DISSIMULATION AND THE CULTURE OF SECRECY IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

JON R. SNYDER

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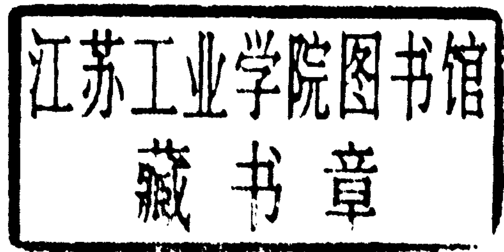
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PREFACE

Lost Horizons

Early in the seventeenth century the young René Descartes (1596–1650) wrote, "Like an actor wearing a mask, I come forward, masked, on the stage of the world."[1] With these famous words—*larvatus prodeo*—Descartes at once recognized the political, social, and cultural difficulties of the task that lay ahead of him as a philosopher, and proposed a means by which to overcome them: dissimulation.[2] He was, of course, hardly original in choosing to take this route. Many other members of early modern society had done the same before him, and many more would follow in due course. In fact, on Descartes' family coat of arms was inscribed the motto "he lives well who is well hidden."[3] Descartes may not, however, have understood the art of dissimulation as well as he claimed. A masked actor openly acknowledges the artifice of the stage, whereas the dissimulator does the opposite, announcing nothing and allowing no one to know even if a mask is or is not in use. For many inhabitants of early modern Europe, dissimulation was a compelling—and often disturbing—feature of their lives, precisely because there was no way to detect with certainty its presence or absence in the world around them: it was at once everywhere and nowhere, and the dissimulator was like an evanescent *homo bulla* who would vanish into thin air without a trace, if one were to come too close. Cutting across many nations, cultures, languages, and institutions, this book examines early modern attitudes toward the shadowy art of dissimulation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Dissimulation provoked conflicting and often powerful emotions in those who suspected it, as well as in those who wrote about it. As Louis

D'Orléans complained in a 1594 diatribe against Henry IV, King of France, "being a secret and hidden animal, man withdraws within himself like the oyster, and only opens up when and to whom it pleases him to do so. His thoughts cannot be made transparent by the brightest light or the sun's most blazing rays, and this is why it is as difficult to judge them as it is difficult to judge a false or genuine diamond in the darkness of night, or a beautiful or ugly painting amidst dark shadows."[4] In these few lines D'Orléans expressed a view of personhood that was widely held between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The mind was—or ought to be—"secret," "hidden," "withdrawn," well-defended and shut tight "like the oyster." Thoughts were inscrutable and masked in impenetrable shadows; they could be read by others only if one chose to "open [oneself] up" and reveal the inner workings of the heart and mind to them.[5] Knowing when, where, and with whom it was appropriate to disclose one's thoughts was just as important as knowing when, where, and with whom to disguise them. Humanity was, in short, well versed in the art of dissimulation. Because it could render one's thoughts and feelings completely inaccessible to others, this art effectively denied anyone the chance to know the true identity of the dissimulator: all were left, D'Orléans lamented, as if "in the darkness of night."[6] Although there were those who for this very reason celebrated dissimulation's defensive powers, many others—such as D'Orléans—were deeply troubled by its capacity to establish an inviolable security zone around persons, making dissimulation one of the most controversial and contested of all the early modern virtues.

A book on early modern attitudes toward the art of dissimulation might be suspected of having something to hide. This preface, however, attempts to throw light on the methodological choices that were made in writing the present work. The title, *Dissimulation and the Culture of Secrecy in Early Modern Europe,* is perhaps the most logical place to start. Intellectual and cultural historians of Europe have long identified the period with which I am concerned, namely the years 1500–1700, as formative for the establishment of the modern state. In the pages that follow I do not, however, offer the reader a historical account of the development of the state security apparatus, from espionage and secret police services to technologies of surveillance and encryption. Nor do I consider the dissidents and underground religious groups who were targeted by repressive regimes during these same years. What I mean by "the culture of secrecy" is something quite different. The present book is concerned specifically with the emergence of a discourse on dissimulation among

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the dominant social groups of the Old Regime, especially (but far from exclusively) in Italy. I argue in chapter 1 that these elites cultivated and disseminated the early modern discourse on dissimulation in order to legitimate or, in some cases, to critique their own highly disciplined practices of self-management and self-representation. If a secret involves not saying something that is or was, then dissimulation is a species of secrecy; and if it was one of the cornerstones of the Old Regime, as this book attempts to show, then the latter may be defined as a culture of secrecy.

The single most extensive body of scholarship on early modern dissimulation belongs to the French historian Jean-Pierre Cavaillé. His prolific output of essays and editions concerning the early modern period led to the publication of *Dis/simulations* in 2002.[7] In this study of the writings of five seventeenth-century heterodox figures—Giulio Cesare Vanini, François La Mothe Le Vayer, Gabriel Naudé, Louis Machon, and Torquato Accetto—Cavaillé sets out to expose what he calls "a reflexive practice of dis/simulation" which can be found, with a nod to the philosopher Leo Strauss, in "a writing of persecution and censorship" that embodies "a poetics and . . . a practice of the secret at once subjective and subjectivizing."[8] By this the historian means that what has been intentionally hidden in the texts of these Old Regime writers is at least as significant as what is immediately visible in them. Although they belong to different strands of early modern libertinism—and experienced the pressures of contemporary censorship in vastly different ways—these five writers nonetheless share a common concern for secrecy. In their works is not deliberately hidden a mystical or metaphysical secret, that is, a recondite meaning that can be recovered thanks to the proper interpretive key. Rather, Cavaillé finds in them the tactical use of secrecy as a constitutive component of self-expression and self-representation, in which a unique portrait of the writer emerges even as he withdraws from us. In the implementation of this strategy, in which evasions and elisions are generated in ways not always foreseen or controlled by the writer, we witness these early moderns' ongoing negotiations with their particular political circumstances, as well as with the era's dominant protocols of socialization. The result is a vision of the singularity of each individual "practice of the secret," set in a specific context, rather than a general theory of its workings.[9]

Cavaillé sees the turn to dis/simulation between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as marking a shift toward secularization ("from transcendence to immanence") in European culture.[10] The practice of

dis/simulation can best be traced, he contends, in the history of Inquisitorial and judicial investigations, persecutions and interrogations, as well as in Nicodemite religious writings.[11] The major early modern theories of this practice may serve as a guide in reading persecuted texts, but these theories cannot be abstracted from their sociopolitical context. What motivates the turn to dis/simulation for so many individuals in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Cavaillé contends, is the pressing need to master appearances, while hiding from sight "the inner space of conscience," whether in the realm of politics or faith.[12] The neologism "dis/simulation" expresses Cavaillé's belief that dissimulation is often inseparable from simulation, although the two are nonetheless dissociated because "it is one thing to keep a secret and another thing to lie."[13] His book shuttles back and forth between the analysis of libertine texts and those setting out a general theory of dis/simulation, from Vanini's subversive theology to the Machiavellianism of Machon (whose treatise on the subject "lifts at least a little the veil of dissimulation, insofar as he is himself unable to dissimulate") or Accetto's politics of resistance.[14] In Cavaillé's view, the seventeenth century in particular is full of individuals in inner revolt against the absolutist system, and thus "we must listen for the wounded cry in the text that keeps silent."[15]

Over and beyond the singularity of each work, *Dis/simulations* identifies other, broader issues raised by the early modern theory and practice of dis/simulation. First, there is a radical tension between "the concern to publish the truth and that of protecting it by the development of justifiable procedures of dis/simulation," which in Cavaillé's view is no more and no less than "a fundamental element of Western culture."[16] The elites who monopolized the public space of discourse in early modern Europe did not see themselves in a reciprocal relationship with the rest of society, and spoke to one another through the use of complex linguistic and cultural codes that belonged to them alone. In other words, there were exoteric and esoteric modes of reading the early modern text, and this double register served to preserve the social status quo by restricting knowledge of its full (if hidden) significance to the exclusive few. This same social logic of a privileged inside and an unreadable outside extends to dis/simulation itself, which could be subversive, in seeking to elude censorship or persecution, but also encouraged accommodation with the Old Regime by splitting off the inner life of the person from outward appearances. The libertine might freely think heterodox thoughts but regularly attend religious services, for instance, in order to maintain his appointed place in society. This was not due to hypocrisy,

a desire for accommodation, or an instrumentalist orientation toward social existence, as we would naturally think of anyone acting in this way today, but rather was a function of the double register of interior conscience and public conformity. Second, Cavaillé ironically sees the Catholic church through its renewed post-Tridentine emphasis on the doctrine of the confession (or penance), in which secrets are revealed and concealed beyond the reach of law and social discipline, as greatly increasing the domain of dis/simulation in early modernity. Although the penitent must confess his most secret sins, the priest can never betray them to others; indeed, according to canon law, the confessor must guard these secrets with his very life, and dissimulate them in the face of any threat against him. Conscience is formed in a secret space, in other words, where the transparency of the individual confession is kept completely separate from the realm of social relations.[17] If the church allows for the existence of legitimate secrets of the heart and mind—and by definition the sacrament of confession deals in these—then libertine culture draws from this the lessons needed for its conquest of a private, interior, autonomous secular conscience, withdrawn from institutional spiritual oversight.

Cavaillé's insights are invaluable for anyone working in the field of early modern studies, but the present book takes a fundamentally different direction. In his historical investigations of simulation and dissimulation, Cavaillé starts from the premise that these two terms cannot be viewed in isolation from one another. Philosophically speaking, any coherent distinction between them cannot be sustained for long: hence the need to invent a term ("dis/simulation") that can capture the essence of both at once. I have instead chosen to take very seriously the fact that, from the perspective of many early modern European writers, there was indeed a significant difference between simulation and dissimulation, which defined a conflict between distinct moral economies. Rarely were the two terms accorded the same treatment, or condemned in the same way: they were not Siamese but fraternal twins. Perhaps there was no logical foundation to this belief, as Cavaillé contends, but it nevertheless informed the world of the Old Regime, in which distinction(s) mattered a great deal. Evidently faced with what seemed at the time like the unstoppable spread of the culture of secrecy, many contemporary writers intervened by trying to define its subtle ground rules and to influence future attempts to deploy, detect, or deter dissimulation. Although some were outspoken in their criticism of its practice, no matter what the intent behind the act may be, there were many who recognized that

dissimulation might, under certain well-defined conditions, possess a specific moral valence distinguishing it from simulation, and at times even justifying its use. The early modern discourse on dissimulation was largely organized, for better or for worse, around the assumption that one could separate it from its evil twin, and I have adopted this stance as the basis for my own investigation.

In the pages that follow, I examine mainly treatises and manuals, or fragments of treatises and manuals, on dissimulation. Whether published or unpublished, I take these—like Peter Burke's exemplary study of early modern conversation, another elusive object of intellectual history—as indicative of a practice that has otherwise proved difficult to locate through the lens of history. They are not, however, documents of the performance of dissimulation itself, only of attitudes toward the art of dissimulation, just as there are no records of (let us say) actual early modern dreams, only the dream-narratives that recount them. As Burke notes,

> the value of the treatises on conversation to a cultural historian is that they make explicit norms which were usually implicit. Actually the last statement, obvious as it may seem, needs to be qualified. The authors of the treatises cannot be assumed to be articulating a social consensus. Different social groups within the same society may follow different rules for communication, while some authors may be subverting the rules current in their own culture. . . . To coax information about practice from treatises . . . means reading the texts against the grain, with all the dangers implied by that procedure.[18]

Burke may have said the obvious, but it bears repeating. These texts make visible to us the conceptual norms of "different social groups within the same society," which, in the case of the discourse on dissimulation, were those of the dominant groups under absolutism.[19] My book explores the discursive paths taken by these elites in an attempt to get to grips with, articulate, legitimize, or contest the norms of dissimulatory practice.

This should not be confused, however, with the practice purportedly subject to these norms, which remains beyond the scope of the present work. As Burke warns, the dangers of trying "to coax information about practice from treatises" are legion, and likely to lead into blind alleys. Even a report in which an ambassador claims to have dissimulated some important state secret while in conversation with a foreign potentate may, of course, be nothing other than a dissimulation in its own right: even with an archive at hand, we would be on dangerous ground in

thinking that we could fully know the truth about his claim. On the other hand, the majority of these treatises may appropriately be read as instances of another sort of practice, namely the development of a normative disciplinary discourse serving as a horizon within or against which individuals and groups oriented themselves with the intent to perform, legitimize, interpret, or contest dissimulatory acts. Although they do not allow us to reconstruct all the ruses of the early modern dissimulator, these texts define the contours of a mode of comportment or *virtù* within which practitioners of this art were likely constrained to remain, or against which they felt compelled to work. Even the early modern writers most vehemently critical of dissimulation confirm the widespread awareness of such a code of behavior within the dominant groups involved in both the production and reception of this discourse (although, once again, behavior itself—the putting-into-work of dissimulation—certainly may have been at variance with this code). In short, I will examine the ways in which a discourse on dissimulation was born, lived, and died without claiming to be able to know, after the passage of many hundreds of years, who was actually dissimulating and who was not. What we can instead recover at this point in time—however partially or provisionally—are those lost horizons of dissimulation that informed the subjectivity and practices of early modern men and women.

The interdisciplinary and international Europa delle Corti group of scholars has persuasively argued since the 1970s that the culture of absolutism (*la cultura classicista*) cannot be confined to traditional schemes of historical periodization or national literatures, because it functioned as a highly diffuse and enduring paradigm of cultural homologation in Europe.[20] The present study, taking its cue from this approach, follows an itinerary traversing a number of exemplary moments in the discourse on dissimulation over a long period of time and a large geographical area, without pretending to treat exhaustively any one text, author, national literature, or historical period. Any attempt to write a book about this elusive subject must inevitably result in a work in which a great deal is missing: I can only try to cast a net around the question of early modern attitudes toward dissimulation, although some, perhaps much, will slip through. If Italy is the focus of much of the book, however, it is because so many of the *maîtres penseurs* of dissimulation—such as Baldassar Castiglione, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Torquato Accetto (to name only three)—were Italians and wrote in the vernacular of the peninsula. I do not provide detailed biographical information for the many writers, either famous or obscure, whose works are discussed in the following

pages. Without denying the relevance of such data, and without trying to suggest that discourses can be disembodied, I confess that my interests lie elsewhere.

I have provided both the original text and an English-language translation (if needed), preferably a published one, for every citation in the main body of the book. In some cases this has meant using contemporary early modern translations, a few of which are still adequate for the purpose, while in other cases more recent translations have been employed. If not otherwise indicated in the notes, however, all translations are my own. I have generally preferred not to modernize or correct the orthography and punctuation of the early modern texts that I cite, although in those instances in which critical editions are available, I make full use of them.

A final caveat. The kinds of dissimulation examined in this book have been generally discredited in the West for more than two centuries now. The Romantic revolution, in privileging the rhetoric of sincerity and transparency, signaled the end of the long reign of the Old Regime, as well as its social and cultural protocols. Dissimulation has not vanished from our world, but it no longer constitutes an art with its own recognized set of rules: its value is merely operational. Today the media-saturated society of the West, built around the principle of publicity, cannot tolerate even the slightest suspicion of dissimulation in those persons who are chosen to be put (profitably) on display. Never have seeming and being been more perfectly merged than they are now, or so most would want—and be expected—to think. Perhaps, however, it is time to think again.

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Acknowledgments

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My intellectual debts are numerous, and readers will recognize many of them without difficulty. One, however, runs deep beneath the surface of this work: as an undergraduate, I had the great good fortune to study with the historian Carl Schorske, whose limitless passion for—and knowledge of—the cultures of Europe did so much to inspire me to become a scholar. Later on, as a graduate student in comparative literature, I began to consider the issue of dissimulation while researching a chapter, on the Baroque philosopher-poet Tommaso Campanella, of my doctoral dissertation. Campanella's terrible trials in the dungeons of Spanish Naples, and the ruses that he used to survive them, made a lasting impression on me. Although my studies subsequently led me in other directions, I always knew that I would one day return to write this book. By a twist of fate, Campanella is not in it, but much that I learned from him is to be found here. Finally, I had already completed the first draft when I came across the publications of Jean-Pierre Cavaillé: his perspective on early modern dissimulation, although very different than mine, helped me to revise and refine my arguments. The responsibility for any and all shortcomings of the present book is, however, entirely my own.

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