

The Jesuit Differential: The Relativity of Truth and Lies in the Theatre of Pierre Corneille and Pedro Calderón de la Barca

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What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and; anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions—they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.

Friedrich Nietzsche, On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense (1873)

It is not uncommon to hear or read about parallels or specular effects drawn between the 17th-century Baroque worldview and post-Modern thought. The Baroque period in the arts was partially characterized by its tendency to question borders between opposite values, that is, to operate a sort of de-construction on binary oppositions a few centuries *avant la lettre* (if there is such thing as this logocentric *letter*, as the late French philosopher Jacques Derrida would argue), not so much in a Derridean way as in a purely Baroque one. This deconstructive worldview was largely determined by the climate of the Counter-reformation and the aftermath of the Council of Trent, in which the Catholic Church

had to defend itself against accusations of irrationality, untruths, mysticism, and idolatry. The death of the feudal system and the upcoming rise of Absolutist monarchy also contributed to the shaping of a worldview that needed to revisit all defining parameters of its societies, including those of language. As John W. O'Malley and Gauvin Alexander Bailey have demonstrated in a two-volume collection on this period of transition from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment,¹ this fascination with questioning reality and truth was also largely connected to the development of the Jesuit spiritual, educative, and missionary systems at the turn of the seventeenth century. The rise of the Society of Jesus was a noticeable epistemological phenomenon as this 16th-century religious order would contribute to the questioning of opposite notions, in an attempt to modernize the Church but through rather conservative and scholastic approaches. This consolidating organ of the larger institution embraced Renaissance humanism as it would simultaneously cultivate nostalgia for various medieval practices and feudal values. What often seemed contradictory around the Jesuits from an outsider's perspective, such as Pascal's, made perfect sense from within the Society's internal perception of the world, especially after each Jesuit priest or alumnus underwent the Ignatian spiritual exercises and the *Ratio Studiorum*. In sum, at the turn of the 17th century, the Society of Jesus occupied the very centre of all intellectual life in Western Europe, and was announcing new definitions beyond deconstructive endeavours.

As Anthony Raspa pointed out in *The Emotive Image*

1. O'Malley, John W. et al. *The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts 1540–1773*. Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1999. Print.

(1983), the Baroque world of Italy, France, and Spain had already made some theoretical claims centuries before the “post-structuralist” fever witnessed in the 20th century: “Baroque man was (. . .) in continual discourse with universal forces just as the existentialist is in increasing contact with the awesome magnitude of nothing and the Marxist with the forever shifting movements of the masses to their destiny” (13). Indeed, in the first half of the seventeenth century, existential doubt often came to replace the scientific and enthusiastic security of the Renaissance, and artists of all kind participated in the erasure of traditionally accepted binary oppositions, on a collective unconscious level. “The characteristic of the Baroque is the fold that goes on to infinity,” as Gilles Deleuze once suggested (227). In this new paradigm, artists came to question the existence of the real, and understood that the opposite of a thing is often what contains the thing itself. Darkness contains light, lies contain truth. In his attempt to understand and define this pre-post-modern time period, Deleuze came to the conclusion that “[c]onsequently, the Baroque world, as Wölfflin has shown, is organized according to two vectors: a sinking downward and an upward pull” (234). For instance, painters like Caravaggio or Rembrandt developed the technique of *chiaroscuro* in their works, a merging of light and darkness, to emphasize the common nature of day and night, instead of cultivating their difference. Architects would play with the contrasts between the verticality of a building’s façade and the vertigo one experiences in its rear interior in order to upset the commonly binary perceptions of space. Playwrights would elaborate on the distortions of reality and the theatricality of social truths, and would thereby transform the dynamics of the stage.

The Jesuits not only formed and financed these artists

of all backgrounds, but they also often imposed very strict theological and ideological guidelines on their art,² particular focusing on theatre as the culmination and converging point of all arts. As Christopher Braider points out in *Refiguring the Real* (1993):

By the seventeenth century, the symbiosis of painting and staging already visible in the Middle Ages emerges more clearly still. A general Golden Age of European drama, age of Jonson, Webster, and Congreve as well as the mature Shakespeare, of Lope and Calderón, Gryphius and Lohenstein as well as Corneille, Racine, and Molière, the seventeenth century is also the age of the—in every sense—spectacular art of the baroque. (150–1)

On the linguistic levels found in theatre, binary oppositions were deconstructed in the same fashion as one can observe them in the visual arts, through the blurring of the contrasts that defined them as well as the suggestion of their interchangeability. Following the same theoretical patterns, the difference between truth and lie was also perceived as a *chiaroscuro* since they could occupy the same space in language and could not be distinguished by any particular method. What if lies were another expression of truth, and truth only the result of congregating lies? What if truth was just a metaphor, arbitrary and socially established, as suggested a few centuries later by Nietzsche? This concern was everywhere to be found in early Modernity, a period marked by the birth of Protestantism immediately followed

2. An instance of such guidelines regarding architecture can be found in Carlo Borromeo's *Instructiones Fabricae et Supellectilis Ecclesiasticae* (1577).

by the Counter-Reformation in Western Europe. In such conflictive climate, the constant questioning of the arbitrary nature of truth would become particularly visible in the arts and letters of Italy, France and Spain, the three daughters of the Roman Church who would reconfigure their entire culture in order to remain faithful to the mysterious nature of iconography in the Catholic tradition, often qualified by the Protestant Reformation as a lying surface alienating from God's truth.

The Counter-reformation might have entertained different interpretations of such truth and the various methods to perceive and approach it in post-Trent Western Europe. For instance, what if lying (*mentire* in Latin) had slipped from being a sin or a vice to becoming an art, from being perceived as a perversion of not telling the truth to an intellectual virtue of disguising the truth? What if *mentire* was an integral part of a play of signs that would alter and deform truth on purpose in order to have the reader/viewer/spectator engage in a reformation of the sign? French philosopher Michel Foucault has worked to identify this phenomenon of evolution of representation toward Modernity in *The Order of Things* (1966) where he suggested that these are the dynamics encountered in Velazquez's *Meninas* and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. According to his conclusions, truth in the Baroque age could no longer be perceived in a linear and direct connection with the viewer's/reader's gaze such as one would usually perceive it during the Renaissance, but rather through a theatrical play, a simulacrum, affecting all of the arts, a play in which this gaze must perceive truth through the colourful filter of lies. As a matter of fact, the seventeenth century artists were keen on showcasing their capacity to simulate (*simulare*), to fake (*fingere*), and eventually to lie (*mentire*). Post-modern thinker Jean Baudrillard, who has traced the history of simulation and

simulacra back to the Jesuits, identifies in the 17th century a “Jesuit moment” in which: “[t]he transition from signs which dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing marks the decisive turning point” (Blond 188).

Interestingly enough, the Latin verb *mentire* derives from *mens* (wit, intelligence) and was originally closer to the signified of *imaginare* than it is nowadays. Therefore, to lie was actually perceived as a demonstration of the intellect to superimpose an imaginary reality on the existing one, or to simulate. Perhaps the Spanish Golden Age was the very locus in which this transformation in the representative arts happens, but it cannot be discontinued from its prolongation in French Classicism. In his most celebrated 1983 masterpiece *Le masque et le visage*, Alexandre Cioranescu, who looked closer on the consequences and mutations of the Spanish Baroque on French literature, recognized in Don Quixote the first character to ever travel back and forth between truth and lies (*imaginare* > *mentire*) in what he considers the most innovative literature of all times (10).³ In sum, the scope of Foucault’s theoretical assertions and conclusions, along with Cioranescu’s detailed philological comparisons regarding early Modernity in the two countries, are enormous and remain valuable in order to understand the potential reattribution of a lost signified to the verb *mentir*, a verb and sign still shared by both Spanish and French to this day.

3. “Don Quichotte n’est pas seulement le modèle pour tous les bovarysmes, il est le premier de tous les personnages qui jouent à la fois avec les deux mondes possibles, le réel et l’imaginaire, et avec eux-mêmes tout d’abord. D’une façon plus générale, le baroque espagnol a proposé la formule en même temps qu’un éventail très ouvert des possibilités d’une nouvelle littérature. (. . .) C’est là sans doute l’innovation la plus riche en conséquences que la littérature ait connue depuis ses commencements.”

Unquestionably, the Baroque period re-established the intervention of wit (*mens*) and intelligence in the act of lying, almost to the point that the truth-teller is perceived as a simple-minded. Lying almost became an expression of *préciosité*, this exaggerated and ostentatious language and literature developing with figures such as Luis de Góngora (1561–1627) in Spain, and the Abbé Cotin (1604–1682) in France. The codification of language as well as the intertwining of truth and lie found in their text became so complex and elitist than they provoked visceral reactions in Miguel de Cervantes and later on in Molière, both of which were later on chosen to have their name associated to the national language of their country for their effort to make it both literary and accessible.

But before focusing on why Spanish became “la *lengua* de Cervantes,” and French “la *langue* de Molière,” other factors external to the search for a higher literariness such as the one we find in the *préciosité* ought to be seriously taken into consideration. For instance, the advent of Jesuit casuistry on 17th-century daily life had substantial repercussions on social understanding of the *mentire*, and brought the old Latin verb closer to the meaning of *imaginare* once again. The *main mise* of the Society of Jesus on social performances, and particularly its affinity with theatre, could lead the modern reader to believe that there might have been something theological about this recalculation of meaning. However, we might perceive it as an essentially philosophical phenomenon after reading Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*:

The sphere of poetry does not lie beyond this world as a fantastic impossibility of a poet’s brain; it wants to be exactly the opposite, the unadorned expression of the truth, and it must therefore simply cast off the false costume of that alleged truth of the man of culture. The contrast between this real truth of nature and

the cultural lie which behaves as if it is the only reality is similar to the contrast between the eternal core of things, the thing-in-itself, and the total world of appearances. And just as tragedy, with its metaphysical consolation, draws attention to the eternal life of that existential core in the continuing destruction of appearances, so the symbolism of the satyr chorus already expresses metaphorically that primordial relationship between the thing-in-itself and appearance. (30)

By the 17th century, the early modern audience has merged with the ancient satyr chorus described by Nietzsche in this quote, had entirely assumed its functions, and the old division between tragedy and comedy has begun to break apart. Within the Baroque worldview of France and Spain, largely influenced by the Jesuit perception of humanism, the satyr chorus is no longer needed but rather internalized in the *chiaroscuro* the audience gets to observe in each character. The hero in particular becomes a projection in which the spectator contemplates his/her own capacity to lie (*mentire*) and to therefore demonstrate wit (*mens*), a mental tool of simulation that can even fool the Devil and become beneficial in the economy of salvation.

Let us now focus on one specific parameter of this epistemological change, that is, the discussion of the act of “disguising the truth” (*mentire*) in Spanish and French theatre. In order to do so, let us take a closer look at the life and works of two playwrights who have been deeply influenced by the simulation process found in the *Spiritual Exercises*, and who have received their education in a Jesuit institution, and on each side of the Pyrenees: Pierre Corneille in France, and Pedro Calderón de la Barca in Spain. Although the list of sources could be increased to more writers, it is preferable to remain focused on the fact that these two playwrights had in

common a fascination for the potentially truthful nature of lies, centuries before Kant, Nietzsche or Freud came around with their own explanations about the phenomenon of the human lie. Moreover, Corneille and Calderón have both published their most significant works between the beginning of the 1630s and the end of the 1650s, three decades in which the fascination for the unstable nature of truth was particularly visible in two countries marked by a whole century of debates between Catholics and Protestants, both fighting for their own truth and constantly denouncing their opponent's lies.

The protection and consolidation of the Catholic faith that the two countries share, in spite of their different political and cultural methodologies around the problem, was partially due to the development of the Society of Jesus, and the works of its founder, Ignatius of Loyola, a religious man born in Spain and educated in France in the sixteenth century. In order to approach the erasure of distinction between truth and lie in the plays of Corneille and Calderón in the light of their relationship with their Jesuit education as well as the established culture of the Counter-reformation in the mid-seventeenth century, let us look at two lesser-known yet significant texts from these authors: *Le menteur*, written by Corneille and represented for the first time in 1643, and *En la vida todo es verdad y todo mentira*, written by Calderón and represented at court for the first time in 1650. Although the two plays have unrelated plots, the questioning of truth and lies as interchangeable entities is announced in the title, and remains central to the development of the respective actions.

Although these works have received less scholarly attention than more canonical works that have become references of Baroque plays of illusion, such as *L'illusion comique* (1635) or *La vida es sueño* (1635), they deserve to

be read in parallel in order to underline the more perpetual movement between truth and lie that can be found in them. I argue that this common movement was conditioned by the Ignatian theology to which both authors have been exposed as students of the Jesuits, and have internalized and recycled in their theatre. This theological worldview was announcing the later conclusions of philosophers from subsequent centuries, particularly those of Friedrich Nietzsche, often perceived as a leading figure of atheism. But there was no atheism in either Corneille or Calderón, but rather secular demonstrations of Ignatian spirituality. Nonetheless, they also perceived truth as a “movable host,” “illusions,” and ultimately arbitrary signs. It is fascinating, in this sense, to see how Jesuit theology is oddly connected to Nietzschean thought via the experiments of 17th-century secular theatre.

As French semiotician Roland Barthes pointed out in 1971, in “Loyola,”⁴ one of the bases of the Ignatian spirituality is the need to retreat and reflect on the potentials of illusion and the dangers of imagination. Barthes underlined that “the energy of language (of which the *Exercises* is one of the exemplary theatres) is a form and the very form of a desire of the world” (68). Since its foundation in the 16th century, the Society of Jesus altogether is a religious order that seeks to guide believers through the natural contraries of the world, the relation between language and desire, and ultimately the identification of illusions in traditionally accepted binary oppositions such as Good vs. Evil. Based on the belief that Satan, referred to as “the Enemy” in Loyola’s *Spiritual*

4. This essay was published in the volume *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, his structuralist approach to Ignatius of Loyola and the logothetic nature of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* written in 1524.

Exercises, is constantly blurring the differences on which the human society is based, the Jesuits sought to educate their students to the art of discerning the works of Satan.

There are many professional careers that allow the development of these skills outside of ministry or theology, and beyond the experience and practice of the Ignatian exercises. Jesuit law schools flourished very soon after the foundation of the Society, and are still to this day very renowned. The Enemy and the forces of evil are at work in the world to constantly cover up the truth originating from God: the Jesuit should therefore educate himself and his students to the art of *mentir* for it is the only way to comprehend truth and the plays of illusions around it. Consequently, Loyola structured a method in which all aspects of potential distortions of reality and truth could be decoded and avoided. Among these countless evil manifestations of illusion, the founder of the Society paid particular attention to the use of the senses and the arbitrary nature of language. Although he did not call it 'arbitrary' *per se* – and therefore doesn't anticipate Saussure's notion –, Loyola suggested in several occasions the unstable status of truth through the use of words. Within this context, the Jesuit would continue to educate their students to the deceitful nature of "truth," since the Enemy, the fallen angel, had the capacity to play with the unity of the sign in language and could easily trick men and women in the arbitrariness of language. In this regard, Satan's *mens* (wit) was comparable to only one other *mens*: His Creator's, a creator he shared with all of humanity.

The development of theatre in the first half of the 17th century in France and Spain was deeply enhanced by the participation of the Society of Jesus in the renewal of this art and its adaptation to the mass culture. As it has been pointed

out in a myriad of studies,⁵ the Jesuits were interested in exploring the potentials of theatre since their early stage and have always entertained interest for the representative arts. Pedro Calderón (1600–1681) and Pierre Corneille (1606–1684), in addition to the coincidence of sharing the name of the first Vicar of the Church of Rome, had their first exposure to theatre through their Jesuit education, and have therefore internalized many of the dynamics of Ignatian spirituality on a conscious and a subconscious levels, since the Jesuits used theatre quite extensively for pedagogical purposes. They both came from bourgeois background and were destined (should we say ‘forced’?) to become lawyers by their father. Just like Dorante, the protagonist of *Le menteur*, Corneille would finish his course of study and start practising law in his native Rouen but would abandon it very soon after, whereas Calderón would realize around the same years in Salamanca that law was not his true calling before graduating. However, their failed experience of argumentation in the art of pleading—the art of distinguishing truth from lies, or vice versa—would encounter eternal success in the dramatic modes of theatre. Instead of defending potential liars, they would both invent characters and throw them in the trials of fictional life, where they would have to discern the difference between truth and lies. The question of lie (*mensonge/mentira*) would remain central to their existence, their belief and their literature.

5. The works of John O'Malley and Gauvin Alexander Bailey, especially their volume on *The Jesuits and the Arts: 1540–1773* (2005), are a great point of departure. Evonne Levy's *Propaganda and the Jesuit Baroque* (2004) takes a different angle on the same question. French critic Annie LeBrun has also done some significant research on the Jesuit fascination for theater replicated in the works of the marquis de Sade in *Petits et grands théâtres du marquis de Sade* (1989).

The direct influence of Calderón in the theatre of Corneille was evidenced during their own lifetime, and the French playwright was consequently criticized for his tendency to recycle Spanish plays almost word for word. In *Héros et Orateurs* (1996), a comprehensive study of Corneille's relation to the Jesuits, Marc Fumaroli goes even further and calls this influence an *enracinement* (rooting).⁶ In addition to the works of Calderón, Corneille read the manuscripts of many other Spanish playwrights such as Guillén de Castro, Alarcón and Lope de Vega. Between 1643 and 1651, the Hapsburg Queen Anna of Austria, daughter of Philip III of Spain, widow of Louis XIII of France, and mother of the future Sun King Louis XIV, governed France in partnership with the Cardinal of Mazarin with a common mission to continue the establishment of absolute monarchy for the state of France. Consequently, the Spanish comedy became very popular since this is a particular moment of interest for the Spanish Baroque in French history. In 1983, Alexandre Cioranescu explored this period of influences and epistemological transitions in *Le masque et le visage: du baroque espagnol au classicisme français*. In this still unchallenged piece of scholarship, Cioranescu focused on the ambiguity of identities, and how they lead characters into plays of representation in which lies can be the mask of truth. In 2002, Liliane Picciola also suggested that Corneille became familiar with Calderón's works around the time he initiates the writing of *Le menteur* (126). The less probable possibility that Calderón would be a reader of Corneille has been

6. "La plus évidente (approche), c'est l'enracinement de Corneille dramaturge dans une tradition à la fois morale, religieuse et littéraire d'obédience jésuite, ce qui le rend familier à la fois du théâtre néo-latin des Collèges de la Société de Jésus, et du théâtre vernaculaire des deux "nations" où les Jésuites ont le plus d'emprise: l'Espagne, on le savait, mais aussi l'Italie" (7).

discussed in 1924 in H.M. Martin's comparative article, and hasn't been researched further since then. This philological approach suggested that Calderón might have had access to Corneille's play through the service of a translator since he wasn't able to read French (415).

Beyond their parallel lives as failed lawyers, the diffusion of Spanish culture in France during the regency of Anna, mother of the future Sun-King, and the probabilities around mutual familiarity of their works, Corneille and Calderón were above all precursors of the modern justifications of the act of lying. They perceived it as a traumatic reaction due to the limitations of language on the one hand, and to the problematic and metaphorical relationships between fathers and sons on the other hand. The paternal figure is often associated in 17th-century theatre with what we have come to perceive as the Lacanian symbolic order in the 20th century, in which language is passed along from a generation to the next. But such order is also carrying the guilt that a father transmits to his son through an education in the arbitrariness of the human laws. Therefore it is no wonder if the two parameters are connected in the questioning of truth, given the commonly accepted arbitrary nature of the language that formulates the laws.

As mentioned before, Corneille and Calderón had in common that they had deceived the dream of their respective father to see their son practice law at the end of their course of study, but had chosen theatre instead precisely because it is a simulated space of trial, a space where truth is constantly questioned through visual and linguistic plays of illusion. In *L'illusion comique*, Corneille projected this conflictive relationship in the father figure of Pridamant, who is responsible for his son's need to escape and live his dream to become an actor, in other words, a

professional liar. Even though the condition of actors was evolving in the 17th century, they were still regarded as marginal figures, simultaneously fascinating and surrounded by stigmas. A bourgeois father could perceive in this career's choice a rebuttal of the patriarchal training that would ultimately represent a threat for the whole society. Calderón's portrayal of the Saturnian complex between Basilio and Segismundo in *La vida es sueño* is another great instance of a dysfunctional father/son relationship.⁷ Since the father stands as the figure responsible for the transmission of "truth," that is the codification of universal reality in metaphors, any transgression of this responsibility would automatically cause a traumatic experience on the son, often an embodiment of the nation itself. The 24-year war between France and Spain right around the middle of the 17th century (1635–1659), the death of Louis XIII in France in 1643, and the dysfunctional relationship of the young Louis XIV with Cardinal Mazarin all served as the traumatic historical background in which father figures are often perceived as generators of lies.

In *L'illusion comique*, the magician Alcandre reveals to Pridamant, a desperate father who has no one else to which he can turn for help, images of his disappeared son. This modern and daring *mise-en-abyme* places Pridamant in the position of a disciplined spiritual exercitant under the direction of a magician, echoing the dynamics of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. This visual initiation, implicitly based on and parodying the Jesuit spiritual exercise, is going to be a life changer for the viewer of the illusion: not only is he seeing his disappeared

7. Armas, Frederick de, ed. "The Critical Tower" in *The Prince in the Tower: Perceptions of La vida es sueño*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1993.

going through the trials of life, but he also draws lessons from these episodes. When Alcandre reveals to him the truth, that his son has become an actor (a profession of bad reputation his father did not approve in the first place, and the very reason why he left the house), the illusion becomes multiple since we, as viewers, no longer know what was part of the illusion, and what was not. Yet both Pridamant and spectator have gone through a simulation process. Pridamant is forced to contemplate the worst-case scenario (his son's death, simulated in his acting) in order to have the experience of the feeling and reconsider his actions. What has been taken for a lie suddenly becomes the truth because as viewers we were not looking through the right frame. All in all, this is the very principle of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*: the amplification of the cathartic experience and the understanding that truth and lie can only be determined through the very limits of perception, that is, the frame. Corneille took it to an even higher level since the spectator in the audience is projecting him/herself in the *persona* of Pridamant, the suffering father who comes out of these exercises transformed in a new man with a sense of justice and a restored faith.

In *Life is a dream*, written in Spain the same year (1635), playwright Pedro Calderón de la Barca introduced the emblematic character of Segismundo, a prince locked by his father, King Basilio, in a tower by fear of a Saturnian prophecy, or by fear of naked truth: not only have the stars predicted that Segismundo would commit patricide, but Basilio lives in a world of untruths that Segismundo can read through. The whole plot of *Life is a dream* questions the difference between reality and the simulation of reality, and introduces Calderón's idea of existence and the world as "great theatre." Segismundo does not know how to distinguish the binary

oppositions that normally determine the social condition of anyone placed in the world. The father/son conflict illustrates that the slipping of signifiers on the signified “truth” from one generation to the next. What can be considered an aberration at a certain age can suddenly become a norm or a certainty with the renewal of power(s). This is a theme that both *Life is a dream* (*La vida es sueño*) and *The theatre of illusions* (*L'illusion comique*) share in the same innovative endeavour. In addition to sharing the same first name Pierre/Pedro, i.e. the name of the disciple chosen by Jesus to become the first vicar of Rome, Corneille and Calderón also had very parallel histories with the Jesuits, and it is therefore no surprise to find these repercussions in their theatre. Unlike other former students of the Jesuits who would find in literature expressions and/or digressions against their former masters, Corneille and Calderón would remain faithful to their Ignatian education as they made progress toward establishing their reputation in the world of drama. Their position toward literature was both modern and somewhat ambiguous. They came from an educative system where they were taught that meaning was to be decomposed between the four levels of the literal, the figurative, the moral, and the anagogical. Within such a worldview in mind, they both sought to emphasize the artistic nature of the act of lying, since its displacements of meaning often invited the spectator to engage in a meditative process in which his/her senses would operate a re-ordering of a chaotic situation.

Moreover, the 16th century had seen in Spain the rise of the Catholic doctrine of *mentalis restrictio* (mental reservation) through the writings of Martín de Azpilcueta, a relative of Jesuit saint Francis-Xavier, contemporary of Ignatius of Loyola, and also member of the Basque nobility like Xavier and Loyola. According to this theologian often nicknamed

“Navarrus,” in any utterance the spoken language was directed to human beings while the thought was aiming toward God. Any discrepancy between these two levels would not be considered a sin, as long as the thought that God heard was sincere and truth. This theologian, and the Jesuit casuists in his footsteps, would therefore pardon the act of *spoken* lying by understanding the need for self-protection and honesty to God. Very fond of grammar and linguistics in the search for a universal meaning, the Jesuit education even permitted formulating utterances that had several levels of meaning, in which both truth and lies could be pronounced simultaneously: again, the lie was directed toward the human while the truth was heard by God. The lie would eventually cover the truth but would gradually vanish, or erase itself, to reveal an untouched and immaculate truth underneath the initially perceived utterance. In other words, the lie functions as the erasure, the indirect, the vector, that makes the truth appear more obvious than if uttered directly. The Jesuit theological worldview regarding this “truth under erasure” definitely finds an echo in the Derridean philosophical concept of writing “sous rature.”

Obviously not all Catholics, and definitely the whole body of Protestant theologians, were very displeased with this Jesuit justification of lies, even under its pseudo-theological labeling of *mentalis restrictio*. In France during the regency of Queen Anna, the anxieties and criticism around Spanish ethics, morals, and theology kept on escalating. The transition into an absolutist format of monarchy begun by Louis XIII was throwing the newly subdued aristocracy in a state of paranoia in which lies were necessary to express the truth. Spain and France were both claiming theological and political justifications in Rome, and the political war between the two crowns was supplemented by this theological battles. In

1657, Jansenist philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal condemned what he considers to be a Jesuit justification of *mentir* in his *Lettres Provinciales*. As Perez Zagorín comments in *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution, and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (1990): “The brilliant wit and outstanding literary qualities of Pascal’s satire achieved an enduring success in convincing the world of the laxity of Jesuit moral teaching” (155). From Pascal’s perspective, the Jesuit casuistry has allowed believers to master the art of disguising the truth, or rather, to utter the truth “under erasure.”

Dorante, the main character of Corneille’s *Menteur*, is an elaboration of the compulsive liar Matamore from *L’illusion comique*. In this earlier work, however, the figure of the liar was rather peripheral, whereas Dorante occupies the very center of the plot and functions as a catalyzer in the economy of the play. The claim that actors are professional liars has therefore been made, but Corneille now alludes to lawyers as the ultimate professional practitioners of lies in *Le menteur*. Dorante is a young provincial lawyer freshly arrived in Paris, and the contact with the city will immediately enhance his desire to use his education in law to the benefit of seductive strategies. Dorante’s initial ambition is “se faire un visage”⁸ (18), since no one in the capital has attributed his face (signifier) to his social status and role (signified). Anticipating the illusory nature of Parisians described by Montesquieu’s Persian travelers in *Les lettres persanes* (1721), Corneille abides by the Jesuit belief that the battles against Satan, sin or the Enemy, are more intense in the urban context than in the rural one. Even Cliton, Dorante’s faithful and wise servant, admits that social survival in Paris involves and requires mastery in the art of lying (20). Paris is a theatre of illusions

8. Translation: to make a face for himself.

while the provinces and the rural world are safer havens for honesty and truth. The binary opposition of truth vs. lies therefore corresponds to the dichotomy nature vs. culture in Corneille's Baroque worldview. Paris is also the space of social trial where aristocratic and bourgeois wits (*mens*) are competing for recognition. It is therefore impossible to survive in it with truth alone, since it is all façades, illusions and artifacts that are all an imitation of nature. In a conversation with his father G eronte, Dorante declares: "Paris semble   mes yeux un pays de Romans, / J'y croyais ce matin voir une  le Enchant e. . ." (51). This comparison with the imaginary world of the novels and the motif of the enchanted island underlines the omnipresent illusion of *nature as fiction* that the city has generally endorsed. Dorante sees Paris as the space that will validate his education in law in the 'honest provinces' (51). He then turns to his servant to point out that *mentir* is an industry, in other words, a skill derived from education for the purpose of a lucrative business career. The pre-capitalist world of Corneille is aware that imagination and wit will better serve the need of the "industry" and therefore quench the thirst for profit and growth of capital more efficiently than honesty and truth. Dorante is embracing all these temptations of the urban fiction, and as the play demonstrates, he ends up being tried and punished for it.

Ignatius of Loyola is very straightforward about trials and punishments in the *Spiritual Exercises*, where the exercitant is constantly reminded of the judgment of his soul already in process and the need to simulate the punishment to avoid temptation. Ultimately, Loyola creates a system in which believers are constantly questioning the potential of a given truth to be a lie, or the possibility for a lie to reflect a profound truth, a spiritual doubt immediately honored by

Pedro Calderón de la Barca: “¿Si sera esto lo fingido y lo otro lo verdadero? ¿O si habrá, al contrario, sido esto lo cierto, y lo otro lo incierto?” (82). Where Corneille develops the tone of comedy, Calderón prefers a much more dramatic, severe, and tragic approach to the necessity of understanding meaning through a differential between truth and lies. In *En la vida todo es verdad y todo mentira*, he places the emphasis on the null result of such differential, that is, the degree zero of meaning, the lack of signified, the emptiness of language: “Como cuando miro / que la púrpura real / el polvo la esmalta en Tiro / que no hay polvo que no / la desvanezca un suspiro, / siendo tan leve su pompa, / que no hay humano sentido / que ser mentira o verdad / pueda afirmar (. . .)” (83). When Heraclio’s sentence is pronounced, the audience finds itself in the same cathartic experience of judgment than the one designed by Ignatius of Loyola in his *Exercises*: meaning has vanished like Heraclio’s breath (*suspiro*), and we are faced with the differential of truth and lies, once again interchangeable.

In *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), Baudrillard sees “a direct relation between the Jesuits’ mental obedience (*perinde ac cadaver*) and the demiurgic ambition to exorcise the natural substance of things in order to replace it with a synthetic substance” (52). The “Jesuit moment” is for Baudrillard the shifting of humanity in the world of capitalism, consumerism, simulacra and hyper-reality. Whether we find this approach a bit outdated nowadays, the integration of theological reflections around the dis-simulation of truth, or the simulation of the *mentir*, is not only a Jesuit fascination by nature, it is also a declaration of modernity in the theatre of Corneille and Calderón, and, to a certain extent, almost a post-modern statement. From the French words *songe*

(dream) to *mensonge* (lie), there is more than a coincidental rhyme, there is another differential, a prefix that evokes intelligence, and, above all, a Baroque fascination for the beauty of covering the truth.

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