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General Introduction

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► **To cite this version:**

Patricia Eichel-Lojkine. General Introduction. Publije, 2015, OUVERTURE AU CLASSIQUE. Le seuil de l'acceptable: expression des idées et représentations imaginaires "limites" à l'âge moderne (XVIe-XVIIe siècles). hal-04719869

HAL Id: hal-04719869

<https://univ-lemans.hal.science/hal-04719869v1>

Submitted on 3 Oct 2024

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2015-n°2

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Le seuil de l'acceptable : expression des idées et représentations imaginaires "limites" à l'âge moderne (XVIe-XVIIe siècles)

« General introduction »

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Please note: this text is a condensed version of the French paper
"Straparole au risque de l'impertinence", dossier *Le seuil de
l'acceptable Publije n° 5 (Ouverture au Classique)/2015-16.*
Translated by Françoise Pinteaux-Jones.

Is it possible to define what was acceptable (or otherwise) in the 16th century? What views could freely be bandied around? We are minded to follow in the footsteps of Jean-Pierre Cavaillé and avoid asserting that religious unbelief was *unthinkable* in Rabelais' France (as, say in the textbook case of Lucien Febvre's 1942 work). At best, the historian may feel able to define the precise terms under scrutiny (unbelief, irreligion, libertinage, incredulity...) then to observe the correlations between the socio-political, literary and linguistic fields, which lead to the finding that *explicit atheism* was *inacceptable* at the beginning of the Early Modern Period. This is explained by the criminalization of open atheism and the disparaging and scurrilous connotations the term carried, making it an undeniable "Pigeonholing insult", freely used in polemics¹. The same reasoning obtains for the term "libertine" in the 17th century when its strong connotation of ill-used freedom devoid of any notion of sin, deterred authors from claiming the term for themselves whose writings – theoretical and fictional (e.g. Charles Sorel) – actually called for such liberty².

Current literary and cultural studies have accordingly focussed more on what might be unsayable than on what would be psychologically unthinkable by persons living in far-off times. For, as one of Cyrano's characters aptly said in his *Comical History of the States and Empires of the Moon*, a man's speech may be curbed but not his imaginings, which are out of reach:

Just Judges," said he, "listen to me; you cannot condemn that man, that monkey or parrot, for saying, that the moon³ from whence he comes is a world; for if he be a man, though he were not come from the moon, since all men are free, is not he free also to imagine what he pleases? How can you constrain him not to have visions, as well as you? You may very well force him to say that the moon is not a world, but he will not believe it for all that.⁴

When researching this subject matter, one must bear in mind that the thinkable does not tally with the say-able – which has, since the 1980s yielded a flurry of

historical research about heterodox statements, more or less veiled expressions of doctrinal divergence, the shifting outlines of irreligious thinking more or less framed around a philosophical system

literary studies of writing strategies as such, in that they resort to elusive or cryptic intimation allowing transgression when dealing with troublesome subjects.

Such research is not to be restricted to speculative writings only. A discourse's capacity to fit in

¹ CAVAILLÉ J.-P., « Athée au début de l'époque moderne : une accusation inacceptable », Staquet A. (dir.), *Athéisme voilé/dévoilé aux temps modernes* (Acts of symposium, Bruxelles-Mons, 2012), Bruxelles, Académie royale de Belgique, 2013, p. 19-24 ; Berns T., Staquet A., Weiss M. (dir.), *Libertin ! Usage d'une invective aux XVI^e et XVII^e siècles*, Paris, Garnier, 2013.

² As put in so many words by CAVAILLÉ J.-P., *Les Déniaisés. Irréligion et libertinage au début de l'ère moderne*, Paris, Garnier, 2013, p. 408-409.

³ What the Selenians think of as the moon, which is the earth to the narrator and readers.

⁴ Thus spoke a Selenian, moved to the defense of the narrator during his trial. In an edition by C.H. Page of the 1687 A. Lovell's translation, published with the title: *The Comical History of the States and Empires of the World of the Moon*.

with institutional or linguistic repressive devices – or to dodge them – is of equal worth in works of imagination, whether satirical or otherwise, whenever they come up against censorships driven as much by morality (the boundaries of modesty) as by ideology. Both domains incidentally intersect in Cyrano’s fantasy (or philosophical tale), which has much to do with the question of acceptability under its many guises, from the expurgated publication of the too daring text of the *States and Empires of the Moon*;⁵ to the integration in the narration – under the guise of talks or discussions – of summarised philosophical doctrines the texts of which were at the time difficult to access, to the thematization within the fiction of issues of proper reception⁶ and censorship:

Look here, he said, unless you wear a square academic cap, a chaperon or a cassock, whatever you say, no matter how fine, if it thwarts the principles of these learned gentlemen of the cloth, you are an idiot, a madman or an atheist.⁷

So the broad focus of our enquiry is the realm of *licence* (in the etymological sense of the word), that is pronouncements that are free, daring, radical (the libertine current), provocative (enough for some to remain clandestine), testing the limits of the licit or using “parrhesia” (speaking one’s mind as, according to Foucault’s elucidations, classical philosophers meant it) and this during the early modern period in France and in Europe.

Yet how are we to know what would be subjectively felt as ambiguous or embarrassing in times long gone? How to spot the fiddling of codes and norms prodding the bounds of acceptability? How to pick up the tensions, negotiations, perpetual adjustments between creation and reception underpinning texts bordering on the illicit? Their scandalous or acceptable nature is hard neatly to capture. This supposes some knowledge of the criteria and forms taken by modesty, subversion and transgression in diverse social groups (given that not only the receptors’ social condition and function but also their age and sex must be taken into account). This requires that social contextualisation be taken into account whilst eschewing literary history’s biographical drift of the “man and his work” ilk.

Accordingly, beyond the documented testimonies (e.g. on censorship) supplied by literary history, the history of publishing, law history etc., a tighter understanding of the threshold of acceptability requires the study of such parameters as the literary – conceivably hybrid – genre(s) to which the relevant piece of writing belongs, along with the socio-political context, the place and date of publication, its scope, the authority of the sponsor, the narrator’s *persona*...

The concept of acceptability put forward by J.-P. Cavallé rests on a pragmatic approach focussed on the public/private cleavage as it affects the utterer (public figure or private individual) but also the

⁵ The text, written circa 1643-1648, was published in its expurgated form in 1657.

⁶ An aural reception within a private circle of kindred spirits being preferable to a written diffusion, public and uncontrollable. See NÉDELEC Claudine : « ‘Ecoute, lecteur...’ : la représentation de la lecture dans *L’Autre monde* de Cyrano de Bergerac », *Les Dossiers du Grihl* [on line], Les dossiers de Claudine Nédélec, Le XVII^e siècle, uploaded 14 November 2007, consulted 20 April 2016. URL : <http://dossiersgrihl.revues.org/421> See also on the subject of reception : MERLIN Hélène, *Public et littérature en France au XVII^e siècle*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1994.

⁷ *L’Autre monde. Les États et Empires de la Lune* [*The Other World: Comical History of the States and Empires of the Moon*], édition Jean Prévot, Paris, Gallimard, Folio classique, p. 92. Thus Gonsales to the narrator. Gonsales is a character borrowed from Francis Godwin (*The Man in the Moon: or A Discourse of a Voyage Thither by Domingo Gonsales, the Speedy Messenger*, 1638). The “gentlemen of the cloth” in this instance allude to the customary gift of a piece of cloth to one’s professor in order to gain access to the title of doctor. (Translation of the quote by the translator of this paper)

text or iconotext (manuscript/print) and the language (that of the elites or of the people). The object is to define piecemeal, for such and such a “free” discourse how it engineers its reception within the text and what reactions it gave rise to in one given group rather than another. This concept owes its heuristic fecundity to its twin linguistic and social relevance. When a statement, an utterance, a discourse are deemed acceptable (as against inappropriate, reprehensible, indecent, or indeed impenetrable), this verdict is passed by a community of speakers of a given language, according to the genre and the tone of the written piece under review.

The boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable are thus fluid, shifting but these two very concepts should first be understood as two poles with many shades in between rather than as categories or rubrics. A statement bordering on the illicit, answers to judgments that rank the possible degrees of acceptability from unqualified approbation to rejection, explicit disapproval and censorship via condoning and the unspoken acceptance of those who turn a blind eye. We get here into the zone of “restricted acceptability” wherein research must cross-reference precise external data (period and modalities of censoring activities, or of clandestine dissemination, chronology of the re-editions and translations as required by the source text adopted...) with both a semantic and material study of the texts (page setting, marginalia...). We hypothesise that such micro-research, likely to serve on all types of written material (testimonies, memoirs, pamphlets, comedies, satirical poetry, tales, short stories...), is bound to enrich our knowledge of the 16th and 17th centuries beyond the old and vague “history of mentalities”.