce qu'il disoit : aussi n'étoit-il point dangereux, & il ne demandoit rien à personne. Le menu peuple, & quantité de femmelettes crédules & superstitieuses, qui le regardoient comme un prodige, lui fournissoient suffisamment tout ce dont il avoit besoin ; outre qu'il restoit fort peu en un lieu, & qu'il ne faisoit effectivement qu'errer par le monde. (41)

The common people ["le vulgaire"] equate this man with the "Wandering Jew" ["Juif-errant"] of Western Christian folklore¹¹ (40). As Delon notes, this mythical figure:

[...] avait assez frappé les esprits pour que se répande à son sujet, à partir du XVIIe siècle, une littérature populaire et savante et que se multiplient les visionnaires ou imposteurs qui se faisaient passer pour lui. (714)

Like the narrator of *Gabalis*, Monsieur La Croix invites such a strange fellow to his home for dinner mostly for his own entertainment: "Mon Maître, qui étoit curieux, & assez commode, après lui avoir parlé plusieurs fois par occasion, l'invita à dîner un jour chez lui, pour avoir la commodité de l'entendre causer pendant quelques heures" (40). This situation affords Massé the opportunity to hear the man's wild account of events in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion.

Michob claims to have been Pontius Pilates' servant, and not only to have spoken to Jesus Christ on the cross, but to have witnessed (or at least heard reports of) a resurrection of the dead at the time of the crucifixion. He describes the bodies of the

¹¹ This rather notorious figure would later be associated with Anti-Semitic propaganda, and particularly as a part of Nazi conspiracy theories in the twentieth century. For a discussion of Tyssot's own anti-Semitism, see Stroup 4-5.

arisen a great deal differently from what one might expect. He narrates a story of human-like creatures bursting forth from tombs in Jerusalem (41). They all look identical, are naked with shrunken abdomens, and have no body hair, nails, teeth, or distinguishing sexual characteristics. These figures struggle free of tombs that have broken open during earthquakes, and they then trample through a crowd that gives way before them and finally run out of the city.

Aside from Michob's quite dubious claim to have been alive sixteen hundred years before, two additional factors call his reliability into question. Even if we believe that he was present in Jerusalem at the time, it is still unclear whether he actually witnessed these things himself, or rather is merely retelling a tale. The only onlookers that he describes are unstable, panicked commoners, some of whom die of fright: "La peur, continua-t-il, que ce spectacle si peu attendu causa, donna la fièvre, & même la mort à plusieurs des assistans. Les plus hardis en voulurent pourtant voir la fin [...]" (41).

He also embellishes the events of his narrative with unorthodox speculations about their theological significance. He first argues, like the onlookers he has mentioned, that these creatures are in fact human saints that have died. He next relays a rumor that once they disappeared from Jerusalem they may have sought out the risen Christ in order to meet him and find their way into Heaven:

Enfin, à l'entendre dire, on n'avoit jamais sù positivement ce que ces personnes-là étoient devenuës : le bruit courut pourtant quelques jours après, qu'ils s'étoient retirez en Galilée, où ils devoient s'aboucher avec Jésus Christ : & de-là être portez dans le séjour des Bienheureux. (41)

The tale takes shape as a reinterpretation of the traditional story of the Harrowing of Hell. The absence of teeth and nails on these humanoids leads Michob to posit that

these creatures have remained underground in an undead state. He equates the physical space under the earth's surface with the afterlife. While they have been there, he asserts, they have lost all bodily implements associated with ingestion and digestion, since the dead do not eat:

[...] plusieurs tenoient la bouche ouverte, mais on n'y apercevoit point de dents : & leurs doigts ronds et unis sembloient être entièrement dénués d'ongles. Ce qui lui faisoit conclure que toutes les parties excrémentales, & celles qui nous servent à broyer, à recevoir & à dissoudre les alimens, pendant que nous sommes sujets à la mort, ne nous accompagneront point dans l'autre monde, où ils ne nous seroient en effet d'aucune utilité. (41)

Michob suggests that everyone who passes into the afterlife physically travels as a corpse, but leaves behind the parts of the body that allow it to regenerate itself by integrating new material into its composition.

The dinner guest's strange claims lead the early modern reader to imagine the doctrine of the resurrection from a point of view that places it on equal footing with the ravings of feeble-minded and superstitious townspeople of the ancient world. The story seems to ignore the question of the immortality of the soul. It is the body itself that travels, seemingly with the soul still in it or attached to it, since the corpses can walk and move on their own. To an extent, this presents a conventional use of a burlesque mode to parody a respectable topic, and Tyssot has carried it out in a Lucianesque style, notably by evoking highly corporeal if not scatological images of consumption, digestion and excretion while describing divine characters. On one level, the story invokes commonplace attacks on doctrines of the resurrection of the body on rationalist grounds that are present throughout libertine writing in the early modern period. We find an example in *Cyrano* in the mouth of the *filz de l'hôte*, when this character asks which body

would be resurrected should a Muslim devour the body of a Christian and then die himself (*Lune* 153-154).

At the same time, Tyssot innovates in a way that is noteworthy here. In line with the first words of the novel regarding the limits within which life takes place, the author reimagines the Harrowing of Hell within constraints provided by early modern, materialist natural philosophy. Parts of the body like teeth and nails that are not used tend to atrophy, shrink and finally disappear, while exercising various organs causes them to strengthen and augment. These resurrected figures no longer have body parts used for digestion or reproduction because they have not been performing these activities. The text leads us to presume that their death state has been a form of deep sleep however, for they still have mouths with which they have no doubt been breathing if not eating. All of this may not be verisimilar from the point of view of the reader, and in the mouth of a suspicious figure like Michob, inconsistencies and unlikely details simply make him seem more like an impostor. In any case, it is the reflection that his story prompts that is most significant. In sum, his tale leads one to envision old Christian narratives (like the Harrowing of Hell) and folklore (such as that surrounding the figure of the Wandering Jew) in light of modern ideas about how the physical and potentially quantifiable limitations of the material world govern all aspects of life and death.

In this episode, a quantified vision of matter takes emphasis over any precedents set by more conventional versions of the story of the resurrection, including those in the Bible. Instead of posing traditional theological claims and then seeking to explain them through mathematics, Michob finds ways to make the events that he supposedly observed fit in with his knowledge of the mathematical constraints on physical phenomena.

When an Abandoned Child becomes Viceroy

With Michob, the pseudo-mathematical aspects of his storytelling provide a relatively stable source of income while relegating him to society's margins and requiring him to be itinerant, but in *Mésange*, we encounter a different situation. In that novel, lest we conclude that selfish manipulation of others is the only way to attain authority within society, we encounter a man named Constance who was born in poverty and now rules as Viceroy of Iceland, and has attained this position through his own diligence and the benevolent impostures of others. At several points in his life, other people create hoaxes that allow him to gain authority. It is as though others use impostures to open up a role for him to play, and when they offer to cast him in it, he gracefully accepts.

Mésange presents this unlikely rise from extreme poverty to a position as head of state as a rare occurrence in early modern society, but one that has many precedents and is not as anomalous as it might at first seem. As the narrator *Mésange* points out to Constance after hearing his tale, historical examples of extreme social ascension date back to the earliest histories in the Old Testament, and to Ancient Rome: "Un Joseph, un Moïse, un David, se sont élevez du néant au faîte de la grandeur. Il y a eu des Empereurs parmi les Romains, dont la naissance étoit si obscure, qu'ils n'étoient connus de personne" (II.234-235). *Mésange* remarks that men of modern times have also risen up from indistinct and suspicious origins among the common people and have secured positions of political leadership. In his view, men like Tommaso Aniello (1622-1647), a Neapolitan fisherman who led a revolt against Hapsburg rule, and Jean de Weert (1595-1652), a lowly mercenary who became a general in several armies, possess a singular

worthiness (“mérite singulier”) that helps them to rise up out of the dust (“poussière”) or sludge (“lie”) of the common people in order to take on powerful political positions:

[...] personne n’ignore que Masaniello devint de simple pêcheur qu’il étoit, Vice-Roi de Naples. Jean de Weert, qui a commandé des Armées entieres, étoit fils d’un pauvre cabaretier de village. Et Tromp & de Ruyter, en Hollande, de simples matelots, qu’ils étoient, & issus de la lie du peuple, se sont poussez jusqu’à la dignité d’Admiral des Flotes du monde les plus nombreuses & les plus redoutables. Je pourrois vous en citer d’autres en grand nombre, & vous entretenir des moyens dont plusieurs hommes d’un mérite singulier se sont servis pour se tirer de la poussière, & parvenir aux premières charges de l’Etat. (II.235)

Mésange perceives such a singular merit in Constance, and the means by which he attains his unlikely social position seem limited to serving various protectors and patrons with constancy until they offer to promote him, at times fraudulently, to more powerful positions. He does not mastermind this scheme, but merely follows instructions while continuing to perform his services diligently and without deceiving his benefactors. In this way, he is born in abject poverty in society’s margins and reaches the highest degree of authority over a territory which itself is presented as occupying the margins of the European world.

Constance claims to have taken a complete departure from the unscrupulous way of life modeled for him by his destitute parents. He purports to confide the truth of his ne’er-do-well family origin to Mésange on the condition of absolute secrecy (which the former Franciscan ironically violates by exposing it in his memoirs):

Il n’y a peut être pas, entre nous, d’homme dans cette île de plus vile extraction que moi, qui ait été plus mal-traité de la fortune, & qui soit enfin parvenu à un plus haut comble de félicité. C’est un secret qui doit rester entre nous, ma propre femme n’en sait rien, & il n’y a pas une ame qui ne

l'ignore, c'est pourquoi je vous deffens de le jamais divulguer, comme je garderay aussi par devers moi plusieurs circonstances de votre vie, que vous m'avez confiées. (II.202)

Constance portrays himself as a man of very lowly origins as he paints a grotesque and orientalist portrait of his parents, a Greek man and an Egyptian woman who left Cairo together in order to wander from town to town, targeting people in difficulty whom they could scam and rob. Constance's parents eke out a dishonest living as con artists, pretending to read horoscopes and perform magical ceremonies:

Mon père étoit Grec, petit de stature, pale, assez mal sain, & de fort mauvaise humeur. Au contraire, ma mere, née en Egypte, étoit grande, bien faite, forte, vigoureuse, bonne, & aussi intrigante que femme du monde le pouvoit être. [...] Quoi que mes parens eussent là [au Caire] tout sujet d'être contents, dans l'abjecte & méprisable profession de tireurs d'horoscope qu'ils exerçoient, il leur fut impossible d'y rester ; il passèrent en Europe, où ils exercèrent leur métier avec succès (II.202-203)

In one instance of imposture that the viceroy recounts, his mother and father stalk a merchant woman in seventeenth-century Rome whose soon-to-be husband had died unexpectedly (205). The transient schemers take in the woman through a series of confidence tricks that combine aspects of what modern crime prevention experts call a 'pigeon drop' and a '419 scam.' Constance's mother gains the woman's trust by performing a classic fortune-telling con, first surreptitiously researching her life history and then claiming to divine circumstantial details about it by reading the woman's palm lines (II.204-205). Next, the would-be chiromancer foretells that the woman will soon uncover a great sum of money that was long ago buried in the cellar below her modest shop:

[...] l'odeur de ce que je cherche m'est déjà venue au nez ; il y a ici un trésor ; n'y revient il point d'esprits ? [...] ordinairement le Diable prend possession de l'or & de l'argent qu'il y a neuf fois neuf ans qu'il est enterré, il y a près d'un siècle que celui ci a été enfoui par une vieille femme avare, qui avoit peur de quelque fâcheuse révolution ; je ne vois point de lignes dans votre main qui en determine au juste la somme, tout ce que je puis vous dire c'est qu'elle est considérable, elle doit aller au moins à vingt mille écus [...]. (II.206)

She persuades the woman to pay her three hundred and fifty francs to uncover the forgotten store of gold and silver (II.207). After performing fake magical spells involving a brew of strange ingredients and eerie theatrics, then planting a gold coin in the basement (II.208), Constance's mother succeeds in stealing a great deal of the merchant woman's wares. She lets the woman see her recovering the gold coin and presents it as proof that the buried treasure is beginning to emerge from the floor on its own (II.209). She then claims to have forgotten crucial ingredients (ambergris and magnetic stones) that would allow her to reveal the rest of the treasure. Much like a modern-day pigeon-drop scammer, she persuades the woman to wait while she runs off to purchase the forgotten items. This gives her plenty of time to escape with stolen goods before the mark realizes that she has been deceived and robbed (II.210).

Such unscrupulous means of existence create a striking contrast with the behavior of Constance himself. After his parents abandon him and his brother as young children in a shepherd's cabin outside of Cracow in Poland, two bourgeois women passing through hear the boys' cries and pleas and decide to pay for their housing, board and education (II. 222-223). While it is initially Constance's brother who calls for help, it is his own striking handsomeness that does much to inspire the women to help the boys: "Comme je ressemblois à ma mere, elles ne furent pas moins charmées de ma beauté, que touchées de

ma misère” (222). This charm will play a key role throughout Constance’s rise to greater political power.

For those readers who are familiar with the story of Jaques Massé, Constance’s brother Béronice bears an uncanny resemblance to Michob in terms of both appearance and character (although not in terms of his profession of chimney-sweep); the viceroy describes him as being of medium height with dark hair and a rounded nose, and Mésange eagerly seizes upon this physical description since he believes he actually met this long-lost brother in Holland¹². The narrator remarks:

J’ai vu un Béronice, repris-je, à peu près semblable à celui que vous me dépeignez, qui étoit sans hiperbole, l’un des premiers hommes du monde pour les humanitez, éloquent, habile, agréable dans la conversation, qui n’ignoroit aucune langue, ni vivante, ni morte, & qui étoit aussi ramonneur de cheminées, sans vouloir être autre chose, quelques offres qu’on lui pût faire. [...] J’ai été deux ou trois diverses fois dans sa compagnie à Leiden, poursuivis-je, mais il avoit cela qu’il ne demeurait pas longtemps en un lieu, son inclination, & la profession qu’il exerçoit, pour se satisfaire, ne le lui permettoient pas : il ressembloit au Juif errant, il ne faisoit que circuir la terre. (II.226)

As Michel Delon has argued, the character of Béronice serves as a demystification of the myth of the Wandering Jew (714).

Whereas Béronice eventually goes off to live and work with a group of chimney-sweeps, when Constance is thirteen years old, his benefactor uses her influence to secure him a position as a servant in the household of a nobleman from Warsaw named Ludoviski (227). Constance’s position in the hierarchy within this new household is among the lowliest for a first year, since he works as errand boy for a servant of

¹² Mésange narrates his encounter with Béronice [sic] at the beginning of the novel (I.25-26). The chimney-sweep demonstrates remarkable skills at instantaneous and eloquent translations between French, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, English, Latin and Greek.

Ludoviski. Opportunity soon knocks however when the lord addresses him for help taking his boots off upon his return from a trip and the other servants are not available:

[...] comme il ne se trouvoit personne à portée pour le servir, tiens, me dit il, en levant la jambe, pourras-tu me tirer mes bottes. Oui da, Seigneur, lui répondis-je, je les tire bien à mon maître, qui est une fois plus gros que vous. Ma réponse le fit rire ; là-dessus je me mis après, & je m'en acquitai si bien à sa fantaisie, qu'il me donna cet emploi à perpétuité. En effet, depuis ce jour là il n'auroit pas voulu souffrir qu'un autre eût anticipé sur mes droits, en eût il deu être incommodé. Et ce n'étoit pas seulement en cela que je lui plaisois, les autres, à son dire, n'étoient que de francs lourdauds au prix de moi : je faisais tout, disoit il, de bonne grace, & j'avois un petit air qui charmoit les gens. Aussi me traitoit il fort humainement, & me faisoit bien des douceurs, ausquelles n'avoient part aucuns des autres : cinq ans se passèrent de la sorte. (II.227-228)

Constance's candid speech and charming bearing win him a powerful protector in Ludoviski. Here as before, the boy's sincerity inspires another person to elevate him within the social order.

After several picaresque plot twists in which Constance loses his status through no fault of his own, and others take pity on him, help him and give him the new name of Ludoviski, after his former master (230-231), at the age of 26 he finds himself in the service of a Danish merchant. His naïve charisma leads to another leap in authority and power when his protector sends him with an envoy to Iceland on a mercantile errand. When a commercial disagreement bursts out between the merchant and his Icelandic trading partners over accounting disparities, he sends his son to resolve the dispute, and makes a point of sending "Ludoviski" to accompany him. When the envoy arrives in Iceland, the viceroy hears that the merchant's son has been treating Constance poorly, and offers him a position aiding in commercial ventures (230).

He works for the viceroy for seven years, until his patron suddenly dies (in private), at which time one more stunning opportunity comes to him. Before word gets out about the death, the viceroy's widow summons "Ludoviski" and offers him a proposition. Since he resembles the late political leader and he is charming and skilled in governance, she suggests a scheme that would allow him to usurp the dead man's position:

...je vous aime à la folie depuis l'espace de sept ans, je n'ai pas honte de vous le dire aujourd'hui. Vous êtes à tous égards tellement semblable à feu mon mari, que nos plus familiers amis s'y tromperaient : vous savez outre cela toutes les affaires de la maison, la manière de gouverner ce peuple ne vous est pas non plus inconnue. Votre maître n'est plus, il n'y a que vous & moi qui le sachions, quelle difficulté y a-t-il que nous le mettions en terre, & que vous teniez le lit en sa place ; au bout de quinze jours ou trois semaines, que vous commencerez à vous montrer, si d'avanture on apperçoit quelque changement en vous, ce que je ne pense pas, il n'y aura aucun danger d'être découvert pour cela, ce sera la maladie qui en aura été la cause, pas un de nos sujets n'entrera seulement dans le soupçon. (232-233)

Constance's complicity in this imposture requires only the slightest action on his part.

He need merely play the role that the viceroy's widow has set up for him, and this performance does not require him to memorize new lines or even alter his appearance.

Once again, Constance's willingness to do his work and follow instructions unquestioningly assures that others elevate him to positions of greater and greater authority. He begins as an abandoned child of common thieves and becomes viceroy of Iceland.

This remarkable social ascension prompts two key reflections in the reader.

Firstly, is this impostor posing as viceroy really telling Mésange the truth, or from his

point of view is this traveler not merely another potential mark? This raises the question of what the false viceroy might stand to gain if he is lying, and what he might stand to lose if he is telling the truth. It would appear that he would risk very little in either case. If he is telling the truth, it might be possible for Mésange to denounce him as an impostor, but given the hero's dependent status as a helpless foreigner and the viceroy's political power, such accusations would likely be dismissed as a malicious and baseless conspiracy theory or calumny. Furthermore, he need not fear that Mésange expose the imposture to his own suzerain, since he has already done so. Constance claims to have previously revealed his imposture to the king of Denmark who gave his approval (234). Amusingly, he first tells the king his own story disguised as a fiction about Ancient Greece, not unlike many tales in *Arcan et Bélize*, before revealing this and asking for the sovereign's blessing (234). Be that as it may, while it is unclear how much of his narrative is history or fiction, he is not taking risks in recounting it to Mésange.

While the story's intradiegetic truth-value may not be determinable, it nonetheless inspires philosophical reflection in the reader, as do the other tales in the novel. It is significant in that two main aspects set it apart from the many other tales of coups d'état and politico-religious imposture in the book. This story explores the potential power of physical attractiveness and earnest diligence, even in the absence of strong political ambitions, and despite obstacles created by extreme poverty and others' prejudice.

To an extent, the viceroy's narrative echoes a story that Mésange had previously read in the Annals of Rufsal before fleeing the country. The framed tale of Héliumac features a minor hero who shares Constance's willingness to perform a role that others (and particularly women) create for him, but what he lacks in charm and charisma is

compensated by his wife's skill at manipulating appearances and common people's superstitions through natural magic (much in the style of Philo, a character from *Arcan et Bélize* whom we shall discuss later). In addition, he starts out slightly higher in the social order, as a respectable bourgeois man, and not as a child of petty thieves, so his upward political trajectory is not as lengthy. At the beginning of this framed tale, Héliumac is a family man living in the city of Cambul. When two prince regents die, the royal line is left without a legitimate successor and the nobles cannot decide whom to elect (I.226, I.227). As an honorable statue carver, Héliumac is technically eligible to be elected, as unlikely as that might appear, and should this happen, his six sons would succeed him (I.228). It is at this moment that Héliumac's wife (whose mother had been of royal blood) hatches a strategy for imposture that will succeed despite its absurdity, as the townspeople's superstition opens the way for a bourgeois to rule as king. Héliumac's wife arranges for three false miracles to occur. First, she sends two of her sons to hide out near a sacred cliff where miracles previously took place. She then sends the other four sons on a hunting trip with several friends, and tells them to pretend to wander near the cliff by chance. When the party approaches, the two sons who are hiding cry out "Je suis YOMAHA, c'est ma volonté que Héliumac soit Roy de Cambul," their voices echo and the entire hunting party swears that they have heard the thunderous voice of God (I.228). Next, Héliumac's wife trains a crow to croak "Héliumac est Roy" and has her sons release him on the opposite side of town. Dozens of townspeople see the bird and hear him say this (I.229). While some think the bird is a witch in disguise and others suspect he is the Devil himself, most conclude that he is a divine messenger, and no one realizes that he is part of an elaborate trick (I.230). When it comes to superstition, the

third time is the charm. A third false miracle convinces nobles and commoners to elect Hélumac king. His wife and sons build a kite and use a special concoction resembling Greek fire to write flaming words on the side of it. Moving from relatively neutral language to threats, they write “Hélumac Roy, ou je brûle Cambul” on the kite, then hoist it high in the air at the edge of town:

Aussi tôt que le bruit se fut répandu de la vue d’un nouveau spectacle, en faveur de Hélumac, d’un signe parlant, d’une comète dont la queue leur venoit annoncer sous de rudes menaces, la volonté de YOMAHA, pas une ame ne resta dans les maisons, tout le monde sortit, & les grands aussi bien que les petits, frapez du dernier étonnement, dirent d’une commune voix qu’il ne falloit pas diférer davantage à élire pour leur souverain celui que Dieu avoit destiné à cette haute dignité depuis si long temps. Le Conseil s’assembla, où Hélumac fut crée Roy de Rufsal, avec l’applaudissement de tout le monde. (I.232)

The people’s superstitious interpretations of three false miracles have permitted a bourgeois to found a new dynasty in Rufsal.

A reader who is aware of both Hélumac’s story and that of Constance gets the impression that Tyssot is using his novel to set out the variables in a thought experiment in political philosophy. It is as though personal charisma, work ethic, intellectual fortitude and natural philosophy knowledge in each potential impostor were variables in an algebraic equation, along with the relative degree of superstition and credulity present in the surrounding society. In tale after tale, Tyssot imagines what might happen if he plugged in different values to this evolving, would-be equation being worked out in fiction.

When an Impostor Legislates Love

In *Amours et aventures d'Arcan et de Bélize*, Tyssot's false baroque novel of 1714 (and the first of the three main works of fiction to be published) we encounter a different example of how attractiveness and charms can increase social stature, especially when credulity and superstition in the community make politico-religious imposture relatively easy. In this world of the ancient Mediterranean, the heroine Bélize takes on a fraudulent identity as a masculine cavalier, charms and amazes everyone she encounters with her attractiveness, and plays the role of a prophet of the god Cupid. She uses the newfound authority that she creates through this imposture in order to impose new rules upon peoples' behavior in the city of Amphisse.

Early on in the text, after Bélize rejects the advances of Arcan, who has developed an overwhelming love for her, she marries another man. But she soon regrets her decision and misses the eponymous hero. When her husband dies in a war, the newly widowed heroine is free to seek after the unhappy fellow she had turned away, but at the same time melancholia prevents her from acting on this impulse. It is at this moment that Locrians arrive to conscript new recruits into their army, and she overhears them speaking of amusing activities that the members of the rank are allowed to engage in. She imagines an original solution for her psychological ills. If she becomes a soldier, she can find pleasure in “jeux, & généralement toutes les récréations capables de dissiper la plus noire mélancolie” (42). It is not clear why she is not afraid of coming to the same end as her late husband. In any case, if she hopes to attempt such a cure for her suffering, she must successfully disguise herself as a cavalier. Thus, she gathers her money, disguises herself in secret and sets off for the city of Amphisse, where she manages to

pass herself off as a male military volunteer, under the name of “Lucidon.” As she had hoped, her sadness rapidly dissipates and this impostor finds that her masculine attractiveness is irresistible to women:

[Lucidon] avoit des charmes pour ces Amphissiennes, qui ne leur permettoit [sic] pas de raisonner : Son air doux & attirant leur faisoit oublier ce qu’elles se devoient à elles-mêmes, & ses grands yeux noirs, qui pénétoient par leur vivacité jusque dans l’ame de ceux qui les rencontroient bien à propos, faisoient remarquer en eux un certain je ne sai quoi d’engageant, qu’on ne voyoit absolument point dans ceux de tous les autres hommes. (44)

This striking, seductive power in her gaze assures her rapid welcome in the nicest *salons* in the city. After this initial imposture (her cross-dressing), she moves on to a second and more elaborate strategy of deception, as conversations about love present an opportunity for remarkable social ascension. One evening, Bélize perceives some dissonance between the various definitions of love that some guests in a *salon* are exchanging. Like the guests at the banquet in Plato’s *Symposium*, the interlocutors are struggling to describe what love is, but then the heroine seizes an opportunity to reframe the debate by sliding deftly from a descriptive register into a prescriptive one:

On n’est d’acord de rien, pas un seul article ne se décide ; Cependant il est clair qu’il est nécessaire qu’on en vienne à une bonne conclusion, afin que l’on sache à quoi l’on sera obligé de s’en tenir dans la suite. En éfet, dit Lucidon, on convient bien des définitions de l’amour, de l’empire souverain qu’il a sur tous les animaux de la terre, & du plaisir qu’il y a d’en être gouverné, mais on ne s’acorde point dans l’observation de ses douces Loix. (45-46)

By redirecting the discussion in this way, Bélize creates an opening, like a void within the community, a new role waiting for an actor to be cast into it. This new role is that of a legislator (“Législateur”) of love who can impose his laws as way of ending any

type of disharmony that arises from such things as perceived infidelity and awkward breakups (49). According to “Lucidon,” such conflicts supposedly stem from disagreements (or ignorance) about the laws of love, and nothing short of a clear set of commandments could finally put an end to many forms of social disorder. One of the women among the speakers elaborates upon the implications of this notion in a way that serves the protagonist’s ends:

Pour moi, [...] je trouve que ce Cavalier a raison ; on n’entend tous les jours que des murmures parmi les amans : l’un se plaint de trop de timidité, l’autre de trop de hardiesse ; l’infidélité & la jalousie régissent continuellement parmi eux ; la rigueur & le mépris se trouvent être le plus souvent de la partie ; & tous ces desordres, je vous prie, ne proviennent-ils pas de nôtre caprice, que nous suivons aveuglément, pendant que nous n’avons rien de meilleur , qui nous règle & nous guide ; au lieu que s’il y avoit des statuts, comme pour les autres actions de la vie, on pourroit y renvoyer ceux qui n’agissent pas dans les formes, & se faire faire justice dans l’ocasion.
(47-48)

Using her skills as a sly manipulator, Belize avoids trying to impose such statutes herself, despite the interlocutors’ insistence that she do so. With the very same gesture, she lays the groundwork for a subsequent imposture: “enfin je ne pense pas aussi qu’aucun de vous prétende que je m’érige ici en Legislateur. Tout ce que je puis faire pour vôtre satisfaction est de vous donner une Copie des réglemens qu’Amour lui-même a pris la peine de dicter aux hommes” (49). In this way, the heroine clears the way to exploit a new fiction as an impostor, and thereby assure harmony in the romantic lives of the inhabitants of Amphisse.

Lucidon claims to have been born in Cypress, the native county of the god Cupid who supposedly imposed his laws upon the entire population of the island. The so-called

cavalier explains that this is the reason why he happens to have memorized a series of precepts about love by heart, as do all young Cypriots. The credulous interlocutors eagerly choose a secretary to transcribe the laws that Lucidon will recite, and elect “présidents” to pass judgment against anyone who refuses to abide by the new commandments. The pretend cavalier then dictates 11 versified “Règlements d’amour.”

This new legislation unfolds in a way suggesting that Bélize may hope to save other women from the type of drama that Arcan had set in motion and that had provoked her melancholia. The new laws of love predominantly dictate men’s actions, expressly forbidding them from dramatizing their feelings in order to win ladies’ affection. The commandments appear on pages 51 through 58. Firstly, a man must move beyond the strict conventions of presenting “soins” like love notes and gifts, and speak directly and frankly about his feelings (rule 1), and at the same time he must not imitate the type of lovers’ language often used in novels (rule 2); if a man is shy, he is forbidden from writing to a woman he loves, because if he lacks the courage to speak to her directly, then in any case he does not deserve her affection (rule 3). Instead of exaggerating what he feels as a way of persuading a woman that he loves her, a man must express himself naturally and without affectation, voicing sentiments directly from his heart (rule 4). As to the particular form in which a man should express his passion, Cupid avoids giving specific suggestions, since it is better for each man to exercise his own judgment (“que] chacun suive son propre sens”) in this area (rule 5). A man in love must moderate his suffering (rule 6) without going so far as to desensitize himself completely to how his lady feels (rule 7). Whereas he should fear and avoid provoking his lady’s anger, he must behave as though he feels no dread at all (“agisse / comme s’il ne la craignoit pas”) (rule

8). He shall learn to read a lady's true emotions in her gaze, just as one might tell time on a watch (rule 9). Finally, he must neither take physical distance, separating himself from his lady (rule 10), nor speak indiscreetly about any favors that she might offer him (rule 11).

These rules recall a passage from Honoré d'Urfé's *L'Astrée* in which a group of shepherds come across a rustic temple in the forest, and one of them tries to impose laws governing the expression of love (II.5). Inside this simple hut, upon a mound of grass that forms an altar, they find an allegorical painting showing two young children (132-134). One member of the group, Silvandre, interprets the image for the others and concludes that the figures represent the Lover and the Beloved. He picks up the painting and claims to read "douze tables des lois d'Amour, que, sur peine d'encourir sa disgrâce, il commande à tout amant d'observer" (136); these laws are supposedly written out below the characters in the composition. In response, another shepherd, the fickle Hylas, accuses Silvandre of imposture:

Je ne crois point, dit-il, Silvandre, qu'une seule des paroles que tu as proférées soit écrite au tableau que tu tiens. Mais, les ayant composées il y a longtemps selon ton humeur mélancolique, tu feins à cette heure de les lire pour leur donner plus d'autorité et tromper plus aisément toute cette troupe. (139)

Silvandre refuses to let the others look closely at the painting, and thereby put the accusation to rest. With regard to the content of the laws, it is quite divergent from those of Bélize-Lucidon. In *L'Astrée*, we are a far cry from the call to moderation that we find in Tyssot, who takes "la règle des romans" as an explicit counterexample (52). In d'Urfé's text, a man in love must work constantly to increase and exaggerate his amorous sentiments, adore a single woman more than anyone else, and be sure that every last

action he performs pleases her in some way: “Qui veut être parfait amant, / Il faut qu’il aime infiniment : / L’extrême amour seule en est digne, / Aussi la médiocrité / De trahison est plutôt signe, / Que non pas de fidélité” (136).

The most striking difference between d’Urfé’s “tables” and Tyssot’s “règlements” involves the effect that they provoke on the other characters, as well as on readers. While Hylas may suspect Silvandre of trickery, the latter character distracts the other shepherds and shepherdesses and turns their attention away from him by joking instead of responding directly, and the narrator then moves on to another topic (139-140). As a result, the reader cannot be sure whether the laws come from the painting or from the character. By contrast, in the case of Bélize, the narration makes us complicit in her subterfuge and this positioning invites us to laugh at the Amphissians’ credulity. The mere fact that the rules are presented in verse assures that the naïve interlocutors attribute a divine origin to them:

Comme en ce temps-là les principaux Oracles ne se rendoient qu’en vers, & que la poésie n’étoit pas si vulgaire qu’aujourd’hui, on ne douta point qu’Amour lui-même n’eut dicté ces commandemens. Ils furent écrits en grands caractères, & placez au plus bel endroit de toutes les sales, où cette jeunesse avoit coutume de s’assembler. Il n’y en eut guère qui ne prit peine de les apprendre, afin de pouvoir mieux les observer. (59-60)

In this way, Bélize uses her poetic talent along with her false masculine identity, and in so doing pretends to reveal the will of a god. She imposes a new social code that protects women from the type of melancholia that Arcan had provoked in her. It is by taking on a man’s clothing and disguising her own guidance as that of a god that she succeeds in creating definitive social change. Her subterfuge illustrates a precept that one of the inhabitants of Amphisse articulates: “les hommes sont naturellement plus enclins à

se soumettre aux Loix d'un Dieu, qu'aux ordonnances de leurs semblables : & au lieu que plusieurs licentieux s'en seroient moquez, il n'y en aura guère qui oseront y contrevenir” (50).

When Secrets can end Sacrifices

Whereas Bélize uses charm, trickery and strikingly good looks as part of her imposture to affect change in domestic relationships, her brother Philo uses different strategies in a distinct arena. Philo is a natural philosopher who manipulates special knowledge of earthquakes and eclipses to position himself as a trustworthy prophet and undermine priestly corruption. Through this part of his novel, Tyssot questions to what extent politico-religious imposture by the just and pious might function as an antidote to injustices perpetrated by clergy members who themselves impose upon the credulous and superstitious. Could it be that assuming a false identity as a prophet is not only an effective strategy for social change, but even a morally imperative one under certain conditions? Tyssot poses this question through the tale of Philo.

Some contextualization of the narrative is useful here. After several long years of life as ascetics in the wilderness, invaders from Carthage capture Philo and Arcan and sell them as slaves. They are taken to the famous city and sold at a slave auction, where the governor of the city purchases them. The man takes Arcan as his valet and entrusts Philo to manage his household accounts. Before long, the philosopher profits from his arcane knowledge of natural philosophy to save his master's heir from mortal peril.

As it happens, Philo was once a disciple of the Pythagorean philosopher Philolaos of Crotona, who invented a cosmological system in which the Earth was mobile (250).

Just like his sister, he carries out a series of subterfuges, finally imposing himself as a privileged channel for the will of a pagan god; the character's own voice usurps authority normally reserved for the divine. Whereas Bélize in a sense becomes a false priest of Cupid, Philo becomes one of Jupiter. In both cases, impostures serve to elevate the social stature of the characters. In addition, Philo saves an innocent infant's life and secures political stability and peace in a state undermined and menaced by corrupt priests. Through this character, Tyssot appears to mobilize a message that would become a common trope among the philosophers of the Enlightenment, as it was for many early modern writers who adapted the myth of Iphigenia and the biblical story of Jephthah to the stage: human sacrifices must end, for such barbarism should be relegated definitively to the past.

Philo succeeds in this undertaking thanks to a remarkable con that he carries out once he settles into life in Carthage. He takes advantage of this urban context and exploits the superstition and credulity of its inhabitants. He uses his specialized knowledge of Nature in order to rise within the social hierarchy:

Il se prévalut de la bonne opinion que l'on avoit de sa personne, & pour mieux profiter de la crédulité & de l'ignorance d'un peuple aussi grossier qu'étoit celui-là, il s'ingéra de faire des Horoscopes, d'expliquer des songes, & de prédire l'avenir, mais toujours avec tant de précaution & de retenue, qu'à peine son dessein pouvoit il manquer de lui réussir. (133)

Such fortune telling is only the beginning of Philo's series of impostures. Thanks to his expertise in natural history and astronomy, he first predicts an earthquake (134) and then a solar eclipse (141-142), and presents the latter phenomenon as a sign of Jupiter's rage against the population. As a way of framing his predictions, he claims to have had a

vision in a dream through which Jupiter had expressed his will and his profound displeasure (136-139). The biblical story of Joseph (in *Genesis* chapters 37-50) may have served as a hypotext for this episode: this future patriarch uses interpretations of dreams inspired by God to escape captivity in Egypt, then he rises to the highest echelons of power and becomes vizier to the pharaoh.

In Tyssot's novel, when the wife of the governor of Carthage gives birth to an heir, the priests' behavior endangers the city. These politico-religious leaders claim that inhabitants of the community have angered the gods, and as a punishment that these supernatural beings have deliberately led the army to defeat in several recent battles. They preach that human sacrifices are the only means of appeasing the angry deities in general, and that in this case only putting the newborn heir to death will be sufficient. This is a tradition that has endured for ages and the governor lacks the authority to question it. The narrator explains:

Quelque considérable que fut ce personnage, il n'osa pas seulement leur faire paroître son chagrin, il auroit passé pour un impie parmi tout le peuple : bien moins pouvoit il se dispenser d'obéir ; sa religion ne le lui permettoit pas, & les Sacrificateurs avoient tant d'autorité qu'ils auroient pu lui causer de très facheuses affaires. Il est bien plus, les mères étoient obligées d'assister à ces abominables sacrifices de leurs enfans, avec un visage riant, & des marques d'une joye extraordinaire, sur peine d'être en horreur à tout le monde, & considérées comme des ennemies capitales de l'Etat. (135-136)

When Philo faces this situation, he analyses it logically and reasons that the death of the lone male heir to the governorship is likely to spark a long and bloody civil war. Yet the weight of tradition and the unquestioned loyalty that the inhabitants hold for the priests represent serious obstacles preventing any attempt to save the imperiled, soon-to-

be victim. The philosopher carries out a brilliant con that saves the baby's life and prevents Carthage from imploding in civil unrest. Since he foretold of the earthquake, some of the local people have seen him as a prophet, and he takes advantage of this state of affairs in order to consolidate his authority and play the role similar to that of Old Testament patriarch, although he is pagan and untruthful. This false oracle tells of a vision that he supposedly had in a dream:

Jupiter, leur dit-il, s'est aparu à moi, dans la ressemblance d'un lion rugissant, ayant une triple couronne sur la tête, un glaive tranchant en sa main droite, & tenant la foudre en sa gauche : il étoit porté par une sphère dorée, qui representoit la terre, & étoit couvert d'un dais de cristal poli, de figure ronde & concave, où brilloient mille étoiles plus éclatantes que celles du firmament. (136-137)

Philo ventriloquizes this divine figure, stating that the lion identified himself as Jupiter and expressed great anger against the inhabitants of the city, but not for the reasons that they had thought. In truth, Jupiter supposedly said, it is the dreadful tradition of immolating children that infuriates him, and he will soon punish Carthage if they do not prevent the sacrifice. If they choose to end this horrible custom, he will unleash his fury upon the city's enemies. "Jupiter" then concludes with the promise of a sign to come:

Et afin qu'ils ne doutent pas de la vérité de mes menaces, dans trois jours le soleil sera obscurci en plein midi, il n'y aura que ténèbres dans tout le pays, & cette obscurité durera au moins une heure. (139)

Philo had previously made astronomical calculations to predict the timing of the eclipse accurately, and now he waits for the city's destiny to change direction. As he concludes his speech, in order to avoid being arrested, he speaks in his own name and accuses the priests of having become rich by stealing the gold and jewelry with which

family members had adorned the bodies of the sacrifice victims. Later, when the eclipse takes place as predicted, the priests flee and the people of Carthage abolish the cult of child sacrifice (142). It is thanks to what the narrator calls ‘pious fraud’ (“*fraude pieuse*”) that Philo delivers the inhabitants from these horrors.

This term of *fraude pieuse* is significant in the writing of an author that has often been read, since the eighteenth century, as an enemy of Christianity in all of its manifestations. Several aspects of Philo’s imposture discourage the reader from interpreting it as an attack against Christianity in the most general sense. Significantly, many figures in the Christian imaginary struggle to end the sacrifice of children to pagan gods. The prophet Jeremiah condemns the practice several times, for example¹³. On another level, however, the tale of Philo clearly uses imagery from Huguenot polemics. Tyssot not only evokes the common trope of priestly corruption, but also in the dream-vision that recalls the Apocalypse of Saint John, he crowns the monstrous lion with the papal tiara, the *tri-regnum*. Through the narrative of Philo’s trickery, the author denounces the alliance between religion and politics that led to the persecution of French protestants under Louis XIV, and which completely altered the destiny of the author’s own family. Within the framework of this thought experiment in fiction, Tyssot asks how politico-religious imposture might be a morally acceptable means of ending such injustices. His literary response seems to lean toward the affirmative while reserving certain conditions. The author suggests not only that Philo’s impostures are legitimate, but that in some cases they are a moral necessity. The episode implies that political disorder including civil war and bloodshed is to avoid at all costs. This end justifies the

¹³ See *Jeremiah* 7:31, 19:5, 32:35.

means that Philo uses. Manipulating perceptions and belief through fiction and theatrics is a reasonable option provided that it assures a predictable devolution of power that avoids bloodshed. Neither lies nor blasphemy nor hypocrisy draw condemnations from the narrator.

For Philo, social disorder is the great enemy against whom intelligent and benevolent impostors must struggle in order to end tyranny. This hero-philosopher understands that, in his world, superstitions allow hypocrites to profit from massacres of innocents and that a frontal assault against such powerful figures is bound to fail. This episode suggests that Tyssot is a new type of Cynic, a sort of duplicitous Diogenes who imagines how social ills might be cured, but it is by no means through open criticism or by frank invective. Instead, it is through imposture of various forms, including theatrics and confidence tricks, combined with circumstantial fictions, which might potentially be made into the panacea that communities like his Carthage so badly need. In order to use this bitter medicine, a sage must first develop the imagination and vision necessary to perceive the causes of social disorder from his post at the margins of unenlightened societies.

When Follies become Phantoms

In the last pages of *Arcan et Bélize*, deteriorating mental acuity on the part of an aging heroine combines with superstitious beliefs and fears to spark catastrophes. This story is an early example within Tyssot's novelistic writing of a theory of how imagining disturbing events and images can pummel and soften one's mind and imagination, and with repeated impacts, can render a person's behavior irrational, and make him or her

extremely vulnerable to imposture. In a weakened state of mind, impostures function like a lethal contagion, provoking melancholia that spreads from person to person and makes them suicidal, obsessive and impervious to persuasion through logic. In this tale, Tyssot posits the possibility that two key variables might fit into his imaginary equation for predicting the evolution of human societies: the quantity and intensity of horrifying stories and images that pass through one's imagination and strike the mind, and the relative force of impostures to batter such minds when they are already feeble.

Near the end of the text, we read that a woman named Zélinde has survived many years of slavery and mortal peril and she at last finds solace when she has an opportunity to tell her tale to Bélize who has hired her as a governess to care for her ailing children (311-343). As she recounts her life story to the mistress of the house, Zélinde's narrative of abuse and horror moves Bélize to pity, and she becomes obsessed with the notion that the Gods have brought this woman to her doorstep as an act of punishment for her and a reward for Zélinde. The younger woman has endured more hardship than Bélize has and yet has committed fewer wrongs and done more good deeds. The eponymous heroine therefore feels that this new arrival deserves to marry Arcan at the very moment that she dies¹⁴. The prospect of such a relationship shocks both Arcan and Zélinde:

Je vous la recommande, Arcan, & je prétens que vous me
juriez en sa présence, qu'aussi-tôt que j'aurai les yeux

¹⁴ My reading of this passage assumes that a typesetting error was made by the printer where Zélinde identifies "le Général Arcan" as her father: "Il n'est pas nécessaire, dit alors Zélinde, de vous dire, Madame, que le Général Arcan étoit mon père, & que ma mère étoit de la maison des Urentins; il suffit que vous sachiez qu'ils n'avoient rien épargné pour me bien élever." (316). Were Arcan indeed her father, this would make the impending marriage an incestuous one, thereby profoundly affecting our interpretation of the scene. However, there is no other mention of Arcan ever having been a general. Furthermore, at no point does he become involved with a woman from the house of the "Urentins." On the other hand, Zélinde states that once lived among the Locrians, whose military leader was a general named "Orchan" (61). Given these factors, it seems reasonable to assume that a typesetter misread Tyssot's manuscript, replacing the name "Orchan" with "Arcan" on the one and only occasion in which Zélinde states her father's identity.

fermez vous la prendrez pour vôtre épouse, que vous l'estimerez, & l'aimerez éternellement. Zélinde changea mille fois de couleur à ce discours, elle ne savoit quelle contenance tenir de honte & de confusion : & Arcan tout interdit, n'étoit pas en état de proférer une parole. (345-346)

Yet Bélize is intractable:

[...] je suis coupable, personne ne le sait mieux que moi, je sens que les puissances célestes en sont indignées, elles en veulent tirer vengeance, & récompenser les vertueuses actions de Zélinde, c'est pour cela que le ciel l'a conduite ici. Je dois infailliblement mourir en peu de jours, si vous voulez que je parte contente, encore un coup, prometez moi d'en faire immédiatement après vôtre femme. Arcan & Zélinde eurent beau dire, il n'y eut jamais moyen de la faire changer de résolution : il falut que ces deux personnes noyées dans leurs larmes, consentissent à sa demande. (348)

Bélize's stubborn insistence upon this idea flows directly from her belief in divine intervention in human life:

Assurément [...] il faut avouer que les Dieux sont justes, & que les moyens dont ils se servent, pour récompenser les bonnes actions des mortels, sont miraculeux. C'est donc vous, ma chère Zélinde, que la Providence a conduite miraculeusement de si loin dans mon logis, comme dans un azile assuré, afin que je vous donne des marques de ma juste reconnoissance. (343)

Once Bélize has heard the long-suffering governess's story, and the idea has occurred to her that the Gods have been involved in manipulating both of their lives, she refuses to listen to any other account of events. The supernatural explanation for Zélinde's arrival has become the only one that she can accept. Her diminished physical and mental state (she describes herself as "valétudinaire" and near death [344]) renders her incapable of calling her own ideas into question in the light of reason.

This becomes clear when Arcan attempts to dissuade her from her demands. He argues that her insensitivity and occasional treachery is merely human and natural, and she need no longer feel guilty, particularly since she now lives happily with him:

[...] nous vivons parfaitement bien ensemble ; je vous aime, vous m'aimez, nous sommes contents l'un et l'autre de nôtre sort : que rien ne vous inquiète, je vous en prie. Songez à vivre, & ne pensons à mourir que lors que la Parque, lasse de nous voir plus respirer, vienne elle-même couper la trame de nos jours, & exiger le tribut que nous devons tous à la nature. (347-348)

Arcan's arguments against Bélize's melancholic and suicidal impulses oppose them on several levels. The husband promotes an Epicurean-inflected perspective on life, emphasizing the worthiness of following nature and enjoying the simple pleasures of love and intimacy, while the wife's arguments seem strikingly and anachronistically proto-Christian, verging on a discourse of martyrdom and sin. This opposition in the couple manifests most strongly in the contrast between Arcan's references to Fate and tranquility on the one hand and Bélize's evocation of Providence, miracles, guilt and merit on the other. While it is true that Arcan himself mentions Providence much earlier in the novel¹⁵, it seems that in his advanced age he has come to embody the pagan virtue lauded by such authors as La Mothe le Vayer and Fontenelle, whereas Bélize in her weakness obliquely evokes Thomist and Molinist theological discourses.

In any case, Bélize's chimerical drive to die and have her husband remarry allow her personal illusions to pave the way for an external imposture. This will bring Zélinde's life to an end as well. Once Bélize has passed away, the former governess takes over the

¹⁵ "J'étois si occupé à vous entendre, reprit Arcan, que le vaisseau se seroit renversé, avant que je me fusse aperçu de son agitation. En éfet voilà un temps qui nous fait d'horribles menaces, il n'y a pourtant point d'autre remède que de remettre tout entre les mains de la Providence. J'ai tant de confiance en cette divine sagesse, que je ne desespère pas de nôtre salut." (184)

affairs of the household, and develops her own mental troubles, which manifest as extreme miserliness (349). This prompts the valet and the cook to mount an elaborate, theatrical imposture that succeeds well beyond their hopes, finally frightening Zélinde to death (349-350). After the servants repeatedly dress as ghosts and pretend to haunt the house, Zélinde's imagination begins to show serious signs of weakness. Seizing upon this opportunity for vengeance, the servants procure the head of a corpse and integrate it into a self-illuminating, mechanical ghost prop such as one might see in an underworld scene in a baroque opera:

[...] il fut résolu tout d'une voix qu'on prendroit une tête de mort, & qu'après l'avoir bien coiffée, & mis une bougie alumée dedans, on la releveroit d'une pierre de quatre doigts d'épaisseur, posée sur deux petits tonneaux mis l'un sur l'autre : qu'après cela on enveloperoit cette machine d'un grand linceul blanc, qu'on la poseroit à l'extrémité de la grande chambre, où l'on entroit en sortant de celle où couchoient le maître & la maîtresse de la maison, & que la cuisinière se cacheroit derrière, comme une habile machiniste, pour en faire agir les ressorts suivant le temps & occurrences. (354-355)

They even go so far as to pad the wheels beneath the machine and grease the axle so that it can move in complete silence so as not to shatter the illusion. This ghastly marionette has devastating effects on the unfortunate woman's mind. Shaking with fear, Zélinde asks the specter to identify itself. Its operator chants an eerie poem in response in which it claims to be an undead Bélize who suffers in the afterlife at the hands of spirits. These entities are supposedly forcing her to torment the woman she cared for in life. This composition, which the servants wrote in advance, ends with these amusing verses: "Notre auguste société / M'impose la nécessité / De faire à jamais ton suplice, / Et punir malgré moi ton infâme avarice" (356). These words, along with some additional

threats and a convincing special effects performance, frighten the onlooker so intensely that she cries out and faints and remains unconscious for two hours (358-359).

Once the woman regains consciousness, Arcan uses rationalist argumentation in an attempt to persuade her to continue leading her life as she had before the supposed hauntings had begun:

Enfin ayant repris ses esprits, elle témoigna à Arcan que puis que les Manes de Bélize lui avoient reproché que c'étoit pour l'amour d'elle que cette vertueuse femme n'avoit absolument point de repos, elle prétendoit incessamment changer de demeure, & abandonner sa personne et ses intérêts. Arcan eut beau lui représenter que le Diable étoit menteur, qu'il ne falloit point ajouter de foi à ses illusions, mais employer des prières ardentes pour s'en délivrer & le banir de sa présence : elle persista à dire qu'elle connoissoit trop bien Bélize pour douter qu'elle se fut présentée à elle, & lui eut véritablement déclaré la cause de ses malheurs : qu'elle lui avoit trop d'obligation pour différer un moment à y apporter du remède, en s'éloignant de sa maison, & en fuyant la compagnie de son époux. (358-359)

Zélinde dies of a fever and epileptic seizures nine days later, never having recovered from the shock of encountering the ghost (360).

Through this sequence of events, Tyssot explores how both advancing age and frightening sights can negatively impact the mind by striking the imagination. While Bélize began as a relatively sly and capable impostor, as she ages, her cognitive capacities weaken, and when Zélinde begins telling her gory tales of the horrors she endured as a slave, these mental images seem to accelerate this mental deterioration. They provoke such sorrow and guilt in her that she becomes obsessed with the idea that Zélinde deserves to take her place as Arcan's spouse. The decline of the first heroine's mind then creates the potential for the usurper-in-spite-of-herself to meet a similar fate at

the hands of others, albeit by theatrical impostures and not merely narrative ones. We have here an early thought experiment with a similar question to the one that Mésange and Bénédon will discuss in relation to witchcraft and storytelling in the novel of Greenland. In the tale of Bélize, Zélinde and the mechanical ghost, Tyssot imagines two additional variables in his calculus for assessing the dynamics that underlie social phenomena and the potential of imposture to affect them. The more firm a person's imagination is, the less it is affected by perceiving or imagining horrible or supernatural events. However, repeated or sustained exposure to disturbing mental pictures can weaken and eventually destroy even the most rational and firm minds.

When Knowledge works as a Lure

While many of the stories that Tyssot tells lead one to surmise that more rational or philosophical imagery always leads to clearer thinking, he also provides an exploration of how it might be used to deceitful ends in *Massé*. In that novel, the episode of the character Du Puis's untimely death has been interpreted as a vehicle of Tyssot's message about society and morality conveyed in fiction (and indeed metafiction), but as yet, the centrality of purportedly philosophical and rational discourse (astronomy in this case) to it has not been emphasized. More importantly for our interests here, this particular scientific discourse is a case of imposture perpetuated by the hero. This passage takes place after the ship on which Massé has been serving as a surgeon has wrecked on an uncharted southern continent. As the castaways set up camp, the captain orders Massé and some companions to hunt and prepare food for the sailors as they attempt to build a new ship out of the wreckage (56). But Massé soon finds this work boring and unworthy of him, so he persuades two companions, La Forêt and Du Puis, to disobey orders,

abandon the crew, and set off into the wilderness in search of new discoveries. This act of rebellion echoes back to Massé's earlier decision to refuse the lifestyle (and the marriage) that his mentor Mersenne had arranged for him (40). At one point, the men find themselves with a difficult choice. In order to continue, they must either climb across the face of a precipice, or swim across a lake, and debate ensues. Du Puis states that he has read travel narratives in which he learned climbing techniques, and he decides to attempt to move across the cliff (73). Massé enthusiastically encourages him, but very quickly decides to swim across the lake with La Forêt instead. They watch as Du Puis loses his footing and falls to his death.

Alice Stroup and Ruth Menzies have interpreted this as a cautionary fable about the dangers of relying on knowledge attained through reading, and have established the centrality of this type of reflection throughout the novel (Stroup 24; Menzies 374).

Indeed, this is certainly an important aspect. However, it does not account for the fact that some of the questionable discourse that opens the way to Du Puis's demise is not written at all, but rather takes the form of oral fictions and impostures on the part of Massé. It is also significant that this trickery follows a trajectory from factual teachings about astronomy to fictions elaborated with a lexicon that recalls astrology and prophecy.

Leading up to Du Puis's death, Massé entertains his companions with celestial wonders, from how a lunar eclipse occurs to how the rotations of the sun and earth create the four seasons. He does so not so much to inform, but rather to distract the men and inspire them to continue plodding through the wilderness in difficult conditions. As Massé tells his readers, the "doux entretiens" (67) on cosmic matters "se faisoient plutôt en vûe de passer le tems, que d'augmenter le nombre des Philosophes, puisqu'il auroit falu s'y

prendre d'un autre biais pour y réussir" (67), but in any case, they helped motivate the men to "avancer considérablement" (67).

In light of this, it seems that the dialogue about astronomy that takes place between the three men should be just as central to our interpretation of the passage as Du Puis's mention of travelogues. Aubrey Rosenberg has argued that none of the text's "scientific digressions" either "advances the narrative" or "contributes to an understanding of the novel" and that instead they should be seen as mere marks of Tyssot's desire to impress readers with his erudition. (Rosenberg, *Tyssot de Patot* 25). Yet Massé's lectures on astronomy quite directly push the action forward, since the deceitful hero's prime motivation is to keep his companions progressing through a strange land toward potential discoveries and riches. Furthermore, Massé's ostensible discourse on astronomy is not merely an informative, non-fictional passage inserted in a novel. It is also part of a dynamic dialogue in which much is at stake both for the characters and for the reader. On an intradiegetic level, the men's survival hangs in the balance as they struggle through a potentially hostile landscape and hope to gain riches and radically new knowledge. From an extradiegetic point of view, their actions and words invite allegorical readings, including the one proposed by Menzies.

Massé sets the stage for this vivid discussion of astronomical ideas at the very beginning of the fifth chapter. Significantly, these plot events take place in 1644, a few years before Cyrano would write *États et empires de la Lune*, and just after the astronomer Godefroy Wendelin had published a work on the moons of Jupiter. Massé mentions Wendelin (65), implying to the reader that he is aware of the latest publications in the discipline. Furthermore, as we learn in the early pages of the novel, the fictional

hero is the former student of the historical Marin Mersenne, who served as “Galileo’s main European conduit,” (Lewis 135) corresponding with thinkers all over Europe about astronomers’ most recent theories. Yet, as informed and up-to-date as Massé may be, his followers’ remarks suggest that they are operating under antiquated assumptions about the stars and planets, more in tune with widespread astrological beliefs of preceding decades than with a post-Galilean worldview. As we shall see, they lack the background knowledge necessary to follow what Massé has to say. They only understand his claims so long as they are able to grasp them, notably by drawing analogies with mental imagery that they take from their own personal experience.

For Du Puis and La Forêt, such strategies for following the hero’s explanations soon reach their limits, at which time Massé must abandon astronomical discourse and better adapt his subjects of discussion to the level of his audience. The narrator writes that the days were getting long as they advanced, both since spring was moving toward summer and they were moving southward, further into uncharted territory, and away from “la Ligne équinoxiale” (63). This apparently offhand comment reveals to the reader that the narrator understands the causes of the seasons and the length of days throughout the year. Thereafter, the experiment with intellectual dialogue proceeds in four movements. In the first phase, Massé describes the Copernican worldview in response to a question from La Forêt. This leads into a historical discourse about how diverse civilizations have determined their calendars, and how the Church manipulated its liturgical year without good reason, and then Massé loses the men’s attention, while continuing to drone on.

He soon mentions a much more striking fact, the extraordinary size of the sun compared to the earth, which once again piques the men's interest and initiates a second movement. The men are skeptical and accuse Massé of extravagance, so he proves this in geometrical terms, drawing a diagram in the sand: "A cette explication j'ajoutai une figure sur le sable, pour leur en faciliter l'intelligence." (66). Walking his companions step by step through hypothetical reasoning, he claims that if the earth were equal to the sun in size, then our globe would cast a perfectly cylindrical, infinitely long shadow, and any planet passing through it would be eclipsed. Conversely, if the sun were the smaller of the two bodies, the shadow of our planet would form a vast cone opening outward from it. Yet, he continues, only the moon is ever eclipsed, so one must conclude that the sun is much larger than our globe (65-66). He concedes however that no one had developed instruments with sufficient accuracy to determine the exact size of the sun, and this opens the way for him to denounce a series of famous astronomers as presumptuous exaggerators. As a result of their lack of sufficient instrumentation to calculate their figures, he claims, a long series of astronomers made extraordinary errors: Ptolemy (90 CE – 168 CE), Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), Tycho Brahe (1546-1601), and later Christoph Scheiner (1573 or 1575-1643), a Jesuit and enemy of Galileo (Lewis 36) and Godefroy Wendelin (1580-1667), a Flemish partisan of Kepler (Tyssot 65; Lewis 143). Despite this, however, they sought to impose their unreliable astronomical approximations upon people as objective truths: "J'avoue, leur dis-je, qu'il est impossible de déterminer au juste la grandeur des flambeaux célestes; tous ceux qui l'ont fait ont été des présomptueux, qui ont tâché de nous en imposer" (65). The proof of this, he

continues, is that their calculations of the sizes of the sun and moon are widely different from each other.

Du Puis then reveals his ignorance, beginning a third phase of the dialogue, when he expresses confusion regarding the mysterious nature of eclipses and planetary “défaillances” (66), terminology recalling that of traditional astrology. Massé attempts to respond, but both men find his words extremely suspicious. He describes the phenomenon of perihelion, which astronomers had established by 1644, saying that the seasons succeed each other as the earth follows its irregular path around the sun; part of the year it swings closer while the rest of the time it flies far outward. Paradoxically, it is in the winter (at least in the northern hemisphere) that the earth is nearest the white-hot sphere! Du Puis objects, saying that the earth should rather get hotter as the sun and earth approach each other, and he formulates a concrete analogy to justify his claim. He asks provocatively:

Mais [...] un même feu ne se fait-il pas mieux sentir à deux pas de distance qu’à dix? [...] Et si le Soleil, qui est chaud, [...] est plus près de la Terre en Hiver qu’en Été, pourquoi la chaleur ne se règle-t-elle pas suivant son éloignement?
(67)

Du Puis’s reasoning is valid, replies Massé, but the man is ignorant of key knowledge that the leader is aware of but that would take too long and be too difficult to articulate (67). Indeed, demonstrating the mathematics of perihelion would be quite difficult under the circumstances. La Forêt interjects that Massé has not satisfactorily explained the celestial mechanics of summer and winter. The hero then attempts to offer insights about the interactions of light and the atmosphere, but it is at this time that the men stop once again, and Massé must change tactics: “enfin, il falut changer de langage” (68).

In this passage, Tyssot successively invests a dialogue both with scientific interest for the reader and with stakes for the progression of the plot, and at the same time, offers an illustration of the challenges involved in educating common people about new astronomical discoveries in the seventeenth century. As Du Puis attempts to decode Massé's explanations, in spite of the simple diagram drawn in the sand, he has recourse to a body of florid mental pictures and preexisting notions about pre-Copernican astrology and quotidian, practical experience that impede and distort what he hears more than they aid in understanding. Tyssot uses these pages to imagine how such a state of affairs might be exploited by an impostor who can produce scientific discourse as a means of manipulating followers.

When we expose the Fiction of History

In *Mésange*, after the hero arrives in the kingdom of Rufsäl, near the North Pole, he gains access to a set of scrolls in which the inhabitants of the land have recorded their history through the ages. References to *Mésange*'s intermittent readings of these annals appear throughout nearly half of the entire book, situated more or less in the center of the text. However he rarely continues reading and translating them for very long at a time; most often, he retells one or two histories he has read in the annals, then discusses their verisimilitude or significance with King Bénédon. Just as frequently, events in the community like festivals, notable deaths, and high-profile court cases interrupt his reading, and he leaves the scrolls to witness and describe cultural events firsthand. At other times, the narrator is invited to participate in recreational activities—including a whale hunt—which take him away from the scrolls.

Few critics have interpreted these fictional, utopian archives as anything other than proof that Tyssot's talents as a novelist sharply declined as he aged. Indeed, Aubrey Rosenberg has argued:

The worst feature about these chronicles is that most of them have little or nothing to do with the story, and Tyssot made no attempt to integrate them into the framework of his narrative as he did so skillfully with his digressions in *Jaques Massé*. In short, these chronicles that occupy so large a place in the story do not fit into it. (*Tyssot de Patot* 161)

I would like to call into question Rosenberg's interpretation here and to show that the fictional archives in *Mésange* play key roles not only in an elaborate and carefully designed narrative structure, but also in the larger meanings of the novel as a whole.

Tyssot uses Rufsal's fictional archives to articulate a theoretical relationship between archives, historiography, fiction and society. In other terms, with the annals of Rufsal, Tyssot accomplishes three major goals. On a most concrete level, the scrolls allow him to offer a highly complex utopian world by explaining the origins and evolution of the kingdom's traditions and laws. On a more abstract level, these imaginary historical records allow him to explore the way that popular superstitions enable impostors, visionaries and madmen to manipulate the society in which they live. On a most sophisticated level, Tyssot uses these archives to inspire his reader to reflect on two related questions. Firstly, what roles do the telling, writing, and diffusion of histories and fictions play in the evolution of society at large? Secondly, how do popular superstition and credulity relate to this process?

When we consider the specific nature of the stories written in these annals, two major questions arise. First, according to what criteria does *Mésange* retell certain

histories and pass over others? From the first moment that Mésange begins to read these tales of the ancient rulers of Rufsal, he makes it clear that he is not simply translating them; he is also choosing only to retell stories of rulers that he considers to be striking or interesting in some way for readers, while omitting countless others. He frequently says that he has passed over dozens of scrolls because he could find nothing of interest, yet he simply could not resist telling one specific tale that he has come across. Most of these particularly irresistible narrative morsels seem to share two key aspects: firstly, they generally stage major shifts in political power in the history of Rufsal, achieved through cunning trickery, conspiracy and intrigue. Secondly, superstition, credulity or general naïveté among the common people of the country are major factors in allowing these shifts to take place. Indeed, in many of the stories, the populace is represented as so dimwitted and superstitious that it calls into question the credibility of the stories themselves, which at times resemble trickster stories for young princes more than they do official state histories. In one story, a young girl known as “Le Matelot” dresses in drag and pretends to be a sailor. She succeeds in impersonating a male heir of the king and becomes king herself. Problems arise, however, when she becomes pregnant. We have already evoked the story of Héliumac.

The second question that the annals bring up is their verisimilitude. Mésange seems to choose the order in which he transcribes stories from the annals in part based not only on their chronological sequence, but also on how believable he judges each one to be. In general, he presents the most realistic, trustworthy ones earliest and the most marvelous or fabulous ones latest, and he frequently points out dozens of histories that he has not found interesting enough to pass on. It is as though the more he reads, the more

blasé he becomes, and the more a history must be extreme in order for him to recall it. When he first begins reading the annals, he says that he spent several boring days skimming over 25 scrolls because he could find nothing “remarkable” in them. The first tale he relates is a relatively straightforward though particularly bloody history of a violent tyrant named Eubron (I.83-90). It seems that Mésange skips over any scrolls in which the kingdom is at peace and the Greenlanders enjoy an idyllic existence; he only pays attention when the horrors of Eubron’s reign begin to shock him. I already mentioned the stories of Le Matelot and Hélumac, which appear in the middle of Mésange’s relating of the archives and are largely realistic but do stretch readers’ suspension of disbelief in some ways. One of the last histories that Mésange takes from the annals has major fantastical elements and he openly expresses doubt about its veracity. As he begins narrating it, he states that he has once again skipped over histories of many rulers, in which he has come across many things [*choses*]:

[...] mais je ne les trouvois pas dignes de les imprimer dans ma mémoire, ou de les rédiger par écrit. Je ne saurois néanmoins passer sous silence qu’[un roi ancien], étoit un homme d’onse pieds de haut, & dont le corps, à l’endroit du ventre, en avoit neuf de circonférence, il se nommoit Hermenon ; sa femme étoit grande & grosse à proportion ; jamais on n’avoit vu de tels monstres. (II.87)

Mésange then recounts the tale of this giant king (with an equally giant wife), saying that “ce qui me rend cette histoire un peu suspecte, c’est que celui qui l’a écrite assure positivement” that this giant couple had 12 children, and that the father’s weight was equally divided among them, even when they reached adulthood (II.88). That is to say that when his children grew up, they were all diminutive, each reaching exactly one twelfth the weight and size of their enormous father. After retelling this story, Mésange

does return to the annals, but he remarks that the closer he gets to the present day, the less he finds interesting; in his words, “plus j’ay avancé, moins j’ay trouvé d’endroits dignes de mon attention” (II.109). This seems to suggest that the populace of Rufsal becomes less superstitious and more ‘Enlightened’ as time goes on. In any case, he tells another comic and unlikely tale of a coup d’état before losing favor with Bénédon and thus losing access to the state archives.

In a sense, as Mésange reads the annals, he acts as a secondary archivist, curating historical documents, though his criteria for including any one history in his archive are quite opposed to those that today’s historians might use. He seems to omit the most reliable documents, and the less a history seems trustworthy, the more likely Mésange is to retain it in his new archive. This ‘new archive’ that Mésange is creating is initially a purely mental one. At one point, he tells Bénédon that one history, which happens to involve erotic court intrigues and cross-dressing, has so fascinated him that he has read it four times and memorized it by heart (II.17). We learn at the end of the novel, after Mésange has returned to the Netherlands, that he did not escape Rufsal with any written record. Instead, after he is gravely injured and mortally ill, he spends four months frantically writing down everything he can remember about his travels, including his readings of the archives, which he transcribes years after the fact while suffering in a diminished mental state (II.282). All of this points toward an explanation of Mésange’s selection of histories to retell: the ones that he passes on to his readers are those that were striking enough to remain in his memory through years of turmoil. The less fantastical histories were never striking enough to keep his attention, much less to hold it long

enough for him to memorize them. Clearly, Mésange's method of re-archiving the archives of Rufsal is dubious indeed.

If Mésange's archiving methods do not demonstrate how to write good history, then what exactly do they demonstrate? In more general terms, how is the reader to interpret Mésange's use of the annals? The discussions that Bénédon and Mésange have about the content of the annals offer us clues. When the hero mentions the histories to the king, they discuss the significance and plausibility of the written accounts, and the king occasionally tells oral stories himself that he claims have been deliberately left out of the written records. For example, at one point Mésange brings up doubts about the story of Herménon, the king whose enormous weight was evenly distributed among his children. Bénédon insists his ancestor personally spoke to eyewitnesses who saw these events, although both they and the ancestor are long dead. He further adds:

Tout ce que vous en voyez n'est rien : on raconte bien d'autres choses de ce Monarque, continua-t-il, qu'on n'a pas osé écrire, de peur que notre Histoire passe pour un roman dans l'esprit de nos descendants. (II.88-89)

Here, Bénédon alleges that there exists an uninterrupted oral tradition that confirms the written record while also supplementing it. Indeed, at one point he even tells an entire elaborate oral story that he claims has been left out of the written record but that has been passed down, word for word, through the generations—it is the story of Raoul, whose adventures with diminutive, subterranean, flying humanoids we recounted earlier. In supplementing and confirming the written record with such narratives, Bénédon also presents a striking paradox while opening the way to a satire on certain types of texts from Christian traditions. In Delon's view, the principal target of satire here is the Bible and its potential as a tool to subjugate political enemies:

Dans l'histoire du Groenland foisonnent [...] les impostures politico-religieuses. Les Annales du pays, avec les déambulations d'une nation à la recherche de sa terre promise, deviennent au même titre que l'*Histoire des abeilles* une parodie de la Bible comme arme politique et moyen d'oppression. (713-714)

While Delon is quite right to point out the importance of politico-religious imposture here and the commentary on how religious narratives can be used to oppress people, it is essential to note that Mésange does not specifically mention the Bible, but actually refers to categories of religious texts that are different from Scripture in an important regard.

When Mésange hears Bénédon's oral additions to the written record, he responds by drawing analogies between the Annals and Rufsalian oral histories and four types of sacred texts: mysteries, oracles, laws and "*constitutions*"—a term that could be understood to mean Papal bulls—, and those that put forth such texts argue for their "infaillibilité" (II. 91). Here as elsewhere in Tyssot's novels, a passage that seems at first to critique religion or Christianity in general seems more likely to be targeting Roman Catholicism when examined more closely. Mésange argues that the histories of kings are "remplies de sotises, de bagatelles, de circonstances absurdes, de faits controuvez, & d'impertinences, qui sautent aux yeux de la plus grande partie des personnes qui les lisent" (II.91). Likewise, he continues:

Chaque Religion même, ancienne ou moderne, a ses mystères, ses oracles, ses loix, ses constitutions, que ceux qui en font profession, croient saintes & divines, à l'exclusion de tout ce que l'on debite des autres, jusqu'à souffrir le martire, &, signer de la dernière goutte de leur sang le témoignage qu'ils rendent de leur infaillibilité, dont ceux d'un parti contraire se rient à gorge ouverte [...]. Ceux qui écrivent, le font dans de certaines vues, que les personnes qui lisent leurs écrits n'ont pas : & souvent il est arrivé que des écrivains ont composé des fixions pour passer leur temps, pour divertir leurs amis, ou pour montrer

à toute la terre que la nature les avoit douez de la faculté imaginative, qui quelques siècles après ont passé pour des dogmes d'un culte sacré, qui ont causé des guerres sanglantes, & la ruine totale de ceux qui ont été assez hardis pour les révoquer en doute, ou en parler avec dérision. (II.91-92)

In the face of such arguments, Bénédon suggests that true albeit marvelous events have been deliberately and systematically expunged from the written record because if the whole truth were told it could no longer be accepted as truth but would rather be interpreted as fiction with the passage of time. In this view, historians and archivists, just like prophets and evangelists, are faced with a double-bind; their job is to conserve the truest records possible, yet if they told the whole truth, readers would deem their histories to be fictions. Anything true that might seem excessively marvelous would call the entire account into question, and this leads archivists to omit the most striking aspects of what has truly happened. However, if the historians of Rufsal are anything like Mésange, then, paradoxically, it is only these very same marvelous aspects of what happened that they consider worthy of being retained and remembered. If these events were to be left out, the archivist would retain nothing but one boring, forgettable scroll after another. Therein lies a central problem that the archives highlight: How can any event be recorded faithfully in writing if one must censor the only aspects of it that are capable of being transmitted through memory and time?

In order to interpret the larger message of this novel, it is important to reconcile these notions that Bénédon puts forth in light of a theory of storytelling and belief that Mésange articulates. One of the events that interrupt Mésange's reading of the archives is a witch trial, and when Bénédon comes to discuss this with him, he exposes a theory of witchcraft as a delusion aggravated by the pleasure of storytelling. Witchcraft does not

occur as people describe it, argues Mésange, because it is not real. Yet, people come to believe in witches as a result of a series of quasi-biological causes and effects. A man might hear a tale of witchcraft, and this gives him pleasure. Desiring to share this pleasure, he tells similar tales to his family members. As he retells the tales, and as the family hears them over and over, they physically deform the animal spirits both of storyteller and listeners, affecting both the sense organs and the imagination, upon which the imagined stories leave imprints, or traces, that get deeper with each retelling. Mésange also notes that the ‘feeble brains’ of women and children are softer, and more easily imprinted upon (I.130). With time, the brains and sense organs of the entire family are so deformed that they can no longer distinguish physical events from imaginary fictions and they come to wholly believe in witchcraft. They may even swear they are witches under the threat of death. This cycle of contagion is set to repeat if someone overhears a member of the family making these claims. On a large scale, superstitious beliefs can affect and infect entire populations in this way.

At this point, if we take a step back from these arguments, it becomes clear that Bénédon and Mésange both contribute to a far reaching, cyclical theory of a relationship between archives, historiography and fiction and the one hand and society, religion and superstition on the other. Tyssot presents this relationship throughout *Mésange*. In this novel, Tyssot highlights a fundamental paradox at the heart of his vision of history and society: the truth of political and religious history is always being omitted, passed over and forgotten, while fictions that embellish history and are parasites to it are always being magnified and spreading until they finally replace it entirely. In the minds of our descendants, our history becomes their novel. For Tyssot, such is the way of society. So

why do the annals of Rufsal take up such a large place in the text? Contrary to what Rosenberg has argued, they are central to the work's meanings, both as they pertain to history, to fiction and to religious traditions, particularly as they evolved within the ecclesiastical hierarchy. With these fictional archives, Tyssot is envisioning how the fraught practices of written and oral transmission of narratives might play into his developing imaginary equation for understanding human societies. In the face of generations of critics who have dismissed and condemned the Annals of Rufsal, Tyssot de Patot undertakes a daring thought experiment. He seeks to evoke how fundamentally hilarious and contagious problems with reading, recounting and archiving can transform history into fiction. For Tyssot, it appears that truth in accounts of events decays with time. The amount of time that has passed since any given event, along with the number of times that it has been recounted and re-archived, take shape as additional variables that somehow fit into his pseudo-mathematical vision for how to understand the phenomena underlying the development and decline of human societies.

When an Envelope disguises the Text inside

Tyssot designed his paratextual materials to serve multiple purposes. They allow him to create distance between the contentious politico-religious issues that they reference and his public persona as a self-taught mathematician hoping to secure and maintain patronage, including a paid teaching position. He poses as one editor, translator or re-discoverer among many who in a sense share responsibility for any objectionable content in the novels. As Tyssot's career advances, his paratextual apparatuses become increasingly sophisticated in their use of metafictional impostures.

In *Arcan et Bélize*, we find a relatively simple strategy at work in the first few pages. When he has his novel published, he hides behind the pseudonym “Chevalier de P.” and opens his book with a dedicatory letter in which he stages a fictitious origin story for his text. A voice identifying itself as this supposed knight dedicates the story to “Mademoiselle la Baronne D.” and complains that this would-be patron has mistaken him for a “faiseur de Romans” whose talents lie in other domains. He claims that it is quite strange for her to see him in this way, since he feels destined to be a mathematician and not a novelist:

Mais hélas ! vous le savez, ou vous ne le savez pas, mon étoile qui veut que je sois Mathématicien, prétend aussi que je n'aye mon imagination remplie que de figures & de démonstrations. (n.pag.)

He suggests that the character of a writer of novels is fundamentally different from that of a mathematician, whose mind occupies itself with altogether different imagery, and this prevents him from writing an original fiction as his patron's request. However, he is quite capable of translating a text written in Latin, and as it happens he has had an opportunity to do just that:

Il me souvient d'avoir un jour acheté dans une auction [sic], entre quelques manuscrits d'un homme docte, un petit livre, qui semble avoir été fait à votre sujet : ce sera là justement votre affaire. (n. pag.)

Tyssot uses this metafiction as a way of tricking and disarming critics who might perceive heresy or blasphemy in the novel, notably in the actions of Philo that we have examined. The author may have designed his text in order to speak simultaneously to at least two distinct publics while offering each a different message. On the one hand, after reading the first few pages, critics and potential censors might dismiss the work as a

baroque novel of little interest, and might be tempted to ignore the rest of its content.

As a matter of fact, this is Rosenberg's own conclusion as he writes that the text is "un roman inférieur qui mérite son obscurité" ("Déisme" 68). On the other hand, persevering readers go on to uncover a series of fables of politico-religious imposture. These secular, quasi-mathematical parables evidence the many thought experiments on religion and politics that Tyssot was already undertaking prior to the novel's 1714 publication.

In *Massé*, a letter from the editor to an unnamed man precedes the main text. It reads: "Monsieur, Voici le Voyage dont on vous a parlé, & que vous avez souhaité de voir. Il m'est tombé entre les mains par une espèce de hasard que je vous raconterai une autre fois [...]" (33). The letter opens by subtly leading the reader to conflate the author with Jaques Massé, the narrator, before ending on a flourish of multiple ironies:

Il y a des endroits dans certaines conversations sur des matières de Religion, qui m'ont paru d'abord un peu forts : mais les ayant examinés de plus près, & voyant que l'Auteur, qui a toujours tenu ferme pour sa Religion, en a fait voir presque toujours la foiblesse ou la fausseté, j'ai crû qu'il n'y auroit rien qui pût ébranler un homme bien instruit dans la Foi Chrétienne, qui est, Dieu merci, assez bien fondée pour ne rien craindre des attaques des Libertins, ou des Infidèles. Ainsi nous n'avons pas besoin d'employer d'indignes artifices, pour cacher la force des raisonnemens qu'on fait contre nous, comme si nous avions une mauvaise cause à défendre. Je suis, &c. (33)

This short paratext has been elaborated into a textual anamorphosis. This term, which I am borrowing from Corrèard, describes discourse that confronts the reader with a semiotic contradiction or conflict ("Vérité" 3), in which multiple details are ambivalent, capable of aligning themselves alternatively into at least two opposing sets of interpretations. Let us consider just two details, for example: the pronouns "en" and "nous". The equivocal use of "en" allows us to interpret that sentence in two opposing

ways: is the author demonstrating the falsehood and weak arguments made about religion in the book's dialogues, or rather is he showing religion itself to be false and upheld by feeble claims? Similarly, the last sentence is doubly equivocal; it is unclear whether it is libertines and infidels or rather those well instructed in the Christian faith who are defending a wrongheaded cause and thus might resort to "indignes artifices" like equivocation and literary imposture. For a potential reader who does not know Tyssot personally, the fable supposedly came from an atheist in prison on the other side of the world, and had been recorded (with a hint of disgust) by Massé, before being edited and published by other individuals. This meant that those targeted by the fable could not pin the blame on any one person, or even on anyone they could identify or physically locate.

However, such use of literary imposture was a double-edged sword; it had the additional effect of putting Tyssot in a very delicate situation. As we noted in our general introduction, he defended the book against critics without openly acknowledging authorship. If the book itself was an elaborate imposture, Tyssot resorted to a secondary imposture in order to protect it from censorship. He wrote in a letter:

[...] si dans toute cette relation il y a quelque chose capable de choquer une oreille chatouilleuse, c'est cette fable des abeilles du chapitre 15, que je désapprouve entièrement, & qui en effet, s'il faut que je le dise, n'est nullement de l'Auteur. J'en ai vu le manuscrit avant qu'elle fut imprimée, j'en puis rendre témoignage : l'Éditeur doit être accusé seul de cette supercherie, & non seulement il s'est ingéré d'ajouter cette parabole à ce bel ouvrage, mais il en a aussi retranché des choses en des endroits, qui étaient dignes de celui, qui les y avait insérées (qtd. in Rosenberg, *Tyssot de Patot* 20).

Tyssot sought to redeem the moral legitimacy of the text by suggesting that an editor engaged in a vile trick. He claims that an editor surreptitiously integrated the

condemnable fable into Massé's true and legitimate narrative, and that it would not be fair to punish poor Jaques by refusing to read his opus. Massé is the victim in all of this, implies Tyssot.

The first pages of *Mésange* take such textual trickery to a dizzying degree of complexity. A dedicatory epistle precedes the main text. Tyssot signs his name "S. TYSSOT DE PATOT" and dedicates the work to his patron, "Wolter Joseph, Baron de Wynbergern, Seigneur de Horsen, des deux Pols et de Zee-burg," but states that he has not actually written it. As in the paratexts preceding *Massé*, here Tyssot claims that he has merely reread and edited the manuscript of a traveler which someone has sent to him:

Oui, Monsieur, on m'a envoyé le Manuscrit d'un célèbre Voyageur, que la mort a empêché de porter au point où il l'auroit désiré, sous prétexte qu'il avoit besoin de mon secours, & que j'y étois si favorablement designé. (n. pag.)

Tyssot thereby makes it appear as though his character *Mésange* is the author of the work, but yet he inserts an amusing double-edged phrase that hints at its true authorship.

As he entreats his patron to protect the text from criticism or censorship, he writes:

Je vous le recommande au lieu de l'Auteur, dont je tiens presentement la place ; ayez en soin comme d'un bien qui nous est commun ; gardez le de la médisance, protégez le contre ceux qui auront l'audace de l'attaquer (n. pag.).

Tyssot presently takes the place of the author as he writes, and the pronoun "nous" ambiguously refers to either Tyssot and the author or he and the patron sharing a common prize. These sentences feature a fair amount of ambiguity on their own, but in fact they are but one of several layers of imposture that Tyssot has used to swathe and disguise his fiction.

After the epistle, there follows an “AVERTISSEMENT” in which an elaborate metafiction tells a tale of the creation and provenance of Mésange’s manuscript. In this narrative frame, two respectable Dutchmen walk into a provincial cabaret, and the bartender tells them that for several years he has kept the manuscript of a traveler who once died in his establishment and trusted him with the work. He shows the text to the two out-of-towners, who agree to edit and publish it, and return some of the profits to the bartender, who claims to have paid the authors’ medical bills before he died:

[...] Messieurs, leur dit il, vous devez savoir que ce célèbre voyageur, tout honnête homme qu’il étoit, m’a abusé, en ce qu’il m’avoit toujours fait accroire qu’il avoit suffisamment de quoi me payer ; & ceux qu’il employoit à lui guérir la jambe qu’il s’étoit rompue devant ma porte, par un accident fatal, dont je me trompe si ses mémoires ne font mention. Cependant il s’est trouvé après sa mort, que tout ce qu’il avoit, ne suffisoit pas pour moi seul à beaucoup près. Je voudrois bien, si ce manuscrit se rend public, que ce fût à des conditions capables de m’indemniser, en tout, ou en partie, des peines & des dépenses que j’ai faites pour son auteur. (n. pag.)

Tyssot uses this fiction surreptitiously to plead with a potential buyer to help contribute toward reimbursing the bartender character for his expense in helping the fictitious author, Mésange.

As if this were not sufficient to disguise the true origins of the work, the voice of the “Avertissement” (which seems to equate with the “S. Tyssot de Patot” who signed the epistle) ends by claiming that the two visitors to the bar passed an edited version of the text on to still another party, an “homme de lettres.” This additional figure supposedly “l’a mis, nonobstant tous ces obstacles, en l’état où on le voit presentement, & me la [sic] transporté, à de certaines conditions dont nous sommes satisfaits” (n.pag.).

With these two paratexts in place, Tyssot establishes an uninterrupted, fictitious genealogy for the content of the tale, and successfully nests some of the stories in *Mésange* within at least eight frame narratives, each of which blurs and confounds the distinction between fiction and reality, and allows for a possibility of alteration, distortion or corruption of the purportedly historical events described. In the case of the little flying humanoid who leads the Rufsalian visitor around the underworld, for example, the creature gives an account to Raoul (level 1), who relays it to his lord (level 2). Generations of inhabitants of the country pass the tale on (level 3) before Bénédon hears it and in turn shares it with *Mésange* (level 4), who then writes it down and leaves his manuscript with the bartender (level 5). The two Dutchmen receive the text and edit it (level 6), then pass it on to the Man of Letters (level 7), who finally sends it to Tyssot de Patot, who once again changes the text (level 8). This exceedingly complex narrative structure allows Tyssot to shield himself from blame for the potentially subversive material in the episode while prompting the reader to maintain an awareness of the unstable nature of textual transmission, which some passages of the novel attempt to theorize, as we have seen.

In all three novels, the paratextual apparatus is integrated with the structure of the novel so as to open an imaginary space for reflection that can be largely free of the constraints of censorship and harsh criticism. On this stage, experimentation unfolds through fiction and casts light on the relationships between tricksters and dupes, superstitions and state secrets as Tyssot imagined them in the early decades of the eighteenth century.

When Polyhedrons give way to Clockwork

As Tyssot undertook this extended process of reflection through the writing of fiction, he left behind clues about how he hoped that natural philosophy might allow for better understanding of politics and religion, and the role that imposture could play in altering the course of human societies. We have seen how he multiplied iterations of tales of impostors, imagining each new schemer with his or her special set of gifts, and staging the character within a framework of clearly delineated conditions, as if these various experiments could be described mathematically. Bélize/Lucidon has overwhelming good looks and charisma. Massé's mind swirls with the astronomical knowledge that his mentor Mersenne imparted to him, and along with it he is endowed with skills at telling florid narratives. If Tyssot decreases the charm factor slightly and augments a character's diligence, and reduces the storytelling ability, he produces someone like Constance/Ludoviski/the Viscount of Iceland. If he decreases the charm still further but compensates with extraordinary linguistic ability, he creates Constance's brother Béronice.

The environments in which he places the characters then combine with these profiles to produce an outcome. Tyssot places Bélize/Lucidon in the socially unstable salons of Amphisse where they await a legislator of love, even though they do not know it yet. Massé's tactics work wonders on two naïve and slightly superstitious mutinying sailors in the wilderness. Constance stops suffering as an abandoned pauper child and becomes the sovereign of a foreign state, while his brother is content to wander along with a troupe of chimney-sweeps.

Alongside the qualities of the characters and the contexts in which Tyssot places them, a series of extended reflections on time, memory, and cognition complete the model that the author develops in fiction. He tells stories urging us to imagine how we might understand the inner workings of human minds, groups and states.

These thought experiments take place within the shrouded and protected imaginary space made possible by paratextual and metafictional impostures. This brings us back once more to our cosmos model. We have posited that when we apply this model to Cyrano's fiction, at the center of the polyhedrons imposture collapses into the infinitesimal and ripples outward toward the infinite, and this cosmic suspicion of deceit invites the reader into an abyss of doubt that combines with a liberation from constraints. We contrasted this state of affairs with Villars' increased confidence that age-old claims of supernatural, universal threats from the Devil and his allies are probably baseless; concentric layers of framed narratives and impostures push us further and further toward doubt. With Tyssot's novels, we find still more confidence that superstitions and fears of the supernatural are devoid of legitimacy. Furthermore, this confidence gains strength from a new armature with which the author undergirds it. This bolstering reinforcement comes from the prospect that the movements of social forces, including politico-religious imposture, might be described in mathematical terms, the way that Newton had recently described the universe. As we peer into Tyssot's model of the layers of imposture, it seems as though the author is seeking to replace the Keplerian polyhedrons—with their mystical pretensions and invitations to read allegorically—with the perfectly measured gears, cranks and spheres that made up the state of the art cosmic model of his own day—the orrery. The impostors, dupes and superstitious crowds in Tyssot's tales prowl and

maneuver around each other with the clockwork predictability of the shiny spheres atop one of those remarkable, early-eighteenth-century instruments.

Conclusion

Through this dissertation, I have examined how early modern notions of imposture infused fictional representations of society, politics and religion, in instances ranging from Cyrano's mystified Narcissus staring at the riverbed to Villars' arrival of the aerial sylph armada to Tyssot's tales of treachery in the snows of Greenland. By the 1640s, Lucian's techniques of targeting assumptions that authorities held sacred had allied with Gabriel Naudé's style of mining the historical records for circumstantial evidence of fraud. My three main authors adapted these precedents and made the writing of fiction into a practice through which they created model after model of social phenomena and cosmic orders, using the imagination to test out each one. Each writer used stunning mental imagery that could evoke our great temptation to mistake fictions for truths, and even make us wonder if we also mistake truths for fictions. As each author built upon the precedents set by previous storytellers, they blurred the distinctions between true histories and hoaxes until a mere shift of perspective could make the one seem like the other, like two images combined in an anamorphic painting. At the same time, each writer elaborated more and more sophisticated techniques of imposture within the media of manuscripts and printed books, thereby opening freer imaginary spaces for thought experiments in political and natural philosophy and theology. This proved especially useful since others would have seen their ideas as distasteful, blasphemous, or subversive. As we have traced these two developments through my primary corpus, we have seen how the authors' experiments within their stories implicated readers, at times

inspiring doubt about traditional accounts of the cosmos, and at other moments seeking to invalidate those narratives of devilry and divine retribution that might otherwise provoke fear.

Alongside this literary mode of alternately reveling in wonder and critiquing superstition, however, we also discern a clear development from Cyrano to Villars to Tyssot, in which the critical impetus of the tales takes increasing precedence over the celebration of marvels and the variability of perception. It is in this way that the work of my three main authors bridges the gap between the hesitation and philosophical uncertainty that critics have associated with the Baroque age, and the growing confidence in the power of reasoning and observation that marks the early Enlightenment. In the timeline of early modern literature, between Rabelais' Panurge in the *Tiers Livre*, who consults dozens of fortune tellers and magicians trying to decide if he should marry, and Montesquieu's Rica, who comically equates the pope with a quack magician in the *Lettres persanes*, we can now put Dyrcona, Gabalis and Jaques Massé back in the places that they deserve. As we read these tales of impostors, we can create a story of how exposing impostures let the light of reason shine throughout the eighteenth-century Republic of Letters.

But should we really believe the tales that we tell ourselves? Before we do so, we must step back from the concentric polyhedrons, the orrery, the manuscript or the printed book that lies before us, and wonder in what ways the object implicates us. If we remember to do this, then Cyrano, Villars and Tyssot have accomplished what they set out to do.

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