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Spirits across the Channel

The Staging of Collective Mental Forces in Gabalistic Novels from Margaret Cavendish to Charles Tiphaigne de la Roche

When Charles-Georges-Thomas Garnier published in Paris the 39 volumes of his *Collection des voyages imaginaires, songes, visions et romans cabalistiques*, between 1787 and 1789, he gathered, in a section devoted to *Cabalistic Novels*, a number of works written by authors like Montfaucon de Villars, Henriette-Julie de Castelnau comtesse de Murat, Laurent Bordelon, Antoine Hamilton, Marie-Anne de Roumier-Robert and Jacques Cazotte[1]. In spite of their diversity in styles and constructions, these texts seem united by their common reference to the "elementary spirits" presented, classified and discussed in the *Comte de Gabalis ou Entretien sur les sciences secrètes*, originally published by Montfaucon de Villars in 1670. This very particular imaginary, populated with sylphs, undines, gnomes and salamanders, was meant to have a deep impact on French literature for more than a century, even if it has remained largely in the shadow of the mainstream authors we usually identify with "the Enlightenment".

My point in this article is to make a few suggestions about two "eccentric" endpoints of this (eccentric) tradition of Cabalistic Novels. At the emerging moment of this tradition, I will attempt to show that Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, four years before Montfaucon de Villars and on the other side of the Franco-British Channel, was already interested in "spirits" which were somewhat connected to the literary imaginary unfolded in the *Comte de Gabalis*. Close to the end of this "*Gabalistic*" century, I will suggest that French physician and author Charles Tiphaigne de la Roche, around 1760, re-appropriated this tradition in a way which was strikingly similar to Cavendish's original intuitions, even if in a genre and within an intellectual context quite different from what had started a century earlier. I hope that this reframing of the Gabalistic novels will help us construct a different reading of this

[1] Charles-Georges-Thomas Garnier, *Voyages imaginaires, songes, visions et romans cabalistiques*, Paris, 1787-1789 (all available for download from the Gallica website : http:bnf.gallica.fr). On Garnier's *Voyages imaginaires*, see Nathalie Kremer: « Voyage au bout de l'imaginaire. Etude du discours préfaciel dans les *Voyages imaginaires* de Garnier (1787-1789). Voyages poétiques » in Alexandre Duquaire (et al.): *L'ambition anthropologique de la fiction au dix-huitième siècle: expériences et limites*, Louvain, Peeters, 2005, p. 135-147.

unfairly understudied corpus, by shedding a new light on their deeper meaning and on their politico-philosophical stakes.

After a general presentation of the Cabalistic novels inspired by Montfaucon de Villars' original text (section 1), I will focus on the depiction of the "immaterial spirits" staged by Margaret Cavendish in her *Blazing World* (section 2, 3 & 4). I will then explore a number of similarities between Cavendish's fancy and Tiphaigne de la Roche's visions about "elementary spirits" in his *Giphantie* and *Zazirocratie* (section 5), before explaining more precisely, in conclusion, why I believe that this underground and neglected corpus of texts deserves our renewed attention (section 6).

As the reader will soon find out, my intuition is that these novels provide us with a remarkably suggestive representation of collective mental forces and mediatic processes, in an age when we desperately need to "see" how *l'esprit* (altogether mind, spirit and wit) contributes to structuring our globalized societies. In a conjuncture where many political thinkers, coming from many diverse countries and philosophical horizons (Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Bernard Stiegler, Slavoj Zizek, Jürgen Habermas, Oskar Negt, Bernhard Waldenfels, Peter Sloterdijk, Arne Naess, Stanley Cavell, Toni Negri, Maurizio Lazzarato, Paolo Virno, among others), tend to focus their attention on processes of subjectivation, on social forms of individuation, on the political economy of affects, on psycho-power or on noo-politics, it may be helpful for literary scholars to contribute to such debates by investigating how writers from the past have portrayed the articulation between the individual life of the mind and the communicational conditioning of our collective *Geist*. All the texts discussed in the following pages strike me as bringing a highly original and still underestimated contribution to this effort of articulation. My hope is to convince the reader that they deserve our closer attention, and that they have much more to offer than what I will be able to sketch in this brief article[2].

THE SUBGENRE OF "GABALISTIC NOVELS" IN FRANCE (1670-1790)

The literary subgenre I am interested in can be situated within the broad category of *le merveilleux* (marvel tales), at the crossroads of the fairy tale, the Oriental tale, the cabalistic tradition, Alchemy and demonology. Within the literature of the Marvel, its specificity consists in staging various forms of *spirits* (*esprits*, genies, sylphs, sylphides), directly or indirectly inspired by the categorization of "elementary spirits" humoristically described by Montfaucon de Villars in his amazingly popular 1670 *Comte de Gabalis*[3]. Drawing his inspiration from Paracelsus and various compilations of demonological sources[4], Montfaucon proposed a classification which associated different types of spirits to each of the four elements (sylphs for air, nymphs for water, gnomes for earth and salamanders for fire). In England, *Gabalis*' legacy is most often

[2] This article is part of a book project entitled *Esprits médiatiques. Modèles imaginaires de l'intelligence diffuse dans la littérature des Lumières*, partly funded by a *Délégation* research grant from the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS).

[3] Nicolas de Montfaucon de Villars: *Le Comte de Gabalis* (1670), Paris, Nizet, 1963.

[4] Parcelsus' *Liber de Nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus* is available in English translation in Henry E. Sigerist (et al.): *Four Treatises of Theophrastus Von Hohenheim Called Paracelsus*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 1941.

studied in Pope's *Rape of the Lock*; in France, it has been described by a few previous studies by Edward Seeber, Roger Laufer, Philippe Sellier and Michel Delon[5] – but the impact and significance of this subgenre within the intellectual landscape of the 18th century remain largely to be explored[6].

Apart from Crébillon fils' *Le Sylphe* (1730), Cazotte's *Le Diable amoureux* (1772) and Potocki's *Manuscript found in Saragossa* (1793-1815), most of the authors and novels staging sylphs and elementary spirits in the 18th century have remained relatively obscure: Laurent Bordelon's *Monsieur Oufle* (1710), Charles de Fieux de Mouhy's *Lamekis* (1735-1738), Jean Galli de Bibiena's *La Poupée* (1747), Marie-Anne de Roumier Robert's *Les Ondins* (1768) and *Voyage de Milord Céton* (1765), or Charles Tiphaigne de la Roche's *Giphantie* (1760) or *Empire des Zaziris* (1761) may not ring many bells outside of very small circles of erudite 18th-century specialists.

I will propose six features in order to identify a subgenre defining these French tales in the 18th century:

a) *These Gabalistic tales stage "elementary spirits" which are (directly or indirectly) inspired from Montfaucon's* Comte de Gabalis *(and from the cabalistic-alchemist tradition from which it is drawn).* This staging of spirits and sylphs, of genies and supernatural beings, has induced most literary historians to classify these narratives within a current that was tightly separated from the literature of "the Enlightenment". They were widely discredited for belonging to an Old Regime of naïve superstitions, irrationalism and pre-scientific mindset. Only with the recent re-discovery of the "modernity" of the fairy tale – which is the only *new* literary genre to have emerged on the side of Modernity at the time of the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*[7] – has it become possible to read such tales as something more than a curious left-over of times passed. The few commentators who studied such texts have already noted a major shift brought by Montfaucon's *Gabalis*: his supernatural creatures are mostly cleansed from their relation to the devil. They may be occasionally mischievous, and momentarily frightening, but the eternal damnation of human souls is no longer at the core of the narratives. One could see this evolution as *a return* to pre-Christian "superstitions" and popular beliefs about pagan deities; my reading will suggest that this apparently "backward-looking" imaginary of spiritual beings rejoined *the forefront* of the Enlighteners' most daring insights, and could be interpreted as *an anticipation* of social relations to come, rather than as a survival of beliefs past.

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[5] See Edward D. Seeber: "Sylphs and other elemental beings in French literature since the Comte de Gabalis (1670)", *PMLA*, March 1944, p. 80-83; Roger Laufer: Introduction à son édition de Montfaucon de Villars: *Le Comte de Gabalis*, op. cit., p. 7-64 ; Philippe Sellier: "L'invention d'un merveilleux : le *Comte de Gabalis* (1670) " in *Essais sur l'imaginaire classique*, Paris, Champion, 2003, p. 61-71. For a good presentation of the evolution of this literary tradition in the 18th century, see Michel Delon: Introduction to the collection of texts *Sylphes et sylphides*, Paris, Éditions Desjonquères, 1999, p. 7-31.

[6] In her excellent study, Isabella Mattazzi proposed the name of "magic novel" or "magic romance" (*romanzo di magia*) to describe these sylph tales, and she provided a very helpful framework to understand their civilizational meaning. See Isabella Mattazzi: *La magia come maschera di Eros. Silfidi, demoni e seduttori nella Francia del Settecento*, Bergamo, Sestante Edizioni, 2007. See also Trude Kolderup: "Humanisations à l'ombre des Lumières : *La Poupée* de Bibiena" in Trude Kolderup & Svein-Eirik Fauskevag (ed.): *À l'ombre des Lumières. Littérature et pensée françaises du XVIIIe siècle*, Paris/Trondheim, L'Harmattan/Solum Forlag, 2008, p. 77-107.

[7] See Jean-Paul Sermain : *Le Conte de fées du classicisme aux Lumières*, Paris, Desjonquères, 2005. See also the yearly issues of the journal *Féeries* devoted to the study of French Marvel and Oriental tales from the 17th to the 19th century (published since 2004 by the ELLUG, with past issues available on line through www.revue.org).

b) *Within the various classes of elementary spirits systematised by Montfaucon de Villars, the subgenre I am more specifically interested in seems particularly attracted towards the sylphs and other* aerial *spirits*. These spirit-tales take seriously the etymological root of the word *spiritus*, which evokes the aerial flows of the winds ("the spirit blows wherever it wills") and of the breath (respiration, inspiration, expiration, and even perspiration). It seems to be in the essence of the spirits staged by these narratives to circulate *in* and *on the air*. The very insistence to call them "elementary" spirits tends to *materialize* them: while they retain certain properties and powers which seem to set them on the side of supernatural forces, many tales go to some length in order to explain their actions through natural and material means. The element of the air is therefore probably in favour because of its very ambivalence: on the one hand, it is one of the four material elements which compose our physical universe; on the other hand, because it is the only invisible and impalpable element, it offers the perfect vector to move smoothly between the material and the immaterial (and back).

c) *The imaginary world of the elementary spirits shows a strong tendency to connect itself with an* imaginary of machines, *human artefacts and technological wonders*. Contrary to common views, which oppose an "Old world" daydreaming about demons, fairies and supernatural entities, to a "Modern world" busying itself with mechanics and technological inventions, the literary genre of the marvellous was at the forefront of innovation in terms of machinery. Not only did several tales pioneer what would later become our "science-fiction" (Tiphaigne's *Giphantie* being a case in point), not only did the fairy world excel in imagining wonderful artefacts, but the very success of the marvel tales led them to be adapted for the stage, which catalyzed the invention of new technology designed materially to produce the type of "special effects" needed for representative purposes. In the printed books as well as on the theatrical and operatic stage, the elementary spirits are insistently portrayed as *spiritus ex machina*.

d) *These tales are interested in the elementary spirits insofar as they interact with human beings and, more precisely, insofar as they* condition *our (apparently free) behaviours*. Gabalistic tales don't really tell stories about spirits, but about *forms of interactions* between the world of the spirits and the human world. Either as objects of desire (like the sylphs) or as members of a superior realm of reality which dominates the human sphere (like Tiphaigne's Zaziri), the elementary spirits are generally staged as exercising *some form of control* (surveillance, manipulation) on the human subjects with whom they interact. In particular, their "influence" is often staged in order to account for the erratic changes in the economy of our affects[8], as well as for the unpredictable connexions between our ideas – which of course suits their "spiritual" nature.

e) *The elementary spirits offer* an explanatory frame *used by the fictions to account for otherwise inexplicable aspects of human subjectivity*. Philippe Sellier rightly noted that "*the revelation of the existence of these invisible beings projected the brightest light on a range of phenomena badly understood. […] The verisimilitude*

[8] On the notion of *economy of affects*, see Yves Citton : "Esquisse d'une économie politique des affects" in Yves Citton et Frédéric Lordon: *Spinoza et les sciences sociales : de la puissance de la multitude à l'économie des affects*, Paris, Éditions Amsterdam, 2008, p. 45-123.

(vraisemblance) *of this new kind of marvel results from its pure logical coherence: everything becomes clearer, once the existence of gnomes and ondines has been recognized*"[9]. Once again, far from being reducible to "mere" fantasy and entertainment, spirit-tales can be read as carried by *an urge to explain*, which re-inscribes them within the development of the modern scientific mind.

f) Finally, *these Gabalistic novels belong to a wider genre (the 18th-century marvel tale) which adopted an overall regime of meta-fiction and of satirical-parodic enunciation*[10]. From the very beginning of the genre, Charles Perrault, Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, Antoine Hamilton and the other inventors of the fairy tale made any "belief" in their fiction highly problematic, if not impossible, by adopting what Jean-Paul Sermain has precisely described as a *meta-fictional* structure of enunciation: their narrative denounced itself (as well as other narratives) as a "fable", *not* to be adhered to[11]. In other words, Gabalistic novels stage spirits in the existence of which nobody is expected to believe. Insofar as they are meta-fictions, these tales are conceived as narrative machines designed to help the reader *modulate his beliefs* (rather than merely "grant" it). The most radical experience in this meta-fictional direction has been provided by the central metalepsis in Mouhy's *Lamekis*, where the author appears in his narrative, harassed by characters he can no longer control[12]. Gabalistic novels include a *parodic* dimension (geared towards their own narrative operations), and they generally tend to paint a *satirical* picture of the human world they portray.

After this general presentation of the subgenre, let us now turn to a British writer who developed an amazing body of work along strikingly similar lines, only a few years before Montfaucon de Villars would launch his trendy "*esprits élémentaires*" into French literary minds.

MARGARET CAVENDISH'S INTELLECTUAL AND SCRIPTURAL PROJECT

Margaret Cavendish, duchess of Newcastle (1623-1673), is currently being (re)discovered as a major figure of the literary and philosophical world of the mid-17th century. During her 16 years in exile in Paris and the Netherland from 1644 to 1660, along with her husband William and his brother Charles, she met the most famous thinkers of the period: Hobbes and Bramhall debated on free will in her salon, William Petty, Descartes, Gassendi, Roberval or Mersenne came for dinner, Torricelli was sending telescope from Italy, while the move to the Rotterdam and Antwerp put her in

[9] Philippe Sellier: "L'invention d'un merveilleux : le *Comte de Gabalis* (1670)", art. cit., p. 67 & 69. Translation mine.

[10] I borrow this characterization from Jean-François Perrin: "Le règne de l'équivoque. À propos du régime satirico-parodique dans le conte merveilleux au XVIIIe siècle", *Féeries* n° 5 (2008), p. 133-149.

[11] Jean-Paul Sermain: *Métafictions (1670-1730) : la réflexivité dans la littérature d'imagination*, Paris, Champion, 2002.

[12] On this amazing episode, see Michèle Bokobza Kahan: "Intrusions d'auteur et ingérences de personnages : la métalepse dans les romans de Bordelon et de Mouhy", *Eighteenth Century Fiction*, Volume 16-4 (2004), p. 648-654 and Peter Fitting: "Imagination, Textual Play and the Fantastic in Mouhy's *Lamekis*", *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, n° 5-4 (1993), p. 314 & 317.

touch with the Dutch intellectual circles of the 1650s[13]. She wrote a number of books in a variety of genres, most of them too puzzling in their form and too disturbing in their content to be taken seriously by her contemporaries, who coined her "Mad Madge". Most notable for my purpose are *The World's Olio* (1655), a hodgepodge of philosophical dialogues, essays, poems, allegories and short stories, the *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666), a treatise devoted to a critical discussion of the new type of experimental science promoted by the Royal Society (where she was invited on May 23, 1667), and the *Description of a New World called The Blazing World* (1666)[14], an imaginary voyage which was published as the second part of the very serious *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*.

Before focusing on the way Cavendish stages the "immaterial spirits" in the *Blazing World*, five general points, already studied in the explosion of excellent scholarly works recently devoted to Cavendish, need to be summarized briefly, in order to understand her wider intellectual project:

1. *Self-moving matter*. Although it kept evolving throughout her life, Cavendish's overall philosophy of nature is generally described as an original mix of atomism and vitalism, of monism and pluralism – the whole of Nature being seen as one substance, composed of an infinite number of material parts, animated by self-motion, in constant flux and transformations: "*Matter must be naturally self-moving, and consequently all parts of Nature, all being material; so that not only Water, Earth, Fire, and Air, but all other natural bodies whatsoever, have natural self-motion inherent in themselves; by which it is evident, that there can be no other principle in Nature, but this self-moving Matter, and that all the rest are but effects of this only cause*"[15]. This original mix of mechanist-vitalist, monist-pluralist ontology inscribes Cavendish in an underground philosophical tradition which goes from erudite libertine thinkers heavily influenced by Epicureanism, like Cyrano de Bergerac (whom she mentions), to Spinoza (who was only nine year younger than the Duchess, and who was developing his thought in Holland while the Duchess was publishing her books), and to the constellation of 18th-century thinkers identified as Neo-Spinozists (Meslier, Diderot, d'Holbach, Deschamps, etc.)[16].

2. *An investigation of the inner self.* Many excellent studies have shown how the composition of the *Blazing World*, published jointly with the *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, is geared towards a criticism of a certain idea and practice

[13] For a biography of Margaret Cavendish, see Katie Whitaker: *Mad Madge. The Extraordinary Life of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, the First Woman to Live by her Pen*, New York, Basic Books, 2002 (on the Parisian and Dutch years see in particular p. 81-132).

[14] I will quote *The Description of a New World called the Blazing World* in the original edition of London, Maxwell, 1666, 2 volumes. I will add the page number of the modern edition provided by Kate Lilley, *The Blazing World and Other Writings*, London, Penguin Classics, 2004.

[15] Margaret Cavendish: *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, London, 1666, II, § 20 "Of Chymistry, and Chymical Principles", p. 62. For a good description of Cavendish's rejection of the mind/body dualism prevalent among the philosophers of her time, see Anna Battigelli: *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind*, Lexington, UP of Kentucky, 1998 (particularly p. 98-102).

[16] On can find in the *Blazing World* a striking summary of the most scandalous thesis identified with Spinozism in the century ahead: "*there is nothing in Nature that can subsist of, or by it self, (I mean singly) by reason all parts of Nature are composed in one body, and though they may be infinitely divided, commixed and changed in their particulars, yet in general, parts cannot be separated from parts as long as Nature lasts*" (I, 43 / 151). For more on French Neo-Spinozism, see my *Envers de la liberté. L'invention d'un imaginaire spinoziste dans la France des Lumières*, Paris, Éditions Amsterdam, 2006.

of Science promoted by the Royal Society, illustrated by the use of telescopes and microscopes. While the Experimentalists tended to believe that we would reach a better understanding of Nature through the development of technological devices extending our perceptive abilities, Cavendish stressed a fundamental gap between seeing and explaining: in order really to understand natural phenomena, one needs to use one's imagination ("fancy"), as much as one's (enhanced) eyesight. In parallel with Spinoza, who showed that truth cannot be conceived as a mere ("objective", photographic) reflection of things-as-they-are, but must be conceived as he result of an active process of construction, the Duchess emphasized the activity of *world-creation* as a central dimension of human thought (including scientific inquiry)[17].

As Mary Baine Campbell has brilliantly suggested, this led her to displace the focus of the discussion with the Royal Academy, from the *submicroscopic domains* investigated by Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* (1665), to the *interior of the human mind*. Since the microscopists, even when they attempt to search the interior of living bodies, were bound to see only surfaces, *interiority* as such (what lies *under* the surface) was bound to escape their grasp: the Art of Micrography, writes the Duchess, "*with all its Instruments, is not able to discover the interior natural motions of any part or creature of Nature*" (*Observations*, I, § 3, p. 7). Fancy, not microscopes, is the proper *machina* to investigate this type of "*interior natural motions*" (aka emotions or spirits): "*Cavendish is interested in the immaterial interior of the person, equally elusive (and in a sense illusive) but representable nonetheless. Her defensive sense that her interest and method are alternative to Hooke's, rather than simply coexisting around a pun, may come in part from a sense that the immaterial and unverifiable are losing status as objects of knowledge under the pressure of the cyber-certainty of instrument-based (prosthetic) perception – a perception to which women had little or no access*"[18].

3. *The battlefield of self-moving thoughts*. Using fancy as a her main instrument to investigate the "*microcosm of the self*" (Campbell), Cavendish discovers a world permeated thru and thru by self-moving thoughts: "*self-moving Matter has a perceptive self-knowledge; and consisting of infinite Parts, those parts have particular self-knowledges and perceptions, according to the variety of the corporeal figurative motions*" (*Observations*, I, § 37, p. 186). As Jay Stevenson has already shown, Cavendish "*believes all thoughts are physical, independent, self-moving beings engaged in a struggle, not for the truth, but for representational pre-eminence within the kingdom or commonwealth of the brain*". In parallel with the conflictual interactions taking place between physical bodies, thoughts appear "*as active, independent agents in conflict with one another*"[19]. The investigation of our inner self proposed by the Duchess thus offers the view of a battlefield of contradictory ideas.

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[17] In *Ethics*, II, 43 & 49, Spinoza rejected the notion that an idea (*ideam*) was "*something mute like the picture of a painting* (*quid mutum instar picturae in tabula*)", but insisted on the *active* and *affirmative* nature of the *production* of concepts (*cogitare, intellegere*); addressing her Reader at the very beginning of *Nature's Picture* (1656), Cavendish stated that "*descriptions are to imitate, and fancy to create*", and that "*fancy is not an imitation of nature, but a natural Creation, which I take to be the true Poetry*".

[18] Mary Baine Campbell: *Wonder and Science. Imagining Worlds in Early Modern Europe*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999, p. 182.

[19] Jay Stevenson: "The Mechanist-Vitalist Soul of Margaret Cavendish", *Studies in English Lliterature*, 36 (1996), p. 529-530.

4. *Writing beyond authority*. If Cavendish's texts have been neglected and looked down upon for so many years, it probably is because they often seem blatantly to contradict each other. As Jay Stevenson has also shown, however, we now tend to see such contradictions as a sign of the very consistence of her scriptural project, rather than as a weakness of her feeble (female) mind: "*just as aspects of nature may exist in conflict, so ideas in the mind may contradict one another. Indeed,* The World's Olio *includes numerous contradictory statements, exhibiting a wide scope and haphazard organisation*"[20]. While it is conceivable that Cavendish would "*undercut her status as a philosopher*" as part of a tactical move, in order to "*accommodate herself and her thinking to a society that could not readily accept a woman's mechanist vitalist philosophy*"[21], I'd rather read the undermining of her authoritative and authorial status as *the positive affirmation of the pluralistic, conflictual and transindividual nature of thought and writing as such*. As we have seen in the previous section, such an undercutting of the postures of authority was (soon to be) developed in many literary writings, from Cyrano's *Voyages to the Moon and Sun*, to the blooming of the burlesque and of the fairy tales, and all the way to the Gabalistic tradition generated after Montfaucon de Villars. As soon as Descartes had debunked ancient scholastic authority, in order to establish a modern form of authority based on scientific claims, countless writers revived a very old (sceptic) literary undermining of philosophical authority (emblematized by the writings of Lucian), which soon led to debunk any form of pretention to truth expressed in monological and doctrinal discourse. These writers pose as unreliable narrators and thinkers, and leave the reader with statements and tales which demand to be criticized, rearranged, corrected, harmonized – i.e. *interpreted* in the most active way. Such an attitude generates a new conception of truthfulness: just as "*Cavendish's solipsistic relativism reduces all thinking to the level of psychic symptom*"[22], so do all these writings portray *a truer access to truth*, since they consciously expose its fragility and its conflictual status of a collective work-endlessly-in-progress-and-debate. Here again, it may not be unreasonable to portray Cavendish's (apparently erratic) scriptural posture as closer to our (Latourian) vision of Science than Hooke's.

5. *Joyful pessimism*. One of the main "contradictions" which makes Cavendish writings difficult for us to grasp is the problematic conjunction between, on the one hand, *an amazing freedom and joy of invention*, which allow her to be uniquely audacious, original, creative and inspiring, and, on the other hand, *an already disillusioned attitude*, which may appear as "reactionary" in many ways, in her denunciation of the dangers of modernity (in techno-science, in political philosophy, etc.). Anna Battigelli is certainly right to describe her as "*a profoundly pessimistic thinker*" who "*was presciently aware […] of the darker aspects of the [modern] revolution*" and who "*campaigned against utopian projects for most of her life*"[23]. And yet, anyone who reads any text by the Duchess will feel the radiant energy of a truly utopian inspiration: her writings emerge from, and call for, worlds which are yet to be invented, but which already stimulate our hopes and desires.

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[20] Jay Stevenson: *Physical fictions. Margaret Cavendish and her Material Soul, dissertation*, Rutgers State University of New Jersey, 1997, p. 87.
[21] Jay Stevenson: "The Mechanist-Vitalist Soul of Margaret Cavendish", art. cit, p. 541.
[22] Jay Stevenson: *Physical fictions*, op. cit., p. 81.
[23] Anna Battigelli: *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind*, op. cit., p. 115

MARGARET CAVENDISH'S STAGING OF THE SPIRITS IN *THE BLAZING WORLD*

It is within this broader intellectual project that the description of the immaterial spirits provided in the *Blazing World* becomes truly significant. The narrative follows a young Lady who is abducted by a merchant who suddenly fell in love with her, but whose ship is hit by a tempest, leaving the Lady as the only survivor, close to the North Pole. She enters into "another world", populated with hybrid creatures half-animal, half-human, living in a city named Paradise, of which the Emperor chooses her as his Empress. The first third of the novel is devoted to her discussion with several representatives of the various sciences developed in the Blazing World: she debates with and against the bear-men (experimental philosophers), the bird-men (astronomers), the worm-men (natural philosophers), the ape-men (chemists), the fox-men (politicians) and the spider-men (mathematicians) or the parrot-men (orators and logicians).

At the end of these discussions, she has two chapels build, in which she preaches "*Sermons of terror to the wicked*" and "*Sermons of comfort to those that repented of their sins*" : "*and thus the Empress, by Art, and her own ingenuity, did not only convert the Blazing-world to her own Religion, but kept them in a constant belief, without inforcement or blood-shed; for she knew well, that belief was a thing not to be forced or pressed upon the people, but to be instilled into their minds by gentle persuasions*" (I, 63 / 164). As we have seen in our summary survey of Gabalistic novels, the central question of spirit-tales is that of the *soft power* of mental conditioning (instilling beliefs into people's mind by gentle persuasion). It is therefore no surprise to see the Empress, right after this episode, feel the need to summon the presence and "*help of Immaterial Spirits*". After the worm-men confess never to have seen such creatures within the earth, the fly-men come to state that they observed them in the air:

> *Although Spirits, being immaterial, could not be perceived by the Worm-men in the Earth, yet they perceived that such Creatures did lodge in the vehicles of the Air. Then the Empress asked, Whether they could speak to them, and whether they did understand each other? The Fly-men answered, That those Spirits were always cloath'd in some sort or other of Material Garments; which Garments were their Bodies, made, for the most part, of Air*. (I, 64 / 165)

As these immaterial spirits heard the Empress's call and paid her a visit, she seized the opportunity to ask them all kinds of questions about the nature of immaterial entities (spirits, rational minds, souls) and about their relations with material bodies. As she expressed "*her great desire to make a Cabbala*", along the lines of "*the Jews' Cabbala*", however, "*the Spirits immediately disappeared out of her sight*" (I, 86 / 179). Upon their no less sudden return, as "*they could dictate, but not write*", they advise the Empress to find herself a Scribe in order to write her Cabbala. After hesitating between "*Galileo, Gassendus, Descartes, Helmont, Hobbes or H. Moore*", the Empress decides to call an acquaintance of all these learned men: the Duchess of Newcastle. In a narrative metalepsis which anticipates Mouhy's apparition in his

Lamekis, Margaret Cavendish projects herself (her soul) in the fictional Blazing World of her novel, and she becomes the scribe, companion and "*Platonick Lover*" of the Empress (I, 89-91 / 181). Their "*subtle and insinuating*" relationship allows them to be "*like several parts of one united body*" (I, 93 / 183). As the souls of the two ladies travel the world, which they consider from an atmospheric distance, and as they land in the Duchess' very household in Newcastle, they enter into a most surprising *ménage à trios*:

> *[*Margaret's soul*] entered into her Lord. The Empress's soul perceiving this, did the like: And then the Duke had three Souls in one Body; and had there been but some such Souls more, the Duke would have been like the Grand-Signior in his Seraglio, only it would have been a Platonick Seraglio*. (I, 111 / 194)

After a number of back-and-forth travels between the Blazing World and our own, the Empress decides to put both worlds in proper political order: the two ladies reorganize the former in order "*to have but one Soveraign, one Religion, one Law, and one Language, so that all the World might be but as one united Family, without divisions*" (I, 121 / 201), after which the Empress embarks on a military expedition meant to re-establish the same proper order in our world. In a rewrite of the recent events in English history that had the Cavendish exiled from their property, she stages a frightening display of destructive technology imported from the Blazing World, in order to grant universal monarchy to a King who was harmed by the criminal attacks of his enemies. After a few speeches and warning, the Empress announced

> *that in case they did not submit to him, she intended to fire all their Towns and Cities, and reduce them by force, to what they would not yield with a good will. But they rejected and scorned her Majesties Message, which provoked her anger so much, that she resolved to send her Bird- and Worm-men thither, with order to begin first with their smaller Towns, and set them on fire (for she was loath to make more spoil then she was forced to do) and if they remain'd still obstinate in their resolutions, to destroy also their greater Cities*. (II, 17 / 213)

In a frightening anticipation of Hiroshima and Vietnam, a series of aerial attacks, with carpet bombing, a deluge of fire and rains of chemical weapons, convinces the enemy to surrender, allowing the Empress to "*save her Native Country*" and to "*make it the absolute Monarchy of all that World*" (II, 20 / 214) – with a transmutation of the high tech weapons of mass destruction into weapons of mass distraction, for a final episode of fire-works and "*entertainment*" (II, 21 / 215).

Meanwhile, the Duchess pursues her "*endeavour to be as singular as she can*" (II, 25 / 218): instead of becoming "*the Empress of a terrestrial world*", as she originally wished, she lets the immaterial spirits convince her to "*create a world within herself*", "*a world of her own invention*" (I, 96-101 / 185-188). The second "conversion" of the novel turns the conquest of outside reality into the imaginative creation of inner worlds, under the guidance of fancy. Her singularity can develop in Newcastle, where she goes back to her husband, and where she can "*discourse sometimes with the most Learned persons of that World*" II, 32 / 222). As the Epilogue claims her pride "*not only to be Empress, but Authoress of a whole World*", she invites

her readers, "*if they cannot endure to be subjects*", to "*create Worlds of their own, and Govern themselves as they please*" (II, 36 / 225).

THE IMMATERIAL SPIRITS AND THE GABALISTIC IMAGINARY

The staging of the immaterial spirits in this narrative presents at least four characteristics which anticipate the features of the French Gabalistic novels published during the following century.

1. *The spirits appear as agents of information, intelligence gathering and global surveillance*. The first demand made by the Empress to the spirits who visit her is "*to give her some information*" (I, 65 / 166) of the world she came from. Their particular form of "*intelligence*" (*ibid.*) seems to be that of a Central Intelligence Agency. Later on, when the Duchess has the ambition of becoming "*an Empress of a world*", her soul mate directs her to the spirits: whereas the Glasses provided by the bear-men (experimental scientists) were denounced as "*false Informers*" (I, 27 / 141), "*the best informers are the Immaterial Spirits, and they'll soon tell you, whether it be possible to obtain your wish*" (I, 95 / 184). When asked how their intelligent agency allowed them to "*know what is to come*", they answer "*that their foreknowledge was only a prudent and subtile observation made by a comparing of things or actions past, with those that are present, and that Remembrance was nothing else but a repetition of things or actions past*" (I, 67 / 167). In a later episode, as the spirits accept to act as "*Vice-Roy of her body in the absence of her Soul*", the Empress' and the Duchess' souls travel over their native world, enjoying a wondrous spectacle of *geo-vision*, imbued with moral pessimism:

> *in a moment* [those two female souls] *viewed all the parts of it, and all the actions of all the Creatures therein, especially did the Empress's soul take much notice of the several actions of humane Creatures in all the several Nations and parts of that World, and wonder'd that for all there were so many several Nations, Governments, Laws, Religions, Opinions, &c. they should all yet so generally agree in being Ambitious, Proud, Self-conceited, Vain, Prodigal, Deceitful, Envious, Malicious, Unjust, Revengeful, Irreligious, Factious, &c.* (I, 103 / 190)

As the spirits give us extraordinary means to overcome the limitations of our natural perception, and as they provide us with a global supervision of the human world, they also feed a disillusioned intelligence of the moral limitations of human behaviors.

2. *The agency of the immaterial spirits is a function of the circulation of their airy vehicles*. As it is constantly the case with French Gabalistic tales, the nature of the spirits is a matter of borderline between the material and the immaterial realm. In conformity with the definition to be provided, a century later, in Diderot's *Encyclopedia* for the word "*Esprit*" (in chemistry), Cavendish's spirits seem to consist in "*a subtle, unbound (délié), invisible, impalpable body, a vapour, a breath, an almost immaterial being*"[24]. This "almost immaterial" mode of existence explains why

[24] "ESPRIT, (*Chimie*) *ce nom a été employé dans sa signification propre, par les Chimistes comme par les Philosophes & par les Medecins, pour exprimer un corps subtil, délié, invisible, impalpable, une vapeur, un*

they are so often associated with the element of the "*thin air*" (I, 78 / 173) – accessible to the bird-men but not to the worm-men. As it is explained about the travelling souls of the Empress and the Duchess, "*had they been of some grosser sort of Air, the sound of that Air's language would have been as perceptible as the blowing of* Zephyrus" (I, 108 /193).

The evocation of language and of the wind, which caused the original tempest in the novel, freeing the Lady from her raptors, gives us suggestive clues about the mode of existence of the spirits. Far from opposing the world of immaterial spirits to the world of material bodies, Cavendish suggests that there can only be *one* Nature, which has both its material and its immaterial dimensions (or "attributes" in Spinozese). "*The word* World *implies a quantity or multitude of corporeal Creatures, but we being Immaterial, can make no world of Spirits*" (I, 78 / 174). It may be relevant to quote the highly unorthodox definition of "*the Natural Soul of Man*" provided by the *Observations*: "*a Material self-moving substance; for the Soul of Man is part of the Soul of Nature, and the Soul of Nature is Material*" (*Observations*, II, § 15, p. 44). It may also be worth noting the no less heretical inversion operated by Cavendish against the traditional dualist vulgate, when the spirits answer that, instead of the soul being the (free) cause of the body's movements, "*bodies made Souls active, as giving them motion*" (I, 80 / 175): "*were it not for the motion of Matter, we Spirits, could not move, nor give you any answer to your several questions*" (I, 74 / 171).

But it is even more suggestive to pay close attention to the very close and careful articulation that the *Blazing World* constructs between the spirits and their "*vehicles*". As Miriam Wallraven has clearly demonstrated, "*what all spirits and souls need is a form of substance, matter, or corporeality in the sense that they consist of a material body, of a vehicle. This vehicle enables them not only to move, but also to have human perception, knowledge and speech*"[25]. The dialogue in which the spirits discuss their relations to their vehicles deserves a longer quote:

> *She asked them, whether their Vehicles were living bodies? They are self-moving bodies, answered they, and therefore they must needs be living; for nothing can move it self, without it hath life. Then, said she, it must necessarily follow, that this living, self-moving body gives a Spirit motion, and not that the Spirit gives the body, as its vehicle, motion. You say very true, answered they, and we told you this before. Then the Empress asked them, of what forms of Matter those Vehicles were? They said they were of several different forms; some gross and dense, and others more pure, rare, and subtil. Then she enquired, whether Immaterial Spirits were not of a Globous figure? They answered, Figure and Body were but one thing; for no Body was without Figure, nor no Figure without Body […] But if you be not material, said the Empress, how can you be Generators of all Creatures? We are no more, answered they, the Generators of material Creatures, then they are the Generators of us Spirits. Then she asked, whether they did leave their Vehicles? No, answered they; for we being*

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souffle, un être presque immatériel" (Diderot and d'Alembert: *Encyclopaedia*, available online at http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/).

[25] Miriam Wallraven: "'My Spirits long to wander in the Air...': Spirits and Souls in Margaret Cavendish's Fiction between Early Modern Philosophy and Cyber Theory", *Early Modern Literary Studies* Special Issue 14 (May, 2004): 10.1-27, § 14.

incorporeal, cannot leave or quit them; but our Vehicles do change into several forms and figures, according as occasion requires. (I, 70-71 / 169)

I would like to read this discussion as an amazing anticipation of Marshall McLuhan's famous maxim that *The medium is the message*. The spirit does not exist outside of its vehicle. Or as stated by the *Allegory 17* to be found in the *World's Olio*: "*The Spirit Travells in Ships of Medium*". The displacement operated by Cavendish on traditional metaphysics is absolutely revolutionary: we are no longer led to think within the dualist framework, where the substance of the spirit/soul would introduce movement into the unanimated world of material bodies; neither is our vision merely turned upside down, into a materialistic philosophy where self-moving matter would be the source of movement for mental operations (through the workings of the nervous system and the brain).

By stating that "*we are no more the Generators of material Creatures, then they are the Generators of us Spirits*", Cavendish's fancy plunges us into an unusual conceptual frame matched only, a few years later, by Spinoza's parallelism: the spirits and their vehicles are one and the same thing, seen from different points of view (or "attributes"). Their relation is not one of determination, causation or priority of one side over the other, but a relation of parallelism. Life is not "given" to the vehicles by the spirits: "*the vehicles are living bodies*" by themselves. The spirits may be "*incorporeal*", but they "*cannot leave or quit their vehicles*".

This revolutionary framework – which cognitive science is rediscovering nowadays as the most relevant way to solve the puzzles of the mind/body relation[26] – closes a number of moot questions (those pertaining to the priority order between matter and thought), but it opens a whole range of new problems. What is now mostly relevant is the type of vehicles through which the spirits circulate: are they made of "*gross and dense*" stuff, or of "*more pure, rare, and subtil*" (almost immaterial) fluff? What are the "*forms and figures*" of these vehicles? The displacement initiated by Cavendish consists in a radical shift from ontology to *mediology*: the properties of the message (spirit) are inseparable from the properties of the medium (vehicles). This displacement also redefines the very location of *l'esprit*: no longer should it be identified with the individual mind (the brain, the soul). Its most massive mode of existence and manifestation is now to be seen in *the messages* which circulate *between* the minds. The fact that Cavendish, like Montfaucon de Villars a few years later, invite us to cast the spirits *in the plural* can be seen simultaneously as a way to depict "*a self-reflexive multiplicity*"[27] inside of each and every individual, and as a way to locate the spiritual/mental life in the *relations* among humans, in the evolution of the *collective intelligence* (or "general intellect"), rather than in the personal psyche. Our collective spirits, our minds, do not exist outside of the messages and the media (the vehicles) which circulate among us.

3. *The depiction of the immaterial spirits helps us imagine the particular type of agency which defines "soft power"*. As the Empress wants to write her Cabbala, the

[26] See for instance Antonio Damasio: *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain*, New York, Mariner Books, 2003.

[27] See Geraldine Wagner: "Romancing Multiplicity: Female Subjectivity and the Body Divisible in Margaret Cavendish's Blazing World", *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 9.1 (May, 2003): 1.1-59, § 1.

Spirits tell her "*that they could dictate, but not write*" (I, 89 / 180): behind the author who signs, and the pen that writes, their precise function is, in full agreement with etymology, *inspirational*. The immaterial spirits (and their vehicles) are located *upstream* from the moment of action, writing, speaking, or even thinking. It seems fitting that modes of thinking and behaving like Prudence or Honesty would be presented as being "*somewhat like Spirits, because they are immaterial, although their actions are corporeal*" (I, 113 / 196). Even if spirits can't transform the material world by their direct or immediate action, they *condition* human actions: prudence, honesty, rashness or folly are spiritual states of mind (virtues or hexis), which determine (downstream) how a person will transform the material and social world.

As we have seen through previous quotes, in their most "*pure, rare and subtil*" forms, the spirits are typically "*insinuating*". After they are asked by the Empress if it was one of them who "*tempted Eve and brought all the mischiefs upon mankind,* […] *they answered that Spirits could not commit actual evils. The Emperess said they might do it by persuasions. They answered that Persuasions were actions*" (I, 82 / 176). Their agency of insinuation and persuasion is precisely located at the level of *soft power*, in its Foucaldian definition of "*a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme, it constrains and forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless a way of acting upon an acting subject*" – an acting subject who, Foucault adds, also is endowed with a certain degree of *freedom* (since *power* is different from sheer *violence*)[28]. Thus, even if the spirits cannot act (materially), they are much more "powerful" than mere physical bodies, since they can *condition* (control, trigger, modulate) the way free agents behave. Another dialogue, between the Empress and her husband, as they prepare to wage war against the enemies of her native country, is particularly enlightening, if one wishes to understand more precisely the relation between hard and soft power articulated by Cavendish:

> *the violent and strong actions of War will never agree with Immaterial Spirits; for Immaterial Spirits cannot fight, nor make Trenches, Fortifications, and the like. But, said the Emperor, their Vehicles can; especially if those Vehicles be men's Bodies, they may be serviceable in all the actions of War.* (II, 2 / 204)

Between the soldier, or the suicide-bomber, who pulls the trigger, and those who persuaded him to perform this action, who is more powerful (efficient, dangerous)? Aren't all material forms of agency conditioned by (less dramatic) spiritual forms of agency? In her investigation of the inner self, Cavendish does indeed reveal a battlefield of self-moving thoughts. Her staging of the immaterial spirits in the *Blazing World* invites us to see human beings – "*men's Bodies*" – as mere vehicles for self-moving perceptions and thoughts (as they can circulate in books, pamphlets, newspapers, television networks or the Internet). Here again, the displacement is radical, since individual (free) agents appear as partial, temporary, replaceable and dispensable vehicles swept away by the transindividual circulation of inspirational

[28] Michel Foucault: "The Subject and Power" in Hubert Dreyfus & Paul Rabinow: *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 220.

winds. It is a totally revolutionary (and humbling) vision of human agency which Margaret Cavendish sketches in the 1660s (along with Spinoza), a *dispossessed* and *transidividual* vision, in sharp contrast with the "possessive individualism" described by Crawford Brough McPherson as emerging in those same years.

4. Finally, *it seems fitting that the dynamics of soft power and the practice of writing would coalesce under the figure of the Cabbala, re-appropriated in an attempts to reclaim the powers of fiction*. I hope to have shown that inscribing the *Blazing World* within a series of "Cabalistic novels" is not as artificial as it may originally have appeared. Our five defining features of the Gabalistic novels do indeed apply to Cavendish's utopian voyage: (a) her narrative stages immaterial spirits, (b) their vehicles are closely associated with the subtle and impalpable element of the air, (c) their presentation is part of a discussion of machines and new technology (microscopes, telescopes, fire-stone bombs), (d) their agency consists in conditioning our (apparently free) behaviours, thus providing (e) an explanatory frame to account for the puzzling aspects of human subjectivity, while (f) hinting towards a regime of narration which problematizes (and undermines through self-parody) the very authority of its own enunciation.

On this last point, apart from the narrative metalepsis though which the (real) author becomes a character of her (clearly fictional) plot, apart from the "contradictions" which logicians can easily uncover between several statements made by Cavendish, apart from ironically staging herself as a Scribe when she confessed that her handwriting was unreadable, it is the very gesture of reclaiming the power of poetical fancy which may be the most interesting move attempted by the *Blazing World*. Cabalists originally appear as an object of *mockery* in the novel: the first "information" provided by the spirits about the Empress' native world concerns the staging and the interpretation of a play by Ben Jonson about Alchemists and Cabalists, who are portrayed as "*mere cheats*" (I, 66 / 166). According to the higher intelligence provided by the spirits, "*Cabbalists have nothing else to do but to trouble their heads with such useless fancies; for naturally there is no such thing as prime or all in numbers; nor is there any other mystery in numbers, but what man's fancy makes*" (I, 74 / 171). The Cabalists' main philosophical mistake concerns the very core of Cavendish's mediologic message: "*they take the purest and subtillest parts of Matter for Immaterial Spirits*" (I, 79 / 174), instead of understanding the proper articulation (of mediation) between the immaterial spirits and their material vehicles. Later, as we have already seen, it is when the Empress evokes "*the Jews' Cabala*" that the spirits mysteriously vanish without any explanation.

While the Cabala is thus clearly denounced as a vain and ridiculous enterprise, which deserves to be subjected to derision and parody, it soon appears, however, that this denunciation is not without ambivalence. Not only does the accusation of *fancy* ring hollow, coming from an author who vindicates the inventive power of fancy against the limitations of experimental observation, but it is the very enterprise of *writing a Cabala* – that most discredited genre – which is the constant obsession of both the Empress and the Duchess. Far from merely *rejecting* the writing of a Cabala, the spirits seem more inclined to inspire the ladies to write *a different kind* of Cabala: not the Jews' Cabala, not a philosophical Cabala, not a moral Cabala, but "*a Poetical or Romancical Cabbala, wherein you can use Metaphors, Allegories, Similitudes, &c.*

and interpret them as you please" (I, 92 / 183). After having gently persuaded the Empress to opt for a Poetical Cabala (rather than a religious or philosophical one), the Duchess herself is persuaded by the soft power of the spirits to renounce her ambition to reign upon a terrestrial world, but instead to "*create a world within herself*":

> *for every humane Creature can create an Immaterial World fully inhabited by immaterial Creatures, and populous of immaterial subjects, such as we are, and all this within the compass of the head or scull; […] also he may alter that world as often as he pleases, or change it from a natural world, to an artificial; he may make a world of Ideas, a world of Atomes, a world of Lights, or whatsoever his fancy leads him to. And since it is in your power to create such a world, What need you to venture life, reputation and tranquility, to conquer a gross material world? […] You have converted me, said the Duchess to the Spirits, from my ambitious desire; wherefore I'll take your advice, reject and despise all the worlds without me, and create a world of my own.* (I, 96-98 / 185-186)

As confirmed by the novel's Epilogue, which closely echoes this last quote, the world-making enterprise of a Poetical Cabala reveals the core message provided by Cavendish to her reader: *It is in your power to create a world of your own!* Male or female, you carry this power with you at all times, "*within the compass of your head*". Once you have created it, you can alter and change it as you please, according to your wildest fancy, without worrying about its "naturality" or "artificiality". While being fed by your own desires, this world will also be nourished by all the inspirations you have received from all the spirits who have conditioned your thinking, your fancy and your wishes.

As they *convert* the Duchess to the new (lay) religion of literature[29], the spirits resuscitate a central tenet of the (Jews') Cabala: *the magical power of words*. As Count Jean Potocki will state in the last great Gabalistic novel of the 18th century, the core intuition of the Cabala rests on the disproportionate effects produced by the airy vehicles of language – these words made from *the purest and subtillest parts of Matter* (a modulation of the wind expired by our human throats):

> *In Hebrew every letter is a number, every word a learned combination of signs, every phrase a terrible formula, which, when correctly pronounced with all the appropriated aspirates and stresses, could cause mountains to crumble and rivers to dry up.* […] *Words strike the air and the mind, they act on the senses and on the soul. Although you are not initiates, you can easily grasp that they are the true intermediaries between matter and every order of intelligence.*[30]

In felicitous conditions, the most subtle materiality of a declaration of war, of a command to build a highway or a dam can indeed be seen as "*terrible formulas*", which cause "*mountains to crumble and rivers to dry up*". As the vehicles of words

[29] On the relation between literature and the spirit(s), see Annette & Linda Simonis: "Zum Verhältnis von Literatur und 'Geist' aus neuerer literaturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive", in Edith Düsing & Hans-Dieter Klein (ed.), *Geist und Literatur. Modelle in der Weltliteratur von Shakespeare bis Celan*, Würzburg, 2008, p. 7-22.

[30] Jan Potocki, *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* (1793-1815), transl. by Ian MacLean, London, Penguin, 1995, Day 9, p. 102.

"*strike the air and the human minds*", we do indeed have the power to create artificial worlds of our own. The Jews' Cabala thus provides a model of spiritual agency which is both ridiculous, since "*there is no other mystery in numbers, but what man's fancy makes*", and endlessly inspiring, since human agency rests almost solely on our power to communicate our world-making fancies through the subtillest intermediaries of our almost immaterial language. Ultimately, it is this common awareness which motivates the connexion I am suggesting in this paper between Cavendish's *Blazing World* and the French Gabalistic tradition.

TIPHAIGNE DE LA ROCHE'S AMBIVALENT « ELEMENTARY SPIRITS »

Not much is known about Charles Tiphaigne de la Roche (1722-1774), who lived exactly a hundred years after Margaret Cavendish on the other side of the English Channel. He was a physician in Montebourg (Normandy), presented his dissertation on the nervous fibres and the affects in 1748, after which he wrote half a dozen books in very diverse genres, from a treatise explaining sexual appeal through perspiration, to utopian voyages, a treatise on overfishing in the Atlantic seas and a psychological novel. Like Margaret Cavendish, he has been almost totally neglected by literary history, until a very recent rediscovery, which is still in its embryonic stage (contrary to the current fame of the Duchess of Newcastle among English-speaking literary critics and Women Studies programs)[31].

In two of his books, Tiphaigne places "*esprits élémentaires*" on the front stage of his narrative: in *L'empire des Zaziris sur les humains, ou La zazirocratie* (published in 1761), these superior creatures are portrayed as "*playing with humans in the same way as humans play with animals*"[32]. Our erratic whims, our self-destructive passions, our crazy ideas and our irrational moves are explained by the invisible games played by the Zaziris in order to entertain themselves at the expense of our happiness. While this brief text offers less a story than a satirical portraiture of the human condition and of its various vices, Tiphaigne had imagined, one year earlier, a more traditional utopian travel to an undiscovered island, *Giphantie* (the title of the book, and an anagram of his own name)[33].

In this island located somewhere in the middle of Africa, the elementary spirits have developed a number of technological wonders, which they use to exercise a rather benevolent (if amused) form of global surveillance over human societies. Here

[31] For a synthetic and erudite view on Tiphaigne's work, the best reference remains Jacques Marx: *Tiphaigne de la Roche : Modèles de I'imaginaire au XVIIIe siècle*, Bruxelles, Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1981. More recent information is available in Philippe Vincent: *Édition critique d'Amilec ou la graine d'hommes de Charles-François Tiphaigne de la Roche*, Mémoire de DEA, Université de Lyon-3, 2001 and in Marianne Dubacq, *Manière dont tel écrivain a vu Giphantie ou le prise déformant du simulacre*, Mémoire de l'Université de Grenoble 3, 2008. Many suggestive insights can also be found in Guy Marcy : *Tiphaigne de la Roche, magicien de la raison*, Montpellier, Le Méridien, 1972.

[32] Charles-François Tiphaigne de la Roche, *L'empire des Zaziris sur les humains, ou La zazirocratie*, Pékin [Paris], chez Dsmgtlfpqxz, 1761 (available for download on http:gallica.bnf.fr). A transcription in text format, provided by Marianne Dubacq, is also available on the website devoted to Tiphaigne, available from http://w3.u-grenoble3.fr/lire/.

[33] Charles Tiphaigne de la Roche, *Giphantie*: Babylone [Paris], [Durand], 1760 (available for download on http:gallica.bnf.fr). A transcription in text format, provided by Marianne Dubacq, is also available on the website devoted to Tiphaigne, available from http://w3.u-grenoble3.fr/lire/.

again, the satire focuses on the generation and economy of our affects: the traveller discovers that all of our passions are triggered by tiny and invisible mosquitoes (*moucherons*), flying in the air that surrounds us, biting us occasionally, thus creating various types of "itching", which account for the variety of human emotions. The traveller also finds out that our inventions and discoveries come from infinitesimally small particles flying in the air, which penetrate through the porosities of our skin, travel with the inner flows of our body, and eventually reach our brain, where they progressively unfold, thus suggesting innovative ideas in the thinker's head. *Zazirocratie* and *Giphantie* jointly depict a world in which the human mind is surrounded, penetrated and occupied by chaotic flows of heterogeneous influences which compete to condition our beliefs and desires. The satiric tone adopted by the narrator leads us simultaneously to mock the inconsistency of human behaviours, to wish for a moral reformation of mankind, and to despair of its possibility.

Although Tiphaigne rarely mentions the folkloric figures of the Gabalistic imaginary (sylphs, undines and gnomes), his work gains much intelligibility when it is relocated within the tradition of spirit-tales presented in the first section of this paper. Like Cavendish, (a) he stages elementary spirits, (b) he locates their agency in (or rather *on*) the air. He is more directly interested than the Duchess in (c) the developments of new visual machines, his only (minor) claim to fame coming precisely from having been labelled, since the 19th century, as "the inventor of photography"[34]. His elementary spirits also appear (d) to revel in conditioning our free behaviours, while (e) the many explanations they provide in their discussions with the narrator help us account for the erratic nature of our affects and mental complexions. Finally, (f) Tiphaigne's intentions are very hard to grasp since, like Cavendish, he seems to make it a habit to contradict himself, or rather to undermine the truth-value of all the statements one could have been tempted to attribute to the author of his books.

Although, for this very reason, his "philosophy" is difficult to define within the traditional categories of the History of thought, Tiphaigne often toys with the notions that defined Margaret Cavendish's ontology: as a physician following the new developments in vitalist physiology, he often evokes the possibility of self-moving matter, illustrated by the workings of the nervous fibres on which he wrote his dissertation. While a century of reflections and hypotheses on the possible self-organisation of material molecules into living bodies could have allowed him to be more precise than the Duchess in his investigation the material phenomena, it is quite obvious that, like the author of the *Blazing World*, his writings are more attracted by

[34] Here is what the *esprits élémentaires* tell the narrator after showing him perfect reproductions of historical scenes, endowed with the exactitude of a mirror-image, but keeping such images recorded for eternity: "*Tu sais que les rayons de la lumière, réfléchis des différents corps, font tableau, & peignent ces corps sur toutes les surfaces polies, sur la rétine de l'œil, par exemple, sur l'eau, sur les glaces. Les esprits élémentaires ont cherchés à fixer ces images passagères ; ils ont composé une matière très subtile, très visqueuse & très prompte à se dessécher & à se durcir, au moyen de laquelle un tableau est fait en un clin d'œil. Ils enduisent de cette matière une pièce de toile, & la présente aux objets qu'ils veulent peindre. Le premier effet de la toile, est celui du miroir ; on y voit tous les corps voisins & éloignés, dont la lumière peut apporter l'image. Mais ce qu'une glace ne saurait faire, la toile, au moyen de son enduit visqueux, retient les simulacres. Le miroir vous rend fidèlement les objets, mais n'en garde aucun ; nos toiles ne les rendent pas moins fidèlement, & les gardent tous. Cette impression des images est l'affaire du premier instant où la toile les reçoit : on l'ôte sur le champ, on la place dans un endroit obscur ; une heure après, l'enduit est desséché, & vous avez un tableau d'autant plus précieux, qu'aucun art ne peut en imiter la vérité, & que le temps ne peut en aucune manière l'endommager*" (*Giphantie*, I, XVIII, p. 131-132).

flights of fancy than by the meticulous observation of medical experiments. He too puts his literary imagination to the service of a world-creating enterprise, of which the ultimate stake seems to explore – in a sort of Macrographia – the workings of the inner self.

For the general impression made by Tiphaigne's imaginary worlds is one of dissolution of the individual person within collective flows of discourses. One episode taken from *Giphantie* illustrates the way in which, like Cavendish, Tiphaigne invites us to envisage people as mere vehicles for the sound-bites and commonplaces which (momentarily) invest and occupy their mental space, their brains and their mouths. Half-way between Lucian's *Icaromenipppos* (where the space traveler overhears all the contradictory prayers addressed by humans to Zeus), and our most high-tech devices of global surveillance (CCTV on a worldwide scale, I-Phone cum *Earth.tv*), the Prefect of the elementary spirits puts a big "Globe" in front of the narrator and a magic wand in his hand, thus allowing him to spy (with a simple "click") on all the conversations currently held all over the world:

> "*Remarque tel point de ce Globe qu'il te plaira. En y posant la pointe de la baguette que je te mets aux mains, & portant l'autre extrémité à ton oreille tu vas entendre distinctement tout ce qui se dit dans l'endroit correspondant de la terre.*" *[…] Le préfet de Giphantie me présenta un miroir. "Tu ne peux que deviner les choses, me dit-il : mais, avec ta baguette & cette glace, tu vas entendre & voir tout à la fois; rien ne t'échappera ; tu seras comme présent à tout ce qui se passe. De distance en distance, poursuivit l'esprit élémentaire, il se trouve dans l'atmosphère des portions d'air que les esprits ont tellement arrangées, qu'elles reçoivent les rayons réfléchis des différents endroits de la terre, & les renvoient au miroir que tu as sous les yeux […] Tu es le maître de promener tes regards sur les habitations des hommes*". *Je me saisis avec empressement de cette glace merveilleuse. En moins d'un quart d'heure, je passai toute la terre en revue.* (*Giphantie*, I, VIII, p. 50 & I, XII, p. 78-80)[35]

What do such wonders of technology allow the narrator to see and hear? A "*Hodgepodge*" of the most banal and hollow trivialities! Just as Hooke's microscope, in Cavendish's opinion, triggered as many errors as it generated discoveries, so it appears, in Tiphaigne's novel, that our wonderful new communication devices reproduce and spread the same old clichés, only faster and at a wider scale (millenarist anxieties, delusional love, nationalistic passions, moralistic topoi, etc.) (*Giphantie*, I, XI, p. 71-73). Here too, the picture of the human world provided by the spirits is the image of a battlefield of self-moving clichés, which circulate through people's minds

[35] "*Observe what point of the Globe thou pleases. Place there the end of this rod which I give thee, and putting the other end to thy ear, thou shalt hear distinctly whatever is said in the corresponding part of the earth. […] The Prefect of Giphantia presented me with a Mirrour. "Thou canst only (says he) guess at things, but with thy rod and that glass, thou art going to hear and see both at once; nothing will escape thee; thou will be as present to whatever passes. From space to space (continued the Prefect), there are in the atmosphere portions of air which the spirits have so ranged, that they receive the rays reflected from the different parts of the earth, and remit them to this Mirrour: so that by inclining the glass different ways, the several parts of the earth's surface will be visible on it. They will all appear one after the other, if the Mirrour is placed successively in all possible aspects. It is in thy power to view the habitations of every mortal." I hastily took up the wonderful glass. In less than a quarter of an hour I surveyed the whole earth*." (*Giphantia*, London: Horsefield, 1761, vol. I, p. 37 & 56-57)

and discourses, as if individuals were reduced to the status of temporary carriers and vehicles for the transindividual reproduction of stereotypes[36].

In another striking episode, the elementary spirit reveal the true cause of human *emotions*, i.e. (literally) of the affects which *move* and *motivate* us (freely) to act as we do. The Prefect of the spirits describes how a very special tree in Giphantie produces very special fruits, which evolve into worms, which later come out of their chrysalis in the form of almost immaterial mosquitoes (*moucherons*), flying in the air all around us:

> *Là, ces moucherons invisibles s'attachent aux hommes, & ne cessent de les piquer d'un aiguillon dont la nature les a pourvus. Et comme la tarentule, avec le poison qu'elle dépose dans la plaie qu'elle a faite, inspire un désir immodéré de s'agiter, de sauter, de danser ; de même ces petits insectes causent, suivant leurs différentes espèces, différentes démangeaisons : telle est la démangeaison de parler, la démangeaison d'écrire, la démangeaison de savoir, la démangeaison de briller, la démangeaison d'être connu, et cent autres. De-là, tous les mouvements que se donnent les hommes, tous les efforts qu'ils font, toutes les passions qui les agitent.* (*Giphantie*, II, VII, p. 55-56)[37]

If, as we have seen, Cavendish could be said to "*reduce all thinking to the level of psychic symptom*", so does Tiphaigne reduce all human motivations to the level of physical itching, triggered in us by almost immaterial *moucherons*, flying in the air that surrounds us. Of course, denouncing the passions as a source of alienation, denouncing the contradictions among human opinions, denouncing the repetition of clichés, belong to the oldest trick in the satirist's bag – and here again, one often reads an inspiration directly drawn from Lucian between the lines of Tiphaigne's texts. However, one highly unsettling feature of Tiphaigne's writing comes from the undermining of his own moralistic stance, which is almost systematically listed as merely one triviality among many others: the denunciation of clichés is denounced as being *itself* a cliché, duly derided in the hodgepodge of trivialities brought to the narrator by the technological marvel of the Globe. Similarly, in the quote devoted to the *moucherons*, the "itch to write" (which pushed Tiphaigne to publish his books) is listed as one of the many ridicules triggering pointless agitation in human beings.

Like the *Blazing World*, *Giphantie* displays a disturbing coexistence of an exuberant and utopian drive towards technological inventions, and a radically disillusioned and pessimistic attitude, devoid of any hope to improve human affairs. Tiphaigne portrays a world of intense and limitless communication, through the omnipresent though invisible vehicles of almost immaterial mosquitoes, flying seeds,

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[36] Richard Dawkins has coined the term "*meme*" to describe the same type of transindividual reproduction of collective mental entities: "*Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation*" (Richard Dawkins: *The Selfish Gene* (1976), Oxford University Press, 1989, chapter 11 "Memes: the new replicators")

[37] "*There [these invisible maggots] stick fast to men, and cease not to infect them with a sting given to them by nature. And as the tarantula, with the poison which she leaves in the wound she has made, inspires an immoderate desire to leap and dance, just so these small insects cause, according to their different kinds, different Itchings. Such are the itch of talking, the itch of writing, the itch of knowing, the itch of shining, the itch of being known, with a hundred others. Hence, all the motions, men put themselves into, all the efforts they make, all the passions that stir them.*" (*Giphantia*, II, 40-41)

light rays, airwaves – but it is a world where communication conditions us without any specific purpose, a world where communication takes place only for its own pointless sake. The medium has totally absorbed and neutralized the message: the elementary spirits unveil a collective mental landscape where the plethora of vehicles crowds out a painful deficit of meaning.

This deep ambivalence between the joys of communicational inventions and the despair of unsubstantial content is refracted upon another ambivalence, affecting the elementary spirits themselves. At the origins of the Gabalistic novels, Montfaucon de Villars satirically staged elementary spirits in which nobody (except for the clinically naïve) was supposed to believe. The Count of Gabalis was ridiculed in his pretense to unveil the "secret sciences" of the Paracelsian Cabala. In the later texts exploiting the Gabalistic mythology, a tacit agreement between the author and the reader assumed that sylphs and undines were purely fictional entities, devoid of any actual reality. In the 18th century, the question is no longer to decide whether such creatures exist (most readers assume they don't), but whether their tales portray benevolent or malevolent (fictional) beings.

While Cavendish's immaterial spirits seemed to be informers above suspicion, Tiphaigne's elementary spirits prove to be highly suspicious characters… In *Giphantie*, they are portrayed as purely *benevolent creatures*, who gently mock humans for their irremediable weakness, but who constantly care for their safety: "*Que feriez-vous, faibles mortels, si, répandus dans l'air, dans l'eau, dans les entrailles de la terre, dans la sphère du feu, [les esprits élémentaires] ne veillaient sans cesse à votre sûreté? Sans nos soins, les éléments déchaînés auraient, depuis longtemps, effacé jusqu'aux derniers vestiges du genre humain*" (*Giphantie*, I, IV, p. 19)[38].

As we have seen, however, in *Zazirocratie*, the same *esprits élémentaires* are portrayed as rather *mischievous* creatures, more interested in entertaining themselves at the expense of human stupidity than in caring for our welfare. This is clearly stated by the opening paragraph of the narrative:

> *Avant l'An un, qui commença la généalogie des temps, le Souverain Etre créa, depuis lui jusqu'à l'insecte, des multitudes innombrables d'Esprits, aussi diversifiés que nos visages. Il voulut qu'il y eût, de classe en classe, des Génies qui dominassent les uns sur les autres; & que ceux qui vivent unis à la nature des Eléments, se servissent de nous pour leur plaisir & leur utilité, comme nous nous servons des animaux. Ainsi l'homme se joue du singe, & les Zaziris s'amusent de l'homme*. (*Zazirocratie*, p. 1-2)[39]

According to this view, spirits are not all born equal: some are more powerful than others, along a vast hierarchical chain of spiritual beings, and the stronger never miss an opportunity to dominate and exploit the weaker. The world of the spirits is a

[38] "*What would you do, O ye feeble mortals! If dispersed in the air, in the sea, in the bowels of the earth, in the sphere of fire, [the elementary spirits] did not incessantly watch for your welfare? Without our care, the unbridled elements would long since have effaced all remains of the human kind*" (*Giphantia*, I, 15).

[39] "*Before the first Year, which originated the genealogy of times, the Sovereign Being created, from himself all the way to the insects, countless multitudes of Spirits, as diversified as our faces. He had some Genies, from class to class, dominate over the others, and He had those who live united with the nature of the elements use us for their pleasure and utility, in the same way as we use animals. So it is that man plays with monkeys, and that the Zaziris toy with men*" (My translation).

battlefield of intertwined influences and unequal cross-conditionings. The "*purest and subtilest*" among them, the elementary spirits, use us for their pleasure, they play with us for their entertainment, and treat us like their pets. As it will be the case again a few years later in Cazotte's *Diable amoureux* (1772) or, even more strikingly, in Potocki's *Manuscript Found in Saragossa* (1793-1815), the (soft) Power which mentally conditions and manipulates us remains deeply ambiguous, balancing between a benevolent side of loving (or at least caring) surveillance, for the common good, and a more worrisome side of mischievous play, for the entertainment of a happy few. Are our spiritual Big Brothers watching us in order to keep us safe, or in order to have a good laugh when they manage to pull a fast one on us? As both the disciplines and the first forms of biopower emerged during the 18th century, such an uncertainty became a crucial feature of our socio-political landscape – with its unrelenting question addressed to any structure of power: do we live in a Giphantie or in a Zazirocratie?

COMMUNICATION ACROSS THE CHANNEL?

In order to elucidate the strange name he found for the elementary spirits in his second text, Tiphaigne writes that "*ces Génies ont je ne sais combien de sens que nous n'avons pas; & ceux qui influent sur nos plaisirs, nos malheurs, & même sur notre santé s'appellent Zaziris, qui, en Chinois, veut dire Agents*" (*Zazirocratie*, p. 6-7)[40]. We now understand more precisely in which manner the immaterial spirits can be called "agents": theirs is *an agency of communication*. Just like the "animal spirits" within the human body are defined by Voltaire, in the *Encyclopaedia*, as "*what has never been seen and what gives movement and life*" to the animated body[41], similarly the elementary spirits represent the influencing factors which communicate movements within human societies. Tiphaigne envisioned their operations as located "in the atmosphere", and mediated by the movements of "portions of air". A few years earlier, another mysterious novel entitled *Le Roman cabalistique* (1750) described herds of invisible animals "flying up and down the streets and squares of Paris in order to influence human thoughts and destinies through the mere displacement of air caused by their movements"[42].

This highly peculiar form of agency located by Cavendish, Tiphaigne and the Gabalistic tradition "in the atmosphere", strange as it is, starts to make much intuitive sense when we relocate it in what we now call the *mediasphere*. What does it mean nowadays to be "*on the air*"? What, if not to have "almost immaterial" parts of oneself emanate from our being (our image, voice, simulacra, sentences, ideas), to have them magically fly in the air like an invisible and impalpable wind, in such a way that they

[40] "*These Genies have I don't know how many senses which we don't have, & those who exert their influence on our pleasures, on our troubles & even on our health, are called Zaziris, which, in Chinese, means Agents.*"

[41] The juxtaposition of the (superstitious) *Genies* and of the (materialist) *vital spirits* in Voltaire's article may be worth mentioning here : "Esprit familier *se dit dans un autre sens, & signifie ces êtres mitoyens, ces génies, ces demons admis dans l'antiquité, comme l'esprit de Socrate, &c.* Esprit *signifie quelquefois la plus subtile partie de la matière: on dit* esprits animaux, esprits vitaux, *pour signifier ce qu'on n'a jamais vu, & ce qui donne le mouvement & la vie*" (Voltaire's article ESPRIT (*Belles Lettres*) in Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopaedia*).

[42] Isabella Mattazzi's description of the anonymous *Le Roman cabalistique* (Amsterdam, Jordi, 1750), in her study *La magia come maschera di Eros*, op. cit., p. 23.

can influence (even minimally) distant minds and behaviours. It may seem farfetched to credit Margaret Cavendish or Charles Tiphaigne with a first intuition of the ways in which our mediatic sociality conditions our existence through what goes "on the air" (news, commercials, phone calls, wireless connection to our email), since the airy vehicles of such mediatic sociality would only be discovered many centuries after these authors' death. However, apart from the fact that the reflection on the power and dangers of mediatic communication goes all the way back to Ancient Greece, as John Durham Peeters has convincingly showed in his fascinating book *Speaking Into the Air*[43], we should remember that the period covered by the Gabalistic novels correspond quite precisely with the first development of periodical newspapers. The influence and soft power of regular flows of information across Europe became a social and political problem very early on, discussed by a lot of reflective minds during the 18th century[44].

Rather than the English word "spirit", a wider inquiry into such intuitions of our mediatic societies should use the French word "*esprit*" as a central platform of exploration and connections. The *esprits* staged by Montfaucon, Mouhy, Tiphaigne or Potocki are located at the crossroad of many lexical fields, which together unfold a rich and multifarious imaginary for the representation of collective mental forces. In religion, *l'Esprit* (the Holy Spirit) refers to a divine force descending upon the individual soul; in philosophy and early psychology, *l'esprit* (the mind) translates the latin *Mens*, which Spinoza gave as the equivalent, in the attribute of thought, to the body in the attribute of matter; in chemistry (and Alchemy), *les esprits* (chemical spirits) evoked a process of distillation by evaporation of the quintessential parts of a substance, resulting, as we have already seen, in a pure "*subtle, unbound, invisible, impalpable body, a vapour, a breath, an almost immaterial being*"; in medicine, *les esprits animaux* (the animal spirits) allowed physiologists to account for the circulation of information through nerve impulses, through small, volatile, subtle and invisible parts of the blood and of the humors, moving at inconceivably high speed thanks to their almost immaterial nature; in literature and rhetoric, the *bel esprit* (wit) accounted for what allows a speaker to charm his audience, functioning as a magic spell which binds the attention of the public; finally, in early sociology and anthropology, *l'esprit d'une société* (*Zeitgeist*), according to Voltaire, defined a population's "*mores, its manners of thinking, of behaving, its opinions*", while Montesquieu used *l'esprit national* as a first approximation for what would later be coined *public opinion*[45].

Voltaire stressed "*in how many different meanings the word* esprit *is used*" and he was well inspired to add that "*this is not a defect of our language, but on the contrary*

[43] John Durham Peters: *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, University of Chicago Press, 2001.

[44] See for instance Pierre Rétat & Jean Sgard (ed.): *Presse et histoire au XVIIIe siècle: L'année 1734*, Paris, Éditions du CNRS, 1978 as well as Pierre Rétat (ed.), *L'Attentat de Damiens, discours sur l'événement au XVIIIe siècle*, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, Ed. du CNRS, 1979.

[45] "Esprit d'un corps, d'une société, *pour exprimer les usages, la manière de penser, de se conduire, les préjugés d'un corps*" (Diderot and d'Alembert, *Encyclopaedia*, article ESPRIT (*Belles Lettres*), written by Voltaire). For Montesquieu, see Nicolas Veysman: *Mise en scène de l'opinion publique dans la littérature des Lumières*, Paris, Champion, 2004, p. 453-463.

an advantage to have roots ramifying out into many branches"[46]. The very word *esprit* functions as an operator of connection and communication across various lexical fields, across various disciplinary channels of collective reflection and debates. From the *Sanctus Spiritus* to the collective *Zeitgeist*, its many meanings coalesce to unite multiple processes of communication within one wide and multilayered circulation, comprising the aerial flows of religious spirituality, the images of the mind, the nerve impulses travelling in the body, the distilled vapours feeding its humours, the broadcasting of ideas, the capture of attention, and the constitution of a common public opinion.

Did Margaret Cavendish and Charles Tiphaigne, although born one century apart, directly communicate? Did the physician ever read the Duchess? Or do the multiple forms of convergence observed between their imaginations of immaterial and elementary spirits merely result from the random circulation of clichés across the Channel? In spite of the time she spent in France, Margaret Cavendish, who did not read nor speak French, seems to have left few traces in French literature. While Tiphaigne lived very close to the British Channel, knew Locke and other major figures of British philosophy, it doesn't seem very probable that he would have encountered the "weird" books written by the Duchess, which were neither translated into French nor discussed among intellectual circles after her death. Of course, one can always hope to find positive (if roundabout and unsuspected) clues of a direct influence of the Duchess of Newcastle over the physician from Normandy – a comparatist study of Cavendish's reception in France remains to be written, as well as a panorama of Tiphaigne's readings and intellectual background.

Even in the absence of such positive clues, however, both writers provide us with a model of communication which helps us see the bigger picture of transindividual resonance behind the particular cases of intellectual influence. Looking at the human world "from the air" provided the travelling souls of the Empress and the Duchess and *Giphantie*'s narrator with the geo-vision of a global circulation and echoing of discourses and affects, all over the planet. Let us recall the central tenet of Cavendish's ontology:

> *there may be numerous material souls in one composed body, by reason every material part has a material natural soul; for Nature is but one Infinite self-moving, living and self-knowing body, consisting of the three degrees of inanimate, sensitive and rational Matter, so intermixt together, that no part of Nature, were it an Atome, can be without any of these three degrees; the sensitive is the life, the rational the soul, and the inanimate part, the body of Infinite Nature.* (*Blazing World*, I, 81 / 175)

While Montpellier physiologists like Théophile de Bordeu were describing the human body as composed of several individual organs, each of them endowed with its own conatus, Tiphaigne, like Margaret Cavendish and the rest of the Gabalist novelists, was staging immaterial spirits in a way which portrayed human minds as animated by transindividual flows of beliefs and desires. "*Numerous material souls*"

[46] "*Il ne faut pas oublier de dire ici en combien de sens différens le mot d'*esprit *s'employe; ce n'est point un défaut de la langue, c'est au contraire un avantage d'avoir ainsi des racines qui se ramifient en plusieurs branches*" (Voltaire, art. cit.).

(vehicles) speak through us each time we open our mouth: all the books we've read, all the speeches we heard are "*intermixt together*" in our thoughts, discourses and behaviors. No less than the organic parts of our material body compose "*the body of Infinite Nature*", the various degrees of our sensitive and rational individual minds communicate within the "*self-moving, living and self-knowing body*" of our collective (if conflictual) *Geist*. While Cavendish seems mostly marvelled and enchanted by all these inventive voices speaking through her, Tiphaigne appears to be more disillusioned by the global picture of repetition and hollowness emanating from their chaotic mix. Both authors portray us humans – and themselves as writers – as immersed in a tempestuous ocean of discourses, where it may be pointless to identify and isolate personal drops, as if they were decisive agents. Whether the French physician has read the English Duchess may not be that important after all, since both writers converge, through their staging of immaterial spirits, in questioning the boundaries of individual authorship, in order better to make us see the collective flows of desires and beliefs which communicate across our personal channels.