Le Parasite Mormon or the “Heretical” Novel

by
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Le Parasite Mormon1 is one of the relatively neglected yet more fascinating of the histoires comiques. Although attributed to La Mothe le Vayer, it is assumed—indeed even asserted in the work’s preface—that Le Parasite is the creation of multiple authors, including in all likelihood such major figures of the genre as Sorel and Scarron.2 Bringing together the most diverse strains of the comic tradition, Le Parasite is in the words of Jean Serroy “...une forme d’hommage rendu à la veine comique tout entière...” (413). The work defiantly attacks traditional writing across several genres while simultaneously weaving tales which illustrate nearly the whole gamut of styles typical of the histoires comiques. I have chosen to refer to this work as the “heretical” novel for two reasons. Firstly, in theory and practice, it repudiates the conventions of seventeenth-century writing placing itself beyond received truths about style and subject matter. Secondly, the opening scene presents the dilemma of Mormon from whom the novel derives its name. He is condemned to be burnt at the stake at the Place de Grève. In the words of one of the crowd, Mormon is accused of being “Sodomistre & Atheistre” (PM 7). Although both charges will be disproved at the end of the novel, they are hardly gratuitous. Indeed, as M. Lever has indicated, the charge of sodomy was normally linked to heresy and atheism, and the condemned was considered to have placed himself outside the pale of christendom (43-47). In fact, the sodomite was “hérétique en amour.”

It would then seem evident that the work’s authors are making a statement about Le Parasite. Just as its principal character has transgressed the established order, so too does the novel itself transgress the “rules” of fabulation. The charges against Mormon become indicative of the work’s situation.

The Parasite Mormon’s narrative structure, a series of interconnected tales, demonstrates the histoire comique’s delight in contorted plot structures. Even the story lines themselves are anything but a smooth and seamless unfolding of narration. We pass from the crowd awaiting Mormon’s execution to the story of his birth and childhood, to a catalogue of his works, to Louvois’s encounter with the “poète crotté,” Desjardins, to a discussion between Louvois and his friend which leads to the stories of Desjardins and Le Pointu,
literary commentary, and eventually back to the story of Mormon and the conclusion.

All of the narratives and, more obviously, the various commentaries are clearly directed towards the notion of writing itself. As J. Serroy has pointed out, each of the major tales represents a particular comic style from the grotesque to the picaresque to the comedy of words (413). More than any other particular tale, the opening account of the parasite’s life functions as an exercise in grotesque hyperbole: Mormon's mother dies of starvation on mardi gras because of her offspring’s voracity in utero; to his great consternation, the infant Mormon gnaws through his dead mother's stomach only in time for desert; the bones of his dead twin-brother, victim of fratricidal cannibalism, are found in his mother's womb. The latter detail is prefaced by the assertion: “Sachez pourtant que je ne vous ay dit que la pure vérité...” (PM 13). Verisimilitude is obviously called into question, but the irony would seem to extend to all narratives including the comic novel. In fact, it will become evident later on that all recounting is clearly viewed with skepticism and subject to correction.

The tale of Mormon’s childhood and youth is scattered with intertextual references to the classics as well as to contemporary sources and naturally directs itself towards Mormon’s gluttony in often the most erudite fashion. While not unusual in its form, this comic biography is followed by a relatively heteroclite element: a Rabelaisian-like catalogue of Mormon’s scholarly works — comic titles dedicated to the pleasures of the table. The length of the descriptive catalogue (13 pages out of 204), makes it an episode in itself and an insertion “heretical” in nature.

All of this narrative occurs as the characters await the execution which is never witnessed but presumed to have taken place. Louvot, the pivotal character who brings all the narrative threads together and provides the bulk of the work’s theoretical commentary, returns home only to be accosted by Desjardins, the “poète crotté,” who presents Louvot with a sonnet in an attempt to gain monetary compensation for what turns out to be a plagiarized work already used to the same effect. A pleasant exchange between Louvot and a gentleman friend leads to the tales of Le Pointu and the poet, narrated respectively by Louvot and the other character. There follows an account of the relationship between these peculiar characters and Mormon.
The first tale, the story of Le Pointu, is rich in literary allusion even from the onset, as the character is described as “...un homme dont la bouche ne lasche pas une seule parole qui ne soit une pointe.” (PM 50-51). In fact, the tale serves largely as a pretext to generate pun after pun. At one juncture, Le Pointu provides a description of his mistress’ face—a portrait which is clearly related to Sorel’s “portrait de Charite” in the Berger as it is a reductio ad absurdum of the traditional clichés of portraiture, for example: “...son nez n’est rien qu’un parasol que la nature a prudemment mis au desus de ses levres pour les garantir des Soleils de ses yeux...” (PM 58).

Other critical allusions to narrative traditions are also found in this account. At one point, Louvot asserts that he cannot remember all of Le Pointu's puns because “...ie n'ay pas la memoire si bonne qu'un Escuyer de Heros de Roman, pour me souvenir si ponctuellement des moindres paroles.” (PM 61). In fact, the limitations of narration seem very much on the multiple authors' minds as shall become more evident in the work's conclusion. The narratives of Le Pointu and the poet are complicated by tales within tales —both will recount stories for the pleasure of Mlle de l'Espine and will attack or defend love in separate diatribes. Mormon himself resolves the conflict resulting from the latter by serving as the “Advocat General” who points out in both a learned and obscene manner the relative merits of each position and proposes a meal of reconciliation in his own self-interest.

At this juncture the story line returns to the present as Louvot tells his interlocutor that in passing the Place de Grève he learned that Mormon was the person destined to be executed. Both presume that this was the case, and Louvot's friend goes on to reveal that Le Pointu and Le Poëte were Mormon's informers (PM 108). This interlude serves as a springboard for Louvot's friend to recount the story of the poet, which achieves a kind of symmetry. Once again, the tale is recounted in the most literary of fashions: it is in part a parody of the fairy tale but more than anything else a typical “histoire de poète crotté” marked by constant exaggeration: Desjardins, the poet, is so small that he is found under a cabbage leaf after having mysteriously sprung to life without any known parents. The story itself concentrates on Desjardins miserliness and his desperate attempts to raise money. The tale is very reminiscent of the “poètes crottés” of Francion and Polyandre. The poet himself is also an incompetent musician and plagiarizer. By embodying poetry, Desjardins clearly calls its value into question.
The attack on poetry then shifts to theater, but in the seventeenth century the connection was far more obvious as Louvot begins what he terms as a critique of “le Poème Dramatique” (PM 114). This is, in fact, a long indictment of the rules and rhetoric of contemporary theater. The critique is essentially centered on the abuses of verisimilitude which mark theatrical representation (PM 145). Louvot cites the numerous violations of the unity of scene and place, the unrealistic practice of soliloquies, asides, and addresses to parts of the body—the last category replete with absurd examples of what might be done if things were taken to the logical extreme. In this case, *Le Parasite Mormon* recycles all the traditional critiques of the *histoires comiques* concerning the mainstream novel. The principal variation is that the target now seems to have been broadened to include the theater which is mocked even in the novel’s preface which proclaims that *Le Parasite Mormon* is the first novel to take place within twenty-four hours.

This ridicule of rhetorical conventions reveals a very modernist attitude toward writing, one that is not at all awed by tradition. Louvot anticipates his interlocutor’s defense of the rhetorical practices he has just criticized with a remark that indicates that the past has no particular authority for him:

Vous me direz que c’est une figure de Rhetorique qui a esté pratiquée de tous les anciens. Je vous réponds qu’elle n’est pas moins ridicule pour estre vieille; que ce n’est pas la premiere fois que l’on a fait du vice vertu; qu’il n’y a point d’authorité qui puisse justifier ce qui choque le jugement & la vray-semblance... (PM 147)

This proclamation then leads to the expansion of his attack against theater, again under the banner of verisimilitude. Louvot mocks the recognition scenes of plays, ridicules characters who talk only of dying of love, sarcastically analyzes the cruelty of mistresses, and condemns the inclusion of oracles in the theater.

While it is obvious that the comic novel’s critique of the mainstream novel has been largely transposed to fit the theater, the question arises as to the seriousness of this critique. Is it really intended to do more than poke fun at theatrical practices? Is it a genuine attempt to introduce reforms? The proposals are “heretical” enough, but are they mere jibes or corrective measures? *Le Parasite* comes at a particular juncture in the history of the comic novel—at the very
moment when “les histoires comiques” would become “Le Roman comique” in Scarron’s work, at a time when the burlesque style whose principal trait is “...de faire raillerie de tout...” (Sorel, La Bibliothèque 59, 199 of original) would replace the more reform-minded earlier works. Given this evolving historical context, it thus becomes uncertain as to whether this critique of theater is not a generalized form of mockery rather than a call for reform, a demonstration of virtuosity rather than an attempt to change writing practice.

Theater, however, is not the conclusion of this theoretical discussion. Louvot’s friend briefly describes his own novel which is presented as the “début d’un Roman burlesque” (PM 155). He, of course, criticizes the contemporary novel and elaborates a plot which ends with the marriage of the hero to his mistress—the worst of all fates. When the friend dismisses his work with the remark “...ce n’est qu’une histoire comique.” (PM 159), Louvot immediately begins a justification of the comic novel. After citing works like Don Quixote and Le Berger extravagant as examples of very successful comic novels, he argues that: “l’homme estant esgalement bien deffiny par ces deux attributs de risible, & de raisonnable, il n’y a pas moins de gloire ny de dificulté à le faire rire par methode, qu’à exercer cette fonction de son ame, qui le fait raisonner” (PM 159).

After a brief interruption concerning Mormon’s fate, Louvot resums his critical observations of various features of contemporary literary taste, and this critique validates to some extent the themes and writing practices of the comic novel. Louvot’s friend has suggested that the story of Mormon is superior to those of Le Pointu and the poet. Louvot takes exception, explaining that with certain stylistic modifications — such as recounting the poet’s story with a series of “comme” — his friend would have found the work more pleasing. He also attacks the obsession with noble language and announces his scorn for writers who scurry off to their dictionaries to find lofty expressions which they believe will somehow improve their works. More importantly, Louvot condemns the obsession with noble subjects to the exclusion of base material. He insists that if Desjardins’ tale had been fiction (which, of course, is precisely the case), it would have been all the better for the judicious choice of vocabulary that produced the impression of reality. The sordidness and baseness of the poet’s life are not the issue; rather, it is the skill with which his life is recounted that makes the art of the tale. According the Louvot, good writing is akin to Columbus’ discovery of
America: once accomplished, it becomes obvious to everyone, but the skill lies in the enterprise which is “easy” only in retrospect.

Here *Le Parasite*’s literary heresy is manifest. In the midst of the seventeenth century, during a period obsessed with *bienséance* and *préciosité*, the work proclaims the equality of subject matter situating the value of writing in its effectiveness as representation and repudiating its decorative function. The intercalated tales of *Le Parasite* are in themselves demonstrations of literary adroitness which proclaim the value of diverse subject matter and insist on that fundamental value of the comic novel: the liberty to write about what one chooses, not what is prescribed.

Once the theoretical “digressions” are brought to a halt, the original story line resumes as, the next day, Mormon himself shows up at Louvot’s house. He is shortly followed by “l’Historien de la Grève” who provides an account of how Mormon got into trouble and how he escaped execution. Having angered both la Hérissonière and Desjardins, Mormon is undone by both of them. The Mormon’s love-making is witnessed rather imperfectly giving the impression that he is carrying on with a male. *Le Pointu* presents Mormon with a manuscript in dialogue form with the pro’s and con’s about belief in God. He asks Mormon to read the “con’s”; the latter is overheard and thus also condemned for atheism as well as sodomy. After a comic brawl between the two arresting factions, Mormon is taken off to prison where he is said to enjoy being fed at state expense. The truth of the events which led to Mormon’s arrest comes to light and leads to his eleventh-hour liberation.

Louvot, however, is aware that “l’Historien de la Grève” has not provided an entirely accurate account as, among other things, Mormon was less than delighted by his detention in prison. As the text puts it, “Louvot vit bien qu’à la mode des gens d’esprit, il l’avoit un peu enrichie sur la fin, pour la faire trouver meilleure.” (*PM* 203). This last commentary on narrative truth injects a note of skepticism about all narrative and moves ever more in the direction of the burlesque whose concern is largely the art of telling rather than correspondence with reality. The volte-face of the ending also underscores the arbitrariness of narration, the omnipotence of the author, and, in all likelihood, the intent to parody the peripeteia of the contemporary novel.
Le Parasite concludes with the additional information as to where to find the poetry Desjardins recited in the Place de Grève and the cryptic refusal to reveal the “dessein” of the novel: “Si l'on nous demande quel il est, nous répondons que c'est assez que nous le sachions, & que nous ne sommes pas obligez d'en rendre compte.” (PM 204). So much for the value of hidden meaning; the text must stand alone.

This collage of tales spanning the gamut of comic styles is clearly a mockery of traditional writing and an experiment in textual virtuality. The insouciance of the novel's conclusion which makes light of any grand design underscores the playfulness of writing. The work is thus transitional between the histoires comiques and the burlesque. While it still has a literary axe to grind, Le Parasite does so in manner which suggests skepticism about its own literary theory. What Le Parasite does choose to highlight is the value of literary dexterity, the variety of subject matter, and the refusal of thematic and lexical uniformity. The text is thus a “heretical” novel in le grand siècle but one, which like its grotesque parasite, merrily eludes the pyres of orthodoxy.

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NOTES

1 All references to Le Parasite will be indicated as PM

2 There are numerous allusions to Sorel's works in Le Parasite. Jean Serroy sees in the portrait of the poet Desjardins the influence of Sorel, whose earlier “poètes crottés” would seem to herald this particular character. Serroy also points out the affinity of writing style between Scarron's Le Roman comique and the tale of Le Pointu (416, 407).

3 This grotesque form of fratricide may well indicate the literary practice of the Parasite Mormon, which indeed “cannibalizes” the whole genre of the histoires comiques to form a unique work of its own. I am indebted to Andrew Wallis (University of Georgia at Athens and respondent at the SE 17 conference, New Orleans, 1994) for the observation on literary cannibalism.

4 Serroy also notes this affinity (418), although, as indicated earlier, he stresses this tale’s stylistic resemblance to Scarron's writing.

5 Among others, he suggests “Mouchez, mouchez vous mon nez.” (PM 147).
Works cited or consulted


