

‘Method and Variation: Narrative in Early Modern French Thought’

Isabelle Moreau, UCL

‘François Bernier: Philosophers’ Fictions / Traveller’s Visions

Seventeenth-century France witnessed a long and complex process of disciplinary specialization, as the principal institutions of cultural and scientific activity took shape.¹ Philosophy emerged from the universities and book markets began to expand and diversify.² Literature was finding its own favoured places. These transformations were accompanied by an unprecedented effort to codify the language, forms and genres of writing – not always without resistance. From the end of the sixteenth century philosophy asserted its autonomy from theology,³ and its scope extended into the domains of the human and natural sciences.⁴ As for fiction, it was at once everywhere and nowhere.⁵ It was making its presence felt in areas from astronomy to law, even as the novel disguised itself as *nouvelle historique*, and travel accounts pretended to be factual narratives. In the dictionaries of the period fiction referred both to the act of dissimulating and to the result thereof, but its fields of application were surprisingly diverse. Fiction generally aroused suspicion; but it contributed to the formation of philosophical ideas and found validation in the field of law. Following its very early usage in astronomy, it infiltrated the domains of physics and mathematics with Descartes, Roberval and Leibniz in the Classical Age. Resistance to fiction was matched by the fascination it aroused. What proof value could be ascribed to fiction? Did it function in the same way as hypothesis? What to make of it in the field of natural science where it was deployed alongside the vocabulary of observation and experience? There was no consensus on these questions. The writers of the period put fiction, this new conceptual tool, to the test; some adopted it, others rejected it.

Among those sceptical about the uses of fiction in philosophy was François Bernier. A physician, philosopher and traveller, Bernier eludes hasty categorization on account of the diversity of his institutional and *mondain* affiliations. In the 1650s he acquired a grounding in Epicurean philosophy with Gassendi, and he frequented learned circles hosted, most notably, by De Thou,

¹ Alain Viala, *Naissance de l'écrivain — sociologie de la littérature à l'âge classique* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), p. 8.

² Dinah Ribard, *Raconter, vivre, penser. Histoires de philosophes, 1650-1766* (Paris: Vrin, 2003), pp. 7-29.

³ Ian Maclean, ‘The Readership of Philosophical Fictions: The Bibliographical Evidence’, in *Philosophical Fictions and the French Renaissance*, ed. by Neil Kenny (London: Warburg Institute, 1991), pp. 7-15 (pp. 8-9).

⁴ The term philosophy is still understood here in its broad early modern sense and therefore covers the investigation of natural and human phenomena alike. Cf. Neil Kenny, ‘Introduction’ in *Philosophical Fictions and the French Renaissance*, pp. 1-6 (p. 1): ‘Philosophy’ is a ‘portmanteau category for all investigations into human and natural phenomena’.

⁵ *Fiction and the Frontiers of Knowledge in Europe, 1500-1800*, ed. by Richard Scholar and Alexis Tadié (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), ‘Introduction’, pp. 1-15.

Luillier, La Mothe Le Vayer, the Dupuy brothers, and Mersenne. Following a lengthy stay in India he became one of the staunchest *habitués* of the scientific and literary salon of Madame de La Sablière. At that time he devoted himself to Parisian life and to philosophy, and published his two major works. These were the *Voyages* (1670-1671), an epistolary work⁶ which secured his literary renown; and the *Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi* (1674-1684),⁷ in which he defended a rival philosophy to Cartesianism. Between these two apparently heterogeneous collections there are numerous points of intersection. Just as philosophy pervades the *Voyages*, so the *Voyages* are cited repeatedly in the *Abrégé*. The experience of the traveller plays a pivotal role in the philosophical stance adopted by Bernier, as it does in his apparent rejection of what he terms the ‘fictions’ of philosophers. Bernier demonstrates a certain resistance to the theoretical systematization which overwhelmed the field of physical science in the seventeenth century.⁸ His discourse is nonetheless still conditioned by the processes of fictional writing. If the record of Bernier’s practical experience is to be an antidote to the fictions of philosophers, it entails a recurrent generic instability. The *Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi* is replete with anecdotes borrowed from the *Voyages*. The voice of the traveller is superimposed on that of the philosopher, borrowing from the novelist’s repertoire the art of the story, the anecdote, and fictional dialogue.

In the autumn of 1655 Bernier set out from France on a voyage to the Orient which would last thirteen years. From 1659 to around 1667 he resided at the Mogul court of Aurangzeb, accompanying it on its peregrinations. He had the good fortune to enter into the service of the minister Daneshmend Khan,⁹ the ‘Seigneur Savant’ with whom he conducted an intellectual exchange of exceptional quality. Bernier wrote these words about his master and protector:

Il ne peut non plus se passer de philosopher tout l’après-dîner sur les livres de Gassendi et Descartes, sur le globe et sur la sphère, ou sur l’anatomie, que de donner le matin tout entier

⁶ I refer to the following edition: *Un Libertin dans l’Inde moghole. Les ‘Voyages’ de François Bernier (1656-1669)*, Frédéric Tinguely, Adrien Paschoud and Charles-Antoine Chamay eds. (Paris: Chandeigne, 2008). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁷ The following edition is used: François Bernier, *Abrégé de la Philosophie de Gassendi*, ed. Anisson, Posuel & Rigaud, 7 vols (Lyon: 1684; repr. by Sylvia Murr and Geneviève Stefani, Paris: Fayard, 1992). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁸ Isabelle Moreau, ‘Fictions across Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century France’ in *Fiction and the Frontiers of Knowledge in Europe*, pp. 53-69.

⁹ Daneshmend Khan (Danechmend-Kan, d.1670) was an eminent member of the Mogul courts of Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb. A merchant who arrived from Persia in 1646, Mohammad Shafi (or Mulla Shafiq Yazdi) was awarded the title of ‘Seigneur Lettré’ for his great learning. He was notably appointed treasurer of the armed forces and was responsible for ‘affaires étrangères’, before becoming governor of Delhi. See the ‘Répertoire des personnages’ in *Voyages* p. 520.

aux grandes affaires du royaume en qualité de secrétaire d'Etat pour les affaires étrangères et de grand maître de la cavalerie. (*Voyages*, 369)

Unfortunately, we have no written trace of these exchanges. We must be content with the two-volume compilation that Bernier published under the title of *Voyages* on his return to France. Just as the *Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi* would contain an integrated account of his travel experience, so his *Voyages* already contained an entire letter on the doctrine of atoms and on the nature of human understanding. Addressed to Chapelle (a somewhat unruly former student of the learned Gassendi), this letter is a philosophical manifesto written in a conversational 'style asiatique' (353) as well as being an introduction to the philosophy of Gassendi.¹⁰

Firstly one must note the ethos assumed by Bernier. Defining himself as a 'voyageur [...] nourri dans l'école des atomes', Bernier makes no claim to have found 'de nouvelles raisons dans les Indes' (353) concerning the delicate problem of the human soul and of animate matter in general. Quite to the contrary, he simultaneously appropriates the sceptical Cicero of the *Academica* and the position of Gassendi regarding the so-called inventions of the moderns,¹¹ recalling that 'tout ce qu'en ont dit les Modernes ou n'est rien, ou n'est pas nouveau' (353). He himself has studied the matter with the greatest care and capitalizes on his travels to 'confér[er] cent fois' the opinion of the 'plus grands hommes' with what was said by authors 'tant anciens que modernes, qu'arabes, que persans, qu'indiens' (349). Travel is fully integrated with sceptical experience and proves to be an excellent antidote to presumptive knowledge. Here Bernier assumes the inverse rhetorical position to that of Descartes in the *Discours de la méthode*. In place of the real voyage, in its own way as unsatisfying as the study of ancient philosophers, Descartes offered the 'vaste allegorie de l'*homo viator*'¹² presented from the viewpoint of its favourable culmination. Bernier, for his part, is far from affirming his voice in a magisterial tone. Instead of presenting his own itinerary as exemplary, he emphasizes his doubts and makes no claims to have discovered the truth. If his travels have

¹⁰ See also the analysis of Jean-Charles Darmon, *Philosophie épicurienne et littérature au XVII^e siècle. Études sur Gassendi, Cyrano de Bergerac, La Fontaine, Saint-Évremond* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), pp. 140-147.

¹¹ See Charles Perrault's parallel between Descartes and Gassendi in his *Hommes illustres*. Perrault remarked that Gassendi 'taschoit à faire voir par de favorables interpretations, que les Anciens avoient pensé les mesmes choses qu'on regardoit comme nouvelles' (Ch. Perrault, *Les Hommes illustres qui ont paru en France pendant ce siècle avec leurs portraits au naturel* (Paris: Antoine Dezallier, 1697; repr. Geneva: Slatkine reprints, 1970), 2 tomes en 1 vol., I, 63-64.

¹² Marc Fumaroli, 'Ego scriptor: rhétorique et philosophie dans le *Discours de la méthode*', in *Problématique et réception du Discours de la méthode et des Essais*, H. Méchoulan ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1988), pp. 31-46 (p. 41). Marc Fumaroli has shown how autobiographical narrative in fact depends on a 'mythe', or, in Descartes's terms, a 'fable' (p. 39). The historical and empirical 'Je' that emerges agreeably at the outset of the *Discours*, having studied the great book of the world, decides to confine itself to the 'poêle' in order to retreat more fully within itself. But in reality this 'Je' conceals a transcendental 'Je'. Cf. René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, ed. G. Rodis-Lewis (Paris, GF-Flammarion: 1966; repr. 1992), Première partie, pp. 25, 29-31.

brought him anything, it is above all a manner of philosophical thinking ‘en style asiatique’ (353) – a style opposed to the Cartesian ideal of ‘chaînes de raison’, ‘dont les géomètres ont coutume de se servir, pour parvenir à leurs plus difficiles démonstrations’.¹³ Bernier assumes an amicable tone and does not shun the digressions and chiaroscuros beloved of the Asiatic lands he had so long frequented.¹⁴

The letter is equally valuable as a philosophical manifesto and allows us to situate Bernier more clearly in the contemporary philosophical landscape. His first target is ancient materialism and its *libertin* avatars. Not without irony perhaps (and here we encounter the chiaroscuros of his writing), Bernier distances himself from ‘Messieurs les esprits forts’ (347) who wrongly confuse ‘authentic’ Gassendism with a vacuist and materialist atomism that is strictly Epicurean. If he refuses to believe that ‘dans l’homme, et même dans tout l’univers, il n’y ait rien autre chose que de corporel, que mouvements locaux et corporels, que corps, qu’atomes, que matière’ (358), he refuses in equal measure the extreme opposite, which consists in believing that ‘dans l’homme, il y ait quelque chose de divin, quelque particule de la divinité ou quelque chose de semblable’ (357-8). In this second group of targets we find the partisans of the theory of the world soul:

C’est un blasphème insupportable et hors de raison de quelques stoïciens, des cabalistes de Perse et des brahmanes des Indes, qui, pour reconnaître clairement la noblesse et la perfection de l’esprit de l’homme, ont mieux aimé se jeter dans cette extrémité que de le croire si bas et si imparfait que d’être tout corps, tout matière, tout corporel. Je n’ai pas garde de donner dans cette pensée : vous verrez dans la lettre de Monsieur Chapelain que je suis bien éloigné de croire que ce soit une opinion soutenable à un philosophe (358)

In a celebrated passage of the *Voyages* addressed to Chapelain, Bernier aligns ancient Monist pantheism with the Brahmans’ exotic image of God within the universe as a spider within its web.

¹³ R. Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, seconde partie, p. 40. Voir sur ce point Pierre-Alain Cahné, *Un autre Descartes. Le philosophe et son langage* (Paris: Vrin, 1980), p. 16; pp. 25-36.

¹⁴ On his return from Asia Bernier was all but obliged to bring with him a ‘style asiatique’ – in contravention of the expectations of a *mondain* public seduced by the moderate attic style of the modern philosophers. His choice of prose letter is moreover at odds with the norms of the genre, since the prose letter was usually situated in the tradition of the middle style of the *Epistulae ad Atticum* and their ‘attic’ aesthetic. See the work of Marc Fumaroli, especially the general conclusion of *L’Âge de l’éloquence*, which focuses on the conflicts and mutations of these two rhetorical forms in France (M. Fumaroli, *L’Âge de l’éloquence. Rhétorique et « res literaria » de la Renaissance au seuil de l’époque classique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994), pp. 673-706). See also Roger Zuber, *Les « Belles Infidèles » et la formation du goût classique. Perrot d’Ablancourt et Guez de Balzac* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1968), pp. 361-70, 391-411; Jean Jehasse, *Guez de Balzac et le génie romain* (Saint-Etienne: Université de Saint-Etienne, [1977]), pp. 441-45; et Jean Lafond (éd.), *Les Formes brèves de la prose et le discours discontinu (XVIe-XVIIe siècles)* (Paris: Vrin, 1984).

Pierre Bayle would recall this very image in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* when he set forth what he had understood of the doctrine of Spinoza.¹⁵

The final target of Bernier's polemic – but not the least – is the philosophy of Descartes. This time his critique operates on two levels. Bernier generally discredits those who claim to act in the domain of physics as do 'les géomètres' in the realm of mathematics (365). He also underscores the weakness of Descartes's replies to criticism made by Arnauld and Gassendi (353-4), and denigrates a number of Cartesian postulates without expanding on them, notably that of 'la matière subtile' (352).

We find these three critiques amplified to varying degrees in the *Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi*. They coalesce around a focal point, as revealed by a study of the occurrences of the word 'fiction'. I allude briefly to this point which I have analysed elsewhere.¹⁶ Bernier discredits theories of the structure of the universe, each time on the grounds of physical and logical impossibilities: be it ancient materialism, particularly the *clinamen* of Lucretius invoked to explain the formation of masses in the universe from 'un tricoti et un concours aveugle de petits corps';¹⁷ the latest avatars of the world soul; or else Descartes's narrative of a new genesis from a mass of 'matière subtile'. The term 'fiction' thus signifies a hypothesis in a degraded state, a hypothesis which has begun to generate errors because detached from experience and observation. Bernier's position on the uses of fiction in philosophy forms part of a much broader current of thinking in the Classical Age on correct use of hypotheses in the field of natural science, especially in physics. As both traveller and philosopher, Bernier defends experimental discourse and the experience of the practical investigator. His critique of philosophers' fictions is but the most visible element of a blind opposition to anything unsupported by experience. This allows us to understand Bernier's divergence from a strict interpretation of the *Syntagma Philosophicum*. As Sylvia Murr has demonstrated,¹⁸ Bernier was not merely content to translate the monumental work of his master. Bernier summarizes – but he also inserts and occasionally adds commentary. He inserts comments drawn from his travel experience. Furthermore he replaces certain lines of argument developed by Gassendi which had become obsolete, relating to experiments on the vacuum, and in the domain of medicine (notably in anatomy and physiology). Finally he adds an entire series of doubts: the

¹⁵ Isabelle Moreau, 'L'Araignée dans sa toile. Mise en images de l'âme du monde de François Bernier et Pierre Bayle à l'Encyclopédie.' in *Les Lumières en mouvement. La circulation des idées au XVIII^e siècle*, ed. Isabelle Moreau (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2009), pp. 199-228.

¹⁶ Isabelle Moreau, 'Fictions across Disciplines', pp. 53-69.

¹⁷ *Voyages*, p. 360 ; *Abrégé*, t. II, livre 1, chap. 13, p. 117.

¹⁸ Sylvia Murr, 'Bernier et Gassendi : une filiation déviationniste ?', in *Gassendi et l'Europe*, ed. S. Murr (Paris: Vrin, 1997), pp. 71-114; 'Bernier et le gassendisme', *Corpus*, 20-21 (1992), pp. 115-135.

doubts of the *Traité du Libre et du Volontaire* aimed at Malebranche and the *Doutes sur quelques-uns des principaux chapitres de son Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi* first published separately in 1681, then republished in volume II of the 1684 edition of the *Abrégé*.

Such additions form part of Bernier's efforts to modernize the framing of philosophical problems, as Sylvia Murr has shown. In this respect the *Abrégé's* rhetoric is closely linked to the philosophical context. Concern for establishing a worldly reputation inflects its form, terminology and choice of speculative themes: Bernier gives priority to those which dominated conversations in the circles and salons he frequented. The *Doutes sur quelques-uns des principaux chapitres de son Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi*, nonetheless, merit our interest in that they enable us to pinpoint the originality of Bernier the philosopher. As he himself wrote in the preface 'Au lecteur' of 1681:

Ces doutes sont non pas sur le fond de cette philosophie, car je ne crois pas qu'on puisse raisonnablement philosopher sur un autre système que celui des atomes et du vide, mais sur certaines matières qui ne laissent pas d'être fort considérables, tels que sont l'espace, le lieu, le mouvement, le temps, l'éternité et quelques autres. Au reste, que ces doutes soient bien ou mal fondés, vous en jugerez. Ce petit livre vous servira toujours à deux choses ; l'une à vous faire voir la pauvreté de toutes nos philosophies (il y a plus de trente ans que je philosophe tres-persuadé de certaines choses ; et voilà cependant que je commence à en douter) ; l'autre, à donner comme une idée générale de la philosophie de Gassendi, laquelle, après tout, me semble la plus raisonnable de toutes, la plus simple, la plus sensible et la plus aisée.¹⁹

Here again we encounter the sceptical ethos of the philosophical traveller, and also his pragmatism. Bernier's criticism tends in the direction of refusing abstract terms 'qui comme tous les autres de cette sorte, nous portent à l'erreur, si nous concevons quelque chose d'abstrait, ou de séparé du concret'.²⁰ Equally his critique stems from a desire to simplify philosophical discourse : 'il arrive souvent à force de vouloir trop penetrer, que nous gastons tout, que nous obscurcissons les choses les plus claires et que nous faisons des difficultez où il n'y en a point'.²¹ For example, he takes issue with the Gassendian concept of space, because when defined in this way space can only be 'une chose qui n'est point, qui n'existe point, [...] qui n'est qu'une pure fiction, ou un Estre purement imaginaire'.²² Bernier's doubts concern not so much the principles of Gassendi's philosophy as certain categories necessary to describe the physical world. Fiction is so much more difficult to hunt down when it has to be sought at the level of narrative sequence, of the sentence, or even of the

¹⁹ Bernier, *Doutes sur quelques-uns des principaux chapitres de son Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi*, 'Au lecteur' (Paris: Estienne Michallet, 1681).

²⁰ *Abrégé*, t. II, Doute 1, p. 264.

²¹ *Abrégé*, t. II, Doute 12, p. 319.

²² *Abrégé*, t. II, Doute 3, p. 276.

phrase. In other words, fiction has hidden away at the heart of concepts; and this involves the same mechanism as that which subordinates observation to conceptualization and explanation, ‘au lieu qu’un Physicien doit rechercher ce que les choses sont en effet, et conformer sa conception aux choses’:²³

Cecy supposé, j’estime que demesme que pour connoistre la nature du Lieu, il ne faut point tant subtiliser, ni avoir recours à je ne sçais quel Estre eternal, et immobile qui ne se trouve point en Nature, le Lieu n’estant autre chose que *la superficie du corps qui environne*, ainsi pour connoistre la nature du Temps, il ne faut point aussi avoir recours à je ne sçais quel Flux eternal, et uniforme, qu’on ne sçauroit trouver nulle part ; [...] ! En un mot à un Estre qui n’est que dans la seule imagination ; le Temps, comme dit Lucrece, n’estant assurément rien de soy, rien d’abstrait ou de separé du mouvement des corps. (*Abrégé*, t. II Doute 12, p. 317)

The philosopher who has recourse to ‘un Estre... qui ne tombe nullement sous les Sens’, a being that Bernier considers ‘purement imaginaire’,²⁴ is merely chasing shadows. The methodological error is all the more destructive here in that the fiction it fashions suppresses all the benefits of a conceptual procedure based on experience and observation.

Since Bernier sought a philosophical discourse which would directly represent reality, he strove to promote a mode of philosophical thinking that would shun the seductive fallacies of fiction. In the *Abrégé* these efforts manifest themselves in two ways: through additions of his own creation, and through a semantic reworking at the conceptual level.

Earlier I alluded to the doubts which Bernier the philosopher inserted into his *Abrégé*. To pursue this line of analysis it is necessary to explain Bernier’s difficulties in setting forth certain Gassendian concepts. Notable here was the concept of the ‘animation générale du monde’, dangerously close to the fiction of the world soul. There is a great deal to be said here on the various uses of analogy in philosophical discourse – but this would be too great a digression.²⁵ I will focus instead on the traveller’s additions insofar as they pose a specific problem of genre. Writers of travel narratives lay claim to an unadorned, simple style: the absence of affectation should ensure that the travel narrative is identified as belonging to the genre of history as document. Yet at the same time it derives its narrative forms and scene-setting techniques from novelistic genres. To put it another way: the travel narrative is an eminently unstable genre. Once Bernier

²³ *Abrégé*, t. II, Doute 1, p. 266.

²⁴ *Abrégé*, t. II, Doute 2, p. 269 ; p. 271.

²⁵ C. Margat-Barberis, ‘art. Fiction’ in *Encyclopédie philosophique universelle* (Paris: PUF).

started to use extracts from his *Voyages* to substantiate his *Abrégé* we can assume henceforth that this generic instability permeates his philosophical discourse.

In his *Abrégé* Bernier regularly refers the reader to his practical experience, conveyed notably in his use of self-quotation. Points of convergence between the heterogeneous genres of philosophical treatise and travel narrative are made conspicuous through differentiated enunciation and avoidance of the impersonal style. Granted, Bernier readily uses the third-person pronoun ‘on’; but equally he employs ‘nous’, and ‘je’ is abundantly present. When he chooses not to follow the *Syntagma* to the letter it is either because he feels the need to comment on particular points, or to include more substantial developments of his own. But at each deviation, however minute, Bernier signals the enunciative discontinuity either before or after his insertion, sharply distinguishing his voice from that of the author, whom he calls ‘notre philosophe’ or ‘notre auteur’. The anecdotes he relates may be new material. Thus in volume II, in the chapter entitled ‘De l’existence et providence de Dieu’, Bernier adds to the expected disquisition on the proof of God’s existence from contemplation of nature, the remarks of his master Daneshmend Khan:

N’ajouteray-je point icy qu’entre les preuves qui regardent la Providence il n’y en a point qui plüssent davantage à Daneche-mend-kan un des plus celebres sçavants de l’Asie, et des puissans Omerahs de la Cour du Grand Mogol, que celles qui se tirent de l’Usage des Parties. *Il n’y a pas*, me disoit ce Grand homme, *jusqu’aux parties les plus grossieres, les Parties naturelles de l’Homme, et de la Femme, qui ne marquent une destination particuliere à leurs usages ordinaires, et par consequent une souveraine Providence qui dans le dessein de multiplier, et perpetuer ses Ouvrages, les y ait expressement destinées, tant elles paroissent formées, ajustées, et appropriées l’une pour l’autre,...* (*Abrégé*, t. II, livre. 1, chap. XVII, p. 176-7)

The comments attributed to his master are related in direct speech and constitute a burlesque praise of male and female genitalia and of sexual pleasure: a short, discreetly irreverent aside before concluding the chapter. Bernier promises to return in due course to the more serious arguments of Gassendi, ‘car notre Autheur semble s’estre surpassé luy-mesme en cecy, tant il paroît avoir esté persuadé de l’existence d’un Souverain Estre, et d’une Divine Providence !’ (177).

For the most part, however, the additions are verbatim recapitulations of passages from the *Voyages*: these are clearly identified and identical to the source text in all but a few details – except where several pages are summarized in a new development that retains only the main argument. Bernier’s recapitulations may be intended to inform, and to make up for gaps or errors in Gassendi’s knowledge: hence the chapters on the source of the Nile and rain cycles of Ethiopia. Bernier wrote to Thévenot:

je vous donnerai de bonne foi ce que j'en ai écrit après avoir vu deux fois cet accroissement et l'avoir examiné très curieusement, et après avoir remarqué des choses dans les Indes qui m'ont donné de plus grands avantages pour cela que n'en pouvait avoir ce grand homme [Gassendi] qui en a si ingénieusement et si doctement écrit, quoiqu'il n'eût vu l'Égypte que dans son cabinet. (*Voyages*, 448)

Here we note the imposing register of the eye witness, characteristic of travel narratives. Bernier's geographical knowledge is not only bookish, but also a practical knowledge combining direct personal experience and first-hand accounts. Bernier is all the more categorical on this matter, being in a position to corroborate the testimony of the Reverend Fathers of the Company of Jesus Almeida, Alphonso Mendez and Hieronimo Lobo, who all had long stays in Ethiopia.

Leur temoignage me semble mesme d'autant plus considerable, qu'il s'accorde non seulement avec les Lettres qu'autrefois David Roy d'Ethiopie ecrivit au Pape Clement VIII et à Emanuel Roy de Portugal, mais aussi avec ce que j'en ay appris à Moka proche de Babelmandel de plusieurs Marchands d'Ethiopie, et entre autres d'un nommé Murat Armenien d'Alep, qui estoit depuis long-temps habitué dans le Pays, et que j'ay veu depuis Ambassadeur du Roy d'Ethiopie à la Cour du Grand Mogol : Voyez la Carte suivante qui a esté tirée sur l'Original que nous devons aux soins de l'illustre Monsieur Thevenot.²⁶

Here Bernier's discourse is the discourse of authority, a display of certain knowledge. In place of an erroneous *savoir de cabinet* he may legitimately propose his own travel narratives and present himself as an authority in learned circles – indeed, had he not, on his return from India, corrected the 'celebre Monsieur de la Chambre' who believed that 'le debordement du Nil venoit de la fermentation et ebullition de la Terre Nitreuse d'Égypte'?²⁷ An 'ingenious' opinion (in other words, a 'fiction') which does not stand up to empirical observation. By dint of the very same observation he justifies hypotheses on the source of rain, springs and rivers, and ventures passing critiques here and there of certain ancient opinions, or of Gassendi's theories.

The testimony of the traveller is not always at odds with the knowledge of the armchair philosopher: the now well-worn *topos* of traveller's observation versus the palimpsest of authorities is coupled with the ideal, shared by a number of travellers, of the complementarity of ancient and modern sources. When Bernier evokes the virtue of frugality in chapter VII, he concludes a series of examples drawn from Antiquity with a 'Peinture des Diogenes des Indes':

²⁶ *Abrégé*, t. V, livre 1, chap. III, p. 43-55 ('De l'Origine du Nil', pp. 44-45) ; *Voyages*, pp. 448-452.

²⁷ *Abrégé*, t. V, livre 1, chap. III, p. 48.

A propos de tout ceci, je ne dois, ce semble, pas omettre ce que je sçais de la vie des Indiens Orientaux, quand ce ne seroit que pour faire voir que toutes ces belles choses que nous venons de dire, ne sont pas de pures Speculations Philosophiques, mais qu'il y a des peuples entiers qui menent une vie aussi frugale, et qui se contentent d'aussi peu de chose soit pour le boire, ou le manger, soit pour les habillemens, que tous ces Cyniques, Stoiciens, et Epicuriens.²⁸

The portrait of these 'Fakirs... qui aussi bien que Diogene vont tout nuds', aims to give philosophical speculations a renewed relevance, offering a concrete application of a moral philosophical problem. Fakirs, Brahmans and 'Banyanes' indeed eat very little and drink only water, 'et cependant ils vivent dumoins aussi tranquillement, aussi joyeux, et aussi contents que nous, beaucoup plus sains, dumoins aussi forts et aussi robustes' (180). This exotic illustration of virtuous frugality is not however lacking in irony when we recall that, in the original text of the *Voyages*, the portrait of the 'Fakirs' was largely derogatory:

Toutes ces choses si extraordinaires, à vous dire le vrai, me surprenaient fort dans le commencement : je ne savais qu'en dire et qu'en penser. Tantôt je les considérais comme quelques restes, ou comme les auteurs de cette ancienne et infâme secte cynique, sinon que je ne remarquais en eux que brutalité et ignorance, et qu'ils me semblaient plutôt des arbres qui se remuaient un peu d'un lieu à autre que des animaux raisonnables ; tantôt je les considérais comme gens entêtés de religion ; mais comme j'ai déjà dit, je ne pouvais remarquer en tout cela aucune ombre de vraie piété ; tantôt je pensais en moi-même que cette vie paresseuse, fainéante et indépendante de gueux pourrait bien avoir quelque chose d'attrayant ; tantôt que la vanité, qui se fourre partout et qui se trouve aussi souvent sous le manteau rapetassé d'un Diogène que sous les bons habits d'un Platon, pourrait être ce ressort qui faisait jouer tant de machines. Et puis, faisant encore réflexion sur la misérable et austère vie qu'ils menaient, je ne savais plus quel jugement en porter. (*Voyages*, 319)

Here we see how the testimony of the practical observer acts as a counterweight to those elements of philosophical discourse liable to excessive speculation. The same practical concerns move Bernier to supplement the Gassendian critique of astrologers' false knowledge, in these terms:

Au reste, on ne trouvera peutestre pas mauvais que je mesle icy quelque chose de ce que j'ay dit des Astrologues dans ma Relation des Estats du grand Mogol, quand ce ne seroit que pour nous delasser un peu l'Esprit de cette grande application où M. Gassendi nous a tenu jusques à présent ? Voicy mes termes.²⁹

²⁸ *Abrégé*, t. VII, livre 1, chap. VI, p. 179-180 ; *Voyages*, p. 319.

²⁹ *Abrégé*, t. IV, 4^e partie, chap. XII : « Que les Responses par lesquelles les Astrologues taschent d'affermir, et de defendre leurs Dogmes, sont vains et frivoles. », pp. 403-405 (p. 403); *Voyages*, pp. 165-167.

Apart from one or two stylistic alterations which emphasize the personal involvement of the author, the text is an almost identical reproduction. Bernier relates here his observations on Indian astrologers, supplemented with a famous ‘conte’ that portrays the humiliation of a court astrologer confronted with the rather uncouth common sense of a head gardener.³⁰ This passage is clearly intended to entertain, to put the reader at ease: at the heart of the philosophical treatise, it introduces a different type of narrative as well as different sort of logic. Just as the philosopher makes way for the historical and empirical ‘Je’, the (philosophical) example becomes anecdotal, and this transition is marked by the use of tenses and the occasional departures from the impersonal present tense in the narrative.

Is this fiction’s return? Has Bernier banished philosophers’ fictions only to smuggle in fable and literary invention? This point is open to debate. For Bernier the traveller’s experience remains an antidote to philosophers’ fictions. Although his discourse does not totally bypass the processes of fictional writing, his anecdotes do not belong as such to the tradition of *mirabilia*.³¹ There are no acephalous monsters to be found in the *Voyages*. Moreover, when Bernier relates the ‘merveilles’ of a spring which he went to see on the recommendation of his master, his purpose is to put forward a rational explanation for the phenomenon of its irregular flow.

Les gentils ont là sur le bord du réservoir un petit *deiïra* ou temple d’idole de Brare, qui est un de leurs *deiïtas* ou fausses divinités, et c’est pour cela qu’ils appellent cette fontaine Send-brary, comme qui dirait eau de Brare, et qu’ils viennent là de toutes parts en pèlerinage pour se baigner et sanctifier dans cette eau miraculeuse. Ils font sur l’origine de cette eau plusieurs fables que je ne vous rapporterai point, parce que je n’y vois aucune ombre de vérité. Pendant cinq ou six jours que je demeurai là, je fis tous mes efforts pour trouver la raison de cette merveille. (*Voyages*, 418-9)

Bernier replaces the narrative of pagan ‘fables’ with an account of the steps he undertook to discover the ‘causes’ of the ‘prétendu miracle’ (419). The explanation he puts forward remains in the realm of the hypothetical, yet it is an appreciably probable hypothesis. His ‘imagination’ is ‘d’autant plus raisonnable’ (420) in that it takes into account the indigenous topography, corroborating the testimonies of local inhabitants. In the *Voyages* Bernier’s interest in marvels and miracles extends only as far as his capacity to demonstrate their underlying causes.³² In the case of the marvellous spring he puts forward a ‘raisonnable’ explanation of an extraordinary phenomenon.

³⁰ See Appendix.

³¹ Frank Lestringant, ‘Fortunes de la singularité à la Renaissance: le genre de l’*Isolario*’, in *Écrire le monde à la Renaissance. Quinze études sur Rabelais, Postel, Bodin et la littérature géographique* (Caen-Orléans: Éditions Paradigmes, 1993), pp. 17-48, especially pp. 30-31.

³² See Frédéric Tinguely, ‘Un paradis sans miracles. Le Cachemire de François Bernier’, in *Études de Lettres*, 3 (2006): ‘Voyage et libertinage (XVII^e-XVIII^e siècle)’, ed. F. Tinguely and A. Paschoud, pp. 55-69.

Elsewhere in the *Voyages* he exposes human deceitfulness, that of astrologers who frequent the court as well as that of pagans and Mullah miracle-makers.

When Bernier recapitulates in the *Abrégé* what he had written about astrological imposture in the *Voyages*, his aim is not radically different: he is still concerned with denouncing imposture. This borrowing from the *Voyages* concludes a series of three chapters devoted to astrologers, in a volume which is itself devoted to the physics of celestial bodies. The change in tone is palpable; but the story of the gardener is not a tale told for its own sake – or at least, it is not only that. For one thing, Bernier relates it in indirect speech: he does not explicitly say whether he heard the story at court, nor who passed it on to him; but we can reasonably assume that it was indeed circulating in the milieu he frequented, notably those of his master Daneshmend Khan. Whether the story was invented or simply embellished matters little: its performativity is what matters, and this is certainly real. The story forms part of the ‘discours’ attributed to ‘des gens entendus’, who are critical of judicial astrology. In his *Voyages* Bernier barely outlines the expected parallel between the judicial astrology which ran riot at the court of the great Mogul and that which was rife in European courts.³³ Rather, this whole development in the *Abrégé*, borrowed from the *Voyages*, is preceded by another anecdote – this one true – concerning the astrologer Morin:

Je pourrais icy rapporter en detail l’Horoscope de M. Maridat Conseiller au Grand Conseil, dans laquelle on verroit que l’Astrologue Jean Baptiste Morin qui l’a dressée a aussi bien reüssi que Nostradamus dans celle de M. Suffredy ; mais tout cela est tellement plein de sottises, de badineries, et de faux evenemens, et sent tellement le Charlatan, et la Bohemienne qui ne bute qu’à tromper, et à attraper une piece d’argent, que j’ay de la peine à m’y arrester. § Je diray seulement à la honte eternelle de cet Astrologue Morin, que voyant que M. Gassendi qui se mocquoit de son Astrologie Judiciaire estoit infirme, et atteint d’une fluxion sur la poitrine, il fut assez impudent pour predire et faire sçavoir à tout le monde par un Imprimé expres qu’il mourroit sur la fin de Juillet, ou au commencement d’Aoust de l’année 1650, pretendant par là eriger un Trophée à son Astrologie ; et cependant M. Gassendi ne se porta jamais mieux qu’en ce temps-là, et il reprit tellement de forces qu’il me souvient que le cinquieme de Fevrier de l’année suivante, nous montasmes ensemble la Montagne de Toulon pour faire les Experiences du Vuide. (*Abrégé*, t. IV, 4^e partie, chap. XII, p. 395)

Bernier had in fact participated in the quarrel between Gassendi and Morin with two Latin pamphlets in the period 1651-1653. The example cited above proves that the best pamphlet is no match for the well-turned short anecdote when it comes to getting the audience on one’s side. The Morin example illustrates the bankruptcy of judicial astrology better than the finest possible *raisonnement*. Similarly, the views of the ‘entendus’ at the Court of the great Mogul did not vex the

³³ *Voyages*, pp. 165-166.

astrologers as much as ‘ce conte qui s’est rendu fameux’ concerning the king, the astrologer and the gardener. Thus deployed, this story has the flavour of a real-life anecdote.

Moreover this example could be compared with the fictitious dialogue in the *Abrégé* between a Dervish and a Turk on the subject of the fatalism that held sway in the Orient.³⁴ Here yet another step towards fiction seems to have been taken. The dialogue of the Turk appears in indirect speech, following an introduction which clearly underscores its exemplarity and its constructedness:

‘...comment pensez-vous qu’un Turc, par exemple, excuse ses crimes quand un Derviche entreprend de luy faire quelque remontrance ? Hé quoy, Derviche, dit-il, est-ce que tu ne sçais pas aussi bien que moy, que tout est escrit là haut, que ce sont des Caracteres ineffaçables, et des Decrets eternels et irrevocables ? Ne conviens-tu pas aussi avec moy, que cette pretendüe Liberté, ce pretendu pouvoir à faire, ou à ne faire pas, à faire bien, ou à faire mal, est un vain phantôme des Iahours ou Infidelles, et par consequent qu’il n’y a au plus en nous que du Volontaire, que de la pente, de l’inclination, ce qui est bien éloigné de ce qu’ils appellent Libre, de ce qu’ils appellent Liberté ?... ’ (VII, 3, 423-4)

The theatrical staging, the vehemence of the speech, evidently derive their effects from the trusty art of oratory. It is uncertain whether Bernier would have acknowledged accusations of fabrication. He says elsewhere in the *Voyages* (161): ‘il est impossible qu’on puisse savoir et rapporter ces sortes des choses mot pour mot et qu’on n’y mette rien du sien’. The Turk’s speech is unquestionably written in a European idiom rather than ‘en style asiatique’, but it is grounded in reality: ‘ce sont là les discours, et les excuses ordinaires de ces malheureux Mahumetans, ou plutost ces blasphemes qui m’ont souvent fait trembler ou en les lisant dans leurs Livres, ou en les entendant de leur bouche’ (VII, 424). In the *Abrégé* the Turk’s speech starkly illustrates the dangers of a belief in strict predestination. It is the culmination of a lengthy discussion of the delicate problem of free will also presented in the form of a dialogue. Thus, if Bernier allows himself to speak his mind on a subject as controversial as this, without being a theologian, he does so under the auspices of a different authority. It is because he had ‘longtemps demeuré parmy les Nations entestées de Predestination’ (VII, 423) that Bernier denounces the dangers of such a doctrine. His experience as a traveller is what enables him to shift the debate from the register of theological speculation to that of political pragmatism, without further trifling ‘à reveiller des Difficultez qui ne servent qu’à embarrasser les Esprits’ (VII, 427).

In Bernier’s writings, the rejection of philosophical speculation entails the promotion of observation and personal experience. The stories he relates are neither text-book examples, nor thought experiments in the abstract. In this sense they do not conform to the scheme of

³⁴ *Abrégé*, tome VII, livre 3, chap. III, pp. 423-424.

philosophical fiction, at least as it was theorized and practised at the time. Bernier's method does not exclude theorization, but subordinates it to the experience of the traveller: his anecdotes are real-life anecdotes, or they are constructed on the basis of real-life experience. In this way, they are true: 'ce ne sont point des visions de Voyageur' (VII, 248). What we find here is a tendency towards a 'realism' which would have great difficulty in establishing itself, if the embittered declarations of Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, formulated scarcely a century later, are anything to go by:

Je suis voyageur et marin ; c'est-à-dire, un menteur, et un imbécile aux yeux de cette classe d'écrivains paresseux et superbes qui, dans les ombres de leur cabinet, philosophent à perte de vue sur le monde et ses habitants, et soumettent impérieusement la nature à leurs imaginations. Procédé bien singulier, bien inconcevable de la part de gens qui, n'ayant rien observé par eux-mêmes, n'écrivent, ne dogmatisent que d'après des observations empruntées de ces mêmes voyageurs auxquels ils refusent la faculté de voir et de penser.³⁵

Appendix

Tous ces discours déplaisaient beaucoup aux astrologues, mais rien ne les fâchait tant que ce conte qui s'est rendu fameux : que le grand Shah Abbas, roi de Perse, avait fait bêcher et préparer un petit lieu dans son sérail pour faire un jardin ; les petits arbres étaient tout prêts et le jardinier prétendait de les planter le lendemain ; cependant l'astrologue, faisant l'homme d'importance, dit qu'il fallait prendre le *sahet* favorable pour les planter, afin qu'ils pussent bien réussir. Shah Abbas en fut content, l'astrologue prit ses instruments, feuilleta ses livres, fit ses calculs et conclut qu'à raison de telle et telle conjoncture et regards des planètes, il était nécessaire de les planter à l'heure même. Le maître-jardinier, qui ne songeait à rien moins qu'à l'astrologue, ne se trouva pas là présent, mais on ne laissa pas de mettre la main à l'œuvre : l'on fit des trous et on planta tous ces arbres, Shah Abbas lui-même les posant dans leur place pour qu'on pût dire que c'était des arbres plantés de la propre main de Shah Abbas. Le maître-jardinier, qui revint sur le soir, fut bien étonné de trouver la besogne faite et, voyant que cela n'était point selon le lieu propre et l'ordre qu'il avait destinés, qu'un abricotier par exemple était dans le solage d'un pommier et un poirier dans celui d'un amandier, bien fâché contre l'astrologue, fit tout arracher les arbrisseaux et les coucha comme il les avait laissés avec un peu de terre sur la racine pour le lendemain. Incontinent, on en donna nouvelle à l'astrologue et lui à Shah Abbas, qui fit aussitôt venir le jardinier et qui, en colère, lui demanda pourquoi il avait été si osé que d'arracher ces arbres qu'il avait lui-même plantés de sa main ; qu'au reste, on avait pris très exactement le *sahet* ; que jamais on n'y reviendrait, qu'on n'en saurait jamais trouver un si bon et qu'ainsi il avait tout gâté et tout perdu. Le rustaud de jardinier, qui avait un peu de vin de Chiraz dans la tête, regarda l'astrologue de travers et lui dit ces trois mots en grondant et en jurant : '*Billah, billah*, il fallait bien que ce fût un admirable *sahet*, celui que tu as pris pour ces arbres, astrologue de malheur ; ils ont été plantés aujourd'hui à midi et ce soir ils ont été arrachés !' Quand Shah Abbas entendit ce raisonnement, il se mit à rire, tourna le dos à l'astrologue et se retira. (*Voyages*, 166-167)

³⁵ Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, *Voyage autour du monde par la frégate du Roi La Boudeuse et la flûte L'Étoile*, ed. Jacques Proust (Gallimard, Folio classique: 1982), 'Discours préliminaire', pp. 46-47.