

**Zeitschrift:** Versants : revue suisse des littératures romanes = Rivista svizzera delle letterature romanze = Revista suiza de literaturas románicas

**Herausgeber:** Collegium Romanicum (Association des romanistes suisses)

**Band:** 35 (1999)

**Artikel:** Travel literature in works by La Mothe le Vayer and Fontenelle

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-266056>

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## TRAVEL LITERATURE IN WORKS BY LA MOTHE LE VAYER AND FONTENELLE

*Récits de voyages* played a significant role throughout the seventeenth century in presenting new ideas and shaping the thinking of readers<sup>1</sup> and they figure prominently in the works of writers such as Fontenelle and La Mothe le Vayer<sup>2</sup>.

La Mothe le Vayer's works are dotted with references to travel and travel literature which contribute to the undermining of European traditions and prejudices. Precise indications of author, title and page are not always given, although he does sometimes indicate that a particular idea comes from a certain writer. He tends mostly to paraphrase or exploit general ideas rather than quote directly, and seems to prefer to make brief passing references to travel and other lands, not developing these ideas at length. However, as with so many other writers, it is the cumulative effect of all these comments which finally has such an important impact, lending weight to La Mothe Le Vayer's contention that when considering the world, its diversity and the relativity of everything should never be forgotten, and generalisations should be avoided. The multitude of different ideas and ways of life in the world should prevent us, he says, from falling into the trap of categorisation and the acceptance of assump-

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<sup>1</sup> See for example G. Chinard, *L'Amérique et le rêve exotique dans la littérature française au XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Hachette, 1913; R. Etiemble, *L'Europe chinoise*, 2 vols, Paris, Gallimard, 1988-89; P. Martino, *L'Orient dans la littérature française au XVII<sup>e</sup> et au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Hachette, 1906.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Francine Charles-Daubert, "L'Amérique entre rêve et cauchemar dans l'œuvre de F. la Mothe le Vayer", *La découverte de nouveaux mondes: aventure et voyages imaginaires au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, edited by Cecilia Rizza, Fasano, Schena, 1993, 313-325; Robert McBride, "La théorie et la pratique des voyages selon La Mothe le Vayer", *La découverte de nouveaux mondes...*, 327-337.

tions and preconceptions, and it is by citing the examples of other peoples, of which he has become aware through his reading of travel literature, that he intends to convince us of this.

The Americas and China are referred to quite frequently by La Mothe le Vayer, and in *De la Vertu des Payens* he uses the discovery of previously unknown lands as an argument against the universality of Christianity<sup>3</sup>. According to Trigault and Ricci, Jesuit missionaries in China, it is quite possible that many Chinese live very morally by following their traditional beliefs:

Le Pere Trigault suivant les memoires du Pere Ricius l'un des Apostres de la Chine, ne doute point que beaucoup de vertueus Chinois n'ayent peu se sauver en observant la simple Loy de nature, et avec le secours special du seul Dieu qu'ils reconnoissoient pour Authour du Ciel et de la terre. (pp. 33-34)

He develops this line of argument by introducing the examples of Japan and America, which not only invalidate Christianity's claim to universality but also indicate that these peoples have got along perfectly well without it for some time and surely cannot all have been damned, despite their ignorance:

Que pouvons-nous dire aujourd'huy apres la descouverte de l'une et de l'autre Inde, et la certitude que nous avons d'une terre Australe iusques icy inconnuë [...] (p. 48)

[...] la Foy n'a pas esté publiée par tout le monde dés les premiers temps du Christianisme, puis qu'il n'y a pas plus d'un siecle et demy que les voyages de long cours l'ont portée aus Indes [...] Comment peut-on donc s'imaginer qu'un pauvre Americain qui n'avoit iamais oüy parler de la vraye religion il y a deus cens ans, ne peüst deslors en nulle façon esviter les peines eternelles, encore qu'il vescuist moralement bien [...] (pp. 50-51)

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<sup>3</sup> Paris, Targa, 1642.

The Japanese Christians too, he says, complained to François Xavier that "Dieu les avoit traittez avec tant de desavantages, qu'ils ne recevoient son Evangile qu'apres tous les autres" (p. 49) and, slightly tongue in cheek, he declares that it is only because "la Foy nous y oblige" (p. 49) that one continues to "croire pieusement" that "les hommes qu'on a trouvez dans cet autre Hemisphere soient venus d'Adam, et n'ayent eu qu'une mesme origine avecque nous". La Mothe le Vayer thus exploits the information provided by travel literature by obliquely attacking or criticising official theses in this way, making a point without going so far as to mount a full-scale attack or get into dangerous waters.

Having expressed his doubts about the universality of Christianity and the need to be Christian in order to be saved, he goes on in *De la Vertu des Payens* to affirm that some people do not believe in God and yet neither are they idolatrous. Despite not being Christian, they are perfectly capable of living virtuous lives:

[...] il peut y avoir des hommes [...] qui vivent reglement et vertueusement dans la loy de Nature. (pp. 53-54)

Indeed, the "Bramins" believed themselves to have reached such a degree of perfection that they became incapable of sin (p. 183) and "Jean Leon nous fait voir dans son Affrique une espece de Religieus, qui croyent parvenir par cinquante degrez d'austerité à une nature si Angelique [...] qu'ils ne sçauroient plus pecher" (pp. 183-184). These people believe themselves to be virtuous, and La Mothe le Vayer seems to think this is quite reasonable. Chinese annals which go back 4000 years indicate that this nation is not guilty of idolatry (p. 280) and both missionaries and "relations de Chine" attest to their virtue:

[...] plusieurs Chinois ayant moralement bien vescu dans la simple observation du Droict de Nature, ont peu faire leur salut eternel, par une bonté et une assistance particuliere de leur Createur. (p. 279)

He stresses the importance of recognising the qualities of other religions, which whilst not agreeing entirely with Christianity have essential tenets of virtue which should be respected:

[...] elles [les religions orientales] ont neantmoins de tres bonnes maximes, et la pluspart de leurs preceptes [...] sont tres-conformes à la lumiere naturelle, et aus veritez du Christianisme. (p. 289)

Perhaps in order to balance out his previous comments, and indicate that he does not accept absolutely all systems and beliefs, he declares towards the end of *De la Vertu des Payens* that of course idolatry is still practised in the world and should be condemned. These comments are aimed perhaps at preventing him from being accused of heterodoxy or else at proving how objective he aims to be. Although prepared to recognise virtue in religions other than Christianity, he does not intend to sanction all forms of behaviour and regard them all as equally acceptable:

Je sçay bien qu'il y a encore des Idolatres dans le monde, et qu'il se trouve en nos iours des hommes qui adorent dans l'une et dans l'autre Inde les animaux, et les choses mesmes inanimées, qu'ils craignent, où qui leur proffitent. La damnable Secte de Mahomet s'estend par toutes les trois parties de l'ancien hemisphere. Et le nombre des Athées y est paravanture plus grand qu'il ne fut iamais. (p. 346)

So throughout *De la Vertu des Payens* the author exploits the possibilities of travel literature, using examples drawn from the Chinese, the Arabs and the Americans to throw light on particular European beliefs or practices. His comments are not usually very lengthy but provide an element of criticism which encourages the reader to relativise and think objectively.

This method which consists of dotting references to other countries throughout a text is continued in the shorter pieces on a variety of subjects which are contained in the *Œuvres de François de la Mothe*

*le Vayer*<sup>4</sup>. The examples of other peoples are particularly useful when talking about religion – he illustrates his comments with examples of societies where people do not believe in the immortality of the soul and recounts bizarre religious practices, all of this supporting his contention that any attempt to generalise or establish universal truths should be rejected. In one country life-after-death is accepted without question, in another it is rejected as absurd: what plan or system is there in all this? He subtly undermines assumptions and preconceptions, rejecting simplistic solutions which do not take account of the multitude of possibilities which exist in the world. In the *Petit Discours Chrestien de l'immortalité de l'ame* La Mothe le Vayer illustrates the fact that all over the world there are different beliefs about death. In China and Japan for instance, the immortality of the soul is not admitted by everyone:

Encore aujourd'hui la pluspart des Mandarins de la Chine vivent en cette erreur [...] Les Relations du Japon disent le mesme de quelques-uns de leurs Bonzes [...] il y a une Secte de Prestres Chinois [...] qui preschent cette detestable doctrine, et d'autres qui veulent que le Ciel ne soit que pour les bestes brutes qui ont tant souffert en ce monde [...] (I, p. 501)

However, there are other examples which show opposite beliefs, since some Chinese and Japanese priests "donnent communément des Lettres de change pour l'autre monde, qui doivent estres exigibles au Royaume de la Lune" (p. 503) and elsewhere in the world belief in the immortality of the soul can be observed:

[...] au lieu que quelques Africains [...] veulent qu'elles s'aillent placer au sortir du corps dans le Ciel du Soleil [...] Quant à l'Amerique, tant Australe que Septentrionale, par toute l'estenduë de ces deux grands Empires de Cusco et de Mexique, on ne doutoit point de l'Immortalité de l'Ame; et les Peuples mesmes vagabonds en estoient

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<sup>4</sup> 2 vols, Paris, Courbé, 1662.

si persuadez, qu'ils l'attribuoient aux bestes, et jusques aux choses inanimées. Nos Sauvages de Canada philosophent tous les jours de la sorte parmi les bois; et les Relations des Hurons leurs proches voisins, portent qu'ils se promettent de monter là haut après leur mort [...] (p. 503)

References to Trigault on China and Sagard on Canada add weight to La Mothe le Vayer's comments here, indicating an awareness of a number of *récits*, and a desire to provide his reader with this kind of supplementary information. He underlines the fact that his remarks are not based on hypotheses or mere suggestions, but on accounts from travellers. The subject of death and the immortality of the soul lends itself very well to the comparative approach through the use of travel literature, as we see again in *De la Vie et de la Mort* where different attitudes to death are discussed:

[...] les Hurons tout barbares qu'ils sont, n'ont nulle apprehension de la mort, parce qu'ils la tiennent pour un passage à une vie fort peu differente de celle-ci, où ils doivent posseder les mesmes choses qui leur ont esté cheres, et qu'on enterre avec eux pour cet effect. (II, p. 163)

Apart from topics such as this where the use of *récits* is perhaps a fairly obvious choice, La Mothe le Vayer regularly refers to them in less predictable contexts. For instance in *Des Habits et de leurs modes differentes* he uses the example of the Jesuits in China to show how necessary it is to dress according to the country where you are living (II, p. 49). In *De la bonne chere* he refers to an account of Tibet, where, it is said, the priests drink wine in order to say their prayers better (II, p. 220). In *De l'ingratitude* he mentions having read about animal hospitals in China, animals being considered more helpless and vulnerable than humans and hence more in need of hospitals (II, p. 277). In *Des Couleurs* he shows how colours symbolise different things in each country; for example white for mourning in China (p. 298), whereas black was considered very

highly by the Incas (p. 299). Even in *La Physique du Prince* he gives examples of how different nations have reacted towards thunder:

Il n'y a eu que les Ethiopiens, si l'on en croit Plutarque, qui n'ont jamais apprehendé le Tonnerre. Nos Hurons de Canada ne sont pas de mesme, ils se le figurent comme un dangereux oiseau, qu'ils prient les François d'aller tuer. (I, pp. 967-989)

Again, in *Des Monstres* both Africa and Siam are referred to (II, p. 325), in *De la Maladie du Roy* Chinese medicine is mentioned (II, p. 816) and in *Des Voiages* he presciently suggests punishing criminals by sending them to the Terre Australe (II, p. 43)! The comments are sometimes accompanied in the margin by an indication of the author who provided the information (Sagard and Belon in *De la Physique du Prince*, Champlain and the Jesuits in *Des Voiages*, Trigault in *Des Couleurs*) but direct quotations are fairly rare. La Mothe le Vayer tends to paraphrase his sources, using their ideas and weaving their arguments into his texts but not always quoting them or giving precise page and chapter references (although on occasions he gives careful references, as in the *Petit Discours*). Most of the time he makes fairly general use of travel literature as in the following passage:

Seroient-ce point de semblables actions qui auroient mis le nom des femmes parmi les Tartares entre les choses sales, et qui ne se doivent jamais prononcer, ni écrire? Au lieu de dire une fille, ou une femme, ils emploient d'autres dictions, et disent une voilée, et une mere de famille. Je l'apprens de la veritable histoire de Tamerlan, traduite depuis peu d'Arabe en nostre langue, et qui porte que ce Prince belliqueux protesta que Bajazet devoit avoir perdu le sens, et estre un fou parfait, de luy avoir écrit le mot de femme dans une de ses lettres. (*Des Femmes*, II, p. 979)

Thus we see La Mothe le Vayer making extensive use of travel literature to combat tradition, fuel doubt and advance the cause of free-thinking. He encourages critical observation and constantly

underlines the mistakes and contradictions which exist in all philosophical systems and the gulf between reason and religion. His attacks are not always frontal, for he tends to resort more to irony and insinuation to make a point, but certain of his ideas were considered dangerous and provocative (for example the possibility of virtuous pagans and the logicality of accepting contemporary pagans just as Classical writers are accepted). For him travel literature is a tool which he can use to demolish the arguments of those who would like to establish a single monolithic truth which would hold true everywhere. Constant examples gleaned from the vast quantities of *récits* produced show time and again how this is just not possible, and how necessary scepticism is. On the whole la Mothe le Vayer contents himself with referring to *récits* and using the ideas which they contain without bothering to note exactly where he found these ideas, and most often without quoting directly.

If we look towards the works of Fontenelle we find once more a certain interest in the *récits de voyages*, although expressed in a different form. Fontenelle aimed to popularise science and disseminate certain ideas rather than produce heavily footnoted, *savants* works. There are few page-references but we can discern in his writings a certain influence, the *esprit* of the *récits*, an awareness of their existence and considerable use of references to other cultures and other countries. Thus we see here the *récits* being adapted to quite a different literary form and performing a useful function.

Comme Bayle, Fontenelle déteste l'autorité; le consentement universel lui paraît particulièrement absurde, si on l'invoque comme une preuve de vérité: qu'une fable soit acceptée par cent personnes ou par cent millions, pendant une année ou pendant des siècles, elle reste toujours une fable. Comme Bayle, il répugne au miracle; et comme Bayle enfin, il se refuse à trouver une différence spécifique entre les païens et les Chrétiens [...]<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Hazard, *La Crise de la conscience européenne*, I, Paris, Boivin, 1935, pp. 222-223.

Fontenelle's interest in travel literature can be traced back at least as far as 1686 when Bayle published in the January issue of the *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* the "Extrait d'une lettre écrite de Batavia dans les Indes Orientales" (pp. 87-91) by Fontenelle, an account of a war between two rival queens, Mréo and Eénegu. Bayle says that "les raretez des Indes sont du ressort de ces Nouvelles" (p. 86) and praises Fontenelle's account, which he apparently took to be genuine whereas in fact it was a satirical account of Catholic/Protestant rivalry<sup>6</sup>. The names of the two queens are anagrams, Mréo symbolising Rome and Eénegu Genève – Mréo's descent from the former queen is in no doubt, but Eénegu bears a closer physical resemblance to her. Mréo is predicted to be the winner, even if her troops are less keen, and Fontenelle comments ironically on "ces Pais barbares, dont les moeurs et les coùtumes sont si étranges"! This use of a fictional situation in a supposedly faraway land to make a point about contemporary affairs, is an approach which was often used by writers, permitting as it does to get very close to one's subject and make a point very directly, whilst at the same time maintaining the possibility of denying any hidden intent<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> In a letter written to Desmaizeaux (17 octobre 1704) Bayle declares that "j'ignorois absolument le sens caché de la *Lettre écrite de Bornéo*, que j'insérai dans ma *République des Lettres*; et personne, non pas même M. Jurieu, ni sa femme, ne devina en ce pais-ci ce que cela vouloit dire. Nous ne le sumes que lors que M. Basnage et d'autres personnes de Rouën, se furent réfugiées, et nous apprirent la chose. Alors nous connumes combien il eût été facile de découvrir le mystere: mais quand on ne soupçonne point qu'il y en ait dans une chose, on n'y en cherche point; et par conséquent, quelque facile qu'il soit à trouver, on ne le trouve point". In *Lettres Choisies de M. Bayle*, 3 vols, II, Rotterdam, Fritsch et Böhm, 1714.

<sup>7</sup> It was again adopted by Fontenelle in a work published posthumously in 1768, *La République des Philosophes, ou Histoire des Ajaouiens*, which tells of a utopian society which is happy, virtuous and wisely governed. This work purports to be the *Relation d'un voyage de Mr S. van Doelvelt en Orient, en 1674...Traduits sur l'original Flamand*, but in it Fontenelle uses this literary form to criticise and improve upon contemporary French society and Europe. See the critical edition of this work by Hans-Günter Funke, Heidelberg, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1982. See also Claude Gilbert's *Histoire de Calejava, ou de l'Isle des hommes raisonnables*, Dijon, 1700, said

Rather than quoting specific writers and entering into long analyses or commentaries, Fontenelle tends to sprinkle references to foreign countries throughout his work, in such a way that the reader is left with a general impression of a certain debt to *récits* rather than definite references. In *De l'Origine des Fables* where Fontenelle attacks fables and superstitions, we see him comparing different nations and different epochs, coming to the conclusion that superstition is universal and has always existed<sup>8</sup>. Fontenelle declares that humans have always been taken in by fables, which are in no way restricted to "peuples barbares", Europeans also having their own forms of superstition. Indeed, he argues, there are often surprising similarities between stories told by the Ancient Greeks and the Americans, and the Chinese too have sought to explain natural phenomena with all sorts of stories. The universality of human "sottise" is Fontenelle's basic idea, he says that "la même ignorance a produit à peu près les mêmes effets chez tous les Peuples" (p. 377) and "tous les hommes se ressemblent si fort, qu'il n'y a point de Peuple dont les sottises ne nous doivent faire trembler" (p. 385). This idea is pursued in the *Dialogues des Morts Modernes* especially in the dialogue between Fernand Cortez and Montézume (Dialogue VI), where Montézume defends the Americans against accusations of barbarity. He declares that they were certainly no more barbarous than the Greeks, and probably less prone to believing silly superstitions, for, he says, "les Athéniens étaient un peu plus dupes que nous" (p. 266). All peoples have at one time or another been victims of such tricks and false beliefs, and in this the Americans are not exceptional, they resemble the Greeks and Romans:

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to have influenced Fontenelle's work, and of which the only known copy is at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

<sup>8</sup> The following works by Fontenelle will be referred to: *De l'Origine des Fables*, Paris, Brunet, 1724; *Dialogues des Morts Modernes*, in *Oeuvres Diverses*, 9 vols, II, Paris, Brunet, 1715; *Digression sur les Anciens et les Modernes*, in *Oeuvres Diverses*, 9 vols, VI, Paris, Brunet, 1715; *Entretiens sur la Pluralité des mondes*, in *Oeuvres Diverses*, 9 vols, VII, Paris, Brunet, 1715.

[...] vous ne sauriez me reprocher une sottise de nos peuples d'Amérique, que je ne vous en fournisse une plus grande de vos contrées [...] (pp. 269-270)

Montézume rejects claims to European superiority, which have never been proved as far as he is concerned. In addition the Americans never asked to be colonised by the Spanish; they had their own forms of art and history and were capable of producing objects which the Spanish did not understand. Once again Fontenelle expresses through Montézume the idea that European claims to superiority are unfounded, for in both the "old" and the "new" worlds human beings are more alike than they often realise. An awareness of other nations, and of the universality of human weakness, can be observed in Fontenelle, as can an interest in the effects of climate. In the *Digression sur les Anciens et les Modernes* Fontenelle suggests that climate in some way contributes to the formation of each individual, as well as affecting social organisation:

[...] la différence des climats ne doit être comptée pour rien [...] on pourroit croire que la Zone torride et les deux Glaciales ne sont pas fort propres pour les Sciences [...] on ne sçait [...] si l'on peut espérer de voir jamais de grands Auteurs Lapons ou Nègres. (pp. 212-213)

These few examples serve to illustrate the fact that Fontenelle was very clearly aware of and interested in *récits de voyages* and keen to exploit the possibilities provided by such literature. Without quoting from specific works he uses a certain awareness of travel literature to discuss a number of ideas.

A similar approach is evident in the *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* where examples drawn from other nations fit into Fontenelle's plan to prove to his companion, la Marquise, the existence of a multiplicity of worlds. Just as there are many different countries on earth he attempts to show that there may be other inhabited planets in the universe. If one could "faire le tour du monde" in 24 hours, its diversity would become even clearer:

[...] des Iroquois, qui mangeront tout vif quelque prisonnier de guerre [...] des Femmes de la Terre de Jesso, qui n'employeront tout leur temps qu'à préparer le Repas de leurs Maris, et à se peindre de bleu [...] des Tartares, qui iront fort devotement en Pelerinage. (*Premier Soir*, pp. 53-54)

Difference is the key idea, for appearance, beliefs and way of life are all different as one moves around the world. In India, it is said that the world is held up by four elephants, which the Marquise finds most reassuring:

Du moins j'aime ces Gens-là d'avoir pourvû à leur seûreté, et fait de bons fondemens [...] Je gage que si les Indiens sçavoient que la Terre fût le moins du monde en peril de se mouvoir, ils doubleroit les Elephans. (*Premier Soir*, pp. 49-50)

In Europe scientists have begun to understand how and why eclipses occur, but "dans toutes les Indes Orientales on croit que quand le Soleil et la Lune s'eclipsent, c'est qu'un certain Demon, qui a les Griffes fort noires, les étend sur ces Astres, dont il veut se saisir" (*Second Soir*, p. 81). Such marked differences from one country to another, one continent to the next, lead him to suggest that if the Moon is inhabited, the people there are unlikely to resemble human beings in any respect whatsoever:

Voyez combien la face de la Nature est changée d'ici à la Chine; d'autres Visages, d'autres Figures, d'autres Moeurs, et presque d'autres principes de raisonnement [...] Quand on va vers de certaines Terres nouvellement découvertes, à peine sont-ce des hommes que les habitans qu'on y trouve [...] (*Second Soir*, p. 96)

So, starting from the knowledge that countries can be very different from one another, Fontenelle expands the argument to show that inhabitants of another planet will necessarily be even more different. He amuses himself by comparing inhabitants of Earth and those of other planets. The Moors, for example, considered on Earth to be

"hot Southerners" would, in comparison with the inhabitants of Venus, appear more like "cold Northerners" (*Quatrième Soir*, p. 160). This sliding scale reminds us of the importance which Fontenelle accords to relativity and his emphasis upon scepticism:

[...] il faut ne donner que la moitié de son esprit aux choses de cette espece que l'on croit, et en reserver une autre moitié libre, où le contraire puisse être admis, s'il en est besoin. (*Troisième Soir*, pp. 113-114)

The exercise of this scepticism and willingness to disbelieve what one previously believed, proves however somewhat upsetting to the Marquise, who, convinced after the first two discussions that the Moon is inhabited, is mortified at the beginning of the *Troisième Soir* to hear her "teacher" inform her that he has since reflected more on the question and come to the conclusion that he may be wrong:

Hier vous m'aviez préparée à voir ces Gens-là venir icy au premier jour, et aujourd'huy ils ne seroient seulement pas au monde? Vous ne vous jouerez point ainsi de moy [...] (p. 113)

Fontenelle is clearly attached to this sceptical approach, and even comments in the *Troisième Soir* that it can be invaluable when reading *récits de voyages*, since travellers are not always strictly accurate in their accounts.

It is in the sixth and final discussion with the Marquise that we return to a criticism of supposed European knowledge and superiority. Here information gleaned from the *Annales de la Chine* concerning "des mille étoiles à la fois qui tombent du ciel dans la mer [...] ou qui se dissolvent et s'en vont en pluye" (p. 295) gives the lie to scientists who believed in the fixed state of the heavens:

Il n'y a pas long-temps que tous nos Philosophes se croyoient fondez en experience, pour soutenir que les Cieux et tous les Corps Celestes estoient incorruptibles, et incapables de changement; et pendant ce temps-là d'autres hommes à l'autre bout de la Terre

voyoient des Etoiles se dissoudre par milliers, cela est assez different.  
(*Sixième Soir*, pp. 295-296)

So *récits de voyages* and knowledge about other countries are here used to show how partial and misleading our information is. Although they often believe themselves to be in possession of truth and knowledge, human beings are frequently mistaken in their vision of the universe. Which is why Fontenelle encourages scepticism, a willingness to accept new ideas and an awareness of the fact that despite resemblances between different countries there are also important divergences. It is essential to remember relativity and not judge everyone according to one's own experience.

Attracted and fascinated by other cultures, Fontenelle not only refers to them in his scientific and philosophical works, where they provide factual information but also uses them in order to satirise Europe and propose something new and different. Evidence that other societies with different ways of thinking and living existed, and had done so for many centuries, in ignorance of Europe and Christianity, encouraged writers such as Fontenelle to think along new lines, oppose eurocentrism and open up new horizons. His use of *récits* is however unsystematic, undocumented and relatively undeveloped. His remarks tend to be predictable, occurring in contexts where such comments may be expected, and he limits himself to short references, rather than expanding out in different directions. With Fontenelle we feel constantly a certain awareness of the size of the universe and its diversity, impression which is reinforced by the occurrence of references to *récits*. In the *Entretiens* for example he remarks that before "je m'y sentoient comme oppressé" but now he knows just how vast the world is "je respire avec plus de liberté" (*Cinquième Soir*, p. 213).

These then are some examples of the ways in which this important and influential literature was read and exploited by two major seventeenth century writers. Each in his own way drew on travel literature to expand arguments on religion and society and to debunk entrenched prejudices. As we have seen, travel literature proved to be

a rich source of inspiration and ideas for writers who sought to question conventional wisdom.

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