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The New Science and the Rise of New Forms of Prose Writing during the Seventeenth Century: the Case of Aphra Behn

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The long-running debate on the birth of the novel has periodically added new theories that even now are far from having exhausted the question, as the interest in new approaches testifies[1]. Here I would like to take up the scientific debate of the seventeenth century, a trademark of the age which influenced the imagination of a whole century, and was not without consequences for the rise of the novel, although curiously this has been insufficiently investigated.

A good example of how much literature owed to the new positions in speculative thought, and how extensively the genre of the novel was in debt to them, can be found in the works of Aphra Behn (1640-1689), well-known as a controversial playwright, poet, novelist and translator.

In 1688 she published her translation of Bouvier de Fontenelle, *Entretiens sur la Pluralitè de Mondes*. The French author was an admirer of Copernicus, whose theories, at the time, were frequently questioned. Behn's translation is still reputed to be the first European

[1] Recently, one of the most popular theories assumes that the changes in the habit of reading, starting from the second half 17th-18th century, is responsible for the twilight of the digression, which was one of the key elements in the old romances. This theory considers silent reading as a revolutionary practice in the ordinary life of ordinary people, favouring the need of a prose less intricate than that of the romances. See R. Loretelli (2008: 11-24), M. Bortolussi-P. Dixon (2003).

translation of the text; in her preface she explains why she is in favour of the new science, or natural philosophy, which at the time included physics and metaphysics[2]:

> The design of the author is to treat of this part of Natural Philosophy in a more familiar way than any other has done, and to make every body to understand him. [...] I must tell you freely, he has failed in his design; for endeauvouring to render this part of natural philosophy familiar, he has turned it into ridicule; he has pushed his wild notion of the Plurality of worlds to that height of extravagancy, that he most certainly will confound those readers, who have not judgment and wit to distinguish between what is truly solid (or at least probable) and what is trifling and airy: and there is no less skill and understanding required in this, than in comprehending the whole subject he treats of. [...]. He ascribes all to Nature, and says not a word of God Almighty, from the beginning to the end; so that one would almost take him to be a pagan. He endeavours chiefly two things; one is that there are thousands of worlds inhabited by animals, besides our earth, and has urged this fancy too far: I shall not presume to defend his opinion, but one may make a very good use of many things he has expressed very finely, in endeavouring to assist his wild Fancy. [...] The other thing he endeavours to defend and assert is the system of Copernicus. As to this I cannot but take his part as far as a Woman's reasoning can go. I shall not venture upon the Astronomical part but leave that to the mathematicians; but because I know that when this opinion of Copernicus (as to the motion of the earth, and the Sun's being fixed in the centre of the universe, without any other motion, but upon his own axis) was first heard of in the world, those who neither understood the old system of Ptolemy, nor the new one of Copernicus, said that this

[2] In the first years of the century Francis Bacon understood natural philosophy as "the inquisition of causes, and the production of effects; speculative and operative; natural science and natural prudence" (Francis Bacon in Johnston 1974: 88). Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning* was first published in 1605 and *New Atlantis* after Bacon's death in 1627.

> new opinion was expressly contrary to the holy Scriptures, and therefore not to be embraced; nay, it was condemned as a Heretical upon the same account: After it had been examined by the best mathematicians in Europe, and that they found it answered all the Phenomena's and motions of the Spheres and the Stars better than the system of Ptolomy; that it was plainer, and not so perplexing and confused as the old opinion; several of these learned men therefore embraced this; but those that held out, when they saw all arguments against Copernicus would not do, they had recourse to what I said before, that his system was expressly against the holy scriptures. [...] I hope I may be allowed to say, that the design of the Bible was not to instruct Mankind in Astronomy, Geometry, or Chronology, but in the Law of God, to lead us to the Eternal Life[3].

Behn's words introduce the reader to new concepts, particularly relevant if we consider that they come from a woman, who was supposed to be "still and silent" by the society of her time. The fact that she too takes a position in favour of Copernicus and against the old philosophy is not to be underestimated, as it represents a challenge to the common view; her position, far from being a simple expression of common sense, recalls theories and texts which at the time were thought not to belong to a woman's sphere.

When she firmly asserts the need to distinguish between what is proper to science or natural philosophy and what pertains to the Holy Scriptures, she is taking up a significant aspect of the philosophical debate of the first years of the century; the distinction which the passage quoted emphasises had been put forward by Francis Bacon, one of the first to point out the differences between "truth of religion and truth of science". More than once, in the various sections of *The Ad-*

[3] Behn's text appears for the first time in the volume *A Discovery of New Worlds. From the French made English by Mrs Behn*, published in 1688. The essay is re-published in *Histories, Novels and Translations written by the most ingenious Mrs Behn* (1700) and in *The Theory or System of Several New Inhabited Worlds, Written in French by Mons. Fontenelle. Made English by Mrs Behn* (1718). The following passage is from the 1700 edition.

vancement of Learning, he reminds his readers how scriptures are given by "inspiration and not by human reason". In the second book of the volume, he concludes "that sacred theology (which in our idiom we call divinity) is grounded only upon the word and oracle of God, and not upon the light of nature" (Bacon in Johnston 1974: 200).

We do not know much about Behn's intellectual apprenticeship, but in spite of her vibrant denunciation of the limits imposed upon a woman, many features of her writing point to her being well acquainted with the cultural disputes of the age, and even with Bacon's works. Probably, it was her familiarity with what had long been going on in the philosophical arena that encouraged her to make such a strong criticism of those who confuse what is proper to science with what belongs to religion. Indeed her condemnation sounds like an echo of Bacon's words against those "who pretended to find the truth of all natural philosophy in the scriptures; scandalising and traducing all other philosophy as heathenish and profane" (Bacon in Johnston 1974: 207).

In the passage quoted above, Behn summarises fifty years of speculative thought which had been set going by the "unfamiliar thought", as Bacon called his approach to knowledge, which he intended to be the tool to break through "frozen minds", as "there is no hope [...] except in a new birth of science; that is in raising it regularly up from experience and building it afresh" (vii).

Precisely the appeal to experience was the great novelty in speculative thought, leading to the separation of science and religion, science and literature[4]. Behn's impatience over the "height of extravagancy" in Fontenelle, her urging us to distinguish what is "truly solid" from what is "trifling and airy", testifies to this significant passage in the history of ideas. She is deeply aware of the importance of Fontenelle's scientific theory, but dislikes the way he communicates it. What she

[4] At the time, descriptions of aspects of the natural world, such as animals or other examples belonging to nature, were described in terms of paraphrases of classics such as Pliny's works.

advocates is the plain style, much more explicit and direct, easily understood by readers who can refer it to their own experience.

The literary value of the Bible is highlighted in contraposition to what is perceived as belonging to another sphere; the ideas Behn expresses here sound like an echo of the distinctions which Francis Bacon's unfamiliar thought had so much promoted. Actually, Behn's criticism of Fontenelle sums up the philosopher's distinctions between the various aspects of human knowledge. In the *Advancement of Learning* he clearly sets out what is proper to each of the two cultures, science and religion, science and literature. Bacon calls poesy "parabolical", in which "the secrets and mysteries of religion, policy, or philosophy, are involved in fables and parables" (Bacon in Johnston 1974: 81). Poesy is thus distinguished from what is tied to the "laws of matter", and "may at pleasure join that which nature had severed, and sever that which nature hath joined; and so make unlawful matches and divorces of things" (80).

In her approach to Fontenelle's text, Behn testifies to the distinction advocated by Bacon which marks the birth of modern thought. She summarises the attitude of a period, indeed of a century, dominated by a strong desire for knowledge, but of a different kind if we place it in relation to the past. For the first time in history, practical knowledge was considered important. This is why "watching rather than reading" and "verifying rather than commenting"[5] prevail in the general attitude of an age which in a conspicuous way was dominated by the overwhelming pressure of experience. The spirit of the age encouraged technical knowledge, a knowledge not to vanish in "delectable speculation", but, as Francis Bacon advocated, operative to the endowment and benefit of man's life[6].

[5] See M. Foucault ([1970] 1972: 15).

[6] The study of the mechanical arts holds a central place in Francis Bacon's project for the reconstruction of science. He strongly opposed the idea, commonly assumed, that considered "a kind of dishonour unto learning to descend to inquiry or meditation upon matters mechanical" (see Bacon in A. Johnston 1974: 70). In his *New Atlantis* shops of divers mechanical arts are included. In Samuel Hartlib's utopian land of Macaria a College of Experience is placed which exemplifies many of Bacon's concepts.

The implications of this attitude are clearly perceptible in Behn; in another passage of her preface, *Essay on Translated Prose*, she analyses some of the theoretical problems connected with this kind of activity, and sets out one of the first theoretical approaches to translation. She explains that her decision to translate Fontenelle's book was due to two reasons: the novelty of the subject in vulgar languages, and the authors' introducing a woman as one of the speakers. Astrea, Behn's pen name, a feminist ante-literam, was positively moved by the novelty of a man of science who considered a woman on the same level as a man, and decided to translate: "for I thought an English woman might adventure to translate any thing a French woman may be supposed to have spoken". But she soon discovered the attempt was not as easy as she had believed, so she considered it appropriate to her task to "say something of translation of prose in general"[7]. And she proceeded to a sort of comparative analysis of the four main European languages:

> The Italian, Spanish and French, are all three at best corruptions of the Latin, with the mixture of Gothick, Arabick, and Gaulish Words. The Italian, as it is nearest the Latin, is also nearest the English, For its mixture being composed of Latin, and the Language of the Goths, Vandals, and other Northern Nations, who over-run the Roman Empire, and conquer'd its Language with its Provinces, most of these Northern Nations spoke the Teutonick, or Dialects of it, of which the English is one also; and that's the reason that the English and the Italian learn the language of one another sooner than any other; because not only the Phrase, but the accent of both do very much agree; the Spanish is next of kin to the English for almost the same Reason [...] The French, as it is most remote from the Latin, so the Phrase and Accent differ most from the English. [...]
> The French therefore is of all the hardest to translate into English. [...] And first, the nearer the Genius and Humour of two Nations agree, the Idioms of their Speech are the nearer; and every Body knows there is more Affinity between the English and Italian people, than the English and the French; and for that Reason, and for what I have said before, it is very difficult to translate Spanish into French: and I believe hardly possible to translate French into Dutch. (Aphra Behn [1688] in Annamaria Lamarra 1990: 58-60)

[7] Astra's preface is entitled *Essay on Translated Prose*, published for the first time in 1688 in the volume *A Discovery of New Worlds. From the French. Made English by Mrs Behn*. It is republished in the 1700 in the edition of *Histories, Novels and Translations written by the most ingenious Mrs Behn*, and in 1718 in *The Theory or System of Several New Inhabited Worlds, written in French by Mons. Fontenelle. Made English by Mrs Behn.*

Two aspects are remarkable in this essay: first of all the idea of the genius of the nation which the romantic and pre-romantic movements will eventually take up. It is a genius which, in accordance with the "spirit of the age", refers to the phonetic, morphological, and semantic peculiarities of the various languages. She takes up an aspect of the philosophical approach to grammar and language which at the time exhibited two different attitudes. The quest for a single rational structure of the various languages where the names, as in the *Bible* where Adam names all things and all creatures, are strictly connected to things; and, at the same time, the drive towards the autonomy of the various languages[8] which implies the study of their differences.

Behn's observations owe a lot to the theoretical debate on this matter, and testify to her remarkable range of knowledge.

The need to discover the genius of languages through the comparative method had been asserted in books and treatises published some years before her essay, such as *Lingua Linguarum* (1658) by Henry Edmundson and *The Primitive Origination of Mankind* (1677) by Matthew Hale.

It is worthwhile observing that the comparative attitude in the linguistic speculation of the age is another manifestation of the importance attributed to particular things which, first with Bacon,

[8] Still a basic book on this question is L. Formigari (1970).

and then with The Royal Society[9], had become the primary material of philosophy and the "stuff and subject matter of true induction". Language is part of the experience of everybody, and experience has become the starting point of the new philosophy. In this light a new importance was attached to language as the expression of a singularity that the new scientists considered a necessary instrument of analysis.

Thomas Sprat, in his *History of the Royal Society* (1667), explained how the aim of the group was to make faithful records of all the works of nature and art[10]; faithfulness implies an attention never paid before to the different uses of language. So the Society took into account "the language of artisans, countrymen and merchants". Language was given a relevant role precisely because of its communicative function; as a consequence, for the first time, a negative connotation of rhetoric began to appear. The utilitarian conception of knowledge and learning meant the glorification of the plain style, which was advocated against tropes and figurative language. Indicative of the new attitude was the position against rhetoric taken by the man who, in his history of the Royal Society, more representatively than others summarised the new attitude: "Who can behold without indignation how many mists and uncertainties, these specious Tropes and Figures have brought on our knowledge?[11]"

The empiricist attitude of the new science was extended to languages and to a new conception of what they may express. This attitude implies that languages are read in relation to culture, to the habits and peculiarities of the people who speak them. This interest is perceptible in Behn's essay, particularly when she compares the characteristics of the French language with the habits of the French people.

> [...] as to the French in particular, it has as many advantages of the English, as to the Sound as ours has of the French, as to the Signification; which is another Argument of the different Genious of the two Nations. Almost all the relatives, articles, and pronouns in the French language end in vowels, and are written with two or three Letters. Many of their Words begin with Vowels; So that when a word after a Relative, Pronoun or Article ends with a vowel, and begins with another, they admit of their beloved Figure Apostrophe, and cut off the first Vowel. This they do to shun an ill Sound; and they are so musical as to that, that they will go against all the Rules of Sense and Grammar rather than fail; [...] Secondly, their words generally end in vowels, or if they do not, they do not pronounce the Consonant, for the most part, unless there were two together, or that the next word begins with a vowel. Thirdly, by the help of their relatives, they can shortly, and with ease resume a long preceding Sentence in two or three short words. (Aphra Behn [1688] in Lamarra 1990: 62-64)

[9] See M. Purver, E.J. Bowen (1960).
[10] See T. Sprat, A. Cowley ([1667] 2003).
[11] Sprat's position and his theory of language is summarised in A. Pizzorusso (1999: 14).

Behn links her comment on the French mentality the language exhibits to her analysis of the French language compared to English:

> [...] as the French do not value a plain Suit without a Garniture, they are not satisfied with the Advantages they have, but confound their own language with needless Repetitions and Tautologies, and by a certain Rhetorical figure, peculiar to themselves, imply twenty lines to express what an English Man would say, with more Ease and Sense in five; and this is the great Misfortune of translating French into English; if one endeavours to make it English Standard, it is no translation. If one follows their Flourishes and Embroideries, it is worse than French Tinsel. But these defects are only comparatively, in respect of the English: and I do not say this so much to condemn the French, as to praise our Mother-tongue, for what we think a deformity, they may think a Perfection. (64)

Behn summarises the unsolved problems of a translator, but she tells us still something else. She recapitulates the empiricist attitude of her age which recognised the value of people's different experiences; it is a first manifestation of cultural relativism, as it will later be called,

which implies a historical attitude towards different cultural backgrounds. Behn highlights the different context from which each language springs[12], giving expression to the historical perspective which is the new approach in the scientific field.

The achievement of empiricism from the first half of the century had meant the twilight of the European conception of knowledge, where nearly all disciplines were included under the portmanteau of natural history which, nevertheless, was neither history nor nature, as no historical point of view was included. Nature was simply intended as a consolidated body of texts, with no reference to what was actually present in nature itself (see Lepenies [1976] 1991). Even the descriptions of animals were based on archetypal models, as in the famous case of Dürer's rhinoceroros quoted by Gombrich (1967: 104). But, in the course of the seventeenth century, for the first time, a sort of independence from the classics becomes visible. In botany, zoology, medicine, and physics, descriptions and comments are no longer intended as simple paraphrases of classics, and so of literature, but as attempts to be faithful descriptions of Nature.

As already mentioned, in 1620 in his *Novum Organum*, Bacon had explained how no hope may be perceived "except in a new birth of science; that is, in raising it regularly up from experience and building it afresh; which no one (I think) will say has yet been done or thought of"[13]. The passage from 'natural history' to a 'history of nature' encouraged by the new philosophical approach testifies to the desire to narrate real life from which a new form of prose writing will proceed.

[12] As in the following passage: "The Italian, as it is nearest the Latin, is also nearest the English, For its mixture being composed of Latin, and the Language of the Goths, Vandals, and other Northern Nations, who over-ran the Roman Empire, and conquer'd its Language with its Provinces, most of these Northern Nations spoke the Teutonick, or Dialects of it, of which the English is also one; and's the reason that the English and Italian learn the Language of one another sooner than any other; because not only the Phrase, but the Accent of both very much agree; the Spanish is next of kin to the English for almost the same Reason: because the Goths and Vandals having over-run Africk, and kept possession of it for some hundred of years, were mixing with the Moors, no doubt, gave them a great Tincture of their Tongue. These Moors afterwards invaded and conquered Spain; besides Spain was before that, also invaded and conquered by the Goths, who possessed it long after the time of the two sons of Teodosious the Great, Arcadus and Honorius" (Behn [1688] in Lamarra 1990: 60).

[13] F. Bacon, *Novum Organum* (in J. Spedding, R. L. Ellis and D.D. Heath [1857-1859] 1961: I vol., 57).

The rise of the novel owes a lot to the new philosophical view. In the same year her translation of Fontenelle appeared, Aphra Behn published *Oroonoko*; as in the case of her essay on translation, the novel too testifies to her interest in what was going on in the speculative area of her time, and is a good example of the way the rise of the novel was affected by the new theories.

Oroonoko was published when the distinction between factual account and fiction was still far from being asserted in the way we perceive it. In John Starke's catalogue published in 1672, for instance, the entry "History" included texts by Suetonius, Rabelais, Quevedo, biographies, travelogues and even a book entitled *The Annals of Love*, containing *Select Histories of the Amours of divers Princes Courts, Pleasantly Related*; in other catalogues of the same period true history was the portmanteau under which geography and history books were collected together[14].

Oroonoko, with its subtitle *A True History*, belongs to this still unstable process of redefinition of literary categories and genres. The device operating in the story of the unhappy prince Oroonoko, and his equally unhappy princess Imoinda, is an example of what has been called "naïve empiricism", a rhetorical strategy which insists on repeated assertions about the 'truth' of what is written.

Precisely the advocacy of Truth is the starting point of Behn's book where the narrator, the author herself, declares she has been an eyewitness to a great part of what she writes[15]. Direct experience is em-

[14] See R. Capoferro (2007: 123-165); P. G. Adams (1983).

[15] The case of naïve empiricism is supported in primis by Behn's life. Biographers and scholars have long debated the truth of what Astrea describes. The first controversial point is her presence in Surinam. The querelle forms a conspicuous chapter of Behn's biography as evidence has been put forward by supporters and denigrators in equal measure. The first underline the names of people such as Mr Martin and Mr Trefy who were in charge of the colony, British at the time, who were far from being famous in their home country; Behn could not have been acquainted with them if she had not been there. The second point in

phasised in the book, which as in other cases of this phase in the history of English literature, can be seen to owe something to the growing influence of empiricism.

The adventures of Oroonoko, the Negro prince that the treachery of a white man has led into slavery, are preceded and accompanied by descriptions of the colony Surinam, in the West Indies, where the action takes place.

As in the style of the numerous travelogues so popular at the time, the first lines of the book describe the place of the action; a description where the new way of referring to nature is clearly evident. Frequent in the text are the descriptions of little creatures inhabiting the place, such as the marmoset:

> [...] a sort of monkey, as big as a rat or weasel, but of marvellous and delicate shape, having face and hands like a human creature; and cousheries, a little beast in the form and fashion of a lion,

favour of Behn are the words she addresses to Richard Maitland, fourth count of Lauderdale (1653-1695) to whom she dedicated her book. It is believed highly improbable that she might have lied to a man under whose tutelage she had apparently placed herself. What is more, her truth might have been refuted by people who were still alive when the book was published. This is the case of Lawrence Hyde, count of Rochester, Crown counseller and in charge of the royal prerogatives on Surinam. More evidence in favour of Astrea comes from David Brion Davis, who in his book *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1966) asserted that *Oroonoko* is much more realistic than it had been supposed to be. He explains that at the time it was not so unusual for an African prince, no matter how European by education, to be kidnapped and sold into slavery. Davis quotes the case of two Negro princes who in 1774 were by chance in a theatre where *Oroonoko* was represented; the two men were reported to have been deeply moved by the story which reminded them of something they knew only too well. Other scholars have mentioned words such as marmoset, or osenbrigs, which were totally unknown in England. On the other side the evidence is no less conspicuous. E. Bernbaum (1913: 42-53; 1973) believes the journey to Surinam totally untrue as for Behn, who in accordance with some hypothesis about her birth he believes to be the daughter of a barber, it was so highly improbable that she had been to Surinam. The plot might have been suggested to her by George Warren's book, *An Impartial Description of Surinam* (1667). William Cameron (1961) refers to a newspaper, *The Almanack*, edited by Anthony Wood, where the story of a negro prince kidnapped and sold into slavery had been published; he was eventually liberated by an English merchant. Ruth Shaffey considers a possible source for *Oroonoko* to be *Friendly Advices to the Gentlemen Planters of the East and West Indies*, which had been published by Thomas Tyron in 1684 (Shaffey 1962: 52-63).

> as big as a kitten, but so exactly made in all parts like the noble beast, that it is it in miniature. Then for little paraketoes, great parrots, muckaws, and beasts of wonderful and surprising forms, shapes and colours. (Aphra Behn [1688] in Todd 1992: 75).

In another page a little beast is described:

> [...] call'd an armadillo, a thing which I can liken to nothing so well as a rhinoceros. 'Tis all in white armour so jointed, that it moves as well in it, as it had nothing on. This beast is about the bigness of a pig of six weeks old. (116)

In this tale, where the style of romance represents a conspicuous part of the whole narration, the pages which testify to the new interest in experience are frequent. An episode in Oroonoko's life in the country he has been taken to includes the description of a numb-eel, a strange fish:

> [...] that while it is alive, it has a quality so cold, that those who are angling, though with a line of ever so great a length, with a rod at the end of it, it shall, in the same minute the bait is touched, seize him or her that hold the rod with a numbness, that shall deprive 'em of sense for a while; and some have fallen into the water, and others drop'd, as dead, on the banks of the rivers where they stood, as soon as the fish touches the bait. (119)

References to the same beast described by Behn can be read in *The Diary of John Evelyn*, dated 18 March 1680, where he hints at "a letter from Surenam of a certain small Eele that being taken with hook and line [...] did so benumb and stupifie the limbs of the Fisher" (in Todd 1992: 359).

Interest in the 'other' marks other interesting pages of *Oroonoko*, where the author describes the occupations of the natives and the relationships of the whites to them:

> We dealt with them with beads of all colours, knives, axes, pins and needles; which they used as tools to drill holes with in their

> ears, noses, and lips, where they hang a great many little things; as long beads, bits of tin, brass, or silver, beat thin; and any shining trinket. The beads they weave into aprons about a quarter of an ell long, and of the same breadth; working them very prettily in flowers of several colours of beads; which apron they wear just before them, as Adam and Eve did the fig leaves; the men wearing a long strip of linen, which they dealt with us for. They thread these beads also on long cotton-threads, and make girdles to tie their aprons, which come twenty times, or more, about the waste, and then cross, like a shoulder-belt, both ways, and round their necks, arms and legs. [...] With these people, as I said, we live in perfect tranquillity, and good understanding, as it behoves us to do; they knowing all the places where to seek the best food of the country, and the means of getting it; and for very small and invaluable trifles, supply us with what 'is impossible for us to get; for they do not only in the wood, and over the savannahs, in hunting, supply the parts of hounds, by swiftly scouring through those almost impassable places, and by the mere activity of their feet, run down the nimblest deer, and other eatable beasts. (78)

This passage, and again, in the middle of the story, where the expedition of the narrator to an Indian town is narrated, might certainly be read, as some have done, as imitating genuine travelogues and journals as well as fictional accounts faking the style of real things; commentators have pointed out that the pages quoted were written in the present tense, in what has been called the "anthropological present", a style "which signals scientific commentary and serves the narrator to establish herself as an authority on the colony" (see M. Rubik 2008: 36).

But whether the encounter with a foreign ethnicity is imagined or factual, the descriptions may also be read as an expression of the interest in human experience in all its varieties which the new episteme of the age supported[16]. The presence of possible "real things" inside a

[16] What is also remarkable is the close bodily contact with Indians the female narrator describes. As M. Rubik observes: "Not only does she gaze, but she willingly offers them her hand, she allows them to touch her all over (she explicitly mentions the face, the breasts and the arms) and to kiss her [...] She also suffers them to lift her several petticoats and to look at her shoes, stockings and even garters 'which we gave them, and they tied about their legs, being laced with silver lace at the ends, for they much esteem any shining things'" (2008: 37). It was certainly unusual for a female traveller to deal with such details in relation to her body. But Behn certainly was an unusual kind of woman, so these passages too may be considered as the relation of a true experience.

text where the suggestions of the romance are still conspicuous, may be due to the need to investigate whatever was related with human experience.

The century shows this interest in various projects and publications: in 1647 Abraham Cowley's book *Propositions for the Advancement of Learning* appeared, advocating the institution of a philosophical college where men could learn "The Mysteries of all Trades, and Improvements of them, The Facture of all Merchandizes [...] and briefly all things contained in the Catalogue of Natural Histories annexed to My Lord Bacon's *Organon*"[17].

In 1667 a *Catalogues of Trades* was compiled by members of the Royal Society, who invited their friends to write the history of one of them. In his *History of the Royal Society*, Spratt recorded how:

> They have propounded the composing a Catalogue of all Trades, Works, and Manufactures, wherein Men are employed; in order to the collecting each of their Histories, by taking notice of all the physical Receipts or Secrets, the Instruments, Tools, and Engines, the manual Operations or Sights, the Cheats and ill Practices, the Goodness, Baseness, and different Value of Materials, and whatever else belongs to the Operations of all Trades. (19)

In 1671 Robert Boyle's essay *That the Goods of Mankind may be much increased by the Naturalist's Insight into Trades* appeared. In it he emphasised the relevance of the trades to natural history and complained about the foolish disdain scholars exhibited towards the 'illiterate mechanicks' in their workshops, where there was the chance to observe "nature in motion".

[17] Quoted in W.B. Houghton (1941).

So *The History of Trades* is associated to the progress of science, learning and society. Boyle explains how much he has learnt from practical observation: "I have seen in the dissection of fishes, more of the variety and contrivances of nature than all the books I ever read in my life could give me convicting notion of" (22).

The whole atmosphere of the century, so dominated by these new interests which the new philosophy brought forward, can certainly be said to have influenced the changes in prose fiction, and to have contributed to pushing aside the atmosphere of the old romances. It is a new taste which novelists will absorb, and Behn is one of the first among them.

Oroonoko as a novel has many merits: it is one of the first books where Europeans are critically observed from the point of view of 'Others'[18]; it may also be read as a denunciation of European baseness and hypocrisy in relation to their policies and the ill-treatment of slaves in the colonies. But with its mixture of fact and fiction it also testifies to the new intellectual milieu of the time that conceives all aspects and products of the speculative mind in function of the benefit for man's life.

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[18] Interesting here is D. Frison's essay (2008: 48-60).

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La preuve par l'Autre, ou du bon usage du paganisme. Théologie de la Révélation primitive et comparatisme religieux chez Lafitau[1]

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Du point de vue théologique, la leçon la plus évidente des périples lointains hors de l'aire culturelle européenne est le constat d'une très grande diversité religieuse et, hormis en terre d'Islam, d'une apparente prévalence des polythéismes. Ce constat peut conduire au relativisme sceptique des Libertins : si la religion est une institution purement humaine dictée par les nécessités de la « politique », les intérêts des puissants et l'imposture des prêtres, rien d'étonnant à ce qu'elle emprunte des formes variées selon les buts qui l'inspirent et les déterminismes qui la conditionnent. Rien même ne s'oppose – c'est la thèse de Bayle – à ce qu'il puisse exister des peuples athées, et malgré cela vertueux. Mais la diffusion quasi universelle du polythéisme peut aussi, paradoxalement, être mise au service de l'apologétique, de telle sorte que les paganismes s'érigent en « preuves » de la vérité et de l'universalité du christianisme.

[1] Ce travail avait pris sa forme définitive lorsque nous avons pu prendre connaissance de l'ouvrage d'Andreas Motsch, *Lafitau et l'émergence du discours ethnographique*, Sillery (Québec), Les Editions du Septentrion, et Paris, Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2001. Une autre version de ce texte a été présentée au XIVe colloque international du Centre de Recherches sur la Littératures des Voyages (Sophie Linon-Chipon et Jean-François Guennoc, éds., *Transhumances divines. Récits de voyage et religion*, Paris, Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, coll. « Imago Mundi », 2005, p. 145-165). Nous remercions le Professeur François Moureau, directeur du CRLV et des Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, d'en avoir autorisé la reprise sous une forme légèrement abrégée.