

On How to Compact a Text, or, La Rochefoucauld in the Tropics*

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EVIDENCES IN A TEXT

The question as to the nature of literature (what it is and, therefore, what it should be) demands ever-increasing contestation of its status. In addition, attention to the arrangement of the text is a productive way to perceive how signs of the successive changes in the *function* of literature can be noted in the sphere of production and reception. While Gumbrecht avoids any type of teleology, in studies like "Pathologies in the System of Literature" he presents a type of evolution in the function of the system of literature (or of literature as a system). If we greatly simplify his reasoning, this function is related to a displacement of the meanings of experience.

At least since the ballads attributed to William IX (1071-1127), the game set loose by letters proposes ambiguities, many of which indicate a relativization of the place of the one who is writing. Referring to a well-known ballad ("Farai un vers de dreyt nien..."), Gumbrecht suggests that "the significant threshold of the manuscript age, which the clerics had protected as their privilege, could have hardly been more called into question than by immortalizing a vulgate song (by a poet who was not even a member of the clergy) that opens with the line 'I'll make up a song about nothing.'" (253) Gumbrecht reminds us that what is at issue here is not the supposed emergence of a modern subject *avant la lettre*, but rather the appearance of that "function" frequently attributed to literature, to wit, the production of gestures of distancing from the normative pressures of everyday life.

It is not my intention here to discuss the intricacies of Gumbrecht's arguments, nor do I intend to criticize these arguments in detail. In the spirit of this book, I merely wish to retrace some of his steps very briefly and schematically in order to test certain hypotheses and relate them to a prob-

lem in literature that I consider extremely important: the presence of La Rochefoucauld's (1613-1680) maxims in a little-known text by the Brazilian polygraph José da Silva Lisboa, the Viscount of Cairu (1756-1835).

Gumbrecht has aptly noted that, in the theatrical atmosphere of court culture, the *transmission* of Provençal poetry required, at least since the 13th century, the (obviously fictional) creation of an authorship that would give it greater consistency. Also seemingly necessary was the addition of prose explanations to the poetic text, conveying what, using the terms of Niklas Luhmann, Gumbrecht calls *compact communication*: "In the handwritten collections of songs, individual texts were configured into textual blocks through the compiler's commentaries, and it is easy to see that block formulation and commentary were determined far more by the thoughts about the possible situations in which they could be used than by any sort of 'authentic knowledge' about the authors of the texts or even about the protagonists of the textual action. All of this moves in the direction of compact communication, of the function of the work of art 'as a communication program, in which the program can be so obvious that it makes every argument superfluous and establishes a secure feeling that everything is already understood'" (256).

The consequent line of reasoning is well-known and I will summarize it radically here. With the invention of the printing press and the repeated multiplication of the distance that separates enunciation from reception, the original "intention" becomes blurred and the text takes on meaning in an increasingly complex situation. Following Gumbrecht's reasoning, what is at issue here is the distinction between "interaction and society." The classical example of *La Celestina*, together with its prologue by Fernando de Rojas, first published in Burgos in 1499, indicates the complexity of the field opened up by studies on reception. If there were ten readers, there would be ten different readings, and this throws onto the editor/typographer the anxiety of losing control over the text. That is, the text is cast into polymorphic social space.

I will now once again take the liberty of quoting Gumbrecht at length, in an attempt to help clarify the somewhat enigmatic presence of La Rochefoucauld's maxims in a text that marks the dawn of the Brazilian Empire, in the early decades of the nineteenth century. I am referring to what might be called the control of meanings (echoing here, as the reader will note, the studies by Luiz Costa Lima [1988] on control over the imaginary), which Gumbrecht locates at the heart of modern literary experience:

We can probably risk the assertion that historical research is only now beginning to perceive just how essential for the 'origin of literature' – or, at least, for the origination of what, in textual typology, is called 'literature' – were the manifold efforts to achieve that unambiguous understanding whose necessity was the immediate response to printing. There was suddenly an obsession with prefaces, it became standard practice to present didactical and other texts in dialogue form, and there was a completely new need for stability and a completely new attentiveness to the historicity of the textual forms. (257)

Also referring to the phenomenon of the so-called *novelas sentimentales*, Gumbrecht states:

It shows that, between the function of 'literature' and 'compact communication' as the solution to specific difficulties resulting from the differentiation of interaction and society produced by printing, a tension existed that was difficult to resolve. Because, however extensively the text itself organizes the possibility of being understood, it has to rely on a precognition of the communication situations among its readers, an understanding the readers—as substitution for the situation of direct interaction—are able to bring into play. If, however, it is supposed to be the function of 'literature'—think of William IX—to stage situations and experiences that are not represented in the readers' knowledge, then the self-organization of the cognitive process through the text is actually not possible at all. To formulate it differently: under those conditions that make 'compact communication' necessary, 'literature' continually tends to substitute for itself a—potentially endless—discourse about literature (poetology). For it is its function to render the improbability of understanding experiential; yet in order to achieve this, it must nonetheless remain understandable. (258)

Let us pause here at this aporia and leave aside Gumbrecht's next arguments, since we seem to have here the unveiling of a mechanism which, transported to the early periods of the use of printing presses in Brazil, places the very status of literature in evidence, staging, through a classical text and its insertion into a 19th-century text (the visual character of which is fundamental, as we shall see), the dangers and ill fortunes of misunderstanding. In other words, the insertion of a classical French text in the treatise created by the Viscount of Cairu stages, we might say, the dangers of the loss of control over what is (or will be) understood by the reader. But let us first examine the initial period during which La Rochefoucauld's "classic" became well-known and went through its first metamorphoses as it circulated about.

A CLEARLY EXPLAINED TEXT

Differently from Pascal's *Pensées*, whose various configurations in books are with us thanks to the editorial zeal of those who survived him, the *Réflexions ou Sentences et Maximes Morales*, by the Duke of La Rochefoucauld, are not a book "invented" by the editors. At least not entirely.

The origin of the maxims,¹ then, including their poetic nature, are a controversial topic. As there is no consensus among the critics, serious philological scholars would seem to disagree with the hypothesis that what is at issue is an oral form (the famous passages from the *pointu* discourse in salons) simply put down on paper. The epigrammatic art during the *grand siècle* was quite different, being based mainly on printed or written letters, and by this time firmly anchored in the domain of the press. La Rochefoucauld's case is noteworthy. It is common knowledge that, in harmony with the Jansenist spirit, his maxims tend to wage mortal combat against the aphoristic wisdom of the Stoics. They see virtue as a mask that covers up both the vices and the fabulous empire of self-love. What interests us here, however, are not specifically the details of this broad and very interesting discussion about classical wisdom (the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns is already on the horizon), but the way it was resolved on the material plane, that is, in the scope of printed circulation and, one might say, of the circulation of letters on the pages.

The first versions and editions of the maxims are good examples. It is always curious to note that the most detailed and reliable of the contemporary editions—organized in the 1960s by Jacques Truchet for the *Classiques Garnier*—would describe the 1678 edition as the "texte définitif," alluding to a stabilization that, significantly, has more to do with the death of the author than with the fixation of the text. In fact, 1678 marks the year of the fifth "authorized" edition, the last to be put out during La Rochefoucauld's life. Before that, beginning in 1665, varying editions place different maxims in different compositions, creating designs and rhythms that are quite different from those the reader might come across in the "final" edition. Moreover, careful observation of the maxims in their changing versions gives rise to an interesting and inevitable para-textual space in critical editions ("suppressed" maxims, "posthumous" maxims, etc.). The reader can thus better understand how the aphorisms are submitted to this constant *honing* proper to the genre. But this process (what Nietzsche, in reference to La Rochefoucauld, would call "die Kunst der Sentenzen-Schleiferei"), can nevertheless reveal something beyond the

author's mere care in making them more cutting. The movement of the text, that is, its constant rewriting, has to do with an original fear that can be sought at a stage prior to its first publication. This fear, which arises in view of the concreteness of the text and its possible meanings, conditions publication itself and makes it imperious. In other words, and breaking down the apparent tautology: in the face of the emergence of the text, one must react, speak of it, and even re-create it.

At another point I had the opportunity to map out in detail the editorial fate of La Rochefoucauld's maxims in 18th-century France (Monteiro, *Moralista*). Here, however, I merely wish to point out that the 18th century truly re-created the 17th-century text and sought meanings for it that make explicit the urgencies of the Enlightenment, if not merely those of the editors. As examples, one could recall the various utilitarian readings of La Rochefoucauld's work that exalt self-love and often filter out the Augustinian foundations of the maxims. This type of reading can suggest that the desires of the individuals are the silent fuel of a gigantic social machine. But the most important agents (or mediators) of these readings, even more important than the *philosophes*, are the editors. The readings, in their own way, are also fixations of the text, and comply with criteria that philology, as an academic discipline, had not yet set out to discipline.

What Gumbrecht calls "poetology" is evident in the interminable comments, counter-discourses, additions and tables that occupy pages and pages of the 18th-century editions of La Rochefoucauld. They are sometimes quite strange, when not simply repugnant to our good judgment as cultured readers, a judgment we might naively imagine frees us from nonsense. But before concluding that the editors are traitors of an "original" text, it might be well to note that the fear that the text, in its materiality, might betray its author, is already perfectly clear in La Rochefoucauld himself.

Without going into great detail, I recall that Madame de Sablé—a friend and confidant of La Rochefoucauld, and herself the authoress of maxims—proceeded to carry out a veritable survey on them in the early 1660s. Faced with the somewhat frenetic circulation of the maxims in handwritten versions, La Rochefoucauld became a hostage of his own text and expressed his concern in 1663 through a handwritten note to Sablé, asking her to lend him, as soon as possible, a written comment that had been made concerning the maxims. Although the author of this comment is still anonymous, we know it was sent to Madame de Schonberg, who was also directly involved in the circulation of the maxims:

Ce dimanche au soir. — Je ne sais plus d'invention pour entrer chez vous; on m'y refuse la porte tous les jours. Je ne sais si la fille à qui j'ai parlé vous aura bien expliqué la grâce que je vous demande; c'est de me prêter pour une heure le discours que Mme de Schonberg vous a envoyé sur les maximes. Je vous supplie très humblement de ne me refuser pas. Outre l'envie que j'ai de le voir, il est même nécessaire pour une raison que j'aurai l'honneur de vous dire. Je vous donne toutes les sûretés que vous pouvez désirer pour le secret; mais, au nom de Dieu, ayez la bonté de m'envoyer cet écrit par le retour de ce laquais. (La Rochefoucauld 569-570)

In short, the “discours” referred to La Rochefoucauld’s maxims as a school of Christian humility, an “anti-Seneca,” a true comment on Saint Augustine. But what stands out immediately in the note is the duke’s distress about what his text had stirred up. He anxiously knocked at the door of the woman who held the secret of the meaning that had been triggered off by the maxims. We might recall Gumbrecht’s observation in regard to Fernando de Rojas and *La Celestina*: if ten were the readers, ten would be the interpretations. We could also recall the great fear aroused in La Rochefoucauld’s simple act of putting his writings into circulation. In a letter to Madame de Sablé, written that same year of 1663 and containing numerous maxims, a short phrase precedes the last aphorism: “en voici une [maxim] qui est venue en fermant ma lettre, qui me déplaira peut-être dès que le courier sera parti” (555). The image of the courier on its way, rushing the letter off, suggests the author’s full awareness that his work should find the somewhat uncontrollable space of circulation. Besides the clear indications of the author’s anxiety about possible flaws in his work, there are the mad circulation of the manuscripts and the awareness that written *material* does not obediently submit to the authority of the one who wrote it.

This awareness becomes even more evident when we turn our attention away from the manuscripts and consider the printed material. It is clearly symptomatic that the first “authorized” edition of the maxims, published in Paris in 1665, chez Claude Barbin, is a reaction against a “méchante” copy published a year earlier in The Netherlands (La Rochefoucauld 267).

Also in view of Gumbrecht’s suggestions concerning the *poetology* that goes hand in hand with “literature,” it would be well to recall that the same editor of 1665 inserted a letter before the maxims: “...je mets ici une *Lettre* que l’on m’a donnée, qui a été faite depuis que le manuscrit a paru, et dans le temps que chacun se mêlait d’en dire son avis. Elle m’a semblé assez propre pour répondre aux principales difficultés que l’on peut opposer aux

Réflexions, et pour expliquer les sentiments de leur auteur. Elle suffit pour faire voir que ce qu’elles contiennent n’est autre chose que...” (267) The letter has a somewhat didactic tone that is not in perfect harmony with La Rochefoucauld’s maxims. But the duke’s work with the text in its materiality seems endless. The second “authorized” edition, “plus correcte et plus exacte en toutes façons que n’a été la première,” included a different *Avis au Lecteur*, explaining the removal of the letter mentioned above, attributed today to La Chapelle-Bessé. This edition, also published by Claude Barbin, dispensed with the various justifications and apologies found in the first edition: “Vous pouvez maintenant en faire tel jugement que vous voudrez sans que je me mette en peine de tâcher à vous prévenir en leur faveur, puisque si elles sont telles que je le crois, on ne pourrait leur faire plus de tort que de se persuader qu’elles eussent besoin d’apologie” (373).

Even if we note some influence by La Rochefoucauld in this *Avis*, we should reject the idea that he assumed without embarrassment the full autonomy of the text, which could then do away with the earlier explanations or apologies. In the final analysis, the incessant work of re-writing the maxims, and the editions that continued to change until as late as 1678, suggests that the writer remained active regarding the circulation of his text.

But now it is time to leave La Rochefoucauld and his fears and recall that the 18th century would convert the *Réflexions ou Sentences et Maximes Morales* into a field of editorial experimentation, with further maxims, texts and comments being added to them. They were even used as a counterpart to moral treatises imbued with bourgeois morality that was totally foreign to the duke’s moralistic attitudes. Exactly through this experimental field, where letters are often explosive reagents, the Viscount of Cairu, in Brazil, saw the maxims as a necessary, albeit dangerous, part of the formation of his readers in the 19th century.

THE WORLD IN APPENDIX

The addition of a Table of Contents to the book of maxims enabled the first edition, of 1665, to combat the wanderings in the text in an effort to protect it from the apparent disorder in which the maxims were organized. Probably not all readers were able to follow the logic of the arrangement of the maxims, especially when such readers were editors haunted by the fear of misunderstanding.

A certain anxiety can be felt in the *Avis au Lecteur* of 1665 regarding this apparent disorder of the text:

Pour ce qui est de la méthode que l'on y eût pu observer, je crois qu'il eût été à désirer que chaque *maxime* eût eu un titre du sujet qu'elle traite, et qu'elles eussent été mises dans un plus grand ordre; mais je ne l'ai pu faire sans renverser entièrement celui de la copie qu'on m'a donnée; et comme il y a plusieurs maximes sur une même matière, ceux à qui j'en ai demandé avis ont jugé qu'il était plus expédient de faire une table à laquelle on aura recours pour trouver celles qui traitent d'une même chose." (268)

It is interesting to note that later editors, especially during the 18th century, seemed unable to resist the temptation to give some "order" to the chaos of the maxims, and what was meant to be a simple table of contents at the end of the text is often transformed into the book itself. Several 18th-century editions organize them according to the "topic" they "treat." In this case the reader can find the writings in their entirety in the alphabetical order of topics. In the spirit of Gumbrecht's considerations (and not only his, of course) it is needless to mention what it meant for the readers to have in their hands a book "organized" in this way, with the maxims arranged "by topic." If any doubt still remains as to the importance of the book in its materiality, one only need page through these old editions to see that there are no "contents" that can be grasped in their purity, disdainful of material support, or superior to it.

The Viscount of Cairu is a 19th-century Brazilian heir to that editorial practice, although, in his case, the "organized" maxims themselves comprised a block at the end of a book he wrote. This work was the fifth volume of his *Moral Constitution and Duties of the Citizen*, published in 1825 by the National Printing Press (*Typographia Nacional*) in Rio de Janeiro, entitled "Appendix of the Maxims of La Rochefoucauld, and Doctrines of Christianity."

In this collection, Cairu included a selection of La Rochefoucauld's maxims, thus creating an extensive moral catechism, or moral treatise, published with the objective of enlightening the "Youth" of the Brazilian Empire. In this edition the maxims function as an inverted image of the ethics the author hoped to infuse among the youth of Brazil, a country that had declared its independence from Portugal only three years earlier. In the opposite direction from the revolutions that shook Europe and The Caribbean, José da Silva Lisboa, who, one year later, was to be honored by the Brazilian emperor with the title of Viscount of Cairu, felt that the lofty teachings he proposed in his treatise² needed a counterpart. That is, he considered it important to display to his young readers the target his edu-

cational project was intended to combat. In the first lines of the "Appendix" we read: "Having manifest the *Moral Constitution* albeit quite imperfectly and through the lights of reason, and aided by the Rules of Revelation, I considered, that it would not be useless to add an Epilogue of *Mundane Morals*, and of *Christian Morals*, with the purpose, by contrast, of understanding the need to retain in the Empire of Brazil [...] the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Religion, which showed the *Great Light* to Nations that lived in darkness" (Appendix 1).

Therefore, on a dual plane, youth were presented with the good ethics founded on Christian mercy, represented especially by passages from the Epistles of Peter and Paul, in opposition to the "Mundane Morals" that the maxims of La Rochefoucauld were seen to represent. The moral discussions that followed were complex and fruitful, and mobilized an impressive collection of readings that, carefully analyzed, allow one to understand the conservative mentality on which the 19th-century Brazilian Empire was founded. But this leads us into a complex mental situation that will not be discussed here.

I will now go into how this dual plane was set up and mention what would seem to be the visual aspect of the opposition. On the one hand we have 17th-century maxims representing the "Mundane Morals," and divided into themes ("Self-love," "Friendship," "Regret," and others). They comprise a compact *block* against which was opposed the rest of the "Appendix," that is, the entire collection of maxims, Christian teachings and comments concerning them. Beyond any possible lack of understanding of Cairu regarding the specifically Christian basis of La Rochefoucauld's maxims (a Christian basis that, in that same 19th century, was likewise to become the basis for a critical understanding like that of Sainte-Beuve), I stress the meaning of the materiality of this opposition, where the desired "contrast" is to be found. Immediately before the chapter in which the maxims are presented, Cairu states that, "Through the parallel of the chapters that follow, I hope that the criterion of the truth becomes clear to the good citizens, those who do not recognize evil motives in good actions, if they abjure Mundane Morals, which are based on self-love and on the covetousness of mortal goods, and follow Christian morals, which are grounded upon the love of God and the hope for eternal joy" (Appendix 2).

The "parallel" between the chapters and the invitation to abjure "Mundane Morals" suggests full awareness of the strength of this contrast. Even if we avoid exaggerating the weight of the way the book was organized, in other words, if we avoid exaggerating the power of the editor, we

can nevertheless see that the text is addressed to “good citizens,” who, at this point we are able to identify as the good *readers*, that is, those who understand and *accept* the book as a guide in its format and its materiality.

But what does it mean to “abjure” mundane morals? It means, first and foremost, to evoke them, make them present and transform them into a visually identifiable and, especially, *tangible* block. (If we are not too far here from a “production of presence,” we are nevertheless quite distant from what Gumbrecht calls “moments of intensity.”) (*Production*)

It would be well to recall that Cairu is a good reader of La Rochefoucauld, as well as a good translator (the first to translate him into Portuguese, as far as is known). In fact, an entire sector of European criticism would later deal with this *mundane* soil on which the anthropology of the maxims was based, more focused on the fallen nature of the creature than on his hopes for salvation. From an Augustinian, or even a Pascalian, point of view, the “second nature” (the social nature of man) is despicable, but necessary. However, shortly after the masks that conceal the individual and his or her desires were recovered by the philosophers of society, Cairu reacted sternly against the idea of man as an agent of dissimulation. As an introduction to the maxims, after alerting “Youth” against the poison they inculcated, Cairu evokes the loathsome Voltaire and his praise of the 17th century:

The Duke of La Rochefoucauld acquired widespread Credit in the Republic of letters, through his book of *Moral Reflections*. [...] It was widely praised in Europe and translated into many different tongues, especially after Voltaire spoke highly of it in the Note he published regarding the Scribes of the century of the French Monarch Louis XIV, where [Voltaire] stated that La Rochefoucauld had been one of those who most contributed to fashion the tastes of the Nation and give it a spirit of justice and concision. All this obliges me to warn Youth that said book contains only Mundane Morals. It pictures the situation of men as they are in a corrupt state, and not as they should have been, and could be, if they adopted Christian Morals. (Appendix 2)

Once Cairu has described the stumbling blocks on the path (the “corrupt” state of mankind can be read simply as man’s current, that is, *real*, state), he then implores his readers to go around them. To “warn Youth” is a strong expression and reinforces the corrective character that marks Cairu’s catechism. It is nonetheless legitimate to ask: if the Viscount is familiar with the French text, if he knows the poison concealed in the maxims of La Rochefoucauld and if he considers them cursed, why did he

include them in his solemn catechism for youth? Why did he not refer to them only in passing or simply ignore them? The answer to these questions might be in what Gumbrecht identified as the fundamental desire of the philologist: “It is my impression that, in different ways, all philological practices generate desires for presence, desires for a physical and space-mediated relationship to the things of the world (including texts), and that such desire for presence is indeed the ground on which philology can produce effects of tangibility (and sometimes even the reality thereof)” (*Powers* 6).

The strange thing is that this desire, which is similar to physical appetite, reveals the *materiality*, the inescapable physical presence in the object that one wants to consume (or simply *swallow* and then *throw up*, if we want to continue with a dietetic metaphor to understand Cairu). There is indeed in Cairu a certain pleasure with the presence—albeit discomfiting—of this *material* he warns against at the exact point where he should be drawing his catechism to a close. But even being aware of this *desire* of presence, we have not solved the central enigma of the problem. Behind the pleasure (perverse, one must say) of touching the object, making it tangible, and inviting youth to touch it as well, there is undoubtedly the desire to control. In Cairu’s case, it is a desire related to the deep fear of facing what is disfigured, or simply amorphous. Here we come to the point where his need to exert control over the text (it should be remembered that Cairu was a court censor) can be better understood if we pay attention to what exactly comprises this desire for control over the material plane, or simply over the political plane.

In one of the numerous passages where he rails against the horrors of the French Revolution, the arch-conservative thinker creates an interesting image to describe the revolutionary vertigo:

One of the greatest evils of Revolutions is the loosening of the laboring classes from the ties of subordination and from the duties of regular and patient work, giving the individuals the insolent daring to move beyond their proper sphere [...] and, instead of each worker having the just emulation to rival in price and perfection the produce of his art among the equals in his trade and (so to speak) attain excellence that corresponds to his rank in his respective class, through the preeminence of his skill and dexterity; they prefer to rush heedlessly into the chaotic vacuum of disorganized ambition of political sovereignty, more licentious and confused than the atoms of Epicurus in the vastness of space, or the molecules of saltpeter reduced to steam by the explosion of gun powder. (Lisboa 19-20)

Once the social tissue has been rent, the firmness of which the Ancien Régime guaranteed for so long, all that is left are these "individuals" who "rush" into the vacuum and cause the explosion that Cairu understandably wished to avoid, from the far side of the Atlantic. Fully versed in Greek and Latin, the Viscount probably had in mind the fact that the term "individuals" (according to contemporary political connotations) could also, in his philological imagination, refer to the notion of "individua," which Cicero made use of to translate Epicurus's Greek word "atoms" (Monteiro, "Patologia"). The "confusion" therefore refers to the chaotic *physical* world that results from the momentary lack of control of the atoms. It should be remembered that one of the characteristics of Epicurean physics is the impossibility of knowing what will arise as the physical and, therefore, *tangible*, world in the instant following the present during which the atoms are always close to the brink, which is the void. Once the atoms are loose (in the case at hand, the *individuals* that read the wrong catechisms in Revolutionary France), it is impossible to know what will arise as a political configuration, that is, as configuration of the individuals in society.

Finally, I wonder whether, for Cairu, the letters that are composed on paper, on the white background of the page, and the ideas he discusses in his long catechism are not this *physical* element he needs so urgently to evoke and control. In those years of frenetic publication of lampoons and pamphlets in Brazil, ideas truly seemed to exist precisely when they were materialized on paper, when letters circulated in printed form. Cairu the censor could simply have prohibited the circulation of the maxims in Rio de Janeiro, but it seemed more interesting (or more effective) to him to *incorporate* them into his catechism, on a dual plane where they carry out the clear function of a temptation that must be resisted. In this light, one might recall that exorcism cannot take place without the materialization of the devil, or even without the spectacle of his release and momentary presence.

CONCLUSION: THE MATERIALITY (META-REALITY) OF POLITICS

What terrifies Cairu is the historical subject taken in its absolute contingency, that is, no longer a subject with a mission (the formation of the Brazilian fatherland, the maintenance of the social structure, the revelation of the meaning of action), but precisely devoid of a mission. The world of the most intimate essences (borrowing an expression from Sérgio Buarque de Holanda) that the maxims of La Rochefoucauld stage are about the inevitable collapse of collective and universal meaning. It seems to remind

us of the existence of a social world that is fundamentally physical (the mechanics of the passions), or "hyper physical," as Philippe-Joseph Salazar (1999) suggests in regard to La Mothe Le Vayer's skeptical points of view.

Reading La Rochefoucauld, we are not only reading a chronicle of the ruin of a class that considered itself universal. We are also viewing the ruins of what was to be the dream of many men in the following centuries, including our tropical viscount: the real possibility of building a permanent dwelling for meaning. It is a meaning that, bringing men together, protects them from political dissolution, which is, in the final analysis, the daring of individuals in open space. (Aren't we close here to what Gumbrecht terms "epiphany"?) This is a specifically physical question, where *control* is exercised on the plane of materiality. In my view, when reacting to the maxims, Cairu gives us a quick glance at the scatological horizon of national politics or, simply, of politics, the constitutive principle of which, as certain contemporary philosophy propounds, is the possibility of freely and sovereignly eliminating bodies.³ We might then ask, before our final word, what is it that bothers us in the release of bodies, and what is there about the written letter, when suddenly revealed as a physical body, that threatens us so deeply?

Lastly, if La Rochefoucauld's work represents a farewell to the hopes that had recently arisen (the idea of a nation was then emerging and it would seem appropriate to recall the hatred that Louis XIV once turned against Port-Royal), we shall thus understand why the maxims became a matter of life and death for Cairu, and why it was necessary, in the body of his treatise, to tabulate them to better abjure them.

Notes

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¹ Here I use the terms "maxims" and "aphorism" as synonyms. I do not feel that the nuances between the meanings of these two words affect my argument. For a discussion on this point, see *Les Formes Brèves*, by Montandon.

² The first four volumes had been published, also in quarto, in 1824 and 1825. See Lisboa's *Constituição Moral*.

³ This is a reference to the Aristotelian dimension of the domination that the city exercises over its citizens. It is a domination that, in the terms with which Agamben further develops Foucault's investigations into the field of biopolitics, represents sovereignty over "bare life"—an expression that Agamben takes from Benjamin's reflections on violence.

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