

## II

THE LITERARY HISTORY OF THE  
*DISCOURSE*

## § I

BEFORE examining the narrative of the *Discourse* it may be well to remind ourselves of certain points in its external history.

The first mention of the complete volume comprising the *Discourse* and *Essays* is in a letter from Descartes to Mersenne of March 1636 (*Corresp.* i. 339) in which we hear of 'four treatises, all in French, the general title of which is to be: *the project of a universal science which can raise our nature to its highest degree of perfection; in addition, the Dioptric, the Meteors, and the Geometry, in which the most curious matters which the author could choose in order to render proof of the universal science which he proposes, are explained in such a way that even those who have not studied at all can understand them.*'

The volume is to be one of from sixty to seventy sheets, and although Descartes had been, he says, making inquiries about printing in Holland and had doubts about the possibility of printing from his badly written manuscript in Paris, he is yet prepared to print in Paris should his friend so advise. The volume, 'according to his old resolution' (p. 340, ll. 15-16), is to appear anonymously.

This 'old resolution' can be traced as far back as October 1629 (*Corresp.* i. 23). The work then planned, the *Meteors*, is to be published with the author 'caché derrière le tableau pour écouter ce qu'on en dira', and the intention is reaffirmed in plainer language ('i'aye resolu de n'y point mettre mon nom') in a letter (i. 85, l. 13) of a couple of months later (December 1629). Descartes had no thought at this time of printing in any other place but Paris, nor—a point of special interest—in any other language but Latin.<sup>1</sup> Since the actual volume was printed in French and in Holland (the number of *errata* is attributed specifically, in a special following note, to the fact that the compositor did not know a word of French), the only one of Descartes' original resolutions which was maintained was that of anonymity, the author's name appearing nowhere in the volume of 1637.

One may well ask how a 'privilege' bestowing copyright could be given to a book wanting an author's name, but in fact it was not so given, and the history of the 'privilege' throws considerable light on Descartes' tenacity. The printing of the scientific essays was finished by the end of 1636 and the sheets were sent to Paris through Huyghens in January 1637. But Mersenne, writing from Paris on 15 February, has a disturbing tale to tell. He can procure a 'privilege' (on terms) for the scientific

<sup>1</sup> So the original. Clerselier's text, adapted to suit later circumstances, actually says *French* (i. 24, l. 3, critical note).

essays. But the Chancellor refused to include in it 'le 1<sup>er</sup> traicté de la Methode de raisonner es sciences' until he had had it actually before his eyes.<sup>1</sup> He asks Descartes, therefore, to send the work as it would be when completed, that is to say, *Discourse* and all. This was done in March, as before through Huygens, and the 'privilege' was finally granted on 4 May. The wearisomeness of the delay may be estimated by the fact that the Dutch licence to print the *Discourse*, granted to Jan Maire, is dated 20 December 1636.

Yet even now Descartes' troubles were not at an end. The 'privilege' was given to him personally. It mentions his name more than once; loads him with extravagant compliments, and covers the printing of any and every of the works 'he has composed or is to compose' (*composera!*), whenever and wherever he pleases. But this is exactly what Descartes did not want. Whatever the ultimate motives of his retreat to Holland may have been, it is clear he desired to live 'apart' (*à l'escart*, as the wits of the time would have it),<sup>2</sup> and he protests more than once that he does not want to compose a series of theoretical disquisitions but to apply himself to the practical problems of medicine. He seems genuinely to have desired this first printed work of his to be published without his name so that he could hear what people really thought about it. His correspon-

<sup>1</sup> *Correspondence of Descartes and Constantyn Huygens* (Clarendon Press, 1926), p. 263, l. 32 f.

<sup>2</sup> So Saumaise, *ap.* x. 555.

dence at this time<sup>1</sup> is full of bitterness at what appeared to him to be Mersenne's deliberate breaking of faith. He had only one course left to pursue, and that was to suppress those portions of the 'privilege' which mentioned him in person and to keep his name out of the title-page. This he did. The title-page of the first edition of the *Discourse* bears no author's name, and the 'privilege' printed at the end of the volume is only a bare excerpt from the flowery tribute to Descartes' powers which had been given 'by the King and his Council and sealed with the Great Seal of yellow wax' on 4 May 1637. The world had to wait for the full text until the Latin version of the whole work, under the title *Specimina Philosophiae*, appeared from the Elzevier press at Amsterdam in 1644.

The *achevé d'imprimer* of the *Discourse* is 8 June 1637, and the first complete bound copy was sent through Huygens to the Prince of Orange, with the author's respectful compliments, on 12 June 1637. It remains to record that, writing to Mersenne on 9 January 1639 (ii. 481), Descartes thanks him for the printer's errors he had noted, but says he is 'afraid the trouble is to no purpose, for, in view of the few copies which the bookseller says he has sold of it, I see no great likelihood of his having to print it again'.

## § 2

The tribulations of an author trying to get a book published are of a lesser interest than the tale of his

<sup>1</sup> e.g. i. 363-5, 373, 375-6.

efforts to write it. The published *Discourse* was made up of four treatises, the *Discourse on Method*, the *Meteors*, the *Dioptric*, and the *Geometry*, and if we would get a true picture of the whole work it is of importance to note the dates of composition of the various parts.

## (a)

The earliest of the Treatises in order of composition would seem to be that which appeared afterwards as the *Meteors*. This was undertaken in 1629 in connexion with some atmospheric phenomena which had aroused much general interest at the time, and Descartes, writing to Mersenne late in that year, says expressly (i. 23, ll. 5-12) that he had interrupted the work he had on hand 'so as to examine in order all' phenomena of that kind, and that he was considering the composition of a 'small treatise which should contain a reasoned account of the colours of the rainbow and generally of all sublunar phenomena'. This treatise is to be a 'specimen' (*'échantillon'* [l. 25]) of his philosophy, and he proposed to publish it, as we have seen above, anonymously. The published *Meteors* answers to the plan given both generically and specifically, since in addition to its general treatment of atmospheric phenomena it contains a detailed consideration both of the rainbow (cap. 8) and of the 'double suns' or 'parhelia', with definite reference to the observations of 1629 which stimulated his interest originally (vi. 361,

l. 11 f.). The whole work was thoroughly revised and re-written in the spring of 1635 when Descartes conceived the project of publishing it not separately but together with the *Dioptric* (i. 329, l. 28 f.), and we know of at least one addition made then and due to an 'expérience' of the spring of that year.<sup>1</sup>

## (b)

The second treatise in order of composition is the *Dioptric*. This is spoken of in November 1630 (i. 179, l. 5) as being far from ready for the press. In particular, it is to have inserted in it an explanation of 'the nature of colours and light' which had kept Descartes for six months already and was only half finished (l. 7 f.), and this 'insertion' is to absolve Descartes from his promise to finish the *Monde* in three years 'because it will be, as it were, a summary of it' (l. 11 f.). Assuming that this *discours de la lumière* (l. 20) is the discourse of that name with which the *Dioptric* opens and which treats specifically of the nature of colour, it is fair to date the beginning of the composition of the *Dioptric* as we have it to the end of 1630. (The other principal inquiries of the treatise, those relating to the construction of optical lenses, are the fruit of Descartes' labours during all the years he was in Holland up to and including 1635, particularly those undertaken through, and by the help of, an instrument maker of the name of Ferrier with whom he was in active collaboration

<sup>1</sup> *Meteors* 6 (vi. 351, l. 30) with *Corresp.* i. 320, l. 3 f.

and correspondence since 1628.)<sup>1</sup> The section on 'refraction', now the second chapter, is mentioned as 'the first part of my *Dioptric*' in letters assigned to January and June 1632.<sup>2</sup> In June Descartes announced his intention not to leave Deventer till he had finished the whole (i. 254, ll. 3-5), and in the meantime there were rumours in the learned world that he had finished it already.<sup>3</sup> Descartes himself thinks of it still in some kind of connexion with the *Monde*, presumably as one part of a complete science of nature comprising both physics and biology (i. 254, l. 5 f.), but the condemnation of Galileo (23 June 1633) changed his plans, and the treatise 'commenced earlier' and now 'reviewed and entirely finished' is to be 'separated entirely from the *Monde*' and published 'by itself'.<sup>4</sup>

## (c)

Till now the *Dioptric* and the *Meteors* are spoken of separately. From now on they are treated together, and we hear for the first time of the general 'preface' to them both (1 November 1635 [i. 330, l. 9]) which is to become the *Discourse on Method*. The 1637 volume, then, if it had appeared according to the plan of 1635, would have been made up of *Meteors*, *Dioptric*, and Preface. The idea of adding

<sup>1</sup> See especially the correspondence for October–November 1629, and *Descartes–Huygens*, December 1635.

<sup>2</sup> i. 235, ll. 1-3; 255, ll. 25-30.

<sup>3</sup> Golius to Huygens, 16 April 1632 (ap. *Descartes–Huygens*, p. lxx).

<sup>4</sup> i. 322, l. 14 f. (autumn 1635).

the third treatise, the *Geometry*, seems to have come to Descartes very late. He says himself that he wrote it while the *Meteors* was being printed, and indeed 'discovered a part of it during that time' (i. 458, l. 5 f.); and as the printing of the *Meteors* was only commenced in the spring of 1636 we have hardly any preparation for the full announcement of the complete volume of the *Discourse and Essays* given in the letter to Mersenne of March 1636 already referred to. Here we have the fully fledged volume as published in 1637, the four treatises, including the *Geometry*. The *Geometry* seems to have dropped from the stars.

It is, however, clear that we must not take too literally Descartes' reference to the composition of the *Geometry*. Its principal novelties were in his brain, as he says himself (ii. 178, l. 9), 'for twenty years', and a comparison between the *Geometry* and his early correspondence and fragments shows that his mind had been working on them all the time.<sup>1</sup> But we must distinguish our special problem here. The point under discussion is not the date of Descartes' interest and discoveries in geometry but that of the addition of the particular treatise called by the name *Geometry* to the complex of *Essays* published with the *Discourse* in 1637. On 1 November 1635 there is no mention of it. By March 1636 it is already a recognized part of the full volume.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Adam, *Vie*, p. 208.



The explanation is presumably to be found in the special character of this last of the treatises. The opening words of its prefatory remarks are well known: 'Till now I have tried to make myself intelligible to everybody; but, so far as this treatise is concerned, I am afraid that it will not be able to be read except by those who are already versed in the contents of books of geometry.' The warning, noted already by Huygens in March 1637 and repeated by Descartes in a letter to Mersenne of May 1638 (ii. 152, l. 19 f.), emerges in its full venom in the unfortunately characteristic letter of ten years later (April 1648 [v. 142, l. 24 ff.]): 'Ma Geometrie est comme elle doit estre pour empescher que le Rob. & ses semblables n'en puissent medire sans que cela tourne à leur confusion; car ils ne sont pas capables de l'entendre, & ie l'ay composée ainsy tout à dessein. . . .' When considering the publication of the *Meteors* and the *Dioptric* (together with the 'preface'), Descartes must have felt that these matters were not sufficient to show the true quality of his 'method'. He introduced, therefore, more difficult matter cast in a more difficult form, and deliberately concealed it from those who, in Huygens' phrase,<sup>1</sup> had not passed through the 'outer courts of the temple'. The *Geometry* is an essay in defiance as well as in the 'method', and its spirit is that of the then-prevailing fashion of calling attention to one's discoveries by publishing a challenge

<sup>1</sup> *Descartes-Huygens*, p. 40, l. 23.

announcing a problem only to be solved by the unique method of the discoverer. It should perhaps be noted that its place in the scheme of the volume is so weak that it was not included in the Latin version of the whole made under the supervision of Descartes and published in 1644, and that it appeared in Latin (from the hands of another translator) separately, and that only in 1649.

## (d)

The *Discourse on Method* as a part of the volume of 1637 is thus penultimate in the general plan: it is the introduction to the combined *Meteors* and *Dioptric* which Descartes was to publish together. It is an independent masterpiece by accident and presumably grew under Descartes' hand during the course of composition. Its contents will be briefly analysed in the next section. At the moment it is sufficient to observe that for Descartes himself it was and remained no more than a preface. We have already seen that he had not thought it necessary to send it to France in order to obtain the 'privilege'. A few months later (April 1637 [i. 369, l. 14]), after the title was settled, he still refers to it as the 'discours *qui sert de Preface*', and while the title was still under discussion, explained to Mersenne (i. 349, l. 16 f.) that he did not call it 'Traité de la Methode' but 'Discours de la Methode', which is the same as '*Preface* ou aduis touchant la Methode'. In a parallel letter about the same time (i. 370, l. 28 f.) Descartes

adds further that if the method is well received 'he will not have so much subject to fear a bad reception for the principles of his physics'. The 'method' and its 'specimens' are thus only the harbingers of a complete natural philosophy, and Descartes' sole aim in printing them, as he says definitely (i. 370, l. 8 f.), is to 'prepare the way for it': *le dessein de ce que ie fais imprimer à cette fois n'est que de luy* [i.e. the 'traité de Physique' of l. 2] *preparer le chemin & sonder le guay.*

## § 3

Whatever the 'first discourse', as Descartes calls it,<sup>1</sup> may have meant for its author, it is for us, of the four treatises going to make up the volume of 1637, incomparably the most important. Its contents are assigned by Descartes himself to its various portions thus: to the first, considerations respecting the sciences; to the second, the principal rules of the method; to the third, the rules of morals derived from the method; to the fourth, the arguments for the existence of God and the soul; to the fifth, various points of physics, physiology, medicine, and psychology; to the sixth and last, some practical considerations concerning the advancement of the sciences.

This subject-order is both clear and instructive, and Descartes' division covers fairly the actual contents of the *Discourse*. Unfortunately, however, it tends to

<sup>1</sup> i. 349, l. 27; 370, l. 27.

obscure certain historical facts told plainly enough in the narrative of the *Discourse* which are of great significance to the student of Descartes' development. The reader of the *Discourse* is under a psychological illusion, for which indeed the author is by no means responsible. The book was published in 1637, and the reader is prone to look upon the whole of it, apart from the first chapter, as recounting the thoughts and aspirations of 1637. But the fact is that the major portions of the book, and those its most famous and most significant, really go back many years earlier. A parallel may perhaps be permitted from a still more famous book, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant jotted down his thoughts on different sheets of paper for twelve years and then wrote them up in the space of four or five months, and although there is no suggestion that Descartes wrote up the *Discourse* in any such way it is yet important to realize that the *Discourse* in its detail no more mirrors the Descartes of 1637 than does the first *Critique* in its detail the Kant of 1781.

An attentive perusal of Descartes' own words, particularly with the help of the erudite commentary of M. Gilson, is sufficient to establish this point. It is not only Part I of the *Discourse* which contains Descartes' reminiscences of his youth. Both Part 2 and Part 3, that is, both the logic and the ethics, are specifically assigned by Descartes to the year 1619, and they describe the thoughts and opinions that occurred to him on the day when he was shut up

in the *poêle*. He was at that time, as he carefully notes (2 *ad fin.*), twenty-three years of age; and as if to emphasize the inclusion of the matter of Part 3 also within the 1619 period he marks the transition from it by the words (3 *ad fin.*):<sup>1</sup>

‘and inasmuch as I hoped to be able to reach my end more successfully in converse with man than in *living longer shut up in the “poêle” where these reflections had come to me*, I hardly waited the end of winter before I once more set myself to travel; and in all the nine following years . . .’

These nine years are clearly 1619–28, and during them Descartes

‘did nothing but roam hither and thither, trying to be a spectator rather than an actor in all the comedies the world displays. . . . I made various observations and acquired many experiences . . . and more than this, I continued to exercise myself in the method I had laid down for my use; for besides the fact that I was careful as a rule to conduct all my thoughts according to its maxims, I set aside some hours from time to time which I more especially employed in practising myself in the solution of mathematical problems according to the Method, or in the solution of other problems which though pertaining to other sciences I was able to make almost similar to those of mathematics. . . . You will see the result in many examples which are expounded in this volume.’

Just as the logic and the ethics, therefore, belong to 1619, so the ‘examples expounded in this volume’,

<sup>1</sup> Haldane and Ross’s translation; and so generally.

that is to say, the scientific Essays to which the *Discourse* is a preface, belong, according to Descartes himself, to the period 1619–28. And yet, as he goes on to say (3, last §), ‘these nine years passed away before I had taken any definite part in regard to the difficulties about which the learned are in the habit of disputing, or had commenced to seek the foundation of any philosophy more certain than the vulgar’. He had, therefore, as yet no metaphysic. The metaphysic belongs afterwards, to the period of his stay in Holland, and Descartes again marks its date for us specifically: ‘And it is just eight years ago [i.e. eight years before the date of composition of the *Discourse* in 1636, to wit, 1628] that this desire [to make myself worthy of the reputation I had gained] made me resolve to remove myself from all places where any acquaintances were possible, and to retire to’ Holland.

In 1628 Descartes was engaged on his metaphysics, and Part 4 of the *Discourse* gives us an abstract of it. This is the treatise (on ‘divinity’), the future *Meditations*, which Descartes set aside in order to work at his philosophy of nature,<sup>1</sup> and this philosophy of nature in its various divisions is described summarily in *Discourse* 5. The treatise which contained it, he says (6 *ad init.*), was finished in 1633

<sup>1</sup> Above, pp. 5 and 17. Descartes writes later of himself as having worked on the *Meditations* during the ‘first nine months’ of his retreat in Holland (*Corresp.* i. 144, l. 19), i.e. winter 1628–summer 1629.

(‘three years ago’); but when a ‘physical theory published a little while before by another person’ had been disapproved by certain people ‘to whose opinion he deferred’, he decided to withdraw it. *Discourse 6* explains why, in spite of all, he is publishing what he does now, and sets out his general plans for the future of science and the amelioration of the lot of mankind.

## § 4

It has been pointed out that the *Discourse on Method* takes the place of a ‘history of his own mind’ promised by Descartes and mentioned by his friend Balzac in 1628 (i. 570, l. 23), and a ‘higher criticism’ of the text may possibly show that the first three chapters embody a written text of early date, just as some of the fifth chapter probably absorbed material already prepared for a different purpose. What is of importance to us is to note Descartes’ own order of his philosophical occupations and writings. It may be set down in the following chronological table:

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|---------|--|
| 1619    | the discovery of the method and the fixing it<br>in the four rules;<br>the drawing up of the rules of conduct.                                       |
| 1619–28 | travel; exercises in the method (the solution<br>of problems both in mathematics and in<br>other sciences susceptible of mathematical<br>treatment). |
| 1628    | retreat to Holland; metaphysics.   |
| 1629–33 | complete philosophy of nature.   |