

Moralism in a Constructed World: La Rochefoucauld's  
Semiotics of the Empty Center

by  
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The seventeenth century was, particularly in France, a watershed period in the development of modern Western culture toward what is now an extremely uncomfortable contradiction. Some of the French moralists explored what the twentieth century has learned to call the "problem of the subject." In many ways they anticipated our dilemma: how to manipulate an apparently quite mutable environment and, simultaneously, preserve belief in an *immutable*, centered self? The post-Renaissance West's Faustian bargain has really involved selling our "soul"--our belief in a realm of stable values the "core" self can know and participate in--in exchange for the power to create a world of human constructs and signs. La Rochefoucauld and some of his contemporaries clearly recognized that this world of human constructs had already made what we call the "flight of the signifier" an inescapable aspect of social and cultural life. Mastery of the environment has left us without a stable context in which to perform. Descartes's postulate of man as "maître et possesseur" of an increasingly *built* world is fundamentally incompatible with his effort to underwrite man as a stable philosophical subject. Man's own technical and linguistic mastery devours his transcendent subjectivity. In turn, the meanings of words cease to be stable and become functions of motive and performance.

The *Maximes* represent the primacy of motives, or claims, in the proposing and interpreting of meaning and identity. The facts that each *maxime* is both fragmentary and complete, and that each one is an affirmative statement that undermines another affirmation about virtues or values, show that "truths" about psychology and society always involve interpretations of performances and ascriptions of motive. "Qualities" exist only as they are

asserted and perceived in relationships. *Amour propre* is desire whose scene of action is the battle for social influence. La Rochefoucauld anticipates the post-Freudian idea that speech is a "symptom." Moreover, the *Maximes'* goal is to provoke conversation: this work exists only as it becomes part of a dialectics, and thus as it participates in enactment of the signifiers' constant slippage. The tension between mobility and the need for stable "predicative" positions in a communication-system is a major implicit theme here. These stable positions can only be mythical, and the meanings that derive from and confirm them, contingent.

Indeed, this issue was a subject of explicit controversy in seventeenth-century France. The philosopher Pierre Gassendi, in a letter to Descartes, argued that there can be no mind and no language in abstraction from social history and social intercourse (Mumford 82). Molière's comedies ridicule the idea of a sovereign, centered and central self (Riggs). Cyrano de Bergerac's *Voyage Dans la Lune* contains eloquent arguments that language, perception, and hence reality are local and relative.

The *Maximes* are a radical representation of this ineluctably social, performative character of language and knowledge. "Qualities" only "exist" as they are performed and perceived in relationships. La Rochefoucauld joins the other seventeenth-century moralists--Molière, Pascal, Cyrano, La Bruyère--who reject the Cartesian attempt to find an *a priori* origin for the self--an origin logically prior to motive and experience--looking for the self, instead, in its motives and performances. It seems, thus, that in an important sense psychoanalysis and its theoretical offspring have brought us back to a point reached in the second half of the seventeenth century. Like psychoanalysis, La Rochefoucauld's social commentary casts doubt on individual autonomy, will, responsibility, and rationality.

La Rochefoucauld's attack on the coherent, sovereign self is clear, first of all, in his evocation of social life's fundamentally mimetic character. He says, as clearly as does any twentieth-century critical theorist, that to exist

socially is to *represent*. "On aime à imiter" he says in "De L'Air et des Manières." In *Maxime* 568<sup>1</sup> he defines social performance as an enactment of *personnages* by *orgueil*. *Maximes* 15, 18, 135, and 362 deny that there is what we would call a centered self. Number 15 denies such centeredness even to the monarch: "La clémence des princes n'est souvent qu'une politique pour gagner l'affection des peuples." Number 18 argues that even moderation is motivated, thus undermining any claim of disinterestedness or objectivity. Absolute individuation is clearly an absurd fantasy in the morass of mimesis that constitutes a social group (Wilshire 44). Our interpretation of ourselves depends on others' interpretations of us. The attempt to influence others' interpretation in order to fill the void of "self-awareness" with admirable "qualities" is a flawed and dishonest process. Moreover, it converts all of social interaction into performative simulation, undermining any claim of metaphysical stability. Social performance is an irreducibly rhetorical attempt to setup an Other whose validation we can depend on. Thus, La Rochefoucauld analyzes performance as claim, and therefore as *symptom*. The self does not have or contain qualities, but it *desires* to be treated as if it did.

*Maxime* 69 states clearly that our essential nature cannot be the content of our consciousness: "S'il y a un amour pur et exempt du mélange de nos autres passions, c'est celui qui est caché au fond du coeur, et que nous ignorons nous-mêmes." There can be no self-knowledge or self-authorization; thus, there must be claims and manipulations which are symptoms of the desire for admiration and validation.

Like Molière (Riggs), La Rochefoucauld recognizes the absolute monarchy's role in making society a competitive chaos of semiosis: in *Maxime* 603, he says that kings can create social identities the way they coin money. The analogy with coining money is fascinatingly apt, since what La Rochefoucauld is refusing is, ultimately, a system wherein value can be defined by power or by successful manipulation of the powerful. One of his fundamental points is the one La Fontaine makes in "Le loup et

l'agneau" and Molière suggests in *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*: when meaning is manipulated by self-interest, social life becomes a system of simulacra. The complementarity of the growing money economy with the centralizing modern State's social engineering is a fertile topic. The State's growing power to create meaning and value and to engineer the physical environment "semioticizes" social reality and philosophical "truth."

Social mobility is a central preoccupation for the French moralists. It opens a free-for-all in which an individual can become whatever he can persuade an audience to believe he is. This mobility, along with its concomitant, individualist voluntarism, is essential to the modern "break-out" from a conservative community of stable groups. It is also the essence of our culture, which is based on the production and exchange of signs taken to denote potency in attaining individualist "difference." The rise to power of the bourgeoisie brought systematic imitation of the noble way of life, as well as literal "ennoblement" as a governmental policy. Such imitation and its success made the semiotic nature of the social structure discernible.

Like his fellow French moralists, La Rochefoucauld can be seen to be denouncing some of the major effects of Renaissance individualism. Individualism tends to make society a chaos of self-seeking--in both senses--cells or atoms (Kerrigan 90). The fantasy of an independent, integral, powerful self is basic to Cartesian philosophy and, on the governmental level, to absolutist monarchy. The *Maximes* subvert such individualism by subverting the master discourse of allegedly stable, knowable qualities and capacities it depends on. If even absolute monarchs are vulnerable to their desires as well as to manipulation by bad counsellors--as La Rochefoucauld contends in the *Réflexions diverses*--then their power is no better used than are the performative skills of their subjects. La Rochefoucauld thus attacks the coherence which depends on the myth of stable subjects and objects whose relations are described and regulated by "true" language. Clearly, he does not share many of his contemporaries' belief in and

enthusiasm for a progressive universal and standardized culture based on disinterested "reason." Language and culture are not operated by transcendent subjects (Coward and Ellis) who stand "outside." In fact, La Rochefoucauld casts doubt even on the existence of a consistent desire to be an integral self: "Chacun veut être un autre." ("Réflexions diverses" III)

*Maxime* 332 is a good example of the many which deny both the coherence and the transcendence of the self: "Les femmes ne connaissent pas toute leur coquetterie." The extent and the effects of the self's interestedness are beyond the reach of consciousness. The meanings of terms taken to designate moral qualities are constantly slipping. The myth of discourse as a transparent disclosure of moral reality is mocked here. Even conscious, calculated *coquetterie*, or hypocrisy, cannot make the self fully present to its own awareness. What can be posited in language is not "posited" by reality. The individual, who is inescapably a part of reality, cannot in any sense be the *ground* of reality. Moreover, not only is the self part of reality, but it is involved in a constant remaking of social, semiotic reality, and its ability to produce new "reality" is beyond the reach and control of both intent and memory. Again, even--or especially--the unique ability of the monarch to produce meaning and value is beyond the very rational calculation which absolutist ideology constituted to justify itself.

The real language of performance cannot be owned or controlled. It always undermines the very claims it is used to state--and to hide. In fact, La Rochefoucauld joins our contemporary "deconstructors" in saying that performance undermines the claims it is designed to advance precisely by failing to hide them completely enough.

Among our contemporaries whose insights La Rochefoucauld seems to anticipate is Jean Baudrillard, who contends that our culture is now dominated by simulations (Poster 1). La Rochefoucauld places the performing individual within a context of other performances. The environment of would-be influences evoked by the

seventeenth-century moralist rather closely resembles the world of advertising blandishments wherein Baudrillard operates. When only simulacra are meaningful, all is ultimately *meaningless*. By withholding his consent, or his indulgent spectatorship, La Rochefoucauld makes the social language of signals and claims a semaphore in the void. The men whom he reflects in the shattered mirror he creates are gesticulating scarecrows: "Pour s'établir dans le monde, on fait tout ce que l'on peut pour y paraître établi." (56) There is no metaphysical stability behind this world of self-promotions. The rhetoric of seventeenth-century self-promotion and that of modern advertising are not fundamentally different. La Rochefoucauld refuses to participate in an exchange of signals which requires suspension of disbelief about the relation between sign--like coins--and the real value they claim to signify.

La Rochefoucauld thus stands in the way of a society based on production and consumption of simulacra by refusing to "swallow" these claims. He seems clearly aware that these "signifiers" refer only to other signifiers--to other claims. Even the monarch is only a motivated, and influenced, performer. The moralist refuses--at least as an artist and moralist--to participate in the exchange. His entire work implies the Baudrillardian contention that there is no relation between a system of simulations and a system of meaning.

So, for La Rochefoucauld, the would-be sovereign self is in fact a gesturing, or signaling, body lost among its motives. He denies not only the masterful subject, but the bounded, integral subject as well: "On est quelquefois aussi différent de soi-même que des autres" (135). The very meaning of "soi-même" is problematized by this denial that any of the self's manifestations demonstrates its "unity." Moreover, "Nous sommes si accoutumés à nous déguiser aux autres, qu'enfin nous nous déguisons à nous-mêmes" (119). The overproduction of simulations *consumes* given reality as the human environment becomes predominantly constructed and therefore semiotic and saturated with intentionality. Would-be sovereign subjects interfere with and in one another. For La Rochefoucauld,

the self is a signifier, constantly returning to itself only to subvert itself by revealing difference and motive rather than sameness and essence, superficiality and slippage instead of constancy and depth. The affirmative subjectivity first articulated by Corneille (Greenberg xiv) is shown in the *Maximes* to be itself a construct. La Rochefoucauld's comment on royal clemency in *Maxime* 15 demolishes Corneille's Auguste, that apotheosis of Renaissance voluntarism.

Social performance speaks a message, then, of which the performer is ignorant or which he would like to hide. In other words, as a signifier, the performing self signifies only that it is repressing its real significance.

Moreover, the goal of the *Maximes* is to provoke conversation. This work exists only as it becomes part of a dialectics, and thus as it participates in enactment of the signifiers' constant slippage. It is decentered literature. The context wherein the *Maximes* developed and were appreciated was an intensely social, constructed one. If the "modernist self" is a journey through all the possibilities of signification (Heller, Sosna, Wellerby 12), La Rochefoucauld's work is already evoking this modernist self. The dialectical basis of the work's existence is reflected in the constant revisions performed by the author. The *Maximes* evolved as does a play through its performances. Madame de Sablé's *salon* provided both a field of observation and a demonstration of the collective, relative nature of meaning-production. The evolving *maximes* enact the slippage of signification through collective performance.

*Amour propre* is La Rochefoucauld's version of the decentered self's symptomatology: motive, performance, and desire, whose scene of action is that of social influence, are within and fundamental to the self's own self-awareness. The hope or desire to manipulate one's environment or to influence one's fellows plunges one into the realm of contingent Being. The language of Being, as Jacques Lacan has said in his critique of *Le Misanthrope*, is the undoing of any stable signified. Although much has

been made of La Rochefoucauld's Augustinian tone, his analysis seems to undermine what John Freccero has called the Augustinian Paradigm (16). This paradigm has as its basis the self's reaching a position of superior knowledge about its development, and thus being able to review experience as a progressive narrative. The hall of shattered mirrors wherein La Rochefoucauld places social man seems to preclude such a progressive narrative. Any pretense of "higher" awareness would, it seems clear, be denounced by the moralist as just that--pretense. La Rochefoucauld irreparably shatters the mirror that constituted the admirable, unitary individual. There seems little likelihood that his fragmented insights could "add-up" to a reconstituted unity.

This broken "mirror" within which the indescribable complexity of social semiosis is reflected breaks up the "master discourse" (Ragland-Sullivan 305) whose purpose is to deny the self's and the society's divisions. La Rochefoucauld anticipates the modern recognition that an ethic of stable "truths" is, in fact, an effect of the will to power. He rejects the manipulation of moral categories by motivated performers, including the monarch. At the same time, he fulfills the Russian formalists' ideal of "making strange" as well as any other writer I know: his critique of the language of qualities calls attention to the performative materiality of language, to its presence as the medium of pretension. Discourse can no longer be conceived as "not there," as transparent. Destruction of the assumed link between abstract concepts and personal "qualites" decomposes the master discourse. The individual self is subverted from within by desire and from without by its problematic relations with other desiring selves.

Even the relation between the author of the *Maximes* and his audience is placed within this context of pretentious desire: "L'orgueil a plus de part que la bonté aux remontrances que nous faisons à ceux qui commettent des fautes, et nous ne les reprenons pas tant pour les en corriger, que pour leur persuader que nous en sommes exempts." (37) This is La Rochefoucauld's version of Baudelaire's "hypocrite lecteur..."! Even the desire to be

seen as an intelligent consumer--or producer--of social criticism is performative. Any will-to-truth is a will-to-power, and to prestige.

La Rochefoucauld recognizes that signification is a performance and that a mutable world, while it can be manipulated or influenced, for precisely that reason cannot support a being or a discourse of stable, substantive qualities or virtues. As an observer of social behavior, La Rochefoucauld is already seeing the emptiness at the "heart" of social meanings that so impresses us today. He is clearly aware that language, even as it encourages us to believe that it "reflects" a stable reality, actually *signifies*, or constructs, an essentially rhetorical *semblance* of reality. The seventeenth century's preoccupation with issues like the increasing "privatization" of salvation, as well as the deliberate manipulation of social status and the physical environment itself, is clear in the *Maximes*. These are perceived by the major French moralists as abuses of Renaissance voluntarism which must be undermined by demonstrating that will itself is the sign of motive, and thus of performance. As Molière suggests in *Le Tartuffe* and *Le Misanthrope*, the *desire* to be perceived as devout, or sincere, makes devotion and sincerity performances rather than truths as it locks the pretentious self into the system of simulations.

Our sense of living in a "post-cultural" context where there is no natural ground and where all is pastiche links us closely to La Rochefoucauld. Modern culture has created a theme-park environment in which signs have literally been converted into physical facts. The given world has largely been obliterated by being colonized or filled with constructs. We are increasingly consumed, ourselves, by the cultural system that uses us to reproduce its characteristic signals. The myth of autonomy is reinforced by the individual's pursuit of the signs of marginal differences. La Rochefoucauld had already learned to recognize and refuse spurious claims to unique moral quality.

We have now advanced very far in constructing a theme-park "environment" wherein regressive fantasies of autonomy and mobility appear to be realized. As La Rochefoucauld suggests, performative strategies for domination create claustrophobic collective environments without advancing toward "truth." He seems to foresee that manipulation of social reality will simultaneously empty it of truth and allow the mineralization of simulacra. Versailles, of course--like Disneyworld--both celebrates and imposes the triumph of simulation. It is important that Versailles represents both a "victory" of engineering over the given environment and the dominance of social meanings by the centralized monarchy. Under the all-dominating eye of the monarch, all actions are performative and any social transformation is theoretically possible. Life at Versailles must have somewhat resembled life in one of our environmentally controlled shopping malls, where crowds mill around among mirrors hoping to obtain impressive identities from a central distribution system. As La Rochefoucauld warns us, such purely semiotic identities neither last nor satisfy. The power to transform meanings and environments installs the flight of the signifier at the heart of both society and individuality.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The numerotation of the *maximes* here follows that in the Nouveaux Classiques Larousse edition. All cited texts have been verified by reference to the Pléiade edition of the complete works. The latter edition is edited and annotated by L. Martin-Chauffier. Paris: Gallimard, 1950. References to other pieces by La Rochefoucauld are to this latter edition.

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