



Is Nothing But

Barthes & La Rochefoucauld

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« Quelque bien qu'on nous dise de nous, on ne nous apprend rien de nouveau. »
Compliments can't teach us anything we don't know already. — François VI, Duc de
La Rochefoucauld.

« Il y a de bons mariages, mais il n'y en a point de délicieux. » There are good
marriages, but there aren't any delicious ones.

A summary of a gloss of several of Roland Barthes's observations regarding La
Rochefoucauld and his *maximes*:

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published in July 2015 by Serving House Books. For more, see [Surviving the website](#).*

The author of the *maximes* is not a writer, but a truth-teller. Thus he prefigures those we have come to call intellectuals. Intellectuals are entirely defined by their conflicted status. Society has asked such people to turn against the society, to critique it. Thus we can see the ambiguous connection between La Rochefoucauld and his caste. *Maximes* were a product of the salons, and yet they never stop critiquing this very society and its values.

Of course the critique is not really threatening since it is not political but only psychological. The critique presented by La Rochefoucauld, at once bitter and insufficient, well defines how far a caste [of society] can go in reflecting on itself, in seeking purification without real risk.

La Rochefoucauld:

« Les hommes ne vivraient pas longtemps en société, s'ils n'étaient les dupes les uns des autres. » People would not last long in human society [or at charity balls, speed-dating, the United Nations] were they not easily deceived and deceiving.

« La constance des sages n'est que l'art de renfermer leur agitation dans le cœur. » The stoicism of sages is nothing but a technique of repression, of enclosing their agitation, their upsettiness, deep inside.

Barthes:

The most telling connection that La Rochefoucauld's maxims make involves a deflating, unmasking equivalence. This is typically expressed using a "n'est que" connector. [*N'est que* = not is but = is only; is nothing but]

We can easily see here what now goes by the name of demystification, since the author, with one word, reduces the appearance (*la constance*: stoicism) to its reality (a tactic, a technique). This unmasking is always reductive; it does not explain; it defines the more (the appearance) by the less (the reality).

The equivalence deflates the appearance in favor of a reality that is always less glorious. It would be tempting to call this deflating the logical expression of La Rochefoucauld's supposed pessimism. Certainly, his work is not euphoric. He begins with virtues and ends up with dangers and passions. There seems to be an avariciousness, a rigidity—La Rochefoucauld gnaws on the generosity of human life, and on its diversity. But this pessimism is ambiguous. It is the fruit of a drive, if not to explain, than to name with great precision.

What matters for La Rochefoucauld is to calm—and even if this comes at the cost of a bleakness—the intolerable duplicity of appearances. A definition, however dark it may be, can offer a kind of serenity. To show that the prevailing moral order serves only to mask an underlying disorder is certainly more reassuring than to cling blindly to the apparent, provisional order.

La Rochefoucauld:

« Nous avons plus de force que de volonté. » Our will is rather less than our force.

« On pleure pour éviter la honte de ne pas pleurer. » There are people who cry to avoid the shame of not crying.

Credit, Links & Some Questions

Image is from a blog of one Geraldine Acevedo, a graphic designer. The image appeared with the following caption, a Spanish translation of a fragment of Barthes's *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (*A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*):

Este 'contagio afectivo', esta inducción, parte de los otros, del lenguaje, de los libros, de los amigos: ningún amor es original. (La Rochefoucauld: 'Hay gentes, que no habrían estado jamás enamoradas si no hubiesen jamás escuchado hablar del amor.')

Translating just the maxim Barthes quotes: There are people who, if they had not first heard talk of love, would never have fallen in love.

La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes*. There are editions giving both the original French and an English translation. St. Augustine Press published one such in 2009.

Roland Barthes's "Préface à La Rochefoucauld," was reprinted in the collection *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*. An English translation by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith is available: *Writing Degree Zero*. I would repeat again: The "Barthes" passages above are not direct translations, but summaries constructed from glosses that I prepared from Barthes's original French text.

Barthes's *Mythologies* and La Rochefoucauld's *maximes* have influenced my own writing tremendously. Curious readers might see:

- **One-liners** — or maxims, if you prefer
- **Going Nowhere? (A fresh look at the movies)**

I would not further horn in on Barthes and La Rochefoucauld, except to ask the following. Let us suppose that an intellectual is, as per Barthes's definition, a speaker of truth to power—or a person within the power structure whose job is to point out some of, though not all of its shortcomings. (And is, perhaps, the point of this to help the society let off steam—and not, say, to promote reform?)

That's not the question I have in mind to ask. What I would ask, rather, is: What are we to call the many members of the intelligentsia who do not seek to critique and demystify, but to facilitate? I am thinking of people who move between academia and business or between academia and government employment, and many who work at think tanks, and many others who are busy proposing and promoting ways for us to be healthier, happier, more sustainable, and all the rest. Far from any bleakness, these people seem to be enjoying the sunlight that beams on champions of a brighter future (however realistic or unrealistic such a prospect may be). It would seem we need a word besides "intellectual" to name with precision people who use their intellects not to excavate and delineate deeper realities but to extend and embellish our appearances.