

DISSIMULATION AND SUGGESTION

Alain SANDRIER, Professor of French Literature, University of Caen

Part 1 – Digression and distance

Let's remind ourselves of an aspect which concerns the spirit of the Enlightenment and the recognisable way it's led its actions; since it was not just a questioning of power as it is often characterised, but rather a distinctive way of playing with authority to better thwart and often criticise it. The 18th century invented efficient ways of contesting given authority, which were not limited to head-on opposition but increasingly resorted to the art of allusion and suggestion. All these indirect forms of harassment towards authority would, without a doubt, become shrewder in the end and take on a deeper undermining. That's the Enlightenment's hallmark.

This holds true for conditions surrounding space for debate at the time. If digressions and allusive games were developed, it was to prohibit certain subjects from being directly addressed. The system of censorship was there to remind us that we were far from a world of free expression, that public speech should compromise with order and particular uses which one could not defy with impunity. As such, writers played with taboo to test the limits of authorities' tolerance and move the lines. One must never forget this possible core of suppression when one focuses on the Enlightenment's forms of struggle. Some are deemed experts in this game of cat and mouse with authorities, and notably writing and censorship.

Part 2 – The Voltairian art of mockery

Let's take Voltaire as an example. It's the most successful example in its capacity to thwart censorship by getting the better of it through all manner of means possible. At times, he pretended to be orthodox so as to better place criticism on another subject. For example, his tragedy *Mahomet* centres on two scenes at a time. By claiming to have support from the Pope, he tries to pass it off as an orthodox play which stigmatises religion traditionally considered as a sham.

But each of us might also interpret the criticism of any religion in its capacity to seize political power by exploiting working class naivety. In this case, Islam is only a defective mirror image of a critique which targets Christianity above anything else; Christianity officially being beyond reproach. We see him play, therefore, with degrees of insinuation in a very subtle manner, profiting from what is authorised in order to better challenge taboos. Incidentally, there is often dishonesty in this way of proceeding.

But Voltaire was never afraid of using dishonesty in his fight. He even brazenly took on the most barefaced lies for the need of the cause. As such, he was keen to pass, from the outside at least, religiously speaking, as an Orthodox Catholic although everyone accused him of the most aggressive attacks against Christianity. He unashamedly rejected the *Philosophical Dictionary* when it came out in 1764, saying loud and proud that "this work of Satan", as he liked to call it in his letters, was not by him and that someone blames him for disparaging it.

It's true that he was afraid for his security over a few weeks since he well knew that this clandestine work that he could nor would claim responsibility for, increased the number of remarks made against Christianity and will do so more and more as the reissues increased until 1769.

In this work, one can see quite well the differing degrees of criticism that one might come across at the time. There were blatant, anticlerical attacks which played on an old and shared tradition, driven by popular forms like song. We see this in the first article called "Abbot". There were also critiques on biblical discourse which he scrutinised to better ridicule and parody it. As such, "Genesis" was presented as a parody of biblical interpretations.

But this article took the liberty of being able to look at the Bible as something no one could consider at the time; that's to say no more or less than a collection of fictive fables, like a mythology which was no more credible than unbelief. Other articles were more complex, including a splendid piece like the first section of the "Faith" article for example.

This presented itself as a small passage, I quote: "Through a descendant of Rabelais, who is pitted against a courtesan in Rome, the Pope Alexander VI and Pic de La Mirandole discuss the Christian religion of which neither one nor the other is a believer". But Pico, before the all-mighty Pope, is obliged to equivocate and hide his lack of faith, which is a way of saying that religion is a superior form which cannot be openly criticised. The couple itself reflects the critical ways and means necessitated by a world perverted by the established lie.

And what to say about this borderline and remarkable piece in the article "Torture", a splendid variation verging on dark humour. To better denounce this barbaric practice, Voltaire calls upon the figure of a magistrate's wife who cleverly asks: "My darling, have you not asked the question to anyone today?" When we know that this article was written after the death of the knight La Barre executed at 18 years old in 1766, who's referred to in the article itself, we see to what extent Voltaire's outrage knew, where necessary, to resort to the most audacious forms. Here, laughter turns against perversity which takes pleasure in degrading man.

Part 3 – Irony, major player

Beyond the case alone of Voltaire and the *Philosophical Dictionary*, one might say that irony was a major player of the Enlightenment. Irony sought a subtle game with the reader or listener. It installed a situation of complicity which distinguished the good and the bad interpreters without seeming to get away from what was authorised or allowed. One had to listen to the contrary of what was insisted, be capable of putting distance between the literal and direct sense for a deeper meaning to emerge.

In short, you call on the reader's intelligence in a time of coded communication. As Voltaire says in the preface of his *Dictionary*: "The most useful books are those whose readers do half the work themselves".

To conclude, let's say the Enlightenment knew how to play with this art of suggestion and dissimulation. We think of Montesquieu's critical and fetish methods, this subtle mind which has always preferred to leave his readers with the pleasure of understanding only half the meaning, a practice he already used in the novel with words from the mind of characters in the *Persian Letters*, as well as in the treaty of the famous text to slavery in *The Spirit of Laws*. His false reasoning given in favour of slavery should alert any well-adjusted person since the most flippant and incongruous justifications were being strung together here in favour of slavery.

But even still, some supporters of slavery, at the end of the Enlightenment, did not see the irony and used these reasons as if they were true justifications given by the thinker in favour of their cause.