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A Cartesian Underworld Uncovered

Le Coëdic's Polemical Poetry against René Descartes

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Abstract

This contribution focuses on a Neo-Latin hexameter poem written by a Jesuit priest around the year 1700 as an example of a poetic reaction to a natural philosophical polemic in prose of the seventeenth century: the debate over the doctrines of René Descartes. It will offer a telling instance of polemic and dissent against one famous and notoriously combative, but at the time already deceased figure of seventeenth-century natural philosophy. Introducing the poem *Mundus Cartesii* and reflecting upon its Neo-Latin and vernacular background, several peculiar reactions to Cartesius' opinions from the Society of Jesus will show how polemic could take an imaginative, satirical, playful form and bring forth literary compositions which defy traditional formal standards.

Keywords

René Descartes – Cartesianism – Neo-Latin – didactic poetry – dream narrative – Neo-Latin satire

...

[...] Hic decus immortale Sophorum
 Regnat Cartesius: [...]
 Vivit adhuc, mihi crede, et molli fixa cerebro
 Vitalis sanam includit glans pinea mentem.¹

‘Here the immortal glory of all wise men, Descartes, reigns: [...] he is still alive, believe me, and an animate pineal gland situated in the soft fabric of his brain encloses a sound mind.’²



René Descartes (1596–1650) is alive, proclaims a character in a Latin hexameter text written around 1700, he is very much alive, even though he should have passed away from an unfortunate bout of pneumonia in 1650 in Sweden, where he was working as a tutor for the Swedish Queen Christina.³ But as we learn from these Latin lines, Descartes was alive and clear-minded in 1700, with a fully functioning pineal gland, which the philosopher had determined as the connection between body and mind.⁴ Not only was Cartesius alive at the time, the text states, but he was an immortal ruler. “Hic”, it reads, here he reigns; but where exactly should that be? It is, in fact, the “World of Descartes”, the *Mundus Cartesii*, where a living Descartes rules over a world (mal-)functioning according to the doctrines proposed in his works over his lifetime. How such a world should work and if it is indeed well functioning and the philosopher indeed of sound mind is only slowly revealed through the text presented below. Introducing the poem *Mundus Cartesii* and reflecting upon its background and its polemic potential will show peculiar poetic reactions from the Society of Jesus to Cartesius’ opinions. This will provide a telling example of polemic and dissent against one famous and notoriously combative, but also, and importantly, at the time already deceased figure of seventeenth century science.

Polemic and dissent in early modern science was not necessarily overly harsh critique or open scorn, but could also take a more subtle form that reveals itself to the modern reader only on closer inspection. This could be the

1 Le Coëdic, 1749: 46; ll. 72f.; 77f. For the sake of clarity, quotations from the text of the *Mundus Cartesii* by Le Coëdic are given with both page and line numbers, as the print only gives the former.

2 Translations are, where not otherwise indicated, by the author.

3 Gaukroger, 1995: 412–417.

4 Bitbol-Hespériès, 2015b; Gaukroger, 1995: 272f.

case in scientific prose monographs, reviews, academic refutations, and letters circulating within the *res publica*, but also – and this will be the focus here – in satirical literary works. Satirical texts had been a common vehicle of defamation of disfavoured people and topics since antiquity and had already been taken up as such by the early humanists.⁵ Some earlier satirical texts aimed to discredit scientific works, disciplines or scientists in an amusing way.⁶ The case of satirical polemic against René Descartes and Cartesianism will show how scientific polemic could take a satirical and imaginative, even fantastic form, which can sometimes leave the modern reader at a loss as to its precise meaning and intention.

1 A Seventeenth Century “War” against Descartes

René Descartes (1596–1650) discussed controversial theories on many topics, including epistemology, physiology and psychology, but also physics, mathematics, moral philosophy and more in his lifetime. He was very well connected within the Republic of Letters of the time and had contacts with numerous scholars especially in Western Europe, in France and the Netherlands, where he was working for most of his life.⁷ A huge part of his network Cartesius owed to his even better connected close friend, the priest, Minim friar and scientist Marin Mersenne (1588–1648), whom Descartes had gone to school with and who played a huge role in helping prepare Cartesius’ works for print, promoting and disseminating them, defending them once controversy arose, and keeping the philosopher informed of the impact of his ideas, opinions and doctrines all over the European *res publica litteraria*.⁸ Already during his lifetime, Cartesius’ doctrines were heavily discussed and often harshly criticized, and among his most ardent adversaries were numerous members of the Society of Jesus. In 1640, Descartes’ opinions on optics, for example, were refuted in a momentous disputation held at Clermont College in Paris.⁹ Letters to his

5 De Smet, 1996; Marsh, 2014; Porter, 2014; Relihan, 2017.

6 Menippean satire had been mocking the figure of the too serious scholar since humanist times: see Relihan, 2017. For seventeenth-century satire against alchemy and alchemists, see Kirsten, 1645; Sędziwój, 1607; van Schoonhoven, 1618.

7 Gaukroger, 1995, provides a thorough overview of Descartes’ life, system of philosophy and influence. A concise overview is given also by van Ruler, 2019.

8 This is especially true for Descartes’ “Parisian” years, but to a lesser degree also for his later time spent in the Netherlands: Baillet, 1691; Dear, 1988; Fowler, 1999; Grosslight, 2013; Moreau, 2012.

9 Ariew, 1999: 140–154; Fowler, 1999: 19f.

friend Mersenne testify to Cartesius' deep embarrassment and anger towards the French members of the Society of Jesus. This can essentially be determined as the beginning of what he himself described as a "war" between Descartes and the Jesuits, which lasted even longer than Cartesius' lifetime.¹⁰

After the philosopher passed away in 1650, engaging with and teaching Cartesian theories continued to be highly controversial.¹¹ For example, Henricus Regius (1598–1679), professor of medicine in Utrecht, was reprimanded for teaching Cartesian philosophy. In the course of this dispute, in 1642, Descartes himself helped Regius formulate a highly offensive response to his critics which led to the official condemnation of his works by the city council of Utrecht.¹² Catholics at Louvain banned Cartesian ideas in 1662 and the Catholic Church added Descartes' writings to the *Index of Prohibited Books* in 1663. Even the French king took sides in this "war": in 1671, Louis XIV issued an anti-Cartesian edict, and the Faculty of Arts in Paris forbade the teaching of Cartesian doctrines in 1691. After many Jesuit schools had provided exact rules and guidelines to lecture against Descartes' theories, the Society of Jesus officially prohibited the teaching of Cartesianism in 1706.¹³

Despite all these official statements, bans and edicts – or even encouraged by them, as prohibited things are often the most fascinating – Cartesius' opinions, writings and doctrines were very much present in the *res publica litteraria* in the second half of the seventeenth century. Scholars all over Europe and across the Society of Jesus engaged heavily in discussions about different Cartesian theories. The efforts on both sides – philosophers and scientists who disseminated and adapted Cartesian ideas and those who criticized, spoke and wrote against them – were most intense in France and the Netherlands, where the late philosopher had been most active.¹⁴ Here, several natural philosophical schools – followers of Cartesius, of Pierre Gassendi's atomistic philosophy, scholastic scholars clinging to Aristotelian methods and ideas – fought fiercely over scientific and philosophical truths, some earning the title of 'sects' by

10 Ariew, 2003: 157f.; Fowler, 1999: 7–35.

11 Ariew, 2003: 157f.; Bellis, 2022.

12 Bos, 2002: xii; Schmaltz, 2019b; Verbeek, 2015. Regius made it into the poem discussed below as one of Cartesius' ardent followers.

13 Ariew, 1999: 142f.; Ariew, 2003: 157f.; Ariew, 2014: 15–26; Fowler, 1999: 7–53; Roux, 2019.

14 Like most complex philosophical systems, Cartesian philosophy was not as distinct as this very restricted overview might suggest. Philosophers and scientists taking up Descartes' ideas in one area of natural philosophy were often refuting or adapting his theories on other topics. Still, they often saw themselves, and even more often were seen by the opposing side, as Cartesians; see Bellis, 2022; Easton, 2015; Schmaltz, 2016.

contemporaries for their relentless defences of the new ideas.¹⁵ So, around 1700, when the hexameter poem under discussion here was most probably written, half a century after his death, René Descartes was still very much alive in the minds of numerous European scholars of the time and the ‘war’ between Cartesianism and his adversaries was far from over.

2 Poetic Polemic: Pierre Le Coëdic’s *Mundus Cartesii*

This dispute was not only fought with bans and edicts, but also with pieces of text. Members of the Society of Jesus were among the most ardent critics of the new philosophies and attacked Descartes and his followers repeatedly via disputations at their colleges along with longer polemics against Cartesians.¹⁶ The hexameter poem introduced at the beginning of this contribution, the *Mundus Cartesii*,¹⁷ can be seen as a testimony to the culmination of this polemic against Cartesianism in the course of the seventeenth century. It is a poem of 804 hexameters, written by a French Jesuit, Pierre Le Coëdic (1668–1754).¹⁸ Its date is unclear: it is suggested that it might have been written around 1700, but it was only printed in the middle of the eighteenth century, in the first volume of the *Poemata Didascalica*, a collection put together by François Oudin.¹⁹ The *Mundus Cartesii* belongs to the genre of didactic poetry, emulating Lucretius’ *De rerum natura* and Virgil’s *Georgics*, as well as medieval and Neo-Latin predecessors. It contains numerous allusions to both Virgil and Lucretius and at one point explicitly invokes the Lucretian muse (ll. 595–598, p. 65):

[...] O ubi Musa,
Quae te Pierio contingere cuncta lepore,²⁰
Lucreti, docuit! Summo de culmine Pindi
Huc adsis, o diva, novoque edissere vati

15 Bellis, 2022; Schmaltz, 2016.

16 For example, the disputation by Ragayne de La Picottière, 1665, printed under both his French name and the latinized Ludovicus Prou; longer prose works include Huet, 1689; de la Grange, 1682; de la Ville, 1680; Vincent, 1677; see Ariew, 1999: 155.

17 Le Coëdic, 1749.

18 Haskell, 2003: 166–175; de Backer/de Backer/Sommervogel, 1891: 1264f.

19 Oudin, 1749, I: 43–72.

20 This alludes to Lucr. 1. 934: musaeo contingens cuncta lepore.

‘O, where is the Muse who taught you, Lucretius, to touch all with poetic charm! Come here from the peaks of the Pindus mountains, goddess, and instruct a new bard.’

The intention of didactic poetry since Lucretius – this had been a topos long before Le Coëdic’s work – was to convey complex content or obscure subjects in an aesthetically pleasing form, similar to bitter medicine given with sweet honey (Lucr. 1. 931–950). The more complex the subject, one might deduce, the more poetic skills are needed to both instruct and please the reader. This was taken seriously by many scholars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Quite a large number of them, including numerous Jesuits, treated natural philosophical or scientific topics in didactic poems.²¹ In Le Coëdic’s *Mundus*, the Cartesian world system is presented in an intriguing framework. While pondering recent natural philosophical hypotheses, the narrator seeks rest in nature and promptly falls asleep. In his dream, he is transported into an arctic region, where he discovers a cave and, venturing inside it, gains access into a world underground which, though seeming similar at first glance, differs from the world above known to him (ll. 33–36, p. 44):

[...] alium delabor in orbem
Huic similem. Sed mole minor radiabat Olympus
Ignibus astrorum fixis. Errantia subter
Sydera non aequo peragebant tramite cursus.

‘I am slipping into another world, similar to the one I know. But the firmament was burning less brilliantly from the fires of the fixed stars and down here the planets were not following their course in a consistent path.’

Catching sight of a splendid palace standing on top of a hill, the narrator goes about exploring cheerfully (*animi laetum*: l. 46, p. 45), comparing himself to Columbus as discoverer of a new world (l. 43, p. 44), and encountering Descartes’ friend Marin Mersenne outside the building. The Minim friar is the one informing the adventurer that he has found himself in “Descartes’ world” and that, contrary to what the world above believes, the philosopher has only feigned his death in Sweden and is, in fact, very much alive in this subterranean world (ll. 53–101, pp. 45–47). Mersenne gives the narrator an extended

21 On the topic, see Haskell, 2003, 2014a, 2014b, 2018, 2021; Korenjak, 2019; Kühlmann, 2016; Markevičiūtė/Roling, 2021; Tautschnig, 2020.

tour of Cartesius' palace, where several of his followers teach the philosopher's doctrines and their own advancements of Cartesian theory to admiring pupils. Among the things shown to the eager narrator are human and animal automata, which are not behaving naturally at all, thus contradicting Cartesian anatomical theories (ll. 171–213, pp. 49–51).²² This is followed by an anatomical lesson based on Descartes' *Treatise on Man*. This work was published posthumously, including notes by Louis de La Forge (1632–1666).²³ Hence, Forgius, as he is called in the Latin text (l. 224, p. 51), is the Cartesian follower presenting the theatrum anatomicum in the didactic poem (ll. 215–260, pp. 51f.). In other rooms of the palace, the protagonist detects Claude Clerselier (1614–1684),²⁴ Blaise Pascal (1632–1662), “uterque Regius” – probably the above-mentioned Dutch Henricus Regius (see n. 12) as well as Pierre-Sylvain Régis (1632–1707), known primarily for his comprehensive textbook version of the Cartesian philosophical system²⁵ – and “all the other devotees of this new sect” (et reliqui, sibi quos nova secta gregales/ Adjunxit, l. 264–265, p. 53) teaching Cartesian ideas. The lessons include experiments on the vacuum (ll. 288–297, pp. 53f.) and on air pressure (ll. 298–314, p. 54). Finally, on the palace's roof, the protagonist gets to meet Descartes himself, who is most interested in his current reputation in Europe. The narrator begins by telling the philosopher about the work of his followers, but does not spare Cartesius' feelings when he also speaks in great detail about the advancements of contemporary natural philosophy and the criticism against his person and philosophical system (ll. 356–413, pp. 56–58). The philosopher's reaction is, firstly, to persuade the narrator to drink a cup of liquid which will open his eyes to the true nature of things, and secondly, to give a long didactic speech in which he recounts the three types of material found in the cosmos and the workings of the universe as he explained it in his works (ll. 444–593, pp. 59–65). At the end of this speech, the protagonist is given a telescope to see with his own eyes how the heavens of Descartes' reign work. He does so enthusiastically, evoking the Lucretian muse and giving a second instruction on Cartesian theories by describing what he sees with the help of the instrument (ll. 594–765, pp. 65–71). He observes and describes the Cartesian heavens, however, they soon begin to collapse and bury Cartesius

22 On this episode, see Haskell, 2003: 170f.; Markevičiūtė/Roling, 2019: 9f.

23 Bitbol-Hespériès, 2015a; Drieux, 2019; Wilkin, 2003.

24 Schmaltz, 2019a; Wilkin, 2003.

25 Régis, 1690. If the author indeed wanted to point those two Regii, Régis would be the only one in this group still alive when the *Mundus Cartesii* was composed. Cf. Haskell, 2003: 171 (who seems to think the author referred to only one or the other *Regius* here); Bellis, 2022: 101; Del Prete, 2019; Reid, 2015.

beneath his own world. The narrator only narrowly escapes this apocalyptic scene through a gate of ivory (ll. 766–804, pp. 70f.).

2.1 *Background 1: a Satirical Neo-Latin Dream Narrative*

When reading this synopsis and the whole poem, the modern reader might ask himself what the intention of such a didactic poem might be. Is it, like other didactic poems of the time, to teach its scientific content? What about the controversial theories of Cartesianism? It seems suspicious, almost impossible, that a Jesuit author of this time uses a didactic poem to spread Cartesian philosophy in light of what has been said above about the opposition towards Descartes and his works by Jesuit authorities in the decades before. Indeed, the text is full of subtle critique and ridicule of Descartes and his followers. The late philosopher does not always seem to be of sound mind; he is depicted as self-absorbed, only being interested in his reputation in Europe, and the narrator's statement about this reputation includes harsh critique, even an accusation of plagiarism (ll. 404–406; p. 58: *Fama refert veterum te compilasse sophorum/ Scrinia, quaeque locis variis dispersa leguntur/ Mente recoxisse*; "Fama reports that you have [merely] assembled and rehashed in your mind writings of wise men before you, which had been scattered about many places").

One might suspect the satirical and polemical intention of the *Mundus Cartesii* at several times within and certainly at the end of the poem, when the Cartesian world collapses and the honest protagonist is able to flee this underworld, but the framework provides some answers to the questions about the work's intention. Importantly, the narrative of the *Mundus Cartesii* is presented in the form of a dream. The oneiric framework was a popular device in sixteenth and seventeenth century Neo-Latin literature, especially in the context of Menippean satires.²⁶ Le Coëdic's didactic poem is clearly inspired by such satirical works relating dream journeys, often entitled *Somnium*, famous examples being Juan Luis Vives' *Somnium et vigilia*, Justus Lipsius' *Satyra Menippea: Somnium* and Petrus Nannius' two *Somnia*.²⁷ There are precedents for the type of narrative of the *Mundus*, which present scientific content, namely Libert Froidmont's *Somnium sive peregrinatio caelestis* (1616), a short satirical narrative about a dream in which the narrator undertakes a tour through the universe and presents current issues from contemporary astronomy;²⁸ Johannes Kepler's famous and influential *Somnium seu Opus*

26 De Smet, 1996: 87–116; Porter, 2014.

27 De Smet, 2015; Relihan, 2017; Sacré, 1994.

28 Arieu, 2015a; de Smet, 1996: 87–116; Glonski, 2013; Pantin, 2001, 2019.

posthumun de astronomia lunari (1634), a fantastic dream narrative describing the moon;²⁹ Athanasius Kircher's *Itinerarium exstaticum* (1656) and *Iter exstaticum secundum* (1657), two ecstatic voyages through the universe and the earth, respectively, as well as, inspired by Kircher, Valentin Stansel's *Uranophilus caelestis peregrinus* (1685), portraying an ecstatic dream journey through the universe.³⁰ These influential Neo-Latin works constitute important models for the *Mundus Cartesii*, as they portray an impossible journey made in a dream-like state to another world, and explain this other world's characteristics.³¹ The *Mundus Cartesii* represents a variation of this theme, as it describes a world turned upside down, which is nonetheless similar to ours. Polemic does have a place in the earlier dream narratives into the universe, as in them recent astronomical discoveries are reflected and discussed by the figures of the respective narrative quite animatedly. While Froidmont was not explicitly defending the Copernican system in his *Somnium*, Kepler quite clearly did, and the Jesuits Kircher and Stansel had to argue for the Tychonian model, the geo-heliocentric system accepted by their order. This results in quite vivid discussions of the narrators, their respective guides and other figures in the different *Somnia*. In his *Itinerarium exstaticum*, Kircher is especially outspoken in his critique of the Ptolemaic world view and all proponents of it.³² Thus, the *Mundus Cartesii* had a fitting model for mocking natural philosophical views in an entertaining way in these Neo-Latin works and took it even further.³³ But besides these Latin literary texts, a vernacular, French tradition seems to constitute another crucial literary background for the Jesuit poem.

2.2 Background 11: Literary Polemic against Cartesius

Despite the bans and edicts against Cartesian teaching, the philosopher's theories undoubtedly had a huge impact on seventeenth century natural philosophy, especially in France. Cartesianism was promoted by the late philosopher's followers not only through the publication of highly specialized scientific works, but also through talks and discussions at academies, through teaching in schools, through the organization of public lectures and experiments, and

29 Ait-Touati, 2011: 17–44; Bezzola Lambert, 2002: 66–105; Glomski, 2013.

30 See Camenietzki, 2004; Glomski, 2013, 2015; Kircher, 1656, 1657; Stansel, 1685.

31 These dream journeys had started to inspire vernacular science fiction literature during the seventeenth century; see Glomski, 2013, 2015.

32 Camenietzki, 2004; Glomski, 2013.

33 Besides these dream narratives, Neo-Latin prose satire had mocked scientists and scientific writing in a humorous and learned way in other forms, as Relihan showed with the example of Caspar Dornau's *Amphitheatrum*, a mock encyclopedia written especially against Ulysse Aldrovandi's encyclopedic efforts. See Relihan, 2017: 345–348.

through textbooks for interested laymen.³⁴ Similarly, the often harsh critique of many of the ideas raised and discussed in the works of René Descartes that had been voiced during his lifetime continued to be issued in different media through the course of the century. It took many different forms, not least literary: university dissertations, pamphlets, letters and more were written against the philosopher.³⁵ The two camps reacted to critique in similar ways: They published polemical responses, as well as satirical texts, aiming to ridicule Cartesius' adversaries. As a reaction to the anti-Cartesian edict by the French king in 1671, a satirical decree in favour of the new philosophy was published by the French author and admirer of Cartesian thinking, Nicolas Boileau.³⁶ Some of Descartes' critics took up this satirical impulse to ridicule their enemies.³⁷ The *Mundus Cartesii* is one example of such a satirical text, which still displays a lot of knowledge about Cartesian thinking.

The inspiration to create a "World of Descartes" had actually been delivered by the philosopher himself in one of his works. His posthumously published *Le Monde de M. Descartes ou Le Traité de la Lumière* (Paris 1664) presented his theories of light and movement, the origins of the cosmos through matter and movement, especially in the form of vortices, and his mechanical physiological ideas, conceptualizing the human body almost like a machine.³⁸ Descartes had already written this work between 1629 and 1633 but had hesitated to publish it after the trial of Galileo in 1633.³⁹ In the treatise, the philosopher imagines a "New World" to demonstrate his convictions on the formation of the universe based on his theory of matter and motion: "For a short time, then, allow your thought to wander beyond this world to view another, wholly new one, which I shall cause to unfold before it in imaginary spaces."⁴⁰ This imaginary world of Descartes turned out to be one of the most important works for seventeenth century Cartesianism. At the same time, it was criticized shortly after the posthumous publication of the treatise in the 1660s.⁴¹ The *Mundus Cartesii* equally looks back on this Cartesian work, as it not only imagines a new world working according to Cartesian laws, but discusses and derides the very same topics presented in *Le Monde*. Besides the demonstration of mechanical physiology

34 Bellis, 2022: 96–101; Clarke, 1985; Easton, 2015.

35 Bellis, 2022: 100f.

36 Arrêt burlesque, 1671, ed. Murr, 1992: 231–240; see Albou, 1994; Roux, 2013: 62–64.

37 Ariew, 2003: 157–161; Huet, 1692; on Huet, see Ariew, 2015b; Lennon, 2019.

38 This work is usually called *The World* or *Treatise on Light* in English scholarship. To avoid confusion here, it will be called by its French short title, *Le Monde*.

39 Ed. by Gaukroger, 1998; see also Bellis, 2009; Gaukroger, 1995: 249–256; Solère, 1994.

40 Descartes, 1664, transl. Mahoney: ch. 6 (31).

41 Correard, 2017: 325f.

and animal automata in the Palace of Descartes, it is especially the philosopher's didactic speech which is telling here: Le Coëdic lets Cartesius proudly expound his theories of matter, the origins of the universe, vortices and almost all the things he had written about in the treatise he was too hesitant to publish during his lifetime.

Le Coëdic was not the first to ridicule this World of Descartes as defective in a piece of imaginative literature, not even the first to do it within an oneiric framework. Another satirical dream journey exactly to the World of Descartes had been published about a decade earlier: *Voyage [sic] du monde de Descartes*, a French prose satire (1690) by the Jesuit historian Gabriel Daniel (1649–1728),⁴² also recounting a fictional dream journey to the world of René Descartes on 308 pages in octavo. The protagonist travels through the universe to this hidden world, which also functions according to Cartesian laws. The text was highly successful: numerous mentions show that it was widely read, especially among the Jesuit community. It saw several editions, including an augmented one printed in Paris in 1702, and it was translated into English (London 1692) and Latin (Amsterdam 1694; Vienna 1720/1721).⁴³ It seems very likely that Le Coëdic knew the widely read prose satire written by his fellow Jesuit Daniel and was inspired to create his own (improved?) satirical text against Cartesian philosophy.

2.3 *A Satirical Didactic Poem: the Mundus Cartesii as a Genre Hybrid*

How did Le Coëdic approach this endeavour in his didactic poem? A comparison between Daniel's French and Le Coëdic's Latin fantastical dreams shows several telling examples of both overlap and dissimilarity. Both protagonists travel in a dreamlike state to a world working according to the doctrines of René Descartes; on this journey, they both encounter Cartesius' friend Marin Mersenne, who explains the curious phenomena in 'Descartes' world'; both authors ridicule Cartesian doctrines by exaggerating them – e.g., showing that his dualism of body and mind could lead to human and animal automata, to bodies which could essentially work (but not work naturally) without a mind or soul.⁴⁴

42 Correard, 2017; Daniel, 1691; Lennon, 2015; Smith, 2019.

43 Correard, 2017; Daniel, 1693. The second Latin translation in two books (Vienna 1720/1721) seems to be a reprint of the first as a gift to the newly promoted bachelor students of philosophy at the University of Vienna. During the disputation in 1720, the question of a reconciliation of Cartesianism with peripatetic philosophy was discussed (Choler, 1720: 168). The Promotor was Ignaz Choler, professor of philosophy at Vienna and a member of the Society of Jesus.

44 Correard, 2017.

The differences between the texts lie predominantly and most obviously in the form. Daniel's most important model for his far longer prose satire is Lucian and his *Icaromenippos*, as the author explicitly states in his preface.⁴⁵ The Neo-Latin text looks back on ancient and contemporary models other than those Daniel's satire reflected. It blends Latin didactic poetry with Menippean satirical dream journeys, which were most often written in prose or presented as prosimetra,⁴⁶ making the text a Neo-Latin genre hybrid – a feature which had become quite common in baroque seventeenth century Latin poetry.⁴⁷ The much shorter verse text of the *Mundus Cartesii* takes up the framework of the dream, but does not give the journey to and out of Descartes' world much space (ll. 1–41, pp. 43f.; ll. 797–804, p. 71). Most of the poem is taken up by the depiction of the world itself, the experiments and classes in the palace, the dialogue with Descartes, the philosopher's didactic speech, and the narrator's description of what he sees through the Cartesian telescope. In comparison, Daniel had dedicated three of the four parts of his prose novel to the journey itself and only the fourth part to the description of Descartes' world.⁴⁸ This is perfectly in line with the characteristics of the respective genres, the prose satire giving more room to the journey and narration, the didactic poem focusing on description and instruction.

The oneiric framework also gets a new twist in the *Mundus* and connects it more closely to ancient and contemporary Latin forerunners: While Daniel's journey to the world of Descartes was, *inter alia*, inspired by other journeys into the universe and the astronomical discoveries and controversies of the seventeenth century, Le Coëdic changes the location of Descartes' world. His protagonist is transported to an arctic region, where he reaches the subterranean *Mundus Cartesii*. His journey is likened to a katabasis, a journey to the underworld. Thus, the astronomical feature disappears in Le Coëdic's dream. While Daniel's narrator travelled through the universe, encountering figures of ancient and contemporary natural philosophy along the way,⁴⁹ Le Coëdic's protagonist travels in the other direction, so to speak, into a subterranean world. One reason for this could be that at the beginning of the eighteenth century fighting over the right world system seemed obsolete: the battle lines had been drawn and the opposing opinions of geocentrism, heliocentrism and

45 Daniel, 1690: fol. *3^r–v.

46 De Smet, 1996; Luggin, 2018; Porter, 2014; Relihan, 2017.

47 Glomski/Manuwald/Taylor, 2023; Hintzen/Müller, forthcoming.

48 247 pages for Parts I–III vs. 61 pages for Part IV; see Daniel, 1691.

49 Among them Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and the anti-Cartesians Pierre Gassendi and Gisbertus Voetius; Correard, 2017; Solère, 1994: 170–175.

the compromise, the geo-heliocentric world system, fought over for decades, including in earlier Neo-Latin and vernacular dream satires.⁵⁰

Besides this, it is probable that this change occurred largely due to the author's literary ambition: he aimed to entertain his readership and elevate his work by likening his protagonist's journey to the most important classical journey to the underground in early modern times, the one described in *Aeneid* 6. The concept of their journeys is comparable: Aeneas visited the underworld to speak with his father Anchises, who provided him with crucial knowledge about his future country. Similarly, in the *Mundus Cartesii*, a young, impressionable scholar reaches a hitherto inaccessible subterranean world and gets taught by an older, supposedly deceased person about the state of the world and the cosmos. Aeneas entered the underworld through Lake Avernus near the Phlegraean Fields. Correspondingly, the narrator of the *Mundus Cartesii* accesses this underground world through a region remote from civilization, in the case of the Neo-Latin text situated in the far North to emphasize the exotic character of the location. While the cave of the Sibyl, who guided Aeneas through the underworld, was marked as "wide" in the *Aeneid* (6, 42f.: *Excisum Euboicae latus ingens rupis in antrum, / quo lati ducunt aditus centum, ostia centum* [my emphasis]),⁵¹ the cave discovered in the *Mundus Cartesii* provides the narrator with only a narrow opening, possibly referencing the character of Cartesian philosophy, considerably more difficult to access in contrast to classical learning (*Mundus Cartesii* ll. 26–27; 30, p. 44 [my emphasis]):

Antiquum iuxta scopulis male hiantibus antrum
Pandebat *parvos aditus*, faucesque malignas. [...]
Infernique reor tristes accedere campos.

'An ancient cave near dire gaping cliffs opens a narrow gap and dangerous entrance. [...] I believe I am approaching the gloomy fields of Hell.'

Aeneas was guided into and through the underworld by the Cumaen Sybil. While the narrator of the *Mundus Cartesii* does not need any guidance to enter the fabulous world discovered in his dream, he is similarly provided with a guide, Marin Mersenne, who teaches him about this new world and helps him establish a connection to the people encountered in this underground world, as the Sybil had done when Aeneas met his deceased father. The parallels between Aeneas' katabasis and the one described in the *Mundus Cartesii* also

⁵⁰ Bezzola Lambert, 2002; Glomski, 2013; Westman, 2011.

⁵¹ Quotations from the *Aeneid* are from Horsfall, 2013.

include the framework of the narration: while Aeneas' katabasis is not explicitly described as a dream, like the journey in the *Mundus Cartesii*, his crossing into the underworld is connected to sleep at several points in the book.⁵² Especially interesting for our comparison is the end of the katabasis, when Aeneas returns to the world of the living through a gate of ivory (Aen. 6,898: *portaue emittit eburna*), as does the narrator of the *Mundus Cartesii* when narrowly escaping the destruction of the Cartesian dream world (*Mundus Cartesii* l. 804, p. 72): "*Incolumen ad superos porta dimisit eburna*." As we learn from the passage in the *Aeneid* (6, 893–896) and earlier classical texts, gates of ivory were said to bring false dreams, whereas gates of horn provided veridical dreams.⁵³ This passage was surely known to the author and most of the readers of the *Mundus Cartesii*, underlining the adventure to the Cartesian world as having been a non-veridical dream right at the end of the didactic poem.⁵⁴ What is more, the image of gates of ivory and horn had been used as an analogy for obtaining knowledge through reason and the senses (gate of horn) or through faith alone (gate of ivory) by a famous anti-Cartesian, Pierre-Daniel Huet, in his *Demonstratio evangelica* of 1679. Given Huet's renown as anti-Cartesian and his close connection to the Jesuit order, it is possible that the author of the *Mundus Cartesii* knew this publication and used the image of the gate of ivory not only to evoke the Virgilian katabasis, but also the notion of getting only deceptive knowledge in the *Mundus Cartesii*.⁵⁵

This mix of dream narrative and katabasis might also bring to mind Ludvig Holberg's later prose work *Nicolai Klimii iter subterraneum*, a fictional journey to a fantastic underworld, which was first printed in 1741.⁵⁶ As it is unclear when exactly the *Mundus Cartesii* was written and if there was any connection between the two authors, it must remain an open question whether the two texts were motivated by the same models or if one directly influenced the other. Both poets might in any case have been influenced by seventeenth century discussions about what is found inside the Earth, famously including ideas presented by another member of the Society of Jesus, Athanasius Kircher, both

52 Horsfall, 2013: 243–247; 608–618.

53 *Sunt geminae somni portae, quarum altera fertur/ cornea, qua ueris facilis datur exitus umbris,/ altera candenti perfecta nitens elephanto,/ sed falsa ad caelum mittunt insomnia Manes.* ("There are twin gates of dreams, of which one is reported as being of horn, where true spirits are granted an easy passage, the other is formed all gleaming of bright ivory, but the Manes send through it false dreams to the heavens") Text and translation Horsfall, 2013. See also his detailed discussion of the passage in the commentary: 612–618.

54 Haskell, 2003: 175.

55 Shelford, 2007: 114–143.

56 Holberg, 1741.

in his dialogue with a similar oneiric framework to our didactic poem, the *Iter exstaticum secundum* (1657), and in his very influential and widely-read natural philosophical treatise *Mundus subterraneus* (1665).⁵⁷ Holberg had been inspired by Edmond Halley's idea of a hollow Earth, first described at the end of the seventeenth century, which may well have also influenced Le Coëdic and his didactic poem.⁵⁸

2.4 *Audience and Intention: a Hybrid Polemical Text for Whom?*

How can we imagine the intended audience of this poetic polemic text written by a Jesuit at the beginning of the eighteenth century? As it first circulated in manuscript form and was only later printed in a collection of Neo-Latin didactic poems, the *Mundus Cartesii* seems to have been written for a much more exclusive audience than Daniel's novel, which was printed soon after being written and was widely read. The intended readership of the *Mundus Cartesii* probably included erudite fellow Jesuits and other educated and learned readers. In contrast to the earlier vernacular satire and in accordance with the genre tradition of didactic poetry, the *Mundus Cartesii* also preserved its didactic intention: it was written to present knowledge, even if not necessarily to teach it.⁵⁹ Le Coëdic conformed to the generic tradition, including by using Virgilian and Lucretian topoi and phrasing,⁶⁰ as well as the very popular didactic device of the simile to explain difficult or obscure matter (e.g., ll. 524–530, p. 62), and by integrating a long didactic speech by Descartes himself and a long didactic instruction by the dreaming protagonist into his poem.⁶¹ It is fitting within this aim of didactic poetry – though it might seem contradictory to the satirical intention of the work and to the whole anti-Cartesian polemic – that the text presents intimate knowledge of the doctrines it condemns. Besides a general understanding of Cartesian ideas, quite substantial familiarity with contemporary scientific scholarship is required to fully understand the experiments and demonstrations described in Cartesius' palace in the poem. Rohaldus' experiment on air pressure with the help of tubes filled with mercury,

57 Kircher, 1656, 1657; on him and the *Mundus subterraneus*, see de Vorsey, 2003; Findlen, 2004; Waddell, 2006.

58 Halley, 1692.

59 Haskell, 2003: 174 calls the author's style of demonstrating knowledge an "*ecphrasis* of a science lecture".

60 See, for example, the invocation of the Lucretian muse above, the beginning of Descartes' didactic speech with the formula known from other didactic poetry "*Principio*" (l. 458, p. 59).

61 For a discussion of the poem within the French Neo-Latin genre tradition, see Haskell, 2003: 166–175.

which attract the largest crowd of spectators within the palace,⁶² is only one example that requires a considerable amount of scientific background information to be understandable and was surely best appreciated by readers who already knew about this specific experiment. In Rohaldus' case, this means that not only could an intended expert reader grasp the meaning of the operation, but might also know that Rohault had repeated Blaise Pascal's experiments and given them a Cartesian twist.⁶³ Descartes had been very doubtful about Pascal's theories about air pressure, so it seems even more condescending towards Pascal that the Cartesian Rohault would use his experiments to the advantage of Cartesian schools. The erudite and up-to-date reader of the *Mundus* could certainly also acknowledge with amusement the mention of large admiring crowds at this demonstration at the palace, as Rohault famously gathered large assemblies of interested people, academics and laymen, when conducting his experiments.⁶⁴ Similarly, the other experiments shown at the Cartesian palace, the philosopher's speech, and the instruction by the narrator present an erudite and complex display of Cartesian knowledge. Surely, Le Coëdic's readers could also appreciate that the whole picture of the Palace of Cartesius, where his followers conduct experiments and teach students the Cartesian doctrines, alluded to another famous school building in another fantastic, utopian narrative about new theories and methods in natural philosophy, Salomon's House in Francis Bacon's *Nova Atlantis* (London 1638).⁶⁵

The demonstration of knowledge per se was perfectly in line with the intention of Neo-Latin didactic poetry and with Jesuit literary production at the time; and, as Yasmin Haskell has shown, playful and erudite, even passionate literary displays were expected from Jesuit literature of the time.⁶⁶ What might leave the modern reader somewhat surprised when reading the *Mundus Cartesii* is exactly what creates the humour and satirical critique of the poem: the tension between detailed and learned presentation of Cartesian doctrine and the ultimate failure of the Cartesian world because of the inadequacy of these doctrines.⁶⁷ The sky within the *Mundus Cartesii* seems too dark right from the beginning (ll. 34–36, p. 44, see p. 288 above) – a possible quip against Descartes' *Le Monde, ou Traité de la lumière* – and the planets do not follow a

62 This Cartesian is Jacques Rohault (1618–1672), who famously and publicly repeated many experiments first conducted by contemporary scientists; see Dobre, 2015; Dobre, 2019; Haskell, 2003: 172; McClaughlin, 1996; Schmaltz, 2002: 12–17.

63 McClaughlin, 1996: 474.

64 Bellis, 2022; Des Chene, 2002; Haskell, 2003: 172.

65 Kendrick, 2003; Price, 2018.

66 Haskell, 2018.

67 Markevičiūtė/Roling, 2019: 9f.

certain course, undermining Cartesian astronomical doctrines; boys playing in the palace's yard demonstrate the absurdity of the Cartesian laws of motion (ll. 104–153, pp. 47–49); the animal automata constructed within a workshop are not behaving naturally; the Cartesians are showing off to an impressionable youth with their experiments; the whole Cartesian world is bound to collapse because it stands on shaky ground and at the end, the narrator escapes through a gate of ivory, a symbol of false dreams since antiquity.⁶⁸ Thus, the *Mundus Cartesii* ridicules Descartes himself and his followers. About half a decade after his death, a good part of critique is not only directed against the deceased philosopher, but against people still following his philosophy – even showing off by organizing public experiments, even teaching young people this errant thinking – despite the fact that it had been proven wrong over and over by anti-Cartesian efforts. In the eye of the Jesuit author and his readership, Cartesius, Cartesians and their erroneous philosophy only have a place in a fictional world far away from the real one, in a utopia bound to collapse.

3 Playing with Poetry against the Cartesians

While René Descartes should have been persona non grata to the Jesuits after fighting a war with them during the last decade of his life, and after his doctrines had been very heavily fought over for more than five decades after he passed away – and especially after it had been prohibited to read, much less teach, his writings – Jesuit authors around 1700 still engaged with Cartesian ideas, even if in a polemical and satirical way. The *Mundus Cartesii* introduced here is an example of a satirical text presenting a lot of contemporary scientific knowledge while criticizing it at the same time. It stems from a polemic which swapped over from prose works into the poetic sphere, from the vernacular into Neo-Latin. This engagement with Cartesianism might have been meant to criticize or ridicule Descartes and his followers, but it still reflects a deep fascination with and intimate knowledge of the philosopher's world. That his readers should have been able to understand the intricate and complex nature of Cartesian natural philosophy shows us that Le Coëdic could expect extensive knowledge about Cartesius and his doctrines from his readers. At the same time, the Jesuit author played with Neo-Latin genre traditions: both the dream narrative and the genre of the didactic poem offered him what Ingrid

68 See Haskell, 2003: 168–175; Markevičiūtė/Roling, 2019, 9f., especially on the episodes of the playing boys and on the animal automata.

de Smet has called a “protective cover for the author,”⁶⁹ giving him flexibility to be fascinated and criticize at the same time.

Le Coëdic consequently mixed the genre of didactic poetry with the satirical vehicle of the dream framework, modelling his polemic poem on classical epic poetry, earlier Neo-Latin *Somnia* and a vernacular anti-Cartesian satire. While the criticism of Cartesius is presented in a more subtle way through this framework than in the vernacular works published before it, the exclusive and erudite readership of the Jesuit author were surely entertained and amused by Le Coëdic's twist on the anti-Cartesian polemic.

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69 De Smet, 1996: 110 (regarding the oneiric framework of Neo-Latin Menippean satires).

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