

The Libertine Novel

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A large treasure trove of evidence from memoirs, journals, correspondences and bibliographical records reveals that the literary world of the age of Enlightenment was teeming with novels 'd'un certain genre' (of a certain type): books neither meant to be read in serious studies nor expected to be displayed proudly on one's console; texts to be enjoyed rather in a safe intimacy, under the cover of darkness, and perhaps 'd'une seule main' (one-handed). These books tell stories revolving not around love, not around epic adventures either, but around the pleasures and temptations of the flesh. Erotic desire (or what today we might, more directly, call 'sex') is the principal preoccupation of these novels we know as 'libertine' and which range from Claude-Prosper Jolyot de Cr billon's *galanterie* to Andr ea de Nerciat's pornography, from Denis Diderot's oriental satire to Claude-Henri de Fus e Voisenon's merry nonsense, from *Th r se philosophe's* anti-ecclesiastical orgies to the voluptuous *pas de deux* of Dominique Vivant Denon's *Point de lendemain* (*No Tomorrow*). But there is much more to these novels than just sex. By challenging traditions and laws, these novels echo the eighteenth century's yearning for liberty and happiness; they illustrate the period's revaluation of society's rules and reflect its growing intellectual emancipation from the fears and prejudices of the past. To study libertine writings is to dive into what gives the French eighteenth century its unique flavour, as they capture both the period's 'Lumi res' (enlightenment) and its 'volupt ' (sensuous desire). These texts constitute a proud reminder that the age of Voltaire was also that of artists Jean-Honor  Fragonard and Fran ois Boucher, that the century of the guillotine was also that of rose-tinted boudoirs and sofas. Yet, libertine novels are also conspicuously ahead of their time. By focusing on forbidden yearnings, they redefine the limits of what words can say, individuals do and imagination conceive. Thus, to study them is also to observe how

novels are able to expand the scope of possibilities, for both literature and mankind, in the name of bliss.

Whilst highly successful and visible in their days, for a long time after, these novels were confined to the infamy of libraries' *enfes* (restricted sections) – alongside other censored volumes – and to the obscurity of these libraries' *second rayon* (second-rate shelves), keeping company with other rejects of literary anthologies. Gradually, however, they have been rediscovered, buoyed by a series of successive waves of interest. The late nineteenth century, with aesthetes such as Octave Uzanne or the Goncourts, had for libertine literature the fascination of an antiquarian collector nostalgically hankering after the myth of *fêtes galantes*. The surrealists of the early twentieth century saw kindred spirits in the licentious authors of the Enlightenment who, like them, pushed the boundaries of tradition in both behaviour and artistic creation. A few decades later, the sexual revolution of the 1960s, coupled with the formalists' interest for forgotten, allegedly second-rate literature, spurred the academic rediscovery of those texts. The marquis de Sade was published,¹ so was Nerciat. Laclos, with his *Liaisons dangereuses*, became an unavoidable figure of eighteenth-century studies. The 1990s and 2000s saw the publication of libertine anthologies that spread the knowledge of these texts beyond academia.² Today, libertine fiction is recognised as a major feature of France's literature, deserving a chapter of its own in the present history of the novel in French. It has found its way into school and university curricula in France and beyond. It has moved from being marginal to being mainstream. At long last, the libertine novel is back to the central place it occupied in its own eighteenth century.

Several questions underlie this chapter's reflections on libertine writing. What is the common denominator of so-called libertine novels beyond the variety of styles, characters, settings and purposes they comprise? What is exclusive to, and original in, the libertine genre, and what singles it out not only from an age-old and still thriving tradition of erotic literature, but also from the other novels written during the age of Enlightenment? And why does libertine literature matter, if at all, in the history of the French novel?

¹ Jean-Jacques Pauvert started publishing Sade's complete works in 1953, an enterprise for which he would be tried the same year.

² See the anthologies *Romans libertins du XVIIIe siècle*, ed. by Raymond Trousson (Paris: Laffont, 1993) and *Romanciers libertins du XVIIIe siècle*, ed. by Patrick Wald Lasowski, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 2005). See also, with texts translated into English, *The Libertine Reader: Eroticism and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century France*, ed. by Michael Feher (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 1997).

I will argue that what makes the libertine novel unique (and attention-worthy) among the rest of erotic literature as well as within the history of French fiction itself is that it is the outcome of the Western world's greatest intellectual revolution: the Enlightenment. The main topic of libertine novels, sex, is treated in a manner which amounts to a demystification of old ideals. Through their authors' representation of erotic desire, traditional moral landmarks and religious idols such as God, piety, chastity, marriage or love, are all unmasked as inadequate to support individuals in their quest for happiness. Libertine fiction records like no other art form the moment when France and Europe were undergoing a transition from the early modern to the modern, the moment when Christian gods died only to be replaced by new ones: liberty and pleasure; the time when 'Public Man' fell,³ pushed into oblivion by the rise of new concepts such as privacy and intimacy. In the novels of Crébillon, Godard d'Aucour, Nerciat, Laclos and their peers, we discover France when the here and now came to matter more than the hereafter, and when bolted doors came to be regarded as gateways to freedom. Libertine novels will thus emerge from this chapter as the indiscreet jewels of the age of Enlightenment. They tell us the secrets of eighteenth-century bodies, disclosing their desires, their frustrations and their tentative escapes from the limitations of the new, godless, and thereby already modern, human condition.

What is the Libertine Novel?

Before delving into what the libertine novel *does*, we first need to define what it is. Experts have long disagreed over the identity of the so-called libertine genre. Part of the problem at the roots of this disagreement is the absence of a self-proclaimed libertine movement. The term 'libertine fiction' was coined during the nineteenth-century to identify those *Ancien Régime* texts alarming (yet also irresistibly titillating) the bourgeois prudishness. Still, the label 'libertine' is neither an anachronism nor a retrospective invention. It echoes the eighteenth-century reception of the texts it seeks to gather under its wings. Works labelled as 'libertine' are not texts that the Church and State would condone. They all have in common at least a whiff of subversion and a focus on the erotic behaviours or preoccupations of their characters. Some eighteenth-century texts might be concerned principally with the depiction of

³ Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

society, its mores, its rules, its actors, without any special emphasis on its erotic hedonism (Pierre de Marivaux's *La Vie de Marianne*). Others might feature forbidden liaisons that they represent as the fruits neither of lust nor of love-as-taste (*amour-goût*) but, instead, of love-as-passion (Abbé Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* or Rousseau's *Julie*).⁴ Whilst a number of stories do feature rakes and their unlawful desires, they revolve around the merit – as opposed to the fallibility – of virtue (Richardson's *Clarissa* and *Pamela* as well as the many *romans de femmes* written at the time).⁵ Then there is of course the prolific eighteenth-century prose fiction that focuses on philosophy in general, but not exclusively on a philosophy of pleasure (Voltaire's *Candide*). Many novels also tell their protagonists' adventures in a subversion of the epic genre, but the libertine episodes they might feature are only an accessory to – rather than a crucial aspect of – the plot (Prévost's *Cleveland* or Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste*). Finally, there exist fictions whose main object is erotic pleasure in all its forms, whether it be a mere temptation or a full indulgence, condoned or condemned by their narrator, backed up by a frivolous lifestyle or by an enlightened philosophy, set in the most realistic Paris or in the most fairy-like Orient, enjoyed in shabby brothels or luxurious boudoirs. That primary focus on sex – not on love, not on virtue, not on philosophy either – is what I propose to regard as the common denominator, and even as the defining factor, of the French libertine novel. Libertine literature can therefore be defined, quite simply, as the erotic literature of the French age of Enlightenment.

Not every scholar is reconciled with this inclusive definition of libertine fiction.⁶ This is due in great part to a reluctance to put in the same basket the *galants* novels of Crébillon or Laclos (aristocratic, elegant narratives, using a 'noble' classical language to narrate the 'vulgar' reality of lust) and pornographic best-sellers such as the *Histoire de Dom Bougre, portier des Chartreux* (*Story of Dom Bougre, Porter of the Carthusians*) attributed to Jean-Charles Gervaise de Latouche or Jean-Baptiste de Boyer d'Argens' *Thérèse philosophe* (infamously lewd novels, featuring lascivious monks and low-rank prostitutes). It is hard not to see in these efforts a desire to sanitise the reality

⁴ Stendhal coined the concepts of *amour-goût* (epitomised by Crébillon's novels) and *amour-passion* in his essay *De l'amour* (1822), ed. by Victor Del Litto (Paris: Gallimard, 1932), p. 27.

⁵ On the defence of female virtue, see Raymond Trousson's introduction to *Romans de femmes du dix-huitième siècle* (Paris: Laffont, 1996), pp. i–xxxiii (p. xxx).

⁶ That debate is the object of Jean-François Perrin and Philip Stewart (eds.), *Du genre libertin au dix-huitième siècle* (Paris: Desjonquères, 2004).

of the libertine trend in the eighteenth century by separating an allegedly purer or higher form of literature from its unworthy lees. The result is a complicated profusion of labels which overlap with each other. Jacques Rochette de La Morlière's *Angola* for instance is at once a worldly, oriental, fairy-like, satirical, philosophical and erotic novel. The discriminatory approach favoured by some fails to account for the fascinating complexity of libertine fiction which, by nature, always challenges the traditional dichotomies of vice and virtue, gravity and levity, reality and illusions, the licit and the illicit, the decent and the indecent.

Not only does a comprehensive definition of libertine fiction highlight the multi-faceted nature of libertinage that was confined neither to shabby brothels nor to lavish boudoirs; it also underlines, as it should, the playfulness of those texts that subvert the traditional hierarchies organising both society and literature. They show that duchesses are not immune to devaluation and that the lowliest of courtesans might well be the greatest artist in voluptuousness. They show too that one can write about base subjects with a grand style, or about noble characters with a lowly language: erotic literature can be written without a single vulgar word by relying on the evocative power of images and metaphors, while fornication can be described with blunt words without being meant to appear either sordid or laughable, as in the anonymously published *Le Rideau levé, ou L'Éducation de Laure* (*The Curtain Drawn Up, or The Education of Laura*), where incestuous threesomes are depicted as initiations to the mystery of bliss. Just as the characters of libertine novels question and play with the limits set to their behaviours, so too do their narrators question and play with the boundaries set to literary expression. Across the whole spectrum of what libertine writing might entail, authors explore the validity of limitations (be they aesthetic or moral) the better to prove these limitations' ineptness.

The subversive essence of libertine novels explains why the label 'libertins' is the most apt to qualify them. Other adjectives have competed for that privilege: 'galants', 'pornographiques', 'philosophiques', 'licencieux', 'obscènes', 'grivois' ('bawdy') all fail to embrace the entire spectrum of this rich literature, since each only refers to a mere portion of its reality. As for 'érotiques', although it does highlight those novels' focus on the temptations or pleasures of the flesh, it lacks this eighteenth-century touch, that obsolescence of the expression 'libertine', which conveniently dates the eroticism represented within the time period that used that word, when libertinage was indeed a thing. Most importantly, the expression 'libertine' has the key

advantage of referring to the dual identity of those novels that tease moral as well as intellectual boundaries. A libertine in the eighteenth century is predominantly a sensuous hedonist, yet he or she is still also very much a free-thinking individual. Intellectual emancipation from the fear of divine punishment and from the repression imposed by early modern society's rules is bound to be at the roots of a libertine's transgressive behaviour. It is also the beating heart of the erotic novels written at the time.

In the early eighteenth century, the expression 'libertin(e)/(s)' had not quite yet shaken off its earlier power to allude to a state of emancipation from various limits: those of slavery in Ancient Rome ('libertini' being emancipated slaves), of rigid Christian doctrines in the Renaissance (the Anabaptist sect of 'libertines' for Calvin), and of traditional ideas in the seventeenth century (René Pintard's 'libertins érudits').⁷ In the last decades of the seventeenth century, a wind of change was blowing over Europe's intellectual landscape. While thinkers such as Descartes, Locke, Newton, Bayle or Fontenelle were challenging scientific orthodoxy, artists like La Fontaine, Scarron or Perrault were likewise challenging tradition and striving for the right to define their own rules. Gradually, those who did not conform to orthodoxy ceased to be considered the dangerous dissidents they once were. No longer called 'libertines', they came to be known rather as 'Modernes' and soon as 'philosophes'. Yet the expression 'libertine' did not disappear with the fast rise of free thinking at the turn of the century. It survived, but it would from then on refer principally to one aspect of this intellectual emancipation, namely the moral dissipation which often accompanied it.

Interestingly, the increasing tolerance of free thinking from the late seventeenth century onwards was contemporary with a novel condemnation of sexuality in its raw form. In the name of grace and refinement, animal impulses such as sex drives were banished under the polished surface of behaviours and language. The bodily reality of one's life – lust included – was increasingly relegated to the secret half of one's existence. 'Libertines' were fast becoming those who dared challenge not so much the intellectual tradition as the aristocratic code of *galanterie* that encompassed ideals such

⁷ René Pintard, *Le Libertinage érudit dans la première moitié du dix-huitième siècle* (Paris: Boivin, 1943). On the history of the term libertin/e, see Raymond Trousson's introduction to *Romans libertins du XVIIIe siècle*, pp. i–lxviii, and Patrick Wald Lasowski's appendix in *Romanciers libertins du XVIIIe siècle*, II, pp. 1623–9. On the history of libertinage, see Didier Foucault, *Histoire du libertinage: des goliards au marquis de Sade* (Paris: Perrin, 2007).

as a chivalrous respect of female chastity. Eighteenth-century libertinage would indeed range from the complete rejection of the 'belle et vraie galanterie'⁸ of the Grand Siècle by rakes and their peers, to a polite subversion of its system by elegant hedonists.

Moral libertinage ('libertinage de mœurs') as opposed to its intellectual counterpart ('le libertinage d'esprit') was becoming a more widespread, more visible, phenomenon in France, as the emancipation of minds opened up new spaces of freedom for bodies. In 1715, the death of the Sun King afforded France a sigh of relief after years of devout austerity. It gave way to a craze for merriments of all kinds epitomised by the legendary hedonist regency of Philippe d'Orléans (1715–23) or by the calm paintings of Watteau. 'Libertine' (as an adjective or as a noun) came to denote transgressive behaviours but, often, with nothing seriously criminal about them. The kingdom of France was, after all, relatively and notoriously lenient when it came to extra-marital affairs.⁹ Except for stern censors who still used the word as the utmost insult, it was all rather playful. A schoolboy was a 'libertin' if he disobeyed the authority of his masters. 'Libertinage' was often used as a synonym for 'badinage' (teasing banter), a naughty experience of liberty: 'I give my mind up to its libertinage. My thoughts are my whores',¹⁰ wrote Diderot to express the appeal of letting his mind run unbound. The libertines of the eighteenth century were thus *bons vivants*, adventurers craving freedom, frivolous fops known as 'petits maîtres', coquettish ladies or wayward spouses: all men and women hardly prone to keeping their whims in check. Yet libertines could also be, of course, at the other end of the sensuous spectrum, rakes and harlots, threatening seducers and corrupt procuresses. The ambivalence of the term, which can be used to refer both to debauchery and to a mischievous eighteenth-century form of *galanterie*, proves the pervasiveness of the libertine phenomenon in the French age of Enlightenment. It touched every social class and gender indiscriminately. It also suggests that the last decades of the Old Regime were characterised by a vindication of Man's natural and unalienable right to pleasure. Before this notion found its way in the Revolution's *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, it was already the underlying principle of all libertinage and of every libertine fiction.

⁸ See Alain Viala, *La France galante* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008).

⁹ Although the last execution for homosexuality in France took place in 1750.

¹⁰ Denis Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, in *Contes et romans*, ed. by Michel Delon (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), pp. 583–665 (p. 585).

From 'Libertinage' to Libertine Novels

The intellectual revolution that was making Man (rather than God) the measure of all things was the catalyst of the new literary genre on the rise in the eighteenth century. Through the novel, the mystery that is humanity could be investigated with an unprecedented clarity and honesty. Characters would be modelled on the everyday men and women of contemporary society rather than on the great heroes of the past. They would be individuals rather than types. Like myth before it, the novel would set out to explore the human condition. However, whereas myths locate the source of events in external causes (in gods or fate), novels internalise this impulse.¹¹ The novelists of the early eighteenth century posited that what prompts actions and reactions dwells in drives of more or less conscious origins, in passions of more or less controllable force. This internal life is the object of the novel, and its investigation is accompanied by an acute awareness of the obscurity in which this interiority is clad. Nowhere do we find a more daring investigation of the invisible mysteries of the heart and mind, or a more intimate access to the candid confessions of thoughts and feelings of characters, than in the erotic novels of the age of Enlightenment. Their authors tackle the challenge of being 'explorers of existence'¹² without being held back by the fear of impropriety or by the reluctance to lay bare unsettling truths.

This might account for Claude-Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon's often being regarded as the father of French libertine fiction. His superficially elegant yet deeply neurotic universe of *marquis* and *vicomesses*, his acute perception of the secret springs underlying both worldly politeness and libertine affairs, and the irony of his narrations inspired many writers such as Charles Pinot Duclos, Godard d'Aucour, Jean-François Bastide, Voisenon, La Morlière, Claude-Joseph Dorat, Denon and Laclos. Crébillon was indeed one of the first to scrutinise the libertine preoccupations of his day and age by making the most of what the novel genre had to offer. He did not invent the conjunction of a sexual topic with deeper reflections on humankind or societies (erotic/enlightened late seventeenth-century texts such as *La Vénus dans le cloître*, published by an unknown author going by the pseudonym 'l'Abbé du Prat', and Nicolas Chorier's *L'Académie des dames*, had

¹¹ See Pierre Chartier, *Introduction aux grandes théories du roman* (Paris: Bordas, 1990), p. 25.

¹² Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (1986), trans. by Linda Asher (New York: Grove Press, 1988), p. 44.

preceded him), but, from the very start of his career, Crébillon also put to the fore of libertine writing the novelist's preoccupation with the unconscious drives of men and women. There, he believed, some truths might be intuited about these individuals and, through them, about the human condition as a whole. In *Le Sylphe* (1730), he raised the question of a lady's unavowable longing for a consequence-free surrender to a nocturnal seducer. The notion that the self is a puzzle was to be advertised on the title page of another of Crébillon's novels: *Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit* (*The Wayward Heart and Head*). Investigating the workings of the heart and mind is openly compared to a labyrinthine quest where one easily gets lost. By asserting this difficulty and making it an object of novelistic interest, Crébillon was heralding the ambition of all novelists, albeit on the magnified scale that would characterise libertine prose fiction. In order to reveal the human reality buried under genuine modesty or conventional decorum, libertine authors do not stop where indecency begins – even though they might choose to write about it in a decent, 'gauzed' way. They dare to peep through keyholes, penetrate behind closed doors and give a voice to silenced desires or shameful questions. In this respect at least, they go one step further than other novelists towards the disclosure of all-too-human secrets.

Their method of investigation itself is rooted in a new way of thinking about truth in the eighteenth century. The shift of attention from the ideal to the real epitomised by the rise of the novel is only one of the many manifestations of the spread of empiricist and sensualist theories in the eighteenth century. Lockean empiricism had spurred novelists to examine the experiences of their characters to understand the world and human life; yet, on top of this, libertine novelists were also putting in practice Condillac's sensualism, as they focus on their characters' sensations to get to know their minds. For if Man is a machine, as the materialists were to postulate, one only has to study that sensory mechanism, the body itself, its manifestations and its reactions, eventually to understand its inner workings.

The libertine novelist is therefore akin to Diderot's sultan Mangogul who, with a magic ring, holds the power to make bodies speak out their deepest secrets in *Les Bijoux indiscrets*. In the libertine masterpiece *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Laclos turns a novelist's magic ring towards the figure of the prude, all the better to reveal her unsuspected erotic torments. Her 'jewel' speaks to us in her letters and those of Valmont where he anticipates psychoanalysis by reading and interpreting her physical reactions (sobs, shivers, palpitations,

blushes and all). Laclos's novel indiscreetly discloses that devotion and chastity (just like, eventually, the cerebral libertinage of the Vicomte and the Marquise) leave the flesh and soul craving for more. Likewise, Gervaise de Latouche's *Dom Bougre, portier des Chartreux* gives a voice to the regrets of a monk who confronts the reality of a life of privations. The narrations of elegant, erotic negotiations, like the narrations of sexual encounters themselves – told with or without any linguistic veil – all have to do with lust, satiated or not. Yet, crucially, libertine fiction highlights that erotic desire is *always already* much more than 'just' sex: it cannot yet be severed from moral, social, philosophical, religious preoccupations. Libertine novels indeed signal that the flesh during the age of Enlightenment was being reconfigured as the holder of a certain truth (the only truth, sensualists and materialists would say) about humanity.

The libertine perception of the flesh as the receptacle of secrets is not exclusively the corollary of the sensualist-materialist theories so popular then. It is also the direct offspring of the rise of the notions of intimacy and privacy (which went hand in hand with the rise of modesty) from the seventeenth century onwards.¹³ The development of privacy in the name of civilisation (self-control heralding the social animal's triumph over Nature) reinforces the Christian idea that the body and its drives are to be subjected to the control of reason, the better to be hidden under *polite* (meaning both polished and policed) surfaces. The body in the eighteenth century is thus subtly reconceptualised from the external object it once was to a subterranean mystery that libertine authors undertake to reveal. Libertine novels perfectly demonstrate the Foucauldian paradox that the moment when bodily drives were being relegated into the intimate (and, for some, 'shameful') part of one's existence corresponds to the moment when there arose an obsession for talking about it: 'What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the secret*.'¹⁴ Sex had to be hidden, but it had to be talked about too. Hence the rise, in the eighteenth century, of a literature that would give the body a voice, the better to lay bare its secrets.

¹³ On the rise of intimacy, see Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby (eds.), *Histoire de la vie privée, Volume III: De la Renaissance aux Lumières* (Paris: Seuil, 1985). On the rise of modesty, see Jean-Claude Bologne, *Histoire de la pudeur* (Paris: Hachette, 1986).

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 35.

Erotic literature had always existed. Yet, prior to the birth of libertine fiction at the turn of the eighteenth century, there had never been erotic novels. Sex had been the focus of poetry (in the love poems of Louise Labé, the voluptuous wisdom of Horatian odes, the bawdy sonnets of Pietro Aretino or the naughty verse tales of La Fontaine). Lust had also been the object of lascivious episodes meant either to make their readers laugh or to warn them about its dangerous appeal (in Boccaccio's, Rabelais's, Pierre de Bourdeille, seigneur de Brantôme's or Robert Challe's tales of cuckolded spouses and misbehaving daughters). It had also been the focus of essays such as Ovid's *Art of Love*. Yet never had erotic desire been given the full space of a novel to be investigated in all its complexity through the concrete, albeit fictional, perspective of a character's experience. With the advent of libertine novels at the turn of the eighteenth century, sex could at long last be represented not as a static topic (that is, a mere event between parentheses) but as a dynamic process. Readers could see it evolve from temptation to indulgence, morphing sometimes into regret, at other times into wisdom. Authors could now represent how pleasure affected a character and even transformed them, as well as, crucially, how it fitted (or did not fit) within society. Furthermore, in a novel, there is room for philosophical digressions when a talkative character or narrator shares his or her opinion on lust. There is even space for psychological investigations as readers are afforded a glimpse into the private thoughts and deeds of characters, thereby disclosing what happens underneath masks of female chastity, pious devotion or aristocratic merit when the self is freed from the control of both reason and virtue.

Still one should not overlook the fact that the rise of the novel – and even more so of the libertine novel – must be credited to a radical transformation of the act of reading in the age of Enlightenment. Progress in both literacy and printing techniques were revolutionising reading practices: what had once been a communal pastime was fast becoming an intimate experience. Whilst censors contemplated this reading revolution with dread, authors seized the new opportunities it offered them.¹⁵ Narrators would now be whispering to the reader's ears without any instance of control over their words and the thoughts these might prompt. Libertine novels magnify the

¹⁵ On censorship in the eighteenth century, see Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) and *The Forbidden Best-sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1995).

issues at stake for novelists at the time. They are viewed with particular suspicion for the threat they represent to the nation's morals. Yet, this occurs not only because of the subversive ideas expressed in their texts; libertine writing also epitomises the fact that the novelistic genre can bypass the control of reason and virtue through the somatic reactions it triggers in readers.¹⁶ No morals can resist the appeal made to the flesh, they claim. The reader is a sensory machine that the novel can activate. 'Reading your naughty *Portier des Chartreux* has set me on fire,'¹⁷ cries a lady in one of the many erotic scenes from libertine literature where, through a clever *mise-en-abyme*, fiction is shown to prompt reactions in real life. Such scenes hold a mirror up to the reader: they normalise and exculpate his or her erotic reception of the text. There is no such thing as a chaste reader, libertine novelists seem to say. From their perspective, there is no innocence to corrupt, only souls to enlighten or avid curiosities to satiate. As if to imply this complicity between reader and text, libertine narratives rely on the reader's active participation in the meaning of the text. He or she is expected to see through irony, double entendre, metaphors and ellipses: obscuring techniques where naked truth looms, not so much hiding as teasing the reader into its full revelation. At their core, therefore, the narrative gauzes of Crébillon's elegant prose have the same motivation as Sade's ambition to tell everything. Behind pornographic transparency just like behind 'galante' decency, one finds the same presumption of a desire less for virtue (or love) than for the flesh. Thus, libertine novels might be masturbatory prompts or spark sensual ideas indeed; yet the added value of libertine fiction, compared to the erotic tradition from which it had stemmed, is the revelations it makes to the reader through its focus on sensuality.

For most characters of libertine novels, sex is configured as the object of a discovery. Pleasure is seldom – not to say 'never' – severed from a wisdom acquired through sensual experiences shown to be not so much perverting as enlightening the novice's mind. As Peter Nagy explains: 'the novel of education is the form of the libertine novel. This idiosyncrasy is surely due to the philosophico-religious origins – blurred but never fully erased – of the movement and its attitude, but also to the importance of the pedagogical

¹⁶ See Jean-Marie Goulemot, *Ces Livres qu'on ne lit que d'une main: lecture et lecteurs de livres pornographiques au dix-huitième siècle* (Aix-en-Provence: Alinea, 1991), p. 32.

¹⁷ Jean-Baptiste de Boyer d'Argens, *Thérèse philosophe* (1748), in *Romanciers libertins du XVIIIe siècle*, 1, pp. 867–977 (p. 914).

will in the birth of the genre.¹⁸ However, one should stress that the most crucial education taking place in the libertine novel is that of the reader. Whereas other erotic narratives or poems had little space to tease out the issues orbiting around the topic of sex, libertine novels offer full-fledged investigations of the subject. Through their idiosyncratic take on the sex-as-revelation paradigm (featured in countless texts, most famously perhaps La Fontaine's tale 'Comment l'esprit vient aux filles' ('How wit comes to girls')), the eighteenth-century libertine novel embodies the transition between the early modern period when bodily needs were not yet all taboo, and the modern, prudish heyday of bourgeoisie when the flesh must be hushed. As it straddles both perceptions of what sex can do and say, the libertine novel displays aspects of both the *ars erotica* of the pre-modern era and the *scientia sexualis* of the modern age. From the former model, it has kept the notion that pleasure is to be talked about for pleasure's sake. Just like Ovid's *Art of love*, libertine fiction investigates voluptuousness in order to share with readers lessons on how best to reach it. Yet from the latter template, that is, from the *scientia sexualis* that came to characterise the discourse on sexuality from the repressive Reformation onwards,¹⁹ libertine fiction retains the idea that exploring the sexual life of characters is a gateway to their secret selves. The exceptionality of libertine fiction within the Western tradition of erotic literature thus lies in the fact that it offers its readers both an initiation to an arcane, exclusive expertise in love-making on the one hand and a revelation about the secrets of human existence on the other.

Libertine Novels on Society and Humanity

Exploring human nature was of course not the prerogative of libertine novelists alone. It was at the core of the Enlightenment project and it would serve a concrete function: such investigation was to provide thinkers with clues on how to reform society in order to make it fit the demands (and limitations) of the natural individual. Philosophical and political essays played their part in that reflection, from Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des lois*, to Diderot's *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*, to Rousseau's *Discours sur l'inégalité*. While Europe was wrestling with man-made notions such as virtue, chastity,

¹⁸ Peter Nagy, *Libertinage et révolution*, trans. by Christiane Grémillon (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 91.

¹⁹ The hypothesis of Michel Foucault in *Histoire de la sexualité*.

modesty and monogamy, travellers were bringing back from their journeys tales of exotic islands where bodily pleasures could be enjoyed freely, with neither shame nor guilt. Although often overlooked, libertine novelists did contribute to the development of that important debate on nature and civilisation. Their fiction challenges the idea that the Old Regime is best adapted to individual needs:

Man himself has forged his unhappiness with his own hand, and sharpened the arrows that must pierce his heart. Shouldn't one wish that he had only ever followed the instinct of nature, instead of submitting himself to laws and customs that have only been invented for the misery of humanity?²⁰

Libertine novels all more or less directly and virulently posit that in the current state of affairs, men and women's natural desires are frustrated and thereby bound eventually to seek satisfaction in a potentially disruptive and/or dangerous manner. The Marquise de Merteuil for instance, who likes to present herself as her own creation ('je suis mon ouvrage'), is subtly characterised in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* as one of the monsters which society engenders by refusing women any legitimate, dignified outlet to their curiosity, ambitions and erotic cravings. Together, libertine novelists dare reveal that contemporary society is not a perfect fit for human nature. For this inadequacy, they blame the Church.

Hence the libertine novel's frequent anti-ecclesiastical streaks. It depicts a universe full of perverse monks and lascivious zealots, of challengers to God himself (such as Laclos's Valmont) or of hedonists who forsake the Church's basic principles; it narrates profane pleasures with a sacred lexicon, thereby positing that the flesh is the only valid channel for transcendence. For libertine narratives are not so much atheist as they are pagan: the object of their heroes' worship has shifted from the Christian God to a more flexible, subjective concept: Nature, who created the human body as sensitive to pleasure and thus made sensual gratification the first commandment of the libertine credo. As the children of an enlightened century, the protagonists of libertine fiction have realised that in the universe recently stripped of divine presence, salvation can no longer be the main motivation for all human actions; happiness is.²¹ The libertine notion of the 'moment', that ephemeral

²⁰ Anon., *Mémoires de Suzon, sœur de D.. B. . . ., portier des chartreux* (1778), in *Romanciers libertins du XVIIIe siècle*, II, pp. 875–971 (p. 898).

²¹ See Robert Mauzi, *L'Idée du bonheur dans la littérature et la pensée françaises au dix-huitième siècle* [1965] (Paris: Slatkine, 1990).

chance to catch pleasure before it passes, is emblematic of the state of mind of those men and women who believe that to be happy, one must seize the day and dismiss all thoughts about the future, the better to enjoy the present. This is not to say that across the whole spectrum of libertine fiction, authors unanimously condone their protagonists' indulgences. If anything, novels such as *Angola*, *Les Confessions du comte de ****, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* or even *Margot la ravaudeuse*, are keen to show the limitations of a libertine way of life. If there is lust under devotion, there is also angst under mirth. Nevertheless, they all illustrate the fact that for their hedonist characters, old ideals – Christian faith included – were deemed irrelevant in their search for happiness.

That demystification of former ideals runs across the wide and varied libertine literary production of the long eighteenth century. Religious ideals such as devotion or chastity, self-denial or mortification of the flesh, are debunked as mere chimeras, as arbitrary as they are meaningless. Socio-cultural ideals are deflated too: monogamy might well be against nature (and therefore doomed to failure), whilst love is but an idea (a 'prétexte', for Laclos's Marquise de Merteuil)²² used to beautify or excuse lust: 'the most vulgar dishes, spiced up by love, are always the most delicious', comments the expert Margot.²³ Similarly, the noble ideal of *galanterie*, which France proudly exported as a product of its superior refinement, is unmasked as a mere varnish that well-born individuals have learnt to exploit the better to combine civilised grace with animal impulses. The only ideal left in *galanterie* is that of an elegant decency praised not for its own sake but rather for its ability to transform pleasure into voluptuousness. This is the lesson of *Point de lendemain*: through the gracefulness which decency lends to erotic negotiations or encounters, a night with no tomorrow can become a full aesthetic experience touching both the body and the mind of its protagonists. What had once been a true code of conduct in the Sun King's era is exposed as having become a mere erotic masquerade in the age of libertines.

Interestingly, in libertine fiction, the demystification of old ideals corresponds to the discovery of an alternative way of life. As these ideals are mocked, they are also presented as necessary disguises to don in order to enjoy libertinage unimpeded. The emancipated protagonists of libertine

²² Pierre Ambroise François Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782), in Laclos, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Laurent Versini (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), pp. 1–386 (p. 173).

²³ Fougere de Monbron, *Margot la ravaudeuse*, in Wald Lasowski (ed.), *Romanciers libertins du XVIIIe siècle*, 1, p. 805.

literature are indeed not represented as marginal individuals ostracised by society but rather as a chosen few who have been initiated to a new system of ideas and behaviours. That system revolves around the notion that dissimulation holds the key to liberty and happiness: *intus ut libet, foris ut moris est* (in private, do as you please; in public, do according to the customs). Locked bedrooms, secluded groves, secret boudoirs, far-away castles (epitomised by Sade's Silling in the heart of the Black Forest) and *petites maisons* in obscure neighbourhoods are reconfigured as spaces of liberty because they are semi-invisible, removed from the public sphere. In exactly the same manner, double entendre, ellipses, politeness, irony or metaphors allow libertine intentions to circulate freely between lovers as well as between the text and the reader, that is, between those initiated to that tacit system of communication. Like seventeenth-century *moralistes* before them, libertine authors reveal French society to be the realm of mendacity. Yet they fall short of condemning those who resort to dissimulation, preferring instead to deplore the state of affairs which has made such dissimulation unavoidable. Their prose fiction asserts that the social ban placed on the manifestation and gratification of a natural desire is bound to result either in concealment or in alienating madness. Such frustration of natural feelings leads to death in Dorat's tragic *Les Malheurs de l'inconstance* or Crébillon's *Lettres de la marquise de M****. It leads to despair in *Dom Bougre*. In Diderot's *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, silenced, starved 'jewels' suffocate and die. Mendacity is reconfigured as the lesser of two evils when dangerous frustration is also at stake. Through its secret orgiastic societies and its fashionable hypocrites, through its veiled prose and its clandestine diffusion, the libertine novel embodies a fragile dream of harmony between the tensions tearing eighteenth-century individuals apart. It expresses the longing for a balance between inner desires on the one hand and social laws on the other. While libertine novels unmask French society as vicious under its elegant *miens*, they also contend that it has no other option unless – or until – civilisation makes room for the all too human craving for happiness and liberty.

Conclusion

Libertine authors offer us formidable vantage points from which to examine some of the most crucial issues characterising the French age of Enlightenment: they vindicate man and woman's inalienable right to freedom and happiness; they explore the mysteries of human nature; they

demystify old ideals like God or sentimental love as being irrelevant in one's search for pleasures; they even take over the *philosophes'* search for a political system that would reconcile individual needs and social harmony. From Crébillon to Mirabeau, they do so by making the most of what the new literary genre on the rise was offering them: writing a novel (rather than a short story, a play, a poem, an essay) was indeed an invitation to look beyond the level of actions and delve deep instead within their characters' thoughts, the better to lay out what tensions might be tormenting them and what forces might be animating them. In many ways, the erotic wanderings of libertine characters anticipated the Revolution of 1789. Yet, it is so not quite because they revealed the decadent mores that reformers would soon condemn to the guillotine, but rather because they had intuited the frustrations boiling within each individual man or woman. Thus, like Mozart's music or Tiepolo's paintings, the libertine novel in all its varieties, be it tragic or satirical, *galant* or pornographic, begs to be read and rediscovered as a fantastic testimony of the eighteenth century's passion for liberty.

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