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Maria-Susana Seguin

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PHILOSOPHICAL CLANDESTINE LITERATURE
AND ACADEMIC CIRCLES IN FRANCE

This paper will be dedicated to the paradoxical and complex relationship that philosophical clandestine literature had with the academic milieu in Paris, in particular with one of the royal institutions that contributed most efficiently to its organization, the Académie Royale des sciences. Indeed, on first sight the interrelation between the most “radical” ideas of “underground” thought (I will come back to these terms later) and the most official of the institutes that operated as political propaganda machines for the French monarchy could certainly come as a surprise. The polemic ideas of the 18th century are composed of a heterogeneity and subtleness which seem paradigmatic to me. These terms through which we attempt to structure, categorize, and class intellectual production should be applied with prudence since, when these intellectual products are removed from the context of their elaboration and their circulation, they don’t always seem to fit the conceptual or historiographical categories that we have since developed. I will thus permit myself a brief terminological and historical clarification, before offering you a series of observations, the object of which is less to apply a theoretical frame for interpreting past works but more to determine how clandestine thought penetrated the most official publications of French and European intellectual life of the 18th century within the practices of the day and the texts themselves.

Thus, our first question is: What do we understand by philosophical clandestine literature? From a research point of view, the corpus of the philosophical clandestine literature is composed of manuscripts that, since their first identification by Gustave Lanson (1912) and Ira O. Wade (1938), have continued to grow in number, to arrive at some 250 different titles in 2000 copies, according to the detailed study by Miguel Benítez¹ essentially preserved in European, predominantly French libraries, and of which the covert circulation has been well documented. The consistency of this corpus is not based on an observable material criterion, such as that of being circulated clandestinely, otherwise we would need to include in this

¹ Mention must be made of the precise study by Miguel Benítez in *La Face cachée des Lumières*, Paris: Universitas, Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1996, and which is even more enriched by the Spanish version, *La Cara oculta de la Lucas*, Valencia, Biblioteca valenciana, colección Ideas, 2003. The journal *La Lettre clandestine* regularly highlights the discovery of new copies of texts already identified or the existence of new titles eligible to be included in the *clandestin* corpus.

volume an entire series of texts (from purely pornographic works to *poésies fugitives*, and also Jansenist writings) that share these same methods of diffusion and reception with our corpus.

As to the nature of these writings, for the most part they are hand-written, but not exclusively. Some, but not all, were ultimately printed. To the contrary, the intellectual and material history of the book and of reading shows us that the different forms that clandestine philosophy took (manuscripts, editions outside of France, clandestine editions within France, etc.) constituted one of the configurations unique to intellectual life of the 18th century in that these practices were exploited by works, that, for various reasons, evaded the strict demands of the book market and the practice of royal and religious censorship to which the large majority of publications were submitted.² In fact, clandestine literature, and even more the choice of a hand-written format, responded not only to the need for protection that authors and readers felt, and created a mode of dissemination unique to certain insider circles, but also constituted an economical and intellectual choice.³ The hand-written format of the manuscript, predominant in the corpus of clandestine philosophy, seems to correspond to a unique trait of this literature, often not only conceived as the favored means of disseminating innately polemical thought, but also as a malleable material, reusable by other readers that subsequently became authors and copiers—thus, in turn, associated with the elaboration and diffusion of a way of thinking that was as much individual as it was collective, at once the expression of leading figures and of a social phenomenon, the translation of a “*crise des consciences*” to borrow the title of Paul Hazard’s book, where the names of the individuals concerned counted less than the network of meanings that structure the texts, and where the beauty of their form often mattered much less than the strength of their arguments.

What characterizes these texts is, beyond their covert diffusion and manuscript format, the fact that they are “philosophical” in the broad sense that the Enlightenment bestows upon this word: they treat topics that are essentially metaphysical or religious in a critical, subversive, or impious spirit, and they battle prejudice from a premise grounded in reason (philosophical, historical, scientific reason). For the most part this makes them heterodox or non-conformist writings in that the ideas that they denounce are most often the truths of faith: God himself (his existence, his essence, and his relation to the world); the human soul (its

² On this point, see: H.-J. Martin et R. Chartier, ed., *Histoire de l'édition française*, tome II, Paris, Promodis, 1984.

³ François Moureau: “La plume et le plomb” et “Clandestinité et ventes publiques”, in [F. Moureau ed.] *De bonne main. La communication manuscrite au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, Universitas; Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1993, p. 5-16 et p. 143-175; and *La Plume et le plomb*, Paris, PUPS, 2006, preface by Robert Darnton. See also Alain Mothu, “Le manuscrit philosophique clandestin existe-t-il ?”, in Jean-Louis Lebrave et Almuth Gresillon, *Écrire aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles. Genèse de textes littéraires et philosophiques*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2000, p. 59-74. *La L. C.* n° 7, 1998, *L'Identification du texte clandestin aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles*. G. Artigas-Menant, *Du secret des clandestins à la propagande voltairienne*, Paris Champion, 2001.

spirituality, its immortality); Revelation (authenticity and consistency of biblical Scripture, the validity of prophets and miracles, the power of biblical exegesis and criticism); historical religions in general (their origins, relation to the political world, crimes committed in their name over the course of history), and Christianity in particular, especially Catholicism, through its history, dogmas, mysteries, and morals. However, this constant in the overall theme of the critical approach can also be based on incredibly varied philosophical orientations, from naturalism to materialism, from atheism to pantheism or deism, and show the influence of Descartes, Bayle, Hobbes or Spinoza, not to mention the erudite *libertins* of the 17th century.

It is thus because of its association with this unorthodox content and a format compatible with dynamic thought, in perpetual re-elaboration and easily adaptable to the conditions of clandestine circulation, that this corpus constituted a particularly strong weapon in “underground” philosophizing at the end of the 17th century and for at least half of the 18th. It is likewise the reason that Gustave Lanson was able to compile the first list of clandestine philosophical manuscripts: he recognized them, and rightly so, as a major source of the most polemical ideas of Enlightenment authors.

From this perspective, it seems difficult to distinguish from this collection a group of titles which are more “radical” than the others, precisely because the reach of these texts cannot be reduced to the nature of the topics that unite them, but must necessarily be associated with their circulation and their reception, which could result in equally “radical” transformations of the ideas expressed by their authors. It is precisely this that happened in the exemplary case of *Doutes sur la religion adressées au père Malebranche* by Robert Challe, who became a materialist and atheist pamphleteer, after Naigeon’s remodelling of the text and Holbach made out of it a whole new work, *Le Militaire philosophique*, or the case of *Mémoire des pensées et des sentiments* of the curé Jean Meslier, whom Voltaire made an apologist for pure deism.

Evidently, we cannot deny the importance that certain texts have had in and of themselves, such as the *Theophrastus redivivus* or the *Traité des trois imposteurs*, nor minimize the philosophical rigor with which some of these authors not only attacked the foundations of Christian theology but also provided entire philosophical systems that are coherent in themselves: the author of *Theophrastus*, Dumarsais, and Robert Challe all offer, from this point of view, very good examples on this topic. My intention is more to insist on the fact that the subversive efficacy of these texts is not only found in the virulence of the arguments they present, but also in their capacity to make critical arguments heard within a

public that, from the outset, was not inclined towards the most virulent philosophical thought. From this perspective, the radicalism of the texts must not be reduced to their static content but must be integrated within a dynamic reading that takes into account the multiple aspects of intellectual life at the time.

The penetration of philosophical clandestine literature within academic circles is, in this sense, representative of the highly subversive dimension of these texts, whose efficacy in the battle of ideas may have been as important, it seems to me, as the most controversial texts—if not by the nature of the arguments that are diffused, then at least in their capacity to prepare the public space for the most virulent of ideas. This phenomenon is reinforced by the fact that numerous actors within the clandestine milieu mixed in academic circles, even occupying prestigious positions, which may seem especially paradoxical since these institutions are based on a dual aim that specifically threatened clandestine thought. We are well aware that the birth of the French Royal Académies constituted a strong political gesture that reinforced monarchical absolutism: on the one hand, controlling intellectual production through the economic and social dependence of the Académie members, and on the other, putting these authors and scholars in the service of the King of France, and what's more, a Catholic king, to whose glory they contribute through their works. The various ministers of France under Louis XIV reinforced this policy, beginning with Colbert, at the same time that the elaboration and circulation of philosophical clandestine literature was intensifying.

Yet we are equally aware that if belonging to these institutions entailed a political involvement with the French monarchy, it was not, however, a guarantee of religious orthodoxy (Voltaire was elected to the Académie Française in 1746), even if the royal *compagnies* scrupulously respected that orthodoxy and counted among their members renowned churchmen (Bossuet was himself a member of the Académie française). Also, academicians acted just as much as censors in the system by supervising editorial activity, through which the King of France intended to impose his prerogatives in precedence to the Roman Catholic Church, whose action was therefore limited to *a posteriori* censorship.⁴ The secular French academicians scrupulously saw to it that no work contrary to the teachings of religion was published, at least without royal permission, but the system opened up a certain flexibility that the protagonists of philosophical clandestinity were able to exploit.⁵

⁴ According to Raymond Birn, in the 18th century, 40% of censors belonged to a provincial or Parisian académie. See *La Censure royale dans la France des Lumières*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2007, p. 105.

⁵ See Fabrice Charton, “Fontenelle, secrétaire perpétuel de l'Académie royale des Sciences”, *Revue Fontenelle*, n°6/7, Publications des universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2010, p. 295-310.

While it is true that it wasn't the majority of academicians who were involved with the philosophical "underground", numerous authors of clandestine texts were regularly attending members or part of the Académies. An author such as Fréret, to whom is attributed the *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*,⁶ and the name of choice during the campaign of systematically publishing clandestine literature (it was under his name that Holbach published l'*Examen critique des apologistes de la religion chrétienne* in 1766), was above all else a prominent Orientalist, a member of the l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres from 1716, even becoming perpetual secretary in 1742. Fréret frequented the circles of the Duke of Noailles and Count Boulainvilliers—much like Jean-Baptiste de Mirabaud, the probable author of *Opinions des anciens sur l'origine du monde*,⁷ whose translation of *Jérusalem délivrée* by Tasso won him a seat at the Académie Française, where he was received on the 28th of September 1726 by his confrère Fontenelle, also becoming perpetual secretary in 1742 (the same year as Fréret) of the prestigious institution, where he replaced the Abbé d'Houteville. Jean Terrasson, who had links to clandestine circles, entered the Académie des Sciences in 1707, then the Académie Française in 1723. And Nicolas Boindin, discreet, but who, we are told, revealed traces of atheism at the café Procope, joined the Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Médailles in 1706 (the future Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres), and was going to be appointed royal censor by Pontchartrain but came up against the veto of Cardinal Fleury for election to the Académie Française, which every indication says he had in his sights.⁸ Admittedly, Levêque de Burigny only became *pensionnaire* of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres late in the game, in 1756, and despite Dumarsais's talents as grammarian, he found no academic position. But it is clear that the presence of some of the participants in philosophical clandestinity within the royal institutions is considerable enough to arouse curiosity and justify research into academic circles—not only to the members of these institutions but also the political leaders under whose authority the academicians were welcomed. The attitude of the Abbé Bignon, for example, as nephew of Pontchartrain, reformer of the Académies des Sciences et des Inscriptions, member of the three Académies Royales, and protector of authors whose role in philosophical clandestinity is well known—such as Fontenelle and Fréret—certainly warrants further research.

⁶ N. Fréret, *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, critical edition by Sergio Landucci, Firenze, Olschki, 1986.

⁷ Manuscript edited by l'Abbé Le Mascrier under the title *Le Monde, son origine, son antiquité. De l'âme et de son immortalité*, [Paris] 1751.

⁸ Maurice Barthélemy, *Documents historiques. La Libre-Pensée et ses martyrs, petit dictionnaire de l'intolérance cléricale*, Paris, Librairie de propagande socialiste et anticléricale, 1904, p. 63.

Membership in the Académies can be explained by the economic support and social recognition that the institutions could offer to authors without a means of earning a living from writing otherwise. Also, it was often accompanied by the protection of a minister, of a network of authority, or by someone close to the royal family, which constituted an additional support in the event of ideological or religious clashes. It also often meant intermingling in the scholarly circles in which numerous clandestine writings were composed and diffused. At the least it offered a privileged position, and in certain cases was an unexpected platform for ideas otherwise condemned to a circuitous distribution.

The most significant example of this can be seen in the case of one of the most discreet, but also most efficient, actors in the clandestine universe, whose name has already come up several times in my presentation as if he were a common reference shared between authors of philosophical clandestinity. This is, indeed, Fontenelle. Royal censor for a number of years, member of the Académie Française since 1691, elected to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in 1701 (which, however, he left before the reform of 1717), Fontenelle was most notably a member of the Académie des Sciences, which he joined in 1697, and of which he became the first perpetual secretary after its reform in 1699, a role he performed until 1740, the date that Dortous de Mairan took his place.

For a long time the discussion on Fontenelle has reduced his academic work to a function of circumstance, a sort of official mask behind which the author hid, to help him forget the *libertés* of his youth, and one which would enable him to lead a double intellectual life, as a member of the “*parti des discrets*”. And it is true that from the moment that Fontenelle joined the Académie des Sciences he published many fewer works under his name and little of the importance of the *Histoire des Oracles* or *Nouveaux dialogues des morts*⁹. Most of his time there was spent preparing the annual volume of the *Histoire de l’Académie des Sciences* the drafting of which became his responsibility after the royal statutes of 1699, and which he would take care of regularly between 1699 and 1740: 41 volumes in total, corresponding to many thousands of pages that warrant close examination when it comes to an author of Fontenelle’s standing.

I shall now turn to formally presenting these volumes. Before the principal “*Mémoires*” of the academicians for any given year, the secretary put together a volume of the “*Histoire*” of the institution: a detailed presentation, with commentary and discussion, of

⁹ Other than the works coming from his membership to the Académie des sciences like *Éléments de la Géométrie de l’infini* (1727) or the *Éloges des académiciens*, of which there are numerous editions throughout the course of the 18th century, we can single out *L’Histoire du Théâtre français* along with its *Réflexions sur la poétique* (1742) and the *Traité des Tourbillons* appearing in 1752.

works, of scholarly production, through which Fontenelle assembled not only an account of the objective progress of knowledge, the life of academicians, and the collective construction of the institution, but he also offered epistemological reflections in accordance with his conception of the history of the human mind. This subsequently transformed this element of the official publication of the Académie Royale des Sciences into a space of personal expression, and indeed quite a free one, all the more so since the royal status bestowed on these writings added an additional privilege: they were published completely outside the orbit of royal censorship. And it is in this context that the word of the Académie des Sciences, in its most official publications, offered some of the most polemic ideas of clandestine thought.

In effect, writing the history of the Académie Royale des Sciences gave Fontenelle the opportunity to test some of the principles supporting his most polemical writings, especially his conception of the natural mechanisms of the human mind, and opened these ideas up for a new public space that was inaccessible to philosophical clandestine writings like his *Histoire des Oracles*. Remembering that this text is inscribed in the double legacy of first, scepticism from Bayle who, after Montaigne and La Mothe Le Vayer, sees in the past a tool for the relativisation of the present, as well as the ideas of the free-thinkers who, since Gabriel Naudé, but particularly since Spinoza, prioritized, with varying degrees of virulence, the idea that all forms of superstition from the fables of antiquity to the alleged Christian revelation are stratagems used by the ruling classes and religious supporters to impose and regulate the political order. Fables in all forms, including stories of the wonders and miracles in sacred history, are deceptions that a purely historical approach allows us to expose.

In his *Histoire des Oracles*, which he presents as a translation of the work of Anton Van Dale, Fontenelle uses these two critical trends to distil ideas, all while reversing the order of reading events, which enables him to inscribe his own theory in what he calls an “*histoire de l’esprit humain*”.¹⁰ The modifications made by Fontenelle to the order in which he presents Van Dale’s arguments profoundly change the logic of its ensemble, but do not weaken it. If the Dutch scholar showed in the first instance that oracles have continued to provide predictions after the coming of Christ, and followed this by showing that we need to consider them simply as human *speech*, Fontenelle shows firstly that the oracles are merely human productions that we no longer consult once historical circumstance proves them to be useless. Fontenelle therefore insists on the idea that the conditions for exercising reason determine the beliefs of each society at a particular time in its history, which is to say that the oracles belong

¹⁰ Jean Dagen, *L’histoire de l’esprit humain dans la pensée française de Fontenelle à Condorcet*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1977.

to a specific age in the development of the human mind, which ‘imposters’ exploited to consolidate their political authority. He certainly never mentions the Christian religion, but in the overall logic he simply generalizes the argument that any religion is susceptible to this movement, and that the defenders of the orthodoxy of the time understood this. I will not dwell on these aspects, and refer to the work of Jonathan Israel on this.¹¹

What is interesting here is that Fontenelle overturns the arguments that attribute a political origin to fables, to affirm, to the contrary, that they are the natural result of a mechanism of the mind. This idea also appears even more clearly in another of his writings, most likely composed near the end of the 17th century, *De l’Origine des fables*, published in 1714, and which underwent a clandestine distribution in the early years of the 18th century (the manuscript *Des Miracles* features whole paragraphs from it) and in another, unfinished, text, *Sur l’histoire*.¹² In these two works Fontenelle explains how, at certain moments in history, the human mind is forced to *imagine*, even *invent*, explanations of phenomena that are cannot be accounted for rationally. This is the first attempt at explaining the phenomena that give rise to fables, thus conceived as the first productions of the human mind. Politicization, and therefore fraud, are what subsequently follow, once the fables have been developed malicious individuals find a way to use them for their own benefit. From Fontenelle’s point of view, the origin of religions is not political in this sense, as is the case for Spinoza, but gnosiological, since they result from a misinterpretation frozen in time and transmitted from generation to generation, by virtue of the authority of tradition.

Thus, these two aspects of the human mind are that of imagination, as the first effort of interpretation, and the submission to the tradition that gives way to the success of fables over time, that is, their imposition as a fundamental frame for the history and beliefs of a people. Hence the need for the modern philosopher, Fontenelle says, to undertake the mission of an “*histoire de l’histoire*”, which is less interested in the facts themselves than it is in the thought processes implemented to preserve the memory and the progress of these same mechanisms through time. History thus becomes a privileged terrain in which the mind can be taken as an object of reflection, so it can observe its own modes of action, analyze its trajectory, as well as the risks it may encounter and that it must therefore avoid. Such a conception of history, based on an analysis of its own modes of operation, must necessarily

¹¹ Jonathan I. Israel, *Les Lumières radicales. La philosophie de Spinoza et la naissance de la modernité (1650-1750)* [2001], Paris, Edition d’amsterdam, 2005, p. 407-423.

¹² *Suite des oeuvres diverses de Mr de F*** contenant les trois traités suivants De l’existence de Dieu, De l’origine des fables et Du bonheur*, Rouen, 1714. Voir S. Akagi, “*Suite des OEuvres diverses de Mr de F*** de 1714: the first edition of L’Origine des fables and two others of Fontenelle’s discours*”, *Études de Langue et de Littérature françaises*, 50, Tokyo, 1987.

lead to the creation of a space in which the mind attains full control of itself, of its productions, and therefore its future, consequently released from any apocalyptic threat.¹³

Writing the *Histoire de l'Académie des sciences* thus allows Fontenelle to study the mechanisms of the human mind in its endless search for truth, in constant tension with error, superstition, and scientific knowledge, and how freedom from any metaphysical influence is necessary for any real discourse on reason. In doing so, this new exercise enables him to complete the methodological transformation he had begun in the *Histoire des Oracles* by modifying his discursive strategy. For, if only the clandestine networks allow the open presentation of ideas that only certain initiated minds are ready to hear, as he affirms in the *Traitee de l'âme*,¹⁴ then it is necessary, in this public space created by the publications of the Académies, to renounce the practice of learning that both the erudite free-thinkers *libertins* and authors of clandestine manuscripts draw from, and which he himself takes part in, to address another audience.¹⁵ The secretary of the Académie des sciences thus tries to discuss issues traditionally reserved for scholars in a language that is accessible to the social classes who still need to be converted—like the omarquise in *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes*—to the “*parti de la philosophie*”¹⁶.

The influence of clandestine thinking in the academic writings of Fontenelle is therefore very important. It initially led to the adoption of a method of writing history that sought not only to account for the objective results of science but moreso to reveal the mechanisms through which the mind manages to liberate itself from error. In other words, Fontenelle put into practice, in a domain removed from religious considerations, including pagan fables and oracles, the same method and same principles on which he had formulated his demonstration in the *Histoire des Oracles* and whose consequences, when broadened as such, are the same. And this is but one example among many.

In 1723, Fontenelle comments on two *mémoires* by the naturalist Antoine de Jussieu, about the nature and origin of “*pierres figurées*”, i.e. stones with visible imprints of things existing in nature (leaves, flowers, small creatures), or deriving things existing in the natural world from remains (bones, teeth, or even small objects or tools that may have been made by humans). Long considered simply “*jeux de la nature*”, the *pierres figurées* had attracted the attention of naturalists from the second half of the 17th century. Some in their number had,

¹³ See Mitia Rioux-Beaulne, introduction to “De l’origine des fables”, in S. Audidière (ed.), *Digressions sur les Anciens et les Modernes et autres textes philosophiques*, Paris, Garnier, forthcoming.

¹⁴ We refer here to the edition of *Traité* in the *Nouvelles libertés de penser*, Amsterdam [Paris], 1743, p. 150.

¹⁵ Scholarship as a philosophical weapon can also explain the presence of clandestine authors in academic circles.

¹⁶ Fontenelle, *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686), ed. Christophe Martin, Paris, Flammarion, 1998, p. xxx.

very early on, affirmed the organic nature of *pierres figurées*¹⁷, paving the way for the study of fossils as evidence of the natural upheavals that the planet had faced throughout its history. The Académie des sciences adopted this position from the beginning; even if all of the scholars that participated in these debates did not agree on the nature of these “upheavals” of which said petrification was the result. If for some this was irrefutable evidence of the universal flood described in Genesis,¹⁸ for a good number of scholars such as Jussieu and Réaumur, it was more a question of partial transformations, punctual and spread out over an entirely different temporality than that of Biblical chronology.

Like Jussieu, Fontenelle did not believe in the idea that *pierres figurées* were the result of a plastic force of nature, let alone a singular, sudden disaster sent by God to punish a guilty mankind. Rather, they were traces of natural species that had existed, and were evidence of the many upheavals or “revolutions” that had marked the history of the Earth over the centuries.¹⁹ This is the meaning behind the second *mémoire* by Jussieu that Fontenelle summarizes upfront in this account: he demonstrated that the *yeux-de-serpent*²⁰ (snake eyes) and the *crapaudines* (small semi-precious stones)²¹ were in fact the remains of two distinct kinds of teeth from a fish native to the seas of Brazil and that their presence in the different quarries of France confirms the changes in land and sea occurring in the distant past. The naturalist also shows in his *mémoire* on “*pierres de foudre*” (lightning stones) that those that he had observed—believed to fall from the sky on stormy days and to which were even attributed supernatural powers—were really only polished stones previously used as a tool for hunting or defense by primitive populations (arrowheads, axes, sharp stones, etc.). Jussieu justifies his explanation using the example of the American Indians, who used polished stones in the same way to substitute for their lack of iron usage.

Fontenelle takes advantage of these two *mémoires* to establish a comparison, absent in Jussieu’s works, between the “revolutions” of nature and the different stages in the history of human societies, which he calls “*révolutions morales*”. In doing so, he presents the principles

¹⁷ Nicolas Sténon (1638-1686): Swedish anatomist and naturalist, author of significant dissertations on the nature of fossils, *De solido intra solidum naturaliter contento dissertationis prodromus* (1669).

¹⁸ Johann Jakob Scheuchzer (1672-1733) and Johann Scheuchzer (1684-1738). Swiss naturalists, corresponding members of the Académie des sciences, authors of numerous dissertations dedicated to the nature of fossils and of the role of the biblical flood in the formation of ground relief, among which we can single out *Herbarium diluvianum*, (Zurich, Imp. D. Gesner, 1709, 44 p. in folio) that Fontenelle discusses not without irony in *HARS* 1710, p. 21-23.

¹⁹ This doctrine, known by the name of “actualism”, and of which Jussieu and Réaumur were the most significant proponents, characterized French geological thought for the first half of the 18th century and counters the catastrophist vision of natural history that makes the universal flood the key moment in the geologic formation of the globe. On this topic, see: M.S. Seguin, *Science et religion au XVIII^e siècle. Le mythe du déluge universel*, Paris, H. Champion, 2001.

²⁰ Eil-de-serpent: gemstone or precious stone formed from fossilized teeth.

²¹ Precious stone, so named because it was believed to come from the head of a toad.

that can also be found in *De l'origine des fables*, published clandestinely in 1714:²² the legendary stories are based on a misunderstanding of natural phenomena, and evaporate once reason manages to explain them. We thus understand why the secretary of the Académie chose to summarize the two *mémoires* in a single article, because what applies to the sciences of nature also applies to the sciences of man. If the nature of *crapaudines* and *pierres de foudre* are not the same (organic or inorganic fossils, geological or archaeological), their epistemological status is still quite similar when it comes to making it the object of a rational discourse. The comparison between common European beliefs and American customs presents him with the opportunity to affirm the psychological and moral uniformity of human nature faced with unexplained phenomena, the principle on which he was already constructing his explanation of fables and superstitions. The account of Jussieu's *mémoires* thus becomes the support for the *fontenellienne* conception of the origin of beliefs, and a privileged one at that, since it brings a sort of scientific and institutional approval to a controversial hypothesis that has multiple consequences. And remembering that Fontenelle, from the supposed neutrality of his position, offered this principle teaching in his well-known history of the “dent d'or” (golden tooth): “Il est bon de s'assurer exactement des faits et de ne pas chercher la raison de ce qui n'est point”²³.

The practice of formulating a history of knowledge-in-development as part of the Académie des sciences also allows Fontenelle to provide a scientific basis for some of the more complex debates of clandestine thought—I have shown elsewhere the importance that Fontenelle grants to all debates concerning the human brain that reinforce the materialistic physiology that was developed in his *Traité de la liberté de l'âme*²⁴, a clandestine text that circulated from the early 18th century and appeared in the *Nouvelles libertés de penser* in 1743. In effect, editing the work of anatomists and correspondents of the Académie for a good twenty years enabled Fontenelle to establish a direct relationship between matter and spirit (*sans cerveau pas d'idée*) and come to affirm a sort of continuity between humans and animals, on which the difference was found in the quantity of matter, and not the quality, let alone the existence of a spiritual soul.²⁵ We are therefore not surprised to note that, as

²² *Des miracles*.

²³ “Sur les singularités de l'Histoire Naturelle de la France”, *HARS*, 1699, p. 23. It is with these words that the *Histoire des Oracles* (1686), opens, the story of the famous “dent d'or”: “Assurons-nous bien du fait, avant que de nous inquiéter de la cause. Il est vrai que cette méthode est lente pour la plupart des gens qui courent naturellement à la cause, et passent par-dessus la vérité du fait ; mais enfin nous éviterons le ridicule d'avoir trouvé la cause de ce qui n'est point”, *OC*, t. II, p. 161.

²⁴ Maria Susana Seguin, “Fontenelle, l'Académie des Sciences et le siège de l'âme”, *La Lettre clandestine* n° 18, 2010, p. 162-179.

²⁵ This principle also emphasizes the idea expressed at the beginning of the *Digression sur les Anciens et les Modernes* through which the philosopher affirmed the universality of human nature, since nature produces men, animals, and plants of the “même pâte”: “La Nature a entre les mains une certaine pâte qui est toujours la même, qu'elle tourne et retourne sans

Motoïchi Terada has shown, the article “*âme*” in the *Encyclopédie* is composed of many passages directly borrowed from Fontenelle’s writings for the Académie Royale des Sciences.²⁶

In fact, if we follow the explanations given by the secretary of the Académie des sciences over the years, there is nothing in nature that cannot be explained other than by the action of matter, as he recalls in an account of the reproduction of plants, where he reverses the logic permitted under the scholastic argument which overlapped body and mind, and thus made from the soul a purely material principle:

*Ce bizarre principe de la philosophie scolastique sur la manière dont l’âme est dans le corps, que le tout est dans le Tout, et le tout dans chaque partie, est donc exactement vrai à l’égard des plantes, et il est assez remarquable qu’on trouve réellement dans la matière ce qui avait été imaginé comme une propriété particulière et incompréhensible de l’esprit.*²⁷

Fontenelle thus transforms academic writings into a privileged platform for his own ideas, but also for ideas that polemic thought could reappropriate, and to which the scientific dimension of the medium, and the apparently neutral role of Fontenelle’s position, bring a guarantee. This strategy did not pass unnoticed under the watchful eyes of his contemporaries, who made very good use of it in the polemic literature of the time. One example of its use is already well known to specialists and we will only mention it here for its representative character.²⁸ Fontenelle reported that in the town of Chartres a young deaf-mute from birth, having “miraculously” recovered his hearing, began speaking at the age of twenty-four. He was questioned by “skillful theologians” on his ideas, in his former state, about God, the soul, etc. Fontenelle noted, with a pleasant *litote*, or understatement, that the young man “*ne parut pas avoir poussé ses pensées jusque là...*”²⁹. In Pierre Bayle we hear echoes of this anecdote in his *Réponse aux Questions d’un Provincial* in 1706 where he develops the implications of the *fontenellien* text: he attacks the innate idea of God by relating what he calls “*un nouveau phénomène par lequel on peut comprendre qu’il n’est pas aussi facile que plusieurs l’assurent de parvenir à la connaissance de Dieu sans le secours de l’instruction*”. Bayle quite wryly points out that “*J’ignore si tout le monde saura gré à Mr de Fontenelle d’avoir inséré ce fait-*

cesse en mille façons, et dont elle forme les hommes, les animaux, les plantes ; et certainement elle n’a point formé Platon, Démosthène ni Homère d’une argile plus fine ni mieux préparée que nos Philosophes, nos Orateurs et nos Poètes d’aujourd’hui”. *Digressions sur les Anciens et les Modernes, Œuvres complètes*, under the direction of Alain Niderst, Paris, Fayard, 1990-1996, coll. “Corpus des œuvres philosophiques en langue française”, t. II, p. 413.

²⁶ Motoïchi Terada, “Une ‘façon’ copiée-collée de l’Encyclopédie?: avatars de textes de l’HMARS à l’Encyclopédie par l’intermédiaire de Chambers”, *Recueil d’études sur l’Encyclopédie et les Lumières* (Tokyo), n 1, 2012, p. 1-40.

²⁷ “Sur une végétation singulière”, *HARS* 1712, p. 43.

²⁸ See Jørn Schøsler, “Le sourd et muet de Chartres”. Un épisode sensualiste oublié de la lutte philosophique au XVIII^e siècle”, *Actes du XIII^e Congrès des romanistes scandinaves, Jyväskylä, 12-15 août 1996*, ed. O. Merisalo et T. Natri, Publications de l’Institut des Langues romanes et classiques, Université de Jyväskylä, 1998, t. 2, p. 621-634.

²⁹ *HARS* 1703, p. 18.

là dans l'*Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences*. Mais quoi qu'il en soit, voilà un nouveau phénomène sur lequel Mr Bernard pourra s'exercer s'il le juge digne de son attention." This anecdote was subsequently used by several authors, notably in clandestine texts, to undermine the metaphysical foundations of Christianity (it is most notably found in the manuscript *l'Ame matérielle* attributed to Du Marsais) and was the object of a materialist interpretation by La Mettrie and Hevétius, to name but two. The anecdote even seems to presage some points made in the *Lettre sur les aveugles* by Diderot.

Thus, the case Fontenelle timely brought to light in 1703 demonstrates an example of one of his favorite strategies: to disappear behind a supposed neutrality, that of the secretary of the Académie Royale des Sciences, to leave the work to others, the most astute or closest readers, to find more controversial implications based on what he was able to bring to light. Neutrality in religious matters claimed by the Académie Royale des Sciences, the method of writing history adopted by Fontenelle, the choice of subjects discussed, and his unique philosophical style, ended up in expressing in academic publications the image of Nature as constantly active—which replaced the idea of God, whose existence is never denied but whose effect is never called upon either.³⁰ Under the pen of Fontenelle, nature acts only by unwavering principles (laws) whose infinite combinatorial processes produce an infinite number of possible structures³¹. In this creative dynamic, random chance even becomes one of the possible factors in the diversification of forms. It is moreover chance, the blind cause *par excellence*, that appears ultimately responsible for the existence of certain structures, including monsters, which is one of the most recurrent themes in the *Histoire de l'académie des sciences*.³²

To conclude. I would like to emphasize three points:

1. It is clear, that firstly the academic circles offered, for various reasons, a privileged terrain for the production and dissemination of clandestine literature that warrants a more systematic examination. But we can also state that Fontenelle's case is rather exceptional in

³⁰ Maria Susana Seguin, "La Nature dans les écrits de Fontenelle pour l'Académie des sciences", *Dix-huitième siècle* n°45 (2013), p. 97-113.

³¹ "Nous pouvons [...] avancer [...] qu'on ne saurait guère attribuer à la Nature trop d'uniformité dans les règles générales, et trop de diversité dans les applications particulières. Plus on étend son plan en y faisant entrer différentes combinaisons des mêmes principes, plus on est en droit de se croire dans la route de la vérité." "Observations botaniques", *HARS* pour 1702, p. 52.

³² "Ce n'est que le hasard de la rencontre des fœtus [...] qui les détermine à quitter certains chemins et à en suivre toujours d'autres. Et comme ce hasard est susceptible d'une infinité de combinaisons différentes, c'est une chose infinie que les monstres qui le sont par quelques parties doubles", "Observations d'anatomie", *HARS* pour 1702, p. 28. "Ne reconnaît-on pas là [à l'origine des êtres exceptionnels que sont les monstres] les effets de causes accidentelles, irrégulières, aveugles, qui n'agissent pas de concert avec les lois générales et ne reviennent point deux fois à une même combinaison", "Sur les Monstres", *HARS* 1740, p. 49.

this regard, not only because of the longevity of his academic involvement, but also by his efficiency as secretary of the institution: no other French academy can claim, like the Académie Royale des Sciences, the publication of an annual volume of its “*histoire*”, let alone an account that stands as one of the first examples of what we would today call historical epistemology. The influence of Fontenelle in the first half of the 18th century must thus be measured by the quality of his ideas and his writings, but also by the power bestowed upon him in his position in the heart of one of the most prestigious institutions of the French monarchy, and through which he enabled a strategic platform for the development and circulation of new ideas. And let’s not forget, moreover, that it was as secretary of the Académie that Fontenelle advised Benoît de Maillet to explore ideas on the origin of marine life he presented in the *Telliamed*.

2. Certainly, the perpetual secretary of the Académie, was, in his official function, the Historiographer Royal of the scientific achievements of the kingdom, and as such, he knew how to make pleasant reading of the driest research, make the experiments of chemists and the observations of astronomers accessible, all while providing the upper social classes with the hero figure of modern times, the scholar, or *savant*, (which is the role of the academic *Eloges*). But Fontenelle was also a free spirit, writing for a public that was not necessarily initiated into the new scientific knowledge of the times or the epistemological principles that underlie them. Discreetly, he makes of the *Histoire de l’Académie royale des sciences* an effective tool to convert his readers to the “*parti de la philosophie*” and, for want of being able to openly present the philosophical foundations of new discoveries, at the least he introduced new modalities of thought and new issues which would enable the audience to be more open to accept certain presuppositions and consequences.

3. From the *Histoire des Oracles* to the academic writings of Fontenelle, the historical method and the transformation of the discursive register reveal the consistency and efficacy of his publications. The lack of explicit moral considerations in the texts of the *Académie royale des sciences* responds to a *fontenellienne* conception of the deterministic theory that the author exhibited in his clandestine writings: such a system cannot be disclosed to the public at large, most people are not ready to receive and adopt such morals, a purely philosophical theory of happiness (which refers us back to the title of another well-known extract of his). The texts of the Académie, addressed to a wide public in Europe, accustomed the reader, by the grace of pleasant language, to the foundations of a philosophical system; the clandestine treatises, written for the initiated, such as the *Traité de la liberté de l’âme* or the *Réflexions sur l’argument de M. Pascal et de M. Locke concernant la possibilité d’une autre vie à venir*,

published together in *Nouvelles libertés de penser* in 1743, explicitly to bring out the consequences.

The *Trésor de la Langue française* tells us that what is “radical” is that which “*qui concerne le principe premier, fondamental, qui est à l'origine d'une chose, d'un phénomène*”; “*qui va jusqu'au bout de chacune des conséquences impliquées par le choix initial*”. The question here is which of the two methods, that of the explicit, but clandestine, manuscripts that only reached the already-converted, or the writings disseminated by academicians and open to the public space, was more “radical” in the introduction of new ideas? I have made a case for taking the latter into account.

Maria Susana SEGUIN
Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier III
IHPC – UMR 5037 ENS de Lyon
Institut Universitaire de France