Saint-Évremond and the Case of Champagne d’Ay: Early Modern French Aesthetic Theory Viewed through the Optic of Terroir

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Saint-Évremond (1610–1703) is the seventeenth century’s best-known wine snob. To relate the story of just how it was that Saint-Évremond found himself the recipient of this dubious honor, or what it meant to be a wine snob in the early modern period, some background information is necessary. In fact, this information is more important than the accusation it helps contextualize. It goes beyond clarifying why Saint-Évremond is important for the history of snobbism and reveals him as an essential player in the development of the concept of terroir.

Terroir is the soil, climate, and physiographic composition of a certain locale. It is a singularly French notion explaining how geographic origin influences its agricultural produce, imbuing food and wines with specific flavors.\(^1\) In the seventeenth century, although the word referred principally to different soils, it was already employed in reference to the cultivation of

produce and the determination of its taste. More than just a culinary term, terroir’s early modern evolution is emblematic of a philosophical battle and the transformation of aesthetic theory in France. Specifically, Saint-Évremond’s commentary on terroir and origins in agriculture, cuisine, and the theater testifies to a monist materialistic vision that persisted in the second half of the seventeenth century despite being partially subverted by Cartesian rationalism and dualist thought. Drawing from Saint-Évremond’s colorful remarks on food, wine, and literature, the following pages contextualize the author and discuss the role of origin in assessing both agricultural produce and, surprisingly, people in the seventeenth century.

Saint-Évremond and Epicurus in Seventeenth-Century France

Besides the snobbism evoked above, part of Saint-Évremond’s bane was that of the Epicurean school itself. Whether at its origin more than two thousand years ago, or during its early modern French resurrection, it popularly conjured up images of decadence, hedonism, and over-indulgence in sensual pleasures. Unlike other Epicureans of his time, the aristocratic Saint-Évremond did little to dispel such a stereotype, instead becoming known for his flamboyant high living. Although this would not have been universally unpalatable, it was perhaps not the most viable strategy for convincing others to adhere to Epicureanism.

In contrast, Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655), who commonly receives the honor for reviving the philosophical school, introduced a more temperate vision of the work of Epicurus to early modern France a generation before Saint-Évremond became known. Gassendi, followed by disciples such as

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3 For an apology of Saint-Évremond and his writings written from within the historical context, see B.D.R., *Apologie des œuvres de Monsieur de St. Evremont: avec son élage et son portrait, & un discours sur les critiques, auquel on a joint plusieurs lettres & fragmens de poésies de M. de Saint-Evremont, qui n’ont pas encore été imprimées* (Paris: 1698).

4 Gassendi’s *Syntagma philosophicum*, which includes his treatise on Epicurus, was published posthumously in 1658. His work in this area, however, was known earlier by many learned scholars (Mersenne, Descartes, etc.) through other publi-
Jean-François Sarasin (1611-1654) and, later, François Bernier (1625-1688) ushered materialist ideas into the realm of serious conversation. He contradicted Cartesian thought, and attempted to legitimize Epicureanism by proving that it was neither the philosophy of excess, nor fundamentally incongruous with Christianity, nor representative of a strict atomistic determinism, which would curtail the freedom of human agency.\(^5\)

This last issue, from the time of Democritus on, constituted one of the fundamental sticking points in convincing potential proselytes of atomism since, as a monist philosophy, it depicted the soul as corporeal instead of spiritual. In the seventeenth century, Descartes had divided the mind from the body, creating an immaterial soul within a dualist system \((\text{esprit and corps})\) that assured the agent complete autonomy over the movements of the body. In contrast, Epicureans portrayed a world produced by atoms randomly raining down. Our bodies and souls are material, created by the combination and recombination of atoms. This materiality of the soul, subject to the laws of physics, left little room for Epicurean proponents to claim complete autonomy over their own actions since a purely physical world would imply that all agency falls within an unbreakable chain of cause and effect. Thus many Epicureans proposed the \textit{clinamen}, or “swerve” to explain random breaks in atomic motion as a way of restoring free will.\(^6\) This notwith-

\(^5\) François Bernier further enlarged the audience by making Gassendi’s \textit{Syntagma philosophicum} available in an abridged French version a generation after its initial publication: François Bernier, \textit{Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi} (Lyon: Anisson, Posuel et Rigaud, 1684).

standing, the system proved overly deterministic for the tastes of many outsiders, presenting something of a thorny issue for Gassendi and others wishing to popularize the school.⁷

Saint-Évremond, who avoided overly erudite explanations or reconciliations between the physics of Epicurus and intellectual currents of the time, chose to advance Epicurean sensuality over its atomistic underpinnings.⁸ Though his writing passes on most of the nuts and bolts issues directly, the deterministic aspect of materialism does nevertheless make its way into Saint-Évremond’s discussion on food, wine, and drama. In fact, by invoking an Epicurean discourse on diversity and limits in the plant and animal world in his discussion of flavor, Saint-Évremond created a novel vision that succeeded in promoting certain unpopular ideas concerning determinism, while avoiding the traditional failings of Epicureans who applied atomistic physics to the agency of human beings. One could argue that his aesthetic discourse on food (and later, theater) provides Epicurean materialism a bridge to the Enlightenment where, after an earlier blossoming in Saint-Évremond’s artistic and culinary theory, it enjoys a rebirth in philosophy.


⁷ Despite such shortcomings, various prominent individuals in seventeenth-century France found Epicureanism attractive. Cyrano de Bergerac, La Fontaine, and, to a lesser extent, Molière all incorporated shades of Epicurean and Lucretian thought into their fiction. Molière is also thought to be the author of a lost translation of De rerum natura (on which, see Darmon (note 2), 21). See Darmon (note 2) as well for more on the Epicurean aspect of Cyrano de Bergerac, La Fontaine and Saint-Évremond. For Cyrano de Bergerac in particular, see Madeleine Alcover, La pensée philosophique et scientifique de Cyrano de Bergerac (Geneva: Droz, 1970). For an analysis that backs away from Molière’s supposed Epicureanism, see Ruth Calder, “Molière, Misanthropy and Forbearance: Eliante’s ‘Lucretian’ diatribe,” French Studies 50 (1996): 138-143.

⁸ For an excellent discussion on this, see Denys Potts in Saint-Évremond: A Voice from Exile: Newly Discovered Letters to Madame de Gouville and the Abbé de Hautefeuille (1697-1701) (Oxford: Legenda, European Humanities Research Centre, Oxford University, 2002), 19. Saint-Évremond, it should be noted, spends much more time considering Epicurean ethics than physics in his Discours sur Epicure (1681).
and science. All of this leads us back to the anecdote concerning the case of the champagne d’Ay.9

The Man and His Appellation

Saint-Évremond was known as a gourmet as early as the 1640s, and his particularly finicky table preferences quickly came under fire.10 The champagne anecdote in question occurred as a mocking reference to the former’s prandial fussiness in a satire written by a certain Boisrobert.11 Saint-Évremond, along with the Marquis de Bois-Dauphin (Mme de Sablé’s son) and the Comte d’Olonne, apparently refused all champagne except that issuing from three particular slopes, including the champagne d’Ay. The trio thus became known in jest as “Les Coteaux,” a playful bit of banter that gained momentum in the 1660s with works such as de Villiers’ Les Costeaux ou les marquis friands, which further satirized them.12

As a result, the “Coteaux” name stuck. Moreover, it became a noun. To be a “coteau” was to be a food snob, a term Boileau further immortalized in his third satire, Le Repas ridicule.13 Ironically, there is evidence that the original “Coteaux” in their later years not only fully embraced the nickname but took to employing it in reference to themselves in public, fanning the mixture of fame and notoriety that grew in regard to their particularity about table wares.14

9 It should be noted that “champagne” at this time was primarily a non-effervescent wine. For the early modern history of champagne, see Benoît Musset, Vignobles de Champagne et vins mousseux: histoire d’un mariage de raison 1650-1830 (Paris: Fayard, 2008).


14 Hope (note 10), 10. La Bruyère too underscores the ridicule of the moniker. He casts it however in the context of social criticism: “Pendant que les Grands négligent de rien connaître, je ne dis pas seulement aux intérêts des princes et aux affaires publiques, mais à leurs propres affaires, qu’ils ignorent l’économie et la science d’un père de famille, et qu’ils se louent eux-mêmes de cette ignorance; qu’ils se laissent appauvrir et maîtriser par des intendants; qu’ils se contentent
Saint-Évremond’s pride in this nickname is not fully intuitive since, among other reasons, it was generally not well regarded in noble circles to be irrevocably associated with a particular region. Starting from the Renaissance, for example, the elite class often disparaged domestic servants by referring to them simply by their region of origin instead of any sort of proper name. The seventeenth century further marked a divide between the court life of Paris and the provinces so that *prétendants* sought metaphorically to wash themselves of any rural patina in order to blend in.\(^{15}\) In this context, Saint-Évremond’s willful association with a geographic appellation was high praise indeed for what could otherwise be considered a blandishment.

Following suit in this ambivalence regarding the mark of an origin, the word *terroir* went from possessing neutral connotations in the sixteenth century to being often derogatory in the seventeenth century. *Le Furetière* confirms that “On dit que le vin a un goût de terroir, quand il a quelque qualité désagréable, qui lui vient par la nature du terroir où la vigne est plantée.”\(^{16}\) By metaphor and metonymy, the seventeenth century associated the word *terroir* with people in a similar way. *Le Furetière* continues:

> On le dit aussi au figuré d’une mauvaise habitude qu’on a prise dans le lieu de sa naissance. Les personnes de Province ne peuvent se défaire d’un certain vice de terroir fort opposé à la politesse (...) On dit qu’un homme sent le terroir pour dire qu’il a les défauts qu’on attribuë ordinairement aux gens de son pays.

This contemptuous use of *terroir* became so forged into the lexicon that when Mme de Sévigné railed in exasperation at her son’s persistence in selling a property that she wished to retain, she explained: “Cette affaire n’est point dans sa tête comme toutes les autres choses; c’est un fonds qui sent parfaitement le terroir de Bretagne.”\(^{17}\) Moreover, *terroir* was a class

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\(^{15}\) “On dit, d’Un homme venu depuis peu de la Province, qu’il a encore l’air de Province, pour dire, qu’il n’a pas encore pris l’air du grand monde & de la Cour; qu’il retient quelque chose des manieres de la Province. Et on dit, Les gens de Province, par opposition aux gens de la ville Capitale & de la Cour. On dit encore dans le mesme sens, Langage de Province, accent de Province, mot de Province.”  
*Province,* *Dictionnaire de la langue française,* 1694 ed.

\(^{16}\) Antoine Furetière, *Le Dictionnaire universel,* 1690 ed.

issue: the seventeenth century believed that those of the aristocracy in particular should rise above the lowly influence of the land.

All of this raises the question of why the sobriquet equating a nobleman with a champagne slope in Ay should be deemed acceptable. Saint-Évremond’s answer is threefold and revealing in different ways, each relating to Ay’s prestige. The first discloses a relatively little-known factoid of culinary historicism that appears in Saint-Évremond’s own remarks shown below: the wines of Ay convey a faint smell of peaches, a fruit apparently considered to be at the top of the order in the strange food hierarchy that the seventeenth century constructed. The second answer is more pertinent in the context of our investigation regarding the evolution of terroir. The wines of Ay had historically been associated with royalty. By drinking them, one metaphorically and metonymically joined the ranks of a prestigious lineage. The third reason is, however, by far the most compelling. Saint-Évremond associates himself with the appellation of Ay precisely because it possesses an uncanny “non-placeness.”

In other words, the wine from Ay is wine without “terroir.” Saint-Évremond writes to the Comte d’Olonne:

> Si vous me demandez lequel je préfère de tous ces vins, sans me laisser aller à des modes de goûts qu’introduisent les faux délicats, je vous diray que le bon vin d’Ay est le plus naturel de tous les vins, le plus sain, le plus épuré de toute senteur de terroir, et d’un agrément le plus exquis par son goût de pesche qui luy est particulier, et le premier à mon avis de tous les goûts.

Saint-Évremond goes a long way toward explaining why he is willing to be associated with the slopes of Ay. In doing so, he is baptizing himself as “non-placed,” pure, and devoid of any enduring influence of the terroir. The quote testifies to how the seventeenth century stigmatized the word terroir, while paradoxically becoming increasingly snobbish about the importance of origin. While puzzling at first, the paradox dissolves with a closer look at wine and food.

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18 Much of terroir’s opprobrium owes to Hippocratic and Galenic discourses, which continued to be influential in the seventeenth century. Commentaries on materialist medicine and social hierarchies frequently intersect. For a passage correlating the terrestrial components of red wine with low class, see Nicolas Abraham de la Framboisière, *Le gouvernement nécessaire à chacun pour vivre longuement en santé* (Lyon: Beuviollin, 1669), 85.

The Menu: A Natural Movement

To reiterate, Saint-Évremond consents to the Coteaux moniker because it connotes the non-place of places: the man, like the wines, does not smell of his origin. This statement of anonymity is perhaps iconic of an idealized perception of aristocracy – but not of food, nor even in truth of the wine from Ay. In fact, the very signature of the origin implies that no other place can produce a wine so natural and pure. For all of this purity, however, it is not stripped of character, since it smells of peaches.20

Indeed, for a meat, vegetable, or wine to smell of its origin in some way is not only accepted: it is expected. Connoisseurs like Saint-Évremond pride themselves on having palates which, in select individuals, attain an unusual degree of discrimination. As food anthropologist Jean-François Revel relates, Dom Pérignon (1638-1715), until a ripe old age, could taste grapes blindly and pronounce without error their field of origin.21 Although such acute powers of discernment belonged to a select few, it was common knowledge that different origins dictated different flavors. Thus Nicolas de Bonnefons, the author of a well-known and authoritative cookbook, explains in 1654 the delights of wines from various regions and plots of land:

Les vins qui se boivent à Paris, y sont apportez de diverse contrées, tant de France, que des pays étrangers, chaque canton en produisant de différents goûts & sèves, blanc, dorez, paillets, & rouges.22

Saint-Évremond, for his part, not only believes in this particularity of taste but also brings a new level of sanctity to what the cooking manuals of the time steadfastly voice: food ought to taste distinctly according to its origin. Indeed, Lavardin, L'Évêque du Mans, notes of the fastidious Coteaux: “Ces

20 On the reputation of Ay and a remark on the fragrance of peaches, see Patrick Forbes, Champagne (New York: Reynal, 1967), 64. Quentin Hope notes in his article as an aside that the producers of Ay used to wash out the interior of their barrels with peach leaves, or even “introduced stone peaches directly into the wine, in order to enhance the flavor (…),” Hope (note 10), 32.

21 A monk from Dom Pérignon’s congregation recounts “Cet homme a conservé jusque dans une vieillesse décrépite une délicatesse de goût si singulière qu’il discernait, sans s’y méprendre, en goûtant un raisin, le canton qui l’avait produit. On lui en présentait un panier cueilli dans toutes les vignes du territoire; il les goûtait, les rangeait chacun selon le sol d’où ils venaient, et marquait avec assurance les espèces qu’il convenait d’allier pour avoir la meilleure qualité de vin, et cela, relativement à la chaleur et à l’humidité de l’été et de l’automne.” Jean-François Revel relates the anecdote in Un festin en paroles (Paris: Pauvert, 1979), 182.

messieurs ne peuvent manger que du veau de Normandie, des perdrix d’Auvergne, des lapins de la Roche Guyon ou de Verdun et, quant au vin, ils ne peuvent boire que celui des bons coteaux d’Ay, Hautvillers et Avenay.”

For Saint-Évremond and his ilk, there is a clear hierarchy of flavors determined by food origin.

Moreover, food should also be pure and natural in its representation of the origin. In the same letter to the Comte d’Olonne, Saint-Évremond stipulates that

Un potage de santé bien naturel, (...) la caille grasse prise à la campagne, un faisan, une perdrix, un lapin qui sentent bien chacun dans son goût ce qu’ils doivent sentir, sont les véritables viandes qui pourront faire en différentes saisons les délices de votre repas.

The word “natural” here means unadulterated and devoid of spices or sauces that would somehow corrupt the transparency of flavors. Again, Saint-Évremond is not alone in pronouncing such a finicky discourse. The cooking manuals from Bonnefons and La Varenne also repudiate the use of spices to hide natural flavors.

Saint-Évremond goes even further, virulently qualifying the overuse of spices and strong sauces as downright noxious.

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23 Quoted by Des Maizeaux, Œuvres de Monsieur de Saint-Évremond: publiées sur ses manuscrits, avec la vie de l’auteur (Amsterdam: 1753), 30.

24 Saint-Évremond, vol. 1, 256.


26 Bonnefons supports the trend towards purity and naturalness by casting sauces in an unfavorable light: “Vous pourrez adjouster à la bonté du Vin, beaucoup d’ingrédients qui servent à l’odeur & au goût, come du jus de Framboises, de l’Eau de Vie, du Sel (...) & encore une infinité d’autres mélanges, inventez par le Caprice des hommes; mais tous ces ragoust ne font que déguiser le Vin sans augmenter la bonté” (Bonnefons, 66). The status of spices was also evolving. Certain spices that had been expensive and used primarily by the wealthy in the Renaissance were becoming attainable by lower classes. They fell from prestige and became associated with gauche heavy-handed or inferior preparations. For the evolution of spices, see Ken Albala, Eating right in the Renaissance (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 210-11. For a theory opposing the notion that spices were used in the Renaissance to disguise flavors of spoiled foods, see the last chapter of Paul Freedman, Out of the East: Spices and the Medieval Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
Royal and Poetic Mediations of Terroirs

Although produce ought to ring true of its origin without smelling unpleasantly of the terroir, the psychological connection between what one eats and where it comes from is mediated by other characteristics. As he extols the qualities of the wines of Ay, Saint-Évremond goes on to bolster their image by adumbrating prestigious proofs of the wine’s merits:

Leon X, Charles Quint, François premier, Henry VIII, avaient tous leur propre maison dans Ay ou proche d’Ay pour y faire faire plus curieusement de leurs provisions. Parmi les plus grandes affaires du monde qu’euèrent ces grands Princes à démêler, avoir du vin d’Ay ne fut pas un des moindres de leurs soins.27

This association with royalty and fame is nothing new: Ay had long been known as the wine of kings, with references to it appearing in the preceding century.28 The remark shows how a terroir, even if the soil is reputedly “anonymous,” is valorized by outward influences.

In fact, Saint-Évremond’s observation concerning royalty and Ay testifies to a mediation that exists between distinct provenances of food and wine and the prestigious personalities who were known to like them. The high status of the origin is often enough granted by a metonymic emblazonment of those who consume it, and this knowledge is inseparable from the creation of a terroir’s mystic. Moreover, not only do kings and other influential personalities, such as poets, mediate a hierarchy of origins, but they also actually attribute flavors to terroirs, impacting both what people taste and how they taste it. Even if Louis XIV did not assign Ay its peach flavors, his influence unquestionably helps explain the popularity of the wines of Champagne in the court and later in the bourgeois class: the taste of Ay, in particular, became the taste of rarefied quality.29 Ay’s popularity and

28 For an important reference to Ay in the preceding century, see Charles Estienne, L’agriculture et la maison rustique (Paris: Jacques Du-Puys, 1586): “Les vins d’Ay sont claires et sauvelets, subtils, délicats, et d’un goût fort agréable au palais, pour ces causes souhaitiez par la bouche des Roys, Princes & Grands Seigneurs, et cependant Oligophores, c’est-à-dire, si délicats qu’ils ne portent pas l’eau qu’en fort petite quantité.” Estienne, 598. It was rumored at the time (the rumor persists today) that Pliny the Elder had written of the “renowned wines of Ay” in Book 14 of his Natural History. This is however not the case.
29 The wine historicist Roger Dion explains in this context that “dans la seconde moitié du XVIIe siècle, il était de bon ton, parmi les raffinés, d’afficher une préférence exclusive pour les vins de Champagne et de prêter une importance singulière aux débats sur les mérites de tel cru de la Rivière ou de tel autre de la Montagne
prestige were further mediated by Voltaire, who wrote of it in *Le Mondain*, his famous poem praising luxury.\textsuperscript{30} He thus poeticized the champagne d’Ay and, as the title suggests, advertised it as cosmopolitan as the people who consumed it.

**Terroir in Literature: From Characters to Criticism**

The trend combining nature, purity and origin with registers shared by people and food continues unabated between the seventeenth and eighteenth century and extends into the domain of the arts. Voltaire writes in the *Encyclopédie* that: “Comme le mauvais goût, au physique, consiste à n’être flatté que par des assaisonnements trop piquants et trop recherchés, ainsi le mauvais goût dans les arts est de ne se plaire qu’aux ornements étudiés, et de ne pas sentir la belle nature.”\textsuperscript{31}

Often the conflation occurs in the satirical genre. In matters concerning both cuisine and the arts, the crude occupants of Boileau’s table in his third satire, *Le Repas ridicule*, gravitate toward cheap knock-offs, produce of inferior origins, and over-seasoning. They unerringly conform to their own origins of low class and rusticity, a fact dramatized each time they attempt to break with their defining influences. Boisterously advertising his uncultivated and undiscerning palate, a particular “fat” indiscriminately promotes domesticated rabbits and pigeons over their more prestigious wild counterparts:

> Surtout certain Hableur, à la gueule affamée  
> qui vint à ce festin, conduit par la fumée  
> et qui s’est dit Profés dans l’ordre des Costeaux  
> a fait en bien mangeant l’éloge des morceaux.  
> Je riois de le voir avec sa mine étique  

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\textsuperscript{30} “D’un vin d’Aî dont la mousse pressée  
> De la bouteille avec force élancée  
> Comme un éclair fait voler son bouchon  
> Il part, on rit, il frappe le plafond.  
> De ce vin frais l’écume pétillante,  
> De nos Français est l’image brillante.”  
> Excerpted from *Le Mondain*, Voltaire, 1736.

son rabat jadis blanc et sa perruque antique
en lapins de garenne ériger nos clapiers,
et nos pigeons cauchois en superbes ramiers.\footnote{32}

The braggart (\textit{hableur}) pretending to be of the ranks of the \textit{Coteaux} could not be more ridiculous in his appreciation of low-quality foods, which he raises to gourmet fare. The literal bad tastes of the food and the metaphorical bad tastes of the guest, despite the pompous comportment, are thus quickly revealed.

More importantly, our conundrum of the case of champagne d’Ay spread from the kitchen to the library and the critic’s pen in the second half of the seventeenth century. By creating representations where characters’ tastes mirror their class, Boileau adheres to the rules that he extends to origins and climate in the \textit{Art poétique}.\footnote{33} His rule also reflects Saint-Évremond’s own professed aesthetic doctrine and embodies a mode of literary criticism popular at the time. Although Saint-Évremond believes that human beings ought to escape the control of \textit{terroir} in the real world, he directs that for the sake of verisimilitude authors ought to take \textit{terroir} into account in their characters. In books, unlike in life, the determinism occurs independently of the character’s social class.

Thus, even for aristocracy, to escape the definition of \textit{terroir} is to break the laws of verisimilitude. This is the criticism that Saint-Évremond levels at Racine’s \textit{Alexandre}, whose protagonist, Porus, has been too “Frenchified” for Saint-Évremond’s tastes:

\begin{quote}
Je m’imaginais en Porus une grandeur d’âme qui nous fût plus étrangère, le Héros des Indes devait avoir un caractère différent de celui des nôtres. Un autre Ciel pour ainsi parler, un autre Soleil, une autre Terre y produisent
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}

\footneterm{33} “Consservez à chacun son propre caractère. Des siècles, des pays, étudiez les mœurs. Les climats font souvent les diverses humeurs. Gardez donc de donner, ainsi que dans Clélie L’air, ni l’esprit français à l’antique Italie.”

Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, \textit{Art poétique}, Chant 3, vv. 112-16.
\end{footnotes}
Saint-Évremond develops the human-animal-plant metaphor and attributes a determining force to the climate, not only in terms of physical appearance, but also in terms of ethical qualities and even different ways of reasoning. Moreover, if Saint-Évremond replaces “terroir” here with “terre,” associating it with the sky and sun, he likely does so to avoid the negative connotations the former word had gained. He is not making a judgment on whether it is laudable or incriminating to be marked by one's origin, but merely stating the facts: for a play to be verisimilar, the author must account for the provenance of the characters.  

### Scenes of the Theater and Stages of the World

Adrien Baillet, a priest and Descartes’ first biographer, opposed such materialism and was an important adversary to climate theory. Speaking of a brand of literary criticism where an author is judged according to his climate and terroir, Baillet laments:

> Quoique nous ayons dit plus haut que les qualités de l'esprit de l'homme sont personnelles, et qu'il y ait une espèce d'injustice à rejeter sur un climat, sur un territoire, ou sur une province, les vices et les vertus qu'on remarque dans les auteurs, néanmoins, plutôt que de faire schisme avec le plus grand nombre de critiques, il faut convenir avec eux que les auteurs étant composés de matière corporelle aussi bien que de substance spirituelle, ils participent au moins par cet endroit à la qualité de l'air qu'ils respirent et du terrain qui les nourrit.

Baillet does not concede that human beings are composed of a material soul and is unremitting in his judgment that the climate will not change the quality of an author’s work. Nevertheless, he allows that the air and the

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ground must have some influence on human beings. Baillet’s work helps testify to the popularity of climate theory at the time.37

A partial explanation for Baillet’s remarks is that they appear a year after an article entitled La Nouvelle division de la terre par les différentes espèces ou races d’hommes qui l’habitent, written by the Epicurean François Bernier, was published in a popular scholarly journal.38 In the article, Bernier explains that voyages around the world have taught him about differences in various populations. He speaks first in broad terms, commenting mostly on how the exterior appearance of humans is influenced by climate and terroir. Notably absent from his account, however, is the psychological or intellectual determinism that found its way into commentaries on authors and fictional characters.

Car quoique dans la forme extérieure du corps, et principalement du visage, les hommes soient presque tous différents les uns des autres, selon les divers cantons de terre qu’ils habitent [...] j’ai néanmoins remarqué qu’il y a sur tout quatre ou cinq espèces ou races d’homme dont la différence est si notable, qu’elle peut servir de juste fondement à une nouvelle division de la terre.

Bernier here propounds an Epicurean discourse on diversity and limits that dates back to Epicurus.39 He states that the inhabitants of the earth are as corporally diverse as the physical districts from which they originate. Although these minute differences are limited to four or five larger categories, the discourse opens the door to dangerous distinctions. It suggests inherent capacities of the body and soul (as far as the soul might be construed as material) determined by the climate of origin.

In fact, Bernier, who visited Saint-Évremond in England in 1685, devotes a discussion on limits and diversity to the various absurd-sounding aesthetic judgments he makes of ethnic groups and the beauty of women. Because his doctrine skates on the thin ice of propounding determinism, which would be unpalatable for a population seduced by Cartesian rationalism, we may surmise that by limiting his selection of examples to women

and non-Europeans, Bernier pulls his punches. He is also specific in combining the power of the “seed” (semence) with the effects of the environment: “Elle (la beauté) ne vient donc pas seulement de l’eau, de la nourriture, et du terroir et de l’air, mais aussi de la semence qui sera particulière à certaines races ou espèces.” The Bernier explanation further cements the importance of class and origin in the French collective imagination. More importantly, within the larger limits of the general categories, Bernier stipulates for regional diversity according to various smaller spaces (cantons), allowing for play in the subtleties brought on by terroir.

**Rationalism, Individualism, and Nationalism in Aesthetics**

In his book *Homo Aestheticus*, Luc Ferry maps the evolution of aesthetics in early modern France. His thesis, that there has been a “democratization of tastes,” is supported by his depiction of a general evolution of aesthetic theory from an objective, communal standard toward an individualized subjective determination of what constitutes beauty in the world. Ferry explains that a cosmic system of aesthetics largely inspired by antiquity was replaced by the personalized system of tastes, closer to what we know today. Assessing the importance of this change involves making some distinctions.

In the Cartesian dualistic separation between mind and body, the rational faculty lies in the immaterial soul. Reason and the will, independent from the lower influences of the body, work together to judge the world. Ferry outlines a rationalist and classicist theory of art and contrasts it with an increasingly popular tendency towards aesthetic theory that is linked to the affective part of the soul. Ferry explains that Dominique Bouhours depicted the two views in the characters of Eudoxe and Philanthe in *Des manières de bien penser dans les ouvrages de l’esprit* (1687). Eudoxe is a rationalist and believes that the success of a work of art is fundamentally linked to its adherence to the rules of reason. Philanthe, for his part, believes that art must appeal to the feelings and délicatesse of an indivi-

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40 Bernier (note 38), 138.
41 The word “canton” itself has historically been used to isolate people and agriculture as the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* explains: “Coin, certain endroit d’un pays ou d’une ville, separé & different du reste. On ne recueille point de vin dans cette province, que dans un canton. Dans cette ville il n’y a qu’un seul petit canton ou il ait d’honnestes gens.”
It is this latter perspective which gains popularity in the beginning of the eighteenth century.

In Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture (1719), Jean-Baptiste Dubos explains the distance separating reason from taste: “S’il est quelque matière où il faille que le raisonnement se taise devant l’expérience, c’est assurément dans les questions qu’on peut faire sur les mérites d’un poème.” For Dubos, there are no objective rules on which to base aesthetics. They vary according to historical time periods and national tendencies. Moreover, tastes oscillate between geographical locales so that an idea of beauty fluctuates among different regions of the same country. Dubos transforms the individualist idea posited for taste and literally relocates it in the realm of terroir:

Comme deux graines venues sur la même plante donnent un fruit dont les qualitez sont différentes, quand ces graines sont semées en des terroirs différents, ou bien quand elles sont semées dans le même terroir en des années différentes: ainsi deux enfans qui seront nés avec leurs cerveaux composez précisément de la même manière, deviendront deux hommes différents pour l’esprit et pour les inclinations, si l’un de ces enfans est élevé en Suède et l’autre en Andalousie. Ils deviendront même différents, bien qu’élèvez dans le même pays, s’ils y sont élevés en des années dont la température soit différente.

Dubos uses terroir and the plant-people metaphor to bridge the gap that Saint-Évremond had left open. For Saint-Évremond, a person’s class allows him to rise above the determination of the terroir. For Dubos, determination and terroir are inextricably combined. Our constitution and our “inclinations” are at least partially determined by our terroir.

The important point is that Dubos’s explanation, although in the domain of aesthetics, anticipates and even facilitates the resurgence of materialism.

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43 Ferry claims that Boileau represents perfectly the rationalist perspectives and quotes from Boileau’s *Art poétique*: “Rien n’est beau que le vrai, le vrai seul est aimable/ Il doit régner partout, et même dans la fable.” See Ferry (note 42), 53-55. Boileau’s perspective is considerably more nuanced than this however. For a more modern reading of Boileau, see Ann T. Delehanty, “From Judgment to Sentiment: Changing Theories of the Sublime, 1674-1710,” *MLQ* 66.2 (2005): 151-72.


45 Dubos (note 44), 238.
and a vein of Epicureanism in the realm of philosophy and the sciences that had been partially eclipsed by Cartesian thought. He does this by reconnecting the body to the soul, making the latter contingent upon the former through the properties of blood:

Durant la vie de l'homme et tant que l'âme spirituelle demeure unie avec le corps, le caractère de notre esprit et nos inclinations dépendent beaucoup des qualités de notre sang qui nourrit encore nos organes et qui leur fournit la matière de leur accroissement durant l'enfance et durant la jeunesse. Or, les qualités de ce sang dépendent beaucoup de l'air que nous respirons. Elles dépendent encore beaucoup des qualités de l'air où nous avons été élevez, parce qu'il a décidé des qualités de notre sang durant notre enfance. (…) Voilà pourquoi les nations qui habitent sous des climats différents, sont si différentes par l'esprit comme par les inclinations. Mais les qualités de l'air dépendent elles-mêmes des qualités des émanations de la terre que l'air enveloppe. Suivant que la terre est composée, l'air qui l'enserre est différent.\textsuperscript{46}

Dubos explains that the “spiritual” soul remains linked to the “material” body. Our tastes – not only our tastes in wine but also our tastes in the high-minded domains of art and literature – are predicated on our geographical origins. Such theories become increasingly important, and are reiterated and refracted by influential thinkers such as Montesquieu, who grants them even more of a role in his \textit{Esprit des lois} than in his aesthetic doctrine \textit{Essai sur le goût}.\textsuperscript{47}

On the subjects of food and literature then, the Epicurean’s commentary serves as a harbinger of the theories that would later infiltrate the French mind. Aesthetic conceptions, like that of Dubos, led to the resurgence of broader political theories on the power of climate. They also confirmed the people-plant analogy that would later usher in a much stronger breed of Epicureanism and materialism in general. The physician La Mettrie would be the precursor of this new movement and the man responsible for igniting the materialist flame in Diderot, Sade, and Helvétius. In his 1748 work \textit{L'Homme machine} (an ironic reference to Descartes), he revives the people-plant metaphor, taking it from the world of aesthetics and placing it directly in the realm of science: “Tel est l’empire du climat, qu’un homme qui en

\textsuperscript{46} Dubos (note 44), 238-9. Cf. Charles Batteux, a critic and proponent of Epicureanism, who adheres to a much more rationalist conception of tastes and beauty. In his doctrine on art and beauty he asserts that there is but one “bon goût.” Charles Batteux, \textit{Les Beaux-arts réduits à un même principe} (Paris: Durand, 1746), 53.

\textsuperscript{47} Montesquieu devotes roughly 15 pages to the effects of the climate on its population in \textit{Esprit des lois} in a section entitled \textit{Des Climats}. 
change, se ressent malgré lui de ce changement. C’est une plante ambulante qui s’est elle-même transplantée; si le climat n’est plus le même, il est juste qu’elle dégénère ou s’améliore.”48