

Micromegas

by
Voltaire

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Micromegas Pdf

By

Voltaire



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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Micromégas

Traduction d'un conte de Voltaire

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs í frönsku fræði

Jasmina Milos

Septembre 2011

Háskóli Íslands
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Abstract

The subject of this research is the translation of a work of Voltaire, *Micromegas*, from French into English. It is a philosophical tale, a critique of society from the perspective of Voltaire, with autobiographical elements.

This work is so important for the literature and for society in general, because this is a philosophical view of society and it proposes changes.

Micromegas has been translated several times, but each translation has brought something new and presented the work in a unique way.

The first part of the research consists of a presentation about the author, his works and the problems of translation. The second part presents the translation.

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1. Introduction

Le désir de l'homme pour la recherche et le savoir, l'enrichissement de la culture et de l'art n'a pas toujours été accompagné par le soutien et l'approbation de l'Église et les différents régimes politiques. En effet la science a souvent été en conflit avec l'Église et ceux qui ont critiqué la société ont été condamnés. La lutte pour les droits de l'homme et la liberté de pensée est aussi présente aujourd'hui et à de nombreux endroits de notre planète les gens ne connaissent pas la liberté d'expression et parfois les droits de l'homme.

Voltaire et les idées dont il parle dans ses œuvres, représentent la période dans laquelle il vivait, le XVIIIe siècle, le siècle des lumières et de la Révolution française. Il est intéressant de voir comment les philosophes et les écrivains de cette époque ont participé à la lutte pour un monde meilleur. Aujourd'hui nous lisons les œuvres de Voltaire et nous reconnaissons en lui un grand classique. Nous avons décidé de traduire son conte philosophique *Micromégas* et de présenter brièvement aux lecteurs cette période que Voltaire décrirait sans doute mieux que nous.

2. Voltaire et *Micromégas*

2.1. La vie de Voltaire

Voltaire est né comme François Marie Arouet le 21 novembre 1694 dans une famille bourgeoise. Il est un écrivain et un philosophe français, souvent considéré comme le symbole des Lumières. Il a marqué le XVIII^e siècle comme un intellectuel engagé, concernant les domaines de la justice, la vérité, la liberté de pensée et surtout contre le fanatisme religieux, bien qu'il ait refusé l'athéisme et reconnu le Dieu comme le seul Créateur.

Il était jeune quand il a commencé à s'intéresser à la littérature. Conduit par sa passion pour le théâtre et son intérêt pour l'histoire, qu'il a reçus de ses maîtres au collège des Jésuites, il a écrit un grand nombre de pièces de théâtre.

Souvent présent dans les cercles aristocratiques et respecté par certains princes il a commencé à écrire des ouvrages historiques et il prit la liberté de créer des vers satiriques sur les régents. Pour son poème satirique sur le régent Philippe d'Orléans, il a été enfermé à la Bastille en 1717, et en 1726 il a été emprisonné et puis exilé à cause de la querelle avec le chevalier de Rohan. Il est parti pour l'Angleterre, où le libéralisme a laissé sur lui une influence profonde. À son retour il a commencé à écrire des œuvres philosophiques et historiques.

Il a, par la suite, décidé de s'installer à Cirey, en Champagne, entre 1734 et 1744. Pendant cette période, il s'est consacré à l'étude de sciences, des lettres et des religions. En 1745 il est devenu historiographe de Louis XV, mais ayant perdu la faveur du Roi il est parti pour la Prusse, invité par le prince, un homme pour qui la philosophie n'était qu'un amusement. En 1753 Voltaire a quitté Berlin. Il s'est réfugié à Genève où il s'est engagé dans l'entreprise de l'Encyclopédie. Il a été attaqué pour son travail et ses œuvres (Séguin, 1992, p. 53).

En 1758 il a acheté le domaine de Ferney où il a vécu jusqu'à la fin de sa vie. Il s'est toujours révolté contre l'intolérance et l'injustice. Il a enrichi jusqu'à ses dernières années, son œuvre littéraire et philosophique. Voltaire est revenu à Paris en 1778, l'année de sa mort. Il a assisté au succès de sa tragédie *Irène* et il a connu encore un triomphe.

2.2. Les œuvres

Au cours de son grand travail littéraire, Voltaire a créé et triomphé dans plusieurs genres littéraires. Le premier était le théâtre. Il a écrit plusieurs pièces de théâtre, comédies mais surtout des tragédies ; nombreuses ont été jouées par la Comédie-Française et fait partie du répertoire théâtral pendant presque deux siècles. Voltaire était souvent acteur lui-même et a aussi pris le rôle de metteur en scène. Il a connu un grand succès quand il était très jeune, en 1718, avec la tragédie *Œdipe* et en 1732 avec une autre tragédie, *Zaïre* (1732). Il a triomphé aussi dans le genre de l'épopée avec *La Henriade* (1728), grâce à laquelle il a devenu un écrivain reconnu. Pour la première fois il a exprimé son horreur du fanatisme religieux. Voltaire a aussi composé plusieurs œuvres en vers parmi lesquelles nous pouvons mentionner le discours en vers *Le Mondain* (1736).

Dans ses ouvrages d'histoire, Voltaire a développé ses jugements personnels. Il a montré le rôle des hommes importants, mais il a aussi écrit de ce qui est nouveau et de la vie quotidienne des gens. Il voulait montrer et indiquer les violences et les erreurs du passé. Utilisant l'histoire il a contribué au progrès de l'humanité. Son but, pour les lecteurs, était de tirer des leçons du passé.

Voltaire a montré son intérêt pour l'histoire dans ses œuvres *Histoire de Charles XII* (1731), *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* (1751), *Essai sur les mœurs* (1756) et il a complété ses œuvres historiques avec *La Philosophie de l'histoire* (1765).

Les œuvres philosophiques ont toujours eu une importance dans la littérature, contrairement aux autres œuvres de Voltaires. *Les Lettres philosophiques* (1734) représentent l'ensemble des impressions que Voltaire a ramenées d'Angleterre et utilisées dans la lutte pour la liberté contre l'intolérance, l'obscurantisme et le pouvoir absolu. Voltaire les a écrites pour donner aux lecteurs une expérience apparemment naïve sur la religion, la politique, l'économie, la science, la philosophie et la littérature avec humour et ironie, mais en même temps il a proposé une nouvelle idée du bonheur ; grâce à cet ouvrage est devenu un texte majeur de la philosophie des Lumières (Charpentier, Tercero, 1995, p. 4).

Aujourd'hui la plupart des œuvres de Voltaire sont tombées dans l'oubli sauf les contes philosophiques, avec lesquels il a inventé une nouvelle forme littéraire. Il a présenté ces œuvres comme des divertissements frivoles et aujourd'hui ils sont considérés comme des chefs-d'œuvre. Il les a écrits entre 1745 et 1760, et les plus connus sont *Zadig ou la Destinée* (1748), *Micromégas* (1752), *Candide ou l'Optimisme* (1759) et *L'Ingénu* (1767).

2.3. Les idées de Voltaire

Toute sa vie Voltaire a été dans une constante lutte contre le fanatisme religieux et à ce combat il a donné le nom « l'infâme ». Il a toujours combattu les religions qui représentaient pour lui une façon de manipuler le peuple et imposer des dogmes et des rites. Il s'est battu pour la tolérance et la liberté dans ce domaine. Cependant, Voltaire a toujours refusé l'athéisme ; opposé à l'idée d'une religion organisée, il a admis l'existence d'un Dieu Créateur et il prônait le déisme, qui implique une relation directe avec le Dieu.

Une question importante pour Voltaire était celle du mal. Il parle dans ses œuvres de deux types de mal. Le premier cas est celui dont les hommes ont été responsables, comme des guerres, des persécutions, des tortures. Le second cas est celui qui n'a pas de cause explicable, comme le tremblement de terre de Lisbonne dans *Candide*. Voltaire a dit qu'une harmonie sur la terre est nécessaire. Il a essayé d'expliquer avec l'optimisme l'idée que le mal est seulement un élément. Puis il a changé cette vision du monde et proposé une vision douloureuse, sans être désespérée. Il croyait que le progrès était possible par l'affirmation de la tolérance, la justice et la raison ; pour lui cela représentait le seul moyen de combattre le mal (Séguin, 1992, p. 60).

2.4. Micromégas

Micromégas a été rédigé en 1739 et publié en 1752, pendant que Voltaire était en Prusse. Ce conte philosophique est composé de sept courts chapitres. Il comporte un récit qui se déroule dans l'univers. Voltaire y décrit un voyage imaginaire, qui s'appuie sur un fait divers réel (l'expédition maritime de savants français en 1737), pour montrer le savoir moderne et pour critiquer l'ordre établi. Pendant ce « petit voyage », il révèle la relativité des mesures, avec une relation de proportions et de disproportions, montrant en même temps des connaissances et des jugements, dans le cosmos. Il

commence son ouvrage comme un conte « [...] il y avait un jeune homme [...] », raconté par un narrateur (Dumeste, 1995, p. 12).

Comme Voltaire pendant son exil, Micromégas est « un jeune homme de beaucoup d'esprit » qui a quitté sa planète Sirius et pendant son voyage dans l'univers, il réussit à trouver la réponse à la question sur la relativité des différentes proportions par rapport à la compréhension des gens. Conduit par la curiosité, il commence un voyage éducatif, « de globe en globe [...] comme un oiseau voltige de branche en branche », utilisant un rayon de soleil, la queue d'une comète ou aurore boréale, qui va augmenter son savoir (Debailly, 2001, p. 79).

Le narrateur raconte le « petit voyage philosophique » de Micromégas (Voltaire, Deloffre, 1979, p. 24), d'un géant Sirien, qui au début de son voyage visite la planète Saturne, où il rencontre un nain – en comparaison avec lui – qui est le Secrétaire de l'Académie de Saturne. Tous les deux commencent un voyage scientifique, qui nous présente une connaissance de la réalité. Micromégas est un mathématicien, un philosophe et un excellent observateur de l'espèce humaine ; il a un esprit ouvert et tolérant et il est très généreux. Son savoir, son objectivité et son expérience lui permettent d'examiner cette « petit race », ces « petites mites », ces « animalcules », ces hommes dans lesquels « il découvre de si étonnants contrastes ». Comme il vient de Sirius, la plus brillante des étoiles, il donne le point de vue critique d'un observateur distant :

Il faut avouer, dit Micromégas, que la nature est bien variée. – Oui, dit le Saturnien, la nature est comme un parterre dont les fleurs... – Ah ! dit l'autre, laissez là votre parterre. [...] Eh non ! dit le voyageur, encore une fois la nature est comme la nature. Pourquoi lui chercher des comparaisons ? – Pour vous plaire, répondit le secrétaire. – Je ne veux point qu'on me plaise, répondit le voyageur, je veux qu'on m'instruise ; commencez d'abord par me dire combien les hommes de votre globe ont de sens. (*Micromégas*, p. 22)

Micromégas veut faire une comparaison entre sa planète et Saturne, pour accueillir un nouveau savoir et une conclusion sur la relativité des choses. Le Saturnien est prisonnier

de préjugés et en arrivant à la Terre il comprend son ignorance et change sa méthode de réflexion. La société mise en scène par Voltaire dans ce conte ressemble beaucoup à celle de la France du XVIIIe siècle. Il y a un collège de Jésuites et une cour royale sur la planète de Micromégas. Saturne a une académie des sciences (Dumeste, 1995, p. 21).

Voltaire montre un jugement mature et une imagination vive. Il parle d'exile, de la transgression d'interdit, du rôle des femmes, de l'absurdité de la guerre et du fanatisme, mais toujours avec ironie et bonheur (Charpentier, Tercero, 1995, p. 12).

3. L'étude de la traduction

3.1. Traduire

Pour traduire une œuvre philosophique de Voltaire, il est nécessaire d'avoir des renseignements sur l'auteur et connaître les courants intellectuels de l'époque de la rédaction de l'œuvre. Les notes qui accompagnent le texte, dans une bonne édition, permettent aussi de mieux le comprendre. Tous ces éléments sont importants pour la traduction, et ils sont nécessaires pour présenter au lecteur l'atmosphère dans laquelle se déroule l'action, le type de personnages, le lieu, les situations.

Pour le traducteur transmettre un texte de la « langue source » à la « langue cible » est un processus qui implique une recherche complexe et sérieuse. Il est important de décider le style de la traduction et la fidélité vis-à-vis de l'original. Le plus important reste la pensée de l'auteur dans une œuvre philosophique qui est à la fois éducative et porteuse d'un message, ce qui à l'époque de Voltaire était très important pour le développement de la liberté de pensée, contre le fanatisme religieux et pour la justice. Nous avons essayé de transmettre l'ouvrage de la langue française à la langue anglaise et de présenter aux lecteurs la pensée et les idées de Voltaire, gardant le plus possible son style, avec le moins possible de changement syntaxique. Voltaire est un écrivain unique et il mérite d'être traduit en respectant ses idées et son message sur l'humanité et la liberté.

Pour traduire cette œuvre nous avons lu quelques traductions, parmi lesquelles la traduction de Roger Pearson. Nous estimons que sa traduction est trop littéraire, ce que nous voulons éviter ici. Nous avons essayé de garder le sens, et ne pas utiliser plusieurs mots pour traduire une seule :

“Micromegas, who was a much better observer than his dwarf, saw clearly that the atoms were communicating, and indicated this to his companion, who, ashamed of being mistaken about them reproducing, did not want to believe that such a species was capable of this.” (Voltaire, trad. par R. Pearson, 1990, p. 114)

“Micromegas, a much better observer than his dwarf, saw clearly that the atoms were talking to each other; and he pointed this out to his companion, who, being ashamed at

this mistake on the subject of generation, refused to believe that species like this could communicate ideas to each other.” (*Micromégas*, p. 36)

Nous avons évité :

- 1) De répéter des parties de phrases, comme dans la traduction de Roger Pearson (to each other)
- 2) les paraphrases (par exemple: did not want to believe, au lieu de refuse)
- 3) « Generation » n’est pas une traduction appropriée à notre avis et nous avons décidé de traduire le mot français *génération* par « reproduction », en nous appuyant sur la définition du CNRTL : génération - *En partic.* Reproduction. ([http :www.cnrtl.fr/definition/génération](http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/génération))

3.2. Le titre

Le titre du texte, *Micromégas*, est un nom de fantaisie composé de deux éléments, *micro* (petit) et *megas* (grand), qui sont d’origine grecque. Le sens du titre nous invite à penser au sujet de la relativité des proportions présent ici dans la relation entre le macrocosmique et le microscopique. Le titre est ainsi étroitement lié au sujet de l’œuvre. Garder le titre original nous semble donc nécessaire et en même temps justifiable par le fait qu’en anglais on peut facilement deviner son sens.

3.3. Le style et le registre de langue

Le style dans le conte philosophique *Micromégas* est simple et permet aux lecteurs de lire et comprendre facilement le texte. Voltaire a écrit ses œuvres dans un ton personnel qui a un remarquable pouvoir de conviction. La syntaxe est simple, les phrases ne sont pas longues. Le vocabulaire est concret et imagé. Les textes sont écrits avec une concision de l’ensemble où rien n’est inutile.

Le registre de langue de *Micromégas* est soutenu. Le vocabulaire est riche et comporte des mots philosophiques. Voltaire utilise des titres comme « monsieur » ou « Excellence » :

« Je rapporterai ici, pour la satisfaction des lecteurs, une conversation singulière que *Micromégas* eut un jour avec monsieur le secrétaire. » (*Micromégas*, p. 21)

« Après que son Excellence se faut couchée, [...] » (*Micromégas*, p. 22)

Micromégas et le secrétaire utilisent toujours le vouvoiement.

« Pour vous plaire », répondit le secrétaire. (*Micromégas*, p.22)

Le vouvoiement est présent dans le texte entier, dans les dialogues. Parce que cette forme n'existe pas en anglais, on peut la rendre seulement par le contexte. Parce que le style, comme nous avons déjà mentionné, est soutenu, nous n'avons pas eu besoin de changer des phrases ou d'ajouter des mots pour montrer l'importance du vouvoiement dans le texte original.

3.4. La syntaxe et la ponctuation

La langue anglaise ne diffère pas autant de la langue française que l'islandais ou le serbe. Cela dit il est nécessaire pour le traducteur de respecter les règles concernant la syntaxe et la ponctuation de la langue cible.

La langue française supporte des phrases longues, avec plusieurs propositions, ce qui fait appel à l'utilisation de virgules et du point-virgule, pour les séparer. Nous avons respecté la longueur des phrases, dans plusieurs cas, pour ne pas quitter le style de l'écrivain et de le rapprocher le plus possible des lecteurs, mais dans certains cas nous avons coupé les phrases et changé la ponctuation.

1) « Dans une de ces planètes qui tournent autour de l'étoile nommée Sirius, il y avait un jeune homme de beaucoup d'esprit, que j'ai eu l'honneur de connaître dans le dernier voyage qu'il fit sur notre petite fourmilière ; il s'appelait Micromégas, nom qui convient fort à tous les grands. »

(*Micromégas*, p.19)

“On one of the planets which orbit the star named Sirius, lived a thoughtful young man, whom I had the honor of meeting on his last journey to our little anthill. He was called Micromegas, a name most suitable for any great man.” (*Micromegas*, p. 22)

Dans cette phrase nous avons choisi de faire une coupure syntaxique et de mettre un point à la place du point-virgule.

2) « Il avait huit lieues de haut : j’entends, par huit lieues, vingt-quatre mille pas géométriques de cinq pieds chacun. » (*Micromégas*, p. 19)

“He was eight leagues tall, and by eight leagues, I mean twenty four thousand geometrical paces of five feet each.” (*Micromegas*, p. 22)

Dans ce deuxième cas nous gardons la phrase mais à la place du point-virgule nous avons décidé de mettre une virgule. Chez Voltaire, les deux points présentent la place dans la phrase où il veut mettre un accent sur « j’entends », parce que ce sont des mesures qui ne sont pas réelles pour les hommes.

3) [...] -Ah ! dit l’autre, laissez là votre parterre. – Elle est, reprit le secrétaire, comme une assemblée de blondes et de brunes dont les parures... - Et qu’ai-je affaire de vos brunes ? dit l’autre. [...](*Micromégas*, p.22)

“Ugh!” said the other, “enough with your flower beds.”

The secretary continued. “Nature is like an assembly of blondes and brunettes whose adornment...”

“What am I supposed to do with your brunettes?” said the other. (*Micromegas*, p.25)

En français, dans le discours direct et indirect, la ponctuation diffère de celle utilisée en anglais. Dans les phrases de Voltaire les guillemets ne sont pas utilisés pour séparer le discours direct et indirect. « [...] ! dit l’autre, [...] », fait la partie de la phrase qui est séparée seulement par des virgules. Le point d’exclamation, la plupart du temps signifie la fin de la phrase, donc ici la phrase ne finit pas là, elle continue, après « dit l’autre », avec une seconde proposition. Les tirets sont utilisés pour séparer le discours d’un personnage de celui d’un autre.

3.5. Le vocabulaire

Le vocabulaire que Voltaire utilise est simple mais en même temps le texte comporte un certain nombre de synonymes. Avec ces mots il traduit son attitude envers les gens, l’importance de leur existence, leurs savoirs et leur ignorance, leur rôle dans la société. Il se moque de la société où il vit.

a) Les mots philosophiques

Voltaire a utilisé les termes comme « atomes », « insectes », « insectes », « mites », « animalcules » et « animales » pour les gens, et pour la terre, « tas de boue » ou « taupinière ». Ce sont des mots connexes.

Nous avons consulté les explications de l'Académie de Rouen (<http://lettres.ac-rouen.fr/voltaire/micromega/txt/integr.htm>) et du CNRTL (<http://www.cnrtl.fr>) pour mieux comprendre le sens de ces termes. Nous pensons que Voltaire voulait mettre en évidence des proportions entre les grands et les petits. Il a fait la comparaison entre les atomes, les habitants de la Terre, les hommes et le géant ou l'animal de Sirius :

1) « [...] ce que le Sirien lui-même était pour ces animaux si vastes dont il parlait, et ce que ces grands animaux sont pour d'autres substances devant lesquelles ils ne paraissent que comme des atomes. » (*Micromégas*, p. 33)

« **animal** : tout au long de l'œuvre, Voltaire utilise deux sens différents de ce mot : au sens large, un animal, c'est un être vivant, organisé, élémentaire ou complexe, doué de sensibilité et de mobilité ; selon cette première définition, l'homme est un animal. Mais l'animal, c'est aussi un être animé privé de raison, et dans ce deuxième sens, "animal" s'oppose à "homme". Le jeu ironique sur ce double sens laisse entendre que bien souvent, l'être humain se comporte de façon déraisonnable [4.3, 5.1(4), 6.5, 6.6(3), 7.2(4), 7.6 7.9]. *Animal raisonnable, supérieur... L'homme* » (<http://lettres.ac-rouen.fr/voltaire/micromega/notes/animal43.htm>)

« L'homme n'est ni une *âme*, ni un **animal**. L'homme est un **animal** transformé par la raison et uni à l'humanité. P. Leroux, *De l'Humanité*, t. 1, 1840, p. 116 (<http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/animal>)

« **atome** : (au sens ancien) : particule infiniment petite. Selon Démocrite, un Grec de l'antiquité, philosophe-physicien, la matière était composée d'éléments premiers insécables invisibles à l'œil nu, les a-tomes, briques élémentaires du réel. Ici, par métaphore, les hommes. » (<http://lettres.ac-rouen.fr/voltaire/micromegas/notes/atome21xx.htm>)

« **atom** – Particule infiniment petite, insécable et homogène, constituant, avec d'autres éléments de même nature, la matière : (<http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/atome>)

2) « Ils entendaient des mites parler d'assez bon sens : ce jeu de la nature leur paraissait inexplicable. » (*Micromégas*, p.31)

« **mite** -Petit papillon blanchâtre du groupe des teignes dont la larve s'attaque aux étoffes de laine et aux fourrures. » (<http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/mite>)

« **mite** : petit insecte ailé dont les larves dévorent la laine. Voltaire a choisi le terme pour ses connotations péjoratives et en considération de la taille et de la fragilité de l'animal [6.1(2), 7.5, 7.9]. » (<http://lettres.ac-rouen.fr/voltaire/micromegas/notes/mite61xx.htm>)

3) « Ce n'était donc pas la peine, répondit l'animal de huit lieues, que ton âme fût si savante dans le ventre de ta mère, pour être si ignorante quand tu aurais de la barbe au menton. » (*Micromégas*, p. 35)

4) « La voix la plus faible entrait dans les fibres circulaires de l'ongle; de sorte que, grâce à son industrie, le philosophe de là-haut entendit parfaitement le bourdonnement de nos insectes de là-bas. » (*Micromégas*, p.31)

5) « Mais il y avait là, par malheur, un petit animalcule en bonnet carré qui coupa la parole à tous les animalcules philosophes ; [...] » (*Micromégas*, p.36)

« **animalcul** -Animal très petit, microscopique » (<http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/animalcul>)

« **animalcule** : animal microscopique. Le terme est A rapprocher des emplois décalés du mot « animal » pour désigner l'homme dans le conte. » (<http://lettres.ac-rouen.fr/voltaire/micromegas/notes/animalcule79.htm>)

Dans la conte philosophique *Micromégas*, le verbe « entendre » a différents significations que nous allons expliquer avec quelques exemples :

1) « [...] il craignait que sa voix de tonnerre, et surtout celle de Micromégas, n'assourdît les mites sans en être entendue. » (*Micromégas*, p.31)

Dans ce premier cas nous allons nous le comprenons comme percevoir par l'oreille, comme dans le première cas de l'explication de l'Académie de Rouen :

entendre : selon les cas, 1) percevoir par l'ouïe, ou 2) saisir par l'esprit, comprendre. Voltaire joue souvent à plaisir de la polysémie, dans un contexte où les deux posent également des problèmes aux interlocuteurs [1.1, 6.1(6), 6.3, 7.4(2), 7.5(2), 7.6].

I.– Domaine de l'*audition*

A.– [Le suj. a une attitude passive, son oreille est frappée par un son ou un bruit perceptible dans son aspect purement physique ou dont on ne retient que l'aspect physique] Percevoir par l'oreille.

(<http://lettres.ac-rouen.fr/voltaire/micromegas/notes/entendrex.htm>)

Mais le plus souvent pour Voltaire le verbe « entendre » signifie qu'il implique ou comprend quelque chose comme ici :

2) « Il avait huit lieues de haut: j'entends, par huit lieues, vingt-quatre mille pas géométriques de cinq pieds chacun. » (*Micromégas*, p. 19)

3) « [...] nous sommes d'accord sur deux ou trois points que nous entendons et nous disputons sur deux ou trois mille que nous n'entendons pas. » (*Micromégas*, p. 34)

4) « Je n'entends pas trop bien le grec, dit le géant. » (*Micromégas*, p. 35)

b) Les noms propres

Il n'y a pas de règle absolue quand nous traduisons les noms des personnes historiques. Les pronoms Derham, Leuwenhoek, Hartsoeker, Swammerdam, Réaumur, Descartes, Malebranche, Leibnitz, Locke, Sultan restent identiques dans la traduction. Mais il y a des pronoms qui ont des traductions reconnus dans les différentes langues. Il convient en effet d'adapter l'orthographe utilisée dans la langue cible. « Aristote » en anglais prend la forme « Aristotle » et Homère devient Homer.

Nous avons traduit les noms des étoiles et des constellations, comme la Canicule et les Gémeaux.

« Combien comptez-vous, dit-il, de l'étoile de la Canicule à la grande étoile des Gémeaux ? »

(*Micromégas*, p. 35)

“How far do you think it is” said the Saturnian, “from the Dog Star to the great star of the Gemini?”

(*Micromegas*, p. 34)

Les noms des personnages de fiction sont rarement traduits. Mais nous pouvons essayer de rendre certains noms si l’aspect farfelu l’emporte sur celui de couleur locale (Hiernard, 3003, p. 153).

Dans notre traduction du conte philosophique on n’a pas traduit les noms des personnages de fiction, et *Micromégas* garde sa forme, sans l’accent aigu.

c) Les verbes

Le type de texte est très important pour la traduction, si c’est une narration, description ou un dialogue. Dans le texte de *Micromégas* le récit du narrateur à la première personne du singulier est toujours présent ; mais il y a plus de dialogues, ce qui pose un autre problème de traduction, par rapport à la ponctuation et l’utilisation des temps en fonction du contexte.

1) “Ugh!” said the other, “enough with your flower beds.”

« Ah ! dit l’autre, laissez là votre parterre. »

2) The secretary continued. “Nature is like an assembly of blondes and brunettes whose adornment...”

Elle est, reprit le secrétaire, comme une assemblée de blondes et de brunes, dont les parures...

3) “What am I supposed to do with your brunettes?” said the other.

Eh ! Qu’ai-je à faire de vos brunes ? dit l’autre.

Il faut démarquer les citations directes avec des guillemets, et aussi convient-il de changer le temps des citations indirectes en anglais où il faut utiliser le passé.

1) “...would immediately take up their pens...”

« [...]... prendront sur-le-champ la plume [...] »

2) “... they would find, I say,...”

« [...]...ils trouveront, dis-je [...] »

Dans ces deux cas Voltaire a utilisé le futur simple et la traduction en anglais doit se faire avec “would”. “Would” peut exprimer un mode conditionnel, la politesse, mais dans ce cas il exprime le futur dans le passé.

4. Conclusion

Malgré les siècles révolus, Voltaire reste unique, comme un écrivain, un philosophe, avec ses idées et sa lutte qui a duré toute sa vie : la lutte pour la justice, la liberté de pensée et les droits des hommes. Ces problèmes sont toujours présents dans notre société contemporaine, de manière variable suivant le pays ou la culture. Par conséquent, il est toujours intéressant de lire Voltaire et faire la connaissance de son point de vue sur le monde, son avis quant aux injustices de la société, les différences sociales au XVIII^e siècle, ainsi que ses idées sur la façon dont une société peut devenir avancée et libre. Ses œuvres sont traduites en plusieurs langues et nous avons donc décidé de traduire et de vous présenter son conte philosophique *Micromégas*. Le style de Voltaire, son humeur et la manière dont il a écrit ses œuvres rendent la lecture de ses contes à la fois intéressante et agréable.

5. La traduction

MICROMEGAS

Philosophical Story

CHAPTER I

VOYAGE OF AN INHABITANT OF THE STAR SIRIUS TO THE PLANET SATURN

On one of the planets which orbit the star named Sirius, lived a thoughtful young man, whom I had the honor of meeting on his last journey to our little anthill. He was called Micromegas, a name most suitable for any great man. He was eight leagues tall, and by eight leagues, I mean twenty four thousand geometrical paces of five feet each.

Some geometers - always of use to the public - would immediately take up their pens, and find that since Mr. Micromegas, inhabitant of the country of Sirius, is twenty four thousand paces tall from head to toe, which is equivalent to a hundred and twenty thousand feet, and since we, the citizens of the earth, are hardly five feet tall, and our sphere is nine thousand leagues around, they would find, I say, that it is absolutely necessary that the sphere that produced him, must be precisely twenty one million six hundred thousand times greater in circumference than our Earth. Nothing in nature is simpler or more ordinary. The domains of some sovereign state of Germany or Italy, which can be traversed in a half hour, compared to the empires of Turkey, greater Moscow, or China, are nothing but poor reflections of the prodigious differences that nature established amongst all beings.

His Excellency's height being as large as has been stated, all our sculptors and all our painters would agree without a doubt that his belt would be fifty thousand feet around, which would give him excellent proportions.

As for his mind, it is one of the most cultivated that we have. He knows many things, and some of them he invented on his own. He was not even two hundred and fifty years

old when he studied, as is customary, at the Jesuit colleges of his planet, where he managed to deduce through willpower more than fifty of Euclid's propositions; which is eighteen more than Blaise Pascal, who, after having figured out thirty-two while playing around, according to his sister's account, later became a fairly mediocre geometer and a very bad metaphysician. Towards the age of four hundred and fifty, at the end of his infancy, he dissected many small insects, no more than a hundred feet in length, which would evade ordinary microscopes. He wrote a very interesting book about this, which got him into some trouble. The mufti of his country, an extremely ignorant pedant found some suspicious, disagreeable, rash and heretical propositions in the book, smelled heresy, and pursued it vigorously; it revolved around finding out whether the substantial form of the fleas of Sirius were of the same nature as the form of the snails. Micromegas gave a thoughtful defense; he brought some women to testify for him; the trial lasted two hundred and twenty years. Finally the mufti had the book condemned by a jury who had not read it, and ordered the author not to appear in court for eight hundred years.

He was marginally saddened by being banished from a court that consisted of nothing but pedantry and pettiness. He wrote a pleasant song against the mufti, who paid no attention to it; and set out to travel from planet to planet in order to develop his heart and mind, as the saying goes. Those that travel only by stage coach or sedan will probably be surprised by the equipment of this vehicle; for we, on our little pile of mud, cannot conceive of anything beyond our way of life. Our traveler had brilliant knowledge of the laws of gravity and all other attractive and repulsive forces. He used them so well that, whether with the help of a ray of sunlight or by the convenience of some comet, he jumped with his crew, from globe to globe like a bird fluttering from branch to branch. He quickly traversed the Milky Way, and I am obliged to confess that he never saw, throughout the stars of which it consists, the beautiful empyrean heaven that the reverend vicar Derham boasts of having seen at the other end of his telescope. I do not claim that Mr. Derham was mistaken in what he saw, God forbid! But Micromegas was on site, which makes him a reliable witness, and I do not want to contradict anyone. After having toured around, Micromegas arrived at the planet Saturn. Accustomed as he was to seeing new things, he could not, upon seeing the smallness of the planet and its inhabitants, stop himself from smiling with the superiority that sometimes escapes the wisest of us. After all Saturn is barely nine times bigger than

Earth, and the citizens of that country are dwarfs, no more than a thousand fathoms tall, or something like that. He and his men made fun of them at first, like an Italian musician laughing at the music of Lully when he comes to France. But, as the Sirian was clever, he understood very quickly that a sapient being is not necessarily ridiculous just because he is only six thousand feet tall. He got to know the Saturnians after their shock wore off. He built a strong friendship with the secretary of the academy of Saturn, an intelligent man who had not invented anything, to tell the truth, but who understood the inventions of others very well, and who wrote some short verses and did some long calculations. I will recount here, for the satisfaction of the reader, a singular conversation that Micromegas had with the secretary one day.

CHAPTER II

CONVERSATION BETWEEN an INHABITANT OF SIRIUS AND ONE OF SATURN

After his Excellency laid himself down to rest, the secretary approached his face, Micromegas said :

“You have to admit,” he said, “that nature is extremely varied.”

“Yes,” said the Saturnian, “nature is like a bed of flowers, in which flowers...”

“Ugh!” said the other, “enough with your flower beds.”

The secretary continued. “Nature is like an assembly of blondes and brunettes whose adornment...”

“What am I supposed to do with your brunettes?” said the other.

“Then it is like a gallery of paintings whose features...”

“Most definitely not!” said the voyager. “I repeat that nature is like nature. Why bother comparing?”

“To please you,” replied the secretary.

“I do not wish to be pleased,” answered the traveler. “I want to be taught. You can start by telling me how many senses the people of your planet have.”

“We have seventy two,” said the secretary, “and we always complain about how few that is. Our imagination exceeds our needs. We find that with our seventy-two senses, our ring, and our five moons, we are too limited; and in spite of our curiosity and the rather large number of passions that stem from our seventy two senses, we still have plenty of time to bore ourselves.”

“I can believe that,” said Micromegas, “for, on our planet we have almost a thousand senses; and yet we still have a kind of vague desire, a sort of dread, which constantly reminds us of how insignificant we are and that there are much more perfect beings. I have traveled a bit; and I have seen mortals who are considerably inferior to us, and some far superior. But I have not seen any who did not have more desires than they had real needs, and more needs than satisfaction. Maybe one day, I will find a country which lacks nothing; but so far no one has given me any indication of a place like that.”

The Saturnian and the Sirian proceeded to wear themselves out, engaged in exhaustive conjecture; but after a lot of ingenious and speculative reasoning, it was necessary to return to the facts.

“How long do you live?” said the Sirian.

“Oh! For a very short time,” replied the small Saturnian.

“It is the same with us,” the Sirian replied. “We always complain about how short life is. It should be considered a universal law of nature.”

“Alas! We only live five hundred great revolutions around the sun,” said the Saturnian. (This is equivalent to about fifteen thousand years, by Earth standards.) “It is obvious that death comes for us almost at the moment of birth; our existence is a point, our lifespan a moment, our planet an atom. Unfortunately we hardly begin to educate ourselves, at which point death arrives, before we get any experience. As for me, I do not dare make any plans. I feel like a drop of water in an immense ocean. I am ashamed, especially in front of you, of how ridiculously I must look in this world.”

Micromegas continued: “If you were not a philosopher, I wouldn’t dare to upset you by telling you that our lifespan is seven hundred times longer than yours; but you know very well that when the time comes to return your body to the elements, and reanimate nature in another form, which we call death; when the moment of metamorphosis comes, to have lived an eternity or to have lived a day is precisely the same thing. I have been to countries where they live a thousand times longer than we do, and I realized that

they also die. But everywhere there are sensible people, who know their role and appreciate the Creator of nature. He has cast across this universe a profusion of varieties with an impressive uniformity. For example, all sapient beings are different, but all resemble one another at a fundamental level in the gifts of thought and desire. Matter extends everywhere, but on each planet it has different properties. How many properties have you found in your matter?"

"If you mean those properties," said the Saturnian, "without which we believe that the planet could not exist as it is, we count three hundred of them, such as: extension, impenetrability, mobility, gravity, divisibility, and the rest."

"Apparently," replied the voyager, "this small number suffices the views which the Creator had in store for your dwelling. I admire his wisdom in everything; I have seen differences everywhere, but also harmony. Your planet is small; so are the inhabitants. You have few sensations; your matter has few properties; this is all the work of Providence. What color is your sun when examined carefully?"

"A very yellowish white," said the Saturnian. "And when we break down one of its rays, we find that it contains seven colors."

"Our sun is pale shade of red," said the Sirian, "and we have thirty-nine primary colors. There is not a single sun, among those that I have approached, which resembles another, just as there is not a single one among you that is identical to the others."

After numerous questions of this nature, he learned how many essentially different substances were on Saturn. He learned that there were only about thirty, like God, space, matter, the beings that sense, the beings that sense and think, the thinking beings that have no volume; those that are penetrable, those that are not, and the rest. The Sirian, whose country contained three hundred and who had discovered three thousand others in his voyages, astonished the Saturnian philosopher. Finally, after having talked to each other, a little about the things they knew and a lot about what they did not know, after having reasoned for the duration of one revolution around the sun, they decided to go on a small philosophical voyage.

CHAPTER III

THE JOURNEY OF THE TWO INHABITANTS OF SIRIUS AND SATURN

Our two philosophers were ready to take off into Saturn's atmosphere, with a sizeable provision of mathematical instruments, when the Saturnian's mistress, who had heard news about the departure, came in tears to protest. She was a pretty, brunette who was only six hundred and sixty fathoms tall, but her charm more than compensated for her size.

"You cruel man!" she cried, "after rejecting you for one thousand five hundred years, just when I was beginning to give in, when I'd spent barely two hundred years in your arms, you leave me to go travelling with a giant from another world; go, you who are nothing but curious, you have never loved: if you were a true Saturnian, you would be faithful. Where do you think you are going? What do you want? Our five moons are less roving than you, our ring less inconsistent. That's it; I will never love anyone ever again."

The philosopher embraced her, cried with her, being the philosopher that he was; and the woman, after swooning, went off to console herself with the help of one of the fops of the country.

Meanwhile, our two explorers left; they jumped first onto the ring, which they found to be rather flat, as predicted by an illustrious inhabitant of our little sphere; from there they went easily from moon to moon. A comet passed very close to the last one; they flew onto it with their crew and their instruments. When they had traversed about one hundred and fifty million leagues, they came to the moons of Jupiter. They stopped at Jupiter and stayed for a year, during which time they discovered some very incredible secrets, which would have been in print if not for the inquisitors, who found some of the propositions to be a little hard. But I have read the manuscript in the library of the illustrious archbishop of...., who, with a generosity and goodness which can never sufficiently be praised, granted me access to his books.

But let us now return to our travelers. Upon leaving Jupiter they crossed a space of around one hundred million leagues, and approached the planet Mars, which, as we know, is five times smaller than our own little planet; they passed by two moons, that

serve this planet, but which have escaped the notice of our astronomers. I know very well that Father Castel will write, very pleasantly, against the existence of these two moons; but I rely on those who reason by analogy. These good philosophers know how difficult it would be for Mars, which is so far from the sun, to survive with less than two moons. Whatever the case may be, our explorers found it so small that they feared that they could not rest on it, and they continued on their way like two travelers leaving of a disdainful village cabaret, pressing on towards the next town. But the Sirian and his companion soon regretted it. They carried on for a long time without finding anything. Finally they perceived a small glow. It was Earth; this was a pitiful sight to those who had just been to Jupiter. However, fearing further regret, they resolved to land. They moved onto the tail of a comet, and finding an aurora borealis nearby, they wove themselves into it, and arrived at Earth on the northern coast of the Baltic sea, July the fifth, seventeen thirty-seven, by Gregorian calendar.

CHAPTER IV

WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM ON PLANET EARTH

After resting for some time, they ate two mountains for lunch, which their crew prepared for them well. Then they decided to get to know the small country in which they were. They went first from north to south. The steps of the Sirian and his crew were around thirty thousand feet. The dwarf from Saturn, followed, breathing heavily. He had to make twelve steps each time the others took a stride; imagine (if it is alright to make such a comparison) a very small lapdog following a captain of the guards of the Prussian king.

Since these strangers moved fairly rapidly, they circled the globe in 36 hours. It is true that the sun, or rather the Earth, makes such a voyage in a day; but you have to understand that it is easier when one turns on one's axis instead of walking on one's feet. So here they were, back where they set off, after having seen the pond, nearly imperceptible to them, called the *Mediterranean*, and the other little pool that, under the name of *Ocean*, surrounds the molehill. The dwarf never got in over his knees, and the

other hardly wet his heels. They did all they could, searching back and forth to see whether the planet was inhabited or not. They crouched, laid down, examined everywhere; but their eyes and their hands were not proportionate to the little beings that crawled here, they could not feel the slightest sensation that could have lead them to believe that we and our comrades, the other inhabitants of this planet, have the privilege of existing.

The dwarf, who was a bit hasty in his judgments sometimes, decided immediately that the planet was uninhabited. His primary reason was that he had not seen anyone.

Micromegas politely indicated that this logic was wrong: "Since," he said, "you are not able to see with your little eyes certain stars of the fiftieth magnitude that I can perceive distinctly. Do you conclude from this, that those stars do not exist?"

"But," said the dwarf, "I felt around a lot; I have searched, tested, explored well."

"But," answered the other, "the feeling you had was not right."

"But," replied the dwarf, "this planet is poorly constructed. It is so irregular, and has such a ridiculous shape! Everything here seems to be in chaos: do you see these little streams, none of which run in a straight line, these ponds that are neither round, nor square, nor oval, nor regular in any shape or form; all these little pointy specks, like bristles across the globe that scratched on my feet? (He was referring to the mountains.) Look again at the shape of the whole globe; how it is flat at the poles, how it awkwardly revolves around the sun, in a way that leaves the climates of the poles uninhabitable? Frankly, what really makes me think no one lives here is that it seems that no sane person would want to stay."

"Well then," said Micromegas, "maybe the inhabitants of this planet are not sane! But in the end it looks as if it may be for a reason. Everything appears irregular to you here, as you say, because everything on Saturn and Jupiter is drawn in straight lines. Ah! It might be for this reason that there is confusion here. Have I not told you that I have always noticed variety in my travels?" The Saturnian replied to all these points. The discussion might have gone on forever, if it were not for Micromegas who, in heated debate, fortunately broke the string of his diamond necklace. The diamonds fell; they were pretty little stones of variable size, of which the largest weighed four hundred pounds, and the smallest fifty. The dwarf picked up some of them; bending down and bringing them up to his eyes for a better look, he noticed that the way these diamonds

were cut made them an excellent microscope. So he took out a small microscope of hundred and sixty feet in diameter and put it up to his iris; while Micromegas chose one of two thousand five hundred feet. They were excellent; but at first they could not see anything and had to adjust. Finally the Saturnian saw something imperceptible that moved in the waters of the Baltic Sea; it was a whale. He carefully picked it up with his little finger, and laying it on his thumbnail, showed it to the Sirian, who began laughing for a second time at the excessively small size of the inhabitants of our planet. The Saturnian, persuaded that our world was inhabited, concluded very quickly that it was inhabited only by whales; and as he was very good at reasoning, he was determined to find out the origin of such a small atom, and whether it had ideas, wishes and freedom. Micromegas was embarrassed. He examined the animal patiently and found no reason to believe that a soul resided within it. The two voyagers were thus inclined to think that there is no spirit in our dwelling, when with the help of the microscope they perceived something much bigger than a whale, floating on the Baltic Sea. We know that at the time a flock of philosophers was returning from the Arctic Circle, where they had undertaken research, which no one had dared to do hitherto. The gazettes claimed that their ship landed on the coast of Bothnia, and that they were having a lot of difficulty staying alive; but the world never reveals its cards. I shall recount how it really happened, without adding anything subjective and without bias; which is no small feat for a historian.

CHAPTER V

EXPERIMENTS AND REASONING OF THE TWO VOYAGERS

Micromegas slowly stretched his hand towards the place where the object had appeared, extending two fingers and withdrawing them for fear of being mistaken, then opened and closed them, skillfully capturing the ship that carried these gentlemen, putting it on his fingernail without pressing it too hard out of fear of damaging it. “This is a very different animal from the first”, said the dwarf from Saturn. The Sirian put the

alleged animal in his. The passengers and the crew, who believed that they had been swept away by a hurricane, and who believed that they were on some rock, started rushing all over the place; the sailors took the barrels of wine, and threw them overboard onto Micromegas' hand, and hurled themselves after them. The geometers picked up their quadrants, astronomic sectors, and Lapland girls, and dropped down onto the Sirian's fingers. They moved around so much that he finally felt something tickling his finger. It was a steel-tipped walking stick being pressed into his index finger. He judged, by this pricking, that it had been ejected from the small animal which he was holding; but he did not suspect, at first, anything more than this. The microscope, which could barely distinguish between a whale and a boat, was useless when it came to something as imperceptible as a human. It is not my intention to injure anyone's vanity, but I am obliged to ask the important men to make an observation with me, which is that if we take the size of a man to be about five feet, we look no bigger on the Earth, than an animal, one six hundred thousandth of an inch high, on a ball with a circumference of ten feet. Imagine something that could hold the Earth in its hands, and who would have organs in proportion to ours; and it may very well be that there are many such things. I kindly ask you to consider what they would think of battles, in which two villages were conquered only to be forfeited later.

I do not doubt that if ever some captain in a troop of imposing grenadiers reads this work, he will increase the size of the hats of his troops by at least two imposing feet. But I warn him that it will do him no good; that he and his will never grow any larger than infinitely small.

What incredible skill it took for our philosopher from Sirius to perceive the atoms I have been talking about. When Leuwenhoek and Hartsoëker were first to see or thought they saw the grains of which we are constructed, they had not nearly made such an amazing discovery. What pleasure Micromegas felt from observing these little machines move, examining all their movements, and following them in all their actions! How he cried out! With what joy he placed one of his microscopes in the hands of his companion!

"I can see them", they said at the same time, "look how they are carrying loads, crouching and getting up again." While they were talking like that, with hands trembling first in the pleasure of seeing such new objects, and then in fear of losing

them, the Saturnian, passing from extreme suspicion to extreme credulity, thought he saw them mating.

“Ah!” he said. “I have caught nature in the act”. But he was fooled by appearances, which happens all too often, whether one is using a microscope or not.

CHAPTER VI

WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM AMONG HUMANS

Micromegas, who was a much better observer than his dwarf, saw clearly that the atoms were communicating, and indicated this to his companion, who, ashamed of being mistaken about them reproducing, did not want to believe that such a species was capable of this. He had the gift of language as well as the Sirian. He could not hear our atoms talk, and he thought that they did not do so. Moreover, how could these impossibly small beings have vocal organs and what would they have to say? To speak, one must think, more or less; but if they could think, they would therefore have some equivalent of a soul. But to attribute such a thing to this species seemed absurd to him. “But,” said the Sirian, “a moment ago you thought that they made love. Do you think that it is possible to love without thinking and without saying a word, or at least without being heard? Beside, do you suppose as well that it is more difficult to produce an argument than a child? For me, both seem to be great mysteries.”

“I do not dare believe or deny it,” said the dwarf. “I have no more opinions left. We must try to examine these insects and reason about it afterwards.”

“That was very well said,” agreed Micromegas, and he immediately took out a pair of scissors with which he cut his fingernails, and from the part of his thumbnail he made a makeshift speaking-trumpet, like a huge funnel, and put the end up to his ear. The rim of the funnel surrounded the ship and the entire crew. The faintest voice was registered by the circular fibers of the nail, so that, thanks to his ingenuity, the philosopher above could hear perfectly the buzzing of our insects below. Within a few hours he was able to distinguish words, and finally to understand French. The dwarf accomplished the same, though with more difficulty. The voyagers’ surprise doubled every moment. They heard

the moths speak rather intelligently. This trick of nature seemed inexplicable to them. You can imagine that the Sirian and his dwarf were burning with impatience to converse with the atoms. The dwarf feared that his thundering voice, and definitely that of Micromegas, would deafen the moths without being understood. They had to diminish its force. They placed toothpicks in their mouths, whose sharpened ends reached down around the ship. The Sirian put the dwarf on his knees and the ship with its crew on a fingernail. He lowered his head and spoke softly. Finally, taking these precautions and many others, he began his speech:

“Invisible insects, that the hand of the Creator was pleased to create in the shape of the infinitely small, I thank him for allowing me to uncover these seemingly unobtainable secrets. Perhaps my court would not deign to give you audience, but I mistrust no one, and I offer you my protection.”

If anyone has ever been surprised, it was the people who heard these words. They could not figure out where they were coming from. The captain of the ship recited prayers of exorcism, the sailors cursed, and the philosophers on board constructed a system; but no matter what systems they thought of, they could not figure out who was talking to them. The dwarf from Saturn, who had a softer voice than Micromegas, explained to them briefly what species they were dealing with. He told them a story about the voyage from Saturn, put them in the picture, who Mr. Micromegas was, and after lamenting on how small they were, asked them if they had always been in this miserable state so close nothingness, what they were doing on a globe that seemed to belong to whales, whether they were happy, whether they multiplied, if they possessed souls, and a hundred other questions of this nature.

A thinker from the troop, more daring than the others, and shocked by the idea of someone doubting the existence of his soul, observed the speaker with metal plates pointed at a quarter circle from two different stops, and at the third said this: “So you believe then, Sir, that because you are a thousand fathoms tall from head to toe, that you are a...”

“A thousand fathoms!” cried the dwarf. “Good heavens! How could he know my height? A thousand fathoms! He even didn’t make a mistake of a size of an inch. This atom just measured me! He is a geometer, he knows my size; and I, who can only see him through a microscope, and I still do not know his!”

“Yes, I have measured you,” said the physician, “and I will even measure your large companion as well.” The proposal was accepted. His Excellency lay down in his full length; for, if he had to remain standing, his head would have been too far above among the clouds. Our philosophers planted a big shaft on him, in a place that Doctor Swift would have named, but that I will refrain from naming it myself, out of respect for the ladies. Next, by a series of triangles linked together, they concluded that what they were looking at was in fact a young man of hundred and twenty thousand feet.

So Micromegas spoke these words: “I see now that one must not judge anything by its apparent size. Oh God! You who have given intelligence to forms which seem so contemptible; the infinitely small means to you as little as the infinitely large; and if it is possible that there are smaller beings than these, that may just have a greater intelligence than those magnificent animals that I have seen in the heavens, who would cover this planet with a foot”.

One of the philosophers replied that he could surely believe that there exist intelligent beings much smaller than man. He told him, not everything Virgil said about bees, but what Swammerdam discovered, and what Réaumur has dissected. He explained finally that there are animals that are to bees what bees are to man, what the Sirian himself was to the enormous animals he had spoken about, and what these large animals are to other substances, in front of which, they looked like atoms. Little by little the conversation became interesting, and Micromegas spoke thus.

CHAPTER VII

CONVERSATION WITH THE HUMANS

“Oh intelligent atoms, in which the Eternal Being desired to manifest his skill and his abilities, you must, no doubt, enjoy pure joys on your planet; for having so little matter, and appearing to be entirely spirit, you must spend your life thinking and loving; that is the true life of the spirit. Nowhere have I seen true happiness, but it must be here, without a doubt.” At this, all the philosophers shook their heads, and one of them, more frank than the others, admitted sincerely, that if one does not include a small number of

inhabitants that are that way, all the rest would be an assembly of mad, malicious, and unhappy people. “We are made of more matter than is necessary,” he said, “to do evil, if evil comes from matter; and too much spirit, if evil comes from spirit. Are you aware, for example, that at this very moment, there are hundred thousand lunatics of our species wearing hats, killing or being killed by a hundred thousand other animals wearing turbans, and that we have used almost all the surface of the Earth for this purpose since time immemorial?” The Sirian shuddered, and asked the reason for this horrible conflict between such tiny animals.

“It is a matter,” said the philosopher, “of some piles of mud the size of your heel. It is not that a single person among the millions that slaughter each other cares about this pile of mud. It is simply a matter of determining if it should belong to a certain man who we call *Sultan*, or to another whom, for some reason or other, we call *Cesar*. None of them has ever seen nor will ever see the little pile of mud in question, and almost none of these animals that slaughter each other have ever seen the animal for which they kill.”

“Oh! Shame!” cried the Sirian with indignation, “who could conceive of this excess of furious violence! It makes me want to take three steps and crush this whole anthill of ridiculous murderers.”

“Do not waste your time,” someone answered, “they are doing enough to destroy themselves. The fact is, you have to know that in ten years’ time only a hundredth of these scoundrels will be left, and that even if they have not drawn a sword, starvation, exhaustion, or intemperance will take them. Furthermore, it is not they that should be punished, it is those desk-bound barbarians who, while sitting in their offices and digesting their last meal, order the massacre of a million men, and solemnly thanked God for it.”

The voyager felt pity for the small human race, in which he was discovering such surprising contrasts.

“Since you are among the small number of wise men,” he told these gentlemen, “and since apparently you do not kill anyone for money, tell me, I beg you, what do you do?”

“We dissect flies,” said the philosopher, “we measure lines, we do calculations; we agree with each other on two or three points that we understand, and we discuss two or three thousand which we don’t.”

It suddenly came to Sirian's and the Saturnian's mind to question these thinking atoms, to find out what they agreed on.

"How far do you think it is" said the Saturnian, "from the Dog Star to the great star of the Gemini?"

They responded all at once, "thirty-two and a half degrees."

"How far do you think it is from here to the moon?"

"Sixty radii of the Earth, in whole numbers."

"How heavy is your air?"

He thought this would get them, but they all told him that air weighed approximately nine hundred times less than the same volume of the purest water, and nineteen hundred times less than the gold in a ducat. The little dwarf from Saturn, astonished by their responses, was tempted to accuse the same people of sorcery, who he had claimed to don't have souls fifteen minutes earlier.

Finally Micromegas said to them, "Since you know so much about what surrounds you, you must know even more about yourself. Tell me what your soul consists of, and how your ideas are formed." The philosophers spoke all at once as before, but they had different opinions. The oldest cited Aristotle; another mentioned the name of Descartes; another of Malebranche; another of Leibnitz; another of Locke. An old peripatetic declared with confidence: "The soul is an *entelechy*, and has a reason because of which it has the power to be what it is." This is what Aristotle expressly declares, page six hundred and thirty three of the Louvre edition. *Entele'xeia' tis esi kai' lo'gos tou dy'namin e'xontos toude' ei'nai.*

"I do not understand Greek very well," said the giant.

"Neither do I," said the philosophical moth.

"Why then," the Sirian responded, "are you citing some man named Aristotle in the Greek?"

"Because," replied the savant, "one should always cite what one does not understand at all, in the language one understands the least."

The Cartesian intervened and said: "The soul is a pure spirit, that has received all metaphysical ideas in its mother's womb, and which, leaving, is obliged to go to school, and to learn all over again what it once knew, and will never know again."

“There was no point then,” responded the eight leagues tall animal, “for your soul to be so knowledgeable inside its mother’s stomach, and to be so ignorant when you have hair on your chin. But what do you mean by mind?”

“What are you asking me?” said the thinker. “I have no idea. We say that it is not matter.”

“But do you at least know what matter is?”

“Certainly,” answered the man. “For example, this stone is grey, has such a shape, has three dimensions, it is heavy and divisible.”

“Well!” said the Sirian, “this thing which seems to you to be divisible, heavy, and grey, would you mind to tell me what it is? You see some attributes, but what about the nature of the thing, the essence of matter, are you familiar with that?”

“No,” said the other.

“In that case you do not know what matter is.”

Thus Micromegas, addressing another wise man that he held on his thumb, asked what his soul was, and what it did.

“Nothing at all,” said the Malebranchist. “God does everything for me. I see everything in him, I do everything in him; it is he who does everything, and I do not interfere.”

“One might as well not exist,” retorted the wise man of Sirius. “And you, my friend,” he said to a Leibnitzian who was there, “what is your soul?”

“It is,” answered the Leibnitzian, “the hand of a clock that tells the time while my body chimes. Or, if you prefer, it is my soul that rings out while my body tells the time; or, my soul is the mirror of the universe, and my body is the rim of the mirror. All of this is clear.”

A small follower of Locke was nearby, and when he finally had his turn to speak, he said: “I do not know how I think, but I know that I have only thought with my senses. I do not doubt that there are immaterial and intelligent substances, but that it would be impossible for God to connect thought to matter I doubt very much. I revere the eternal power. It is not my place to limit it. I affirm nothing, and I am content in believing that many more things are possible than I think.”

The animal from Sirius smiled; he did not find this the least wise; and the dwarf from Saturn would have hugged the follower of Locke, were it not for the extreme disproportion. Unfortunately, there was a little animalcule in a priest’s hat, who

interrupted all the other animalcule philosophers. He said that he knew the secret, and that it could be found in the *Summa* of Saint Thomas. He sized up the two celestial inhabitants. He said that their people, their worlds, their suns, their stars, had all been made only for mankind. At this comment, our two voyagers nearly fell over with unstoppable laughter which, according to Homer, is a characteristic of the gods. Their shoulders and their stomachs heaved and sank up and down, and during these convulsions the ship that the Sirian had on his nail fell into one of the Saturnian's trouser pockets. These two good men spent a long time looking for it, finally found it, and tidied it up neatly. The Sirian continued his discussion with the little moths. He spoke to them with great kindness, although deep down in his heart, he was a little angry that these infinitely small beings appeared to have an almost infinite pride. He promised to write for them a beautiful philosophical book, in small script specifically for them, and said that in this book they would see the meaning of everything. Indeed, he gave them this book before leaving. It was brought to the academy of science in Paris, but when the ancient secretary opened it, he found nothing but blank pages. "Ah!" he said, "I expected as much."

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