

Sacred or Profane Pleasures? Erotic Ceremonies in Eighteenth-Century French Libertine Fiction

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In France, the Age of Enlightenment was also an age of literary levity that saw a proliferation of erotic and pornographic narratives in which philosophy often fused with sexual gratification. The famous Choderlos de Laclos with his *Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) and the infamous Marquis de Sade, along with authors such as Crébillon and Vivant Denon, epitomize this moment in French literary history, when erotic freedom paired with intellectual liberty. This “libertine” literature, as it is known, is characterized by its focus on fleshly desires and pleasures. The subject matter of libertine novels, short stories, poems, and paintings is the rendezvous that brings together the characters for an initiation into, or a celebration of, erotic delights. Indeed, lovemaking is often described as a religious ceremony. Why is this so? Why should lust be narrated with a religious lexicon? Why should lovers express rapture through imagery that is normally associated with the church? Why should fornication be orchestrated as a ritual?

First, by blending together religious images and eroticism, libertine authors highlight that libertinism stems from intellectual emancipation: parodying religious ceremonies and associating worship with lust requires a certain audacity and independence with respect to what is traditionally and institutionally held as sacred. Second, the comparison

of certain erotic scenes to religious ceremonies appears to be connected to the desire not only to profane religion but also to sacralize pleasures and paint them with the reverence they are deemed to deserve.

The objective of this article is to argue that the libertines' intellectual independence does not necessarily entail their rejection of religious concepts such as God, the sacred, and worship. Rather, their emancipation means that they feel free to redefine these concepts. The parody of ceremonies in libertine fiction stems less from a *rejection* than from a *redefinition* of what is sacred or divine. What libertines worship does not have to be the God of the Christian Church. Their deity can instead be Nature, Reason, Pleasure, or Liberty. And because they are free to rethink the concept of God as they please, libertines can develop a much more intimate relationship with this concept, hence its intrusion into bedrooms and boudoirs. In this article, therefore, I argue that the erotic ceremonies featured in libertine fiction permit the authors to underline their protagonists' intellectual emancipation but not necessarily their lack of a spiritual dimension.

The present analysis of the libertine stance toward religious matters touches upon the wider reality of the Age of Enlightenment. It raises the question of what follows in civilization when God is dead. Could there exist an ontological need for the concept of the Divine, whether the divinity in question be equated to the biblical God or to an abstract notion like reason or *jouissance*? Indeed, if Diderot's skepticism finally led him to atheism, Voltaire's enlightenment made him a deist, not an atheist. Later, during the French Revolution, the Committee of Public Safety abolished the Christian "cult" but replaced it with a worship of the Supreme Being, a paradox that Sade denounced: "Était-il besoin de briser les autels de la superstition et du fanatisme pour en arriver à reconstruire à l'envers ce culte grossier?"¹ (Was it necessary to break down the altars of superstition and fanaticism to come to rebuild upside down this vulgar cult?)² We must then wonder about the purpose of the erotic ceremonies that thrive in libertine fiction: Do authors want to suggest Man's

1. Donatien Alphonse François de Sade, "Sade contre l'Être suprême," in "*Sade contre l'Être suprême*," précédé de "*Sade dans le temps*," ed. Philippe Sollers (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 61.

2. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

all-too-human need for a divine dimension? Or do they want to ridicule this idea by creating such witty parodies of worship?

The question of the possible ontological need for a religion preoccupies many branches of the human sciences. While the psychology of religion tries to understand why men, whatever their epoch or culture, have felt the need to believe in a supernatural power, the evolutionary psychology of religion argues that answers are to be sought on the societal, rather than the individual, level. Academic battles are fierce between those who defend the theory that men and women neither need deities nor faith and that evolution will triumph in the twilight of the idols³ and those who claim that religions are the backbone of human consciousness⁴ as well as of societies. David Hume had already put forth such a justification for faith as early as 1757:

No wonder, then, that mankind, being placed in such an absolute ignorance of causes, and being at the same time so anxious concerning their future fortune, should immediately acknowledge a dependence on invisible powers.⁵

The present article does not aim to answer these questions.⁶ Neither does it aim to apply these modern theories nor to offer an anthropological perspective from which to understand libertine fiction. Rather, I explore a literary representation—perhaps a fantasy—of one of the

3. Echoed by Sam Harris in *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004) and Christopher Hitchens in *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Warner Twelve, 2007). Richard Dawkins, for instance, defines religion as a mass delusion and atheism as the healthy reaction to that disease or weakness of the mind. See *The God Delusion* (New York: Bantam, 2006).

4. A school of anthropology of religion regards positively what they call an ontological instinct to believe in the supernatural, akin to the survival instinct. See Pascal Boyer's *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); and Justin L. Barrett's *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Washington: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

5. David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion* (1757), quoted in Frank E. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 127.

6. A synthesis of the impact of the laicization of the post-eighteenth-century Western world can, however, be found in the fine and comprehensive work edited by Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

various contemporary reactions to the "disenchantment of the world" that arose as a consequence of the Enlightenment.

Through the representations of erotic ceremonies in eighteenth-century French literature, I show that libertinism, one of the responses to the (relative) dechristianization of Europe, was characterized neither by a pure despair nor by a pure joy at the idea of a metaphysical void. Libertines enjoyed the freedom that came with the gradual vanishing of the Christian God and the weakening supremacy of Christian traditions—but often because it meant that they could toy more freely with the concept of religion. New idols replaced the old ones in the metaphysics of eighteenth-century libertinism. The libertines' universe is indeed dechristianized; their private lives are likewise freed from the dominion of the church, but these hedonists refuse to have their world altogether "disenchanted." The persistence of religious structures and images allows libertine pleasures to truly thrive, either through the delights of an ultimate, blasphemous transgression of old principles or through the experience of sex as the ultimate form of bliss, a mystical *jouissance* reaching both the flesh and the mind at once. To understand the libertine literary representations of sex as sacred, and their attachment to religious concepts despite their intellectual emancipation, we must refer to Sigmund Freud. In his later days, he came to regard the need for idols as the sign of a desire to open up the mind to possibilities set beyond the empirical world.⁷ Therefore, from a libertine perspective, transforming lovemaking into a ceremony can reveal a conceptualization of erotic bliss as an emotion beyond the everyday experience of the common people.

At the core of the present reflection on the literary representations of libertine ceremonies is the idea of blasphemy and what it might signify. This article progresses by addressing successively the two main aspects of blasphemy: first, blasphemy blatantly arises from the desire to show scant respect for a thing held divine. Indeed, these libertine ceremonies

7. Freud developed this idea in his last book, *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* (1939; Ditzingen: Reclam, 2010). Previously, he had regarded faith as a childish rampart against the dread of death and the desire for the existence of God as akin to a child's crying need for a father. See *Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (1927; Bremen: Europäischer Literaturverlag.).

first and foremost belong to a libertine manifesto affirming their participants' intellectual insubordination. The tone is light, irreverent, droll, and provocative; it is part and parcel of the libertine's reaction to any institution that seeks to impede the fulfillment of their desires. In the first part of this article, I therefore analyze why libertine lessons are narrated as ceremonies of initiation and explain how this relates to the blasphemous stance that characterizes libertinism. In particular, I argue that the ceremonial overtone of erotic lessons is driven by the fact that such educations aim to debunk the church's notion of what is sacred, revealing instead to pupils where sacredness really lies for a libertine: not in institutions and usual hierarchies but in the abandonment to Nature's impulses. Born anew after their first lessons, novices are now able to let go of, and even ridicule, former restrictions and definitions.

Second, however, blasphemy remains a gesture through which the sacred and the profane are united. Could we see, beyond the libertine bravado of parodying ceremony and demystifying the Christian ritual, a hint of a longing to bridge the gap between the two dimensions and perhaps even to touch the sacred? In the second part of my article, I consider libertine ceremonies as genuine celebrations of Pleasure—a new deity deserving worship.

Libertine Education as Initiatory Ceremonies

In libertine fiction, the ceremonious nature of certain rendezvous is often the spontaneous outcome of the education it represents for one of the participants. The lessons that libertine masters share with their pupils go beyond the scope of usual tutoring. They represent less an education than an initiation, more a rite of passage than a lesson. Whereas education just reforms one's way of thinking, an initiation radically transforms one's being.

The term *initiation* in the most general sense denotes a body of rites and oral teachings whose purpose is to produce a decisive alteration in the religious and social status of the person to be initiated. In philosophical terms, initiation is equivalent to a basic change in existential condition; the novice emerges from his or her ordeal endowed as a

totally different being from that which he or she was before his or her initiation; the novice has become *another*.⁸

So frequent are scenes akin to an initiation ritual present in libertine fiction that initiatory ceremonies can be considered as a topos of the genre. This should not be a surprise in a literature that, although ranging from the sentimental to the pornographic across the span of the century, finds a unifying principle in the educational motive. Whatever their stance toward pleasure, whether they condemn or condone one's abandonment to temptations, all libertine authors describe the enlightenment of a character with regard to sexuality, a new facet of which is revealed to him or her in the course of the story.

The crux of a libertine education is erotic. Yet, an entire new perspective on the world is revealed through sexuality. Patrick Wald Lasowski, perusing the depths of libertine frivolity and resorting to the imagery of liberation ("s'est délivré" [freed himself]), comments on the existential dimension of the countless erotic discoveries that punctuate the history of libertine literature:

Il y a, à travers la diversité des formes, une structure romanesque dominante. Le roman libertin est . . . roman de formation. Il fait le récit d'une initiation, d'une découverte, d'une exploration du monde, au terme de laquelle le héros s'est délivré des doutes, des hésitations, des terreurs qui l'habitaient.⁹

(There is, despite the diversity of forms, a governing novelistic structure. The libertine novel is . . . a novel of education. It tells the story of an initiation, a discovery, an exploration of the world, at the end of which the hero has freed himself from the doubts, hesitations, and terrors that haunted him.)

Characters learn from their encounters with one another. Should one be younger or obviously less experienced than his or her partner, the erotic narrative borrows heavily from the didactic lexicon. A mistress remains

8. Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiations: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* (1958), trans. Willard R. Trask (Woodstock, NY: Spring, 1995), x.

9. Patrick Wald Lasowski, foreword to *Romanciers libertins du dix-huitième siècle*, ed. Patrick Wald Lasowski, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard "Pléiade," 2005), 1:xlvii.

a mistress, but a lover becomes another's pupil or master, and an intercourse becomes a lesson taught by "immoral teachers" (as in Sade's *La Philosophie dans le boudoir, ou les instituteurs immoraux* [1795]). The one-night affair described in *Point de lendemain* (1777) has been called "une leçon de nuit"¹⁰ (a night lesson) whereas, through the libertine perspective of Andréa de Nerciat (1739–1800), the surprising discovery of sodomy becomes an "impromptu doctorate" (*Le Doctorat impromptu* [1788]). This collusion of eroticism with education serves as a reminder that historically, libertinism has its roots in intellectual emancipation rather than in debauchery.

When the term *libertine* first appeared in the early modern period, it was to describe and denounce a sect of Anabaptists. It was then synonymous with "atheist," "skeptic," "deist," and any kind of religious dissident. What defined a libertine was his or her intellectual independence from dogma, as if echoing the word's ancient meaning—a *libertinus* was a freed slave in ancient Rome. By the seventeenth century, this independence often walked hand in hand with a disregard of certain socioreligious values, such as monogamy and temperance. It was also punishable by fire: many a free spirit died on the stake in the first decades of the Grand Siècle¹¹ for having refused to conform to the sanctioned definition of God and finding divinity, instead, in their appetites: "Ils n'ont d'autre Dieu que leur ventre"¹² (They have no other God than their stomach). As the century progressed, under Louis XIV's ever tighter moral codes, prudery increased, which relegated sexual freedom to secrecy and relative silence. At the same time, the progress of Reason was digging a channel for emancipated spirits to express themselves. Fontenelle's, Bayle's, and Saint-Évremond's intellectual independence no longer made libertines of them but, already, men of the Enlightenment. The eighteenth century's free spirits—Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot—are labeled as *philosophes*. A century earlier, they would have

10. Philippe Sollers, *Le Cavalier du Louvre : Vivant Denon, 1747–1825* (Paris: Plon, 1995), 79.

11. Such was the fate of Jules César Vanini in 1619. Théophile de Viau was condemned to the same sentence but was eventually burned only in effigy.

12. Le Père Garasse, *La Doctrine curieuse des beaux esprits de ce temps* (Paris: Charpillet, 1622), 37.

been "libertines," but by the beginning of Philippe d'Orléans regency (1715–23), the term is reserved for rakes and fornicators, prostitutes and fallen ladies. Until recently, French history tended to consecrate the idea of a shift from one type of libertinism—intellectual or *éru-dit*¹³ in the seventeenth century—to another—merely physical in the eighteenth.

However, libertine literature, as has been widely recognized, blurs traditional boundaries by multiplying examples of texts that partake at once of the pornographic novel and of the philosophical essay.¹⁴ In an age when adultery and fornication are still officially condemned by society and the church, sexual freedom demands a certain form of intellectual emancipation. Therefore, any erotic story somehow narrates the independence (acquired or being acquired) of a protagonist with regard to institutions and the Christian religion. Religious dissidence, while tacit in some novels,¹⁵ can be central in other libertine writings. Blasphemy then takes center stage.

Such novels often advertise their anti-ecclesiastical stance in their very titles, as can be seen in the famous examples of *Histoire de Dom Bougre ou le portier des chartreux* (1740), *Histoire galante de la tourière des carmélites* (1743), and *Les Lauriers ecclésiastiques* (1748).¹⁶ These novels continue a tradition of philosophical and theological dialogues infused with pornography that Aretino (often regarded as the father of Western pornographic literature) consecrated with his *Ragionamenti: La Vita delle Monache, La Vita della Maritate, La Vita delle Puttane* (1534–36), in which the lives of married women and of prostitutes come second only to the beguiling lives of nuns. The late seventeenth century had given libertine authors from the Age of Enlightenment new models reviving this

13. The expression *libertins érudits* was coined by René Pintard in his thesis. See *Le Libertinage érudit dans la première moitié du dix-huitième siècle* (Paris: Boivin, 1943).

14. To such an extent that in his effort to categorize eighteenth-century literature, Henri Coulet has labeled pornographic texts *romans philosophiques*. See *Le Roman jusqu'à la Révolution*, 2 vols. (Paris: Colin, 1967).

15. The tales of Crébillon, Duclos, and Dorat, for instance, do not emphasize the necessary "enlightenment" of their protagonists.

16. Respectively written by Gervaise de Latouche, Meusnier de Querlon, and La Morlière. One can also think of the anonymous *Le Triomphe des religieuses ou les Nonnes babillardes* (1748), *Lettres galantes et philosophiques de deux nonnes* (1777), and *Les Exercices de dévotion de M. Henri Roch* (1786).

tradition, such as *Vénus dans le cloître ou la Religieuse en chemise* (1683). The authors and the implicit readers of such texts seem to have relished the collision of two mutually exclusive discourses and images: the pornographic and the religious.

These texts' anti-ecclesiastical stance manifests itself in the most vivid manner as nuns, monks, priests, and devout women are revealed as the most lustful creatures of the libertine universe. Yet, they also show that transgression is pleasure's best accomplice. The more transgressive, the better—hence the bliss of the nuns and monks who pervert the Christian ritual they live by. Most famously, the monks who capture, rape, torture, and kill their victims in dark orgies in Sade's *Justine, ou les infortunes de la vertu* (1791), as well as the monks and nuns from two neighboring institutions who meet in nocturnal debauchery in *Dom Bougre*, illustrate the pleasure of perverting the most sacred symbols of an institution. When these rakes meet, they do not free themselves from the order of the ritual. Quite the contrary: they reproduce the structure of a mass and repeat the words of the religious service. Sexual excitation is enhanced by the libertines' self-consciousness about breaking the rules as well as by their pride at managing to wittily pervert the would-be pure meaning of religious ceremonies.

One text, the highly anti-ecclesiastical *Thérèse philosophe* (1748), best illustrates the pleasure—both sensual and intellectual—to be gained from perversion. It opens with the fantasized details of an actual and well-known scandal in the eighteenth century: the seduction of a young nun by her priest. From a closet, the narrator and protagonist, Thérèse, is watching it all happen. Père Dirrag makes his penitent kneel and pray, promising that her obedience and devotion will make her feel the presence of the “cordon de Saint François” (Saint François's knot), which he administers from behind: “Par ce moyen il s'assure qu'elle ne tournera pas la tête, qu'elle ne verra rien de son impudicité”¹⁷ (He can thus make sure that she will not turn her head, that she will see nothing of his impudicity). The extreme innocence of Eradice makes the scene comic, albeit acid: “Elle croit tomber dans une extase divine, purement

17. Jean-Baptiste de Boyer d'Argens, *Thérèse philosophe, ou Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du P. Dirrag et de Mlle Éradice* (1748), in *Romanciers libertins du dix-huitième siècle*, 1:892.

spirituelle, lorsqu'elle jouit des plaisirs de la chair les plus voluptueux"¹⁸ (She thinks she is falling in a divine ecstasy when she is in fact enjoying the most voluptuous pleasures of the flesh). The religious discourse is used on two parallel levels for many pages in *Thérèse philosophe*, as if to signify that this language is in itself pregnant with vice.

Such texts are obviously highly blasphemous. Their authors, not content to simply mock the church, also mock religious feelings when they conflate physical ecstasy with religious emotion. This contributes greatly to the humor and satire of these texts. A devout woman succumbs, to the delight of her libertine lover, with ejaculatory prayers:

Quelle jouissance qu'une dévote! Que de charmants riens!
Comme cela vous retourne! Quel moelleux! Quels soupirs! . . .
Ah! ma bonne Sainte Vierge! . . . Ah! mon doux Jésus!¹⁹

(What an ecstasy a devout woman can be! So many charming little things! How it can upset you! What a softness! What sighs! . . . Ah! Holy Virgin Mother! . . . Ah! Sweet Jesus!)

Another devout woman confuses her apprentice's cries of pleasure for an ecstatic prayer; she just fails to notice the young man hidden under the apprentice's skirts:

La voilà qui se persuade que Cécile récitait ses prières. "Continuez, mon enfant, continuez. . . Vous êtes dans la voie du salut." . . . C'étaient les titillations de cette langue agile qui avaient causé dans les sens de Cécile ce désordre que Geneviève avait pris pour un élan de dévotion.²⁰

(Here she is, convinced that Cécile was repeating her prayers. "Keep going, my child, keep going. . . You are on the way to salvation." . . . It was the tease of that dexterous tongue that had

18. Ibid., 1:891.

19. Honoré-Gabriel de Riquetti, Comte de Mirabeau, *Ma Conversion, ou Le Libertin de qualité* (1783), in *Romanciers libertins du dix-huitième siècle*, 2:982.

20. Charles Pigault-Lebrun, *L'Enfant du bordel* (1800), in *Romanciers libertins du dix-huitième siècle*, 2:1239.

caused in Cécile's senses that disorder that Geneviève had mistaken for an impulse of devotion.)

Similar examples abound, and all serve the same purpose of profaning the religious discourse and underlying its vacuity. Such passages aim to reveal that the believers' virtue is but an illusion (at best, it is fragile and ready to crumble at the first temptation) and that religion can only be an absurdity because its language makes no sense to the point of lending itself to the emotion it condemns: erotic bliss. Through blasphemy, libertine authors aim to reveal the legitimacy and even the supremacy of pleasures of the flesh over religious or social prejudices.

Beyond the lack of respect, blasphemy is a demonstration of independence and of defiance toward God and his word as proclaimed by the Ten Commandments: "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God."²¹ Through blasphemy or blasphemous behaviors, libertines claim that they have no fear of God's punishment, an act of bravado that Don Juan and most of his fictional avatars, from Molière's *Dom Juan* (1660) to Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1687), have epitomized in their challenge to the statue of the commander, as if to say that if there exists a metaphysical power in the universe, it should manifest itself to punish their insults. Jean Starobinski has detected in such provocations the possibility of a tacit, desperate cry for a God:

Ils préfèrent blasphémer la figure traditionnelle du Père. Ils se replient dans le rêve du défi et de la faute, pour susciter en fin de compte une punition où ils trouveront la preuve d'une Présence dont ils ne peuvent se passer.²²

(They prefer to blaspheme the traditional figure of the Father. They lock themselves in the dream of a challenge and a fault, to eventually trigger a punishment in which they will find the proof of a Presence without which they cannot live.)

Still, beyond this doubt, this possibility, there is one certitude: the libertine thus advertises himself or herself as free from the bondage of fear

21. Exodus 20:7 (New Revised Standard Version [NRSV]).

22. Jean Starobinski, *L'Invention de la liberté: 1700–1789* (Geneva: Skira, 1987), 74.

and submission to a higher power. The only power to which a libertine might concede is that of his or her appetites and drives. The fear of damnation, just like the belief in virtue, belongs, according to them, to inferior beings. In a fine study of three supreme examples of eighteenth-century libertinism—Versac from Crébillon's *Les Egarements du cœur et de l'esprit* (1735–1738), Valmont from *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Sade through his heroes—Pierre Saint-Amand has portrayed libertines as "immortals,"²³ promethean figures set above the rest of common men, satanic seducers rivalling God, should God exist. They rival, if not with God, at least with the concept, through a battle they lead in the minds of the devout women they seduce.²⁴ Valmont reveals his project to his accomplice the Marquise de Merteuil in terms that lift his enterprise of corruption to the metaphysical sphere: "J'aurai cette femme ; . . . j'oserai la ravir au Dieu même qu'elle adore. . . . Je serai vraiment le Dieu qu'elle aura préféré"²⁵ (I shall have this woman; . . . I shall dare stealing her from the very God she adores. . . . I shall truly be the God she will have preferred). Seduction, worldly as it is, can take cosmic proportions. Through sin and blasphemy, libertines affirm their belonging to a chosen few who have refused to let the church and its Christian God limit their impulses.

Yet, these chosen few sometimes decide that a novice is worthy of being initiated to their wisdom and is invited to join their superior sphere from which God has been dethroned. Thus what they provide is no longer a simple education but an initiation, and the enlightenment they offer is considered to be of such a magnitude that it is worthy of a ceremony. Of course, the fact that the demystification of the church and its dogma should be staged as a ceremony is in itself a blasphemy; it is yet another challenge to the concept of an Almighty God and to the idea that the church alone has the right to declare what to worship. The libertine ceremonial, which sublimates depravation into an initiation,

23. Pierre Saint-Amand, "The Immortals," trans. Jennifer Curtis Gage, in *Libertinage and Modernity*, ed. Peter Cryle and Catherine Cusset, Yale French Studies 94 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 116–29.

24. Betty Becker-Theye also saw a satanical grandeur in these seducers' enterprises. See *The Seducer as Mythic Figure in Richardson, Laclos and Kierkegaard* (New York: Garland, 1988).

25. Pierre Ambroise François Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, in Laclos, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Laurent Versini (Paris, 1979), p.1-386 (p.22).

constitutes in itself a first step toward intellectual independence: what used to be the sole property of the church in eighteenth-century France is now owned by libertines. Libertines have redefined what is sacred and what is profane. Erotic desire, they explain, is only profane for the “profanes,” for the nonenlightened souls who “détournent les éjaculations naturelles de leur cœur pour en diriger les élans vers des êtres fantastiques. L’amour est un dieu profane qui ne mérite pas leur encens. . . . C’est pour nous un blasphème que d’exprimer l’amour.”²⁶ (Deviate the natural ejaculations of their hearts and address such impulses to fantastical beings. Love is a profane god that does not deserve their incense. . . . It is for us a blasphemy to express love). This erotic love is what is presented as worthy of reverence and secrecy, of being wrapped in a silence that confers it its sacred dimension, as we shall see in the second part of this article. The novices’ acceptance of this reversal of values is a first step toward their libertine enlightenment, toward the revelation of what libertines hold as sacred.

The blasphemous nature of these initiatory ceremonies is symbolically reinforced by their setting: they take place at night. The surrounding darkness acts as a metaphor for the intellectual journey that the novice is about to undertake and that will set him or her free from the rule of Christ, the Light of the World.²⁷ Libertine narrators enjoy the polysemy of their descriptions when it comes to darkness. Indeed, the tenebrous setting envelops the scene in a depth of religious resonances. It is sometimes said in passing, casually, but this feigned airiness only highlights the novice’s momentous move from light to darkness, virtue to vice, as in *Thémidore* (1744), in which the young narrator follows a courtesan into the dark recesses of her alcove: “Nous passâmes vers le côté obscur”²⁸ (We moved to the dark side). The transition is both literal and metaphorical for this young man who surrenders to depravity. Libertine authors are here playing with the codes of the Johannic Manicheism

26. Anon. [Mirabeau?], *Le Rideau levé, ou L’Éducation de Laure* (n.p., 1786, n.p.: Au Palais sous les robes, 1882), 1.

27. “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (NRSV, John 8: 12).

28. Claude Godard d’Aucour, *Thémidore* (1744), in *Romanciers libertins du dix-huitième siècle*, 1:523.

used by the church: if light is the domain of Christianity and virtue ("God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all" [NRSV, John 1:5]), night will be theirs, lending them and their pupils a perfect setting for educations that will be in fact countereducations, teaching the reverse of what is taught in daylight.

Libertine literature displays a taste for ironic contrasts as sharp as the day-night dichotomy: harp classes in the afternoon for Cécile de Volanges but "catéchisme de débauche"²⁹ (catechism of debauchery) at night with Valmont in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*,³⁰ a father-and-daughter relationship in the daytime for Laure and her stepfather in *Le Rideau levé* but lessons of voluptuousness together and with her governess in hours of darkness, prayers and religious instruction from dawn to dusk in convents but sapphic initiations from dusk to dawn for the countless nuns of anti-ecclesiastical fiction who admit to "[se] branl[er] du soir au matin"³¹ (masturbating from evening to morning). This duality also serves to proudly advertise the successful hypocrisy of these masters of libertinism who manage to live two antithetic lives. Even before the advent of libertine fiction, it was commonly acknowledged that nocturnal lessons could only be deviant: emblematically, the medieval scholar Pierre Abelard recalled how his theological tutoring of Héloïse would metamorphose itself at night: "Mes nuits éta[ie]nt données à l'amour, mes journées au travail"³² (My nights were given to love, my days to work). If sunlit hours must be lived in accordance with public laws and religious prejudices, nocturnal educations can teach disciples to dedicate themselves to the ideals of individual happiness, truth, and nature. The lesson, from Rousseau's *Emile* to the pornographic *Mémoires de Suzon* (1778), is invariably the same: society and the church have wronged humankind in setting up laws that are in perfect contradiction to Man's nature:

29. Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Letter CX, 354.

30. On the educative motive in Laclos's novel, see Susan Dunn, "Education and Seduction in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*," *Symposium* 34 (1980): 125–37.

31. Anon., *Mémoires de Suzon, sœur de D.B. . . ., portier des Chartreux, écrits par elle-même* (1778), in *Romanciers libertins du dix-huitième siècle*, 2:900.

32. Pierre Abelard and Héloïse, *Correspondance* (1120s), ed. Edouard Bouyé and trans. Octave Gréard (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 68.

L'homme même a forgé de ses propres mains son malheur, et aiguisé les traits qui doivent lui percer le cœur. Ne serait-il pas à désirer qu'il n'eût jamais suivi que l'instinct de la nature, plutôt que de s'être soumis à des lois et à des coutumes qui n'ont été inventées que pour le malheur de l'humanité?³³

(Man himself has crafted his misery with his own hands and sharpened the darts that shall pierce his heart. Should not one wish that he had only ever followed nature's instinct rather than submitting himself to laws and customs that have been invented only for humanity's misery?)

This is the introductory lecture of all libertine educations, hence Sade's opening his *Philosophie dans le boudoir* with an introductory warning to his readers:

Ces passions, dont de froids et plats moralistes vous effraient, ne sont que les moyens que la nature emploie pour faire parvenir l'homme aux vues qu'elle a sur lui; n'écoutez que ces passions délicieuses. . . . Détruisez, foulez aux pieds . . . tous les préceptes ridicules inculqués par d'imbéciles parents.³⁴

(These passions, with which cold and pointless moralists scare you, are but the means that Nature uses to lead Man to the ambitions it has for him; listen only to these delicious passions. . . . Crush, trample over all the ridiculous precepts taught by imbecile parents.)

Thus the "immoral teachers" of libertine literature are shown encouraging their disciples to listen to the call of the wild and to escape from what in their view is an arbitrary and absurd social order.

This emancipation constitutes the core material of the anonymous novel *Le Rideau levé, ou l'éducation de Laure* (1786), in which a man and a governess teach his stepdaughter to become an independent spirit and

33. Anon., *Mémoires de Suzon*, 898.

34. Sade, *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795), in *Œuvres*, ed. Michel Delon, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard "Pléiade," 1990), 3:1.

therefore a happy woman. From an early age onward, Laure has been taught the virtues of skepticism; philosophy must replace her prejudices: "Apprends de bonne heure à réfléchir et à former ton jugement, en le dégageant des entraves du préjugé"³⁵ (Learn rapidly to think and to form your judgment by freeing it from the shackles of prejudice). She must rethink the boundaries that the church and society have set between Good and Evil. The Christian God, in this libertine catechism, as in Sade's, is replaced by Nature, which willfully made men as creatures of cravings:

Consultons la nature : quels ont été son but et ses desseins? La reproduction des êtres, et elle n'a imprimé tant de plaisirs dans l'union des sexes que pour y parvenir d'une manière agréable et par conséquent plus sûre.³⁶

(Let's consult Nature: what were its goals and objectives? The reproduction of beings, and it has only put so many pleasures in the union of the sexes in order to fulfill its objective through agreeable—and therefore safer—means.)

The enlightenment described in this novel is given a metaphysical air from the title page onward. The lifted curtain of the title, the one thanks to which Laure will discover the physical bliss of her two tutors, is a direct reference to the etymology of "apocalypsis": the lifting or tearing of the curtain hiding the truth. Through the allusion to a revelation, Laure's very factual education (sexual and philosophical) becomes a parable for an initiation to a new definition of the sacred. As Mircea Eliade explains, initiation not only signifies the end of childhood and ignorance, it also implies the end of one's profane condition.³⁷ Thus, the hierophany featured in *Le Rideau levé* can be understood as revealing to the novice Laure that the truly sacred is in fact the laws of Nature prompting man to seek *jouissance*.

To further highlight the sacred nature of the revelation made to Laure, when she is finally about to be initiated into the mysteries of sexuality,

35. Anon. [Mirabeau?], *Le Rideau levé, ou L'Éducation de Laure*, 18–19.

36. *Ibid.*, 155.

37. Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiations*, x.

her tutors are careful to re-create all the attributes of an initiatory ceremony. In a boudoir, a mystical night is reproduced through dimmed blue lights (“la lumière du jour en était absolument bannie. . . . Les foyers de quatre réverbères . . . adoucis par des gazes bleues” [daylight was absolutely banned from the room. . . . The fire of four torches . . . softened by blue veils]), and the bed is transformed into a sacrificial altar (“Je me jetai de moi-même sur l’autel” [I threw myself on the altar]).³⁸ The use of the semantic field of ritual sacrifices can be justified by its aesthetic function within the text. These references are rhetorical allusions to the ancient world, and their role is to ornate the text just as statues of Greek gods ornate interiors and gardens in the early modern period. Yet, these mentions of sacrifices and altars, of crowns and worships, also serve to startle the reader and convey the intensity of the impact that the sexual discovery has on the existence of the initiated character.

This moment, the culmination of Laure’s initiation, must result in her transformation into a new being; Laure’s old self is therefore ritually sacrificed. Her blood must be spilled—“mets-moi toute en sang” (make me bleed)—to make room for the new, enlightened woman that her defloration will have turned her into. The masters of this initiation ceremony tie her waist, hair, and arms with “rubans couleur de feu” (ribbons the color of fire) and place the neophyte on a sacrificial cushion of the same color—“un petit coussin de satin couleur de feu, mis au milieu, qui formait la pierre sur laquelle devait se consommer le sacrifice” (a small pillow the color of fire, put in the center, which stood for the stone on which the sacrifice was to be consummated)—that shall evoke the purification through fire followed by the phoenix-like rebirth of her whole being. Ritually, on this altar, Laure dies—“J’étouffais, je mourais ; mes bras, mes jambes, ma tête tombèrent de toutes parts ; je n’étais plus à force d’être” (I could not breathe, I was dying; my arms, my legs, my head fell altogether; by being, I stopped being)—and starts her life on a new first day: “Le premier où j’ai connu les délices de la volupté” (The first when I knew the delights of voluptuousness). Although erotic ecstasies have often been described as little deaths far beyond the scope of libertine writings, libertine authors are careful to emphasize the rebirth

38. All quotes on this page come from Anon. [Mirabeau?], *Le Rideau levé*, 60.

that follows certain of these blackouts. Once reborn a libertine, one can finally worship the new sacred that has been revealed throughout this initiation: pleasure.

Ceremonies as Celebrations of Pleasure

When libertine authors paint sexual gratification with poses and colors that are normally the prerogatives of the religious sphere, they are not necessarily positioning themselves against all religious notions.³⁹ Their characters' blasphemy, their defiance, and their insults are directed against the Christian Church and its polarization of the erotic and the divine alongside the dichotomy of evil and good, profane and sacred. Refusing the dogmatic premises on which the devaluation of sexuality in the Western world has been based, libertines and libertine authors return to an original and actual definition of the sacred when they associate it with the pleasures of the flesh. They show an understanding of the fact that the sacred and the divine are two different things, despite the Christian tradition of assimilating them.

Anthropologists such as Émile Durkheim, Rudolf Otto, and Mircea Eliade⁴⁰ have remapped the two domains of sacred and divine. They stress the fact that the sacred can exist independently from the church. Whereas the divine is necessarily sacred or sacralized by religious institutions, the sacred is not necessarily divine: it does not have to relate to a god. The sacred, they explain, is characterized by its remoteness from the normal order of things—from the profane, the everyday—hence Man's instincts to erect temples in remote places, to perform ceremonies at night while others sleep (from Bacchanalia to Aphrodisies to Easter or Christmas wakes), and to provide heavy doors to churches

39. Alexis de Tocqueville, at the end of the century, had already remarked that the hatred for the church was greatly due to the clergy's disproportionate riches, not exclusively to the symbols it used. On this subject, see Starobinski, *L'Invention de la liberté*, 116.

40. Émile Durkheim, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse : Le Système totémique en Australie* (1912; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013); Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy [Das Heilige]* (1917; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968); and Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961).

behind which believers are separated from the buzz of the modern world. In all these situations, what is experienced is something new and different from the normality of the everyday. The *ganz andere*, the “absolutely other,” and the *mysterium tremendum*, the “overwhelming mystery,” that accompanies its contemplation, define the sacred, according to Otto and his followers.⁴¹ Only the divine is associated with gods. The sacred, by contrast, can be found anywhere, even in something as worldly and earthly as physical pleasures. The sacred is a way of seeing and existing in the world by being aware of the *majestas*⁴² characterizing this other dimension.

To understand what prompted libertines to associate sexuality with a form of sacredness, we must remember that since the early seventeenth century, sexuality belonged to a dimension severed from daily life, relegated to the nocturnal and to the bedroom or closet.⁴³ As Michel Foucault has seminally explained in his *Histoire de la sexualité* (1976–1984), sex and the discourses of pleasure have not only been *demonized* but also—paradoxically—*sacralized* by centuries of repression.⁴⁴ The libertine novel, as one of these discourses about eroticism, is therefore endowed with the sacredness that used to be the privilege of religious predication:

C'est le sexe aujourd'hui qui sert de support à cette vieille forme, si familière et si importante en Occident, de la prédication. . . . Demandons nous comment il a pu se faire que le lyrisme, que la religiosité . . . se soient . . . reportées, pour une bonne part au moins, sur le sexe.⁴⁵

41. Otto introduced the terms *ganz andere*, *mysterium tremendum*, and *mysterium fascinans* in *Das Heilige*. His theories and definitions are summed up by Mircea Eliade in the introduction to *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961).

42. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 17.

43. Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby have commented on this exacerbation of the notions of privacy and intimacy with regard to the body (and consequently to sexuality) in *Histoire de la vie privée*, vol. 3, *De la Renaissance aux Lumières* (Paris: Seuil, 1985).

44. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, *La Volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 14.

45. *Ibid.*, 15.

(It is sex nowadays that serves as a support to this old form of predication that is so familiar and so important in the Western world. . . . Let's ask ourselves how it can have happened that lyricism, religiosity . . . could have been transferred, if only partially, onto sex.)

Foucault does not mention any blasphemous stance in this collusion of the former sacred with the new. Confined to secrecy, it was natural that libertine texts and pleasures gained an almost numinous aura that libertine narrators only magnify, and with which they ironically play, when they turn orgies into ceremonies or see sacred ecstasies where there is but a physical orgasm. In fact, the man who can perceive the presence of the sacred in the world, whether in the spectacle of the nocturnal sky or in erotic bliss, is not necessarily a blasphemer but truly a "religious man."⁴⁶

Thus the provocation addressed against the Church's sacred (when libertines become nuns or when they use altars and chalices for their sexual pleasures) is not necessarily a blasphemy of that wider definition of sacredness and of that religious feeling. Rather, libertines' blasphemous ceremonies become a celebration of this exceptional, otherworldly dimension that has been revealed to them in the awe-inspiring intensity of erotic bliss.

Besides, even their actual blasphemy of a certain form of (mostly Christian) sacredness can perhaps be interpreted as meaning more than disrespect, even if only on a subconscious level. It is indeed one of the attributes of blasphemy to bridge the gap between sacred and profane, or divine and worldly, as Alain Cabantous has remarked in his study of blasphemy in the Western world:

Avec le blasphème, il s'agit de prendre la mesure de la relation entre le divin et l'humain, de saisir la limite entre deux mondes co-existants et pourtant de plus en plus distincts dans l'approche spirituelle de l'Europe moderne.⁴⁷

46. This is how Mircea Eliade defines the "religious man" throughout *The Sacred and the Profane*.

47. Alain Cabantous, *Histoire du blasphème en Occident: XVIe-XIXe siècles* (Paris: Michel, 1998), 10–11.

(With blasphemy, what is at stake is the evaluation of the relation between the divine and the human, the capture of the limit between worlds which co-exist although they are getting more and more distinct in the spiritual approach of modern Europe.)

This would explain why libertines and libertine authors were not willing to get rid of the symbols and religious cults that punctuate their narratives, such as altars, temples, and ceremonies. By redefining the sacred as independent from any instituted religion, they could have forsaken all these signs and traditions. Yet, the choice to keep these symbols reinforces the impression that pleasure is truly sacred. Besides, *jouissance* is enhanced by being experienced as something fabulous, beyond the everyday:

Au lieu de promouvoir une réalité neuve, l'on prend pour modèle un théâtre d'ombres : ainsi, faisant irruption dans le monde moderne, la liberté commence par ajuster sa figure sur de grands précédents fabuleux.⁴⁸

(Instead of promoting a new reality, they take a theater of shadows as their model: thus, breaking in the modern world, freedom starts by shaping its form on grand and fabulous precedents.)

Pleasure is thus celebrated in a manner normally reserved for deities.

Of course, the ceremonial staging of libertine orgies must be deemed blasphemous. The intention to parody is undeniably present. However, the religious discourse and its imagery represent the best—if not the only—way to express intense emotions. This corroborates Cabantous's suggestion that what motivates blasphemy is not always solely a blasphemous intention. Referring to pleasure by resorting to the imagery of religious bliss is a natural, almost instinctive attempt to cope with the ineffable. Ejaculatory prayers such as "ah mon Dieu" come out instinctively. Beyond the comical effect produced by the proximity of sin and faith, these prayers that punctuate many a love scene in libertine fiction efficiently underline the characters' automatic recourse to religion to describe unearthly feelings rather than to provoke the Church or God.

48. Starobinski, *L'Invention de la liberté*, (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2003), 117.

Félicia, narrating her hedonist youth, often faces the impossibility of translating her emotions in order to share them with her readers. Nevertheless, ellipses and prayers can equally well suggest the boundless nature of her bliss: "Dieux! . . . Quelle nuit! . . . Quel homme! . . . Quel amour!"⁴⁹ (Gods! . . . What a night! . . . What a man! . . . What a love!) The sacred discourse of the church and the erotic narrative share the deep consciousness of their unavoidable failure to express the unfathomable nature of the emotions they are concerned with. As Florence Deschamps remarks in her analysis of the meaning of blasphemy in libertine texts:

Au-delà d'une simple perversion du lexique religieux effectuée dans une intention parodique, le recours au sacré pour dépeindre une jouissance amoureuse s'inscrit en fait dans la tradition des grands textes chrétiens. Pensons au *Cantique des Cantiques*.⁵⁰

(Beyond the simple perversion of the religious lexicon performed with a satirical intention, resorting to the sacred in order to represent an amorous bliss inscribes itself in fact in the tradition of great Christian texts. One can think of the *Song of Songs*.)

Staging lovemaking as a ceremony, or expressing pleasure with words borrowed from the religious lexicon, is thus a form of reverence, a way to acknowledge the awe-inspiring and unfathomable nature of the pleasure one seeks. For libertines, it is a sign of a refusal to reduce sex to a simple fact and instead to magnify the impact it has on their lives. It is part and parcel of the libertines' efforts toward refinement that so often characterize their eroticism. Michel Delon calls this "le passage de la pulsion sexuelle au raffinement érotique"⁵¹ (the shift from sexual pulsion to erotic refinement). Although they admit to being driven by

49. André-Robert Andréa de Nerciat, *Félicia, ou Mes Fredaines* (1775), in *Romanciers libertins du dix-huitième siècle*, 2:861.

50. Florence Deschamps, "Au commencement était le verbe . . .": Parole sacrée et blasphème au sein des écrits érotiques du XVIIIe siècle," in *Libertin, mon ami*, ed. Patrick Wald Lasowski, *Revue des Sciences Humaines* 271 (Lille: Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses de l'Univ. Charles-de-Gaulle, 2003), 83–84.

51. Michel Delon, "L'espace de la séduction dans le roman français du dix-huitième siècle," in *Littérature et séduction*, ed. Roger Marchal (Paris: Klincksieck, 1997), 382.

their appetites, most libertines do not welcome the prospect of copulating like animals. Their pleasures thus demand a *mise-en-scène*, hence, sometimes, their games of seduction, repetitions, accessories, and ceremonies too. Anything susceptible to giving emotions and sensations a special, possibly stupefying, resonance is priceless in a century when Man discovers he exists only through these sensations. As Georges Poulet has shown in his *Études sur le temps humain*, the Age of Enlightenment corresponds to a period in Western history when only the here and now mattered once the certitude of an afterlife had been shattered by the Enlightenment. Beyond the here and now is a void of apathy from which only sensations can lift Man: “A la place de Dieu, il y a des sentiments, des sensations, tout ce qui cause ces sensations.”⁵² (Instead of God, there are feelings, sensations, everything that causes these sensations), hence the libertines’ cry for extreme emotions that can touch not only their bodies but also their minds. Ceremonies therefore appear as an efficient way to condition the mind for great pleasures and to build up expectations and desires by postponing their satisfaction.

The longing, not to say the need, to compare lovemaking to a ceremony is best exemplified in the short story *Point de lendemain* (1777). With this text, Vivant Denon wrote an apotheosis of libertine literature, before the dark libertinism featured in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and the Marquis de Sade’s fiction took over. *Point de lendemain* tells the story of one night between two lovers. Mme de T*** has abducted the young Damon from the opera and takes him for a night with “no tomorrow” to her husband’s castle outside Paris. From the onset of the tale, this night has a peculiar resonance: “Le flambeau mystérieux de la nuit éclairait un ciel pur d’un demi-jour très voluptueux”⁵³ (The mysterious torch of night was lighting a pure sky with a very voluptuous *chiaroscuro*). The plot is simple and could be regarded as a dull, banal one-night stand between two strangers. Yet, the way in which it is narrated and the way in which it is actually experienced by the two protagonists forbids us from seeing a commonplace episode of fornication in this short story. Throughout the tale, we witness the couple’s efforts to raise their

52. Georges Poulet, *Études sur le temps humain*, 4 vols. (Paris: Plon, 1949–68), 1:25.

53. Dominique de Vivant Denon, *Point de lendemain* (1777; Paris: Liseux, 1876), 9.

pleasures to the level of a sacred communion. This desire leads them to perceive the presence of an otherworldly enchantment in the world: "Notre imagination faisait d'une île qui était devant notre pavillon un lieu enchanté"⁵⁴ (Our imagination transformed an island that was in front of our pavilion into an enchanted place). From then on, a garden pavilion can become a sanctuary (*sanctuaire*);⁵⁵ a boudoir, a temple; and lovemaking a ceremony of worship to the god of erotic love.

What characterizes a ceremony is its careful and meaningful orchestration. The lovers, conscious of this, decide to enjoy this night by following a (worldly) ritual of seduction and by devising a buildup toward the climax of their celebration:

Tout ceci avait été un peu brusqué. Nous sentîmes notre faute. Nous reprîmes avec plus de détail ce qui nous était échappé. Trop ardent, on est moins délicat. On court à la jouissance en confondant toutes les délices qui la précèdent.⁵⁶

(All this had been a bit rushed. We felt our mistake. We started again, in more detail, what we had missed. Too eager, one is less delicate. By running to jouissance, one confuses all the delights that precede it.)

Their preliminary homage culminates with the perfect imitation of a ceremony that starts as an initiation: "Tout cela avait l'air d'une initiation. . . . Mon cœur palpitait comme celui des grands prosélytes que l'on éprouve avant la célébration des grands mystères"⁵⁷ (All this looked like an initiation. . . . My heart was beating like that of a proselyte about to be tried before the celebration of great mysteries). A temple has been re-created within a boudoir where a statue of the god of love presides: "Devant cette statue était un autel, sur lequel brillait une flamme; au bas de cet autel étaient une coupe, des couronnes et des guirlandes"⁵⁸ (In front of this statue was an altar, on which a flame was shining; at the

54. *Ibid.*, 30.

55. *Ibid.*, 53.

56. *Ibid.*, 28.

57. *Ibid.*, 43.

58. *Ibid.*, 43.

base of this altar was a cup, wreaths, and garlands)—all the paraphernalia of religious worship instead of erotic accessories. Later, when their celebration is complete, the lover is crowned: “La déesse prit une couronne qu’elle posa sur ma tête”⁵⁹ (The goddess took a wreath, which she put on my head).

Vivant Denon is here reproducing a common trope of libertine art⁶⁰ whereby lovemaking becomes a ceremony by blending together various traditions, from Masonic meetings⁶¹ to ancient rituals. Allusions to the Masonic ritual are numerous: in *Point de lendemain*, such references range from the blindfolding of the novice to his circumambulation in a labyrinthine castle to a transit through the Room of Reflections (the boudoir being full of mirrors) to his admission into the Temple to his final fall and symbolic death. Still, despite these many details that often fill the descriptions of libertine love scenes, the overall comparison refers to ancient nocturnal ceremonies such as Priapées,⁶² Aphrodisies, and Bacchanalia. Emblematically, in *La Nuit merveilleuse* (ca. 1790), the anonymous pornographic rewriting of *Point de lendemain*, the Masonic atmosphere with its gospel of unselfish love gives way to the worship of Priapus: “La scène avait changé : au lieu du temple et de la statue de l’Amour, c’était celle du dieu des jardins”⁶³ (The scene had changed: instead of the temple and statue of Love, it was that of the god of gardens). Yet it is Bacchanalia, rather than Priapées, that provide libertine authors with the aptest comparison for the love scenes

59. *Ibid.*, 46.

60. One can think of the paintings of Boucher and Fragonard, notably the latter’s allegories of love.

61. Mirabeau, Caylus, Nerciat, Duclos, Laclos, and Vivant Denon, to name but a few, were all Freemasons.

62. This was indeed the time when “the arrogant connoisseur” Richard Payne Knight, *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus* (1786; London: Forgotten Books, 2008), and the Londonian dilettanti, like libertine authors, were discovering the Priapic celebrations of the ancient world. Vivant Denon himself was fascinated by Priapus, as witnessed by his travelogues *Voyage en Sicile* (1788), ed. by Patrick Mauriès (Paris: Le Promeneur, 1993) and *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute égypte pendant les campagnes du général Bonaparte* (1802; Paris: Gallimard, 1998). See also Hélène Lafont-Couturier, *Priapées et sujets divers gravés par Dominique-Vivant Denon* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2000).

63. Anon. [Vivant Denon?], *La Nuit merveilleuse, ou Le Nec plus ultra du plaisir* (ca. 1790), in “*Point de lendemain*” suivi de “*La Nuit merveilleuse*,” ed. Paul Emmanuel Auguste Poulet-Malassis and Jean-Jacques Pauvert (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1993), 45.

they narrate. Euripides's *The Bacchae* (405 BC) offers an example of the extreme *furor* and forgetting of the self as of limits that characterize *trance*. We already noted the violence of the images used in *Le Rideau levé*, in which the girl's sacrifice requires the actual spilling of her blood. Likewise, in *Point de lendemain* the lovers' passion is described as a Dionysiac sacrifice: "On arrache un nœud, on déchire une gaze: partout la volupté marque sa trace, et bientôt l'idole ressemble à la victime"⁶⁴ (One tears down a bow, one tears a veil, everywhere voluptuous prints its mark, and soon the idol resembles the victim).

However, when libertine authors resort to the model of the *Bacchanalia*, it is not only to refer to the *furor* of the *trance*. They also aim to highlight the communion of souls that can take place in physical *ecstasy*. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Friedrich Nietzsche famously remarks that what defines the Dionysiac is this spiritual communion:

Now, with the gospel of world harmony, each man feels himself not only united, reconciled, and at one with his neighbour, but one with him, as if the veil of Maya had been rent and now hung in rags before the mysterious primal oneness.⁶⁵

Libertine authors seem to have had a strong intuition of what Nietzsche would later argue. Erotic bliss can be a communion beyond the limits of the material world. It is described as the utmost form of pleasure toward which lovemaking should tend, as La Mettrie remarks in his essay on the art of bliss: "Ce n'est point la jouissance des corps, c'est celle des âmes qu'il me faut"⁶⁶ (It is not the *jouissance* of the bodies but of the souls that I need). Even a cynical libertine like Valmont discovers the superiority of this *jouissance*—"ce charme inconnu que j'ai ressenti" (this unknown delight that I experienced)—when he finally makes love with the devout Mme de Tourvel. To describe it, he is forced to use the image of a Dionysiac *trance*: "L'ivresse fût complète et réciproque"⁶⁷ (The

64. Vivant Denon, *Point de lendemain*, 9.

65. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872), trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner (London: Penguin, 1993), 15.

66. Julien Offroy de La Mettrie, *L'Art de jouir* in "L'Homme machine" suivi de "L'Art de jouir" (1748 and 1753; Paris: Bossard, 1921), 148.

67. Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Letter CXXV, 295.

intoxication was complete and reciprocal). For once, his soul, too, has been convened to this erotic intoxication. This conception of lovemaking as a religious communion is where libertine writing merges with sentimental prose, and the pornographic description of a sacrifice-like intercourse is told with the same terms as Saint-Preux's in Rousseau's *Julie* (1761): bliss is a "tight union of the souls" (*Rends moi cette étroite union des âmes*).⁶⁸ There is a sublime dimension in such a bliss. Through the assimilation with a Dionysiac trance, *jouissance* is represented as a vertigo in which one can contemplate infinity, and in the eighteenth century, according to its "esthétique de l'infini" (aesthetics of infinity), what one perceives by contemplating infinity is God himself: "Dans l'infinité du monde, l'infinité de Dieu nous est rendue sensible"⁶⁹ (In the infinity of the world, the infinity of God is made sensible to us). From a libertine perspective, *jouissance* may thus have an organic justification for being experienced and represented as a religious ceremony.

Behind the libertine representation of lovemaking as a religious ceremony is the unifying principle of the characters' desire to transcend all limits. Through their blasphemy, they place themselves beyond society's laws, beyond the word of God, and beyond the limits normally prescribed to mortals. Their *jouissance* is described as an experience of infinity. On the one hand, one could argue that this effort to replace a form of worship (the Christian) with another is but a sign of their eagerness to fill in the void left by the "disenchantment of the world," as if the secularization of the Enlightenment had left behind it an existential despair and a longing for new deities to worship, whether these be Reason, Nature, or Pleasure. On the other hand, one could argue that through their blasphemous parodies of ceremonies, these libertine writers have seconded the Enlightenment's enterprise of debunking the vacuity of religious discourses and practices. As ever with libertine literature and libertinism, the answer must be sought between these two interpretations, in the libertines' carelessness, or, as Catherine Cusset

68. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), in *Œuvres complètes*, 2:148.

69. Starobinski, *L'Invention de la liberté*, 166.

would phrase it, in "la conscience ironique de ce rien"⁷⁰ (the ironical consciousness of this nothingness). If there is no God, then metaphysics is a blank page ready to be filled, just for pleasure's sake, with an abundance of fabulous references ranging from Masonry to the parodied Christianity to Bacchanalia. For libertines, God may be dead, but the enchantment of the religious is not.

70. Catherine Cusset, "Cythère et l'Élysée: jardin et plaisir de Watteau à Rousseau," in *Jardins et châteaux*, ed. Roland G. Bonnel, *Dalhousie French Studies* 29 (Halifax, Canada: Dalhousie Press, 1994), 83.