

Original Paper

Scale, the Other, and Boundaries: Postcolonial Allegory and Posthuman Reflections in Voltaire's *Microm égas*

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Abstract

*As a very tall figure in French literature, and a main speaker of the French Enlightenment movement, Voltaire got his biggest literary achievement through his short philosophical stories. In the year 1752, he completed the writing of the philosophical story *Microm égas*. Taking the interstellar journey as its frame, the narrative follows the giant *Microm égas* who comes from Sirius and a companion who comes from Saturn, in their activity of visiting Earth. By means of differences in dimension, scope, and cognition, the story tells mankind, forming a post-colonial fable which contains knowledge violence and a center-edge power structure. In the same time, the narration lowers mankind on the ontological stratification plane. Through the dissolving of existential limits and the ending with the paradox of a "blank philosophy book", it therefore prefigures the core posthumanist principle of the "decentralization of the human being". Based on the same origin between cosmic civilizations and species rank structures, this article hence will explain this Enlightenment text by the two perspectives of postcolonial theory and posthumanist theory, therefore exploring its across-era thought value.*

Keywords

*postcolonial allegory, posthuman thought, Voltaire, *Microm égas**

1. Introduction

The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century was a complex and far-reaching intellectual and cultural movement, during which the very term and concept of "civilization" took shape (Chong, 4). The Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries radically advanced human understanding: Newtonian mechanics, telescopes, and microscopes overturned traditional views of the universe, demystifying the world and reframing it as a precise, calculable machine. Materially, the Age of Discovery's global trade and colonial expansion enriched the bourgeoisie and disrupted

Eurocentrism by exposing Europeans to non-European civilizations. Politically, the rising bourgeoisie needed a new ideological discourse to challenge feudal theocracy and monarchy, with the critique of privilege forming the core of the Enlightenment. As a standard-bearer of the bourgeois struggle against clericalism and despotism, Voltaire crafted *Micromégas* as a philosophical drama reflecting on the cognitive limitations of Europe and humanity at large.

2. Cognitive Violence and the Construction of “Humanity as the Other”: The Postcolonial Allegory in *Micromégas*

2.1 The Construction of “Humanity as the Other” in the Hierarchy of Cosmic Civilizations

Voltaire’s vision transcended the divide between Europe and non-Europe, constructing a binary opposition of center and periphery, superior and inferior through the power imbalance between extraterrestrial civilizations and humanity.

To *Micromégas* and the Saturnian, humans on Earth are mere atoms too small to observe, leading them to conclude that humans lack thought and reason. Upon arriving at Earth, the Saturnian observes it with contemptuous criticism, describing the planet as “irregular and ridiculously”, “a state of chaos”, it moves round the sun in that awkward way and its ponds “neither round, square, oval, nor any other regular form” (Voltaire, 25). This series of negative descriptions focuses not on what Earth is, but on what it is not. The initial cognition framed by the Saturnian’s negative rhetoric mirrors what Edward W. Said reveals in *Orientalism*: the meaning of the Orient (here, Earth) depends more on the West (here, extraterrestrial civilizations) than on the Orient itself. The structures and geometric standards of Sirius and Saturn become universal, normative criteria for judgment, while Earth is judged as a peripheral entity “lacking order”. The Saturnian renames Earth’s mountains “little sharp things”, effectively subsuming Earth into the cognitive framework of the extraterrestrial civilization and stripping terrestrial things of the right to name themselves—a direct illustration of the “cultural hegemony” in Said’s *Orientalism*, wherein larger and more advanced civilizations in the cosmos gain power to dominate others (Said, 7). The Saturnian, positioned at the “center”, exercises the right to define the “peripheral” Earth. His negation of Earth essentially affirms the superiority of his own civilization; Earth, as the “periphery”, serves to highlight the perfection of Sirius as the “center”, much like the Orientalist image of the Orient, which exists to reflect the superiority of the Western “self”.

In his analysis of *Orientalism*, Said notes that the Orient is constructed as “irrational”, while Europe is “rational”. The Orient is depicted as something one judges (as in a court of law), something one studies and depicts (as in a curriculum), something one disciplines (as in a school or prison), something one illustrates (as in a zoological manual) (Said, 40). *Micromégas* likewise observes Earth with cognitive violence, claiming that no reasonable beings would live there, hence that no humans exist. This is a typical discourse of power: the cognitive subject, occupying the center, monopolizes the definition of “reasonableness” and uses it

to deny the value and even the very existence of the periphery. Such presuppositional, definition-over-cognition thinking is the core mechanism of Orientalist discourse. The existence and value of the periphery are constructed by the speech of the center. Though Micromégas and the Saturnian are not conquerors—merely passing observers and judges—their gaze embodies a power relation that constitutes an allegory of colonialism.

Micromégas's observation of Earth thus forms a complete "center-periphery" power landscape. From renaming mountains and landforms to negative judgments of Earth's shape and a priori denial of human existence, every plotline shows the cognitive subject constructing and dominating the object of cognition. Through this allegory, Voltaire reveals that the "center" becomes central not due to inherent superiority, but because it holds the power to define the "periphery". The arrogant words of Micromégas and the Saturnian expose not the inferiority of the judged, but the narrowness and hubris of the judges themselves—Voltaire's irony against all forms of centrism.

2.2 Concrete Expressions of Othering: The Labeling of Humanity as "Minuscule" and "Irrational"

Micromégas's first layer of othering humanity is the physical and spiritual "minusculeization" achieved through cosmic scale. As a visitor from Sirius, Micromégas possesses a body and cognitive dimension vastly beyond humans; from his perspective, whales and ships are barely visible under a microscope, and humans are "atoms" discernible only with great effort. This physical "minusculeization" paves the way for the later label of "irrationality". In Chapter 6, Micromégas utters the first words between extraterrestrial civilization and humanity: "invisible insects" (Voltaire, 30). "Invisible" ironically erases the existence of humanity, which prides itself as the crown of creation. Calling humans "insects" further degrades the species, reinforcing humanity's minuteness. Micromégas watches these small creatures wriggle, examines their abilities, and studies their activities with amusement. This amused gaze resembles the colonialist's exoticized viewing of indigenous rituals, implying a one-sided power structure of seeing that strips the subject of dignity.

Meanwhile, the Saturnian shifts from extreme skepticism about human existence to extreme credulity, assuming the small creatures are "busy reproducing". The ship carries elite humans—philosophers, debaters, theologians, scholars, and scientists—representing the highest achievements of human knowledge and reason, yet they are reduced to wriggling microscopic beings absorbed in biological reproduction.

On the surface, Micromégas's amusement stems from human smallness. As a work of science fiction, *Micromégas* here invites interpretation through Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of grotesque realism, whose core feature is "degradation": the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity (Bakhtin, pp. 19-20). Micromégas's laughter is not mere satire or schadenfreude; it pulls human philosophical discourse down from its closed, sublime position. Bakhtin notes that degradation and debasement of the higher do not have a formal and relative character in grotesque realism. "Upward" and "downward" have here

an absolute and strictly topographical meaning. “Downward” is earth, “upward” is heaven. Earth is an element that devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb) and at the same time an element of birth, of renascence (the maternal breasts). Such is the meaning of “upward” and “downward” in their cosmic aspect, while in their purely bodily aspect, which is not clearly distinct from the cosmic, the upper part is the face or the head and the lower part is the genital organs, the belly, and the buttocks (Bakhtin, p. 21). Earth and humanity, as a wriggling microcosm, form a “lower” world relative to the macrocosm—irrational, absurd—while extraterrestrial civilizations occupy the “upper” position of head, reason, and wisdom.

In sum, “minusculeization” and “irrationalization” together constitute Voltaire’s othering of humanity. “Minusculeization”, via violent cosmic scale compression, uproots humanity from the illusion of being the “crown of creation”, reducing it to atoms and insects visible only under a microscope. This erasure of physical space is an ontological disenchantment that fundamentally undermines humanity’s legitimacy as the observing subject, turning it into an object under the gaze. When humanity’s proud philosophers and theologians become wriggling microscopic beings to extraterrestrial visitors, Voltaire uses *Micromégas*’s amusement to achieve a subtle Bakhtinian degradation. *Micromégas*’s gaze ceases to be neutral observation; it forces human spiritual activities—rational speculation—into the material–bodily “lower” sphere, equating them with absurdity, instinct, and even excretion. The Saturnian’s misrecognition of reproduction negates the purity of human reason and alienates human civilization as lowly biological wriggling. Thus, “amusement” evolves from an emotion into a power structure: the overlook of higher civilizations over lower beings, and the judgment of reason upon irrationality.

Ultimately, through this dual othering of “minusculeization” and “irrationalization”, Voltaire piercingly dismantles the illusion of eighteenth-century Eurocentrism. He places humanity’s blind, anthropocentric confidence in its own civilization under a radically alien lens for ruthless dissection, completing a profound self-examination of the “anti-Enlightenment” within Enlightenment reason: when humans attempt to measure all things with reason, they may unknowingly become wriggling insects under another scale.

3. The Blurring of Boundaries and the Decentering of Man: Posthuman Thought in *Micromégas*

The philosophical significance of Voltaire’s introduction of a condescending extraterrestrial perspective in *Micromégas* extends far beyond cultural criticism. When infinitely small humans are placed under the gaze and scale of Sirius and Saturn, the rational subject celebrated by the Enlightenment quietly loses its central position. Metaphysical debates once central to European thought are reduced to near-biological wriggling in the eyes of interstellar travelers, and humanity’s proud life activities are misread as mere reproduction. Voltaire’s ironic design touches on a question not yet fully thematized in his era but already emerging: Where are the boundaries of human existence, and is there an

unbridgeable divide between human and nonhuman? With its unique philosophical narrative, *Micromégas* anticipates posthumanism's critique of anthropocentrism.

3.1 From "Crown of Creation" to "Cosmic Particle": The Ontological Degradation of Humanity

In *Micromégas*, humans are repeatedly called infinitesimal beings, atoms, pitiful, and nearly nothing—marking an ontological degradation. N. Katherine Hayles states in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* that "posthuman signifies a major shift in basic assumptions about subjectivity. The collective heterogeneity of the posthuman implies a distributed cognition, located in parts of the body that communicate only weakly with one another. The posthuman subject is "an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (Hayles, p. 3).

From a posthuman perspective, humans are no longer isolated, omnipotent lords of creation or closed rational units, but decentralized ecosystems with cognitive functions dispersed across the body and the external environment. Voltaire's "scale compression" in *Micromégas* is a visual representation of decentering: viewed from far enough away, "humans" are merely temporary aggregations of cosmic matter. This lens reveals that Voltaire not only shrinks humans spatially into "atoms" but also ontologically reduces them to quantifiable, measurable material units.

Chapter 7 records conversations between *Micromégas*, the Saturnian, and scholars on the ship. The extraterrestrial travelers first wonder about human spiritual life—reason, thought, consciousness—assuming that with so little matter, humans "must live in contemplation". When all philosophers deny this, a heated debate about the soul and spirit ensues without resolution. *Micromégas* asks the sages what they do daily; one philosopher replies: "We agree on two or three questions everyone understands, and argue endlessly about two or three thousand no one understands". *Micromégas* and the Saturnian eagerly ask humans to calculate distances from Sirius to the Pleiades, Earth to the Moon, and the weight of air; humans give precise answers: Thirty-two and a half degrees, sixty times the radius of the Earth, air weighs approximately nine hundred times less than the equivalent volume of the lightest water, and nineteen hundred times less than gold for ducats (Voltaire, p. 33). Metaphysical debates about the soul are suspended, replaced by calculable data. Distances, weights, and spaces are measurable, and these data flow across species and planets unchanged. This shift from quality to quantity foreshadows Hayles's description of the information-age cognitive paradigm: a move from metaphysical "presence/absence" to information-theoretic "pattern/randomness" (Liu, p. 25). Human experience is compressed into encodable symbols, excluding embodied, ineffable life from dialogue.

Humanity's fall from "crown of creation" to "cosmic particle" is not simple denigration by Voltaire, but a dialectical tension. When *Micromégas* calls Earthlings "clever atoms", he acknowledges their rational capacity—echoing the subtlety of Hayles's posthuman subject: reduced to a "material-informational

hybrid”, humans retain agency, redistributing existence in a decentralized way. The Saturnian initially mistakes wriggling humans for beings busy reproducing, then is astonished to find they can measure celestial distances and deduce light propagation. This misrecognition and correction relocate human subjectivity: no longer cosmic center, humans remain nodes in a cognitive network.

On a deeper level, Voltaire’s scale compression is a visual decentering: from a sufficiently distant frame of reference, humans are temporary waves rising and dispersing in the boundless ocean of cosmic matter. The fall from “human” to “insect” to “atom” strips away layers of human ontological status. The allegorical power of *Micromégas* lies in its innocence: Voltaire did not write a posthuman manifesto, but honestly imagined an extraterrestrial gaze in the age of the early telescope. This imagination unexpectedly cracks open human self-understanding: as temporary assemblages of matter and information, human boundaries are not naturally fixed, but constantly reconstructed through encounters with cosmic scale and the gaze of the Other.

3.2 *The Other Side of Enlightenment: The Blank Book as a Precursor to Posthuman Thought*

Voltaire ends *Micromégas* with a philosophically rich scene: before leaving Earth, Micromégas promises humans a brilliant philosophical book revealing the end of all things. Yet when the book is opened, scholars find only blank pages. The brilliance of this ending lies in its paradox: truth is not denied—Micromégas truly wrote the book—but truth is not fully delivered, for humans cannot see or read it. This paradox echoes the core epistemological debates of the eighteenth century: What are the limits of human understanding? Can humans grasp truth?

Xu Ruikang gives a very clear and perspicuous account of eighteenth-century French Enlightenment philosophy in his analysis, arguing that the thinkers of that period “strove to apply materialist doctrines to all objects of knowledge” and “affirmed the objectivity of nature and its laws of motion, taking nature as the object of knowledge” (Xu, p. 99). Therefore, it is natural to conclude that Voltaire’s epistemology is grounded in Locke’s empiricism and opposes speculative systems based on fantasy. Since the senses are properly regarded as the gateway to knowing external objects, the blank book admirably illustrates the limits of sensory experience, and hence Voltaire uses the blank pages to show that no ready-made textbook exists. Therefore, true knowledge must be observed and written by each person through their own senses. Micromégas’s act of writing is a perfect, clear confirmation that truth exists: unseen by humans, but real, and thus a splendid symbol of Enlightenment philosophy. Philosophy here exhibits a clear and deft faith in objective truth, and more importantly, Voltaire’s design anticipates Kant’s epistemological solution. Sun Hedong gives an excellent summary of Kant’s division of the world into “phenomenal” and “noumenal” realms: “The thing-in-itself exists objectively but is unknowable; what we know are its phenomena” (Sun, p. 23). Micromégas’s book is therefore a “noumenal” text: it exists, but appears “blank” to humans bound by their cognitive forms. Consequently, Kant’s “bounding reason to make room for faith” is beautifully realized in Voltaire: truth is not denied, but simply placed beyond human reach.

Because Voltaire repeatedly refers to “scale” and “perspective”, he very naturally and elegantly frames the blank book as a metaphor for “infinity” and “the unknown”. *Micromégas* begins with exiled academic disputes and ends with a blank book, thus forming a perfect circle: humanity is always engaged in debate, but truth lies beyond the limits of cognition. Therefore, just as humans need a microscope to be seen, they need a “cognitive microscope” to read *Micromégas*’s truth, a tool they do not possess. The blank book presents a lucid, systematic picture of a posthuman knowledge landscape: truth is no longer anthropocentric or human-readable, and knowledge can exist quite independently of humans. Since *Micromégas* is presented as a carrier of the “posthuman perspective”, it possesses a cognitive dimension entirely inaccessible to humans. Therefore, this is not a rejection of human reason, but rather an invitation to place it within a wider cognitive spectrum, wherein humans perceive only a part, while the spectrum itself is real and enduring.

The true meaning of the blank book may be: truth exists, but it never reveals itself automatically. *Micromégas* leaves not answers, but questions; not an end, but a beginning. As an Enlightenment thinker, Voltaire does not use extraterrestrial omniscience to negate human striving, but uses the “blank book” to remind humanity: human reason is limited, and that very limitation demands constant exploration. In this sense, *Micromégas* is both a product of the Enlightenment and its self-transcendence. Through the allegory of scale relativity, Voltaire opens for humanity a cognitive universe that can never be fully illuminated, yet is forever worth exploring. This stance—affirming in negating, rebuilding in deconstructing—is the most precious legacy posthumanism inherits from the Enlightenment.

4. Conclusion

This paper takes Voltaire’s philosophical tale *Micromégas* as its object, analyzing its cultural criticism and cognitive reflection from dual postcolonial and posthuman perspectives. By unpacking the construction of “humanity as the Other” in the hierarchy of cosmic civilizations, it reveals that the labeling of humans as “minuscule” and “irrational” allegorizes the center–periphery power structure in postcolonial contexts, confirming the core propositions of cultural hegemony and cognitive violence in Said’s *Orientalism*. Meanwhile, humanity’s ontological fall from “crown of creation” to “cosmic particle” and the paradoxical blank philosophical book left by *Micromégas* anticipate posthumanism’s themes of blurred boundaries and the decentering of Man.

Set in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, *Micromégas* uses interstellar fantasy to critique Eurocentric arrogance, reflect on the inherent limits of human cognition, and move beyond mere cultural criticism to self-examine Enlightenment reason. Its value lies in building an intellectual bridge between postcolonial critique and posthuman reflection through allegory, proving that early Enlightenment texts already contain profound doubts about anthropocentrism. *Micromégas* is thus both a product of the Enlightenment and its self-transcendence. From a contemporary perspective, future

research can expand comparative horizons, placing early literary works in transhistorical dialogue or integrating more interdisciplinary theories to deepen exploration of postmodern thought in early literature, offering new perspectives for understanding the tradition of self-reflection in human civilization.

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