

**The Comedy of Authorship in Charles Sorel's  
*Le Berger extravagant***

**by  
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For centuries, readers have had great difficulty in attributing various works to the polygraph Charles Sorel. From Jean-Pierre Nicéron in the eighteenth century (1344) to Antoine-Alexandre Barbier (*q.v.*) and Émile Roy in the nineteenth (402-424), critics strove to establish a referential relationship between Sorel, the man, and the contradictory manifestations of authorial voice in his various literary, critical, historical, and scientific texts. Sorel refuses to acknowledge his texts as his own — a gesture which works not only by means of anonymity, pseudonyms in his titles and explicit denial in his criticism, but also by a deliberate effort to promote confusion concerning his authorship within the texts themselves (Adam 1343-1344; Verdier: dissertation 2, *Charles Sorel* 74). The source of this ambiguity lies both in the disparity between Sorel's literary theory and practice, and in the "ironic" nature of the authorial voice, which says the contrary of what it means by suggesting more than it explicitly denotes (Hodgson 25-26). Jean-Pierre Faye situates this ambiguity on the narrative level in Sorel's comic novels; by techniques of masking and posturing, the authorial figure is mutable, multiple, and capable of reproaching and subverting successive representations of itself (Faye 40). Therefore, every time the reader thinks that he/she finds the consummate embodiment of authorial functioning, it absconds and eludes the reader's expectations. As Martine Debaisieux's study of Sorel's *Francion* shows, the dispersal of authorial activities on narrative and metanarrative levels contributes to the "mystification" of a single, monologic project, and thus evinces "l'instabilité de l'identité d'un écrivain conscient de l'emprise de la tradition littéraire sur sa propre création" (145).

Sorel presents the ambiguity of authorship as a subject matter for literary comedy and social criticism in *Le Berger extravagant* (1627-1628), in the critical gloss of his own novel, *Les Remarques* (1628), and in its rewrite *L'Anti-roman* (1633-1634). The author-

ial figure multiplies to become anonymous writer, editor, compiler, historian, literary and social critic, satirist, moralist, biographer, autobiographer, and anti-hero. The act of authorship passes through all the levels of the text by means of modulations of characterization and tone. According to Jean Sareil, it is this passage of the authorial figure through several narrative frames which qualifies comic writing and permits it to juxtapose several, seemingly contradictory intentions (Sareil 180). It has long been noted that *Le Berger's* dialogue of points and counterpoints, situated on narrative and metanarrative levels, generates a series of competing critical appraisals of esthetic and specifically literary conventions (Coulet 198-201; Tilton (*q.v.*); Serroy (*q.v.*); Chouinard (*q.v.*)). However, as this study is about to demonstrate, Sorel's comic treatment and criticism of authorship as a social convention and textual construction are just as prevalent throughout *Le Berger*.

Sorel employs three concurrent notions of "author," which according to Alain Viala had currency at the time and were based on various etymologies. First, from the Greek *autos*, meaning "of oneself, independently" (Liddell & Scott 135), "author" implies "one who creates independently from others, namely, in an original manner or as the origin of creation." Second, Pléiade writers, such as du Bellay, took "author" as a derivative of the Latin *auctor* and *augeo*, meaning "one who augments or supplements a previous text." Third, the Ancients stood as *auctoritates*, that is, authorities or models of creation that have had some weight and influence in rhetorical and literary traditions (Viala 276-277). Therefore, Sorel and his immediate predecessors, such as d'Urfé and Cervantes, were confronted with competing, if not partly contradictory notions of individual, textual production: creation, supplementarity, and authority. Indeed, Sorel confronts this ambiguity of definition in *Le Berger* by presenting originary, supplementary, and authoritative authorship as mediated by social and esthetic codes. Specifically, his field of evaluation of these codes is the "Histoire comique."

In his definition of the "Histoire comique," the representation of diverse social types gives rise to their critique, which is couched in joyful and facetious terms:

...la vraye Histoire Comique selon les preceptes des meilleurs Autheurs, ne doit estre qu'une peinture naive de toutes les diverses humeurs des hommes, avec des censures vives de la plupart de leurs defaux, sous la simple apparence de choses joyeuses...(Polyandre, *Histoire comique*, tome I, Advertissement aux lecteurs).

First, the authority of the best authors (*meilleurs Autheurs*) lies in their prescriptive role in defining Sorel's narrative genre of choice. Second, taking into account the polysemia of the legible and homonymic implications of the word *deffaux*, one can say that this comic genre permits the identification of socially typifying aspects (*humeurs*), the censure of faults in the social code (*défauts*), and the artificial construction of roles of imposture (*des faux*). Sorel thus uses the "Histoire comique" to catalog the faults in the phony, or forged nature of social archetypes. Individuals themselves are therefore not the object of derision and critique in the "Histoire comique," but rather the social and literary roles defining them are. One must wonder, however, what happens when Sorel turns this optic of social critique on the very constructedness of authoritative and originary authorship mentioned above.<sup>1</sup>

In the preface of *Le Berger*, the authorial voice directs its critique against the chimerical and socially conventional operations necessary for the constitution of authoritative and originary authorship. The attack is specifically aimed at the imaginary and artificial nature of the authorial role, for while it seems to apply to individuals, the accumulation of images emphasizes a fault in the social code that promotes imposture:

Je ne puis souffrir qu'il y ait des hommes si sots que de croire que par leurs Romans, leurs Poësies, & autres ouvrages inutiles, ils meritent d'estre au rang des beaux Esprits; il y a tant de qualitez à acquerir avant que d'en venir là, que quand ils seroient tous fondus ensemble, on n'en pourroit pas faire un personnage aussi parfait qu'ils se croyent estre chacun (*Le Berger extravagant* 13).

The authorial figure comments on the writers' belief (*croire, ils se croyent*) that their textual production will elevate them to a rank (*rang*), for which their socially recognizable traits do not qualify them. Even if their individual, supposedly original qualities as authors (*chacun*) were assimilated into one body (*tous fondus ensemble*), they could not accede to the position of authoritative authorship. Authorship appears as a fictive characterization or role (*personnage*), approved according to hierarchical codes of prestige (*rang*). Furthermore, authorship constitutes a place or position (*en venir là*), which Sorel's authorial figure occupies all the while he attacks its conventional status in literature and society as authoritative, that is, as a locus where the subject creates and masters discourse. It is even more interesting to note that Sorel's authorial voice, in its efforts to emerge by means of emphatic tones and wide-sweeping claims, critiques these very means and draws attention to its own conventional, imaginary, and representational nature. This technique of criticizing by means of doing the very thing being criticized continues throughout the rest of *Le Berger's* restaging of authorship.

When the authorial voice explains its reasons for anonymity, its hyperbolic tone clashes with its argument. It makes seemingly paradoxical claims to both its modesty and its superiority to other authorial figures:

J'ay si peu de vanité que je ne desire point que l'on sçache mon nom, ny que des affiches me facent connoistre, & puis quand j'aurois surmonté tous les Escrivains de ce temps, la victoire seroit si petite, que si je me voulois acquerir de l'honneur, il faudroit bien que je me fisse des ennemis plus illustres.  
(preface, 15)

The bombastic, authorial voice hides its name in such a way as to disavow its referential status and authoritarian position. In its exaggerated self-empowerment, it effaces its individuality as an original creator by suppressing the denotative link to an individual origin: the signature. It abandons its posture of modesty in the first half of the sentence, and adopts that of its contrary, vanity. In say-

ing that its victory over other authors would be minimal, the voice slights its own project to prove its modesty. The authorial voice, while emptying itself of an originary identity and subverting its self-aggrandizement, demonstrates the illusion and ultimate emptiness of other authorial positions. For Sorel, the suppression of the signature serves as a tool to challenge the unified, originary, and authoritarian construct of authorship as a social and literary fiction. However, the collapse of the figure of the author does not conclude in the Preface, for it reappears in the larger narrative as well.

At the end of *Le Berger*, the authorial figure re-emerges neither as a textual origin, nor as an authority, but as a textual destination and as a scribe augmenting an authoritative text, much like the narrator of *Don Quixote*:

Cervantes's ironic vision enables him to put within the pages of *Don Quixote* things that are normally outside books automatically; and also to manipulate the story so that the principal characters are actually conscious of the world outside the covers of the book. He includes within its pages an author (supposedly *the* author), Benengeli. He brings his real self in incidentally as the man who presents Benengeli's fiction to the public. On occasion he mentions himself just as if he were a personage who existed cheek by jowl with his characters...." (Riley 40-41)

The author-narrator turns out to be the editor and secretary of memoirs written by fictional characters: "Je vous ay raconté maintenant tout ce que j'avois dessein de vous dire des diverses fortunes de mon Berger Extravagant suivant les memoires que j'en ay eus de Philiris & de Clarimond qui n'ont pas eu le loisir de les mettre en ordre" (XIV: 549). In a *mise en abyme* that retroactively embraces and brackets the fictional status of the whole novel, the author-narrator now occupies the same fictional space as the characters, and in so doing, reveals himself to be the illusionistic product of narration. This *mise en abyme* thus accentuates, accroding

to Lucien Dällenbach, the mutual construction of the writer and the written text:

...[L]e phénomène que la mise en abyme a pour fonction de mettre en évidence [est] la construction mutuelle de l'écrivain et de l'écrit. (25).

Moreover, by passing from reality into fiction through metalepsis (Genette 243-246), the author-narrator plays an ambiguous series of roles whose reliability is questionable:

...& puis ne se deffient-ils [les lecteurs] point de moy? Que sçavent-ils si je ne leur ay point conté une fable pour une histoire, ou bien si pour desguiser les choses, & ne point faire connoistre les personnages dont j'ay parlé, comme je ne leur ay pas donné les noms qu'ils portent d'ordinaire, je n'ay point pris la Brie pour quelque autre province?

(XIV:  
549)

Allowing for the possibility of being a fable, history, *roman à clef*, biography, and autobiography, the author-narrator's discourse slips into areas of profound generic ambiguity, as remarks Verdier (*Charles Sorel* 70). More importantly, Sorel has the author-narrator discount its reliability (ne se deffient-ils point de moy?) and thus calls into question its status as an authority capable of making claims to the imaginary, the referential, and ultimately to truth. Here Sorel deliberately challenges notions of authorship as original, authentic, and authoritative with images of its supplementarity, inauthenticity, and subordination to the very modes of representation it claims to master.

Sorel also problematizes notions of originary and authoritative authorship by investing the title character of *Le Berger extravagant*, Lysis, with an authorial function. Similar to the author-narrator, the novel's protagonist begins to move metaleptically, from fiction into reality, when he addresses a letter in the form of a poster to novelists and poets:

À Tous Poetes,  
Romanistes, &c.

Messieurs,

M'ayant esté averty de vostre haut sçavoir par des personnes fort capables, & en ayant d'ailleurs receu des tesmoignages dans vos innombrables escrits, j'ay creu que je ne pouvois rencontrer de meilleurs associez que vous au dessein que j'ay pris de restablir la felicité du monde. Vous pouvez voir ce que je promets dans mes affiches, & vous serez icy suppliez de ma part de me venir trouver en Brie, pour y prendre l'habit de Berger. Il n'y a point d'excuse qui vous puisse exempter d'estre de cette profession, car vous avez publié dans vos livres, qu'elle est extremement delicieuse. Cela m'a donné la hardiesse de vous adresser cette lettre, & j'espere que dans peu de temps je vous verray icy tenir la houlette d'une main & la plume d'une autre pour escrire vos belles aventures à mesure que vous les avez mises à fin. Ce sera alors que vous recevrez toute sorte de courtoisies de la part de

Vostre plus affectionné amy,

Le Berger Lysis.

(VI: 238)

As a fictional character and the writer of the "letter-poster," Lysis fulfills an authorial function, which in turn fulfills his name-sake of "extravagant," that is, "astray, wandering." (Cotgrave, *q.v.*) His text metaleptically strays from the fictional realm of the pastoral novel, where the letter functions as a private form of discourse, and wanders into social, political, and theological realms of reality, where the poster constitutes a public display. Lysis very rarely strays consciously into the realm of social reality:

Refus du monde réel, re-cr ation d'un monde jeune. Le symbole de ce refus, c'est, pour Lysis, la qualit  de berger.  tre berger, c'est se retrancher du monde, partir au loin, retrouver une innocence qui n'a pas encore  t  alt r e par les vices inh rents   la soci t  organis e.... Il faut s' loigner davantage de la ville, il faut essayer de trouver un lieu mythique pour y vivre dans un temps mythique, la conqu te de la simplicit  est   ce prix (Sutcliffe 26-27).

He does so here, however, in order to invite authors to coexist metaleptically with the imaginary objects of their representations: "...& j'espere que dans peu de temps je vous verray icy tenir la houlette d'une main & la plume d'une autre." This comment on their introduction into the novel serves to destabilize the authorial voice as an organizing agent in narration. By challenging them with their composite figurative description, Lysis reverses the hierarchical relationship between writers as origins and authorities, and fictional characters as their imaginative products. In addition, if they assume the authoritative role as literary *savants*, Lysis will recognize the proof of their claims: "Ce sera alors que vous recevrez toute sorte de courtoisies de la part de Vostre plus affectionn  amy, le Berger Lysis." Despite the fact that an author created him, the "extravagant shepherd" manages to represent authors as authorities that posit a particular model of the idyllic, felicitous lifestyle. Much like Don Quixote, a reader and imitator of chivalric novels, Lysis takes authors' pastoral representations *  la lettre*, and thus stresses their power — namely, to objectify the fictional and thereby invest it with its own kind of reality, which may well exceed authors as originators and supposed masters of discourse.

In *Les Remarques on Le Berger*, Sorel employs a critical, authorial voice to explain that Lysis's "letter-poster" is a challenge to the construct of originary and authoritative authorship. The enunciator supports his critique not with references to other novels, but to historical referents. He presents anecdotes of a Jew burned in Paris and the Fr res de la Rose Croix, both of whom, having published their authorial claims on posters, turned out to be impostors for not fulfilling those claims: "Il faut donc conclurre que c'est

une regle pour connoistre tous les imposteurs, que de voir s'ils font ce qu'ils promettent monstrent aux autres" (*Rems.*, 610). Sorel thus underscores the falseness of authoritative claims that cannot be substantiated by their authorial origin. With these anecdotes, Sorel reverses the ostensible effect of Lysis's "letter-poster" in the narrative: instead of having him make undue claims to authoritative and original authorship, he has him question the socially and esthetically constructed role of authors by revealing the emptiness of their promises. Therefore, in his transgression of frames of literary and historical reference, Sorel shows authorship to be a narrative and rhetorical construct — specifically, a representation of originary subjectivity and authority constituted within and by means of fiction.

This metaleptic movement between imaginary and referential realms culminates in Sorel's second edition of *Le Berger* entitled *L'Anti-roman*. In dividing and delegating authorial functions to different fictional agents, Sorel seems to privilege authorship as a supplemental activity over its original and authoritative construct. The most striking gesture to this effect appears in the full title: *L'Anti-roman, ou L'Histoire du berger Lysis, accompagné de ses Remarques*, Jean de la Lande, poitevin (*q.v.*). First, the definite article in the contraction *du* implies that there is a particularized and individual shepherd, who may not only be a referent existing before the composition of his story, but may also be its author. Second, because of the gender ambiguity in possessive *ses*, it is not clear whether the critical *Remarques* can be attributed to the "Histoire," thus giving the book a critical autonomy, or whether the protagonist Lysis has a critical and analytical role in his own story. Third, this edition appeared under the pseudonym Jean de la Lande, poitevin, which designates a real authorial referent with a different origin, Jean de la Lande, breton (Roy 408). Therefore, three displacements of the authorial function appear: from the signatory to the fictional character, since it is his story; from the signatory to other critical agents, since the gloss of the novel may belong either to the fictional character or the novel itself; from one author's name originating in Brittany to an other's in Poitou. Because of all of these displacements, the novel defies any single spatial or subjective origin. In *L'Anti-roman*, Sorel persists in prob-

lematizing authorship by obfuscating its origin and challenging its authority in a series of mediating, authorial activities.

Much like Cervantes's scene of writing in the "Prologue" to *Don Quixote* (Riley 27), in the Preface "Aux Lecteurs," Jean de la Lande is authorial only by signature, for he explains that the narrative was composed by other hands:

Il y a plus de huict ans que cette Histoire me fut communiquée par un personnage que j'honore de toute mon affection lequel m'incita à la remettre par ordre. Il y avoit deslors en son cabinet quantité d'autres manuscrits sur differens sujets, dont il avoit dicté quelques uns, & il avoit laissé faire les autres à quelques personnes à qui il en avoit donné l'invention ou les memoires; Cettui-cy estoit de ceux où plusieurs mains avoient touché, mais par l'instruction que je receu, il me fut aisé de mettre de l'egalité par tout. (tome I, 7-8)

The authorial voice goes on to say that he used a great anthology of judgments on other novels to create his *Remarques*. The collection of *lieux communs* now constitutes a third source of critical commentary within the novel. As the apparently unifying authorial figure under which all other authors are subsumed, Jean de la Lande claims to collate and augment the manuscripts of other authors and critics. However, the authorial origin is fundamentally plural, and even under the guise of the pseudonym, is lost. The pseudonym as *the* name for *the* author only serves as a placeholder for a plurality of voices whose names cannot be found. Indeed, in concurrence with the "Histoire," Lysis, and the previous authors and critics, Jean de la Lande further divides authorship by making claim to the text himself. Thanks to structures of *mise en abyme* and metalepsis, it seems that the scene of writing becomes a free-for-all open to characters, anonymous authors, critics, collectors, and compilers. Sorel thus demonstrates how the imposition of the pseudonym works in vain to consolidate the origin, authenticity, and authority of authorship, for it serves only as a nominal mask covering many voices in a competition for authorial status.

In his questioning of original and authoritative authorship, Sorel progresses from *Le Berger*, where the origin of composition is blurred and its reliability is questioned, to *L'Anti-roman*, where authorship consists of the augmentation of other textual origins and authorities. The dialogic activity in *Le Berger* involves tensions between narration, history, and critical appraisal which are sustained by successively collapsing authorial figures in order to generate statements concerning the representability of authorship in the context of fiction. In contrast, the dialogic tensions between narration and criticism in *L'Anti-roman* work continuously to interrupt and dismantle authorial figures to the point that multiple and supplemental authorship distances all textual origins, and even begins to tear apart the Sorelian corpus. For instance, at the end of *L'Anti-roman*, Sorel allows for several authorial hands by attributing his *Francion* to Molinet Duparc and *Le Berger* to Jean de la Lande, and by judging *Le Berger* superior to the *Francion*: "Si l'on confronte l'histoire de Francion à celle de Lysis avec le jugement qui y est nécessaire,...le moindre traict de celle du berger est cent fois plus ingenieux" (tome II, 1164). Sorel thus refers to his other texts and evaluates them as if they were written by another writing subject (Faye 40). While expanding his own corpus, Sorel repeatedly puts its authorial attribution into question and thus brackets the status of his own representation in his texts as an original, originary, and authoritative author. Indeed, he will later disavow his imaginative fictions by calling them mere "exercices d'esprit.". He had first used this expression in *L'Anti-roman*, where he distances himself as an authorial figure from the critical commentary: "[C'est] un exercice d'esprit où il semble que je blasme ce que je loue et que je loue ce que je blasme" (I, 162-163). Forty years after writing *Le Berger*, Sorel disowns his comic fictions, for he views them as esthetic and intellectual experiments of his youth:

Lors que les Escrits ont plus de bien que mal, ou que portans un caractere d'indifference, ils ne sont que des Exercices de ceux qui les font, & des Essais de leurs forces, il n'est pas necessaire de les mettre au rang de leurs veritables Œuvres. Il n'y a jamais eu d'obligation de se dire l'Autheur des Livres qu'on desavoüe en les donnant, & que comme des

livres étrangers, des sentimens & de la methode desquels on ne demeure point d'accord. (*La Bibliothèque française* 107).

In contrast to notions of original, originary, and authoritative authorship, Sorel exploits the idea of authorial supplementarity in his creation of fictions. Therefore, through the techniques of *mise en abyme*, metalepsis, and multiple attribution, Sorel manages to cover any trace of a single, unified, and monologic author. Is it then not surprising that so many scholars were compelled to enter the archives and rewrite the story of Charles Sorel's literary attribution?

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>On that point, I disagree with Antoine Adam when he says that Sorel's "Histoire comique," as it appears in the *Francion*, constitutes a pessimistic satire against individuals of his time (146)

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