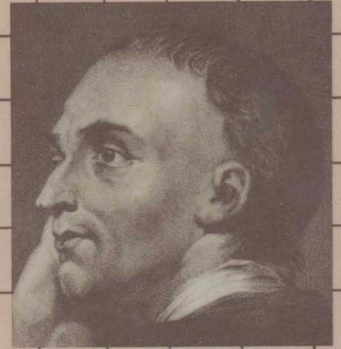


*The Critical Cosmos Series*  
*Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM*

# French Prose and Criticism through 1789



THE CRITICAL COSMOS SERIES

*French Prose and Criticism  
through 1789*

Edited and with an introduction  
by *HAROLD BLOOM*  
Sterling Professor of the Humanities  
Yale University



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## Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best criticism available upon the principal writers of French nonfictional prose and criticism from Montaigne through the Revolution of 1789. I am grateful to Chantal McCoy and James Swenson for their assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction centers upon Montaigne and Pascal, contrasting Montaigne's relation to Seneca and Plutarch to Pascal's more anxious influence-relation to Montaigne. The essay by Timothy J. Reiss on Montaigne concerns the effect of the great essayist's sense of the self's instability upon his desire for a strong social order.

Descartes, the other authentic founder of French intellectuality, is read in his *Discours de la méthode* by Jean-Luc Nancy as having inaugurated "the pure *I* . . . who utters myself uttering," which became the *I* of Louis XIV, Victor Hugo, Flaubert, and Stendhal.

The Port-Royal *Grammar* and *Logic*, a crucial context for Pascal, is analyzed by the great linguist Noam Chomsky as part of the history of Cartesian linguistics. La Rochefoucauld, ironic moralist and prince of aphorists, is discussed by Philip E. Lewis as a social psychologist of self-love and its consequences.

Pascal's theory of rhetoric is illuminated by the late Paul de Man, the leading rhetorical critic of our era. Louise K. Horowitz, in an overview of Madame de Sévigné, discourses upon the relation between love and language, and upon the tensions between Jansenism and idolatry.

The orator Bossuet is analyzed by Domna C. Stanton as a bold confronter of "the problematics of utterance and reception." Kirsti Simonsuuri treats Perrault's criticism as a dialectic of individual genius playing against cultural influences, while Wilbur Samuel Howell, historian of rhetoric,

charts the relations between poetry and oratory in the literary theory of Fénelon.

Roland Barthes considers La Bruyère as a theorist of writing, after which Herbert Dieckmann presents Fontenelle's theory of poetry. Saint-Simon's vision of Louis XIV is eruditely examined by Leo Spitzer, in a critical mode very different from the Marxist Structuralism of Louis Althusser's study of Montesquieu and Herbert Lüthy's informed exegesis of Quesnay's sense of the economics of society.

Voltaire's rationalist excursions into history writing constitute the subject of Suzanne Gearhart's essay, while Blair Campbell restores La Mettrie to his importance as *philosophe* as well as biologist. Paul de Man returns with his influential deconstruction of the rhetoric of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, after which Michael Fried presents Diderot as aesthetician, and the theorist of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, reads Condillac as an instance of everything problematical in the work of reading.

D'Alembert's rhetoric is surveyed by Peter France, while Ronald L. Meek gives an overview of Turgot and the idea of progress. Condorcet's elitism is examined by Keith M. Baker, after which this volume concludes properly with the French Revolution as mirrored in Carol Blum's study of Rousseau's influence upon the political rhetoric of Robespierre and Saint-Just.

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# Introduction

## I

Montaigne, until the advent of Shakespeare, was the great figure of the European Renaissance, comparable in cognitive power and in influence to Freud in our century. His mordant essay "Of Books" is marked by a genial irony that is profoundly skeptical of the Humanist program that ostensibly (and rather off-handedly) is endorsed:

Let people see in what I borrow whether I have known how to choose what would enhance my theme. For I make others say what I cannot say so well, now through the weakness of my language, now through the weakness of my understanding. I do not count my borrowings, I weigh them. And if I had wanted to have them valued by their number, I should have loaded myself with twice as many. They are all, or very nearly all, from such famous and ancient names that they seem to identify themselves enough without me. In the reasonings and inventions that I transplant into my soil and confound with my own, I have sometimes deliberately not indicated the author, in order to hold in check the temerity of those hasty condemnations that are tossed at all sorts of writings, notably recent writings of men still living, and in the vulgar tongue, which invites everyone to talk about them and seems to convict the conception and design of being likewise vulgar. I want them to give Plutarch a fillip on my nose and get burned insulting Seneca in me. I have to hide my weakness under these great authorities. I will love anyone that can unplume me, I mean by clearness of judgment and by the sole distinction of the force and beauty of the remarks. For I who, for lack of memory, fall short at every turn in picking them out by knowledge of their



origin, can very well realize, by measuring my capacity, that my soil is not at all capable of producing certain too rich flowers that I find sown there, and that all the fruits of my own growing could not match them.

This hardly seems a matter of “classical courage” but rather of cunning, humor, skill, and a deliciously bland disarming of one’s critics. It is also, rather clearly, a knowingly defensive irony, directed against a literary anxiety that Montaigne insists is universal, and not merely individual. Montaigne at this time (1578–80) is well under way to his final stance, where he forsakes the high Humanist doctrine in favor of the common life, so as to affirm the exuberance of natural existence, and the enormous virtue of being the *honnête homme*, thus establishing a new norm against which Pascal would rebel, or perhaps an influence that Pascal could neither escape nor accept. What “Of Books” subverts most audaciously is the Humanist scheme of benign displacement by imitation. When Montaigne writes of his unsavory critics, “I want them to give Plutarch a fillip on my nose and get burned insulting Seneca in me,” he not only accurately names his prime precursors, but he asserts his own power of contamination. In contrast, consider Ben Jonson, more truly Greene’s hero of “classical courage”:

The third requisite in our poet or maker is imitation, *imitatio*, to be able to convert the substance or riches of another poet to his own use. To make choice of one excellent man above the rest, and so to follow him till he grow very he, or so like him as the copy may be mistaken for the principal. Not as a creature that swallows what it takes in, crude, raw, or undigested; but that feeds with an appetite, and hath a stomach to concoct, divide, and turn all into nourishment. Not to imitate servilely, as Horace saith, and catch at vices for virtue, but to draw forth out of the best and choicest flowers, with the bee, and turn all into honey, work it into one relish and savour; make our imitation sweet; observe how the best writers have imitated, and follow them: how Virgil and Statius have imitated Homer; how Horace, Archilochus; how Alcæus, and the other lyrics; and so of the rest.

Here one imitates precisely as the precursors imitated, which seems to me an apt reduction of the Humanist argument. It is no surprise that Jonson goes on to say of reading that it “maketh a full man,” borrowing from his truest precursor Sir Francis Bacon in the essay “Of Studies.” Admirable essayist in his narrow mode, Bacon is about as adequate to compete with Montaigne as Jonson was to challenge Shakespeare. It takes a singular perversity to prefer Bacon’s essays to Montaigne’s, and yet Jonson could insist persuasively that he was being loyal to the Humanist doctrine of imitation:

Some that turn over all books, and are equally searching in all papers; that write out of what they presently find or meet, without choice. By which means it happens that what they have discredited and impugned in one week, they have before or after extolled the same in another. Such are all the essayists, even their master Montaigne. These, in all they write, confess still what books they have read last, and therein their own folly so much, that they bring it to the stake raw and undigested; not that the place did need it neither, but that they thought themselves furnished and would vent it.

Bacon's essays certainly do not "confess still what books they have read last," and Montaigne is anything but formalist in his use of quite immediate reading. Greene is wiser, I think, when he recognizes that ambivalence and the antithetical haunt all imitation, however Humanist:

The process called imitation was not only a technique or a habit; it was also a field of ambivalence, drawing together manifold, tangled, sometimes antithetical attitudes, hopes, pieties, and reluctances within a concrete locus.

At the heart of Humanism was an ambivalence, even an antithetical will that perhaps still makes the phrase "Christian Humanist" something of an oxymoron. Most simply, Humanism entailed a love of Greek and Latin wisdom and humane letters, a desire to know qualities uniquely available in antiquity. Christianity, in the early Renaissance, indeed became Greek and Latin in its culture, at a certain cost. The morality of the Christian Bible is scarcely Greek or Latin, and the God of Christianity remained the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, rather than the gods of Achilles, Odysseus, and Aeneas. Imitation or mimesis, whether of nature or of a precursor, is a Greek notion, rather than a Hebraic postulate. We cannot image an ancient Greek or Latin author confronting the stark text of the Second Commandment.

Erich Auerbach, in his *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, finds in Rabelais and Montaigne an early Renaissance freedom of vision, feeling, and thought produced by a perpetual playing with things, and hints that this freedom began to decline not so much in Cervantes as in Shakespeare, the two writers who by paradox may be the only Western authors since antiquity clearly surpassing the powers of even Rabelais and Montaigne. As Auerbach emphasizes:

In Rabelais there is no aesthetic standard; everything goes with everything. Ordinary reality is set within the most improbable fantasy, the coarsest jokes are filled with erudition, moral and philosophical enlightenment flows out of obscene expressions and stories.

This extraordinary freedom of representation in Rabelais is matched by Montaigne in Auerbach's description of his emancipation not only from the Christian conceptual schema but from the cosmological view of his precursors Cicero, Seneca, and Plutarch:

His newly acquired freedom was much more exciting, much more of the historical moment, directly connected with the feeling of insecurity. The disconcerting abundance of phenomena which now claimed the attention of men seemed overwhelming. The world—both outer world and inner world—seemed immense, boundless, incomprehensible.

Shakespeare, "more consciously aristocratic than Montaigne" in Auerbach's view, grants the aesthetic dignity of the tragic only to princes, commanders, and eminent figures in Roman history. To the Humanist heritage Auerbach attributes Shakespeare's sense that there is more than a temporal gap between contemporary life and the heroic past:

With the first dawn of humanism, there began to be a sense that the events of classical history and legend and also those of the Bible were not separated from the present simply by an extent of time but also by completely different conditions of life. Humanism with its program of renewal of antique forms of life and expression creates a historical perspective in depth such as no previous epoch known to us possessed.

Of Cervantes Auerbach beautifully remarks: "So universal and multi-layered, so noncritical and nonproblematic a gaiety in the portrayal of everyday reality has not been attempted again in European letters." It is as though Humanist perspectivism—not yet developed in the rambunctious Rabelais, a powerful shadow in Shakespeare, forsaken for the common life by Montaigne—had been set aside by a genial power of acceptance of the mundane in Cervantes. But these in any case are the Renaissance writers as strong as Homer, Dante, and Chaucer. With lesser writers (lesser only as compared with these), the opening to the past carried with it a perspectivism that generated anxieties both of influence and of representation. Paradoxically, Humanism both exalted and burdened writers by proclaiming that the vernacular could achieve what the ancients had achieved by the aid of an antique greatness that carried its own implicit force of inhibition.

The literary criticism of the sixteenth century, since it is so entirely part of what can be called a Humanist manifesto, now demands to be read in a certain spirit of affectionate de-idealization. The greatest writers of the century accomplish this de-idealization by themselves, and if such an activity be considered criticism (and it is), then Montaigne, rather than du Bellay or Sidney or Tasso, becomes the great critic of the early Renaissance. To call the *Essays* a vast work of literary criticism is a revisionary act of

judgment, but only in the sense of seeing now that Sigmund Freud, who died in 1939, appears in 1986 to have been the crucial critic of the twentieth century. Montaigne's defense of the self is also an analysis of the self, and Montaigne appears now to have been the ancestor not only of Emerson and Nietzsche, both of whom acknowledged him, but also of Freud, who did not.

Returning to Montaigne then, in a wider compass than just the essay "Of Books," is to encounter a poetics of the self that is also a relentless (for all its casual mode) critique of the Humanist, idealized poetics of the self. Petrarch, du Bellay, even the more pragmatic Sidney, and most of all the tormented Tasso—all of them idealize their stance in relation to vernacular precursors, and also in regard to ancient wisdom. Montaigne, once past his Humanist first phase and his skeptical transition, does not deceive either himself or others when it comes to the problems of writing:

I have not had regular dealings with any solid book, except Plutarch and Seneca, from whom I draw like the Danaïds, incessantly filling up and pouring out. Some of this sticks to this paper; to myself, a little or nothing.

This, from near the start of the 1579–80 essay "Of the Education of Children," is one of the most astonishing sentences even in Montaigne. Terence Cave, in *The Cornucopian Text*, reads this sentence in the manner of Derrida and Barthes:

The fullness of two model-texts is here designated, it would seem, as a source; the labour of the Danaïdes would thus represent the activity of transmission or exchange ("commerce"), by which the textual substance of Plutarch and Seneca is displaced into a discourse bearing the signature "Montaigne." But this sentence is marked from the beginning by a negation. Plutarch and Seneca appear in a concessive phrase made possible only by the absence of any "livre solide": a characteristically Montaignian insistence on the emptiness of discourse (particularly the written discourses of pedagogy) allows provisional access to certain privileged texts whose unsystematic, open-ended form endorses that of the *Essais* themselves. The negation is not, however, limited to the unnamed texts Montaigne claims to have neglected. The Danaïdes are, after all, not a wholly reassuring figure of plenitude. Rabelais cites them as a counter-example of cornucopian productivity, a sign of despair, and the uselessness of their labours is made explicit in the following sentence: "J'en attache quelque chose à ce papier; à moy, si peu que rien." The *locus* is closed, as it began, in negation. The *moi*, in a place outside discourse, is scarcely touched by the language even of Plutarch and Seneca; its integrity is preserved, as at the beginning of the passage, by a repudiation of books. Alien

discourse cannot be "attached" to the self, is external to it. Hence the gesture of transference, endlessly repeated, appears as an empty mime. The only thing to which fragments of another text may be attached is "ce papier," a mediate domain which clearly concerns the *moi* (since the sentences inscribed on it have a habit of beginning with "je"), but is no less clearly different from it. The paper on which the text of the *Essais* appears is, indeed, a place of difference: it allows the rewriting and naturalization of foreign texts; it thereby permits the search for the identity of a *moi* in contradistinction from what is "other"; but at the same time it defers any final access to the goal of the search, since the self is expressly an entity dissociated from the activity of writing.

If read in that deconstructionist manner, then Montaigne is achieving an awareness that the experimental fullness he seeks outside language, and which he hopes to represent in his own language, is no more a true presence in Plutarch and Seneca than in his own pages, or in his own self. Like the Danaïds, all writers are condemned to carry the waters of experience in the sieve of language. But Montaigne (unlike Cave) *does* regard the *Moral Essays* of Plutarch and the *Epistles* of Seneca as "solid books." They are not merely privileged texts or sources, but pragmatically, experientially, they have, *for Montaigne*, a different status than his own writing possesses. They are the fathers, true authors and authorities; they do augment because they do not go back to the foundations, but for Montaigne they *are* the foundations. And some of their reality does stick to Montaigne's manuscript and printed page, even if some does not. Montaigne's self is as formidable as the selves of Plutarch and Seneca; his self repels influences. Yet he does grant priority to the text of the fathers, because his text, as opposed to his self, cannot have authority without some transference from the fathers.

Cave concludes his very useful study of Montaigne by turning to the text of the culminating essay, the magnificent "Of Experience" (1587–88). After observing that there is envy and jealousy between our pleasures, so that they clash and interfere with one another, Montaigne opposes himself to those who therefore would abandon natural pleasures:

I, who operate only close to the ground, hate that inhuman wisdom that would make us disdainful enemies of the cultivation of the body. I consider it equal injustice to set our heart against natural pleasures and to set our heart too much on them. Xerxes was a fool, who, wrapped in all human pleasures, went and offered a prize to anyone who would find him others. But hardly less of a fool is the man who cuts off those that nature has found for him. We should neither pursue them nor flee them, we should accept them. I accept them with more gusto and with better grace than most, and more willingly let myself follow a natural inclination. We have no need to exaggerate their inanity; it makes itself

felt enough and evident enough. Much thanks to our sickly, kill-joy mind, which disgusts us with them as well as with itself. It treats both itself and all that it takes in, whether future or past, according to its insatiable, erratic, and versatile nature.

Unless the vessel's pure, all you pour in turns sour.

Horace

I, who boast of embracing the pleasures of life so assiduously and so particularly, find in them, when I look at them thus minutely, virtually nothing but wind. But what of it? We are all wind. And even the wind, more wisely than we, loves to make a noise and move about, and is content with its own functions, without wishing for stability and solidity, qualities that do not belong to it.

Cave deconstructs this:

Full experience is always absent: presence is unattainable. All that the *Essais* can do, with their ineradicable self-consciousness, is to posit paradigms of wholeness as features of a discourse which, as it pours itself out, celebrates its own inanity. The Montaignian text represents the emptying of the cornucopia by the very gesture of extending itself indefinitely until the moment of ultimate *egressio* or elimination: the figures of abundance play a prominent part in the closing pages of *De l'expérience*. Whatever plenitude seems to have been proper to the past, whatever festivity is assigned to these terminal moments, Montaigne's writing is both the only place in which they can be designated, and a place from which they remain inexhaustibly absent.

The plenitude of the textual past, of Plutarch, and of Seneca, and of Horace, is certainly present here, but so is the pragmatic presence of an achieved text, a newness caught in its annunciation. If we are all wind, and Montaigne's *Essays* nothing but wind, why then let us be as wise as the wind. The text, like ourselves, makes a noise and moves about. Like the wind, we and our texts ought not to seek for qualities not our own. But an unstable and fluid text, always metamorphic, can be viewed as positively as a mobile self. If Montaigne declares limitation, he also asserts a freedom, both for his text and for himself.

Montaigne, like the characters of Shakespeare's plays, changes because he listens to what he himself has said. Reading his own text, he becomes Hamlet's precursor, and represents reality in and by himself. His power of interpretation over his own text is also a power over the precursors' texts, and so makes of his own belatedness an earliness. What Petrarch and du Bellay and Tasso longed for vainly, what Sidney urbanely courted, is what Rabelais first possessed in the Renaissance and is what culminates

in Montaigne's "Of Experience," before it goes on to triumph again in Don Quixote, Falstaff, and Hamlet. Call it a Humanist reality rather than a Humanist idealization: an exaltation of the vernacular that authentically carried representation back to its Homeric and biblical strength. In that exaltation, the writer makes us see regions of reality we could not have seen without him. As Wallace Stevens said of the poet, the enterprise of the Renaissance Humanist author:

tries by a peculiar speech to speak  
The peculiar potency of the general,  
To compound the imagination's Latin with  
The lingua franca et jocundissima.

## II

Pascal never loses his capacity to offend as well as to edify. Contrast his very different effects upon Paul Valéry and T. S. Eliot. Here is Valéry:

I hate to see a man using artifice to turn others against their lot, when they are in it in spite of themselves and are doing what they can to make the best of it; to see a man trying to persuade others that they must expect the worst, must always keep in mind the most intolerable notion of their predicament, and be alert to whatever is most unbearable in it—which is precisely the notion of suffering and risk, and anxiety about the risk—using the notion of eternity as an almighty weapon, and developing it by the artifice of repetition.

This is to accuse Pascal of being an obscurantistic rhetorician, rather resembling the T. S. Eliot of the religious prose writings. Here is Eliot on Pascal:

But I can think of no Christian writer, not Newman even, more to be commended than Pascal to those who doubt, but who have the mind to conceive, and the sensibility to feel the disorder, the meaninglessness, the mystery of life and suffering, and who can only find peace through a satisfaction of the whole being.

I suspect that Valéry and Eliot are saying much the same thing, the difference being the rival perspectives towards Pascal of a secular intellectual and a Christian polemicist. Pascal essentially is a polemicist, rather than a religious or meditative writer. The *Pensées* ultimately are not less tendentious than the *Provincial Letters*. A Christian polemicist in our time ought to find his true antagonist in Freud, but nearly all do not; they either evade Freud, or self-defeatingly seek to appropriate him. Pascal's Freud was Montaigne, who could not be evaded or appropriated, and who scarcely can be refuted. But Pascal's case of influence-anxiety, in regard to

Montaigne, was hopelessly overwhelming. Eliot, putting the best case for Pascal, insisted that Montaigne simply had the power to embody a universal skepticism, in which Pascal necessarily shared, though only to a limited degree. Doubtless Eliot attributed to Montaigne one of the essayist's plethora of authentic powers, but a secretly shared (and overcome) skepticism hardly can account for the full scandal of Montaigne's influence upon Pascal. Tables of parallel passages demonstrate an indebtedness so great, extending to figuration, examples, syntax, actual repetition of phrases, that Pascal would be convicted of plagiarism in any American school or university with their rather literal notions of what constitutes plagiarism. The frequent effect in reading Pascal is that he begins to seem an involuntary parody of his precursor. This is particularly unfortunate whenever Pascal overtly denounces Montaigne, since sometimes we hear the pious son castigating the unbelieving father in the father's inescapable accents.

It has been surmised that Pascal jotted down his *Pensées* with his copy of Montaigne's *Essays* always lying open before him. Whether this was literally true or not, we may say that Montaigne was for Pascal quite simply a presence never to be put by. Eliot speaks of Montaigne's readers as being "thoroughly infected" by him, and certainly Pascal must have known inwardly the anguish of contamination. What are we to do with *Pensées* 358, one example out of many:

Man is neither angel nor brute, and the unfortunate thing is that he who would act the angel acts the brute.

That would have been admirable, had it not been lifted from the best essay ever written, Montaigne's "Of Experience," where it is expressed with rather more force and insight:

They want to get out of themselves and escape from the man. That is madness: instead of changing into angels, they change into beasts; instead of raising themselves, they lower themselves.

It is an ancient commonplace, but Montaigne plays variations upon his sources, since his sense of self is his own. What is distressing is that Pascal neither evades nor revises Montaigne, but simply repeats him, presumably unaware of his bondage to his skeptical precursor. Since Pascal's mode is polemic, and Montaigne's is rumination and speculation, the rhetorical edge is different; Pascal emphasizes moral action, while Montaigne centers upon moral being. Yet the reader is made uncomfortable, not because Pascal has appropriated Montaigne, but because Pascal has manifested a paucity of invention. Voltaire and Valéry would seem to be confirmed. Pascal writes as a pragmatic enemy of Montaigne, and this necessarily makes Pascal, as Valéry said, into an enemy of humankind. We are in a difficult enough situation, without being castigated by Pascal merely for being what we have to be. Do we still need Pascal? We read Montaigne as we read Shakespeare and Freud. How can we read Pascal?



Nietzsche insisted upon finding in Pascal an antithetical precursor, and shrewdly located Pascal's major error in the famous "wager":

He supposes that he proves Christianity to be true because it is necessary. This presupposes that a good and truthful providence exists which ordains that everything necessary shall be true. But there can be necessary errors!

Later Nietzsche observed that "one should never forgive Christianity for having destroyed such men as Pascal." Yet Nietzsche also remarked, in a letter to George Brandes, that he almost loved Pascal for having been "the only *logical* Christian." The true link between the two was in their greatness as moral psychologists, a distinction they share with Montaigne and with Kierkegaard and, in another mode, with Swift. Pascal's strong swerve away from Montaigne, which transcends his guilt of obligation to a naturalistic and skeptical master, is manifested in the development of a new kind of religious irony. Montaigne urges relativism because we are opaque to ideas of order other than our own, but this is precisely Pascal's motivation for our necessary surrender to God's will. Since God is hidden, according to Pascal, our condition is no less than tragic. A hidden God is doubly an incoherence for us; intolerable if he exists and equally intolerable if he does not. We are thus reduced to an ironic quietism, in which we are best off doing nothing in regard to worldly realities. We reject the order of society so thoroughly that pragmatically we can accept it totally.

The extraordinary ironies of the *Provincial Letters* are founded upon this Pascalian stance that allows him to chastise the Jesuits for worldliness while defending society against them:

What will you do with someone who talks like that, and how will you attack me, since neither my words nor my writings afford any pretext for your accusation of heresy and I find protection against your threats in my own obscurity? You feel the blows of an unseen hand revealing your aberrations for all to see. You try in vain to attack me in the persons of those whom you believe to be my allies. I am not afraid of you either on behalf of myself or of anyone else, as I am attached to no community and no individual whatsoever. All the credit you may enjoy is of no avail as far as I am concerned. I hope for nothing from the world; I fear nothing from it, I desire nothing of it; by God's grace I need no one's wealth or authority. Thus, Father, I entirely escape your clutches. You cannot get hold of me however you try. You may well touch Port-Royal, but not me. Some have indeed been evicted from the Sorbonne, but that does not evict me from where I am. You may well prepare acts of violence against priests and doctors, but not against me who am without such titles. You have perhaps never had to deal with anyone so far out of your range and so well fitted