
Faced with the daunting challenge of synthesizing what appears to be a disjointed *Maximes*, many critiques have abandoned this work of La Rochefoucauld to its own paradoxes and contradictions: in the end, the reader must find his own way(s). For his part, Eric Turcat does not recoil from the challenge and offers in *La Rochefoucauld par quatre chemins*, not one but four possible methods of understanding apparent disparate fragments of thoughts. Each chapter of his book is devoted to one particular reading of the text. The first one, rhetorical, demonstrates the ironic nature of the *Maximes*, and plays on the contradiction underlying the concept of the “honnête homme” who ends up being not so honest. The second reading offers a psychological approach (“Psycho vectorielle”), in order to understand whether La Rochefoucauld writes his maxims from the point of view of inferiority—which would postulate pious shame as one of the motivators for writing—or from the point of view of superiority—which would inscribe noble contempt at the center of the work. The third reading is anthropological in nature and aims to reinterpret the perception of Love in the text. Playing on the distinctions associated with Levi-Strauss on nature-culture (raw-cooked) but also on the boiled or the roasted, the smoked and the fermented, Turcat presents a third possibility of understanding love: the grilled or the steamed. The goal in this chapter is to appreciate the middle way so dear to the classics and the ideal of the “honnête homme.” The fourth and final reading centers on the questions of “fortune” and examines this topic with Greimas’ structuralist approach of the quatern (doing and being) and Gosselin’s modal approach, reinterpreting the fatalistic conjecture of the *Maximes*.

Overall, Turcat offers a precise rationalization of La Rochefoucauld’s text, carefully examining (especially in chapters 1 and 4) every expression in selected maxims and showing how word meanings we take for granted, as well as word associations, could be reinterpreted, and reevaluated. One of the most productive examples of this game
can be found in the ambivalence between “habileté” (craftiness) and “honnêteté” (honesty): should the “honnête homme” be truly honest or should he use his intelligence and art to appear as such? In the end, Turcat proves that the distinction is not as clear-cut as the reader may like it to be.

Beyond careful analysis of the written word, Turcat is also cautious not to fall in the structuralist pitfall of neglecting the historical context and the personality of La Rochefoucauld, as well as the environment in which he was living. Turcat sheds light, in this book, on a La Rochefoucauld as a dangerous moralist who prefers often the appearances of courtly existence to the deep life of the soul. Is La Rochefoucauld a devotee of the Jansenist Arnault or a disciple of François de Sales? In the end, the reader is left with the same question that Pontius Pilate presumably asked Christ: “where is the truth?”

My main reservation to this soundly constructed book is that Turcat knows his subject so well that, at times, he tends to lose his reader. Even if Turcat’s text is well illustrated and finely constructed, not every reader has the author’s mastery of La Rochefoucauld. As Turcat explains the irony of La Rochefoucauld, he himself uses irony, and this tends to leave the reader wondering who is playing with whom. This being said, Turcat gives the reader an unusual understanding of the Maximes without falling into the trap of an ideological or idealistic vision of the text. This book is definitely for the specialist of La Rochefoucauld and should be read with the Maximes close at hand.